PROMISES KEPT AND BROKEN – THE POWER OF A SPOKEN WORD IN THE CHIVALRIC WORLD OF *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

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ABSTRACT

The article demonstrates the performative character of chivalric culture portrayed in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur.* I refrain, however, from the investigation of all explicit forms of theatricality, in favour of a closer and more detailed look at the socially constructive nature of knights' linguistic behaviour and its bearing upon character portrayal. My research is based on J. L. Austin's model of speech act theory centred upon illocutionary expressions invested with executive power by socio-historical dynamics of conventional interaction. There are some points of convergence between Austin's and medieval views on oaths. For Austin these declarative utterances generate communal reality, and in the Middle Ages an oath was regarded as a verbal act activating the reality of a moral commitment, existing independently of an individual. Austin's reasoning about social and conventional character of speech acts also seems to be close to St. Augustine's description of human language, in which the validity of a word's meaning was supposed to depend on common consent. Additionally, in Austin's model as much as in earlier Augustian delineation, the effect of public utterances depends upon felicity determined by a character's intention. The contemporary approach has been adopted in this study of *Le Morte Darthur* because it provides convenient analytical tools, which help to scrutinise the implications of perfomative language for which Malory's work reveals the predilection. The power of an oath to establish social reality is demonstrated in this article on the example of the Pentecostal oath, shown as a potent mechanism, which brings into existence the fellowship of the Round Table knights and determines their identity, channelling the knightly energy towards socially desirable ends. The ties consolidating Arthurian community are also engendered in *Le Morte Darthur* by more personal declarations that the individual knights make, such as pledges of loyalty, promises of help and friendship or the acts of yielding oneself to a mightier opponent. At the same time the ability or inability of keeping one's word may also be indicative of a degree to which a knight adheres to the chivalric pattern. Consequently, speech acts produced by the knights of the Round Table not only construct Arthur's world but also help Malory to encode in his work the entire typology of chivalric behaviour.

The world of late medieval England was saturated with the idea of public spectacle evident in the ritualised and ceremonial forms of civic and courtly culture. Processions, biblical pageants, magnificent royal entries as well as the colour and splendour of chivalric customs and rites clearly marked the dominant expressive mood of this culture described by James J. Paxon as "a self-constituting, performed social process ... interdependent with textual modes of cognition" (Paxon 1998: 2). In this publicly oriented world every utterance could be invested with ideological depth and function as a social act. A promise or an oath, due to its role as the structuring element of feudal chivalry and due to its fully formalised structure, is an explicit example of such a social deed operating in the context of medieval performativities.

As historical records prove fourteenth and fifteenth century vows taken in connection with tournaments or feats of arms in real war could be very fanciful, sworn upon a bird or accompanied by the adoption of a golden chain or other conspicuous signs of a binding promise, creating, thus, public spectacle intended as a display of chivalric values (Keen 1984: 212). Although the oaths of Malory's knights do not seem to be so extravagant, they also generate a dramatic effect attributable to their performative nature. This means that their utterance is aimed at the achievement of a particular public effect – consolidation of the chivalric community and the assertion of knightly virtue. They construct the chivalric culture in which sworn loyalties have to be adhered to in the name of God and earthly honour. Additionally, owing to their public role in the social texture of mutually binding commitments, word bonds, as Jefferson (1993: 177) observes in her study of *Prose Lancelot*, may provide a ground for the portrayal of individual characters as well as inter-relations between them. Malory apparently also makes use of the narrative potential of the word bond motif, frequently depicting the act of promise making and endowing it with ideological implications facilitating characters' delineation and their comparative evaluation. At the same time a promise does not only operate in *Le Morte Darthur* as a textual device encoding character features but also functions within the narrative world as an element of the code of chivalric behaviour a knight may exploit in his pursuit of worship. The performative character of a promise in Malory's Arthuriad is thus manifested not only in its capability of shaping the structure of the chivalric world but also in its involvement in character self-fashioning.

As it is commonly known, a word as a bond functioned in European feudal society as its master code, regulating the transmission of power and property, guaranteeing political alliance and continuity of power. Various forms of the pledged word, like the pledge of allegiance or betrothal could enforce political and sexual fidelity essential in the culture which was both patriarchal and patrilineal (Canfield 1989: xi-xiv). The chivalric code of the word with its prerequisite values of loyalty, constancy, and trust performed a reasserting and pro-

tective function towards this social order and, hence, defined the transgressors as traitors posing a threat to the existence of the whole community.

The social and political significance of word bonds was further enhanced by their ethical and religious dimension. It is worth noting that if secular law could be concerned with the consequences of oath taking, the validity and interpretation of an oath belonged to the jurisdiction of the Church. According to Aquinas' definition, an oath was an act of will, whose interpretation depended on the primary intention underlying its utterance. Hence, even if vows and solemn oaths were given precedence over simple promises, each given word actually constituted an obligation in God's eyes (Jefferson 1993: 30).[1] The official Church policy permitted Christians to swear, although with moderation, and the licit oaths usually invoked God, the Virgin or the Saints. St. Augustine and medieval texts of cannon law regarded the violation of a given word as a perjury, subjecting the transgressor to divine wrath. Consequently, the structural bond of the feudal society, the act of fealty, in the same way as all other oaths, involved not only its primary obligation (in this case that of loyalty and service) but also a very serious moral commitment (Jefferson 1993: 73).[2] Fidelity to a given word was, therefore, considered the highest virtue. The difficulties arising from the confrontation of moral absolutes with practice were not only the object of concern for medieval theologians but, in the literary world, equipped the medieval writer with a useful context within which the characters could be compared, contrasted and measured against one another.

Medieval views of word bonds must be taken into consideration, if the interpretation of a character's behaviour related to an act of promise making is to claim credibility. Still, the performative power of an oath, a vow, or a promise can be better appreciated, if we simultaneously look at these word bonds also

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[1] Lisa Jefferson investigates twelfth-century Latin texts of cannon law, thirteenth-century Latin texts of secular legists, like Beumanoir, Blanot, Durandus, Baldus's fourteenth century text feudal law, as well as thirteenth- and fourteenth-century customaries in relation to the thirteenth debate among legal writers and theologians about regulatory procedures allowing communities to manage the conflicts of interests resulting from the multiple use of oaths as well as about an individual's moral condition.

[2] The breech of a bond was permissible only if a higher moral imperative overrode an individual loyalty, or the person, one was bound to, committed or contemplated a crime against God, such as murder, felony or treason. Even then, however, the penance was to be exacted and paid (Jefferson 1993: 61, 79). In the case of potentially dangerous oaths which did not contain any conditional clauses and as such could involve the oath taker in a conflict of loyalties, the legal texts and confessional manuals of the thirteenth century allowed their invalidation, either if they committed the perpetrator to an illicit act or if the tacit, unexpressed conditions accompanying the vow were accepted (Jefferson 1933: 164). The undesirability of the fulfilment of a given promise could excuse the perpetrator from an earthly task, nevertheless, the burden of perjury had to be shouldered and the divine punishment expected.

from the perspective of J. L. Austin's contemporary model of speech act theory.[3] The adoption of a contemporary approach in this study of *Le Morte Darthur* seems excusable because in both Austin's modern model of analysis as much as in the earlier Augustian delineation the effect of a promise depends upon felicity determined by a character's intention. The idea of intentionality is particularly conspicuous in St. Augustine's theory of the free will, in which he asserts that although God is the origin of everything, all evil acts are initiated by man (Colish 1997: 31). Moreover, the basic purpose of language, according to Augustine is to reflect human intentions honestly (Rudd 1994: 11). There are, however, more points of convergence between Austin's understanding of overtly declarative utterances and the medieval views on an oath, a verbal act activating the reality of a moral commitment, which once sworn began its independent existence outside human jurisdiction. Austin's theory of performative utterances helped to abolish the conventional opposition between words and things as well as between language and society. According to his analysis, community endows an individual's words with the potency to enact social reality by means of a commonly recognised convention (Austin 1962: 14). The medieval oath, though ultimately directed to God, was also fully conventionalised by society, which recognised it as a promise, if given formulaic phrases were used and a licit guarantor (God, the Virgin, the Saints) invoked. Additionally, Austin's reasoning about social and conventional character of speech acts seems to be very close to St. Augustine's description of human language, in which the validity of a word's meaning was supposed to depend on common consent, and which, therefore, was not only a physical phenomenon but also, and perhaps primarily, the effect of the social contract (Rudd 1994: 10).

Austin's theory of speech-acts assumes that the illocutionary force of such utterances is a combination of language and social practice.[4] Sandy Petrey further elaborates on Austin's assumptions: "Performative language not only derives from but also establishes communal reality and institutional solidity ... Like the acts named by performative verbs communities are within and outside

language simultaneously. When words do things, they actualise their users as well as their meaning" (Petrey 1990: 21). This is a vital aspect of Austin's theory which throws light upon the way promises, and especially the oath of knighthood, create the reality of chivalric culture in *Le Morte Darthur*. The Pentecostal oath, which Malory's knights swear on the occasion of the foundation of the Round Table defines the code of chivalry a knight is compelled to adhere to, if he wants to win worship:

> ... than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir morthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and yonge. And every yere so were the[y] sworne at the high feste of Pentecoste (*The works*: 120).

The oath of knighthood, rendered by Malory, compels the Round Table knights to avoid crime, the use of brute force and deceit, and imposes upon them the duty of defending the weakest, thus clearly binding the knightly profession to the social policy of the preservation of the welfare of the whole society. The social dimension of this oath is consistent with the late medieval opinion that knighthood served the common good, expressed in John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, Caxton's *Book of the ordre of chyvalry*, or in the actual fifteenth-century oath of the knights of Bath (Benson 1976: 149). The role of the Pentecostal oath is, however, not only prescriptive but also, and perhaps within Malory's narrative primarily, generative. It actively structures the figures of individual knights, who on swearing it adopt a pre-determined model of behaviour. What is more important, by committing all Arthur's knights to a common cause, it creates a community sharing the same code of moral superiority and constructs consolidating bonds of allegiance (McCarthy 1988: 80). Being collectively sworn, it brings into existence the fellowship of the Round Table.

The integrative power is not, however, limited only to the Pentecostal oath, the major oath of Arthurian knighthood, but can also be detected in other acts of public declarations. The impact of these may then extend over a smaller number of knights but their performative and solidifying effect is no less conspicuous. An example of such an oath may be found at the end of *The quest of the Holy Grail*, when Launcelot and sir Bors are pledged to friendship and mutual company for the rest of their lives:

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[3] Paul Strohm, basing his reasoning on practice theory, encourages such enlargement of the analysis circle to combine objects and experiences that were thought previously as having little in common, and he explains that a theory should be treated only as "an analytical vantage point too powerful and versatile fully to be contained or exhausted by any one discipline or field of study" (Strohm 2000: 34).

[4] The idea of a word as not only a means of communication but an active creative power goes back to the well-known opening of St. John's Gospel: "In principio erat Verbum", determining both the concept of the creative word as well as its divine nature, which led to the understanding of speech as a God-given resource, the abuse of which was delegated by St. Augustine to the area of sin (Rudd 1994: 11). Although Austin's theory of linguistic performance is devoid of this religious aspect, it does not presuppose a less significant impact of language on reality. His idea of the creative power of language focuses, however, mostly on the socially conventionalised forms of the first person declaratives.

'Cousyn, ye ar ryght wellcom to me! For [all that ever I may do for you and for yours, ye shall fynde my poure body redy atte all tymes whyle the spyryte is in hit, and that I promyse you feythfully, and never to fayle. And wete ye well, gentyl cousyn sir Bors,] ye and I shall never departe in sundir whylis oure lyvys may laste.'
'Sir,' seyde he, 'as ye woll, so woll I'   (*The works*: 1037)

This promise establishes a bond, implying mutual trust, essential as medieval evidence shows, to friendship and kinship.[5] Creating a guarantee of mutual assistance, the promise acquires an instrumental dimension of a tool performing a specific social function. Still, its affective quality also surfaces as it engenders not only a practical but also spiritual bond.

Apart, however, from its integrative function, each oath, and the oath of knighthood in particular, also provides a benchmark against which the moral value of each knight might be measured. The significance of a promise as a testing ground for chivalric virtue becomes clearer when one considers the implications of Austin's theory of performatives within the context of the medieval philosophy of the world. A promise as a speech act capable of generating reality can be felicitious, according to Austin, only if uttered publicly and, therefore, acknowledged by an audience. Hence, by its very nature a promise is a shared act, affecting more than one individual, and establishing a social bond. What provides a link between the social nature of a promise and its popularity as a measure of a character's value is the emphasis in medieval literature on a human being's conduct within established relationships rather than on his individual achievement. This kind of assessment of an individual might be considered as a derivative of the medieval understanding of the world as a hierarchical structure, in which the human world is bound to seek celestial harmony. In this context the preservation of social relationships, as Medcalf (1981: 58) observes, gains primary significance, since they constitute the most effective guarantee of stability and accord, reminiscent of heavenly peace.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the violation of every oath, but especially the oath of knighthood, aimed at establishing social order and restraining violence, brands the perpetrator with a stain of shame and excludes him from the company of worshipful knights. Sir Perys de Foreste Savage, who kept robbing and distressing ladies, is punished by Launcelot,[6] who cleaves his head in two. Launcelot's punitive behaviour occasioned by a lady's complaint is preceded by his outright expression of disapproval: "What? Is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravysher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of Knyghthode, and contrary unto his oth. Hit is pyte that he lyvyth" (*The works*: 269). Failure to live up to the ideal of keeping a given word results in a loss of honour, incurs shame and often also death. If the transgressor is not killed, he is at least publicly discredited. Sir Pedyvere, having treacherously slain a lady escorted by Launcelot, is brought by him to Camelot, where Gwenyver commands him to make a pilgrimage to Rome, carrying the dead body with him as a token of his shame. The reprehensible behaviour has to be rightfully censured, since shame of the false affects the whole community, as it is evident in Gwenyver's reproach to her kidnapper, Meliagaunt: "Thou shamyst all knyghthode and thyselffe and me" (*The works*: 1122). The breach of the oath of knighthood at all times denotes a knight as a villain whether he is guilty, as in the instances mentioned above, of enforcing his will upon ladies, or of greed as it is the case with Mordred.

Those who transgress the knightly code and who, therefore, violate also the oath of knighthood pose a threat to social order. The danger might be, however, averted through another verbal act – that of yielding, which in a culture where might equals right, follows the inevitable defeat of the transgressor. The perilous knights Edwarde and Hew of the Red Castel, guilty of depriving Lady Le Rocher of her lands, are proved false by Ywain, who, responding to this lady's complaint, honourably fights against them, and ultimately sends them to yield to Arthur. A similar fate befalls the Duke of South Marches and his sons, who are defeated by Marhalt in the aftermath of their open declaration of hatred for Arthur and his knights. Malory describes this act of yielding in detail: "And so by their comunal assent [they] promysed to sir Marhaute never to be fooys unto kynge Arthure, and thereupon at Whytsonady next aftir to com, he and his sonnes, and there to putt them in the kynges grace" (*The works*: 174). Arthur's adversaries overcome by Launcelot are additionally obliged to yield to the queen, as it is the case with the three knights, who have shamefully attacked one man. Launcelot tells them:

'On Whytsonday nexte commynge go unto the courte of kynge Arthure, and there shall ye yelde unto queen Gwenyvere and putte you all three in hir grace and mercy... to be her presoners.'
'Sir,' they seyde, 'hit shall be done, by the feyth of oure bodyes, and we be men lyvyng.' And there they sware every knyght upon his swerde...
                                                (*The works*: 274)

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[5] Philippa Maddern in her study of the fifteenth century idea of friendship based on letter evidence and legal documents of late medieval Norfolk gentry suggests that it might be possible to dismantle a long standing dichotomy between the concept of modern emotional friendship and the idea of the past friendship as a contractual relationship based on material assistance. She emphasises the importance of pledged trust (both expedient and affective) in a network of supportive friendships growing in popularity at that time among immediate neighbours, very often not linked by any patronal connections. According to her: "though instrumentality was of prime importance in fifteenth century friendships, to assume polarity between instrumental and affective friendships seems unwarranted" (Maddern 1994: 113).

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[6] I follow the spelling of names adopted by E. Vinaver (ed.) in *The works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Those who represent a threat to the fellowship of knights are successfully re-integrated into this community through the power of a word bond (Canfield 1989: 180). Not only are the enemies overcome but also potential future assaults are prevented. The custom of the Round Table knights of binding those they have defeated with a promise to come to Camelot and yield to Arthur provides an additional context in which the performative power of a word equals and supplements that of a sword.

The oath of knighthood engenders and consolidates the fellowship of knights and sets up moral standards, whose violation threatens the reputation and the very existence of the chivalric community. Much as it affects the collective identity of the Round Table knights, it is not, however, the only oath in relation to which Malory's characters have to prove themselves. *Le Morte Darthur* abounds in a variety of individual promises, which even if they are not equally solemn, cannot be recognised as less binding either in the light of Austin's theory, according to which the convention of swearing determines obligation, or in the reasoning of medieval man, who like Aquinas believed in God's concern for each word given in public. Malory seems to share this conviction as he directs readers' evaluation of his characters, exposing their attitude towards the promises they make, and depicting the best of knights as actively establishing their reputation by taking vows whose demanding nature is supposed to increase their worship.

The author of *Le Morte Darthur* constructs the figure of king Arthur very favourably, anglicising and elevating him to the status of a rightful conqueror and emperor (Riddy 1996: 55-75). It is not surprising then that Malory also frequently emphasises Arthur's faith towards a given word. When Gwenyver faces death at the stake, Sir Bors encourages Launcelot to take the queen to Joyous Gard until the king's wrath fades, and then return her without fear that Arthur will betray him like Mark betrayed Tristram. Although the situation of both kings is comparable, "kynge Arthur and kynge Marke were never lyke of condicions, for there was never man that ever coude preve kynge Arthur untrew of hys promyse" (*The works*: 1173). Launcelot further enhances the aggrandisement of Arthur's figure when he explains to the Bysshop of Rochester his rejection of the Church's mediation in his confict with Arthur: "... full well I dare truste my lordys owne wrytyng and hys scale, for he was never shamed of hys promyse" (*The works*: 1195). Neither of these opinions can be mistaken, since, as Malory demonstrates, Arthur fulfils his promise to help Launcelot and his brothers against king Claudas. Also when manipulated by Morgane le Fay's enchantment into fighting against Accalon equipped with stolen Excalibur, Arthur keeps faith to his initial promise to fight "to the uttermuste", despite severe wounds, since it is "levir to dye with honour than to lyve with shame" (*The works*: 144). Malory's Arthur cherishes his faith to a promise and, thus, his honour, more than his life.

The ability to keep a given word is related to a character's loyalty, the primary virtue of a feudal society, exemplified in Malory's work most conspicuously by Gareth (Raff 1976: 110). Gwenyver is ready to believe all he says because "ever sytthen he was growyn he was feythfull and trew of his promyse" (*The works*: 340). He is also equally appreciated by Launcelot, to whom he shows exceptional loyalty of service, helping him in distress, even at the cost of changing sides at the Great Tournament. Gareth's fortitude in keeping his promise is also clearly validated when he fulfils his promise to Lynet and rescues her sister, Lyoness, from the Kynge of the Rede Londe, undaunted by Lynet's humiliating comments. As if following the advice of medieval penitential manuals, he keeps his word despite Lynet's sneering. The promise is thus a self-imposed test that both moulds his character and constructs his public role within his community.

The implications of keeping faith to a given word become, however, more complicated when we come to consider the figure of Launcelot, whom Beverly Kennedy (1995: 81) posits as a chief exponent of Malory's category of true knights, and who, by prayer, lifts the enchantment from Sir Urry, destined to be healed only by "the beste knyght of the worlde" (*The works*: 1146). He verifies his status as a true knight, fulfilling his promise to king Bagdemagus' daughter to support her father at the tournament against the Kinge of North Galys, or by keeping his word given to sir Bors to prove Gwenyver's innocence in the judicial duel in the episode of *The poisoned apple*, to mention but a few such situations. He declares the irrevocable status of the vow sworn by the Round Table knights to depart on the quest of the Holy Grail, but when during this quest he promises a hermit upon the faith of his body to avoid the queen's company, "as much as [he] may forbere" (*The works*: 897), he forgets about it, having returned from the quest.

The awkwardness of his affection for the queen is resolved by Malory also within the context of oath taking. As McCarthy rightly observes "wrongness or rightness are less important than loyalty, less important that the need to preserve honour by remaining faithful to one's promise to serve" (McCarthy 1988: 91). Having been helped by Gwenyver on the day of his knighting to regain his lost sword, and thus saved by her from shame, he "promyst her at that day ever to be her knyght in ryght othir in wronge" (*The works*: 1058). It is possible that his awareness of the promise of service given to the queen supplements in a crucial way the motivation resulting from his love for Gwenyver, when he volunteers to fight in the series of trials by battle in order to prove her innocence, however questionable his moral right to do so might be. Launcelot asserts his duty towards both Gwenyver and Arthur and unalterably conceives of himself as Arthur's champion. He maintains his ties of allegiance, and keeps the pledge of knightly service, even at the cost of his own defence, which is evident when he refuses to fight when confronted by Arthur and Gawain at the sige of Benwick,

following Gareth's death. It is only when his honour is directly questioned that he undertakes the challenge.

The apparent paradox of Launcelot's behaviour may result from the fact that the implications of promises in *Le Morte Darthur* are primarily social, delegated to the sphere of public virtue, rather than the matter of one's conscience. The gravity of the medieval belief in divine involvement might be sometimes inferred, but it is never explicit in Malory's work. A primary role of a promise in *Le Morte Darthur* is, therefore, to engender ties within the community. It is an actual fact, here and now, created and recognised by common understanding or convention, as Austin could frame it, which affects the life of an individual within the community and, thus, the community itself.

It is in the context of the vow as a social act that the knights who break a given word are delineated in Malory's work as a threat not only to the fellowship's honour but also as a threat to the existence of the chivalric community, whose structure is based upon a word bond. Mark, who is notorious with respect to breaking his promises, not only fails to do the required homage to Arthur, to whom Malory negatively compares him, but also betrays Tristram, who repeatedly risked his life to save Cornwall or Mark himself. Contrary to his promise to worship his faithful vassal in return for his service, Malory's Mark plots treacherously against Tristram, which creates a textual strategy freeing Tristram from his obligations towards him, and mitigating his love for Isolde. Mark's destructive conduct occasioned by his violation of promises is not, however, excused in any way and his villainous nature is highlighted in the act of Tristram's murder.

The analysis of character's portrayal in relation to the mechanisms of oath taking also posits Gawain in an unfavourable light. His condemnation is not as straightforward as Mark's, since he is also praised for his valour and portrayed as making amends before his death, and even after, when he visits Arthur in his dream to deliver a warning. The quest of adventure undertaken with Ywain and Marhalt places, however, his honour in question. Unlike the other two knights who successfully complete their adventures, living up to the expectations created by their oath of knighthood, Gawain proves a false knight, who consciously breaks a promise given to sir Pellas. Instead of helping this knight to win the love of lady Etarde, Gawain betrays him, and having deceived Etarde, fulfils with her his own desire. The breach of his word is unpardonable and serves as a negative signpost for the reader. Kennedy chooses to categorise Gawain as a heroic knight, valorous and skilful in the art of war, but lacking courtly polish and entangled in private vendettas (Kennedy 1995: 83). As a member of a community constructed upon a complicated structure of word bonds, he may, however, also appear as a potentially destructive figure. This assumption seems to be confirmed when his private feud wreaks havoc with the mutual obligations of Lancelot and Arthur. The choice of Gawain as the one who, by means of his oath,

instigates the Grail quest, meritorious in its religious dimension but initiating the dissolution of the Round Table, together with the earlier evidence of his abuse of word bonds, can be considered as already foreshadowing his future disruptive role. The ability and/or willingness to keep faith to one's given word may be, thus, seen as accorded the narrative function of a test of a character's compliance with the social policy and the structural system, inscribed in the existence of the chivalrous community and, hence, also as a signpost of this character's role in the fictional chivalric world.

What additionally matters in the process of characterisation apart from the fact whether a promise is kept or broken is the kind of promise which is sworn. In *Le Morte Darthur* there are promises whose beneficial performative effect has been described earlier. They may be aimed at the restoration of order, as the one sworn before the Roman campaign, or promises, which aim at increasing a character's moral value and establishing his reputation, as the one of sir Palomydes to fight seven times before he is christened. Apart from these, however, *Le Morte Darthur* abounds also in unwise oaths, which, as it is evident in Jefferson's (1993: 120) analysis of medieval penitential manuals, were particularly frowned upon by the medieval clergy. In contrast to a large number of promises depicted in Malory's work which bind a knight to a specific noble purpose, and which are presented as self-imposed challenges generating a favourable image of a knight among his fellow community members, these problematic oaths rashly guarantee the fulfilment of an unspecified wish, potentially entangling a character in a moral conflict or at least jeopardizing his emotional comfort. As a result of such hasty unconditioned promises Mark has to watch Blamoure de Ganys carrying away Isolde from his own court and Arthur cannot prevent Malegaunt's kidnapping of Gwenyver.

The effect of such an oath may be, however, far more disastrous. In return for Excalibur Arthur promises the Lady of the Lake: "Be my feyth ... I woll gyff you what gyffte that ye woll aske" (*The works*: 53). When she returns to claim either the head of Balyn or of the damsel with a sword, Arthur faces an irresolvable conflict, in which the highest price, his honour is at stake. Having promised before to protect his knights he cannot forfeit Balyn's life but at the same time is obliged to fulfil the promise given the Lady of the Lake. "Truly sede kynge Arthure, I may not graunte you nother of theire hedys with my worship, therefore aske what ye woll els, and I shall fulfille youre desire" (*The works*: 65). As a result of an unreasonable promise Arthur faces impasse, resolved only to the shame of his court with Balyn's beheading of the Lady. Balyn himself also makes a fatal, rash oath when he makes a vow "to God and knyghthode" (*The works*: 80) to fulfil the quest of a knight slain by an invisible knight, Garlon. He follows the dead knight's lady and kills Garlon, but as a consequence, a dolorous stroke is delivered to king Pellas.

A serious moral conflict also entails when Sir Torre makes an unconditioned promise to a damsel appealing to his gentility and his love of Arthur: "'Now' seyde sir Torre, 'aske a gyffte and I woll gyff hit you'" (*The works*: 112). When the lady asks for the head of Abelleus, a knight he has been fighting with, he is full loath to agree, especially that the knight begs mercy, which makes the circumstances potentially disgraceful for Torre. Providing a feeble excuse by reminding Abelleus of his previous refusal to yield, Torre rejects his request for pity: "'I may nat now' seyde sir Torre 'but I sholde be founde false of my promyse...'"(*The works*: 112). The price of keeping a word is high here as it involves violence and the breach of chivalric code. All these examples seem to suggest that crucial as the promises were in the process of integration and consolidation of the knightly community, they could also be capable of dismantling it when made rashly and without proper consideration. The threat these unwise oaths pose to Arthur's fellowship of knights once again confirms the significance of their performative nature.

The creative power of an oath and its performative impact on the narrative world seem to be evident in Thomas Malory's Arthuriad. The most prominent of Malory's vows, the Pentecostal oath, amounts to a mechanism actively generating the Round Table community and channelling knightly energy towards morally and socially desirable ends. The performative power of this oath is matched by the effectiveness of promises compelling transgressors to the act of yielding and reintegrating them into the community of virtuous knights. Those who act contrary to the oath of knighthood are morally censured and severely punished in order not to allow the shame of the few to affect the whole social organism. Apart from this major oath there are also numerous individual promises, which also perform an integrative role aimed at restraining violence in the world threatened with disorder. Additionally, these word bonds function in *Le Morte Darthur* as narrative devices facilitating the process of character delineation by providing a useful test of a given character's adherence to the rules, according to which the chivalrous community is supposed to function. The accumulation of textual material concerning the behaviour of individual characters towards sworn obligations may help to make a general distinction between true and false knights. Conflicts of loyalties and subtle moral implications inherent in those promises prevent, however, any simplified evaluative judgements, allowing rather for the comparative juxtaposition of various characters. Speech acts produced by the Round Table knights give shape to Arthur's world, actively constructing its basic social framework and the figures of knights.

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