


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved: 

From its origins in the fifth and sixth centuries, Arthurian legend has been a source of material for writers from a breadth of times and cultures. Sir Thomas Malory used earlier Arthurian treatments to compose his fifteenth-century epic romance Le Morte D'Arthur, now one of the best-known versions of the legend. T. H. White, a twentieth-century writer, used Malory's work as the source for his own retelling of the story of Arthur.

The resulting novel, the four-part treatment The Once and Future King, deals with ideas suggested to White by Malory's narrative, exploring chiefly the nature of man and the attendant problem of war. White revitalizes his subject by creating medieval people who converse in twentieth-century idiom and by injecting comedy into the situations he presents.

He also infuses the narrative with personal experience, most significantly drawing upon his relationship with his mother to shape his treatment of women and the concept of fate that dominates his novel. The story of Arthur already being a blend of history and myth, White also melds historical periods one into the other, creating a work that transcends chronological boundaries.

More than simply a modernization of Malory, the novel is a dramatization of White's world view, evidencing a powerful, generally unforgiving fate and a human race that has fallen. In spite of the best efforts of Arthur, humanity appears fated to fulfill the destiny its base condition merits.

White, however, is not a fatalist, and he does suggest that mankind may yet redeem himself. When the time arrives, Arthur, the king of the future as well as the present, will be there to guide man through a better existence.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE WORLD OF T. H. WHITE

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Division of English

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

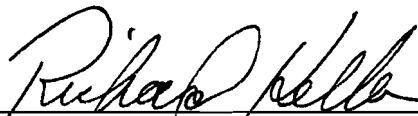
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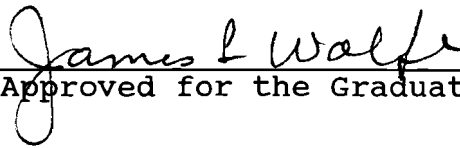
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## PREFACE

Siriol Hugh-Jones wrote of T. H. White: "As a writer he runs free of any group, school, or movement and defies classification" (ix). Little critical material is available on the works of this man (1906-64), perhaps because, as Hugh-Jones, suggested, White's writings exhibit along with "an extraordinary richness of texture" and subject matter, "a diversity of purpose" that makes him somewhat perplexing to approach from a critical standpoint (ix).

In the study that follows I have attempted to explore in some detail White's best-known work, The Once and Future King, building upon existing critical considerations of the novel and available biographical material on the author. By treating both the man and his literature, I hope to reveal more about the novel and its creator.

My thanks go to Dr. Melvin Storm for his encouragement and direction. (I am also grateful to him for forestalling a flood of criticism by nipping in the bud my overuse of mangled metaphors and my tendency to carelessly split infinitives.) My family and friends also deserve special thanks for putting up with a person who became to them a missing person. Finally, I thank the Lord for word processing, without which none of this would have been possible.

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## Chapter One

### AN INTRODUCTION TO WHITE'S WORLD

T. H. White, like Thomas Malory and other chroniclers of myth and history, took as his subject the legend of Britain's King Arthur. His vantage point was the twentieth century, but it was a twentieth century tempered by the author's world view. Not surprisingly, the author-presence that permeates The Once and Future King is a complex mix of elements--a reflection of the writer, himself an amalgam of motley elements, and of, too, the complicated events that stirred the century he inhabited. He presents himself a seemingly awkward task, that of remaining a modern man while transporting himself to the Middle Ages of his primary source.

White's first reported contact with Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur occurred when he submitted in fulfillment of his college requirements an analysis of the impractical nature of Malory's treatment of the Arthur legend. The thesis, long since lost, was reputed to be somewhat irreverent, and the story goes that one of his examiners was a Malory specialist not partial to White's insinuations. "Tim" White's essay did not receive the necessary marks. In a letter to his friend Sydney Cockerell, White later recalled with characteristic flippancy, "Naturally I did not read Malory when writing the thesis on him"; when White did take time to read the work with care he found to his delight,

(a) that the thing was a perfect tragedy, with a

beginning, a middle, and an end implicit in the beginning, and (b) that the characters were real people with recognizable reactions which could be forecast." (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 98)

White also thought Le Morte D'Arthur addressed a wealth of important human issues, dealing with human nature and man's responsibility to his world, and with war, that tragedy that seems inevitably to result when man misconstrues responsibility for power.

White was later to write that "the central theme of the Morte d'Arthur is to find an antidote to war" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 186). Immediately he saw the potential to enlarge upon the war issue and those others implicit in Malory; he was hooked by the richness of the subject; the scene was set for his own epic. From the old thesis came The Sword in the Stone, published in 1938, a sportive prologue to most of the events that take place in Malory's tale. The book's sequel, The Witch in the Wood, was published in 1939, followed by The Ill-Made Knight the year after. The three novels (The Witch in the Wood was revamped into The Queen of Air and Darkness) plus a fourth, Candle in the Wind were finally published in single-volume form in 1958 as The Once and Future King.

T. H. White was, according to friends, unhappy most of his life. Yet he remained optimistic, trying to shake off the legacy of a miserable childhood by pouring himself into play and work. The Once and Future King is, in many ways, an intensely autobiographical work, with his own experiences and



ideas appearing throughout the novel. Terence Hanbury White, the offspring of an Irish-born father and a Scottish mother, was born in colonial India. Both parents were apparently high strung and given to rash action, launching into major projects without first thinking them through; his mother Constance seems to have accepted Garrick White's marriage proposal simply because he came along at the right time. White's biographer writes, "Goaded by her mother's taunts about the cost of supporting her, [Constance] said she would marry the next man who offered, and did so" (Warner, T. H. White 25). The union was poorly made and tempestuously matched; it was dissolved when Terence was in his teen years. Garrick remained a rather hapless alcoholic background figure to his son, but Constance's early handling of White affected the balance of his life; he never married, never had children of his own, and struggled with a distorted sense of sexuality. After her death, he wrote in his diary:

I adored her passionately until I was about eighteen. . . . I didn't get much security out of her. Either there were the dreadful parental quarrels and spankings of me when I was tiny or there were excessive scenes of affection during which she wooed me to love her--not her to love me. It was my love that she extracted, not hers that she gave. I've always thought she was sexually frigid, which was maybe why she thrashed it out of me. Anyway, she managed to bitch up my loving women. She made me dote on her when I was in school. (qtd. in Warner, T.

A daunting female presence dominated White's life, a force that was of Scottish origin. Significantly, the force that seems to manipulate events in his novel is linked not only to a number of feminine characters, but to a particular Scottish family, the royal clan of the Orkney Islands. (White groups both his Scottish and his Irish characters under the same label, "Gael." Recalling White's own Gaelic heritage from both the Scots and the Irish, the fact that he makes his fictional Gaels violent, destructive people is telling.) Constance White, herself, can be seen in the matriarch of that family, Queen Morgause of the Outer Isles, Lothian, and Orkney, variously a mother, a seducer, and ultimately a destroyer, a swallower of everything weaker than she. Just as White by extension allowed his mother to "bitch up" his good opinions of other women, Morgause's influence spreads to his characterization of other females in his narrative, endowing them with the power to control and manipulate both circumstances and men. In fact, White extends the territory of feminine manipulation to include the whole of his fictional universe; the controlling force shaping the lives of men and nations is petulant, unpredictable, by turns attentive and indifferent, and sometimes casually cruel, reflective of the most influential woman in his experience.

For it is the author's wide-flung catalogue of personal experience that shapes itself around the characters and wends its way through the plot, allowing White as the book's narrator to comment on everything from cricket matches to juvenile

romance films to the efficacy and necessity of war. The writer did, indeed, engage in a great amount of learning throughout his lifetime, immersing himself in at one time or another (to name a few) hunting, fishing, and assorted crazes after creatures like snakes and horses; natural history, science, and sociology; flying, shooting, gardening, carpentry, milking, and ploughing; the study of Italian and of Braille; hawking, painting and drawing, and boating; diving, anthropology, cinematography, and engineering. All of these enthusiasms show themselves in his writings. He explained his voracious appetite for knowledge in a lecture entitled "The Pleasures of Learning":

My parents loathed each other and were separated; divorced, when I was about fourteen or so. This meant my home and education collapsed about my ears; and ever since I have been arming myself against disaster. This is why I learn. (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 23)

The disaster he feared was not only of personal, but of global significance:

Now, believe it or not, I can shoot with a bow and arrow, so that when the next atomic bomb is dropped poor White will be hopping about in a suit of skins shooting caribou or something with a bow and arrow. (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 23)

Sylvia Townsend Warner, his biographer, paints a portrait of a man so conscious of a void within his character that he made every effort to fill it in any possible manner, whether it be

through drinking, socializing, and hunting or through activism and scholarly pursuits. This personality finds its way into his novel, especially animating a Lancelot, like White, agonized by a "gap [within him]: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was aware, and ashamed, but which he did not understand" (315); he must fill the hole with the pursuit of perfection. Merlyn tells the child Arthur in the first section of The Once and Future King that learning something is "the best thing for being sad" (183). Warner suggests "that so much learning [on White's part] presupposed a good deal of sadness" (T. H. White 24).

White the man was himself something of a tragic figure, usually conscious of his shortcomings, usually powerless to fix them. He has infused a personal note of tragedy into a number of his tetralogy characters: eager, doomed Arthur; scholarly, eccentric Merlyn, whose vision is apparently obsolete; prideful, explosive, short-sighted Gawaine; tormented, mother-absorbed Mordred. Facets of him occasionally surface in his women; Guenever's childlessness, for instance, mirrors the writer's own condition. White himself thus embodied many of the more tragic elements found in his characters, especially those in Lancelot, the author's sinful and saintly ill-made knight. White, living in relative isolation during World War II, on his guard anyway against revealing his personal deficiencies, agonizing over the rightness and wrongness of armed struggle, extracted from within himself raw material for his retelling of the tragedy of Arthur.

White's chief form of defense against the terror of his existence remained his writing. His friend John Moore recalled that he was "a dead serious writer." It was his writing, Moore supposed, that "mattered to him the most," and "he was quickly cast down or lifted up according to how that writing had gone" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 93). As a writer White was in control, able to suffer somewhat the lot fate had left him, and able to create worlds where his rules had the final say, where perhaps the odds could be bettered.

The world of The Once and Future King is such a world. It is a world of beauty marred by an overbalance of filth, a world inherently tragic, that still has a place for gentle humor, a place where humanity should rightfully rule, but fate instead seems to hold sway over all. As a result, the balance of the universe is upset; fate now controls man and man's domain, and its indifferent yet unforgiving presence permeates all. Man seems destined to carry out the role consigned him by fate; in the background, however, hope lingers, nurtured by the possibility that fortune may turn to man's favor and man regain his true, ruling status. People, too, might not be the predestined puppets they appear; perhaps each individual can, in some way, influence his own destiny.

After completing revisions on the omnibus version of his Arthurian tetralogy he wrote in his diary that he believed and hoped the fruit of his twenty-year project to be a great book. The root of this grand projection was the book's "great subject, which is the epic of Britain," to which he added that "you have to write downright badly to make a mess of it" (qtd.

in Warner, T. H. White 272). In The Once and Future King T. H. White does more than simply present an appealing rendering of a sure-fire subject. In addition to addressing elemental human concerns--and as part of his treatment of those issues--White bestows upon the reader a collection of characters that are real, complex people, perhaps totally predictable, "with recognizeable reactions that could be forecast," but never dull. Through these characters, White works out his themes, establishing along the way that man, and especially Arthur, is at heart innocent.

Although White saw Arthur as a classically tragic hero, a great man brought low due to some frailty, the king is also a figure of Boethian tragedy, for he trusts overmuch to the benevolence of fortune. But Arthur, like those human issues which White developed from Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur, transcends the merely medieval and plays to the twentieth century, a fractured time peopled by folk who, like Malory's king and White's king, seem trapped by the circumstances of war, duty, love, and chance.

White's work may read, at times, like that of a fatalist, but he, like Arthur in the book's final chapter, is not quite finished. Running through the book is the undercurrent of hope suggesting the possibility of a second chance for White's humanity and its dutiful king, which may, by way of inspiration, suggest a new beginning for the fractious twentieth century. And perhaps along with the rest, another try for White, himself.

## Chapter Two

### MALORY'S MORTE AND T. H. WHITE

The legend of King Arthur is often labeled "The Matter of Britain," dealing as it does with the unifying of Britain into a united kingdom. It is a legend, though, not entirely native to Britain, appearing not only in the literary traditions of the Galls, the Celts, and the Norse, but also in those of the Greeks, the Serbo-Croats, and the Japanese, among others (Lacy, Preface vii). Many cultures record tales centering around a powerful, conquering leader who reigns wisely for a period of time. The universal nature of the legend attracted many, as did its mixture of fact and myth. Was Arthur, the central figure of this tradition, an historical person? The first allusions to the shadowy figure that gives rise to the legends place him in the fifth and sixth centuries A. D.; modern theory holds that although he was probably a real person living around that early time, this "real" Arthur is only the inspiration, and not the substance, of the legend named for him. As Geoffrey Ashe writes in The Arthurian Encyclopedia,

A manifest obstacle [to establishing fact concerning Arthur] is that the medieval writers who developed the Matter of Britain had little interest in authenticity. They were not writing historical fiction in the modern sense. Like all medieval storytelling based on ancient material, Arthurian romance updated it, portraying kingship, warfare,

costume, and much else in contemporary terms, however idealized and fantasized, and giving pride of place to themes of contemporary interest, such as chivalry and courtly love. (21)

During the wide span of time that comprised the Middle Ages, and even into the Renaissance, different strains of Arthurian legend appeared, establishing Arthur variously as warrior, patriarchal ruler, and Christian king, depending upon the aims of the writer. Gradually, the familiar characters of the tradition began to appear (Mordred, Merlyn, Gawaine, Lancelot, Guenever, Morgan Le Fey, the Lady of the Lake) together with the common motifs (the Round Table, the sword in the stone, Camelot, Excalibur, the Holy Grail). Writers used the elements of the legend, then, as a means of addressing the issues of their respective times.

The English knight Thomas Malory, writing at the end of the medieval period, created in his Le Morte D'Arthur a work of prose surpassed by few if any previous treatments of the legend in the breadth of material it included. He drew extensively upon the thirteenth-century French Vulgate Cycle of prose Arthurian works, using from the cycle the Queste del Saint Graal, Lancelot, and the Mort Artu among others. He also incorporated the French works Tristan and Merlin into his own. The English Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur and the Alliterative Morte Arthure also provided him many episodes to include in his comprehensive study. Throughout Malory's work, he notes that he included only the material that he deemed the most



important. He, like the proliferators of Arthurian lore that were to come after him, had to sift through the available source material and select that which would contribute to a new vision of the old legend, a vision that would reflect not only the legend's crafter, but the world that shaped the craftsman.

T. H. White, writing more than 450 years later, followed the same plan that Malory had used, looking at his source material and choosing what seemed important to him. White cared little for Malory's sources other than for the wealth of material they afforded Malory (Warner T. H. White 153). It was Malory's product that captured his enthusiasm, and it was Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur that anchored his work, The Once and Future King. White explored the expanse of Malory's encyclopedic work, determining which of its elements he should retain in his approach to the legend.

His handling of the Morte D'Arthur included both the dramatization of events apparently as the events take shape, as seen through the eyes of participants, and the second-hand recountings of events that have happened earlier or to someone other than the character narrating the story. The story of Sir Tristram, which takes up nearly one-third of Malory's work, makes its way into The Once and Future King in conversations between Lancelot and Arthur and between Lancelot and Guenever. In this way White's audience discovers indirectly what Malory relates directly, Tristram's falling in love with his Uncle Mark's wife, Isoud, their subsequent affair, and the knight's eventual death at the hands of the uncle, the King of Cornwall. White also uses this tactic to explain the quest for the Holy

Grail, a pursuit that dominates a large portion of the latter part of Malory. White at all times treats the Morte with respect, balancing adulation for Malory with a healthy scepticism of the tale's more fantastic elements. Thus, he is able to lampoon Arthurian tradition gently, without diminishing the grandeur of its subject, able to venerate the Middle Ages for its achievements while at the same time recognizing its lapses.

White also adopts Malory's convention of providing commentary upon the story he is relating. Although the twentieth-century writer does not repeat the request for succor that ends Malory's book, he does, like Malory, make reference in his work to other sources. Whereas Malory often refers to the tales from "the French Book," White suggests that his readers consult Malory for a full treatment of, for instance, the appearance of the covered Grail at Camelot or a tournament at which Lancelot defeats thirty or more knights. Both narrators admit that they are not omniscient, that they cannot be sure of all facts surrounding a particular motivation or event. But both writers let their audience know that they as narrator-writers are aware of how certain events ultimately turn out. White uses this technique more so than does Malory, establishing the sense of destiny that thickly pervades his novel.

In the words of Malory's original editor, Caxton, "the joyous and noble book" that is Le Morte D'Arthur

treateth of the birth, life, and acts of the said

King Arthur, of his noble knights of the Round Table, their marvellous enquests and adventures, the achieving of the Sangrail, and in the end the dolorous death and departing out of this world of them all. (Colophon XXI:13)

Because White does use Malory's version of Arthurian legend to provide a foundation and set boundaries for his own recounting, a brief rendering of the events in the older work together with commentary on White's treatment of it may prove useful to understanding White's book. (For the sake of convenience the spelling of names has been regularized, with White's choices used.)

As Caxton's asserts, Malory's tale, covers the life span of the king (beginning slightly before his birth and ending some time after his death) and follows the many adventures of his knights from the Roman wars to the search for the Holy Grail, and to the final battle of a civil war fought upon Salisbury plain. Malory also depicts Arthur's unknowing incest with his sister, resulting in a son, Mordred, and gives special emphasis the adulterous relationship of Arthur's queen, Guenever, and his best knight, Lancelot. In White's narrative he touches upon the Roman Wars against Emperor Lucius provoked when Lucius demands tribute from Arthur, recording Arthur's success in the conflict. Mentioned also in brief are Sir Gareth's adventures as Beaumains the kitchen page, an identity the boy adopts upon first coming to court. He, under Lancelot's tutelage, turns into a knight of the first order. White refers only tangentially to Lancelot's sponsorship of another young knight

tangentially to Lancelot's sponsorship of another young knight called La Cote Male Taile (after his ill-fitting clothing), although Malory devotes much attention to the adventures of both young knights. Malory, in fact, relates in detail the assorted adventures of many of Arthur's knights, recording that Sir Gawaine cut off a damsel's head by mistake, that King Pellinore failed in his appointed task, that Sirs Sagramore and Dinadan consorted a while with Sir Palomides, and that Sir Uwaine rescued his father King Uriens from the murderous intents of his mother, Morgan Le Fey. Malory also records several attempts at murder by Morgan upon her half-brother Arthur, and further relates how a damsel of the lake saves the king from an enchanted and deadly cloak. In addition, a damsel of the lake also gives Arthur his invincible sword Excalibur. White, however, does not use these elements (and numerous others) much at all, referring to them after the fact or ignoring them altogether.

Another episode that White barely mentions makes up the second section of Malory's book and concerns the brothers Balin and Balan, who kill each other before discovering one another's true identities. The tale is linked to the search for the Holy Grail, for it is Balin's sword that Lancelot's son Galahad withdraws from a marble stone, a feat that designates him as the chosen knight in the Grail quest. Furthermore, it is this same sword that has struck the "dolorous blow" that incapacitated the Grail King and cursed three kingdoms. White keeps his distance from Galahad, the Grail, and religion in general, choosing to focus on a different sort of issue at

the heart of Camelot's problems: the twisted nature of man.

The material from Malory's work that White uses as the basis of his plot begins with the reign of Uther Pendragon, King of all England, who is at present bothered by a rebellious vassals, "a mighty duke in Cornwall" (I:1), also called the Duke of Tintagel. Uther calls both the duke and his wife Igraine to the king's castle, where he attempts to seduce the duchess. She is honorable, though, and resists the king, fleeing with her husband to Cornwall. The king besieges the Cornwalls, but falls sick "for pure anger and for love of fair Igraine" (I:2). The seer and necromancer Merlyn comes to Uther's rescue, promising to bring him to Igraine. Merlyn adds that "the first night that ye shall lie by Igraine ye shall get a child on her," and requests that Uther repay him by giving him the baby "to nourish there as [he] will have it" (I:2).

Uther agrees to this course of action, Merlyn changes him into the form of the duke, and Uther enjoys an evening in the duchess's chamber. The true duke, it is revealed, is killed in battle three hours before Uther assumes his form, and Igraine is later puzzled by this inexplicable visit from a husband who had died hours before. With the Duke of Tintagel dead, The king marries his widow. Two of her daughters by the duke are married at this time also, with Morgause wedding King Lot of Lothian and Orkney and Elaine marrying King Nentres of Garlot. A third daughter, Morgan Le Fey, is sent to a nunnery, where she becomes "a great clerk of necromancy" (I:2). Later, Morgan weds King Uriens of Gore. When a baby boy is born to Igraine,

Uther turns him over to Merlyn, and Merlyn puts the baby in the custody of the knight Ector and his wife. The child is christened Arthur. When White's treatment begins, these events have long since occurred, but they are of vital importance to his narrative. The heirs of Orkney, for instance, are conditioned in childhood by their mother Morgause to hate Arthur, the new Pendragon, because of the wrong done by Uther to their family. Lot and Morgause's sons, Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth, recite the story of Uther's rape of Igraine as a bedtime story, using what White calls "the Old Language of chivalry" (214), actually Malory's own dialect. The story holds the root of what White calls the Orkney feud, which interferes with the sons' later allegiance to Arthur, balance it as they must with their duty to their ancestors. Eventually, White makes clear, the feud is a decisive element in the destruction of the kingdom that Arthur builds.

After Malory installs the infant Arthur in Sir Ector's abode, he records Uther's death. He relates that a sword stuck through an anvil placed in a great stone has appeared in a London churchyard, that whoever can remove the sword from the anvil (this is not Balin's sword) will be the next king of England. A tournament is held in London on New Year's Day and all the lords journey there, including Sir Ector and his son Sir Kay, together with Arthur, who is now somewhat grown and serving as Kay's esquire. At the tournament, Kay discovers he has left his sword in their lodgings and sends Arthur after it. Arthur finds the place is locked and angrily decides to remove the sword from the anvil in the church, ignorant as he is of

the implications of the act. He indeed pulls the sword out, Malory writes, and relays it to Kay, who recognizes it and tells his father that he, Kay, has pulled it out. Ector questions his son, though, and Kay confesses that Arthur had removed the sword. Ector then reveals that Merlyn had brought Arthur as an infant to him and his wife. Arthur removes the sword from the anvil several times for all to see; still, many of the assembled barons refuse to accept a young squire as their sovereign. He is, in the end, crowned. These events White faithfully records in the first section of his novel (named after the climactic event), but he extends them considerably, making Merlyn the tutor to both Arthur and Kay as they grow up in Sir Ector's castle, comfortably located in a clearing in the middle of the Forest Sauvage. Malory is mute on the subject of Arthur's childhood, so White improvises considerably with the conventions of Arthurian legend. As part of young Arthur's (nicknamed the Wart) "first-rate eddication" (10), Merlyn changes him into a number of animals, providing him with a glimpse at nature's systems of government, something he will have need of later, although he is not aware of it at present.

In Malory's narrative, then, Arthur becomes king, but war eventually ensues between Arthur and the Eleven Kings, a group led by the husbands of Igraine's daughters. Arthur takes as his allies Kings Ban and Bors of France and defeats the rebels by means of his superior strategy. White follows Malory quite faithfully here, using this suppression of the rebel uprising

as the basis for Arthur's conclusions that strength is not something to be used irresponsibly, as a weapon, but should instead be harnessed and put to work for the good of humanity. This philosophy sets the foundation for his Round Table.

Malory also relates that during the course of the war, Lot's wife Morgause journeys with her four sons to Arthur's court in order to relay a message to the young king. Arthur, unaware that she is his half-sister, "cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her" (I:19). Morgause, also unaware of their familial tie, consents, and they conceive Mordred. By the time the baby is born, Merlyn has revealed to Arthur his mother's identity; Arthur realizes his son is a product of incest. Arthur takes Merlyn's advice and orders that all the children born on the same day as Mordred be placed on a ship and set adrift. The ship wrecks, but the infant Mordred is saved and reared by a kindly man until he joins his father's court fourteen years later. White follows Malory closely on these facts, although he returns Mordred to Morgause following the shipwreck. White also credits unnamed "advisors" with the decision to kill Mordred, lifting the blame from Merlyn. White's Arthur, though, is tormented to the end of his life by his attempt on Mordred's life, and the resulting deaths of the innocent children.

In Le Morte D'Arthur, the union of Guenever and Arthur begins ominously. Merlyn warns the young king of the danger of marrying the daughter of King Leodegrance of Camelard; she "was not wholesome for him to take to wife" (III:2) due to her inevitable coupling with Lancelot. Arthur does not heed



Merlyn's warning, however, for he loves the beautiful Guenever. Although as king he shows himself to be a shrewd assessor of human nature, Malory's Arthur lacks a capacity to judge his loved ones in the same fashion. (White emphasizes this trait of Arthur's also.) Guenever's dowry consists of one hundred knights and the Round Table, and on the wedding day, the king's nephew Gawaine is knighted. The name of the city is given as Camelot.

While Arthur is shown to be overjoyed with both his new wife and his new army (not to mention the accompanying furniture), little insight is given into Guenever's opinion of her fortune. She appears a flat, distanced figure for much of the book, coming to life only when her involvement with Lancelot intensifies. White follows Malory's lead somewhat, introducing her into his novel just in time for her to fall in love with Lancelot.

Lancelot, the son of King Ban, is first encountered in the Morte as a boy in France when Merlyn visits with one of the damsels of the lake and prophesies the boy's greatness. Lancelot's given name is revealed to be Galahad, the name his son will later carry. Malory's Merlyn has now become "assotted" with the damsel, Nimue, and he shows her many of his enchantments to win her to him. She fears him, though, because "he was the devil's son" and uses the arts Merlin has taught her to trap him under a great stone so "that he came never out for all the craft he could do" (IV:1). In The Once and Future King, Merlyn is aware beforehand that Nimue will imprison him

in his "wretched tumultous" (222), but he does not seek to avoid it, and he actually looks forward to being "assotted" with great anticipation. (White also combines all of Malory's damsels of the lake into one Lady of the Lake.) White's Merlyn also rather flippantly mentions that he is reputed to be half-demon and half-Gael, a volatile combination.

Years later, Lancelot appears in Camelot to join the Round Table fellowship and makes a name for himself as quite a competent and virtuous fellow, becoming legendary for never failing at jousting or competition of any nature "but if it were by treason or enchantment." Malory then alludes for the first time to the exquisite treason and enchantment that has begun to insinuate its way into the heart of the kingdom:

Wherefore Queen Guenever had him in great favor above all knights, and in certain he loved the queen above all other ladies damosels of his life, and for her he did many deeds of arms. . . . (VI:1)

In that sentence Malory lays the foundations for the disaster that is to come.

Lancelot then leaves on a series of famous quests that establish his reputation as the best knight in the world. Lancelot and Guenever are hardly intimates at this point; he seems to love her chastely, in the true spirit of chivalry. He defends her before the four queens who abduct him to be a paramour to one of them; when they insinuate that he and the queen are lovers he responds, "Were I at my liberty as I was, I would prove it on you or on yours, that she is the truest lady unto her lord living" (VI:4). On the whole, people generally

see Lancelot as a prodigy of knighthood and a pinnacle of purity. He is "the worshipfullest knight of the world" (VI:17), the one with "the greatest name of any knight," who was "honored of high and low" (VI:18). The later books following the quest of the Grail show his religious fervor and humility.

Vida Scudder, in her study of the work, writes that it is only as Lancelot begins to break under the burden of his sin against God and King that he becomes the truly compassionate, humble, great knight he is traditionally reputed to be (270). White's Lancelot, though, is interesting and complex from the start, plagued as he is with a heightened sensitivity to pain and a penchant for inflicting it, a bottomless inferiority complex, and an idiosyncratic view of God.

Malory also depicts the infighting that mars Arthur's kingdom, the deadliest of which involves the family of Gawaine, White's "Orkney faction." The Pellinore family incurs the wrath of Arthur's Scottish vassals after King Pellinore, known as the Knight of the Strange Beast (due to the Questing Beast that he follows), kills Lot in battle when the Orkney king is at war against Arthur. Gawaine and Gaheris vow to avenge their father and they later succeed in killing Pellinore. The feud does not stop, however, for Pellinore's oldest son Lamorak engages in an affair with Lot's widow, Morgause. The Orkneys move to entrap and murder Lamorak by catching him with Morgause. The older queen and the young knight apparently do love each other, but Gaheris interrupts them in bed, and in his

fury he "suddenly gat his mother by the hair and struck off her head" (X:24). Gaheris allows Lamorak to depart the scene saying, "Because thou art naked I am ashamed to slay thee" (X:24), vowing to kill him at later date. The Orkneys later descend upon Lamorak en masse and kill him. Gareth, however, is not among them, claiming to have broken with his brothers, now including Mordred, who has come to court.

White approaches the Pellinore-Orkney feud somewhat differently, maintaining that Lot survives the war to become one of Arthur's knights, and that Pellinore kills him accidentally in a practice joust. Gawaine alone murders Pellinore; Lamorak does have an affair with Morgause, but it is probable that she had a great deal to do with initiating the affair. It is Agravaine, accompanied by Gawaine and Mordred, who kills his mother in bed with her lover; the same three later set upon Lamorak, and Mordred murders him. White's Gareth, like Malory's, does not participate in the killings, but neither does White's Gaheris. Gaheris's role is greatly diminished from the Morte, and he becomes, in White's book, the dull brother. This tactic allows for a greater differentiation between the characters of Agravaine and Gaheris and is appropriate to the treatment he gives the Orkney family, and mankind in general.

The love affair between Lancelot and the queen apparently gains momentum in Book XI Of Malory's work when Lancelot enters Corbin, the kingdom of Pelles, first rescuing a lady from a scalding water enchantment and then slaying a dragon that is terrorizing the land. King Pelles schemes to bring Lancelot

and his daughter Elaine (not the daughter of Igraine) together, for prophecy foretells that together they will parent the knight who will claim the Holy Grail, the cup that Christ drank from at His last supper, brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea. This act will lift a curse that Pelles's country is under, but it will also signify the breaking up of Arthur's Round Table. (Lancelot also has an impressive lineage, being closely linked to Christ.) Knowing of Lancelot's love for Camelot's queen, the king accepts the plan of the enchantress Brisen, to change Elaine into the likeness of Guenever while making the knight too drunk to exercise any self-control. White again holds to Malory's narrative, making it his own, though, by combining Elaine and the woman in the scalding bath (he calls her "the boiled girl" [371]), by crediting the seduction scheme to Brisen's husband, the butler, and by suggesting that Pelles is slightly mad for thinking he is a "near cousin to Joseph of Arimathea." The king responds to Lancelot with Malory's language, "You, of course, are but the eighth degree from Our Lord Jesus Christ." White makes his Pelles into one among the collection of entertaining minor characters that people his novel, as this invitation to the knight suggests:

You must come and stay with me. . . . Show you the holy dish some day, and all that. Teach you arithmetic. Nice weather. Don't have daughters unboiled every day. I think dinner will be ready.

(374)

In Malory's narrative, Brisen's plan for deceiving Lancelot succeeds, and in the morning the knight is so ashamed and angry that he nearly runs Elaine through with his sword. When Pelles's daughter begs for mercy, explaining that she was only following her father's directive toward fulfilling the prophecy, the knight repents of his unknighly behavior. Elaine beseeches Lancelot to return soon, for she has given him "the fairest flower that ever I had" (XI:3) and at least deserves his goodwill. This incident is the first time that a carnal aspect enters Malory's telling of Guenever and Lancelot's relationship, for until the knight surrenders to Elaine-as-Guenever his defenses of the queen's honor have seemed genuine and have passed without being called into question by other characters. Now, however, the tone shifts. Once Malory has introduced the probability of an adulterous sexual association between queen and knight, it is addressed as a certainty; the barrier now shattered, Lancelot's honor is almost immediately assailed, with Lancelot branded by ghostly figures as one whose "sin is so foul in him he may not achieve holy deeds," for in "spiritual matters he shall have many his better" (XI:7).

Malory's Lancelot leaves Corbin, falling upon sundry adventures, among them imprisonment. He does not return directly to Camelot. White's knight rides straight from Elaine to Guenever, and here the two fall into adultery. White's Lancelot, sure that his honor has been destroyed by Elaine, rides home to Camelot to further the damage with the true object of his lust. Malory does not chart the evolution of

Lancelot and Guenever's love as it moves from acquaintance to affection to passionate love, nor does he provide a moment when the two consummate their relationship; the fact of their crime suddenly is, marked only by a change in the tone of references to Lancelot. Later, Lancelot's kinsman Bors (not King Bors) brings the news of Lancelot's encounter with Elaine to Camelot (Malory labels Bors and his brother Lionel as Lancelot's nephews while White calls them all cousins; later Malory refers to them all as cousins or brothers). He has visited Pelles's castle and seen Elaine, who has by this time given birth to a son she calls Galahad, to honor Lancelot's given name. The queen is "wroth" and accuses her lover, by this time returned home, of betraying her. She excuses him, however, after hearing that Elaine bore Guenever's likeness when he lay with her. White's Guenever, in contrast, claims not to believe Lancelot's story, forgiving him only because she loves him.

When Elaine comes to Camelot soon after, Malory has Guenever and others attest to the girl's beauty. So jealous of her beauty, though, is the queen that she insists on putting Elaine in a room near hers, the better to keep an eye on her enticing guest. To keep her eye on Lancelot, Guenever insists he come to the queen's own chamber to pass the night. Brisen, though, subverts the royal plan by once again making her lady to look like Lancelot's, and the knight once again allows himself to be led to the wrong lover. Guenever, finding Lancelot's chamber empty, "writhe[s] and welter[s] as a mad woman" (XI:8). She discovers Lancelot with Elaine, and

accusing her knight of treachery, banishes him from her court, chamber, and sight. Her rejection drives him mad and he jumps wildly from a window into a two-year bout with insanity.

Witnessing this, Elaine scolds Guenever, and Guenever orders Elaine from the court. The girl leaves the next day, but does tell Lancelot's kinsmen that the queen's rebuke caused him to flee Camelot; Lancelot's brother Ector (not Arthur's foster father) with Bors and Lionel then confronts the queen and the three vent their anger upon her for their kinsman's state. The queen faints at their harsh words. Later, she begs them to find Lancelot and return him to court, an effort she will subsidize with treasure and provisions. White holds generally to Malory's treatment of these elements, adding touches like Guenever's charge to Elaine, "Take your fancy man and go!" (395).

Malory's Lancelot, meanwhile, loses his memory along with his mind, and after a spell of wild fighting and living as a savage he ends up the town fool in the city of Corbin, the place where he begot Galahad upon Elaine. Elaine recognizes him there, and he is taken to Pelles's castle to be cured by the presence of the Holy Grail. Upon regaining his senses, Lancelot is again overcome with shame; he asks Elaine to arrange for him to retreat to another castle of her father's, because he is banished from Camelot, and Elaine then accompanies him to the Castle of Bliant. There he takes on the identity of Le Chevalier Mal Fet--Malory translates it as "the knight that hath trespassed" (XII:6)--living with Elaine and acquiring the reputation of the "fairest knight and the



mightiest man that is . . . living." (XII:7). While there he thinks continuously of Arthur, Guenever, and Camelot, "And then he would fall upon a weeping as his heart should to-brast" (XII:6). White includes much of the same detail, although White's Elaine has grown plump and plain, and has decided to enter a convent at the time she rediscovers Lancelot. She promptly abandons those plans when he resurfaces, and devotes the rest of her life to him. In addition, Lancelot is healed not by the Grail but by plenty of bedrest and remedies from the "Madness" section in "the Bartholomeus Anglicus" (408). At Joyous Isle, Lancelot calls himself the Ill-Made Knight, and he is suitably gloomy. A toddler Galahad is underfoot; at this age he is absent from Malory.

The Lancelot of Le Morte D'Arthur eventually encounters the queen's searchers, who convince him to return to Camelot; he goes, and great celebration ensues. White differs in his narrative in that his Lancelot promises at some time to return to Elaine. Malory's Elaine is soon to die, though, and will have no need of such promises.

Back in Arthur's city, the queen "wept as she should have died" to hear of Lancelot's mad adventures and the dismal name he adopted, but the king posits that it must have been Lancelot's love for Elaine that drove him to such distraction. However, several in the court know otherwise: "But all Sir Lancelot's kin knew for whom he went out of his mind" (XII:11). With this Malory reinforces the lovers' guilt, the king's blindness to their sin, and the awareness some have of the

adulterous relationship. In White's novel, nearly every person at court except Arthur acknowledges that the queen and the king's commander-in-chief consort together. Arthur's ignorance is a choice, though; he chooses not to try to catch his wife and his best friend at anything scandalous, and hopes this will somehow make the deed less real. Malory's Arthur seems, by contrast, simply unaware.

Soon after recording Lancelot's returns to Camelot, Malory begins to relate the quest for the Holy Grail; Lancelot is fast in the middle of it. (The year is revealed to be 487 A.D.) Both Lancelot and Gawaine are shown to be unworthy of the title "Best Knight in the World," for they cannot perform the task that will award them the honor. Only Galahad can do it, removing the sword of Balin from a red marble rock. Arthur, however, expects his first knight to be able to accomplish the deed, and when Lancelot declines to attempt it, Arthur insists that his nephew assay it. The king is blind not only to Lancelot's blemishes, but also to Gawaine's, which are the more obvious. Lancelot, however, is painfully aware of his failures, and repeatedly voices his contrition. White mentions these events but does not directly relate them or offer much commentary on them.

White does not even refer to the pre-Grail tournament in Winchester, where, as Malory records, Galahad unseats all combatants he faces save his father and Sir Percivale, one of Pellinore's sons. All in the court admire Galahad, including Queen Guenever. Gawaine, after the appearance of the covered Grail at the after-tournament feast, leads the other knights in

vowing to seek the vessel so that they may see it more clearly. Arthur is mournful to the point of being maudlin at the impending departure of the knights. Guenever and Arthur individually converse with Lancelot, with the king asking his friend to counsel him out of his depression, "for I would that this quest were undone and it might be" (XIII:8). Lancelot reminds the king that the knights are fixed in their purpose and cannot be dissuaded by any; his encounter with the queen, though, is more volatile. She is beside herself with grief, and in a statement revelatory of her and Lancelot's confused loyalties, cries, "O Lancelot, Lancelot, ye have betrayed me and put me to the death, for to leave thus my lord" (XII:8). Lancelot assures her that he will come back to her as soon as he "may with my worship," but the queen is inconsolable. She laments "that ever I saw you," but decides, "he that suffered death upon the cross for all mankind be unto you good conduct and safety, and all the whole fellowship" (XIII:8). Guenever exhibits that queenly quality of being, in this case at least, able to recognize a higher duty Lancelot must fulfill. (White rarely shows his Guenever in this position.) She is not so spiteful this time as to wish him ruin for discomforting her. White dispenses with the parting conversations and the rest of the episode's details by telling his readers to find out about the events leading up to the Grail quest "in Malory," because, he writes, "That way of telling the story can only be done once" (436).

As mentioned earlier, White relates the Grail search after

the fact, in the persons of narrators who have been involved with it. His narrating knights lift their stories from Malory's accounts. During the Grail search, Malory shows that Arthur's knights are held to a standard of conduct higher than their ordinary existence demands. Although Galahad and his fellow Grail knights Bors and Percivale chastely meet the challenges that are afforded them, both Lancelot and Gawaine are many times condemned for their own sinfulness. Gawaine is told by a monk that he is wicked in contrast to Galahad, who is blessed. A hermit reveals to Arthur's nephew, "Ye have used the most untruest life that ever I heard knight live" (XIII:17). The hermit offers Gawaine the opportunity to repent of his sins, but he declines. Lancelot, too, is found wanting in several instances. Significantly, though, he repents of his love for the queen and is shriven on the stipulation that he never go near the queen again. Malory's knight recognizes, "My sin and wickedness have brought me unto great dishonour" (XIII:19), and later vows "never to be as wicked as I have been" (XIII:20). Lancelot, unlike Gawaine, will adhere to the higher Grail code of knightly honor.

Still, he consistently and unknowingly allies himself with evil, and is repeatedly reminded of his "evil faith" and "poor belief." Some respect is still paid him, however, because he is also told "thou hast not thy peer of any earthly sinful man" (XV:6). Malory writes that his Lancelot has "been the devil's servant four and twenty years" (XVI:4), but he is still better off than Gawaine in the higher ethical standards of the quest, because he has killed no one during the search, and will not do

so for its duration. He has also taken it upon himself to forsake sin. Gawaine, on the other hand, is called "an untrue knight, and a great murderer" (XVI:6), and grows weary of the quest. He does have a vision betokening the chosen status of Bors, Percivale, and Galahad as the Grail Knights. Lancelot's brother Ector, Gawaine's companion, also has a vision in which his brother is made to endure a number of humbling experiences, including being knocked from the ass he is riding upon, and drinking from a well in which the water recedes when approached. Gawaine then mistakenly kills his cousin Uwaine in a joust and is soundly defeated by Galahad in tournament. Having trespassed in the three vital areas of charity, abstinence, and truth, Gawaine and Ector return to Camelot.

White's Gawaine relates to Arthur and Guenever his impression of both the Grail and Galahad. After exclaiming (with the Scottish accent White gives him), "May God presairve me from the Holy Grail, whatever," he declares that Galahad, whom he calls, "yon lily laddie" is "the utmost catamite which it had been my woe to smell the stink of through the world" (438). The Galahad portrayed in Malory and talked about by White's characters is a being of such purity that he seems to Gawaine, Guenever, and even Arthur, unfeeling or inhuman, anchored as he is in the spiritual realm. Bors, too, is shown to be a knight who exhibits total obedience to God and church, favoring the tenets of his religion over the dilemmas of persons in distress; Percivale is an innocent, and pure, but he is somewhat simple. White relates Bors's tale through his

brother Lionel, and Percivale's through his brother Aglovale. Lancelot, however, relates his own experience to his king and queen once he returns, and tries to explain his son's otherworldliness to the Royals. He is thankful for the humiliation he was made to suffer, and feels as though he has been renewed, given another chance by his God.

Malory's telling of Lancelot's Grail experiences continues with Lancelot's entering a mysterious ship which houses the body of Percivale's martyred sister. He stays aboard that ship for a month or more, and is later joined by Galahad; the two of them dwell within the ship for half a year. Galahad is then called away from his father to resume the quest. Both men know they will never see each other alive again, and commend each other to Christ. Lancelot is then called to go to a castle where he is told, "thou shalt see a great part of thy desire" (XVII:15). Inside he is given a partial glimpse of the Grail Mass at which the three Grail knights are present. Upon entering the room housing the Grail, Lancelot is immediately rendered unconscious and stays so for twenty-four days, penance for his twenty-four years of adultery with Guenever. Upon recovering his senses he discovers he is in Carbonek, the castle of King Pellles. Malory relates that Lancelot is later informed Pellles's daughter Elaine is dead, and he grieves for her. White, though, is not quite through with his Elaine.

The Lancelot of Malory's Morte, upon returning to King Arthur and the queen, is received joyfully along with the other returning knights. The news eventually comes that Galahad and

his companions have discovered the Grail and taken it to the city of Sarras. Galahad has since died, but Bors will at some point return. Percivale, though still alive, will never return to Camelot. Then,

Sir Lancelot began to resort unto Queen Guenever again, and forgat the promise and the perfection that he made in the quest. For . . . as he was seeming outward to God . . . ever his thoughts were privily on the queen, and so they loved together more hotter than they did toforehand, and had such privy draughts together, that many in the court spake of it, and in especial Sir Agravaine, Sir Gawaine's brother, for he was ever open-mouthed. (XVIII:1)

Agravaine is cast in the role of betrayer, a role that he retains in White's novel, motivated by his jealousy of Lancelot. White also delays the resumption of the lovers' affair for a period, and dwells at length with Lancelot's battle to live up to the new understanding of God he thinks he has acquired.

In Malory's book, however, the affair has begun again. To avoid the gossip of the court Lancelot takes every opportunity to be away from Guenever, helping "ladies and damosels that daily resorted to him" (XVIII:1). The queen misunderstands his motives, however, and again "waxe[s] wroth" with her knight, again sending him away from court, even though he protests that he avoids her only fear for of bringing dishonor upon her. Guenever, to prove that she favors all knights and not just

Lancelot, holds a party for twenty-four of the kingdom's most honored warriors. Tragedy strikes at the feast, when poisoned fruit intended for Gawaine is eaten instead by Sir Patrick. Guenever is suspected, and Sir Mador, a relative of Patrick's, demands that the queen be burned for the act, as Arthur's law accords; none of the knights available will fight Mador to uphold the queen's honor, as they believe her guilty. The king, anxious for his wife and ignorant of the reason of Lancelot's absence, chides Guenever, "What aileth you [that] ye cannot keep Sir Lancelot upon your side?" (XVIII:4). White has Lancelot leaving at the behest of Guenever, but for a very different reason: the stress of their celibate relationship has become too much for both of them.

Malory continues his tale as Arthur asks Sir Bors, for love of Lancelot, to defend the queen. After much weeping and groveling, Guenever finally manages to convince Bors to fight; he will defend the queen unless a better knight arrives to take his place. Bors then rides out of Camelot and informs his uncle of the queen's plight, and Lancelot arrives, in disguise, to fight Sir Mador, defeat him, and save the queen's honor.

The king and queen are ecstatic, "and either kissed other heartily." When Lancelot is revealed to be the queen's savior, Arthur thanks him profusely for the "great travail that ye have had this day for me and for my queen," and Guenever "wept so tenderly that she sank almost to the ground for sorrow that he had done to her so great goodness where she showed him great unkindness" (XVIII:8).

Then Nimue, that same damsel of the lake with whom Merlyn



became assotted, reveals the real poisoner as a kinsman of Sir Lamorak, "the good knight that Sir Gawaine and his brethren slew by treason" (XVIII:3). That feud has even yet not ended. The guilty knight, Sir Pinel, flees, and Guenever is truly vindicated. White follows Malory's telling.

Malory next relates the story of Lancelot's involvement with Elaine of Astolat, which begins with Lancelot arriving late to one of Arthur's tournaments. He had not planned to participate as he is still recovering from the fight with Mador, but Guenever urged him from the castle so that the two of them would not be alone, encouraging gossip. To avoid the impression that Lancelot has quarreled with the queen and been forced to leave, he elects to fight anonymously, borrowing a blank shield from his host, Sir Bernard of Astolat. Bernard's beautiful daughter Elaine falls in love with the anonymous knight, and beseeches him to wear her sleeve in his helm during the tournament. Although wearing tokens is not his custom, he acquiesces because it will further his disguise. He then gives his shield to Elaine, and proceeds to the tournament where he vanquishes thirty knights. He is seriously wounded, however, and retreats to the cell of a healing hermit.

Malory then records that Gawaine visits Bernard's home and discerns from Elaine's talk and her possession of Lancelot's shield that she and the knight are lovers. He takes the news back to Camelot, enraging the queen. In the meantime, Elaine has tracked down Lancelot, and is nursing him back to health. Bors, too, finds Lancelot, and conveys the queen's anger to

him. Lancelot resolves to fight in a tournament for Guenever, but is reinjured in practice; when Guenever hears the news she remarks that she wished the knight would have died instead. Later, as Lancelot finally prepares to return to Camelot, Elaine requests that he either marry her or become her paramour; he politely declines, telling her he loves another. After he departs, Elaine elects to kill herself.

Guenever receives her lover coolly, thinking him unfaithful. She and the king, however, notice a small boat floating down the river; in it are the mortal remains of Elaine of Astolat. She clutches a note that reveals she died for want of Lancelot's love; the queen then suggests her lover should have given Elaine more encouragement to live.

White alters this episode in one important way, by replacing Elaine of Astolat with Elaine of Corbin, who is by this time looking "rather like Queen Victoria" (489). She is convinced that Lancelot has returned to her for good, and he has not the heart to tell her the truth. Lancelot lodges in Corbin and not Astolat, and Elaine is not the lovely young "lily maid," but the aging mother of his now-dead son. White's Elaine "nursed her hero back to life" (492), with Lancelot finally telling her that he must return to Camelot. Guenever keeps her distance from him until the body of the middle-aged Elaine floats down the river. The queen is quite overcome with sympathy for the dead woman, and chastises Lancelot for his abandonment of Elaine.

Malory recounts that Lancelot rides in the next tournament distinguished by Guenever's gold sleeve; aided by his kinsmen

and a disguised Gareth, he puts in the best showing, opposing Arthur, Gareth's brothers, and other powerful knights. Because Lancelot is once again "out of habit," the king does not recognize him at first and is angered by the strange knight's successes. Gawaine then deduces that the knight bearing the sleeve is Lancelot, and Arthur concurs; all is forgiven.

White's account agrees with Malory's, but suggests that there might even have been a suicidal motivation behind the king's attack on Lancelot, whom he surely recognized; tired of the unhappy triangle the two men and Guenever occupied, Arthur might have sought a way out.

Later on the queen and her honor guard are abducted while "maying" by Sir Meliagrance, who is hopelessly in love with the queen. Lancelot is alerted and comes to her rescue.

Meliagrance is frightened at the prospect of facing Lancelot in combat and begs Guenever's protection in return for his surrender. She consents and defends him before Lancelot, who wishes to have done with him. The lovers quarrel and then reconcile. That evening Lancelot sleeps with the queen, leaving blood from a cut hand on the sheets. Meliagrance accuses the queen of treason with one of her wounded honor guard, and Lancelot agrees to defend the queen's honor in a joust. After Lancelot evens the odds between Meliagrance and him by removing half of his armor and tying one hand behind his back, he kills the kidnapper anyway. Still, the suspicion of illicit love between Lancelot and Guenever has grown stronger. White retains the episode in full, flavoring it by making

Meliagrance a cockney. He also makes the intercourse between Lancelot and Guenever a more significant event; it marks their first night together since his return from the Grail quest. Lancelot has forsaken his God for his lover.

Malory then describes the healing of Sir Urre's wounds by Lancelot; prophecy holds that only the best knight in the world can manage the feat, and Lancelot is called upon to do it. He doubts he can perform, but he does accomplish the deed. White turns the event into a crisis of confidence for Lancelot and has him contemplate suicide, so certain is he that he can no longer fill the office of best knight. God, however, grants him a miracle, and the wounds close. In both Malory and White, Agravaine is watching Lancelot and Guenever closely. In fact, he and Mordred are spreading around negative rumors about Lancelot, openly speaking of his affair with the queen. In both versions of the tale, Gawaine refuses to be involved in any denunciation of the lovers, citing the brothers' debt to Lancelot for many favors rendered. He urges them not to tell Arthur and leaves with Gareth and Gaheris before Agravaine and Mordred break the news to the king.

Malory's Arthur is "loth" that there is gossip in the court concerning his lady and knight and gives Agravaine license to lay a trap for them. The king then leaves on a well-publicized hunting trip outside the city, allowing Guenever to summon Lancelot to her chamber. In White's book, Arthur calmly tries to convince Agravaine and Mordred to drop the accusation; that failing, he agrees to leave the castle, feeling that as king he must let justice win out.

In Le Morte D'Arthur, Bors warns his uncle not to see Guenever that night, because Agravaine is plotting treason. Lancelot assures Bors that he will be with the queen only a short while, and then merely to see what she has summoned him for. In The Once and Future King it is Gareth who warns the knight; again, Lancelot dismisses the danger. In both tellings, Agravaine and his band of knights surprise Lancelot in the queen's chamber and command Lancelot to leave the room and surrender to them. Both Malory and White record that he is unarmed. He assures the queen that if he is killed his kinsmen will rescue her from any punishment. She, however, says she will die if he is slain. Lancelot then admits one of the attacking knights into the room, kills him, and dons his armor. He proceeds to defeat the rest of the party, killing them all except Mordred, who escapes with wounds. Guenever elects not to flee with her lover until she is sure of Arthur's reaction. Promising to save her if she is to be burned, he leaves, taking his loyal knights to a location nearby to wait for the storm to break.

Upon hearing Mordred's report of the incident, Malory's Arthur immediately condemns his wife to death according to law, but Gawaine urges restraint, affirming his belief in Guenever and Lancelot's fidelity to Arthur. The king seems bent on obtaining "justice," however, and reminds Gawaine that Lancelot has killed his brother and, earlier, two of his sons. Gawaine regrets the family deaths but asserts that his kin knowingly entered into combat with the unmatched Lancelot, thereby

causing their own deaths. Clearly, Gawaine has changed from his earlier vengeance-seeking days. This last exchange between the king and his nephew is not in The Once and Future King, perhaps because it varies too much from the respective portraits White wished to establish for the characters.

For the next section, White adheres to Malory's narrative quite faithfully. Lancelot and his men do rescue the queen from burning but in the process kill many of Arthur's knights who serve as guards over the execution. Among those killed by Lancelot are Gaheris and Gareth, unarmed and reluctant participants, present only at their uncle's behest. But unlike Agravaine, Gareth and Gaheris were not intentionally challenging Lancelot, unarmed as they were; their deaths soon transform Gawaine into a single-minded instrument of retribution.

Arthur mourns for his dead nephews and for the other knights, noting that "much more am I 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" (XX:9). White's Arthur laments the state of affairs, but does not specify which tragedy pains him the more. Each Arthur foresees that another feud has been set in motion, this one between the king's Orkney relatives and Lancelot's kin; it, too, will darken the last days of his kingdom.

Lancelot himself cannot forgive his unintentional slaughter of Gawaine's unarmed brothers; Gawaine, of course, will not entertain thoughts of conciliation with his blood

enemy, and he convinces his uncle to follow Lancelot to his castle, Joyous Garde, where the criminal knight is installed with the queen.

Arthur and Gawaine lay siege to Joyous Garde, but Lancelot refuses to bear arms against them. Gawaine taunts Lancelot for his brother's deaths, and Lancelot finally reacts to the taunting; a full-fledged battle ensues. Lancelot saves Arthur from certain death at the hands of Bors, seating the king on his own steed after the sovereign is unhorsed. Arthur is moved, but the fighting continues. Again, White adheres to Malory's events.

Finally, the Pope calls for an end to the fighting, and for the king to accept his queen once again. Lancelot returns Guenever to her husband with full pageantry and, in speech outlining his many services to the crown and to Arthur's family, he requests a full reconciliation with the king. Arthur seems ready to consider the proposal, but Gawaine argues against it. Accepting Gawaine's counsel, Arthur reluctantly banishes Lancelot from the country. Lancelot and his kinsmen retreat to France, but Arthur and his nephew chase them "through the vengeance of Sir Gawaine" (XX:19) to lay waste to Lancelot's lands. Arthur makes Mordred chief ruler of England in the king's absence ("because Sir Mordred was King Arthur's son" [XX:19]), leaving him also in charge of Guenever.

In France, Lancelot sends a messenger to the king's court who courteously requests that the destruction wreaked by Arthur's troops upon Lancelot's lands cease. Arthur allows

Gawaine to turn away the envoy, though he does so tearfully and without heart. Lancelot receives the message in like fashion, realizing that the king's forces must be met in battle, although he has been "never so loth" (XX:20) to do so. The next day the French lords find their city of Benwick besieged, and discover Gawaine shouting insults and challenges at Lancelot. He finally must defend his honor, and the two opponents agree to fight until one of them dies or yields.

Gawaine has the advantage first, gifted as he is (by a holy man) with increasing strength during the morning hours. White, although attributing Gawaine's peculiar might to his Gaelic heritage, generally agrees with Malory's account, writing that Lancelot gains the upper hand after noon, finally inflicting upon Gawaine a serious head wound. Lancelot will not kill Gawaine even though the injured knight demands his own death. Gawaine recovers, only to challenge Lancelot to another, identical fight. As Gawaine recuperates from this second dangerous contest, news then comes from England that Mordred has usurped Arthur's throne. A third planned combat between Lancelot and Gawaine is forestalled.

Malory writes that Mordred also plans to marry his stepmother. Guenever eludes him on the pretense of shopping for her trousseau and barricades herself in the Tower of London. Mordred lays siege to the tower. He then hears of Arthur's return and begins planting stories of the king's perversion and ill-management in the populace. As a result, the son's following grows.

Le Morte D'Arthur reports that Arthur and Mordred clash at



Dover. The king fights so courageously that he routs Mordred's forces. In the battle, though, Gawaine is once again injured in the place where Lancelot had twice struck him, and Arthur is inconsolable. The king discloses to his dying nephew that "in Sir Lancelot and you I most had my joy, and mine affiance, and now have I lost my joy of you both; wherefore all mine earthly joy is gone from me" (XXI:2). Gawaine repents of separating Arthur from his first knight and writes a letter to Lancelot affirming his respect for him and lamenting the trouble that has passed between them. He acknowledges that his failure to forgive was the cause of much of the grief, and implores Lancelot to bring a force to aid Arthur against Mordred, Gawaine's last kin. He also states that he, Gawaine, is most thankful to be dying from a wound given him by that most noble of knights, Lancelot. After Gawaine's death, Arthur defeats Mordred again, this time at Barham Down, and Mordred flees to Canterbury.

Malory emphasizes that the populace recognizes Mordred's duplicity and returns to the side of the rightful king. While maintaining most of Malory's details, White makes no mention of this change in the people's attitudes and focuses instead on Arthur's misery following the two battles. Malory's White has two dreams as he awaits his final battle with Mordred on Salisbury plain. In the first, a water wheel to which he is secured plunges him under the water's surface where he is torn asunder by serpents; apparently fortune's wheel is turning to his detriment. In the king's second dream, Gawaine's ghost

appears to him, warning him against engaging Mordred in battle the next day. If he makes a truce with Mordred, Gawaine tells him, Lancelot will come in a month's time and together they can defeat the usurper. White, although he ends his narrative the night before the battle, does not include the dreams that tell Arthur that fortune is turning against him. Something else, it seems, awaits his Arthur. At the novel's close, a disillusioned king contemplates the futility of his efforts to make life better for humankind. Defeated by his despair, he is resuscitated by the devotion and innocence of a young page named Tom, who, White relates, wears a surcoat "with the Malory bearings" on it. King Arthur then sends little Thomas Malory away from the scene of battle, making him promise to relate the story of Arthur's endeavors to future generations, and to carry on the tradition that the king has started. After sensing the presence of Merlyn in the tent, Arthur realizes that although he, as king, must die the next day, he will some day return to a better world.

Le Morte D'Arthur continues with a truce between Mordred and Arthur which is inadvertantly broken. Almost total destruction results, and Arthur kills Mordred, but Mordred mortally wounds his father. Arthur is carried away to Avilion to be healed of his wounds. The next morning, though, a tomb appears at Glastonbury that supposedly contains his body. Arthur may have died or he may have lived; the question remains moot. It is rumored, Malory says, that Arthur will return again to rule Britain; many say his epitaph reads, HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS (XXI:7). Malory finally

relates that Guenever and Lancelot both repent of their sin and take holy orders. Each dies a good death. At the end of his story, he adds that Constantine, the son of Cador of Cornwall, is chosen King of England after Arthur, "and worshipfully he ruled this realm" (XXI:13).

T. H. White chose to end his The Once and Future King with a character study of its king. Although White did write a fifth section for his Arthuriad, The Book of Merlyn (not published until after the author's death), the later work continued the emphasis on Arthur and described only incidentally the fates of Guenever, Lancelot, and Mordred. In closing his book with the emphasis on the king, then, White apparently wished to confirm Arthur as the most important element in the retelling he had created; by focusing on the life of the man who is king, White aims to explore the condition of mankind. He accomplishes his aim, using Malory in the way Malory used the works before him: White gathers the legend to him, and having given it new life, releases it to the world.

## Chapter Three

### BOUNDARIES

The Once and Future King is about boundaries. White does not care for them much; they make people territorial and keep them from seeing that the fellow just across the border is very much like them. His Arthur, for instance, discovers that boundaries are the cause of war: "It was geography that was the cause--political geography" (638). Geographical barriers, however, were not the only boundaries with which White was concerned. Upon reading Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century Le Morte D'Arthur, White decided that the work possessed something that transcended cultural and chronological boundaries, and this something White wished to reproduce. After finishing the first section of his tetralogy, White wrote to Sydney Cockerell of his project:

I am after the spirit of the Morte d'Arthur (just as [Malory] was after the spirit of the sources he collated) seen through the eyes of 1939. He looked through 1489 (was it?--can't trouble to verify) and got a lot of 1489 muddled up with the sources. I am looking through 1939 at 1489 itself looking backward.  
(qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 134)

Using the idea of "looking backwards" as a shaping motif in his Arthuriad, White has created a novel dealing with the major dilemmas of human existence--love, life, death; the natures of man, God, and fate, mingled with speculation on human

accountability and war; sin and purity, good and evil, the seeming hopelessness of it all--from his unique modern cum medieval perspective. He breaks down some borders as he goes.

White was determined to preserve the essence of Malory's Morte because he regarded the writer as "the greatest English writer next to Shakespeare" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 153). It was White's respect for Malory and his compendium of the legend that urged the later writer into a fidelity to the earlier. But it was a fidelity delineated in White's terms. The timeless human problems would, of course, be preserved, as would the major incidents and characters. In a peculiar example of his adherence to Malory, White sets his story not in the fifth century, where Malory did, but in the fifteenth century, when Malory was writing. To explain further his choice he stated that he was trying even more to capture the spirit of the older work: "I am putting myself as far as possible in Malory's mind (which was a dreamer's) and bundling everything together in the way I think he bundled it" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 133).

The precedent of Malory's bundling together of events, characters, and themes gave White license to do his own packaging. In using his own fictions to clarify those of Malory, he is attempting to emphasize the ultra-fictive nature of the project--"to write of an imaginary world which was imagined in the 15th century" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 133)--to alert his audience to something more than storytelling at work in the work: underlying all of White's artistry are those dilemmas from Malory now transferred to White, questions

that boil down to one: how does man live, not only now, but then, and later?

To make sure a twentieth-century audience can follow his story, White is careful to bridge any gaps by explaining the conventions of the time and being quite willing to illumine some of the obscure situations that to Malory's public needed no clarification. For instance, he explains about knightly endeavors:

Tilting was a great art and needed practice. When two knights jousted they held their lances in their right hands, but they directed their horses at one another so that each man had his opponent on his near side. (56)

Later White remarks that "we had better explain about the tournaments which used to take place in Gramarye in the early days." He continues,

A real tournament was distinct from a joust. In a joust the knights tilted singly, for a prize. But a tournament was more like a free fight. A body of knights would pick sides, so that there were twenty or thirty on either side, and then they would rush together harum-scarum. (345)

Chivalric combat is not the only subject he expands upon. The author writes about church-protected Lancelot's journey out of the country after he has returned Guenever to her husband and been banished from Britain:

Fifteen days to Dover was the time assigned to any

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felon who had taken sanctuary. He would have to do it in the felon's way "ungirt, unshod, bareheaded, in his bare shirt as if he were hanged on a gallows." He would have to walk in the middle of the road clutching the small cross in his hand, which was the symbol of his sanctuary. (603)

In the process of holding his reader's attention, White also plays the schoolmaster a bit.

The writer also sets out to reconcile seeming inconsistencies in Malory's narrative. This project he approaches with enthusiasm, using the opportunity to "show off" his skill at making his characters--and his narrative--more topical and appealing to a modern audience. One example of his defense of Malory combines burlesque with psychoanalytic theory, and concerns the plight of Sir Grummore Grummursum, a White creation, and Sir Palomides, a knight of legend, besieged by King Pellinore's Questing Beast, Glatisant. Palomides asks Merlyn's assistance:

"We dressed up," bawled Sir Palomides miserably, "as a sort of beast ourselves, respected sir, and she saw us coming into the castle. There are signs, ahem, of ardent affection." (304)

Merlyn suggests they "Psycho-analyse her," according to "The usual method." They should "Just find out what her dreams are and so on. Explain the facts of life. But not too much of Freud" (305). The knights do their best:

"Well you see," Sir Grummore was shouting, "when a hen lays an egg..."

Sir Palomides interrupted with an explanation about pollen and stamens. (305)

Finally, White draws this comic episode to its task by explaining that "the Questing Beast saw reason at the last moment," but

The drawback was that she transferred her affection [from King Pellinore] to her successful analyst--to Palomides--as so often happens in pschoanalysis--and now she refused to take any further interest in her old master.

Therefore,

This is why, although Malory clearly tells us that only a Pellinore could catch her, we always find her being pursued by Sir Palomides in the later parts of the *Morte d'Arthur*. (307)

And here again is the writer's "looking backwards" tactic: just as White matches a figure of his own making (Grummore) with those from legend (Palomides, Pellinore, Glatisant) to explain better a single incident in Malory's narrative, White designedly spatters bits of his own invention throughout the blueprint of the older work to better bring all of it to life and into perspective.

The serious themes of Malory are situated amidst much irreverence and gaiety, as White the narrator expertly leads the reader from historical fact to mythical supposition, allowing himself the occasional luxury of correcting previous Arthurian chroniclers (even Malory) when he thinks it



necessary. Defending his physical conception of Guenever, he writes, "There is a story that her hair was yellow, but it was not. It was so black that it was startling. . ." (331). White makes his Lancelot ugly and tormented, a regular gloomy gus in his youth; the writer then snipes at a favorite target:

"Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites would have found it difficult to recognize this rather sullen and unsatisfactory child"

(320). He also combines the two rather romantic characters of legend, Elaine, daughter of Pelles, and Elaine of Astolat into his version of Elaine, whose love for Lancelot is rooted more in vacant habit than passionate ardor, and who does not die young like her antecedents, subject as she is to the natural aging process. White comments at her suicide, committed not in the extremity of frustrated yearning but in the dull resignation of mid-life: "It was not a lily maid of Astolat they saw but a middle-aged woman whose hands, in stiff-looking gloves, grasped a pair of beads obediently" (494). Of an aging Guenever and Lancelot he writes, "An observer of the present day, who knew Arthurian legend only from Tennyson and people of that sort, would have been surprised to see that the famous lovers were past their prime" (528). These alterations he makes to support his novel's aims; this last example, especially, he includes to add to his realistic treatment of the characters: they are people, not just mythic figures, and they, along with all of those in his novel, fall victim to the passage of time.

His manipulation of the accepted past-present-future progression is another technique that White uses to present his

ideas to the twentieth-century audience. White hurdles chronological barriers, mentioning modern war machines as points of reference in a description of a medieval battle, and referring to a modern sport while describing medieval battle strategies. Malory's work, too, contains anachronistic references, but Malory's use of it is probably accidental or in keeping with the literary practice of the Middle Ages. In the arming of knights, for instance, the time period in which the literature is written dictates the appearance of the armor. Sir Gawain the Green Knight, an anonymous poem probably composed in the late fourteenth century, equips its hero in armor not introduced until the early 1300s (Tolkien and Gordon 90); a fifth or sixth-century knight he is not. An earlier medieval Arthurian romance, Chretien de Troyes's Erec et Enide, records an accurate description of the armor of the late twelfth century, the time period in which the work was composed (Nickel 12). This practice continued somewhat into the Renaissance, showing itself in disbanding by the Roman conspirators of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar at the striking of a clock not introduced into Europe until the thirteenth century. Malory, writing in 1469 (not 1489 as White ventured to Cockerell), lived at the end of one period and the beginning of the next; he would naturally display traditional conventions in his work.

As a twentieth-century writer, White's use of anachronism is deliberate instead of customary. He plays with it, relishes it, holds it up for all to notice and ponder. One of his

methods involves employing anachronistic comparison, interjecting the modern in contrast to the medieval. Thus, White reminds his reader of the transcendent value of the material he is addressing by stuffing the narrative with detailed accounts of the similarities between modern activities and fifteenth-century ones: people now are not so far removed from people then. As a result, the author likens medieval armour to the plating on modern tanks (297), jousting to a cricket match (319), gambesons to hockey and football padding (320), and pel-quintain practice to shadow-boxing (321); moving in armour he compares to maneuvering in a diving suit (321-2). White draws upon his own experiences and knowledge of the modern reference to vivify the analogy, both modern example and medieval antecedent (although in White's backwards-looking sensibility the modern actually seems to predate the old). Discussing Lancelot's donning of armour, White writes,

A diver has forty pounds of lead on each foot and two plaques of lead--each weighing fifty pounds--one on his back and one on his chest. Except when he is at sea, he weighs twice as much as a man. . . .

Practiced divers become adept at dealing with these handicaps, and can hoist those forty pound feet up and down the ship's ladder fairly nimbly--but an amateur half kills himself with the mere toil of movement. Lancelot, like the diver, had to learn to be nimble against the force of gravity. (321-2)

White extends his comparisons to social and cultural elements. Here, he discusses the relations between the ruling class and

the ruled:

The Saxons were slaves to their Norman masters if you chose to look at it in one way--but, if you chose to look at it in another, they were the same farm labourers who get along on too few shillings a week today.

He adds, in a hopeful vein,

The truth is that even nowadays the farm labourer accepts so little money because he does not have to throw his soul in with the bargain--as he would have to do in a town--and the same freedom of spirit has obtained in the country since the earliest times.

(131)

White pays tribute to the time-transcendent unfettered spirit of humanity, in which he sees hope; true humanity is a thing in rare supply, and seems to be the source of the novel's cautious optimism.

The author takes the view that medieval life was not only equal but even superior to modern life in a number of ways. But to make this prospect palatable to his audience, he must first correct misconceived notions of the earlier period. He declares that the nineteenth-century labeling of that time as the Dark Ages was "impudent" (533), and reminds the reader that aircraft were being experimented with in the tenth century, medieval scientists were modern enough to discover gunpowder and some secrets now lost to history (534), and "At least they had some sparkling names for their cocktails," (among them: Mad

Dog, Father Whoresonne, and Lift Leg [535]). He emphasizes that the evil sometimes associated with the patriarchal social hierarchy was "in the bad people who abused it, not in the feudal system" (131). White insinuates, too, that in the Middle Ages, "Everybody was essentially himself," unfettered by modern angst, and he wonders if people have, "in our few hundred [years], altered out of recognition?" (539).

Even medieval hunts were of greater import than those of more modern times because more rested upon them; life was more dangerous and therefore more precious, and subsequently had to be lived more fully:

Boar hunting was fun. It was nothing like badger-digging or covert-shooting or fox-hunting today. Perhaps the nearest thing to it would be ferreting for rabbits--except that you used dogs instead of ferrets, had a boar that easily might kill you instead of a rabbit, and carried a boar spear upon which your life depended instead of a gun. (143)

Although the medieval period had its bad points, they have been greatly overpublicized. White enlarges upon these sentiments by balancing medieval "Battle, Famine, Black Death and Serfdom," with modern "Wars, Blockade, Influenza and Conscription." He adds, "Even if they were foolish enough to believe that the earth was the centre of the universe, do we not ourselves believe that man is the fine flower of creation?" (539).

The period of the Middle Ages White builds into his story has one advantage over the historical period; White is in

control of this one, and he is going to idealize the original's pluses and clean up some of the minuses. Arthur's civilization will be White's means of doing so. The unsporting sport, for instance, of White's fifteenth century is the old style of warfare, employed by those "bad people" who distorted the feudal concept:

They--the kings with the tank-like knights of their nobility--were prepared to take a sporting risk. . . . King Lot might have said that the rebellion he led against Arthur was the image of foxhunting without its guilt, and only twenty-five percent of its danger. (296)

This is of the Old Order of chivalry, that of Arthur's father Uther, one based on the precept that Might is Right, and the weak exist for the amusement of the strong. The writer labels this sort of warfare as indicative of a "surprisingly modern civilization" (531), whereby

the Eleven kings needed a background for their exploits. Even if the knights had little wish to kill each other on the grand scale, there was no reason why they should not kill the serfs. It would have been a poor day's sport, indeed, according to their estimation, without a bag to count at the end of it. (296)

White rights the wrongness of this practice, thus supplanting the brutal Old Order--and by association, modernity--by having his Arthur abolish the operating code of Lot and his

contemporaries. The new king institutes a warfare deadly to serfs and knights alike; again, as with the boar hunt, the weightiness of the new kind of battle causes those involved in it to recognize its finality apply that realization to their lives. In White's view, the proximity of death in the Middle Ages--and in his Middle Ages--did not cheapen life as it seems to have done in the current era; on the contrary: it made life enjoyable on a level unattainable nowadays.

White also blurs the lines between history and fiction, describing the revolt of the Eleven Kings in terms of racial conflict between a Gallic overlord and his Gaelic vassals, pointing to the age-old antagonism between the two groups, ongoing even today. White also invites his reader to question at least some history, primarily the history of the English monarchy. He sets up Uther in place of William as Uther the Conqueror, dating his ruling class to the Norman invasion. This makes the underclass, of course, Saxon, which allows him to incorporate the Norman-Saxon conflict and the myth of Robin Hood into his story. He then slights historical British monarchs, many of whom he labels "imaginary." The effect of this tactic is, of course, to call into question somewhat whimsically the validity and effectiveness of previous reigns of power. The novel devotes much attention to the weighty matter of true leadership, suggesting that the author has his own agenda to espouse when it comes to that subject; it can be no accident that his Arthur ascends the throne in 1216, the year of the second issuing of Magna Carta, England's first experience with just law. But perhaps White's references to

"the supposed Edward III" (536) and "the so-called Henry IV" (551) are primarily his way of asserting that he is in control of his universe, that his fiction is real and real history is fiction, and his universe is better than the one recorded in the chronicles. But the author will not allow his illusion to be regarded as real, either, for he makes Uther's reign 150 years long--1066 to 1216. That last date reveals more of White's time-wrinkling techniques, for he claimed that he was setting his story in Malory's time, the late 1400s. By placing a thirteenth-century label on a vision of England marked by fifteenth-century conventions, White reiterates his idea that chronological boundaries are not what are important; the human factors underlying the various customs of each time period are the things of value.

Use of these anachronistic techniques constantly reminds the reader that the author is approaching the story looking backwards ("Wart would not have been frightened of an English forest nowadays, but the great jungle of Old England was a different matter" [18]; "Seven hundred years ago . . . people took dreams as seriously as the psychiatrists do today. . ." [317].). It also reinforces the notion that White is definitely, intentionally, writing fiction about fiction and he wants his audience to recognize this; all the while, he continues to craft his fictions with vitality, making them on some level "real" to those who read them. By playing up the artificiality of the form, he makes more conspicuous the location of his message, lying within those human dilemmas



broached in Malory and now implicit in the landscape of White's fictional world.

That T. H. White has a message to convey is clear. He delivers his version of those supposed Dark Ages not only to entertain, but to enlighten, correct, and instruct. His factual knowledge of the time period does lend him authority to alter misconceptions about actual recorded historical fact (i.e. the "Dark Ages" reputation the medieval period has). He goes beyond that, however, creating his ideal medieval society; thus, he can unequivocally state, "Everyone was happy," due to the benefits of his medieval society (131). Writing at the advent of the second world war, White recorded in his journal the "sorrow and perturbation of spirit" he felt; he must "begin to write in order that when the whiff of murder comes stealing something may be left behind" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 100). White's biographer records,

The book White had in mind was intended for survivors of those civilians who by their sheepishness, mental laziness, and good feeling had allowed themselves to be bossed into war by their governments. Such survivors must learn to think for themselves, and form some sort of international front against warmakers. (Warner, T. H. White 100-1)

What better platform for him than a novel dealing with the national creation myth of Britain, charting the birth of a new, better nation out of the brutality of the old?

And what more appropriate mouthpiece could a former schoolmaster and reknowned renaissance man provide for himself

than the character of Merlyn, Malory's wizard, transformed by White into a late medieval jack-of-all trades, but specifically a tutor-philosopher who inspires his young charge Arthur to explore new ideas and above all to think. Merlyn personifies the anachronism White employs with such relish and to so many ends, for Merlyn lives outside normal chronology, backwards in time. He is forever getting his time periods confused, thus creating a great deal of comedy. Merlyn is constantly confusing his historical eras, letting his "backsight" interfere with his perception of the now. He shows up for a boar hunt in "running breeches," looking "rather like Lord Baden-Powell, except, of course, that the latter did not wear a beard" (145). Throughout his presence in the novel, his attire conjures up other time periods; he takes a walking tour across the kingdom clad in modern hiking gear and even once has difficulty locating the correct hat he is to wear in his present time slot. Talking to his unseen and unheard magical costume supplier, he receives first a top hat and then a sailor hat. Looking at his latest acquisition, he says, "That is what it is, a beastly anachronism" (91).

But Merlyn is more than comic relief. He provides the novel with its historical perspective, its primary sense of then, now, and later are One; living throughout Time, he experiences all periods. He knows all events that will occur, for, in his experience, they have already happened. This lays the groundwork for Merlyn's air of authority: he must know of what he speaks, for he has been there. White, then, uses

Merlyn as a mouthpiece for many of his views, especially those concerning leadership and war. He makes references to twentieth-century political stirrings, once using the example of Hitler to sway Arthur from a conception of benevolent fascism (234-5). Merlyn remarks, in addition, that he, himself, was young at the time the aforementioned Austrian came to power; White, himself, was in his early thirties at the beginning of Hitler's Reich.

White was at heart a pacifist, and debated whether he should, comfortably out of his government's view in Ireland, "give notice of my existence to the appropriate registration body" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 168). Finally, due to his having written "an epic about war, one of whose morals is that Hitler is the kind of chap one has to stop" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 185), White prepared to serve England. Circumstances and ill health prevented him; he nonetheless had been reluctantly ready to go to war: "I believe in my book, and, in order to give it a fair start in life, I must show that I am ready to practice what I preach" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 185).

Merlyn manages to convince Arthur that Might is not Right, that battles are not fun, but

Merlyn was still explaining.

"When I was a young man," he said, "there was a general idea that it was wrong to fight wars of any sort. Quite a lot of people in those days declared that they would never fight for anything whatever."

"Perhaps they were right," said the King.

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"No. There is one fairly good reason for fighting--and that is if the other man starts it.... When you can be perfectly certain that the other man started them, then is the time when you might have a sort of duty to stop him." (232)

Merlyn, as did White, sees war as "perhaps the greatest wickedness of a wicked species" (232), but believes that sometimes, to obliterate the evil, men must answer the evil in kind--for the greater good.

The effect of all this juxtapositioning of history and concept is to make real the universality of the human condition to the reader. White's historical muddle is calculated; his reasonable (though very opinionated) narrator plus his scholarly, polemic Merlyn show from the vantage point of the twentieth century that Arthur's kingdom is a good one, a vast improvement over what had gone before it, and in many ways an improvement over the progressive modern world; it has an enlightened mind--White's--behind it, one who knows about boundaries, and knows how they can get in the way.

## Chapter Four

### THE WRITER AND HIS CHARACTERS

White set for himself the task of making Le Morte D'Arthur come alive to contemporary readers, while maintaining what he saw as the strong literary tradition of Malory. He presents the familiar characters of Arthur, Guenever, Lancelot, Merlyn, of course, and the rest of the cast of the Morte in a thoroughly appealing way, as though they might inhabit that kingdom just down the road (turn right at the second castle on the left, continue four leagues through the forest, beware of the Little People, careful of the fewmets, there, etc.). White is able to fill in some of the gaps in Malory's narrative for the twentieth-century reader concerning historical background and character motivation; he also addresses the problem of the modern world's limited exposure to and patience with Malory's style and language by pointing out the humor of events present in Malory, elaborating on those happenings for further explanation, or by adding outrageous and often silly characters, episodes, and witticisms of his own. Comedy is not the author's only means of making his characters real, however. His individuals experience real human problems in very human ways, however extraordinary the approach to the problem the person takes may be.

As with the other elements of his novel, White uses characterization carefully to support his book's themes. (White wrote of his character Sir Grummore, "It is a serious comment

on chivalry to make knights-errant drop their 'g's' like huntin' men" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White [134].) Even his somewhat peripheral people are more than literary props. White makes King Pellinore, for instance, a scatterbrained, foolish, kind knight who ends every statement with "what?", dutifully pursues the Questing Beast wherever she leads, fewmets and all, even at the loss of his kingdom, and falls helplessly in love with the Queen of Flanders' daughter, Piggy. White makes Pellinore an absurd, yet real, character; in this glimpse into the king's psyche, he is at once a credible, sympathetic participant in White's imaginary universe:

The nice thing about the Queen of Flanders' daughter, had been that she did not laugh at him. A lot of people laughed at you when you went after the Questing Beast--and never caught it--but Piggy never laughed. She seemed to understand at once how interesting it was, and made several sensible suggestions about the way to trap it. Naturally one did not pretend to be clever or anything, but it was nice not to be laughed at. One was doing one's best.

(281)

Yet his character serves, too, as an example of a man adrift and isolated by circumstance, taking his cues from outside forces, and his experience serves as a precursor to the later love relationships of Lancelot that emphasize the tyrannical nature of love and duty.

White devotes more attention, of course, to the development

of his major characters and attempts to present them as psychologically complex people. All of them are sympathetic in a particular way and no easy explanations entirely delineate them.

Arthur as a young man has "a stupid face" for "lack of cunning," is a good learner, enjoys being alive, and believes that people, though somewhat warlike, can be won over to proper thinking (221). Arthur is not perfect, for following a battle in which he has lost seven hundred foot soldiers he remarks to Merlyn, "I must say it is nice to be king. It was a splendid battle" (221), and later, "it was a jolly battle, and I won it myself, and it was fun" (223). These statements recall his childhood fascination with knighthood, fighting, war. Another incident reveals that he is sometimes more bad than good. When transformed into a badger, he desires to kill and eat a defenseless hedgehog: "'Hedge-pig,' said the Wart remorselessly, 'forebear to whine, neither thrice nor once'" (185). Being more compassionate than the standard breed of person, however, Arthur soon realizes his error; he apologizes to the hedgehog, and even compliments him on his singing voice. His reaction to these supposed lapses of character shows why he is king; although thoroughly human and possessing all of humanity's faults, he also has a heightened sensitivity to what is truly right in the world, struggle as he must to understand it. Later White paints Arthur as a man frantically trying to keep pace with the evolution of his kingdom, trying out the concepts of Spirituality, Justice, and Civil Law when the Might-for-Right tenets of the Round Table become obsolete.

Still, Arthur's best efforts fall short; the disillusioned old man at the end of the novel has tried his best and failed, and still does not seem to have the answers: "What was Right, what was Wrong?" he asks, later musing, "If I were to have my time again . . . I would bury myself in a monastery, for fear of a Doing which might lead to woe" (631). The king is, in the end, a thoroughly human character.

A thoroughly corrupt character is Arthur's son, Mordred. However, the villain of the novel (if, indeed, there is one) is not merely a one-dimensional evil being. The author manages to make Mordred credible as an individual. Equating him physically with one of England's more infamous kings ("He had been born slightly crooked--a clumsy delivery by a midwife--like Richard III" [431]), White paints his Mordred, like Shakespeare's Richard, as a complex villain, worthy of contempt but worthy of sympathy, also. While not making Mordred an attractive character, the author manages to portray him as one tormented by the demons of his parents, especially those of his mother.

White especially humanizes his characters by drawing upon his own experiences, injecting his characters with a substantial dose of autobiography. The world view guiding White's novel was generated within the toilings and lurchings of his own existence; in The Once and Future King, that personal outlook is intricately interwoven throughout, but is infused most noticeably into the people. The autobiographical element, in essence, incubates the Malorean originals, causing



them to evolve into characters of more reality and contemporary significance. Each then becomes a mobile forum for White's method of emphasizing Malory's verities, and for expounding on some important points of his own.

His treatment of the common people inhabiting the kingdom of Lothian and Orkney seems to have had its roots in White's six-year wartime stay in Ireland. Identifying both the Scots and the Irish in his book as "Gaels," he seems to have transferred his experience with the Irish to his fictional Orkney Scots (and to St. Toirdealbach, the Orkneys' crotchety Irish tutor). While in Ireland, White immersed himself in Irish history and folklore, studying the particular blend of pagan and Catholic ritual that had in the past marked Irish Catholicism. Although he stayed long in Ireland, and learned to love the country and the people, the Irish frustrated him, for they seemed to spend their time dwelling upon irrational, paranoid theories about his activities. They thought him, for one thing, to be an English spy:

His movements were watched; he was reported to the police and not allowed to leave the mainland; he had joined the local security force but was asked not to attend parades. (Warner, Prologue xix)

Like the English knights Pellinore, Grummore, and Palomides lodged in the kingdom of Lothian and Orkney, he was an outsider, a victim of "the cleft between the hated and the hating race" (Warner, Prologue xix). Warner adds, "His disillusionment may have been rubbed by the parallel with The Candle in the Wind, where Arthur's goodwill is of no avail

against his hereditary enemies" (Prologue xix-xx).

Although he at one point in Ireland considered becoming a Catholic, he later dismissed religion in general, deciding its emphasis was too heavily on money and sin, and not enough on compassion and love (Warner, T. H. White 171). His treatment of the search for the Holy Grail illustrates his discomfort with Catholic dogma and his opinions on its usefulness.

White the educator-lecturer-philosopher, White the pacifist forced into war, is clearly present in Merlyn. (Hugh-Jones [ix] and Warner in T. H. White [99] support this reading.) There is still more of the creator within the creation, though; Merlyn's guilty yet impassioned admiration for hawking also recalls the hunter White who felt torn between respect for wild geese and his own predatory instinct: "My lead [may] down you / In the heart-tumbling dive and thump I joy to view" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 159). The above lines come from a poem written about his struggle with the matter, one which he concluded, "--It was because I loved you that you had to die," bringing in another of his lifelong struggles, one against a strain of sadism within him. Merlyn, too, is drawn in by the power of the predator:

He secretly adored to watch the falcons for themselves. Their masterly circles, as they waited on--mere specks in the sky--and the bur-r-r with which they scythed on the grouse, and the way in which the wretched quarry, killed instantaneously, went end-over-end into the heather--these were a

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temptation to which he yielded in the uncomfortable  
knowledge that it was sin. (227)

Merlyn is unable to reconcile his predilection toward carnage with his being "an opponent of blood sport on principle-- although he had gone through most of them during his thoughtless youth" (227); even the grouse's being used for food provides no relief for the the vegetarian wizard's bruised principles. The author, like his creation, had indulged in all manner of "blood sport" while young (Warner comments, "Skilled killing was a part of White's compartmentalized character" [T. H. White 70].), from foxhunting to fishing, but it was destroying the graceful and much-admired wild geese that led him to the crisis he explored in the earlier poem. White eventually resolved his moral quandary by giving up hunting the geese all together.

The author's veneration of the geese's natural majesty White transfers to the boy Arthur. Wart, changed into a goose for educational purposes, is so enlivened by this concentrated exposure to nature that he "wanted to cry a chorus to life" (167), so close to the spirit of existence has he become. The geese, "wavering like smoke upon the sky as they breasted the sunrise, were all at once in music and laughter" (167). White celebrated the birds throughout his life, claiming they brought him serenity (even when he was actively hunting them), and endowed them with spiritual force, referring to them once as mihi angeli (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 114). Fittingly, the geese are the ones to teach Arthur of the unnaturalness of boundaries and war; they show the future king a vital yet

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nearly ethereal society--so far above all else it is--happily and skillfully functioning and thriving, and exhibiting, as Wart notices, "comradeship, free discipline and joie de vivre" (166).

Arthur plays several other White-like roles, beginning with that of pupil. The author, as mentioned before, was a voracious learner all his life; his king is also, being the diligent pupil of Merlyn, of the wild geese, of the badger, and of experience itself. Merlyn tries above all to teach his charge to think for himself and to place value upon things of true worth. Like all other students at Queens' College, White had a tutor; unlike all others, the man who taught White "how to behave and think" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 35) would remain his pupil's friend throughout life. To T. H. White, L. J. Potts was "by education a moralist and by inclination speculative," together with being "the only man who I have known to try to live up to his own rigid rules of decency and to behave himself" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 35). White's own tutor instilled in him a sense of morality and provided an example of a person creating and then following a moral law, in essence serving as a role model both for him and for his Arthur. (Warner's biography repeatedly asserts that White was a person who held "an old-fashioned esteem for goodness and faithfulness" [68].)

White seems particularly to have benefited from mentoring, for he had an important guide in his educational life even before Potts. In his days at Cheltenham, "a rather cruel

public school," one master took a special interest in him, commending his work and encouraging him to pursue writing. Much later White remembered, "His name was C. F. Scott and I shall be grateful to him until I die" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 31). White also enjoyed, during his adult life, close relationships with a number of learned men on whose professional judgements he often relied, among them the scholar and philanthropist Sydney Cockerell and the writer David Garnett.

White, like Arthur, also had an elevated sense of the romantic, and a penchant for hero-worshipping. Wart's comments to his goose friend defending fighting because "It is knightly" (170) not only suggest White's attraction to the predatory instinct, but also show his admiration for the warrior. Warner records a romantic hero-worshipping side of his character that was often in conflict with his pragmatic, pacifistic elements (109). White, though, conscious of the paradoxical nature of his position, makes his fictional counterpart learn his way out of his romanticism. Thus, The Once and Future King depicts a starstruck boy unable to recognize the stupidity of some chivalric customs, including the joust between Pellinore and Grummore, and later shows a teenaged king recanting his first giddy impression of war: "It was a jolly battle, and I won it myself, and it was fun," changes to "It was not fun, then. I had not thought" (223). The book finally presents an Arthur who has gone beyond the bounds of thinking about chivalry and war as separate issues, having recognized chivalrous sporting as petty "Games-Mania" and war as primal conflict rooted in its

antecedents, both of which are merely symptoms of the trouble that ails mankind.

It is finally this dispirited Arthur of the book's final chapter who wishes to be able "to bury [himself] in a monastery" to avoid committing acts "which might lead to woe" (631), echoing White's own request for a "religious order which took a vow of perpetual silence" in which he could "go to bed for ever [sic]" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 262). Arthur acknowledges, as might have White, "that the battle against chaos sometimes did not seem to be worth fighting" (364).

The character of Guenever also shares qualities with White. Guenever's childlessness, identified as her "central tragedy" (472), finds a partner in White's identical condition, about which Warner writes, "With no child to spend them on, White's riches taunted him" (T. H. White 289). The author himself lamented, "I seem doomed to sterility, and I can't help feeling it a waste." He added, "My body . . . is superficially well made, and seems so pathetically deserving that I feel a cad to baulk it all the time" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 51). Guenever is in a similar position, being one "whom God had seemingly made for breeding lovely children" but who is "left an empty vessel, a shore without a sea." White, ever cautious of risking his feelings, lamented that "all the time one's rosebuds are slipping away," a comment that brings to mind his commendation of Guenever, for "having the courage to take and give from the heart, while there was time," thereby "gather[ing] her rose-buds while she might" (472), a feat of

which White feared himself incapable. The Once and Future King suggests that Guenever may have loved Lancelot "because of the son she could not have" (472), a situation that parallels White's own admittedly confused love for the youthful son (called "Zed" in White's journals) of friends; he originally wished to be "an all-provider" for the young man, but later simply "looked forward to paying his Cambridge fees" (292). Like Guenever, whose husband and lover both "lived full lives and accomplished things of their own" (471) while still maintaining their attachment to her, White recognized that in functional love relationships the lover must not smother or consume the beloved.

Lancelot, The Ill-Made Knight of The Once and Future King, is White's most psychologically complex and deeply autobiographical character. White takes great pains to establish from the knight's childhood that he is a troubled individual: "The boy thought there was something wrong with him." White adds that throughout Lancelot's life "he was to feel this gap: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was to be aware, and ashamed, but which he did not understand" (315). This profile fits White's own; he, like Lancelot, felt there was something amiss in him, and underwent years of psychoanalysis to counteract it.

White developed a penchant for self-flagellation in his youth, apparently due to a policy of repeated canings which his prep school enforced (Warner, T. H. White 31). Lancelot exhibits a similar masochistic tendency, equating a nettle-scratching he gave himself with a semi-divine experience: "They

didn't sting me!" he exults. "I think I can remember the shock when they didn't sting" (382). In later life, Lancelot chastises himself in another way by wearing a hairshirt, as a reminder of his guilty liaison with Guenever. What motivated White's actions is material for speculation, but it might have been that sense of something defective in his character, something deserving of the punishment he received.

Along with his own, White had a taste for other creatures' pain. He labeled himself a sadist; part of him deplored this facet of his character, and he went out of his way to counteract it. As a result, he was extraordinarily generous in action to a wide variety of "undesirables," adopting injured animals, underprivileged families, and unpopular causes. But maintaining a balance proved difficult, for as his long-time correspondent David Garnett explains, "He found himself in the dilemma of either being sincere and cruel, or false and unnatural. Whichever line he followed, he revolted the object of his love and disgusted himself" (White and Garnett 8).

The author invests Lancelot with this same affliction: "He liked to hurt people" (339). Lancelot, though, is the character to whom keeping his word means the most, for he appreciates the structure an honor code brings to his tumultuous inner strivings. Throughout his life, the knight taps this internal imbroglio as he strives to be something better: "He felt in his heart cruelty and cowardice, the things which made him brave and kind" (360-1). It is Lancelot's respect for honor that inspires his therapeutic harnessing of



it, for although part of him is twisted, the other part is pure. It is this goodness that makes his badness so painful, and makes him the more determined to combat it. Lancelot's ideas recall the White who had an old-fashioned esteem for goodness and faithfulness, who harbored a "medieval monkish attitude" (White and Garnett 277) toward morality, and who so abhorred his own perversity that he sought all manner of activity to blot it out. Again, the theme of learning something as a defense against sadness is repeated; White's knight tries to channel the self-loathing he feels into something to benefit others along with himself.

Wrestling with his personal demons cannot erase Lancelot's attraction to pain, for part of "why he fell in love with Guenever was because the first thing he had done was to hurt her" (339). White, too, was drawn to tragedy, recording, for instance, with an objective yet interested eye, both the treatment the Irish gave their calves ("Calves aged eighteen months are dishorned with a saw: they stand in the field, bloody and bedimmed" [qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 120]), and the gory killing of a young animal by a pack of hounds ("The worry lasted for half a minute, perhaps, before it disintegrated into separate hounds with separate parts of the body--a mask, a pad, a string of grimy guts" [qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 53]).

But White had diagnosed himself to be not only cruel, but also homosexual, a "condition" which he tried to keep in check through years of therapy and heavy drinking. In his notes for "The Ill-Made Knight" he wonders if Malory's Lancelot, too, may

be homosexual ("Can a person be ambi-sexual--bisexual or whatever?" [qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 149]), but elects not to deal with the issue in his retelling, feeling that to emphasize sexual perversion would be to shift the focus from Malory's universalities. Perhaps he also felt unwilling to address other than obliquely such a personal, painful matter.

John Moore called White a "self-tormented person" who was "75 percent of the time unhappy and often very unhappy," plagued by a kind of free-floating anxiety: Moore suggested that White's unhappiness was "probably about nothing in particular." If, as Moore posited, the writer "saw himself very much as Lancelot in *The Ill-Made Knight*" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 93), White felt himself, like Lancelot, to be disabled by a force unexplainable, a thing planted in the "inextricable tangles" of his brain "when he was tiny, by something which it is now too late to trace" (368). The parental quarrels and punishments endured when White "was tiny" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 28) that shook his security so, seem to have lead him to a conclusion that applies not only to the maladjusted Lancelot's plight, but to White's own: "It is so fatally easy to make young children believe that they are horrible" (368).

As suggested by the book's pronouncement on Lancelot's case, the relationship between caregivers and their dependents figures prominently in the novel. In no case is it more prominently explored than in that of the royal family of Lothian and Orkney. The mother-child connection heavily

motivates the actions of each Orkney child, just as Constance White's relationship with young Terence significantly influenced her son's development. Many similarities exist between the character of Morgause and the portrait of Mrs. White recorded by her son and other observers. White characterized his mother as a "beautiful," "strong-willed," and "selfish" woman who was both "imaginative" and "malingering" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 27), eventually driving her husband to drink. Like Constance, Queen Morgause "doesn't get on with her husband" (227) and "wears the trousers" (230) in her family. Morgause is also "an exquisite creature" (217), motivated by a vacant sort of discontent to gratify above all herself, whether it be by reigniting a war to satisfy a personal need for vengeance or pretending virginity to ensnare a unicorn and, with it, her knightly houseguests. All this she does at the expense of her maternal role, shirking her nurturing duties to gratify herself; for although they attempt it only to win her notice, she has her sons whipped when they, instead of she, are successful in catching the magic beast. Operating from this same locus, she also wants to control the young king half her age whom she has convinced herself she loves, using a gruesome magic charm to achieve her aims:

The way to use the Spancel was this. You had to find the man you loved while he was asleep. Then you had to throw it over his head without waking him, and tie it in a bow. If he woke while you were doing this, he would be dead within the year. If he did not wake until the operation was over, he was bound to fall in

love with you. (306)

Morgause either wants Arthur for herself, or she wants him dead; the one who should be the more responsible and nurturant is designedly destructive.

Constance White was apparently of a similar all-or-nothing nature in her treatment of her son. According to a relative, she was "of an extremely jealous nature" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 27), often sabotaging her toddler son's attempts to share affection with his father or nursemaid. It was this same "insane jealousy" that lead her to reprimand her two-year-old-son for playing with a friend instead of listening to her music. White recounted the battles between his parents, witnessed by relatives when he was too young to consciously recall them, and involving "one on either side of my cot, each claiming that he or she was going to shoot the other and himself or herself, but in any case beginning with me" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 27). The author exonerated his father from guilt in actions of this sort, judging that the wife had pushed the husband to such extremity. Sylvia Warner, after studying the material available on Constance, called her "a menacing psychopathic mother" (Prologue x). The association with Morgause fits.

White wrote, "My mother was a woman for whom all love had to be dependent" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 124), and that "she wooed me to love her--not her to love me" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 28). Perhaps her ability to employ this method successfully reflects Morgause, whose children "adored her

dumbly and uncritically, because her character was stronger than theirs" (213).

White's slavish devotion to his mother ended around the time he turned eighteen; he carried with him, though, much of her character. Warner records that the adult White was "overbearing," and his "tendency to take charge of everything, set everybody to rights, impose his judgements and feel a martyr's wounded self-importance when they were rejected, was inherent in his character." These characteristics were "an inheritance from his mother" (T. H. White 306); they also reflect the fictional Orkney faction. For example, the adult Gawaine's habit of loud, impassioned defenses of opinion and rights, initially generated in defense of his mother's family, reflects similar reactions on the part of White. One such episode involved a "furious altercation" engendered after a hotel at which he was staying refused to allow his female setter in the dining room. The author stormed out of the inn, "purple in the face" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 238), recalling the Gawaine who "exploded like one of the new-fangled cannons," behaving further like "a baited bull" (526). White's "fits of ungovernable rage" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 221) were usually much regretted by him, a reaction paralleling Gawaine's response to his "black passions" during which "he seemed to pass out of human life" (275). Also, the imposing and bulky, over-six-foot figure that White filled out might have found some reciprocity in Gawaine's "foxy, burly, and towering" stance (602).

It is in childhood, though, that the mother's influence on

the child is most pronounced. Morgause's four older sons are, while young, rabid protectors of the family faith, hot upon revenging their family's misuse, and very conscious of their martyred forebears. Although only Gawaine carries the intensity of familial identity into later life, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth match him in that fervor in their youth. Convinced of their crusade's absolute rightness, it is to them a sacred duty, and they pray "that they might be true to their loving mother" and "worthy of the Cornwall feud which she had taught them" (306). The drive to perpetuate the feud is their only constant in life, for Morgause

had brought them up--perhaps through indifference or through laziness or even through some kind of possessive cruelty--with an imperfect sense of right and wrong. It was as if they could never know when they were being good or when they were being bad.

(213-4)

Not only does this description suggest a reason for the Orkneys' wild behavior, but it recalls White's opinion of Constance, and his recognition that his mother did not give him much security (Warner, T. H. White 28).

Arthur's explanation to Lancelot of what plagues Gawaine and his brothers might reveal what White believed his own problem to be:

The real matter with them is Morgause their mother. She brought them up with so little love or security that they find it difficult to understand warm-

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hearted people themselves. They are suspicious and frightened. . . . It is not their fault. (332)

For White seems to have invested each of the Orkney children with a facet of his own personality. Gawaine at fourteen is the noble-hearted, pigheaded warrior he will be in the later sections ("Up Orkney, Right or Wrong" [218]), already subject to the blind rages he later regrets. Agravaine is the insecure bully who will "always try to frighten people" (257). He exhibits "curious feelings" for his mother (a White trait) and sadistic impulses toward those things which inspire loving feelings; his slaughter of the unicorn, whose appearance "killed all other emotions except love" (258), suggests White's dilemma with the wild geese. Agravaine shares "a sadist's acute intelligence for pain" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 120) with his creator, and the character's active imagination makes him afraid of the pain he anticipates. Finally, Agravaine is contentious and ambitious, constantly challenging Gawaine's authority as leader of their juvenile clan, regarding the others as his intellectual inferiors "because he used his head more" (214). White, too, held "a high opinion of his capacities" (Warner, Prologue x), and desiring a change in status, he kept a sharp eye on appearances. Agravaine also is conscious of the appearance of things, especially regarding his mother and the English knights. Warner calls White "ambitious and emulatory" (T. H. White 146). Gaheris is nothing if not emulatory, for he "did and felt what the others did" (218); the White who was indifferent to a hunt "though the approval or disapproval of the other riders affected him" (Warner, T. H.

(Warner, T. H. White 54), the admitted homosexual who pursued a "normal love affair" (Warner, T. H. White 82) with a woman at his analyst's behest, at least tried to do and feel what the others did. Gaheris is also a taciturn boy who usually "hover[s] around the edge" (275) of activity, arriving last, "stupid and not knowing what to do" (259). White's sense of inferiority apparently enabled him to swing easily between "unrestrained braggadoccio" and "nauseating self-pity" (Crane 19); self-exiled in Ireland from English society, paralyzed by his fear of war, he felt helpless and wrote, "Why mention . . . ourselves, or anything, or trouble to make these marks with ink?" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 145).

The White who acted on behalf of the weak and helpless seems to inhabit Gareth, the romantic, the admirer of lost causes and grand gestures, who "hated the idea of strength against weakness" (218). These ideas recall, among other things, White's support of two young boys dismissed from a prep school where he taught after they were found in the same bed, and his philanthropy toward the deaf and blind. The former resulted in his departure from the school, the latter was financially costly, but as Warner writes, the "chivalrous" White "was drawn to defenceless causes as others are drawn to lost ones" (T. H. White 55). If White did not champion the lost cause as he did the defenseless one, he certainly admired it. In an earlier novel, the author coined the phrase "the immortal generals of defeat" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 109), which suggests that noble failures were perhaps of more worth



than actual successes. White might have thought, as did Gareth, "What a nice way to do it," for even though it "was no good" to those defeated, still "it was grand!" (239). An encounter the fourth Orkney has with his mother also suggests what might have passed between young Terence White ("Dumpling" to Constance) and his. Gareth, bringing heather to Morgause "as an apology for being whipped" is promptly and unexpectedly "covered . . . with kisses" as she "glanc[es] in the mirror." Gareth "escaped from the embrace and dried his tears--partly uncomfortable, partly in rapture" (272). Morgause, having decided to abandon her vamp mode for that of saint, has now decided that the "ridiculous knights" who ignored her charms and talents can hold her interest no longer against her "darling boys": "Her heart ached for them, her maternal bosom swelled," for now the Queen of Air and Darkness "was the best mother to them in the world!" (272). Constance White, playing St. Joan one day and the Queen of the Nile the next (Warner, T. H. White 28), again, brings to mind Morgause.

In the end, though, it is Morgause's total control of her youngest son Mordred that is the grisliest and most obscene example of a caregiver-receiver relationship perverted, perhaps suggesting what White feared might have happened to him had he not wrenched himself out of Constance's grasp. Mordred, much younger than his half-brothers, is raised alone by his mother "in the barbarous remoteness of the Outer Isles," left alone "to be dominated by her" (523). Although White carried a legacy of mother-hurt around in him, and displayed some of the dysfunctions he had inherited from her, Mordred's injury goes

deeper: all the while he is absorbing her grudges, her tactics, her destructive bent--her essence--she is consuming him, robbing him of any identity outside that of instrument of her justice. White writes that Morgause both "ate" her son "like a spider" (609) and "existed in him like a vampire" (612): while she lived he was "her living larder"; after her death "he had become her grave" (612). The ruinous effect of White's "maniac dam" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 21) on his relations with women and his subsequent bachelorhood recur in Mordred, who is the only one of the Orkney boys not to marry. Unable or unwilling to rid himself of Morgause (as White did somewhat with Constance) Mordred becomes her:

When he moved, when he blew his nose, he did it with her movement. When he acted he became as unreal as she had been, pretending to be a virgin for the unicorn. He dabbled in the same cruel magic. He had even begun to keep lap dogs like her--although he had always hated hers with the same bitter jealousy as that with which he had hated her lovers. (613)

Constance White, imaginative, beautiful, malingering, kept lap dogs, training their "slavish minds," as she had done with her son while he allowed it, to the point that "the dogs had to love her" (qtd. in Warner T. H. White 124). White escaped the destiny that Mordred had to play out by severing emotional attachment to her. His friend John Moore remembered White's later attitude toward Constance, one of "cool, steady, uncompromising dislike, lacking in compassion" (qtd. in Warner,

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T. H. White 89). It is possible that he felt as violated as  
Mordred is.

## Chapter Five

### "ORIGINAL SIN"; THUS, A PETULANT FORTUNE

Constance White irreparably warped the life entrusted to her safekeeping; Morgause damages her children with too little love and too much inconstancy. Just as bad mothers pervert the office of motherhood, so has humanity failed to fulfill its sacred trust. White implies that man is the guardian of creation, and that he has neglected his duty. As a result, a cold fortune seems to govern White's universe.

Conventional treatments of the concept of destiny, fate, or fortune, especially those from the Middle Ages, stem from the Roman goddess Fortuna, who in the tradition of the philosopher Boethius, impartially and somewhat indifferently administers both justice and injustice to all. The fortune personified by Fortuna is an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and volatile influence in human affairs (Greene 145). In the medieval tradition of which White was so fond, she is the controller of destinies and the giver of prosperity; with Fortuna guiding the workings of the universe, all creatures will have their turn on the top side of fortune's wheel, but all must take their turn on the bottom, also. Therefore, it is foolish to put security in fortune's generosity; one never knows when the wheel will turn again. The world depicted in The Once and Future King seems dominated by a force similar to Fortuna, with one major exception; the wheel of fortune remains in the "down"

position for the majority of mankind, with no one or nothing occupying the "up" side, except perhaps fortune itself.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the fallen nature of man. White illustrates his views on mankind's place in God's creation through a parable in "The Sword in the Stone," told to the Wart by a wise badger-friend of Merlyn's. The parable raises the issue of man's inherent potential to achieve; perhaps by ignoring his potential, man has put himself on the underside of the world's doings. In the parable the badger writes that at the beginning of time, just as God (here described in the royal plural) is creating the universe, the embryos of all species, man, badger, platypus, and the rest, are identical in appearance. All stand in obedience before God, unclothed, awaiting the next command. God allows each embryo to alter parts of its make-up to fit the various tasks it wants to accomplish. While the badgers ask "to change [their] skin into shields," and others desire "to use their arms as flying machines and their mouths as weapons," man tells God, "I think that You made me in the shape which I now have for reasons best known to Yourselves, and that it would be rude to change." Man elects to stay as God has created him, and he hopes "that the feeble decision of this small innocent will find favor with Yourselves" (192). God is delighted with man's decision and gives him dominion over the other creatures, because man "is the only one who has guessed Our riddle." Man, now named Adam, will remain a "naked tool" all of his life, able to recognize some of God's sorrows and some of His joys. God is "partly sorry for you, Man, but

partly hopeful." (193).

At the end of the parable, God blesses Adam and sends him out to reign. Man, though only an animal, is charged with the care of the other animals and creation. Although he is not God, and can only see part of what the Creator sees, he has the potential to be somewhat godlike. In the universe depicted in White's novel where brute force inevitably gets in the way of justice, and men are "more than half horrible" (247), something has gone wrong. Man has neglected his responsibility and has fallen, perhaps by warring upon himself, by overvaluing strength. This "original sin" (221) as White calls it has entered the world, and things are in an awful muddle.

Throughout the novel, White often uses theological terminology and imagery, but he seems to be employing them more for their connotative effect than for their religious significance. The God in the badger's parable, for instance, is a pompous, comic figure, useful as a representation of a powerful creative force with just a hint of compassion; White does not seem to be proselytizing for Christianity. His references to Adam and original sin seem the more useful for the associations they inspire (man's destructive impulses) than for the Christian doctrines with which they are connected.

White, in fact, seems scornful of the activities of organized religion. The seekers of the Holy Grail, White shows, find themselves in an almost endless series of brutally absurd situations and are expected to make decisions and do

deeds that go against man's better impulses. These things they endure in order to adhere to Catholic dogma. Dogma, that man-made vehicle for human spirituality, has, it would seem, missed the boat.

White's somewhat facetious treatment of the Grail quest suggests that he does not advocate the standard religious concept of an omnipotent, benevolent, yet terrible God. That God might seem to White to be something like dogma, a concoction of man. White instead appears to be suggesting a dualistic universe operating on a balance between negative and positive elements. White's characters describe man in his depraved state not as simply bad, but as more than half bad, suggesting that in his natural state, his nature would indeed contain some bad equally balanced with good. Fortuna, it must be remembered, is an impartial dispenser of both justice and injustice, of good and bad to mankind. In the universe of White's novel, injustice is far more in evidence; if all were right with White's world, though, fortune might not become exclusively just. A balance between the two extremes would be restored. White's ideal universe, it seems, would not be a place of prescribed perfection in which man could do nought but right, but simply a world in which mankind would have an even chance of success and failure. In the present world, he seems deprived of this opportunity, controlled as he is by his dominant, darker side, a side which gained the upper hand when man neglected his duty to creation.

White reinforces his views on the human condition in a section discussing what he believes to be the seventh sense,

which he defines as "knowledge of the world" (377). It is this seventh sense that eventually compromises people. In a passage recalling the embryos and Adam the author writes, "There was a time when each of us stood naked before the world, confronting life as a serious problem with which we were intimately and passionately concerned." Now, however,

All these problems and feelings fade away when we get the seventh sense. Middle-aged people can balance between believing in God and breaking all the commandments, without difficulty. The seventh sense, indeed, slowly kills all the other ones, so that at last there is no trouble about the commandments. We cannot see any more, or feel, or hear about them. The bodies which we loved, the truths which we sought, the Gods whom we questioned: we are deaf and blind to them now, safely and automatically balancing along toward the inevitable grave, under the protection of our last sense. (378)

The biblical Adam's decision to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was his original sin and subsequently shattered his innocence. In White's universe, the knowledge of the world that produces the seventh sense leads to the dehumanizing worship of power, and a loss of individuality. Those who reign on Earth have neglected Right for Might, for man has abandoned his original practice (from his embryonic state) of standing openly and innocently before the powers that govern the world; he has chosen, like Adam--for he is Adam,



according to White's parable--to fall. Now, that fallen element is inherent in his character. White's idea of innocence, though, is not the bloodless purity of Galahad, but is the sweet goodness of Arthur, a genuine man who has many stains on his conscience, but still perseveres. Arthur acknowledges his "badness" but remains optimistic for the future.

Many of White's characters support his ideas concerning man's darker side ruling the lighter. Gawaine seems unable to stop the destructive tempers into which he flies. Guenever, in a fury, "had a shame and hatred of what she might say, but she could not help saying it" (384). The author describes Kay as an ordinary, decent person frustrated by conflicting pulls of selfishness and greatheartedness:

He was not at all an unpleasant person really, but clever, quick, proud, passionate and ambitious. He was one of those people who would be neither a follower nor a leader, but only an aspiring heart, impatient in the failing body which imprisoned it.

(40)

The bad side of his nature seems the stronger, and is perhaps invincible. Man seems a victim of self-sabotage, fated to bow to his worse nature.

Where man shirks his duty, fate asserts control.

White's Merlyn invokes Malory by railing at Wart's petulant foster brother: "Kay," he says, "thou wast ever a proud and ill-tongued speaker, and a misfortunate one. Thy sorrow will come from thine own mouth" (40). The magician also

mentions, as the young king is being crowned, the "glorious doom" that is eventually to befall Arthur (209). The book's narrator, too, possesses Merlyn's prescient sight, revealing before the fact that Gawaine in later life killed women in blind rages (275), that Lancelot "ended by being the greatest knight King Arthur had" (318), that Guenever died in "an unreconciled sort of way" (473). This sense of fatedness pervades the novel, leaving little room for doubt as to the destiny of Arthur's kingdom: the narrator communicates halfway through the novel that Arthur will come "to grief at the end" (312). In using this technique, White is, for one thing, following Malory's lead, and he is once again calling the reader's attention to the fact that the novel is indeed a work of fiction, an imaginary universe over which the author has control. By setting himself up as an almost supernaturally informed observer of the human drama of the book, he is signalling his audience to be aware of what is underlying all of this: the themes present in Malory that White makes the focus of his narrative.

The destiny of each character, then, has been known from the beginning, and in the universe of The Once and Future King all destinies intersect. This loosely suggests a type of determinism, for all human actions in White's imaginary world are causally related, one to another. But the power that appears to plot the world's evolution seems to belong more to a fatalistic universe, operating as it does without perceivable plan or motive, only occasionally taking notice of the

difficulties of the human condition and certainly delegating no power of self-determination to the human race. This force suggests Fortuna, with her ever-revolving wheel at her side. As White sees it, fortune commands authority in Arthur's world, but the wheel has stopped, with humanity on its underside; the wisdom of man having somehow failed, he has been tumbled from his place at the head of the other embryos he had been ordained to rule, replaced by a fate that inclines to the negative. Again, man seems fated, with free will no longer a possibility.

In essence, a force outside of humanity seems to propel circumstances in The Once and Future King forward. Mordred is a character who has been molded by such a force, his role in life selected for him. White depicts a creature rendered useless for anything but hating and treachery due to his perverse upbringing by his mother and a strange, mystic inheritance bequeathed him by his Gaelic blood. Left alone with his mother while his older half-brothers have escaped to Arthur's court, he is, as a child, the sole focus of "her ancestral grudge against the King," and "her personal spite" (523). White makes it clear that Mordred is a product of his environment, owing to the nurturing tactics of Mother Morgause. The Cornwall feud and his father's incestuous affair with his mother consume him; he is indisputably hell-bent upon bringing his father to ruin claiming, "King Arthur came to a woman who was faithful to her husband. When he left, she was a wanton" (615). Primarily, he is a victim of his unnatural mother's mothering; still, he has unmistakably suffered at his father's hand. In addition, Mordred is the

unhappy product of incest--certainly none of his doing, but just as certainly an influence upon his self-identity. He is also hunchbacked, a thing beyond his control. Finally, he is the victim of a madness that possesses him at last, brought on as it is by a lust for revenge. Inflamed by this madness and his Gaelic inheritance, he appears caught in a scheme more of his mother's making than his own. In his situation, to be mother-dominated is almost to be fate-dominated. Even his physical deformity comes from interaction with Morgause, resulting as it does from the most personal act between mother and child, birth.

Although Mordred's case is an extreme one, he is not alone in his seemingly impotent state. All characters are, to varying degrees, in the same situation. White explained in a letter to his old tutor Potts that the three major themes he saw running through his narrative were those of the Cornwall feud founded upon Uther's murder of the Duke of Cornwall, the "Nemesis of Incest" concerning Arthur and his sister Morgause, and the Guenever-Lancelot romance (Warner, T. H. White 130). White threads his concept of fate throughout the plots, orienting them to the fallen state of man. In all is mingled good with bad; all three themes are themselves intertwined. Thus, Mordred schemes to avenge himself, his mother, and her parents upon his father-uncle for the wrong done by the king and his father. Mordred's vehicle for carrying out this justice is the affair between the queen and the king's commander-in-chief.

All things in White's universe are thus related. The situation of Mordred (and to a lesser extent, his brothers) is, in diminutive, the situation of White's entire fictional universe. Implicit in The Once and Future King is a force which, following traditional literary convention, displays feminine overtones; just as Orkney boys are dominated by Morgause, it is the male characters who are held in thrall to this Fortuna-like presence, and it is through the development of certain female characters, primarily Morgause, with Guenever and Elaine, that the reader can trace White's ideas on the contrivances of this fate. The author roots his fate, though, in the ancestry of the Gaels, revealing a lineage extending back through prehistory into mythology; it is through this Gaelic link that White designates Morgause and her family as the primary movers of the power that moves the universe.

To link firmly the Cornwall-Orkney Royals to fate, White must first trace their evolution from an earlier genre of creature, the fairies. In White's narrative, all Gaels are reputed to have fairy blood in their veins, a trait that predisposes them to an involvement with mysticism, an illogical mistrust of outsiders, and a fervent nationalism (all traits that White observed in the Irish during his years spent in Ireland). Presumably a product of cross-breeding between fairies and humans, the Gaels are a curious hybrid, possessing some of the best and the worst of both species. The fairy species, in its pure form, behaves not unlike fate.

As White would have undoubtedly been aware, their name is

a French derivative of the Latin fatum, fate or destiny. Fairies automatically inspire associations with Celtic folklore and the mythology of other cultures, for fairies in some form or another appear in cultures as diverse as the Greeks and the Eskimos ("Fairy" 39). Here, White is not only laying the groundwork for a Gaelic link to fate, he is establishing the universality of his material by dealing with a concept that cuts across cultural boundaries. He accomplishes again the task of transcending traditional barriers; what he did earlier with time periods he does now with subject matter.

Universal as the idea of fairies seems to be, White's fairies, however, are of a different tradition than are beneficent beings like Cinderella's fairy godmother, Pinocchio's Blue Fairy, or Peter Pan's Tinkerbell that appear in popular "fairy tales." They are not, as Kay suggests, "people with bluebells for hats, who spend the time sitting on toadstools" (101); in fact, they are powerful, supernatural beings operating outside of human existence and usually beyond human comprehension. They, like fate, are mysterious; only a few things about them are known. Yet they can affect humans in a most unpleasant manner, holding people to a stringent decorum concerning the speaking of fairy names. If that standard is violated, woe be upon the human who offends. All these characteristics suggest a people existing in the world, connected with humanity, but unforgiving and demanding of it, and suggesting, perhaps, the downside of fortune.

In "The Sword in the Stone," Arthur, then young Wart, and Kay join Robin Hood and his band on a mission to recover Friar Tuck, Wat the forest bogeyman, Sir Ector's dog boy, and the Wart's dog, all of whom have vanished from human sight. The culprits are thought to be the fairies. The missing folk had reportedly disappeared immediately after one of them broke a fairy rule. White, through Robin, reveals this about the kidnapers:

Some people say they are the Oldest of All, who lived in England before the Romans came here--before us Saxons, before the Old Ones [Gaels] themselves--and that they have been driven underground. Some say . . . that they don't look like anything at all, but put on various shapes as the fancy takes them. Whatever they look like they have the knowledge of the ancient Gaels. They know things down there in their burrows which the human race has forgotten about, and quite a lot of these things are not good to hear. (101)

These mystical, mythological, fate-like characteristics thus established, Robin and Marian further reveal that just as it is not wise to offend fate, it is not good practice presumptuously to call the fairies, fairies; it is better to call them the Little People, or the People of Peace, the Oldest Ones of All, the Good Folk, or the Blessed Ones. Fairies, too, cannot bear to be close to iron and to weapons made of it, for it was the men of the Iron Age who drove them under the earth's surface. They, ancient creatures that they are, were engendered in the much earlier Age of Flint.

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Like fate, like fortune, the fairies are stern taskmasters, holding those less powerful than they to strict standards. The fairies have taken their latest captives in their customary way; Dog Boy made the mistake of accidentally summoning a fairy when he called the Wart's dog, "Dog," without following the fairy directive of pointing to the animal when addressing it. He, in a sense, tempted fate, and fate responded. Since fairies' proper names are the names of nature--Dog, Cow, Goat--anyone who uses one of them without specifying to what or to whom it is directed is fair game. Tuck, Wat, and the dog had to suffer along with Dog Boy; the fairies believe in guilt by association. Kay and Wart are warned, therefore, that it is unlucky to speak about fairies, for they are not retiring creatures; "They are everywhere, even while people are talking" (102), and to talk of them risks offending them. Explaining the callous operations of the fairies, Robin adds, "It is not so much that they wish to do evil, but if you were to catch one and cut it open, you would find no heart inside" (101). This echoes the traditional concept of fate as an indifferent force.

White reveals another thing about the fairies: "The Oldest Ones of All were gluttons" (110). They desire to absorb their victims into the fairy world by enticing them to eat some fairy food; once the captives have eaten they can never return to mortal life. On this matter the fairies behave much as an indifferent fate might, seeking to conquer



only for the sake of conquering, destroying the individuality of the victim simply because that is how fate operates.

The fairies, then, in White's view, represent a power older than early humanity, commanding at least the abilities to change shape and to vanish like the wind; they are associated with nature and the earth, living underground and bearing names of animals, existing before humanity came into being; they also seem to harbor an emotionless natural antagonism toward man; they are omnipresent, ready to pounce upon the mistakes of hapless transgressors; and while not designedly evil, neither are they charitable. Finally, one of their favorite pastimes is to consume, seeking to absorb others by making them consumers, also.

The fairies are a capricious crew, using humankind much in the fashion of the Greek gods, for their own delight insofar as they are capable of experiencing it. Robin, in fact, states that Circe, the sorceress of Homer's Odyssey, was a fairy queen (102), linking the fairies to the wealth of Hellenic mythology from the nature-spirited nymphs and satyrs to the deities of Olympus. Those high gods of the Greek myths are movers of fate themselves, as is Circe; when she changes Odysseus' men into swine, she violently affects their futures. White, by inserting Circe into a supposedly Gaelic tradition, again suggests that interconnectedness in the elements underlying most races and cultures, a link that when distilled might reveal more about humanity.

The Gaelic race of the author's Arthurian universe is

indeed saturated with the fairy influence; consequently the Gaels, like Circe, can violently affect an individual's destiny. Morgan Le Fey, Princess of Cornwall, is also the Queen of the Fairies and seems to control much magic despite being "made of human flesh" herself (111). Morgan and her office form an important link between the Oldest People of All and the Gaels, the Old Ones. In addition, an earlier form of Morgan's name, "Fata Morgana," establishes her in the larger tradition as an instrument of fate ("Morgan Le Fey" 1169), a tradition whose implications bleed into the Gaelic people as a group, with Morgan's kin serving as representatives of the whole. Morgause, Morgan's sister, also dabbles in a type of magic, here labeled "the black one," and does so not as the result of any conscious choice, but "because the little magics ran in her blood--as they did with all the women of her race" (217). Morgause is "not a serious witch like her sister" (217), practicing magic not so much as a job or an art, but because she knows no other way to occupy her time. Being primarily interested in bending others to her will, she is particularly involved in the destinies of those around her, using magic only as a means to manipulate better the human element to fit her unpredictable design.

Another link with the larger body of mythology and with fate exists through Morgause, Morgan, and their sister Elaine (not Galahad's mother), "The Lovely Cornwall Sisters," of whom "all three . . . are witches of one sort

or another" (230). They can be compared to the three sister deities of the Scandinavian nornir, along with the Fates and Furies of classical tradition ("Predestination" 275). In general, the Fates are the three goddesses who control the destinies of cities or individuals ("Fate" 199). They are usually spinners, determining a person's lifespan with the thread they spin, and harboring a reputation for inflexibility. The Furies are the angry goddesses, punishers of evil-doers, especially those who transgress against the laws of human society by lying, violating the rules of hospitality, or murdering their own relatives ("Erinyes" 745). They are sometimes employed by the higher gods to stir up trouble and hatred on earth. On the Roman side they are also linked to the goddess Furina, who was associated with a spirit of darkness that watched over men's lives, haunting them ("Furies" 358). The Cornwall sisters do all of this. They traffick in the occult, and they certainly are a divisive influence within Arthur's kingdom, inciting their husbands to revolt against their sovereign and feudal overlord; Morgause's sons, too, eventually shatter the country's unity. The three sisters obstinately seek revenge for the wrong done to their parents when Uther Pendragon invited them to his castle under false pretenses, and which culminated in the rape of their mother and the death of their father. Uther had violated both truth and courtesy, attempting to seduce a guest under his protection, and assuming a false form to achieve the object of his desire. Finally, at least Morgan and Morgause do seem able to control the fates of those

around them through their magics, and in the case of Morgause, through the force of her personality. This connection with myth brings the concept of fate once more into view as a universal force affecting all, regardless of nationality, race, or tradition. Whether through the fairies, or through the Fates and the Furies, fortune, it seems, still controls the wheel.

It is with the fairies, of course, that White is primarily concerned. Though not as pure a sampling of her fairy heritage as Morgan (Morgause, after all, at least thinks she can love, choosing as her obsession, variously, the English knights, her children, Arthur, and later a knight young enough to be her grandson), the Queen of the Outer Isles, of Lothian, and of Orkney retains a hearty strain of heartlessness. In one instance, she boils a cat alive for the practical benefit (invisibility, and the power that comes with it) its bones can provide. She then loses interest in her project and abandons it, indifferent to the loss of the animal, apparently a pet. Though not remorseful, she does not appear to enjoy the animal's torment, either; she does it because, as in the case of the fairies and their actions, that is simply what she does. She consistently neglects her children not out of premeditated cruelty but out of self-absorption, and her attention to them is unpredictable. Morgause decides "with a sudden change of posture" that she is "interested in nothing but her darling boys," when her efforts to conquer Pellinore, Grummore, and Palomides are thwarted. In her intemperate, blackly absurd

manner, Morgause is convinced that to her sons she is "the best mother . . . in the world" (272), forgetting the fact that she often goes for weeks without seeing them or remembering that they exist. She is only play-acting at maternal duty; like the fairies, she lives only to consume or absorb, and is soon hot after a project that really interests her: the entrapment and seduction of young King Arthur. She, too, is a glutton.

Morgause has more in common with her ancestors, though, than magic, temperament, and appetite. She consumes, and as she swallows her targeted folk, she influences their eventual fates. Her victims, as in the case of Mordred, seem to absorb her essence even as she is eating them. Like the fairies, she absorbs into her ranks those whom she has enticed to ingest her fodder. She is entirely successful with her youngest son; with her older sons her success is less, in varying degrees. Nevertheless, she dominates them, numbing their awareness of their individuality; as noted earlier, Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth adore their mother "dumbly and uncritically, because her character was stronger than theirs" (213). But the fairy strain is strong in them anyway. Although their father, King Lot, is a Gall, they are still very much the offspring of their dear "mammy," due not only to her control of them, but to her bloodline. Gawaine, legend has it, has the fairy blood in him due to the color of his hair (Guenever's servingwoman informs the queen "that the Old Ones have the fairy blood in them, through the red hair" [607]), and in consequence is as an adult "strong as three people before noon, because the sun

fights for him" (607). White also makes a point of singling out an occasion on which Gawaine has a very strong, non-human reaction to being confronted with a steel weapon, iron being anathema to fairies (527). The Gaels, like the fairies, are linked to natural elements, giving them a bent toward the primal or instinctive. Gawaine and his brothers, upon leaving their home to travel to King Arthur's court for the first time, hear "the soul of the Gaelic world" calling to them "in the loudest of fairy voices: Remember Us!" (308).

Listening to the fairy influence seems an inescapable part of being Gaelic. That Gaelic "fairy-ness" that seems to manifest itself in humans in the form of stubborn ethnocentrism is a reworking of the fairy presumption that all outsiders are criminal if they break fairy rules. The commoner Gaels in general share this trait, suspecting the innocent English knights, the "Sassenach," of any number of terrible motives, wondering, "Were [the knights] for some purpose almost too cunning for belief, only disguised as themselves?" (244). White establishes, however, that along with the "incalculable miasma that is the leading figure of the Gaelic brain" (243), the Northern folk possess a capacity for warmth that not many peoples can match, finally accepting the outsiders into their hearts, "irrespective of racial trauma" (295). It is only when those Gaelic features are tainted by an outside force, which in the case of the Orkney children is Morgause, that a dangerous, volatile element

is produced. The ethnocentrism escalates into a type of arrogant xenophobia tinged with the desire for the blood of perceived enemies.

In Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth, at least, their better impulses are often in conflict with their fairy-like tendencies. It is as though the warping influence of their mother has stimulated their fairy blood into hyperactivity, leaving them to wrestle not only with the duality of their human nature, but with their inhuman nature as well. Gawaine especially seems possessed by this supernatural/natural dichotomy; plagued all his life by violent rages, "when he was in one of these black passions he seemed to pass out of human life" into the inhuman, always "regret[ting] it bitterly afterwards" (275). While the Orkney boys, like their aunt the Fairy Queen, are made of human flesh, many of their acts border on the inhuman. A legacy from their mother, they possess "an imperfect sense of right and wrong" (214), as the fairy blood has become muddled up with their mortal strain. Although they are not heartless in the fairy sense, they have been made, thanks to their upbringing, cruel and bloodthirsty in an innocent sort of way. When the adolescent Orkneys encounter a pair of pack animals, "The idea which the children had was to hurt the donkeys. Nobody had told them that it was cruel to hurt them. . ." (241). Whipping the animals round in circles, "the children did not appear to be enjoying the suffering" (242), an indication that their sense of right might be nonetheless there, however imperfectly developed. Whatever sense they might have is clouded by their devotion

to their mother and all that she represents.

Significantly, it is Morgause's "favorite story" (216), the old feud between the Pendragon-England-Gall party and the Cornwall-Orkney-Gael faction which she taught her sons to carry with them always, that is fatal to the causes of all involved, people, races, and nations alike.

Morgause in large orchestrates the fate of her children; they in turn are also movers of fate due to those same things that make them their mother's heirs, her mothering techniques and her ancestry. No child is more influenced by her than her youngest. Mordred seems fated from the moment of his conception to live an unfortunate life; his upbringing and his fairy blood combine to drain him of his individuality and his humanity.

Morgause descends from an ancient and mythological heritage, making her at least partially inhuman. She is selfish, unfeeling, cruel, but seems to be so more through instinct than intent. She molds her children into variations of herself, obliterating their free will at least to a degree. In short, she behaves in a way generally assigned to fate: she dominates, she injures, she destroys, she very occasionally rewards, all without seeming plan or purpose. In a universe where all destinies are interconnected, it is the intersection of her path with her half-brother the king's, though, that moves her character out of a situation that merely reflects the workings of destiny and into a position of more power, for she brings about Arthur's downfall. Mordred is born of this brief



alliance, and it is Mordred who will eventually challenge his father in civil war. Since the state of Arthur's kingdom, his ideal, his (actually White's) universe, and ultimately, mankind, depends upon the fortune of the king, when Morgause seduces him she is the force of fate worked upon the universe of Arthur.

Morgause corrupts the teenage king (four or five years older than her oldest son) for the same reason that she pursues Pellinore, Grummore, and Palomides and shackles her sons' souls: gluttony. There is little doubt that Arthur is innocent in his dalliance with his half-sister; Morgause has put Arthur under a love spell of sorts, one enacted when the earlier mentioned spancel, a tape of human skin, is tied around the head of the sleeping victim: "If he woke when you were doing this, he would be dead within the year. If he did not wake until the operation was over, he would be bound to fall in love with you" (306). When Arthur awakes, encountering Morgause for the first time, he notices that "she was folding up a tape" (310). White writes of the ensuing coupling between Arthur and his half-sister, "It is impossible to explain how these things happen" (310). The unmistakable impression, though, this incident imposes upon the reader is that Arthur is a victim of circumstance, tricked through the designs of Morgause into committing unknowing incest.

The doom that began with the conception of Mordred is propagated by the offspring of the instigator. The Orkney faction is forever embodying the "uncontrollable, ideal-wrecking fate" which John Crane suggests their mother

represents (93); they distress the king and his code of honor, for instance, by swearing revenge against the Pellinore family for Lot's accidental death. Gawaine eventually murders King Pellinore in a fit of family loyalty; Agravaine's decapitation of Morgause and the subsequent murder of Lamorak (Mordred stabs him in the back) compound Arthur's difficulties. These infractions are only incidental to the collapse of Arthur's world, however. Agravaine and Mordred engineer the confrontation that exposes Guenever and Lancelot's affair, an act which divides the kingdom. Gaheris and Gareth unwittingly figure into their uncle's downfall when they are accidentally killed by Lancelot, an event which inflames Gawaine's fairy blood, blinding him to logic and binding him to Mordred's lies. It is Mordred, finally, who leads the rebellion against his father, and who will eventually kill the old man, seemingly bringing the story of Arthur to an end.

The story seems a tragedy in the classical sense, for the protagonist's one frailty, his innocence, triggers events that in the end bring upon his demise. Endearing as Arthur's innocence is, it is, in his present world, a failing. Arthur compounds his error by consistently refusing to acknowledge that the divided nature of mankind is geared more often toward bad than good. Although he recognizes that people are "half horrible and half nice," possibly "even more than half horrible" (246), he must constantly battle the fact that he "was always a simple fellow, who took people at their own valuation easily"

(311). He seems unwilling to accept the degraded state of man, behaving "as though . . . he did not believe in original sin"

(221). In a dualistic universe where good and bad have equal sway, that original sin is some action that has upset the balance. Although Arthur is trying to restore man to his responsible position at the helm of creation, he cannot seem to comprehend the power that wickedness wields, and seems to believe that all will work out for the best. In short, he is trusting to the goodness of fortune, and will be shown to be, according to the Boethian tradition, a great fool.

With an eye on the tragic accountability of Oedipus, White labels Le Morte D'Arthur "a perfectly Aristotelian tragedy" because Arthur "had slept with his sister," and "it was the offspring of this union who finally killed him" (qtd. in Warner, T. H. White 130). This act of succumbing to Morgause is his error, and even though he was unaware of their family tie and is probably a victim of the spancel, he is still responsible, for as White writes at the end of The Queen of Air and Darkness, "It seems, in tragedy, that innocence is not enough" (312).

He also must be held accountable for the desperate action he takes against his infant son. Confused and terrified as any nineteen-year-old would be at the gravity of his incestuous intercourse with Morgause, the king chooses to accept the counsel of his advisors. Arthur must live not only with the other children's deaths on his conscience and Mordred's deadly resentment, but, too, with the poisonous results of the younger man's hate.

It is finally the king's failure to act in the affair between the queen and Lancelot that gives Mordred and Agravaine the weapon they need to destroy Arthur. He tells Gawaine, "I didn't want to be conscious of it. I hoped that if only I was not quite conscious of everything it would come straight in the end." Remembering Mordred Arthur adds,

When I was a young man I did something which was not just, and from it has sprung the misery of my life. Do you think you can stop the consequences of a bad action, by doing good ones afterwards? I don't. I have been trying to stopper it down with good actions, ever since, but it goes on in widening circles. (579)

Once committed, an action cannot be reversed. The king, it seems, must pay for his sins.

The author expostulates that Arthur's failing "is why Sir Thomas Malory chose to call his very long book the Death of Arthur." White continues:

Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy of sin coming home to roost. (312)

Although he is unaware of his sin with his sister at the time he commits it, Arthur's innocence is not enough to absolve him

of blame; that same inability to recognize evil leads him to the greater wrong of the attempted murder, which succeeds only in further blotting the king's soul. In White's imaginary universe all must answer to judgement.

The Matter of Britain as presented by T. H. White is in actuality the saga of one man. For White, like Malory, has made his book an epic in the general sense of the term, charting the development of a people, a nation, and a world through examination of the life of its king. By way of bringing definition to Malory's material, White clarifies the elements of Aristotelian and Boethian tragedy he found already present in the older tale, fusing them into his treatment of the legend of Arthur. While other characters are examined in depth--indeed, each character is in some way caught in his or her own tragedy--it is ultimately Arthur's story, for Arthur is both England and Royalty, and it his triumphant rise, his tragic fall, and above all his enduring humanity that propel the book. Through Arthur's experiences White shows not only how circumstances beyond one's control often end up deciding one's destiny, but also how simply closing one's eyes and hoping for the best in difficult situations will cancel the efficiency of any number of diligently performed duties.

It is finally this last element, the Boethian caveat against trusting to inconstant fortune, that provides the novel with its unifying motif: White, a man dominated and maimed by a smothering, manipulative, casually cruel mother, gives his book a fate that adheres to the traditional feminine principle, exhibiting petulance and inconstancy. He suggests fate is

not sensitive to the finer qualities of man--compassion, endurance, love, choosing as he does to portray primarily the negative aspects of the Fortuna tradition.

Lancelot is one who is dominated by fate, both through his association with women and through experiences in his childhood. His experiences mirror Arthur's at oblique angles. But while making the knight's travails a part of Arthur's doom, White also makes them Lancelot's own tragedy. He is, as White takes great pains to draw, an imperfect person very conscious of his imperfection. He knew at age fifteen that he would call himself "Chevalier Mal Fet," the Ill-Made Knight (317). His "flaws", though, seem beyond his control: his spiritual lack has been with him for as long as he can remember, and his appearance ("He looked like an African ape" [317]) is hardly something he can alter. To offset these failings he desires to be the best knight in the world so "Arthur would love him in return" (323). This leads him into the fault of pride, as White illustrates by transplanting Malory's unseating-of-Lancelot vision dreamed by Ector into Lancelot's adolescent years, as a dream he, himself, has. (317). The fact that he has a messiah complex of sorts, wanting "to perform some ordinary miracle--to heal a blind man or something like that, for instance" (323), shows him to be both presumptuous and simple in his understanding of God. Yet he is intensely spiritual, and he seems to be a character struggling to surmount the odds stacked against him. He cannot, however, quite escape.

Lancelot alone among the human characters (excepting the backsighted Merlyn, who is actually half demon) seems to sense something of his destiny. That he has sensed "something missing" within him for as long as he can remember might actually be indicative of his awareness of his flawed human nature. And since negative-heavy human nature is a result of man's chosen course of action, original sin, Lancelot's sense of manipulation comes more from within than from without. Although he was apparently fated to rescue Elaine from Morgan's boiling water and he is tricked into having an affair with her, his later actions regarding her seem to be internally motivated. Again, although his love for Guenever seems an irresistible force, his role in that love relationship is dictated by him.

With Elaine, Lancelot allows himself to be controlled by her. While telling her, "It is unfair to bind me with pity" (377), that is exactly what he allows her to do. Her gracious acceptance of Lancelot on his terms ("She did not cry or bid for pity--and he knew she was sparing him these things" [410]) immediately makes him do things on her terms. "I told Elaine," he explains to his brother, "that I would not promise to stay with her: so I must" (417). Lancelot, then, is abdicating his responsibility to himself, sacrificing his individuality, only reacting to Elaine instead of taking the initiative himself. He finally leaves her, not due to long and careful consideration of such a move, but due to 1) Ector Demaris and Degalis's convincing Lancelot that Arthur and Guenever need him more than Elaine, 2) his Uncle Dap's

appearing on the scene with Lancelot's old gear, and 3) Elaine's assuming that he will return to Camelot. The Ill-Made Knight reacts to the suggestions of others, and then acts in the way that his flawed inner mechanism dictates.

His extreme devotion to honor and duty compels him to serve others. As a result, he often puts himself at the disposal of others, primarily damsels in distress. In one instance, the knight is bound to serve the daughter of King Bagdemagus in return for her aid in Lancelot's escape from the four queens who imprison him in the Castle Chariot (one of whom is Fata Morgana, herself; from the fire back into the frying pan?). He must fight on her father's side in a tournament, against some of his own Round Table comrades. The daughter is "a bold creature, who was probably fond of getting her own way," and is therefore manipulative, bursting into tears "in a charming and determined way" (345), the better to make her case with Lancelot. Lancelot "saw at once what he was expected to do" (346), and elects to do it.

GuenEVER naturally controls a good portion of his thought and activity. His love for her and her position as queen make him deferential to her wishes; all the same, he seems to desire it. He tells her only half-facetiously, "Jenny, I was happy because you were ordering me about." He adds, "I like you to look after me, to tell me what I ought to do" (541). Lancelot cannot get along without his lover, going mad when she once orders him to leave her, and he subsequently allows her to control the dynamics of their relationship, denying in



part his responsibility, and sacrificing in part his individuality.

In his current world, he, like Arthur, is held accountable for his actions. His fatal choice involves trusting fortune over faith, or more specifically, preferring to listen to his unpredictable lover over his seemingly constant God, an action that can only lead to destruction. To Lancelot, White explains, God is an important person to be deferred to, just as Arthur is, and his beloved Jenny. Lancelot sees the three of them, God, King-Hero, Queen-Lover, as equal powers vying for his devotion; he gives it to the one whom he determines needs him the most. Sensing Guenever's need for him much as he senses Elaine's, he reacts by surrendering his powers to his lady.

It might be fitting to say the Orkney faction are fated to fulfill the workings of the larger fate. So, too, seem many of the women in White's tale; they, like the Gaelic Orkneys, have their lives assigned them by circumstances beyond their control, and they, too, are powerful determinants in the destinies of others. White points out that the marriage between Guenever and the king "had been fixed by treaty . . . without consulting her" (362). While she loves her husband, she still misses the "passion of romance" (363), and therefore falls for Lancelot when he comes along. As was the case for most medieval women, "It was her part to sit at home," even though she is "hungry in her fierce and tender heart" for more than that which she is allotted (473). White further explains that Guenever had little recourse other than

to behave as she did because

There were no recognized diversions except what is comparable to the ladies' bridge party of today. She could hawk with a merlin, or play bind man's bluff, or pince-merille. These were the amusements of grown-up women in her time. But the great hawks, the hounds, heraldry, tournaments--these were for Lancelot. For her, unless she felt like a little spinning or embroidery, there was no occupation--except Lancelot. (473)

Her love for her husband's best friend is something bred almost of necessity for the survival of her spirit.

Elaine is similarly constrained by circumstance. Her path mixes with Lancelot's through the machinations of Morgan Le Fey, when he rescues her from the boiling water. Elaine is, in fact, destined to meet the knight because the prophecies foretell that only Lancelot Dulac will be able to break the witch's enchantment of the girl. Once she falls in love with Lancelot, she is fated to spend the rest of her life living on his legend, surviving without a true identity of her own. Lancelot suggests that her entrapment of him which leads to Galahad's conception was not her own idea: "Probably your father made you do it, so as to have the eighth degree from Our Lord in the family" (376).

Elaine, though, like Lancelot, seems to be motivated from within by a human failing that causes her to invest all of her hopes in Lancelot, without working on any within her.

Admitting that the seduction of Lancelot was her fault ("I ought to be killed. Why didn't you kill me with your sword?"), she turns around and pleads, "But it was because I loved you. I couldn't help it" (376). Her world from then on centers on Lancelot, "for whom her child-mind lived" (387), for she has no reserves of her own, being "quite without character" (386) and simple, not in the honest, optimistic fashion of Arthur, but in a passive, immature way. When she finally realizes she has lost Lancelot forever, she has nothing more to fill her life, and so she ends the empty existence she was unable to give meaning to on her own. Still, her uncalculated manipulation of her beloved continues, as her death inspires all of Lancelot's deepest guilt feelings, driving a wedge between Guenever and him "more effectively than ever" (494). White's themes compound themselves, as does human nature.

White makes Mordred, like Lancelot, more than just an instrument of Arthur's downfall; he is illustrative of another type of tragedy, the result of man's failure to hold up his end of life's responsibility. Both of Mordred's supposed caregivers have wronged him. Arthur's unconscionable decision to act against his son can certainly never be erased, but Morgause has, in essence, destroyed him. It is in Mordred's destruction that the theme of caretakers mishandling their responsibility is its most potent. White writes concerning a now-insane Mordred that the thing "that rots the mind" and "condemns the tragic character to his walking death" is "the mother's not the lover's lust." He continues:

It is Jocasta, not Juliet, who dwells in the inner chamber. . . . The heart of tragedy . . . lies in the giving, in putting on, in adding, in smothering without pillows. Desdemona robbed of life is nothing to a Mordred, robbed of himself--his soul stolen, overlaid, wizened, while the mother-character lives in triumph, superfluously and with stifling love endowed on him, seemingly innocent of ill-intention.

(611)

Mordred never has the chance to be himself, Elaine is never able to find a real identity, Lancelot is driven to subordinate his will to the will of others. All are products of White's universe, in which ill destiny seems to reign, whether it be rooted within humans or operating from without.

White's selection of women and Gaels to illustrate the workings of fate suggests a curious paradox: those whose roles were dictated to them by circumstance (as were medieval women, as are Morgause's troubled children) have the most power over those who are supposed to be free. In the end, everything seems a paradox, for how is a king to change mankind, an aged Arthur wonders on the eve of his final battle with Mordred, if mankind has no genius for his own improvement? Or no power to effect a change in himself? Fate, at that point, seems overwhelming.

## Chapter Six

### HOPE, FREE WILL, AND THE "UP" SIDE OF FORTUNE

White has seemingly constructed a universe ruled by a fate that is at its best, inconstant, and at its worst, overtly destructive. It is, above all, devoid of the stuff of humanity, registering neither compassion nor malevolence. In its actions it seems inclined toward the negative, dispensing much punishment and little reward, perhaps because in the universe of The Once and Future King man is deserving of that treatment; man is, as even the king asserts, "more than half horrible" (247). Perhaps as a penalty for the fallen state of their nature, the folk who people the author's fictional landscape seem locked into fates not of their own making. They are chastened, too, for their ignorance; in a fallen and therefore tragic universe, innocence, White relates, is not a proper excuse.

The author, however, hints that man's existence may not be quite as fixed as it at first glance seems. White's use of qualifying words and phrases suggests that a fate other than the one dictated to man by his universe might be possible. The suggestions are subtle, however, giving only the possibility that alternatives exist for the characters, that people may potentially be masters of their own fates. Even these oblique intimations, though, imply that hope is not entirely absent from White's world. Events or character traits that appear to be mostly minor addenda to the novel's makeup are actually

important components in establishing another of White's themes: humankind may in some fashion redeem itself. It is not an easy or an immediate redemption that the novel allows for, however.

Man's vision of the universe, and, therefore, his understanding of it, is clouded; he is confused about a great many things, and God is apparently one of them. Able to understand Him only in a man-made context, man has forced God into the artificial constructs of dogma. White appears to disapprove of dogma, and of any God that would champion it. Yet religion and the church do contain something of the spirit, for the Grail miracles nevertheless occur, and although Arthur decides in the end he "could not accept the godly view" of the church (633), it is doctrine he is rejecting, and not spirituality. This God may be other than the traditional God; no one in fact seems to understand well the workings of Him. Because White keeps the religion of the Grail Knights at a distance, Lancelot's is the only model of God that White supplies in any depth. Lancelot's view of God, though, is odd, odd enough to make the reader suspect that Lancelot is missing something in his personal theology; Lancelot regards God as a person and sees God as residing somewhere vaguely in the East. The Grail quest itself shows that Arthur does not understand well the God that is supposedly in his universe, and he understands little of what Lancelot relates to him concerning the demeaning yet uplifting experiences Lancelot had, finally deciding that the successful Grail knights are "supernatural virgins" (469). Although White treats with some comedy the

three knights who come nearest to the Grail, he also, through Lancelot, suggests a possible reason for the behavior of Galahad and his fellows. Lancelot answers objections to Galahad's unmannerly behavior by positing that his son is following a different code from the one Gawaine and the other knights follow, and it is a higher code, one not fully understood. Perhaps in the same way, man is unable to understand the workings of God. Whether or not White equates God with the indifferent fate is uncertain; in any sense, though, it suggests that man may look forward to something he cannot yet comprehend, and that something may be a positive force.

White also leaves room for the interpolation of human free will into his carefully contrived universe. He communicates this message to his audience in one way through his choice of language, placing in the same text both assertions of absolute certainty and suggestions of possibility. Thus, White writes that one character did die in a certain manner, and that another character did become this sort of fellow in later years, and that a third character might have acted in a particular way. White employs the language of probability and possibility in addition to that of certainty; although the end result is well-known and prescribed, the human factors leading to it are not. The effect created is one of a universe in which destinies are fore-known, but in which human motivation might be a variable.

White provides a variety of ideas concerning why Arthur suddenly decides to fight against Lancelot in the last big tournament, suggesting "just for that one minute of anger Arthur was the cuckold and Lancelot the betrayer." White immediately asserts that though the above seems "the apparent explanation" of Arthur's uncharacteristic behavior, "there may have been another thought behind it." Arthur, the author supposes, "may have fought against Lancelot in the hope of being killed by him," leaving the commander-in-chief to marry Guenever. White adds that the king "may have given Lancelot the chance of killing him in a fair fight, because he himself was worn out," yet another alternative. The author concludes his series of conjectures with "It may have been" (496). Here, White takes a cryptic incident from Malory and provides a number of possible explanations for it, letting his reader decide that any or all of the accountings are correct, or that perhaps none of them are. White suggests that not all things are known or pre-set. While a thing is possible or even probable, it is not absolutely certain.

Much of this White communicates through his narrator; by making his narrator not quite omniscient, White leaves his universe a little more open to the suggestion of something existing in it that is not categorizeable, that cannot yet be analyzed and explained, something existing outside of the manipulation of fate, even.

Just as White suggests that human will may not be entirely bound by fate, he also indicates that the workings



of fate may not always influence a particular action. Still, he is not very optimistic about humankind's chances against fortune's bullying power because, in these cases, the author does usually slant the evidence he discloses to weigh more heavily in the favor of the fated alternative over the others. He gives his audience, then, a primary reason an event occurred, together with some secondary reasons. In relaying the incident so that a choice among explanations for the event seems to exist, he actually builds a better case for one of them; semantically, any of the explanations could work, but rhetorically, one is the most persuasive. In listing possible reasons for Arthur's sexual coupling with Morgause, White suggests a number of things that might have led to it, including Morgause's beauty and the king's unexpressed mother-love, his simplicity of character tricked by her manipulative art, and his youth subjugated by her age. All of these possibilities are likely, and they also suggest themes that White addresses throughout his novel. White builds the best case, though, for his conditional statement, "Perhaps the Spancel had a strength in it" (311), by spending over a page in the previous chapter on the workings of the magic charm, and by implying in his description of the meeting between Morgause and her half-brother that the queen has, indeed, used the spancel, as she is in the process of putting it away when he awakens to find her in front of him. (In fact, it is quite likely the removal of the tape which awakens Arthur.)

And by laying better groundwork for the explanation that the spancel precipitated Arthur's fall, White emphasizes the idea that the majority of the power in the universe is allotted to fate, although human elements may have the potential to affect an individual's destiny.

Fate is powerful, but man may not be as powerless as he appears to be, at least in the area of will. But, too, man may be more responsible for himself and his world than it may seem in a foreordained universe. With this possibility in view, White writes that Lancelot, following his drunken night with Elaine, whom he thought was Guenever, is aware of the drink he took "and of the love potion which had perhaps been put in it" (375); Lancelot may have been drugged, but he may also have had a choice. (Malory, on the other hand, allows for no doubt that Lancelot was enchanted by Brisen.) Lancelot himself later states, "It was my fault for getting drunk," but adds, "I wonder if that butler tried to make me. It was not very fair if he did" (376). He vacillates between thinking he may have been aggressor or victim.

The badger of embryo parable authorship illustrates another instance of language qualification, and confusion as to the message it communicates. The badger qualifies the treatise he has written as "not a bit interesting" and "not very good" (191), but White shows that the writings of the "learned creature" are indeed important to the badger-author, reporting that the animal "cough[ed] diffidently" when talking about his manuscript "to show that he was absolutely set on explaining it" (190). The badger then, of course, proceeds to recount one

of the major themes underlying the book, revealing that the animal hardly thinks it is no good or uninteresting. White seems to be using the badger's technique himself, setting up his important insights as merely possibilities, suggesting to the reader who has charted his methods and means that although he as author and creator of the novel's fictive universe should know what constitutes Truth in his world, nothing is certain, for perhaps fortune's wheel may turn without even the creator ascertaining it.

This technique of sometimes supposing instead of always knowing also emphasizes the complicated motives that often surround human activities. As the interrelatedness of all things is one of the author's themes, it is fitting that most of White's themes, which have been clarified through his techniques, come together in Morgause's seduction of Arthur. After the Orkney queen has used her aforementioned spell against England's king, causing him to fall, White first comments, "Perhaps the Spell had a strength in it," pointing up Arthur's helplessness at the mercy of Morgause's magic. However, when White refers to Arthur's and Morgause's motivations outside the pull of magic, he is throwing open avenues of human choice in his universe, and that choice becomes an element superimposed upon the workings of fate. When White suggests that the young king's naivete in the face of the woman's superior age and strength of character might have led to their coupling, he is at least implying that Arthur chose to give in to her. Here,

too, White refers to his themes, bringing in the dangers of innocence (suggesting, maybe, that people cannot afford to be innocent) and the shirking of responsibility on the part of the one who is more powerful and should be more accountable. This last idea figures directly into White's theme of the mother figure playing on the child's natural bond to her, perverting it: "Perhaps," White speculates concerning Arthur's surrender to Morgause, "it was because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the role of mother love, as she stood with her own children behind her, took him between wind and water" (311). An extraordinary yet very human young king commits an error that is eventually fatal to him and his kingdom. He may have consciously chosen his course; he may have been compelled. As the instrument of fate, his half-sister is simply doing what she was designed from the first to do--unless she is not entirely fated, and choice is possibility. When choice is accepted as a given, the reader can conclude that the one who initiated the fatal course of action should have acted differently; it was her responsibility to do so. She misuses her power over her less puissant co-defendant in "the act," and he is too innocent to recognize the wrong. Underlying the incident is an assertion that voluntary and involuntary participants in ignoble activities are equally accountable in this world, because this world itself fell long ago, when man must have made the choice to do so; the pattern repeats itself.

In spite of the gloom of this assertion, the fact that

man does seem to have some control over his destiny remains. Despite the overbalance of people doing wicked, selfish things, Sir Aglovale chooses to end the feud between the Pellinores and the Orkneys, because Arthur convinces him that "a king can only work with his best tools" (450), and he needs Aglovale to be such a tool for the good. Sir Belleus, too, decides to forgive Lancelot after the knight nearly kills him in an accident of circumstance. As proof that men can change, White offers up Bedivere, a man who murders his adulterous wife but who repents of his crime sincerely after a visit to the Pope.

In addition, the suggestion that those who are oppressed by fate can to a degree reclaim their lives is present within White's framework; the older Orkney boys illustrate this. All grow up in the same set of circumstances, and yet only Agravaine is truly without honor. True, Gaheris remains "dull" and imitative throughout his life, but he at least does not side with his second-oldest brother, and he does not accompany Agravaine and Mordred to murder Lamorak as Gawaine does. Gaheris's younger brother turns out to embody the ideal of knightly virtue. White refers to him as "the beautiful Gareth" (514), and he is that. Passionate, loyal, heroic, forgiving, and above all, just, he breaks with his family on two occasions to side with Lancelot, whom he, in full knowledge of his affair with Guenever, still recognizes as "the greatest man I know" (554). Guenever calls Gareth "one

of the nicest people at court" (566), and it is Gareth's death at Lancelot's hand that so inflames Gawaine's sense of family injury, causing him to pledge eternal enmity against Lancelot. Gawaine, though he kills Pellinore and approves of the killing of Lamorak ("Lamorak deserved death, like a felon, because he and his father had injured the Orkney clan" [430]), is "generous in his own heart," once he gets past his blind family loyalty, and he feels cheapened after Morgause is killed along with her lover, knowing he has "hurt Arthur's Ideal" (431) by being involved in such an action.

Gawaine is another one of the many basically decent characters in the novel, like Kay or like Guenever, who act badly not because they want to, but because they cannot help the way they act. Even if Gawaine believes a wrong needs to be righted, as with the Pellinores, he regrets losing control of his senses when he descends into primitive violence: "Ach God! If but I hadna siclike waeful passions!" (528). In this life, however, Gawaine is unable to resist his passions until it is too late for him; it is his incessant baiting of Lancelot that forces the besieged knight to leave his castle and fight Gawaine, giving him the wound from which the oldest Orkney will eventually die. But Gawaine does in some manner escape his heritage before he dies by writing Lancelot, putting his brothers' deaths behind him, and taking responsibility for the costly clash between Lancelot's and Arthur's forces. He further implores Lancelot to gather his troops to aid Arthur against his last remaining immediate relative, Mordred. The passionate Scotsman has at last managed to maintain a hold on

passionate Scotsman has at last managed to maintain a hold on his senses and reclaim his innocence, as the handwriting he demonstrates in his letter suggests; it is "lovely old Gaelic minscule," like "an old-fashioned boy's":

He had carried this innocent precision, these dainty demoded cusps, through misery and passion to old age. It was as if a bright boy had stepped out of the black armour. . . . (625)

White suggests that Gawaine's story is not ended, and that a new start might await him somewhere else. Bors, after reading Gawaine's final letter, speculates that "Gawaine" might have been pronounced "Cuchullain" up north, in Scotland or in Ireland. This Celtic form of Gawaine's name calls up associations with the other tradition of the Gawaine character in Arthurian literature, the courteous and chaste warrior who is a national hero (Tolkien and Gordon xvii). A new life might await Gawaine, one not plagued by black passions and regrets, where his good nature perhaps will rule. As a song Bors connects with Gawaine says (White states that the modern translation printed in the book might be faithful to words Bors would have been familiar with), "Still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland, / And we in dreams behold the Hebrides" (627). The possibility of hope for Gawaine does, in White's plan, exist.

In the narrative, Gawaine's inner childlikeness seems his salvation, as though White were hinting that the crusty, unhappy old Gaelic warhorse might find something better waiting

for him elsewhere. Arthur's innocence, though, appears to lead him to his doom, and in this case appearances are true; Arthur is doomed in this world by his frailty.

Merlyn's actions suggest that perhaps there is more to the plan for Arthur than his destruction by guilelessness. Merlyn has seen (or will see) all times; he knows, if not all elements of Arthur's future, many of them (he knows, for instance, that Guenever and Lancelot will contribute to Arthur's downfall); and yet he encourages Arthur to continue working on a solution to mankind's ills, stipulating only that he keep thinking. Merlyn's and Arthur's efforts seem pointless if Arthur is, indeed, fated from the beginning to finish in nothingness, defeated by an unforgiving fortune. A variable exists, though, in that Merlyn is acting only as the emissary of some Other, something with a knowledge and a wisdom superior to his, granting him only enough power to tutor the Wart for a set time. He also has no magic when it comes to Kay, for as he says, "The power was not deputed to me when I was sent" (90). Whatever it is that sent Merlyn seems to have a mind of sorts, and it is logical to assume that it also has a plan.

Merlyn knows at least part of that plan. He says,

I will tell you something else, King, which may be a surprise for you. It may not happen for hundreds of years, but both of us are to come back. Do you know what is going to be written on your tombstone? Hic jacet Arthurus Rex quandam Rexque futurus. Do you remember your Latin? It means, the once and future king. (287)



perhaps, for he is, after all, the Once and Future King of England; Merlyn has assured him that monarch and tutor will both return. Merlyn's actions are now understandable, for although he could foresee Arthur's eventual doom, this universe may be merely a training ground for the next, a world in which original sin need not have happened, where man is not fallen and therefore not more than half corrupt, and where humankind can occupy the position of leadership it is meant to occupy. Arthur will serve as man's companion, as man tries to live successfully.

As suggested earlier, White's ideal universe would perhaps not be a utopia, in which man would be compelled to do only right, but simply a world in which mankind would have an even chance of success or failure. In that world he would be in definite need of a companion to help him to his best self. The child Arthur's expedition into the forest with Robin Hood and Kay is an almost allegorical rendering of White's views on the nature of man, fate, and Arthur's role in the workings of fate and man; it shows, too, that innocence can prevail against a prohibitive fortune.

The journey into the Forest Sauvage is an important one in The Once and Future King. As he plots the progress of his characters White is also establishing the chief tenets of the novel's philosophical workings; here he lays the groundwork for the rest of the novel by proving his king necessary to man, and man necessary to him. Robin Hood, tied even more closely to his forest habitat by what White designates as his true name,

Robin Wood, guides Kay and Wart through the trees to the fairy castle of Morgan Le Fey. Both the forest and the fairies are traditionally linked in literature to the female principle (Cirlot 101,112). In The Once and Future King White uses the female link to fortune to suggest a guiding force behind his universe, and provide a parallel for the actions of his female characters. White's fate shows, for the most part, only its unjust side; in the forest, though, Robin's band makes up a rebel force that not only fights the unjust martial might of the Normans but also opposes the compassionless activities of the fairies. It is possibly significant that White supplies Robin with a "right-hand man" who is a woman and his wife, one who is strong-minded and independent, yet compassionate and solicitous of the boys' safety. Marion at first doubts that Robin should involve Kay and Wart with Morgan, claiming, "It is inhuman" (98), and she captivates the younger child significantly enough for him to decide that if he must marry in the future, he will wed a girl like her, "a kind of golden vixen" (107). White seems to intend Robin and Marion's outlaw group to suggest a positive side to that petulant feminine principle that is so damning of men, proving that fortune can be better disposed toward mankind; perhaps, too, the arrival in White's first book of Merlyn with his designated "Mission Arthur" signifies that a dormant force for justice has roused itself and is injecting some positives into the fallen world.

In the forest, two of those positives make ready to fight the negative. Kay and Wart are the only ones who can rescue the captives of the fairies, for they, unlike the grownups

who guide them to Morgan Le Fey's fairy stronghold, are still innocent, and "only innocent people can enter [fairy] castles" (103-4). Merlyn has specified that this is not Arthur's but Kay's test. Kay elects to undertake the dangerous venture, saying, "Well, I am game. It is my adventure after all" (104), and Wart elects to accompany him, because he is fond of his imprisoned dog. This foray into adventure in which the caprices of fate can exemplify themselves must be done by Kay, the ordinary human of basic but confused decency; the future king is along as a traveling companion. Kay performs well, challenging Queen Morgan with his iron knife much in the way Odysseus brandishes his sword at Circe while calling for the return of the men she has transformed into swine; Kay firmly demands the liberation of the beings Morgan holds captive, anchored as they are to columns of pork. Kay must call upon the Wart to help him defeat Morgan, though, joining hands with him to approach the fairy queen with their weapons. She and her castle disappear, and Kay reasserts to Wart and the liberated prisoners, "Now then, this is my adventure" (112).

The rescuers and rescued are careless in their escape, however, and their dawdling enables Morgan to loose on them her watchdog, a griffin. Wart is attacked by the griffin and his collarbone broken, but he is saved from death by Kay, who shoots the fearsome beast in the eye. So it is at the end of the novel; mankind saves Arthur, or rather it is Arthur's

recognition of mankind's potential for good that allows him to face his impending death with regal bearing and real optimism. The boys' adventure into the Forest Sauvage occupied by forces of both Robin Wood and Morgan Le Fey might be viewed in a broader perspective as a journey into life, with the king's true role being the help to mankind in difficult times.

Mankind, like Kay, can be valiant and wise and is at heart pure, and he can, perhaps, fulfill his potential by accepting his responsibility, acknowledging that life is "his adventure."

Although the power reigning in the author's imaginary universe seems to behave in a capricious manner, White holds that there is perhaps more to the seemingly inconsistent rangings of fate than appears. The four older Orkney children's Irish tutor, St. Toirdealbhach, is, according to White, "a relapsed saint, who had fallen into the Pelagian heresy of Celestius, and he believed that the soul was capable of its own salvation" (237). The old man has been "a source of mental nourishment" to the children, with the boys "resort[ing] to him like hungry puppies anxious for any kind of eatable, whenever their mother had cast them out" (251). He has been their mentor and is an important element in their lives; having taught them how to read and write, among other things, his attitudes may influence their actions. Hope exists that the boys might escape their fated roles. In fact, the saint's marriage to the very Scottish Mother Morlan might be more than a representative merging of an Irish and a Scot to suggest White's category, "Gael"; a blend of the concepts of destiny (Mother Morlan's own fairy heritage) and free will (St.

Toirdealbhach's heresy) points toward a new type of fortune possibly in the making.

The series of female characters that spans the novel reveals with more clarity that fortune may change, its ways becoming less indifferent though not necessarily less harsh. At the book's beginning in "The Sword in the Stone," Morgan Le Fey and Maid Marion are the two dominant female presences. Morgan is a queen, one of society's elect, while Marion is in hiding as an outlaw. The designated architect of the coming New Order clearly favors the seeming criminal over her supposedly regal competitor, for the former is in truth more noble (and more human, White reveals) than the latter. Throughout the following three sections of the novel, as Arthur's stature as king increases, fortune grows more like Marion and less like Morgan.

At the beginning of Arthur's reign, the Old Order of Arthur's father and the Eleven Kings is still basically intact. The new king's principles are still in a formative stage, and his control over his vassal properties is far from fixed. Therefore, fortune is still of the fairy type, with Morgause acting as its primary agent. Throughout the third section of White's novel, "The Ill-Made Knight," Arthur steadily increases in greatness, until "a sight of Arthur" is equated with "seeing the idea of Royalty" (421). By the end of the section Morgause is dead, killed by her own son, and fortune has become more like Arthur's own version of Marion, Guenever, whom he adores "for her dash"

(336). In the intervening time, Arthur's successes as a ruler increase, his power as an absolute monarch grows, and his various attempts to civilize mankind seem successful. All appears to be a working according to his design, with fortune exhibiting a temperament not unlike Elaine's, adulatory and fawning, but in the end, too shallow to endure. It is in Guenever that true fortune invests itself.

Guenever appears to own some of the same characteristics Morgause does. White writes, "You could pretend Guenever was sort of a man-eating lioncelle herself, or that she was one of those selfish women who insist on ruling everywhere." He adds that she does, in fact, seem to fit into this category upon "superficial inspection" (471). One very important distinction, though, exists between the two queens; Guenever, like Morgause (and like Constance White, for that matter), is "beautiful" along with being "demanding, impulsive, acquisitive, charming" (471). But Guenever has a sanguine quality about her that her predecessor lacks, and her fits of temper are always thoroughly human affairs as opposed to Morgause's bouts with a piqued sense of dignity, resulting in some of her characteristic restless behavior but little display of passion. In addition, Guenever, unlike Morgause, "was not promiscuous" in her appetites. According to White,

There was never anybody in her life except Lancelot and Arthur. She never ate anybody except these. And even these people she did not eat in the full sense of the word. People who have been digested

by a man-eating lioncelle tend to become non-entities--to live no life except within the vitals of the devourer. Yet both Arthur and Lancelot, the people whom she apparently devoured, lived full lives, and accomplished things of their own.

(471)

Guenever is no indiscriminate glutton; she is, as White calls her, a "real" person. Like fate, she is unpredictable, but underneath that unpredictability are real loves, hates, loyalties, and above all, genuine compassion. Morgause has faded from view, appearing only once in the novel following her pivotal role in "The Queen of Air and Darkness," as one of the four queens who abduct Lancelot in order to make him the lover of one of them. Her stature has been reduced so that she is only identified as the Queen of the Out Isles, and her sister Morgan Le Fey is clearly the commanding presence of the four. That Lancelot so easily escapes from these witch (and fairy) queens is perhaps significant. The knight often serves as Arthur's surrogate both in duty and in dealings with fate, and this incident seems to suggest that fate is moving in a different direction than before. Lancelot clearly prefers Guenever to Morgan, Morgause, and their sort.

It is toward the end of the narrative fortune's character seems to soften. Although events started earlier must play themselves out, the tone of the playing has changed. God or fate seemingly responds to Lancelot's

suicidal prayer and allows the agonized knight, sinner that he is, to perform another miracle, healing Sir Urre of his grievous wounds, proving that the old commander-in-chief is still the best knight in the world. Fate seems even more spiritual, more holy, as Guenever, who was never much for religion, looks "like a woman who has grown a soul" (564), and even sings to herself a hymn. It is almost as if White has fused the elusive concept of God or spirit that has been circulating through his novel with fate.

Fortune, then, seems to be preparing for something more than a simple turn to the "up" side. The blending of spirituality and an indifferent fate suggests a fundamental growth of sorts in the nature of the force that governs the universe.

White has suggested via Merlyn that history can improve upon itself--in fact, Arthur's entire New Order is based on this precept--but the improvement can go only as far as man's nature will allow it to; people are basically the same whether they are clad in mail or diving suits, whether jousting in medieval days, foxhunting in Victorian times, or passing a soccer ball in the twentieth century. Arthur's mistake is that he fails to acknowledge what he knows: that due to "original sin" man is a fallen creature, and his evil must be expected and anticipated--even if it manifests itself in loved ones.

In the end, though, it is not for this world that Arthur was made. He has, in a way, outgrown the world into which he was born. Although he improves it immeasurably, it is finally too far gone for him to redeem. But man is



redeemable, man is innocent at heart, like Kay and Gawaine, and like little Tom Malory of Newbold Revell near Warwick, who looks at his king with "pure eyes of absolute truth," testifying even as the old monarch's kingdom is at its end, "I would do anything for King Arthur" (636).

For Arthur admires and loves humankind, in spite of its many barbarities, just as the hero-worshipping Wart admires Kay, in spite of Kay's bullying (14). Arthur looks forward at the novel's end to something just outside his perception, a thing like his vision of Merlyn in the book's final chapter, present but not yet tangible. Perhaps the "something" involves the cryptic God of this world with a slowly evolving fate suggesting that fortune, like the God-figure in the embryo parable, might exhibit just a hint of compassion in the next world; man may be able to look forward to a universe in which he can possibly be more than half good. Arthur reflects,

There would come a day--there must be a day--when he would come back to Gramarye with a new Round Table which had no corners, just as the world had none--a table without boundaries between nations who would sit to feast there. (639)

White records that "the Majesty of England drew himself up to meet the future with a peaceful heart" (639). The final words in The Once and Future King: THE BEGINNING.

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