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# ARTIFACTS

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## King Arthur and His Part in the Breaking of the Round Table

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**Amy is an English Major and a senior at Mizzou. At the age of sixteen, she decided to drop out of high school and continue her education at a local community college. It was there that she found a passion for school and writing. She strives to learn something new every day about any topic! She chose to submit this**

paper because of her genuine interest in the subject matter and how, through copious research, her view of the great King Arthur changed. She hopes that others find something of interest in her piece, leading to a want to further learn about the famous fall of Camelot or another related topic.

Thomas Malory's book, *Le Morte Darthur*, illustrates for its readers the rise and decline in power of the principle character, King Arthur. Beginning as a man chosen to become the King of Camelot and surrounding lands, King Arthur seemed to have befit perfectly as everything the kingdom needed in a ruler. However, once he becomes king, his decline and the fall of his kingdom has become one of the most revered tales people turn to in order to understand the world of Arthur. With a number of elements contributing to the kingdom's fall, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where everything went wrong, and more importantly, who started the beginning of the end. I argue that King Arthur can be solely blamed for the destruction of the round table and the fall of his kingdom due to his selfish, oblivious nature and his misunderstanding of how to separate his personal and professional desires. Considering he is often known as a heroic, noble king, this presents a new way to look at King Arthur and how he was as a person. It can also be a critique of kings during Malory's time, and how he perceived them to be hypocritical and personal when it was inappropriate.

We often think about how kings during Malory's time were expected to act and the standards they upheld for their court and kingdom. A good king usually has his kingdom in mind first, with other aspects of his personal life second (such as who his mistress and best friend shall be). He lives to rule his people and his people, including his knights and queen, live to serve him, thus bringing about balance to the kingdom. King Arthur begins to blur his professional and personal life whenever he sleeps with sister, Igraine, and conceives of Mordred, his bastard son. After falling in love with her sight, "the King cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her. And so they were agreed, and he begot upon her Sir Mordred" (Malory, 1998, p. 21).

While this is at the beginning of his reign, I link it to Arthur's first large mistake. Rather than taking responsibility for sleeping with his sister and creating his son, Arthur decides instead to cover it up after the wizard Merlin forewarns him that "ye have lain by your sister, and on her ye have begotten a child that shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm" (p. 23). Merlin predicts correctly that because of Arthur's cruel nature to his son, Mordred shall live and return to take vengeance against his father for abandoning him and not being a proper father. Upon hearing Merlin's words, Arthur takes it upon himself to attempt to kill all the newborn sons in order to rid himself of his problem—his bastard son. "Then King Arthur let send for all the children that were born on Mayday... and so there were

found many lords' sons and many knights' sons, and all were sent unto the King...and all were put in a ship to the sea" (p. 31). However, in Arthur's attempt to rid the kingdom of his son, he instead takes innocent lives and hurts many people by taking their sons and sending them out to sea to die in the case that one should be Mordred. Unfortunately for King Arthur, the infant Mordred is "cast up" and is not taken onto the ship. As Merlin had predicted, Mordred lives and will return to take over his father's kingdom.

Had Mordred's rightful father not attempted to kill him, the events Arthur leads may have turned out different. "A good man found [Mordred] and fostered him till he was fourteen years of age" (p. 31). While Mordred is being raised and cared for, King Arthur puts his son in the back of his mind, believing him to be dead. Arthur starts the setback that will eventually lead to the fall of his kingdom because he attempted to kill Mordred rather than raise him as a son. By not properly accepting and raising Mordred, Arthur gives his son a reason to fight back and to one day seek vengeance against his father. However, as Arthur grows as king and begins to collect his knights for the Round Table, Mordred is not realized to be a serious threat until it is too late.

The next big event during Arthur's rule is the quest for the Holy Grail. During this quest, Arthur struggles to deal with the loss of his knights over a long period of time as they attempted the search for the grail. Although there were signs suggesting that Arthur should not send his men on the quest or carry out the journey, he chooses to continue anyway. In her article "Squaring the Round Table: Time, Hierarchy, and the Fall of the Round Table," Theresa Ann Sears says that "the *Queste* presents the stories as a series of failure" (Sears, 2005, p. 3). She further explains that with the knights' parting comes a sudden gloom over the kingdom that would not go away once they returned, due largely in part to Arthur's "[oblivion] to the winds of change that are approaching his kingdom" (7). Once again, just like with Mordred, Arthur prefers to either ignore or not notice the signs pointing to his downfall. While he may have been chosen to be the king by pulling the sword from the stone, his downfall quickly begins by denying and ignoring the signs and events around him.

Aside from his ignoring Merlin's warning that Mordred will one day seek vengeance, another sign Arthur chooses to ignore is when the Floating Sword appears and he begs one of his knights to fetch it, an errand which none would do. As Lancelot and Gawain deny his request, Arthur further pushes for them to retrieve it. (p. 7) Arthur is a stubborn king who will continue to do as he chooses, despite warnings against him. The error of Arthur's selfish ways come back to haunt him in the end.

Once Arthur realizes the seriousness of his mission to retrieve the Holy Grail, it is too late. Sears states that "when he hears Lancelot and Gawain take oath to devote themselves to the Quest, the King laments: 'No Christian king ever had so many good knights or men of rank at his table as I have had this day, nor will when these are gone, nor shall they ever be reassembled at my table as they have been now'" (p. 10). Now that King Arthur realizes that Lancelot and Gawain plan to devote themselves whole-heartedly to their quest to retrieve the grail for their king, Arthur is astonished and sad. His knights will die in the quest and many will never return. By sending them to find this grail, he is further breaking up his round table for something that seems nonsensical. Rather than keeping his knights around to guard and protect his kingdom, he sends many to their deaths by directing them into

unknown territory and lands. Once more, Arthur has blurred his professional want, which would have the knights stay nearby, and his personal desire for the Holy Grail.

However, Arthur was chosen to be the king of the people for a reason. Having pulled the sword from the stone, the people of Camelot agreed that he was destined to be ruler; “the commons cried at once, ‘We will have Arthur unto our king, we will put him no more in delay; for we all see that it is God’s will that he shall be our king’” (Malory, 1998, p. 11). The fact that he was chosen by the common people and also by God shows that Arthur was truly meant to be a great king. Sears argues that another reason for the downfall of Arthur’s society is due to the extreme imbalance of his court. She mentions, “Arthur, as king, is frequently described as sitting at the ‘high table,’ not the Round one. There is a general understanding that Lancelot is a finer knight than his comrades, just as everyone believes that Kay is noticeably less skilled. ...The romances portray Lancelot as ... one who disrupts the courtly order with his desire for the queen. Women, of course, appear consistently in an inferior position, and certain kinds of women (the old, the poor, the unsightly, the magical) have even less influence” (p. 12).

Nevertheless, I cannot agree that these are the reasons why the Round Table falls. As a king holding up a court complete with knights and ladies, there is naturally going to be an imbalance of power. Arthur is the head of the table and should be specially seated higher because he is not the knights’ equal—he is their lord and they are his vassals. Women were treated lower back then because that was how it was in all kingdoms, not just in Arthur’s. In reality, I believe that the way in which Arthur ran his court is just. I support his reasoning for the lack of “proper” equality, as Sears would argue, within his court as a way of showing respect and power to keep order in his kingdom. It is how he ruled his knights and people where I find issue and believe Arthur to be a flawed ruler.

One fact that cannot be ignored when criticizing the fall of Camelot is that Lancelot greatly disrupts the order of the court by having an affair with the queen, Guinevere. This is another factor for the fall of the round table, and as David Benson says in his article “The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*,” “the penultimate [fall] is composed of five separate narratives whose various events and settings prepare us for that fall” (Benson, 1996, p. 222). While Mordred is off in the corner planning his plot, Lancelot is having a romantic affair with Arthur’s wife Guinevere. Arthur now has two important factors that will eventually lead to the fall of his kingdom. By having his affair with Guinevere, Lancelot creates a break in the table because of their stations: his as Arthur’s vassal and hers as Arthur’s queen and wife. In order to right the wrongs, Arthur knows that he must punish his wife upon finding out about the secret affair. I agree that this part of the break in the table could be considered Lancelot and Guinevere’s fault, although I feel that King Arthur could have dealt with it better. If he had changed the way he dealt with his wife, his table might not have broken.

As punishment for her disloyalties, Arthur condemns his wife to death—a decision that splits his table. Now choosing to be on either Arthur’s side or Lancelot’s side, the knights are facing harsh realities that could have been avoided. Arthur’s decision to have his wife killed rather than banished confuses me, especially since Arthur states, “... much more am I sorrier for my good knights’ loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company” (Malory, 1998, p. 481). I would think that Arthur would choose the less drastic choice, rather than submitting Guinevere to death. Arthur is in a tight predicament since she is

the lover of one of his knights, and his decision to send her to her grave further splits him and his knights apart. As Benson states, “[Arthur] chooses the love between comrades over the erotic passion so often celebrated in Arthurian Romance” (Benson, 1996, p. 230). This is critical because Arthur is put amidst a fight between his knights and the punishment of his wife, who has betrayed him. Arthur chooses his knights, as they are his comrades and friends over his wife, who seems nothing more to him than a simple woman who deserves to die because of her bad deed. But it is pivotal that Arthur chooses his camaraderie over his marriage, because rather than helping to keep the table together, it actually breaks it farther apart.

There is also another drastic incident at play: after having accidentally killed Gawain’s two brothers, Lancelot is on the run and war between the two knights is beginning to form. Rather than not take sides, Arthur says to Gawain, “Sir Lancelot slew them in the thick press and knew them not. And therefore let us shape a remedy for to revenge their deaths” (Malory, 1998, p. 483). Arthur is allowing for Gawain to follow through with revenge, even when the Pope tells him “that he take his queen again and accord with Sir Lancelot” (p. 489). Instead of following his professional vows and keeping his knights together and orderly, he is now aiding Gawain in revenge against Lancelot. The long-term outcome of this decision means war, and these rivalries King Arthur has built up eventually lead to the downfall.

With his knights now at war, King Arthur agrees to leave his kingdom in order to aid Gawain in his fight against Lancelot. This is one of the final blows to his kingdom—upon leaving, Arthur “[makes] Sir Mordred chief ruler of all of England. And also he [puts] the Queen under his governance ...” (p. 498). King Arthur is now making many mistakes: not only is he leaving his kingdom in the hands of his bastard son whom he tried to have killed as a baby, he is also leaving his kingdom in order to fight in a war where his beloved knights are battling against each other. While this war may or may not have been completely avoided had Arthur not agreed to choose sides, his kingdom would certainly not have fallen because he would not have needed to leave in order to fight.

After returning to find that his kingdom has been taken over by Mordred, King Arthur is devastated. “... The common voice among [the people] that with King Arthur was never other life but war and strife, and with Sir Mordred was great joy and bliss...they were better pleased with Sir Mordred than they were with the noble King Arthur” (p. 507). The peoples’ voices are significant because they are now revolting against their current king and rooting for the new one. The king they once desired and chose to take over the throne after witnessing him pull the sword from the stone is now the same one they diminish as king. While Mordred may have been King Arthur’s bastard son and nemesis, the people believe that he is a better ruler for them than Arthur.

While trying to fix everything and gain his kingdom back, King Arthur and Mordred decide to reunite and make a deal. An agreement would have been sealed and war between the king and his son could have been avoided, had an adder not bitten the foot of a knight at the ceremony, thus leading the knight to pull out his sword on the adder. As he pulls out his sword, the other knights believe that it’s time to fight, and war breaks out. During the war between him and his son, King Arthur looks around and says, “Jesu mercy, where are all my noble knights become? Alas, that ever I should see this doleful

day!" (p. 512). His kingdom and his Round Table are now forever broken and ultimately unfixable—even after Arthur’s slaying of Mordred and his own impending death.

While it is definitely true that many characters were the reason for the fall of the Round Table, I believe that had he not ignored the signs and paid more attention to his kingdom, Arthur would have led a successful reign. It is unfortunate how his personal life worked out, with Lancelot and Guinevere having an affair and Mordred never being killed. However, had he dealt with his professional life choices better, his personal issues may have worked themselves out for the best as well. I argue that Arthur should have taken responsibility for his son upon finding out about him. He should have taken the knights’ omens seriously about the quest for the Holy Grail and not have neglected his kingdom and knights in order to find the Holy Grail. Moreover, he should absolutely not have chosen sides in his knights’ battle when he could have done as the Pope said. These are all major faults of Arthur, who seemed to blur the lines between his wishes for his personal and professional life as the king. As a ruler, his kingdom and his knights should have come first, instead of his personal desires. Realizing the flaws in King Arthur makes him a more human, mediocre king than the heroic, valiant one we often associate nowadays when we hear the name “King Arthur.” It is important to know that he was a flawed character, as Malory could have been critiquing the rulers of his time for the wrongs they had done. Rulers, such as King Arthur, have a lot of responsibility to uphold for their kingdoms to run properly and smoothly. Indeed, other characters take a little fault for the fall of the Round Table, but I place most of the blame solely on the one and only King Arthur.

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