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The Other Prince of Tides

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The Other Prince of Tides

Dena Strong

His name was originally Medraut -- "the sea child."
That's all we know.

The only truly historic reference to the world's most infamous bastard is a single line from the *Annales Cambriae*, describing the year 537 or 539: "the Battle of Camlann, where Arthur and Medraut fell, and there was death in Britain and Ireland." I could try to argue that the legend-spinners got it all wrong, and that "Medraut" was a general under the war- duke Artorius, but it would be pointless; there's no more evidence for that than there is for the minstrels' version. The line between history and fiction is going to get blurry; when you're talking about King Arthur, there's no other way to do it, because there's so little history and so much fiction. In the end, the distinction doesn't really matter. All of it becomes fiction; as such, all of it becomes the history of another world.

For the sake of the paper, let's say that the events as Malory gave them are the events as they happened. It's entirely possible to hang Malory by his own belt-- without changing any of the events, only their interpretations. Somewhere between the *Annales Cambriae* and the time Malory took pen in hand to fence with the shade of Excalibur, the "sea child" became "evil counsel" -- Mordred, the man who gave the word "bastard" a bad name. The word had always referred to parentage, but I wouldn't be too surprised if its association with personalities came from the legend of Mordred, the literal "royal S. O. B." (*nobody's* ever liked Morgause, not even the feminists). That portrait has survived basically unquestioned by the storytellers for fourteen centuries; to the best of my knowledge, Mary Stewart was the first to present an alternative, and even she felt pulled into the "traditional" ending. So here I am to give Mordred another hearing, fifteen hundred years after it ceased to matter... well, they do the same thing for saints, don't they?

Nobody denies that Malory performed a spectacular feat by taking a hodgepodge of troubadours' songs and pulling them all into a single, semi-coherent story. However, by the time he was done with it, I think he was too exhausted to go back and smooth out the rough edges; some of his explanations simply don't make sense. By the point where the Norton Anthology picks up the story, Mordred is a blood-sucking viper out to get whatever he can in whatever way he can... but that portrait has almost nothing but the adjectives in common with the Mordred we meet at first, and Malory himself doesn't recognize it. There's an interesting comparison between Lancelot, who can do no wrong, and Mordred, who can do no active right, even when the two of them do the same thing. At one point in a joust, Lancelot backed away from a fight with Sir Dinadan, ran off and dressed up as a woman, and came back to fight him in a woman's dress-- thereby totally humiliating Sir Dinadan. "'Well,' said Sir Dinadan to Lancelot, 'thou art so false that I can never be ware of thee...'" (Malory, p. 94); the Queen laughed so hard she fell over. When Lance does it, it's funny; when Mordred does it, though, it's treacherous. A lady

named Alice la Beale Pilgrim came to Camelot, challenging some knight to knock Sir Alisander l'Orphelin out of a square of ground which he couldn't step outside for a year. If somebody managed to do that, she'd marry him. The knights went riding out, and Alice watched Alisander knock a few of them off their horses and she fell in love with Alisander instead. Along comes Mordred just a little bit too late...

Right so came the false knight Sir Mordred, and saw Sir Alisander was assotted upon his lady; and therewithal he took his horse by the bridle, and led him here and there, and had cast to have led him out of that place to have shamed him. [That, by the way, was exactly what Alice had originally wanted; it wasn't Mordred's fault that she changed her mind.] ...So when Alisander understood himself how the false knight would have shamed him had the damosel not been, then was he wroth with himself that Sir Mordred was so escaped his hands... (Malory, 78)

Granted it was a dirty trick, but it was no dirtier than the one Lancelot had just pulled, and no dirtier than the one Sir Dinadan pulled on King Mark with Mordred as an accomplice. Mark (of Tristan-and-Isolde fame) was the one man Malory liked even less than Mordred; Mark and Sir Dinadan came across a group of six knights, and Sir Dinadan told Mark that Mordred was Lancelot. Then he went to join them and Mark stayed behind; upon discovering that Mordred had been injured in some fight, they dressed the court jester in Mordred's armor and sent him chasing after King Mark, who thought that the jester was Mordred and Mordred was Lancelot, and decided to run like hell: "Anon, as King Mark beheld his shield, he said to himself, 'Yonder is Sir Launcelot; alas, now am I destroyed;' and therewithal he made his horse to run as fast as it might through thick and thin. And ever Sir Dagonet [the jester] followed after King Mark, crying and rating him... when [they] saw Dagonet so chase King Mark, they laughed all as they were wood [insane]" (Malory, 25-6). Sir Dinadan is one of Malory's favorites (at this point); Mordred can't be that repulsive if we meet him with five friends who have voluntarily chosen his company and Sir Dinadan feels no qualms about making him part of the joke on King Mark. There's too much of a break between the wry, whimsical Mordred on page 25, who points out that he's been wounded and they should put his armor on Dagonet in order to carry out Dinadan's joke, and the evil-minded hellraiser on page 457 (Norton 393) who jumps into Agravaing's plot enthusiastically.

T. H. White picked up the story from Malory, and finished its polish in a distinctly modern vein; nobody in the Middle Ages would have come up with the twist that Lance, the *preux chevalier*, was as homely as an ape. White also stays remarkably faithful to Malory's view of things, although it's all done with a distinctly modern British humor; the beginning of the Norton clip is echoed neatly in *The Once and Future King*.

Then spoke Sir Gawain and said, 'Brother, Sir Agravaing, I pray you and charge you, move no such matters no more afore me, for wit you well, I will not be of your counsel.'

'So God me help,' said Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth, 'we will not be known of your deeds.'

'Then will I!' said Sir Mordred.
'I lieve you well,' said Sir Gawain, 'for ever unto all unhappiness, sir, ye will grant.' (Norton, 393)

Gawaine said: "For the last time, Agravaire, will ye hold yer gab? I winna have airt nor pairt in it."

"Nor will I," said Gareth.

Gaheris said: "Nor I."

"If ye press on with it, ye will but split the clan. I have told ye plain that none of us will help ye. Ye will be left to yer ain stour."

Mordred had been waiting with sneering impatience.

"I am on Agravaire's side," he said. "Lancelot and my aunt are a disgrace to all of us. Agravaire and I will take the responsibility, if no one else will.' ...

"Ye were aye fit for work of shame."

"Thank you." (White, 584)

White also does a remarkable job of turning a puppet villain into the man everybody loves to hate-- even the man himself, who has no illusions about anything. We don't necessarily like what Mordred says, but up to a point he has the truth inarguably on his side. He's a bastard in both senses of the word, and quite aware of it; he's also one of the most intelligent men in the book, with a cynical knack for pointing out the obvious, senseless stupidity in Arthur's life. In a book full of astounding one-liners, Mordred is a master of insightful sarcasm:

[Gawaine said,] "I doubt ye will ever patch it up in full, while Mordred is on life."

Lifting the tapestry of the doorway with a pale hand, the ghostly creature in half-armor, its unarmed elbow in a sling, stood on the threshold.

"Never," it said with the bitter drama of a perfect cue, "while Mordred is alive."

Arthur turned round in surprise. He surveyed the feverish eyes, then went to his son with a movement of concern.

"Why, Mordred!"

"Why, Arthur."

"Dinna speak to the King like yon. How dare ye?"

"Do not speak to me at all."

... Gawaine was turning on his half-brother like a mechanism. His whole body turned.

"Mordred," he asked with a cumbrous accent. "Mordred, wha' have ye left Sir Gareth?"

"Where have I left them both?... Go and look for them, Gawaine, among the people on the square."

Arthur began: "Gareth and Gaheris..."

"They are dead."

". . .Mordred!"

"Arthur," he replied. He turned on him a face of stone, insanely mixed between venom, blandness and misery.

"...But, Mordred, are you sure they are dead?"

"The top of Gareth's head was off," he said with indifference, "and he had a surprised expression. Gaheris had no expression, because his head was split in half."

"...It must have been a mistake."

"It must have been a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the pure and fearless Knight of the Lake, whom you have allowed to cuckold you and carry off your wife, amused himself before he left by murdering my two brothers-- both unarmed, and both his loving friends." (White, p. 617-619.)

This Mordred is at least consistent-- which leaves an obvious problem: in *either* book, how could a man with Mordred's intelligence (and/or deviousness) seriously believe that Arthur would rather fight Lancelot over Gawaine's dead brother than come home and deal with his treacherous son? Malory decided that Mordred was simply a traitor, and that treachery would pass for a motivation for almost anything. White had a better alternative: since only a fool or a madman would think that Arthur wouldn't defend his crown, White's Mordred slowly slips over the border from dramatic to insane. And even mad, Mordred keeps the mockingly observant spark at the core:

"Come now," he said, in high good humour, quite mad, enjoying his cat-and-mouse. "We must not rush it in this bald way.... You must call me Mordy, or some such pet name. Then it will seem much more natural when I call you Jenny. Everything will go forward so much more pleasantly."

She would not answer.

"...Suppose I were to tell you... that I had a letter this morning? That Arthur and Lancelot are dead?"

"I should not believe you."

"They killed each other in battle."

"It is not true," she said quietly.

"As a matter of fact, it isn't. How did you guess?"

"If it was not true, it was cruel to say so. Why did you say it?"

"A great many people would have believed it, Jenny. I expect a great many will."

"Why should they?" she asked, before she caught his drift. Then she stopped, catching her breath...

"You can't mean..."

"Oh, but I can," he exclaimed gaily, "and I do. What do you think would happen if I were to announce poor Arthur's death?"

"...It would not be true! Arthur has always treated you with such scrupulous justice..."

He said with cold eyes: "I have never asked to be treated with justice. It is something which he does to people, to amuse himself."

"But he is your father!"

"So far as that goes, I did not ask to be born. I suppose he did that to amuse himself, also."

"... He didn't know," she explained gently, "that your mother was his sister, when it happened."

"And I suppose he didn't know I was his son, when he put us out on the boat?"

"He was scarcely nineteen, Mordred... He has been so fair..."

"The just and noble king! Yes, it is easy to be fair, when it is over. That is the amusing part." (White, 649-651)

So it looks like all the bases were covered: Mordred has not only lost his common sense, he's lost his mind with it, and he takes an army to Camlann...

Where did he get the army?

Malory gives Mordred something that he didn't consider very praiseworthy: the support of the people of Britain.

For then was the common voice among them that with Arthur was none other life than war and strife, and with Sir Mordred was great joy and bliss. Thus was Sir Arthur depraved, and evil said of. And many there were that King Arthur had made up of naught, and given them lands, might not then say him a good word.

Lo ye all Englishmen, see ye not what a mischief here was? For he that was the most king and knight of the world, and most loved the fellowship of noble knights, and by him they were all upholden, now might not these Englishmen hold them content with him.

...And so fared the people at that time, they were better pleased with Sir Mordred than they were with King Arthur; and much people drew unto Sir Mordred, and said they would abide with him for better and for worse. And so Sir Mordred drew with a great host to Dover, for there he heard say that Sir Arthur would arrive, and so he thought to beat his own father from his lands; and the most part of England held with Sir Mordred, the people were so new fangle. (Malory, 506-7)

One point where White differs from Malory is that White has Mordred act as the driving force behind Gawaine's insistence that Arthur go to war with Lancelot, over Sir Gareth's death. In Malory, it's just Gawaine acting without thinking about the consequences. (White, 628-631; Malory, 475-481; Norton, 401-2.) Here, I believe Malory had a more likely story. Yes, Gareth's death was a tragedy for everybody involved; but he was one man. Both Arthur and Gawaine should have realized that one accidental death was not a good enough reason to start a war that would cause hundreds more. The people of England were more aware of it than their king was-- Arthur appeared to be more concerned with one knight than with hundreds of foot soldiers, and more concerned with his wife than with hundreds of knights. That really isn't a portrait of a kind and responsible monarch. If Mordred realized it too, then he was fighting for the good of the *country*, rather than the good of the Round Table. That's one in the teeth for Malory, who blames the popular support of a new king on "new-fangledness" rather than a simple exhaustion with Arthur... the king who had recently done nothing but spill blood over his inability to keep his wife in his own bed.

Arthur's side wasn't always right, just because it was Arthur's-- and Mordred's side couldn't have always been wrong, just because it was Mordred's. By the end, Arthur had alienated most of his own people-- and

he took the trained knights with him; when they returned, he slaughtered his own citizens because they disagreed with him, and they slaughtered the knights because they were so sick of 'might making right' (despite White's idea of Arthur's intentions). Malory had been knighted himself; it's only reasonable (if horribly short-sighted) for him to accept the Round Table's view of things. T. H. White made Malory's tale a better story-- but he didn't necessarily make the story itself better.

Neither Malory nor White could take an important philosophical step; neither of them could question that King Arthur was on the right side at all times. But if you can take that step and look at the events again, all of the implausibilities go away-- Arthur was a good king for a long time, and then his court got out of his control; once that happened, he was so concerned with regaining his Round Table that he forgot about his country. So his heir tried to do what was best for his country-- take the throne himself, and let Arthur and Gawaine and Lancelot squabble it out among themselves. Marrying Guinevere would have been an important move to gain the symbolic connection with the crown; after all, Arthur had been illegitimate and he'd needed Excalibur as a symbol of royalty. Excalibur was currently in France, beating on the walls of Joyous Garde over one thoughtless swing of another sword; Guinevere was in England, within reach, and it really didn't look like any of the knights would stop fighting until most of them were dead anyway. As far as I can see, Mordred's biggest mistake was in getting himself killed-- and that was because of a vicious streak in Arthur, who ignored his friends' advice to let him be. In a weird way, Arthur asked for it; in an equally weird way, Mordred didn't. And if he'd won that battle, literal as well as literary history might have turned out a lot differently. Wouldn't it be strange if Mordred-- the traitor third in line after Judas and Brutus-- was actually a better regent than his father? Mordred was fighting to destroy what the Round Table stood for; but perhaps, heretical as it sounds, that wasn't such an evil idea after all.

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