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“How could the body politic be made to work in the absence of its head?”:

Beheadings, Gender, and Power In Malory’s Morte Darthur

The Wars of the Roses were without a doubt one of the most transformative and traumatic events of medieval England. This bloody conflict called into question commonly accepted notions of nobility, masculinity, kingship, governance, and violence. The deposition of Richard II in 1399 set into motion aftershocks that would be felt half a century later, as the notion of divinely anointed kingship was called into question—in a world where kings could be gotten rid of, who had the right to rule? The answer came down, in many ways, to one issue: blood.

Blood and bodies both loomed large in the medieval imagination. Questions of physical fitness and weakness, superiority and inferiority and the ever-present worries about gender were all crucial to the way medievals understood the world about them. The violence of the civil war was something felt by all participants and most non-participants as well. It is hard to tell the exact number of the dead, though it is almost certainly not as great as many accounts put forward. “More than one observer put the number of those present in the Yorkist army at the battle of Towton in 1461 as 200,000. Writing shortly after the battle, the Milanese ambassador reported that some 28,000 men had lost their lives, while William Paston reported 20,000 killed... if the estimate for

the Yorkist army was true (and the Lancastrian army was agreed by most contemporaries to be even larger), then it follows that most Englishmen of fighting age were actually present on the battlefield at Towton.”¹ This certainly could not have been the case—but the exaggerations prove that these were larger armies than had before been seen by almost anybody in the country. The fact that these numbers reported by contemporary accounts are so astronomical is key to understanding the medieval English psyche—in the minds of historians, the entire population was implicated. Everyone was at risk

Awareness the gravity of this historical crisis is important for understanding Malory. Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur* in the very midst of the Wars of the Roses, and spent part of this time as a prisoner of war. The violence of civil war, and in particular the ways that this violence was imagined, had a profound impact on his life and on his works. Like other writings of the time, *Le Morte Darthur* is highly concerned with bodies and with blood—most especially with *bloodline*. For Malory, King Arthur’s right to rule is based in blood, as the secret son of King Uther, but the legitimacy of that claim, and of that bloodline, is frequently called into question due to the peculiarity of his conception. Because Uther’s rape of Igraine by disguising himself as her husband happens *after* her husband is dead, Arthur is paradoxically both the son of an unmarried widow and the son of a faithful woman— his mother is not an adulteress, as she was under the impression that she was sleeping with her husband. Already in the narrative, the importance of female bodies is foregrounded, because female bodies are those in which generative, reproductive power is housed. The queen produces the next line of

¹ Grummitt, David. *A Short History of the Wars of the Roses*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. p 144

royal bodies—the future rulers—and thus, quite literally, gives birth to the coming state. The wife and mother is crucial to producing and maintaining the royal body politic: the royal, male, person of the king. Arthur's eventual downfall comes through his lack of legitimate heirs from his queen, Guinevere, ultimately costing the king his life via his illegitimate son Mordred's patricide. Female bodies hold within them royal blood, and reproduce that blood for the future generation. When that power is called into question, either by lack of chastity (adulterous relationships) or barrenness (lack of children), the entire body politic is threatened. The female body is a progenitor whose chastity is what must ensure the legitimacy and purity of the next generation. And because female bodies ensure the future, control of them is control *of* the future.

This preoccupation with female bodies as vessels for kingship intersects in complicated ways with the medieval metaphor of the body politic, which imagines the state as a physical form or body in which every section of society has its place and role to play. Every facet of society was represented, each in its rightful place—peasants at the bottom and various people increasing in importance until the very top—a spot occupied by the king. This body is generally assumed to be that of the royal, male person—analogueous in many ways to the body of the man who was its “head.” The body politic, without the head, is unidentifiable. The head is the source of direction, instruction, identification, unity—what holds it all together. Without a head a body is not just dead, but meaningless and chaotic. Without the head, the body falls down and falls apart—No amount of royal or noble blood within a body can save it without that crucial piece. Importantly, this body politic was an assuredly male one—it has no generative power. While it contains noble blood, it is not a vessel for reproducing it. States do not

want to create new states, but rather maintain themselves whole and functioning. The creation of a new body can only be through violence. because the state does not want to be reproduced and indeed cannot be reproduced without violence.

The king, then, is the head of the body politic, the ruler of the *corpus*. Heads—and their relation to and control of bodies—are symbolically crucial in the fifteenth century, where the Civil War saw the issues of kingship call into question the role of that head. The head of the body politic provides an identity—the face of the country (portraits on currency and other royal ephemera have been widely used for centuries). The head is also the seat of wisdom, decision-making, direction. The head determines the fate and position of the body just as the king determines the fate and position of the country—the body politic relies upon its head. And in fifteenth-century England, the head of the body politic was, quite clearly, in danger. After all, at the start of the Wars of the Roses, with tensions rising between Lancaster and York over accusations of disloyalty and squabbles about monarchical and hereditary rights, one historian observed that “amidst this tense and bloody climate that Henry VI had, in 1453, a mental collapse whose cause is still unknown, which left him so lacking in understanding and memory and so incapable that he was neither able to walk upon his feet nor lift up his head,”² leaving him in a catatonic state which lasted for eighteen months. The country was without a king, and the question now loomed: “How could the body politic be made to work in the absence of its head?”³ Certainly Henry VI becomes an unreliable head, a head incapable of bearing the crown. But his was also the head

² Royle, Trevor. *Lancaster against York: The Wars of the Roses and the Foundation of Modern Britain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print. p.143

³ Grummitt, David. *A Short History of the Wars of the Roses*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. p 13

that had been born for the express purpose *of* bearing that crown, the man with the most royal blood running through his veins, the best claim to the throne. Unless something changed, on the basis of blood Henry VI *was* the true and rightful (if dysfunctional) head of the body politic—whether or not he was fit for it.

The only solution available was to call into question the legitimacy of that blood—the blood upon which the Lancastrian claim to the throne rested. Female bodies were turned to as sites that generate legitimacy. Certainly, accusations of illegitimacy, bastardy, and questions about whose blood had the *best* claim became increasingly common. It is crucial to remember that the York-Lancaster drama is a family feud, and one in which there is no clear right answer. Neither branch is unequivocally descended from any royal first-born sons—the Yorkist claim is based around paternal *and* maternal lineage, the Lancasters are a cadet branch of the royal family. Both cases are only enabled by the fact that the direct line of heirs from Richard II was cut short, without that female regeneration. The entirety of the wars of the roses, then, comes down to the blood, and the blood the head of the body politic possesses.

The beheadings of *Le Morte Darthur* thus have symbolic grounds in Thomas Malory's experiences, but they are also typical of his everyday reality—the Wars of the Roses saw a tremendous upswing in all kinds of violence, but particularly when it came to beheadings. Heads on pikes were, not to exaggerate, *everywhere*. At one point there were as many as twenty-three heads on top of London Bridge.⁴ Before his open defiance of the king's authority, the Duke of York was threatened with the heads of his dogs staked outside his castle, holding scrolls in their mouths mocking him and

⁴ Royle, Trevor. *Lancaster against York: The Wars of the Roses and the Foundation of Modern Britain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. p 131

declaring they would rather have his head upon the walls instead of their own. Later, that very thing would come to pass—his own head would adorn the walls of his city, along with those of his son and co-conspirators. One of the most prominent chronicles of the Wars of the Roses, *Gregory's Chronicle*, features lists of the beheaded, sans context, in its midst, such as: “folowyng thys good Lorde Mountegewe let to be smete of the heddys of thes men, the whyche that hyr namys here folowyn in wrytyng” and then a list of thirty-one men who were executed within a one-week period in May 1461.⁵ Heads, then, are ever-present in the fifteenth-century collective psyche. And the madness of Henry VI (1422-62, 70-71), with both its connection to the head (as seat of wisdom) and his role as the nation's head, was of especially crucial importance. The sanctity of heads was called into question—it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that the heads and their broken bodies littered the mental landscape, but nevertheless they were incredibly important. And this is reflected in the literature that we see around this time, particularly in Malory.

The heads of *Le Morte Darthur*, however, differ (in many ways greatly) from the heads of contemporary chronicles. For one, they are contextualized—each beheading is a story, however minor. The perpetrator, at least, is always named, though the victim may not be. These are not paradoxically anonymous skulls on pikes, or brief mentions of names—these are narrativized heads. The other important difference is that—utterly unlike the beheading of the fifteenth century—many of these victims are *female*. Women were not beheaded during the Wars of the Roses (Anne Boleyn et al are of the Tudor era), and are not mentioned in any of the contemporary chronicles. So why these

⁵ 'Gregory's Chronicle: 1461-1469', in *The Historical Collections of A Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. James Gairdner (London, 1876), pp. 210-239

female bodies and *female* heads? And what of the men that get beheaded here? Like the women, their deaths are also contextualized. No head is lost in a vacuum, so what are the stories? Why are *these* the stories that Malory tells, and what is he trying to say? In this essay I will read Malory's many scenes of beheading against the violence of the Wars of the Roses. As I argue, both relied on and shaped the metaphor of the body politic, yet Malory's *Morte* also highlights the particular role that women have to play—especially as keepers of noble and knightly blood. Upon them rests the responsibility to create the knights of the future—but female death, especially by beheading, challenges that.

The first beheading scene of *Le Morte Darthur* makes clear the explicit links between female bodies and bodies of state. In this story, the Lady of the Lake, a figure instrumental to validating Arthur's legitimacy, loses her head soon after the establishment of his rule. The young Arthur, still establishing his kingdom, has just accepted from her in the previous chapter his fated sword, Excalibur, and its magical scabbard. The lady tells Arthur, "that swerde ys mine, and if ye woll gyff me a gyffte whan I aske hit you, ye shall have it... And I woll aske my gyffte whan I se my tyme."⁶ In classic, almost fairy-tale fashion, Arthur agrees to a bargain before fully determining what his side of it will be—a fact that will prove problematic soon afterward. It is interesting to note here that the woman is referred to all through this exchange as a "damesell" by Arthur and the narration—only the canny Merlin tells us she *is* the Lady of the Lake. Her magical presence within the narrative is obvious, for she is both known to Merlin and bears all the trappings of sorcery in her appearance. The appearance of this

⁶ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. l.xxiv. p 35

sword of course echoes the sword in the stone, put in place by Merlin. That sword proves Arthur's legitimacy to rule, a fact which he must demonstrate multiple times, before multiple witnesses, before he is to be believed. The link between swords and male authority—specifically, royal authority—is thus by this point established, along with the link between the sword and masculinity/virility. Excalibur, however, is even better than the unnamed sword pulled from the stone, and thus bestows even *greater* authority. The gift establishes his manhood and his bodily power as a “chosen” or anointed king. The Lady of the Lake, then, has a crucial role in creating the royal body politic. Like the queenly/motherly female body, she controls royal power and can pass it on to an heir. But like the queenly mother, there is also a risk—a risk that she could repeat the process.

The threat of reproduction is for some time latent, but eventually returns—tellingly, accompanied by another sword. We are introduced to Balin, the star knight of this chapter, and his brother Balan. A damsel from Lady Lyle of Avalon (never mentioned again) with another mysterious sword appears at the court, a sword which can only be pulled from its sheath by a knight without stain. He manages to do so, but refuses to give the sword back to the damsel, even when she tells him it is cursed and with it he will kill his best friend. It is in this manner he earns the name “The Knight with Two Swords.” As Balin gets ready to depart, “there com into the courte the Lady of the Laake, and she com on horsebacke rychely beseyne, and salewed kynge Arthure and there asked hym a gyffte that he promysed her whan she gaff hym the swerde.”⁷ Arthur agrees to do so, and she tells him the name of his sword, Excalibur. The king tells her

⁷ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.iii. p 40

that anything that is within his power to give her his hers. He is, perhaps, unprepared for what happens next.

The lady's answer drives home her understanding of the political stakes. "Well, seyde thys lady, 'than I aske the hede of thys knyght that has wonne the swerde, othir ellis the damesels hede that brought hit. I take no force though I have both theire hedis: for he slew my brothir, a good knyght and a trew; and that jantillwoman was causer of my fadirs deth."⁸ This is not what Arthur was expecting. We see here the important theme (that will only be developed more strongly within this episode) of inter-familial strife. The Lady of the Lake seeks vengeance for the wrongful murders of her family members. Balin and the damsel of Lady Lyle, previously unconnected, appear to have some link—they have both killed members of her family. The phrase "I take no force" is of interest as well—the Middle English Dictionary cites it as an idiom meaning "to be indifferent, to pay no heed or attention; to regard (an action, a condition, an event) as a matter of indifference; to have no scruples about (doing something)."⁹ We get from the lady a sense, then, of detachment and of coldness. She is demanding one of their heads as a gift or a boon, rightfully owed, rather than an act of passionate revenge. In this context, beheading makes the most sense as a method of execution—she does not want them merely *dead*, she wants their *heads*, which serve as proof of death, carrying within them the identity of their owners. For beheading was a form of execution—not as common, perhaps, as it would later become (the reign of Monsieur Guillotine was far in the future), but the (theoretically) controlled act of beheading gave it legitimacy. It is,

⁸ Ibid

⁹ "Fors" Def 10a. *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 2014. Web. 28 Feb. 2015.

ideally, contained violence. Demanding a head, then, serves in many ways to remove the asker from the violence. To ask for someone's head is of course to demand their death, for a body cannot live without a head—but still, the order “kill them” does not have to be uttered. It is, ideally, elegant.

That Arthur is still mastering the nuances of political negotiation becomes apparent in his answer: he tells the lady to ask for something else. She refuses. The moment is tense, and could easily turn into a folktale-like episode where Arthur has to deal with the consequences of making ambiguous bargains with witches, but he is instead saved from this sticky situation by the re-entrance of Balin, who returns from his preparations and “saw the Lady of the Lake, which by hir meanys had slain hys modir; and he had sought hir three yeere before.”¹⁰ We get evidence from him that this is in fact a mutual family feud—he has killed her family, and she his. No mention is made of who started this, or whose “fault” the feud may be—we are simply told that it is ongoing. They both have blood on their hands. The person the Lady of the Lake killed “by hir meanys,” a phrase we are intended to assume implies witchcraft and magical arts, is Balin's mother. The death of a mother, carries with it a sense of continuation cut short. The killing of a mother, after all, eliminates the possibility of sibling rivalry (and indeed, Balin will later be killed by his brother). The rivalries between various brothers in the York faction again highlights this—siblings with equal amounts of royal blood and at least some valid royal claims are a threat to the body politic as they jostle for control of the head. The role of female bodies in producing these situations cannot be ignored.

¹⁰ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.iii. p 41

After Balin sees the lady, we learn that “whan hit was tolde hym how she had asked hys hede of kynge Arthure, he wente to hir streyght and seyde, ‘Evyll be ye founde: ye wolde have myne hede, and therefore ye shall loose youres!’ And with hys swerde lyghtly he smote of hyr hede before kynge Arthure.”¹¹ The Lady of the Lake, seeker after Balin’s head, has instead lost her own. In the manner of beheadings, this is simultaneously right and wrong, elegant and transgressive. For Balin does make a formal accusation, in front of the court. He knows *why* he is beheading her, as does everyone else. It is rationally done, and done in retaliation. A head was asked for, a head was lost. He even beheads her “with hys swerde *lyghtly*” (emphasis mine). That qualifier makes the action seem easy, quick, inconsequential—when in fact it is anything but. He has slain a guest in the middle of the court—a place that is supposed to be safe and hospitable. Not only a guest, but a woman to whom the king was indebted, and with whom Arthur had not concluded his business. This is an act fraught with tensions, whose implications certainly go far beyond a mere killing.

That uncertainty, that ambivalence, mirrors fifteenth-century concerns about kingship, fitness, and authority—a king only rules if people obey him. Notably, the killing of the Lady of the Lake removes Arthur from any responsibility in honoring the promise he made to her (and ensures that she will not be doling out any more magic swords to any more potential rivals)—but it is still a direct violation of his authority, and he is furious, and tells Balin “Ye have shamed me and all my courte, for thys lady was a lady that I was much beholdynge to, and hyder she com undir my sauffconduyghte.”¹² At a

¹¹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.iii. p 41

¹² Ibid

point so early in Arthur's reign, when he is still a young king and relying upon Merlin as his advisor for the complicated business of court, this is a direct challenge to his authority. The fact that this act has immense political importance is foregrounded by its setting—the very place where political business is conducted. It is one of the first bargains that Arthur has made, and he fails to hold up his end of the deal—instead, the Lady of the Lake ends up dead, with Arthur both unable and perhaps unwilling to defend the body that helped create him as a king. This death calls into question who is in charge, and who has the right to make decisions over life and death.

Yet Arthur's reaction also serves as a tacit acceptance of violence outside of the king's presence. The condemnation is not, perhaps, that family feuds are wrong; but that the king's court is hardly the place to settle them. Balin is thus in disgrace. He tells the king "this same lady was the untrwyste lady lyvyng, and by inchauntement and by sorcery she hath bene the destroyer of many good knyghtes, and she was causer that my modir was brente thorow hir falsehode and trechory."¹³ The Lady of the Lake, in his words, is the *real* transgressor here—she engages in falsehood and treachery, and is untrue. Balin also widens the scope here by accusing the lady of destroying many knights with her powers, as well as his mother. While we, as readers, have learned about his mother, and the family-feud connection, in the narration before then, he only makes this accusation after the lady is dead. Voiceless, mute, the lady cannot defend herself—her speech is taken away along with her life. Arthur refuses to accept this defense, telling Balin that "For what cause soever ye had... ye sholde have forborne in

¹³ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.iii. p 41

my presence. Therefore thynke nat the contrary: ye shall repente hit.”¹⁴ Arthur will not accept Balin’s charges—not because he thinks they are valid or invalid (he makes it clear it does not matter to him which way)—but because Balin ought to have kept it to himself, and satisfied the matter away from the king.

The relocation of beheading *outside* the court is confirmed by the fate of the body and its head. We learn that “Balyn toke up the hede of the lady and bare hit with hym to hys ostry, and there mette with hys squyre.”¹⁵ The head is then given to the squire, with orders to take it to Northumberland where Balin’s friends are, and tell them what happened and how his “moste foo ys dede.”¹⁶ The head serves then as a bearer of truth—proof that Balin did what he said he did. The head is a signifier of death, without the unwieldy reality of the entire corpse. Heads are proof—in many ways they *are* the person they are taken from, the seat of their wisdom and power as well as of their face and identity. Meanwhile, we learn, “kyng Arthur and all the courte made grete dole and had grete shame of the Lady of the Lake. Than the kyng buried hir rychely.”¹⁷ Her mourning and rich burial (apparently sans her head) seem to be in answer to her socially unacceptable murder in front of the king, and to make up for Arthur’s inability to protect her—because that, really, is the right that Balin challenged. He acted against the orders and intentions of the king, and disregarded his sovereignty, and that is the shame Arthur must overcome—the challenge to *his* status as head.

¹⁴ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.iii. p 41

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

When Balin is later confronted about his actions by the Irish knight Lancecoeur, whom Arthur has sent out to fight him and restore honor, he acknowledges that Arthur has every right to be upset. He justifies his actions, however, in saying “the lady that ys dede dud to me grete damage, and ellis I wolde have bene lothe as ony knyght that lyvith for to sle a lady.”¹⁸ Again is the family feud brought up, and the he-killed she-killed nature of their conflict. The ongoing cycle of violence between Balin and the Lady of the Lake is not, of course, over with her death—there are still many more to come in Balin’s tale. And there are far more heads in store for *Le Morte Darthur*—many of them women’s heads. The Lady of the Lake’s death is both the result of a cycle of violence and part of that cycle of violence, and its generative power to re-create the royal (male) body is cut short, rejecting the futurity of the next generation.

The next chapter of *Le Morte Darthur* continues and complicates the anxieties about a body politic vulnerable to beheadings and blood. “Torre and Pellinor” starts with a reaffirmation of Arthur’s legitimacy, and we are told Arthur “was chosyn kynge by adventure and by grace, for the moste party of the barowns knew nat he was Uther Pendragon son but as Merlyon made hit opynly knowyn.”¹⁹ Arthur’s legitimacy to the title of king is thus doubly reinforced—he had the ultimate qualification of royal blood, of course, but he is accepted (somewhat) by people who do not know of that, because of “adventure” and the deeds that he has done, and by “grace” of God. Either way, Arthur is somewhat stable and ruling with authority, and thus he is urged to take a wife and ensure the royal succession. The events of this chapter, then, cycle around the quests

¹⁸ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.v. p. 43

¹⁹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.i. p. 59

taken on after Arthur's marriage. Arthur takes a wife on the advice of his barons and of Merlin, who are agreed that it is necessary and fitting for him to do so—in many ways, this is the body politic demanding something of its head.

Yet the wife he chooses, Guinevere, is cause for concern—Merlin tells him that she is “nat holsom for hym to take to wyff”²⁰ and that she will, someday, love Lancelot. It is that fatal triangle, of course, that is instrumental in the fall of Camelot, but the question of Guinevere's “holsom”-ness is not, perhaps, limited to her infidelity but also her infertility. She and Arthur never have children—while their infertility could come from either side of the marriage, Arthur does manage to have a natural son—and because of her adultery with Lancelot, there is concern that any children she did have would not be Arthur's. Guinevere threatens that passage of royal blood and ultimately, she fails to re-create the body politic in the form of a new heir, leaving the only successor to the kingdom Mordred, product of incest and infidelity. Instead of literal reproduction, Guinevere fulfills a re-productive role as the bearer of the Round Table, their wedding present and symbol of their regenerating court, as well as fifty knights to fight for him. Though Arthur's marriage with Guinevere does not produce a physical heir, still it does bring forth the regeneration of the body politic. The state is served by their marriage, though not in a bodily way.

Yet as symbols of a united body politic the knights around it are also prone to the cycle of beheading, as perpetrators and as victims. Such is the case with two of its first knights, Gawain and Tor. Gawain is of course of royal blood, Arthur's nephew by his sister (and one-night stand) Morgause. Tor's birth situation is more complicated—he

²⁰ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.i. p. 59

appears to be the son of Aryes, a humble farmer, and his wife, but turns out to “com of good kyndrede as ony on lyve, and of kynges bloode”²¹ as King Pellinore slept with his mother (half by force, we are told) and is his real father. This is also (echoing Arthur) before his mother married Aryes, thus meaning Tor’s mother is not an adulteress. The emphasis of blood and relationships in this chapter foregrounds in our minds the crucial role of kinship and bloodline in the text, zeroing in as it does on the messy interactions between bodies. When the requisite mysterious adventure happens at the wedding feast, it is Gawain, Tor, and Pellinore who undertake the three parts of the quest (Gawain must obtain the white hart, Tor the brachet that fled, and King Pellinore the lady).

Gawain’s adventure comes first, and ends perhaps the most disastrously with an unfortunate beheading. After solving a dispute between brothers, Gawain continues after the white hart and finally slays it with his hounds. However, this hart turns out to have been a present to Sir Blaumore from his lady, and he slays Gawain’s hounds in retaliation. As with Balin and the Lady of the Lake before them, the conflict is based in a series of retributions, the sort of bloodshed all too common in the wars of the roses. Here, however, we can see the start of the conflict—Gawain has been ordered to do one thing, the knight wants another. Interesting that it is over a gift from Blaumore’s lady, a gift that is both symbolically innocent and quickly slain, foreshadowing what is to come.

Gawain and Blaumore cannot settle their differences amicably, of course, and thus fight. Eventually Gawain gets the better of him, and Blaumore pleads for mercy

²¹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.iii. p 62

from Gawain as a noble knight. Gawain is incensed and refuses Blaumore's promise to make amends. The cycle of violence has gone further than can be solved by rational means, perhaps—the only thing that can stop the escalation is some kind of shock or tragedy. Blaumore asks again for mercy, “But sir Gawayne woulde no mercy have, but unlaced hys helme to have styken of hys hede. Ryght so com hys lady oute of a chambir and felle over hym, and so he smote of hir hede by myssefortune.”²² This violence comes as a shock to all concerned, including Blaumore and Gawain. The lady's death is confused, mistaken, accidental. We do not know if she fell over Blaumore to ask for mercy or without knowing what was going on—the whole scene is confused and disjointed. The body of Blaumore's love—an innocent noblewoman whose life is cut short—serves as an accusation, forcing the audience to “focus on the violence evoked by needless killing and the failures of knighthood.”²³ After Gawain offers mercy to Blaumore, rather after the fact, the knight tells him “I take no forse... whether I lyve or othir dye.”²⁴ His lady's death seems to make the conflict meaningless, a reminder that the continuance of violence ends with a headless woman, blood pooling on the ground.

The death of Blaumore's lady—like the deaths of so many damsels throughout the *Morte*—is a reminder of futurity curtailed and cut short. The generative female body is dead, before it can bring forth anything new. The headless body renders her mute, unable to protest or tell her story—and indeed, the woman never speaks and is never

²² Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.vii. p 66

²³ Tracy, Larissa. "So He Smote of Hir Hede by Myssefortune: The Real Price of the Beheading Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory." *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination*. N.p.: Brill, 2012. p 217

²⁴ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.vii. p 66

named. Yet her head remains as proof of what she was, an accusation, one of the “literally silent, but figuratively vocal heads in the *Morte* that condemn the knight who does not follow the oath of chivalry.”²⁵ For Gawain is transgressing, here—refusing mercy to a man who asked for it without having a reason as to why he is doing so. And the death of Blaumore’s lady is a natural consequence—her head, the proof of Gawain’s wrongdoing. The head is such a potent accusatory signal that, in an echo of Balin, he is later forced to bear it around his neck on his travel back to Camelot, with the lady’s body before him on the horse. It is not enough for Gawain to tell the story of his wrongdoing—he is forced to bear physical proof of the woman whose life he took. The king and queen are, understandably, quite displeased, and Gawain is made to swear an oath “that he sholde never be ayenste lady ne jantillwoman”²⁶ as long as he lives. The female body, then, needs protecting *especially* because it is a generative body and because it is regarded as a non-combatant body. Gawain’s act threatened the codes of chivalry meant to ensure the future of the court, and for that he must make amends.

If Gawain’s adventure acts as a “What Not To Do For the Young Knight,” Tor’s takes the problems of beheading in a different direction. Charged with bringing back the brachet, or hound, which fled through Arthur’s court, he also comes across two knights, defeats them, and sends them off to Arthur—as with the similar episode in Gawain’s story, his manly worth as a virile knight is here affirmed. Sir Tor manages to find and take the brachet, and has ridden away when the dog’s owner, Abelleus, hunts him

²⁵ Tracy, Larissa. "So He Smote of Hir Hede by Myssefortune: The Real Price of the Beheading Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory." *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination*. N.p.: Brill, 2012. p 218

²⁶ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.viii. p 67

down. While the hart was a gift from Blaumore's lady to her knight, this brachet seems to have been a gift from Abelleus to his lady—the lady from whom Tor stole it. They fight, and Tor gets the better of Abelleus. He offers mercy, if the man will give him the brachet, but Abelleus refuses—an inversion, then, of the Gawain story—a link only further strengthened with the arrival of an unknown damsel out of nowhere. Her role, however, is quite different from that of Blaumore's lover. She asks Tor for a gift, because he is a gentleman and she is a gentlewoman (based, of course, entirely in blood—for other than his kingly heritage Tor has spent his life as a peasant). He (like Arthur before him) agrees, without asking what it is.

The damsel thanks him and demands “the hede of thys false knyght Abelleus, for he ys the moste outerageous knyght that lyveth, and the grettist murtherer.”²⁷ Tor is uncomfortable with what she has asked—he has offered Abelleus mercy, even if the other knight has not accepted—but the damsel explains that Abelleus killed her brother (“a bettir knyght than he”) right before her eyes, even after she had begged for mercy on his behalf. There is a suggestion, too, that Abelleus has done this multiple times, and is in the habit of refusing mercy. Clearly, the warning of what Gawain could have become is present—Abelleus had no woman's death to stop his pattern of violence, and so a woman's request must be called in to deal with him. Having heard this, Abelleus does beg for mercy—but Tor has given his promise, and Abelleus has already refused it. Tor takes off Abelleus's helmet “and therewith he arose and fledde, and sir Torre afftir hym, and smote of hys hede quyte.”²⁸ Tor gives the head to the lady and makes his way

²⁷ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.xi. 70

²⁸ Ibid

home with the brachet, where he is praised for his conduct in the affair. Notably, a woman is left in possession of the head, which is *not* borne away by the knight responsible. This beheading is judged “correct,” then, and justified—it falls within the realm of chivalric acceptability. Abelleus’s beheading is like the other (and few) male beheadings within the text—generally, punishment against men who have transgressed the rules of knighthood. Here, the idea of beheading as a form of execution comes once more to the forefront. Though it is not necessarily an organized punishment demanded by a court, it is clearly an attempt to re-assert social control over people who have transgressed the accepted codes of chivalry and masculinity.

While the episodes of Gawain and Tor’s respective quests are very clearly linked, the trials of King Pellinore offer a more stark reminder of the physicality of the head, even as it seeks to distinguish this physicality from the more vulnerable body. Unlike Gawain and his son, Tor, King Pellinore is not a young and untested new-made knight setting out to prove himself but an old man—a father—seeking to prove his loyalty and worth to Arthur. He is tasked with finding the knight that kidnapped the lady who rode through Arthur’s court, and sets out at once. He passes a woman weeping at a well, holding a wounded knight in her arms, who begs him for help. “But kynge Pellynore wolde nat tarry, he was so egir in hys queste; and ever she cryed an hondred tymes aftir helpe. Whan she saw he wolde nat abyde, she prayde unto God to sende hym as much nede of helpe as she had, and that he myght feele hit or he deyed. So, as the booke tellith, the knyght there dyed that was wounded, wheretofore for pure sorrow the lady slew hirselff with hys swerde.”²⁹ While this is not as obvious a denial of mercy

²⁹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.xii. p 71

as found in Gawain's story—Pellinore does not kill the woman, and she is never in danger from him—still, his refusal to help her causes her death. She, in turn, has prayed to a higher power that he be punished for his lack of chivalry which (quite a bit later) comes to haunt him. But king Pellinore continues on, finds the lady, defeats the knight, and rides back to find the knight and lady by the well both dead—not just dead, but “etyn with lyons other wyth wylde bestis, all save the hede.”³⁰ The role of head-as-accusation is quite clear, here. The woman and her lover have been destroyed and reclaimed by nature, but her head stands as proof of her life, and of the fact that Pellinore let her die when he could have saved her. The mention of lions (not, of course, native to Britain) also serves to reinforce royal connotations—something which becomes all the more important once we discover who she is.

Pellinore laments that he did not save her, “for she was a passing fayre lady, and a yonge.”³¹ He, like Gawain, recognizes exactly what he has done wrong—and, indeed, that it was wrong. In both incidents the silent, accusatory woman's head acts upon the erring knights as a sort of wake-up call, a reminder of the horror of violence and the consequences of their actions. It is important, too, to note that the knight's body appears to be largely intact, as Pellinore bears it on his shield to a hermitage and asks the holy man to bury it. He, in turn, carries the head back with him to Camelot—parallel to what Gawain has to do. Although the woman was not beheaded, her head still serves as proof of his wrongdoing—upon female bodies are written the stories of male transgressions. The head is an accusation of Pellinore's callousness and lack of

³⁰ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.xiv. p 74

³¹ *Ibid.*

chivalry, refusing to help a lady. He is “greved passynge sore”³² when he looks at the head, and much is made of the woman’s fair hair, youth, and beauty. The idea of a future cut short is very prominent—she is clearly a noblewoman, who died for love. It is then that Merlin, too, upon Pellinore’s admission of his guilt, tells him “Truly ys ought sore to repente hit... for that lady was youre owne doughtir... and that knyght that was dede was hir love and sholde have wedded hir, and he was a ryght good knyght of a yonge man, and wolde a proved a good man... and hyr name was Alyne.”³³

This beheading, even more so than that of Blaumore’s lady and of Abelleus, also crisply drives home the impact of beheading on futurity. She is the first woman to get a name, and indeed a past as Pellinore’s own daughter. This figurative filicide makes Pellinore directly responsible for the destruction of the younger generation. The emphasis that *if* Alyne had lived her lover (Myles of the Laundis, we learn his name is) would have married her, and that he would have been a good knight, indexes the idea of futurity and reproduction. By rooting this beheading in the idea of a potential family cut short, the horror of both Myles’s tragic wounding and Pellinore’s callousness and refusal to help is brought home—Pellinore’s actions did not just cause the death of his own daughter, but the figurative death of the future generation. After all, her blood is (through him) royal blood, and she could in time have produced both knights and rulers, and other women to carry on the succession. But because her own father would not step in, she is dead and with her dies that branch of his bloodline. Merlin warns

³² Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. III.xv. p 75

³³ Ibid

Pellinore that he will regret this day and this transgression—but then, perhaps, he already has cause to.

The concerns over succession that are so central to the Wars of the Roses are played out and dealt with here, albeit more subtly. The deaths of these two women call into question the ability of a younger generations to succeed and flourish. In both cases noble blood is cut short because of knights failing to observe the rules of chivalry. The episode with Blaumore's lady highlights the importance of mercy, and of the protection of the innocent. She is a mute victim whose only accusation can be her corpse. Alyne at first glance seems similar—but she accuses Pellinore aloud, though no one but the reader can hear. Her story is that of Blaumore's lady writ large, and more obvious, in part perhaps because Pellinore is an older knight and ought to better know the rules. He is a symbol of the fact that knowing chivalric codes will not necessarily ensure that they will be followed. Tor, meanwhile, is the only knight who does no wrong. He does beheading the "right" way, at least upon first glance—he executes a man who has refused mercy, at the request of a lady who has a legitimate grievance with him. Yet Abelleus complicates things by asking for mercy after his head has been demanded—and indeed, we have only the lady's word that he is guilty of what she says he is. It is not a cut-and-dried acceptable beheading, but unlike the heads resulting from the mistakes of Gawain and of Pellinore, this one is (largely) controlled. It follows the rules, does not harm a non-combatant, and serves as a punishment for transgressing the codes of chivalry and failing one's knightly duties. This beheading serves the body politic rather than threatens it, and does not raise worrying conclusions about the state's future.

The strange theme of violence against women—and especially of beheading—becomes systematic and institutional in an episode from Book Nine (in the Tristram section of the *Morte Darthur*). At the heart of one of the stranger parts of the novel, sandwiched between the familiar beginning of Arthur’s heroic narrative and the grail quest and subsequent destruction of Camelot. At the core of book nine, and the *Morte* as a whole, is a beheading game. Tristram and La Beale Isoud encounter “the Castle Plewre, that is to say ‘the weeping castell’,” where knights and ladies both have their heads on the line. Sir Brehnour, lord of the castle, and his lady wife have instated a custom whereby:

“who that rode by the castle and brought ony lady with him he muste needys fight with the lord that hyght Brehnour. And yf it so were that Brehnour won the fylde, than sholde the knyght straunger and his lady be put to death, what that ever they were. And yf hit were so that the straunge knyght wan the fylde of Sir Brehnour, than sholde he dye and his lady bothe.”³⁴

At first glance, this custom is cruel and strange—but fair, at least, by the standards of the text. The stated situation is simple: two knights fight, whoever loses is executed. Here, there is not yet a mention of possible beheadings. The only noteworthy fact is the mention of the ladies—whose survival depends on the prowess of the knight with them (something which, under the narrative structures of the text, is often more or less arbitrary). Of course, under what to the modern mind seems like chivalric power structures, *this* is what has gone wrong in the castle—knights are supposed to protect ladies, not put them to death. If we accept the idea that chivalry is meant to reduce the

³⁴ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. VIII.xxv. p 258

cost to bystanders, putting female (and thus non-combatant) lives on the line is morally wrong and against all codes of honor.

This, of course, will not really prove true, as it so rarely does in the *Morte*. In fact, the women, we later learn, are expected to compete as well. A knight, finding Tristram and Isoud in the dungeon, informs them that when a knight fights with their lord, “he that is the wayker muste lose his hede.” So it’s not just execution that Tristram has to face—it’s beheading, which is a whole different animal. We also learn that “when that his done, if his lady that he bringgeth be fowler than is oure lordys wyff, she muste lose hir hede.”³⁵ Beheadings are thus manifested as systematized violence in the form of this custom/game with clear, fair rules.

The qualities on which strangers are judged are the qualities which are, perhaps, those that quantify their worth in this society. Knights are fighters, and thus face a contest of arms. Knights who fight poorly are worth less, and thus less worthy of keeping their heads. Women, meanwhile, are judged purely on physical appearance—a foul woman is worth less and, again, must lose her head. Continuity (keeping heads) thus depends on personal worth to society. No room is allowed for personal talents or gifts other than pugnacity and pulchritude—prowess and looks are the only yardsticks by which visitors (at least noble visitors) can be measured.

The value of the female body, then, is both this power to reproduce and the power to attract the man who will complete this cycle—and that is what Isoud and Brewnor’s wife are to be judged on. Unlike their male counterparts, they are denied agency in the contest—for Isoud and for Brewnor’s wife, the outcome of this contest is

³⁵ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. VIII.xxv. p 258

largely already decided. Their beauty is something they are born with, rather than something they can improve. It also emphasizes what is, societally, the value of women—their reproductive capabilities and value as sexual objects. If the ultimate achievement in male strength is, here, the ability to behead and destroy your martial enemy, the ultimate achievement in female strength is to be more attractive and more desirable than your enemy. They have the ability to pass that strength on, to create it in the future generation and bring forth well-formed knights and beautiful ladies to enact the same scenarios and same dramas once more, ensuring the perpetuity of the body politic.

These rules are repeated time and again throughout the episode—the knights will fight, the weaker loses his head; the ladies are looked at, the uglier loses her head. It creates a sense of legitimacy and (in strange way) of fairness. After all, Brewnor and his wife risk their lives every time they play this game, every time they capture a new pair of strangers. This claim to legitimacy is supported by Tristram, who initially condemns it—“this is a foule custom and an horryble”³⁶—then immediately accepts it, saying “I have a lady that ys fayre ynowe, and I doute nat for lacke of beaute she shall nat lose her hede. And rather than lose myne hede I woll fyghte for hit on a fayre fylde.”³⁷ Tristram thinks the custom is shameful—but he also doesn’t view it as a threat. He knows that Isoud will win, because she is the most beautiful woman in the world, and he is one of the best knights (except, perhaps, for Guinevere and Lancelot—as Malory is always so careful to remind us).

³⁶ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. VIII.xxv. p 259

³⁷ *Ibid.*

When Brewnor brings out his lady, muffled, and Tristram brings out Isoud, Tristram again protests the game, and declares he would rather lose his head than have his lady lose hers. He is still reluctant for a woman to be harmed—but, it's *his* woman that he is concerned about. When Brewnor tells him there's no getting past it, Tristram protests that judgement here will not be fair—before (in the very next sentence) declaring Isoud is so fair that there's still no contest, and allowing her to be shown.

“And therewith Sir Trystrames shewed forth La Beale Isode and turned her thryse aboute with his naked sworde in his honde. And so dud Sir Brewnor the same wyse to his lady.”³⁸ The whole process seems reminiscent of a beauty pageant to the death. The women here have no agency—Isoud does not speak throughout the entirety of this episode, and sir Brewnor's wife does not even have a name, much less a voice. The men are the actors in this contest, even when the women's lives are at stake. The “naked sworde in his honde” is also important to remember—the threat of the violence is very real, and ready. Either of these women could be beheaded in an instant by the looming, naked phallic symbol wielded by the dominant men in their lives. These are female bodies under threat from the very people that (theoretically) ought to be protecting them—noblemen and knights. The protection of female bodies—especially noble female bodies—is an essential part of the chivalric ethos, ensuring the existence and prosperity of the next generation. The fact that women are here not only losing their heads, but doing so in such a systematic fashion implies an intentional, planned destruction of futurity and potentiality. And these women have to way to fight back—unlike the men, judged by their fighting prowess, these women are judged on

³⁸ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. VIII.xxv. p 259

appearance—a different valuation of a head. Unlike their lovers, they cannot change their fates.

Sir Brewnor, we are told, is afraid because everyone knows Isoud is the more beautiful woman. But quickly he tells Tristram that, while he would be sad were Tristram to kill his wife, he would console himself by taking Isoud after he kills Tristram. This is more or less accepted as all right. Again, neither the wife nor Isoud speak. Tristram declares that to lose sir Brewnor *or* his lady would be no great loss, as they are proponents of this cruel system—though as we have heard from no one but Sir Brewnor on this front, his wife’s complicity is at the very least *not* unquestionable.

Still, that doesn’t stop Tristram, who we learn “therewithall sir Trystrames strode unto him and toke his lady frome hym, and with an awke stroke he smote of hir hede clene.”³⁹ Even though Tristram has been spending all this time criticizing the system of violence and the threat to his lady from the beheading game—he has no compunctions about hacking the head off of another lady. The beheading of Sir Brewnor’s wife is, ultimately, an attempt to control the female body and to cut its power short. The threat of her body’s reproductive power is just that, a threat: as long as she lives, there is the potential for the story to be continued. Tristram feels the need to nip this in the bud, in order to ensure that there can be no reproduction of this particular body politic.

The fact that it is an “awke stroke” is important, too. The word “awke” (or “auke”) is where the modern English word awkward comes from and means, quite aptly, clumsy, fumbling, or wrong.⁴⁰ Tristram’s vengeance on the lady is thus removed from the semi-

³⁹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. VIII.xxv. p 260

⁴⁰ “Auke” Def b. *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 2014. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.

mythic pedestal that often happens in the *Morte D'Arthur*, where gruesome deaths can (sometimes) be glossed over or ignored. This is openly awkward. This is clumsy.

Tristram, quite frankly, bungles it. Because it isn't sir Brewnor's wife that Tristram wants to get back at—it's sir Brewnor. Brewnor's wife wasn't threatening Isoud—*she* was not going to strike off heads—that was her husband. But Tristram, despite the sword he still has, doesn't attack Brewnor but his lady. Tristram (despite all his condemnations) is still playing by the rules of the game. Yet there seems to be some condemnation of him still, some kind of recognition of the wrongness of his need vengeance and who he takes it out on. The moment, after all, comes as a shock, and Tristram subverts our expectations of what a "hero" should do.

The beheading of sir Brewnor returns the narrative to a more straightforward contest of male political power. The two knights meet on the field, they fight, and after Tristram proves stronger he "threste sir Brewnor downe grovelyng, and than he unlaced his helme and strake off his hede."⁴¹ There is nothing awkward about this, nothing clumsy. The fight is between men, honest and simple, and there seems to be no narrative ambivalence about Brewnor's death. Unlike the beheading of his lady, Brewnor is (in the narrative's eyes) clearly guilty, and is an acceptable target of violence. He had agency in his own death—he had a chance—which is more than his unnamed wife ever could have. Rather like Abelleus, this death is neither hasty nor accidental: it is a deliberate punishment and execution of a man who threatens Tristram's body and the bodies of others. It follows the rules that Brewnor himself laid out, it is in some way justified, and it is caused by Brewnor's own actions. The beheadings of men follow a

⁴¹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. VIII.xxvi. p 258

pattern of punishment: those who transgress chivalric codes and acceptable masculine behavior lose their heads. Brewnor's death, unlike his wife's, is simple and clear-cut—not awkward at all.

It is interesting, too, to note that in the aftermath of the deaths Galahalt, Brewnor's son, refuses to take vengeance on Tristram for slaying his parents. He gives all the blame to his father—saying that it was his father's shameful custom that caused them to grow apart and that he is not sorry for his father's death and the ending of said custom. His mother, however, gets nary a mention. Her complicity is not discussed and her death is neither celebrated nor grieved. She is glossed over, erased—not an important beauty and thus worth nothing in these narratives of violence. Women are subject to a kind of violence and erasure that the men in these stories, at least, have some kind of control over—either as its agents or combatants, but never as its victims. The death of his mother, too, must bring to mind the worrying motif of matricide throughout the text. For of course it is the deaths of his parents that allow Galahalt to come into his own and take over the castle, finally throwing out the old regime. He has no other threats to his inheritance, no worries about maintaining the succession—the future is his, and something he is able to control in part because his mother's death ensures female sexuality and reproductive power *is* controlled.

The head of state—King Arthur himself—only commits one beheading in the whole of the book. Yet of all incidents, this is one of the most significant, that carries with it a particularly charged reminder of his own need to serve as the head of the body politic and his anxiety about female threats to that status. As is fairly typical for the *Morte Darthur*, the king takes a back seat after his coronation and is not very involved in

the battles between knights until (of course) the story's fatal end. A king's job—a head's job—is to direct and rule, not to have a personal stake in the violence or indeed a personal hand. Only when the whole of the body politic is threatened (as it is by Mordred's actions at the story's end) is he needed to act and prove his virile, legitimate worth. Yet Arthur's adventure with the sorceress Aunowre, which surfaces in middle of the story, is different—it is one of the few tales in which he plays an active, combatant role, and it is the only time he both kills a woman and cuts off a head.

Aunowre is a sorceress of North Walis who “by fayre promises and fayre behestis made Kynge Arthure to ryde with her into that foreyste Perelous... and many days she had loved Kynge Arthure, and bycause she wolde have had him to lye by her she cam into that contrey.”⁴² As is so common in the *Morte D'Arthur*, women with power end up being temptresses and seductresses, bent on controlling men (the opposite of how things are “supposed” to go). Aunowre attempts to bend Arthur to her will once they are in the forest, but he remembers his queen and demurs. The issues here are, interestingly, of male fidelity within marriage (rather than female). Guinevere (in episodes both before and after this one) is in the midst of her affair with Lancelot—and yet (in an inversion of expectations, perhaps) *Arthur* is the one being tested.

After he refuses her, we learne “whan thys lady Aunowre saw that she myght nat have him at her wylle, than she laboured by false meanys to have destroyed kynge Arthure and slayne him.”⁴³ Of course, she does not simply kill him herself, while he is

⁴² Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. XI.xvi. p 300

⁴³ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. XI.xvi. p 301

presumably still staying at her castle and under her power. She also cannot make him sleep with her using her sorcery, despite the fact that she was able to entice him into the Forest Perilous. Female power (even magical power) seems to have its limits here, halted at the active seduction of a man through something other than trickery. Whether this is Aunowre's impotence, the failure of female power in general, or the fact that her victim is the king and head of state himself is up for debate.

Arthur's presence here *as the king* is, of course, crucial. It is not a random knight under threat here, it's the head of state. The king, who is often treated in the tales as being rather bound to his court, tied to Camelot and the Round Table, is not only in the midst of his own adventure (though the framing of the story still subsumes him to Tristram, whose book this is) but also in grave danger—from the female body. In this tale, the head of state's own head is threatened, bringing us to that all-important question once more: What happens to a body without a head? What happens to a state without a ruler?

Luckily, at this point we don't need a real answer to that question. The Lady of the Lake becomes aware of Arthur's danger and "cam into that foreste to seke affir sir Launcelot du Lake othir ellis sir Trystrammys for to helpe kynge Arthure."⁴⁴ This is not, of course, the same Lady of the Lake that was beheaded by Balin at the start of the *Morte*. Unlike the beheaded lady, this sorceress, Nynyve, has no stake in setting up kingdoms or passing out magic swords. With her, there is no threat of the establishment of other kingdoms or investing others with royal and masculine authority. Instead, this Lady seems to perform the care-taking and protective duties of the mother without

⁴⁴ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. XI.xvi. p 301

possessing the regenerative power of a symbolically maternal figure. Her role is not to establish, create, challenge, or legitimize Arthur's body politic, but merely to protect it. While her magic powers are real and potent—she may or may not be the same sorceress that trapped Merlin in an oak tree—Arthur does not depend on her for establishing his rule or lending him legitimacy. At this point, he is an established king and any ability to establish other rule is not a threat—this iteration of the Lady of the Lake can only help him, and is not a threat.

She encounters Tristram in the wood and leads him at last to Arthur—just in time. “At the laste these two knyghtes smote down that one knyghte, and one of hem unlaced hys helme, and the lady Aunowre gate kynge Arthurs swerde in her honde to have stryken of his hede.”⁴⁵ The detail of unlacing the helm—as happens to pretty much *all* the knights who lose their heads in this text—has a dual meaning. There is, of course, the practical necessity of de-helming a knight before striking his head off: otherwise you can't do it, you'll hit armor first. But it also makes the head a visible thing. Rather than looking like a faceless helm, the victim of a beheading must needs be acknowledged as a person. They have a face—and they can be identified. It can read like the beheader is double-checking, making sure this is not a mistaken identity.

Aunowre's wielding of the sword is also important here. For all that she has depended upon her knights to do the dirty work of capturing Arthur and beating him in a fight, *she* wishes to be the one to take her vengeance, personally. And she intends to do it with his own sword—Excalibur. She is assuming the stereotypically male role, wielding Arthur's own phallic symbol—the symbol, likewise, of his rule, for Excalibur is the *king's*

⁴⁵ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. XI.xvi. p 301

sword, given to him by the previous Lady of the Lake. Aunowre takes up the standard of royal authority and of the royal body, directly threatening and challenging Arthur's claims to dominance and governance, and defying the expectations of her sex to do so. In her attempt at beheading Aunowre is an actor, rather than a victim, both the sexual and physical aggressor—but, of course, she can't get away with this.

Tristram (after, somewhat inexplicably, just looking on as Arthur was beaten by two knights—perhaps waiting for when the situation is at its most dire) rides in and challenges the two knights, whom he promptly kills. Neither is beheaded—one smote through the body, the other chopped in half. It is Arthur who goes after Aunowre, and, we learn, “overtoke hir and with the same swered he smote of her hede. And the Lady of the Lake toke up hir heded and hynge hit at her sadill-bowe by the heyre.”⁴⁶ In return for his own masculinity and kingship being threatened, it is necessary for *Arthur* to be the one to behead Aunowre, and reclaim his sword and with it his status. In a way, there are echoes of the previous beheading game—a head for a head. But this female who loses her head is, at least, complicit in her own demise. She lost, yes, but at least she got a chance to fight.

The fact that the Lady of the Lake is the one to both cause Aunowre's demise and to end up with her head at the end again signals the presence of female power in this tale—reminiscent, perhaps, of the heads at stake in the Guinevere-Morgan le Fay conflict in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This is a fight between women (indeed, Aunowre is thwarted in her aims by the presence of Guinevere, whom Arthur is unwilling to cheat on), and the men are players in it. Yet female transgression—the theft of the

⁴⁶ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. XI.xvi. p 301

sword, the threat of beheading (with its echoes of emasculation, i.e. loss of maidenhead)—these must be punished. Removing the *royal* head in particular—the most virile part of the body politic, the *sine qua non* of manly authority—threatens the very foundations of masculine state power. Aunowre blurs gender barriers, she is an actor—but she must pay for it with her own head.

Arthur's beheading game foreshadows one even more central to the violent management of the body politic: the beheading of Morgause (queen of Orkney, sister to the king and mother of Arthur's only child) by her son Gaheris in book ten, chapter twenty-four, is a scene loaded with meanings and implications. She, of course, is carrying on an affair with Sir Lamorak, whose father (supposedly) killed King Lot of Orkney—Morgause's former husband. We learn directly from the narrative that "he [Lamorak] went into a parlour and unarmed him; and then he went unto the queen's bed, and she made of him passing great joy, and he of her again, for either loved other passing sore. So when the knight, Sir Gaheris, saw his time, he came to their bedside all armed, with his sword naked, and suddenly gat his mother by the hair and struck off her head."⁴⁷ The nature of this beheading is, quite clearly, sexual—the son killing his mother as she is in bed with another man—furthermore, a man who is identified with the murder of his father. It's a very Oedipal moment, at first glance—the son jealously controlling his mother's sexuality—but Gaheris punishes not the paternal stand-in and rival for his mother's attention but his mother herself. Morgause is beheaded, but Lamorak escapes unscathed.

⁴⁷ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. X.xxiv. p 377

The loss of Morgause's head can be tied to the loss of a maiden-head— (symbolically, of course, for the queen has had multiple children). But her purity is what is at stake here—her fidelity and chastity are being questioned. Once again we see the theme of male control over female bodies—the female body on its own, taking control of itself, is a threat that must be contained. If we regard the beheading of women as being tied to symbolic rape and “deflowering”, it seems clear that the death of Morgause fits the pattern perfectly. She is beheaded naked, in bed with a man she is not married to—in other words, in the middle of an adulterous liaison—something Malory alternately supports, glosses over, and condemns, making immediate value judgements tricky. It is hard (nigh-impossible) to tell exactly *when* Gaheris beheads her—are they in the middle of sex? Before? After? We don't know. All we know is that Gaheris gets his sword (a symbolic male organ, it bears repeating) naked, grabs her by the hair and cuts off her head. The hair is a significant detail—long, loose hair was generally a sign of loose morals or sexuality, and it is unbound because she is in bed, having sex with an unacceptable man. Female heads are often mentioned in context with their hair—the first Lady of the Lake is carried by her hair, as is Aunowre. It has both logistic uses (handle) and creates a visceral image.

One of the most curious details about the incident is the fact that the violence is specifically directed *at* Morgause—and not, as might have been expected, at Lamorak. Even Lamorak takes offense, saying “Ah, Sir Gaheris, knight of the Table Round, foul and evil have ye done, and to you great shame. Alas, why have ye slain your mother that bare you? with more right ye should have slain me.”⁴⁸ He is, after all, the

⁴⁸ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. X.xxiv. p 378

“aggressor” here, the man who would, normally, be assumed to be the initiator of the act. Furthermore, he is the one that the Orkneys have a feud with—it is not that his mother is adulterous that is unacceptable to Gaheris (though that, of course, is part of it). His mother is adulterous with a knight he disapproves of—Sir Lamorak, who Sir Gaheris charges “hast put me and my brethren to a shame, and thy father slew our father; and thou to lie by our mother is too much shame for us to suffer.”⁴⁹

The feud between the two families is emphasized repeatedly in this passage. Gawain and Gaheris have slain Pellinore, Lamorak’s father, who they accuse of killing their father, King Lot. Lamorak argues that in fact it was Balin le Sauvage who killed their father—not Pellinore—and that, thus, Pellinore’s death has gone unavenged because it was not itself a real revenge killing. This claim in itself is interesting, and also contradicts the *Morte Darthur’s* earlier books. In book two, chapter ten, we learn that in one of the battles Arthur had with the Emperor Lucius: “here was a knight that was called the Knight with the Strange Beast, and at that time his right name was called Pellinore, the which was a good man of prowess, and he smote a mighty stroke at King Lot ... and therewith anon Pellinore smote him a great stroke through the helm and head unto the brows... King Pellinore bare the wite of the death of King Lot.”⁵⁰ It is unclear whether this is an error on Malory’s part, or evidence that he changed his mind and/or the story, or if it is intentional and Lamorak is either wrong or lying. The blaming of the killing on, of all people, Sir Balin is also very interesting. Balin, of course, is responsible for what may be the very first beheading in the book—he kills the Lady of

⁴⁹ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. X.xxiv. p 378

⁵⁰ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. II.x. p 48

the Lake in the middle of Arthur's court after she demands his head. He blames her, as well, for the death of his mother—while she, in turn, charges that Balin slew her brother. It is another example of a family feud spilling over into the everyday life of the court and impact that way of being. Certainly such issues would not be unfamiliar to Malory—the wars of the Roses saw many personal vendettas carried out in the midst of greater strife—Grummitt says: “the political turmoil of the fifteenth century also allowed for an increase in other forms of violence. In other words, civil war provided a cover for personal vendettas to be pursued and for random acts of violence to be perpetrated.”⁵¹ In the *Morte*, both beheadings are tied into a vague, heard-about feud whose facts and actualities are rather fuzzy, and both end with a woman dead, her head held by her hair.

Because it is, as before mentioned, *Morgause* who is the victim of beheading. Gaheris kills his mother—not her unacceptable lover—and indeed, after telling Lamorak why he hates him, tells him “because thou art naked I am ashamed to slay thee” and orders him to flee, for if he encounters him armed he will most assuredly try to slay him. The irony here is obvious. It would be dishonorable for Gaheris to kill or try to kill Lamorak, because he is naked—but killing Morgause is fine. She is: naked, unarmed, noble, not a threat, female, and *his own mother*—all things that should, under chivalry, theoretically shield her from harm—but it is more acceptable and indeed more natural for Gaheris to attack her rather than Lamorak.

Violence against women is thus encoded so deeply into the system that Gaheris finds it more acceptable to kill his mother than another knight—indeed, the other knight is safer merely by the virtue of also being a participant of the system. Male-male

⁵¹ Grummitt, David. *A Short History of the Wars of the Roses*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. p 147

relations are here so rigidly and thoroughly codified and rule-bound that killing Lamorak is unthinkable and undoable—it would be Not Chivalric. Because Morgause falls outside that system—while she is theoretically supposed to be protected by it, women are not allowed to participate in it—she is fair game, and her head is up for grabs.

The rigid system of chivalric rules for male-male behavior towards one another is at play here—and indeed, in this episode the constraints of chivalry are being called into question. “Normal” rules of morality (normal of course being relative) seem to dictate that killing one’s mother is worse than killing her lover, on the basis of kinship alone. Killing an unarmed woman over killing an unarmed man may *also* be seen as, generally, a worse moral choice. And yet the system of chivalry extends protections over Lamorak that it does not over Morgause, and Gaheris, blindly following the system, takes his revenge on his mother rather than the man he and his brothers are feuding with—the very man who is the *reason* he wants to kill his mother. This is not unquestioned, of course—Gaheris is censured for this act by Arthur, Gawain, and Lancelot, among others. Gawain is angry that Gaheris killed their mother—and also, we learn, that he had let Sir Lamorak escape. Arthur casts Gaheris from the court for the murder. And Lancelot tells the king, “here is a great mischief befallen by felony, and by forecast treason, that your sister is thus shamefully slain.”⁵² Clearly, the larger community of knights does *not* approve of Gaheris’s action—though his actions fit the letter of chivalry, perhaps, in practice they are unacceptable. Yet this Gaheris is merely following the rules—the system itself is what is broken. “Good knights” can perhaps rise above it, to varying degrees, and understand the intent of the law and/or inhabit the moral gray

⁵² Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. X.xxiv. p 378

areas, but “lesser” knights like Gaheris, blindly following what they have been told, show the real flaws inherent in thinking of the world in this chivalric mode.

So—why Morgause? She is a target because she is female, yes, but also because of *who* she is—the king’s sister, daughter of Igraine, wife of a king, a lady of noble blood. It is the blood, ultimately, that is important. Lamorak’s horror at her murder is described in terms of the blood spilled: “sir Lameroke sawe the blood daysshe uppon hym all hote, wyche was the bloode that he loved passyng well, wyte you well he was sore abaysshed and dismayed at that dolerous syght.”⁵³ The blood is described almost fetishistically—it becomes the center of the scene. For many beheadings, in *Le Morte Darthur* and in literature in a broader sense, the focus of the horror at a beheading is on the head itself—but Malory has made this about the blood, which splashes “all hote”—both in reference, perhaps, to the hot-blooded action that Gaheris has just taken (a descriptor often applied to his brothers as well), as well as making the image uncomfortably real. This concern with blood is not, of course, merely about the violence. As the king’s sister, Morgause’s blood itself is noble—and that, we are told, is what Lamorak loves. By couching the death in terms of blood, Malory emphasizes the role of family and status in this interchange. The familial feud pits blood against blood when it comes to Lamorak and the Orkneys, and on some level the murder of Morgause puts an end to the threat of said blood combining.

After all, Morgause is a woman and a mother, four times over—a mother of four (legitimate) boys, like the four sons, perhaps, of Edward III, from whom the various candidates in the Wars of the Roses claimed descent. However unlikely it may be, given

⁵³ Malory, Thomas. *Complete Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. X.xxiv. p 377-8

Morgause's presumed age, she can, at least theoretically, have children. Her death, like the deaths of many other women, represents a cutting-off of potentiality. Megan Arkenberg talks about the "*productive* role of female characters"⁵⁴ within the text, both on a metaphorical and physical level. Women are vessels of the blood, and of the continuance of knighthood, by producing the next generation. The crime of matricide, then, prevents that potentiality. In killing his mother Gaheris ensures that he will have no other siblings, especially not with the man whose blood he blames for murdering his father. Morgause's death ensures that the body politic will not be mixed, and that there are no other heirs to threaten the succession of the Orkneys. In murdering his mother he is not only preventing the creation of further bodies politic, as it were, but denying a resolution to the feud through marriage and alliance.

Le Morte Darthur is, ultimately, intimately concerned with the breakdown of the body politic. As the title implies, this is not a story with a happy ending. Arthur's glorious kingdom ultimately falls to ruin and he dies without an heir. The Round Table breaks up and falls apart, with the majority of Arthur's knights either dead or living as hermits. Mordred and Arthur's mutual destruction serves as a patricide/filicide that manages to both destroy the younger generation and remove all chance of the older one re-creating itself. The bloodlines of the three great knights—Lancelot, Tristram, and Lamorak—are all cut short, and Galahad (the best knight of all) is assumed to heaven, ending the bloodline of Joseph of Arimathea (among other notables).

Notable, perhaps, in the end of the text is the utter *lack* of beheadings—especially female ones. Morgause is the last woman to lose her head in *Le Morte*

⁵⁴ Arkenberg, Megan. "'A Mayde, and Last of Youre Blood': Galahad's Asexuality and its Significance in *Le Morte Darthur*." *Arthuriana* Vol 24.3 (2014). p 8.

Darthur, completing, perhaps, the cycle that began with the murder of the Lady of the Lake. While women and their bodies are still incredibly important within the text, still at risk of danger and still quite bodily present, their heads stay on. While there are several men beheaded, like Abelleus and Sir Brewnor, as punishments or as executions, that, too, stops once the Grail Quest begins. The body politic is perhaps less of a concern for the Grail narrative, which is far less concerned with issues of state and authority. By the start of the final chapter in the tale, the state has begun its ultimate breakdown. There is a sense that Camelot in the wake of the Grail Quest is already doomed, that continuity is no longer a possibility. It was, perhaps, doomed even before the story of the grail begins, when the noblewomen of the story who represent the possibility of the creation of the future state have all lost their heads.

The beheadings of *Le Morte Darthur* reinforce the precarious position of the body politic. Arthur's right to rule and stability depend on a multitude of things, and beheadings call those claims into question. The violence against women, specifically, highlights the breakdown of the supposed order of Arthur's realm—chivalry has failed to look after these women, whose reproductive powers pose a threat to male virility. Indeed, the masculine body politic is not, perhaps, able or equipped to deal with its feminine creator and counterpart. Women are instrumental to chivalric action and values—it is through the presence and bodies of women that knights may relate to one another, win praise and glory, and accomplish great deeds. But the importance of those bodies does not safeguard them from the dangers they face in relation to the larger political body.

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