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Once upon a Time: The *Morte D'Arthur*'s Relationship to the Fairy Tale Canon

Sarah N. Lawson
SUNY Geneseo

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The tales of the legendary King Arthur have become a part of British literary history. They are stories of romance, chivalry, magic, and adventure; the development of the stories took place over centuries, beginning primarily with Geoffrey of Monmouth in 1136 and continuing on in the work of many other writers, including Sir Thomas Malory in 1469. Despite its classification as a chivalric romance, many elements of the Arthurian romance cycle that developed over its lifespan reflect common folklore or storytelling motifs that are still recognizable today in the form of literary fairy tales. These include the evil stepmother (*The Fyrste and the Secunde Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones*), the rags-to-riches story (*The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney*), and the poison apple (*The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwenyvere*). The following paper will explore the roots of each of these motifs in an attempt to uncover the relationship between Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and familiar literary fairy tales.

There is some dispute about whether or not the Arthurian romances have any foundation in the folklore genre in the same way that literary fairy tales do. However, the persistence of folkloric motifs is undeniable. It bears resemblance to the literary fairy tales that emerged across Europe later, and it is possible that the *Morte D'Arthur* has a part to play in the development of literary fairy tales. But is it an early literary fairy tale, predating even the work of the Neapolitan Giambattista Basile, a distant cousin to the folklore genre or a work unto itself, related only marginally to the folkloric tradition? The motifs examined in an effort to answer this question will be compared to their use in popular literary fairy tales of Perrault's *Cendrillon* and the Grimms' *Sneewittchen*, with some attention paid to these motifs in other familiar literary fairy tales.

ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

In order to accurately place the relationship between Malory's work and literary fairy tales, the roots of both *Morte D'Arthur* and the popular fairy tales must be identified. Widespread awareness of the tales was intensified with their inclusion in *The History of the Kings of Briton* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, written in the mid-twelfth century. *The History* brought the tales to the attention of French poets such as Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, who developed the earliest forms of Arthurian romance. Both prose and poetic versions of the tales followed over the next centuries. In 1469, the popular tales were adapted and compiled into one large work by the British knight Sir Thomas Malory. This work was printed by Caxton in 1485. Unlike the stories of Arthur, the folklore genre is essentially ageless. Folklore has existed since humans began to share stories with one another. The greatest length of its history lies in the oral tradition, when older members of the community would pass on the history of the society to younger generations. The tales often changed from teller to teller, as in their performance of it, one teller's memory may have altered details or forgotten certain aspects of their story. Location, time, and population all had an effect on the stories that were told, making oral tradition less consistent in their telling than the stories of post-literate society. Despite the changes in the actual performances of the story, however, the desired message was still communicated. Bruce A. Rosenberg states,

> All of these processes conspire to alter the details in the transmission of narratives (as of ordinary facts), to get it 'wrong.'

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Stories in our culture are goal-oriented, and even though many of the details are altered in transmission, the goals of the narrative tend to be preserved. (Rosenberg 84)

Though their details changed over time, these oral tales succeeded in communicating social ideals and morals in order to preserve tradition.

Many of these oral fairy tales and folktales were never written down, but Giambattista Basile transcribed some of them in his compilation *Lo cunto de li cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille*, commonly known as *Il Pentamerone*, in the seventeenth century. The idea of writing down folklore and even developing new fairy tales continued in France in the 1690s and persisted through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most famous compilation of cultural tales is *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*, first published in 1812 by the German linguists Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

The next step in determining the connections between the *Morte* and the fairy tale genre is analyzing the definitions of Arthurian romance, folklore, and fairy tale. Folktales are a very agrarian genre—they existed and continue to exist as a way for everyday people to communicate their knowledge of the world through stories. According to Ruth B. Bottigheimer,

> Folktales tend to reflect the belief system and the world of their intended audience…Folktales are generally brief, related to everyday life, and have a simple linear plot that is easy to remember. (Bottigheimer)

They easily adapted to specific towns and tellers and were easy to adjust as needed because of their simple structure. Romances, on the other hand, tend to be more complex, less linear, and much longer. Thomas Malory notably cut long, irrelevant side adventures of characters in the *Morte* from his French source material.

The romance genre first appeared in the twelfth century. It is also known as heroic literature and has features such as courtly love, heroic quests, and characters who are primarily kings and knights. It took the forms of poems, prose works, and sometimes songs. "By romance, we commonly mean a tale of an improbable or, better, of an incredible character" (Griffin). Chivalric romance was also the genre of the educated class. It wasn't until the late seventeenth century that the literary fairy tale would be developed by Charles Perrault and his contemporaries in the courts of France. Peter Brooks wrote on Perrault in the journal *Yale French Studies*,

> He is creating a literature where before there had been myth and folklore. The act of transcription, both creative and destructive, takes us from the primitive to the modern, makes the stories and their themes enter into literacy, into civilization, into history. (Brooks 11)

This identifies the difference between folklore and literary fairy tales: the stories that had once been mutable and individual became permanent and locked into the written word.

Despite the differences between chivalric romances and literary fairy tales, there are also explicit connections between the two. English fairy tales did not develop as such until the early seventeenth century, but these stories link directly back to Arthurian romance. The first fairy tale printed in English was *The History of Tom Thumbe, the Little, for his small stature surnamed, King Arthur's Dwarfe: whose Life and adventures containe many strange and wonderfull accidents, published for the delight of merry Time-spenders*. Thomas Green writes,

> Here we have a fairytale, rather than a heroic tale or courtly drama, being integrated with the Arthurian milieu to create a new Arthurian hero and adventure. The result is thus an Arthurian fairytale, rather than a Romance.

This demonstrates the fusion that began taking place between Arthurian romances and fairy tales; the strict lines between the genres were beginning to blur.

As the genres became more mutable, many motifs found in chivalric romance also began to appear in literary fairy tales. These motifs are perhaps the most valuable tool with which to explore the connections between the *Morte D'Arthur* and later literary fairy tales. Unlike other elements that were significantly altered when they crossed the genre lines, many of

these motifs remained nearly unchanged. The motifs of the evil stepmother, the rags-to-riches tale, and the poison apple are motifs that are the most recognizable, leading to the following analysis.

The Evil Stepmother

The evil stepmother motif has its roots in the oral tradition of folklore. In the many stories where the mother dies in the protagonist's childhood, a second wife normally usurps her position. There are many theories about this motif's role in folklore and fairy tales. Marina Warner, writing on the development of the evil stepmother motif, notes that the terms used for stepmother and mother-in-law were the same in English until the mid-nineteenth century. The terms in French are still the same: *belle-mère* (Warner 218). *Belle* or *beau* were used in conjunction with family relationships in French as early as the thirteenth century, and were typically an honorific prefix related to *chère*, or "dear," though there are also some recorded ironic uses (Patterson). Warner writes that the evil stepmother motif describes any fusion of families—both the remarriage of the father and the marriage of the young wife who must then move into her mother-in-law's home. There is conflict in both scenarios, and it is from this reality that the evil stepmother motif arises (Warner 219).

Warner theorizes that in the age of the oral tradition, the storyteller, as a grandmother or mother-in-law herself, would eliminate the good mother at the beginning of the tale and would posit herself as the good fairy, the one who is to be trusted and who will defeat the evil, "false" mother in the story. It was a key ingredient in establishing the role of the narrator in the oral tradition:

> Reversing the angle of approach…we can then discover in the tales the fear she [the mother-in-law] feels, the animus she harbours against her daughter-in-law or daughters-in-law: when the mother disappears, she may have been conjured away by the narrator herself, who despatches her child listeners' natural parent, replaces her with a monster, and then produces herself within the pages of the story, as …the good old fairy, the fairy godmother. Thus the older generation…prunes out the middle branch on the family tree as rotten or irrelevant, and

thereby lays claim to the devotion, loyalty, and obedience of the young over their mothers' heads. (Warner 227)

The landmark book *The Uses of Enchantment* by child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim suggests that the stepmother is a necessary character that allows the child to distinguish the "good" parts of the mother from the "angry" parts of the mother until the child is mature enough to accept that these are two parts of the same person. He also points out that it offers children a lesson in goodwill: "The child wishes only for good things, even when he has ample reason to wish that bad things would happen to those who persecute him" (Bettelheim 72).

The stepmother motif occurs prominently in the first several pages of *The Fyrste and the Secunde Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones*. Sir Trystram's mother, Queen Elizabeth, dies in childbirth. About thirty lines later, Trystram's father, King Melyodas, remarries a woman with children of her own:

> Than hit befelle that the Kynge Melyodas wedded Kynge Howellys of Bretaynes doughter; and anone she had chyldirne by King Melyodas. Than was she hevy and wroth that hir chyldirne sholde nat rejoyse the contrey of Lyones, wherefore this quene ordayned for to poyson yong Trystrams. (Malory 229)

Here we see not only the stepmother, but her jealousy of the firstborn, "natural" son and her plot against him. This plot turns against her, and she is eventually discovered, but when she is about to burn at the stake, Trystram pleads for her life. "As for that, I beseche you of your mercy that ye woll forgyff hir; and as for my parte, God forgyff hir, and I do" (Malory 230). This is a demonstration of Bettelheim's suggestion of the child's goodwill toward the evil, setting the child apart from others like him.

Wicked stepmothers appear in literary fairy tales across Europe in the seventeenth century. The two most recognizable evil stepmothers are those in Cin-

derella-type stories such as *Cenerentola* of Italy (Basile, 1634), *Cendrillon* of France (Perrault, 1697), and *Aschenputtel* of Germany (Grimm, 1812) and the Snow White stories like *Sneewittchen* of Germany (Grimm, 1819). In the Cinderella stories, the stepmother oppresses the child in order to promote the standings of her own children within the family, just like Trystram's stepmother in the *Morte*. In the Snow White stories, her jealousy of the protagonist's youth and beauty becomes murderous. Trystram's stepmother demonstrates qualities of both of these famous stepmothers, and she also predates them in written form by nearly two hundred years. The resemblance of Trystram's stepmother to the stepmothers of Basile, Perrault, and the Grimms is striking, and it may indicate a linear relationship between the *Morte D'Arthur* and literary fairy tales.

Rags-to-Riches

The rags-to-riches storyline is another motif that frequently occurs in folktales and fairy tales. It takes two primary forms: the riches-to-rags-to-riches version, wherein the hero's wealth is stolen and then restored at the end of the adventure (*Cendrillon*); and the rags-to-riches version, wherein the protagonist begins poor or misfortunate and either through his own wit or supernatural aid becomes wealthy at the end (*The Golden Goose*). A third variation, the rags-to-riches-to-rags form, usually occurs when the protagonist is a trickster and obtains his wealth through dishonest means, or else oversteps the bounds of his good fortune by aspiring to godlike proportions and falls once more into poverty (*The Fisherman and His Wife*).

The version of this motif that appears in *The Tale of Syr Gareth of Orkeney* is of the first sort. Young Gareth arrives in Camelot and asks King Arthur for a position in the kitchens, which is granted to him, along with an unflattering nickname, Beaumains. Though King Arthur and his knights do not know this, Gareth is the nephew of King Arthur and half-brother to some of his knights. He came from riches, but voluntarily descended into a lower social class in order to prove himself. This use of the motif is far less common in literary fairy tales. It is a distinctly chivalric use of the motif, and it sets *The Tale of Syr Gareth of Orkeney* apart from other stories with this motif. With the help of a magical dwarf (perhaps Tom Thumb), Dame Lyonet, and Sir Lancelot, Sir Gareth travels across the land battling evil knights until he finally saves Lyonet's kingdom from the Red Knight of the Red Lands. In the end, he is rewarded with the hand of Lyonet's sister, Lyonesse (Malory 177-227).

The most immediate and recognizable literary fairy tale featuring this motif is the Cinderella fairy tale.

There are so many variations of the tale that it has been given its own category in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Folklore Index: 501A—Cinderella. Though certain elements vary from story to story, the major plot points remain the same. A young, kind girl becomes the oppressed housemaid of her stepmother and stepsisters and is degraded with an ugly nickname. She is given an impossible task to earn her way to the king's ball, and with the help of benevolent animals, trees, or a fairy godmother, she arrives at the ball in marvelous attire. She flees the ball at midnight, and the prince uses a shoe that the girl has left behind to find her. She is raised to the rank of princess, and the oppressors are either punished or forgiven in spectacular fashion.

Gareth and Cinderella are different in that Gareth chooses a lower rank, while Cinderella is forced into one against her will. Nevertheless, their upper-class origins cannot be hidden. Nature itself seeks to restore them to their birthright. In Gareth's case, it is the magic dwarf (dwarfs often represent beings that are close to nature) that provides him with spectacular armor and provisions for his quest. In Cinderella's case, it is usually a tree planted over her mother's grave and the birds residing there that grant her the finery in which to attend the ball. Maria Tatar addresses this feature of the motif. She states, "In the fairy tale, nature (in the shape of flora and fauna) helps the hero to restore the natural order of things by reinstating the once "natural" child to his true social position" (Tatar 32). This theme also appears in other fairy tales such as *The Goose Girl*. The greater the claim of the protagonist to greatness, the more nature seems to react in its attempt to have that greatness credited to them.

But where do the Cinderella stories and the *Morte D'Arthur* connect? The rags-to-riches storyline, particularly the Cinderella version of it, has existed in its earliest forms since the first century A.D. (Heiner). It continued to develop over the following centuries until it intersected with Arthurian romance in the twelfth century A.D. First, the story of King Lear appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Briton*. Princess Cordelia is often considered to be a Cinderella character, though she is an example of riches-to-rags-to-even-richer. A few decades later, Marie de France, famous for her penning of Arthurian lays, wrote *The Lay of the Ash Tree*, which is sometimes included in the Cinderella Cycle (Heiner). The *Morte* followed in 1485 with *The Tale of Syr Gareth*.

Its male protagonist and distinctly chivalric quest form prevent it from being considered a 'Cinderella' tale, but it shares many motifs with the Cinderella Cycle. Cinderella tales in other countries appeared in the sixteenth century, such as Straparola's *Doralice* and Basile's *Cenerentola* in Italy and Martin Montanus's *Ein schöne history von einer frawen mitt zweyen kindlin* in Germany. Later, in 1697, the Frenchman Charles Perrault would popularize the story, leaving an indelible mark on the story for the next three hundred years. *The Tale of Syr Gareth* may not have had a direct influence on the development of the Cinderella Cycle in the following centuries, but it certainly fits neatly in the tradition of the rags-to-riches story.

The Poison Apple

The third fairy tale motif examined here will be the symbol of the poisoned fruit. It is perhaps one of the oldest motifs, with its most famous occurrence appearing in the Biblical book of Genesis. The fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is wrongfully consumed by Adam and Eve, and they are expelled from the Garden of Eden for their crime. Though the actual variety of fruit consumed in this story is unknown, it is often portrayed as an apple. Poison apples or other forms of deadly fruit appear both in fairy tales and in the *Morte D'Arthur*. The most well-known poison fruit of fairy tales is the apple given to Snow White by her evil stepmother to kill her in the Grimm story *Sneewittchen* (1857). The apple succeeds in killing Snow White, and she is placed into a gold and glass coffin by the seven dwarfs with whom she has taken shelter. She is later revived when her coffin is jostled during transport by the prince's servant and the apple is dislodged from her throat. In the *Morte D'Arthur*, the poison apple appears in *The Tale of Syr Launcelot and Quene Gwenyvere*, when Guinevere is falsely accused of killing a knight with a poison apple. She is nearly executed for the crime, but Sir Lancelot arrives to fight for her and the true criminal is discovered.

There are many other associations to be made with a symbolic apple. Besides the 'apple' from the Garden of Eden, there is also the apple of discord from Greek mythology. When the goddess Aphrodite is given the apple to distinguish her above other goddesses, the events leading to the Trojan War begin (Bettelheim 212). The relationship to the Garden of Eden story and the Greek myth has imbued the apple symbol with meanings of love and sexuality. Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* goes even further to identify the apple as representing the mother's breast. In *Sneewittchen*, "that which is symbolized by the apple…is something mother and daughter have in common which runs deeper than their jealousy of each other—their mature sexual desires" (Bettelheim 213). In the fairy tale, that which should represent something maternal is transformed into something deadly, and the same thing happens in the *Morte*.

When reading the poisoned apple tale in the *Morte*, it is important to not ignore this background behind the symbol. Guinevere is assumed to be the culprit behind Sir Patryse's murder because she made the dinner, but she is also the only female present. The apple is a feminine symbol, and this perhaps incriminated her even more. Not another thought is spent on the fact that Sir Patryse was drunk when he consumed the apple and that he could just as easily have picked another—Guinevere did not give him the apple herself. "Sir Patryse…toke an appyll, for he was enchaffed with hete of wyne, and his myssehapped hym to take a poysonde apple" (Malory 591). Guinevere's position as the lady of the house, the "mother," made her the perfect suspect; her femininity is turned against her, much in the way that Snow White's desire for mature femininity causes her downfall.

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The lineage from Biblical tales to Greek stories through the *Morte* and *Sneewittchen* is clear. The fateful fruit connects them all. However, the specifically *poisoned* apple is what ties the *Morte* to later fairy tales such as *Sneewittchen.* The *Morte D'Arthur* again predates the Grimm version of the tale by centuries, and it also predates many of the other Snow White variants found across Europe. As renowned folklorists and linguists, it would be unlikely that the nineteenth-century Grimm Brothers were unfamiliar with Arthurian legend. There has also been criticism that they did not collect strictly German tales as they intended to, but gathered stories from their peers, who may have been unclear about the origins of the tales that they were sharing. In her article, Ruth B. Bottigheimer notes, "The girls and women who told Wilhelm Grimm the stories of volume one were all literate and well-read. It was characteristic of literate German girls and women in the late 1700s and early 1800s to have had access to many books of fairy tales. Published in German, nearly all of those fairy tales' plots were imports from France" (Bottigheimer). Due to this overlap of French and German, upper- and lower-class tales, the appearance of a poisoned apple in *Sneewittchen* and the occurrence of one in the *Morte D'Arthur* may not be a coincidence.

A Linear Connection

The age of literary fairy tales did not begin in Europe until the seventeenth century or, at the very earliest, the late sixteenth century. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* was written in about 1469, amidst the Wars of the Roses in England. There was literary precedent for his work in the romance tradition begun by Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century, just as there was an oral tradition that existed as a precedent for literary fairy tales. However, because of the way that traditions mingle and stories cross borders and absorb elements from other stories, it is very possible that some of the motifs common in popular literary fairy tales are directly descended from or related to Arthurian legends and romances. The story of 'Tom Thumb' is a perfect example.

Further proof that exists beyond the scope of the *Morte* includes the similarities between Marie de France's *Lay of Eliduc* and *Lay of the Ash Tree* to Snow White and Cinderella stories. Likewise, the obscure tale of *Pandragus et Libanor* by Baudouin Butor (which details the adventure of an uncle of King Arthur) is incredibly similar to Sleeping Beauty. Perrault's version, *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, was almost certainly inspired by the tale of Troylus and Zellandine from the medieval Arthurian romance *Perceforest* (Heiner). While the folklore genre was agrarian and belonged to the uneducated classes, the literary fairy tale was begun and perpetuated by the educated bourgeoisie, most notably in France (Zipes). These upper-class writers would undoubtedly have been familiar with the tales of King Arthur, which was a story that extended far beyond the borders of the country in which they primarily took place. At the time that these fairy tales were written, the *Morte* had existed for over a century and would have likely inspired some of the new fairy tale writers.

The best identification of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* in the fairy tale tradition is as a cousin to the genre. The origins of the fairy tales and of the *Morte* are similar—they are rooted in oral tradition at some point early in their development—but they each grew from these traditions at separate times. The timeline of their construction is different, with the *Morte* and other Arthurian romances developing more completely at least one hundred and fifty years before the first literary fairy tales. The two genres intersect in their common motifs and themes, which implies they are not completely disconnected. In fact, it can be said that literary fairy tales are an inheritor of the Arthurian romances. Tom Thumb, a seventeenth-century fairy tale character who is based in the Arthurian legend, supports this possibility.

The history of stories is immeasurable in its scope. Arthurian romances such as the *Morte D'Arthur* and literary fairy tales present a model of how oral tales became the stories familiar today, and they are extremely important in understanding how the art of storytelling grew and developed over time. A relationship between the two demonstrates even further how complex and widespread the telling of stories was in the medieval world, and the tales present new ways to understand the past that allow a closer connection to the stories we have inherited.

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