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“Always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succor”: Women and the Chivalric Code in

Malory’s *Morte Darthur*

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Felicia Ackerman (Brown University)

There once was a knight named Sir Lancelot  
Who couldn’t keep it in his pantsalot  
One day he got caught  
His king was distraught  
And he had to go off to Francealot.

Medieval chivalry involves a distinctive sort of moral code, one that is far loftier than what the above limerick suggests. This sort of code, however, is unlikely to appeal to most present-day philosophers. Progressive people are apt to dismiss chivalry as oppressive to women. This essay will subject that attitude to critical examination through a discussion of one particular chivalric code, the code in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. I will argue that in addition to its obvious limitations, Malory’s chivalric code holds some currently unrecognized advantages for women. First, however, some background about Malory’s *Morte Darthur* is in order.

The *Morte Darthur* is an English prose compilation, compression, adaptation, and supplementation of medieval French (in Malory’s translation) and English Arthurian romances. Written by Sir Thomas Malory, it was first published (as well as edited) by William Caxton in 1485.<sup>1</sup> This essay focuses on the two-volume Penguin Classics edition, which is based on the

Caxton edition (and from which my Malory excerpts are taken, unless otherwise indicated), as the Penguin basically preserves the language of the Caxton edition but modernizes the Middle English spelling.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between changing the language and changing the spelling obviously has borderline cases, but the net effect of focusing on the Penguin is to make the quoted Malory material readily accessible to philosophers. In this essay, I take the Penguin text largely as a given and use such expressions as ‘Malory’s world’ without going into such questions as to what extent the relevant aspects of Malory’s world come from his sources or what editing Caxton did. Of course, when I speak of Malory’s world, I mean the fictional fifth-century world of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, not the fifteenth-century world of Malory’s actual life. This fictional world is fundamentally a world of the aristocracy; it does not have the full range of people found in the actual world. Also, although there are many writers of Arthurian material and hence many versions of Arthurian chivalry, for simplicity of exposition I will confine myself to Malory, as he is the greatest of all Arthurian writers and also the medieval Arthurian writer most widely read today.<sup>3</sup>

“[P]erhaps the most complete and authentic record of M[alory]’s conception of chivalry”<sup>4</sup> is found in Malory’s version of the Round Table Oath (also called the Pentecostal Oath), to which “all the knights...of the Table Round, both old and young...every year were...sworn at the high feast of Pentecost.”<sup>5</sup> The Caxton edition’s version of the Round Table Oath goes as follows:

never to do outrageousness nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no mean to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their [the knights’] worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon

pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, ne for no world's goods.<sup>6</sup>

The version in the edition of Malory described in footnote 1, the Vinaver edition, goes as follows:

never to do outrage nor murder, and always to flee treason, and to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their [the knights'] worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen and widows succour; strengthen them in their rights, and never to enforce them, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no love, ne for no worldly goods.<sup>7</sup>

The clause mentioning ladies (unsurprisingly known as the ladies' clause) is my focus in this essay. Malory's terminology for women illustrates the point that he is writing about the aristocracy. I will go along with this restriction (although, for simplicity of exposition, I will sometimes use the general terms 'woman' and 'women'), as nonaristocratic women rarely even appear in Malory's world. Malory can be faulted for his dismissive attitude toward the lower classes; however, this issue is outside the scope of my essay.

What does the ladies' clause require knights to do? Of the various roles knights of the Round Table have in Malory's world, two are important here.<sup>8</sup> First, Round Table knights function as quasi-policemen and keepers of the peace, who prevent and investigate crimes, rescue victims and potential victims, and, unlike policemen in our society, lawfully sometimes mete out summary, even capital, punishment. (The benefits of such knightly police action are not limited to women victims and potential victims. Knights often rescue their beleaguered or imprisoned fellow knights, as well as damsels in distress.) Examples of knightly police action on

behalf of women include killing a serial rapist (Book VI, chapter 10) and interceding for a woman against a homicidally jealous husband (Book VI, chapter 17). In the jealous husband case, Launcelot even ignores the husband's attempts to justify his behavior. Women, however, can also be victims of summary justice. When a lady Arthur has spurned tries to strike off his head with his own sword in revenge, Arthur beheads her, following another lady's advice, "Let not that false lady escape."<sup>9</sup>

Is Arthur violating the oath? If not, how should oath be understood? I will return to this question after outlining the second pertinent role of a Round Table knight, a role likely to strike the modern reader as bizarre. Nowadays, we are apt to take for granted our modern system of criminal justice, where (at least in the absence of plea-bargaining) the guilt or innocence of someone accused of a crime is determined by presenting the evidence to a jury of his peers. In Arthur's kingdom, however, guilt or innocence is determined by a trial by battle between the accuser (or a knight fighting on his behalf) and the accused (or a knight fighting on his behalf). In a sense, the judge is God, who is expected to "speed the right"<sup>10</sup> by providing victory to the side of the accused if he is innocent and to the side of the accuser if the accused is guilty. Women do not have the option of fighting on their own behalf in trials by battle in Malory's world. But the ladies' clause keeps women from being "helpless before the law so long as legal quarrels could be settled only by means of battle,"<sup>11</sup> any more than nonlawyers in our world are helpless before the law to the extent that our legal quarrels can be settled only by means of lawyers. Just as nonlawyers in our world gain legal power by having lawyers represent them, women in Malory's world gain legal power by having knights fight on their behalf in trials by battle. Similarly, just as police power protects civilians against crime in our world, knightly power protects women against crime in Malory's world. The analogy between knights and

lawyers or policemen is -- to put it mildly -- hardly perfect, but it is a corrective to the exaggeration of the subjugation of women in Malory's world. In fact, since the oath *requires* Round Table knights always to do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succor, such women have an automatic claim on the prowess of even the strongest knight. It is as if present-day Americans had an automatic claim on the free services of the likes of Johnnie Cochran and Alan Dershowitz. It might even be argued that in this respect, women are more powerful than men in Malory's world, as the Round Table Oath does not require stronger knights to provide succor to lesser knights.

Dorsey Armstrong has argued that "the knightly understanding of women as powerless ironically renders them powerful."<sup>12</sup> This insight is just part of the story. What makes women powerful in Malory's world is not just the knightly understanding of women as powerless, but this understanding *in conjunction with* the moral imperative that knights of the Round Table do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succor. Without this imperative, the knightly understanding of women as powerless could be a basis for overpowering and taking advantage of women rather than for protecting and serving them.

At this point, some qualifications are in order. First, just how much more powerful (in the indicated way) are women than lesser knights in Malory's world? Round Table knights certainly do hold themselves obligated to aid their fellow knights, as well as to aid women. For example, Launcelot's rationale for rescuing Kay from three knights who "lashed on him at once with swords"<sup>13</sup> is "if he be slain I am partner of his death."<sup>14</sup> And in a much later incident, Arthur says, in praising Gareth, "For ever it is a worshipful [honorable] knight's deed to help another worshipful knight when he seeth him in a great danger."<sup>15</sup>

A second possible objection to what I have said so far is that the oath's final clause -- prohibiting battles in a wrongful quarrel -- indicates a restriction on the succor owed to ladies. There is an obvious tension between the two clauses: what if doing a lady succor requires fighting for her in a wrongful quarrel? This possibility is not just theoretical. In the final tale (Book XX), Launcelot saves Guenever from being burned to death when he knows she is guilty and offers to prove her innocence in a trial by battle. But in an earlier episode, where Guenever is (falsely) accused of poisoning a knight at a feast, the remaining knights who were present at the feast refuse to fight for her in a trial by battle because "all they have great suspicion unto the queen"<sup>16</sup> and Launcelot, who has promised Guenever "ever to be her knight in right other in wrong,"<sup>17</sup> is (initially) absent. A problem thus arises: sometimes a woman may need to *appear* to be in the right in order to get a knight to fight for her to *prove* she is in the right. Women who do appear to be in the right, however, have the power I have mentioned: every Round Table knight is obliged to defend them. Note also that it is not only men from whom women may need protection in Malory's world. The possibility that a woman may need protection from another woman is recognized in a forerunner of the Round Table Oath, administered only to Gawain, which includes the provision that "he should never be against lady ne gentlewoman but if he fought for a lady and his adversary fought for another."<sup>18</sup> As Malory tells us, "there by ordinance of the queen there was set a quest [judgment] of ladies on Sir Gawain, and they judged him"<sup>19</sup> to swear to this oath. Recognizing the judicial role of women to "set a quest" to advance their interests is another corrective to the exaggeration of the subjugation of women in Malory's world.

When the ladies' clause conflicts with other clauses of the oath, Malorian values frequently favor the former. Malory clearly approves of Launcelot's above-mentioned support of

Guenever. Another clause that may conflict with the ladies' clause is the mercy clause, which requires that a knight accept a surrender and refrain from slaying a knight he has overcome in combat and who has yielded to him and asked for mercy. This situation can arise when the victorious knight is in either of the knightly roles I have mentioned: quasi-policeman and keeper of the peace or combatant in a trial by battle, and in other potentially homicidal situations as well. Mercy is a Christian virtue. Requiring mercy shows the religious underpinnings of Arthurian knighthood as embodying Christian virtues, rather than resting on brute force.<sup>20</sup> In order to see how such a requirement may conflict with the ladies' clause, we need to consider what the ladies' clause might require of knights beyond the already mentioned quasi-police and trial-by-battle functions.

Doing women succor does not entail automatically granting whatever they may request. Sexual requests are clearly exempt. For example, when Elaine of Astolat (who may be more familiar to philosophers as Tennyson's Lady of Shalott) implores Launcelot to "have mercy upon me, and suffer me not to die for thy love"<sup>21</sup> by marrying her or at least becoming her lover, he is not in violation of the ladies' clause (or, for that matter, the mercy clause) when he refuses. Nor does giving women succor invariably override other considerations in Malory's world. If it did, female transgressors could hardly be punished. But the scope of the ladies' clause may be surprisingly broad. Malory scholars often take it to include adherence to the so-called "rash boon" tradition, where a lady asks for a "gift," and a knight is expected to grant her request before even knowing what the gift will turn out to be.<sup>22</sup> Armstrong uses this tradition in order to argue that there is a way in which the outlook underlying the ladies' clause *unintentionally* gives power to women. She employs an example involving a damsel in an early, pre-oath episode, which is part of how, as Thomas L. Wright puts it, "Malory's rules of chivalry [i.e., the clauses

of the Round Table Oath] are...determined empirically.”<sup>23</sup> In this episode, a damsel “asks *first* for a gift, which request [Tor] in adhering to the already demonstrated and soon to be made lawful rule about behavior to ladies [i.e., the ladies’ clause], grants.”<sup>24</sup> But the damsel, taking advantage of what Armstrong calls “the helplessness of a knight when confronted by a lady asking favors,”<sup>25</sup> is pursuing a personal vengeance. Her requested “gift” turns out to be the head of Abellus, who, she tells Tor, killed her brother, *and* who yields and asks Tor for mercy. Interestingly, in an earlier “rash boon” episode, where the “gift” turns out to be the head of Balin or the damsel who gave him a sword, Arthur is not helpless when confronted by a lady asking favors. He blamelessly refuses to grant this gift to the Lady of the Lake, saying, significantly, “I may not grant neither of their heads *with my worship* [honor],”<sup>26</sup> despite the fact that he previously agreed to give her “what gift ye will ask”<sup>27</sup> in return for her giving him his sword Excalibur and, unlike Abellus, no potential target is asking for mercy. As Mark Lambert has observed in another context, Malory’s outlook has “internal contradictions...He has not thought the whole thing out.”<sup>28</sup> Tor’s and Arthur’s pre-oath dilemmas foreshadow the oath’s incompatible requirements.<sup>29</sup> But these incompatibilities do not prevent the oath from functioning as a moral code in practice in cases where the incompatibilities are irrelevant.

Armstrong’s article does not mention the case of the Lady of the Lake, but she offers this analysis of Tor and the damsel:

The damsel in this episode performs as a knight would expect her to, miming feminine behavior and thus transcending her categorization as such: although in a sense a helpless, needy female, she capitalizes on her position to effectively make [Tor] her instrument. Here we can see how the rigid conception of gender categories and the attributes that mark these categories

actually create a space in which women may wield some measure of power and influence within the patriarchal social project of chivalry. While the Arthurian community understands and indeed, values the catalytic effect the feminine has in encouraging feats of bravery and prowess, it fails to anticipate the use of that catalytic effect for ends other than the glorification of the community and of the individual knights who comprise it. In this instance, her brother's death provides the damsel with the impetus to act for her own 'selfish' interests, rather than subsuming her personal desire into that of the communal good (i.e., a test of knightly ability that would bring renown back to [Tor] and his community).<sup>30</sup>

I will consider this account in relation to the oath's mercy clause, which has important parallels with the ladies' clause. Here are three parallels. First, both clauses have penalties attached: death for violating the ladies' clause and social death (forfeiture of worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore) for violating the mercy clause. The oath does not rank-order the clauses. But the fact that Arthur and Guenever "made great joy"<sup>31</sup> upon hearing Tor "tell of his adventures"<sup>32</sup> (on a quest including the episode discussed above) suggests that at least in this instance they value service to ladies over mercy to knights. Whatever the damsel's intentions, Tor's adventures do, in fact, "bring renown back to [him] and his community" -- precisely because this community places such high value on knights providing service to women.

Second, both clauses deal with relations between the strong and the weak. On the one hand, the two clauses support Elizabeth Pochoda's claim that the Round Table Oath "is specifically directed at eliminating the tyranny of one individual over another, at protecting the weak from the strong."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the existence (or creation) of such weakness is

essential to chivalry. Knights who yield as overcome are “passive, powerless object[s],”<sup>34</sup> “vulnerable and helpless”<sup>35</sup> -- precisely the qualities Armstrong identifies the Arthurian community as ascribing to women. Her claim that “a demonstration of knightly prowess is impossible without the presence of the subjugated feminine”<sup>36</sup> should be applied to the presence of the defeated, subjugated knights. A disanalogy is that the position of the defeated knight is (to use the sort of social-science jargon that would make Malory turn over in his grave) achieved rather than ascribed, as well as relative to a particular context of a particular combat. But just as Arthurian society ascribes roles to women, it establishes conditions for knightly combat. Both the ladies’ clause and the mercy clause, like the clause prohibiting battles in a wrongful quarrel, deal with specifically knightly duties, as opposed to general human duties. All people are supposed to refrain from committing murder, “outrageousness,” or treason, but the oath’s remaining three clauses are unique aspects of the knightly role in Arthurian society.<sup>37</sup>

The third parallel is the most important for my purposes. It is that both clauses can be manipulated by the weak. Beverly Kennedy has suggested that the mercy clause “can be interpreted either as an ethical imperative applicable to the behavior of an adventurous knight errant [which includes the quasi-policeman role] or as a rule applicable to the behavior of combatants in trial by battle.”<sup>38</sup> The victorious knight is often free to set his terms for granting mercy. Knights who receive mercy from a knight in his quasi-policeman role are often required to go and yield themselves at King Arthur’s court. Other terms for granting mercy also occur. In an early tournament in Ireland, Tristram extracts these terms from the defeated Palomides: “that ye forsake my lady La Beale Isoud, and in no manner wise that ye draw not to her. Also this twelvemonth and a day that ye bear none armour nor none harness of war. Now promise me this, or here shalt thou die.”<sup>39</sup> Neither Tristram nor Palomides is yet a knight of the Round Table, but

Tristram's requirement would be acceptable in one. Later, King Mark, also not a Round Table knight, swears (upon yielding to Gaheris) never to be against errant knights and to befriend Tristram if Tristram ever comes into Cornwall (Book IX, chapter 38). But just as women can use the ladies' clause for their own personal ends, defeated knights can do likewise with the mercy clause, swearing to terms they have no intention of keeping. This possibility is also not just theoretical. Neither King Mark nor Palomides keeps his promise. But then a question arises. What does the mercy clause indicate: that the Arthurian community cannot anticipate the possibility of insincere promises accompanying appeals for mercy or that the community values mercy so highly that it is willing to take that risk? Now consider the parallel question of whether Armstrong is correct in claiming that the ladies' clause indicates the community's inability to admit or even conceive of "the possibility of female agency"<sup>40</sup> that goes against the community or whether this clause indicates that the community places such high value on doing succor to women that it is willing to take that risk. Consider also that even before the promulgation of the Round Table Oath, we encounter masculine acknowledgment of particular cases of perfidious women following private, antisocial agendas. This casts doubt upon Armstrong's claim that "the masculine agents of the chivalric community cannot, of necessity, allow for or conceive of any resistance to gender categories as constructed by the Arthurian society."<sup>41</sup> When Balin justifies his beheading of the Lady of the Lake on the grounds that she destroyed many good knights and caused his mother to be burnt "through her falsehood and treachery,"<sup>42</sup> Arthur's reply is "Which cause soever ye had, ye should have forborne her in my presence."<sup>43</sup> This reply indicates open-mindedness about this lady's true character, rather than inability or unwillingness to conceive of "the possibility of female agency" that could choose to work against knights.

So far I have been discussing Malorian chivalry in relation to views of Malory scholars who are not professional philosophers. I now turn to an explicitly philosophical treatment of a related notion, Linda Bell's discussion of gallantry. Bell does not specifically discuss Malorian chivalry. Gallantry, as she conceives it, is not identical with Malorian chivalry. But it is worth considering to what, if any, extent Bell's criticisms of gallantry apply to Malorian chivalry. Bell characterizes gallantry as follows: "First, gallantry involves a generosity that goes beyond what is required by good manners. Gallantry, like good manners, is praised; but unlike a breach of manners, a lack of gallantry is not usually condemned...no...negative judgment [as rude] greets the man who does not go out of his way to open the door for a woman."<sup>44</sup> This overlooks the traditional requirement of a certain degree of gallantry as part of good manners. For example, *Drebbett's Etiquette and Modern Manners* says, "Courtesy has long demanded that a man should open a door for a woman."<sup>45</sup> In support of her claim, Bell points out that "Sir Walter Raleigh's [spreading his cloak over a puddle in the path of his queen] received mention...in history books,"<sup>46</sup> while mere good manners would not. But this shows only that Sir Walter Raleigh's extreme gallantry counted as supererogatory to the point of being noteworthy, not that all gallantry did. Certainly, the chivalry embodied in the ladies' clause is obligatory in Malory's world; it is part of an *oath* knights swear to.

Bell also claims that gallantry involves "a feigned inferiority"<sup>47</sup> and hence a duplicity, involving a kind of irony that is really an insult on the part of the man. While Bell cites men whose rationales for gallantry support this claim, its general applicability to Malory's world is dubious. Vowing to do women succor is not inherently duplicitous, nor, as I shall argue presently, does it entail any insult. Of course, Malorian chivalry, like virtually anything else, can be used in a duplicitous way. In an early episode, Gareth, his true identity concealed, gets King

Arthur to let him answer a damsel's plea for succor. But that damsel despises him, mocks him for being a "kitchen knave," and denigrates his success at knightly pursuits. When a knight he defeats asks for mercy, Gareth tells him, "thou shalt die but if [unless] this damosel that came with me pray [ask] me to save thy life."<sup>48</sup> This episode fits Bell's account of gallantry: Gareth, in granting the damsel's grudging request that he give the knight mercy and telling the damsel, "your charge is to me a pleasure,"<sup>49</sup> is feigning inferiority and subjugation to her will. He has actually gotten this scornful damsel to make a request for mercy that only he can grant, *after* she has already made it clear that she despises him too much to be willing to request this of him. (After all, her repeated requests that this "kitchen knave" go away are not to him a pleasure; he refuses to grant them.) But this is an atypical situation in Malory's world.

Another philosophical critic of gallantry, Marilyn Frye, faults gallant men for "commonly [making] a fuss about being helpful and providing small services when help and services are of little or no use [but rarely being] at hand when substantial assistance is really wanted either in mundane affairs or in situations of threat, assault, or terror."<sup>50</sup> Whatever the merits of such criticism of the twentieth-century society about which Frye is writing, it is obviously false of Malorian chivalry. In Malory's world, knightly assistance to women characteristically comes in response to women's practical requests, often in situations of threat, assault, or terror. Note also that women in Malory's world can act as judges of knightly behavior (as in the already mentioned episode involving an oath administered only to Gawain). This undermines the applicability of Bell's claim that "the recognition of gallantry as a civilizing factor requires an acknowledgment that the physically stronger and mentally superior have a right to rule those who are physically and mentally weaker."<sup>51</sup> Malorian chivalry does rest on a blanket assumption that women are physically weaker than men, overlooking social causes of and possible

exceptions to such “weakness.” But requiring knights to use their presumed physical strength in the service of women hardly constitutes acknowledging the right of the strong to rule the weak, nor does Malorian chivalry assume women’s mental inferiority at all. And although physical prowess is a knightly virtue essential for the knightly role, the assumption that it is lacking in women is not an insult. Women in Malory’s world are not judged by that standard or devalued because of the assumption that they cannot meet it.

But who is stronger? Who is weaker? Why? Such questions lead to Bell’s criticism that is most applicable to Malorian chivalry: “Gallantry is not...reversible.”<sup>52</sup> In particular, “the sexes of the two participants in gallantry are not irrelevant.”<sup>53</sup> The same is true of Malorian chivalry. Men can be providers, but women can only be recipients (although, as I have indicated, knights can also be recipients of knightly succor and mercy). Some women in Malory’s world have magical powers, however, which Geraldine Heng characterizes as “a woman’s equivalent of a knight’s skill at arms,”<sup>54</sup> and which are sometimes used to benefit knights in a sort of reverse chivalry (for example, Book IV, chapters 10 and 22). There is no suggestion that this assistance insults knights. Admittedly, such reverse chivalry is much rarer than standard chivalry in Malory’s world, in part because knights outnumber women with magical powers, let alone women who use such powers in order to benefit knights. There are also anomalous instances where women do wield knightly weapons (for example, the already mentioned case of a spurned lady who attempts to decapitate Arthur with his own sword). Armstrong holds that “even as the [Round Table] Oath seems to offer explicit protection to women in the ladies’ clause...it also simultaneously and deliberately constructs them as ‘feminine’ in the chivalric sense -- helpless, needy, rape-able.”<sup>55</sup> Seems to offer? In what sense is the protection illusory? Part of the problem is presumably that women are being made dependent *on* knights for protection from rape *by*

knights.<sup>56</sup> An obvious alternative would be to “empower” women to protect themselves, thereby revising what Catherine Batt calls “the *Morte*’s sexist (and of course unequal) terms of individual social integrity -- women are rapeable, men risk defeat in battle.”<sup>57</sup> But why is it bad for women to need recourse to knights for protection? I will consider two possible answers.

The first possible answer is that dependence is inherently degrading. This sort of claim is prominent in present-day philosophical justifications of assisted suicide. For example, Ronald Dworkin approvingly notes that some people “think it degrading to be wholly dependent [because of the] impact...on their own dignity,”<sup>58</sup> and M. Pabst Battin cites a sick old woman’s “dependence” as one reason why her “[s]uicide...may be constitutive of human dignity in [that] it leaves one less example of human degradation in the world.”<sup>59</sup> By contrast, other philosophers, including feminist philosophers such as Susan Wendell, question independence as an ideal and point out that no one is completely independent and that “‘independence’...is defined according to a society’s expectations about what people ‘normally’ do for themselves and how they do it.”<sup>60</sup> Anita Silvers notes that independence need not “be compromised by having others execute, on one’s behalf, physical activities one cannot or does not wish to engage in one’s self [provided that this does not involve] being controlled by the caregiver.”<sup>61</sup> Such views are both more logical and more humane than the view that “dependence” is characteristic of only some people’s lives or is inherently degrading.

But this does not let Malorian chivalry off the hook. Sex-role rigidity has obvious disadvantages. Although not inherently degrading, reliance on knightly prowess does not always work well for women in practice. Some knights mistreat women. And knights do not always spring to a lady’s assistance, as Guenever discovers in the poisoning episode previously mentioned, where she has to engage in some genuinely degrading begging for help. Furthermore,

given the opportunity, some women might prefer to fight for themselves, some might be good at it, and some might welcome the opportunity to explore new, nonbellicose means of conflict resolution, as might some men. Malorian chivalry has genuine weaknesses for women.<sup>62</sup> This essay has focused on its strengths.

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<sup>1</sup> A different edition of Malory, the Vinaver edition, is based mainly on the Winchester manuscript, a Malory manuscript (believed to be in the handwriting of scribes rather than of Malory himself) discovered at Winchester College in 1934 and subsequently edited by Eugène Vinaver -- a sequence of events that, unsurprisingly, transformed Malory scholarship. Although the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's edition contain basically similar material, they also have significant differences, and debate continues over which is more authentic, in the sense of being closer to what Malory actually wrote. (For discussion of this issue, see Robert L. Kindrick, "Which Malory Should I Teach?" in Maureen Fries and Jeanie Watson [eds.], *Teaching the Arthurian Tradition* [New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992, pp. 100-105]; Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, *The Two Versions of Malory's Morte Darthur* [Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1995]; and Eugène Vinaver [ed.], *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, Third Edition, revised by P.J.C. Field [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990], especially Vinaver's preface to his first edition and chapters 2-4 of his introduction.) Reflecting his (highly controversial) view that Malory wrote eight separate romances rather than one unified work, Vinaver called his edition not *Le Morte D'Arthur* (Caxton's title), but *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. The general term 'the *Morte Darthur*,' which I use in this essay, covers both versions. Vinaver's edition uses unmodernized Middle English spelling, and there is no unabridged edition based on the Winchester manuscript and using modernized spelling.

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of Malory scholars (whom I hope this essay will also interest, despite the practical necessity of my including background information already familiar to them), I include references to Vinaver's three-volume *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* for all quoted Malory passages. I am using a three-way reference system, giving first the volume and page numbers in the Penguin Classics volumes (e.g., v.2, 227), then the book and chapter numbers in the Caxton edition (e.g., C XIV, 2), then the volume and page numbers of the corresponding (and not always identical) passages in the third edition of Vinaver's three-volume *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (e.g., V 2: 907). The spelling of all proper names is from the Penguin Classics volumes.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of other versions of the chivalric code in the work of other medieval Arthurian writers, see Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, Second Edition (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 67-68 and Thomas L. Wright, "The Tale of King Arthur': Beginnings and Foreshadowings," in R.M. Lumiansky (ed.), *Malory's Originality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), p. 36 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Vinaver, *Commentary on The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3: 1335.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (London: Penguin, 1969), v.1, 116; C III, 15; V 1: 120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, v.1, 115-16; C III, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1:120. I have used the modernized spelling in Sir Thomas Malory: *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, abridged and edited with an introduction and explanatory notes by Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 57, although I have not followed her substitution of 'not' for 'ne.'

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of other knightly roles, see my "Never to do outrageousness nor murder': The Code of the Warrior in the World of Malory's *Morte Darthur*," in Shannon E. French, *Code of the Warrior* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

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- <sup>9</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, v.1, 409; C IX, 15; V 2: 491.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, v.2, 379; C XVIII, 4; V 2: 1051.
- <sup>11</sup> Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, p. 39.
- <sup>12</sup> Dorsey Armstrong, "Gender and the Chivalric Community: The Pentecostal Oath in Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur,'" in *Bibliographic Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 2000), p. 303.
- <sup>13</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, v.1, 214; C VI, 11; V 1: 273.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, v.2, 425; C XVIII, 24; V 3: 1114.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, v.2, 378; C XVIII, 4; V 2: 1050.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, v.2, 386; C XVIII, 7; V 2: 1058.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, v.1, 104; C III, 8; V 1: 109.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, v.1, 104; C III, 8; V 1: 108.
- <sup>20</sup> For qualification here, see my "Never to do outrageousness nor murder..."
- <sup>21</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, v.2, 411; C XVIII, 19; V 2: 1089.
- <sup>22</sup> Knights (including King Arthur) sometimes agree to fill unspecified requests from men as well.
- <sup>23</sup> Wright, "Beginnings and Foreshadowings," p. 42.
- <sup>24</sup> Armstrong, "Gender and the Chivalric Community," p. 301. (Italics in original.)
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.
- <sup>26</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, v.1, 64; C II, 3; V 1: 65. (Italics added.)
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, v.1, 56; C I, 25; V 1:53.

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 195-96.

<sup>29</sup> For more discussion of this problem, see my “Never to do outrageousness nor murder...,” as well as Bonnie Wheeler, “Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The Case of Sir Gawain’s Reputation,” *Arthurian Literature* 20 (1993), pp. 117-118 and Wright, “Beginnings and Foreshadowings,” pp. 62-66.

<sup>30</sup> Armstrong, “Gender and the Chivalric Community,” p. 302.

<sup>31</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, v.1, 109; C III, 11; V 1: 114.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, v.1, 109; C III, 11; V 1: 113.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth T. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Armstrong, “Gender and the Chivalric Community,” p. 297.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300 n17.

<sup>37</sup> For an interesting discussion of the relation between moral rules and social roles, see P.F. Strawson, “Social Morality and Individual Ideal,” *Philosophy* XXXVI, no. 136 (1961): 1-17.

<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, v.1, 320; C VIII, 10; V 1: 388. It may seem ludicrous that a tournament could come to this, but it is an illustration of the blurred line between sport and battle in Malory’s world. See the discussion in my “Never to do outrageousness nor murder...” Note also that the condition against bearing armor or harness is not unique to Tristram. Alisander le Orphelin also employs it (Book X, chapters 36 and 39).

<sup>40</sup> Armstrong, “Gender and the Chivalric Community,” p. 312.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>42</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, v.1, 65; C II, 3; V 1: 66.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Linda A. Bell, "Gallantry: What It Is and Why It Should Not Survive," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1984), p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> Elsie Burch Donald (ed.), *Drebbett's Etiquette and Modern Manners* (London: Pan Books, Ltd., 1982), p. 232. (Italics added.)

<sup>46</sup> Bell, "Gallantry," p. 165.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>48</sup> Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, v.1, 245; C VII, 8; V 1: 306.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983), p. 6. Frye grants that her essays in this book "are timebound and culturebound" (ibid., ix).

<sup>51</sup> Bell, "Gallantry," p. 169.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>54</sup> Geraldine Heng, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory," in Thelma S. Fenster (ed.) *Arthurian Women: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 112 n39.

<sup>55</sup> Armstrong, "Gender and the Chivalric Community," p. 298. See also Catherine Batt, "Malory and Rape," *Arthuriana* 7: 3 (1997), p. 85. Armstrong is referring to the Vinaver edition's version of the oath, which has an explicit prohibition against rape ("never to enforce them"). Vinaver suggests that Caxton deleted the explicit prohibition because "it must have seemed to [him]

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singularly incongruous in an Arthurian context” (Commentary on *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3: 1335), i.e., it was an unacceptable insult even to suggest that Arthurian knights could be guilty of rape (although it was presumably acceptable to suggest that they could be guilty of murder). See also Batt, “Malory and Rape,” p. 96 n17.

<sup>56</sup> See the discussion in Batt, “Malory and Rape,” p. 85.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90. Batt grants that this dichotomy is not absolute, but space limitations prevent me from going into this or discussing Batt’s treatment of additional complexities concerning rape in Malory’s world.

<sup>58</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Life’s Dominion* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 210.

<sup>59</sup> M. Pabst Battin, “Suicide: A Fundamental Human Right?” in M. Pabst Battin and David J. Mayo (eds.), *Suicide: The Philosophical Issues* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), p. 274. See the discussion in my “Death, Dying, and Dignity,” in K. Brinkmann (ed.) *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, v.1: Ethics* (Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), pp. 189-201.

<sup>60</sup> Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 145.

<sup>61</sup> Anita Silvers, Review of Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and Medicine* 97.2 (1998), p. 123. See also Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, pp. 146 and 148.

<sup>62</sup> There are additional problematic constraints on women in Malory’s world. For example, some women, such as Guenever, are subjected to arranged marriages (although others are not). Space limitations restrict this essay to a discussion of the ladies’ clause of the Round Table Oath.