“Do thou thy warste, and I defyghe the!”: Mordred’s Rebellion Against Arthur and Malory in

*Le Morte Darthur*

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When Thomas Malory undertook to write a comprehensive English account of the legend of King Arthur, the task before him was by no means simply to copy, translate, and integrate the sources available to him. His sources indeed laid out the frame of the story, but they varied so greatly in form, tone, and factual details that it was up to Malory to decide what story to tell. Helen Cooper situates *Le Morte Darthur* in the fifteenth century’s trend away from metrical romances, which favored “reunion, reconciliation, the due succession of father by heir,” towards prose romances that commonly featured “[t]reachery and murder within the body politic or the kin group, the slaying of father by son, the failure to pass on good rule in a strong and righteous order of succession, and sometimes also incest” (819, 820). The new prevalence of such elements (all of which appear in *Le Morte Darthur*) suggests “that their authors found a new literary form in which to express a more realistic and bleaker view of the world they lived” (821). The precedent established by his sources only partly explains why Malory’s work fits this pattern so well; the rest is Malory’s own doing. Comparing *Le Morte Darthur* to its sources reveals that Malory’s work was not mechanical but required engaging with the legend from his own perspective and making choices about how to tell it.

Malory’s sources for the eighth and final book of *Le Morte Darthur*, commonly titled “The Death of Arthur,” were the Middle English poem known as the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and the Old French prose *La Mort le Roi Artu* (also known as the *Mort Artu*), the final section of the Vulgate Cycle. While most elements of the plot of “The Death of Arthur” can be directly traced to one or both of these sources, Malory’s retelling by no means lacks originality. One of the most common means by which Malory innovates is through words spoken or written by the characters that deepen their emotions,
motivations, and relationships. The heroes—Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, and Gawain—benefit from these innovations; Arthur’s traitorous son and nephew Mordred, however, misses out on character development. Malory does not attempt to portray a villain who is as human as the heroes. His innovations in the portrayal of Mordred instead have to do with increasing Mordred’s symbolic value as the personification of all things evil and unnatural. Yet the result of making Mordred so vague as a person is that it is possible for other interpretations to slip into the text. These alternate interpretations are what Frank Kermode has termed “secrets”: the elements of a text that most readers are inclined to ignore because they disrupt the “propriety” of the work (81, 83). Kermode proposes that in a text, “there will always be some inbuilt interpretation” which “will produce distortions, secrets to be inquired into by later interpretation” (83). Malory makes no secret of his book’s “inbuilt interpretation,” which, just as Kermode suggests, is often precisely the location of the “distortions” that point to other interpretations. “The Death of Arthur” is littered with signs of Kermodian secrets that challenge the image of Mordred that Malory’s highly tragic presentation of the end of the Arthurian legend requires. Mordred’s role within the story parallels his role as a piece of text manipulated by Malory: in the process of achieving his villainous potential to distort the proper order of Arthur’s kingdom and to sabotage the protagonists’ network of meaningful personal relationships, Mordred calls into question his portrayal in Le Morte Darthur, thereby exerting a subversive influence on Malory’s work.

To liberate these secrets, I will begin by discussing the reading that emerges if one reads intuitively, “expecting the satisfactions of closure and the receipt of a message” (Kermode 84). As a narrator Malory does not hold back in pushing certain interpretations
of the story he is telling, a narrative he inherits from previous authors but alters to support
his vision of the Arthurian legend. I will locate Mordred’s place in that vision by first
discussing Malory’s portrayal of the other main characters of “The Death of Arthur,”
especially in relation to the stanzaic Morte Arthur and the Mort Artu, before moving onto
the multitude of ways Malory crafts his portrayal of Mordred himself and the function he
makes Mordred fulfill. After this, I will turn to the elements of the text—again
emphasizing Malory’s relationship to the sources—that push back against the more
obvious interpretations.

Because Malory’s approach to rendering Mordred differs significantly from his
approach to the other major characters in “The Death of Arthur,” to understand Mordred
it is necessary to consider Malory’s portrayal of these other characters, namely Arthur,
Lancelot, Gawain, and to a lesser extent Guinevere, Bors, and Ector. These characters in
turn, like Mordred, can be best understood through an awareness of the changes Malory
makes to his sources. Of the sizeable passages in “The Death of Arthur” that have no
obvious analogue in either the stanzaic Morte Arthur or the Mort Artu, most consist
primarily of words spoken or written by characters. All of the aforementioned characters
are given significant additional dialogue except for Guinevere, who at least retains long
speeches from the sources and receives the author’s attention in other ways.¹ Mordred is
as much of an anomaly in this landscape of adaptation as he is within the story. Many of
the most significant innovations are passages of dialogue that draw attention to the
characters’ awareness of their (often conflicting) loyalties and their disintegrating

¹ Vinaver reproduces J. D. Bruce’s list of thirteen passages in “The Death of Arthur” that are
original to Malory (1618-9). Although he notes that some of these passages have potential
inspirations in the sources, none of them has a close analogue.
personal relationships. Inevitably, such innovations affect the portrayal of the catastrophe and as a result implicitly reflect on Mordred as one of its instigators.

A representative innovation in *Le Morte Darthur* is the dialogue between Arthur and Gawain after Lancelot massacres the knights that catch him in Guinevere’s room, including Gawain’s brother Agravaine. In the stanzaic poem (the source for the massacre of the knights), when Mordred, the sole survivor, brings Gawain and Arthur the news, Gawain only briefly mourns for Agravaine. Quickly “his herte began to colde” as he remembers that Agravaine ignored his warning that “Launcelot was so much of main / Against him was strong [difficult] to hold” (1915, 1918-9). Gawain experiences a phase of grief that ends when he decides that Agravaine sought his own death. His reaction merely prepares for the contrast with his devastation at the deaths of his brothers Gaheries and Gaheriet (Gaheris and Gareth) and reestablishes his acknowledgement of Lancelot’s prowess. It conveys no other information about the relationship between Lancelot and Gawain, which will soon undergo a sudden and spectacular deterioration. Arthur, meanwhile, speaks no lines, nor are his feelings even indicated. The stanzaic *Morte Arthur* by no means lacks the essence of tragedy: it depicts the “progression from prosperity or well-being to hardship or despair” (Whetter 87). It contains passages that convey deep emotions, such as Arthur’s reaction when Lancelot slaughters a second set of knights to save Guinevere from execution (1968-73), but Arthur and Gawain’s reception of Mordred’s bad news is not such a passage. The deaths of Agravaine and the other knights, for which Mordred is partly responsible, therefore lack a tragic coloring. Nor does this section lend great significance to the upcoming results of Mordred’s

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2 Unless otherwise noted, all my glosses of Middle English words are taken from the glosses in the Benson/Foster edition of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and the Norton Critical Edition of *Le Morte Darthur*. 
actions: the death of the knights at Guinevere’s execution and Gawain’s resulting enmity toward Lancelot. Because the deaths of Agravaine and his followers do not prompt much reflection from Arthur and Gawain on the relationships that make up Arthur’s circle, this event does not contribute greatly to the blame that attaches to Mordred.

At the same point in the narrative, Malory inserts copious dialogue that brings attention to the bonds of family and friendship acting on Arthur and Gawain. In Le Morte Darthur it is here that Arthur laments the loss of the “noble felyship of the Rounde Table,” whereas in the stanzaic poem he does not mourn the Round Table until Lancelot kills the knights attending Guinevere’s execution (Malory 654). In another departure from the source, Arthur is “sore amoved” by the conflict—enhanced by the repeated possessive pronoun—between his roles as king and husband: “I may nat with my worship but my queen muste suffir dethe” (654). This expression of affection adds Arthur and Guinevere to the list of relationships soured by Agravaine and Mordred. When Gawain urges Arthur not to kill Guinevere or Lancelot, Arthur reminds him, “ye have no cause to love [Lancelot]” for killing “thirtene noble knyghtes,” including his sons (a detail Malory invents, making Gawain’s loyalty to Lancelot all the more striking) and brother Agravaine, and nearly killing his half-brother Mordred (655). Arthur’s confusion reframes Gawain’s stance: it stems not only from blame for his brothers and sons but also from respect for Lancelot. Malory, in contrast to the stanzaic poet, portrays Gawain’s grief and his refusal to blame Lancelot as simultaneous: in one unbroken speech, Gawain admits that “[his family members’] dethis sore repentis [him]” but maintains that “they ar the causars of their owne dethe” (655, 656). By transferring the initial reaction to Mordred’s report to Arthur, Malory lets Arthur participate in the unfolding tragedy and
gives Gawain the opportunity to proclaim the strength of his affection for Lancelot. In addition, by elaborating on the friendship between Gawain and Lancelot, Malory prepares to make their upcoming feud more shocking. In these ways Malory infuses a familiar matiere with a distinct sen: more so than in the stanzaic Morte Arthur, the public loss of Arthur’s kingdom and its chivalry is surpassed in importance by the concomitant personal loss of meaningful relationships. The blame for all the grieving and feuding that occurs ultimately falls on Mordred’s shoulders as the surviving ringleader of the conspiracy against Lancelot.

Mordred, in contrast to the many people whose lives he ruins, has no chance to expound upon his motivations and his place in the network of relationships. His thoughts and personality remain obscure compared to those of the protagonists, but Malory has strategies for inserting meaning into his portrayal of Mordred that have nothing to do with Mordred’s own words or actions. For instance, “The Death of Arthur” opens with an original passage that establishes a precise setting in “May, whan every harte floryshyth and burgenyth”; the corresponding part of the stanzaic Morte Arthur takes place when “A time befell” (Malory 646, SMA 1672). This happy season will see the beginning of a “grete angur and unhap” that “stynted nat tylle the floure of chyvalry of alle the worlde was slayne” (Malory 646). Part of this passage’s function is to symbolize the summer of chivarly threatened by the approach of a figurative winter. But it has another element of significance: before the “unhap” has even begun, the narrator claims that “all was longe upon two unhappy knyghtis which were named Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred”

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3 These terms, which originate with Chrétien de Troyes, are translated by Eugène Vinaver roughly as “matter” and “spirit” (lxxix). Vinaver further defines sen as “the intellectual, emotional, and sometimes material content added by the author in accordance with his own interpretation of the original matter” (lxxx). The sen Malory brings to “The Death of Arthur” is a more deliberately tragic one than the “spirits” of his sources.
The connection of Mordred’s machinations with May, the symbol of the chivalry and general happiness that he will ruin, recalls an event from back in the first book: Merlin informed Arthur that “he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May Day” (39). The link between Mordred, May, and destruction originates at the beginning of Arthur’s reign. Mordred’s entrance onto Le Morte Darthur’s center stage corresponds with his entrance into the world, as if nature has designated the moment for him to intervene in the events of the court. The word “unhappy” similarly implies that Mordred’s role in the tragedy is out of his hands. Malory builds Mordred’s eventual destruction of the “floure of chyvalry” into him from the beginning and in doing so weaves Mordred together with fate and fortune: forces greater than himself, or indeed than any individual.

Part of what makes Mordred an effective villain, although not a psychologically deep one, is his tendency to survive against all odds. Like the May connection, this aspect of Mordred forms a link between his birth and infancy and “The Death of Arthur” and makes him resemble a symbol more than a character. Hearing Merlin’s prophecy, Arthur has all the newborn sons of lords and knights sent to sea in a ship that “was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up” (Malory 39). The intended victim is the only one to survive. Malory’s only known source for Arthur’s massacre of the May babies is the Suite de Merlin, which tells a vastly different story: after summoning the children to his court, Arthur considers killing them, but in a dream he is chastised him for this plot and told to set the boys adrift, trusting in Christ to protect them. Mordred, meanwhile, survives the wreck of the ship that was to carry him to Arthur’s court (Field 90-91). Malory’s rearrangement of these story elements endows
Mordred with seeming indestructibility; the cost is the blot on Arthur’s character. In addition to tainting Arthur with the inherent horror of infanticide, Malory cannot relate this story without casting the king as Herod and young Mordred as Jesus. This parallel was already present in the source, but Malory enhances it by showing Arthur following through with his murderous design. P. J. C. Field suggests that when Malory began *Le Morte Darthur*, he might have intended to focus more on retribution for sin, but he ultimately took his work in a different direction, thereby allowing Arthur to escape any consequences for this action (99-100). Malory attempts to mitigate these affects by displacing as much blame as possible from Arthur to Merlin, on whom “many putte the wyght … more than on Arthure,” although this information does not suffice to erase either the stain on Arthur or the biblical parallel (Malory 40).

Mordred’s life again comes full circle in his and Agravaine’s confrontation with Lancelot outside Guinevere’s bedroom. Lancelot “slew Sir Aggravayne—and anone aftir twelve of hys felowys … And also he wounded Sir Mordred, and therewithal he [Mordred] fled with all hys might” (651). The brevity of the narration gives the impression that the massacre happens quite quickly, as if Lancelot has no trouble cutting down one knight after another. Lancelot gets close enough to Mordred to wound him, yet Mordred manages to escape, which is impressive although not brave. The source for Mordred’s close call with Lancelot is the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, which begins late in Arthur’s reign and makes no mention of Mordred’s infancy, let alone anything like the

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4 Field’s essay “Malory’s Mordred and the *Morte Arthure*” asks why Malory, who usually adapts with a “strong moral thrust” and depicts Arthur as admirable, would deviate from his source to show Arthur committing such a horrible act (92). Field suggests that Malory had a second source for this episode: a lost, longer version of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Alternatively, Malory might have used only the *Suite* for the plot but borrowed Arthur’s “ruthless royal self-assertion” from the alliterative poem (100).
May massacre. The Vulgate Cycle, which predates the invention of the infant Mordred’s miraculous survival, does not specify whether Mordred participates in the ambush against Lancelot. Malory is thus the first to bring into one text these two striking instances of survival: one when Mordred is a baby, the other when he is up against the deadliest of Arthur’s knights. His Mordred defies the odds as well as his father’s kingship.

Mordred’s incredible ability to survive forms just one of piece his defining trait in *Le Morte Darthur*: he can be summed up in one word as anomalous. He is totally unnatural, beginning with his incestuous and adulterous conception. Karen Cherewatuk in “Royal Bastardy, Incest, and a Failed Dynasty” and Lisa Robeson in “Malory and the Death of Kings: The Politics of Regicide at Salisbury Plain” trace some of the ways Mordred represents a perversion of just about everything. Cherewatuk argues, “The ‘trouble’ Mordred will wreak has its roots in his incestuous conception” (110). She examines the serpentine imagery that Malory attaches to Mordred in two dreams of Arthur’s. The first dream occurs immediately after Arthur’s tryst with Morgause: “hym thought there was com into hys londe gryffens and serpentes … and they dud hym grete harme” (30). In the second dream, the night before he dies, Arthur falls from Fortune’s wheel into the water below “amonge the serpentes, and every beste toke hym by a lymme” (683). Cherewatuk notes that in the corresponding passage in the *Mort Artu* there are no serpents and the result of Arthur’s fall is merely that “he was broken to bits” (Cherewatuk 121, *From Camelot to Joyous Garde* 150). In these dreams—one right after Mordred’s conception, the other right before his death—“Malory consistently equates Mordred with the imagery of snakes and not with that of the dragon,” thereby “deny[ing] this incestuously conceived son association with the family emblem or name, Pendragon”
Malory’s refusal to associate Mordred with dragons is actually even more pointed than Cherewatuk makes it out to be: she does not mention the fact that in the dream in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, “dragons fele there lay unbound” in the water (3182). Malory makes use of snakes to represent the danger Mordred has posed to Arthur since his unnatural conception and to establish Mordred as an outsider, fundamentally different from his father.

It could almost be argued that Mordred’s predestined role as an enemy of the proper order of things is merely coincidental with, and not a consequence of, the improper circumstances of his conception, but there is one problem. When Merlin reveals to Arthur that Morgause is his sister, he prophesizes Mordred’s existence in a way that makes Mordred’s behavior difficult to separate from his birth: “[Y]e have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme … hit ys Goddis wylle that youre body sholde be punysshed for your fowle dedis” (Malory 32). This prophecy is why I take issue with Robeson’s claim that the “illegitimate direction of his will defines Mordred as much as or more than his illegitimate and incestuous birth” (145). While it is true that Mordred’s actions make him a villain, Merlin’s words prevent us from disentangling the two components of Mordred’s wrongness: his will and his birth. The specifics of “Goddis wylle” are not totally clear: is the destruction of “all the knyghtes of [Arthur’s] realme” part of Mordred’s purpose, or is it a side effect of Mordred’s existence? Regardless, if Mordred’s act of patricide is punishment for Arthur’s incest, Merlin implies that this act and all the actions that lead up to it, such as the usurpation, are a direct consequence of the sin Arthur committed. It
follows that the flaws in Mordred’s character, which he chooses to act upon, spring directly from the illegitimacy and, more importantly, the incestuous nature of his birth.

While I disagree with Robeson on this point, she makes valid arguments about how both Mordred and Arthur represent flawed models of kingship. Arthur is a case of weak kingship (a point to which I will return) and Mordred is a distortion of proper kingship. Together they distort the proper father-son relationship, and not only because they are simultaneously uncle and nephew. Given that Arthur considers Mordred a valid choice of steward, Robeson argues, Mordred might have inherited the throne legitimately as Arthur’s nephew, but his impatience reveals the “illegitimate direction of his will.”

The way Mordred attains the position of steward allows Malory to augment the treachery Mordred here commits. In the *Mort Artu*, Mordred volunteers to take care of Guinevere; in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, Arthur leaves the choice of steward up to his knights. In Malory’s version, Arthur independently decides to leave Mordred as ruler of the land and guardian of the queen, not because of Mordred’s aptitude for the position but “bycause Sir Mordred was Kynge Arthurs son” (672). This nepotism may not be the sign of a strong king, but it is at least a recognition on Arthur’s part that Mordred belongs to his family. As a result, Mordred’s betrayal of the trust Arthur placed in him is as much a crime against the family as against the throne. Essentially, Mordred’s approach to politics is to try to circumvent the prescribed processes, for “[s]ons do not succeed their fathers before the father is dead; this is as unnatural as the incest” (Robeson 145). Nor do they attempt to marry their fathers’ wives, but Mordred wishes to “wedde [Guinevere]—which was hys unclys wyff and hys fadirs wyff” and make his family tree even more warped
Malory allows Mordred a place in Arthur’s family only insofar as this familial bond emphasizes the difference between them and the son’s treachery.

Mordred seems to have a redeeming quality in his respect for the law, but even lawfulness is a form of perversion in him. Ryan Muckerheide has explored Malory’s use of real treason law in “Slander and Strife” (the beginning of “The Death of Arthur”). Malory uses legal terminology not present in either source: “While Arthur tells Agravain to catch Lancelot and Guinevere in the act in all three versions, only in Malory does Arthur specifically require ‘prevys’” before he will accept Agravaine’s claim (Muckerheide 66). Because the queen is one of the adulterers, the adultery is not just any act of treason but can be classified specifically as lèse-majesté, that is, “a crime that was injurious to the king himself” (Muckerheide 67). By Malory’s time this was a type of treason, but originally it was a separate crime, and one that was to be reported to the king immediately. To conceal the crime, even temporarily (as Mordred and Agravaine do), was to become an accomplice in the betrayal of the king. Thus, Mordred and Agravaine have the law on their side as they report and prove the affair, while the other brothers, who wish to conceal the affair, are legally in the wrong. (Muckerheide shows that Malory, ever nostalgic, incorporates real, though slightly outdated, English treason law, so it is not a stretch to apply laws originating in the twelfth century to the “early medieval”—although highly anachronistic—setting.) “Why, then, give the villains the support of the law and portray the heroes as accomplices to treason?” (Muckerheide 67). The answer has to do with the relative importance of the law. While Malory surely does not wish to assert that the law does not matter, it in itself is not his highest priority. That honor belongs to the fellowship of the Round Table; this, not the adultery itself, is what
Gawain, Gaheris, and Gareth defend by opposing their brothers’ actions. Gawain gives voice to this point of view in his warning that, should it come to war, “there woll many kynges and grete lordis holde with Sir Launcelot” (646). By nevertheless supporting Agravaine, Mordred deliberately chooses the law over peace and fellowship.

The appeals to the law, which provide some justification for Agravaine and Mordred even if their priorities are ultimately wrong, come only from Agravaine. Malory follows the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* in having Agravaine do all the talking with Arthur. In the poem, Mordred does not say a single word until after Agravaine’s death. In *Le Morte Darthur*, he speaks only thrice during that time, and only once not in unison with Agravaine: when Gareth and Gaheris refuse to side with Agravaine, Mordred says “Than woll I!” (646). Agravaine, not Mordred, tells Arthur that as his “syster-sunnes, [they] may suffir [the adultery] no lenger” and that Arthur “shulde be above Sir Launcelot” (647). The full redemptive potential of this speech belongs to Agravaine alone and only touches Mordred through association. This is completely different from the *Mort Artu*, in which Mordred gives perhaps the most thorough defense of his and Agravaine’s actions in any of the three texts:

> Sir, we kept it from you as long as we could, but now the truth must out and we must tell you. Insofar as we have concealed it from you, we have been perjured and disloyal toward you. Now we acquit ourselves of our duty. We tell you with certainty that such is the truth. Now consider how this shame is to be avenged.

*(FCTJG 74)*

In *Le Morte Darthur* Agravaine marvels only to his brothers, and not to Arthur, that they “be nat ashamed bothe to se and to know how Sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and
nyghtly by the Quene” (646). Malory does not replicate the confession of the stanzaic poem’s Agravaine to Arthur that “we have false and traitours been,” thereby making Agravaine a little less sympathetic than he might have been (1734). More importantly, he omits Mordred’s fairly redeeming moment of honesty in the French text. Mordred is technically on the side of the law, but by following it to the letter, he misses the big picture. Furthermore, he and Agravain may not even be correct in their accusation. The Mort Artu and stanzaic Morte Arthur depict Lancelot and Guinevere in bed together when Agravaine’s band arrives, but Malory refuses to specify what the alleged adulterers are doing: “And whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make no mencion” (649). Although Malory does not provide serious grounds for suspecting that they were actually “at other maner of disportis,” he tries, unlike the sources, to create the possibility of their innocence. The law should be a way to keep Arthur’s society in the best condition possible, but in Mordred’s hands it becomes the cause of needless hatred and violence.

Although betrayal, civil war, and unstable kingship had been part of the Arthurian legend for hundreds of years by the time Malory began his work, they would have had special resonance for him as a witness to the Wars of the Roses. Helen Cooper writes that instead of “moral and religious shortcomings,” the downfall of the Round Table is “the splitting of the kingdom into viciously hostile magnate affinities in a manner analogous to [Malory’s] own age” (826). Field regards with skepticism other critics’ attempts to read contemporary political commentary into Le Morte Darthur by looking for oblique endorsement or condemnation of York or Lancaster; he argues that most of the parallels to Malory’s time are probably coincidental (48). Still, even Field finds it credible that,
intentionally or not, Malory allowed his political environment to influence his version of the legend. These influences are not parallels to particular people and events so much as general reflections on the state of England by a “disconsolate Englishman of no party” (Field 66). For example, one of Field’s contenders for a passage influenced by historical events is the list of counties that support Mordred’s rebellion (Malory 683). Field is skeptical of Vinaver’s claim that this list corresponds to bases of Yorkist sentiment, but suggests another explanation relevant to the Wars of the Roses: the key, he suggests, is a passage in the stanzaic poem in which Mordred and his followers “for-sette the see on ylke side [of Dover]” (3046). Memory of this passage may have caused Malory, already “concerned over the way the civil war divides his country,” to move from the “social division” between Mordred’s supporters and Arthur’s toward “geographic division” of the country by listing six counties clustered around Dover as bases of Mordred’s power (Field 68). Whether or not Malory had this line of the stanzaic poem in mind, by designating an entire geographical region of England as complicit in Mordred’s treachery, Malory matches on a large scale the fragmentation of society into discrete factions.

Field also finds it plausible that Malory consciously innovated with his own time in mind when he decided that Mordred should use cannons. After Mordred seizes the throne and announces his intent to marry Guinevere, the queen barricades herself in the Tower of London, at which point Mordred “was passynge wrothe oute of mesure” and “threw engynnes [siege engines such as catapults] unto [the inhabitants of the Tower], and shotte grete gunnes” (679). Anachronism (for example, the existence of the Tower of London) is nothing unusual in Le Morte Darthur nor in its sources, but the “grete
gunnes” are another matter, for the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* arms Mordred only with “many a showr [of arrows]” and the *Mort Artu* only with “siege engines” (*SMA 3000, FCTJG* 119). In 1460 the Yorkists used cannon against the Tower for the first time—and, when Malory was writing “The Death of Arthur,” the only time—in an attack on the Lancastrian garrison (Field 65). By giving Mordred’s attack “something of the concrete reality of a vividly remembered event of the civil war,” Malory brings the narrative out of the past and into the troubled and unromantic present. As Mordred attacks the walls of the Tower, he also attacks the fantasy of a noble past in which knights fought fairly and for honorable ends.

Malory’s innovations pertaining to Mordred sometimes come from the mouths of other characters, thereby establishing Mordred’s position with respect to the social web surrounding Arthur. In the lines of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* that narrate Gawain’s argument with Agravaine and Agravaine’s confrontation of Arthur, the only appearance of Mordred’s name is when the narrator, setting the scene, mentions that “Mordred, that mikel couthe of wrake” is present (1675). This ominous introduction gives a sinister feeling to Mordred’s ensuing invisibility in the text. Malory too keeps Mordred in the background, subordinate to Agravaine, but pays a little more attention to him than the poem. When Mordred declares his intent to side with Agravaine, Gawain responds that he believes Mordred: “for ever unto all unhappynes, sir, ye woll graunte” (646). Lancelot, after his banishment, expresses a similar opinion on Mordred: he fears to leave Arthur defenseless against Mordred, who “ys passyng envyous and applyeth hym muche to

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5 “Wrake” is a word that, according to the *Dictionary of Middle English*, comprises just about every kind of harm a person can inflict: its definitions include “revenge,” “annihilation,” “injury” “misery,” “sin.” This line from the *Morte Arthur* is listed as an example of the sixth definition: “Hostility, enmity, strife, discord; also, anger.”
trouble” (671). Malory transfers the comment on Mordred’s propensity for troublemaking from the narration to these two moments in dialogue (Gawain’s statement is closer to the stanzaic line in placement while Lancelot’s is closer in content). His choice to put such similar judgments of the villain into these two characters’ mouths connects Lancelot and Gawain. This connection is comparable to a repeated line in the stanzaic Morte Arthur that describes each character at different times, “kyd [proved] he coude [knew] of werre” (referring to Gawain at 2751 and to Lancelot at 2892) about which K. S. Whetter writes, “This unity of description serves not only to recall their previous unity of friendship, but also to suggest that Gawayne … is not that far removed from Launcelot” (98). Malory achieves the same effect by allowing Lancelot and Gawain to speak for themselves. It is due to Mordred’s actions that these similar-minded men are at odds, yet as a common enemy he brings out the affinity between them. Mordred’s function of disrupting the proper order and instigating conflict facilitates Malory’s exploration of other characters, but not so much of Mordred himself.

Finally, Malory greatly abbreviates an episode that, in the stanzaic source, reveals aspects of Mordred that are manifest nowhere else in the poem or in Le Morte Darthur: the arrangement of the meeting on Salisbury Plain, which turns into a battle. The stanzaic Morte Arthur draws out the process, focusing its narration on Mordred, not Arthur. Initially, Mordred refuses to meet with Arthur and swears (rather heavy-handedly) “by Judas” that Arthur will hold to his promise of battle (3250). His insistence that what Arthur “hath hight [promised] he shall it hold” anticipates the value Malory’s Mordred will place on obeying the rules; in neither text does Mordred’s treachery preclude some kind of code, even if he does not hold himself to identical standards (3252). Hearing
Arthur’s offer to make him his heir, Mordred becomes willing to “talk togeder with good entent” (3269). His professed capacity for goodwill towards Arthur increases from there: if Arthur will make Mordred his heir and immediately give him Kent and Cornwall, “Trewe love shall there leng and lende [stay and reside]” between them; otherwise, there will be a battle (3276). Malory simply states the terms on which Arthur and Mordred agree and the plan that “Kynge Arthure and Sir Mordred shulde mete betwyxte bothe their ostis”; apparently there is no difficulty on either end (684). Certainly, Mordred’s willingness to negotiate in the poem stems from his ambition, and the invocation of Judas overshadows the whole passage, but he displays both a measure of principle and the potential for reconciliation with his father. Le Morte Darthur, while it lacks the last-minute reminder than this character is so morally corrupt that he would swear by Judas, also lacks any evidence of Mordred’s capacity for achieving a harmonious conclusion to the conflict with Arthur.

However, having enumerated the villainous aspects of Mordred, we must turn to the other side of his character and take note of the opportunities Malory leaves for other interpretations to emerge. It will be valuable to provide another of Kermode’s definitions of “secrets”: “material that is less manifestly under the control of authority, less easily subordinated to ‘clearness and effect,’ more palpably the enemy of order, of interpretative consensus, of message” (83). There is a strong association in “The Death of Arthur” between such material and the character of Mordred, who is himself “the enemy of order” and not “under the control of authority.” As Mordred provides an alternative to Arthur’s reign, the secrets that gather around him represent alternate possibilities for the text. Field’s suggestion that Malory might once have intended for Arthur to face retribution for
the May massacre casts light on one such potential secret, if a relatively conspicuous one: by depicting Arthur a villainous role and neglecting to follow up on it, Malory produced material at odds with the “inbuilt interpretation” in which Arthur is the “moste kynge and nobelyst knyght” (680). The textual secrets of *Le Morte Darthur* suggest an alternate text in which the contrast between the noble Arthur and the villainous Mordred is not as sharp as Malory needs it to be. Malory does not present Arthur as perfect—after all, he enables Agravaine and Mordred’s troublemaking—but Mordred receives far more blame than anyone else from the characters and the author, perhaps more than he deserves.

As with the straightforward reading of Mordred’s character, the alternative interpretations frequently appear in the words of the narrator and other characters, or indeed from the very fact that so much of his character is established externally. For an example we may return to the transference of “Mordred, that mikel couthe of wrake” from the narration to the dialogue. I do not doubt that Gawain and Lancelot have a good grasp of Mordred’s character, but because they do not speak from an omniscient perspective, their words carry less weight than narration would (which is not to say that statements made by a narrator are beyond questioning). The frequent removal of references to Mordred’s thoughts, feelings, and words make him a blank slate, consistently difficult to pin down as good or bad. The stanzaic *Morte Arthur* occasionally specifies what Mordred is feeling or thinking, as in his battle against Arthur at Barlam Down. He “cometh glad and gay” to the battle and is “full of sorrow and care” when Arthur wins (3100, 3118). Of course it does not reflect well on him that he is glad to war with his father and king, but at least it is an emotion; and “sorrow and care” might even induce sympathy. Malory deals with the whole Barlam Down battle in a few sentences
and does not insert many references to Mordred’s interiority to counteract these
omissions. As a result, Arthur seems to be up against an abstract challenge rather than a
fellow man; on the other hand, by giving no indication of Mordred’s thoughts, Malory
leaves open the possibility that those thoughts are not evil. Absences of information that
the reader can fill in a variety of ways constitute Kermodian aspects to *Le Morte Darthur*,
pushing back against the interpretation Malory pushes.

In order to believe the reading I laid out in the first half of this essay, the reader
must frequently take Malory’s word concerning matters of interpretation and *matiere.*
Malory’s vague approach to Mordred is a double-edged sword. By seldom granting
Mordred interiority, thereby avoiding the risk of validating his point of view, Malory
succeeds in portraying him as less human than the other characters; the downside is that
he sacrifices the possibility of establishing Mordred as an evil *person* in convincing ways.
His explanation for Mordred’s involvement in Agrawaine’s plot is that both brothers “had
ever a prevy hate unto” Guinevere and Lancelot, the cause of which is not indicated
beyond their jealousy for Lancelot’s prowess and status (646). There is, however, an
answer embedded in the text that can be easily dug out: “hit ys shamefully suffird of us
all that we shulde suffir so noble a kynge as Kynge Arthur ys to be shamed,” says
Agravaine (646). I see no reason not to take Agravaine at his word here. Mordred, given
his usurpation, probably does not share Agravaine’s opinion of Arthur, but his opinion of
the law is a different matter. Malory neither states nor shows that Mordred’s disapproval
of the crime of treason does not originate from a genuine desire for a law-abiding society,
even if he has to break the law to achieve it.
Mordred’s reign as king is the context for statements by the narrator for which, upon closer inspection, the text lacks a firm basis. It is supposedly “a myschyff” that the people of England “myght nat … holde them contente with [Arthur],” which implies that their fondness for Mordred itself is wrong (Malory 680). While none of the texts provide details about Mordred’s reign outside of his conflict with Arthur, his pursuit of Guinevere, and his attraction of allies, Malory makes a deviation from the sources that leaves more space for ambiguity about what kind of king he is. Before Mordred’s usurpation, the stanzaic poem depicts him giving “grete giftes” to people who then say that “with him was joy and wele, / And in Arthurs time but sorrow and wo” (2963, 2964-65). Only after establishing this support does Mordred fake Arthur’s death. Malory retains the popular approval of Mordred with similar phrasing: the subjects say that “with Kynge Arthur was nerver othir lyff but warre and stryff, and with Sir Mordrede was grete joy and blysse” (680). But the context is different: Mordred’s treachery is already known and Arthur is on his way back from France. The people praising Mordred, who have had more time than their counterparts in the poem to judge him, intend to fight for him against Arthur. These facts alone give the popular opinion more credibility in Le Morte Darthur than in the stanzaic poem. Perhaps Malory wanted to enhance the betrayal of Arthur by his subjects by having them stand not only with Mordred but also against the rightful king. If so, he made a very strange choice in removing any reference to bribery. In any case, the Kermodian secret here is the absence of information refuting Mordred’s subjects’ praise and supporting the narrator’s judgment. Consequently, the picture that emerges of Malory’s antagonist threatens the text itself.

6 The Mort Artu too shows Mordred gaining support through bribery before he fabricates the report of Arthur’s death (FCTJG 114).
Malory uses the English people’s lack of loyalty as an excuse for an aside, nonexistent in the sources, alleging that this vice is practically an English tradition, but again, the facts do not align with the editorializing. Put another way, the matiere does not support the sen. Arthur, Malory states, “was the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and most loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes—and by hym they all were upholdyn,” so only the “new-fangill” nature of the English can explain why they would not “holde them contente with hym” (680). He subtly shifts from speaking about Arthur’s knights to speaking about his subjects in general. Malory attempts to justify his judgment by establishing a reason for loyalty to Arthur, also unmatched in the sources: Mordred’s supporters include people whom Arthur “had brought up of nought” (680). This detail paints Arthur as a king whose reign benefited his people, but “The Death of Arthur” abounds with evidence capable of explaining his subjects’ betrayal.

By the end of his reign, Arthur lacks the backbone and/or prudence to maintain his position above his advisors. Lisa Robeson draws parallels between Arthur’s kingship at different stages and the reigns of historical kings in recent memory. Whereas the young King Arthur resembled Henry V (1413-1422) and Edward VI (1461-1470, 1471-1483) for his ability to control his vassals and channel their strength for politically sound ends, the old Arthur resembles Henry VI (1422-1461, 1470-1471), who suffered from “the lack of a strong executive will that failed to transform counsel into policy that would benefit the commonweal” and whom Edward deposed (Robeson 139). A good king should not ignore counsel, but he should respond to it wisely, which Arthur does not do in “The Death of Arthur.” Robeson points to Gawain’s ability to rope Arthur into a needless war against Lancelot, with the result that the “counselor, not the sovereign, speaks for the
crown” (138). Once Arthur comes to regret going to war, instead of overriding Gawain’s will he can merely lament, in a line lifted directly from the stanzaic poem, “alas, that ever yet thys warre began!” (Malory 663, SMA 2204-05). Furthermore, before Gareth’s death, when Gawain was still a voice of reason, Arthur ignored his advice to pardon Guinevere and Lancelot in favor of the ruthlessness of Agrawaine and Mordred. Since Arthur practically seems compelled to heed whoever gives him the worst advice, the people’s preference for Mordred could not be written off as pure fickleness or venality even if Mordred’s bribery were retained. Malory’s indictment of English fickleness dodges the complaints Englishmen outside of Arthur’s inner circle might have against him and the valid appeal Mordred might possess. If Mordred is set up as Arthur’s opposite in that Arthur is “the moste kynge and nobelyst knight” while Mordred threatens everything Arthur has built, then by inserting these weaknesses into his depiction of Arthur, Malory transfers some positive value to Mordred as an alternative to Arthur. This effect is the other side of the phenomenon by which the more sympathetic portrayal of the other characters reflects badly on Mordred.

Although Mordred and Arthur are clearly contrasted in many ways, hints of similarities emerge as the end of the text approaches. Malory diverges from the stanzaic Morte Arthur by eliminating almost all of the dialogue that leads up to the meeting at Salisbury, as I mentioned earlier, but he resumes the use of dialogue to relate the similar instructions that Arthur and Mordred each give their knights. While in the poem the gist of the command (if you see someone drawing a weapon, fight) is the same on each side, the phrasing has little in common. In Le Morte Darthur, however, Arthur’s command to “sle that traytoure Sir Mordred, for I in no wyse truste hym” immediately finds an echo in
Mordred’s command to “sle all that ever before you stondyth, for in no wyse I woll nat trust for thys tretyse” (684). The differences are nearly negligible: in singling out Mordred, Arthur can hardly be taken to imply that his knights should not try to kill any one of Mordred’s knights who “before [them] stondyth,” while Mordred’s mistrust of the treaty requires a mistrust of Arthur himself. The parallel phrasing clears the way for deeper parallels to emerge: Mordred and Arthur have similar views of each other and strategize in similar ways. It also recalls an earlier instance of two (temporarily) antagonistic characters voicing like thoughts: Gawain and Lancelot’s condemnations—different in phrasing but close in content—of Mordred’s personality. The comparison is not perfect, for Gawain and Lancelot had a common enemy who brought out this unity between them, whereas in Arthur and Mordred’s more complicated situation, their unity emerges due to their conflict with each other. But the point is that any hint of unity challenges the reading in which Mordred is no more than Arthur’s foil and bane.

Mordred’s warning to his army provides another serious complication to the interpretation in which he is limited to a symbol of perversion and evil. In both the stanzaic Morte Arthur and Le Morte Darthur, Mordred fears retribution from Arthur in the form of a betrayal of the truce. In the former text, his reasoning is thus: “I wot that Arthur is full wo / That he hath thus his landes lorn” (3330-31). Malory’s Mordred expresses the same information with phrasing that carries quite a different implicit meaning: “for I know well my fadir woll be avenged uppon me” (684). The earlier text focuses on the cause of Arthur’s anger and does not mention the target of that anger. First, Malory reverses it: Mordred is concerned with the fact, not the cause, of Arthur’s vengefulness. Second, the object of Arthur’s vengefulness, which Malory could have
followed the source in leaving implicit, is now the endpoint of the sentence. Third, “Arthur” becomes “my fadir.” Mordred never once refers to Arthur as “father” in the stanzaic poem, nor has he done so previously in *Le Morte Darthur*. It is a moment that cannot be simply attributed to the greater attention paid to Mordred, for the source gives him as much attention without such a note of pathos. While Malory’s approach to rendering Mordred—maximizing villainy while minimizing sympathetic qualities—inevitably leaves the door open for secrets to creep into the text, this is not that inevitable kind of secret, for the rest of this passage does not differ greatly from the source.

Another strangely kind innovation is Malory’s adjustment of the incident with the snake, which sparks the final battle on Salisbury Plain, from its source, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Arthur has just negotiated a truce with Mordred (which would have bought time to wait for Lancelot to arrive and help) when a snake in the grass bites a knight, who draws his sword to kill it. Arthur and Mordred have both instructed their men to attack at the first sign of treason, so, in the poem, “When Arthur party saw that sight, / Freely they togeder sought” (3346-47). Therefore the man who drew the sword must have been on Mordred’s side. Although Malory has previously associated Mordred with snakes, he leaves the knight’s allegiance ambiguous: “both ostis dressed hem togydirs” (685). It would have been easy to align Mordred, however loosely, with treason once more and to divide him and Arthur in yet another way by specifying that Arthur’s party initiated the fighting, yet Malory avoids distinguishing between the two of them at the moment when their attempt at peace fails. Once again, the text only superficially maintains the pretense that Mordred is no more than a symbol for evil, while another possibility—that father and son could have reconciled—peers through the cracks in this “inbuilt interpretation.”
The cyclical nature of Mordred’s life appears one more time when the war and strife that began with him now end where they began. The final relationship to be tainted by violence is that between the father/uncle/king and his son/nephew/usurper. Yet some of the narration’s least hostile moments with respect to Mordred occur during the climax of “The Death of Arthur.” To some extent this is the inevitable consequence of the mere amount of attention Mordred receives, but there is nothing inevitable about the fact that Mordred, who ran away from Lancelot, now acquits himself impressively in battle, emerging for at least the third time as the only survivor (on his side), this time through might, not self-preservation. The relationship between Arthur and Mordred becomes even less one of opposites and even more like mirror images. Arthur, as anyone would expect, “ded full nobely, as a noble kynge shulde … And Sir Mordred ded hys devoure [duty] that day and put hymselffe in grete perell” (685). This parallel provides another glimpse as if into an alternate reality in which these two, who are not as different as they once seemed, are allies as father and son should be, not mortal enemies. The Mort Artu kindly calls Mordred “a good knight and bold,” but all the stanzaic poem (which Malory follows more closely for relating the battle than he does the Mort Artu)\(^7\) has to say about their way of fighting is that Mordred rides “boldly” and Arthur “of batail never blanne [ceased]” (FCTJG 159, SMA 3361, 3364). Malory adds the details and parallelism through which the secrets rise closer to the surface.

While some aspects of Mordred’s final confrontation with Arthur and his death are more congruent thematically with the first reading I laid out than with the more sympathetic reading, I believe that discussion of this moment would be out of place anywhere other than the end of this essay. In all three texts, Arthur, having lost all but

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\(^7\) Vinaver 1650.
two of his knights, rushes and mortally wounds Mordred, who in return gives Arthur a deadly blow just before dropping dead. In the *Mort Artu*, Arthur bewails his general loss of “earthly glory,” but frames his attack upon Mordred only as vengeance for Sir Sagremor, not as retribution for all Mordred’s evils: “To avenge that blow, I vow to God that here Mordred or I must die” (161). The stanzaic poem takes the devastation further: whereas about three hundred people still stood in the *Mort Artu*, here “nought / That ever sterred with blood or bone” is alive but “Arthur and two that he thider brought” (Lucan and Bedivere) and Mordred (3380-81, 3382). Arthur then says to his companions, “Shall we not bring this thef to ground?” and instantly rushes forward to do so (3389). Mordred is most literally a “thef” because he is a usurper, but the word might also refer to his “theft” of lives, peace, and happiness. Malory makes it clear that Arthur kills Mordred with all of his son’s crimes in mind. He conveys the devastation caused by the battle from the perspective of Arthur, who is “wode wroth oute of mesure” when he “loked aboute hym and cowde se no m o of all hys oste and good knyghtes leffte no mo on lyve” but Lucan and Bedivere (684). “Now gyff me my speare,” he commands Lucan, “for yonder I have aspyed the traytoure that all thyss woo hath wrought” (685). Of course, “thys woo” was also “wrought” by Lancelot, Guinevere, Gawain, Agravaine, and Arthur himself, but Mordred is the most convenient scapegoat, and putting “all” the blame on him allows Arthur to justify his reckless vengeance.

Arthur’s anger at Mordred shows the commendable love he felt for his knights, but it also shows the same lack of prudence that allowed Mordred to steal his throne. In the sources, the surviving knights do not intervene as Arthur attacks Mordred, but in *Le Morte Darthur* Lucan tries to persuade Arthur to “latte hym be … for he ys unhappy”
He goes on to say that Arthur, having won the battle, can now get revenge on the traitor without risking his own life, but his initial words sound almost compassionate, especially “unhappy.” Where “defeated” would have worked, Lucan instead chooses an adjective that has “the sense of being doomed to misfortune, almost accursed” (Cooper 829). Indeed, the image of Mordred “leanyng uppon hys swerde amonc a grete hepe of dede men” turns Mordred’s propensity for survival into something to be pitied (Malory 685). It also suggests that he knows that he has lost. Despite the fact that he would still have his throne and his knights if he had heeded Gawain’s advice “nat to be over hasty” in condemning Guinevere and Lancelot, Arthur rejects Lucan’s similar advice (also rejecting the advice of the dead Gawain, who warned him in a dream that if he fought Mordred he would die) and runs at Mordred, yelling, “Traytoure, now ys thy dethe-day com!” (685). By addressing Mordred as “Traytoure,” Arthur subtly acknowledges the bond of loyalty he and his son should have shared; nevertheless, he blames Mordred, and Mordred alone, for shattering that bond and sets his heart on retribution. Arthur’s refusal to see Lucan’s very reasonable point of view makes his insistence on punishing Mordred look more imprudent—and heartless—than in the sources. Their final clash is not between good and evil but between two flawed, earthly men.

One of Malory’s most surprising—not to mention disturbing—innovations with respect to Mordred concerns the manner of Mordred’s death. In the Mort Artu Mordred merely turns to meet Arthur; the stanzaic Morte Arthur does not mention his reaction to Arthur’s approach at all. In Le Morte Darthur, however, he “ran untyll [Arthur] with hys swerde drawyn in hys honde” (686). Malory alone gives the ensuing gory details: pierced all the way through his body by Arthur’s spear and knowing his death is moments away,
Mordred “threste hymselff with the might that he had upp to the burre of Kyng Arthurs speare” and strikes Arthur in the head with his sword (686). Mordred’s death entails patricide, regicide, and an extremely disturbing level of commitment, yet it is also courageous and, in a twisted way, even admirable. The only instance of “dual identification” of Arthur as both Mordred’s father and his king is at the moment of patricide/regicide: “he smote hys fadir, Kynge Arthure, with hys swerde” (Cooper 829, Malory 686). Killing one’s father or one’s king is bad enough; doing both at once is unthinkable. But filicide is no better than patricide, and Arthur wounded Mordred first. In evaluating the significance of Arthur and Mordred’s deaths, it is also necessary to remember Merlin’s prophecy shortly after Mordred’s conception: “hit ys Goddis wylle that youre body sholde be punysshed for your fowle dedis” (Malory 32). Whatever sinful things Mordred embodies, he dies fulfilling divine will, as well as enacting his own vengeance on the father who would have killed his infant son to avert a prophecy.

Mordred’s death sums up his whole role in *Le Morte Darthur*: he is depraved and admirable, a traitor and an avenger, a villain and a victim, and defiant of authority—Arthur’s, Malory’s, or anyone’s—to the last.

Having reached the subject of Mordred’s defiance of authority, I will conclude by mentioning one more event in “The Death of Arthur.” During Mordred’s assault on the Tower, the Bishop of Canterbury threatens him with excommunication if he does not show respect for his father, stepmother, and God. “Do thou thy warste,” seye Sir Mordred, “and I defyghe the!” (Malory 679). His scorn for the Bishop is consonant with his treachery against both Arthur and Malory. Mordred defies societal custom with his birth; probability with his tendency to survive; paternal and regal authority with his
usurpation and slaying of Arthur; the reader’s attempt to understand him with his ambiguity; and Malory’s design with the “secrets” he harbors. All kinds of elements of Le Morte Darthur converge to set Mordred apart from everyone else, whether by minimizing his semblance of humanity, maximizing his villainy, or simply overlooking him. He bears the weight not only of his own actions but also of Arthur’s incest, adultery, and weak leadership, Lancelot and Guinevere’s adultery, Gawain’s relentlessness, Agravaine’s conniving, and so on. Mordred incorporates all the harmful forces lurking in his father’s kingdom. For the most part, the resulting character is out of place among the major players in the legend. Malory’s priority with Mordred is not to fit him in as an equal, if not equally virtuous, member of the web of human beings around whose personal and interpersonal tragedies “The Death of Arthur” revolves. Rather, he adapts his sources in such a way that Mordred more than any of the other characters reads like a tool of the author, who crafts him to precipitate and magnify the tragedy, not to share in it. Yet this reading is only half the story, thanks to the textual secrets that attach to Mordred. In this way, Mordred is Malory’s enemy as well as Arthur’s. But from another perspective, the parallel between his roles in the different levels of the text vindicates the prophetic judgments of Mordred made by Gawain and Lancelot: Malory really did craft a character who lives to make trouble. Mordred is as dangerous for Malory’s text as he is for Arthur’s kingdom, and Le Morte Darthur is richer for it.
Bibliography


