Le Morte d'Arthur: The Honour In Arthur’s Court

Malory’s intention is to emphasise the honour in Arthur’s court but the book shows many events where honour of each character is tested. Lancelot’s feelings for Guenevere increase as the story progresses and at the end this love compels him to compete with Arthur for her. Story follows the struggles of knights of the Round Table to uphold a strict code honour and chivalry. Each knight embarks on a quest for their honour for them and king Arthur

In the Great Tournament, there is a theme of personal goodness which is how the characters act in society and how they actually are. Integrity is assumed to be equity, bravery, justice and heroism on and off the battlefield. This ties up with honour which is gained by piety and associated with honourable people. Women have to associate themselves with honourable or good men to have a good status in society. This is based on ideals, not judged by personal attributes, which means you are who you are because of who you know. Characters are able to obtain an image of perfection because they are honourable or associated honourable. The loyalty comes to the king, then fellow knights and then to your wife.

Arthur’s court is a depiction of an ideal society in which every individual upholds their honour; free, long-lasting love and loyalty (first to God, the king, fellow knights, then wives). These three values cannot co-exist in many circumstances for example when Sir Gareth aids Lancelot and defies King Arthur because of his loyalty to Lancelot in ‘The Knight of the Cart’ (Malory, 78). The loyalty to the king is compared to the debt to Lancelot. He felt a duty towards Sir Lancelot whom the odds were against because Lancelot made him a knight. Lancelot takes his loyal knights which lessens Arthurs courts which causes honour and shame to co-exist. Honour, loyalty and goodness out-ties each other, as Gareth explains that if he resists he will lose his honour and goodness of being a noble knight.

There is flaws in Arthurs system because even though he was suspicious of Guenevere and Lancelot, he requires them to be caught in the act by someone else instead of ordering a dual (trial by combat is one of Arthur’s laws). Lancelot is also stuck between loyalty to his king and his love to Guenevere. Even when king Arthur invades his land, Lancelot keeps his honour intact by refusing to fight him. Lancelot is the epitome of loyalty, regardless of his love affair, he does not let it cloud his judgement and go against his king.

The oaths of Malory’s knights not extravagant but generate a dramatic effect attributing to a performative nature. Construction of chivalric culture in which sworn loyalties must be accepted by and professed in the name of God and earthly honour (Anderson, 2016). Arthur’s social order is represented by his knight’s chivalric code of loyalty, trust, consistency and honour which defined transgressors as traitors and thus traitors to the entire community. The oath of knighthood forces the knights of the round table to avoid any criminal activity, unlawful brutal force, to protect ladies, defending the poor or weak and to be honourable knights. Knights of the Round Table renew their oath of chivalry every year to show the kind that their honour is intact. All knights do well in upholding their honour but in time they give in to temptation. The breach of knighthood denotes a knight in two ways: whether he is guilty by force, e.g. when Meliagaunt goes after Guenevere, or when there is greed e.g. when Mordred temporarily handled the castle and then he wanted queen Guenevere as well.

In ‘The Knight of the Cart’ (Chapter 4, 78), Meliagaunt confesses his love for Guenevere and his means to capture her and have him as his own, but he sticks to his honour when he waits for the queen’s knights to armour themselves because he finds no honour in fighting an unarmoured knight. The queen’s ten noble knights said: “Sir Meliagaunt, wit thou well thou are about to jeopardy thy worship to dishonour, and also ye cast to jeopardy our persons. Howbeit we be unarmed and ye have us at a great advantage…” (Chapter 4, 81). The warning then goes straight to Lancelot without telling King Arthur because Lancelot is queen Guenevere’s knight. Even Lancelot’s horse reveals loyalty and honour when he returns to the castle after being shot by forty arrows.

In “Slander and Strife” (Part four,100) which is the starting of May, assumed to be the season of love but it isn’t because the flower of chivalry is dead. This is where King Arthur loses his honour as he is ridiculed by Mordred and Agravain because they are jealous of the knight of all knights, Lancelot. Arthur is shamed because as the kind he hasn’t been able to keep his own court in order yet he wants to be ruler, when the two people he trusts the most are doing things behind his back. Sir Gawain said that no one said anything about the affair because of their honour and loyalty towards Lancelot and King Arthur. It would have caused a war and Lancelot has always been a noble knight of the court. He saved both the king and the queen before; all the knights already knew about the affair but knew the risk of speaking and Lancelot is the best knight.

Arthur’s Knight of the Round Table code links honour with virtue rather than honour with reputation. This chivalric code distinguishes between what is good or bad, right or wrong for a knight. In Lancelot’s case, he cannot obey the commands of his lover Guenevere and still remain a good knight. He cannot serve righteousness and simultaneously participate in an adulterous relationship. Arthur’s Pentecostal oath links worldly honour and true goodness, Malory explains that they rarely coincide. According to surreptitious love, honour becomes a question of reputation rather than virtue. Protecting a knight’s/Lady’s own honour as reputation can instigate evil actions as the difference between wrong and right is irrelevant when exposure threatens honour.

After the destruction of the Round Table, Guenevere and Lancelot substitute innocence and is judged harshly when compared to Malory’s ideal of virtuous love. Adultery corrupts Lancelot’s soul. To hide their guilt, to protect the queens honour and his own, he must preserve in his sin of pride. Malory emphasises on the code of chivalry by showing how hard it is to live by. Lancelot, king Arthurs most trusted knight, succumbs to his desires for Guenevere. Only Galahad maintains this code because he is young and hasn’t had any temptations yet.

Women are objects of desire and embody the feminine courtly virtues. But women manipulate events by using the desires of man. Guenevere as a main figure is the entire reason as to why Camelot fell apart. Adultery caused Camelot and Arthur’s reign to fall to pieces. She retains her virtue and isn’t the true form of manipulation. Agravain is the whole reason the love affair leaks and breaks down Camelot. A catalyst effect of a lot of events into one. Arthur worried about Gawain, puts Mordred in charge which eventually leads to their deaths. At the end of the novel, Lancelot and Guenevere share responsibility for the destruction caused the division of the Round Table into fractions.

When Guenevere realises the death of her king and destruction of the kingdom is her fault, she notices the damage done to her soul and her kingdom by loving unrighteous in which he orders

Lancelot to leave her and return to the virtuous life of marriage, love and family. Lancelot refuses and seeks spiritual heal as he initially intended for the Quest but lost because of Guenevere. Lancelot needed more earthly virtues to avoid sin and corruption in order to attain spiritual stability. He put his honour and knighthood at stake when he fell in love with queen Guenevere and though this caused most of the tragic events in the novel. Queen Guenevere is the reason that most of the characters died because of the lust the knights had for her.

Malory's intention of representing honour comes at a great cost and at times are contradictory. Honour is seen to come from your status as a knight and the pledge to your kingdom to serve, as well as your associations. It is very important to recognize all the other factors that affect honour such as love, virtue, lust, loyalty, personal goodness greed etc. It is the reason why the kingdom was built and destroyed. The honour of every character is built by their sacrifices for the kingdom and the church and their and destroyed by the guilty pleasures of life itself.

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