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MEDIEVAL INDIVIDUALS AND HERMETIC COMMUNITIES IN *LE MORTE*

*DARTHUR*: WHAT READING MALORY SUGGESTS ABOUT GREIMAS'S

SEMIOTIC SQUARE

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MEDIEVAL INDIVIDUALS AND HERMETIC COMMUNITIES IN *LE MORTE*  
*DARTHUR*: WHAT READING MALORY SUGGESTS ABOUT GREIMAS'S  
SEMIOTIC SQUARE

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

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This work is dedicated to my mother, Shelby DePrisco (b. 1967—d. 2017)

It is also dedicated to the rest of my family: my father (James DePrisco) and my siblings Kyle, Elyse, Lance, GenMarie, and Miriam. I would not be here without their love and support.

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## Abstract

In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the progression of the Round Table toward its ultimate destruction offers examples of how the medieval individual navigates through various communities, as well as the fracturing (both of self and system) that occurs when this navigation is forbidden. The medieval conception of the individual is not a man within a vacuum but is instead he who emerges through the participation in and balancing of membership in many groups. Arthur, however, has created a hermetic community that does not allow access to other groups, which in turn stunts the development of the very knights on which he and his system rely. Their inability to grow into individuals, paired with growing tensions between the knights, causes the ultimate destruction of Arthur's community.

Furthermore, the Round Table in many ways seems like a trespass into the space that one might expect to be filled by the Church. Malory is a notably secular writer for his time; he focuses more on physical prowess and worldly reward over spiritual growth. That being said, Arthur's community does not merely ignore the institution of the Church—it seems instead to try to replace it. Arthur sets himself up as the moral compass for his knights, his system requires that knights internalize the goals of the Round Table, and when religion does fill a presence in Camelot through the Grail Quest, the vast majority of knights are too steeped in sin to be successful in their pursuit of the spiritual. Indeed, Arthur appears to use the Church (as a physical institution) as a model for his project but does not also adopt the attributes of the Church as a spiritual body. In short, by his very design the king's community is frozen in space and time, and it lacks those transcendent attributes that would allow it (similar to the Church) to adapt and survive. This is best revealed by Arthur's unwillingness—or inability—to accept his knights as multifaceted members of multiple groups, which makes their development into medieval individuals impossible, and makes his community unsustainable.

To better frame and explore these points, I use Greimas's semiotic square as a model for inquiry. Analyzing the various components of Malory's story as four corners on a square helps the reader to see how each component interacts and contrasts with the others. Indeed, the square makes for a clear and logical foundation upon which to begin one's inquiry; it is where I began mine. Through my analysis of *Le Morte Darthur*, however, I will illustrate what Malory offers to challenge the square, as well as what I conclude would be a better tool for structural analysis. While the semiotic square helps to clearly establish a framework through which to understand a text, it does not communicate the evolution and fluidity within the narrative. Malory's story, through its dynamic content and structure, suggests a need for a new tool and even offers a sense of what that tool could look like.

## Background

Arthur's community is entirely reliant on his knights: those who go out, do his bidding, and make manifest his internal desires. The full dependence on knights is a reasonable strategy for a king whose role *as king* necessarily includes being an active, public symbol within the halls of his own court. This role does not extend beyond the Round Table, however: as Jonathan Nichols states, "Camelot loses its focal point of order when the King steps off the dais" (Nichols, 120). Indeed, localization within place seems critical for the maintenance of community; established borders define the knights' boundaries as members of the Round Table while keeping out the uninitiated. The Round Table consists of approximately one hundred and fifty members: an ideal number for the sake of communication, collaboration, and shared goals. With more members, unity becomes near impossible, while a smaller group does not have as much power or influence.<sup>1</sup> Yet even with an ideal number of members, with the King staying relatively stationary, his presence will fade outside the kingdom thus losing potency or esteem. Interestingly, Arthur's knights do not seem tasked with expanding membership of the Round Table so much as they are sent to extend its presence and values. For example, in helping ladies and going on quests, the knights use courtly ideology to influence the outside world. Therefore, knights become the visible manifestations of Arthur's will:

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<sup>1</sup> In a wide-ranging study of the nature and evolutionary adaptation of human communities in relation to the neurulation basis of mammalian "communities," Robin Dunbar argues that 150 members is the "natural" size of functional human communities. See *Grooming, Gossip, and the Origins of Language*.



going out, acting as the King would wish, and serving as a tangible reminder of the somewhat-hidden ruler.

In many ways, the knights are almost avatars of Arthur; yet despite their symbolic import, these actors are men with their own aspirations, fears, and desires that do not always fully correspond with their knightly roles. The Round Table requires a steady stream of knights who are willing to take on the taxing role of the embodiment of the King's physical and spiritual sovereignty. But the system inherently demands too much sacrifice of opportunities for external endeavors and impulses to self-sovereignty beyond the social and political role of knighthood, which is where the individual is born. Therefore, this conflict – between duty and impulse, between prescribed social and narrative role and the pressure to enact individual sovereignty – can help us understand the eventual collapse of a system that insists on the collective and transpersonal nature of the social sphere. Its members can only realize themselves as knights *defined* by the community they serve, in which they fulfill their duty and value to which they are committed.

One of the struggles of reading *Le Morte Darthur* is its lack of central figure. Arthur himself plays a relatively minor role and a large portion of the book follows Tristram, who isn't even a part of Arthur's court until much later on. Terrence McCarthy goes so far as to say that “the central figure, the main hero, is the Round Table itself” (McCarthy). Beverly Kennedy makes similar observations in her book *Knighthood in Morte Darthur* when she points out, by quoting the 15<sup>th</sup> century jurist, Sir John Fortescue, that “Whether a king is engaged in defending ‘his reaume ayen þair enemeyes outwarde bi the swerede’ or ‘his peple ayenst wronge doers inwarde bi justice’, he is ‘bot a man

allane but his men”” (Fortescue 116), (Kennedy, 22). She then goes on to refer to Arthur directly, saying, “[Arthur] honours the best of [his knights] with membership in the elite fellowship of the Round Table, which constitutes the core of his political power” (Kennedy, 28). He does not merely honor the best of his knights with membership, but also bestows upon each of them his identity and sovereignty as his embodied representative.

Such a system inherently creates distance between Arthur’s personal desires for his kingdom and the fulfillment of his plans, which take the form of impersonal – social, semiotic, and above all *worldly* – sovereignty above and beyond the individual and impersonal interactions of its members, including the “sovereign” King himself. In depending on his knights and the impersonal social-semiotic system that *realizes* actors in the worldly drama *as* knights, he is trusting that his personal and political vision will remain safe from extra-social spiritual impulses while his men are under pressure, away from watchful eyes, or suffering temptation. In emphasizing that his knights become physical manifestations of his values and beliefs, Arthur has created a system intensely materialistic, as evidenced both by his exclusive focus on the secular, spatial, and temporal and by his ignorance of the spiritual. This emphasis stunts the growth of the very men that he depends on, however, directly leading to the downfall of his system.

The maintenance of the Round Table in part requires that the knights forego membership in outside communities, which in turn limits their capacity to develop a certain form of individualism. Again, one must recall that the medieval conception of the individual man includes many stark differences from the more modern notions of (worldly) individualism that emerged in the 18th century and that culminate and manifest

themselves in the secular politics of the French and American Revolutions and the triumph of bourgeois ideology. The individual in the Middle Ages would have accepted streams of influence from various sources: one's leader, family, the underlying societal structures, religious belief, hierarchical standing in a political system, etc. In short, the medieval individual is a sum of various different groups and systems and cannot be conceived of outside of these circles as a self-realizing sovereign self. The medieval self is not a free-standing agent of activity such as assumed in Enlightenment and bourgeois humanism, but neither is he simply a social and semiotic "avatar" of a worldly representative of a symbolic entity. Rather, the Medieval individual seeks to achieve an individuality that is neither a self-evident agent, endowed with certain inalienable rights, nor a subordinate element, all but erased, within a given social/semiotic organization.

In his navigation among various social groups and institutions, which are neither free-standing (and self-evident) worldly institutions nor simply the subordinate parts of a larger hierarchical whole, but rather constitutions a *spiritual body* within but beyond these versions of worldliness, the medieval individual becomes what he has already always been: a spiritual body imbricated in but not solely dependent upon the groups he navigates among in a quest beyond worldliness. Thus, the willful but spiritually conditioned prioritization of certain goals, the privileging of different groups at different times, and emphasizing certain aspects of the self each taken together reveals the individual man. Such medieval individualism works through the world to achieve a spiritual body – analogous to the spiritual body of the Church – beyond both the worldliness of hierarchical social/semiotic systems and the worldliness of self-evident free-standing agency.

In the context of this notion of an extra-worldly individualism, then, I argue that we can discern the manner in which Arthur's system gives rise to an individualism that is simply a self-sustaining given and the product of a hierarchical social/semiotic system such as the Round Table. Because the medieval man grows out of the navigation among several different groups, but in his movement, he is neither a product of those groups nor an agent fully free of them, we can expect there should be balance as he navigates through his various relationships, goals, and responsibilities. Yet in *Le Morte Darthur*, we also see many examples of access to groups outside the Round Table being sacrificed for the Round Table community: Launcelot's entire story, for example, is one marked by denial of his personal desires (or the potential for them). Furthermore, as I will discuss in more detail later, religious pursuit requires a discovery of the individual as a changing, multi-faceted being throughout time (which requires entry into multiple groups). As an extension, spirituality often seems at odds with Arthur's endeavors. Indeed, it is the Grail Quest which initiates the crumbling of the community, and only three knights are able to attain the spiritual reward: the rest are too tainted by sin. Needless to say, Arthur's court is not an environment conducive to the pursuit of sanctification, but is it in direct odds with such a task? Indeed, it is.

It is through interacting with conflicting groups that moral questions arise: if one is entirely immersed in one worldview with one set of goals, there is no environment for practicing virtue. Therefore, because Arthur has limited his knights' capacity to operate between differing circles to the degree that he has, he has set up his system in conflict with a lifestyle conducive to exploring and discovering virtue, which is the ultimate practice for attaining a happy, well-directed life. I argue that success in these aims,

measured through a description by Malory of happiness or fulfillment, begins when knights drift away from the Round Table in pursuit of negotiation with the world. In contrast, the knights who buy into the system most fully tend to end up broken and violently killed.

My reasoning here is that the fundamental structure of the Round Table places too much emphasis on the knightly community and its hierarchical assumptions. Most importantly, this comes at the expense of access to the other spheres which, through timely negotiation, works to define the medieval individual. Such negotiation, I argue, is necessary for a pursuit of virtue. The Church— with its own sense of “spiritual body” that erases the distinction between worldly and extra-worldly activity – offers a space in which the medieval individual and the community, analogous to worldliness and otherworldliness of virtue and faith, are balanced. It still requires sacrifice, but with the promise of a transcendent good to follow. Moreover, in its special *situation* (not “location”) in the world, the Church leaves space for outside groups, which in turn allows for self-discovery through an emergent understanding of the individual self of the medieval world—this is the work, I am arguing, of *navigation*—that results in a more well-rounded and spiritually mature body of members.

### **Greimas’s Semiotic Square**

To better explore the relationship that the Round Table shares with its knights and surrounding environment, I turn to Greimas’s semiotic square to guide my analysis. The reasoning here is that the square, by its very format, demands exploration and navigation

of all four corners: the shape inherently suggests a connection between each of the corners and invites the viewer to contemplate their values in relation to each other. Because the Round Table is a dynamic, connected system situated within an even more interconnected world, the semiotic square is a natural choice for guiding my inquiry. In his essay, “The Semiotics of Speculation: A. J. Greimas and the Example of Literary Criticism,” Ronald Schleifer claims that “Greimas’s semiotic square creates a method or algorithm of conceptual dialogue in its very oppositions that functions to organizing speculation by screening and reducing the plurality of possible interpretations” (Schleifer, 169). For my analysis, I aim to identify the various institutions, attitudes, and relationships which create the foundation for the Round Table and, as an extension, the story as a whole.

Before moving to a description of *Le Morte Darthur* explicitly, I will first highlight another attribute of the semiotic square that makes it especially useful for my purposes. The square itself is a mixture of the logic and the semantics—what one might call the form and the content. The positioning of formal notations—S, non S, ~S and ~(non S)—is a function of logic; one must be able to identify elements that are in logical relations of contrariness and contradiction. In the introduction to Greimas’s book *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, Schleifer explains, “The semiotic square is a logical mapping out of structural possibilities: for any content which can be understood as itself analyzable into binary oppositions (S vs. non S), the square, repeated and superimposed, will exhaust the logical structural relations between its minimal elements” (Schleifer, xxxiii). Yet the square is not entirely focused on logical mapping: it also includes an emphasis on semantics as well. Schleifer mentions that “[the square] situates semantics in time as a function of discourse in ways that phonology... is not so

situated: it reinforces the central importance of the semantic level” (Schleifer, xxxii). Greimas presents the square first as a logical model, and then as a meaning-bearing tool. Fredric Jameson identifies the result: “the semantic or semiotic structures in Greimas’s scheme seem to map out what he takes to be the logical structure of reality itself, and stand as fundamental categories of that reality, whatever its historical form” (Jameson, 46-47). Jameson was inspired to use the square to direct his literary readings. It has inspired me as well, and one of my goals in this project is to use logical structure to help reveal deeper meaning, not only in Malory’s text but in the organization of what I am calling the “medieval individual.”

Using the square begins with a somewhat arbitrary decision about the subject to direct one’s analysis; for my purposes, I am looking at the narrative of *Le Morte Darthur*. The first and most obvious component within Malory’s story is the group of knights themselves, which is what I have chosen as my starting point, although I could have just as easily turned to the King, the Round Table, monarchy, or medieval men. Ultimately it is the knights’ successes or failures which set the tone for the system as a whole, however, and although they are expected to internalize the will of another, their actions are the true determiners of the Round Table’s success. In many ways, the court rests upon the shoulders of one man, but who he is depends on how one chooses to look: Arthur makes the decisions, Launcelot is his most valuable knight, the main actor of any episode carries the weight of the community and is the sole focus of the audience. Therefore, the individual becomes the first actor that one must contend with to better grasp the system and, as an extension, will also be the foundation of my analysis.

Nancy Armstrong guides the next steps of using the semiotic square when she states, “Once any unit of meaning [S] is conceived, we automatically conceive of the [opposite] of that meaning [non S], as well as an opposing system of meaning [ $\sim$ S, the negation of S] that correspondingly implies its own [opposite,  $\sim$ (non S)]” (Armstrong, 54). With ‘the individual’ as our S, ‘hermetic community’ immediately takes the role of non S. Through knights internalizing Arthur’s will and bringing the community with them in each of their endeavors, the Round Table strives for a unified group with social borders (one hundred and fifty knights) but without physical borders— one that extends wherever individual members may tread. Again, through questing, the knights bring the values of the community to solve the problems of the surrounding areas. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the Round Table is the furthering of the idea of the hermetic community itself: it is inherently self-contained and inwardly focused. None of this comes as a critique but is merely an observation about the expectations placed on the knights and the intended results which occur by extension. Knights help ladies, take prisoners, and fight against dissenters: all under the unified banner of the Round Table community.

From non S, we move to  $\sim$ S, which encompasses S as well as non S.  $\sim$ S instantiates the spectrum of which S and non S are *polar opposites*. For this category, religion is one such system that allows for and even requires both self-contained individuality and self-contained community. The pursuit of Christianity must be an individual, personal choice (the existence of free will is central to its canon) and is made up of individual members who represent different parts of the spiritual body. Through the mixing of each member’s participation in and relationship with the divine, the Church community becomes the sum total of the faithful’s lives and their religious experiences



are shared by all. On the other hand, this results in the faithful taking part in and internalizing a certain code. One does not identify as Christian without religion informing and influencing all of one's choices and experience. As  $\sim S$ , religion becomes the contradiction of knighthood, even as it shares in similar structures and expectations. Indeed, knighthood almost appears to be a reflection of religion: a system that mimics the structure of the Church while simultaneously making it near-impossible to pursue religion. Yet if Arthur uses a model of the Church in order to form his own community of knights, he errs in believing that temporal reward is enough to justify knights sacrificing access to outside communities for the sake of the Round Table. Indeed, religion diverges by simultaneously accepting the history of the individual (that Launcelot is able to become a priest suggests the openness to which I refer) while also challenging them to rise to levels they could not through worldly, temporal means. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the fact that the Church recognizes the dual nature of man: a being compounded of both body and soul.

In the final corner, we find  $\sim(\text{non } S)$  which is easily the most difficult part of the square to identify.  $\sim(\text{non } S)$  is the contrary of  $\sim S$ , but in such a way that it is also the contradiction to non S. Therefore, the entry in the fourth corner must be the contrary of religion and mutually exclusive of the community: materialism is one example. A focus on the material is the opposite of spiritual pursuit, and given the limited resources of physical items, materialism is inherently focused on private gain, insofar as it is discrete and accountable. This category becomes especially interesting considering the Grail Quest: although primarily a spiritual journey, the lack of the knights' success suggests that, for many of the Round Table members, it amounted to nothing more than the seeking

of a cup. Community helps in the pursuit of material gain, but at the end of the quest, material possession seems its singular goal. Moreover (and this is a topic I will explore more in-depth later on) Arthur identifies the Grail Quest as that which will initiate the eventual downfall of the Round Table, and he is entirely correct. For his community and his men, the introduction of the quest is nothing short of devastating.

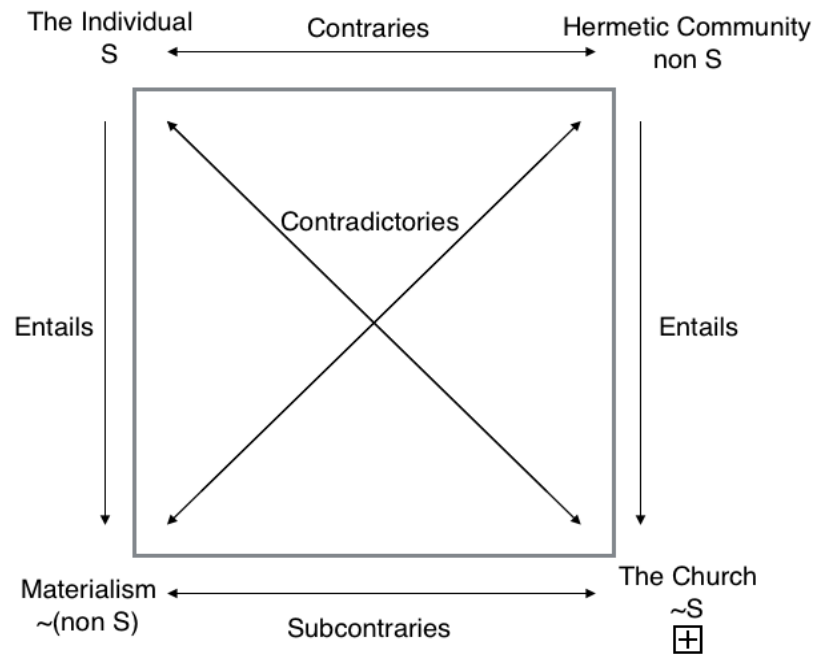


Figure 1: Abstract Semiotic Square

In this version of the semiotic square, the entries are all quite abstract, yet I would argue that they fit within the more logically focused aspect of the semiotic square. The individual, the community, the Church, and materialism all fit in with the very structure of the story. If I wanted to take a more semantic, content-focused stance, I could look at the human elements of the structure, which could also take a variety of elements. To begin, we could identify the knight as the basic building block of the Round Table, the King as he who promotes the vision of the system, priests as those who operate outside

of Arthur's community but serve both the individual and the community, and the Grail as a physical cup (stripped from its spiritual connotations, as many knights seem to

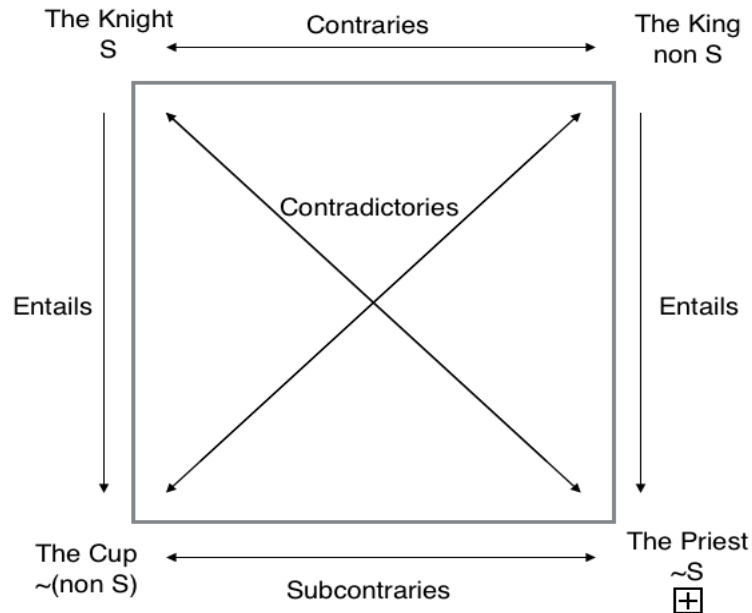


Figure 2: Concrete Semiotic Square

experience it). Doing so allows us to narrow in on how individual knights may experience their various identities within the court and throughout the story. Launcelot, for example, takes part in each entry of the square, thus giving readers different insights into his understanding of his role within the community: that each entry directly ties back to himself conceived as a medieval individual. Galahad has a very different experience with these entries—he never becomes a priest and he actually does see the Grail—so using such a tool to analyze his experiences might suggest that Galahad is not concerned with man as a medieval individual. Indeed, he actively gives up his own life to be taken into heaven, thus leaving his worldly home (both the environment as well as his own body) behind for the sake of something greater. The examples could continue, but both the more

abstract and the more concrete versions of the semiotic square will be useful for the purposes of my paper, so I will draw upon both.

These comparisons (and especially that between S and  $\sim$ S) become increasingly important near the end of the story when the Round Table begins its collapse. If knighthood, and more specifically, the system of the Round Table, privileges hermetic community over the individual sphere, then the later sections of the story are the culmination of growing tensions experienced due to a lack of individual discovery that is the result of the denial of participation in various groups. Because of their failure to have experience in navigating conflicting groups, the knights fail to mature into their individual selves, thus compromising the very foundation of the Round Table. In contrast, we see the Church as a stable institution throughout the story. Yet perhaps religion is not the only system which successfully combines both the community and the individual. In fact, one could easily imagine a version of knighthood that does allow for individual pursuits in conjunction with the requirements of the court. That being said, Malory's description of Arthur's brand of knighthood does not fit within this category, and religion stands as an alternative system throughout. Arthur seems to recognize this, such as when he panics over his knights choosing to embark on the Grail Quest. There are relatively few descriptions of Arthur interacting with religion directly; he chooses instead to consult in Merlin's magic or the authority of other secular rulers. I am not suggesting that Arthur needed to incorporate more religion into his rulership in order to be successful; I am saying that the knights' failure to engage in conflicting groups and thus develop what I am calling medieval individualism, particularly the knights' lack of individual emergence

in conjunction with the Round Table's inward-directed focus, created an environment that was not sustainable.

Although useful (and perhaps even necessary) for the formative stages of my argument, eventually the semiotic square becomes significantly less effective in its ability to capture the various nuances of the four corners' relationships with each other. Just as it is sufficient for the beginning stages of my argument, it is also sufficient to analyze the earlier stages of the Round Table: when the system is being established, the vision is fresh and new, when the knights are invigorated in their endeavors, and their interpersonal relationships are simpler. I will identify the points at which the complications of the story extend beyond the four corners of the square and will end my overall argument with suggestions of how the semiotic square needs to be superseded in order to better reflect evolving texts and connections.

## **The Medieval Individual**

Some would argue that the conception of a medieval individual is an oxymoron—that the individual did not develop until at least the Renaissance. Perhaps this is true given some definitions of the individual, but the version that I am referring to is significantly different from our modern understanding of the individual person. As I will explain more in-depth shortly, it necessarily includes navigation, group membership, and an initial lack of identity. While a full analysis of the specifics of such an understanding is well beyond the scope of this paper, my own work would not be complete without some time spent clarifying the similarities and differences between the medieval conception and our own.

This will then set the foundation for better understanding Sir Tristram's experience as an atypically inwardly-focused knight, as well as what his experiences indicate about the Round Table as a whole.

To begin, one must clarify what would fit within the category of "individual" for the medieval man. We can certainly find evidence of where it is not: in ancient Greece, for example, Aristotle identifies the polis, or the city, as the foundation for understanding right living. In his introduction to *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*, Colin Morris asserts that Hellenistic philosophy can be difficult for the modern reader to grasp due to the fact that ancient Greece had "no equivalent to our concept 'person' while [Hellenistic philosophers'] vocabulary was rich in words that express community of being" (Morris, 2). Often, the Renaissance holds the status of being the time in which the first glimpse of modern personhood begins to come into focus; Jacob Burckhardt, John Martin, and William Caferro are just a few who identify the Renaissance through such a lens. Burckhardt even gives arguments for why the medieval era could not hold such a position:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half-awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. (Burckhardt, 1860).

John Martin uses Burckhardt's assertion as a starting point to analyze the moral and political redefinitions that took place during the Renaissance as an extension of their newly developed sense of self, yet he also nods to the various scholars who reject the claim that the Middle Ages had no room for the individual man. Although Martin does

not explore the possibility of earlier conceptions of the individual in his work, plenty of other scholars do.

For example, in his book *The Individual in Medieval Society*, Walter Ullmann, goes back all the way to the 12th century as his point of origin for growing awareness of the individual. R. W. Southern makes similar observations in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies. The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* by R. R. Bolgar comes to the same conclusions as well, positing the 12th century as the true beginning of a shift toward what would eventually become modern individuality. I will take from both stances: Burckhardt's positioning of the medieval man in a series of groups and Ullmann's assertion that budding individuality goes back as far as the 12th century. My conclusion and the understanding that I will use throughout my argument is this: in determining which groups get privileged and which do not (sometimes against the wishes of other members of a particular circle) the group member becomes an individual. We see this in Launcelot's adventures outside of Arthur's influence, in Gawain's choice of the Grail Quest over the king, and throughout the life of Sir Tristram.

Sir Tristram offers an especially complex example of an individual who appears to forsake many of the bonds of the established knightly communities, while at the same time embodying and even furthering them. Donald Schueler explores Tristram's place in the story and states, "the section has much to do, as one might suppose, with the adventures of Sir Tristram, but the activities of that knight have a distressing habit of occurring almost always beyond the range of Arthur's influence" (Schueler, 52). In many ways, Tristram may seem like the opposite of the typical knight, yet even he cannot escape Arthur's community—not within the story itself or within one's analysis of it.

Schueler later states, “the story of Tristram makes sense in the overall narrative pattern only if it is considered an analogue to the main drama of Arthur’s Round Table, paralleling that story in its action and characterization as it does in time” (Schueler, 53). Yet if Tristram’s actions are in many ways the antithesis to the attitudes of the typical Round Table knight, there is some deeper connection to create the analogy between the two (similar to the logical relationship of contrariety—of polar opposition—between S and non S on the semiotic square.)

Perhaps Sir Tristram is a dangerous choice to pair with the entry of the Individual for the sake of my analysis; in many ways, he seems like the knight who has most internalized the structure of the knightly community, even as he avoids it. If one of his goals is to venture off and establish an alternative lifestyle—one marked by free travel, the attainment of his love, and the avoidance of aligning too closely with any one kingdom—his endeavor is an ultimate failure. Throughout his adventures, Tristram lives out a pattern of leaving Cornwall and returning, only to be betrayed once more by King Mark. Even as he ventures off on his own, Tristram begins to gather his own followers, thus re-creating a community similar to the one he left behind. Eventually Tristram does join the Round Table, although against his will, as if it is inevitable for a knight of his skill level to be drawn into the fold. Yet for all his failures in separating himself from the group, he is also the knight who experiments more than any other: Tristram is the one who navigates through the largest variety of communities. He is a member of Mark’s court, becomes a Round Table knight, interacts with religion, leads his own small group of men, and pursues his love with Isode. If the Medieval individual is that which emerges



through the active balancing of multiple different groups and communities, then Tristram fits neatly into this category.

Interestingly, this character whose lifestyle is most conducive to the discovery of his individual self is also the one who is hesitant to join the Round Table: “thereto me is lothe, for I have to do in many contreys” (Bk. X, 6). Malory’s treatment of Tristram may be an example of his personal attitude toward a knight without a court, a treatment that, admittedly, does not indicate a positive opinion. If an understanding of the individual did begin to emerge in the 12th century, our fifteenth-century Malory is willing to engage in the idea, but ultimately finds it lacking. This maps nicely to the frame of Tristram’s story.

Tristram’s more independent streak is manifest even during his time within King Mark’s court. In one example, King Mark commands Tristram to fight a weary knight—Sir Lamorak—during a tournament; Tristram agrees to the joust but is also vocal about his disapproval and appears to have no qualms about rebuking his king in public. In yet another example, King Mark banishes Tristram from the kingdom. Once more, Tristram abides by Mark’s decree, but also voices his discontent with the turn of events. He complains:

And well am I rewarded whan I smote down the good knyght sir Lamerok de Galis at kynge Markes requeste. And well am I rewarded whan I faught with the Kynge with the Hondred Knyghtes and the kynge of North Galys, and both thes wolde have put hys londe in servayge, and by me they were put to a rebuke.... And many othir dedys have I done for hym, and now have I my waryson! (Bk. IX, 22)

When he does go off on his own, he spends time happily living with Isode (both in the forest and then later in Launcelot’s castle), fights in disguise, and deviates from the more

typical knightly questing pattern by gathering followers as opposed to sending prisoners back to his King.

In some ways, Sir Tristram seems like Malory's thought experiment, created to answer the question: what is a knight without a court? Given Malory's position in prison during the time of his writing, such a question is all the more realistic for him to have been contemplating. That being said, Malory's answer leaves the reader with the impression that he cannot fully conceptualize such a circumstance—or alternatively, does not believe it would be sustainable. There is a parallel here to an earlier Arthurian legend: *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*. In it, Arthur is horrified to discover a knight without a lord; he seems almost incapable of conceptualizing what such a situation entails. He exclaims, "'Hevinly God!... how happynis this thing?/ Herd thair ever ony sage sa selcouth ane saw!/ Sal never myne hart be in saill na in liking/ Bot gif I loissing my life, or be laid law/ Be the pilgramage compleit I pas for saull prow/ Bot dede be my destenyng/ He sall at my agane cumyng/ Mak homage and oblissing/ I mak myne avow!'" (lines 265-273). Arthur's question reveals curiosity mixed with horror: he does not immediately understand what he has learned. It is a point for interrogation. Although less theatrical and more contemplative, Malory (while willing to explore the idea of the individual knight separate from court) comes to a similar conclusion. As a result, we find Tristram continuously drawn back into the knightly community.

Despite his hesitance to join the Round Table, however, he still appears to value a sense of community as he often travels with Sir Lamorak and Sir Segwarydes. Although he does not travel with Sir Launcelot, Tristram also develops a strong bond with both Launcelot and his kinsman, which further establishes a web of companions. Moreover,

he continues to fight in jousts and tournaments—making a name for himself and creating opportunities for public displays of prowess. Therefore, Sir Tristram may be even more entangled in the system of knighthood than other knights: although he tries to escape, he eventually begins recreating the system on his own. It makes sense that Tristram continues to participate even as he seeks to explore his own identity and desires: the individual is not the person who forsakes groups or communities but is instead a person whose individuality emerges as he navigates through those various circles. It is Tristram's participation in multiple spheres that heightens his identity as a medieval individual.

Tristram unexpectedly disappears almost entirely from the rest of the story, however. Readers leave the knight in Launcelot's castle, finally reunited with his lady and still mostly separate from other knights. Malory never follows Tristram's story specifically after this point, but we do later learn that Tristram is murdered by King Mark. Launcelot briefly explains:

for whanne by meanes of treatyce syr Tristram brought ageyne la Beale Isoud vnto kyng Mark from Ioyous gard loke what befelle on the ende / how shamefully that fals traitour kyng marke slewe hym / as he sat harpyng afore his lady la beale Isoud / With a groundyn glayue he threst hym in behynde to the herte / hit greueth me said sir launcelot to speke of his dethe / for alle the world may not fynde suche a knyghte. (Bk. XX, 807)

After making his name as one of the best knights in all the world (second only to Launcelot), Tristram is stabbed in the back by one of the most hated of men. His death is by no means dignified, nor is it addressed more than in passing. After spending several books following Tristram and his adventures, Malory suddenly drops his character without much warning or explanation. One explanation could be that Tristram's experiment was a failure: we do not know how he winds up within close proximity to

King Mark once more, but given the circumstances of his death we can assume that he eventually returned to his old community. Another possibility is that Tristram's death represents Malory's attitude toward the knight pursuing individuality too fully: the navigation through the groups overshadows the groups themselves. I will not attempt to argue for any one interpretation here but offer both as plausible in their own way. Instead, I position Tristram as the example of the self-contained individual: one who is too separate from his various groups by reason of his navigation through them, thus taking a more externally observational role as opposed to an internally involved position. Such self-contained individualism indicates a growing awareness (and interest) in the possibilities of a man who rethinks the established societal structure. That he is ultimately unsuccessful is owing more to his execution than to his mindset, as Launcelot's story will later suggest.

For our purposes, we can situate Sir Tristram on one end of a spectrum. His story indicates certain important factors in regard to medieval individuality which, although no other knight pursues individuality as fully, still inform the degree to which the other characters can be said to be individuals. The most important is that being an individual does not mean separation from all groups. Instead, individuality emerges from participation in groups, which is why Sir Tristram and Sir Launcelot are more individualistic than some of the lesser knights who are more fully (or even completely) defined by the Round Table. Furthermore, the most extreme instance of the medieval individual would be someone so focused on their navigation through the groups that they fail to interact within them. I would not say that Sir Tristram represents this sort of man, but he does come closer than anyone else in Malory. The consequence is that he is

betrayed and killed by a threat that would have been easy to avoid had he been more cognizant of his membership in King Mark's court. Indeed, every other character can recognize King Mark's untrustworthiness; that Sir Tristram is unable to respond accordingly, despite his closeness to his leader, suggests that he experienced a blindness not shared by his fellow men. In analyzing Sir Tristram's character and story progression, readers can extrapolate the various levels of individuality that a knight may experience. In situating the individual as our S, we can turn to the hermetic community as the non S.

### **Hermetic Community**

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Tristram, one would find a knight fully embedded within Arthur's system: a complete acceptance of the community as opposed to the wayward and experimental individual. Moreover, because the medieval individual emerges from the navigation of various spheres, the member of a hermetic community would focus solely on one group—defining himself by one specific community. Given Malory's handling of Tristram's story, one may be tempted to predict that the treatment of this character would be significantly more sympathetic. Sir Balin fits the category of the knight who fully and purposefully strives to internalize Arthur's will, but his life is even less successful and more tragic than Tristram's. There exist many conflicting opinions in the scholarship surrounding who Balin is and what he represents, and for good reason. His story is one of the more memorable and compelling, but it also presents many unanswered questions as to how he fits into the rest of the narrative. It is one of the purposes of this semiotic analysis to describe how he does.

In the episode of Balin and Balan, a lady arrives at King Arthur's court, carrying a sword that only the knight with the least treachery can unsheathe. She explains, "This swerd that I am gyrd with al doth me grete sorowe and comberaunce / for I may not be delyuerd of this swerd / but by a knyghte / but he must be a passyng good man of his handes and of his dedes and withoute vylonye or trecherye and withoute treason" (Bk. II, 77). Balin is the one to pull the sword, which makes him stand out as the worthiest knight in the kingdom— but within moments he kills the Lady of the Lake and loses his good graces with Arthur. It is a fast-paced and astonishing scene: Balin immediately introduces himself as an individual with conflicting identities (both the knight of least treachery but also a knight that Arthur bans from his court as a potential detriment to his system). How useful is it to be the least treacherous if one can still err in such a complete and dramatic manner? Balin's lack of treachery can refer to a lack of savviness or the inability to deceive. In short, readers can assume that Balin's actions are honest reflections of not only his understanding of the situation at hand, but also the ideal way to resolve conflict. Should this be the case, readers can also look to Balin's interaction with the Round Table to better understand how an individual, incapable of deceit, would evaluate the proper way to interact with the system. Interestingly, most of Balin's story happens outside of the community, which may suggest that he is entirely wrong in his assessment. Yet even given his inability to successfully integrate himself back into the Round Table, he still offers insight into the most honest approach that any knight takes in trying to participate in Arthur's community.

When Balin leaves the castle, he decides that the best way to regain a position amidst Arthur's knights is to fulfill the king's desires and act as an agent of Arthur's will.

He explains to his squire, “I wylle hyhe me in al the hast that I may to mete with kynge Ryons and destroye hym eyther els or dye therfor / and yf it may happe me to wynne hym / thenne wille kynge Arthur be my good and gracious lord” (Bk. II, 81). Balin is focusing entirely on pleasing Arthur and chooses to adopt the king’s endeavors as his own; he believes that if he is able to defeat the king’s enemies, he will redeem himself as a trustworthy knight and regain a spot at the Round Table. He chooses to pre-emptively fulfill Arthur’s desires: to combine his intellect with Arthur’s will. Because Arthur must remain in the physical location of the court, the continuation of his mission relies on knights adopting his will. This, then, is why I identify Balin as the knight that best represents the hermetic community: linking his identity as least treacherous knight with his goal of internalizing Arthur’s plans as his own (perhaps best described as a willing possession), he manifests the Round Table community in his every action. In many ways, Balin is working diligently to become the perfect Round Table knight—exactly the type of man needed in order to keep the system running.

That being said, throughout his questing Balin seems entirely incapable of making a correct choice. At various points within his episode, Balin encounters a situation in which there are no clear answers as to how best to proceed—and he either continuously makes the wrong decision, or there was no way to escape a horrible outcome in the first place. For example, after leaving the castle, Balin kills the knight Sir Launceor in a joust after Launceor vows to kill Balin in order to avenge Arthur. Killing his enemy may seem like a straightforward choice for Balin, but Sir Launceor’s lover, Lady Columbe, arrives and commits suicide out of sorrow. Other characters in the story seem to hold Balin accountable for Columbe’s death, which inspires the question of what he should have, or

even could have, done instead. Later on, an invisible knight named Garlonde kills two of Balin's companions. Balin vows to avenge his comrades and eventually finds Garlonde in King Pellam's castle. Unfortunately, they meet in the middle of a feast and Balin must decide whether to kill his foe immediately, which would be an abuse against courtesy, or to wait until a more suitable time, but potentially not get another opportunity. He chooses the former for fear that he might lose Garlonde should he wait— but then learns that Garlonde is King Pellam's brother.

Deborah Ellis connects Balin's eventual tragedy to his initial betrayal by killing the Lady of the Lake. Auguste Canitz believes that Balin's end comes from his misunderstanding of the importance of outside images: "Balin's difficulty is rather wider, though it is related to honour in that he fails to realize the importance of making appearance coincide with reality... Although a lady warns him about this [danger], there is a willfulness and a death-wish in Balin which compounds his lack of understanding of the meaning of things" (Canitz, 87-88). While Balin may or may not have a death-wish or experience tragedy as some form of punishment for his betrayal of Arthur, one of his most defining characteristics is his adoption of Arthur's goals. Another is his inability to make a correct choice.

Why is Balin constantly placed in impossible situations, and are his experiences representative of Round Table knights as a whole? Because the structure of the Round Table finds its success primarily through knights accurately understanding and executing the social mission of their king, every situation becomes a question of what Arthur would do. The king is the compass for the rest of the court. Yet Arthur remains a relatively inactive character: he does not pave the way with examples of conflict resolution of his



own. Therefore, knights must proceed using as their compass an *imagined* king. In actuality, this means that knights act according to social standards. How knights act is a representation of their own beliefs and values (social versus personal); that they are operating as extensions of Arthur's will invests enormous amounts of power and authority on individuals who may not be equipped to wield it. This becomes all the more serious as the story progresses, and the knights do not grow as individuals due to their inexperience in outside groups. Their social immaturity extends to a personal immaturity, leading to an inability to adapt, cooperate, or imagine a reality beyond the one they have constructed on their own.

While social standards guide the other knights in their decision-making processes, Balin spends almost all of his time outside of court and has no functional society. Because of this, he is even more reliant on his imagined king/compass—he does not even have his fellow men to help inform his conception of the Round Table. Interestingly, Balin's identity as a hermetic community member (one defined by one group, even if it is mostly an imagined one) looks similar to our modern conception of the self-contained—and self-defined—individual. The main difference is that Balin yearns for access to the community, whereas modern individualism relishes self-reliance. One of the reasons why Balin may be so supremely unsuccessful is due to his inability to improvise: he has fully adopted an imagined Arthur as his compass for action, but Arthur (both imagined and physically present) does not provide any useful examples. Therefore, every choice becomes an impossible choice, as Balin has internalized the will of an inactive personality through his connection to a hermetic community.

For the Round Table to flourish, the knights must adopt Arthur's will as their own without corruption or heavy editing in order to maintain the king's vision. That being said, Balin's story indicates that this mindset is not enough. The knights must also be able to add their own individual experiences, choices, and goals to the overall community in order to sustain the system in an ever-shifting world. To do so, they must have discovered their own identities as individuals, something Balin is never consciously able to do. Unfortunately, the individual may be the very key necessary for the maintenance of the Round Table, but also the very element that it naturally cannot promote due to a jealous suspicion of the very outside communities that allow for individual discovery.

### **Materialism and the Church**

If the hermetic community of the Round Table is not conducive to an experience of juggling various communities and selves—thus allowing for the emergence of the medieval individual as an analytical and active thinker—there is another institution within the story that is. In comparison to Arthur's court (and increasingly present as the story progresses) we find the Church. Unfortunately, there does not exist nearly enough scholarship on the role of Christianity in *Le Morte Darthur*, as confirmed by Hanks and Jesmok in their collection of essays: "Malory's use of myth and magic to explore these themes has received extensive scholarly attention, but his views on and thematic use of Christianity have long needed a closer look" (Hanks, 1). Part of the issue is that Malory's Round Table is notably secular, and the Church's absence is a glaring hole in most of the

story. In regard to Arthur's death scene, but with application to the rest of the story as well, K.S Whetter writes:

This scene of the knights' return to chivalric action is Malory's invention and typifies his focus on secular chivalry and secular fellowship, for throughout the *Morte Darthur*, including the Grail Quest, Malory continually valorizes earthly deeds in order to aggrandize and memorialize the secular fellowship of Round Table knights. Such memorialization reveals Malory's secular rather than Christian focus and narrative. (K.S Whetter, 157)

Yet for all of Malory's focus on the secular, earthly practices of the Round Table, the Church is a force throughout the story, and while not always immediately involved, its presence cannot be entirely ignored.

Indeed, even the materialistic, secular attitude of the Round Table cannot be spoken of without reference and comparison to the Christian Church—which is why I have chosen to combine both topics (materialism and the Church) within this one section. This choice is directly connected to the fact that *Le Morte Darthur* is not just a book about contrasting elements; it finds ways to connect the unlike as well. In this way, the semiotic square is a natural fit as a tool for guiding reading and analysis. By this point in the story (and in my analysis of it) the critic must shift toward a new frame for inquiry: one that highlights the unified nature of the Round Table as well as its inner conflicts. Here the semiotic square begins to lose its precision and a new tool suggests itself as a replacement. In combining the material and the spiritual in one section, I am beginning to illustrate how that could look.

Malory's Arthur (and perhaps Malory himself) is not especially concerned with the metaphysical, yet the structure of the Round Table mimics the community of the

faithful. One could argue that Arthur's main vision closely resembles the mystical Body of Christ, with Arthur as the head and moral compass, and with promises of an earthly kingdom as opposed to spiritual reward. Indeed, even the Grail Quest—the most dramatic opportunity for the Round Table knights to explore the religious sphere, and thus bring their identities as individuals into higher definition—becomes nothing more than the (unsuccessful) search for a material cup for the vast majority of Arthur's men. If Arthur is the compass who directs the focus of his community, his message is clear: success is measured through physical, not spiritual, gain.

The ultimate failure of the Round Table could then be attributed to a complete incongruity in relation to its fundamental design: the structure of the Church cannot be extended to a secular, temporal hierarchy. No individual, not even Arthur, can be blamed for its inevitable downfall; the vision was simply unsustainable given the tools (material objects) available. What are the significant differences between the Christian Church and the secular Round Table which allow the former to succeed, but the latter to end with destruction, betrayal, and death? Sir Launcelot may be the key to understanding the fundamental differences between the two systems. R.S Lundie focuses on this question: "In [Malory's] telling and profound recognition of the impermanence of human relationships," he writes, "lies one of the main elements of tragedy, and that in the theme of divided allegiance which rings through his last books he creates a power that far surpasses gloom—a power that is essentially tragic" (Lundie, 94). Narrowing in a little further on Launcelot himself, Jesmok supports this idea when she states, "as is often the case in the *Morte*, Lancelot dominates dramatic interest, embodying the conflicts between religious and secular chivalry" (Jesmok, 93). Throughout the story, Launcelot exhibits

the exploratory, individualistic tendencies of Tristram while also maintaining a loyalty to Arthur similar to Balin's, and notably ends his days as a priest separate from his secular community. That Launcelot is one of the few knights to experience a happy death further highlights his unique (and ultimately successful, although surprising) approach as one who navigates various spheres.

Launcelot's story contains many of the same elements of Tristram's: prowess in battle, love of a king's wife, disguises during tournaments. Given their many similarities, it is at the points at which their stories diverge that readers can find interesting implications. Where Tristram ultimately chooses his individual desires over those of his community, Launcelot remains loyal to Arthur. Launcelot also ends his days separated from the Round Table, and while Malory does not tell us the circumstances in which Tristram is murdered by King Mark, we still find the knight and his king in close proximity at the point of Tristram's death. Perhaps most notably, Launcelot dies peacefully, surrounded by his closest companions and situated as a member of the clergy. Tristram's death is less than dignified and only referenced in passing. From these key distinctions, readers can begin to craft an understanding of where Launcelot stands on the spectrum between hermetic individual and hermetic community. Although he spends most of his time firmly situated within the secular system of the Round Table, Launcelot's story is one of spiritual redemption insofar as his character is an example of a man who ultimately discovers the balance only possible within the Church.

There are two assertions that I am making here: the first is that Arthur's system copies the structure of the Church but does not leave room for religious pursuit, and the second is that Launcelot's character is the most illustrative of spiritual growth. I begin by

quickly identifying Arthur's nebulous relationship with religion as well as the underlying materialism of the court. Afterward, I describe Launcelot's journey through faith, the implications of his ultimate redemption, and why his story discreetly offers one suggestion of how the Round Table could have survived.

Religion has a background role in Malory's narrative of Arthur's court, and when it does make an appearance, the various characters' response to it can sometimes be surprising. For example, when Gawain indicates a commitment to going on the Grail Quest—the single most religious group endeavor in the book— Arthur has a meltdown.

“Allas” said kynge Arthur vnto sir Gawayn, “ye haue nyghe slayne me with the auowe and promesse that ye haue made / For thurgh yow ye haue berafte me the fayrest felauship and the truest of knyghthode that euer were sene to gyders in ony realme of the world / For whanne they departe from hens I am sure / they alle shalle neuer mete more in thys world / for they shalle dye many in the quest.” (Bk XIII, 621-622)

In the Grail Quest, Arthur identifies an event that marks the end of his community. Moreover, his assessment is absolutely correct; Whetter asserts that, “...the Grail Quest represents a spiritual and critical test for Launcelot and the Round Table fellowship, a test that most of the knights obviously fail and that both highlights previous sins and foreshadows the post-Grail sinful decline of the fellowship” (Whetter, 158-159). Once the deeply held shortcomings of the members of the Round Table are brought to light, the system can no longer operate as it once had. The veil has been lifted (the true situation revealed) which causes chaos.

The Grail Quest, as the most religious episode in the book, offers unique insight into the moral climate (or lack thereof) of the Round Table. Eugène Vinaver and his

successors interpret Malory's treatment of the Grail Quest as evidence that the author views the quest as an "intrusion" upon the story—that the only focus should be on the secular, material world (Vinaver, 1977). Such an interpretation fails to address why Malory included the section at all, however, if he had indeed viewed the quest so disparagingly. That being said, Malory definitely does not treat the quest as a sacred example of the metaphysical realm's superior positioning over the physical, which is why I propose that one can use Vinaver's assertion as a starting point to form a more nuanced understanding of these episodes in the overall story. Malory does not see the quest as an intrusion upon the rest of the story, but he does use it to draw to light that it is an intrusion upon the Round Table: the system which Arthur has created has no room for a spiritual awakening (positive or negative), and the knights' failure to attain the Grail is just as detrimental to the sustainment of the Round Table as their success would have been. For Arthur's knights, the Grail Quest is diminished to its most materialistic aim (the hunt for a cup), which is also a revelation of the state of their underlying community. Indeed, the materialistic, physical nature of the quest is the clearest indication of the ultimate temporality of the Round Table itself. Because it cannot adapt to changes in an organic, viable sort of manner, it is doomed to crumble. There is nothing transcendent (no life-giving soul) to sustain the knightly community throughout (and beyond) time.

Yet not all knights experience such a complete failure. Galahad, Percival, and Bors each see the Grail, thus suggesting that the materialism of the Round Table is not all-encompassing. While each of these three knights offer his own unique insight into the religious aspect of Arthur's court, it is Launcelot whom I want to analyze as the primary religious agent. Although he does not attain the holy vision, his story is one of the most

detailed and his journey toward religion is dynamic and ultimately successful. He apparently spends his youth disregarding the spiritual, becomes aware of his own shortcomings later on in life, begins a pursuit of holiness, but fails soon after returning to court. “This wavering in religious pursuits has caused many to see Lancelot as unstable, a trait that may be a tragic flaw but may also be his salvation. Lancelot’s stability (or lack of it) is central to his character development, to his education through suffering, and, ultimately, to his salvation...” (Jesmok, 93). One might rethink Jesmok’s notion of “lack of stability” as the positive ability to navigate among communities. That is, drawing from the semiotic square, a more dynamic tool for interpretation, and my understanding of the medieval individual, I see here in Launcelot’s “wavering” the emergence of an individual actor. His is a story of the dramatic fluctuating between various external and internal pressures: the demands of the court, the insistence of his own conscience, the curiosity surrounding the unknown. His initial failures only serve to heighten his eventual victory: his holy death. While other knights may be more successful in their various religious pursuits, and although Launcelot spends relatively little time focused on the spiritual, I believe he is Malory’s best representation of the ideal member of the Church.

The Church does appear to be the model that Arthur uses to structure his Round Table, yet the two systems differ in significant ways. Where the Round Table excludes other community alliances and spheres of influence—hence its “hermetic” nature—the Church welcomes the whole medieval man, including his various group memberships and the individual that must navigate through them. Perhaps due to the gravity of a belief in free will, or perhaps due to the universality of the Church, there is less emphasis on the state of being a member of the faithful and more focus on the dramatic adventure of



becoming one. Indeed, no member of the faithful is done with his journey until the end of life, and according to some religious traditions, not even then. This is an attitude reflected in Malory's treatment of Sir Launcelot, whose defining characteristics must first include his subdued exploration of how to balance his immersion into various groups. He maintains his loyalty to his different communities, but also sustains a profile outside and between them. This ability to take part in different groups but to still maintain membership in each of them is what allows him to eventually come to the Church while other knights are incapable of making the leap. Indeed, most of them are so ingrained within Arthur's system that they do not even have the chance.

Counterintuitively, one of the attributes that most helps his pursuit of religion is his maintained affair with Guenever. At the end of the story, upon the destruction of the Round Table, "Queen Guenever reveals a clear understanding of sin and salvation. Finally, her movement toward God moves Lancelot and his followers to at least the ritual of religious life, and she leads Lancelot, Malory's abiding interest, to sanctity; Guenever succeeds where even the saintly Galahad failed" (Jesmok, 92). It is not merely Guenever's turn to religion that directs Launcelot toward God; I would identify their extended affair as an opportunity for Launcelot to maintain an individual pursuit not sanctioned by the rest of the community. This in turn sets the stage for his openness to religion.

Yet even for Launcelot, the affair is not entirely a positive occurrence: it is also that which sparks the dissention within the court that ultimately leads to the brutal destruction of the Round Table. Moreover, characteristics of the affair suggest that it too is actually embedded within Arthur's system: Launcelot and Guenever's love is sterile (as is her marriage with Arthur) and his connection with the queen limits Launcelot's

ability to openly pursue legitimate relationships. His romance with Elayne, which could perhaps have been a healthy, loving union without Launcelot's constricting attachment to the queen, instead has to be obscured by magic and is unable to flourish. Elayne makes her intentions clear, but Launcelot identifies some part of himself that is not conducive to marriage: "What wold ye that I dyd' said syr Launcelot / 'I wold haue you to my husbond' sayd Elayne / 'Fair damoyse I thanke yow' sayd syr Launcelot / 'but truly' sayd he 'I cast me neuer to be wedded man'" (Bk. XVII, 759).

Regardless of his inability to pursue her fully, Launcelot's romantic interaction with Elayne comprise another great example of his quiet flirtation with an existence separate from the Round Table. While he only sleeps with Elayne due to magical deceptions on her part, he does not afterwards act like a man entirely horrified with what has transpired. Launcelot asks Elayne who she is, and she tells him that she is the daughter of King Pelles. Launcelot immediately (and suspiciously) replies, "Well, I woll forgyff you," and "therewyth he toke her up in his armys and kyssed her, for she was a fayre lady, and thereto lusty and yonge, and wyse as ony was that tyme lyvyng" (Bk. XI, 576). If disguising himself in tournaments or while questing through wearing different armor allows Launcelot to explore other facets of his identity, Elayne's disguise may serve a similar purpose—both for herself and for Launcelot. While Launcelot would never sleep with another lady under normal circumstances, Elayne's disguise creates the only opportunity that would find him unfaithful to Guenever. Once he has found himself there, he does not resist as one might expect. If Elayne represents to him one more opportunity to explore a life outside the community, he literally embraces it. Eventually, she produces a son, saves Launcelot's life on multiple occasions, and wishes to become his wife. She

is exactly the sort of woman who would be perfect for the knight; that they do not end up together seems unnatural.

Yet she does not fit in with Arthur's community, and ultimately does not survive her entrance into courtly affairs. Those things which Elayne offers—a family, a child, and a life outside of the Round Table—are mutually exclusive to the system that Launcelot has chosen. If Elayne does represent a life more focused on spheres separate from the knightly community, however, Malory frames her in a positive and attractive manner. Even in her death, she seems from a world quite outside the Round Table: “there he sawe the fayrest woman lye in a ryche bedde couerd vnto her myddel with many ryche clothes / and alle was of clothe of gold / and she lay as though she had smyled” (Bk. XVIII, 762). The particular mention of Elayne lying “as though she had smyled” becomes of significant importance later in Launcelot's death scene, which I address shortly.

Yet life within the Round Table proves to not be a possibility for Launcelot either. The scandal of his affair becomes a point of increasing tension for some of his fellow knights, with different members taking personal offense to Launcelot's relationship with the queen. Sir Agravayne complains, “I merueylle that we alle be not ashamed bothe to see and to knowe how sire Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene / and al we knowe it so and it is shamefully suffred of vs alle that we alle shold suffre soo noble a kyng as kynge Arthur is soo to be shamed” (Bk. XX, 798). For these Round Table knights, the shame of Arthur is shared within the community, and thus many feel that they must respond as if to a personal affront.

Here we see an interesting instance in which the knights' participation in Arthur's system extends beyond the actual desires of the King himself because Agravayne and Mordred are establishing their individual frustrations, in the name of Arthur, as their guide for action. These two knights believe that if Arthur knew about Launcelot's affair, he would respond in a certain way; this in turn inspires the question of how their situation within the community is helping to inform their individualistic identities. Because they have delved into the realm of the imaginary (not an uncommon practice for Round Table knights, given that Arthur offers no examples of how he would actually act or respond to most situations requiring action), they are drawing from their own understanding of Arthur and his mission in order to craft a sense of how to proceed. Arthur is still the moral compass, but it is an Arthur that only truly exists within their collective imagination. That the knights are not unified in this assessment— Gawain is vehemently against their mission— suggests that the hermetic community has started to overturn the medieval individual within the Round Table.

The internal conflicts within the Round Table are influenced by distress over Launcelot's affair (his engagement with outside communities in a way that is too public to ignore), but this distress is in turn influenced by a growing tension between all the knights' fractured and underdeveloped identities. In creating and interpreting Arthur's will, Agravayne and Mordred are really putting their vision of Arthur (or rather, themselves) at the head of the community; when Gawain expresses his dissatisfaction, his own understanding of the system is in conflict with theirs. Here we see that the community is actually creating individuals, but underdeveloped ones: instead of navigating between various groups, they are navigating *inside* the group. In this way, the

individual and the community may not be on opposite ends of the square at all but are instead embedded within one another. Unfortunately, the Round Table as a system is not constructed for this type of navigation and cannot survive this evolution of experience. The violent end to Arthur's community is a tangible example of the dramatic rejection of the medieval individual from the Round Table: both the individual that emerges from various groups, and the one that emerges from the fracturing of a single group. That it is the Round Table that disintegrates suggests that no system can position itself against the natural development of man throughout the various points of his life: instead, the system must include enough flexibility to incorporate the individual at different stages of progression. The alternative, as the Round Table reveals, can be nothing short of deadly.

Yet Launcelot manages to undergo the same sort of transformation and still ends his days in peace and happiness. The description of his death has mystical undertones: "So whan syr Bors and his felowes came to his bedde they founde hym starke dede; and he laye as he had smyled, and the swettest savour about hym that ever they felte" (Bk. XXI, 860). We can turn to the differences of situation between Launcelot and the other Round Table knights to identify the attributes which allowed for such an ideal death. The most important is that he is separated from the rest of the knightly community. Another significant attribute is his position within the Church. Because of the universal nature of the Church, its structure is less focused on any one way to act or live and more focused on the unique experiences of each believer as informed by a central value system. Launcelot's entire story is a sweeping narrative of exploration and experimentation—often done quietly and perhaps without an articulated sense of purpose. In this way, Launcelot is the ideal candidate for a more meaningful entry into the Church, as his

navigation between various groups allows for a deeper understanding of how they interact with each other and with himself. Although the Church is itself a community, it is one comprised of members who bring their own relationship to their God to create an environment that is as rich as it is connected. Therefore, the various experiences of the members are shared by the entire institution, thus comprising “the Body” of the Church. In this way, the Church requires the individual identity of its members whereas the Round Table can only encompass fragmented entities rather than individual identities.

I could end the section here, having illustrated the fundamental differences which allow the Church to flourish while the Round Table crumbles even though both use roughly the same design. There is one more aspect of Malory’s narrative which merits attention, however. Although Launcelot dies almost entirely alone, his death is still immediately connected to that of Elayne. Malory uses the same phrase for both of them: they “laye as (s)he had smyled,” which are the only two times that he uses this phrase. At the point of death, Malory makes one final link between the two, thus drawing attention to the importance of their relationship as an additional communal experience that extends event to their deaths. The most important fact of their relationship is that it did not get to flourish and grow: the demands of the Round Table left no room for a wife and family for Launcelot. Therefore, part of the connection between their relationship and their deaths is the fact that they did *not* have a fully established relationship— that this lack in some indirect way led to their dying. If the Round Table denies its men the capacity to pursue certain types of goals or pursuits, and if this denial is inherently connected to the deaths of Launcelot and Elayne, then one interpretation is that a different system with more room for the individual would have resulted in a much more positive outcome for

all the players involved. Had Launcelot been free to pursue a committed relationship with Elayne due to a much more flexible and lenient Round Table design, the tensions between the community and its fragmented entities would not have risen to the extent that it did—it might have allowed room for the medieval individual—and perhaps Arthur’s court could have survived a little longer.

### **Circling the Square**

Readers join the characters in a dramatic, dynamic, and oftentimes violent journey through conflicting groups, which in turn gives birth to the medieval individual. Once it has been established, the individual and the community often seem at odds with one another; Arthur’s materialistic system and the Church’s body of the faithful are two contrasting ways to address the question of how the individual and the community interact. Interplay between institutions, conflicting goals, tension between groups, and the navigation of various endeavors each drive the plot of *Le Morte Darthur* through one generation of knights within Arthur’s court. Greimas’s semiotic square illustrates these various relationships in a clear visual “mapping”; considering the story through the structure of the square helps to highlight some of the subtle nuances of Malory’s text. That being said, such a dynamic story does not consistently fit within such a framework, and reconstructing Greimas’s tool eventually seems necessary in order to continue an analysis of the book. Inspired by the various similarities between Tristram and Balin as well as Launcelot’s journey through each of the entries on the square, I propose that one strategy is to turn Greimas’s square into a circle.

The square offers a clear—and “logical”—visualization of the ways that the four points interact and stand at odds with one another, but it does not lend itself to an interpretation of fluidity or inherent connection and, I am arguing, medieval individualism. This, then, is what Malory might teach to semiotics: to circle the square drastically changes some of the natural implications of how the different entities interact within the story, concluding with the overall revelation that each point works with all the rest in both a collaborative as well as a contrasting manner: the oneness that is inherently connected to the infinite. For this section, I will briefly go back over the entries of my original semiotic square, illustrating how *Le Morte Darthur* uncovers the differing interactions between each and thus suggesting why circling the square leads to deeper understanding.

To begin, the Medieval individual stands in contrast to the hermetic community in that the existence of the individual necessitates interaction with various communities, which are definitionally going to have different goals. That being said, if the Medieval individual emerges from the maneuvering through those groups, then the communities (hermetic or not) must exist first. Even the ways in which the individual entity and the community are in conflict with one another subtly suggests a level of cooperation because both must be existing simultaneously for any level of tension to occur. A circle offers an excellent visualization of such a relationship because of the infinite points between any two points— innumerable spaces for possibility and discovery. For the relationship that the Medieval individual shares with the community, it is senseless to try to separate the two because one implies the other. We see this in the ways that Sir Tristram’s individualistic escapades mirror the communities that he tries to avoid. He could not



become a Medieval individual without communities to rebel against; if the discovery or creation of the individual is contingent on differing groups, then the way to discover oneself is to interact with those circles in an active and conscious manner. In fact, the self-contained individual may be more immersed in community than one who does not pursue such an identity. Regardless, if we position community on a semiotic circle, the individual fills the spaces surrounding and within the point of community in such a way that both are equally present within the shape itself. They are present in their own points as well as in each other's because they inherently suggest one another.

Indeed, my discussion of the individual positioned on the circle has already unavoidably included the community, but there are additional points that I would like to make about the community itself. To begin, we can ask whether or not a hermetic community, situated within a vacuum, would consist of various individuals. Using my definition of the Medieval individual, the answer would have to be no. That being said, a community within a vacuum has no presence within reality, and in contrast, the existence of one community immediately implies the existence of another (creating a border necessitates the space beyond the border) which in turn implies the awakening of the individual. Sir Balin's fixation on the Round Table creates for him an imagined image of Arthur, which in turn gives rise to the individual Balin through his using of this image to navigate through the world outside of court. Furthermore, once the individual has arisen in the spaces between groups, one can begin to see sub-communities develop within the greater community itself. For example, Mordred and Agravayne's conception of Arthur stands in conflict to Gawain's, which creates dissention within the court. In mixing their individual identities with the internalization of the community, a new community begins

to grow. It is reliant on the existence of the Round Table, yet apparently mutually exclusive to the Round Table as it exists at that moment in time. Once again, we see a collaboration and contrast which does not come through on a square but does resemble the points of a circle.

Shifting to the third entry, I wish to focus more on the Church's relationship with materialism, given that I have already established how the Church requires both the Medieval individual and the community to exist. So far, I have described the spiritual pursuit inherent within the community of the faithful, but in its structure, the Church itself navigates between the physical and the spiritual: it is an *institutional manifestation* of Medieval individualism. We see this language reflected in religious description such as "the Body of the faithful." Moreover, the Church is the home of various physical artifacts and tools which aid in study or worship. The Grail, the holy lance, and mystical blood are each good examples of the tactile, visible products of the Church in *Le Morte Darthur*. As soon as the Church incorporates members, rituals, and practice, it becomes inseparable from the material and is instead an embodied institution. Launcelot serves as an expression of this dynamic when we include his whole person, complete with past sins and current insufficiencies, in our consideration of him as a member of the faithful. Perhaps the Church is the entry on the semiotic square that most requires a reworking of the tool. Often made notable by its absence from the story as opposed to its incorporation, yet inherently implied by the very structure of Arthur's court (and thus present wherever Arthur's influence extends,) we find the Church woven into every aspect of the story. Once more, a circle better implies such a relationship.

Finally, materialism too eventually extends beyond the limitations found in the structure of Greimas' interpretive tool. If the Church is the physical manifestation of spiritual belief, materialism is applying spiritual or abstract belief to the physical. To adopt a materialistic worldview is to adopt the values and attitudes that immediately emerge as well. Materialism includes ritual, devotion, and belief. Arthur may be a leader focused almost entirely on secular pursuit, but his connection to the Round Table is clearly a matter of religious fervor. Because Arthur cannot or will not separate himself from his court in any significant way, what would have directed him toward the spiritual is instead directed to the physical world—his hermetic community. If the Church incorporates and cooperates with every other entry on the semiotic square, as an example of Medieval individualism, then Arthur's materialism must also do the same. Moreover, if materialism and the Church are in inherent communication with each other, they are also in communication with each other's various connections to the other entries, thus creating an infinite feedback loop only contained within the framework of a circle.

Greimas's semiotic square provides an excellent foundation for considering *Le Morte Darthur* as a series of relationships, conflicts, and interactions. It inspires questions conducive for deeper interpretation while revealing underlying connections between the people, groups, or events involved. That being said, its very structure suggests a certain interpretation and one that is not necessarily the most illuminative. In beginning by using the square to read the text, one can then analyze the resulting reading experience and make adaptations accordingly. Indeed, one must "circle back" to the beginning after engaging in the initial experience of encountering the text, thus already suggesting the solution to the problems of developing interpretation. Having embarked on an exercise

of immersion and interpretation of *Le Morte Darthur* using Greimas's semiotic square as the guiding principle to inform my procedure, I have come to the conclusion that beyond a certain point, it is too limited in its capabilities and that a circle would make for the dynamic and complex tool demanded by such an involved text—and, indeed, such complex phenomena as Medieval individuals and communities.

The square provides an effective example of how different topics are in contrast, but a circle indicates a wholeness that cannot be reduced to distinct parts. That being said, a circle is also comprised of an infinite number of points, which suggests a heightened level of possibility in regard to the number of components that create the narrative as a whole. One might worry that a semiotic circle would suggest that any interpretation could fit within the infinite number of points that make up the shape, but a circle is inherently exclusive: the border indicates an inside as well as an outside in such a way that one must be thoughtful in what they attach to its formation. The Round Table is also an exclusive institution—a community comprised of one hundred and fifty knights—but so too is the Medieval individual who is comprised of various groups, connections, and relationships. Considering the mutually dependent nature between the Medieval individual and the community, as well as the added complication of how materialism and spirituality further influence Malory's main actors, *Le Morte Darthur* appeals for a more dynamic instrument for interpretation than the semiotic square. The Square serves as an effective tool for inspiration or directing research questions; it was one of the starting points for my own work and many of the connections that I made were in large part due to the visual aid of the semiotic square. Yet much like the occurrences of Malory's book, the changing nature of inquiry requires a formula for guidance which can evolve to address the various levels

of analysis. Indeed, perhaps the Semiotic Circle will one day supersede a Semiotic Sphere, although that is beyond the realm of my own research questions.

Through an intensive exploration of a broad cast of characters through the span of one lifetime, *Le Morte Darthur* illustrates some of the more nuanced connections between the institutions, values, and mindsets that make up Arthur's court and, more widely, the Medieval mindset. Using Greimas's semiotic square has allowed me to better direct my own research into Malory's analysis, which in turn revealed a list of four groups or ideas that work together to build the foundation of the story: the Medieval individual, the Community (hermetic and not), the Church, and the Material. Using the square, readers can identify how these entries are in communication; the individual emerges from the community, the Church encompasses both, and materialism initially seems a denial of community and the spiritual. Yet eventually it becomes clear that these relationships are not quite so simple and, while partially accurate, they do not tell the entire story.

Within communities, we find individuals forming new communities that are simultaneously reliant upon and exclusive of the greater group. Similarly, we find that the seeming self-contained individual should be more involved, not less, with different communities because it is through cooperation and navigation that the individual occurs. The Church, meanwhile, embraces a more dynamic and whole person than one might initially expect because it too is an institution comprised of changing members—not just those who are holy in a specific, limited instance. Therefore, Church members are beings situated throughout time, thus including their various communities and resulting identity as individuals. This is partially what is meant when describing the Church as a “body”: it is inherently connected to the spatial and temporal as a physical manifestation of

Medieval individualism. Finally, the materialism of the court cannot be entirely contained by the physical, secular world; Arthur, for example, uses the Church as a model for his own system and he attaches an almost religious fervor to his own hermetic community.

In a similar manner to the mutual influence that community and the Medieval individual place on each other, using Greimas's semiotic square to analyze *Le Morte Darthur* also results in revelations about the square as a tool. Through my analysis, I have explored the ways that the square has illuminated my own pursuit, but also the ways in which it is limited in its scope. Although my own work has only scraped the surface of what such tools can offer to the field of structural analysis, one clear indication is that the time is right to incorporate more elements into the square: to multiply its surface, to reveal a circle. Through an emphasis on fluidity, wholeness, and motion as elements of higher definition interpretation, one can take a lesson from the various knights of the Round Table and apply those conclusions on the semiotic square. In short, we can recognize the tool as an excellent starting point, but also accept that it cannot address the complicated and dynamic nature of texts such as *Le Morte Darthur*, similar to how the Round Table suggests that stagnancy in a hermetic community fails to adequately respond to an ever-changing world.

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