

Cultural Production in the Arthurian Court: A Glimpse of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

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Abstract:

Well before the emergence of the modern sense of "city," the cultural life of the majority of medieval people depends on and surrounds feudal manors and castles. People from the upper class, especially the royal families, live in the court, as their residence, a locale that cultivates their mentality, whether consciously or unconsciously. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the Arthurian knights and kings often move from one destination to another in a rather rapid pace. During the movement among places, different kinds of (sub-)culture clash and there needs solutions to compromise distinct cultures. Questions such as how the characters, especially King Arthur, deal with new problems concerning new environment will be explored. Meanwhile, Malory's representation of medieval culture and its production in places such as Caerleon and Camelot will be discussed too. How does Malory imagine the city of Caerleon and Camelot? The romancer's imagination of these two places presents a different picture from that of his predecessors. For instance, unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth's interest in the court held at Caerleon, Malory puts more emphasis on Camelot. Though Malory makes a few references to Caerleon, including that this is where Arthur's coronation takes place and where Sir Gareth's wedding takes place, he devotes even more efforts to painting Camelot. Geoffrey's Caerleon is associated with affluence, while Malory's with treachery and illicit relationship. Some scholars deem that Malory's Camelot is a romantic locale, connected with joy and harmony, yet Malory does not romanticize the court at Caerleon when he describes the young Arthur's illicit behaviors. Through the description of Malory, I will attempt to interpret the kind of culture based on the activities happening in these two courts. Arthur is said to be crowned at Caerleon, so both in Geoffrey and Malory, yet Arthur's wedding with Gwenyvere is scheduled at Caerleon, in Geoffrey's version, and at Camelot, in Malory's imagination. The question why Arthur gradually moves his political and cultural center from a wealthy and pleasant city at Caerleon to Camelot is interesting. My tentative assumption of the shift in Malory is that his Arthur attempts to shake off the yoke from the previous generation, embodied by the magician and prophet figure, Merlin, and to break from any association with the king's own cruel act of abandoning infants, Merlin's preaching about his sexual misdemeanors, and ultimately everything reminding people of bad name and dishonor at the Caerleon court. By thus doing, the new king is able to establish his own kingdom without interference from outside.

Key words: court, Caerleon, Camelot, cultural production, Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*