

## **Magic as Gendered Knowledge in Merlin's Rise and Fall: A Discourse on Male Homosocial Bonding**

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### **Abstract**

The fictional character, 'Merlin', has been widely accepted as an icon of "wisdom" in Western culture. In Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the representation of Merlin's intellect is especially manifested in political foresight and acumen. Merlin's intellectual masculinity is potent enough to be mystified as magic. In Malory, magic is a significant factor in the valorization and emasculation of Merlin within the economy of male bonding. Merlin is initially portrayed as a positive magician whose magic is discursively moralized and gendered as masculine. Through his supernatural prowess, the divided Britain is united and Arthur's court of chivalry is fostered. Merlin's magic also contributes to enact and cement bonds among Arthurian knights. As the narrative progresses, however, Merlin is feminized. Despite that Merlin's magic functions as a positive force in the Arthurian male homosocial realm, it excludes Merlin from the Arthurian economy of male bonding. Further, in his pursuit of Nimue, Merlin's magic is gendered feminine because he abuses his magical knowledge as currency to buy Nimue's virginity. Merlin fails to hold himself to the high standard required of a positive magician. He is feminized and punished by "shameful death" at the hands of Nimue. Viewed through the lens of male homosociality, Merlin's death is a result of the paradoxical functioning of male homosocial bonding, which occurs when the demands of heterosexual love clash with those of male homosocial bonds and obligations.

**Keywords:** Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Merlin, Male Homosocial Bonding

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## 性別化的魔法與梅林的崛起/墮落：(男)同性社會性紐帶的建構

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### 摘要

在西方文化，巫師梅林常被當作智慧的象徵。在摩利理爵士的《亞瑟王之死》一書中，梅林的智慧尤其展現在政治遠見和權謀上。他的才智甚至被神秘化成魔法。在《亞瑟王之死》中，魔法是建構梅林正面巫師形象的要素。他首先被描繪成亞瑟王的智囊和守護者，因為他的協助，亞瑟王統一了分裂的王國。在這個角色建構中，梅林的魔法被性別化為男/陽剛，恰與其他女巫師的魔法形成二元對立（陰/陽；惡/善；女/男）。再者，梅林的魔法也促進了圓桌騎士們的情誼和同性紐帶關係的建立。然而，隨著故事進展，梅林卻被陰弱化。雖然梅林的魔法在（亞瑟王王國）男同性社會扮演著正面力量，它卻也吊詭地將梅林排除在（男）同性社會性紐帶經濟體之外。此外，在他追求妮薇中，梅林的魔法是被置位於女/陰弱/惡的位階，因為他以魔法為籌碼希冀能換取妮薇的貞操。梅林違反了作為一個正面巫師的道德要求。最後，他死在妮薇的手中。從（男）同性社會性結構的觀點解讀，梅林的死體現了一個（男）同性社會性結構運作的矛盾情況，這個吊詭說明了異性戀做為男性主體意識建構的必然標記和（男）同性社會性關係之間某種程度的不相容。

**關鍵詞：**摩利理爵士、亞瑟王之死、梅林，（男）同性社會性紐帶

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The fictional character, “Merlin,” has been widely accepted as an icon of hermetic “wisdom” in Western culture. Traditionally a Celtic shaman-bard-seer-“man of the wild” figure, Merlin is portrayed as Britain’s political prophet, kingmaker and the king’s advisor in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*.<sup>1</sup> In Malory, Merlin embodies male intellectual masculinity, in direct contrast to the military masculinity exemplified by the Round Table knights. The representation of Merlin’s intellect is especially manifested in political foresight and acumen. Merlin’s intellectual masculinity is potent enough to be mystified as magical. Depicted as the paragon of the positive magician, Merlin’s magic is discursively moralized and gendered as masculine. However, I argue that although Merlin’s magic functions as a positive force in the Arthurian realm, it excludes Merlin from the Arthurian economy of male homosocial bonding. Further, in his pursuit of Nimue, the chief Lady of the Lake, Merlin’s magic is gendered as feminine because he abuses his magical knowledge as currency in order to buy Nimue’s virginity. In light of contemporary theories of male homosociality, Merlin’s wooing of Nimue can be interpreted as a strategy intended to validate his masculinity and to bond with the other men of Arthur’s court. Yet Merlin’s death at the hands of Nimue is nevertheless a result of the paradoxical functioning of male homosocial bonding, which occurs when the demands of heterosexual love clash with those of male homosocial bonds and obligations.

This paper explores the role of magic in both the valorizing and the emasculating of Merlin, within the economy of male homosocial bonding in Malory. Taking the concept of male homosociality as developed by Michael Kimmel (1994) and Michael Flood (2008), I will address the contradictory aspect of male homosocial bonding as embodied in Merlin’s tragic end. “Homosociality,” as defined by Jean Lipman-Blumen, refers to “the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex” (16). According to her, “homosociality” is distinguished from “homosexuality” in that “it does not necessarily involve (although it may under certain circumstances) an explicitly erotic sexual interaction between members of the same sex” (16). Discussing Western culture, Lipman-Blumen claims that the basic premise of the homosocial view of male sex roles is that “men are attracted to, stimulated by, and interested in other men” (16). What is implicitly suggested here is that male same-sex friendships are more valued than male–female cross-sex friendships.<sup>2</sup> Also relevant to this notion of men’s preference for same-sex relations is Kimmel’s theory that masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment. Kimmel states that:

We are under constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated

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<sup>1</sup> The representation of Merlin as a political prophet and kingmaker is first seen in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey’s Merlin might be modeled on Nennius’s Ambrosius, a young, fatherless prophet who reveals Vortigern’s crumbling fortress as a result of battling between a red and a white serpent, symbolic of the war between the Britons and Saxons. However, in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin, c. 1150), Merlin is depicted as a “Wildman of the wood.”

<sup>2</sup> Various studies show that both men and women have been found to prefer same-sex close friendships over cross-sex relationships, and to regard same-sex friendship as close to ideal. See Rose 65.

for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance. (128)

The significance of male homosocial bonding in the enactment and validation of masculinity and masculine identity is thus foregrounded. Kimmel further suggests that in contemporary Western societies, women are a form of currency contributing to a man's status and ranking on the masculine social scale (129).<sup>3</sup> In other words, men are encouraged to pursue amorous relations with women so that they can enhance their social ranking among other men or bond with other men. Sociologist Michael Flood also points out that in the Western male homosocial realm, a man's heterosexual activity is a key path to his masculine status. Flood further observes that male homosocial relations take priority over male-female relations, both social and sexual, and male homosocial obligations are positioned as primary (330-59). What is overlooked within this homosocial manhood ideology as perceived by Kimmel and Flood, however, is a validation paradox: men are encouraged to pursue male-female amorous relations so that they can enhance their status among other men, but simultaneously, male-female relations are censured and suppressed as men demand that homosocial allegiance be given primacy over heterosexual bonds.

The contemporary dominant Western discourse of homosocial manhood is further characterized by male homophobia, which, as Kimmel notes, functions as a central organizing principle of the cultural definition of manhood (131). According to Kimmel, "male homophobia" is "more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay," it is

the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend...Our fear is the fear of humiliation. We are ashamed to be afraid. (131)

Kimmel's expansion of the definition of "male homophobia" particularly highlights "fear," "anxiety," and "shame" as other characteristics of Western male homosocial bonding and draws attention to the pressure and fierce competitiveness men have to endure in their effort to attain and maintain respectable manhood.<sup>4</sup> Male homophobia nevertheless signifies homosexuality as demeaning to masculinity. As Lipman-Blumen suggests, homosociality does not necessarily involve same-sex sexual interaction. How then, is homosexuality positioned in the spectrum of male homosocial bonding, in the

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<sup>3</sup> Working from Lévi-Strauss's study on primitive kinship systems, Galye Rubin has observed that in primitive societies women functioned as a conduit of male-male relationships and women were transacted to allow men to forge closer ties with other men. See Lévi-Strauss; Rubin 27-62.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to emphasize the "anxiety" aspect of male homophobia. As Peter Redman suggests, the term "phobia" derives from psychoanalytic theory and phobias are understood as "the product of 'anxiety hysteria': an extreme fear of an object or situation characterized by avoidance strategies, in which anxiety arising from conflict in the inner-world of the psyche is displaced onto an external object or situation, which then stands in for the original." See Redman 485.

sense that it inevitably provokes a cognitive dissonance in relation to homosocial bonding?

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve K. Sedgwick uses male homosociality and male homosexuality to refer to two ends of a continuum of male gender relations. As Sedgwick points out, "homosocial" is applied to such activities as "male bonding" which is often characterized by homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality (1). However, as she observes, the nature of gendered relations informing that continuum is sometimes ambiguous because what is conceptualized as erotic or sexual "depend[s] on and affect[s] historical power relationships" (2). To highlight the erotic/sexual potential of men's relations with other men yet without automatically including it, she names the entire continuum of male gender relations "male homosocial desire." "Desire" in this context, is seen as a "social force" which shapes an important relationship (2). Male homosexual desire is just one position on the continuum that her theory of male homosocial desire attempts to situate. In addition, Sedgwick observes that heterosexual relations may themselves be strategies of male homosocial desire (21). Drawing on Sedgwick's definition of male homosocial desire, I mean to suggest by "male homosocial bonds" those alliances between males among whom there are established social relationships, and to indicate by "male homosocial bonding" the broad spectrum of male-male bonding practices. Also, my use of the term "heterosexual" refers to male-female relationships, including both amorous relations and platonic friendships. By "homosexuality" I mean any forms of same-sex sexual desire and behaviors.

In this paper, I first examine the construction of Merlin as wisdom incarnate, and as the paragon of the positive magician. Next, I analyze Merlin's depiction as a social anomaly whose demonic origin, poor physical appearance, and magic articulate his "otherness" in the Arthurian male homosocial community. I end my paper with a third section that illustrates a homosocial paradox which is manifested in Merlin's "shameful death" at the hands of Nimue and the relations of this paradox and the gender tensions that obtain between Merlin, the knights, and Nimue, as these extend to and inform the overarching gender ideology of Western culture.

#### *Merlin as Wisdom Incarnate*

In Malory, Merlin functions as the architect of the Arthurian community. His actions coaching Arthur in chivalric practices reinforce the ideals of Arthur's court. He facilitates Arthur's birth (I.1) and devises the Round Table—the physical manifestation of Arthurian chivalry (XIV.2).<sup>5</sup> When King Lot and many other lords defy the young Arthur's kingship, skeptical of his royal lineage, Merlin instructs Arthur not to be intimidated by their

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<sup>5</sup> The text also mentions that Uther bestows upon King Leodegrance (Guenever's father) the Round Table. When Guenever marries Arthur, it is given to Arthur as a wedding gift (III.1). The quotations and references in this paper are from *Caxton's Malory*, an edition edited by James W. Spisak (based on the Pierpont Morgan Library copy of Caxton's 1485 edition) and published by the University of California Press in 1983. Translations of the quotations are mostly based on Janet Cowen's edition of *Le Morte Darthur*, with my own modifications to modernize spelling and punctuation.

superior military strength, but advises him to bravely confront his challenges (I.8). King Lot and his allies eventually disregard Arthur's birthright and challenge his kingship by launching a war against him from the north. In a battle, the northern rebels are slaughtered by Arthur. Sixty thousand men are killed and only fifteen thousand left alive. Merlin cautions Arthur that it is sinful to kill too many humans under the eyes of heaven and, foreseeing that the northern rebels will not be overcome this time, Merlin advises Arthur to wait and meet his enemies later. Highlighting generosity as a required virtue of a worthy king, Merlin reminds Arthur that he owes his victory to his men, and that therefore he should rest and reward them (I.17). Merlin exemplifies intellectual masculinity. With his political and military acumen, Merlin helps Arthur defeat the northern rebels and establish a unified kingdom (II.10). When King Lot and his allies launch wars against Arthur, it is Merlin's idea that Arthur should seek external military support from King Ban of Benwick and Bors of Gaul, two of the worthiest men in the realm at that time, in his fight against Lot's superior force. Merlin knows that Ban and Bors have recently suffered a severe setback in their war with King Claudas, making the offer of a political tie both welcome and reciprocally beneficial (I.10). Impressed at Merlin's insight and judgment, Arthur and his barons say "[t]hys is wel counceilled" (this is well counseled, I.10). Joined by King Bors and Ban, Arthur's military strength is enhanced, and with Merlin's astute military deployment and tactics (I.14), Lot is soon trapped in an ambush and forced into a critical situation. In the end, Merlin's strategy successfully deters the northern rebels' advance.

Merlin's image as wisdom incarnate is further enhanced by his representation as a positive magician. In Malory, magic is represented in three different forms: the first, Christian miracles (such as the Holy Grail and the "sword-in-the-stone" trial); the second, sorcery or enchantment (non-Christian supernatural powers such as shape-shifting, healing power, and creating love potions); the third, political foreknowledge or prophetic ability. Merlin's magical prowess, his sorcery and prophetic ability, are the featured qualities of his wisdom status. Merlin is endowed with supernatural powers such as shape-shifting and foreknowledge, which enhance his sublime difference and mystical otherness and establish his high importance in his role as Arthur's court magician. Merlin's magical prowess is gendered masculine in Malory, but just what manner of masculinity Merlin possesses, and how he may manifest it, become the issues at hand. In her study of images of white magicians in the English literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Joy Ellen Parker suggests that the boundary between good and evil, white and black magic is drawn according to magicians' intentions and actions. An examination of the morality of magic in Malory, as Parker observes, reveals a dichotomy between positive masculine magic and harmful feminine magic (27). With the exception of Nimue, the chief Lady of the Lake, female sorceresses such as Morgan le Fay, Lady Hellawes, and Lady Annowre are usually associated with evil and lust. They often use magic for selfish purposes, either to gain power or to satisfy their sexual desire (VI.3; VI.15; IX.16). In contrast, Merlin is the only male magician and the embodiment of benevolent magic. His magic is reserved for the cause of good for the Arthurian community. On an occasion,

Merlin puts a charm on King Lot that makes him fail to join his allies in time and results in their losing the battle to Arthur (II.10). At another time, Merlin uses magic to save Arthur from being killed by Pellinor, who, as Merlin prophesizes, will later do Arthur a great service in the future by killing King Lot (I.24). In addition, he predicts that Pellinor's sons, Percival and Lamorak, will become two of the most worthy knights of the Round Table. When Pellinor is about to kill Arthur in a joust, Merlin intervenes in their fight by casting an enchantment over Pellinor, who quickly falls asleep on the ground. In so doing, he not only saves Arthur's life but also secures Arthur's future bonding with Pellinor and his sons. Viewed through the dyadic lens of positive masculine magic and harmful feminine magic, Merlin's manhood is directly signified and validated by his magical ability. Further, Merlin's masculine status is exalted because the work discursively endorses his role as a divine spokesman when his magical prowess is represented as foreknowledge. All of Merlin's magical acts are exercised with the singular intent of maintaining Arthur's life, kingship and kingdom, which are the symbolic essence of chivalry and masculinity in Malory's cultural and moral universe. This in and of itself confirms his role as a keeper and guardian of the realm of masculine homosocial traditions and their attendant courtly ideals. However, whether he is validated as a member of that realm, or is relegated to the role of an outsider, turns on his ability to either manifest a masculine presence, or not.

*Merlin as the "Other"*

Although Merlin's magical prowess benefits Arthur's chivalric enterprise the text discursively marks him as intrinsically deviant, a social anomaly whose masculine identity is denied by the community. He is largely excluded from the Arthurian male homosocial bonding mechanism. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the Round Table Fellowship is the center of the Arthurian homosocial realm and the Round Table knights are the supreme exemplars of the highest masculine ideal. Among several virtues associated with a good knight, Tucker suggests that "martial prowess" is "the first quality demanded of a knight, and Malory gives it particular prominence in his stories and comments" (65).<sup>6</sup> In their attempt to gain "worship,"<sup>7</sup> Round Table knights are constantly searching for adventures, jousts, and tournaments. In this regard, military activities and physical valor are the primary strategies and requirements for male homosocial bonding. Unfortunately, Merlin is short of martial valor and neither his intellectual prowess nor his supernatural gifts earn him "worship" or elevate his social standing. Even though he helps Arthur defeat the northern rebels by providing military strategy and magical ruse, his peers are

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<sup>6</sup> When "chivalry" is used to refer to an ideal of knighthood, Maurice Keen notes that prowess, loyalty, largesse (generosity), courtesy, and franchise (the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue) have been regarded as classic virtues of a good knight and the association of these qualities with chivalry has been established as early as in Chrétien de Troyes's romances (c.1160-90). See Keen 2.

<sup>7</sup> Tucker suggests that "worship" in Malory could mean "deeds of valor," but has connotations of glory and honor. It also implies "nobility," as the term "worship" or "worshipful" is never applied to common people. Tucker 65-67. On the other hand, P. J. C. Field suggests that "worship" means "honor" in two senses: noble idealism of mind and high reputation. See Field 49.

largely silent about his feats. Read in light of Kimmel's theory that masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment, Merlin's masculinity is not validated because his peers do not give him credit for his contributions.

The silence about Merlin's achievements might indicate a gender tension between Merlin and the knights. Giving that Merlin can command the world with his intellectual and discursive power, put beside his supernatural abilities, the knights' military and physical prowess would amount to very little. What would have been very evident to them is that Merlin is someone who evidences powers far beyond their ken, and if he is not quite a "man," according to their purview, he is certainly someone whose mystical abilities are capable of calling the significance of their masculinity into question. In addition, Merlin is the architect and insurer of Arthur's most fundamental and necessary power of rulership, thus the masculinity of the knights might well have seemed diminished by virtue of Merlin's questionable yet superior status. On the other hand, the knights' indifference toward Merlin's feats could suggest their inability to comprehend Merlin's intellectual and mystical powers. In this regard, the silence of the knights may not necessarily have anything to do with either validating or not validating Merlin's masculinity, but may rather be an implicit articulation of their fear or jealousy of the absolute unknown he represents.

That Merlin is positioned as external to the Arthurian male homosocial mechanism is further highlighted in his portrayal as a man lacking of high birth and in good looks, which are two key requirements in the culture of male homosocial bonding in the Arthurian realm. "Worshipful" knights such as Launcelot, Gareth, and Tor are men of noble lineage and refined in physical appearance.<sup>8</sup> Merlin, by contrast, is a "deuyls son" (devil's son, IV.1, IV.13). There are no detailed descriptions of Merlin's body or face in the text, nevertheless, it can be inferred that he is far from good-looking, strong, or big, all of which are components of ideal masculinity evidenced in Malory's portrayal of worthy knights such as Launcelot and Gareth. Except for one instance that tells how he changes his shape into the likeness of a fourteen-year-old child (I.20), Merlin is often referred to or appears as an old man (I.20), a beggar (I.1), and a poor man (I.3).<sup>9</sup> On one occasion, he is portrayed as a "chorle" (churl),<sup>10</sup> clothed in black sheep skins, big boots and a russet gown with a bow, arrows and wild geese in his hands (I.17). Notably, Merlin's physical strangeness might signify his presumed asexual nature. Based on these depictions, Merlin's physical appearance is in direct contrast to the valorous knightly images that populate Malory's lifeworld. His lack of a fine physical appearance, together with his demonic origin, reinforces Merlin's deficiency in terms of normative masculinity and highlights the fact that he does not "fit in" according to the cultural logic of the Arthurian gender system.

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<sup>8</sup> For the depictions of Launcelot's, Gareth's, and Tor's physical appearance, see VI.8; XII.4; III.1; VII.1.

<sup>9</sup> In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, however, Merlin is initially depicted as a lad. See Geoffrey of Monmouth 167.

<sup>10</sup> "Churl" can mean peasant or countryman. The term usually connotes contempt or disparagement. See Oxford English Dictionary, Second edition 1989.

Throughout the work, Merlin's magical gift is assumed to derive from an evil paternal inheritance—the “deuyls crafte” (devil's craft) as it is referred to by a knight (III.14). King Lot and his allies also ridicule Merlin's supernatural prowess by calling him a “wytche” (witch, I.8), a “dreme reder” (dream reader, I.9), and a “fayter” (faieter, meaning deceiver or impostor, II.10). Although the mocking of Merlin might be projected as mere bias (Lot being Arthur's major rival), it nevertheless marks Merlin as an anomaly and groups him with the marginalized. His diabolic birth and magical prowess articulate his “otherness” which positions him externally to the Arthurian male homosocial realm.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Merlin's prophetic ability, a gift which endorses his supremacy as supernatural agent who channels knowledge between the secular and the divine realms, does not help him to bond with other men. Most of the Arthurian knights find no interest in his political prophecies. At various times, Merlin warns Arthur of his doom (I.20; II.11), warns of Launcelot and Guenever's adultery (III.1), and cautions Arthur to keep his scabbard safe (II.11; IV.1),<sup>12</sup> yet Arthur pays little attention to Merlin's “uncomfortable predictions,” a term coined by Rachel Kapelle to refer to Merlin's prophecies (78). Perhaps, as noted by Kapelle, Merlin's foreknowledge is an unwelcome intrusion into the Arthurian community in that “he represented a voice that they did not always wish to hear” (78). The story of Arthur's massacre of infants born on May-day aptly illustrates Merlin's poor peer relations because of his foreknowledge. As recounted, Merlin discloses Mordred's date of birth (May-day) to Arthur.<sup>13</sup> The information leads to Arthur's mass murder of many children born that day in an attempt to eliminate his future nemesis.<sup>14</sup> Arthur's selfish act reproduces precisely King Herod's slaughter of the holy innocents as described in the Gospel of Matthew, in his mad attempt to intervene and kill his perceived future rival, Jesus Christ (Matthew 2: 16-18). Merlin, however, does not comment on or criticize Arthur's misconduct. Considering that Merlin is portrayed in the text as a judge of knightly morality (for instance, I.17; III.12-15),<sup>15</sup> his silence implies that he might be Arthur's accomplice in this crime. Reinforcing this interpretation, many barons who lose their infants are very displeased and “many put the wyte on Merlyn more than on Arthur”

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<sup>11</sup> Some critics suggest that to stress Merlin's significance as Britain's political prophet and kingmaker, Malory omits Merlin's birth and greatly decreases the element of magic in his portrayal of Merlin. See Spivack 18; Harding 146; Parker 70. Caxton, on the other hand, hardly mentions Merlin in his preface to *Le Morte Darthur*. The only time he speaks about Merlin is to refer to “how Merlyn was assotted,” implying Merlin's fatal romance with Nimue, in his brief introduction of Book Four.

<sup>12</sup> The scabbard can prevent anyone who carries it from bleeding if wounded. Merlin foresees that Morgan will steal it and attempt to kill Arthur.

<sup>13</sup> Mordred is Arthur's illegitimate son. Arthur begets Mordred in his illicit affair with his half sister Margawse. Merlin predicts that Arthur will die at the hands of Mordred.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur orders all the children born on May-day to be put in a ship and left in the open sea. All of them but Mordred die in a shipwreck. Mordred is saved by a man who takes care of him and brings him to Arthur's court when he reaches fourteen years old (I.27).

<sup>15</sup> Merlin once denounces Arthur's brutal slaughter of King Lot's men in battle, saying to him that God is angry with him because of his excessive killing (I.17). In another incident, Merlin scolds Pellinor for not providing succor to a lady and reveals that the lady is in fact Pellinor's daughter. Merlin prophesizes that because of his misconduct, Pellinor is to be abandoned by his most trusted friend when he is in the greatest need (III.12-15).

(many place the wite [blame] on Merlin more than on Arthur, I.27).<sup>16</sup> Viewed through the lens of Kimmel's concept that masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment, Merlin's reputation and masculine honor is blackened as the barons hold him responsible for the crime, which also goes a long way toward confirming Merlin's supposedly demonic roots.

At another time, Merlin informs Arthur of his future entombment underground, then asks Arthur: "had ye leuer than al your lands to haue me ageyne" (had you rather than all your lands to have me again, IV.1). Merlin seems to be soliciting sympathy from Arthur, a decidedly non-masculine gesture. Arthur responds simply with carelessness: "syn ye knowe of your aduventure, puruey for hit and put away by your craftes that mysauenture" (since you know of your adventure, prepare for it, and put away by your crafts that misadventure, IV.1). The indifference implicit in Arthur's remarks further supports my argument that Merlin is projected as an anomaly who is positioned as external to the Arthurian male homosocial bonding system. Once he is imprisoned in a cave by Nimue, Merlin is quickly forgotten by his peers and even by King Arthur himself.

I have thus far examined Merlin's otherness in the contexts of issues such as visual strangeness, supernatural abilities, and demonology. Arthur's entire saga represents a transition from the ancient pagan practices of the past, and the newly arrived Christian imperatives of Arthur's court. In this way, Merlin is the axial figure who symbolizes that transition, since his role delivers Arthur out of the pagan dangers of the past, and ushers him into his role as a Christian king, one who heralds the Grail quest undertaken by the Round Table Knights. However, as the narrative progresses, Merlin is marginalized, revealing a contradictory portrayal of Merlin. Initially he serves as an absolute necessity in his role as Arthur's mentor, savior, and supporter, yet his eventual apparent "othering" by Arthur, signifies that for all of his help and his many favors given, he has fallen to the status of a "necessary evil," a "corrupt" if essential advisor who has worn out his welcome.

#### *Merlin's Validation Complex*

Merlin is unable to bond with the Arthurian men by means of superior intellect and magical prowess. Together with his demonic origin, inferior physical appearance, Merlin's magical prowess is another essential factor that contributes to his exclusion from the Arthurian male homosocial bonding. Viewed in light of male homosocial theories that women are often employed as conduits of male homosocial bonding, Merlin's wooing of Nimue can be read as his attempt to prove his manliness and to bond with the Arthurian men. Simply put, Merlin is compelled to validate his manhood through heterosexual activities with Nimue, whose high social ranking would have helped elevate Merlin's ranking in the male homosocial realm if he had succeeded in his amorous pursuit.

In Malory, women are conventionally treated as markers of manhood (Armstrong 17, 36-37). Merlin says to Arthur once that "a man of your bounte and noblesse shold not be

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<sup>16</sup> It is also a recognized sociological phenomenon that groups attribute blame to "outsiders" to maintain group cohesion.

without a wyf" (a man of your bounty and noblesse should not be without a wife, III.1). At one point a damsel laments Lancelot's bachelorhood, saying "[S]yre knyghte, me thynketh ye lacke, ye that are a knyghte wyueles, that ye wyl not loue some mayden or genntylwoman...and that is grete pyte" (Sir knight, me think you lack, you that are a knight wifeless, that you will not love some maiden or gentlewoman...and that is great pity, VI.10). In the Arthurian community, Launcelot and Tristram's respective amorous relations with Guenever and Isoud, for example, facilitate their bonding with other Arthurian men: in particular, Launcelot with King Arthur and Tristram with Palomides.<sup>17</sup> Further, their potency, revealed through their respective sexual activity with Guenever and Isoud, also allows them to validate their manliness.<sup>18</sup> As if to validate his manhood to other men, Merlin leaves Arthur's chivalric enterprise for Nimue, the highest ranking lady in the realm of magic. Recalling Merlin's aforementioned revelation of his future imprisonment in a cave to Arthur, Merlin's pursuit of Nimue clearly establishes that he is looking to regain his former stature in Arthur's eyes by telling him about his courting of a "dangerous" woman, one of the oldest forms of homosocial bonding known to men. Unfortunately, Merlin's romance with Nimue reveals his debased, lecherous self—a man lacking in sexual self-control. Worse, impelled by his desire for Nimue, Merlin transgresses his role as the positive magician by abusing his magical knowledge.

The text tells that Merlin is infatuated with Nimue, he "wold lete haue her no rest, but alweyes he wold be with her" (would let have her no rest, but always he would be with her, IV.1). Overruled by his passion for Nimue, Merlin "wold haue had her pryuely away by his subtile craftes" (would have had her privily [secretly] away by his subtle crafts, IV.1). Notably, Merlin's passion for Nimue is dictated purely by sexual desire rather than by the true love that Launcelot feels for Guenever.<sup>19</sup> Nimue herself tolerates Merlin's harassment only because she wants to learn his magical arts. To protect her sexual honor and virginity, she tactically makes Merlin swear that he will never use magic as a means to overcome her. Taking advantage of Merlin's folly, Nimue learns much secret knowledge of his magic during their trips together. Finally weary of Merlin's constant sexual advances, Nimue decides to get rid of him (IV.1). One day when Merlin shows her a secret underground cave, Nimue tricks him into going inside, then with her magic, blocks the entrance and imprisons Merlin forever. Merlin's death can be read as a symbol of the neutralizing of his magical prowess and as a metaphor for his emasculation,

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<sup>17</sup> The exchange of Guenever between Arthur and Launcelot cements the bonds between them and benefits the collective wellbeing of the Round Table Fellowship. Through the transaction of his queen to Launcelot, Arthur is able to keep Launcelot's service, and through Launcelot's valorous deeds Arthur's eminence and that of the Round Table Fellowship is elevated. Launcelot, at his end of the bargain, is able to establish superior status by being identified as the queen's lover. See also, Armstrong 193. The bonding between Tristram and Palomides is manifested in their rivalries and is enacted through their shared desire for Isoud (See Book X, chapter 86, for instance).

<sup>18</sup> Sexual virility is universally regarded as a key component of ideal masculinity. See Gilmore 223; Bullough 41.

<sup>19</sup> The depiction of Merlin's carnality partially coincides with the love Malory so condemned in his contemporaries, that "nowadays men can not loue seuen nyghte, but they must haue alle their desyres" (nowadays men cannot love seven night but they must have all their desire, XVIII.25).

because his magical prowess is the most direct, and the only real signifier of his masculinity, as indicated in the dichotomy of positive masculine magic and malevolent feminine magic framing his demise at the hands of Nimue. His attempt at sexual domination of Nimue is a dual failure of masculinity: he fails to dominate her sexually, and he is symbolically castrated by being trapped inside the cave, which is a classical feminine space in Western (Freudian) symbolism. Nimue delivers Merlin back to the womb, yet not in the fashion he desires, a trope on Merlin's libidinal foolishness, further suggesting that he had not what it takes to master either the sacred feminine wisdom that Nimue embodies, or her female sexual desire.

In this story, Merlin's desire impels him to abuse magic: he first tries to use his magic to persuade Nimue to have sex with him, and then he voluntarily transfers magical knowledge to her in the hope that this will convince her to go to bed with him. Merlin's action speaks for his transgression because as the paragon of the positive magician, Merlin should only use his magic to support Arthur and his community, rather than to satisfy personal lust. Also, magic used to support Arthurian society is gendered as masculine, while magic used to harm the Arthurian community or satisfy personal lust is gendered as feminine. As evil sorceresses usually resort to magic for sexual purposes, by using his magical knowledge as currency to buy Nimue's virginity, Merlin is metaphorically feminized. He is no different from evil and lustful sorceresses such as Morgan le Fay, who utilizes magic to imprison Launcelot in an attempt to sleep with him (VI.3). Merlin's desire for Nimue blinds him to his own self-destructiveness, an absolutely unforgivable thing for one gifted in his magical way. Although Merlin predicted his fateful falling under her spell to Arthur well in advance of his imprisonment in the cave, he nevertheless allows himself to be overruled by irrationality, which has long been equated with the feminine. Merlin's desperate and pathetic pursuit of Nimue bespeaks his failure to stand to in his (masculine) authority as a wizard.

Merlin fails to bond with Arthurian men through his relations with Nimue. He also fails to configure his masculinity through Nimue. Worse, his unsuccessful sexual advances towards Nimue invite suspicion about his sexual potency, a key attribute of ideal masculinity in Malory. Viewed through Kimmel's and Flood's concepts of male homosociality, Merlin's tragic end illustrates a paradoxical functioning of male homosocial bonding in Malory. Male homosociality demands Merlin prove his manhood to other men by means of women. Yet it also requires Merlin to prioritize his duty to Arthur and the community over his desire for Nimue. When Merlin deserts "his divinely ordained quest of the kingdom's welfare for the sake of self-gratification" (Goodrich 102), he is ultimately punished by "shameful death" (I.20), a metaphor for emasculation, which refers to a man dying at the hands of a woman in Malory. This taint on Merlin's manhood is highlighted by the contrast between his death and Arthur's "worshipful death" at the hands of men on the battleground (I.20).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Merlin once warns Arthur that because of his incest with Margawse, God will punish him to die at the

Merlin's ignoble death articulates a contradictory aspect of male homosocial bonding in Malory which is distinguished by an incompatibility between heterosexual desire and homosocial allegiance and obligations. How does this problematic concept of homosocial manhood relate to the gender ideology of Western culture? The dominant Western gender ideology is primarily characterized by the conceptual binaries of man/woman and masculine/feminine (Song 12; Cixous and Kuhn 44). Viewing women as markers of manhood and conduits of male-male relations, Kimmel's and Flood's concepts of homosocial manhood highlight these rigid binaries, emphasizing heterosexual relations as crucial sites for cultural construction of masculinity and masculine identity in the West. Female sexuality is a key factor in the paradoxical functioning of male homosocial bonding as embodied in Merlin's tragedy. Merlin's death is a result of his desire for Nimue. Female sexuality, however destructive a role it may be given, nevertheless proves the centrality of heterosexuality in the construction of normative masculinity in Malory. Problematic as it is, the homosocial paradox, as demonstrated in Merlin's romantic misery and wretched end, discursively reinforces the binary oppositions of man/women and masculine/feminine as fundamental characteristics of Western gender ideology. In addition, in his relations with Nimue, Merlin's individual failing, in which his magic plays a crucial role, confirms that masculinity is also a heterosexual enactment. Nimue's rejections of Merlin's sexual advances and her trapping him underground bespeak her judgment on and denial of Merlin's masculinity.

As Sue E. Holbrook points out, after Merlin's entombment, Nimue replaces Merlin and carries on in his role as Arthur's advisor and guardian (771). She saves Arthur from the treacherous Morgan le Fay (IV.9-10, 16) and the lustful sorceress, the Lady of Annwre (IX.16). She also provides aid to Arthur's knights such as Pellinor (III.5, 12-15). More significantly, as Holbrook suggests, she is depicted as Sir Pelleas's devoted and loving wife (771), so that her virtue and chastity form a strong contrast to Merlin's lechery. The work thus highlights virtue and chastity as important attributes expected of a positive magician. Merlin's romantic misery exposes his failure to hold himself to the high standard required. On the other hand, by depicting Nimue as the new guardian of the Arthurian community, Malory provides another representation of femininity. In addition to the archetypal portrayals of Arthurian females as evil, lustful sorceresses or weak, distressed damsels, femininity is also a supportive and nurturing force in the male homosocial realm. After all, it is Nimue and other ladies who take the dying Arthur to the Isle of Avalon and give Arthur's men hope of the return of the king.<sup>21</sup> The shift of gender roles between Merlin and Nimue then raises the following questions: what is the cultural significance in terms of gender ideology in Nimue's outwitting and displacing Merlin as

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hands of his bastard son Mordred on the battlefield. Merlin then comforts Arthur that at least his death will be a worshipful death, whereas his own will be a shameful one.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur is fatally injured in his battle with Mordred. Witnessed by Sir Bedevere, Arthur is taken to Avalon (the legendary magical realm) by Nimue, Morgan, the Queen of Northgalis, and the Queen of the Waste Lands to have his wounds healed. But Arthur's death is soon confirmed when his tomb is discovered in a chapel (XXI.5-6).

the new guardian of the Arthurian community by having him imprisoned in a cave? Does it reflect certain anxieties about gender identities that may have been present during the publication period of *Le Morte D'Arthur*? In Merlin's portrayal as initially a seemingly asexual man, as Arthur's advisor and court magician, then as someone of poor peer relations, a lecherous man, and a romantic loser, what is really at stake in this gender tension between Merlin, the knights, and Nimue?

In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, heteronormativity is one of the key aspects that define masculine identity (Armstrong 36-7). In addition, masculinity is regulated by homophobia, which is clearly illustrated in Launcelot's comic encounter with Sir Belleus, in which the fear of male-male sexual desire or physical intimacy is addressed. In this instance, Launcelot finds a pavilion in a forest and, tired from traveling, he quickly falls asleep in it. Sir Belleus, the owner of the pavilion, arrives shortly afterwards, and in the darkness, he mistakes Launcelot for his paramour. Lying down next to Launcelot, he "toke hym in his armes and beganne to kysse hym" (took him in his arms and began to kiss him, VI.5). Launcelot leaps to his feet and runs outside the minute he feels "a rough berd kyssyng hym" (a rough beard kissing him).<sup>22</sup> Sir Belleus, realizing that he is about to have sex with a man, promptly follows behind with his sword in hand. Not knowing each other's identity and thinking that each bears hostile intent to the other, they start fighting. As a result, Launcelot inflicts a severe wound on Sir Belleus. The fighting scene is nevertheless eroticized—without the protection of armor, the knightly body is permeable and invites penetration. Even though Launcelot and Sir Belleus eventually find out it is a misunderstanding, this amusing incident presents homosexuality or homoeroticism as a transgression in terms of proper manly conduct, and likewise damaging to masculinity.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Armstrong comments on Launcelot's unintended erotic acts with Sir Belleus, "Lancelot's immediate and violent reaction reflects an awareness of the potential danger of homosexual rumor and reputation that overshadows such a community of males" (94). Homophobia as a key aspect of male homosociality in Malory is clearly manifested. This finding is in line with conventional views proposed by critics such as John Boswell (1980), James A. Brundage (1987), and David F. Greenberg (1988) who suggest that Western culture has become more and more homophobic since the late Middle Age (Mieszkowski 21-49). Malory's conception of homosocial manhood as represented in *Le Morte D'Arthur* stands for the hegemonic definition of masculinity in his era, given his aristocratic background and "noble and dyuers gentylnen of thys royaume of England" (noble and diverse gentlemen of this realm of England) as his

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<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly notes that the beard "serves as an unambiguous sign of sexual *sameness*. It reveals the two knights' 'mistake' at the same time that it covers up the possibility that Lancelot might have followed through with his lovemaking." See Kelly 60.

<sup>23</sup> Although there is an instance of Launcelot sharing a bed with Sir Kay (VI.11), it is presented as an arrangement made by the host instead of an invitation from Launcelot to Kay or vice versa. Armstrong, however, reads it as an acceptable and nonthreatening act, suggesting that Launcelot and Kay's lodging together reinforces the heterosexual gender binary in the text, "with those more 'preux' and valiant knights occupying a masculine position in opposition to those less martially adept knights occupy a more subservient, 'feminine' role." See Armstrong 91.

projected readers. In this regard, Merlin gives negative confirmation of the requirements of male homosocial bonding. To ease the buried anxiety about homosexuality which might have been provoked by Merlin's seemingly asexual nature, Merlin is feminized as someone with poor peer relations, who, in an attempt to validate his masculine status, foolishly seduces Nimue and ultimately dies a shameful death at her hands. In staging this outcome, Malory establishes and implicitly reinforces heteronormativity as a crucial definition of masculinity, which is regulated by homophobia. On the other hand, the gender tension between Merlin, the knights, and Nimue, indicative of a buried anxiety about homosexuality, further supports and reinforces Kimmel's observation that homophobia is a central organizing principle in the Western definition of manhood (131). Thus does this cycle of tales transmit a prescriptive set of behaviors and role models structured around the tensions between heteronormativity, homosocial bonding, homosexuality and homophobia. The text's compelling rhetorical gesture is to provide an exciting and complex challenge to readers to decode these paradigms and contradictions according to the received notions of masculinity and homosocial desire that informed the cultural logic of chivalry and knightly virtue during Malory's day.

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