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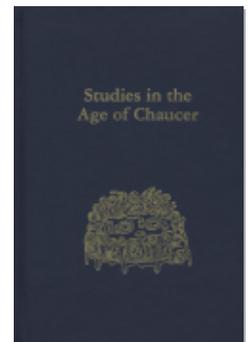
Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur" by Dorsey Armstrong (review)

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REVIEWS

DORSEY ARMSTRONG. *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur."* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. Pp. viii, 272. \$59.95.

This spirited and engaged account of Malory's *Morte* highlights the importance of the Pentecostal Oath as a chivalric code, one that Malory produces in reaction to "the trouble of his day" and that "unintentional(ly)" institutionalizes "a particular ideal of gender relations," only for its fulfillment to hasten Arthurian society's downfall (p. 7). Armstrong offers a vigorous reading of how gender, community, and chivalric identity interact in the *Morte*, and traces how such concerns shape and give coherence to the narrative as a whole. Crucial to the argument is how the Arthurian knight both defines himself against and depends on a particular construction of the female as passive in complement to his own aggressive behavior. In successive chapters, Armstrong draws adroitly on literary theory to outline the effect of masculine and feminine as mutually defining and sustaining positions in the *Morte*, from the episode of Arthur's campaign against Lucius, through assessments of knighthood as performative, to the *Sankgreal* as a "critique" of chivalric values, and the final catastrophe (although one might want to modify the argument that the exercise of gender relations per se is "progressively degenerative" [p. 24] in the *Morte*).

In discussion, the Pentecostal Oath takes on a double function; it clearly reveals the failings of the society that produced it and that it produces, for the "stability of identity" it promises in codifying female and male roles is exposed as fictive in its disregard for the crucial role the feminine plays in masculine identity (p. 37), and while an inflexible gender model is imperative to maintaining the Arthurian order, adherence to it ultimately spells disaster for the community. At the same time, the Oath offers a guide to chivalric behavior, and the actions of women deemed to transgress its rule are also said to ruin the chivalric community while simultaneously exposing its inherent weakness as a social model. The tension in interpretation here seems to arise from the contradictions of Malory's narrative, which continually demonstrates an apparent lack of self-awareness coupled with a knowing anxiety over,

and constant revision of, its own procedures. Armstrong is highly sensitive to the inadequacies of a restrictive binarism in considering gender in Malory, and yet local readings risk presenting women's autonomy primarily in the terms of a masculine anxiety traditional to chivalric romance, as though the thinking behind the Oath's prescriptions has sometimes leached into the act of critical reading.

The suggestion that it is Morgause's unruly volition that produces Mordred as monstrous (p. 54) is a somewhat disturbing case in point; the text itself does not condemn Morgause in these terms, and while the narrative may, of course, generally displace onto women problems that male chivalric behavior has generated, this reading homogenizes constructions of gender at a point where causation is most ambiguous and contested. If the Pentecostal Oath is the *Morte's* "master signifier" (p. 28), it might be more productive to consider Mordred's career in the light of the Oath's astonishing conceptualization of, and inadequate provision for, "treson." Similarly, the assertion that Guinevere "should be held responsible" for Lancelot's actions at the end of the *Morte*, because "What Arthur seems to understand at long last is that the masculine project of chivalry is really nothing more than knights acting in accordance with the wishes of ladies" (p. 191), registers a specific power for the feminine as regards the action, but fails to address how the not-uncommon knightly disavowing (and anti-Oath) defense of killing on the grounds of obedience to women demands, by this point, consideration within the general breakdown in the rule of law and of social relations. And richly comic as is the idea that Morgan and her fellow queens engage in sexual mischief in the absence of a handbook to instruct them in proper behavior (p. 98), it does not explain why and how Morgan is so much more complex a character in Malory than in the French sources (where, more prominently villainous, she is also subject to stricter regulation).

Armstrong tends to repeat key sentences from critical positions, as when she quotes Gravdal on rape in Arthurian literature (pp. 11, 36, 241), or Shichtman and Finke on violence (pp. 37, 196). This certainly helps maintain the clarity of the argument, but it also intimates that there is room to engage with and refine, further than she does, the critical terms thus established as foundational. An occasional shift in a term's associations leaves some points undeveloped (for example, the contradictions in the relation of "the feminine" to virginity in Perceval's Sister's case [p. 238] and in Galahad's [p. 171]). Sometimes, discussion

concentrates on one aspect of gender in a particular episode, where one would welcome broader contextualization and a concomitantly sharper focus on (say) masculine accountability, or the interaction of both masculine and feminine agency. For example, it would be interesting to look at the role of the Arthurian court as closely as at the role of marriage in the comparative histories of Fair Unknowns, or to compare Perceval's self-mutilation with Lyonet's control over Gareth's thigh wound.

Malory's work appears sometimes more relaxed toward gender than are his sources, and sometimes anxious to maintain a tighter control of gender—it is telling that Malory omits the eponymous hero's experience of the fractured shield in the Prose *Lancelot*. At the same time, the *Morte* textually inscribes the problems inherent in the attempt to invoke and deploy gender as reading strategy and as control mechanism, and in consequence gender accrues an epistemological function, its investigation integral to an understanding of the *Morte*'s literary strategies. Armstrong's analysis could perhaps go further in its project to uncover the complexities and ramifications of Malory's work, but in its acknowledgment of the text's dense ambiguities, its concern to find a critical vocabulary appropriate to the subject, and its provocative lines of inquiry, this book forms a thought-provoking contribution to the continuing debate about gender in Malory.

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C. DAVID BENSON. *Public "Piers Plowman": Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. Pp. xix, 283. \$45.00.

Most readers find *Piers Plowman* a difficult poem, and its difficulty has long been considered part of its greatness. Unlike the *Canterbury Tales*, whose greatness, for modern readers, lies in its near-mythic accessibility, the greatness of *Piers Plowman* lies in its difference, the feeling that its difficulty might be overcome by careful study of its particular past.

One of the most perplexing differences about *Piers Plowman*, however, is that it was so much a part of its own literary present. Not only does the poem address topical issues, and not only does it insist on its own