



## Arthurian Literature – Critical Commentary – Passage 2 'How Uther Pendragon Gate Kyng Arthur'

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This passage, in which Arthur must prove his ability to pull the sword from the stone multiple times and be denied his right to kingship almost every one of those times, is intrinsic to the greater narrative of Malory's *Le Mort Darthur* as one of the first instances in the text to handle the themes of nobility of birth and right to kingship. The precedence of nobility of birth as valued by all the barons in this scene who deny Arthur's right kingship, and the presentation of the 'comyns' who rarely appear in Malory's narrative as a whole, are equally significant in Malory's presentation of what it means to be elected king. The characterisation of Arthur as innocent and subservient this early is interesting in the context of his later character development in the *Mort* and is additionally worth considering given how his character changes with his length of rule.

In the passage from 'How Uther Pendragon Gate Kyng Arthur', Arthur is presented as innocent to the implications to his ability to pull the sword from the stone. He asks "myne own dere fader and broder, why knele ye to me?". Earlier in the chapter Arthur only removed the sword from the stone as his foster brother Kay was in need of a sword, 'I thought my broder Syr Kay shold not be swerdles'. Even after Syre Ector reveals the significance of his ability to pull the sword from the stone, Arthur's actions are never evidently governed from self-interest in this passage. Arthur's initial reaction is sadness that Ector and Kay are not his family by birth, emphasising his concern for others over his own self-interest: 'Arthur made grete doole whan he understood that Syre Ector was not his fader'. It is Ector who encourages Arthur to take the case to the Archbishop, 'Therewithall they wente unto the Archebisshop' which in turn leads to Arthur demonstrating his ability to pull the sword from the stone on numerous occasions before witnesses. Despite being able to pull the sword from the stone, Arthur submits to both Ector and the Archbishop's advice rather than asserting his right to overrule them as future king, demonstrating not only his naivety towards the implications of his actions, but the social hierarchy still intact in spite of the miracle of the sword's removal from the stone.

Ector is characterised as highly aware of this social hierarchy, of the rights of feudal lords and barons, and this colours his interactions with Arthur following Arthur's removal of the sword from the stone. Entirely aware of the service he has done raising Arthur and the lack of his reward for this service hitherto, Ector manipulates Arthur's barely-realised power for his own future gain. Ector asks Arthur "woll ye be my good and gracious lord when ye are Kyng?", aware of the lands he can gain if Arthur consents to Ector serving him as his feudal lord, as well as the benefits that his son Kay can reap: "I will ask no more of yow but that ye wille make my sone, your foster broder Syr Kay, seceall of alle your landes". Ector emphasises Arthur's close relationship to Kay with the phrase 'your foster broder' to improve the likeliness of Arthur's appointing Kay to that position. Arthur's assent to both of Ector's requests demonstrates his generosity towards his now-subjects Ector and Kay, a quality highly valued in kingship in medieval literature. This assent is made before he, Ector and Kay even go to the Archbishop, emphasising Arthur agrees to grant Ector's requests of his own generous will and not just because it is his official duty as king to demonstrate generosity.

Despite Arthur being recognised as future king by Ector and the Archbishop it is far more arduous for Arthur to prove his worth to the barons called witness on each occasion Arthur pulls the sword from the stone for them. The prevailing reason for the barons' dissent is Arthur's doubtful status of noble birth, 'it was grete shame unto them all and the reame to be over-governyd with a boy of no hyghe blood borne'. Despite Arthur's ability to perform the miracle prophesised by Merlin 'for to shewe somme myracle who shold be rightwys kynge of this reame', the barons by right of their own definite high blood status hold the right to refuse Arthur's authority, God given by 'somme myracle' as it was. The barons' rejection of Arthur's kingly authority due to lack of proof regarding his noble birth demonstrates their value of blood before virtue and goodness. Arthur demonstrates these latter two qualities with his selflessness in granting Ector's requests and his lack of self-assertion after the miracle of pulling the sword from the stone.

This passage is also remarkable in examining Malory's representation of social nobility as 'the comyns' make a rare appearance, Malory's narrative of *Mort* otherwise mostly concerning itself with characters of noble birth. It is the 'comyns' who see the significance of the 'myracle' and demand Arthur for their king, 'We wille have Arthur unto our kyng'. The 'comyns' main function in this passage is to elevate Arthur into kingship with their unerring support. The 'comyns' are characterised only by their

plurality and their support for Arthur, whereas certain 'lordes' and 'knyghtes' in the passage are actually named and individuated by these names: 'Syr Bawdewyn of Bretayn, Syr Kaynes'. The 'comyns' function in the passage's narrative solely to help Arthur to kingship by their mass support.

Despite a slightly broader than usual depiction of social classes with Malory's inclusion of the 'comyns', the passage's overarching narrative still concerns itself with the importance of noble birth and legacy above all other attributes. The 'barons' and 'lordes' initially demonstrate this with their refusal to accept Arthur as king, but this preference for noble birth begins with Ector's statement to Arthur: 'I wote wel ye are of an higher blood than I wende ye were'. This refers not only to Arthur's nobility of actions but literally to his blood status as the son of King Uther Pendragon. When inviting witnesses for the final occasion on which Arthur pulls the sword from the stone, Merlyn is sure to invite 'suche knyghtes as Uther Pendragon loved best and moost trusted in his dayes', perhaps in the hope they will recognise something of the father in his son. When Arthur does ascend to the throne, his first task is to right 'grete wronges that were done syn the dethe of Kyng Uther'. Arthur, as new king, is already held to the standard his father set before him, although only Merlin knows Arthur's true paternity. Thus Malory presents kingship as a hereditary duty to fulfil the duties previous kings fulfilled, and becomes focused on these duties as opposed to the anticipation of change and awe the God-given supernatural 'miracle' of a prophecy on a sword in a stone might otherwise suggest.

Malory thus asserts Arthur's ascendancy to kingship in this passage as result of his noble birth above his other attributes. The importance of noble birth to kingship is emphasised by the barons' refusal of him as their king and Ector's comment 'I wote wel ye are of an hygher blood than I wende ye were', his assumption is that Arthur must be of noble birth to even be considered by the higher powers that govern the stone to be king. The inscription on the stone described prior to the passage emphasises it is the '*KYNGE BORNE* [my italics] OF ALL ENGLOND' who may pull the sword from the stone. It is Arthur's birth foremost, with the support of his father's 'moost trusted' knights, not a 'miracle', that ensures his kingship, despite the overwhelming support he later receives from 'the comyns', and people 'both ryche and poure'. The 'comyns' make up the numbers of Arthur's support, but the nobility recognised in him by Ector and his father's knights ensures he has any support for his ascendancy to kingship in the first place.