

Dorsey Armstrong. *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* University Press of Florida, 2003. pp. viii + 272.

**A**s Dorsey Armstrong's excellent study of the role of gender in Malory attests, the *Morte d'Arthur* offers, to paraphrase Dryden, "Arthur's plenty," and readily invites new and revised readings. Armstrong argues, sensibly and convincingly, that gender is key to understanding Malory's text, and she focuses on the ways in which the Pentecostal Oath and the community of knights that it binds together define and sharpen "specific ideals of masculine and feminine gender identities in the Arthurian community" (1). She further argues that "a compulsion to fulfill these ideals drives the narrative of the *Morte d'Arthur* forward to its inevitable ending" (1). In so arguing, Armstrong breaks company with earlier scholars whom she sees as too narrowly reading Malory's great work as simply a nostalgic look to a long-distant past.

Armstrong's study is divided into five chapters. In chapter one, she discusses the role

of gender and the chivalric community in the rise of Arthur's kingdom. Here she provides a gloss of the Oath and lays the groundwork for the discussions that will follow. She sees the Oath as "the master signifier" (31) by which all knightly behavior in the *Morte d'Arthur* is judged. While the Oath is essential to the fellowship of the Round Table, it also creates a tension within the court, since fulfilling the tenets of the Oath often requires knights to abandon the world of the heterosocial court for a homosocial wilderness in which to perform deeds of derring do. And in a nod to earlier critical discussions of Malory's originality, Armstrong sees the Oath as a way for Malory to link both martial and marital in ways absent from his sources. Armstrong's convincing analysis of the differing roles Igrayne, Morgause, and Morgan Le Fay play in this dialectic is especially intriguing.

In chapter two of her study, Armstrong turns her attention to Lancelot, Malory's "floure of al knyghtes," whose bachelorhood ensures, rather than impedes, his knightly career, but also comes to embody the tension within the community bound by the Pentecostal Oath. Lancelot's service to women has its limitations. Armstrong sees Arthur and Lancelot as "representatives of masculinity and community within the *Morte d'Arthur*" (109), but she argues further that their status is not normative. Malory presents his readers with an array of knights whose often conflicting takes on masculinity and community differ from each other and from those of Arthur and Lancelot to contribute to the ever present dramatic and narrative tension in the *Morte d'Arthur*.

Further to underscore this tension, Armstrong's third chapter, her most insightful and original, offers a contrasting reading of the roles that Gareth and Tristram play in Malory's Arthurian enterprise. The combined tales of Gareth and Tristram make up the great

middle of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and Armstrong argues that these two tales, especially in terms of their complementarity, have too often been overlooked or slighted by scholars. Here she suggests marriage is a continuing goal for knights although the achievement of that goal in effect terminates a knight's chivalric career. Marriage thus replaces devotion to God in Malory, and such a notion explains Malory's careful manipulation of his sources in his takes on the tales of Tristram and of the Quest.

In her reading of Malory's version of the Quest, Armstrong clearly parts company with scholars who do not see the *Morte d'Arthur* as a cohesive whole. Rather, quoting and expanding upon a comment made by Kathleen Coyne Kelly, Armstrong sees Lancelot's role in the Quest as setting him apart from Galahad, who is neither masculine nor feminine, who "exists outside the homosocial bond, and [who], in fact, prevents the homosocial from becoming fully realized" (177). With Gareth and Tristram, Lancelot forms

a trinity of role models for an ever decreasing fellowship who cling to outmoded norms of masculinity and who are incapable of preserving the chivalric code as an ideal.

Indeed, in trying to do so, they ironically only hasten that code's final undoing.

Armstrong concludes her study with a gloss of the death of Arthur. In Malory's rendering of this traumatic event, Armstrong argues, lies the final statement of his complex and complicated understanding of chivalry. For Malory, the link between violence and the heteronormative both supports and undermines the courtly code. Malory thus celebrates the value of chivalry and mourns its self-destructiveness. What is most important for Malory, according to Armstrong, is that redemption remains a possibility at the end of the *Morte d'Arthur*. "Lancelot goes to heaven not because he recognizes the errors of his ways and repents, but because he does his 'utmost' to adhere to the ideals of the chivalric community. That the ideals themselves are self-destructive, producing chaos rather than

order, is less important than the fact that Lancelot—enthusiastically, impressively, successfully—performs them" (211).

Throughout this important study of the *Morte d'Arthur*, Armstrong writes with a command of Malory's text and a clarity of style that are both admirable. She nicely proves that a literary study can be based solidly in multiple schools of theory without being driven solely by any one school, at times to the detriment of the text under scholarly consideration. Armstrong is scrupulous in her acknowledgment of her sources and scholarly debts, and her publisher has been equally meticulous in producing a book which is free of misprints and technical errors. *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* offers a fresh, solid reading of Malory's great work, and for this Arthurian scholars have much to thank Dorsey Armstrong for.

Kevin J. Hart  
La Salle University