

WHITE KNIGHTS AND THE PENTECOSTAL OATH: THE LINEAGE OF ALT-
RIGHT AND INCEL MASCULINITIES IN SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE*
DARTHUR

by

GRIFFIN KING

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki,
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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*Dedicated to all those who were patient with me,
and all those we lost along the way.*

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Abstract

Addressing the lacuna in academic scholarship on the rhetoric used by the alt-right Incel subgroup, this thesis consider how (and perhaps why) the “Incel” movement has misappropriated medievalisms. Drawing on existing scholarship on both Incels and performed masculinities in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, this thesis aims to explain how Incels orient themselves in relation with medievalisms, using *Le Morte* as a touchstone for both its interest in masculinity and its popularity. By considering how Malory uses the Pentecostal Oath to push a normative performance of masculinity, this thesis asks how a 15th century work both contributes to and questions ideas of hegemonic gender binaries. The goal of this thesis is not to legitimize Incels with historical precedent, but rather disprove the notion that there was once a time where men had sole sexual control over women. Rather, this thesis advances discussions on how academia tends to study only a part of the wider alt-right community when looking at appropriated medievalisms, and that academics may need to broaden their gaze to fully understand the depth and width in which medievalisms are being abused for contemporary political discourse.

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May the road ever rise to meet you, and may the wind forever be at your backs.

Chapter 1: Introductions

In 2018, a van driven by a self-identified Incel¹ sped down a sidewalk in Toronto, killing 11 people and injuring 15 more. This attack brought the word Incel, a portmanteau of Involuntary Celibate, into the Canadian zeitgeist. Though the 2017 Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right Rally’ contributed to an explosion of academic publications and public journalism discussing the alt-right appropriation of misrepresented medieval symbols and traditions, I have yet to find thorough academic discussion of how Incels fit into the larger “alt-right tapestry” (Hoffman et al 572) of contemporary alt-right terrorism using medieval appropriation. In this thesis, I assert that Incels are not just a modern threat, but a problem that was contemporary to Sir Thomas Malory when he authored *Le Morte Darthur*. By seeing how old Incel-like behaviour is, we can begin to see how a lineage of misogyny that subsists on notions of gender essentialism, aggrieved entitlement², and femmephobic misogyny has persisted in hegemonic³ masculinities since the 15th century. By considering how Incels directly and indirectly draw justification and symbolism from a pop-culture misunderstanding of the Middle Ages, this thesis is written with the goal of addressing the lacuna in academic discourse regarding how Incels may be influenced by medievalisms, and how instructors may need to adjust their discussion of medieval

¹ Merriam-Webster defines an Incel as “a person (usually a man) who regards himself or herself as being involuntarily celibate and typically expresses extreme resentment and hostility toward those who are sexually active” (Merriam-Webster).

² Coined by Michael Kimmel in *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. Kimmel defines it as that “sense of entitlement that can no longer be assumed and that is unlikely to be fulfilled” (Kimmel xiv).

³ This thesis relies on R.W. Connell’s understanding of hegemony, as outlined in *Masculinities*. Expanding on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as a “cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life” (Connell 77), Connell expands hegemonic masculinity to operate as the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to... the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees... the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77). Due to word limits in relation to this thesis, discussion on hegemony and the depth to which hegemony itself could be written about regarding *Le Morte* must also be simplified.

elements in class to avoid contributing to the future radicalization of young men. *Le Morte Darthur*'s fundamental interest in the way masculinity is performed and perceived⁴; as well as its position as a critical inspiration for modern adaptations and thus popular modern understanding of the Middle Ages makes it an invaluable text for examining how Malory seems to have sympathies for Incel-like masculinities while also exploring disparate models of masculinity that undercut Incels' narrow ideals of manhood, I argue that instead, Malory chooses to expand on and explore masculinity as a complex and vulnerable social construct⁵.

This thesis's methodology is centered around Malory's exploration of what we would recognize as Butlerian concepts of gender performance and models of normative masculinities. This thesis does not intend to anachronistically frame Malory as an Incel, but rather highlight that the gender-based anxieties on display in the first books of *Le Morte* may stem from the same problematic performances of masculinity that have contributed to the modern Incel movement. While Malory's text and characters do reflect modern Incel beliefs of misogynist gender essentialism, a sense of victimhood caused by aggrieved entitlement, and an overarching sense of fatalism, an analytical reading of these themes and the characters who display these behaviours reveals an undercurrent critical of the whole of hegemonic Arthurian masculinities. In short, by looking at how Malory is interested in the policing of masculinity and its performance, we can see insecurities of manhood that may resonate with or reflect Incel values, while also seeing

⁴ Tobin Lee McClain addresses this in detail in their article "Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance". McClain believed that "societies project their anxieties about proper gender roles" (198) onto the Arthurian canon.

⁵ Previous versions of this thesis considered later events and characters. Of particular note were considerations as to how Malory complicates simplified notions of masculinity through his characterizations of Gawain, Pelleas, and Lancelot. These sections were ultimately beyond the scale of this thesis and had to be cut.

how Malory was critically engaging with and condemning what we could now see as the misogyny essential in Incel rhetoric and praxis.

This thesis approaches such a complex topic in two primary chapters. The first of these chapters develops a connection between Incels, the alt-right, and the medieval, and why these groups seem to have a fascination with the medieval. The first chapter also explains fundamental elements of Incel rhetoric, including their “(1) misogyny, (2) victimhood, and (3) fatalism” (Cottee 100). It also explores how Incel concepts such as the “sexual marketplace” (Menzie 6) play into hegemonic masculinities at play in the first books of *Le Morte*. The second chapter explores how Incel belief in a ‘sexual marketplace’ parallels Malory’s worship⁶ economy and ultimately establishes a status economy that encourages gender essentialism and models of normative masculinities. This chapter is followed by the conclusions of this thesis and a reflection on why Incels may find common ground with these fictional knights and how Malory is ultimately condemning Incel-like masculinities despite his common ground with their obsession with masculine performance.

The Alt-Right and Incels

The 2017 “Unite the Right Rally” in Charlottesville⁷ caused an explosive conversation regarding alt-right appropriations of medievalism. However, while some elements of the alt-right receive significantly more airtime (see the Proud Boys or other militant alt-right groups espousing their views on white supremacy) for both their

⁶ ‘Worship’ is a nebulous term that Ruth Lexton admits was “contested in the text and in Malory’s time” (Lexton 78). However, Lexton summarizes worship as being “won through chivalric action, the performance of ‘dedys of armys’” (78). She also notes that “Malorian worship is connected less to the idealized form of honor in Malory’s French sources than to a performative and practical notion of status” (78).

⁷ The image on the following page provides an example of one such appropriation.

misappropriation of medievalisms, Incels have not yet received the same critical examination of how or why they appropriate medieval symbols. Though high profile Incel violence has seemed to lack direct influence from the medieval, it would be incorrect to say that Incels have not been influenced, in part, by medievalisms. First, it is important to ask what an Incel is, what they believe, and where, within the limits of this thesis, their beliefs coincide with Malory and *Le Morte Darthur*.



medievalpoc
@medievalpoc



Nazis aren't very happy that I keep posting the *original* medieval European bearer of this standard, Saint Maurice (right):



the New York Times



11:47 AM · Aug 14, 2017

First, it should be stated that the term Incel did not originate in a misogynist community, but rather started by a female student named Alana at Carleton University

aimed at “provid[ing] support and rehabilitation for romantically alienated individuals” (Hoffman et al 566). The term Incel did not gain its modern associations with misogyny and violence until the word was adopted by sexist communities on social media sites such as “Reddit and 4Chan” (Cottee 98). These newer Incel groups eventually became part of the larger “confederacy of interest groups... broadly known as the Manosphere” (Ging 639), an ideology “dominated by evolutionary psychology, which relies heavily on genetic determinism to explain male and female behaviours in relation to sexual selection” (649). In contrast to academic understanding that “[g]ender exists precisely to the extent that biology does *not* determine the social” (Connell 71), this Manospheric ideology encourages belief in binary-essentialist views of gender and its performance, as well as an inherent hegemony in social status based on genetic variables beyond the control of individual men. Largely concerned with a perceived “decline of males⁸” (639) in the 21st century due to crumbling patriarchal norms, the rise of women’s rights, and racially-based anxieties of replacement, cuckoldry, and so-called ‘degeneracy’⁹, Incels view themselves as socially marginalized by people with more social status than themselves¹⁰.

The notion of low social status lays at the heart of Incel identity. The Manosphere believes that social status is highly reliant on the need to “display of ownership over an

⁸ This plays into the Incel philosophy of the ‘Red Pill’, that claims to “awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing” (Harrington 640).

⁹ An alt-right buzzword that generally connotes any relationship the alt-right does not approve of. This extends to same-sex relationships, queer relationships, and non-normative gender performance within straight relationships.

¹⁰ Within the wider Manosphere this largely fits into alt-right Great Replacement anxieties, which revolve around the belief that due to racially-based affirmative action in schools, the growing presence of women in positions of power, and the growing acceptance of queer relationships, white men will eventually become marginalized in a multi-faceted society. This anxiety, of course, is rooted on the presumption that other groups will oppress straight white men in the same way straight white men have historically attempted to oppress those they ‘Other’.

attractive sexual partner” (Menzie 12) because “[t]hrough sex masculinity is affirmed” (Witt 678). This display gains men what Menzie terms “socio-sexual capital” (12), which in turn allows them to affirm and demonstrate their own insecure sense of masculinity by controlling women, who the Manosphere see as “sexual gatekeeper[s]” (O’Malley 10) who deny Incels the “male sex right” (Menzie 6) and are thus the source of their aggrieved entitlement. As such, Incels are inherently misogynistic, viewing themselves as victims, and women as contemptible objects who barricade their way to performing what the Manosphere view as an essential part of masculinity. This leads Incels to see themselves as socially marginalized, and thus call themselves “beta[s]” (Ging 650) and “[c]ucks¹¹” (Cottee 65) due to their inability to find sexual partners, let alone one would supposedly grant them social status through sexual ownership and display. Incels thus see their lack of sexual access as ostracization and consider themselves to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy, if it could be said they belong within the hierarchy at all. In contrast to Incel masculinity, Incels believe that men who embody “traditionally masculine attributes that reinforce hegemonic masculinity (i.e., “seeing [an individual] as strong, brave, or confident)” (Menzie 10), are ‘Chads’. To Incels, Chads are “alpha males” (10) who have the highest socio-sexual capital of males, and thus the highest social status. Though Incels may pursue Chads’ status through “Looksmxing’ (the business of personal self-improvement and cosmetic surgery” (Cottee 98), the fatalist belief in the

¹¹ S. Cottee notes some delineation of terms in some Incels communities. According to them, men who do not qualify as Chads, but are not sexless like Incels are “‘Cucks’ [,who] are denounced as unmanly and weak, whereas ‘Faggots’ are condemned as traitors to their sex” (Cottee 95).

“blackpill[1]¹²” means that regardless of attempts, Incels are fundamentally unlovable and that any attempt to increase their status or form true emotional bonds is doomed to fail.

Ultimately though, Incels demonize women as the source of their frustrations. Because Incels believe that women serve as gatekeepers to the ultimate performance of masculinity (displaying an attractive partner), women are “critiqued for not embodying all [the] heteropatriarchal conditions” (Menzie 4) placed upon them by Incels, foremost of which objectification. This relationship is reflected in Incels’ paradoxically fatalist views that masculinity relies on heterosexuality to be performed while simultaneously claiming they will never achieve such a goal due to their own perceived inferiority. As such, Incels accept that they cannot compete with other men in the “sexual marketplace” (Menzie 6) women control through access to their bodies. By framing heterosocial relationships as an economic statement, Incels make clear that they blame women for their lack of social status. While Chads may have access to the sexual marketplace, they believe it is ultimately women who control sex as a “political tool” (4). In this framework, Incels view women as having sole power over both social status and performed masculinity, as the only performance that truly matters to the Manosphere is the display of a desirable sexual partner. However, because women have agency to choose their own partners, this means there is a “sex deficit” (6), which reflects a status deficit. Thus, because Incels are unable not having sex, they believe they have a status deficit that places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

¹² A belief, complimenting the Redpill, that Incels are inherently undesirable due to a genetic inability to perform normative masculinity and thus “rejec[t] both the goal of sexual intimacy and the means of male self improvement” (Cottee 102). They fatalistically surrender any attempt at making connections with non-Incels.

For Incels, the answer to sex deficit rests in the past. Since Incels believe that their problem could be resolved by removing the sex deficit, and therefore the status deficit, their solution is to “shift to more archaic (or even dystopian) systems of governance that place men as primary decision makers over the sexual marketplace” (Menzie 6). Incels believe that women are “hypersexual” (Maxwell et al 1858), and thus should be “dominated” (Ging 649) because they cannot ‘fairly’ manage the sexual marketplace. This demand to control women’s sexuality plays into a larger framework of Manospheric misogyny beyond the scope of this thesis. However, within the scale of this thesis is the idea of returning to, as Menzie frames it, an “archaic” (6) system of bodily control reflected by Incel belief in an anachronistic understanding of the past. To Incels, the social inequality they feel victimized by is a direct product of women’s sexual liberation and agency. They desire to return to a (non-existent) period when men controlled the sexual marketplace through control of women’s agency. This reflects the larger scope of the alt-right’s obsession with appropriating the past to excuse their crimes in the present.

Incels and their Middle Ages

Incels are not the only men interested in the idea of men and masculinity in the Middle Ages. Scholars such as Bruce Hoffman, Kenneth Hodges, and Leo Braudy have all discussed constructions of medieval masculinities in their own works. Likewise, medievalists have not seemed to directly engage with why Incels, whose identity is founded on non-normative “hybrid masculinities” (Ging 651) in contrast to traditional

toxic¹³, “militarized, authoritarian masculinity” (Harrington 347). Because *Le Morte* is a touchstone for understanding Arthurian concepts of nebulous terms like “worship” and “chivalry”, I will draw examples from the text in order to explore and explain how Malory’s own anxieties around masculinity may parallel Incel-like beliefs, and how Malory goes beyond the simple misogyny of Incels. This thesis does not claim that Incels have read *Le Morte Darthur*. Rather, this thesis is aimed at considering how Malory depicts and critiques varied models of masculinity, some of which include models that represent Incel-like behaviours. While a thorough examination of the alt-right and even Inceldom as a whole is beyond the scope of this thesis, this section will attempt to lay some foundations of why Incels may borrow from their conception of medievalisms so heavily, and in turn allow us to transition into why I believe *Le Morte Darthur*’s exploration of masculine gender performance is such a critical example of Incel-like masculinities in a medieval text.

First, it should be noted that the alt-right are not the only groups to identify the past, or more specifically, the medieval hegemonic masculinities. In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Ernesto Laclau notes that Antonio Gramsci’s “‘typical example of civil society’s hegemony... is the Church during the Middle Ages” (*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* 47). For Gramsci, the medieval catholic church seems to be the greatest architect of normative identities in the pre-modern world. Incels seem to make the same connection with little consideration for variations in the church’s ideals and politics over the length of the Middle Ages nor the

¹³ This quote is directly referencing how Shepherd Bliss framed toxic masculinity when he coined it in 1980s. This was confirmed by Harrington during an email exchange with Bliss, in her article “What is ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Why Does it Matter?”.

vast areas of medieval Europe influenced by the church. While not directly pulling from the church as an influence, Incels seem obsessed with the image of an institution regulating hegemony and thus make explicit connections to a misunderstood medievalism. Though Gramsci's belief that hegemony is a "cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life" (Connell 77), its ultimate focus on classism leads to the implicit coding of all relationships requiring capital. Instead, this thesis relies on Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity operating as the "currently accepted answer to the... legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees... the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77)¹⁴. Though Connell does not make the same connection to the Middle Ages that Gramsci makes, she does accept that hegemonic masculinities do rely on "correspondence between [a] cultural ideal and institutional power" (77). Slightly narrowing the concept of hegemony, Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity accepts that while hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy do require institutional support to enforce normativity onto a population, the explanation of or connection to such a system do not have to be explicitly medieval.

Gramsci is not alone in connecting hegemony to historical precedent, as Butler also notes, in vaguer chronology, that "[t]he performative invocation of a nonhistorical 'before' becomes the foundational premise that guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed" (*Gender Trouble* 4). Butler illustrates that modern groups use an idea of the past to legitimize their actions in the present. Using Gramsci's claims, it makes a sort of sense that Incels would identify themselves with a major political body that supposedly controlled performance of masculinity while

¹⁴ As mentioned in footnote 3, the length of this thesis leads to a great simplification of the complexities of hegemony.

members themselves retained a celibate identity¹⁵. As Harrington writes, constructions of “gender-based violence is historically and culturally specific, involving both structural and situational power relations” (346), which in turn would give Incels an excuse to give themselves a false historic precedent for their beliefs. Even as contemporary anti-Incel academics like Menzie write, academics still associate Incels beliefs with a sense of “archaic” (Menzie 6) societies, lending credence to the possibility that there was a period in which men, without protest, controlled a socio-sexual marketplace that controlled social status. Instead, this thesis hopes to use Connell’s understanding of hegemonic masculinity as a culturally backed and institutionally recognized form of masculine performance consistent with patriarchal oppression of women. Considering how even academics, aware of their claims or not, conflate the Middle Ages with a fictional past where hegemony ruled unopposed as the dominant social structure, it makes sense that Incels, who seem to spend so much time reading or theorizing justifications for their beliefs, would attach themselves to the Middle Ages.

Incels are not the only group from the alt-right to attach themselves to a false understanding of the Middle Ages. This thesis does not need to waste time on how images of crusaders, knights, and other militant images of the Middle Ages have been co-opted by violent hate groups. However, Incels have widened their gaze when appropriating images and terms from the Middle Ages. While some Incels have called for blatant violence while evoking the Middle Ages (see the image attached), other Incels associate the perpetrator of the Isla Vista killings in 2014 with religious martyrdom, referring to the killer as “Saint Elliot” (Witt 676). In both instances, Incels explicitly

¹⁵ The Catholic Church asserted celibacy upon the priesthood in the 12th century. This tradition has continued into the present.

avoid the usual martial appeal of knights and crusaders in their appropriation of medievalisms. Instead, they choose to identify themselves with the church, the same political body that Gramsci considers the major regulatory body of medieval hegemony. This implicit exclusion of the usual knightly image appropriated by the alt-right is made an explicit rejection of more martial masculinities through their use of the term “White Knight” (Jones 1916) as an insult. This association with the figure of a knight as an insult puts them at odds with normative alt-right appropriations of medievalisms. As such,

the question needs to be asked why do Incels disdain the image of the knight, and how does that fit into Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, a text whose men are almost exclusively practicing or retired knights. Their disdain for the image of the knight further contributes to the possibility that Incels have not read Malory at all, and that his concepts of masculinity, as heavily reliant on martial prowess as they are, provide more variety than the narrow concepts that Incels believe in.



RPM

@Redpilledmanlet



Not if we administer the appropriate punishment our based ancestors in the middle ages successfully and effectively administered. This is what God wants



Chapter 2: What is the Figure of the ‘White Knight’

Incels’ rejections of the figure of the White Knight emerge from the ways in which Incels associate White Knights with protectors of women and the sexual market.

According to Jones, Incels consider a White Knight to be a man who has “committed the ultimate sin: they were either feminised or submitted to female power” (Jones 1916). This insult serves as a form of emasculation and ostracization aimed at delegitimizing men who do not support their Manospheric views. The irony behind this insult is that it is rooted in a pop-culture understanding of medievalist “chivalry”, the idea of serving women with the hopes of getting something in return. For Incels, this sexual gratification would never come, and thus service to women is considered a fool’s errand.

The fundamental misconception that Incels have about the figure of the White Knight is that they greatly oversimplify the heterosocial bonds and constructs at play in medieval romances like *Le Morte Darthur*. While both Malory and Incels seem to police masculine performance, Malory’s masculinities provide much more variety in their manifestations than Incel masculinities do, granting a deeper complexity to Malory’s discussion of masculinity and how it may manifest within the constraints of hegemonic social formations. Incels, perhaps for their lack of research into the Middle Ages and its fiction, instead direct themselves towards specific misunderstood elements of the Middle Ages and second-hand sources from pop culture to shape their dangerous beliefs. Therefore, their evocation of the “White Knight” as an insult is ultimately reductionist to the archetype they are trying to evoke, aware of this mistake or not.

As mentioned in the introduction, Incels seem to bear a disdain for more “traditionally masculine” symbols that the rest of the alt-right seems to embrace. Chief

amongst these symbols is the knight. While right-wing media sites like *The Express* use a mounted knight coated in barding and livery as their official logo,¹⁶ Incels condemn the idea of knighthood with their figuration of the White Knight, a man who has “committed the ultimate sin” (Jones 1916) of displaying “subservience to women” (Jones 1910). For Incels, a White Knight is a man who mistakenly submits to the authority of a woman in hopes of gaining social status through sexual access. Incel ideology sees this as a fool’s errand and they believe that so-called White Knights aiding women are being emotionally and physically used for their attention and labour. The blatant sexism of Inceldom aside, their perspective on what makes a White Knight gravely appropriates and misrepresents the complex relationships between the sexes and differing gender identities¹⁷ in the Middle Ages. However, by considering how Incel-like beliefs in systems such as a socio-sexual marketplace that relies on masculine performance and women’s ability to control men, we may illustrate how Incel beliefs may correlate to medieval¹⁸ intergender relations. Furthermore, by considering how these influences manifest in Malory, we can see how medieval men like Malory constructed their fiction around, and thus participated in, an aristocratic conversation around how masculine hegemony should be performed. As such, the primary goals of this chapter are: first, to consider how and where the term White Knight and its meanings may engage with Malory’s work; second, to ask how the behaviour Incels attribute to White Knights plays a part in Malory through the

¹⁶ This is to say nothing of hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan rebranding themselves as the “Knights of the Klu Klux Klan” in the 1970s to evoke the supposed honourable and defensive connotations knighthood had to offer.

¹⁷ While Malory never uses anachronistic terms we may recognize as identities outside of the gender binary, he routinely shows how characters may bend or outright defy the gendered expectations placed upon them, including Merlin, Nynyve, and to an extent, the hypermasculine Lancelot.

¹⁸ This is not to say that correlation is causation in the fashion that medieval masculinities caused modern Inceldom. Rather, this correlation may show why Incels construct their alt-right masculinities and medievalisms differently than other alt-right groups while still using those medievalisms to justify themselves.

construction of hegemony and socio-sexual economies; and third, to outline how Malory is critiquing these constructions as part of the critical masculinity project at the center of *Le Morte's* homosocial relationships.

What is White Knight?

First, we must understand the context around the term White Knight. While it is clear Incels use the term White Knight as an insult, referring to men who defend women at all because they believe these men will ultimately be used by women, the term White Knight does exist outside of these specific contexts with its own connotations. In “The ‘White Knight’ Effect: Benevolent Sexism Accounts for Bystander Intervention in Party Situations Among High Status Men”, Rushcelle M. Leone and their co-authors discuss how men who display “benevolent sexism” (705) are often identified as White Knights. These men believe that social status is “central to male identity” (708) and are more likely to feel that they must “intervene to protect women” (708) in dangerous social situations, including parties where alcohol is involved, nightclubs, and other social environments where altered states are more likely to occur. To clarify, Rushcelle is not accusing anyone aiming to protect others in social situations as White Knights. Rather, their article discusses how the benevolent sexism White Knights perform only “protects” women who they feel are deserving of their attention, and thus means they “only intervene to prevent violence among certain women” (708). As such, even beyond Incels contexts White Knights are often framed as men who do expect something from women for aiding or protecting them. While Incels exclusively see this relationship as requiring sexual favours, Rushcelle’s study keeps results vague. Regardless, in both systems men rely on the perceived vulnerability of women as a way of justifying their social status by

displaying a capability of serving and protecting women. Likewise, though these terms are intertwined, they show a further degree as to how the idea of knighthood and “chivalrous” (705) behaviour are intrinsic to hegemonic male identities in the 21st century. Regardless of actual medieval basis, both uses of the term rely on the concept that it is inherently dangerous to be a woman in public, and that men must fill a protector role because of a perceived inability for women to protect themselves.

Despite the White Knight’s modern roots, its framing of the supposed dangers women are unable to face in public does have some foundation in the Middle Ages, and plays a significant role in *Le Morte Darthur*¹⁹. In her essay *Malory and Rape*, Catherine Batt discusses²⁰ how masculine identity in *Le Morte* fundamentally relies on not just on “feats of arms” (Batt 93) performed by men, but also women’s “integrity and identity in terms of their rapeability²¹” (Batt 89) and how men can strive to protect women. The rapeability of women in Malory’s setting appears as a fundamental part of masculine performance and the larger project of hegemonic masculinity at play in the narrative.

While Malory’s knights perform deeds of arms and battle with each other to display

¹⁹ It should be noted that Malory never uses the term White Knight in the way modern society would. When Malory does mention a white knight, it often has to do knights being clad “all in whyght” (Malory 277), wearing “whyght armour, horse and all” (506). It also seems to denote as a sight of spiritual manifestation, as is the case with the “whyght knyght” (Malory 509) that vanishes in the tomb of Nacien, or spiritual purity, as is the case with the “whyght knyghtes” (537) of the grail quest. The exception here are Guinevere’s Knights of the Queen, who are discussed in Chapter 4.

²⁰ I note this is a discussion because the larger scope of Batt’s essay includes metatextual context on Malory’s own charges of sexual assault and how rape plays a larger role in the text as an assault on identity and personal integrity beyond what I can encapsulate in the thesis at this time.

²¹ Kenneth Hodges also addresses this in *Forging Chivalric Communities*. He notes that worship fundamentally relies on “[v]ulnerable women [as] central to the Round Table oath’s definition of chivalric manhood. Dorsey Armstrong also addresses how this sexism is essential to Malory’s masculinities. She argues that knightly masculinities in *Le Morte* are “only possible when the feminine is present in a subjugated position” (Armstrong 36) and thus “the object through and against which a knight affirms his masculine identity” (36). Though the so called ‘ladies’ clause’ is framed as legal precedent insuring the protection of women, the clause does so by reinforcing the idea of Malory’s women having to be vulnerable targets and, ultimately, tools through which Malory’s knights can express and display their manhood.

status amongst other men, women are positioned as rapeable objects that need to be defended or exchanged for notions of masculine status and thus perpetuate the oppression of women by men²². Arthur's own conception by rape due to Merlin disguising Uther Pendragon as "the duke [Igrayne's] husband" (Malory 5) and Torre's conception "half be force" (65) seem to enable this belief, as neither father receives social or political censure for their acts. Instead, Malory's selective choice to choose which women deserve protection and which are, for lack of a better term, rapeable, seems to reflect the modern White Knight's inclination to judge and only "intervene to prevent violence among certain women" (Rushcelle 708). Thus, Malory seems to enable the rape of women provided they are of lower status than the man, such as the case with the Uther, who was "[k]ynge of all Englund" (Malory 3) and Igrayne, who is only once referred to as a duchess in her own right, but who instead spends the majority of the first book being tied to her partner's status²³. This unequal status is also the case with "Kynge Pellynor" (Malory 65) and Torre's mother, a simple "houswyff" (Malory 65). Codified in these relationships is male supremacy and ever present threat knights present – both as saviour and rapist. Men of higher social standing and power seem to be free to take what they desire from their prey, and women are forced to serve as sexualized plot devices to legitimize the birth of exemplary heroes who, in turn, may further enforce masculine power as knights in their adulthood. The inherent threat knights present to the rapeability of women plays a major role in *Le Morte* as a means of men justifying and displaying their status and power through acts of homosocial violence and heterosexual domination,

²² One of the women who defies this dynamic, Nynyve, is explored in this thesis.

²³ Malory changes the exact terminology but frequently refers to Igrayne and the unnamed Duke of Tyntagil as "the duke and his wyf" (3), or to Igrayne alone as simply a "lady" (5). Igrayne only receives the honorific Dame once, on page 4, after she is separated from her husband and secured in the castle Tyntagil.

establishing a militarized²⁴ and orderly masculine hegemony. Thus, it seems like a surface-level reading presents Malory as a pro-rape author who asserts that policing and oppressing women through rape is a fundamental part of masculinity and would thus be consistent with misogynist Incel notions of aggrieved entitlement regarding women's sexual liberty and the modern White Knight's selective choices in protecting women due to their benevolent sexism. Though this thesis is not trying to assert that Incels or misogynists have read Malory, this overlap provides a connective tissue to the possibility of a lineage of misogyny between the hegemonic masculinities that Malory is exploring and critiquing in *Le Morte*, and the modern idea of the White Knight.

The problem with reading *Le Morte* as a blatantly pro-masculinity, pro-misogyny text, for the sake of this thesis, is two-fold. First, *Le Morte* deviates from Incel-like constructions of masculinity. Second, the reading is gravely over-simplified and neglects major dynamics of how Malory shapes Arthur's kingdom and the gender relation within. To consider the former point, it is worth noting that Incels do not just want a chance at developing a relationship with a partner. Rather, Incels yearn for a system where men are "all but guaranteed a female marital partner" (Cottee 96). Incels do not want to compete for affection amongst other men, but rather feel entitled to a partner and want to have women delivered to them. As such, though *Le Morte* has its own issues with how a contemporary audience would view its misogyny, Malory specifically avoids the characterisation of women as passive 'rapeable' chattel to be rendered up to men for social status. While Torre's mother never gets to provide details how she attempted to

²⁴ Dorsey Armstrong quotes Terence McCarthy in *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*, who argued that Malory's masculinities are "'essentially military' in spirit" (Armstrong 2).

avoid Torre's conception²⁵ "half be force" (Malory 65), other women in Malory's text go to great lengths to avoid sexual assault, denying their would-be rapists the opportunity if it is in their power to resist. Even on the first page of *Le Morte*'s narrative, Malory writes how after rejecting Uther's sexual advances, it is Igrayne who advises her husband that, together, they should "departe from hens sodenly, that [they] maye ryde all nyghte unto [their] owne castell" (Malory 3). Not only does Malory set a precedent of women resisting unwanted sexual advances, but it is Igrayne who reads their danger of the situation and advises the course of action she and her husband must follow. Rather than being a passive figure solely protected by her husband, Igrayne is the active partner in her marriage from the beginning. Igrayne's rejection of Uther is not framed as a rejection due to infidelity, but rather uses the first person "I should be dishonoured" (Malory 3 emphasis mine) to illustrate that it is Igrayne's desire to reject Uther's advance, not that of her husband. This rejection causes Uther to break down as he laments his lost chance to sleep with Igrayne, eventually "[falling] seke" (Malory 4). Uther's lack of immediate victory and access to Igrayne causes him emotional distress, reflecting feelings of his aggrieved entitlement regarding sexual access. As such, Malory sets a precedent of feminine resistance to masculine sexual domination from the first pages of *Le Morte*'s narrative. The women of Malory's England will not stand for sexual oppression and act according to their own thoughts, desires, and agency. This agency alone resists pro-Incel readings of the text and works to demonize its Incel-like masculinities as an unopposed monolith that may serve to lend historical (albeit fictional) legitimacy to Inceldom and

²⁵ While the legal context this silence may be critiquing is outside the scope of this thesis, both Batt's "Malory and Rape" and Saunder's *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* address this concern in greater detail by considering the legal precedent surrounding the silencing women who had been sexually assaulted in the 14th century. Older Arthurian literature, such as *The History of the Kings of Britian* does not share this legal background, nor Malory's approach to verbal performance.

misogyny. Rather, despite Malory's seeming predisposition to use women as set pieces to justify the threats his knights must face, many of his female characters exhibit their own agency and desires that conflict with patriarchal standards or the desires of individual men. Igrayne's rejection of Uther is not an Incel-like rejection in favour of a higher status man (after all, Uther is King of all England), nor does Malory explain that Igrayne's husband goes to war out of damaged pride due to Uther's advances to keep the text centered around the relationships between men. Rather, Malory focuses the first sexual advance of the story not on how it affects two men, but how it affects rapist and potential victim, Uther and Igrayne. Instead of a simple patriarchal conflict between men, Igrayne's husband acts to support his wife's claim without demands of evidence against his social superior. Thus, *Le Morte* does not present an uncomplicated support for misogynist behaviours and aggrieved entitlement, nor does it accept hegemonic masculinity as a sure-fire system.

Malory's complication of gender roles and agency thus becomes too broad for a simple pro- or anti- masculinity reading. Malory has, within the first pages of *Le Morte*, put Igrayne in danger of a king's sexual advances with the latent fear of sexual assault and "dishonour" (Malory 3), prompting her and her husband's flight from Uther's castle. Thus, Malory seems to set a precedent for the dangers women will face throughout *Le Morte*. However, Malory also frames the attempted seduction as a dishonourable and unmasculine thing to do through Uther's failure and later lovesickness²⁶. Though Uther is pursuing the masculine act of sexual intercourse that Incels and some academics believe

²⁶ This condemnation may also be further emphasized by Uther's wasting disease and disworshipful death following his successful sexual assault of Igrayne.

is central to the concept of knightly masculinities²⁷, Malory portrays Uther's advances as an incorrect course of action. He then goes on to punish Uther for his transgression, as Uther falls into a malaise of lovesickness. The complication is that despite Uther taking an active role in seeking a sexual partner and thus performing masculinity within the bounds of the hegemonic expectations placed on him, he is rejected and therefore put into a lethargic state. As Martin explains, lovesickness' negative connotations come from "uncontrolled reactions to love, encased in both the body and the mind" (4), which in turn "trouble romance masculinity because they prevent action, an integral component of male performance" (4). In short, Uther is emasculated by his own failure to pursue the masculine norm despite behaving as Romance traditions dictate men should. Uther is then further emasculated by his own inability to control his depressive state following this rejection, as it prevents him from pursuing further masculine performance. As such, Uther's failings as a man begin to compound. First, he is failure in seduction, and then a failure in any active state expected of men at all. It is not until Sir Ulfius, one of Uther's vassal knights and thus a subordinate masculinity, beseeches Merlin on Uther's behalf, does Uther begin to act again. With Merlin's aid, Uther disguises himself as Igrayne's husband and rapes her²⁸. By summoning Merlin, Ulfius aids his king in resuming his attempt to affirm his masculine identity through sexual conquest and physical performance at the cost of a woman's consent and agency. Due Ulfius' actions, *Le Morte* returns to a narrative that relies on a normative notion of knightly masculinities that, in turn, relies on martial prowess and sexual conquest to demonstrate hegemonic superiority

²⁷ Dr. Molly Martin frames sex as a "act of masculinity" (*Vision and Gender in Malory's Le Morte Darthur* 4) for example.

²⁸ The text does not frame it as such. Uther does not have sex with Igrayne by force, nor does he kidnap her in an act of raptus. Rather, Uther violates what we may anachronistically call a violation of informed consent by deceiving her that he is supposedly her husband, returned from battle to rest.

over lesser men and oppressed women. However, Uther's failing has opened a wound in the supposed hegemony of Malory's Arthurian world that will never heal. Rather, Igrayne's agency and Uther's failings within the masculine hegemony begin a conversation within the social structures of *Le Morte* as to how not just how a man can perform masculinity, but also how a man may fail performing masculinity, and what that means for manhood.

Hegemony and Economy

Due to Uther's failure to immediately seduce Igrayne and her subsequent resistance to Uther's predations, Malory puts the fundamental binary of homosocial violence and heterosexual intercourse in masculine performance in question. Rather than unquestioning regurgitating literary archetypes, Malory seems to actively engage with varied notions of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities within a stratified society, and how those performances may affect social status. While not a one-to-one parallel for the same misogynist systems that Incels believe in with their socio-sexual economy, Malory's system of "worship" does police what masculinities *Le Morte's* society deem desirable.

Following Uther's malaise after failing to seduce Igrayne, his knight Ulfius summons Merlin. While no grand fanfare introduces Merlin as the sorcerer of near-mythical power modern audiences may associate him with, Malory's Merlin²⁹ is the first individual to mention worship as a concept within the plot and dialogue of *Le Morte*. Though Merlin does not go to any effort to clarify what worship may mean when he

²⁹ Merlin is also the influence that later codifies sex and display of a female partner as part of high-status masculine performance. Merlin tells Arthur that a "man of your bounte and nobles scholde not be withoute a wyff" (Malory 62).

introduces the concept, academics since have debated its purpose. This thesis is primarily concerned with how Ruth Lexton explores notions of worship as a nebulous concept that was “contested in the text and in Malory’s time” (Lexton 78). Though this lack of clear definition means that any working definition of worship may be biased, Lexton notes that worship is consistently “won through chivalric action, the performance of ‘dedys of armys’” (78), as well as noting that “Malorian worship is connected less to the idealized form of honor in Malory’s French sources than to a performative and practical notion of status” (78)³⁰. As such, Lexton’s definition of worship lends itself well to a thesis deeply concerned with the performance of masculinity and its impact in both “public and private” (*Identity and Hegemony* 51). Whereas Incels are largely concerned with reductive archetypes that reflect narrow and simplified notions of socio-sexual status, Malory’s knights provide a complex and complicated view of varied men performing various notions of masculine performance within a hegemonic framework.

A primary example of a man operating within the complex and conflicting hegemonic frameworks of *Le Morte* is Merlin. Merlin constructs the notions of worship, not unlike how Incels construct their understandings of socio-sexual hierarchies. The irony in this parallel is, perhaps, that both Merlin and Incels construct hegemonic frameworks that would shun their own models of masculinity as undesirable and thus marginalize themselves within frameworks of their own devising. For Incels, this self-marginalization further contributes to their internalized feelings of misogyny and gender essentialism, aggrieved entitlement, and victimhood, and ultimately, their sense of

³⁰ Dorsey Armstrong also addresses this in *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory’s Morte d’Arthur*, when considering how Malory’s system of worship is interested in a “collective, secular focus” (Armstrong 34) surrounding knightly performance.

fatalism. Though Lexton's framework for worship incorporates more of *Le Morte's* discussion on worship from later in the text, Merlin's (and Malory's) first use of the term is when he binds Uther to the deal that promises Uther and Igrayne's yet un-conceived child will be brought to Merlin by swearing it on "[Uther's] worship and the child's availle" (Malory 5). Within worship's first use, it immediately becomes a binding contract between men without the consent of women. Despite Arthur being born Igrayne's son, it is Uther and Merlin's deal, sworn on Uther's sense of worship and thus the homosocial connection between these two men. The first use of worship in the text frames it as a fundamentally hegemonic currency, in which men expend social capital in the form of worship to gain sexual access, which in turn will win them further worship through the practice (practical) performance of that sexual act and patriarchal notions of blood right from the resulting child, perpetuating the familiar hegemonic state. It is no coincidence that the second incidence of worship being mentioned in the text is not until Uther lays dying and Merlin asks if Uther will confirm Arthur as his heir. Uther's final words confirm, in this rapidly developing language of homosocial interaction that "righteously and worshipfully that [Arthur] clayme the croune" (7). In two acts fundamental to the foundations of *Le Morte's* narrative and setting, Malory associates worship, a "performative and practical notion of status" (Lexton 78) with words spoken between two men about the next generation of kingly masculinities and thus state-defining masculine identity. Though not yet clearly codified as to what good worshipful behaviour is, Merlin makes speech a fundamental part of relationships between men beyond notions of homosocial violence and heterosexual intercourse. In Uther's utterance

of worship in his dying words, he reaffirms this new social paradigm as something new to stay until such a time as Arthur codifies its ideals in the Pentecostal Oath.

Regardless of its later codification³¹, worship begins as a homosocial credit between Uther and Merlin as a means of achieving their individual desires and goals without the input or perceived interference of women. As such, worship takes on capitalistic connotations as something to be spent and earned through acceptable means. Uther's investment of worship capital in his rape of Igrayne leads to Arthur's birth and thus a king who is complicit in the renewal of the worship economy for a new generation. The pre-Pentecostal Oath *Le Morte* displays an emphasize on homosocial interaction for the means of reproducing hegemony consistent with Incel and alt-right notions of returning to an imagined Middle Ages where men did have notions of control of women's sexual agency and society. Even Uther and King Pellynor's pre-Pentecostal affairs, both of which fall uncomfortably close to, if not within, the limits of modern sexual assault parallel modern White Knights choosing which women are worth their "protection" and "attention". With Merlin's aid, Uther seems to establish a status quo of masculine dominance that would not be out of the place in a an Incel forum. The issue with such a reading is that Malory goes on to complicate such a reductive notion of masculine hegemony and economized social interaction. As such, while Malory's figuration has some overlap with the White Knights of the 21st century, the knights of *Le Morte* resist blanket comparisons following the events that contextualize and establish the Pentecostal Oath. Merlin has made speech a fundamental part of performed masculinity between the

³¹ Discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

binary notions of homosocial violence and heterosexual intercourse, and affirmed the homosocial contract for another generation.

Chapter 3: Gender Essentialism in the Codification of the Pentecostal Oath

Though Incels do show a significant degree of disdain for knightly masculinities, Incels are not completely without parallels to Malory's constructions of worship and hegemonic masculinity. By considering how Malory polices masculinity throughout *Le Morte*, readers can discern that Malory does seem to be seeking or constructing some form of idealized masculinity through how *Le Morte*'s knights are rewarded or condemned for their masculine-coded performances. This chapter seeks to understand how Malory provides, using the Pentecostal Oath, a codified model of masculinity that is distinct from his predecessors and sources. While the Oath serves to formalize the protections that women should receive under Arthur's rule, and thus present them to a reader as a sort of 'protected class' within Arthur's kingdom, the Oath still provides permits models of gender performance modern progressive readers may find problematic. First, the Pentecostal Oath still places homosocial relationships and male-focused laws first and foremost in its delivery. Secondly, it still frames masculinity as relying on the vulnerability of women for performance and status; this reduces any affect that the Oath may have on guaranteeing the safety of women in Arthur's kingdom, often at the cost of their agency. Thirdly, despite this codification possibly creating clearer boundaries for men within the hegemonic order of Arthur's kingdom, knights still fail to meet it, or outright break its provisions, leading to unequal degrees of punishment or marginalization for their failures. As such, though Malory provides a clear foundation for his concept of knighthood, the Pentecostal Oath still fails to fix the problems wrong with how Malory models his masculinity on a hegemonic model. Thus, men fail at the

performances expected of them within *Le Morte* and lead to performing and embodying misogynist behaviours and traits not unlike those seen in modern Incels.

First, it is worth explaining the history of the Pentecostal Oath³² and its relation to gender performance in *Le Morte*. Though *Le Morte* draws heavily from older works of Arthurian lore, both Corrine Saunders³³ and Ruth Lexton note the Oath is “original to Malory” (Lexton 68). Thus, the Oath is not merely a stray element of chivalric tradition carried from a source text into Malory’s own exploration of Arthur, but rather a deliberate expansion and exploration of the Arthurian world added by Malory³⁴. For the sake of this thesis, the goal of analyzing the Oath is to consider how the Oath interacts with the complexities of gendered relationships in *Le Morte* and understand how the Oath represents a masculine ideal Malory presents to his knights and readers. The episode begins with Arthur and Merlin arranging Arthur’s marriage and the subsequent wedding, in which a “whyght brachet” (Malory 66) is chased into the chamber pursued by other hounds. At first attempting to ignore this call to adventure, Arthur only agrees to send knights when Merlin explains to Arthur that failing to complete the quests would “be disworshyp to [him] and to [his] feste” (66). As such, Merlin introduces Arthur to the concept to worship via the threat of lost status at his own wedding. This framing device

³² The Pentecostal Oath takes place on the night of Pentecost, which celebrates the founding of the Catholic Church. Arthur holds court on this knight every year and makes knights swear and reswear the Oath. Pentecost is also the day on which Arthur was “sworne unto his lords and the comyns for to be a true king” (Malory 13) during his coronation. As such, both evenings provide fundamental ties with foundations of hugely significant institutions within the setting.

³³ Saunders includes the Oath as amongst the “most striking additions to [Malory’s] sources” (Saunders 242).

³⁴ The Oath’s exact purpose is somewhat debated. Lexton argues that the Oath “performs a political function of service in the interest of the common good” (67), which is in large part due to either “Arthur’s strength” (48) as a leader, or to “compensate[e] for Arthur’s failings in governance” (48). Corrine Saunders, on the other hand, reflects on the metatextual purpose of the Oath as a promise that expands on the emphasis of “loyalty and obedience” (240) found in contemporary chivalric treatises with the clause “regarding violence against women” (240).

for the following quests, though not particularly relevant to the quests themselves, frames the effectively heterosocial exchanging of oaths in a wedding with a mandatory performance of hegemonic masculinity. While Arthur remains at the feast with his new wife and assembled vassals, selected men are to set out on an adventure to provide status for their new liege. Thus, the narrative reaffirms itself as primarily interested in masculine deeds as the perspective shifts from that of Arthur to his individual knights pursuing these quests and away from the wedding ceremony, a ceremony where gendered relationships are essential to the making of lifelong oaths.

During one of these quests, King Pellynor fails to save a young woman named “Alyne” (77), who requests his aid while she holds a “wounded knight in her arms” (Malory 73). Riding on to because he is “egir in hys queste” (73), Pellynor’s ignorance causes “the lady sl[ay] hirselff with [her companion’s] swerde” (73). It is not until Pellynor returns from his quest that he sees the bodies “etyn with lyons and other wylde bestis” (76). Pellynor expressly puts his own desire for worship and status above the needs of the lady he encounters, and the health of her knightly companion. Considered alongside Pellynor’s earlier rape of Torre’s mother, his behaviour seems to consistently reflect a neglect and disinterest in women’s safety and agency in exchange for status through martial deeds. Rather than stop to aid the couple in need or establish a connection with these two individuals, Pellynor rides on to find the couple he is searching for. By neglecting this woman’s safety, he begins to highlight the problems with performance of martial deeds and performed masculinity that the Oath eventually aims to fix.

Following the original route for his quest, Pellynor eventually comes across a pair of knights fighting over a woman; one knight, Sir Outelake, is attempting to take “hir by

force” (74), while the other knight is her cousin Meliot de Logurs, who desires to “lede hir to hir kynne” (74). The possession of the woman in question, Nynyve, becomes a point of contention for the three knights, as Outelake’s lies confirm him as a kidnapper who “toke away thys lady” (740) from the high feast. The discussion eventually leads to a battle wherein Pellynor kills the attempted rapist Outelake and gains the submission of Meliot, who in turn rests with Pellynor and Nynyve before their travels. The entire scene is heavily involved with notions of performance and homosocial interaction without the will or input of Nynyve. Never given a chance to explain her own desires with her own voice (unlike Igrayne before her) Nynyve is reduced to a catalyst to cause the fight between the men. As Butler notes in *Gender Trouble*, the censorship of speech ties into both “the condition of dissatisfaction” (58) of those who are oppressed, as well as eventually being appropriated to “confirm the authority of the speaking subject” (73). Nynyve serves as a reflection of this principle, silenced in this moment despite her articulation later in the text to better frame the deeply hegemonic environment she finds herself in. Surrounded by three men familiar with violence, her ability to speak is stripped away, further cementing the male-focused hegemony of this scene. Without her input, Meliot introduces the other knight of the scene, his sworn brother named Bryan of the Ilis. The turn away from Nynyve’s danger and to the casual introduction of additional character further develops an atmosphere of homosocial familiarity that is discordant to the previous danger. Pellynor has, over the course of the scene, killed a knight in combat, gained verbal submission from another (and thus access to Nynyve), and made acquaintances with a third. Through an act of violence and his speech Pellynor has proven his idealized masculine behaviour within the worship economy by displaying

deeds of arms, subordinating another man's masculinity, gaining access to a woman³⁵, and speaking publicly to affirm such deeds³⁶. The hegemonic relations in the scene seem to idealize Pellynor within the frameworks Malory has so far laid out to the reader.

However, Malory does not idealize Pellynor when he returns to Arthur's feast. Instead, Pellynor's sole authority over the scene is shattered when Nynyve falls from her horse and announces her "arme ys oute of lythe³⁷" (Malory 75). Through no direct fault of Pellynor's, the course of the episode rapidly shifts away from the idealization of the previous scene. The undercurrents of failure begin here, and continue through Pellynor's return to the well where he abandoned the lady Alyne. Here he finds her and the knight dead and eaten by animals. His following condemnation as being "gretly to blame that ye saved nat thys ladyes lyff" (76) by Gwenyver drastically changes the dynamic of the episode. Whereas Nynyve spends most of the episode silenced in the presence of masculine figures, Gwenyver's presence changes the politics of speech. Gwenyver, in Butler's terms, expresses the "condition of dissatisfaction" (*Gender Trouble* 58) with the current state of misogyny in Arthur's court. As a woman in a position of power, she uses her voice and abilities to disrupt the hitherto steadily growing hegemony of the social economy. As such, as focused as Malory is on masculine performance and the relationships between men as peers and enemies, he seems to begin a pattern of returning to women as agents who operate outside this simple masculine hierarchy. As much as men may try to exclude women from the decision-making process, women present themselves as a variable who will not be controlled or objectified by reductive notions of

³⁵ Sexual or not, he has her guardianship for the time being and Nynyve has yet been given the ability to articulate her protests or compliance.

³⁶ As affirmed with Merlin and Uther's spoken confirmations of their pact and Arthur's right to rule.

³⁷ Its socket.

gender performance. Even when placed into passive positions and robbed of their voices while men strive to perform acts of normative masculinity, their voices inevitably return to condemn elements of misogyny in the text.

However, though these women vocally articulate themselves in a pattern of resistance to masculine oppression, Malory does depict resistance to their attempts at expressing agency. As Butler noted that eventually all speech expressing dissatisfaction may be appropriated by the “Phallic-Other that will phantasmatically confirm the authority of the speaking subject” (*Gender Trouble* 73), Malory reintroduces Merlin as a threat to women’s agency *and* women’s safety. It is only after Nynyve speaks at the end of the prior quest that Merlin seems to notice, and thus begin stalking, her. Butler’s claim that the marginalized would use speech as a tool of resistance includes the idea that patriarchy will attempt to reassert control over resistance as part of the patriarchal norm, which Malory presents to the reader through Merlin. Malory parallels this concept as he turns away from Nynyve and Gwenyver’s speech to refocus on the dialogue between Pellynor and Merlin. Merlin follows Gwenyver’s initial condemnation with one of his own, explaining how the woman Pellynor failed to save was his own daughter from a prior affair, expanding on his crimes and relaying punishment onto him for his deeds³⁸. Merlin’s actions here reflect how Butler claims that the “Phallic-Other” (*Gender Trouble* 73), the man, will eventually to “confirm the authority of the speaking subject” (73) within their own circles of power. Though Gwenyver is the first to move against Pellynor for his misdeeds, it is Merlin who must confirm it, reappropriating the anger in the scene

³⁸ It may be noteworthy that Merlin claims that God himself will punish Pellynor for these deeds, as “yet should truste moste on of ony man on lyve, he shall leve you there ye shall be slayne” (Malory 77). In short, for Pellynor’s crimes God has decreed that Pellynor will be abandoned by the man he trusts most in the world, much like how he abandoned those in need prior.

to be a homosocial punishment, rather than one that may give Gwenyver direct influence over the scene. As such, Merlin emphasizes a system where even law and accusations are controlled by gender-based anxieties, making the economy of “heroic status” (Scala 380) a system that also contains the ability to measure “moral, ethical, and legal parameters of judgement” (Scala 380). Gwenyver’s key role in the accusations are minimized so that Merlin can reassert the hegemonic order in which women are to be silent and men relay status through their performance. It seems that though Malory is willing to concede the point that what Pellynor did was wrong, Arthur’s court requires that men must have the last word. Thus, Merlin must affirm that, as a man, he has the status to pass judgement on Pellynor, further supported by his connection to the divine³⁹.

The petty dynamism here reeks of Incel-like misogyny. Though Malory seems to be displaying notions of independent women, the men of the court attempt to silence both Nynyve and Gwenyver. Though not sympathetic to Incel-like notions of women needing to be distributed amongst men as social capital, this episode does carry Incel anxieties regarding women displaying agency and, possibly, controlling men’s actions. Reinforced by parallels to the Incel belief that women need to serve some purpose to men (usually relating to sex and thus status), Merlin also finally reveals that the woman Pellynor failed to save was his “owne doughtir” (Malory 77). Evoking both notions of disinterest in familial commitments and his duty as a knight, Malory seems to punish Pellynor for his failures to protect women while still emphasizing that a woman’s value is wholly based on her relation to a man (in this case, a high status king). Reflective of the anxieties

³⁹ It is worth noting that Malory cuts Merlin’s origin from the text, leaving his nature and abilities much more nebulous than other works. As such, readers have no confirmed claim if Merlin truly is the spawn of a demon or blessed by the divine in *Le Morte*.

explained previously in this thesis, Merlin prevents Gwenyver from setting the precedent of having power over men and Malory's narration then moves to discuss the Oath itself, ultimately considering but not entertaining Gwenyver's judgement over a man. In both cases, this episode reaffirms a patriarchal silencing and overwriting of women that leads the way for male narration as it reasserts control over the end of the episode. In turn, this shift away from the legitimate concerns of the women in the text parallels an Incel-like need to control women lest they control men.

The Hegemonic Oath

Though the Oath has been lauded as a unique addition to Arthurian canon and serves as a strangely feminist confirmation of women's rights amidst the context of its creation, it is still invaluable to consider how the Oath itself does little to effect the deep-rooted hegemony in *Le Morte*. Fundamental to this reading of the Oath is that understanding that the so-called "'ladies' clause" (Lexton 67) is that, a clause in a longer Oath. Although the Oath has men swear to "always... do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour], strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and neve to enforce them" (Malory 77), the Oath still positions women in a fundamentally vulnerable state. Buried in the middle of a paragraph, the ladies' clause is blended into a larger paragraph establishing the law of Arthur's rule following the events of the quests. As such, though women are placed at the figurative center of the discussion, they are not the concluding point. Rather, Malory ends this episode so involved with weddings and heterosocial interactions with the affirmation that every knight of Arthur's court will repeat this Oath "every yere... at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste" (Malory 77). Like the rest of the episode,

what is a fundamentally heterosocial story is attempting to bury the role of women in the masculine from all sides.

This fundamental masculinist hegemonic focus lies at a central part of the misogyny of the Oath. Like in the quests preceding its development, the Pentecostal Oath is made to police gender and performance amongst other men. Butler notes that gender performance is not one action committed and forgotten, but rather a “repetition and a ritual” (*Gender Trouble* XV). The annual re-swearing of the Oath fulfills both the repetition and ritual⁴⁰ parts of performance, as a group of men stand united and affirm an Oath not just to protect women, but also “never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allways to fle treson, and to to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy” (Malory 77). Not focused on women, the beginning of the Oath is a homosocial contract between knights to help them distinguish what is good or bad performance, which in turn is meant to be upheld against “forfiture of their worship” (Malory 77). As such, though the Oath includes the protection of women as a clause, it is a fundamentally homosocial promise made between men of Arthur’s court and hegemonic community that would permit them to (in the way Incels view social structures) “aggressively compete and dominate others” (Kupers 713 in Ging 640) in a *policed* fashion. Rather than having men blindly searching for quests in the name of worship, the Oath outlines the hitherto unseen rules of Merlin’s worship economy which, hopefully, will help knights regulate⁴¹ their performance in

⁴⁰ Dorsey Armstrong comes to a similar conclusion, noting that Malory’s knights engage in a “never-ending performance” (Armstrong 67) to assert their hegemonic status.

⁴¹ Other academics have noted the regulating features of the Oath. Of particular interest to this thesis is that the Pentecostal Oath “enables the knights to unite in their support of Arthur’s weakened kingship” (Lexton 69). Arthur, as one man and an (arguably) weak king, cannot control the actions of all knights and as such, requires a verbal Oath from all knights to confirm they act within accordance of the law. Personally, I would ask readers to consider how Malory’s own engagement with agency and the limits of individuals may play a part in Arthur needing to codify or ‘deputize’ subordinate masculinities to enforce the Oath.

ways less disruptive to the wider kingdom. Because women are not the focus of the Oath, how it impacts heterosocial and heterosexual relationships is minimal. Though the Oath superficially claims to protect women, it never includes words or speech of women, ultimately making the Oath an exclusionary act that does little to consider the desires or agency of women. As much as Malory seems to want to give women agency, in the early books of *Le Morte* they are repeatedly silenced by the men in their communities in favour of male-dominated discourse that excludes women from making decisions about their own bodies or futures.

The hegemonic nature of the Oath takes on an ironic twist when one considers the Incel-like anxieties of controlling women. In the episode that immediately follows the development and swearing of the Pentecostal Oath, Merlin, who has developed the worship economy in the first place, finds himself breaking its fundamental rules. Malory has, to this point in *Le Morte* established a complex and somewhat contradictory form of masculinity through the vehicle of the worship economy. While Malory negotiates themes of birthright and nobility, he also emphasizes how men should perform deeds of arms, seduce women, and speak well in exchange for the homosocial status that will gain them vassals and subjugated masculinities. Yet the Pentecostal Oath puts limits on such behaviours, as now knights cannot offend each other, nor can they deny mercy when asked. Most importantly, though men have attempted to silence women throughout *Le Morte*, Merlin is unable to silence Nynyve like Pellynor and her captors did in the prior episode. Despite being the first character within the next to use the term worship, and the character most associated with its verbal rulings and changes, Merlin's death reflect what

happens to “shamefull”⁴² men. Merlin, for all his policing of other men’s behaviour, never commits to a normative masculinity within the text. He never performs martial feats, even if he does advise battles. He never directly subordinates another man, though he does educate them on hegemony. Merlin, as far as masculinity is concerned, can voice his status as a man through his dialogue, and through his attempts to gain sexual access to Nynyve. However, Nynyve never consents to Merlin’s advances, as Malory explains that Merlin was “assorted upon hir” (Malory 78), emasculated by his won desires and driven to near-madness. In turn, Nynyve quickly becomes “aferde of [Merlin]” (79) because he is explicitly after her “maydynhode” (79). The framing makes the possibility of sexual assault seem inevitable, so Nynyve is driven to the extreme of trapping Merlin under a stone, making it so “he come never outefor all the craufte he coude do” (Malory 79). To protect herself from sexual assault, and from Merlin’s own hypocrisy, Nynyve violates the standards of the hegemonic order and goes beyond just resisting a man-she kills him in self defense.

However, it is no coincidence that such an episode should immediately follow the fundamental codification of masculine performance. Just a page prior, Merlin seems to consent to Arthur’s ruling on the prohibition on sexual assault. Yet, a page later he finds himself cast into the same fate he seemingly spared Uther from, an emasculation by violence and a disworshipful death⁴³. The seeming problem with Merlin’s character,

⁴² Merlin immediately contrasts his own death against Arthur’s “worshipfull dethe” (Malory 32), providing context that shame and worship are antithetical.

⁴³ Though readers never see Merlin’s actual death, he is seemingly unable to escape from his imprisonment and slowly loses influence throughout the text. Within Merlin’s conception of the worship economy, he never display significant performance to be considered ‘worshipful’.

outside of any notions that may connect him with an infernal heritage⁴⁴, is that he is fundamentally tied to the notion of masculine performance. Though Merlin does not perform masculinity in the way outlined, he cannot help but repeat the cycles of hegemonic masculinity and violence. As Saunders explains, “the pattern of the conception of the hero through... deceit is crucial to the foundation and subsequent history of the Arthurian world, the *Morte*⁴⁵, paradoxically, is constructed around the need to protect women from rape and abduction” (Saunders 241). As involved as Merlin is in the act of judging masculine behaviour and policing gender, his role is to perpetuate the simplest notions of gender in *Le Morte*. Women must, in his system, be rapeable to allow men to fulfill their role as protectors for the sake of masculine performance. In this way, Merlin takes on the supernaturally connotated monster that needs to be slain, or the bad knight who needs to be defeated. However, paralleling Incel anxieties, Nynyve denies the need for a man to save her. Rather, she saves herself from Merlin’s advances and breaks the cycle of violence she had already experienced in the previous episode. Thus, though Malory’s Pentecostal Oath may ultimately be a sort of virtue signalling (after all, the first adventure following the Oath is an instance where a member of Arthur’s court immediately breaks it), Malory does present us with a fundamental shift in gender dynamics through Nynyve’s actions. Through a woman’s non-normative performance and an attempt to protect herself, Nynyve breaks a cycle of violence that stretches back to at least the previous generation (it is Merlin, after all, who is so key to Uther’s assault on Igrayne). Thus, though the Pentecostal Oath represents a shift in *Le Morte*’s attitudes

⁴⁴ The text repeatedly reports rumours that Merlin is a “devyls son” (Malory 79). While not confirmed by the narrator as true, Malory seems to be drawing on preexisting versions of Merlin from other texts, such as the *Vita Merlini*.

⁴⁵ Italics are mine.

regarding gender performance, it is not with a man that they see the Oath's fulfillment. Rather, it is the actions of a woman, who had been excluded from the speaking of the Oath, who upholds the tenets of both clauses: she incites no violence, she avoids Merlin's deceptions⁴⁶, and she prevents her own sexual assault. As such, Nynyve is the first agent of the Oath and thus the first individual following its formation to, hypothetically, earn worship under its rules. Without outwardly defying the gender norms centered around womanhood in the text, Nynyve still achieves a state of supposedly masculine status that men fail to reach.

The complications of homosocial relations Nynyve brings to the table are too many to catalogue in this thesis. However, even the shift in her character from damsel to sorcerer marks a shift in the text's attitudes towards women. While Nynyve's transformation is easy to read as a feminist win against an agent of the patriarchy, Nynyve's action to reflect Incel beliefs that women do not cultivate "relationships that do not materially benefit her sexually or financially" (Menzie 8). While women have resisted violence and victimhood prior to Nynyve slaying Merlin, Nynyve may be the first explicit victor over her aggressor, upending the hegemonic assumption of masculine dominance. Furthermore, the way Nynyve defeats Merlin broadly fit the tenets of the newly formed Oath, showing a socio-political shift away from the masculinities of Uther and Merlin and towards a new evolving status. However, Nynyve's actions being the first betray the problems with the Oath. Despite the Oath being a homosocial agreement between the knights, its first supporter is a woman. Despite the Oath meant as a form of

⁴⁶ There is an argument to be had over if she deceives Merlin or not. Merlin's prior lines reflect an awareness of his specific fate. Not only does he tell Arthur that he would not "endure longe" (Malory 78), but specifically notes that he would be "putte into the erthe quyk" (Malory 78). The fact that Merlin is literally buried alive seems to point towards his abilities of foresight predicting the method of his imprisonment.

regulation for Malory's knights following the misogyny of the prior chapters, it is a woman who must first demonstrate that it is possible to perform masculinity as Arthur decrees. The failure of *Le Morte*'s knights to follow this system highlights 1) their misogyny and lack of care for women and the Oaths they swear to other men, instead opting for an older, habitual model of masculinity they may be more familiar with, and 2) a possible inability to perform masculinity as Arthur decreed, levelling the question of whether this model of regulated hegemony is still not sustainable for the men of the court and their peers.

As such, though Malory does seem to forward the Pentecostal Oath as a dynamic shift in the power structures at play in *Le Morte*, and as an attempt to codify the protections of women, the knights of *Le Morte* ultimately seem to fail at following these tenets. The familiar misogyny that Malory's knights have previously explored sticks with them after the introduction of the Oath, and it takes Nynyve, a woman who has already been victimized by the violent objectivation at the center of knightly masculinity, to demonstrate the first act of effective censure against a man who would defy this Oath. Though the misogyny of such behaviour is not a direct parallel to modern Inceldom, the assumptions made about women's agency and the silencing of women are both core parts of Incel behaviour. Furthermore, the continued focus on hegemonic status and worship in the text still reflects an Incel-like misogyny that *Le Morte*'s knights cannot completely untangle themselves from. Yet Malory does choose to try to separate from such reductive notions of silence through the continued resistance and evolution of social networks, both of which are headed by Igrayne and Nynyve, two women who have been affected by the sexism of Arthur's court. Though modern Inceldom disdains any direct connection to

knighthood, Malory's hegemonic social structures between knights and their interactions with women are still evocative of modern Inceldom and parallel the same male-dominated assumptions that Incels have about modern society. Malory cannot separate his work from the hegemony essential to the worship economy, nor to the parallels we can draw to the reductive archetypes Incels believe in. While it is admittedly anachronistic to place modern Incel frameworks on Malory's knights, the goal in this chapter is to strike a parallel between the silencing and control of women's sexual and agency that Incels want to perform in the modern world, and the attempts of men like Outelake and Merlin within the core text. While Incels may not directly be influenced by the cornerstone of medievalism that is *Le Morte*, the parallels of misogyny in this chapter do explore how Incels may have gotten the notion of historical period where male supremacy ruled over women. Their reading of course, ignores how Malory complicates the hegemony of his work with continued resistance from women in the text, and codified, if ineffective, rules against the abuse of women and the supposedly 'dishonourable' domination of other men. In doing so, Malory's text denies Incel simplicity while still attempting to untangle the misogyny inherent to hegemonic masculinity, and the sexism that may draw the alt-right to the medieval is the first place.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Despite the various connections to Inceldom I make in this thesis, I do not think that Malory, nor the work of *Le Morte* itself, are pro-Incel. Rather, the goal of this thesis is to articulate the that the same gender anxieties that affect and inspire modern Incels were considered while Malory was writing *Le Morte*. By considering how Malory engages with misogyny and the enforcement of gender essentialism, I hoped to shed light on how *Le Morte* is a fundamentally hegemonic text, especially when considering how so-called ‘failed masculinities’ are considered within the work. However, by considering how Malory has characters like Nynyve and Igrayne resist the hegemonic system from the first page, modern readers can ask themselves how Malory defies the expected Romance notions of masculinity. Whether through Igrayne’s resistance to sexual assault or Nynyve’s superior mastery and display of ‘masculine’ performance, Malory presents the reader with a flawed⁴⁷ and failing model of hegemony. As such, *Le Morte* does not fit the narrow idea of what the alt-right thinks the Middle Ages are or were. Rather, like the rest of the alt-right, Incel appropriations of the Middle Ages are inaccurate and misunderstood talking points passed down through pop-culture and generations of misogyny. Though *Le Morte* has its issues when weighed against modern progressive values, the book itself is not a monolith of masculinist propaganda, nor an outdated model for idealized masculinities. Rather, *Le Morte* is a text deeply concerned with not just the performance and perception of masculinity, but also with how those

⁴⁷ Both Kenneth Hodges and Dorsey Armstrong have come to similar conclusions. Hodges argues that *Le Morte*’s hegemony is “fatally flawed, fatally unstable, and so too [are] its practitioners” (*Forging Chivalric Communities* 2). Armstrong also argues that though Lancelot is the masculine ideal, he also represents the “weaknesses inherent in the chivalric social order” (Armstrong 66). This weakness appears in the way that Lancelot, despite possessing male privilege, is often “*compel[led]*” (66) by women to act according to their desires.

performances affect those perceiving and the individuals, regardless of sex, who perform them. Dissatisfied with the misogyny associated with Inceldom, I hope this essay contributes to a wider discussion of how non-normative masculinities like Inceldom may appropriate medievalisms, and how we can dissuade, disprove, and dismantle the beliefs that have enabled a lineage of misogyny dating back to the 15th century and before.

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