

Privacy and the ideology of chivalry in the oaths of medieval heralds and Malory's *Morte Darthur*

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In this paper, I argue that the late medieval chivalric culture of England and France encompassed a developing notion of privacy, one which was imaginatively probed in chivalric romances and embedded in the oaths sworn by the secular officers of chivalry, the heralds. I begin by establishing that, on either side of the Channel, medieval heraldic oaths were centred on the same untenable promise to serve both a particular lord and the nobility at large on equal terms. While heralds vowed to report treason to their masters, they concomitantly swore to serve as confessors of arms to the nobility as a whole and to never repeat a noble person's dishonourable words or deeds without their permission. Within heralds' oaths thus lay a conspicuous, though convoluted, conceptualization of privacy demarcating a realm of autonomous action within which noble individuals need not be accountable to their community. I then turn to explore how a similar imperative of privacy undergirds the vision of chivalric honour in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, particularly in Malory's treatment of Aggravayne and Mordred's ruinous public revelation of Guenevere and Lancelot's union. In both heralds' oaths and Malory's *Morte Darthur*, privacy offered medieval nobles increasing license to eschew the obligations of honour which ostensibly justified their pre-eminence and significantly undercut the moral claims made for chivalry.

Did late medieval people have any notion of privacy? The matter has long been contested; on the one hand, C. M. Woolgar tells us that 'privacy, in the modern sense, was a development of the seventeenth century onwards' and that, in the densely inhabited great households of late medieval England, people of all ranks 'led a public life, with no privacy in any sense that we would recognise'.¹ In her work on late medieval London, Shannon McSheffrey similarly asserts that 'in our conceptualizations of privacy and publicity we are inheritors of liberal Enlightenment thought' and that therefore our present 'divorce between public and private would have been wholly foreign' to medieval people, 'especially in the realm of sexuality'.² On the other hand, scholars such as Diane Shaw and Marion Turner argue that fourteenth-century Londoners did have an incipient notion of privacy and, indeed, that that they increasingly sought to demarcate private spaces for themselves within the city by subdividing their

¹ C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT, 1999), 197 and 8.

² Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006), 191 and 193.

households into smaller, more personal chambers.³ Legal evidence supports this; there are fourteenth-century examples of neighbours suing one another under London's Assize of Nuisance for perceived infringements on their privacy, such as the creation of intrusively placed windows or peepholes.⁴ Other scholars, including Danielle Régnier-Bohler, Georges Duby, Philippe Braunstein and, more recently, Laura Ashe, propose that conceptualizations of privacy emerged alongside a new cultural focus on interiority in the later Middle Ages.⁵ 'Privacy gives interiority reality', Ashe writes, for it is the private realm within which an individual self can be given free rein, safe from the censure, intervention, and demands of the public and its authorities.⁶

The late medieval chivalric culture of England and France is one place where we can see a developing notion of privacy, one which was imaginatively probed in chivalric romances and embedded in the oaths sworn by the secular officers of chivalry, the heralds. Although the medieval English and French Colleges of Arms were two distinct entities, heralds on either side of the Channel functioned as an international brotherhood which shared the same customs and, often, the same corporate texts.⁷ The oaths sworn by English and French heralds in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries survive in a handful of variations, all of which agree largely in substance and centre on the same untenable promise to serve both a particular lord and the nobility at large on equal terms.⁸ As we shall see, while heralds vowed to report treason to their masters, they concomitantly swore to serve as impartial confessors of arms to the nobility as a whole and to never repeat a noble person's words without his or her permission nor to reveal any knowledge which would damage a noble's reputation. Within heralds' oaths thus lay a conspicuous though convoluted conceptualization of privacy, one which, in theory, extended both to men and women, lords and their knights, as well as to allies and enemies. In the following discussion, I place heralds' oaths in dialogue with Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* and propose that, like the heralds, Malory was grappling with a nascent notion of privacy. Both heralds' oaths and the *Morte Darthur* are texts which tentatively demarcate a realm of autonomous action within which noble individuals need not be accountable to their community and, moreover, which suggest that there are certain hidden realities that the community itself does

³ Diane Shaw, 'The Construction of the Private in Medieval London', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 23 (1996), 447–66 and Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton, NJ, 2019), esp. 20, 169, 182–3, and 196. Contrary to Woolgar, Felicity Heal observes a similar 'impulse towards privacy' in *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), 43. For further discussion of domestic privacy, see Dominique Barthélemy and Philippe Contamine, 'Les aménagements de l'espace privé', in Georges Duby, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée, 2: De l'Europe féodale à la Renaissance*, 397–504 (1985; repr., Paris, 1999) and Jeremy Goldberg and Stephanie Tarbin, 'In Private: The Individual and the Domestic Community', in Andrew Lynch and Susan Broomhall, eds, *A Cultural History of the Emotions in the Late Medieval, Reformation, and Renaissance Age*, 123–40 (London, 2019).

⁴ *London Assize of Nuisance, 1301–1431: A Calendar*, ed. Helena M. Chew and William Kellaway (London, 1973), xxii, xxv, xxvi, and xxxii, as well as Shaw and Turner in the previous note.

⁵ Danielle Régnier-Bohler, 'Exploration d'une littérature', in Duby, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée*, 303–94 and, in the same volume, Georges Duby and Philippe Braunstein, 'L'émergence de l'individu', 505–618. Laura Ashe, *The Oxford English Literary History, 1: Conquest and Transformation: 1000–1350* (Oxford, 2017), esp. 286–93. For further studies of medieval privacy, see Diana Webb, *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages* (London, 2007) and Alice Jane Cooley, 'Get a Room: Private Space and Private People in Old French and Middle English Love Stories', PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2010. Privacy in the works of Chaucer and the *Gawain*-Poet have also received particular critical attention; see e.g. R. W. Hanning, 'Telling the Private Parts: "Pryvete" and Poetry in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*', in James McMurrin Dean and Christian K. Zacher, eds., *The Idea of Medieval Literature: New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard*, 108–25 (Newark, DE, 1992); Peter Goodall, 'Being Alone in Chaucer', *The Chaucer Review*, 27 (1992), 1–15; Steven R. Guthrie, 'Chivalry and Privacy in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *La Chastelaine de Vergy*', *The Chaucer Review*, 34 (1999), 150–73; and A.C. Spearing, 'Public and Private Spaces in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Arthuriana*, 4 (1994), 138–45.

⁶ Ashe, *Conquest and Transformation*, 288.

⁷ For this internationalism, see Anthony Wagner, *Heralds of England: A History of the Office and College of Arms* (London, 1967), esp. 43–4.

⁸ For discussion of the various surviving versions of the French and English heraldic oaths and of heralds' contradictory obligations of loyalty, see Wagner, *Heralds of England*, 43–6 and Emma-Catherine Wilson, 'An Unedited Version of the Medieval French Heraldic Oath', *Notes and Queries*, 71 (2024), 386–9.

not benefit from revealing. These developments significantly undercut the moral claims made for chivalry, including those asserted by heralds.

Before we go any further, however, a distinction must be drawn between privacy and secrecy, where the first is a licit and socially upheld right to withdraw (by oneself or with others) from the public sphere, and the latter is an illicit, dishonourable, and threatening concealment from the public sphere.⁹ In societies without any concept of privacy, all thoughts and behaviours involve the interests of the community as a whole and anything which is hidden is necessarily suspect and secretive. Conversely, in societies with a concept of privacy, individuals have the right to a hidden sphere involving only their own interests from which the community collectively agrees to avert its gaze. Of course, the risk is always present that the individual's private sphere will be invaded by others, but such an invasion would itself constitute a violation of the community's social contract. It is important to note that this semantic distinction between privacy and secrecy was by no means consistently employed in the Middle Ages. The terms *private* and *secret* were linguistically very close across Middle English and Middle French; while the English *prive*, its cognates (e.g., *preveize*, *prevai*), and the French *privé* were most often used to designate that which was personal, familial, or intimate and the adjective *secret* and its cognates (e.g., *secré*, *secrète*, *secrettes*) were used in both languages to designate that which was hidden, known only by a few, or mysterious, each of these terms had a wide range of positive and negative connotations which sometimes overlapped.¹⁰ The French *secret* and its cognates were notably often associated positively with the sacred in the Middle Ages while at the same time encompassing numerous negative definitions related to human behaviour.¹¹ The French and English heraldic oaths use only the term *secret*, which I understand in the context of these texts to connote privacy, confidentiality, and discretion, while Malory uses variations of both *private* and *secret*, often in alignment with modern usage. My distinction between privacy and secrecy must therefore not be understood to straightforwardly reflect late medieval usages of these terms but rather as a useful heuristic to unpack chivalric authors' shifting attitudes concerning the limits of an individual's communal obligations.

HERALDS' OATHS AND THE LIMITS OF CONFIDENTIALITY

In the version of the French heraldic oath given in the *Sicily Herald's Tract* (c. 1434–7), Jehan Courtois instructs his fellow officers of arms that: 'en touttes manières vous tendrés en secret ce qui sera à céler' ('in every way you will keep secret that which should be hidden').¹² Although Courtois' terminology is different from that we have established, operating at the heart of his statement is the notion of privacy rather than secrecy; the herald assumes *a priori* that there are certain things 'which should be hidden' from the community and that, even if they are discovered by officers of arms, should not be repeated or reported. While Courtois is cryptic about what it is exactly that should remain hidden, perhaps assuming that his contemporaries would know well enough what was of a private nature, the heraldic oath given in the

⁹ This distinction is indebted to that drawn by Ashe in *Conquest and Transformation*, 286–93.

¹⁰ E.g. one meaning listed by the *MED* for *secret* is 'intimate, privy; trusted'; one for *prive* is 'stealthy, furtive, treacherous'.

¹¹ Frédérique Le Nan, *Le secret dans la littérature narrative arthurienne (1150–1250): Du lexique au motif* (Paris, 2002), 19–104. For further semantic analyses of Latin, English, and French uses of *private*, *secret*, and related terms in the Middle Ages see Georges Duby, 'Ouverture', in Duby, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée*, 15–50 (15–23); Webb, *Privacy and Solitude*, xv–xvi; and Cooley, 'Get a Room', 10–8.

¹² Jehan Courtois, *Parties inédites de l'œuvre de Sicile, héraut d'Alphonse V, Roi d'Aragon*, ed. Ferdinand Roland (Mons, 1867), 89; my translation.

earlier *Anjou Tract* (c. 1406) clarifies that officers of arms must vow to conceal the ‘deshonneurs’ (‘dishonours’) of the nobility to the best of their abilities.¹³ The mid- to late fifteenth-century Anonymous French heraldic oath similarly specifies that heralds are ‘presé de tous-jours raporter le bien & d’eschever et celer le mal’ (pressed to always report the good and to leave off and conceal the bad’) when reporting the deeds of noblemen.¹⁴ This obligation can be seen as the logical result of heralds’ vows to safeguard the honour of the nobility as a whole and to serve all noble people impartially; were a herald to report a knight’s dishonourable words or deeds to a lord, not only would the herald damage the honour and reputation of the knight, but he would also overtly be prioritizing his loyalty to the lord. The limitations imposed on heralds by their duty to protect the honour of all noble people and to remain impartial required that they turn a blind eye to the dishonourable deeds of the nobility and, conceptually, treat them as private.

In late medieval noble communities where knights purported to be held to a higher moral standard than their social inferiors, heralds’ oaths thus gave these noblemen a remarkably high degree of latitude. According to Ramon Llull’s *Llibre de l’orde de cavalleria* (1274–6), one of the most popular treatises on chivalry in the late Middle Ages, it was precisely the threat of shame which was to prevent knights from compromising the principles of their high office:

vergonya deffen cavayler, qui és, après offici de clergue, lo pus alt offici que sie, que no s’enclí a vils fets, ni la nobilitat de son coratge no devayl a malvestat ni a engan ni a nuyl malvat nodriment.

(shame protects the knight, whose office, after that of the cleric, is the highest office that there is, so that he does not stoop to base deeds and the nobility of his courage does not descend into malfeasance, deceit or any evil habit.)¹⁵

Llull therefore instructed that a newly dubbed knight ought to show himself to the people of his community so that they could know of his vow to defend the honour of chivalry and keep him accountable, ‘cor, on més de gents sabran sa cavaylaria, major reffrenament aurà lo noveyl cavayler a fer nuyls faylments qui sien contra son orde’ (‘for the more people who know about his knighthood the greater restraint the new knight will have from committing any misdeeds against his Order’).¹⁶ Certainly, a knight could not licitly hide his misdeeds from his community. In the romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there is similarly strong sense that a knight’s honour was a matter of communal concern and that each knight needed to report both his honourable and shameful deeds in full to his community. In Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, the knight Calogrenant is enjoined by Queen Guenevere and a group of Arthurian knights to recount how he was shamefully defeated by the powerful Esclados the Red.¹⁷ Likewise, in Walter Map’s tale of Sadius and Galo, the latter of these

¹³ Nicolas Villart, *Anjou Tract*, edited in Gert Melville, ‘Der Brief des Wappenkönigs Calabre. Sieben Auskünfte über Amt, Aufgaben und Selbstverständnis spätmittelalterlicher Herolde’, *Majestas*, 3 (1995), 69–116 (108, Paris text); my translation. Subsequent footnotes supply page numbers for both the Oxford and Paris versions of the text, unless a direct quotation is cited, in which case the version of the text in which the quotation occurs is specified.

¹⁴ The Anonymous French Oath, edited in Wilson, ‘An Unedited Version’, 3–4 (4).

¹⁵ Ramon Llull, *Llibre de l’orde de cavalleria*, ed. Albert Soler Llopert (Barcelona, 1988), 202, V: 4; translation from Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, trans. Noel Fallows (Woodbridge, 2013), 66.

¹⁶ Llull, *Llibre de l’orde de cavalleria*, 200, IV. 12; translation from Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, 65.

¹⁷ Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, in Daniel Poirion et al., eds, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1994), 337–503 (ll. 53–587). See Joseph J. Duggan’s discussion of shame in Chrétien’s romances in *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven, CT, 2001), 93–132 (see 115–9 for *Yvain* in particular).

knights is forced to recount with great agony and shame how he attempted to rape a maiden and afterwards acted with cowardice when she summoned a giant to defend herself.¹⁸ The invitation letter of King Jean II's Company of the Star (founded in 1352), which stipulates that all members of the order must meet and recount their glorious and shameful adventures each year, attests that the sense a knight should be publicly dishonoured for his misdeeds persisted into the later Middle Ages.¹⁹ However, the notion of privacy codified in heralds' oaths by the beginning of the fifteenth century concomitantly carved out space for self-proclaiming chivalric knights to behave poorly without incurring either shame or legal repercussions. While it is worth noting that the knights of the high Middle Ages were by no means inherently more honourable than their later medieval counterparts, the conceptualization of privacy evidenced in heralds' oaths allows medievalists to pinpoint one of the strategies of self-justification available to knights to occlude their misdeeds in the late Middle Ages.²⁰

In the English heraldic oath recorded in the mid-fifteenth-century Black Book of the Admiralty as well as in the Anonymous French oath, this notion of privacy in service of the nobility was expressed through analogy with the confidentiality of confession.²¹ While it is worth noting that Catholic confession had not always been a private practice and that partitioned confessional boxes did not come into use until the second half of the sixteenth century, the seal of confession was instituted in canon law at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.²² In addition to the well-known decree that each Christian person having reached the age of discernment must confess themselves annually to a priest, the twenty-first constitution of this council equally required that the priest take utmost care 'ne verbo vel signo vel alio quovis modo prodat aliquatenus peccatorem' ('not to betray the sinner at all by word or sign or in any other way').²³ In both the Anonymous French and English heraldic oaths, officers of arms emphasized the confidentiality of their service to the nobility by characterizing themselves as 'confesseur[s] d'armes', or 'confessour[s] of armes'.²⁴ The first of these oaths required that a herald swear:

que vous serez secret en gardant tous les secrez conseilz de tous chevaliers, escuiers, dames et damoiselles sans les reveler ne descouvrir en quelconque maniere que ce soit. Et generalement vous garderez comme un vray confesseur d'armes toutes manieres de conseil et secrez sans les aucunement descouvrir ou reveler horsmis raison[.]

(that you will be secret in keeping all the secret counsels of all knights, squires, ladies, and maidens without revealing them nor uncovering them in any way whatsoever. And in general you will keep like a true confessor of arms all manner of counsels and secrets without uncovering or revealing them in any way without reason.)²⁵

¹⁸ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, C. N. L. Brooke, and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), 223–34.

¹⁹ For the Company of the Star, see D'Arcy Jonathan Dacre Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown: The Monarchical Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe 1325–1520* (Woodbridge, 1987), 167–210.

²⁰ For the frightening reality of knightly violence across the medieval period, see Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (1999; repr., Oxford, 2001).

²¹ The English oath is printed in Travers Twiss, ed., *Monumenta juridica: The Black Book of the Admiralty*, 4 vols (London, 1871–6), 1. 297–9.

²² For the development of private confession see Suzanne Verderber, *The Medieval Fold: Power, Repression, and the Emergence of the Individual* (Basingstoke, 2013), esp. 25–55 and Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ, 1977), esp. 16–27 (confessional boxes are discussed at 82).

²³ Norman P. Tanner, ed. and trans., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols (Washington, DC, 1990), 1. 245.

²⁴ The Anonymous French Oath, 3; *Monumenta juridica*, 1. 297.

²⁵ The Anonymous French Oath, 3; my translation.

Thus, just as a late medieval knight could confess his sins to a priest without fear of social repercussions, so he could divulge his chivalric dishonours to a herald and gain guidance without damaging his public reputation.

In theory, anything a herald was told or overheard, no matter the locale or the speaker (so long as this person was noble), was liable to be treated with the confidentiality of confession. As the English and Anonymous French oaths take care to specify, a herald was therefore prohibited from bearing testimony to a disagreement he had overheard between two gentlemen unless he obtained permission from both parties. If this permission were denied, the herald was instructed to 'kepe your mouth close, and bere no wittnesse', even if pressed for information by public authorities such as a sovereign, judge, or (in the Anonymous French oath) court of chivalry.²⁶ A herald's oath and the private matters it safeguarded were thus remarkably posited to stand beyond the realm of public obligations, just as the confessions made to a priest—but with the crucial difference that a herald could impose no penance. Despite heralds' vow to privately counsel knights towards 'trouth, worshippe, and vertue', the secular cult of chivalry which heralds served was one which functioned on the public recognition of honour and prowess.²⁷ Private penance in such a model is meaningless to begin with, and there is no indication in heralds' oaths or in other chivalric texts that officers of arms ever had the authority to impose such self-abasement on their masters. From within the cult of chivalry, the knights of the late Middle Ages therefore had very little to keep them in check, and the religious model of confession appropriated in heralds' oaths became close to meaningless once stripped of its penitential purpose.²⁸

Heralds' imperative not to reveal the indiscretions of the nobility is reinforced in the *Anjou Tract*, in which the Anjou King of Arms, Nicolas Villart, considers what a herald must do if he discovers the secrets of clandestine lovers. It is in Villart's discussion that we find heralds' oaths most directly tested against the treatment of adulterous or otherwise illicit love in vernacular romances such as Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Due to the fact that heralds were sworn to serve both the lovers themselves as well those whom they were dishonouring, notably the female lover's spouse or father, this was a complicated matter. Although Villart equivocates that he himself is not wise enough to decide on 'si grant cas' ('such an important affair'), both the Oxford and Paris witnesses of his treatise advise heralds not to reveal the lovers.²⁹ In the Oxford witness, a herald happening upon lovers is instructed 'le taire' ('to keep silent') and, if the lovers have the intention of marrying, to act as their 'loyal et secret messagier' ('loyal and secret messenger').³⁰ However, if the couple does not intend to marry, the herald must simply 'honestement et gracieusement departir et laisser toutes ambazades, gardant tousiours leur hommes' ('honestly and graciously depart and leave off delivering messages, always keeping their men'), for it is a herald's vow 'ne mentir d'armes ne mesdire d'amours' ('not to lie concerning arms nor to talk ill of love').³¹ The phrase 'gardant tousiours leur hommes' is highly ambiguous given the multiple meanings of the verb *garder* and the lack of clarity about who is meant by 'leur hommes', which may refer to the lord's retainers. It is therefore unclear in the Oxford witness if the herald should depart completely or remain nearby to watch over

²⁶ *Monumenta juridica*, 1. 298. Cf. The Anonymous French Oath, 4. As I have elsewhere noted, heralds' vows thus help explain why these men were so routinely excluded from the judgements of the medieval courts of chivalry, 'An Unedited Version', 2–3. Counterintuitively, English kings of arms (the highest rank of herald) could bear witness to disputes; see Anthony Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages: An Inquiry into the Growth of the Armorial Function of Heraldry* (1956; repr., Oxford, 2000), 56–64.

²⁷ *Monumenta juridica*, 1. 297. Cf. The Anonymous French Oath, 4.

²⁸ See Ashe's discussion of late medieval knights' empty appropriation of religious models and her argument that chivalry was a self-justifying art of success in *Conquest and Transformation*, 181–240.

²⁹ Villart, *Anjou Tract*, 105 (Oxford text); my translation.

³⁰ Villart, *Anjou Tract*, 104 (Oxford text); my translation.

³¹ Villart, *Anjou Tract*, 104 (Oxford text); my translation.

his lord's retainers (perhaps to keep them from discovering their lord's covert union).³² In the Paris witnesses of the treatise, the herald is still more explicitly instructed 'ne dire voir d'amours' ('not to reveal love') and is obliged to deliver messages between all consenting lovers, even those, by extension, who do not intend to marry.³³ In both versions of the *Anjou Tract*, then, clandestine lovers discovered by heralds are afforded a private sphere within which their actions are not answerable to the community so long as they remain hidden. To reveal hidden love would be inherently unchivalrous, Villart implies.

There were limits, however, to heralds' confidentiality, especially as these officers' loyalty to the nobility at large was undercut by their vow to serve one particular master above all others, to whom they were obligated to report treason. Indeed, both the English and Anonymous French oaths take care to specify that a herald's vow not to repeat the words of the nobility did not apply to treason. English royal heralds explicitly swore to be 'servisable and secrett in all poyntes, except treason' and to report 'any maner langage or any other thing that shulde touche treason' to the king or his council.³⁴ French heralds were similarly expected to report their knowledge of 'aucune trayson' ('any treason') conspired against either the French sovereign or their own masters.³⁵ Privacy could therefore not condone treason. At a conceptual level, this makes sense. Treason in its very nature threatens the common good and implicates the interests of the community as whole; there can be no claim that the words or actions of traitors are beyond the public sphere. At the moment where treason is discovered, then, privacy becomes secrecy: an illicit concealment from the public sphere to which a blind eye cannot be turned. In the English heraldic oath, it was additionally stipulated that heralds' vows of confidentiality did not apply to any words or deeds dishonouring women, for such crimes are 'ayenst the lawe of Godde, and of all gentillesse'.³⁶ Although it may therefore appear clearly defined in what circumstances a noble person could or could not claim a right to privacy and, by extension, expect heralds to hold their tongues, in reality treason was a highly malleable concept which could encompass any number of words or actions, thus potentially nullifying heralds' vow of confidentiality.³⁷ The notion of privacy given expression in heralds' oaths was fragile indeed.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in a late medieval chivalric culture driven by the public recognition of honour and its converse, shame, that any notion of privacy found its tentative beginnings. It is similarly remarkable that heralds, men who claimed the authority to shape chivalric reality by crying the deeds of the nobility and bestowing honour, stipulated in their oaths that certain of the nobility's deeds should remain hidden and unaccounted for. Of course, these stipulations were not intended as an ethical defence of privacy for its own sake. In one respect, heralds' vows of confidentiality can be seen as the logical result of these officers' primary duty to safeguard the honour of all noble people and of their need to be trusted to deliver messages without betraying secrets. These vows also considerably curbed officers of arms' power to shape noble reputations, and they appear to have evolved naturally

³² See 'garder', *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français (1330–1500)*, Université de Lorraine (pubd online 2023), <<http://www.atilf.fr/dmf>> accessed 11 June 2024.

³³ Villart, *Anjou Tract*, 105 (Paris text); my translation.

³⁴ *Monumenta juridica*, 1. 297.

³⁵ The Anonymous French Oath, 3; my translation.

³⁶ *Monumenta juridica*, 1. 298.

³⁷ For the malleability of the concept of treason see E. Amanda McVitty, *Treason and Masculinity in Medieval England: Gender, Law and Political Culture* (Woodbridge, 2020), esp. 5–7 and 15–8; Maité Billoré, Introduction to Myriam Soria and Maité Billoré, eds, *La trahison au Moyen Âge: De la monstruosité au crime politique (Ve–XVe siècle)* (Rennes, 2010), 15–31; Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (1999; repr., Philadelphia, PA, 2002), 206–47; Maurice Keen, *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms*, 149–66; J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1970), esp. 1–14; and S. H. Cuttler, *The Law of Treason and Treason Trials in Later Medieval France* (Cambridge, 1982), esp. 1–27.

as the result of powerful noblemen's desire to avoid shame. While the ideology of chivalry had long sought to assert that the nobility was morally superior to others and that 'la bonne ordre de chevalerie [...] pourroit l'en et devoit tenir la plus dure ordre de toutes' ('the good order of knighthood [...] should be considered the most rigorous order of all'), the realities of human behaviour necessarily required obfuscation.³⁸ When appropriated to serve chivalric ideology, the notion of privacy created a space for noble people to act in any way they chose without accountability or the risk of incurring dishonour. Heralds' careful qualification of what their oaths could condone—dishonours, disputes, and clandestine love—and what they could not—treason—signals that they were attuned to the potentially dangerous social ramifications of their nascent notion of privacy. Moreover, although the oaths we have explored were sworn exclusively by heralds, these texts attempted to codify chivalric attitudes which extended beyond heralds themselves and to their noble masters. As Richard W. Kaeuper explains, 'We can best discover the ideals of knights themselves in works written by them or by those quite close to them'.³⁹ While Kaeuper tells us that 'vernacular manuals or handbooks written to instruct knights provide a classic source', heraldic texts provide an equally valuable though often overlooked perspective on knightly attitudes.⁴⁰ In heralds' oaths in particular, medievalists are afforded an insight into how late medieval chivalric culture came to encompass a developing notion of privacy and, thereby, a new lens through which to read contemporary chivalric literature shaped by the same cultural pressures as those navigated by heralds.

MALORY'S MORTE DARTHUR AND THE POLITICS OF PRIVACY

One of the works of literature which can be elucidated by heralds' efforts to systematize chivalric ideals and codes of conduct is Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (completed in 1469–70). Richard Barber's assertions that Malory, a fifteenth-century knight who spent some time in the court of King Edward IV, must have been familiar with heraldic texts and that these texts subsequently helped shape his portrayal of the fictional Arthurian court have been widely accepted.⁴¹ Barber notes that Malory modelled the Pentecostal oath sworn by the knights of the Round Table, one of Malory's additions to his sources, on the oath of the Order of the Bath, and that the tournaments of the *Morte Darthur* reflect the English tournament tradition recorded in contemporary heraldic miscellanies.⁴² Karen Cherewatuk has additionally demonstrated that, regardless of whether Malory was directly inspired by heraldic texts, chivalric miscellanies containing heraldic material 'share with the *Morte Darthur* a complex and syncretic vision of knighthood which undergirds Malory's work and which the author, his audience, and even his editor held in common'.⁴³ Despite Malory's apparent lack of interest in the rules of blazonry and the scarcity of heralds in his work, texts copied and circulated by heralds such as the oaths of secular orders of chivalry, combat ordinances, and didactic treatises on

³⁸ Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. and trans. Elspeth Kennedy, with introduction by Richard W. Kaeuper (Philadelphia, PA, 1996), 174–5.

³⁹ Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, 273.

⁴⁰ Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, 273.

⁴¹ Richard Barber, 'Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Court Culture Under Edward IV', *Arthurian Literature*, 12 (1993), 133–55 (148).

⁴² Barber, 'Malory's *Le Morte*', 148–51. The similarity of the Pentecostal oath to the oath of the Order of Bath has more recently been discussed in Ralph C. Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur* (Woodbridge, 2008), 20–2.

⁴³ Karen Cherewatuk, 'Sir Thomas Malory's "Grete Booke"', in D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., ed., *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's Morte Darthur*, 42–67 (43) (Woodbridge, 2000). See also Karen Cherewatuk, "'Gentyll' Audiences and "Grete Bookes": Chivalric Manuals and the *Morte Darthur*', *Arthurian Literature*, 15 (1997), 205–16 and Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* (Woodbridge, 2003), esp. chapter 2: 'The Political Interests of the Gentry and their "Grete Bokes"', 39–82.

knighthood have therefore been shown to illuminate the cultural knowledge underpinning both the *Morte Darthur* and the worldview of its medieval readers.⁴⁴

To my knowledge, the only scholar to have drawn connections between Malory's text and heraldic oaths in particular is Stephen H. A. Shepherd. In his edition of the *Morte Darthur*, Shepherd appends the English heraldic oath, briefly noting that 'It is perhaps worth thinking of Malory, in his writerly capacity as a noncombatant recorder of chivalric endeavour and identity, as [a] kind of herald' and that heralds' vow not to reveal the secrets of the nobility 'resonates well with Malory's famous demur concerning Launcelot and Guenevere'.⁴⁵ I find Shepherd's second observation particularly interesting, and I suggest that it can be taken further. As I shall explore, the resonance between the notion of privacy tentatively defined in heralds' oaths and the *Morte Darthur* extends beyond Malory's obfuscation about the nature of Launcelot and Guenevere's love, to his wider perspectives on chivalry and political stability throughout the text. Like Cherewatuk, my intent is not to write an influence study but rather to demonstrate how the texts I pair 'mutually illuminate each other and their shared chivalric culture'.⁴⁶ Both heralds' oaths and Malory's *Morte Darthur* give particular expression to a broader, more nebulous notion of privacy at play in late medieval chivalric culture. Malory's text is one which works above all through the repetition, modification, and accumulation of corresponding plot points, thus we find him testing the notion of privacy in different ways at multiple moments in his text, notably in instances where covert love is openly exposed.⁴⁷

One episode where the social benefit of exposing hidden lovers is overtly problematized occurs in the 'Tale of Balyn le Sauvage' when Balyn meets a knight named Garnysh who is on the verge of slaying himself. Upon learning that Garnysh is distressed because his lady has failed to meet him in the woods as she had promised, Balyn immediately promises to remedy the situation by finding the lady in question. Under Balyn's lead, the two knights then charge off to the nearby castle where the lady resides. The description of this 'wel wallyd and dyched' castle emphasizes its enclosed, private nature; as Balyn searches the castle for Garnysh's lady, he scours the most intimate of domestic spaces, moving 'fro chamber to chamber' and looking into her bed before finding her asleep in a 'fayr litil gardyn' with another knight in her arms.⁴⁸ When Balyn leads Garnysh to the sleeping couple, the betrayed knight immediately 'smote of bothe their hedes' in a fit of rage.⁴⁹ As Angela Gibson notes, the initial takeaway from this episode would therefore 'seem to be that Balyn successfully saves the life of a good knight and secures punishment for the wicked'.⁵⁰ Yet, the apparent rectitude of the lovers' reckoning quickly sours as Garnysh realizes the consequences of what he has done and blames Balyn for his intervention, bemoaning: 'O, Balyn! Moche sorow hast thow brought unto me, for haddest thow not shewed me that syght I shold have passed my

⁴⁴ For Malory's (largely haphazard) interest in heraldry, see Kenneth J. Tiller, 'The Rise of Sir Gareth and the Hermeneutics of Heraldry', *Arthuriana*, 17 (2007), 74–91 as well as P. J. C. Field's discussions in *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Woodbridge, 1993), 162–9 and in *Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field, 2 vols. (Woodbridge, 2013), II, 858–60.

⁴⁵ Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., '[Oath of a Herald]', in *Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur*, (New York, NY, 2004), 783–5 (784).

⁴⁶ Cherewatuk, 'Sir Thomas Malory's "Grete Booke"', 52.

⁴⁷ Episodes of interest which could not be considered here for lack of space include Lyonett's interruption of Gareth and Lyonesse's premarital tryst in the 'The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney' and the exposure of Tristan and Isolde's adulterous union, for which see the discussions in Terence McCarthy, 'Private Worlds in *Le Morte Darthur*', *Études Anglaises*, 39 (1986), 3–14 and Angela Gibson, 'Malory's Reformulation of Shame', *Arthuriana*, 11 (2001), 64–76.

⁴⁸ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I, 69–70. Field's edition of *Le Morte Darthur* (cited above at n. 41) is used throughout. For the symbolism of the bedchamber, bed, and garden as private spaces in medieval literature see Hollie L. S. Morgan, *Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England: Readings, Representations and Realities* (Woodbridge, 2017) and Régnier-Bohler, 'Exploration d'une littérature', 312–20.

⁴⁹ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I, 70.

⁵⁰ Gibson, 'Malory's Reformulation of Shame', 68.

sorrow.⁵¹ Despite the fact that Malory condenses his principal source, the Post-Vulgate *Suite de Merlin*, throughout this episode, he here adds Balyn's protestation that his intervention was well-intentioned.⁵² Balyn explains that his 'entent' was only that Garnysh 'myght see and knowe her falshede' in order that he love the lady less and regain his courage, continuing: 'God knoweth I dyd none other but as I wold ye dyd to me.'⁵³ Nevertheless, Garnysh is adamant that Balyn is to blame and that it is the 'sorou double' of both having witnessed his lady's infidelity and having killed her which he 'may not endure' and which then causes him to kill himself on the spot.⁵⁴ Malory omits his source's description of Balyn's subsequent shock and self-blame, but the episode's lesson remains the same: no matter one's good intentions, it is sometimes better to leave unpleasant truths deliberately unacknowledged than to expose others' hidden activities.⁵⁵

This lesson grows more politically charged in Malory's account of Mellyagaunte's intrusion on Guenevere in the episode of 'The Knight of the Cart'. In this episode, Launcelot rescues Guenevere from the kidnapper Mellyagaunte only to remain the night at his castle. Launcelot takes this opportunity to enter secretly into the queen's bedchamber and take 'hys pleasaunce and hys lykynge', but he cuts his hand on the iron bars of her window in the process and leaves bloodstains on her sheets.⁵⁶ When Mellyagaunte enters Guenevere's bedchamber the following morning, he sees these bloodstains and in order to 'hyde hys owne treson' immediately accuses her of having slept with one of the injured knights of her retinue.⁵⁷ Lancelot must therefore intervene once more to defend the queen. Although Malory's direct sources for this episode remain unclear, his retelling of Mellyagaunte's intrusion diverges in significant ways from the episode's earlier versions in the Vulgate Cycle and Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot ou le chevalier de la charrette*, both of which may have been known to Malory.⁵⁸ In both of these earlier texts, the bloodstains on Guenevere's sheets are openly visible when Mellyagaunte enters her chamber.⁵⁹ By contrast, Malory's Mellyagaunte sees the bloodstains on Guenevere's sheets only once he has pulled back the canopy shielding her bed 'for to beholde her'.⁶⁰ Malory thus raises the stakes of Mellyagaunte's entry into Guenevere's domestic space; the knight now deliberately penetrates the most intimate and personal of all spaces, the canopied bed, in order to expose what is hidden inside. As Dhira B. Mahoney and Molly Martin have shown, the gendered special dynamics of this episode are unmistakably suggestive of rape.⁶¹

Another significant change made by Malory is that his account is the only one to indicate that Mellyagaunte's actions constitute a violation of the queen's privacy. In the Vulgate Cycle

⁵¹ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 70.

⁵² Cf. *La suite du Roman de Merlin*, ed. Gilles Rousseau (Geneva, 2006), 169-80 (paras. 211-23).

⁵³ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 70.

⁵⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 70.

⁵⁵ Cf. *La suite du Roman de Merlin*, 179 (para. 223).

In certain respects, Balyn's episode is analogous to Chaucer's 'The Manciple's Tale', where the crow is harshly punished by Phoebus for having reported his wife's adultery and, thereby, precipitated the god's rageful murder of her. Scholars remain largely divided as to whether crow's report and/or punishment were justified; see e.g. John J. McGavin, 'How Nasty Is Phoebus's Crow?', *The Chaucer Review*, 21 (1987), 444-58 and Peter C. Herman, 'Treason in the "Manciple's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review*, 25 (1991), 318-28.

⁵⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 852.

⁵⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 853. For Mellyagaunte's accusation and the 'widespread understanding that bloodied beds signify adultery' rather than menstruation in late medieval literature, see Morgan, *Beds and Chambers*, 162-5.

⁵⁸ Field explains that it is not possible to prove Malory's direct source for this episode from textual parallels with either earlier version; see his discussion in Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, II. 685-90.

⁵⁹ Gibson, 'Malory's Reformulation of Shame', 71. Cf. Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot ou le chevalier de la charrette*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Daniel Poirion et al. (Paris, 1994), 505-682 (ll. 4752-7) and *Le livre du Graal*, ed. Philippe Walter et al., 3 vols (Paris, 2001-9), II. 1396, para. 459.

⁶⁰ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 853.

⁶¹ Dhira B. Mahoney, 'Symbolic Uses of Space in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', in K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu, eds, *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, 95-106 (102-6) (Woodbridge, 2005); Molly Martin, *Castles and Space in Malory's Morte Darthur*, 212-24 (Woodbridge, 2019).

and Chrétien's *Lancelot*, there is no sense that Mellyagaunte's entry into Guenevere's chamber is transgressive in itself, and Launcelot can only legitimately defend the queen on the technicality that Mellyagaunte has accused her of sleeping with an injured knight other than himself.⁶² In the *Morte Darthur*, Launcelot makes a similar defence, but he argues first and foremost that Mellyagaunte had no business peering into the queen's bed to begin with, no matter the damning evidence he has uncovered:

'Now truly,' seyde Sir Launcelot, 'ye ded nat youre parte nor knyghtly, to touche a quenys bed whyle hit was drawyn and she lyyng therein. And I dare say,' seyde Syr Launcelot, 'my lorde Kyng Arthur hymselff wolde nat have displayed hir curtaynes, she beyng within her bed, onles that hit had pleased hym to have layne hym downe by her. And therefore, Sir Mellyagaunce, ye have done unworshypfully and shamefully to youreselff.'⁶³

Malory thus has Launcelot formulate a notion of privacy, one which is not present in his sources and which Mellyagaunte notably claims not to understand ('Sir, I wote nat what ye meane').⁶⁴ According to Launcelot, Mellyagaunte's exposure of Guenevere's hidden activities is itself illicit; he implies that the knight took the liberty to act as only the king would when about to have sex with his wife. This countercharge is loaded for a number of reasons, not the least of which is Mellyagaunte's well-known lust for the queen and recent kidnapping of her.⁶⁵ Launcelot therefore puts the hypocrite Mellyagaunte in his place, but his retort is wincingly ironic given his own entry into the queen's canopied bed the night before. What is more, Launcelot's defence of Guenevere's privacy is undercut by his somewhat troubling statement that Arthur would not intrude upon his wife's privacy unless he desired sex. By noting this caveat, Launcelot also calls attention to the sexual activity which takes place within the queen's bed even as he defends the privacy of this space. Within these ironies and their unsettling subtexts, the main ideological thrust of Launcelot's countercharge to Mellyagaunte is that it is shameful to suspect the queen and an outrageous offence to invade her privacy in order to seek out potential misdeeds. By extension, Launcelot opens the door for his adulterous love with Guenevere to be understood as private rather than secret and, thereby, to grant it a degree of social legitimacy—so long as the lovers remain hidden.

As has often been observed, Malory himself worked hard not to expose the nature of Guenevere and Launcelot's love in his narration and largely shields the couple from the prying gaze of his readers.⁶⁶ With what Shepherd characterized as heraldic discretion, Malory almost entirely omits his sources' descriptions of the physicality of Guenevere and Launcelot's union.⁶⁷ 'The Knight of the Cart' is in fact the only episode in which Malory confirms that

⁶² In both these earlier texts, Mellyagaunte accuses Guenevere of having slept with Sir Keu, whereas in the *Morte Darthur* he does not name a specific knight.

⁶³ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 853–4.

⁶⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 854. Paul Strohm productively reads Mellyagaunte's peeping as well as the text's systematic disavowal of its own meaning in Lancelot's countercharge through the lens of Freud's primal scene in 'Mellyagant's Primal Scene', in *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000), 201–14.

⁶⁵ See the discussion of Launcelot's countercharge in Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (New Haven, CT, 1975), 189, n. 79 and Gibson, 'Malory's Reformulation of Shame', 70–1.

⁶⁶ See, notably, McCarthy, 'Private Worlds', 10–1; E. Kay Harris, 'Evidence Against Lancelot and Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Treason by Imagination', *Exemplaria*, 7 (1995), 179–208; Robert S. Sturges, 'Epistemology of the Bedchamber: Textuality, Knowledge, and the Representation of Adultery in Malory and the Prose *Lancelot*', *Arthuriana*, 7 (1997), 47–62 and, in the same volume, Beverly Kennedy, 'Adultery in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*', 63–91; as well as Corey Olsen, 'Adulterated Love: The Tragedy of Malory's Lancelot and Guinevere', in D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok, eds, *Malory and Christianity: Essays on Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur*, 29–55 (esp. 39–40) (Kalamazoo, MI, 2013).

⁶⁷ Shepherd, ed., '[Oath of a Herald]', 784.

Launcelot ‘wente to bedde with the quene’ and, even then, there has been some doubt among scholars as to what extent Malory intended to indicate that the couple had sexually consummated their love.⁶⁸ Elsewhere, when Guenevere and Launcelot are accused of adultery by Aggravayne and Mordred, Malory famously equivocates that he ‘lyste nat thereof make no mencion’ of whether the lovers were abed together, ‘for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes’.⁶⁹ While this vagueness is highly contrived and unconvincing given the long tradition of Guenevere and Launcelot’s adultery, Malory manufactures privacy for the couple by reminding us that we too, like their accusers, cannot—and should not—know for certain what occurs behind their closed door or within their canopied bed.

In part, Malory’s authorial discretion appears designed to uphold his favourite knight, Launcelot, as the embodiment of a chivalric ideal who is ontologically good and righteous. Malory cannot fully escape the plot dictated by his sources, but the notion of privacy allows him the leeway to maintain the possibility that Launcelot is innocent or, at the very least, not fully culpable of treason. On another level, Malory’s discretion also reflects the broader sense throughout the *Morte Darthur* that the stability of a chivalric society driven by honour and the avoidance of its converse, shame, depends on the reprieve of privacy, where the moral shortcomings and personal injuries of individuals need not involve the community as a whole. Malory does in a number of places indicate that knights must be held accountable by their community for their misdeeds, as when Gawain smites off the head of a maiden and is made to ride around Camelot with her corpse ‘to telle of hys adventures, and how he slew the lady’.⁷⁰ Megan Leitch has additionally shown that the knights of the Round Table recurrently use accusations of treason to condemn deviant behaviour amongst themselves.⁷¹ However, Malory is also acutely aware that ‘he that hath a prevy hurte is loth to have a shame outward’.⁷² For Malory, the public airing of private grievances always holds the threat of destruction for, given that shame amounts to social death, any slight to a knight’s honour requires his immediate and violent action. As Balyn learns, to seek to expose private dishonours is to risk violent chaos, which is precisely what Mellyagaunte intends when he accuses Guenevere of adultery in order to detract from his own treason. In the *Morte Darthur*, the common good benefits from letting sleeping dogs lie, even if this means that transgressions cannot be openly acknowledged or punished. Through his tight-lipped treatment of Guenevere and Launcelot’s love, Malory constructs a way of viewing Launcelot’s private misdeeds as fundamentally separate from the knight’s public service to Arthur and, by extension, from Malory’s chivalric history of Arthur’s court.⁷³ So long as Launcelot assures the well-being of Arthur’s queen and kingdom, Malory implies, no knight should question what he does in private, for to suggest that he does anything dishonourable would in itself constitute a shameful threat to the community’s stability. This shroud of privacy is what allows for the Arthurian court’s continued existence.

⁶⁸ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 852. For the potential ambiguity concerning the physicality of the lovers’ union in this episode see Christina Francis, ‘Reading Malory’s Bloody Bedrooms’, *Arthurian Literature*, 28 (2011), 1–20 (11–3), though I believe Malory to be clear enough in his subsequent statement that Launcelot ‘toke hys pleasance and hys lykyng until hit was the dawnyng of the day’.

⁶⁹ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 874. Malory makes a similar digression on ‘love nowadays’ immediately preceding the episode of ‘The Knight of the Cart’ at 841–2, therefore contributing to the ambiguity of Launcelot and Guenevere’s time abed together.

⁷⁰ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 86.

⁷¹ Megan G. Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of Roses* (Oxford, 2015), 92–114.

⁷² Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 312. Malory’s observation here refers to Segwarydes, who—like Arthur—decides not to openly expose his wife’s infidelity or to seek vengeance on her lover.

⁷³ As we will see below, Gawayne explicitly comes to argue for this segregation of Launcelot’s public and private activities. See also Launcelot’s declaration that he has ‘deserved’ the queen’s love through his continued service to her in Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 890.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the *Morte Darthur* is that Arthur and the knights of the Round Table are themselves cognizant of this social dynamic.⁷⁴ Malory here picks up on a narrative thread already present in one of his sources, the Middle English *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, but intensifies it in unique ways. Unlike in the earlier Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artu* (another of Malory's sources), where Arthur is surprised to learn that Launcelot has slept with his wife, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* omits Arthur's surprise and shows him only to be saddened.⁷⁵ When these two texts are read alongside one another, as Malory would have done, the poet of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* therefore appears (perhaps unintentionally) to suggest the possibility that Arthur may already have suspected his wife's infidelity with Launcelot.⁷⁶ Malory grasps this possibility for all of its narrative potential; in his retelling, he strikingly indicates that Arthur already suspected the lovers' adultery prior to Aggravayne and Mordred's revelation and that, furthermore, he has no interest in bringing the couple to public reckoning:

For, as the Freynshe booke seyth, the kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon Sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here there-off, for Sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge loved hym passyngly well.⁷⁷

In fact, Merlyn had informed Arthur prior to his marriage that 'Gwenyvere was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff' and 'warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir and sche hym agayne'.⁷⁸ Arthur's forbearance concerning the lovers' adultery stems from his love and appreciation of Launcelot, but it is also politically astute; the king recognizes that the fellowship of the Round Table depends on Launcelot's continued service and that, by publicly defending his honour and turning against his best knight, he condemns his kingdom to civil war:

'And alas,' seyde the kynge, 'me sore repentith that ever Sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever, for wyth hym woll many a noble knyght holde.'⁷⁹

Arthur's regret that he must turn against Launcelot is present in both the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and, to a lesser extent, in the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artu*, but the sense that the king has long turned a blind eye to his wife and friend's betrayal in order to ensure the stability of his kingdom is unique to Malory. There can be little doubt that, in Malory's vision, Arthur's lack of personal jealousy concerning his wife and his private acceptance of her adultery are indicative of his heartfelt fellowship with Launcelot and good rulership.⁸⁰ Arthur is not to be derided for being cuckolded by the best knight in the world, and, unlike his dark double

⁷⁴ See Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision*, 194–200 and Radulescu, *The Gentry Context*, 124–5 and 131–2.

⁷⁵ *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, in Larry D. Benson, ed., and rev. Edward E. Foster, *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1994), 11–123 (ll. 1736–51). Cf. *Le livre du Graal*, III, 1298–9, paras. 141–2. For further comparison of Arthur's reaction in both these texts as well as in Malory's *Morte Darthur* see John Michael Walsh, 'Malory's Arthur and the Plot of Aggravain', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 23 (1981), 517–34; Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision*, 194–7; and Radulescu, *The Gentry Context*, 122–30.

⁷⁶ See Walsh's consideration of why the poet may have omitted Arthur's surprise in 'Malory's Arthur and the Plot of Aggravain', 522–3.

⁷⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 872.

⁷⁸ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 76.

⁷⁹ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 882.

⁸⁰ Arthur's lack of jealousy concerning Guenevere is most clearly evidenced in his well-known lament: 'And much more I am sorry for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenes I myght have inow, but such a felyshyp of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company', Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 886–7. Malory's portrayal of Arthur is here more closely aligned with the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, where the king is wise and largely unemotional concerning his wife, rather than with the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artu*, where he is jealous and rageful. See the discussion in the sources listed above at n. 75.

King Mark, he does not jeopardize the stability of his court by spitefully plotting to expose his wife's adultery and to slay her lover.⁸¹

Beyond Arthur, other admirable knights of the Round Table are equally cognizant of the politics of privacy and wary of precipitating civil war. As Julie Nelson Couch has observed, Malory's Arthurian court is, on the whole, much less prone to gossip than in his French sources and far more reticent to slander the honour of Arthur, Guenevere, and Launcelot.⁸² Although Malory indicates at the beginning of 'The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere' that 'many in the courte spake of the lovers' 'prevy draughtis togydir', none of Arthur's courtiers is willing to jeopardize the common good by openly exposing the lovers except for the 'opynne-mowthed' villain Aggravayne and his opportunistic half-brother, Mordred.⁸³ In fact, as in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, Malory signals that the good knight Bors had long known and kept silent about his kinsman Launcelot's night-time meetings with the queen.⁸⁴ The impression that Bors' silence safeguards the continued well-being of the Arthurian court is accentuated in Malory's addition of the knight's warning to Launcelot that, should he be caught with the queen, it would 'wratth [injure] us all'.⁸⁵ Gawayne makes the same point when attempting to dissuade Aggravayne and Mordred from reporting the lovers to Arthur. Gawayne warns his brothers that their exposure of Guenevere and Launcelot will inevitably result in 'warre and wrake' and, in addition, intimates that Launcelot has earned the court's leniency given how many times he has rescued the king, the queen, and the knights of the Round Table, including Aggravayne and Mordred themselves.⁸⁶ Later, after his brothers have exposed the lovers to the court at large, Gawayne repeats this latter argument to Arthur when he counsels the king not to be 'over hasty' in his judgement of the queen:⁸⁷

'thoughe hyt were so that Sir Launcelot were founde in the quenys chambir, yet hit myght be so that he cam thydre for none evyll. For ye know, my lorde,' seyde Sir Gawayne, 'that my lady the quene hath oftyntymes ben gretely beholdyn unto Sir Launcelot, more than to any othir knyght; for oftyntymes he hath saved her lyff and done batayle for her whan all the courte refused the quene. And peradventure she sente for hym for goodnes and for none evyll, to rewarde hym for his good dedys that he had done to her in tymes past. And peraventure my lady the quene sente for hym to that entente, that Sir Launcelot sholde a com prevaly to her, wenyng that hyt had be beste in eschewyng of slaundir; for oftyntymys we do many thynges that we wene for the beste be, and yet peradventure hit turnyth to the warste.'⁸⁸

As Ashe observes, 'Gawain's reasoning is not intended to prove, or even to argue, that Launcelot is innocent of adultery'; instead, the knight delicately proposes that Launcelot 'has earned the right to a private space within which what passes between the queen and

⁸¹ See the discussion in McCarthy, 'Private Worlds', esp. 5–6.

⁸² Julie Nelson Couch, 'With Due Respect: The Royal Court in Malory's "The Poisoned Apple" and "The Fair Maid of Astolat"', in D. Thomas Hanks Jr., ed., *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-Views*, 63–77 (New York, NY, 1992).

⁸³ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 790. Even when Launcelot openly challenges the court to accuse Guenevere of having committed adultery, no one does so, and everyone except Gawayne laments his banishment from court; see Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 903.

⁸⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 873. Cf. *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, ll. 1772–84. Malory also notably modifies his sources to have Lavayne know of and remain quiet concerning Launcelot's nighttime meeting with the queen in the episode of "The Knight of the Cart" despite Mellyagaunte's accusations of treason. Cf. Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 851; Chrétien, *Lancelot*, ll. 4554–78; and *Le livre du Graal*, ll. 1395, para. 458.

⁸⁵ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 873.

⁸⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 933. Cf. Gawayne's similar warning in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, ll. 1688–715.

⁸⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 882.

⁸⁸ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 882–3.

her champion is their own affair (with all the ambiguity such terminology implies).⁸⁹ For the sake of the queen and of avoiding outright civil war, Gawayne here attempts (unsuccessfully) to reinstate the privacy which had for so long shielded Guenevere and Launcelot.

Of course, the tragedy of the *Morte Darthur* is that Arthur and the virtuous knights of the Round Table are only able to turn a blind eye to the lovers' union for so long before Aggravayne and Mordred force them to confront it and, thereby, precipitate the fall of the Round Table. At the beginning of the final book, Aggravayne and Mordred report Guenevere and Launcelot to Arthur against the counsel of Gawayne, Gaherys, and Gareth, who vehemently denounce their accusations as 'talis'.⁹⁰ Gawayne and his virtuous brothers' insistence that Aggravayne and Mordred are telling 'talis', or false stories, is particularly interesting given, of course, that everyone involved knows what they report to be true.⁹¹ Indeed, one of the paradoxes of Malory's text is why Aggravayne and Mordred are depicted to be in the wrong for reporting treason to the king. Should not all the knights of the Round Table who suspect Guenevere and Launcelot's treasonous adultery report it to Arthur? This is what the treason laws of the late Middle Ages dictated they should do and notably what the Arthur of the Vulgate *Mort Le Roi Artu* implies when confronting Gawain for not reporting the lovers: 'Gavain, fait li rois Artus, fuiés vous de ci! Car certes, vous estes cil en qui je ne me fierai jamais, car malvaisement vous estes contenus vers moi, qui saviés ma honte et le sousfriés et riens ne m'en disiés' ('The king said, "Gawain, leave here; I'll never trust you, for you treated me badly when you knew about my dishonor but tolerated it and didn't inform me").⁹²

However, Malory's notion of privacy distorts his retelling of Arthurian legend and compels the good knights of the Round Table to keep their suspicions to themselves. What Gawayne, his virtuous brothers, and the rest of Arthur's courtiers recognize—and what Aggravayne and Mordred maliciously discount—is that the exposure of Guenevere and Launcelot's union amounts to a shameful and dangerous violation of the privacy Launcelot has earned through his continued service to Arthur. Moreover, despite the fact that a queen's fidelity was universally understood to be a matter of political concern in medieval Europe, Malory takes care to indicate that Aggravayne and Mordred's accusations are motivated by 'prevy hate' rather than an interest in the stability of Arthur's kingdom.⁹³ Although Gawain warns his brothers of the destruction that their accusations will precipitate, Aggravayne and Mordred are prepared to pursue their hatred '[f]alle whatsumever falle may'.⁹⁴ As Raluca L. Radulescu has observed, their accusations therefore constitute a treacherous disregard for the common good that Launcelot assures, and it is this which makes them 'lyars' (as Lancelot calls them) despite the truth of their claims.⁹⁵ Contrary to the brothers' claims that Arthur and his court have long been shamed by Guenevere and Launcelot, it is they themselves, in Malory's logic, who dishonour Arthur by exposing his hidden injury and destroying the 'fragile non-existence' of the lovers' affair.⁹⁶

The notion of privacy is equally central to comprehending how Aggravayne and Mordred precipitate Guenevere and Launcelot's downfall. Malory modifies his sources in ways which

⁸⁹ Ashe, *Conquest and Transformation*, 290.

⁹⁰ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 871.

⁹¹ Aggravayne specifies to Arthur that he and his brothers 'know all that Sir Launcelot holdith youre quene, and hath done longe', Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 872.

⁹² *Le livre du Graal*, III. 1301, para. 144; translation from *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, 10 vols (1992–6; repr., Woodbridge, 2010), VII. 60. Malory notably omits this dialogue in his retelling.

⁹³ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 870.

⁹⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 871.

⁹⁵ Radulescu, *The Gentry Context*, 124. Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 898.

⁹⁶ Ashe, *Conquest and Transformation*, 290. For similar arguments, see also Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision*, 195–200 and Radulescu, *The Gentry Context*, 122–39.

emphasize that the brothers' plot is predicated on manipulating the Arthurian court's politics of privacy and exposing the lovers as publicly as possible. Firstly, Malory indicates that, immediately before reporting the lovers to Arthur, Aggravayne speaks to his brothers about Launcelot's dalliance with the queen 'opynly and nat in no counceyle [secrecy], that manye knyghtis myght here'.⁹⁷ This is in direct contrast to the Vulgate *Mort Le Roi Artu*, where the brothers 'parloient de Lancelot et de la roïne moult a estroit' ('were talking about Launcelot and the queen very confidentially').⁹⁸ The *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* does not specify how many people were present when the brothers spoke about Launcelot and the queen, but there is no indication that Aggravayne spoke with the intention of being overheard.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Malory makes significant changes to the scene in which Aggravayne, Modred, and their twelve accomplices ambush Guenevere and Launcelot in the queen's bedchamber in order to catch the lovers in 'the dede'.¹⁰⁰ In comparison to the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and Vulgate *Mort Le Roi Artu*, Malory increases the drama of the villains' ambush by verbally echoing his earlier account of Andret's exposure of Tristan and Isolde as well as 'by increasing the dialogue, the action, and (perhaps most noticeably) the noise level'.¹⁰¹ Unlike his sources, Malory charges the episode with continual references to the ambushers' frenzied 'noyse', here meaning both 'noise', in our modern sense, as well as 'troublemaking', 'rumour', 'scandal', and 'accusation': 'But ever in one Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred cryed, "Traytour knyght, com oute of the quenys chambir!"; "A, Jesu mercy!" seyde Sir Launcelot, "thys shamefull cry and noyse I may nat suffir"; "Now, fayre lordys," seyde Sir Launcelot, "leve youre noyse and youre russhyng"; "Sires, leve youre noyse," seyde Sir Launcelot, "[...] and make you no suche cryng and such maner of sclaudir as ye do."¹⁰² Crucially, Malory signals that all this 'noyse' did not arise by chance but was rather deliberately manufactured by the ambushers in order to expose the lovers in the full hearing of the court:

there cam Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred wyth twelve knyghtes with them of the Rounde Table, and they seyde with grete cryng and scaryng voyce, 'Thou traytoure, Sir Launcelot, now arte thou takyn!'

And thus they cryed wyth a lowde voyce, that all the courte myght hyre hit.¹⁰³

By openly calling attention to the lovers in this way, Aggravayne and Mordred force the hand of Arthur and his court. Guenevere and Launcelot's privacy has been shattered and no one is now able to ignore their union or avoid its ruinous consequences.

And yet, Aggravayne and Mordred notably fail to catch Guenevere and Launcelot in 'the dede'. As we have already observed, neither the ambushers nor we as readers know for certain whether Guenevere and Launcelot were abed together behind the queen's closed bedchamber

⁹⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 870.

⁹⁸ *Le livre du Graal*, 3. 1296, para. 139; my translation.

⁹⁹ The author of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* specifies only that 'The knyghtes stood in chamber and spake' and does not specify how many men were present beyond the five brothers (l. 1673). Later, when Arthur enters the chamber, we are told that 'the knyghtes stood, / Gawain and all the other press', suggesting that a larger company or crowd may have been present (ll. 1712–3).

¹⁰⁰ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 872.

¹⁰¹ D. Thomas Hanks Jr., 'Malory, the *Mort[e]s*, and the Confrontation in Guinevere's Chamber', in D. Thomas Hanks Jr., ed., *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-Views*, 78–90 (79) (New York, NY, 1992). See also Martin, *Castles and Space*, 177–81 and Radulescu, *The Gentry Context*, 127–31. Cf. Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 345–6 for the ambush of Tristan and Isolde.

¹⁰² 'noyse, n.', MED; Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 874–6. Cf. *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, ll. 1808–63 and *Le livre du Graal*, III. 1303–7, para. 148–51. Note that earlier in the *Morte Darthur*, at the beginning of 'The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere', Launcelot withdraws from the company of the queen 'for to eschew the sclawndir and noyse' of Aggravayne and other courtiers, I. 790.

¹⁰³ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 874.

door. Even more so than in the Vulgate *Mort Le Roi Artu* (where the door already features prominently in the episode's action), the barred entry to Guenevere's bedchamber symbolizes the contested barrier between the public and the private realms, the latter of which Malory shrouds with ambiguity and equivocations concerning the nature of love in 'that tyme'.¹⁰⁴ No matter the ambushers' efforts to penetrate the bedchamber and to ram down its door with a great bench (Malory's addition to his sources), they are prevented from truly exposing the couple's hidden activities, even when Launcelot skilfully opens the door for an offensive blow.

Although the ambushers' failure in this regard increases our sense of the villainy of their accusations and the tragedy of the Arthurian court's demise, the lack of incontrovertible evidence against the lovers does not matter in any ontological sense given the operation of honour and privacy in the *Morte Darthur*. Aggravayne and Mordred succeed in destroying the lovers' privacy by the very act of calling attention to it; the union that had previously been left unacknowledged has now become secret, an illicit concealment from the community which must be brought to public resolution despite the misgivings of Arthur and his courtiers or Gawayne's efforts to reconstitute the couple's privacy. The king must defend his honour once his shame has been voiced. By the same measure, Aggravayne and Mordred succeed in shaming Guenevere and Launcelot simply by crying their 'noyse' in the full hearing of the court. The chivalric world Malory creates is one governed by honour and shame rather than innocence and guilt. Therefore, no matter the true nature of their union, the lovers will continue to be incriminated until Launcelot can defend their honour through his physical prowess. As Launcelot tells Arthur, he longs for this opportunity to prove himself with his hands:

'And as for my lady Quene Gwenyvere, excepte youre person of your hyghnes and my lorde Sir Gawayne, there nys no knyght undir hevyn that dare make hit good uppon me [i.e., put to trial by combat] that ever I was traytour unto youre person. And where hit please you to say that I have holdyn my lady youre quene yerys and wynters; unto that I shall ever make a large answer [i.e., an open challenge], and prove hit uppon ony knyght that beryth the lyff, excepte your person and Sir Gawayne, that my lady Quene Gwenyvere ys as trew a lady unto youre person as ys ony lady lvyngye unto her lorde, and that woll I make good with my hondis.'¹⁰⁵

However, swayed by Aggravayne and Mordred's slander, Arthur tyrannically denies Launcelot this possibility to defend his honour, fully cognizant that his best knight 'trustyth so much upon hys hondis and hys myght that he doutyth [i.e., fears] no man' and that he will inevitably win any judicial combat in which he fights.¹⁰⁶ Knowingly precipitating the civil war that will doom his kingdom, Arthur thus refuses Launcelot access to judicial truth and, concomitantly, the power to dictate public reality.

CONCLUSION

Both Malory's *Morte Darthur* and late medieval heraldic oaths are interested in how what is said can constitute reality and, thereby, what it is that must not be said for the sake of preserving social stability. Each of these texts betrays the volatility of an honour-driven chivalric culture and is suspicious of the social benefit of exposing the misdeeds of the nobility to public reckoning. In the *Morte Darthur*, Malory expects his knights to act with the confidentiality of

¹⁰⁴ Martin, *Castles and Space*, 178–9.

¹⁰⁵ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 890. Malory adds a similar statement by Launcelot to his sources at I. 898.

¹⁰⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I. 883.

heralds and to have a nuanced sense of what should remain private. Knights who do not uphold the Arthurian court's imperative of privacy, such as Mellyyagaunte, Aggravayne, and Mordred, are villains who threaten social unity through their exposure of others' hidden activities. Covert lovers, on the hand, are not a threat to the community as such, so long as their love remains hidden. Like the Anjou King of Arms, Malory therefore indicates that such lovers must not be revealed by those who happen upon them, even if the lovers do not intend to marry. In his treatment of Guenevere and Launcelot's union, we find Malory grappling with the question that naturally arises from the *Anjou Tract* but that the king of arms leaves unaddressed: should covert lovers be reported if their union amounts to treason? After all, despite their vows to keep the dishonours of the nobility hidden, heralds specified that privacy could not condone treason and that betrayals of one's lord needed to be reported. As we have seen, Malory instead prioritizes the privacy of Guenevere and Launcelot and depicts those who report the lovers to be villains. However, Malory also attempts to circumvent the *Anjou Tract's* dilemma altogether by conceptualizing that, so long as it remains hidden (and by extension fruitless), Launcelot's adultery with the queen cannot truly be considered treasonous; given that Launcelot is the best knight of Arthur's court, he must necessarily be the queen's champion and, thereby, must be permitted to have a private relationship with her. Treason, for Malory, is the disruption of the common good which Launcelot assures as the best knight. Privacy is what allows the Arthurian court to ignore (and Malory himself to occlude) its best knight's adultery with the queen. Just as in heralds' oaths, then, the notion of privacy engenders a chivalric ideology which demands that its own ideals be enacted in the controlled arena of the public sphere, and enquires no further.

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