The flawed characters of king arthur and sir lancelot

There was a trend toward well-rounded, realistic characters during and throughout the Renaissance that arguably began with, or at least along roughly the time frame as, Thomas Malory's famed Le Morte D'Arthur. The characters in older pieces of fiction were often unrealistic and one-dimensional. They were designed very specifically to reflect particular characteristics and lacked the flaws and intricate details of sophisticated and well-rounded characters. In the case of the fabliau, a style of storytelling that originated in France and is seen in flashes in the works of Chaucer, characters are deliberately absurd, caricatures of realistic personality traits. Malory, however, designed characters with obvious, as well as realistic, flaws. Over a century after Malory's work, Shakespeare would create some of the most well-known characters in the history of fiction, characters that were popular due to their accurate representation of the human condition. The moral, yet flawed protagonists of Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur, such as King Arthur and Sir Lancelot, laid the groundwork for an entirely new era of fiction.

In The Middle Ages, knights were evaluated by something called the " Chivalric Code." The Chivalric Code was an extensive list of rules that dictated a knight's conduct both on and off the battlefield. With rules such as, " At all times to speak the truth," and, " To fight for the welfare of all," it was essentially impossible to full follow the Chivalric Code at all times (" Knights Code of Chivalry"); therefore, the best knights were those that came the closest. Even the famed, and fictional, King Arthur and Sir Lancelot were incapable of living up to the high moral standard of the Chivalric Code.

However, their failure to behave perfectly makes them more compelling characters.

King Arthur, for example, is a just and mighty ruler. He is well-loved by his knights and subjects, and conquers many lands. Arthur is also known to be honest, a quality that Lancelot seems to lack. Sir Bors says of Arthur, "…for there was never yet man could prove King Arthur untrue of his promise," (Malory XX. VI). These traits are the ones present in every telling of King Arthur's tale, the ones that he is known for. For all of his good qualities, however, Arthur has a few fatal flaws.

When Arthur is made aware of Guinevere's unfaithfulness he is filled with rage. Malory writes, " These proofs and experiences caused King Arthur to command the queen to the fire there to be brent," (Malory XX. VII). Without a second thought, he orders his wife to be burned. Gawaine, his nephew and one of his best knights, advises Arthur to give the judgement more consideration. " My lord Arthur, I would counsel you not to be over-hasty, but that ye would put it in respite, this judgement of my lady the queen, for many causes," (Malory XX. VII). The main reason he puts forth is that, though Lancelot was indeed in the queen's chambers, no one actually witnessed him doing anything unsavory. However, Arthur will not be swayed, and orders his wife to be burned regardless of his lack of proof. Arthur's quest for vengeance extends to Lancelot as well. He says, " And if I may get Sir Launcelot, wit you well he shall have a shameful death," (Malory XX. VII). Once Arthur's most trusted knight, Lancelot is now his biggest rival.

Eventually, Arthur does come to his senses, as any righteous king would, and wishes to make amends with Lancelot and his wife. When overcome with sudden guilt, Arthur says, " Alas, that ever I bare crown upon my head! For now have I lost the fairest fellowship of noble knights that ever held Christian king together," (Malory XX. IX). The King finally shows some remorse for breaking the bond that his Knights of the Round Table shared. In fact, it was Gawaine who perpetuated Arthur's war against Lancelot. The text says that, "...the noble King Arthur would have taken his queen again, and have been accorded with Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawaine would not suffer him by no manner of mean," (Malory XX. XII). Seemingly incapable of holding a grudge, Arthur is willing to end his feud with Lancelot even though his affair with Guinevere was, " one of the many destructive elements that precipitated the fall of the Round Table," (MacBain 60). In this passage, Arthur redeems himself to an extent by displaying his great capacity for forgiveness.

However, Arthur does not seem to show much concern for his wife at any point in the tale. First, he rushed her to the stake at the mere mention of an affair, and then in the midst of his feud with Lancelot, just as he is expressing his guilt, he remarks, "...much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company," (Malory XX. IX). Arthur considers his wife to be replaceable, less important than his precious knights. This attitude is likely what drove Guinevere into Lancelot's arms in the first place. Malory does an excellent job of creating a more realistic King Arthur, one who retains all of his most famous qualities, but is also a little rough around the edges.

The same can be said of Sir Lancelot. The famous knight retains his most well-known qualities, such as strength, prowess in battle, and chivalry toward women. There are many mentions of Lancelot's strength. King Arthur claims that, " Sir Launcelot is an hardy knight, and all ye know he is the best knight among us all… and I know no knight that is able to match him," (Malory XX. II). This claim is proven true when Agravaine and a small company of knights attempt to ambush him in the queen's chambers. The author writes that, "…there was none of the twelve that might stand Sir Launcelot one buffet," (Malory XX. IV).

On other, numerous occasions, Lancelot's trademark quests are mentioned. While speaking to Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred in defense of Lancelot, Gawaine references these very exploits saying, "…ye must remember how ofttimes Sir Launcelot hath rescued the king and the queen… he rescued me from King Carados of the Dolorous Tower, and slew him, and saved my life. Also, brother Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred, in like wise Sire Launcelot rescued you both, and threescore and two, from Sir Turquin," (Malory XX. I). The author also notes that, " Sir Launcelot had done so much for [King Arthur] and the queen so many times," (Malory XX. II). In her article, " Disarming Lancelot," Elizabeth Scala explains that, " It is through his actions, the extent to which he proves successful in armed battle, that Lancelot is known. But Malory also depicts scenes in which Lancelot is disarmed that offer a significant challenge to his conception of Lancelot's identity," (Scala 1). Lancelot's strength and prowess in battle are intact in Le Morte D'Arthur, but Malory also puts the knight's lesser known dark side on full display.

Though he is traditionally considered to be the poster boy of chivalry, there are two particular passages in Le Morte D'Arthur that demonstrate clear contradictions in Lancelot's moral code. The first takes place in the queen's chamber when Sir Agravaine, Sir Mordred, and a group of twelve other knights catch Lancelot sleeping with Guinevere. First, Lancelot violates the Chivalric Code by lying about his affair with Guinevere. He does this repeatedly throughout the book. When confronted by Sir Agravaine and the others, Lancelot calls through the door and declares that if they would let him declare his case before King Arthur rather than killing him that he would, "…answer you as a knight should, that hither I came to the queen for no manner of mal engin, and that will I prove and make it good upon you with my hands," (Malory XX. IV). In other words, he claims that he is in the queen's chamber for no unsavory purpose. Then, reasoning that he has no other choice, Lancelot slays all of the knights except Mordred, who he wounds, and flees the castle. Before he does so, however, he delivers a speech to his lover, Lady Guinevere:

Then he took the queen in his arms, and kissed her, and said: Most noble Christian queen, I beseech you as ye have been every my special good lady, and I at all times your true poor knight unto my power, and as I never failed you in right nor in wrong sithen the first day King Arthur made me knight, that ye will pray for my soul if that I here be slain. (Malory XX, III)

This scene is important to truly grasp the nature of Lancelot's fatal flaw. Lancelot's eloquent speech to the woman he loves is phrased so that it appears he is taking the moral high road; however, at its conclusion, Lancelot slays thirteen knights that were merely carrying out the king's

orders, and who he at one time considered friends. It is as if Lancelot emphasizes the parts of the Chivalric Code that pertain to courtly love and the treatment of women, and ignores those that have to do with honor and honesty.

As if Lancelot's remorseless slaughter was not bad enough, in the following chapter Lancelot recounts the night's events to his nephew, Sir Bors, and some others. He says, " I suppose it was made by treason, howbeit I dare largely excuse her person, notwithstanding I was there by a forecast near slain, but as Jesu provided me I escaped all their malice and treason," (Malory XX. V). Lancelot still refuses to admit his wrongdoing, and even goes so far as to accuse Sir Agravaine and the others of committing treason by attempting to capture him.

The second scene which exposes Lancelot's contradictions takes place when he rescues Guinevere from being burned at the stake. There are many knights there who have no choice but to protest Lancelot's mission, and as a result are slain. " Then when Sir Launcelot had thus done, and slain and put to flight all that would withstand him, then he rode straight forward unto Dame Guenever, and made a kirtle and a gown to be cast upon her; and then he made her to be set behind him, and prayed her to be of good cheer," (Malory XX. VIII). This passage is another perfect example of how Lancelot over-emphasizes the sections of the Chivalric Code that pertain to courtly love and the proper treatment of women, and neglects those that refer to loyalty and honor. The description is almost humorous. Lancelot plows through dozens of knights that were once his comrades without a second thought, but goes to such extreme lengths to ensure that Guinevere is

comfortable riding on his horse. According to Danielle MacBain, “ These actions can be said to introduce a greater realism into the tale even as they darken lancelot by showing him violating (quite brutally) the provision of the Arthurian code,” (MacBain 62). Malory does not pull any punches when it comes to degrading his protagonists; however, both Arthur and Lancelot make amends for their wrongdoings in the end, once again cementing their status as honorable men of renown despite their flaws.

In conclusion, King Arthur and Sir Lancelot are each bona fide heroes in their own right, but they achieve their hero status realistically, by overcoming both physical and ethical obstacles. They are characters of superior morality, but they are far from perfect. A similar trend toward imperfection took place in Hollywood during the second half of the twentieth century. While perfect human specimens such as Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Audrey Hepburn, and Marilyn Monroe dominated screens in the forties and fifties, Hollywood eventually discovered that audiences enjoyed and more closely related to lead characters that genuinely reflected the human condition. That is, flawed audiences enjoy flawed characters. Malory caught hold of this idea long before many authors did, and that fact contributed greatly to the success of Le Morte D’Arthur and the polarizing image of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table that lasts to this day.

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