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Adultery and the Fall of Logres in the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*

DAVID SCOTT WILSON-OKAMURA

In the post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*, the king's adultery brings about the destruction of Logres. The primary model for this particular treatment was Old Testament history, especially King David's affair with Bathsheba. This biblical model accounts for both the romance's structure and ethos, characterized by an abundance of arbitrary imperatives and seemingly inordinate consequences. (DSW-O)

Before there was a Carbonek, even before there was a Camelot, there was a Camlann: there was a great battle, by the river Camel, and Arthur was defeated there by the armies of his nephew Mordred. That is the legend as it has come down to us from Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155). But who, or what, was responsible for Arthur's defeat there? According to Geoffrey, Arthur fell at Camlann because his nobles rebelled against him. Britain, the historian laments, has always been vulnerable to civil strife, even from the time of Julius Caesar, because the pride of that nation will not long endure the rulership of one man over them (*Historia* 11.9, 12.5). Mordred, in this version of the story, is little more than a personification of Britain's age-old impatience with the reigning monarch. Arthur's queen is not chaste, but she plays almost no role in the actual downfall of the nation. Here, in dealing with Camlann (as elsewhere in the *Historia*), Geoffrey of Monmouth is not so much concerned with the character of individuals as with the character of the British nation.

In the first half of the thirteenth century, however, the focus of the legend shifts: the disaster at Camlann comes about through the improprieties of individuals, and the theme of adultery comes to occupy center-stage in considerations of Arthur's career as a whole. According to the anonymous author of the so-called Vulgate *Mort Artu* (c. 1230), Arthur lost the battle of Camlann because Mordred had superior forces; Mordred had superior forces because Arthur was away in Gaul, which gave the traitor the chance to woo

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the barons to his cause; Arthur was in Gaul because Gawain had insisted on avenging his brother's death on Lancelot; Lancelot killed Gawain's brother in the process of rescuing Guenever from the stake; and Guenever was at the stake for committing adultery with Lancelot. And thus it would appear (or so the logic of the story would suggest) that the queen's affair was responsible for Arthur's defeat. This, in any case, was how it would later be interpreted in England. Although Malory affirms that Guenever 'was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende' (1120; XVIII.25), the queen herself is compelled by conscience to confess before Lancelot and her fellow nuns that 'Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the most noblest knyghtes of the world; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne' (1252; XXI.9).¹ The responsibility for Arthur's defeat at Camlann is thus lodged, by the queen's own admission, with the adulterous couple.²

Others have said enough elsewhere in this issue of ARTHURIANA about the love of Guenever and Lancelot. Within a decade of the Vulgate cycle's completion, however, there appeared a new explanation for Arthur's defeat: the post-Vulgate cycle of prose romances known as the *Roman du Graal*, probably composed between the years 1230 and 1240. The *Roman*, as Fanni Bogdanow has reconstructed it, originally consisted of the romance we now call the *Suite du Merlin*, along with adaptations of the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* and the Vulgate *Mort Artu*. Here again, as in the Vulgate, Arthur meets his death at the hands of Mordred, who has gathered the armies of Logres to his side while the king was across the Channel fighting Lancelot. Again, the debacle at Camlann comes about through the queen's adultery. But now the king's demise is ultimately traced back to his own incestuous union with the wife of King Lot, the product of which union was Mordred. This act, and the prophecy of destruction which accompanies it, are narrated in the first branch of the cycle, the *Suite du Merlin*. Coming, as it does, at the beginning of the cycle, the note of doom that is struck here pervades everything that follows. The result, as Bogdanow observes, is a new version of the Arthurian legend in which there is no 'double esprit' such as we find in the some of the Vulgate romances (208). 'The *joie de vivre* so characteristic of the early parts of the *Lancelot* proper is completely absent,' and in its place, there is 'a constant preoccupation with sin' (215, 209). Lancelot's chivalric exploits (including his love affair with Guenever) fade into the background, and the king himself assumes responsibility for the final catastrophe at Camlann.

At the same time, the burden of explanation is thrown back onto the first branch of the cycle, where the conception of Mordred is actually narrated. The contents of this branch, the so-called *Suite du Merlin*, will be familiar to most English readers because it was the main source for the first four books of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. But although Malory's adaptation of the *Suite du Merlin* is in many places a masterful one, the logic of that romance has sometimes been obscured by its celebrated English redaction, and deserves to be considered by a wider audience in its original form. The *Suite du Merlin* is a long romance, however, and there are many episodes, such as Gawain and Marhalt's adventure on the enchanted Roche aux Pucelles, which I have not space to treat of here. My primary goal is to correct what seems to me an oversight on the part of the *Suite*'s previous critics, who have consistently emphasized the incestuous aspect of Mordred's conception, neglecting its adulterous aspect altogether. Since the incest as such was entered into unwittingly, this leaves Arthur relatively innocent, and the whole cycle has therefore been viewed as a tale of *mescheance*, a tragedy of fate in which the protagonist dies, like *Œdipus* or *Lear*, 'a man more sinned against than sinning.' I would argue, to the contrary, that this romance is a quest for first causes in which not incest but the king's adultery figures as the pivotal event in the history of Logres. The obvious model for such a literary production was the history of the Hebrew nation as recounted in the Old Testament. I would suggest that it was from this history, rather than from tragedy, that the *Suite* derived both its basic structure and its prevailing ethos.

The work that scholars have dubbed *La Suite du Merlin* is, as the name suggests, a continuation of a Merlin romance that was attributed to Robert de Boron (*fl.* 1200). It is preserved, along with a prose version of the *Merlin*, in two manuscripts.³ There is no demarcation between the *Merlin* and its continuation in either of these manuscripts, however, and it is likely that a medieval reader would have encountered them together as a single unit. For Malory, the fruit of that encounter was the first part of the *Morte d'Arthur*, which Vinaver referred to as 'The Tale of King Arthur.' Together, the two works provided Malory with the story of Arthur's conception and his rise to power, the circumstances of the incestuous union that engendered Mordred, the origin of Excalibur, and the story of Balin and the Dolorous Stroke—in brief, almost all that Malory has to tell us of the early years of Arthur's reign.

But the *Suite du Merlin* is more than a chronicle of Arthur's first years as king. Merlin also makes several prophecies concerning the quest for the Grail and Arthur's death. The predictions are, for the most part, consistent

with their Vulgate 'fulfillments' (for exceptions, see Bogdanow 60–87), but the spirit of a prophecy can be altered by addition, even where it does not introduce contradiction. Thus, Merlin prophesies that the instrument of Logres' destruction will be Mordred, as in the Vulgate; but he does not stop there: not only will Logres fall *through* Mordred, but Logres will fall *because* Arthur conceived him. Or to put it another way, Merlin does not, in prophesying, change what will happen, but he does change why it will happen. In the Vulgate, as Fanni Bogdanow observes, the 'theme of Mordred's incestuous birth seems to serve mainly to heighten the horror of the final tragedy. The circumstances in which Arthur committed incest are not explained, and he is not reproached for his sin' (143). In the *Suite*, however, Merlin explicitly reproves the king and predicts the destruction of Arthur's realm as a consequence (Huth 1:154–58; cf. Malory 43–45; 1.20). What had, heretofore, served merely as a piece of dramatic coloring thus assumes the status of a cause, and the king is made to be the author of his own undoing.

The symmetry that results from this narrative adjustment will not be lost on the moralist. But the moralizing impulse is arrested, at least momentarily, if we consider the circumstances of Arthur's fatal transgression. The king does not knowingly sleep with his own sister. It is only *after* the union has been consummated that Merlin informs Arthur of his own heretofore secret paternity. Before that, Arthur does not even know that he has a sister. Incest, apparently, was no part of Arthur's intention, but rather a by-product of his ignorance.

The engendering incident, with its confluence of ignorance and consequence, is the first 'chapter' in the *Suite du Merlin* proper,⁴ and as such it sets the pattern for several of the episodes that follow. One such episode, occurring about halfway through the romance, involves an encounter between King Pellinor and a nameless maiden in the forest. Although the maiden pleads with him to stop and give first aid to her wounded lover, Pellinor rides on because he has a prior engagement elsewhere. The wounded knight dies, and the maiden kills herself for grief. Only after she is dead does Pellinor learn that the nameless maiden was his own daughter (Huth 2:115–39; cf. Malory 114–19; III.12–15). As in the case of Arthur's union with his sister, the full import of Pellinor's action is not revealed until it is too late to rectify the outcome.

Sometimes the actors in this romance do have knowledge in the form of prophecy, but frequently the prophecy itself is too vague to be useful. Thus, when Arthur tells Merlin that he intends to marry Guenever, the sage informs him that another girl would be better, because this one's beauty may possibly work him great harm some day. But 'li roi n'entendi pas cele parole que

Merlins li dist adont, car trop estoit obscure [the king did not attend to the speech that Merlin uttered at that time, because it was too obscure]' (Huth 2:61; cf. Malory 97–98; III.1), and so he marries Guenever anyway—with catastrophic results for the kingdom.

Prophecy in this romance seems to be especially vague with regard to formal causes. Thus Arthur is told only *that* great harm may come to him by this woman, but not *how*. Balin's fatal encounter with the messenger from Avalon is typical in this respect. Having loosed the hangings from a mysterious sword, Balin is informed by its original bearer, a maiden from Avalon, that he would do well to give it back to her. She explains that, if he takes the sword, it will go ill with him, for the man he kills first with it will be the man he loves best. If he dares to take it, he should be assured that he takes his own death (Huth 1:217). Again, the actor is told *what* will happen, and in this case even by what means (the material cause: *viz.*, the sword), but it is not explained how Balin will come to be fighting in earnest with his best friend, an unlikely situation by any standard. A perverse coincidence of obscurity and improbability is the result. Balin decides to take his chances, and keeps the sword. In the end, as we know from Malory, as well as the *Suite*, the weapon is instrumental in Balin's own death and that of his brother. But Balin does not fight with the man he loves most in this world knowingly: the armor they are wearing hinders mutual recognition, and catastrophe ensues from partial knowledge once again. Prophecy, it would seem, is not very useful in this romance.

Sometimes prophecy is omitted altogether, and bald imperative takes its place. The best example of this is the affair of the Dolorous Stroke, another of Balin's adventures. According to the *Suite*, Balin is defending himself in a fight when his sword breaks and he goes in search of a replacement. By chance, he stumbles upon the very chamber which houses both the Grail and the hallowed lance which pierced the side of Jesus at the Crucifixion. But the lance is not identified as such to Balin; nor does the Grail make its presence known to him. An unseen voice simply cries out that he is not worthy to enter such a high place. Again, the warning is vague, and Balin ignores it: his opponent is at his heels, and this is no time to indulge the scruples of an ethereal voice. Balin enters the chamber, and the lance appears to him, floating in midair, 'point downward.' 'Mais il ne [la] conoist pas trez bien [But he did not know that very well]': still Balin does not quite recognize the lance. A voice warns him again, louder this time, 'Ne la touchie, pechiez [Do not touch it, lest you sin]!' The nature of the sin he is about to commit is not explained, however, and Balin, taking up the lance in both hands,

strikes his opponent (who turns out to be the Fisher King) a 'grievous blow' in 'both thighs.' Immediately, the walls of the palace collapse and a 'voice as big as a heifer's' cries out that God will exact his vengeance for this 'on those who did not deserve it.' At the sound of the voice, fear grips the palace: terror alone kills more than a hundred knights instantly; two hundred more lie dead in the courtyard. No one dares to venture inside. Bystanders outside the wall are 'mahaigné et quassé [wounded and broken]' by falling masonry (Cambridge MS fol. 270d–71a).⁵ And when, after two days, Balin finally emerges from the rubble, the countryside is deserted, the corn blasted. Everywhere, the story is the same:

Il trouvoit par mi les viles la moietie des gens mors et des bourgeois et des chevaliers, et parmi les chans trouvoit il les labourans mors. Que vous diroie jou? Il trova si dou tout destruit le roiaume de Listinois qu'il fu puis de tous apielés li roiaumes de terre gastee et li roiaumes de terre forainne, pour chou que si estraigne et si gastie estoit devenue trestoute la terre. (Huth 2:30)

[Among the villages he found half of the people dead, knights and townsmen alike, and in the fields he found the laborers dead also. What can I tell you? He found the whole of the kingdom of Listenois so decayed that it was known by all as 'the kingdom of the blasted soil,' or 'the kingdom of the lonely earth,' because the land had become everywhere so desolate and barren.]

Here again, the after-effects of Balin's action cannot be undone (or at least, not by Balin): the Fisher King and the wasteland he now presides over will languish until the advent of Galahad. As if to underline the general point, an old man warns Balin—just before the fatal encounter with his brother—'Vous avés passé les bonnes; il n'i a mais riens del retourner [You have crossed the border; but there is no turning back]' (Huth 2:44).⁶ As with Pellinor's daughter and Arthur's bastard, the train of consequence is past recall. And once again, the burden falls, as Merlin notes afterwards, 'on those who did not deserve it' (Cambridge MS. fol. 271c–d; transcribed in Bogdanow 248).

To sum up, calamity in this romance seems to spring not from malice, but from ignorance. Balin fails to recognize his brother, and consequently slays him in a duel. Because he does not recognize the sacred lance or the Fisher King as such, he strikes a blow that devastates whole kingdoms. Pellinor, likewise, fails to recognize his daughter, and she takes her own life as a result. Ignorant of his sister's very existence, Arthur fathers an abomination, and thus unwittingly becomes a party to the destruction of Logres and to the dissolution of the Round Table.

In the eyes of previous critics, ignorance mitigates the actor's guilt in every case. According to Fanni Bogdanow, Arthur and his fellows are 'fated

to perish through mischance after bringing misfortune to other... not because they are deserving of punishment, but because they are the chosen victims of destiny,' a theme which 'dominates the *Suite du Merlin*' and finally 'justifies the Arthurian tragedy' (216). 'Arthur's sin of incest,' she says earlier, is merely 'an accident, another example of the *mescheance* which overshadows Logres' (150). Balin's misadventures are no different: as Vinaver remarks, the Knight of the Two Swords is 'first and foremost a victim of a relentless destiny which is neither a just retribution for a misdeed nor a simple accident, but part of a tragic pattern of human existence' (Vinaver, *Works* 1275).⁷

The collocation here of the terms *destiny* and *tragedy* is not coincidental. Indeed, Vinaver explicitly yokes the two concepts in a separate essay on the Balin episodes, where he argues that Balin and his friends come to ruin

not because he is a guilty man who deserves punishment, but because fatality pursues its course and turns his noblest thoughts into crimes.... For tragedy does not exist where a sin is punished or an offence expiated. 'Such a story,' to quote again an Aristotelean formula, 'would move us to neither pity nor fear: pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves.' Neither is aroused by an equitable adjustment of the hero's fate to his deed. These emotions find their way to works of narrative by other means: they come with the sense of human helplessness, of the futility of the noblest endeavour in face of the uncontrollable forces which govern man's destiny; and they are brought home when the tragic doom is deepened by the shadows which it casts upon the whole range of human life.⁸

These words of Aristotle are eloquent, humane, even, and they stand, along with the *Consolation of Philosophy*, as 'one of the most vigorous defences ever written against the view, common to vulgar Pagans and vulgar Christians alike, which 'comforts cruel men' by interpreting variations of human prosperity as divine rewards and punishments' (Lewis 82). True, Aristotle's *Poetics* was not widely read in the Middle Ages, but that did not stop medieval authors from writing tragedies. The Vulgate *Mort Artu* (i.e., the romance with which Bogdanow contrasted the *Suite* in its treatment of Arthur's demise) is a case in point. Although Guenever's affair with Lancelot would seem to us (and seemed to Malory) the main cause of Arthur's defeat at Camlann, the king himself saves his final and most bitter imprecations for Fortune.⁹ Even Mordred, as Frappier observes, is depicted as little more than 'l'instrument inconscient du Destin [the unconscious instrument of Destiny]' (276). The love affair between Guenever and Lancelot is portrayed in a similar fashion: as an *amour fatal*, a 'force d'amors...à laquelle nul ne peut résister [force of love...which nothing can resist]' (266–73). Fate is the motive force

behind everything, weaving ‘en secret la trame même du roman [in secret the very fabric of the romance]’ (266). Indeed, according to Frappier, ‘Le thème de Fortune—du Destin—est sans doute le thème majeur de *La Mort Artu* [The theme of Fortune—of Destiny—is without doubt the major theme in *La Mort Artu*]’ (287). Comparisons with *la tragédie grecque*—so poignant in its evocation of Destiny’s *impitoyable rigueur*—would therefore seem to be inevitable; in any case, Frappier’s study of the Vulgate *Mort* is riddled with them.¹⁰

But are the disasters which befall Arthur and his companions in the *Suite du Merlin* merely the outworking of a tragic destiny? I would argue that the break with the Vulgate tradition was cleaner than that. As in the *Mort*, *mescheance* and *aventure* (a word which may be translated as ‘chance,’ ‘fortune,’ or ‘destiny’) are, it must be owned, prominent themes in the *Suite*. At one point, Merlin even addresses Arthur as the *rois aventurus*, saying,

[Tu] es rois par aventure e fus conceus par aventure, e fus norris par aventure... e si fus engendrés par aventure e par aventure receus tu la corune, car ensi plaisoit il a Nostre Seignor.

[You are king *par aventure* and were conceived *par aventure*, and were fostered *par aventure*... and just as you were engendered *par aventure* you also received the crown *par aventure*, for thus it pleased Our Lord.]¹¹

Merlin goes on to say that Arthur’s reign and realm will be characterized throughout by *aventure*, and reminds Arthur that ‘tut ensi com aventure te dona le realme, si le te toudra aventure [just as *aventure* gave you the kingdom, so *aventure* will take it away from you].’¹² Fanni Bogdanow concludes from these remarks that ‘If there is any explanation for King Arthur’s mischance, it is simply his own destiny’ (153). Given Merlin’s reference to *Nostre Seignor*, however, it does not seem possible to distinguish ‘destiny’ in this romance from what Dante called ‘divine providence.’¹³ The Christian tradition in which Fortune appears as a subordinate ‘minister’ of divine intentions is a long-standing one, and its history has been detailed elsewhere.¹⁴ Sometimes, as in the Vulgate *Mort*, there appears to be a ‘sorte de compromis entre la conception païenne, qui fait de Fortune une puissance indépendante, et la conception chrétienne, qui la soumet entièrement à Dieu [type of compromise between the pagan conception which made of Fortune an independent force, and the Christian conception, which subjects it entirely to God]’ (Frappier 262). But there is no sign of such a compromise in the *Suite du Merlin*. *Aventure*, in the passage which Bogdanow cites, seems to function as a synonym for the will of God. If, as Vinaver and Bogdanow

have urged, *aventure* is finally responsible for the calamity that overtakes Logres and Listenois, this is indeed a tragic vision: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods: / They kill us for their sport.' We, too, might subscribe to this notion of a dark God who visits calamity on the ignorant and undeserving. But the problem of ignorance, at least, is in large part resolved if we reclassify the 'original sin' in this romance, the incestuous union that begot Mordred.

In her study of the post-Vulgate romances as a cycle, Fanni Bodganow devotes six pages to the subject of carnal transgression. Illicit love, she notes, 'is severely condemned in the *Suite du Merlin*, just as it is in the Post-Vulgate *Queste*' (209–15). In her list of examples, however, she does not mention the most prominent (if only because it is the first) example of illicit love in the whole romance: Arthur's adulterous intrigue with the daughter of Uther Pendragon. Since I will be returning to this scene repeatedly in the discussion that follows, I cite it here in full:

Or dist que un mois après le couronnement le roi Artu vint a une grant court que li rois semonst a Carduel en Gales la feme le roi Loth d'Orkanie, serour le roi i fu. Mais quoi que elle fust sa suer, si n'en savoit elle riens. La dame vint moult richement a court a grant compaignie de dames et de damoiseles. Et ot avœc li grant plenté de chevaliers. Et amena avœc li quatre fieus que elle avoit eut dou roi Loth, qui estoient moult bel enfant et de tel aage que li aîsnés n'avoit que dis ans seulement, et estoit li aîsnés apelés Gavains et li autres Gahariès, et li tiers Aggravains et li quars Guerrehès.

Ensi vint la dame a court o tout ses enfans qu'elle avoit moult chiers. Et elle estoit de si grant biauté plainne que a paines peust on veir ne trouver sa pareille de biauté. Si l'a moult honeree li rois pour chou que elle estoit roine couronnee et de haut lignage comme dou roy Uter Pandragon. Moult fist li rois Artus grant joie de la dame et moult le festia et li et ses enfans. Li rois vit la dame de grant biauté plainne, si l'ama durement, et la fist demourer en sa court deus mois entiers. Et tant qu'en chelui terme il gut a li et engendra en li Mordrec, par cui tant grant mal furent puis fait en la terre de Logres et en tout le monde. (Huth 1:147; cf. Malory 41–43; 1.19)

[Now it says that, one month after the coronation of King Arthur, there came to the great court which he had summoned to Carlisle in Wales the wife of King Lot of Orkney, who was the king's sister. But though she was his sister, she knew nothing of it. The lady came very richly to court, with a great company of ladies and maidens. She also had a great many knights. And she brought with her the four sons which she had

had of King Lot: very lovely children, and of such an age that the eldest was but ten; the eldest was called Gawain, the second Gaheris, the third Agravain, and the fourth Gareth.

Thus came that lady to the court with all her children, whom she held very dear. And she was of such surpassing beauty that one could in truth hardly find her equal in that regard. So the king honored her much, because she was a crowned queen and of high birth, even that of the king Uther Pendragon. Arthur surrendered himself wholly to the favors of that lady, and held many feasts in her honor, both hers and her children's. The king gazed upon the richness of that lady's beauty, so that he loved her fiercely, and caused her to remain in his court for two whole months. And at the end of that time he lay with her and begot on her Mordred, through whom were afterwards effected such great evils in the land of Logres and in all the world.]

According to English tradition, the name of Lot's wife was Morgause. But the name, along with the idea that 'she was sente thydir to aspye the courte of kynge Arthure,' is purely Malory's invention (41; 1.19); in the French tradition, she is always and only 'Lot's wife' and 'Arthur's sister.' This is hardly fair to the woman involved, but it does serve to emphasize that there are *two* sins committed here, one exotic, and one commonplace, but both accounted 'deadly' by medieval Christians: incest and adultery. Modern readers tend to overlook the adultery, but it is (from a Christian standpoint) actually the graver sin, because in this instance it was committed deliberately. Incest, by contrast, occurs only by accident in this romance,¹⁵ and the guilt which it entails is thereby mitigated; as St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–75) would observe approximately thirty years after the composition of the *Suite*, 'Ignorance excuses a man from sin insofar as a thing is not known to be sinful.' However, he qualifies this by adding that

a man may still possess sufficient information to know that an act is sinful, even though he is ignorant of something pertaining to the sin which had otherwise prevented him from sinning. Imagine: if someone strikes another man, he knows that man to be a human being. That fact is sufficient to determine the sinfulness of his action, even though he does not know that man to be his father—which circumstance sets up a different kind of sin... Wherefore such a man would sin through ignorance, but he would not be totally excused from his sin, because he would know enough to understand that he was. (Aquinas 1a 2ae, 76:3)

The application here is obvious. Arthur commits incest unknowingly, but adultery knowingly. No one as yet knows that the woman involved is Arthur's sister. But everyone at court knows that she is Lot's wife, not Arthur's. His ignorance, therefore, mitigates the sinfulness of incest, but not that of adultery.

The same logic can also be applied to the Pellinor incident: although Pellinor did not know that it was his own daughter he was abandoning to suicide, he did know that she was a woman in distress, and that ought to have sufficed for him to pause and give succor. In other words, Pellinor broke the Golden Rule. Ignorance excuses him *qua* father, but not *qua* knight and fellow human being.

This is a beginning. We have still to treat of Balin's sin, but we have established a limit to the moral problem which ignorance had posed for earlier critics. The characters in the *Suite du Merlin* do not know everything, but their knowledge is frequently sufficient to the moral questions at hand; their ignorance, therefore, is no excuse. There remains, to be sure, the larger problem of punishment, which seems both disproportionate to the offenses which occasion it, and which lights too often on those who did not deserve it. Again, I would suggest that a solution is to be found in a closer examination of the adultery scene, this time in light of biblical allusions.

The paradox of a noble king who was also a notorious adulterer was not a new one for the medieval reader, who had already encountered it in the career of Israel's most illustrious monarch, King David.¹⁶ The story, as it is recounted in 2 Samuel 11–12, runs as follows. With the spring thaw, the armies of Israel go out (as they do every year at this time) to plunder their neighbors. Ordinarily, the king leads them in this. This year, however, David remains at Jerusalem, and leaves the conduct of the annual campaign to one of his generals. One day, while walking on his rooftop, he spies a woman bathing. She is exceedingly beautiful, and so the king makes inquiries. Her name is Bathsheba. Her husband, Uriah, is absent: he is a soldier in David's army, and the army is at present besieging the Ammonite citadel at Rabba, which lies forty miles away across the River Jordan. David takes advantage of the situation, invites Bathsheba to the palace, and seduces her. Unfortunately, she becomes pregnant. In order to avoid scandal, David has Uriah recalled from the siege, and invites him to spend a night with his wife, hoping that he will sleep with Bathsheba and think himself the father of the child that has already been conceived. Uriah, however, refuses to sleep with his wife while the armies of the Lord are in the field. Meanwhile, it is getting harder and harder to hide the fact that Bathsheba is pregnant. Finally, David arranges for Uriah to be sent to the front lines while the rest of the army withdraws. The Ammonites overrun the abandoned position, as David knew they would, and Uriah is killed. The king marries Bathsheba, and it looks as though the scandal will be averted.

Nevertheless 'this thing which was done was displeasing to the Lord' (2 Sam. 11.27), and God sends the prophet Nathan to confront the king. Nathan begins by telling a parable. There were two men in the city, one of whom was rich, and the other poor: his only possession was a lamb, which shared the family's bed at night. One day, the rich man had a guest, but instead of providing for his guest from the abundance of his own flocks, he took the poor man's lamb and slaughtered it for the evening meal. After hearing this story, David is naturally indignant, and pronounces a severe punishment on the man who would do such a thing. Nathan replies, 'You are the man, both interpreting the parable and delivering a chilling prophecy:

The Lord God of Israel declares: I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul, and gave to you the house of your master, and your master's wives into your breast; I also gave you the house of Israel and Judah: and if these things be little, I shall add much greater things unto you.

Why therefore have you despised the word of the Lord, to do evil in my sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and you have slain him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Wherefore the sword shall never depart from thy house, because you have despised me, and you have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Therefore the Lord declares: Behold, I shall raise up evil against you from your own house, and I shall take your wives before your eyes and give them to one close to you, and he shall lie with your wives in the eyes of the sun. For you did it secretly: but I shall accomplish this word in the sight of all Israel, and in the sight of the sun. (2 Sam. 12.7–12)

David repents, and Nathan absolves him. The child of David's union with Bathsheba dies, though, and the curse on David's house begins to work itself out. In chapter 16, David's son Absalom rebels against the king, drives him out of the capital, and takes his father's concubines up to the palace roof where he couples with them 'in the sight of all Israel' (2 Sam. 16.22), just as Nathan had prophesied. This was the second part of the curse. The first part of the curse—the oracle of perpetual conflict—is fulfilled over the course of the next twenty one generations. David eventually regains the throne from Absalom, but within two generations there is another rebellion and the kingdom is divided into North and South (1 Kings 12). After eighteen generations, the northern kingdom is overrun by the Assyrians and the people are exiled. Meanwhile, the southern tribes that remained loyal to David's successors struggle for nineteen generations to fend off hostile neighbors until, during the reign of Zedekiah, Jerusalem is finally invaded by the Chaldees. The Jews go into exile, and the Babylonian captivity begins (1 Kings 12–2 Kings 25; cf. 2 Chron. 10–36).

Did the king's adultery bring about the eventual downfall of the Hebrew nation? Nathan's prophecy does not, it must be owned, make this connection explicit. On the other hand, the biblical narrative of David's life was not intended to be read in isolation. David's reign was glorious and poignant by turns, but it is also part of a larger unit: the history of the Hebrew people under a monarchy, as told by one who knows how the story will end and lived in exile, after the fall of Jerusalem.¹⁷ It is, as Martin Noth observes, the story of the Hebrew kings as told by one who beheld the whole 'with the final...catastrophes in view,' and sought an explanation in the moral conduct of a nation and her leaders (122). From this perspective, 'the fate of the house of David and that of the house of Israel have always been inextricably intertwined. The sword that will never depart from David's house hangs over Israel's house as well' (Polzin 127). David's downfall is the downfall of the Hebrew nation, foreshadowed in microcosm.¹⁸

In summary, we may say that the affair with Bathsheba marked a turning point in Jewish history. According to 1 Kings 15.5, 'David did right in the eyes of the Lord, and all the days of his life he did not depart from anything which [the Lord] had commanded, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.' For David, the affair meant filial rebellion, ignominious cuckoldry 'in the sight of all Israel,' and (for the dynasty he was about to establish) perpetual bloodshed. For Israel, the affair meant exile. Adultery spelt doom for both king and kingdom as well. I would urge that the king's adultery assumes a similar status in the history of Logres as the author of the *Suite du Merlin* envisioned it.

* * *

This would not be the first time that an Arthurian romance had modeled itself (at least in part) on the career of Israel's most illustrious monarch. According to M. Victoria Guerin, there are already in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* ten 'significant events' with parallels in David's life; Guerin has identified no less than fourteen such parallels in the Vulgate prose cycle (15–17). The Arthurian parallels to the Bathsheba affair are particularly striking. First, in the *Estoire de Merlin* (the Vulgate branch which the *Suite du Merlin* replaced), Uther takes the wife of Gorlois, just as David takes the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Later in the same romance, Arthur does the same with Lot of Orkney's wife. Finally, in the Vulgate *Mort Artu*, Arthur's son Mordred rebels against the king and attempts (unsuccessfully) to bed his father's wife, just as Absalom rebelled against David and (successfully) appropriated his father's concubines on the palace roof. Guerin concludes from these parallels that

Mordred's treason in *La Mort Artu* may be seen, when read in conjunction with the David story, to be a delayed retribution for Arthur's sin with his sister....[T]he son of Uther's adultery will come to grief through the child of his own sin of incest....Uther's adultery with Igrerna, and Arthur's own consequent birth, now become a realization of the biblical threat of 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation' [Exod. 20.5]. Arthur is doomed to repeat, in all innocence, his father's sin of adultery in a far more serious form and, in so doing, to sow the seeds of his own downfall. (25, 23)

Unfortunately, the critic invokes a biblical paradigm, only to fall back on the rhetoric of classical tragedy. Like Bogdanow, Guerin is preoccupied with 'the far more serious sin of incest' (23), and therefore discounts Arthur's adultery. As Arthur entered into the incest unwittingly, Guerin (like Bogdanow and Vinaver) has no choice but to regard Arthur as an innocent man, 'doomed' to an unhappy end by an accident of paternity.

Although Guerin's account here is largely restricted to the branches of the Vulgate cycle, there is nothing in the Vulgate, much less any of the post-Vulgate romances, to suggest that Arthur was 'doomed to repeat' any of his father's sins. The 'biblical threat' to which Guerin refers us is not irrelevant to the *Suite*, but her application of it here is founded on a simple misunderstanding of the phrase 'visiting the iniquity,' which does not mean (as Guerin suggests) 'repeating the transgression' but (as the Latin of the Vulgate, *visitans iniquitatem*, suggests) 'punishing the offense.' That Arthur in some sense suffers for his father's transgression with Igraine is, of course, indisputable: had Uther not begotten the child in such an underhanded fashion, there would have been no question of Arthur's paternity, and therefore no Barons' War (Huth 1:167–68; cf. Malory 45–46; 1.21). Although he is, in point of fact, Uther's rightful heir, the circumstances of his conception leave Arthur with no way of proving it; Arthur, in consequence, is forced to make war on his own countrymen in order to gain the throne that is his by right. In this sense, the son has paid for the father's transgression. But for all that, the son did not sin 'in all innocence.'¹⁹ Arthur, like David, took another man's wife, and like David, he knew that she belonged to another.

Why has this fact escaped the critical notice of so many for so long? In all likelihood, it is because, for all that it condemns illicit love, the *Suite du Merlin* never explicitly condemns Arthur for taking another man's wife. Why not? One possibility, put forth by a respected Malory scholar, is that this particular brand of adultery was sanctioned by the code of the 'Worshipful Knight.' Thus, Beverly Kennedy argues that 'Arthur does not feel honor-bound to be loyal to King Lot, even though Lot is his feudal vassal, presumably

because Lot rebelled against him' (Kennedy, 'Adultery'). Arthur, accordingly, is not dishonored by the affair with Lot's wife. To be sure, as Kennedy notes elsewhere, 'Feudal law was based on the reciprocal obligation of lord and vassal: it was treason to commit adultery with the wife of one's lord, and it was no less treason to commit adultery with the wife of one's vassal.' The affair with Lot's wife, however, is taken as evidence that this law 'allows some exceptions' (*Knighthood*, 175–76).

It is possible (indeed, it is psychologically probable) that, in the heat of passion, the knowledge that this woman's husband was a former rebel helped Arthur to rationalize the breach of feudal loyalty he fiercely yearned to commit with her. And if one defines Arthur's code as 'the things that Arthur does,' then by definition Arthur cannot violate the code. If, however, we judge him according to external standards (such as the knighthood treatises that Kennedy explores in her book), Arthur is clearly guilty of what Malory calls 'treson,' one of the 'two most serious crimes under English common law' (Kennedy, *Knighthood* 38). The other one was murder; and except that his plans for the infant Mordred were thwarted, Arthur had been guilty of that one, too.

Although Lot has rebelled against Arthur, he is not for all that 'lacking honor or "worship,"' as Kennedy alleges ('Adultery'): to the very end, Malory maintains that Lot was a 'worthy...knyght,' and that his death was cause for 'grete pité' (77; II.10). Although there were twelve kings who died fighting Arthur in the last rebellion, Malory records that Lot's tomb was singled out for special honors: 'Arthure lette make the tombe of kynge Lotte passynge rychely, and made hys tombe by hymselff [Caxton: 'by his owne']' (77; II.11). The text does not say why Arthur accords Lot this special treatment, but presumably the simplest explanation is that he is trying to appease a guilty conscience: he knows that he has wronged Lot in taking his wife, and now would make amends as best he can. For, according to Malory, the only reason that Lot took up arms against the king a second time was that 'kynge Arthur lay by hys wyff and gate on her sir Mordred' (77; II.10). In other words, Arthur has only himself to blame for the latest of Lot's uprisings.

But this explanation of Lot's rebellion, along with the special burial arrangements, are both Malory's inventions. In the *Suite du Merlin*, Lot makes war on Arthur because he believes that Mordred is his *own* son, and that Arthur has destroyed him along with the rest of the children murdered in the May Day massacre (Huth 1:246–49); this was certainly a grave sin on Arthur's part, but no mention is made of the affair with Lot's wife, presumably because Lot never found out about it. Merlin never refers to the adultery as

such, and neither does *li contes*. And yet there is more than one way to point a moral. In the present instance, I would argue, setting and circumstances invoke the biblical model of David and Bathsheba, rendering explicit moralizing superfluous. The basic plot of the Vulgate cycle was already well-suited to such an analogy, as Guerin has demonstrated. That the author of the *Suite du Merlin* constructed his romance with this analogy in mind is indicated by the fact that he altered his main source (the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin*) in such a way as to make his own narrative conform even more closely to the biblical pattern, revising the existing account of Arthur's affair in three significant details, each of which has a telling parallel in the story of David and Bathsheba. But in order to recognize these departures as departures, we must first acquaint ourselves with the narrative as it stood before the author of the *Suite du Merlin* set his hand to it.

The *Estoire de Merlin*, a late addition to the Vulgate cycle, was, like the *Suite du Merlin*, a continuation of the *Merlin* romance attributed to Robert de Boron.²⁰ Like the *Suite*, it is a history of the early years of Arthur and his court, and the *Estoire* has, in fact, provided the *Suite* with the raw material for several of its episodes: the Barons' War, the rebellion of Lot and Royens, the conception of Mordred, the marriage of Arthur and Guenever, and the beguiling of Merlin, to name a few. But the *Suite* is not merely an abridgment or summary of the *Estoire* narrative. It is, on the contrary, a rival version of early Arthurian history that is at once darker and more romantic than its original, abounding in marvels and yet preoccupied with sin and its consequences. Nowhere is this preoccupation more apparent than in the revised account of Mordred's conception.

According to the *Estoire*, Arthur was still a squire when he met Lot's wife. The nobles of Logres had assembled in Carlisle to choose a new king after the death of Uther Pendragon, and it chanced that Arthur and his step-brother Kay took lodging with Lot and his household. There Arthur met the lovely daughter of the late Igraine of Cornwall, and fell in love with her. Arthur did not yet know that he too was born of the noble Igraine, and still believed himself the son of Uther's *vavasour*, Sir Antor (Malory's Sir Ector). Lot's wife, in any case, rebuffed the young squire's attentions until her husband rode off late one night to confer with the other nobles in secret as to who should be the next king. Arthur, meanwhile, went to Lot's bed and got in with the baron's sleeping wife and put his arms about her. After a time, the lady woke up, but assuming that the man in bed with her was her lawful husband, she made no resistance to Arthur's advances. Arthur, perceiving this,

lenbracha & iut o lui tout plainement si li fist la dame moult grant ioie & bien
li fist, car ele quida que ce fust ses sires, & en tel maniere fu mordres engendres

[took her in his arms and lay with her thoroughly. And the lady made him great joy
and did it with good will, for she believed that he was her lord, and in this manner was
Mordred conceived.] (Sommer 2:129)

Then the lady went back to sleep, and Arthur went back to his own room. The next day, he revealed to her what had passed between them, and the lady blushed, but no one knew their secret, and it never happened again.

Although it relates the early years of Arthur's career, the *Estoire* was, as I have said, a late addition to the Vulgate cycle: in all likelihood, the last addition. Mordred's paternity was, by this time, an established *datum* of Arthurian history (Sommer 5:284–85), but the story of his conception remained as yet untold. The nagging question of how Arthur could bring himself to sleep with his own sister was yet unanswered. An *apologia* was clearly called for because, as the *Estoire* tells us, 'maintes gens len priseroient mains qui la uerite nen sauroient [many people would think ill of [Arthur] for the deed, did they not know the truth of the matter]' (Sommer 2:128). The truth of the matter, according to the *Estoire*, is that there were mitigating circumstances: Arthur did *not* know who she was when he slept with his sister, and what is more, it only happened once. The question of adultery, meanwhile, is never raised.

In the *Suite*, by contrast, there is no farcical bedroom trick to relieve the horror of what Arthur has done. On the contrary, the horror is deliberately intensified. After he parts company with Lot's wife, the king has a dream in which a great serpent kills everything in its path and puts the whole kingdom of Logres to waste and destruction. At last, the serpent comes to Arthur, and the two do battle 'hard and cruel.' Arthur manages to kill the serpent, but not before he too receives a mortal wound (Huth 1:148; cf. Malory 41; 1.19). Troubled by the contents of his dream, the king goes hunting the next morning, only to be confronted by the accusation of a young child he has never met before:

[T]u iés dyables et anemis Jhesucrist et li plus desloiaus chevaliers de ceste contree. Car tu iés rois sacrés, et en cele houneur et en cele dignité fus tu mis seurement par la grace Jhesucrist non par autre. Artus, tu as fait si très grant deslouiauté que tu as geu carnelment a ta serour germanne que tes peres engendra et ta mere porta, si i as engené un fil...car par lui [vendra] moult de grant mal en terre. (Huth 1:154; cf. Malory 43–45; 1.20)²¹

[You are a devil and an enemy of Jesus Christ and the most sinful knight in this country.

For you are a consecrated king, and in that honor and in that dignity you were assuredly established by the grace of Jesus Christ, not by another. You have committed a grave outrage, Arthur, in that you lay in carnal fashion with your full sister, whom your father conceived and your mother bore. In so doing you have begotten on her a son... and through him many a great evil will come upon the land.]

Later that same morning, Arthur receives similar tidings from an old man who can, it happens, interpret dreams. Having listened to Arthur's dream, he tells the king,

Sachiés que vous tornerés a dolour et a essil par un chevalier qui est engentrés, mais il n'est encore pas nés. Et tous chis roiaumes en sera destruis, et li preudomme et li boin chevalier dou roiaume de Logres en seront detrenchiez et ochis. Et li pais en remanra orphenins de boins chevaliers que tu i verras a ton tans. Ensi remanra ceste terre deserte par les œvres de chelui pecheoir. (Huth 1:158; cf. Malory 43–45; 1.20)

[Know that your affairs will be turned to grief and ruin by a knight who is begotten, but not yet born. And all the kingdoms will be destroyed by him, and the valiant men and the good knights of the kingdom of Logres will be cut down and killed by him. And the land will remain deprived thereby of the good knights which you shall see here in your time. And so the land will remain desolate through the deeds of this evil-doer.]

The prophetic child, of course, is Merlin in disguise, and so is the old man. The parallels with the biblical scene in which Nathan confronts David are numerous. First, a parable (or in Arthur's case, a dream) stands in need of interpretation, and the prophet (or wizard, as the case may be) obliges. Then the king is reminded that his elevation to the throne was God's own doing: his sin has placed him at enmity with God. Finally, the king is denounced, and the demise of his kingdom is prophesied.

But the story, and the biblical parallels, do not end there. David, it will remembered, was forced to do away with Bathsheba's husband in order to legitimate the child they had conceived together. Arthur's approach to damage control is more direct, but homicidal nonetheless. Instead of killing the husband so that he can marry the wife, Arthur tries to kill the child. The problem is, Arthur does not know the child's name, and Merlin will not tell.²² Though he will be the cause of great suffering, the child is yet innocent, says Merlin, and 'seroit il desloiaus qui l'ochiroit [he would be impious who killed him].' Arthur pleads the national interest: 'En ne vaurroit il dont mieus que cil par cui ceste grant dolour venra fust destruis sens que tant de gent morussent par ses oevres [Were it not better that he should be destroyed through whom such great dolor will come, since so many people will die through his actions]?' (Huth 1:159). Merlin agrees that indeed, it would be better, for the land; 'but,' he continues:

quel chose que la terre i gaaignast, jou i perderoie trop. Car je i perderoie l'ame de moi, dont il m'est ore plus que de tout che pais. Et pour chou le vous celeraie jou. Je voel mieus m'ame sauver que la terre. (Huth 1:159)

[whatsoever the land should gain by this, I would lose too much. For by this I would lose my soul, which is of more importance to me than this whole country. And therefore I shall hide him from you. I would rather save my soul than the land.]

Merlin does reveal one detail, though: the child will be born on May Day. Accordingly, Arthur institutes a policy which is at once thorough, and thoroughly out of keeping with the image of the noble king that has come down to us: *all* of the children born in May will be put out to sea and abandoned to the winds, just as David abandoned Uriah to the Ammonites. In the event, the children are saved *par aventure*. But while Merlin will later defend Arthur's policy in public to the barons, in private he refers to it as *felonnie*, which does not merely mean 'a serious crime,' but the distinctly ignoble crime of treachery (Huth 1:211, 246).

Whereas the Vulgate *Estoire* offered an *apologia* for Arthur's actions, the account given here in the *Suite du Merlin* borders on character assassination. The comparison with David was, in this respect, hardly flattering to Arthur. But Arthur's attempt to 'trammel up the consequence' of his affair with Lot's wife is also reminiscent of a New Testament scene: Herod's attempt to liquidate the infant Messiah by killing every male child born in Bethlehem, two years old and under (Matt. 2:16–18). Judging from its popularity in medieval painting (Schiller 1:114–16), the Massacre of the Innocents was well-known to contemporary audiences; the author of the *Suite du Merlin* could hardly have hoped that his readers would not draw the inevitable parallel between Arthur of Britain and Herod of Judea. Malory, by contrast, alludes to Arthur's policy, but has the good sense to insinuate that it was Merlin who suggested it (55–56; 1.27). But the *Suite du Merlin* refuses to bowdlerize the incestuous affair with Lot's wife: whereas Malory and the Vulgate *Estoire* make excuses for the king, the author of the *Suite* explicitly denounces him and even likens him to a notorious infanticide. The question is, to what purpose?

The degree to which the author of the *Suite du Merlin* has appropriated a scriptural model for his secular romance is impressive, but the procedure itself dates back to Geoffrey's *Historia*, as Guerin has reminded us (15–21). What was new was the *Suite's* appropriation of Old Testament history *as the history of a nation*, and not merely as a series of moral lessons for the individual. Whereas a modern critic like Noth or Polzin sees in the affair with Bathsheba

a microcosmic anticipation of the downfall of Israel, the early Church Fathers saw self-contained allegories of salvation.²³ The larger context of Israel's history and impending exile were completely ignored. But for all that it dominated Scriptural exegesis in the Middle Ages (and it did not dominate it entirely), allegory appears to have held almost no interest for the author or authors of the post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* (of which cycle the *Suite du Merlin*, it will be remembered, was the first branch). When a post-Vulgate author *does* remake an allegorical romance, namely, the Vulgate *Queste du Saint Graal*, he trims or omits the *allegoresis* altogether. Whereas the author of the Vulgate romance 'was concerned primarily with the *senefiance* of his narrative, its symbolical meaning,' the author of the post-Vulgate *Queste* 'was interested first and foremost in the substance of the narrative' (Bodganow 204); that is to say, he was most interested in the very thing which allegory was invented to explain away: the 'literal' or 'historical' *sensus* of the text. Now, in this respect, the author of the *Suite* was probably typical of his age. For it was in the thirteenth century, as A.J. Minnis has shown, that 'It became fashionable to emphasize the literal sense of the Bible, and the intention of the human *auctor* was believed to be expressed by the literal sense. As a result, the exegetes' interest in their texts became more literary' (5). Whereas the early Church Fathers regarded David typologically, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century commentators tended to view him as an *exemplum* of pride and subsequent humility (Minnis 103–12).²⁴ As R.A. Shoaf has noted, this is the view of David that is implicitly invoked at the end of the fourteenth century in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. But in spite of this renewed interest in the literal sense of the text, however, the medieval commentaries which Minnis cites do not relate David's downfall to that of the nation he presided over. As with the earlier allegorical commentaries, the tendency of the *exemplum* commentators was to relate Old Testament episodes to the life of the modern-day Christian, not to the history of the Jews in which they were originally embedded. The author of the *Suite du Merlin* was not the first to liken Arthur to Israel's greatest monarch, but he was the first to grasp the link between the king's adultery and the destruction of the nation he presided over.

Like the biblical history on which it was modeled, the *Suite du Merlin* regards history from the perspective of one who knows how the story will end, who writes 'with the final...catastrophes in view.' In one sense, this new approach represented a return to the origins of the Arthurian story in Geoffrey's *Historia*, where Arthur's biography is embedded in the larger history of Brut's descendants and their ultimate subjugation to Saxon invaders. The

difference is that, for Geoffrey, there was no analogue in Arthur's career to the affair with Bathsheba: according to Geoffrey, Britain fell because her people were fundamentally restless, cursed at the end with a string of bellicose kings, *civilis belli amatores* (11.5, 8). Though Britain's downfall was hastened by Arthur's death, it was not occasioned by the king's misconduct. In the *Suite du Merlin*, however, Arthur's *felonnie* determines the whole future of Logres.

This was a marked departure, not only from Geoffrey's chronicle tradition, but from the tradition of Arthurian romance, as well. That Arthur leads a shadowy existence in the *lais* of Marie de France and the *contes* of Chrétien de Troyes is a commonplace of literary criticism. As for the Vulgate, the real hero of that cycle is not Arthur but Lancelot. In the *Suite du Merlin*, by contrast, Arthur assumes the pivotal role in the history of his country, a history which was now approaching biblical proportions.

But the affair with Lot's wife also entailed a certain formal pay-off. In the *Estoire*, it will be remembered, Arthur was a mere squire when he took Lot's wife. In the *Suite*, Arthur is king, and the man he cuckolded is a feudal dependent. This adjustment was necessary in order to bring the story into line with the David affair, where the king cuckolded a loyal subordinate. But it also sets up a new line of symmetry, one which had remained, heretofore, unexploited by the legend-makers. Now, there was a special meetness in Arthur's having been cuckolded at the hands of Lancelot. As a young king, Arthur had taken the wife of a prominent subordinate: in one place, Merlin even tells Arthur that Lot was 'the best knight in your realm' (Huth 1:246). It was therefore especially fitting that the old king should himself one day be cuckolded by Lancelot, who would also be known as 'the best of Arthur's knights.' As Arthur did to Lot, so Lancelot will do afterwards to Arthur. As the reign of Arthur began, so will it end.

The question still remains, though, of whether or not it is unjust that all of Logres should be punished for Arthur's affair with Lot's wife. Did the people of Listenois merit the devastation wrought by Balin's sacrilege? The closest thing to it in modern literature is the scene in the 'Ancient Mariner' where the whole crew of a sailing vessel, 'four times fifty living men,' is struck down by vengeful polar spirits because somebody shot an albatross. Coleridge, like Merlin, was sensible of the inequity in this, and defended his poem on the grounds that it was as a work of 'pure imagination,' claiming that

It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the

shells aside, and lo! a geni starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant, *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the geni's son.
(*Table Talk* 31 May 1830)

The inconsequence of the tale offends our sense of proportion, yet we do not therefore reject the poem outright. There is a part of us which feeds upon the absurdity of the *non sequitur* here, not simply because it is comic but because it hints of other worlds, is redolent of possibility. But in another sense, this kind of absurdity is all too familiar, for as the great Chaucerian J. L. Lowes once observed, it

happens to be life, as every human being knows it. You do a foolish or an evil deed, and the results come home to you. And they are apt to fall on others too. You repent, and a load is lifted from your soul. But you have not thereby escaped your deed. You attain forgiveness, but cause and effect move on unremoved, and life to the end may be a continual reaping of the repented deed's results. That is not a system of ethics; it is the inexorable law of life.
(273)

Lowes does not, it will be noted, claim that this is just. As a *punishment* for avicide, the death of the crew in Coleridge's poem was surely inordinate. But it is very difficult to say what an inordinate *consequence* might be, for anything. Or, to put it another way, punishments ought to fit the crimes which occasion them. But not all consequences are punishments. Where Balin is punished for sacrilege, Listenois merely suffers, just as Logres suffers for Arthur's crime: not because it deserves to, but because 'the evil that men do lives after them.' Ideas like 'fair' have nothing to do with it. What is is sometimes not what ought to be. For better or for worse, that 'is the inexorable law of life.'

It is a grim law, to be sure, and one might be excused for asking, is there anything to distinguish it from the tragic vision of a critic like Vinaver or Bogdanow? Is it not just another way of saying that the gods are cruel, or (what is worse) indifferent? The problem is further complicated when we consider that, for all we can posit a theoretical difference between punishment and consequence, it often seems in this romance that both stem from the transgression of a somewhat arbitrary rule, the violation of which is hardly cause (in the natural order of things) for catastrophe. Balin takes up, unawares, a sacred lance, and Listenois is desolate. He keeps a sword, and in so doing 'destines' himself to slay his brother with it. Wherefore?

Once more, we find a key to the interpretation of this romance in the biblical narrative of David's affair with Bathsheba. According to the superscription, Psalm 51 (Vulgate 50) was composed by David 'when the

prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.' Commonly known as the *Miserere* (from the opening words, *Miserere mei, Deus*, 'Have mercy on me, O God'), it was one of the 'Seven Penitential Psalms,' which were recited every Friday in Lent after Lauds. It is, from a practical point of view, an ideal prayer of confession, perfectly intelligible except for one line, which is (like the rest of the psalm) addressed to God: 'tibi soli peccavi et malum coram te feci, [against you alone have I sinned and done evil in your presence]' (Vulgate Psalm 50.6; AV 51.4). One wonders what Uriah (or even Bathsheba) would have made of this. Had not David sinned against them, too? And yet the psalmist insists that it was not a social contract but rather a divine decree that the king violated when he took Bathsheba and murdered her husband.

Nathan provides a clue to David's reasoning when he asks the king 'Why therefore have you despised the word of the Lord?' (2 Sam. 12.8), implying that the ordinance David violated was a divine one. To be sure, the precepts of the covenant God made with the people of Israel were numerous. Some of them—the prohibition on perjury (Exod. 20.16), for instance—differed little from those found in other Semitic law codes, such as that of Hammurabi. Other precepts, such as the special mildew regulations (Lev. 13.47–39), were obviously instituted as public safety measures. But there still remained a indigestible core of statutes which could not be rationalized, but were instead established simply to mark off the people of Israel from the surrounding nations. Certain dietary restrictions, such as the one God placed on cloven-footed mammals that 'chew not the cud' (Lev. 11.1–8), probably fell into this category. But the main precept of this type was male circumcision. According to Genesis 17.11, Yahweh enjoined Abraham and the members of his household to practice it 'in signum foederis inter me et vos [as a sign of the covenant between me and you].' No further justification, medical or otherwise, is ever given.²⁵ Apparently, the token was chosen at random, for the foreskin as such had no intrinsic meaning in Semitic culture until Yahweh made it the sign of allegiance for Hebrew males. The point was simply that Abraham should do what Yahweh told him to do, for no other reason than that Yahweh told him to do it. This was the heart of the covenant: not a social contract bred out of prudent consideration of what had and had not worked in ages past, but simple obedience to sometimes arbitrary mandates. The covenant was not, in the final analysis, a code of ethics, but an expression of allegiance to an individual, namely Yahweh. That is why David says to Yahweh, *tibi soli peccavi*, even though it was (to all appearances) Uriah whom the king had wronged: he had, as Nathan observed, 'despised the word of the

Lord.' It was, of course, still possible to classify David's sin as a species of *luxuria* or *superbia*,²⁶ but from David's own point of view, the real issue was simply obedience.

I mentioned earlier that, in the *Suite du Merlin*, the messenger from Avalon does not itemize the steps by which Balin will kill his best friend if he keeps the enchanted sword: Balin is simply warned of what will happen, and directed to return the weapon. Later, when Balin makes as if to take the sacred lance, he is simply commanded, 'Ne la touchie, pechiez!' In this case, there is not even a mention of punishment or consequence to follow: there is only the unequivocal mandate, 'Do not touch it, lest you sin!' No one claims that the retention of an enchanted sword constitutes a violation of chivalric ethics. As with the precepts of the Old Testament covenant, there is no attempt to rationalize either of these injunctions on general principles.

Like the covenant God made with Israel, the ordinances which govern Logres can be divided into two categories: ethical and arbitrary. The first class includes such Sunday School precepts as 'Help maidens in distress' and 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' They are prosaic, to be sure, but they are not banal; or rather they are only banal until someone disobeys them: then we remember why they are important. How important, the knight does not always know ahead of time. It may turn out that the girl he abandons in the forest was his daughter, that the woman he took to his bed was his sister. He never knows. But he does know that he ought to succor the helpless and leave his neighbor's wife alone. These, presumably, are precepts for all times and for all nations. The second category, that of arbitrary precepts, is more peculiar, but because it eliminates the prudential concerns which enter into the ethical commands, it illustrates more perfectly the supreme importance of simple obedience in this romance. For the morality that this romance enjoins is not that which strives to effect the greatest happiness of the greatest number. If that were so, then Merlin would have slain the infant Mordred and saved the kingdom, perhaps even at the cost of his immortal soul. But whereas Arthur appeals to utility, Merlin takes his stand on a fixed and immutable edict, the authority of which is absolute: 'seroit il desloiaus [he would be outside the law]' who killed the child that yet was innocent. This law makes sense to us, but that is not, I think, why Merlin obeys it. Rather, he obeys it because it is the law.

In this, he is what G.K. Chesterton once called a 'true citizen of fairyland.' For fairy tale rules are notoriously arbitrary: 'an incomprehensible happiness rest[ing] upon an incomprehensible condition.' Thus,

‘You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire *if* you do not say the word “cow”’; or ‘You may live happily with the King’s daughter, *if* you do not show her an onion.’ . . . A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone. (Chesterton 99–100)

Chesterton called this principle the Doctrine of Conditional Joy. In the *Suite du Merlin*, it is exemplified by such commands as ‘Give back that sword’ and ‘Do not take this lance.’ As with the ethical commands, disobedience meets with disaster. But we do not then realize in retrospect (as we did with the ethical precepts) why it is, in general, a good idea not to have a sword or hold a lance. To put it bluntly, the only lesson we ‘learn’ from these disasters is to ‘do as you are told.’ Why? ‘Because I said so.’

We are wary of such commands: ‘unquestioning obedience’ is not a virtue with us, but a cause for anxiety. In this romance, though, the arbitrary commands have a special function: they restore a sense of contingency to a legend, the shape of which had been fixed now for nearly a century. After Geoffrey, no one could change the fact that Logres would be destroyed in the end. The only question that could still admit of a new answer was how Logres fell. Was it, as the author of the Vulgate *Mort* averred, because it was destined to do so? Or was it because its knights, and most of all, its king, did ill?

This is where ‘the inexorable law of life’ and the tragic vision part company. The great advantage of the tragic vision is that it permits us to pity Arthur and his fellowship, instead of blaming them. For tragedy does not exist where a sin is punished or an offence expiated. ‘Such a story,’ to quote again an Aristotelean formula, ‘would move us to neither pity nor fear: pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves.’ The price of such pity, though, is ultimately pessimism: for such pity is inevitably attended, in Vinaver’s own words, with ‘the sense of human helplessness, of the futility of the noblest endeavour in face of the uncontrollable forces which govern man’s destiny.’ That is the spirit of tragedy. In the *Suite du Merlin*, though, disaster is not inevitable. There are rules, and there are consequences—startling ones, even. Behind the rule, though, lurks a choice.

We noted above that the token of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel was circumcision: an act of pure, unrationalized obedience to a precept devoid of ethical content. Even this, though, was but the reflex of older covenant. According to St. Augustine, God’s compact with humankind as a whole was

symbolized by a similar token in Eden. Already in the fourth century, a rich tradition of allegorical interpretation had grown up around the fabled Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, nevertheless Augustine insisted that 'the one tree' was just an ordinary tree, 'sed propter commendandum purae et simplicis obœdientiae bonum [forbidden, not because it was itself evil, but in order to commend the good of pure and simple obedience].'²⁷ The prohibition on this particular tree was therefore arbitrary; it could just as well have been an avocado as an apple. Eating or not eating was simply a way of casting your ballot for or against the Creator: 'Yes, we will obey today' or 'No, I think not.' Like circumcision, though, the tree itself remained a cipher, a way to signify desire, but not itself an object of desire. The only 'knowledge' that it conferred was 'transgressi mandati experimentum [the experience of a disobeyed commandment]' (*De civitate Dei* 13:21); or as Milton would have it, 'knowledge of Good lost, and Evil got.' To choose the fruit, therefore, was not to cast one's vote for knowledge, but simply to declare oneself a rebel. That some such mechanism should exist was important, because in a garden where all else was permissible, it was the one place where the couple could say, 'No.' Without a venue for disobedience, their obedience had else been meaningless. Thus God's whim established Adam's liberty.

'Just so, if small things may be compared with great ones,' is agency secured in our romance: by prohibition. That Logres and Listenois would both come to ruin we already knew from Geoffrey and Chrétien. In the *Suite du Merlin*, though, these disasters do not come about (as in Aristotelean tragedy) 'by necessity,' but because the principals of the story broke a rule. In Balin's case, the rules were arbitrary, but even the most arbitrary rule leaves the actor with a choice. They might have done otherwise (though they did not). Thus did the legend cast off the shackles of destiny which the Vulgate *Mort* had imposed upon it, and became a romance once again, pregnant with wonder and the sense that anything might happen. 'The vision,' as Chesterton observed, 'always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things conceded depend upon one small thing withheld. All the wild and whirling things that are let loose depend upon one thing that is forbidden' (99). You must not take the sword, or the lance, and you must not take your neighbor's wife.

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NOTES

- 1 See also Malory's original, the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, 3638–43.
- 2 There are, of course, other factors involved, in particular, the Grail quest and the feud between the houses of Lot and Pellinor. But as Charles Moorman rightly observes, the most immediately compelling [of these factors] is the Lancelot-Guenever story....[T]heir love and their tragedy, which is, of course, the tragedy of the whole society, are inseparable' (164).
- 3 The bulk of the *Suite* is known to us from Cambridge ADD. 7071 (which I have consulted in microfilm) and BM ADD. 38117 (known as the Huth *Merlin*, after its previous owner). Since the Cambridge ms. remains unpublished, I have cited from the Paris and Ulrich edition of the Huth ms throughout, except where a two-leaf *lacuna* in that ms necessitates citation from the corresponding folia of the Cambridge ms (see note 5 below). The conclusion of the romance is, unfortunately, missing from both mss, and is preserved separately in Bibliothèque Nationale (fonds français) MS 112, livre 2, fol. 17b–58b. Complete bibliographical details, along with a brief summary of the whole romance, are given in Bogdanow 11–13, 23–39.
- 4 Although the engendering episode is preceded, in the Cambridge ms, by an account of the Barons' War, this material is for the most part merely a summary of material from the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin*. According to Fanni Bogdanow, the Huth redactor 'realized that the rebellion section was different both in spirit and subject matter from the new narrative, and deliberately left it out' (39). Wilson, on the other hand, contends that the Huth ms actually represents an earlier form of the romance, to which the account of the Barons' War was added later. In any case, both critics agree that the *Suite* proper begins with the arrival of Lot's wife at Arthur's court and the subsequent conception of Mordred (Wilson 13; Bogdanow 38).
- 5 The Huth ms is, unfortunately, missing two leaves at this point in the narrative. This material can be supplied from the Cambridge ms of the *Suite*, the relevant leaves of which are transcribed in Bogdanow 241–49.
- 6 Cf. Malory 88; 11.17: 'thow passyst thy bandes to come this waye; therfor torne ageyne and it will availle thee.' Vinaver comments that, 'Whereas [the French romance] leaves Balin no escape and no choice, [Malory] suggests that he could have saved himself by turning back and that at that moment his fate was still in his hands' (Malory 1319).
- 7 This remark was omitted in the second and third editions of Vinaver's commentary.
- 8 Vinaver, *Balain* xxix. It is, however, common for Malory critics to employ the term tragedy in a different, even opposite sense. Compare, for instance, Benson 208: 'we find good evidence for considering the *Morte Darthure* a tragedy, with Arthur and his knights suffering the just consequences of their sins.' This too is a noble conception of tragedy, albeit not a classical one. For the sake of clarity, I have used the word tragedy throughout in the Aristotelean sense which Vinaver attributes to it here.

- 9 See *La Mort le Roi Artu* par. 172, 176, and 192; see also Sagremor's remark, par. 190. For commentary, see Frappier 274–88, Micha 192–205, and Lacy 89–96. On the role of fortune in Geoffrey's *Historia*, see Fries, 'Boethian Themes.'
- 10 See, for example, the references to Aeschylus and Sophocles in Frappier 258, 264, 266, 274–76, 283–85.
- 11 Cambridge ms fol. 289c–d (cited in Bogdanow 153); this corresponds to Huth 2:97, in which the repetition of *par aventure* is interrupted in one instance by the substitution of *par miervelles*.
- 12 Cambridge ms fol. 289c–d (cited in Bogdanow 153). For other examples of the *aventure et mescheance* theme in the *Suite du Merlin*, see Bogdanow 149–55, 215–20.
- 13 In *Monarchia* 2.9, Dante defines *fortuna* as 'that cause which we more correctly denominate *divinam providentiam*.' See also Huth 1:154, where Merlin reminds Arthur that 'tu iés rois sacrés, et en cele houneur et en cele dignité fus tu mis seurement par la grasce Jhesucrist non par autre' [you are a holy king, and in that honor and in that dignity you were assuredly established by the grace of none other than Jesus Christ].
- 14 See Frappier 258–62; Lewis 81–84, 139–40, 176–77; and especially Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna*.
- 15 On incest, see Archibald, 'Incest in Medieval Literature,' and especially 'Arthur and Mordred,' which summarizes previous work on the subject (including an influential piece by Helen Adolf, which argues that Arthur's incest is essentially an extreme instance of postlapsarian cupidity). Archibald notes that incest was a popular literary topos in twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature, concluding, however, that the authors of the Vulgate and post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin* romances did little to develop or realize the implications of the incest topos in their own works, although their narratives contain elements from contemporary incest stories.
- 16 Even as early as the fourth century, St. Ambrose had remarked that 'when the account of [David's] deeds has been read, most people... marvel that so great a prophet did not avoid first the contagion of adultery, and afterwards of homicide' (*Apologia David* 1.1).
- 17 That these four books were readily encountered as a unit in the Middle Ages is indicated by the fact that they appeared in Vulgate Bibles as 1, 2, 3, and 4 Kings respectively. The modern argument for the single authorship of 1–2 Sam. and 1–2 Kings is forcibly expressed by Noth (17–26).
- 18 David also shares with Israel a common sin. Reading ahead in the history of the Hebrew kings, we learn that the most grievous of Israel's sins was idolatry. But in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the primary metaphor for idolatry is adultery. Thus in Jer. 3.9, for instance, we read that the Jewish nation has 'committed adultery [Vulgate *moechata est*] with stone and wood;' that is to say, with idols. Again, in Chapter 5 of the same book, the Lord complains of the Israelite people that their 'sons have forsaken me, and have sworn by them that are not gods; I fed them to the full, and they committed adultery [*moechati sunt*], and in the harlot's house they took their ease. They became amorous horses and stallions: every one was neighing after his neighbor's wife' (Jer. 5.7, 8). In

similar fashion the prophet Ezekiel laments that the Jews 'have prostituted themselves [fornicatae sunt] with their idols' (Ezek. 23.37). The adultery trope is again employed in Judges 2.17, 8.27; 1 Chron. 5.25; Ps. 105 (AV 106).38–39; Ezek. 6.9, the whole of Chapter 16, 20.30, Chapter 23; Is. 57.3–9; and Jer. 2.11–25, 13.25–29—always as a metaphor for spiritual apostasy (see also, in the New Testament, Rev. 17–18). In one celebrated instance, a whole book is constructed on the basis of this trope: according to Hosea, the 'minor' prophet who bore that name was actually directed by God to marry a prostitute, who afterwards forsook the prophet and took up with one of his friends. Nevertheless, at Yahweh's instruction, Hosea received her back into his house and was reconciled to her. Thus the prophet enacted on the stage of his own life the forbearance that God had shown to the idolatrous nation of Israel: 'Go yet again, and love that woman, beloved of your friend and an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the sons of Israel—and they look to foreign gods, and cherish the husks of the grapes' (Hos. 3.1). Unfortunately, the prophet's gesture was in vain: in spite of the Lord's forbearance, the Hebrew people continued to worship 'the husks of the grapes' (i.e., empty idols), until Yahweh finally punished them with exile.

- 19 Although Guerin does not point this out, Aquinas does say that children sometimes imitate the sins they see their parents committing, and so repeat them; but he nowhere suggests that children are in any sense 'doomed' to do so. On the contrary, such children are 'etiam majori poena digni, si poenas patrum videntes correcti non sunt [deserving of even greater punishment, when they see the punishments of their parents and yet are not reformed]' (Aquinas la 2ae 87.8 *ad primum*).
- 20 As such it is sometimes referred to as the Vulgate *Suite*, I have, however, avoided this term here in order to avoid confusion with the post-Vulgate romance of the same name.
- 21 The Paris and Ulrich text has for this last phrase 'car par lui verra moult de grant mal en terre.' The correct reading, *vendra*, is preserved in Cambridge ms fol. 232a.
- 22 To be sure, the hint was there in Merlin's prophecy, 'and you have begotten a son on her.' For some reason, though, the king does not yet understand that the child Merlin spoke of, 'conceived...but not yet born,' will be his own child, begotten on Lot's wife. It is only in the later branches of the cycle that Arthur realizes who Mordred really is.
- 23 See Ambrose, *Apologia David* 3.14; Isidore, *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum* 532 (PL 83.411–12); pseudo-Bede, *Quaestiones in Libros Regum* 2.1–2 (PL 93.441–43); and Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* 3.28.55 (PL 75.626–27). Gregory's *allegoresis* was frequently cited (sometimes without attribution) by subsequent commentators: Eucher of Lyon (PL 50.1090–91), Rupert of Deutz (PL 167.1135), Rabanus Maurus (PL 109.99–101), Angelomus the Monk (PL 115.361–65), and Claudius of Turin (PL 104.703–704); it also appears in the popular *Glossa Ordinaria* (PL 113.572). The biblical narrative was also susceptible of political interpretation: see Buc, 'Healing Power.'
- 24 This is not to say that the early Fathers did not also regard David as an *exemplum*:

- see Augustine, *Ennarationes in Psalmos* 50.1–5 (PL 36.585–88) and Gregory, *Moralia* 3.28.54 (PL 75.625).
- 25 The hygienic value of this practice, to which some attribute its institution, is a subject of continuing medical debate.
- 26 These are Gregory's terms; see *Moralia in Iob* 33.12.25 (PL 76.688).
- 27 Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 13.20; cf. *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 2.35. For commentary on both passages, see Evans 96–97. On early Christian and Rabbinical interpretations of the Fall, see Evans 26–104.

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