‘Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful’: A Famous Arthurian Image in Tennyson and His Predecessors

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The image of the arm rising from the lake to claim Excalibur is traced from Tennyson’s poetry back to its first appearance in Arthurian literature, and to an endeavor to bring the Vulgate *Mort Artu* into a fully complementary relationship with the *Queste del Saint Graal*. (LG)

Many a schoolchild, in my own generation at any rate, was introduced to the Arthurian legend through Tennyson’s ‘Morte d’Arthur’ and was left with a lasting mental picture of that arm, ‘Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,’[1] rising from the mere to receive Arthur’s sword. It is still a defining Arthurian image, but it was not ever thus, and in this contribution I would like to trace its ancestry.

Written in 1833–34 and published in 1842 framed as ‘The Epic,’[2] Tennyson’s poem was subsequently adapted, with the frame removed and adjustments to the opening and closing passages, and incorporated, as ‘The Passing of Arthur,’ into *The Holy Grail and Other Poems*, dated 1870 but published in December 1869, and shortly afterward into the set of *Idylls of the King*.[3]

When Tennyson’s Arthur commands Bedivere to ‘take Excalibur, / And fling him far into the middle mere: / Watch what thou seëst, and lightly bring me word’ (Ricks 2:7, 226 ll. 36–38), he has only just reminded him how ‘In those old days, one summer noon, an arm / Rose up from out the bosom of the lake, / Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, / Holding the sword’ (Ricks 2:6–7, 226 ll. 29–31). Tennyson knew the latter scene from Malory,[4] but the effect of having it retold at this late stage is both to undermine suspense about what is to happen next and to present Bedivere as somewhat lacking in perception, for he might have been expected to guess from the description what Arthur was anticipating. Indeed, after Bedivere, dazzled by the sword’s bejeweled beauty, hides Excalibur for the first time Arthur protests that ‘surer sign had followed, either hand, / Or voice, or else a motion of the mere’ (Ricks 2:9, 226 ll. 76–77). On the second occasion, Bedivere’s reasoning is

concerned not just with the visual pleasure given by the sword, but with the desirability of an Arthurian relic:

> 'Some one might show it at a joust of arms,
> Saying, "King Arthur's sword, Excalibur,
> Wrought by the lonely maiden of the Lake,
> Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps
> Upon the hidden bases of the hills."' (Ricks 2:10–11, 226 ll. 102–06.)

Ironically, it is for his initial reaction to the sword's visual appeal and potential value that Arthur berates him soundly.

On the third occasion, of course, Bedivere complies with Arthur's command and the 'sign' duly appears:

> So flashed and fell the brand Excalibur:
> But ere he dipt the surface, rose an arm
> Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
> And caught him by the hilt, and brandished him
> Three times, and drew him under in the mere. (Ricks 2:13, 226 ll.
> 142–46.)

After Arthur's last battle, Bedivere had taken the wounded king to:

> a chapel nigh the field,
> A broken chancel with a broken cross,
> That stood on a dark strait of barren land.
> On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
> Lay a great water, and the moon was full. (Ricks 2:5, 226 ll. 8–12).

It seems that the symbols of Christianity, as well as the physicality of Arthur's world, are in ruins: no prayers are said at this time and in this desolate environment. After Excalibur has been received into the lake and Arthur has been placed in the barge with its black-clad forms and golden-crowned queens, Bedivere's musings on the Arthurian past include the thought that 'Such times have been not since the light that led / The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh' (Ricks 2:17, 226 ll. 232–33). This is a rather audacious presentation of the king as a Christ-figure,[5] and it is significant that, of the wise men's gifts, myrrh alone is mentioned; the broken chancel and its broken cross acquire additional poignancy.

From the barge, Malory's Arthur had asked '"pray for my soule!"'[6] a brief request which Tennyson (with a little help from *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5)[7] expands into a declaration of faith that includes some much-quoted words:

> Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
> Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
> Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
> …

> For so the whole round earth is every way
> Bound by gold chains about the feet of God. (Ricks 2:17–18, 226 ll. 247–49, 254–55.)

Tennyson's Arthur then recalls to the knowledgeable reader his personal story when he tells Bedivere that he is going for healing 'if indeed I go— / (For all my mind is clouded with a doubt) / To the island-valley of Avilion' with its 'bowery hollows crowned with summer sea' (Ricks 2:18, 226 ll. 257–59, 263). As a child, I thought that this sounded a distinctly unsafe flood-risk of a paradise, a detail to which I shall return later. Tennyson has poetically recorded an element of uncertainty which was present in many an Arthurian text of a far earlier period.[8]

In the 1842 publication the conclusion of the framing 'The Epic' has the poet dreaming of Arthur's coming again 'With all good things, and war shall be no more' (Ricks 2:19, 226 l. 300), until he wakes to find that the bells are ringing in Christmas morning. In the 1869 revision as 'The Passing of Arthur' (Ricks 3:547–61, 475), this Messianic presentation of Arthur was modified by omitting his second coming and placing the scene at New Year. Bedivere's reflections on the visit of the holy Elders, however, were retained.

Also in the 1869 publication, Tennyson had ventured into even more questionable territory in 'The Coming of Arthur' (Ricks 3:265–81, 464), when in the course of a very free rearrangement of, and addition to, his sources he filled in the account of how Arthur had obtained Excalibur. It is retold by Arthur's loyal sister, Lot's wife Bellicent, her name taken from *Of Arthour and of Merlin* and thus avoiding the incestuous association of Malory's Morgause.[9]

Bellicent describes a scene with Arthur enthroned following his coronation. It is significant that as Arthur speaks, he 'cheered his Table Round / With large, divine, and comfortable words' (Ricks 3:274, 464 ll. 266–67)—vocabulary that would have recalled to Tennyson's readers the Communion service of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England: 'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.' The resonance is enhanced by heavenly rays of light which fall upon the queens present, who will be friends in need to Arthur. Merlin is there,[10] and nearby is the Lady of the Lake—the whole of her—'Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful' (Ricks 3:274, 464 l. 284).

Bellicent explains that the Lady gave Excalibur to the King (specifically to drive out the heathen) and describes how Arthur rowed across to take the sword 'that rose from out the bosom of the lake' (Ricks 3:275, 464 l. 296); the garb of the bearer's arm is not described. She also explains that the weapon has inscriptions '"Take me"' and '"Cast me away!"' (Ricks 3:275: 464 l. 302, 304), thereby both anticipating and authorizing what will eventually happen. The provenance of that authority needs to be identified, and David Staines observes that Bellicent's account 'invented by the poet, recalls the effect of

the Grail upon the knights.'[11] It is no coincidence that Tennyson's Grail, too, is 'Clothed in white samite or a luminous cloud,'[12] and to seeds already sown Tennyson adds to Bellicent's story imagery supporting that already applied to Arthur. A 'mist / Of incense' curls around the Lady of the Lake, there are 'holy hymns,' and, most startling of all, the Lady 'Hath power to walk the waters like our Lord' (Ricks 3:274, 464 ll. 286–87, 289, 293). This incense-wreathed Lady of the Lake might be thought to display an affinity with the high Anglicanism of the Oxford Movement, though that does not appear to be where Tennyson's own sympathies lay, and there is probably more to discover about the picture that he provided for his Victorian readers.[13]

Tennyson's immediate source (and the inspiration for the way in which Bedivere's thoughts would briefly turn to posterity) is Malory's account, in which the sword Arthur drew from the stone breaks, and Merlin promises him a new one (Malory 1:42–43). Arthur and Merlin come to a lake, in the middle of which is 'an arme clothed in whyght samyte, that helde a fayre swerde in that honde' (Malory 1:43, ll. 16–18). A 'damesell goynge uppon the laake' (Malory 1:43, l. 20), and in Malory specifically identified by Merlin as the Lady of the Lake, but whose clothing is not mentioned, says that the sword is hers, and she offers it to Arthur in return for a boon (Malory 1:43–44; this leads into the tragic tale of Balin and Balan). In Malory, as in Tennyson, Arthur rows across, takes the sword, and the arm and hand vanish under the water. If Malory's account is closely followed, therefore, it is evident that the Lady of the Lake, who converses with Arthur above the water, is clearly not the possessor of the samite-clad arm which protrudes from the lake while they talk. It appears that Tennyson's initial, Malory-inspired recall in his 'Morte d'Arthur' of an arm, not a whole Lady of the Lake, clothed in white samite, has been consciously adjusted to provide his portrayal of the Lady as she appears in 'The Coming of Arthur.'[14]

Malory's own source for the way in which Arthur receives his new sword was the French Post-Vulgate *Merlin*,[15] from which he retold the story with some changes in detail. In particular, in the French account Merlin explains that fairy authority is required for entering the lake: 'Nus n'i enterroit sans le congiet as fees qui ne fust mors erramment' (*Suite* 1:50, section 63 ll. 13–14) ['No one could enter it without leave of the fairies without dying instantly'], but shortly afterwards tells Arthur that 'Diex vous envoiera auchun conseil' (*Suite* 1:50, section 63 l. 26) ['God will send you counsel in some way'] about how the sword he can see within it may be obtained.

Corinne Saunders has drawn attention to magic's 'significant role . . . in the illumination of divine providence.'[16] Merlin, here, is apparently working with God as he once had in connection with the now-broken sword which Arthur had drawn from the stone, an act which revealed his kingship as divinely appointed: 'par l'election Jhesu Crist.'[17] As Saunders points out, the

Lady of the Lake is a more ambivalent figure: 'Her role too seems positive, affirmative of destiny, yet, as we have seen in relation to Balin, from another perspective her arts can appear deeply destructive.'[18]

In the Post-Vulgate, Arthur and Merlin see:

> en mi le lach…une espee apparoir par desus l'iaue en une main et en un brac qui apparoit tresque au keute, et estoit viestus li bras d'un samit blanc et tenoit la mains l'espee toute hors de l'iaue. (*Suite* 1:50, section 63 ll. 18–22.)
>
> [In the middle of the lake . . . a sword appear above the water, in a hand and arm which appeared as far as the elbow, and the arm was clothed in a white samite and the hand held the sword right out of the water.]

The damsel who arrives shortly after Merlin's promise of divine counsel comes hurriedly on horseback from the direction of the sea (a practical detail changed by Malory). After negotiations with Merlin she walks across the lake, without, we are told, even getting her feet wet, and personally fetches the sword for Arthur. Merlin later explains to him that within the lake there is a city on a rock, reached by a wooden bridge: both are invisible to outsiders, who see only the lake.

Norris Lacy suggests to me (by personal communication) that this explanation may have been provided by a writer reluctant to make the woman who crosses the lake do what Jesus did. Malory seems to have had no such qualms: as well as having the damsel arrive from the lake itself rather than from the sea, he removes both Merlin's reference to advice from God and the (comparatively rational in the circumstances) invisible bridge, leaving Tennyson to confront Malory's account head-on as he devised his own method, through Bellicent's introduced narration, of making the arm that rises from the water into part of an overall plan compatible with divine will.

In Malory, Lucan and Bedivere take Arthur 'to a lytyll chapell nat farre frome the see syde' (Malory 1:924 l. 9)—though apparently unoccupied, it is not stated to be otherwise than intact—and Bedivere is subsequently instructed to go to 'yondir watirs syde' (Malory 1:925 ll. 12–13). Sea and lake are here not differentiated quite so sharply as they will be by Tennyson. What is far clearer in Malory is that there is a difference between the white-clad arm, in the service of the Lady of the Lake, that delivers Arthur's sword to him and the one that, much later, receives it back from Bedivere after two failed attempts (Malory 1:925–26; the desirability of an Arthurian relic, noted above, is Tennyson's addition). In Malory's second scene, when Excalibur is finally thrown into the water, 'there cam an arme and an honde above the watir, and toke hit and cleyght hit, and shoke hit thryse and braundysshed' (Malory 1:926 ll. 14–16). Unlike Tennyson's account, this time there is no white samite.[19] Malory's Arthur makes no reference to the time when he obtained the sword, so that although the reader might recall the earlier scene,

the sense of mystery is more effective and Bedivere is not blatantly primed for what to expect.

In Malory, Arthur says that he is going to the 'vale of Avylyon' to be healed (Malory 1:927 l. 6), though Bedivere subsequently finds, in a chapel different from that to which Arthur had earlier been taken, and occupied this time by an explanatory hermit, the new tomb of a body brought by 'a numbir of ladyes' (Malory 1:927 ll. 22–23); Bedivere appears more convinced that the tomb holds Arthur's body than does the hermit. The chapel forms part of the ambiguity of the story of Arthur's passing in Malory, but was a complication with which Tennyson dispensed, as he also, a little earlier, rejected the unhappy Lucan and his unedifying death. As will be seen, it could be suggested that, despite the king's own doubts, Tennyson takes Arthur more unequivocally to Avalon than has happened in mainstream Arthurian literature for some considerable time.

While Malory used the French Post-Vulgate *Merlin* for the scene in which Arthur receives Excalibur from the lake, for Arthur's last battle he had access both to the English Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,[20] which does not cover the earlier parts of the Arthurian story, and to the French Vulgate *Mort Artu*[21] on which the English poem in turn drew.

In the Stanzaic *Morte*, there are elements that Malory discarded. The chapel beside the sea, to which Lucan and Bedivere[22] take Arthur after the last battle, is already unoccupied while not specifically ruined, but here, and not retold by Malory, prayer is offered all night to Mary for mercy and to Jesus for Arthur's salvation (Stanzaic *Morte*, pp. 103–04 vv. 427–28).

The stanzaic poem has Arthur's request to cast Excalibur in the 'salt flode' (p. 105 v. 433, l. 3450) accompanied by an exhortation by the Cross. In later accounts Bedivere will hide the sword twice, but here on the second occasion he casts the scabbard alone into the sea, to no effect. His second deceit is then compounded by his affirmation '"syr, it is done, by the Rode"' (p. 106 v. 436, l. 3477). When he finally carries out Arthur's bidding a hand—just a hand, unclad in anything—comes out of the water, takes the sword and brandishes it three times. Arthur says that he is bound for 'the vale of Avelovne' (p. 107 v. 441, l. 3516) for healing, and goes away on the ship with no request for prayer. Malory removes much of the Christian ethos from the early part of the episode, leaving tragedy and mystery, yet he gives Arthur a simple but powerful 'pray for my soule' from the barge (Malory 1:927 l. 7).

The Stanzaic *Morte* provides the immediate antecedent of the episode in which Bedivere comes to a chapel and finds the new tomb of a body brought by ladies at midnight, even though shortly before there has been a reference to healing in 'the vale of Avelovne,' a term which traveled via Malory and, coupled with the centuries-old awareness of Avalon as an island, gave rise to Tennyson's image of the 'island-valley.'[23] Its use in the Stanzaic *Morte* provides

another powerful example of the connection between the magical and the Christian in Arthurian legend, for its origins lie in the 'Vaus d'Avaron/Avalon' from the *Joseph* of Robert de Boron, to which Petrus (and not, incidentally, the Grail) is to go.[24] Interestingly, the *Perceval* which closes the Robert de Boron cycle, and which may well have been known to the author of the Stanzaic *Morte*, has Arthur state his own destination as Avalon/Avallon, but nowhere refers to it as an island.[25]

There is no 'white samite' at all in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and it becomes entirely clear why when its own principal source is consulted. This is the French Vulgate *Mort Artu*, in which the story of the casting of Excalibur into the lake is first told, in a structure of the author's devising.[26] At the time when the *Mort Artu* was composed, it completed the story told in the *Lancelot en Prose* and the *Queste del Saint Graal*. The *Estoire del Saint Graal* and the *Merlin* were, according to the generally accepted view, added later as 'prequels.' However, already in existence (and subsequently incorporated into the Vulgate Cycle as the first part of its *Merlin* section) was the *Merlin* of the Robert de Boron cycle, including the now-famous story of the Sword in the Stone from which those adding to the body of Arthurian literature would have been aware that the king's appointment had been divinely sanctioned.[27]

At no stage of the Vulgate Cycle's composition and compilation does Arthur's sword break, so there is no need for one to be bestowed conditionally upon him by an ambivalent Lady of the Lake, nor for a hand to rise from the water with a new sword. The breaking of the sword from the stone, and the supply of a replacement from the lake, appears to have been a retrospective innovation on the part of the Post-Vulgate *Merlin*'s author to give a matching 'opening' to the Vulgate's existing 'closure' scene in which Arthur's sword is received into the water. This is why the arm in Malory's second scene, inherited from the Vulgate, not clad in white and brandishing rather than simply holding the sword, is different from the one earlier in his story, quietly raised by the Post-Vulgate's samite-clad lake-dweller. Tennyson has simply given the two scenes consistency of dress, while retaining for the second one the 'brandishing' of the sword from Malory, itself inherited from the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.

What, then, of the original scene close to the end of the Vulgate? Here, instead of Tennyson's 'broken chancel with a broken cross' or Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*'s unoccupied though not apparently unsound building, we have a fully functioning Black Chapel, with the ubiquitous hermit resident close by to sing Mass daily: there is no suggestion that this is a place where regular Christian worship has been abandoned. In Tennyson and Malory, nobody prays at this stage; in the Stanzaic *Morte*, Lucan and Bedivere pray all night for Arthur, but in the *Mort Artu*, Arthur personally prays with bitter tears all night for his men:

> Einsi demora li rois Artus jusqu'au matin a genouz en proieres et en oroisons, que onques ne s'en mut ne sa proiere ne fina vers Nostre Seignor, qu'il eüst merci de ses homes qui le jor avoient esté ocis ; et en ce qu'il fesoit ceste proiere il ploroit si durement que cil qui avec lui estoient entendoient bien qu'il ploroit. (*MA*, p. 440, section 232 ll. 34–38.)

> [Thus King Arthur stayed until the morning, on his knees in prayers and orisons, without ever moving or ceasing to pray to Our Lord that he would have mercy on his men who had been killed that day; and while he was making this prayer he was crying so hard that those who were with him could well hear that he was crying.]

He will have one more prayer to make.

Here, Girflet and Lucan are the last surviving knights.[28] After Lucan's death, Arthur and Girflet ride to the sea shore, where Arthur gives Excalibur to Girflet, telling him to go up a hill, where he will find a lake in which he is to cast the sword. Malory restores some of the Stanzaic *Morte*'s simplification, but it will be left to Tennyson to derive maximum dramatic effect from the topography. In the *Mort Artu*, just before Arthur calls Girflet to receive instructions, he makes a short, tearful statement which is part address to Excalibur and to the absent Lancelot and part prayer:

> 'Ha! Escalibor, bone espee et riche, la meillor que l'en seüst ou monde fors solement cele as Estranges Renges, or perdras tu ton mestre et ton seignor! Ou troveras tu jamés home ou tu soies si bien emploiee come tu estoies en moi? Si m'aït Diex, tu ne le puez trover se tu ne viens es mains Lancelot. Hé! Lancelot, li plus preudons del monde et li mieldres chevaliers que je onques veïsse et li plus cortois, pleüst ore a Jhesu Crist que vos la tenissiez et je le seüsse! Si m'aït Diex, m'ame en seroit plus a eise a toz jorz mais.' (*MA*, p. 442, section 234 ll. 15–23.)

> ['Ah, Excalibur, good, rich sword, the best one known in the world except only the one with the Strange Sword-Belt, now you will lose your lord and master! Where will you ever find a man with whom you will be so well put to use as you have been by me? God be my help, you won't find him if you don't come into Lancelot's hands. Oh Lancelot, the noblest man in the world and the best knight whom I ever saw and the most courtly, may it now please Jesus Christ that you would hold it and that I would know! God be my help, my soul would be more at ease for evermore.']

The key words are 'et je le seüsse' ['and that I would know']. The hand which rises from the water, seizes the sword, and brandishes it—one of the defining images of the Arthurian legend—is the answer to Christian prayer, a prayer dropped from the English retellings. At this stage of the legend's development, a development taking place in Old French, Arthur's drawing of the sword from the stone has indicated God's choice of him as king, and it is that same

sword he carries into his last battle in the *Mort Artu*. His faith is such that he asks for a sign and believes that he will receive one.

Girflet asks for the sword for himself, but Arthur tells him that it would not be put to good use in him. In an episode with more structural detail than it will subsequently contain, Girflet first throws his own sword into the lake (an incident discarded by the Stanzaic *Morte* but, it will be seen, with its own relevance here). On the second occasion, he casts away the scabbard (an act not recounted by Malory). On both occasions, the absence of any sign allows Arthur to know that he has been deceived, and the second time he insists to Girflet that the sword will not be lost without 'grant merveille' (*MA*, p. 444, section 235, ll. 26–27)—'merveille' again recruited into the service of divine providence. At this prompting, Girflet hurls the sword into the lake and

> maintenant que ele aprocha de l'eve, il vit une main qui issi dou lac et aparut jusqu'au coute; mais dou cors donc la main estoit ne vit il point; et la main prist l'espee par mi le heut et la commença a branler III foiz contremont. (*MA*, p. 444, section 236 ll. 6–9.)
>
> [as it came near to the water, he saw a hand that came out of the lake and appeared as far as the elbow: but he saw nothing of the body to which the hand belonged. The hand took the sword by the hilt and started to brandish it back and forth three times.][29]

Here, in the scene's pristine context, there is no reason for the hand to require delicate, mystical clothing as it brandishes the sword, or, indeed, for it to be gender-specific.

In her critical guide to the *Mort Artu*, Karen Pratt sees the scene as an answer to Arthur's prayer 'that Lancelot du Lac be his successor and that Arthur should be given a sign of God's approval of this choice.'[30] She points out that, indeed, Lancelot later avenges Arthur on Mordred's sons without being punished by God as happens to Constantine in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. The transferral of Excalibur could, of course, be read as a transferral of power, but Arthur's prayer with its very specific reference is answered in a manner that is dramatic yet oblique, for Lancelot is not at any stage presented with the sword. It is returned, not to Lancelot himself, who is in the city of Gaunes and not at the time subaquaeous, but to the world from whence he came to play his part in Arthur's story—I shall return to the significance of this.

At Girflet's parting from Arthur, during which the knight unsuccessfully pleads to be allowed to accompany him, the king will not say where he expects to go. Knowledgeable audiences might well have anticipated a reference to Avalon at this point, but there is none: a deliberate rejection of a location with which the author had been presented by his predecessors. Tellingly, its only mention in the *Mort Artu* is as a place frequented by enchantresses (*MA*, p. 134, section 47). Now, a ship of women bears away the king, and audience

expectations appear to be confirmed when Girflet recognizes Arthur's sister Morgan, who is well known to him. However, the *Mort Artu* author is in the process of diverting deliberately the believing Christian King Arthur from an anticipated path: it is no accident that Arthur does not speak a prayer from the ship, for he already has his assurance.[31]

The grieving Girflet watches the departing vessel, and after spending two days with a hermit, on the third day—a detail that is scarcely accidental—he finds earthly finality: the tombs of Lucan and of Arthur at the Black Chapel, the same place at which Arthur had prayed after the battle. Arthur's tomb is unambiguously identified by the inscription 'Ci gist li rois Artus qui par sa valor mist en sa subjection XII roiaumes' (*MA*, p. 448, section 238 l. 27–28) ['Here lies King Arthur who by his valour brought twelve kingdoms into subjection to him']. The man who serves at the Black Chapel (who, as noted earlier, had already been introduced to the story during Arthur's last hours) explains that women had brought the king's body there three days earlier. In other words, the women who took Arthur away by ship, who might be thought to occupy the mysterious heart of the Arthurian enigma, have in this version of his story brought the king for Christian burial.

The account appears to undermine the legend of Arthur's mysterious journey and anticipated return, and in view of the discarding of any reference to Avalon as Arthur's possible destination, and the finding on the third day of a tomb which is closed and inscribed, I feel it can be argued that this was indeed the intention here. However, the author, perhaps unintentionally or perhaps pragmatically, by ensuring Girflet's parting from Arthur bequeathed a potential ambiguity to those not following the finalizing agenda of the *Mort Artu*. As Karen Pratt writes, the 'event . . . is not depicted, but narrated to Girflet by a *preudome*; we, like Girflet, have to accept the fact of Arthur's death on trust.'[32]

Girflet, who has already cast away his sword, becomes a hermit but lives only eighteen days after what the author clearly and unequivocally describes as 'la mort le roi Artus' (*MA* p. 450, section 238, l. 40), a term which in due course became the uncompromising title of works which recorded something very much less certain. It is sometimes erroneously applied to the closing section of the *Perceval* of the Robert de Boron cycle, which in all likelihood predates the Vulgate *Mort Artu* and has Arthur in Avalon and his people long awaiting his return.[33]

Faced both with Avalon and with a material tomb, succeeding authors had to decide how to handle the situation. (The additional complications provided by the question of Glastonbury are too luxuriant to be discussed here.) They could discard or attempt to reconcile: the latter option provided ample scope for leaving a vestige of mystery—or for having one's cake and eating it. The mysterious disappearance of Arthur's body in the *Vera Historia*

de Morte Arthuri, with subsequent reference to a sealed tomb, poses its own problems of interpretation and chronology which are beyond the scope of this article.[34]

In the Stanzaic *Morte*, the chapel (found on the following day, rather than the third) is differentiated from the one to which the living Arthur had been taken; the tomb is present but the inscription is read silently by Girflet and not quoted. However, the poem ends with Arthur and Queen Gaynor buried at Glastonbury, the *Mort Artu*'s finality confirmed despite Arthur's earlier statement in the English poem that he was bound for Avalon and healing.

The Italian *Tavola Ritonda* removes any reference to the tomb altogether, leaving unalloyed mystery. Arthur's last two companions are Ivano, who dies of his wounds, and an anonymous squire, who is given the task of casting Arthur's sword into the sea (as in the Stanzaic *Morte*, rather than into a lake). In an abbreviated retelling, the squire casts away the sword at the third time of being instructed, the arm appears, receives and brandishes it before drawing it under, the ship arrives, and Arthur is taken away. The squire does not, of course, need to visit a chapel or a hermit, for there is no earthly monument for him to see: he is left simply to recount the 'maraviglia' of Arthur's believed departure for a fairy-inhabited, but unnamed, island.[35]

The Post-Vulgate richly rewards investigation. As seen earlier, Arthur receives his sword from the lake in the *Merlin* part of the cycle, used in turn by Malory. In the *Mort Artu* section[36]—part of which survives only in a Portuguese text—magic and Christianity are even more intricately interwoven. In the Vulgate, after the death of Lucan at Arthur's unwitting hands, the king bitterly laments the changing role of Fortune in his life. The Post-Vulgate overlaps and expands his speech, with the second part addressed to God, whose control of the king's changed circumstances is accepted.[37] Immediately afterwards, however, Arthur—taking upon himself the role of Wace's Merlin[38]—makes a statement that is not in the Vulgate:

> Ca mĩa morte seera tam en dulta a todas gentes, que nenguũ nom se poderá louvar que sabe certamente a verdade da mĩa fin. (*La version Post-Vulgate* 3:458, section 672.)
>
> [For my death will be so in doubt to everyone, that nobody will be able to boast that he knows for certain the truth of my end.][39]

Arthur's subsequent prayer about Excalibur is retained, in this version reinforced by his recent acceptance of God's directing will. Girflet's wish to have Excalibur is also retained, with the addition of Arthur's foretelling of the unfortunate knight's not far distant death. The sequence of events is very much that of the Vulgate, with an unclad arm receiving and brandishing the sword (here, as in Malory, there is no attempt to match clothing to the earlier scene in the Post-Vulgate *Merlin*), but now Arthur's farewell speech to

Girflet picks up the thread of doubt and ambiguity, stressing the uncertainty that will henceforth prevail, and closing with a particularly fine Arthurian encapsulation:

> 'se vos preguntarem novas de mim, responde-lhis que rey Artur veo per ventura e per ventura se partiu, e ele soo foy Rey Aventuroso.' (*La version Post-Vulgate* 3:469, section 679.)
>
> ['If they ask you news of me, answer them that King Arthur came by adventure and by adventure he went away, and he alone was The Adventurous King.']

Girflet can well believe this when in due course he returns to the chapel and finds the two tombs (other texts' introduction of a second chapel deprive the luckless Lucan of memorialization). He is given an account of Arthur's burial, and shown the inscription. Less ingenuous than his literary forebear, he opens the tomb, and finds that the body has disappeared, leaving only the helmet the king had worn on the day of battle; Girflet dies within three months. The Post-Vulgate has employed the relevance of the third-day discovery of the tomb in a way that more than matches any authorial audacity of later centuries, synchronizing Arthurian faith and Arthurian mystery while allowing the popular legend opportunity for development. This was not quite the intention of the Vulgate author.[40]

The Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal*,[41] with all its marvels, had already brought one version of the Grail story to a close by having the sacred vessel received into Heaven by a disembodied hand, to which the hand in the *Mort Artu* is obviously complementary—though had there been any wish to avoid territorial speculation and material Grail claimants it has, of course, proved supremely unsuccessful. The complementarity, however, goes further. Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton suggest that the casting away of Arthur's sword 'acted to prevent a proliferation of Excaliburs,'[42] but, more than that, I suggest the *Mort Artu* author intended a matching finality, providing Arthur's body with an inscribed tomb (whether the author had Glastonbury in mind can only be a matter for conjecture), and his soul with an assurance of faith rewarded—though similarly failing to halt the tide of speculation about the Once and Future King.

The Vulgate *Mort Artu*'s lake scene functioned as a pivotal moment between secular and sacred, closing the waters over the old world of adventure and in a timely manner placing the characters in a new one in which the priorities will be spiritual. Janina P. Traxler writes that 'Arthur's grand gesture signals both his own end and that of an entire legendary world,'[43] and indeed it does in an earthly sense, but the *Mort Artu* author has another dimension to his vision. Malory's Arthur returns his sword to its origin in the lake, as Traxler observes—but the situation was different when the story was first composed.

The author had inherited both the Christian ethos (and ending) of the Grail story, and the knowledge of Lancelot's supernatural upbringing, and found a memorable way to reconcile the two. The sign which responds to Arthur's prayer and confirms his faith is also significant for Lancelot, for it closes his old story by means of a powerfully symbolic act, as Excalibur is received into the world of his own past. Though he still has battles, both physical and emotional, to fight, his path now leads him to a new way of life and ultimately to a holy death.[44]

The topography of Arthur's passing supports the interpretation that the casting away of Excalibur was for the Vulgate author a separation of worlds. In the *Mort Artu* Arthur waits beside the sea while Girflet climbs a hill to the lake. The water into which the sword is cast is clearly differentiated from that over which the ship comes for Arthur. The Stanzaic *Morte*, however, has the sword cast into the 'salt flode' (p. 105, v. 433, l. 3450), and it is to the same shore ('that stronde,' p. 106, v. 439, l. 3499) that Arthur then asks to be taken, as though the receipt of the sword had a direct connection to the ship of women that has appeared in the meantime. Malory and, more clearly and conclusively, Tennyson, restore the separation of sea and 'great water' that were requirements of the story in its earlier form: a lake with its denizen plus a sea over which a ship could subsequently travel.

Arthur's belief holds, from the *Mort Artu* to his request for prayer from the barge in Tennyson's poem. In between, some of the story's Christian details have been discarded, leaving Tennyson to elaborate in his own way. His development of the Christian element in the presentation of Arthur's sword employs a Lady of the Lake in whom, ironically, magic and religion are brought into a contact that is more medieval than Victorian. His Arthur, meanwhile, is made into something of a Christ-figure himself, but again, as the Post-Vulgate shows us, there is little that is new under the Arthurian sun. The author of the French *Mort Artu*, on the other hand, has Jesus act in response to Arthur's faith, while Arthur believes and trusts in Jesus without being equated with him.

I began this contribution at the end, and I end it at the beginning, not with an arm clad in white samite, but with a hand brandishing a sword as a sign sent by Jesus—just as that same sword had been placed in an anvil and a stone, outside a church, to announce a king 'par l'election Jhesu Crist.'[45] Whatever subsequent centuries and cultures made of it, the image of the arm rising from the lake to claim Excalibur had Christian faith as its motivation and its very purpose. The *Mort Artu* author makes 'merveille' into a pointer to salvation in a way that represents a magnificent achievement, for Lancelot as well as for Arthur—and for storytelling within a medieval Christian society.

SUNDERLAND

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NOTES

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1 Christopher Ricks, ed., *The Poems of Tennyson in Three Volumes: Second Edition Incorporating the Trinity College Manuscripts*, 3 vols. Longman Annotated English Poets (Harlow: Longman, 1987), 2:13, 226, l. 144. (Refs. to this edition as 'Ricks' throughout, with volume and page reference followed by poem and line numbers where relevant.)

2 Ricks 2:1–19, 225, 226. For details of publishing history, see Ricks 2:1–4; also David Staines, 'Tennyson, Alfred Lord (1809–1892),' in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 931 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 446–49. On Tennyson's early Arthurian writing, see Roger Simpson, *Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson 1800–1849*, Arthurian Studies 21 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990).

3 Ricks 3:547–61, 475. See also Ricks 2:4; F.B. Pinion, *A Tennyson Chronology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 123; Staines in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (see n. 2), p. 448, and Andrew Lynch, '"…'if indeed I go'": Arthur's Uncertain End in Malory and Tennyson,' *Arthurian Literature* 27 (2010): 24–25 [19–31].

4 Malory's work would have been known to Tennyson through editions of Caxton's printed text, of which three appeared between the years 1816 and 1818: *The History of the Renowned Prince Arthur, King of Britain* … , ed. Alexander Chalmers, Walker's British Classics (London: Walker and Edwards, 1816) (the first modern printing, based on Stansby's 1634 edition, and including Stansby's Preface as well as Caxton's); *La Mort d'Arthur*: *The Most Ancient and Famous History of the Renowned Prince Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table*, ed. Joseph Haslewood (London: R. Wilks, 1816); *The byrth, lyf and actes of Kyng Arthur, of his noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table, theyr merveyllous enquestes and aduentures thachyeuyng of the Sanc Greal; and, in the end, le Morte Darthur, with the dolourous deth and departying out of this worlde of them al*, ed. Robert Southey, with introduction and notes, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1817). See also Yuri Fuwa, 'Malory's *Morte Darthur* in Tennyson's Library,' in *Studies in Medievalism 4*: *Medievalism in England*, ed. Leslie J. Workman (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 161–69, in particular

p. 167. David Staines, *Tennyson's Camelot: The Idylls of the King and Its Medieval Sources* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982) includes (pp. 164–74) a tabulated comparison of Malory's and Tennyson's accounts from the 1816 Wilks edition of Malory and Tennyson's 1842 poem.

5 See John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King'* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), passim; also, for biblical allusions, J.M. Gray, *Thro' the Vision of the Night: A Study of Source, Evolution and Structure in Tennyson's Idylls of the King* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980).

6 Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P.J.C. Field, 2 vols. Arthurian Studies 80 (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 1:927, l. 7. (Refs. to this edition as 'Malory' throughout.) For the printed editions of Caxton's Malory available to Tennyson, see n. 4 above.

7 I owe this observation to an anonymous annotator of Durham University Library's copy of Ricks.

8 See Lynch, '"…'if indeed I go.'"

9 The text would have been known to Tennyson from the summary contributed by Walter Scott, from the Auchinleck Manuscript, in George Ellis, *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme; Edinburgh: Constable, 1805), 1:233–307 (p. 239). See Staines, *Tennyson's Camelot*, p. 82 n.33.

10 On the complex and developing figure of Tennyson's Merlin, see *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2003), in particular: Goodrich's Introduction, pp. 25, 28–30 [pp. 1-90]; Catherine Barnes Stevenson, 'Druids, Bards, and Tennyson's Merlin,' pp. 361–77; Linda K. Hughes, 'Illusion and Relation: Merlin as Image of the Artist in Tennyson, Doré, Burne-Jones, and Beardsley,' pp. 378–409.

11 Staines, *Tennyson's Camelot*, p. 83.

12 'The Holy Grail,' Ricks 3:463–90 (p. 479), 471, l. 513.

13 See Simpson, *Camelot Regained*, pp. 193–94.

14 This begs the question of how Tennyson envisaged the possessor of the hand which claims Excalibur at the last. A fascinating account is given by Tarquin Blake in *Haunted Ireland* (Cork: Collins Press, 2014), p. 86. It tells how Tennyson, a frequent visitor to Aubrey de Vere at Curragh Chase, County Limerick, returning to the house late one night, went to investigate a noise of splashing from the lake in front of it and observed 'the mystic arm of the Lady of the Lake rising from the water clutching a sword.' The story is apparently linked to the summer during which he composed his poem 'Lady Clara Vere de Vere,' published, along with 'Morte d'Arthur,' in 1842. Tennyson was, apparently, not the first nor the last person to see the mysterious apparition, with a subsequent dramatic visitation immediately preceding the destruction of the house by fire on Christmas Eve 1941.

15 *La Suite du roman de Merlin*, ed. Gilles Roussineau, 2 vols. Textes littéraires français (Geneva: Droz, 1996). (Refs. to this edition as '*Suite*' throughout.)

16 Corinne Saunders, 'Magic and Christianity,' in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney, Christianity and Culture: Issues in Teaching and Research (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 101; see also pp. 86–87 [pp. 84–101]. See also Saunders, 'Religion and Magic,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 201–17: 'The themes of religion and magic, interwoven in the supernatural, are crucial to the Arthurian legend' (p. 201).

17 Robert de Boron, *Merlin: Roman du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha, Textes littéraires français (Geneva: Droz, 1979), p. 269, section 83, ll. 21–22.

18 Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Studies in Medieval Romance 13 (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p. 243. See also Donald L. Hoffman, 'Malory's Tragic Merlin,' in *Merlin: A Casebook*, pp. 332–41, and, in the same volume, Anne Berthelot, 'Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake,' pp. 162–85.

19 The detail of the white-clad arm that receives Excalibur from Bedivere in Christopher James Riethmuller's *Launcelot of the Lake* (1843) may suggest derivation from Tennyson or independent adaptation; see Simpson, *Camelot Regained*, pp. 214–15.

20 *Le Morte Arthur: A Romance in Stanzas of Eight Lines*, ed. J. Douglas Bruce, EETS e.s. 88 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903; rep. 1959). (Refs. throughout as Stanzaic *Morte*.)

21 *La mort du roi Arthur*, ed. and trans. Emmanuèle Baumgartner and Marie-Thérèse de Medeiros, Champion Classiques (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007). (Refs. throughout as *MA*.)

22 I have used the form 'Bedivere' throughout for clarity, but although this is the form for which Tennyson opted, the Stanzaic *Morte* has 'Bedwere,' while 'Bedwer/e' and 'Bedyvere' appear in the Winchester manuscript of Malory, and Caxton uses several forms, of which 'Bedwere' is the most frequent (x 33), with 'Bedeuer' (x 3), and 'Bedeuere', 'Bedewere', 'Bedwer', 'Bedyuere' (each x 2) all appearing. (My thanks to Professor P.J.C. Field for these details.)

23 Post-medieval literature may describe Avalon as either; see Simpson, *Camelot Regained*, passim. Tennyson had already referred to the 'valley of Avilion' in 'The Palace of Art' (1831/2); see Simpson, pp. 193, 250, Ricks 2:4.

24 Robert de Boron, *Joseph d'Arimathie: A Critical Edition of the Verse and Prose Versions*, ed. Richard O'Gorman (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1995), verse and prose pp. 308–09, showing variant forms.

25 *The Didot Perceval According to the Manuscripts of Modena and Paris*, ed. William Roach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941; rep. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1977), pp. 202, 277–78. Further exploration of influence on the Stanzaic *Morte* from the Robert de Boron cycle is beyond the scope of this article, but see Richard J. Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 54–55, 259. On the complexity of the Old French manuscript background to English Arthurian literature, see

my 'Malory's Sources—and Arthur's Sisters—Revisited,' *Arthurian Literature* 29 (2012): 121–42. (especially 128).

26 See Richard Trachsler, *Clôtures du Cycle Arthurien: Etude et textes,* Publications romanes et françaises 215 (Geneva: Droz, 1996), pp. 119–22; also the notes to *MA* at pp. 443–47.

27 See Elspeth Kennedy et al., 'Lancelot with and without the Grail: *Lancelot do Lac* and the Vulgate Cycle,' in *The Arthur of the French: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Karen Pratt, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 4 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 274–78 [pp. 274–324].

28 In the Stanzaic *Morte*, Arthur's French butler Lucan becomes brother to Bedwere, better known in England in that role, who in turn displaces Girflet.

29 Field (Malory 2:822, note to 1:926 ll. 14–16) notes that Malory's description of an arm and a hand rising from the water is closer to the French than to the Stanzaic *Morte*'s hand.

30 Karen Pratt, *La Mort le roi Artu*, Critical Guides to French Texts 137 (London: Grant & Cutler, 2004), p. 24.

31 Pratt (*La Mort le roi Artu*, p. 45) considers that the text does not offer an assurance of Arthur's salvation, but I base my interpretation on the prayer and the sign rather than on subsequent events.

32 Pratt, *La Mort le Roi Artu*, p. 24. No mortal or physical evidence remains in the *Mort Artu* account, for here Arthur takes his horse and arms on board ship. See also Trachsler, *Clôtures du Cycle Arthurien*, p. 134, and pp. 133–35 for discussion of reasons to exclude the possibility of Arthur's return.

33 See n. 25.

34 Michael Lapidge, ed. and trans., 'The *Vera Historia de Morte Arthuri*: A New Edition,' in *Glastonbury Abbey and the Arthurian Tradition*, ed. James P. Carley, Arthurian Studies 45 (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 115–41 (Latin text with parallel English translation), with additional manuscripts listed by Richard Barber, 'Addendum on the *Vera Historia de Morte Arthuri*,' pp. 143–44. Richard Barber, 'The *Vera Historia de Morte Arthuri* and its Place in Arthurian Tradition,' in *Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. Carley, pp. 101–13, suggests (p. 110) that 'the mysteriously-appearing tomb' in the Latin work may have influenced the Vulgate *Mort Artu*. However, the reference to a sealed tomb in the Latin is in the context of alternative accounts of Arthur's fate, and if there is influence it may rather be in the other direction. See also Ad Putter, 'Latin Historiography after Geoffrey of Monmouth,' in *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature*, ed. Siân Echard, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages 6 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 97 [pp. 85–108]).

35 *La Tavola Ritonda*, ed. Marie-José Heijkant (Milan: Luni Editrice, 1997), p. 541. The reference to Ivano as the last of the named knights is interesting as in certain English texts Yvain is given additional prominence, and it can be he who casts away Excalibur. See Moll, *Before Malory*, pp. 56–62.

36 *La version Post-Vulgate de la Queste del Saint Graal et de la Mort Artu*, Vol. 3, ed. Fanni Bogdanow, Société des anciens textes français (Abbeville: F. Paillart, 2000); see pp. 456–58, sections 671–72, and pp. 465–75, sections 677–83, for the part of the story discussed in the present article. Bogdanow's commentary and comparison with the Vulgate is in her Vol. 4.2 (Abbeville: F. Paillart, 2001), pp. 456–62.

37 See Fanni Bogdanow, 'The Changing Vision of Arthur's Death,' in *Dies Illa: Death in the Middle Ages, Proceedings of the 1983 Manchester Colloquium*, ed. J.H.M. Taylor, Vinaver Studies in French 1 (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984), pp. 114–15 [pp. 107–23].

38 'Merlin dist d'Arthur, si ot dreit, / Que sa mort dutuse serreit.' ('Merlin said of Arthur, rightly, that his death would be doubtful.') *Wace's Roman de Brut, A History of the British: Text and Translation*, revised edition, ed. and trans. Judith Weiss (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 333–34, ll. 13285–86.

39 This takes place in the 'Capela Veyra' (*La version Post-Vulgate* 3:456, section 671). Some manuscripts of the Vulgate *Mort Artu* have a 'Veire,' 'Vaire,' or 'Vraie' instead of a 'Noire' Chapelle; see *La version Post-Vulgate* 4.2: 456.

40 Bogdanow, 'The Changing Vision of Arthur's Death,' p. 116; see also Trachsler, *Clôtures du Cycle Arthurien*, pp. 133–35.

41 *La Quête du Saint-Graal: Roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Fanni Bogdanow, trans. Anne Berrie, Lettres Gothiques (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2006); see pp. 652–53, section 332.

42 Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton, 'Arthurian Geography,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, p. 232 [pp. 218–34].

43 Janina P. Traxler, 'Arthurian Exits: Alone, Together, or None of the Above,' in *The Arthurian Way of Death: The English Tradition*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and K.S. Whetter, Arthurian Studies 74 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), p. 179 [pp. 169–92]. For other work on the significance of the casting away of Excalibur, see the references at n. 26 above.

44 Despite, as Kevin Whetter observes and discusses, being recognized and remembered for his secular chivalry. See 'Subverting, Containing and Upholding Christianity in Medieval Romance,' in *Christianity and Romance*, pp. 102–18, especially pp. 103, 113–14. Of course, the story does not end at Arthur's tomb: see Trachsler, *Clôtures du Cycle Arthurien*, pp. 118–41.

45 See n. 17.

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