

Sir Mordred the Traitor

Mordred has always been associated with the legend of Arthur in some way or another. He has not always been an Orkney, though, nor has he always been totally evil. When he betrays King Arthur, it is always through Guinevere--using either his own adultery with her or using Lancelot's.

A picture from the Camelot Page of "Sir Mordred the Traitor".

Another neat picture--of the "Combat of Mordred and King Arthur"

You can find more Mordred art at our own Arthurian Art Gallery.

Unless otherwise noted, all information is drawn from *The Romance of Arthur: an Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*

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The Early Mordred

One of his first appearances in Arthurian Legend is as a man named Medraut, in the *Annals of Cambria*, which was supposedly written in the early 10th century. He fought in the terrible Battle of Camlann with Arthur in 539 A.D., though it is not clear whose side he was on. Both Arthur and Medraut were killed.

In the 54th triad of the *Triads of the Isle of Britain*, a Welsh document, we see a hint of Mordred's adultery with Guinevere, as well as Arthur's consequent revenge:

"Three Unbridled Ravagings of Britain: The first of them, when Medrawd came to Arthur's court in Celli Wig in Cornwall; he left neither food nor drink in the court he did not consume, and he also pulled Gwenhwyfar out of her chair of her state, and then he struck a blow upon her. And the second Unbridled Ravaging, when Arthur came to Medrawd's court; he left neither food nor drink in either the court or the cantref [district]. And the third Unbridled Ravaging, when Aeddan the Treacherous came as far as Dumbarton to the court of Rhydderch the Generous, and he left neither food nor drink nor animal alive."

Mordred in Geoffrey of Monmouth

In Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, Mordred is even more familiar to us. He is the brother of Gawain; their parents are Arthur's sister and King Loth, King of Norway (the Orkneys are ruled by Gunvasius at this point). When Arthur and his vassals go off to war against the Romans under Lucius, Arthur makes the mistake of leaving the kingdom in the care of Guinevere and his nephew Modred. Before long, Modred has taken the crown and the queen of Britain for his own: "it was announced to [Arthur] that his nephew Modred, to whose guardianship he had entrusted Britain, was wearing its crown in tyranny and treachery, and that Queen Guinevere, having broken the oath of her prior nuptials, had been joined to him in unconscionable lust. Geoffrey of Monmouth will not speak of this, my noble duke" (91). He goes on to describe the allies Modred had treacherously won, especially the clans of the north who hated Arthur.

After a great battle, Modred's army is put to flight, and Arthur pursues it. Guinevere hears of this and flees to a nunnery (the story should be starting to sound familiar). Arthur is not a wimpy cuckold in Geoffrey of Monmouth; he humiliates Modred in battle, chasing him down until the final battle, where Modred falls. The rebel allies do not flee in despair, however; Geoffrey generously gives them the glory of a last stand. Arthur is mortally wounded, and he goes to Avalon to be healed.

Mordred in Layamon's Brut

Layamon's Brut conveys the pain that Arthur felt at the betrayal of Mordred, and the narrative sometimes reads like a chorus echoing Arthur's sentiments. He has dreams foreshadowing the disaster, and when he hears of Mordred's treachery, he responds with despair and anger.

It is interesting to note that Arthur and Gawain are much less lenient and much more powerful than they are in later centuries-- there is no pathetic hope of a Lancelot to come rescue Guinevere from the stake, no powerlessness in the face of one's own law. Arthur abandons the war against Lucius and goes back to "kill cunning Mordred and torch the queen / And destroy all those who are tied to this treason" (14,065-66). Walwain (Gawain) also is angry; he insists on pulling her to pieces.

The queen is also portrayed differently here than in later centuries. She is indeed a traitress against King Arthur, for Mordred has become her "dearest consort." She even counsels him against the king. In later versions of the tale, her guilt in this instance is partially cleared by the fact that Mordred tells her that the king is dead. Here, she is just as blameworthy as Mordred.

The war between Arthur and Mordred is terrible, but it gives Layamon an opportunity to show how wicked Mordred is, having the traitor sneak away from his own supporters so as to stall Arthur's finding him and leaving them to be needlessly killed by Arthur. The queen hears of Arthur's fierce onslaughts, and predictably steals away and takes holy orders. Arthur, the "angriest of kings," hunts Mordred down and kills him and all his cowering companies. Arthur's valorous life is cut short by fifteen terrible wounds, but Merlin the magician prophesies that he will be healed and return to Britain.

Mordred in the Alliterative Morte Arthure

The anonymous author of the Alliterative Morte Arthure takes as much pleasure in demonizing Mordred as Layamon did. He betrays the king, taking his castles, his crown and his wife. Arthur does battle with him just as in the other stories. Mordred is proud and insolent in his new-found power, which enrages Gawain and Arthur. Gawain, who throughout the ages is hot-tempered and fierce both with words and with weapons, curses and pursues Mordred ruthlessly. The author recounts much of Gawain's heroic fight with Mordred, but with Mordred's sly stroke of a knife, the brave Gawain meets his end.

At this point, Mordred has a rare moment of remorse; he stands up and declares how wonderful Gawain was as a knight--bold, blessed, humble, lordly and well-praised. Mordred breaks down in tears and bewails the fate that made him cause such a tragedy--to kill his own kinsman and one of Arthur's best knights. He rides off remembering the glories of the Round Table which he has destroyed; "he railed and he rued all his ruinous works" (3894). But this is the only time we see Mordred in a sympathetic light. There is no begging for Arthur's forgiveness, no manifestation of repentance to the people he hurt. Arthur refuses to give up the fight until Mordred is dead. They kill each other, and thus ends the reign of Arthur and his nephew Mordred.

Mordred in Malory's Morte Darthur

In Malory's Morte Darthur, Merlin prophesies Mordred's birth. Arthur and his sister are his parents. To hide the shame of incest, Arthur tries to kill Mordred by sending every baby born on May-day out to sea. The babies all drowned except for Mordred, for a good man saved him and took care of him until fourteen years later, when it was time to present him to the court. This little story appears at the very beginning of Arthur's reign, giving Mordred an understandable reason to hate Arthur.

He becomes a knight and goes out and jousts with other knights from time to time, but he is usually defeated soundly. Other knights do not love him; it is often only for Gawaine's sake that they spare him. Once Dinadan rescues Mordred and Agravaine from Sir Breuse Sance Pitie, but they end up fighting about Lamorak, and Dinadan knocks them both down again. Later on, Agravaine and Mordred kill him "cowardly and feloniously" while he is on the Grail Quest.

Mordred is also capable of nasty tricks on other knights. On one occasion, he takes

advantage of Sir Alisander, leading him about on horseback while the poor knight is gazing on his lady and not paying attention to anything else. A damsel arms herself and gives him a great blow to shake him back to his senses, and when Alisander realizes how Mordred would have shamed him, he is angry that he let Mordred escape. But Mordred's reputation as a false knight is growing.

In Camelot, he is about as popular as Sir Kay; they both love to mock and scorn new knights. Sir Percivale, as he is out on a quest, sends a bitter message to them, saying that he hopes someday to be as worthy as either of them, that he will never forget how they treated him when he was knighted, and he will someday return to Camelot when he has more glory than either of them. The messenger twists the message into flattery, but Kay's and Mordred's response is still mocking--Percivale will never be a good knight.

He is seen as somewhat of a spy--crafty and very shrewd. He is not an open rebel, for his personality is not strong, but his hatred is deep. He maliciously and cunningly destroys the dream of Camelot and his father Arthur through the two people Arthur loves best: Lancelot and Guinevere.

Lancelot and Guinevere know that the court is aware of their love, and they also know that Mordred and Agravaine are just biding their time. These two can do great damage to the Queen's reputation, so Lancelot tries to find a way to protect it without compromising their love. Of course, what happens afterwards is the famous story of the Death of Arthur, in which Mordred and Agravaine lay a trap for Lancelot and Guinevere. Gawaine had not wanted them to, for not only was Lancelot an excellent knight, and not only had he rescued Mordred and Agravaine, but also he knew that this act of betrayal would destroy the Round Table. Despite his opposition, they force Arthur to help them catch the adulterers.

While Arthur is away hunting, Lancelot goes to visit the queen. Mordred and his band of twelve Scottish knights catches him there, and Lancelot, though initially unarmed, kills all but Mordred. Agravaine and two of Gawaine's sons meet their deaths here. Mordred immediately goes to find the king, who has no choice but to burn her at the stake for her treason.

Guinevere is taken to the stake, and as Gawaine and Arthur had predicted previously, Lancelot comes to her rescue, and he accidentally kills Gareth and Gaheris. Sir Gawaine, who loved them dearly, especially Gareth, is inconsolable. Mordred eggs him on in his desire for revenge. Arthur cannot get out of it; the law demands that the Lancelot and the queen pay with their lives.

Mordred is set up as regent and given charge of the king's lands and household while the king and his knights are away besieging Lancelot. Even the queen is put under Mordred's authority. But Mordred sets up a Parliament and gets himself

crowned king. He desires to marry Guinevere, though he acknowledges that she is his father's wife. He has some letters made as if they were from the battlefield, saying that Arthur was dead. Guinevere, faithful queen that she is, speaks fair to Mordred and then tricks him into letting her go to London, where she shuts herself up into Tower of London and defends herself.

Mordred, in the most unknighly fashion, uses cannon on his enemies, even on Guinevere's fortress. A bishop warned him against committing the crimes he sought to commit, including the false story of Arthur's death, his desire to marry his uncle's and father's wife, and his shameful conduct as a knight. Mordred disregards the old bishop, who proceeds to place the curse of the church on him, whereupon Mordred seeks the bishop's life.

When Arthur hears of the mischief at home, he comes back to set everything straight. Mordred somehow gets the people to believe that with Arthur everything is war, but with him, all is joy and bliss. So the nobility turns to Mordred--"the people were so new fangle," observes Malory (475).

In the first battle between Arthur and Mordred, Mordred's army is put to flight. Arthur discovers Gawaine nearly dead. Gawaine, with what strength he has left, writes a letter to Lancelot informing him of his death and asking him to come help Arthur take Mordred off the throne.

At the final scene between Arthur and Mordred, the two armies agree to have a parley. Each warns his armies not to trust the other; if they see any sword drawn, they must rush forward to help. Unfortunately, one of the soldiers is stung by an adder, and when he draws his sword to kill it, the armies see it and rush at each other. The fight lasts all day, and all of Arthur's faithful knights are killed. Arthur, when he finds Mordred, kills him, but not before he himself receives his tragic death-wound.

Guinevere, when she hears of their deaths, repents of all she did to undo Arthur and takes holy orders. Lancelot receives Gawaine's letter and comes to help, but finds both Arthur and Mordred dead.

Mordred the traitor is dead, but so is the Round Table, and nothing can be done to bring it back. Lancelot and Guinevere die in grief, and that is how Malory's tale ends.

Mordred as Shadow

Charlotte Spivack and Roberta Lynne Staples see Mordred not as an evil villain, but as the Trickster figure, and at worst, the Shadow of Arthur. He becomes more complex when he represents a psychological aspect of Arthur. I am not sure about this idea, but it's an interesting one. Here it is, for what it's worth. See *The Company of Camelot* for a complete development of

Staples and Spivack's ideas.

A shadow is, as LeGuin says, "the other side of our psyche, the dark brother of the conscious mind. It is Cain, Caliban, Frankenstein's monster, Mr. Hyde . . . it is the serpent, Lucifer. The shadow stands on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious mind, and we meet it in our dreams, as sister, brother, friend, beast, monster, enemy, guide. It is all we don't want to, can't admit into our conscious self, and the qualities and tendencies within us which have been repressed, denied, or not used" (qtd. in Spivack 115). It is not evil, but it can only unmake. It is the animal side of human nature.

Not only is Mordred the product of incest (certainly a part of the dark side of Arthur's nature), but he seeks another incestuous relationship with Arthur's wife. He is filled with a hatred that Malory never really accounts for. He is malicious and vicious, yet without the rationale that the conscious mind would require. Though he does have reasons to desire revenge, the impetus to merely destroy is powerful in him. Nowadays, Arthurian authors are beginning to give him the benefit of the doubt, yet all through the ages, Mordred has been presented as pure malice and viciousness. Arthur refuses to acknowledge Mordred, for he cannot face him. In the end, Arthur does not get rid of Mordred permanently; instead, they kill each other. Without the Shadow, a person has only two dimensions, and that is why, figuratively speaking, Arthur and Mordred could not exist apart from each other.

A vindication of Mordred? Can it be possible?

Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Take a look at Tyagi Nagasiva's essay and collection of quotes about Mordred" [The Case of Sir Mordred: Research/Comment.](#)

Pictures taken from:

Hatherell, William. The Battle between King Arthur and Sir Mordred., rpt. in David Day, *The Search for King Arthur* (Novara: Facts on File, 1995) 137.

Woodcut from Aubrey Beardsley, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (London, late 19th century), rpt. in Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (Avenel: Gramercy Books, 1995) 261.

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