

The Politics of Misadventure at Camelot The Fall of Arthur's Kingdom in *La mort le roi Artu*

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‘Adventures in the kingdom of Logres were in such decline
that they hardly took place anymore’.²

The poisoning episode: ‘The greatest misadventure in the world’

A third of the way through *La mort le roi Artu* (c.1230),³ an early thirteenth-century Old French prose romance that concludes the Lancelot Grail Cycle,⁴ ‘the greatest misadventure in the world’ takes place at Camelot, the court of King Arthur of Logres.⁵ Although the poisoning episode, as I refer to it here, is extraordinarily complex

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² Frappier 1964.

³ Frappier 1964 [henceforth MA]. In the text and notes, passages from MA are cited by giving a Roman numeral for the section number, followed by a period, followed by a Roman numeral for line number(s). Translations – in which I use modern English cognates for key words such as ‘misadventure’ and ‘traïson’ – are my own, but I have consulted the English translations in Cable 1971 and Lacy 1995 and the modern French translations in Baumgartner and Madeiros 2007a and Hult 2009a. For a concordance to MA, see Kunstmann and Dubé 1982; for recent bibliography, Baumgartner and Madeiros 2007c; and Hult 2009c. In addition to Frappier 1964a, I have also consulted Baumgartner and de Madeiros 2007a; and Hult 2009a.

⁴ In its original form, according to most scholars, the Lancelot-Grail Cycle included three parts: (1) *Lancelot* (sometimes called the *Lancelot en prose* or the Cyclic Prose-Lancelot) = Micha 1978–1983; (2) *Graal* = Pauphilet 1967; and MA. For English translations of *Lancelot* and *Graal*, see, respectively, Lacy 1993–1996, vols. 2 and 3; and Lacy 1993–1996, vol. 4, pp. 3–87. On the cycle, see Hult 2009b: 9–29; Dover 2003; Kibler 1994a, 1994b, 2003; Lacy 1993; Micha 1987.

⁵ On misadventure and mischance, see the discussion below at fn. 27 and following.

and difficult to interpret, the following summary will suffice for the moment.⁶ While Queen Guinevere is eating in her chamber with Arthur's nephew Gawain and many other knights of the Round Table, a knight called Avarlan is plotting in another room to poison Gawain, whom he hates for reasons that are never explained. Dispatching a servant to give a poisoned fruit to the queen, Avarlan expects her to pass it to Gawain, a particular favorite of hers, who will eat it and die. But Guinevere – who is not watching out for 'treason' – gives the fruit to a knight called Gaheris the White, brother of Mador de la Porte, who accepts it out of love for her. Taking a bite, he immediately drops dead. Astonished by this 'marvel', the queen and the other knights all jump up from the table. Seeing the dead knight, the queen is grief-stricken about this 'misadventure' (62.37) and does not know what to do, 'because it was seen by so many worthy men that she could not deny it' (62.38–40).

One of the knights hurries off to tell Arthur about the 'marvel' (62.42) that has just taken place: the queen has killed a knight of the Round Table through 'the greatest misadventure in the world' (62.44–45). Coming to the queen's chamber and seeing Gaheris's body, the king says that Gaheris has suffered a very great 'mischance' (62.53), adding that the queen has done great 'villainy' if she has acted 'willingly' (62.53–54).⁷ 'Surely', according to an anonymous speaker, 'she deserves death for this deed, if she truly knew that the fruit that killed the knight was poisoned' (62.54–57).⁸ Meanwhile, Guinevere is so overwhelmed by the 'mischance' of Gaheris's death (62.64–65) that all she can say is that she would never have given him the fruit had she known that it (i.e., the fruit itself) was 'disloyal' (62.62). But Arthur now tells her that howsoever she gave the fruit to Gaheris, her deed was 'evil and villainous' and that he strongly suspects that she 'acted out of greater anger than [she] admit[s]' (62.65–6).⁹ After Arthur returns to his own palace, he signs himself with the cross a thousand times, in reaction to the 'marvel' of the knight who died by such 'mischance' (62.76–78). Meanwhile, Guinevere laments that God had forgotten her when she killed such a worthy man by what she, too, calls such 'mischance', adding that she gave him the fruit 'with great good will'.¹⁰

On the following day, however, when Gaheris is buried outside Camelot Cathedral, Arthur's knights decide by 'common consent' to place above his tomb an in-

⁶ For the entire three-part episode see (1) 62.16–63.18; (2) 67.16–69.13; and (3) 74.1–85. Hult 2009c.

⁷ 'de son gré'.

⁸ 62.52–54.

⁹ A difficult passage. I follow Cable 1971: 83.

¹⁰ 62.85–86: 'par grant debonnereté'.

scription that reads: 'HERE LIES GAHERIS THE WHITE OF KARAHEU, BROTHER OF MADOR DE LA PORTE, WHOM THE QUEEN CAUSED TO DIE BY POISON' (63.11–13).¹¹ Days later, Mador – who had been absent from court when Gaheris died – returns to Camelot and chances on his brother's tomb.¹² After reading the inscription and verifying what it says about Gaheris's death with a knight of the Round Table who happens to be passing by, Mador seeks vengeance for his brother by coming before King Arthur and demanding that he do 'right' (*dreit*) to him about the queen, whom Mador accuses of killing his brother 'by treason', adding that if she denies the accusation, he will prove it by fighting any knight who defends her.¹³ Upon hearing the accusation, many at court say that the queen is in serious trouble and will find no one to fight Mador, 'because everyone knows for certain that she killed [Gaheris] as she has been accused' (67.70–73). Although Arthur, we are told, is distressed by Mador's accusation, he is obliged to do him 'right', which clearly calls for the queen's execution (67.74–77). When he summons her to answer Mador's charge, Guinevere is aggrieved and angry: she knows that no one will defend her, because it is generally known that she killed Gaheris (67.77–82). Flanked by Gawain and his brother Gaheriet, the queen comes before Arthur, who repeats Mador's accusation, and asks Mador whether he is accusing her of having killed Gaheris 'by treason' and 'knowingly'.¹⁴ But when Mador insists that the queen did kill Gaheris 'disloyally' and 'by treason', she finds no knight at Camelot who will defend her against his accusation (68.1–9). She then asks Arthur to do 'right' to her according to the judgment of his court about how to proceed in her case.¹⁵ Without asking the knights of his court for advice on this matter, Arthur announces the court's judgment (*esgart*) himself, declaring that if the queen were now to admit to Mador's accusation, she would be put to death immediately; otherwise, he will follow the customary pro-

¹¹ 'ICI GIST GAHERIZ LI BLANS DE KARAHEU, LI FRERES MADOR DE LA PORTE, QUE LA REINE FIST MORIR PAR VENIM' (194.20–21).

¹² For the second section of the poisoning episode, see 67.16–69.13.

¹³ Killing 'by treason' (*par traïson*) is a recognized form of homicide in medieval French law. See White 2001, 2007, and 2008. For the sake of clarity, I translate the OF word 'appel' as 'accusation'.

¹⁴ 67.64–66: 'par traïson' and 'a mon escient'.

¹⁵ On the customary procedures of courts in literary and historical trials, see White 2011. Ordinarily, the king or a lesser lord of a court would ask his knights or barons to make an 'award' (*esgart*). After these men consulted privately about the matter and decided on the award, one of them would announce the award publicly (White 2008). Although the lord of the court could reject the award, he would ordinarily be open to strong criticism for doing so.

cedure of giving her forty days to find a knight to defend her.¹⁶ By subsequently asking Arthur to give her other ‘advice’ (68.22), Guinevere obliquely suggests that he help her to reconcile herself with Mador. But Arthur refuses to deviate from his previous judgment, saying that he would not do wrong for the queen or anyone else (68.21–23).¹⁷ Although Mador is dissatisfied with the king’s decision to give Guinevere so much time to find a champion, he agrees to return to Camelot in forty days and leaves the court, while Guinevere remains there, feeling very sad, because she knows that no knight will defend her except possibly one of ‘the kinsmen of King Ban’ (69.2–7), a group of ‘foreign’ knights from Gaul, who include Lancelot, the late King Ban of Benioc’s son; Lancelot’s brother Hector¹⁸ and their two cousins, Bors and Lionel, the sons of King Ban’s brother, the late King Bors of Gaunes.¹⁹

However, all four of these knights are absent from court, because, as will be explained more fully below, the queen has previously banished them from her lodge at Camelot in the erroneous belief that Lancelot betrayed her by giving his love to a beautiful young woman known as the Girl of Escalot. When Guinevere later tells Lancelot’s cousin Bors that she hates Lancelot mortally for betraying her, Bors tells Lionel and Hector that the three of them should separate Lancelot from the queen by returning with him to their kingdoms of Gaunes and Benioc in Gaul.²⁰ During the period of their banishment, Bors, Hector, and Lionel associate themselves with Arthur’s rival, the king of North Wales (37.14–37), while the queen later signals her estrangement from Lancelot by hinting that she might transfer her affections to Bors, who, she says, is more worthy of ruling a great empire than any other knight she knows (44.23–27). Nevertheless, Bors is so angry at Guinevere for her false accusation that Lancelot betrayed her by giving his love to the Girl of Escalot that he later refuses to fight for her against Mador.

Meanwhile, Arthur has apparently been making efforts to find a knight to champion the queen’s cause and is distressed that every knight he asks to do so refuses on the grounds that the queen was in the wrong and Mador in the right (79.3–8). Even

¹⁶ ‘Many say that the queen will not find anyone to fight for her, because they know for certain that she killed the knight as she has been accused’ (67.68–73).

¹⁷ This difficult passage should be interpreted in the light of the fact that the lord of a court had the option of halting judicial proceedings in a case such as Guinevere’s and arranging an ‘accord’ between the defendant and the plaintiff (White 2011 and 2016).

¹⁸ Hector is Lancelot’s half-brother, but is usually called his brother.

¹⁹ On King Ban of Benioc and his brother, King Bors of Gaunes, see *Lancelot en prose* 7: Ia.1–18; *Lancelot* 2: 1–5.

²⁰ Bors tells Lancelot that the queen had ‘barred you and me and all those coming with you to enter her lodge’ at Camelot (59.98–100).

Gawain turns down the king, because ‘we know that the queen killed [Gaheris] as she was accused’ (79.16–17). On the day of battle, however, Guinevere’s defense is finally taken up by Lancelot, who has heard a detailed account of Gaheris’s death and Mador’s accusation against the queen from an anonymous knight of the Round Table who witnessed both events and whom he encounters by chance in a forest (74.27–96). Soon afterwards, when Lancelot encounters Hector and then Bors—both of whom have learned of Mador’s accusation against Guinevere—it appears that although all three of them are willing to defend her, each of them views the case differently. Hector tells Lancelot he will go to defend the queen against Mador’s accusation of treason (74.117–120). Although Lancelot says he believes from what the knight has told him that Mador is in the right and Guinevere in the wrong, he also declares that because she formerly did him great honor, he will go to Camelot (albeit in disguise) to defend the queen, though not so boldly as he ordinarily would (75.33–42). Bors, too, has heard about the queen’s plight and is pleased about it, because, he says, she will now need to make peace with Lancelot in order to insure that he or one of his kinsmen will fight in her defense (75.29–32). Shortly before the day of battle, Bors goes to Camelot and speaks with the queen, feigning ignorance of the accusation against her and telling her that she deserves to have no one to defend her against Mador’s accusation and that he is pleased by the ‘mischance’ that she has experienced (77.22–29).

On the day of battle, Lancelot comes to Camelot in disguise and defends the queen against Mador’s charge that she killed his brother disloyally and by treason, by fighting to prove the oath he gives that she never contemplated disloyalty or treason (83.3–5). In other words, Lancelot denies, not that the queen killed Gaheris, but that her intentions were disloyal and treasonous when she did so. By defeating Mador, who is ignorant of his adversary’s identity and fails to grasp the meaning of his defense of the queen (83.5–6), Lancelot wins an acquittal for Guinevere. When he reveals his identity, the author says, he brings joy to everyone except Mador, who accuses the king of ‘treason’ by setting Lancelot against him. Lancelot’s victory also pleases Gawain, who said immediately after hearing Lancelot’s defense, but without knowing who he was, that he now anticipated Mador’s defeat, because he, too, would have sworn that the queen never contemplated disloyalty or treason (83.8–16). As a result, Mador is put to shame when he is reduced to accepting Lancelot’s mercy and his help in securing the queen’s forgiveness and a pardon from the king (84.50–56).

Because the story shows, in effect, that Guinevere killed Gaheris by misadventure rather than ‘willingly’, ‘disloyally’, or with ‘treason’ in mind, her acquittal of an accusation of killing him disloyally and by treason certainly seems just, given what

the audience knows about the killing and the oaths sworn by Mador and Lancelot, and given the medieval view of treason as a duplicitous, underhanded way of deliberately harming someone to whom loyalty is owed.²¹ Nevertheless, the way in which Gaheris's death is handled at Camelot is still deeply puzzling and raises many questions about what motivates the characters involved in the poisoning episode to act as they do and why the royal court proceeds in the case as it does. To begin with, because Arthur and the unnamed knight already mentioned indicate immediately after Gaheris's death that the question of Guinevere's guilt or innocence turns on whether she knew that the fruit that killed him was poisoned, why does no one ever ask, even after Guinevere's acquittal, who else could have poisoned the fruit—much less try to locate and punish the culprit, so as to ensure that Mador will have vengeance for his brother's death? Why is the inscription on Gaheris's tomb never changed so that it will not shame the queen by indicating that she brought about his death?

These questions are worth raising, not only because they bear on the broader issue of whether Arthur's court does right in the matter of Gaheris's death, but also because the authors of two later versions of the poisoning episode in Middle English stories about the death of Arthur took it for granted that a medieval court would have addressed these issues directly.²² In the late fourteenth-century *Stanzaic Morte Darthur*, after Guinevere is acquitted of Mador's accusation, the squires who served food and drink at the dinner where Mador's brother died from eating a poisoned apple are tortured until one of them admits to poisoning the apple. To give due satisfaction to Mador for his kinsman's death, the guilty squire is then executed in Mador's presence (Benson 1994: 56–57). In Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte Darthur*, after Guinevere's acquittal of poisoning Mador's kinsman (here known as Sir Patrise) a Sir Pinel is identified by the Lady of the Lake as the knight who poisoned the fruit that killed Patrise in his attempt to kill Gawain. Sir Pinel then flees from Arthur's court. Later, an inscription on Patrise's tomb that identified the queen as his slayer is changed, so as to state that Pinel was the traitor who poisoned Mador's kinsman (Mallory 1998: 405–413). By contrast, the original version of the poisoning episode in *La mort le roi Artu* raises doubts about whether King Arthur's court does justice in this case and if not, why not.

Because it is customary for Arthur's knights to act as judges in his court, their role in the poisoning episode is worth examining closely.²³ Since initially, both Arthur

²¹ White 2008. On killing by misadventure in English law, see Hurnard 1969: 68–130.

²² On Middle English adaptations of MA, see Cooper 2003.

²³ In literary trials, as in historical ones, the knights and/or barons of a king or a lesser lord customarily act as judges in his court; see White 2011.

and the anonymous speaker evidently allow for the possibility that Guinevere did not poison Gaheris intentionally, why do the king's knights foreclose this possibility when they formulate the inscription indicating that she caused him to die by poison? Why do Gawain and Gaheris first show support for the queen by standing alongside her when she comes before the king to answer Mador's accusation, but later are unwilling to defend her, as are Arthur's other knights? Moreover, when it comes to making a judgment about how the court should proceed and what punishment it should impose on Guinevere if she fails to rebut Mador's charge, why do Arthur's knights leave both decisions to him? Do they all believe that it would be right to condemn the queen to die if no knight were to defend her against Mador's accusation of treason, and wrong to proceed in any other way in this matter? Since Gawain says, after hearing Lancelot's oath in defense of the queen, that he, too, would swear that she 'never contemplated any disloyalty or treason' (83.4–5, 19–23), why did he not offer to swear this oath or at least query Mador's accusation at an earlier stage of the trial, when it would have mattered?

Lancelot's attitude toward the case is also hard to fathom, as are those of Hector and Bors and that of Guinevere herself. Not having witnessed Gaheris's death, Lancelot relies on the account of it given by the anonymous knight in the forest, who, to be sure, is ignorant of Avarlan's role in the killing and considers the queen's cause unjust, but who mentions to Lancelot that she had received the fruit that poisoned Gaheris from a page (74.34–64, 78–79). Upon hearing the knight's report, Lancelot seems to signal his belief in the queen's innocence, first by expressing astonishment at the failure of Arthur's knights – including Gawain and Gaheriet – to defend her (74.71–74) and later by undertaking to defend her himself. Nevertheless, Lancelot tells Hector and Bors shortly after learning of Gaheris's death that by fighting on Guinevere's behalf, he will be in the wrong and Mador in the right. If he believes in the queen's innocence, why would he not also believe that he will be in the right if he fights on her behalf? If he thinks her guilty, why is he shocked to learn that none of Arthur's knights – not even Gawain or Gaheriet – is willing to defend her? Does he fight on her behalf only because he believes he is obliged to do so in order to recompense her for the honor she has previously shown him? And why does he come in disguise to Camelot to fight on her behalf? Does his attitude toward the case differ from that of his brother Hector, who, by all appearances, was ready to fight Mador to defend the queen as soon as he heard about the case? As for Bors, is he interested in whether Guinevere did or did not kill Gaheris by treason? Or does he regard her desperate need for a champion merely as a means of forcing her to make peace with Lancelot? Even Guinevere's view of her own case seems to vary from moment to

moment. When the page handed her the fruit, did she have any reason to think that the fruit itself was ‘disloyal’? If not, why does the author go out of his way to say that she was not on the lookout for ‘treason’? Immediately after Gaheris’s death, the queen worries that because all the knights had witnessed it, she could not deny it. But what does she have to deny? Later, after publicly protesting her innocence, she privately acknowledges that the failure of Arthur’s knights to defend her is fitting, because ‘they all know’, she tells herself, ‘that you are in the wrong and Mador in the right’ and are therefore abandoning her and letting her die ‘a shameful death’ (72.7–14).

As for Arthur, why does he appear to vacillate in his view of how Gaheris died and what role the queen played in his death? After learning from a knight who had been eating in the queen’s chamber that Guinevere had killed Gaheris through ‘the greatest misadventure in the world’, the king calls his death a great ‘mischance’, thereby implying that the killing was not necessarily deliberate, or at least not on Guinevere’s part. But when Arthur says that ‘the queen had done great villainy, if she had done this willingly’, he suggests that her intentions in giving the poisoned fruit to Gaheris may well have been innocent and that determining what they were is crucial to evaluating her conduct. However, when the queen insists that her intentions were innocent, Arthur insists that she acted maliciously, villainously, and angrily. Why does Arthur suddenly attribute these hostile emotions to Guinevere? Why, later on in the trial, does the king deviate from customary judicial procedure by failing to ask his knights for advice on how his court should proceed in the queen’s case and what punishment it should impose on her, if she is guilty as charged? Why does the king insist on sentencing her to death, if no knight rebuts Mador’s accusation in battle, rather than trying to make peace between them?²⁴ If the king believes his queen innocent of Mador’s accusation, why is he unable to convince any of his knights, even Gawain, to defend her? If he does not believe her, why does he give her time, over Mador’s protests, to find a champion who will fight on her behalf, and then keep looking for a knight to play this role? Is Arthur simply maintaining the pretense of supporting his queen and following customary court procedure, or does he actually hope that a champion can be found to defend her against the accusation of killing Gaheris by treason?

Some of the questions just raised cannot be fully addressed without considering the other plot-lines with which the successive phases of the poisoning episode are interlaced, while others can be answered only speculatively, because neither the characters in *La mort le roi Artu* nor its author can be trusted to say what they mean or mean what they say. But a close reading of the episode still enables us to address the

²⁴ See White 1978.

broader question of whether King Arthur and the members of his court fulfill their customary obligation to do 'right' in the matter of Gaheris's death by misadventure and to resolve the conflict that it generates. Though the text provides no way of explaining why no one at Camelot even tries to determine who poisoned the fruit that killed Gaheris and why, the failure of Arthur and his knights to do right to their dead companion by avenging his death is obvious and is all the more glaring when we note that his death at the king's own court brings shame not only to him and his kinsmen, but to the king and to all his companions of the Round Table as well as to Guinevere.

Because Guinevere clearly does not deserve to die as a traitor for her role in Gaheris's death, it is equally clear that she does not merit the torment and shame to which Arthur subjects her by initially threatening to put her to death unless she can find a knight to defend her and later trying ineffectually to find her a champion himself. Nor does she deserve to be publicly shamed by Mador's charge of treason or by the inscription on Gaheris's tomb, which directly implicates her in his death. But Mador is surely entitled to something other than the shame he incurs by losing his battle to Lancelot and by having to seek Guinevere's mercy and the king's pardon for having falsely accused her. What Mador was owed and should have received before he made his accusation was an apology from the queen for killing Gaheris, not by treason, but by misadventure, and possibly some form of compensation for his death. In return, he would have been obliged to pardon the queen and show her forgiveness. From the study of trial scenes in other Old French and Anglo-Norman literary texts, it is clear that through the mediation of third parties, including the king, an 'accord' of this kind between Mador and Guinevere could have been arranged, at the earliest soon after Gaheris's death and at the latest just before the king accepted the gages of Mador and Lancelot; and at several other points during the proceedings (White 2001, 2008). But the failure of anyone other than Guinevere to even hint that the conflict between Mador and Guinevere need not have been resolved by battle is a clear sign that at Arthur's court, relations that are supposedly based on love and trust have broken down to the point where they are, at best, transactional political connections and, at worst, relations of suspicion, envy, and even hatred.

Misadventures and the fall of Arthur's kingdom

If the poisoning episode were the only incident in *La mort le roi Artu* in which one character unintentionally causes harm (including lethal harm) to another character or characters but is later accused of acting deliberately or even by treason instead of being reconciled with the character(s) he or she harmed, we could interpret the story

of Gaheris's death and Guinevere's ensuing trial as an anomalous interlude in a story often read as recounting a series of tragic, causally connected events that lead ineluctably to King Arthur's death and the collapse of his kingdom.²⁵ However, because *La mort le roi Artu* includes so many other incidents of this kind and because all of them reveal, generate, or exacerbate internal conflict at Camelot that goes unresolved, we need to ask what role they play in a story that begins in the aftermath of the Quest of the Holy Grail and ends with the final dissolution of the Arthurian world.

Even a partial inventory of the misadventures, mischances, and acts of folly included in the first half of *La mort le roi Artu* reveals how important these incidents are to the story. In the first main episode Gawain confesses that on the recently completed Quest of the Holy Grail, he killed eighteen companions of the Round Table by mischance and because of his own sin (c.3). Compelled by the irresistible force of love to recommence an affair they had abandoned during the Quest, Lancelot and Guinevere bring shame to Arthur without really intending to do so (c.4). At a tournament, Bors wounds Lancelot without either of them recognizing the other (c.19) and an anonymous knight kills Lancelot's squire by misadventure (c.21). Soon afterwards, a knight is killed by a wild boar (c.23). Lancelot inadvertently insults and angers the queen by foolishly wearing the sleeve of the Girl of Escalot and thereby convincing Guinevere that he has betrayed her (c.34). A royal huntsman wounds Lancelot by 'mischance' when trying to shoot a stag (c.64). The queen, as we have seen, kills Gaheris by misadventure (c.65). Lancelot unintentionally causes the death of the Girl of Escalot by refusing to give her his love (c. 70). Lancelot kills Arthur's nephew Gaheriet, whom he did not recognize and would not have killed if he had (c.95).²⁶ Even if we take the view that these instances of misadventure, mischance, and folly are individual signs of a broader, irreversible change in the fortunes of Arthur and his kingdom (see, e.g., Lacy 1994), the harm – lethal or otherwise – that they accidentally cause is less dangerous and destructive than the harm that results when these accidents are misinterpreted or misrepresented as deliberate.

While acknowledging that in this story, as in medieval European societies generally, misadventures and mischances are signs of bad luck and bring shame to the characters they harm and the ones who are, in some sense, their instruments (Miller 1990: 61–68), I argue that the author of *La mort le roi Artu* also uses such incidents

²⁵ See, e.g. Burns 1993: xv, xxxi; Lacy 1994: 89, 90, 94, 95. On 'the relentless logical progression of events in *La mort*' see Burns 1995: 154.

²⁶ To underscore the similarities among several of these incidents, the storyteller uses the same two words – 'mesaventure' (2.12; 57.20; 62.37, 44) and 'mescheance' (3.17, 21, 26; 57.23; 62.53, 58, 78, 83; 65.27; 71.48; 77.28; 90.27; 103.12; 110.53). See also Kunstmann and Dubé 1982: s.vv. 'mesavenir' and 'mescheoir'.

(detailed below) both to reveal intrinsic weaknesses in Arthur's kingdom, including his fatal flaws as a ruler, and to show how they ultimately result in his death and the dissolution of the Arthurian world. By doing so, the author has created a very different and much more disturbing story about Arthur's fall than the traditional one first presented in celebratory accounts of his reign in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c.1135) and then re-told in Wace's Anglo-Norman adaptation of Geoffrey's text in the *Roman de Brut* (c.1155). In both of these narratives – which provide the basis of what has been called 'the Arthurian myth'²⁷ – Arthur's fall is entirely due to a political coup by his nephew Mordred, which takes place so suddenly and unexpectedly that it cannot detract from the glorious reputation that King Arthur had earned earlier in his reign. After the fifteen-year-old Arthur succeeds his father, Uther Pendragon, as king of Britain, his matchless military prowess, largesse, and skills as a political leader enable him and his ever-expanding following of loyal nobles and knights to unite all of Britain under his rule, conquer many other kingdoms, and make his court the most important political center other than Rome. When his political successes threaten the Romans and provoke them into planning an attack on him, Arthur gathers support from his loyal magnates and knights to launch a counter-attack. After entrusting his kingdom of Britain to his nephew Mordred, Arthur sails away with a great army to Gaul and is starting to cross the Alps in order to conquer Rome, when he learns that Mordred has betrayed him by usurping his throne and marrying his queen. Quickly returning to Britain, Arthur meets Mordred in a great battle, where he kills him, but is mortally wounded himself.²⁸

In *La mort le roi Artu*, as in Geoffrey's and Wace's narratives, Arthur is ultimately brought down by the treason of Mordred. But by the time the king sails back from the continent to fight him, the flawed political relationships that had tenuously held Arthur's kingdom together have so totally broken down that Arthur condemns Guinevere to death by burning; the people of Camelot denounce Arthur and his nephews as traitors; Lancelot and his kinsmen kill twenty of Arthur's knights, including three of his nephews; Arthur and Gawain initiate a war of revenge in the kingdom of Logres against Lancelot and his kinsmen; and when the latter return to their homelands in Gaul, Arthur and Gawain sail there to attack them. Before doing so, Arthur puts

²⁷ On the 'Arthurian myth', see below.

²⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007: 248–253; Wace 1999: 326–335. Arthur's chosen successor Constantine defeats Mordred's two sons in battle and kills them. But after Constantine dies, Britain is so weakened by civil strife that the Britons lose control of the island and can only await Arthur's return to restore their political fortunes (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007: 252–257; Wace 1999: 35–37). On the narratives of Geoffrey and Wace, see E.D. Kennedy 1996b: xv–xviii; Bogdanow 1996: 91–92.

his kingdom and his queen in the custody of Mordred, who usurps Arthur's throne and becomes king of Logres. Mordred also seeks to marry Guinevere, who angrily rejects him, takes refuge in the Tower of London, and dispatches a messenger to tell Arthur what Mordred has done. Upon learning of Mordred's treason (c.163), Arthur returns to the kingdom of Logres to fight him. In a great battle on Salisbury Plain, Arthur kills Mordred, but not before Mordred gives him a mortal wound (c.191).²⁹

How does *La mort le roi Artu* explain this catastrophe? According to the traditional view, it 'lays out an inexorable chain of cause and consequence in which the . . . love affair [that] Lancelot and Guinevere [renew at the beginning of the story] rekindles a clan vendetta between Arthur's family and Lancelot's that eventually draws the king away from his kingdom and makes . . . his bastard son Mordred's treason possible'.³⁰ However, to treat the renewal of Lancelot's and Guinevere's mad love affair as the underlying cause of Arthur's downfall is to overlook, not only his kingdom's inherent weaknesses and his fatal flaws as a ruler, but the prominent role of misadventures and acts of folly in initiating and sharpening conflict at Camelot. Even at the outset of *La mort le roi Artu*, Arthur is revealed to be far inferior as a ruler to the Arthur of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, both of whom celebrate him as the king of all Britain (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007: 9.15, 9.220; Wace 1999: 9641–9643), and the conqueror of many other kingdoms (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007: 9.211–305; Wace 1999: 9799–10132). Here, however, Arthur is merely the king of Logres – which does not even include all of England – and must therefore compete for power and honor with other British rulers, such as the king of North Wales, who has hopes of drawing at least some of the kinsmen of King Ban to his court.³¹ Moreover, Arthur's court at Camelot is infinitely more faction-ridden and politically unstable than the opulent court of kings, magnates, and knights at Caerleon that Geoffrey of Monmouth describes (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007: 9.306–530) or the court where Wace's Arthur establishes his Round Table in the *Roman de Brut*. According to Wace,

²⁹ For the conclusion of *La mort* see below.

³⁰ Burns 1993: xxxi. For the adultery as the underlying cause of Arthur's inevitable fall, see also Cable 1971: 20; Frappier 1964b: x; Lacy 1993: ix. According to Lacy 1994a: 89, 'the irreversible forces shaping events [in the story] have been set in motion, largely by the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere'. For valuable critiques of this argument and the makings of a fuller explanation of Arthur's fall, see Hult 2009b: 59–74; Baumgartner and Medeiros 2007a: 29–36; Bogdanow 1996: 93–94.

³¹ On the political geography of *La mort le roi Artu* and *Lancelot en prose*, see Micha 1987: 251–281.

there was no court so talked about, not even that of the Roman emperor. [Arthur] never heard of a [praiseworthy knight] who would not belong to his household, if he could get him, and if such a one wanted a reward for his service, he would never leave deprived of it. On account of his noble barons—each of whom considered himself superior [to the others]—Arthur had the Round Table made. . . . There sat the [the barons], all equal, all leaders; they were placed equally round the table and equally served. None of them could boast that he sat higher than his peer; all were seated near the seat of honor, none far away. No one—whether Scot, Briton, Frenchman, Norman, Angevin, Fleming, Burgundian or Lorrainer—whoever he held his fief from, . . . was accounted courtly if he did not go to Arthur's court and stay with him. . . . They came from many lands, those who sought honour and renown, partly to hear of his courtly deeds, partly to see his rich possessions, partly to know his barons, partly to receive his gifts. He was loved by the poor and greatly honoured by the rich. Foreign kings envied him, doubting and fearing he would conquer the whole world and take their kingdoms away (Wace 1999: 9739–9780).

By contrast, Arthur's court at Camelot in *La mort le roi Artu* is merely the center of the kingdom of Logres and is rarely attended by faraway kings. Moreover, the court is sharply divided into two rival factions, one consisting of the king's five nephews, Gawain, Gaheriet, Agravain, Guerrehet, and Mordred (who is later revealed to be Arthur's illegitimate son), and the other of Lancelot, Hector, Bors, and Lionel. As 'foreign' knights from the kingdoms of Benioc and Gaunes in Gaul, the latter hold no land from Arthur and are attached to his court only because of Lancelot's adulterous love affair with Guinevere (36.47–66). If the affair were to end, all four would immediately leave Camelot and return to Gaul. To make their position at Arthur's court all the more difficult, their superiority in terms of prowess and honor to all of Arthur's nephews except Gawain and possibly Gaheriet is so obvious that Lancelot in particular is envied and hated by Agravain, Guerrehet, and Mordred, though not by Gawain and Gaheriet, who maintain amicable relations with him. Meanwhile, Lancelot and Guinevere, too, are hated by Arthur's sister, the sorceress Morgan, who has long hoped to destroy them. As for Arthur, he nominally owes protection to his own knights, who have sworn oaths of fidelity to him, and is expected to reward and honor them for their service, and to do right to them if they are harmed either directly or through their kin. In his capacity as the heirless head of a lineage that includes his five nephews, he and they have reciprocal obligations. But whether the king will honor these obligations is uncertain, as are the nature of the duties that Arthur owes

to King Ban's kinsmen and that they have to him. In a kingdom characterized by political contradiction and paradox, Arthur tries and fails to fulfill his conflicting, yet essential roles as king, lord, head of a lineage, and cuckolded husband. He can cling to power only if Guinevere and Lancelot are loyal to each other and disloyal to him and only if his unruly nephews show disloyalty to him by disloyally ignoring the disloyalty of Guinevere and Lancelot. Worst of all, the personal rivalries and feelings of hatred that permeate Camelot are particularly dangerous to the peace and unity of the Arthurian political community, because all the nobles who belong to it – including the king and queen – participate actively in what William Ian Miller calls an 'honor-based culture' (Miller 1990: 29–34) that requires them, as individuals and as group members, to compete for honor in any way they can, to avoid dishonoring themselves, and to avenge even the slightest hint of shame, as one can see from the many vows to take vengeance – usually against each other – that fill the pages of the story.

Although the Arthurian community just described bears some resemblance to the one depicted in other Arthurian romances, including the *Lancelot en prose*, the author of *La mort le roi Artu* drastically alters its political dynamics by eliminating the central motif around which these stories are usually organized, namely the chivalric adventure, which 'gives meaning to the actions and endeavors of [Arthur's] court' in other romances (Lacy 1994: 87–88). Ordinarily, adventures provide Arthurian knights with opportunities to gain honor by riding out from Camelot and defeating wicked knights and lords, rescuing ladies or their fellow knights from grave peril, conquering territory, securing material wealth, and sometimes gaining a wife in the process. In *La mort le roi Artu*, however, adventures have declined so much following the Grail Quest that King Arthur needs to organize tournaments to make sure his knights will continue to bear arms (3.33–43). Since he evidently lacks the requisite resources to distribute largesse, much less the power to gain new wealth, no foreign knights other than the kinsmen of King Ban come to Camelot, where there are few, if any opportunities to gain honor except by fighting for recognition as the best knight at a tournament or by engaging in court intrigues. In short, the Arthurian court turns in on itself; and the never-ending competition for honor that underlies chivalric culture is, at best, a zero-sum game.

In place of adventures, the author of *La mort le roi Artu* substitutes misadventures, such as the one that befalls Gaheris and leads to Guinevere's trial in the poisoning episode. As we have already seen, these misadventures are sometimes bizarre, grotesque, or even comical. But they are always potentially dangerous, because in the Arthurian world, as in medieval societies generally, misadventures and mischances—which are difficult to distinguish from each other – are not what are now called in English an 'acci-

dent', which carries little or no blame or legal liability.³² Instead, they are signs of bad luck, sin, or possibly divine disfavor.³³ So there is reason to wonder why a particular misadventure befell a particular character and why another character was its instrument. Besides, since it is so hard to know whether a supposed misadventure is truly a misadventure and so easy to impute ill-will to the character who was its agent, the impulse to avenge the harm and the shame that the misadventure has caused is difficult to resist. Moreover, even when a misadventure truly is a misadventure, it can often be honestly misinterpreted or maliciously misrepresented as an intentional act causing harm and shame that calls for vengeance. Finally, even if a misadventure is acknowledged to be a misadventure by everyone concerned, it still calls for an apology, a plea for mercy or forgiveness, and possibly an offer of another form of compensation and its acceptance. Achieving peace and reconciliation between the character harmed and the character acting by misadventure is difficult to arrange without intercession by a third party, because it is potentially shameful for the former to accept publicly an apology or other compensation and for the latter to give it publicly, unless each is assured that doing so is not dishonorable. For all of these reasons, the author of *Le mort le roi Artu* is able to use cases of misadventure, along with acts of folly, little mishaps, and odd coincidences, as vehicles for revealing the feelings of anger, jealousy, enmity, envy, and distrust that are endemic to Arthur's court and kingdom and difficult if not impossible to suppress or give up in order to bring conflict to an end even temporarily.

A series of misadventures

Because the various plot-lines in *La mort le roi Artu* are so carefully interrelated and intricately interlaced,³⁴ the misadventures analyzed below can be considered only roughly in sequence to show how they lead circuitously to Arthur's fall by intensifying old conflicts at Camelot, stirring up new ones, and providing opportunities for third parties to settle old scores and stir up new trouble. At the beginning of *La mort le roi Artu*, when the king commands that his knights' adventures on the Grail Quest be written down, they all learn, not only that thirty-two of their companions were killed in combat, but that eighteen of them – including Arthur's particular favorite, King Bademagu – were slain, not by enemy knights, but by Gawain, who is one of their own companions and a nephew of Arthur's. Instead of acting as a peacemaker by at

³² My discussion of 'accident' depends heavily on Miller 1990: 61–68, and 2003: 73–95.

³³ For a different view of 'narrative accidents' in *La mort le roi Artu* see Lacy 2003: 117–118, 121, 122 n. 8.

³⁴ On 'interlacing' in *La mort le roi Artu* and the Lancelot-Grail cycle generally, see E. Kennedy 1994.

least trying to reconcile Gawain with his fellow knights and, in particular, with the kin of the knights he killed, Arthur orders his nephew to confess publicly that he committed his many killings, not because he was a better knight than his victims were, but on account of mischance and his own misfortune. In this way, the king only sharpens internal divisions at his court by shaming Gawain so much that he feels even worse about his killings than he did before; by making his nephew a target for vengeance by the kin of the knights he killed; and possibly by giving himself the satisfaction of taking a cowardly form of vengeance on Gawain, instead of doing right to his victims or to him. This is not the only time in this story when Arthur fails to perform a king's traditional role of peacemaker.

A little later, two successive acts of folly by Lancelot and Guinevere pose a far more serious threat to peace at Arthur's court than do Gawain's unfortunate killings. First, Lancelot becomes so totally enamored of Guinevere that they renew the love affair that they suspended during the Quest. As long as the affair remains secret, it has the paradoxical effect of enhancing Arthur's power and prestige, because it insures that Lancelot and his kinsmen will remain at Camelot, instead of returning to their homelands in Gaul – as they would have done if the affair had not been renewed (36.59–64) and would do if it ended. For this reason, Arthur and others at Camelot have an incentive either to ignore all thoughts of the shame that the affair brings to him and to his kingdom or to refrain from even hinting at it publicly. However, the affair does not remain a secret, because the lovers conduct it so 'foolishly' that Arthur's nephew Agravain learns of it (4.1–14). His goal is to exploit his accidental discovery for his own ends by bringing harm to Lancelot, whom he hates, under the guise of encouraging Arthur to avenge the shame which, he insists, Lancelot is doing to him through his wife. But Agravain can achieve this objective only under the following circumstances: First, despite Arthur's great capacity for vacillation and many reasons for ignoring, forgetting, or disbelieving reports of the adultery and calls for full vengeance against the lovers, he must be convinced – and remain convinced – that reports of the adultery are true; that Lancelot has deliberately shamed him through his wife and cannot be excused by saying that he was drawn into the affair by the irresistible force of love; that knowledge of the adultery has become public and cannot be suppressed or ignored; and, finally, that the shame that it brings him if he does not openly avenge it outweighs the shame of losing the support of Lancelot and his kinsmen and of fighting and losing a war with them. Before justice can be done on Lancelot, moreover, Agravain must draw others into his conspiracy to help him catch Lancelot in the act of having sex with Guinevere. Then the lovers must be tried in Arthur's court, judged guilty and sentenced by Arthur's knights, and executed.

By the mid-point of the story, the conditions necessary for punishing the adultery have largely been met, not only as a result of purposeful political action by Agravain and other enemies of Lancelot's, but also because a series of misadventures has either provoked or intensified internal conflict at court. In the meantime, a tournament called by Arthur at Winchester serves as an occasion for multiple misadventures, each of which serves, in one way or another, to promote suspicion and discord, not only between the king and Lancelot, but among Lancelot, his three kinsmen, and the queen. All of these misadventures can be seen as unintended consequences of Lancelot's elaborate scheme to reaffirm his status as the greatest knight in the world. After telling everyone except Guinevere that he is so unwell that he cannot go to Winchester and must remain at Camelot, and insisting that his three kinsmen attend the tournament, Lancelot plans to go to the tournament in disguise by wearing different arms from the ones he usually uses and riding a different horse, so that other knights there will be willing to fight him and thereby give him the opportunity he craves to earn recognition as the best fighter there. However, because Agravain has just learned about Lancelot's affair with Guinevere, he assumes, after hearing that Lancelot will remain at court instead of going to Winchester, that he is doing so, not because he is unwell, but because he wishes to be with the queen. So Agravain believes that he will now have an opportunity to destroy Lancelot by catching the lovers together, proving to King Arthur that Lancelot is shaming him through his wife, and having his enemy Lancelot put to death. As a first step in this process, Agravain tells Arthur about the adultery and the shame that it causes him. Though the king says he doesn't believe him, he says he won't stop Agravain from spying on Lancelot and the queen. Moreover, by ordering Guinevere to remain at court, Arthur deliberately sets up a test of the truth of what Agravain has told him. Because Lancelot does go to Winchester and Arthur happens to recognize him despite his disguise, the king assumes that Agravain is wrong about Lancelot and the queen. Even so, he has now allowed his nephew to set in motion a plot to entrap them that later succeeds.

Another unfortunate consequence of Lancelot's ill-advised decision to fight in disguise at the Winchester tournament – where Arthur's knights of the Round Table fight on one side and 'foreign' knights coming mainly from elsewhere in Britain on the other – is that he is grievously wounded by his own cousin Bors, without either of them recognizing each other. How does this misfortune come about? Like Lancelot, Bors, Lionel, and Hector have come in disguise, but unlike him, they fight on the side of Arthur's knights, apparently for the purpose of identifying themselves as knights of the Round Table. Even though Lancelot knows which side his kinsmen will be fighting on, he chooses to join the foreign knights, who are known to be

weaker than Arthur's knights, because he believes it would be dishonorable for him to fight on the stronger side and, one may assume, it would be much more difficult to achieve recognition as the best knight at the tournament.³⁵ By doing so, however, Lancelot ensures that he will gain this honor only by defeating and thereby dishonoring the best knights who are fighting on Arthur's side, including Lancelot's own kinsmen. Lancelot's purpose is obvious to King Arthur, who, as we have seen, has recognized Lancelot by chance. So when Arthur sees him joining the foreign knights, he orders his nephews Gawain and Gaieriet not to compete in the tournament at all, for fear that if they did so, they and Lancelot might injure each other and that ill-will would arise between them. Whether or not Arthur immediately realizes that Lancelot and his kinsmen are fighting on opposing sides, he does nothing to obviate the possibility of their injuring each other. In the course of the fighting, Bors encounters Lancelot, and without either of them recognizing the other, gives him a deep wound in his side and knocks him to the ground. Although Lancelot pays back his unknown assailant by knocking him to the ground in turn, and later performs so many other great deeds of chivalry that everyone on both sides judges him to be the best knight at the tournament (20.25–26), his wound turns out to be so serious that he needs six weeks to recover from it and later vows to avenge the wound by killing the knight who gave it to him (40.17–22). Meanwhile, Bors suffers shame for wounding Lancelot, even though he did not intend to harm his cousin.

Bors has no reason to think that he did wrong by wounding Lancelot, because he did not know who he was. But Arthur, having realized at the tournament that Bors had wounded Lancelot (19.60–61), uses a chance meeting with Bors and Hector several days later to revisit the incident in a way that leads Hector to believe that the king is talking about it 'out of spite' and to respond by showing anger and ill-will toward Arthur (24.30–44). Later still, after learning from Gawain that his assailant was Bors, Lancelot makes peace with him, after Bors ashamedly and obsequiously seeks his pardon. Lancelot forgives him, but not before complaining that Bors and Hector had done what they could prevent him from winning the tournament, as he had hoped to do (46.1–52). Even after Bors makes his peace with Lancelot, however, he continues to feel ashamed about having wounded his cousin, particularly because Gawain keeps talking to him about the incident (47.1–5).

Yet another unintended consequence of Lancelot's decision to go to Winchester in disguise is that he unintentionally insults and shames Guinevere. When Lancelot is on his way to Winchester, he spends a night at a castle where he meets the beautiful Girl of Escalot, who does not know who he is, but hears him called 'the best knight

³⁵ See 16.32–19.66.

in the world'.³⁶ Totally enamored of him, the Girl then requests that Lancelot grant her what Anglophone scholars call a 'rash boon' by promising to give her a gift without knowing in advance what it will be. Instead of sagaciously granting the gift to the Girl on condition that it is one he can honorably give her, Lancelot responds that 'there is nothing on earth that I could do that I would not do' in response to the Girl's request (14.9–10). When she tells him that he has promised to wear her sleeve at an upcoming tournament at Winchester and bear arms there for love of her, he is troubled, because he knows that if the queen were to learn about what he did, she would be angry with him. However, this eventuality seems unlikely, because Lancelot will be in disguise at the tournament and assumes that no one there will recognize him or figure out who he is (14.1–36). He turns out to be wrong.

When he wears the Girl's sleeve at the tournament and Guinevere hears reports of his doing so, Lancelot unintentionally insults and angers Guinevere, who retaliates against him and his kin. When Gawain later tells Guinevere about Lancelot's purported love for the Girl of Escalot (31.1–32.20), the queen believes that Lancelot has betrayed her and, in addition to seeking an opportunity to take vengeance on Lancelot and the Girl (32.33–37), she eventually banishes him and his kin from her lodge at court (32.20–33.13). Her act later rebounds on her, because its unintended effect is that Lancelot and his kin are absent from Camelot when she needs them to defend her against Mador's accusation that she killed his brother by treason. In addition, if Lancelot were to decide to leave Camelot for good, as Bors explains to the queen, then he and Lancelot's other kinsmen would go with him to their own homelands in Gaul, because they were in Arthur's kingdom only because of him and he was there because of her (36.59–64). For this reason, Bors tells the queen on a later occasion, her hatred of Lancelot is causing great harm to Arthur's kingdom (59.76–82). A further unintended consequence of Lancelot's granting the rash boon to the Girl of Escalot is that by agreeing to wear the Girl's sleeve and bear arms for love of her, he inadvertently gives her what she later interprets as a claim on his love. And as we shall see below, when Lancelot rejects the Girl's claim, he not only kills her through her grief at this rejection, but is publicly shamed at Camelot for doing so.

Next, another series of particularly strange misadventures leads Arthur to believe that Lancelot and Guinevere have shamed him, and that he should arrange their entrapment so as to provide the requisite legal proof to justify putting them to death. For no apparent reason, Arthur and some of his knights happen to leave Camelot and get lost in a forest where, they believe, there are no houses or castles. The knights start to pitch their tents, when they suddenly hear a horn call from close by. Riding

³⁶ For the entire scene, see 13.1–14.36.

in the direction of the sound, the king and his knights arrive at a castle where they are offered hospitality by a mysterious lady, who unbeknownst to them is Arthur's sister, Morgan the Faithless. After an opulent feast, Arthur is conducted by two girls to a bed chamber, where, without his initially realizing it, there are pictures painted by Lancelot to tell the story of his love for Guinevere. The next morning, Morgan comes to Arthur without revealing her identity and requests a rash boon by asking Arthur to reward her hospitality, without telling him what reward she will claim. When Arthur grants her request, she tells him who she is and says that her reward is for him to spend two entire days contemplating Lancelot's pictures of his love affair with Arthur's wife and the adventures he undertook for love of her—and not Arthur. Because Morgan mortally hates both Guinevere and Lancelot, she wants her brother to view the pictures, so that he will see his own shame and Lancelot's treason. Egged on by Morgan, Arthur vows that if he can catch Lancelot and Guinevere in the act of having sex, he will inflict such punishment on them as will be spoken of forever. From then on, the author says, Arthur is even more suspicious of Guinevere and Lancelot than he had been before (48.1–54.14).

Just at this point in the story, the author presents the first phase of the poisoning episode, which we can now re-examine in order to propose plausible, though inevitably speculative answers to some of the questions previously raised above about the handling of Gaheris's death. Because Arthur has recently returned to Camelot from Morgan's castle, where he vowed to take revenge on Lancelot and Guinevere, he is so deeply suspicious of the queen that he either believes or is open to believing that she poisoned Gaheris, or is prepared to use Gaheris's unexplained death as a pretext for inflicting shame and distress on Guinevere without revealing his own shame, as he would need to do if he were going to take vengeance on her. This would not be the first time in the story that Arthur or another character has taken or tried to take a cowardly form of secret revenge on a character who did not necessarily deserve it. As for Arthur's knights, we may speculate that here, as elsewhere in the story, they take their cues from the king, whose failures to support Guinevere strongly are far more telling than his fitful efforts to find support for her. Mador meanwhile takes his cues from his fellow knights, who have hedged their bets a bit by formulating an inscription that implicates the queen in Gaheris's death by poison, though without explicitly accusing her of treason. But because women in medieval societies are proverbial poisoners, it is a very short step from the inscription to Mador's accusation. Desperate to avenge the terrible shame he has suffered on account of his brother's shameful death, Mador believes what he reads and what he hears from everyone at Camelot, many of whom saw Guinevere poison Gaheris. As for

Lancelot's role in the poisoning episode, one possible way of explaining it is to say that since Guinevere has seemingly betrayed him by believing him capable of betraying her with the Girl of Escalot, he is certainly entitled to consider the queen capable of treachery.

Following Gaheris's death by poison, several other misadventures intensify the growing rift between Arthur and Lancelot. While Lancelot is in a forest near Camelot, he is seriously wounded by an arrow shot by a huntsman who was shooting at a stag. After Lancelot vows to take revenge on the huntsman as soon as he can, a wise hermit assures him that he was wounded by 'mischance'. But since Lancelot recognizes the huntsman as a servant of Arthur's, he has reason to fear that the king is trying to kill him, without publicly acknowledging why he wants him dead (64.1–65.60). Previously, the huntsman who had wounded Lancelot fled and explained what he had just done to his fellows, who fear that if Lancelot is hurt, they will all be punished either by Arthur, if he learns what happened, or else, if the king does not act, by Lancelot's kinsmen (64.55–65.8). A little earlier, when the Girl of Escalot is wasting away for love of Lancelot, she asks him for his love in her 'mischance'. When Lancelot refuses her, she literally dies for love of him (57.1–47). Then, to ensure that Lancelot's treacherous killing will at least earn him public shame, though not the blood vengeance he probably deserves, the Girl engineers another misadventure. While Arthur and Gawain are standing near a stream that runs through Camelot near the Cathedral, an unmanned, richly decked boat arrives. Inside, they find not just the Girl's dead (though miraculously uncorrupted) body, but her written complaint, which accuses Lancelot of being the wickedest man in the world, because he refused to grant her mercy when she was dying for love of him. Professing horror at Lancelot's refusal to grant the Girl his love and declaring that everyone should blame him for it, Arthur has her buried in a tomb bearing the inscription, 'HERE LIES THE GIRL OF ESCALOT WHO DIED FOR LOVE OF LANCELOT'.³⁷ As a result, just as Guinevere is publicly shamed by the inscription linking her to the poisoning of Gaheris, Lancelot, too, is publicly shamed by an inscription implicating him in the Girl of Escalot's death.

Soon afterwards, Lancelot – who has already been banished from Camelot by Guinevere, wounded grievously by Arthur's huntsman, and shamed, first, by the Girl of Escalot and then by Arthur – comes to Camelot, secures Guinevere's acquittal of Mador's charge, and is fully reconciled with her before leaving again. When he returns, he and queen carry on their affair even more foolishly than before, so that it is

³⁷ 71.1–73.7. 'ICI GIST LA DAMOISELE D'ESCALOT QUI POR L'AMOR DE LANCELOT MORUT' (73.8–9).

now public knowledge (85.33-9). Agravain's efforts to expose the lovers and induce Arthur to punish them now proceed in a way that initially results in the alienation of Gawain and Gaheriet from Agravain, Guerrehet, and Mordred and from Arthur as well. When the king's five nephews happen to be talking very loudly about the adultery in a chamber at Camelot, Arthur happens to be passing by and commands them to tell him they are saying. Gawain and Gaheriet refuse, leave the chamber, and later speak to each other openly about the great danger of telling the king about the adultery. They agree that if the king were to learn about it and then come into open conflict with Lancelot over it, his court would be destroyed and dishonored, because Lancelot would fight Arthur—and defeat him, thanks to the strong support he would have from Gaul and many other lands. Meanwhile, Agravain tells Arthur that Gawain and Gaheriet have betrayed him by concealing the shame that Lancelot has caused him, while Mordred says that he and Agravain will help Arthur to avenge it. Though Guerrehet warns that if the king were to put Lancelot to death, Lancelot's kinsmen would wage a great war on him, Arthur prefers this outcome to failing to avenge his own dishonor. He thus commands his three nephews to catch Lancelot and Guinevere naked in bed together. The plot misfires, almost comically so. After the lovers sneak off to a chamber at Camelot, undress, and get into bed together, Guinevere hears Agravain's knights banging on the door, which Lancelot had locked behind them. While the knights are breaking the door down, Lancelot jumps out of bed, gets dressed, kills them as they enter the chamber, and escapes. After he meets up with Bors, Lionel, and Hector, they all leave Camelot together (83.39–90.99).

Guinevere, however, is captured, taunted and abused by Agravain's henchmen, and brought before Arthur, who announces that because he cannot take vengeance on Lancelot, he will take it on Guinevere; and he foolishly justifies putting her to death by citing his treacherous nephew's mendacious claim to have proof that she betrayed Arthur by lying with Lancelot. The king's knights then violate the customs of the king's court by letting Agravain, Mordred, and Guerrehet propose that the queen die by burning. With the exception of Gawain and Gaheriet, all of the king's other knights acquiesce in the decision, because they know that Arthur supports it. Gawain is so outraged by the judgment on Guinevere that he formally renounces his fidelity to Arthur. But Agravain, Mordred, and Guerrehet prepare to take the queen to be burned in the meadow outside of Camelot; they also try to forestall any effort by Lancelot and his men to rescue Guinevere by recruiting a group of knights to accompany them and compelling Gaheriet to join it, even though he says he will never fight against his friend Lancelot (91.1–93.77).

To rescue the queen, Lancelot and Bors lead an attack on Arthur's knights. After

Lancelot challenges Agravain and kills him and Bors challenges and then slays Guerrehet, general fighting breaks out between the two groups of knights. Having witnessed the killings of his two brothers, Gaheriet angrily retaliates by killing two of Lancelot's knights. Hector retaliates against Gaheriet, without recognizing him, and knocks off his helmet. When Lancelot happens to ride by, he splits Gaheriet's skull without knowing who he is; and upon learning his victim's identity, he is enraged, because he loved Gaheriet and would never have struck him if he had recognized him. In other words, Lancelot has killed Gaheriet by misadventure. Even so, Bors predicts that because Gawain and Arthur loved Gaheriet so much, they will now wage a war on Ban's kinsmen that will never have an end (94.1–96.17).³⁸ The prediction is correct, largely because Gawain is so outraged by the sight of Gaheriet's bloody wounds that he spends the rest of his life striving to avenge him and repeatedly obstructs all efforts to put an end to Arthur's war against Lancelot by means of a peace agreement between the two men.

After discovering Gaheriet's dead body, without knowing who killed him or why, Gawain angrily – and falsely – says that his slayer hated him, and he swears to take vengeance on the traitor who killed him (100.49–62). After Gaheriet's slayer is identified as Lancelot, Arthur and Gawain have him buried at Camelot Cathedral in a tomb whose inscription reads: 'HERE LIES GAHERIET, KING ARTHUR'S NEPHEW, WHOM LANCELOT OF THE LAKE KILLED'.³⁹ Given how closely the inscription resembles the one stating that Guinevere caused Gaheriet to die by poison, it is hardly surprising that the initial misinterpretation of the circumstances of Gaheriet's death leads to a great war waged by Arthur and Gawain against Ban's kinsmen and a lawsuit between Gawain and Lancelot; it also obstructs subsequent efforts to make peace in either conflict. After an inconclusive battle between Arthur's forces and Lancelot's, it appears that their war will end quickly. Suddenly, the Pope intervenes in the conflict, when he somehow learns that Arthur has condemned the queen to death for a 'misdeed' that had not been proven against her. He therefore places an interdict on the kingdom of Logres until Arthur takes back his wife (who has been with Lancelot ever since her rescue) and lives with her in peace, as a husband should (117.6–16). Despite the misgivings of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere about the Pope's resolution of the conflict, Lancelot surrenders the queen to

³⁸ Because the Old French word 'fin' – like the Latin 'finis' – can refer to an agreement or accord that brings a war or another kind of conflict to an end, the phrase, 'la guerre. . . qui jamès ne prendra fin' (90.87, 96.14) is best translated as 'the war that will never be ended by an agreement'.

³⁹ 99.1–102.23. 'CI GIST GAHERIET, LI NIES [sic; should read: niés] LE ROI ARTU, QUE LANCELOS DEL LAC OCIST' (102.20–21).

the king and agrees to leave Arthur's kingdom. The war appears to be over (118.99–103), until Gawain is so enraged by the prospect of peace that he cannot restrain himself from picking a fight with Lancelot and angrily insisting that their war will continue until Gaheriet's death is avenged by the death of Lancelot, who, Gawain charges, had 'wickedly' killed his brother by 'treason'. Although the king refuses to allow Gawain to fight Bors in order to prove this accusation against Lancelot (119.38–88), who soon returns to Gaul (122.1–124.6), Arthur, at Gawain's urging, ignores the warnings of his wiser counsellors. Eventually he renews the war against Lancelot and makes plans to sail with his army to Gaul and attack him (127.3–8; 128.1–130.54).

After Arthur makes the catastrophic blunder of entrusting his kingdom and his queen to the treacherous Mordred (129.1–36), he sails with his army to Gaul, where Gawain – ever more dementedly angry with Lancelot – inadvertently transforms what was already a deeply contestable accusation that Lancelot treacherously killed his brother Gaheriet into the totally outrageous charge that Lancelot had treacherously killed 'his brothers', despite the fact that Agravain was killed openly after Lancelot had challenged him, while Guerrehet's slayer was not Lancelot but Bors, who killed him openly after challenging him. Even worse, by witlessly granting a rash boon to his rage-crazed nephew, the king is tricked into permitting him to fight Lancelot in a duel Gawain is certain to lose. Lancelot does his best to defeat Gawain without killing him, but inadvertently gives him what turns out to be a mortal wound. So foolishly and angrily did Gawain conduct himself in his personal vendetta with Lancelot that just before he dies, he is first blamed by Arthur for his own death and then blames himself, asking to be buried in Gaheriet's tomb, with a revised inscription reading: 'HERE LIE GAHERIET AND GAWAIN, WHOM LANCELOT KILLED BECAUSE OF GAWAIN'S EXCESSIVE RAGE'.⁴⁰

At this point, the author of *La mort le roi Artu* finally picks up on the traditional story of Arthur's downfall by describing Mordred's treason and Arthur's return to Britain to fight him, but does so in such a way as to show that the king himself is largely to blame for his own fate. After learning of Mordred's treason, Arthur foolishly rejects Gawain's advice that he seek Lancelot's support against Mordred (c.166); and as a result, the king's army is much weaker than it could have been. Prior to Arthur's final battle with Mordred, in which he kills his enemy, but receives a mortal wound from him, Arthur acknowledges that if it turns out badly for him, it will be because of his own sin and excessive rage (c.178). Finally, the author's new version of the old story adds one last misadventure. Before Arthur tells Girflet, one of his two

⁴⁰ 144.1–157.54; 172.1–30. 'CI GIST GAHERIET ET GAUVAINS QUE LANCELOT OCIST PAR L'OUTRAGE GAUVAIN' (172.29–30).

surviving companions, to throw his sword Excalibur into a nearby lake, where a hand comes out of the water to catch it, the dying king embraces his faithful butler Lucan. But he embraces him so tightly that he bursts Lucan's heart and kills him without realizing what he has done, until Girflet tells him how badly he acted in killing Lucan.⁴¹ After Arthur dies in a state of grief, anger, and sadness (192.23–24), he is buried inside a chapel in an opulent tomb whose inscription reads: 'HERE LIES KING ARTHUR WHO THROUGH HIS VALOR SUBJECTED TWELVE KINGDOMS TO HIS RULE',⁴² though one would never know about these triumphs from reading *La mort le roi Artu*.⁴³ Right next to Arthur's tomb is a less opulent one, whose inscription provides a better conclusion to the story of Arthur's fall: 'HERE LIES LUCAN THE BUTLER, WHOM KING ARTHUR SMOTHERED BENEATH HIMSELF'.⁴⁴

***La mort le roi Artu* and the subversion of the Arthurian myth**

The sharp contrast between the story of Arthur's fall in *La mort le roi Artu* and the accounts of it in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin prose-narrative and the Anglo-Norman poem of Wace is readily understandable when we consider the ideological uses to which Geoffrey's and Wace's texts were put by late twelfth-century Angevin kings and their supporters, and the interests that *La mort le roi Artu* could easily have served for their enemies in Capetian territories during the early thirteenth century. Whatever the motives that led Geoffrey and Wace to produce histories of King Arthur's reign in c.1135 and c.1155, respectively, the fact that the former dedicated his work to Earl Robert of Gloucester, the maternal uncle of King Henry II (1154–1189), while the latter wrote his *Roman de Brut* for Eleanor of Aquitaine, the same king's queen, fits together neatly with Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann's contention that 'King Arthur's court and the customs he introduced there in ancient times provided a model from

⁴¹ 192.1–17. The description of how Arthur killed Lucan in Frappier's edition of *La mort* (Frappier 1964a) is inconsistent with the much briefer one in the inscription on Lucan's tomb, as given in virtually all manuscripts of this text. However, the description of the same killing in Hult 2009a: 868–871 fits well with the inscription, as explained in p. 869, fn. 1.

⁴² 194.23–24. 'CI GIST LI ROIS ARTUS QUI PAR SA VALEUR MIS EN SA SUBJECTION .XII. ROIAUMES' (194.23–24).

⁴³ On the treatment of Arthur's military campaigns in *The Story of Merlin* (which postdates *La mort le roi Artu*) see Lacy 1993b: ix; Burns 1993: xxiv.

⁴⁴ 194.20–21. 'CI GIST LUCANS LI BOUTEILLIERS QUE LI ROIS ARTUS ESTEINST DESOUZ LI' (194.20–21). The translation in my text follows Hult's modern French one of an almost identical inscription in Hult 2009a at p. 881.

the past for the court of Henry II'.⁴⁵ Reinforcing her argument, Jean Flori has recently written that 'the Plantagenet court adopted the Arthurian one and made it its own by assimilation, for a variety of ideological motives'. More specifically, he continues,

Henry II's appropriation of the Arthurian myth offered three major advantages: it legitimised the Anglo-Angevin dynasty by inscribing it into the lineage of the kings of Britain/Brittany, themselves [supposedly] of Trojan origin; since [the myth] could be set against the legend of Charlemagne, which was likewise exploited by the kings of France, it fitted into the framework of the political conflict between Capetians and Plantagenets; and finally, by affording them a common point of reference, it could serve to bond together the elites of the different Plantagenet territories. (Flori 2007: 294–295)

If the mid-twelfth-century Arthurian myth created by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace served to legitimate Henry II's Plantagenet empire in these ways, what can we say about the possible political import of the radically revised Arthurian myth that was incorporated into *La mort le roi Artu* and its true prequel in the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, the *Lancelot en prose*?⁴⁶ Because both prose-romances were evidently written in the Capetian territory between c.1210 and c.1230,⁴⁷ by which time the Plantagenet kings of England had largely lost their continental territories to their Capetian rival, Philip II of France (1180–1226), it appears that the authors of *Lancelot* and *La mort le roi Artu* created a literary vehicle for contesting Plantagenet imperial claims in newly formulated terms. Instead of deploying the legend of Charlemagne to counter the Arthurian myth in the manner referred to by Jean Flori, the authors of *Lancelot* and *La mort le roi Artu* directly subverted the myth of King Arthur as the powerful ruler of a great empire. In doing so, these authors not only emphasized Arthur's flaws as a ruler, the inherent weakness of his kingdom of Logres, and his failure to expand the territories that he ruled directly; they also showed that he owed so much of his power to Lancelot, his wife's lover from Gaul, that when his ties to Lancelot were severed, his own kingdom began to collapse. In short, the Arthurian kingdom of Logres and its king are rotten from the start of what became the Lancelot Grail Cycle in the *Prose Lancelot* and was concluded in *La mort le roi Artu*.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Schmolke-Hasselmann 1982: 62. On the dedication of Geoffrey's text, see Reeve 2007: ix-x; on Wace and Eleanor, see Weiss 1999: xii–xiii.

⁴⁶ See Hult 2009b: 7–29.

⁴⁷ On dating and geographical provenance, see Frappier 1964b: viii–ix.

⁴⁸ What follows draws on Hult 2009: 75–115.

The literary subversion of the Arthurian myth is well underway in *Lancelot*, which opens, not in Britain, where Arthur has just succeeded his father, Uther Pendragon, as king of Logres, but in the kingdom of Benioc, where Lancelot's father, King Ban, is under attack from the treacherous King Claudas and is soon overthrown after receiving none of the help he is owed and repeatedly seeks from his lord, King Arthur.⁴⁹ To be sure, Arthur is said to be so heavily burdened by internal revolts that he could not possibly provide the aid against Claudas that he owes to Ban and Ban's brother, King Bors of Gaunes, the father of Bors and Lionel (Hult 2009b: 9–115). But it turns out that even after Arthur puts down the revolts, he remains woefully delinquent in fulfilling his obligations to avenge the deaths of Ban and Bors and help their orphaned heirs—including Lancelot, Bors and Lionel—recover their lost inheritances. Indeed, Arthur's failure to honor these obligations is so blatant and shameful that on several occasions, he is publicly denounced for this 'sin' at his own court. After a monk from Benioc called Adragain the Dark tells King Ban's widow, Queen Elaine, that King Arthur bears 'the shame' for the subjection of Benioc and Gaunes to the treacherous Claudas, 'because he should long ago have avenged our [shame]', he travels to Arthur's court at London, where he lectures the king on a lord's duties to his own men:

'you are too slow to avenge acts of shame and injury done to you! The truth is, whoever harms a liegeman of yours harms you, for however the [man] is harmed, the shame of it is always yours. You honor and fear and serve those who take up arms against you and attack you; and those who have served you loyally, those you forget! Yet they have lost lands and honors, even their lives, and risk losing their souls in your service!'⁵⁰

More specifically, Adragain tells Arthur that his failure to avenge the death of King Ban, the disinheritance of Queen Elaine, and the loss of their son [i.e. Lancelot, who was abducted by the Lady of the Lake] 'so sull[y] your reputation that it is a wonder how you can dare to look any honorable man in the face'. After making feeble excuses for his ignominious failure to redress the wrongs that the monk has just cited, King Arthur insists that 'what I have done wrong I must put right as soon as God gives me the means'.⁵¹

Years later, however, when Arthur evidently has the means necessary to fulfill his obligations to Ban's son Lancelot and Ban's nephews, Bors and Lionel, he has

⁴⁹ See *Lancelot* 2: 1–5; *Lancelot en prose* 7: 1a.1–14.

⁵⁰ *Lancelot* 3: 24; *Lancelot en prose* 7: Xa.17

⁵¹ *Lancelot* 2: 24; *Lancelot en prose* 7: Xa.22–23.

still not acted on his vow to do so. Instead, the king behaves so shamefully when reminded of his sin that he shames the knights of his own court in the presence of visitors. When a knight called Banin comes from Benioc to Arthur's court and identifies himself as the godson of the late King Ban, Arthur broods 'for a long while, as tears rolled down his cheeks and fell upon the table' until Gawain grabs a horn and blasts out a sound that startles the king. Once Arthur's nephew has gotten his attention, he tells him that his brooding 'is an insult to everyone', because a king should show 'good spirits and a warm welcome' to visitors to his court.⁵²

Later in the story, Arthur has terrible dreams that are interpreted as presaging his fall from power. In one of them, the king's hair is falling out of his head and his beard is falling away; in another, 'all his fingers fall from his hands, leaving only his palms'. The meaning of these dreams, wise priests tell Arthur, is that 'you are to lose all worldly honor, and those in whom you have the greatest trust will, all unwillingly, fail you'.⁵³ Subsequent events come close to confirming these predictions. When Galehaut – the half-giant lord of the Distant Isles and Lancelot's sometime companion and lover – brings a large army to attack the kingdom of Logres, Arthur is 'greatly afraid of losing his land, and all honor, and his men were deserting in great numbers as the wise clerics had predicted'. While Galehaut could easily have taken over Arthur's kingdom, he realizes that his adversary has so few men that he would gain no honor and incur only shame by conquering Logres. Galehaut therefore inflicts even greater humiliation on Arthur by granting him 'a truce for one year on condition that he bring his full forces with him at the end of the year', at which point, Galehaut says, he himself will 'win greater honor in making war on [Arthur] than [he] would now'.⁵⁴ In an effort to rehabilitate himself, Arthur seeks advice from an anonymous wise man who counsels him on how he might be able to regain his lost honor. After the king follows the man's advice by confessing all of his sins to his archbishops and bishops, he acknowledges that he forgot to confess 'the great sin' he committed toward King Ban, who died in Arthur's service, and toward Ban's wife Elaine, who was disinherited after her lord's death by King Claudas. When Arthur tells the wise man how terrified he is about how many of his men are deserting him, even though he loves them, the wise man responds that

'it is no wonder that your men are deserting you, for since a man has failed himself, other must surely fail him; and you have failed, in that you have behaved

⁵² For the entire episode see *Lancelot* 3: 57; *Lancelot en prose* 7: XXa.4–12.

⁵³ *Lancelot* 2: 108; *Lancelot en prose* 7: XLIVa.4.

⁵⁴ *Lancelot* 3: 120; *Lancelot en prose* 7: XLIXa.17.

badly toward your Creator with respect to the dominion you were to hold from him, and not from any other. They must fail you; this is God's sign that He wishes to remove you from dominion, and therefore he took away those by whose aid you have long maintained it'.⁵⁵

In order to 'win worldly honor, the hearts of your people, and the love of Our Lord', the wise man tells Arthur, he must now reject avarice and distribute largesse. Whereas the Arthur of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace was generous by nature and lavishly rewarded his men, the wise man's lengthy, detailed instructions on gift-giving to the Arthur of the *Lancelot en prose* obviously constitute a sharp rebuke to him. A good king should already know that 'the giver must be just as joyful as he to whom the gift is made' and understand 'why [he] should never tire of giving.' As the wise man explains to Arthur:

'you can never be destroyed [by giving]. But you can be undone by keeping too much of your wealth, for none was ever destroyed by generosity, but many have been destroyed by avarice. Always give generously, and you will always have enough, for whatever you give will remain in your land, and from many other lands wealth will come into yours. And giving will never fail you as long as you are watchful, for you will never wear out the gold and silver of your land; rather they will wear you out, as the water wears out the mill-wheel. For this reason you must always think of giving'.⁵⁶

In response, Arthur agrees to do as the wise man orders; and from all appearances he soon recovers his lost dominion. But only toward the end of the story does he come close to fulfilling his obligations to Ban's kinsmen by supporting a war on Claudas that ends with the conquest of Gaunes, Benioc, and Gaul.⁵⁷ Even if we overlook Arthur's many other failures and failings as a king, as detailed in the *Lancelot en prose*, there are good grounds for arguing that the author of this romance has cast him in the role of a 'useless' king (see Peters 1970).

If we now re-examine *La mort le roi Artu* against the background of *Lancelot* – which includes many passages foreshadowing Arthur's fall and to which its sequel refers with increasing frequency as it reaches its conclusion (Hult 2009b: 21–29) – we can see how the later text's portrayal of Arthur builds on the one developed in

⁵⁵ *Lancelot* 3: 121; *Lancelot en prose* 7: XLIXa.22.

⁵⁶ *Prose-Lancelot* 2: 122; *Lancelot en prose* 8: XLIXa.24–30.

⁵⁷ *Lancelot* 3: 278–321; *Lancelot en prose* 6: C–CV.

the earlier text. The previous analysis of the misadventures that contribute to Arthur's fall in *La mort le roi Artu* suggests how the king's weakness, folly, disloyalty, moral blindness, and vindictiveness contribute to his fall. To this list of Arthur's flaws, we should add a refusal to show mercy, an inability to make peace, and a chronic failure to follow the advice of his wisest counsellors and to reject evil counsel. The confession that the king extorts from Gawain at the beginning of the story serves only to shame the king's nephew and alienate him from his fellow knights and to satisfy Arthur's half-repressed desire to take a cowardly form of vengeance on Gawain for the knights he killed on the Quest. Later, Arthur's half-repressed desire to take vengeance on Lancelot and/or Guinevere for the shame they have done him appears to be the animating force behind the king's erratic and otherwise inexplicable handling of Guinevere's trial for poisoning Gaheris and his exploitation of the Girl of Escalot's bizarre posthumous complaint that Lancelot killed her. Later still, we see how the evil, treacherous, and self-serving counsel of Morgan, Agravain, Guerrehet, and Mordred shames Arthur to the point where he finally expresses his desire for vengeance on the lovers and tries to destroy them. Even then, however, the king is too weak to act on his own initiative and slavishly depends on counsellors who are either envious and treacherous or too crazed by rage to tell him what to do. Agravain and his co-conspirators manipulate the king into ordering the lovers' entrapment and Guinevere's execution. Arthur is so weak and foolish that he allows Gawain to direct the war in Gaul with Ban's kinsmen and lets him fight a battle with Lancelot that brings about his own death. Then, the king witlessly entrusts his kingdom and queen to a known traitor. Wrathful and yet cowardly and treacherous to the very end, King Arthur summons up enough strength before he dies to kill Lucan, his last loyal friend. By misadventure.

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