

# A flawed code: chivalric ideals in morte d'arthur



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Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* explores chivalric ideals in the late Middle Ages through the actions of King Arthur and the rest of his knights. Through his exploration of chivalry, however, he also explores the problems that arise from having such a strict code of conduct based on honor and unflinching loyalty to oaths. *Morte D'Arthur* does so by addressing the removal of autonomy and the damage of interpersonal relationships, and rather than presenting solutions to these problems, it explains that the best way to resolve issues caused by chivalry is to forgive infractions caused by chivalric code.

*Morte Darthur* addresses the removal of personal choice and the toxic obligation to authority that stems from chivalric codes. Chivalric codes in the time of Malory created unbreakable oaths between men and their rulers, and between individual knights, that could result in unspeakable violence. When Mordred and Arthur's armies meet on the battlefield, the two sides could have come to a truce and walked away unharmed. As the two sides swear oaths that "ye say any manner of sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely, and so slay all that ever before you standeth" (492), however, countless men are murdered simply because a man "drew his sword to slay the adder" (492) who bit him, because no one stops to ask why a sword was been drawn or to try to understand the situation better: the oaths caused by chivalry force the men into blind, bloody obedience. A similar situation occurs when Lancelot accidentally kills two unarmed men in the tournament for Guinevere's life; although Gawain views Lancelot as his friend and "may never believe that Sir Lancelot slew my brethren" (489), the chivalric codes that determine vendettas and blood feuds drive him to "seek Sir Lancelot

throughout seven realms, but I shall slay him" (490). This will cause additional violence to people that Gawain cares for, and will eventually end with his own death, but any choice Gawain may have had is taken away because his actions are dictated by the vendetta-infused honor code of chivalry. Arthur laments that the death of Gaheris and Gareth will cause "the greatest mortal war that ever was" (489), as war will be waged against Lancelot by Gawain and, by obligation, Arthur, until "I have destroyed Sir Lancelot's kin and himself both, other else he to destroy me" (489). Arthur has no wish to kill his friend and start this horrific cycle of violence, but chivalry binds him to a rigid set of codes that dictate his actions and take away his choices.

This system of unwavering oaths leads to unspeakable violence. The final battle between Arthur and Mordred is described as being "more dolefuller [than all others] in Christian land" (492), and the fighting doesn't stop until "an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down" (492), and Arthur is too enraged to continue. Rather than stopping the battle once it became clear that neither side would win, or even stopping to question why a sword had been drawn in the first place, the oaths caused by chivalry force the two armies to fight until continuing on is physically impossible. Arthur is also bound by honor to punish Lancelot and Guinevere harshly after learning of the affair: while Lancelot is his friend and he says that "my heart was never so heavy as it is now" (489) at the thought of having to punish him, chivalry dictates how he must act in light of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. Arthur's feelings mean nothing; he must instead act based on a toxic set of regulations set in place for knights and rulers.

Chivalry distorts interpersonal relationships because of honor and duty.

There is still friendship between Lancelot and Arthur, as Arthur laments that he is “sorrer for my good knights’ loss than for the loss of my fair queen” (489), and Arthur ultimately blames Agravain and Mordred for what has happened and says that they “haddest unto Sir Lancelot hath caused all this sorrow” (489). He himself harbors little personal hatred for Lancelot, but his obligation to chivalry destroys their friendship by dictating Arthur’s actions. Codes of honor also repel Guinevere from Lancelot: following Arthur’s death, the guilt that Guinevere feels for being unfaithful to her husband prevents her from ever seeking out Lancelot again. She “enters a convent at Amesbury” and “commands him never to see her again” (496), and drives him to life in a monastery as well. The two of them are separated for the rest of their lives even though they could have happily reconciled. Arthur is also forced to make his personal life public as a result of the honor codes that dictate his society. After Lancelot and Guinevere are found to have been having an affair, he’s forced to publicly address the scandal, and in doing so he damages his relationships with both of them. While the matter of an affair is one that could have been dealt with quietly between three people, *Morte D’Arthur* addresses the implications of chivalric codes turning personal matters into public ones and forcing people to feel that their interpersonal relationships are dictated by codes of honor.

Chivalry creates a hierarchy that forces people to feel inferior to those society deems superior. Following the deaths of Arthur and Guinevere, Lancelot feels that he can’t mourn them properly as his friends and people he cared about, and the hermit in the church tells him that “ye displease

God with such manner of sorrow-making" (497). Lancelot sees himself as inferior and sinful, and hates himself for his sin in relation to them. When he remembers " how by my defaute and mine orgule and my pride that they were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living of Christian people" (497), he becomes extremely upset; he views himself as the downfall of two exceptional people, despite the fact that both Arthur and Guinevere were regular people whose own actions caused them problems just as much as his actions did, and that Guinevere participated in the exact same affair that he did. In the end, Lancelot's incredible grief and self-hatred drives him into the grave because he " never after ate but little meat, nor drank... for then he sickened more and more and dried and dwined away" (492). He not only sees himself as supremely inferior to Guinevere and Arthur as a result of his sinful actions; he views himself as unworthy of living any longer because his sins negatively impacted the two of them.

Malory proposes the resolution of problems caused by chivalry by promoting forgiveness for behavior infractions caused by the rigid codes of chivalry, and acceptance of the fact that problems will arise from chivalric codes.

Despite his anger with Lancelot, Gawain eventually "[writes] to Lancelot to come to the aid of his former lord" (491) before he dies. He realizes that Lancelot is needed to help in the fighting and that he needs to forgive Lancelot for accidental murders committed in the middle of a confusing fight instigated by honor codes and obligations. While chivalry may force individuals to make decisions they otherwise may not have made, therefore causing violence, suffering and the crumbling of relationships, the problems associated with chivalry can be solved if people acknowledge that chivalry

inherently leads to problems and that they must be willing to forgive people for the damage they caused while obeying the laws of chivalry. The attacks against Lancelot as a result of chivalry and honor codes are also reversed after his death: in spite of the fact that many knights despised him for accidentally killing two unarmed men and led a brutal vendetta against him, and the fact that his king exiled him in disgrace, he's praised relentlessly after he dies and is called "the courtest knight that ever bore shield... the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse... the kindest man that ever struck with sword" (499). Malory proposes forgiveness and praise for good people whose reputations have been destroyed and whose lives have been ruined as a result of the unflinching code of chivalry. He never attempts to argue that chivalry is without its consequences; in fact he offers several examples depicting the fact that this is absolutely not the case. Rather, he offers ways to cope with the issues caused by such a rigid code of ethics, through forgiveness of violent and unkind behaviors and an understanding that the laws of chivalry are not ones that can be broken.

Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* explores the issue of chivalry, the rigid code of honor and ethics that knights had to follow during King Arthur's time. He discusses the problems that arise from such a strict code of behavior, from a removal of personal choice as characters are forced to make decisions based on what chivalry dictates rather than their own personal emotions and opinions, to extreme violence caused by a culture that values relentlessness in battle, to ruination of interpersonal relationships as characters turn on their friends and loved ones because the chivalric code of honor forces them to ignore personal obligations. The suggestion he offers to

solve these problems is to forgive infractions caused by behavior dictated by chivalry, a solution that suggests at the inevitability of chivalry: the solution is not to resist, not to ignore the codes in place, but to accept what will happen because of those codes and forgiven any problems that may occur as a result. Chivalry was not seen as something that could be broken, its rules not things that could be ignored, and Malory's presentation of it reflects that.