



THE KING BEHIND THE MIRROR

An analyses of 'Le morte d'Arthur' as a mirror of
princes

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Preface

T.H. White called him 'the Once and Future King': King Arthur. Throughout the middle ages, he was the main character of a literary tradition which included knightly ideals, courtly love and many adventures. Nowadays, the most famous version is the fifteenth century '*Le Morte d'Arthur*' (LMdA) written by Thomas Malory (1470), a knight who wrote the book in prison.¹ It was the last medieval piece of Arthurian literature, and was the source for later Arthurian literature, like White's 'The Once and Future King'.

Sir Thomas Malory was an English knight and a prisoner during the reign of Edward IV.² He probably was active in the military during the War of the Roses, serving under the Earl of Warwick who fought on the Yorkist side and supported Edward IV. The Earl changed sides, exiled Edward and put the Lancastrian Henry VI on the throne. Being a loyal Warwickshire knight, Malory probably followed the Earl, which excluded him from being pardoned by Edward IV. Malory wrote 'LMdA' while being in prison and finished the book between March 1469 and March 1470. He died shortly after and was buried at the church of the monastery of the Grey Friars near Newgate Prison.

A contemporary book is 'The Fall of Princes', written by John Lydgate (c. 1370-c.1450), a Benedictine monk.³ Unlike 'LMdA', this was not Arthurian literature, but part of a different medieval genre: the mirrors of princes. Another, earlier example is Notker the Stammerer's biography of Charlemagne. Like 'LMdA' however, it contains tales of famous kings. Unlike 'LMdA' it is classified as a mirror of princes, where 'LMdA' is seen by scholars as the last medieval part of the Arthurian tradition.

This thesis explores the possibility for 'LMdA' being a mirror of princes. It will give some more context of 'LMdA' outside of the Arthurian tradition. Like 'The Fall of Princes', it is a tale about a famous king who had many qualities and ended up badly despite of it. If these similarities seen at the first glance were enough for 'LMdA' to be classified as a mirror of princes can be read on the following pages.

¹ Norris R., *Malory's library, the sources of the Morte Darthur*, (Cambridge, 2008), 1.

² Senior M, *Sir Thomas Malory's tales of King Arthur*, (Londen, 1980), 9-10.

³ Mortimer N., *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes, narrative tragedy in its literary and political contexts*, (Oxford 2005), v.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis will discuss the relation between Malory's 'LMdA' and medieval mirrors of princes, based on Field's edition of the Winchester manuscript.⁴ For the theoretical context, the PHD about twelfth century Castilian mirrors of princes was used, combined with the mirror of princes 'The Fall of Princes'.⁵

This thesis is written with the goal to answer the following question: To what extent does 'LMdA' match Tang's characteristics of mirrors of princes?

The story will be analysed within the same categories as Tang used in his thesis. Namely:

- How does the king rise to power?
- How does the king's reign end?
- Which personal traits characterise the perfect king?
- Which political intentions could the writer have had to write the story?

Each category will be a chapter and will start with explaining Tang's theory on the subject. This theory will be illustrated with fragments of 'The Fall of Princes' and tested on 'LMdA'. As can be imagined, some parts of the categories will overlap. Personal traits can characterise the perfect king, but some personal traits can cause his downfall for instance. Because the first two themes are quite big, the later chapters will refer to phenomena which are mentioned earlier on and build forward on it. This creates a complete as possible image of the theory, the analysis and the results.

0.1 Malory: Caxton vs. Winchester Manuscript

As the main text for LMDA, Caxton's version would have been the most predictable choice but it did not suffice for the theoretical foundation used for this essay. The theory used for the motives to classify a medieval tale as a mirror of princes is the a PHD thesis written by F.R.M. Tang combined with the mirror of princes 'The Fall of Princes'.⁶ For his thesis, Tang classified these literary motives in four categories: the rise of the king, the fall of the king, the personal traits which made a king a perfect one and the possible political intentions the mirror's author might have had to write down the story.

Because of the last category, Caxton's edition of 'LMdA' is unusable for this thesis. To be able to tell something about an author's intentions the eldest version, or at least the eldest version possible, must be used because it is the closest to the author's own words you can get. A later version of the tale may include additions and changes made by the copyist and add an extra interpretation to the tale. This makes it harder find scientific arguments to say something about the intentions Malory himself might have had to write 'LMdA'.

That is why the Winchester manuscript is chosen as 'LMdA''s main text. As said before, this is the oldest available version of the text, so the closest to Malory's original words you can get. We know that the difference between the Winchester Manuscript and Caxton are mostly linguistic and minimal.⁷ However, to make the risk of misinterpretation as small as possible, the Winchester Manuscript is still considered the safest option. This is chosen for the 2014 edition written by P.J.C. Field. This is the latest academic edition and includes the latest information, grammatical additions

⁴ Field P.J.C., *Le Morte Darthur*, (Cambridge, 2013).

⁵ Tang, F.R.M., *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, (Amsterdam 2002) en Mortimer

⁶ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*,

⁷ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, Introduction.

and academic justification. Caxton is not ignored of course. His preface to 'LMdA' is used because this is the part he explains why King Arthur was such an important figure and why his story was important enough to be published.

0.1.1 Dependant kings and authors

Another possible option was to use Caxton, which is the most known version during the late medieval ages, but to cut the last category. This was to be considered impossible. Mirrors of princes are a literary phenomenon first, but it has a cultural and political origin which is typical for the medieval court and characteristic for the medieval (political) culture. During the medieval ages, intellectuals and writers had no freedom of speech as we have today: they could say or write what their client (in this case a king/prince) wanted to hear, but everything else was dangerous and could be paid with their life as the king's power was absolute and he could sentence them to death or imprison them for life when he liked. So expressing criticism openly was dangerous, but it did not stop the author from writing it down: they hid it in tales of famous legendary or biblical princes, or in stories of kings past: the mirrors of princes. These stories could be read as just stories, but could be interpreted as guidance, advices and warnings for princes and kings as well. With these stories, they hoped to inspire the kings and princes who read them to do what was right, and to point out the possible consequences if they did not. The king in return, was dependant on the authors who partly created his image by writing down his stories. Positive ones must be written about him to maintain his good image and keep the nobles acceptance of his power. This mutual dependence between the king and the author is a distinctive factor of medieval courtly literature.

If the last category was cut, the cultural and political climate which were the 'cause' of the mirrors of princes to be written would have been ignored, and the stories would have been analysed as literary phenomena only, instead of the reaction to the politics of medieval kings they were as well as a literary phenomenon. This would have been the same for the analysis of 'LMdA', which would have been incomplete. Therefore, this category had to be included: this addition analyses the why of mirrors of princes instead of only how.

0.2 Lydgate: case check

Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes' is used as a contemporary case check to mend the gap between Tang's thesis, which is about twelfth century Catechism mirrors of princes, and the fifteenth century Arthurian 'LMdA'. The 'Fall of Princes' is an English translation and adaptation of the Italian '*De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*' (1355-60) via a French prose version: '*Des Cas des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*' (1409).⁸ This contemporary text is already classified as a mirror of princes and serves as a comparison between Tang's theory and the fifteenth century practise. Like Arthur, the kings are not historical, but mythical or biblical figures and the text is part of a longer tradition of adaptations and translations before this version was written down.

0.3 Secondary literature

The rest of the Source corpus mainly exists of literature that add extra information about the political and courtly culture in fifteenth century England to put 'LMdA' and 'The Fall of Princes' into historical perspective. This explains why the characters in the stories do what they do and whether this behaviour really happened, or was expected. One source is about the sources Malory used to write his 'LMdA', used to find out what his place in the Arthurian tradition is and what the difference is between 'LMdA' and the previous versions of the tale. All to find out to what extent LMDA corresponds with Tang's theory about mirrors of princes.

⁸ N. Mortimer., *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes, narrative tragedy in its literary and political contexts.*

Chapter 1: How to become king

According to Tang, a twelfth century king was God's replacement on earth. He was the shepherd who had to lead his flock to heaven.⁹ He had to inspire them and he had to educate his people in the rules laid down in the Bible by giving the perfect example possible: himself. Living the perfect Christian life, the king had to show his people what it meant to be a good Christian. Therefore, sinful behaviour was out of the question. This can be seen in the mirror of princes '*Castigos*': the author literally wrote that if the king made a mistake, the consequences were ten times worse for the king than for anyone else.¹⁰ Everyone in court paid attention to what the king was doing every hour of everyday so everyone in court knew if he did something wrong.

1.1 God's choice

Good behaviour only was not enough to become king however, the king had to be a son or at least a descendant from a previous king. The king was appointed by God to lead his people because God let him being born as a son of a king. Therefore, it was his destiny and his duty to lead his people. This was considered even more important than good behaviour as can be seen in Malory later.

Lydgate does not really focus on God's appointment on kings, but on his interference when kings fail to behave as he expected. The Biblical King Nimrod for instance, he was a proud king who build a high tower for himself and for his people: the infamous tower of Babel. Nimrod started acting too proud however and started to compare himself with God himself. This was not what God wanted him to act like, and knocked down the tower and created a confusion of tongues between Nimrod's people as a punishment. Until that moment, the people all spoke the same language, but this was the beginning of a great quarrel that separated the realms of the Earth. Instead of the great king he could have been, Nimrod became known as the founder of idolatry.¹¹ Lydgate focusses on God's wrath instead of God's acceptance discussed in this chapter. More about this can be found in the analysis about the end of the king's reign.

1.2 The acceptance of the 'beardless boy of low blood'

Like Lydgate, 'LMdA' does not focus on God's acceptance of the young Arthur as king. Unlike Lydgate however, this is not because Malory focuses on his downfall, but because other elements caused Arthur becoming (accepted as) king. This part is based on the prose 'Merlin' and the French 'Vulgate Suite'¹²

Starting with Arthur's lineage, Arthur was born as the son of King Uther and Lady Igraine. Until short before Arthur's birth, Igraine was married to the duke of Cornwall, and Uther fell in love with her the moment he laid eyes on her during a gathering in his castle.¹³ Uther sought help from Merlin, and he disguised Uther as the duke so he could visit Igraine at Tintagel without her noticing.¹⁴ At the same time, the duke was at Tarrabil castle fighting a war and was slain.

⁹ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 99.

¹⁰ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 101.

¹¹ J. Lydgate, 28-32.

¹² Norris R., *Malory's library, the sources of the Morte Darthur*, 13.

¹³ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 1.

¹⁴ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 3.

“So after the deth of the duke Kyng Uther lay with Igrayne, more than thre hours after his deth, and begat on her that nyght Arthur.”¹⁵

“So after the death of the duke King Uther lay with Igraine, more than three hours after his death and begot on her that night Arthur.”

Uther marries Igraine short after and Arthur was born, he was taken and baptised by Merlin and raised by Sir Ector, who gave away his own child for Arthur to be nourished.¹⁶

On his dying bed, Uther appoints Arthur to be his heir, but this wasn't enough to make Arthur king.¹⁷ Rather, it started a quarrel between the most important nobles and knights for the throne because they did not accept Arthur as a king. That following Christmas, Merlin placed a sword in a stone on a square platter in the graveyard and had it guarded so nobody could touch it. Who could pull the sword from the stone would be the next king. Of course, this is Arthur but still he could not become king. His coronation was put off and he had to repeat pulling the sword from the stone on several holidays. Only when other knights tried it as well and found out they were unable to, they accepted Arthur as their king.¹⁸

Only a few nobles and knights, among them king Lot, still refused to pay their respects to Arthur at his coronation because they considered him to be born out of wedlock and therefore an illegitimate heir.

“But the kynges wold none receive, but rebukes the messagers shamefully and said they had no joye to recyve no yeftes of a berdles boye that was come of low blood...”¹⁹

“But the kings would not receive, but shamefully refused the messengers and said they had no joy in receiving gifts from a beardless boy that came of low blood...”

They saw Arthur as a young boy of low blood and an illegitimate child of king Uther who tried to become king. Fortunately for Arthur, Merlin explained them that Arthur was conceived after the duke had died and Uther marries Igraine within two weeks after the night Arthur was conceived. Therefore, Arthur could be considered the legitimate heir to the throne. It was only then, that all nobles accepted Arthur as their new king.

So, Arthur did not become king because of his lineage, which was questionable and used as an argument by the nobles to prevent his coronation. God and Christianity had little to do with it as well, except that the most important events happened during Christian holidays. Instead, Arthur became king because of a magical feature, namely the sword in the stone, and by the authority of Merlin, who in this version is a mysterious figure with magical powers whose council is followed by everyone including the king.

These elements in 'LMdA' do not correspond with the characteristics laid down by Tang, like the king's legal lineage to a previous king and God appointing the king, at all. Actually, these guidelines were used by the nobles, kings and knights who were against Arthur becoming king as arguments to prevent his coronation from happening. Were it not for Merlin defending Arthur and explaining why he was the legitimate heir to the throne and entitled to become king, Arthur never

¹⁵ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 3.

¹⁶ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 5.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 6.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 10.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 12.

would have been accepted at court it would have been impossible for him to become king. Therefore 'LMdA' can't be considered as a mirror of princes on this point.

Chapter 2: How to end a king's reign.

In the mirrors of princes found in Tang's thesis, kings are both untouchable and vulnerable. The king is part of a system in which he can make the law and is more important than most laws. However, even the king must obey certain guidelines and rules to remain on the throne. For example, the king is not allowed to make conflicting laws and is therefore limited in his power.²⁰ Furthermore, he has to have a stable personality and be a good example to his people. This means that kings can't make impulsive, spontaneous decisions or listen to only one advisor. But most of all, he cannot cause strife, and especially fraternal strifes (blood onto blood) are out of the question. This was considered as one of the worst things the king could do.²¹ To be able to live up to these expectations, the king had to follow the law and do what the people expect of him to create unity among the realm. If he fails to do this, he can be dethroned.

In short, the king must answer to two sets of law: the worldly laws which he and his predecessors lay down, and to God's law which is written down in the Bible and on which the worldly laws were based. By obeying to those two systems, the king should guide and educate his people by being the example of a good Christian, the people will be good Christians as well and all will go to heaven after they die, along with their king. One mirror of princes in which this phenomenon is mentioned is *Castigos*, written in Catalonia. In this mirror, the king must be like God as much as possible.²²

One way to show this is by passing just and by merciful judgment. The king must inform himself about each case as well as possible and he has to listen carefully to his advisors before making his verdict. However, he can only judge his people based on existing laws. As mentioned before, the king can change existing laws. However, this is only possible when a law conflicts with a higher (divine) law at that time.²³ Lydgate's written about this as well:

*"Sum man sey trouthe, and summe be variable;
Wherefore a prynce off riht, as it dothe seeme,
Sholde weel examine afforn or that he deeme."*²⁴

²⁰ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 75.

²¹ J. Lydgate, *Lydgate's Fall of princes* 117.

²² F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 78.

²³ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*. 76.

²⁴ J. Lydgate, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes* 129.

“Some men say truth, and some are variable,
Therefore a prince does right as it does the same,
should examine well before he deems.”

Lydgate thinks that the king must always look for the truth but he should not just take something as truth at face value to avoid being misinformed and passing misjudgement as people at court may try to benefit from him.²⁵

This cannot be found in ‘LMdA’ completely: Arthur’s reign didn’t end because of bad ruling, but it partly ended because of his misjudgement: he trusted Lancelot to be a good knight, but he had an affair with Arthur’s wife Guinevere.²⁶ Arthur also trusted Mordred at his court, but he betrayed him as well and eventually killed Arthur.²⁷

2.1 The limitations of Arthur’s power

This does not mean that no single element of this theory can be found in ‘LMdA’, because there are elements of it to be found in Arthur’s downfall: his image as the perfect king is damaged when word of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere gets out and Arthur has to obey to the law and condemn Guinevere to death for adultery. Although he loved her, Arthur’s hands were tied because he could not speak judgement conflicting with the law, or place himself and his wife above it.

This does not save the kingdom completely; even while following the rules and being a righteous king, Arthur’s verdict causes strife between his knights and he loses loyal followers. Arthur becomes the victim of his own political system and there is no way out. It is known that Arthur could not control his wife and he was no longer perfect because of it. By obeying the law and condemning his wife to death, Arthur still is the righteous king he had always been, but it was not enough to save himself and to keep him on the throne. His image was damaged and his power no longer was undisputed. This quarrel eventually created to opportunity for Mordred to seize the power and started the battle of Salisbury Plain, where Mordred kills his father.²⁸ The moment Arthur’s image is damaged, his powers starts slipping away because it creates both a reason as an opportunity for others to owning his power or to seize the throne.

2.2 Propheisising Arthur’s death

However, there are elements found in Arthur’s downfall that do not have anything to do with misjudgement, bad ruling or personal failure at all: the *topos* of prophecy. The end of Arthur’s reign and life was already predicted early in the story: In the first book Merlin, disguised as an old man,

²⁵ J. Lydgate, *Lydgate’s Fall of princes* 127.

²⁶ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 870.

²⁷ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 924.

²⁸ *Ibidem* 924.

predicted Arthur's death by his own son who he had just conceived by his half-sister Morgaine Le Fay:

*"... but ye have done a thyng late that God ys displeased with you, for ye have lyene by your syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme."*²⁹

"... but you have done a thing that God is displeased with you, for you have lied by your sister and on her you have gotten a child that shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm."

Arthur thinks he can prevent this by ordering to put all children born on May Day, the day Mordred was born, to be killed at sea.³⁰ Mordred survived the disaster however, and was fostered by Lot and his wife until he was fourteen years old; he travels to Arthur's court to get his revenge and to unknowingly fulfil the prophecy.

The May Day disaster can be considered as bad ruling caused by the prophecy, which it was. As discussed in the previous chapter it was the king's task to guide his people to heaven by being the perfect example of a good Christian. Killing children is not a part of this. However, this was not the only prophecy related element considering Arthur's death.

When the young Arthur gets his famous sword Excalibur (not to be confused with the sword in the stone) from the Lady of the Lake, he also gets a sheath.³¹ Merlin asks him which one he thinks best, the sword or the sheath. Arthur picks the sword and Merlin tells:

*"Ye ar the more unwise, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde, for whyles ye have the scawbeberde upon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded."*³²

"You are the more unwise, for the sheath is worth ten of those swords for while you have the sheath upon you, you shall lose no blood, even when you are so sore wounded."

Merlin tells Arthur that he will lose no blood, if he has the sheath with him, and Arthur understands why the sheath is more powerful than the sword. However, fallen in love with another knight, Arthur's half-sister Morgaine le Fay, steals the sheath and replaces it with a fake lookalike.³³ Therefore, Arthur does not have the sheath with him during the fatal battle and gets mortally wounded. If he had the sheath, Arthur would not have died and would have won the battle.

Besides these prophetic elements during Arthur's early life, there are two right before the fatal battle as well:

*"... Sunday at nyght, Arthur dremed a wondifull dreme, and in hys dreme hym semed that he saw upon a chafflet a chayre was faste to a whele, and thereupon sate Kyng Arthure in the richest clothe of golde that might be made. And the kyng thought there was undir hym, farre from hym, an hydeous depe blak water and therein was all maner of serpentis and wormes and wylde bestis fowle and orryble. And suddeynly the kyng thought that the whyle turned up-so-downe, and he felle amonge the serpentis, and every beste toke hym by a lymme."*³⁴

"At Sunday night, Arthur dreamed a wonderful dream, and in his dream, he seemed that he saw upon a scaffold a chair was fastened to a wheel, and thereupon sat King Arthur in the richest clothes

²⁹ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 36.

³⁰ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 46.

³¹ *Ibidem* 44.

³² *Ibidem* 44.

³³ *Ibidem* 46.

³⁴ *Ibidem* 920.

of gold that might be made. And the King thought there was under him, far from him, a hideous deep black water and therein was all matter of serpents and worms and wild beasts fauwl and horrible. And suddenly the king thought that the wheel turned up-so-down, and he fell among the serpents and every beast took him by a limb”

After this dream, Arthur dreams of Gawain who tells him that if he waits for another month for Lancelot to come to help, he will win the battle.³⁵ This does not happen, and Arthur gets mortally wounded by the hand of Mordred. Where the first prophecy more caused Arthur’s downfall instead of saving it and the second one can be considered as advice that was followed badly, this dream is a prophecy. It shows Arthur’s end right before it happens and although Arthur, again, tries to prevent it from happening, there is nothing he can do to escape his faith.

2.3 Mirror or not on this point?

Where the May Day disaster can be classified as bad ruling, the other two prophecies were beyond Arthur’s control and had more to do with faith than with Arthur’s personal shortcomings. Only parts of Arthur’s downfall and death in ‘LMdA’ correspond with Tang’s theory. The limitations of Arthur power can be seen in how he and his knights react to Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair, and he made a mistake with the May Day disaster.

The rest was because of faith and out of his control: if he had Excalibur’s real sheath with him, or if the battle could have been postponed, things may have turned out different. Therefore, Arthur’s downfall can’t be accounted for by Arthur’s personal flaws or mismanagement only, and doesn’t completely correspond with the guidelines of mirrors of princes.

Chapter 3: How to be the perfect king

This is a point where Malory and mirrors of Princes collide. As we’ve seen several times, the king is depicted as a leader who must lead his people into heaven by example. Therefore, according to mirrors of princes, he had to be virtuous, couldn’t be sinful and couldn’t make a single mistake because everyone was always watching him, and God could and would intervene when things would get out of hand.

But the king had to achieve even more. Other people at court had additional ideas about what the king should be like as well. For his army and to expand and protect his land he had to be a good strategist.³⁶ Influenced by knightly orders, the king had to live up to their standards as well and be brave, honourable and loyal to his subjects and vassals. This because he often headed the order and therefore was the example for all.

For lawyers, he had to be wise, have knowledge about law, law making and be just in order to be a good judge.³⁷ For the kingdom’s finances, he had to be wise in his spending, to avoid debts for the kingdom. To be able to do that he had to have knowledge about mathematics and finance. In later times, he had to be almost a scholar himself, because he had to have knowledge about Christianity as well. To be able to be a good Christian example and an inspiration to his people, he had to be able to read the Bible and to know how he had to interpret it.³⁸ As opposed to earlier kings who often were illiterate (it is widely known that Charlemagne couldn’t write and had scribes writing

³⁵ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 920.

³⁶ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 100.

³⁷ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 100.

³⁸ *Ibidem* 99.

for him) these kings had to be educated about the correct Christian ways to pass this on to his subjects.

Because he was the only constant factor of power, he had to be warrior, a lawyer, a bookkeeper and a scholar all at once. There were incidental institutions (kind of like parliaments) who sometimes had the power to act on political situations in the kingdom, but this wasn't always the case. And even when they were present, the king always had the power to stop them if he wanted. Because of this, his advisors hoped for the king to be able to understand what they were doing and what was right. This influenced the image of the perfect king in mirrors of princes.

The writers of mirrors of princes wrote their stories to inspire their kings to do the right thing and to give him an example on how he should act and what could happen if he didn't. It wasn't as if they would be able to make the king do this. In the end, it was his choice. He was the most powerful man in the kingdom and no one had the power to force him to act like he should. That's why mirrors of princes were written to inspire the king instead of forcing him to do the right thing: it was the only power over the king the writers had without risking his wrath and falling from favour.

3.1 the perfect king or the perfect people?

Malory's vision of King Arthur built further on this ideal as can be seen in the following quote:

"... and charged them never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon payne of fortitude of their worship and lordship of Kynge Arthur for evir more; and allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes succour, strenghte hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them upon payne of dethe. Also that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarrel for no love ne for no worldly goods"³⁹

"...never to commit outrage or murder, to always flee treason, and to give mercy to those who asked for mercy, upon pain of the forfeiture of their honour and status as a knight of King Arthur's forever more. He charged them to always help ladies, damsels, gentlewomen, and widows, and never to commit rape, upon pain of death. Also, he commanded that no man should take up a battle in a wrongful quarrel—not for love, nor for any worldly goods."

He saw King Arthur as a king who managed to unite a divided Britain, and to keep the Saxons away for a long period. No king before him could do this. He described Arthur as an honourable man who knew how to show mercy when he needed to, but was against fleeing in battle, which was dishonourable. Elements of knightly orders and courtly romance literature can be seen in this description of Arthur as well: Malory describes him as someone who ordered to always help ladies, and to never commit rape, which dishonoured a woman for life, and to only start a battle if you have a good reason.

As we have seen, for Malory the reason for Arthur's downfall was not caused by Arthur's own person and his flaws, but by faith and by his subjects, who could not see what a great king they had contributed to his downfall and the end of his reign by not helping Arthur, in 'LMdA' he confronts the reader directly:

"Lo ye all Englysshmen, se ye nat what a mychyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and the nobelyst knight of the worlde, and the moste loved the felyship of noble knyghtes and by hym they all were upholdyn, and yey might nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym. Lo thus was the

³⁹ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 97.

olde custom and uasayges of thys londe, and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom. Alas! Thys ys a great defaughte of us Englysshmen, for there may no thyngge us please no terme."⁴⁰

"o, you Englishmen! Do you not see what a mischief there was? For he that was the greatest king and noblest knight of the world, and the loved fellowship of noble knights, and whose honour raised that fellowship up—he was ill treated by his subjects. These Englishmen were not happy with him. Lo, such was the custom and behaviour of the people of this land, and many men say that we have not lost that custom. Alas, this is a great fault in us Englishmen, for there may be no thing we please."

Malory sees this as a common flaw in the English people that they can't recognise a great king when they have one and will never be content with any king because of it. This seems to be something different than in the Catalanian mirrors of princes. Malory sees the flaws in the people as a cause of trouble where the other mirrors of princes put emphasis of the king's character and the qualities and flaws he should or shouldn't have. Basically, Malory assumes a mutual dependence between the qualities a king should have and the qualities of his people. They have to recognise and appreciate a good king when they have one, instead of disposing him and get someone worse as a king in return.

Malory's publisher, Caxton, saw Arthur as one of the nine greatest kings who've ever ruled, among famous kings as Charlemagne and Godfried of Bouillon. In his preface, he writes:

"Since the birth of Christ, three noble Christian men have been acclaimed throughout the world and installed as three of the Nine Worthies. The first is the noble Arthur, whose great deeds are to be found in the pages that follow. The second is Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, of whom stories are told in many places in both French and English. The third and last is Godfrey of Bouillon; I made a book of his life and deeds for that excellent prince and king of noble memory, King Edward IV."⁴¹

The curious thing is however, that he didn't expand on why he thought this and why he thought Arthur was such a great king and this story was worth publishing. Which is a pity, because even back then publishing a book was costly and the story was so widely known that some English kings searched for Arthur's body to enlarge their power.

3.2 The perfect diverse king

Like Malory, Lydgate thought that a king's power can be overruled, but like the mirrors of Princes, this is God who intervenes. This can be seen in the story of the Greek hero Theseus.⁴² At the end, Lydgate warns his reader that he must be just to all men or God will intervene by letting his subjects rebel against him as he did with Theseus. Instead of the, 'ignorant' but independent people Malory talks about, the rebelling people were just an instrument in the hands of God, through whom he punished Theseus because he disobeyed his rules and wasn't fit to remain king. It wasn't the people who decided that a king proved to be inadequate; it was God.

What is interesting however is that Lydgate almost never really tells what he thinks kings should do or be like if they want to be a great king. Instead, he warns them about what they shouldn't do, like when he apparently intends to write that kings should be stable, he warns kings not to be unstable

⁴⁰ P.J.C.Field, *Le Morte Darthur*, 916-917

⁴¹ Malory, T., & Armstrong, D., *Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur: A New Modern English Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript*. West Lafayette, (Ind: Parlor Press 2009), xlix.

⁴²J. Lydgate, *Lydgate's Fall of princes* 125

because his subjects will follow his example, and so on.⁴³ This makes 'The Fall of Princes' a long list of warnings about what God would do if a king was good enough. But when was he a good king? Lydgate doesn't explicitly expand on this. If we turn his writings around, we read that a king should make no hasty judgements, be a good listener who checks the facts before believing a story.⁴⁴ He ought to examine a case well before he judges it and should always decide according to reason and right, and take the truth and his conscience into account.⁴⁵ But is that really what Lydgate considered a good king? Who knows? Unlike Malory, he never explicitly says what the perfect king's qualities should be. The readers of 'The Fall of Princes' have to find this out on their own.

What we do know is that the image of the perfect king is a complex one. Not only because of the many different qualities he should have, but also because many different parties had many different ideas about the matter depending on their interests. Influenced by both literature and clerical and knightly orders, it would have been hard for kings to act according to all those expectations.

3.3 The perfect people?

Being a literary character, King Arthur already had all those qualities and all Malory had to do was to write them down. But literary tradition aside, Malory added another dimension to this matter: he ascribed power and responsibility to the English subjects (probably the nobles) as well; something Lydgate and the other mirrors of princes never did. By being displeased with Arthur and by opposing him, they were partly responsible for his downfall and its consequences.

It seems that Malory felt like they didn't acknowledge the good they had, made the situation worse because of their discontent and thus dethroned the perfect king. For Malory, 'LMdA' isn't just about the perfect king anymore, it is about the perfect subjects as well. Instead of God intervening, like in Nimrod's case in chapter 1, Malory directly addresses to his readers: the English nobility. He confronts them with what they have done to cause Arthur's downfall and to lose a great king. Therefore, the English people are not God's instrument to punish an unworthy king, but they put it on themselves because of their own ignorance, what Malory holds them accountable for. Therefore, 'LMdA' again does not correspond completely with Tang's characteristics for mirrors of princes. The story is not only about the reign of the perfect king, but about the imperfect people as well and Tang has not taken this element into account.

Chapter 4: How to stay safe as a king's critic

Judith Ferster wrote in her book, 'Fictions of Advice', that it's very hard to find the political intentions and criticism in mirrors of princes.⁴⁶ Firstly because it is hard to identify and date them exactly, which makes it unsure which events and which kings caused what criticism. The political situation of the writers makes this even harder: as said in the previous chapter, it was impossible for them to have power over the king, but their situation was even harder and more dangerous if they criticised him. If they criticised a specific king openly, they fell from grace and could lose their lives if they did. The king was the most powerful man in the kingdom and if he wanted something, it happened. That is why the writers used stories of previous or mythological kings to express their criticism and never

⁴³ J. Lydgate, *Lydgate's Fall of princes* 127

⁴⁴ J. Lydgate, *Lydgate's Fall of princes* 128

⁴⁵ Ibidem 129

⁴⁶ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 131.

named the king they criticised by name.⁴⁷ They had to write in very guarded terms for good reason and this makes it hard to identify the story and, eventually, the actual criticism behind it.

Because the stories are as general as they can be to protect its writer, it's hard to find out which events he reacted to and if they were actual events or the king and his politics' general flaws. This may also be the case regarding the locations described in the tales, which means that it's hard for researchers to locate mirrors of princes both chronologically and geographically.

4.1 Following traditions?

The second problem is the medieval literary tradition which inspired the writers. Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes' was an English adaption of Laurent de Premierfait's '*Des Cas de nobles hommes et femmes*' (1409) of an adaption of a poem written by the Italian Boccaccio.⁴⁸ Lydgate added stories of English princes and adapted parts of the texts to make it its own. But large parts remained the same or simply revered to the original texts. This means that at first glance the text appears to be Lydgate's view on kings, but this does not always have to be the case. It traces back to views of others, to literary traditions the previous writers referred to or followed. This makes the text a complex whole of different views, interpretations and traditions.

The result of literary traditions can be seen in 'LMdA' as well. Malory continues a literary tradition which started long before he was even born and can partly be found in France as well. He used the French Vulgate Cycle, and the English version of Geoffrey of Monmouth as source material, along with minor Arthurian tales, and added his own view on the story and on the king's image. For the story itself, this means that, logically, some events can't have happened as Malory described. The Grail queste for instance, while in Caxton's version it is initially said that Arthur's tale would be told, this tale continues to be the tale of Arthur's knights. In the Grail quest, Arthur is almost a side character and Lancelot and Percival become the most important. It is only when the quest ends and they find out about Mordred's betrayal, Arthur becomes a main character again.

4.2 A complex whole

This is the result of a long and complex literary tradition which Malory tries to capture into one coherent story. But this makes it also hard to find out where the tradition ends and where his own view begins. What we do know is that Malory did not so much criticize the king, but the English nobility. They were as vulnerable as the king himself, or maybe even more vulnerable because they had to act out his politics, whether it was good for them or not. They had to show their loyalty while having to live with the consequences of the king's politics themselves. Malory himself worked for more than one lord during the War of the Roses, which eventually resulted in him getting arrested and getting put in jail. This might explain his attitude towards the nobility and kings. How his life turned out was partly the result of the politics of his lord he had to act out. But unlike a lord or king who was mainly above the law, Malory had to live with it.

Reasons for criticism, and examples of it can be found in 'LMdA', but you must look very closely and it's hard very to prove that this was Malory's point of view and not part of a (literary) tradition. The same goes for Lydgate and other writers of mirrors of princes. Their stories were critical stories, based on other stories and part of longer literary traditions to hide the real subjects of their criticism and to protect themselves from harm. This makes it had to find prove and arguments for the

⁴⁷ F.R.M. Tang, *De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castilie-Leon circa 1230-1350*, 122.

⁴⁸ N. Mortimer., *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes, narrative tragedy in its literary and political contexts*, v.

existence of their criticism. It is also possible that they just wanted to tell a good story. If Lydgate and Malory did criticize a specific king, they hid it well behind the words on the pages. Unfortunately, they may have hidden it too well for researchers to prove this.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

As we've seen before, Arthur is depicted as a great king: he's righteous, a good warrior, a great warlord, he's honourable and doesn't change the law for his own benefits. This matches with the characteristics in mirrors of princes, which also can be found in Tang's thesis and in 'The Fall of Princes'. So, on these points, this Arthurian tale can be classified as a mirror of princes.

However, Arthur did not become king because God wanted him to, and his reign didn't end because God intervened as most mirrors of princes prescribe. This doesn't mean that Christianity doesn't have an important role in the story, because it does. This can be seen in the quest of the Holy Grail, which is a Christian artefact, and in the Christian holidays on which the young Arthur had to repeatedly pull the sword from the stone. The reasons the nobles had to deny Arthur the throne, were also based on Christian standards. These are a few examples of the Christian influences on the tale. The tale also includes some criticism about the 15th British political system and nobility. Malory portrays Arthur as a great king for his people, instead of a great Christian or a great warlord. He assigns Arthur's end partly to the nobility and their ignorance, instead of in Arthur's personal flaws, sins or God's interference.

5.1 A new mirror?

Unfortunately, it cannot be ignored that God doesn't have the active role in the tale he has in the Cattellian mirrors of princes and in 'The Fall of Princes'. In 'LMdA', this part is played by Merlin, for instance in Arthur ascending the throne, and in predicting the end of Arthur's reign.

This set of data creates a mixed whole. First, we have Arthur who almost completely personifies the perfect medieval king, but not 100%: he can be seen as a bastard, and unfit to ascend the throne because of it. Second, there's the lack of Christian influence and God's interference in the story and in Arthur's reign. This is an important factor in mirrors of Princes and cannot be ignored. Besides, there are many magical elements in 'LMdA' which aren't related to the Christian faith. Excalibur, Arthur's sword and the most famous weapon in the Arthurian tradition, was given by the lady of the lake whose further identity is unknown. Arthur's reign also didn't end because of personal flaws, but because of external circumstances and because of prophecies.

This all considered, 'LMdA' cannot be classified as a mirror of princes on this point. Although it can be seen as a contemporary critical political piece, hidden into a piece of fiction, it doesn't contain enough of the important elements mirrors of princes have. It could be a mirror to some people, but it's not a mirror of princes. 'LMdA' includes a lot of the literary characteristics of mirrors of princes Tang describes in his thesis, like the king being righteous and being a good warlord.

However, it cannot be ignored that Malory does something different: he describes King Arthur as a good king to his people, instead of being a good Christian first. Putting Arthur's doubtful lineage aside, Malory finds the reason of his qualities in his stable reign and names the ignorance of the English nobility as one of the causes of Arthur's downfall. This may have had something to do with the different time and circumstances Malory lived in compared with the twelfth century Castilian mirrors of princes on which Tang's thesis is based, but it is too big of a difference to classify 'LMdA' as a mirror of princes within this theoretical context. It has elements of it, but stands on its own because of its differences. Malory may have created a different mirror than a mirror of princes.

Literature

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