SMOTHERING MOTHERS AND CORPSE-LIKE SONS: T.H. WHITE'S *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING*, FREUD, AND QUEER CODING

Marilyn Mannino
(University of Exeter)
mm1195@exeter.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4017-6428

ABSTRACT: T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* is one of the most important modern adaptations of Arthurian legend when looking at how these villains have been characterised in modernity. Morgause is Arthur's half sister and mother of his only son, and this book cements her as a villain in the Arthurian corpus. Mordred, her son fathered by her brother, is the other major villain in this story. White's novel depicts Morgause as an abusive mother, using the language of consumption and vampirism to show how she haunts her son's psyche after her death. This unhealthy dynamic is also used to explain Mordred's queerness in the novel. Using Freudian analysis, one can understand further how interconnected these villainous characters are, and how Morgause's toxic motherly love has made her son Mordred into a villain.

KEYWORDS: Mordred, Morgause, queer, mothers, psychoanalysis.

MADRES SOFOCANTES E HIJOS CADAVÉRICOS: *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING* DE T.H. WHITE, FREUD Y 'QUEER CODING'

RESUMEN: *The Once and Future King* [*El Rey que fue y será*] de T. H. White es una de las adaptaciones más importantes de la leyenda de Arturo, considerando cómo se ha caracterizado a los villanos de la leyenda en tiempos modernos. Morgause es la medio hermana del Rey Arturo, y la madre de su único hijo. Esta novela la confirma como villana en el corpus de los escritos artúricos. Mordred, el hijo de Morgause engengrado por su hermano, es el otro gran villano de la historia. El libro de White representa a Morgause como una madre abusiva, usando el lenguaje del vampirismo para ilustrar cómo acecha la psique de su hijo incluso después de su muerte. Esta dinámica enfermiza también se utiliza para explicar la extrañeza o 'queerness' de Mordred en la novela. Usando el análisis freudiano, se puede entender la interconexión entre estos villanos, y cómo la maternidad tóxica de Morgause convierte a su hijo Mordred en un villano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Mordred, Morgause, queer, madres, psicoanálisis.

INTRODUCTION

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* ranks alongside Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (printed in 1485 by William Caxton) as a foundational Arthurian text revisited by modern audiences and artists seeking to create their own adaptations. White's novel was first published between 1938 and 1940 as a series of short novels, then collected into one volume in 1958. His depiction of Morgause, the mother of King Arthur's bastard son Mordred, changed how she was seen in future works and adaptations. With how White characterises Mordred and Morgause, understanding Morgause is key to understanding his depiction of Mordred. This Mordred is a figure so pale he is near albino, persistently dressed as a fop or as his mother.

Using queer theory and Freudian readings of mother-son dynamics, this article will examine how T.H. White depicts Mordred and Morgause as interwoven villainous characters.

While modern adaptations of Arthurian stories are undoubtedly rooted in the past, White reinterprets Mordred as a character in a way that resonates with his modern audience. There are also «queer proximities and contingencies that permit us to touch the medieval past in particular ways» (Raskolnikov, 2022: 236). In all the medieval iterations of Mordred, too, there is a way to read queerness into the narrative arc: he is quite literally the end of the bloodline, which is a worry still to some parents of queer children in modernity. Questions of his fertility and anxieties about deviant desires give medieval iterations of Mordred further queer undertones. As for Morgause, she often becomes collated into the same character as Morgan le Fay, another sister to her and Arthur. Morgan is explicitly antagonistic in medieval literature, while Morgause never is. Whether this be cutting down a large cast in modern adaptations or vilifying a maternal figure, it becomes part of Morgause's legacy into modern adaptations.

SCHOLARSHIP ON WHITE'S SOURCES AND ON HIS OWN LIFE

Scholarship has done work to trace White's sources, and it seems he «saw Malory's Arthurian material as a single, unified, comprehensive tragedy made up of three interconnected strands» but «White made little or no use of Malory's own sources in writing [*The Once and Future King*]» (Sprague, 2007: 49, 60). There is not a concrete formula for how a writer is expected to craft a story, but for a novel with such obvious and overt inspiration as a retelling it does seem a little surprising that the author would not consult a variety of sources in his writing process. Additionally, «White does not appear to have availed himself of much contemporary Arthurian scholarship» and relied heavily on his own imagination with this novel (61).

White's own biography has been used frequently in what writings I have found about his work. While it is impossible to wholly assign his own lived experience as the reason why he wrote something, it would have subliminally informed his work. Many pieces rely on Freudian and psychoanalytical readings to some degree to interrogate this text and come back to the facts that White's own mother was abusive and that he was deeply closeted.

Much scholarship on this novel is keen to draw connections between White's life and the novel, some of which come from his own diaries and notes. There is surviving documentation that «White himself underwent psychoanalysis in an attempt to "cure" his homosexuality, an experience which left him with some knowledge of Freudian methodology and which probably colored his perspective on women, particularly his mother» (Worthington, 2002: 100). He wrote in his diary after his mother died that «she managed to bitch up my loving women» (100). From his personal writings, it is clear that he based Morgause off his own mother (Sprague, 2007: 96). As Thompson's article detailing the history of Morgause as a character notes, «nowhere in medieval literature does one find Morgause among the villains» (Thompson, 1993: 1). White set the precedent for Morgause as a villainous and unredeemable character.

For better or worse, if one wants to read White's Mordred, one must also read his Morgause, since they are so entangled. She is a character on the fringes of medieval Arthurian literature, often unnamed. In White's one source, Sir Thomas Malory, she is «defined as three things: a queen, a mother and sexually active» (Hildebrand, 2018: 27). But since "T. H. White's text is doubtful of motherly love in general», and Morgause's own personality subsumes Mordred, that blend between the two of them becomes part of Mordred's own character, especially in the backend of the novel (35). There is no question she was a poor parent and

guardian to her five sons, with the effects of that abuse colouring their lives as recounted in the novel. This confusion of how «she treats her children like lovers, sustaining herself on their affection … is sometimes portrayed as crossing the boundary of maternal love into sexual» (36). The novel says that it was harder for Mordred than his brothers, not just due to his parentage, but since he was alone with Morgause, focusing her attention wholly on him. That goes some way to explaining why he turns out far worse and is far more tormented than his brothers.

While *The Once and Future King* is rooted in an imagined medieval setting, it differs from the imagined past of medieval romance by becoming medievalist instead, with the contemporary political commentary thoroughly woven through the text. In Carolyne Larrington's important work about the enchantresses of chivalric romance, she writes that,

> modern versions of Morgause are both substantially shaped by a Freudian understanding of mother-son relations, and by a recognition that women's limited access to power leads them to seek it in other ways, through psychological manipulation, and, in the case of White's queen, through a continual aggrieved recollection of ancient injuries done to the house of Cornwall which she parades before her sons. (Larrington, 2006: 181)

This complicated and unpleasant dynamic between mother and son is key to understanding their dynamic. That the author was familiar with Freud and imposed Freudian theory onto his own life can be used to reinforce these readings, while the body of the text itself suggests a Freudian reading even without this background.

MORDRED'S DESCRIPTION ALONGSIDE QUEER CODING, SIGMUND FREUD, AND QUEER THEORY

'Queer coding' is a term coined by film studies to describe images, signals, and body language used to denote when a character is queer. This practice was used more often after the Motion Picture Production Code, better known as the Hays Code, had been put into effect. In response to the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, the Supreme Court ruled that «all levels of government [could] censor or ban films at will» (Sanders, 2024: np). Hollywood was a group of creatives and existed not just to create but to make money; this is why they hoped «to stave off outside censorship». In 1922, Will H. Hays, who was «a noted Indiana conservative», headed up the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America office to make a code of censorship made for Hollywood by Hollywood (Sanders). They developed what became known as a «Code of Purity» which «prohibited depictions of certain specific sexual and violent acts, and listed many other acts about which filmmakers were cautioned to "exercise extreme care"» (Sanders, 2024: n.p.). Certain vices or crimes could only be portrayed if they were appropriately punished by the time the credits rolled.

While there was doubtless some good intent behind this, especially since it directly followed the notorious *The Birth of a Nation*, the code led to what could be shown in films being intensely limited. Interracial kisses were prohibited in film and television, with the 1968 episode of *Star Trek* «Plato's Stepchildren» being popularly known as containing the first interracial kiss on American television. Queerness was similarly something that could not be shown in cinema due to the morality stipulations, and it also had to be suitably punished by the end of the film. In the actual body of the Code itself, «Clause six of section 2 on "Sex" states that "sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden"» with queerness being considered as part of that «perversion» (Lugowski, 1999: 9). All of this provides a reason why queer romance was not shown explicitly in film, with filmmakers falling back on queer coding if they wished to show queerness on screen.

Beginning with White, Mordred became subject to the queer coding like many modern villains. Mordred has no children and is defined as the shameful end to his bloodline. Mordred does not and cannot participate in the «intensely heteronormative demands placed upon the nobility to produce a male heir» partly because he is born of incest so any children will be from a twisted line like him (Raskolnikov, 2022: 243). He is also the youngest of five brothers, so he and any potential sons are extremely unlikely to inherit. A fifth son who is related to the king and a prince in his own right is perfect for political matches, but even Sir Thomas Malory doesn't include Mordred when the other brothers are married off at the end of «The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney».

Mordred is inherently marked as queer through this non-participation in expected heteronormative structures to produce his own heir. His own existence is queer and disruptive since a child born through incest disrupts those familial bonds. This lack of female romantic partners, no continuation of the bloodline, and inherent queerness in his person, suggests there is the possibility for queerness in other aspects for the character.

The text of *The Once and Future King* withholds Mordred's physical presence on the page for as long as it can manage. He is spoken about on more than one occasion before he is directly described. When discussing Mordred and his brothers, Arthur says, «The real matter with them is Morgause, their mother. She brought them up with so little love or security that they find it difficult to understand warm-hearted people» (White, 1987: 332). The family dynamic which Mordred originates from becomes increasingly detailed over the course of the novel. Mordred and his brothers all orbit around their mother, who are devoted to her despite her raising them in an abusive environment. Arthur adds that, «It must have hurt her worst of all when Mordred came [to court] … Women are always fondest of their last babies» (427). He centres Morgause in this discussion of Mordred's home life, as she has centred herself. Lancelot remarks that, «so far as I can learn, she was never particularly fond of any of them. If she was hurt by their coming to court, it was only because she hated you» (427). Lancelot, too, centres Morgause, correctly pointing to the tangled emotions Morgause has about her sons. She does not love them, but she loves the status being a mother to five princes gives her. She hates her brother and does not want her sons to prefer Arthur to her. Arthur says, «Lancelot, if you had only known my sister — if you had only known the Orkney clan at home. They are mad on their family» (428). The clannishness of the Orkney brothers has long been remarked upon in scholarship. Emerson Storm Fillman Richards, in his article about contemporary Anglo-Irish relations to White, writes of the racism and specific language embedded in how he writes about various Celtic and Gaelic identities, including that of the Orkney brothers (Richards 2017). It all adds into reading something dangerous into those family dynamics, with the tendency for blood feud and family cleaving together. Those insular family dynamics present a danger of incest due to the unhealthy closeness, which is a thread that continues over the course of the novel when examining the dynamic between Morgause and her sons.

When Mordred finally appears on page, the text provides a detailed physical description:

> He was a thin wisp of a fellow, so fair-haired that he was almost albino: and his bright eyes are so blue, so palely azure in their fitted depths, that you could not see into them. He was clean-shaven. It seemed that there was no part of him which you could catch hold of, neither his hair, nor his eyes, nor his whiskers. Even the colour had been washed out of him, it seemed, so as to leave no handle. Only, in the skeletal, pink face, the brilliant eyes had crow's feet round them — a twinkle which you could assume to be of humour, if he liked, or else of irony, or merely of screwing up those sky-blue pupils so as to look far and deep. He walked with an upright carriage, both ingratiating and defiant — but one shoulder was higher than the other. He had

> been born slightly crooked — a clumsy delivery by the midwife — like Richard III. (White, 1987: 431)

The lack of colour in his person provides a contrast to whiteness traditionally representing purity. The colours of Mordred being 'washed out of him' implies he has lost whatever colour and personality he once had. The colour white here is a lack of self rather than purity. The eyes, often seen as deeply representative of a person, retain what little character and colour is left in the man, suggesting that Morgause has nurtured him into the twisted incestuous character he is here, wiping clean whatever his personality would have been if left to nature. This cleansing of the self by Morgause will fully 'come home to roost' after her death.

After his first appearance, Mordred is described further over the course of the novel. Over and again, the text notes how Mordred dresses, in one instance saying,

> as for Mordred's toes, their chains were secured to a belt round his waist. The surcoats, which had originally served as covering to armour, were long behind and high in front. You could hardly walk for fear of tripping over your sleeves … [and gentlemen] showed their legs to an equally startling extent. (478)

This focus on fashion to the point of extravagance paints him as a character focused on that outward appearance. If the clothes make the man, Mordred here puts forward an expensive and impractical exterior. His clothing here is inspired by medieval fashion touched by medievalist conceptions, so the reader must remember that «while sartorial performativity is at issue, so is the employment of apparel or accessory as symbol, image, motif, or metaphor» (Kuhn, 2007: 1-2). The text turns the number of accessories he wears into its own motif, speaking time and again of how outlandish his dress is. That Mordred is wearing the story's equivalent of runway fashion as daily wear illustrates a sense of performances, since the cutting edge of Camelot's fashion is overly extravagant.

On quite a fundamental level, 'queer' just means 'non-normative'. Lacan writes of things being named and identified in relation to the Other, linking the term 'queer' to how «queer continually names and performs a relation to something other than itself» (Phelan, 2015: 78). The term 'queer' itself is «collective, contingent, and multiple, rather than singular, absolute, or rooted in an individual psychic subject» (78). The multiplicity of narratives in this term allows it to encapsulate a hugely diverse number of moments. It allows for a lack of identification with heteronormativity and an identification with people, things, and moments that are queer (79).

But this does not fully explain why 'queer', especially when used as a neutral word to describe the LGBTQ+ community, is paired together and mentioned together with incest. That relates to the definition being non-normative and Freudian psychoanalysis. In his *Three Essays on Sexuality* which have had multiple translations since their first publication, Sigmund Freud documents and categorises different types of sexualities, including atypical (or queer) ones. He also defines various terms such as the 'sexual object' being the one who feels sexual attraction and 'sexual aim' being their object of desire (Freud, 1962: 1-2). 'Invert' is used for 'homosexual', since in his words the sexual aim is directed inward, to one's own gender, with the addendum that these individuals have «an early affective sexual impression … as a result of which the homosexual inclination developed» (5). While sometimes clinical to the point of sounding alien, Freud's essays do posit how sexuality and sexual attraction might begin at a very young age, centring that 'affective' impression that alters one's sexuality.

Freud is (in)famous for coining the Oedipal Complex and positing that the mother is the child's first sexual aim:

> it may be assumed that in the man the infantile memories of the mother's tenderness, as well as that of other females who cared for him as a child, energetically assist in directing his selection to the woman, while the early sexual intimidation experienced through the father and the attitude of rivalry existing between them deflects the boy from the same sex. (Freud, 1962: 86)

This does rely on many assumptions, including and not limited to two heterosexual parents being present, both parents being cisgender, and the mother taking on the sole role of caretaker for the child. One nonetheless can see how from these assumptions, Freud draws a general image of how the child can mistake a mother's love for sexual attraction. Freud does amend his writing by saying the mother would doubtless be horrified if she knew her baby was sexually attracted to her, but through her own actions, she «supplies the child with feelings which originate from her own sexual life; she pats it [the child], kisses it, and rocks it, plainly taking it as a substitute for a full valued sexual object» (80). This confusion between erotic and familial love can never be confirmed by real world babies, since babies do not talk. Freud's work has been hugely influential in theory, psychoanalysis, and pop culture. Do many women not complain that their boyfriends want them to treat him like their mother does and do all the cooking and cleaning and emotional labour, and do wives not complain they have an extra child that is their husband?

Freud writes of when a parent 'spoils' a child with too much affection. He writes that it «accelerates the sexual maturity … and makes [the child] unfit temporarily to renounce love or be satisfied with a smaller amount of love later in life» and writes that the parent who is too loving often passes their 'neuropathic' tendencies and dispositions onto their child (Freud, 1962: 80-81). Ultimately, he is writing of Nature versus Nurture, and of generational trauma. Freud then writes that «overcoming and rejection of these distinctly incestuous fantasies … [is] one of the most important as well as one of the most painful psychic accomplishments of puberty» as one «[breaks] away from the parental authority» (83). The child forms their own identity separate from the parent, and even if this confusion between familial and sexual love is typical, it is also typical and important to cast those confused incestuous feelings aside.

If one of the parents is absent for whatever reason, Freud writes that the sole parent will then «absorb all the love of the child, and in this way establishing the determinations for the sex of the person to be selected later as a sexual object; thus a permanent inversion is made possible» (Freud, 1962: 86). This lack of normative development leads to twisted feelings; the inversion here notes more than one type of queer (non-normative) sexuality since the inclination is not just towards one's own gender, but for the child to the parent. Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 thriller *Psycho* demonstrates this twisted, inward love that Bates has for his mother who abused him; he dresses as his mother to commit murder, and the film suggests there is something abnormal about his sexuality and that he cannot love a woman as he ought. More generally, the idea that a child, especially a boy, needs a father to not be coddled and to turn out strong builds on Freud's writing. With this line of thinking, the father prevents the mother from 'spoiling' the child with too much love, shaping their affections to be abnormal from the overindulgence. Freud writes that the «omnipotence of love nowhere perhaps shows itself stronger in this one of her aberrations. The highest and the lowest everywhere in sexuality hung most intimately together. ("From heaven through the world to hell"» (25). This seems to ignore that, under Freud's assumed parenting structure, women are more often present to discipline the child.

Freud's theories also work with the concept of the Death Drive, wherein everyone is driven to have sex for purpose of procreation and then they die. That destined end is more important than the journey of life. A lot of these ideas are taken for granted by society, with an

imagined Child often being used to prop up arguments, especially in the political sphere. As Lee Edelman writes in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, «What … would it signify not to be "fighting for the children"?» (Edelman, 2005: 3). This posits that queerness and the lack of assumed reproductive normalcy disrupts social norms. It shows fundamental antisocial behaviour, since in this argument, queer people do not exist to continue the propagation of the species. In this way, the different Death Drive that queer people instead possess «dismantles the subject from within … [and becomes] the negativity opposed to every form of social viability» (9). In this reading, the queer figure further contains an «appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory» that comes to oppose «history as linear narrative» and society itself, no longer «perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization» and instead causing society to continue towards a collapse (4). The doom of civilisation is a very villainous motive. As established, queer coding is often used for villains. This immoral act of destroying society and that «the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself» aligns perfectly with villains reflecting illicit desires of a society that produced them (13). The villain is temping and exotic, a hedonistic Other, and they know what the hero (and, in turn, the reader or viewer) has locked away in their own heart.

Mordred is never allowed a future. He is the shame of his father and his father's death. Mordred, despite being an innocent baby who survives a shipwreck, is not the pure imagined Child that Edelman refers to. Arthur conceiving him through incest ruins any chance at being a poster child for normalcy, just as the same trauma does not let him participate in normative heterosexual relationships. In medieval literature, incest became a well utilized trope; stories would «often feature foundlings and separated families: the hero may not recognize his mother or sister in time to avoid disaster» (Archibald, 2001: 7). This is how some medieval authors depict the union between King Arthur and his sister Morgause. Due to this incestuous conception, Mordred is often presented as fated to become a villain, but he «narrowly escapes the horrible death arranged for him by Arthur» due to the innocence of being a literal baby (209). Arthur is more reminiscent of King Herod than a noble hero when he massacres an untold number of babies to try and kill Mordred in his infancy. The inward violence marks Arthur and Mordred's relationship as fractured from its conception. Mordred being the shame of his father, and the end of his bloodline takes on an especially queer tone in a modern light; how many countless other queer people have been named these same things by their own parents?

Edelman writes, «what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively — to insist that the future stop here» (2005: 31). Mordred wholly embodies this. No matter how Mordred wrestles against any prophecy, Arthur kills his son, and Mordred mortally wounds his father. The cycle repeats in retelling after retelling. Mordred ends each story, but another story will always be told, where he is again the doom of Arthur and of Camelot.

THE DEATH OF MORGAUSE, A MOTHER'S LOVE, AND MORDRED'S MADNESS

Reading this theory alongside the portrait White paints of Mordred allows one to read the images coded into White's text. The subtext might not be spoken aloud, but it does not need to be. This focus on the visuals of Mordred at the outset draws some attention away from Mordred's interior. After Morgause is murdered, Mordred's self shatters. If the reader was not aware of the instability of his identity before, the text explicitly draws attention to this afterwards, saying, «Anybody who had not seen [Mordred] for a month or two would have known he was mad» (White, 611). This is the moment where the textual catharsis for reading

Mordred as a tragic figure cements itself, even if he is seen at a distance from the reader's direct understanding through the eyes of Queen Guinevere instead of through his own interiority. She notes that «He took his seat with an elaborate gesture, the pug jumping into his lap. In a way, it was tragic to watch him, for he was doing what his mother did. He was acting, he had ceased to be real» (611). White makes direct reference to Shakespeare's *Othello*, adding to the reading of Mordred as a tragic figure: «Desdemona robbed of life or honour is nothing to a Mordred, robbed of himself – his soul stolen, overlaid, wizened, while the mother-character lives in triumph, superfluously and with stifling love endowed on him, seemingly innocent of ill-intention» (611). Deliberately evoking the overwhelming sorrow and despair of Desdemona creates a point of reference for the reader without White having to spend as much of his own text devoted to Mordred.

The reader must ask, why is it Desdemona to whom Mordred is compared, and not Iago? Both Desdemona and Mordred are smothered: one literally slain this way by her husband and the other figuratively by his mother quashing his sense of self. Desdemona is ignored and diminished over the course of *Othello*. How she is dismissed here by the narrator carries the same misogyny that colours all descriptions of women throughout *The Once and Future King*. In this way, the narrator can hold Mordred up as a more tragic figure. Iago is harder to argue as a tragic figure, since he is not a victim as Desdemona is. If Mordred were compared to Iago here, then the underlying sympathy the narrator and narrative bears to him and his situation would not be as apparent. Iago is a villain; Desdemona is a victim. While Mordred is both, the narrative still feels sorry for Mordred. This comparison to Desdemona both reinforces and pushes against the misogyny around the sexualisation of a beautiful, dead woman getting such sympathy while a living, maltreated man does not receive the same in the textual apparatus that surrounds him.

The descriptions of Mordred's madness also present a clear way into a Freudian reading of this novel. In this scene, like in many others featuring Mordred, the text notes that «Mordred was the only son of Orkney who never married» (611). This emphasis on a lack of normative heterosexual relationships marks Mordred as inherently queer, adding to the overall queer coding that marks out this version of the character. White adds layers of incest to this mess by continually suggesting that the only woman Mordred could ever (romantically and physically) love is his mother. Men, equally deviant an option as his mother, are fair game. If the only woman he wishes to sleep with is his mother, he is still not participating in normative heterosexual dynamics.

The text goes into detail of his brothers having «fled» to Arthur's court to escape their mother while Mordred remained with her alone «for twenty years – her living larder» (611-12). This language of consumption further emphasizes how unhealthy and abusive their dynamic was. This is furthered when the narrator writes that «he had become her living grave. She existed in him like the vampire» (612). This language of the living dead and other classic monsters serve to make Morgause more villainous and emphasizes her cruelty. She is the closest thing novel has to a chief villain, and how she has scarred Mordred so irrevocably is part of that villainy. This goes beyond the mind games she played with all her sons and with Arthur, further into how Mordred begins to act like her:

> When he moved, when he blew his nose, he did it with her movement. When he acted he became as unreal as she had been, pretending to be a virgin for the unicorn. He dabbled in the same cruel magic. He had even begun to keep lap dogs like her –although he had always hated hers with the same bitter jealousy as that with which he had hated her lovers. (612)

Describing that he was as jealous and hateful of her dogs as he was her lovers points to some twisted sexual desire he had for his mother. That they are on the same level of dogs, animals known for blind obedience and devotion, shows that Morgause thought little of her lovers. That Mordred wishes to occupy such a role, giving up masculine privilege in the patriarchal world of the novel only serves to further emasculate him; after all, no man would want to give up that dominance he holds over himself and his world.

White attempts illustrate Mordred's philosophy and the root of his anger to the reader. Near the finale, Mordred and one of his brothers try to expose Guinevere and Lancelot's affair, and the text describes how «Mordred and Agravaine thought Arthur hypocritical – as all decent men must be, if you assume decency can't exist» (478). While a very keen observation of such perspectives, that assumed darkness hiding in all people does not wholly explain why Mordred hates Arthur so thoroughly. Mordred says, «It may have happened long ago, but that doesn't alter the fact that Arthur is my father, and that he turned me adrift in a boat as a baby» (519). The text acknowledges the May Day Babies as uncharacteristically cruel of Arthur. It emphasizes that «the trouble was that Mordred himself was the bastard» (520). This inherent trauma from the moment of Mordred's conception, his father trying to kill him, the abuse at the hands of his mother, all leads to the Mordred of this novel being a figure scarred and weighed down by the failings of both his parents.

The text more than once emphasizes that Mordred «had been brought up alone with his mother, in the barbarous remoteness of the outer Isles» and he had been «left to be dominated by her, with her ancestral grudge against the King and her personal spite» (523). The word «barbarous» here removes Morgause and Orkney from the civility and gentility that marks Arthur's court. The word «dominate» has sexual overtones, especially with how the text continually describes the dynamic between mother and son. There is no healthy reading of this: «Morgause, brooding in the North with the one child who remained to her, had concentrated her maternal powers on the crooked boy. She had loved and forgotten him by turns, an insatiable carnivore who lived on the affections of her dogs, her children and her lovers» (523). If this is how he was treated his entire life, it makes sense he would expect Arthur to have hidden maliciousness. Arthur reading Mordred as his own sin made manifest is hardly a kindly turnabout Arthur offers him. When dissecting Mordred's internal world further, the text reads:

> Mordred – confused between the loves and hatreds of his frightened home – had at the time been a party to her assassination. Now, in the court of a father who had been considerate enough to hide the story of his birth, the wretched son found himself the acknowledged brother of Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris and Gareth – found himself lovingly treated by the King-father whom his mother had taught him to hate with all his heart – found himself misshapen, intelligent, critical, in a civilization which was too straightforward for purely intellectual criticism – found himself, finally, the heir to a northern culture which has always been antagonistic to the blunt morals of the south. (523)

Mordred is a creature born of hybridity and a single seed all at once. His nature is that of a single, twisted, inbred family line. The nurturing he is given as a child is similarly twisted. But he is offered a confusing olive branch from Arthur as an adult, not enough to wholly change him but enough to further confuse him. The love a child has for a parent or home is seemingly natural enough, but it can be twisted and abused, as it was here between Morgause and Mordred. That twisted love can turn into hate directed outward. Looking inward, it creates a depiction of Mordred who is at once self-aggrandizing and self-loathing. This complicated, unkind, tormented version of Mordred is one who, while firmly villainous, still is a character who can be offered some measure of sympathy from the reader, at the seeming grudging allowance of the narrator.

Mordred clearly wants to be more than what the text allows him to be, and what Morgause allows him to be. After nearly dying at Lancelot's hands, he tells one of his brothers, «Gawaine, I swear I didn't run away… On my honour, Gawaine, I tried to fight… I am not a coward» with the text emphasizing that «He was almost weeping» (575). Mordred wants to be part of the normative chivalric bonds, but the trauma from his incestuous, nonconsensual conception and his upbringing does not allow him to make healthy genuine connections. As he cries, Mordred tells Arthur he wishes he were dead and that he had never been born, and Arthur replies «So do I, my poor boy. But you are born, so we must do the best we can» (576). This text does not dwell on Arthur's trauma. This line shows that he still sees Mordred as his sin to bear and believes he must get on with it as best he can. He does not look at Mordred here as his own person, but instead as that sin once again.

When Morgause is dead and Mordred's self has been fully subsumed by her, Guinevere asks him if he hates Arthur, to which he replies, «I don't hate him. I despise him … and I suppose he didn't know that I was his son, when he put us out in the boat?» (614). It all comes back to the trauma he suffered for things he had no control over, and he tells her, «I have never asked to be treated with justice … I did not ask to be born. I suppose he did that to amuse himself» (614). This implies that Morgause only paid him attention when it amused her. He cannot imagine Arthur doing otherwise. This inability to separate Arthur from her due to that incestuous parentage makes it impossible for Mordred to make amends with him or to come to terms with his trauma. Instead, he has some idea of the repeated cycles of Arthuriana, and he says, «I was thinking of a pattern, Jenny, a simple pattern… Yes. My father committed incest with my mother. Don't you think it would be a pattern, Jenny, if I were to answer it by marrying my father's wife?» (616). He forgets the first rape of Igraine by Uther to produce Arthur, but this text also breaks from medieval tradition by not naming it as rape. What he describes is still generational trauma. Rather than breaking the cycle, he instead wishes to perpetuate it and further harm others, continuing to cause destruction instead of allowing any potential for healing. There is the additional threat of incest between Mordred and Morgause, with even Arthur suggesting, «Perhaps he [Mordred] was in love with her [Morgause]» (618). Gawain goes on to suggest Mordred was jealous of Arthur and Lamorak for having slept with her, leaving Lot off the list perhaps since he was her wedded husband, and Mordred would have been barred from ever marrying her. Again, the text never lets us forget that «All of [Morgause's sons] except Mordred had wives of their own» (524). He destroys himself and the entire cycle rather than try and heal himself.

MORGAUSE AS A VILLAIN IN T.H. WHITE AND INFLUENCED BY FREUD'S WRITING

Freud writes of cannibalism and sexuality, conflating sexual desire and familial love again by describing the mother's breast during nursing as a sexual object for the child (Freud, 79). This space between consumption, morbidity, incest, and vampirism allows for more of that queer potential, with queer theory giving some direction to reading these scenes. Returning to the portrait the narrator offers of Mordred, that he is «thin… [and] so fair-haired that he was almost albino» will remind fantasy readers of Elric of Melniboné, a tragic yet villainous character in one darkly armoured shell, and lovers of the Gothic will see hints of a vampire's portrait in Mordred's own. That the lack of colour in him means one cannot grasp him. The unreadable eyes, with «a twinkle which you could assume to be of humour, if he liked, or else of irony, or merely of screwing up those sky-blue pupils so as to look far and deep» only further allow Mordred to be read adjacent to the lines of a monstrous lover like a vampire (White, 431). This emphasis on creatures that consume, whether vampire or nursing baby, all carry with them heavily Catholic imagery. That imagery is baked into the aesthetics a vampire story bears,

reinforced by the language of the miracle Communion performed at Catholic mass. There is something simultaneously horrifying and fascinating if one takes Communion at face value: the son of God (who is God) is being literally eaten by those who worship. Is this not the same overwhelming, all-consuming love the infant has for their mother? Rather than Madonna with child, there is no purity to the maternal love Morgause has for Mordred. When Morgause's love for her son is even present, it is twisted and consuming. Mordred was not born of virgin birth; he is the youngest of five sons and born from incestuous rape. Mordred is no saviour, and Morgause is closer to embodying the Whore of Babylon in the Madonna/Whore dichotomy.

Morgause is constructed as an antagonistic figure, if not outright as a villain. She oscillates between her schemes and petty magic to performing the part of doting mother. White writes that when she remembers her children exist, she thinks of «nothing but her darling boys. She was the best mother to them in the world! Her heart ached for them, her maternal bosom swelled. When Gareth nervously brought white heather to her bedroom as an apology for being whipped, she covered him with kisses, glancing in the mirror» (272).

She whips her sons out of frustration when some knights of Arthur did not respond to her seductions, taking her anger on the boys. Morgause looking into the mirror to see the tableau of her with Gareth acting as mother illustrates the performative nature of her role as mother. The second section of the whole novel, «The Queen of Air and Darkness», is not only named for her but establishes her abusive relationship with her four older sons and illustrates how each of the Orkney brothers has a different, though equally toxic, relationship with her.

The consummation scene between Morgause and Arthur has an equally uncomfortable Freudian element. The text describes how Arthur «woke with a start, to find a black-haired, blue-eyed beauty in front of him, who was wearing a crown. The four wild children from the north were standing behind their mother» (311). Taking her sons along while seducing Arthur is alarming, even if Arthur were not her brother. Further, Morgause does try some magic to ensnare Arthur, but the text refuses to say whether the final reason why Arthur sleeps with her without even knowing her name it was magic, her general beauty and his general youth, or «because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the rôle of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water» (311). But «Whatever the explanation may have been, the Queen of Air and Darkness had a baby by her half-brother nine months later. It was called Mordred» (312). The extreme ambivalence toward the incest paints an uncomfortable picture of dubious consent on Arthur's part in the most charitable interpretation. Morgause's sexual predation is one of the most important facets of her character, alongside her performance as a mother.

White first begins to describe Mordred in this passage. The narrator offers an example of a thesis for the text:

> Even if you have to read it twice, like something in a history lesson, this pedigree [of Mordred] is a vital part of the tragedy of King Arthur. It is why Sir Thomas Malory called his very long book the *Death* of Arthur. Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy, of sin coming home to roost. That is why we have to take note of the parentage of Arthur's son Mordred, and to remember, when the time comes, that the king had slept with his own sister. He did not know he was doing so, and perhaps it may have been due to her, but it seems, in tragedy, that innocence is not enough. (312)

Comparing this section of text to a history lesson gives the narrator more authority to present their own reading of the text. It also presumes authorial intent in the title of Malory's work, ignoring that his publisher had some doing with the title of the piece. Most of all, it crafts

Mordred as an external personification of Arthur's sin that returns to enact judgement on him. Invoking Aristotle's tragedy also suggests that the text will have a catharsis to the central drama. But the final battle between Arthur and Mordred never happens on the page. The final action is Arthur sending a boy away to tell his story to others. Arthur saving the life of a boy when he tried to drown his son can be him metaphorically trying to save a child when he did not before. If one takes the above writing by White at face value, Arthur is the tragic heart of the text. But can tragedy be read in White's Mordred nonetheless, or is he too thoroughly villainised to allow for such a reading?

Arthur sees Mordred as this tragic symbol for him, Arthur's own albatross. He confesses to Lancelot and Guinevere that he is Mordred's father and that he fell in love with Morgause as a young man. He tells them that «God saved Mordred, and sent him back to shame me afterwards" for the sin of sleeping with his sister (548). Arthur notes that, «Mordred is ambitious and fond of honour, as I always was. It is only because he has a weak body and has failed in our sports, and this has embittered him… He is brave, too, in a queer way, and he is loyal to his people» (549). This is far from a negative assessment, and lists traits in a detached, fair manner. It shows that Arthur does not hate Mordred for the role Mordred sees that he must enact in Arthur's own life. While he does not ignore positive traits Mordred has, he does see him as irrevocably marked as Arthur's own sin made manifest. Queer would also be a word used to describe sexuality in White's time, and while it would carry negative connotations, the double meaning of queer/strange and queer/gay here works well to encapsulate the image Mordred presents in the text. This reading by Arthur colours how many other characters see Mordred and seems to work alongside and reinforce the earlier reading of Mordred suggested by the text itself.

CONCLUSION

Freudian readings are very popular for *The Once and Future King* for so many reasons, especially with so many critics and scholars using White's own life to further add to this interpretation. The Freudian tones only add to White's Mordred being a queer coded villain. He sets the stage for future iterations of the character into modernity. Novelists such as Mary Stewart, who wrote *The Crystal Cave* (1970), all the way to Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* (2020) have gone back to White as a source text. The 1960 *Camelot* musical, composed by Frederick Loewe and written by Alan J. Lerner had a 1967 film adaptation, explicitly draws on White's iteration of the legends, while John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur* likewise mimics the mother-son dynamic between Morgause and Mordred. White's novel has had an irrevocable influence on how modern authors conceive of their own adaptations, and their own versions of Mordred.

The twisted family line that Mordred is part of consumes itself over the course of the novel. From the moment of his incestuous conception, Mordred was set on a path of destruction over the course of the novel, with the Hays Code and White's own life influencing the tropes of 'queer-coded villain' that make Mordred up. Queer coding also uses the trope of 'bury your gays' – after all, if one is to be suitably punished for their acts or crimes or sins over the course of the piece, what better punishment is there than death? Mordred in White's novel is killed off the page. Even if the reader does not see his final moments, Mordred has already been thoroughly destroyed before he dies; all that is left is Morgause, who is left to suffer a second death in her son's body, hidden away from the reader's gaze.

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