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From Children's Story to Adult Fiction: T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*

HEATHER WORTHINGTON

This paper reads the textual complications and structural development of White's multi-volume novel as a set of traces of and responses to sexual anxiety. (HW)

The fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated.
Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

The myth of King Arthur has been appropriated and adapted by many writers and in various ways, but most frequently as a vehicle for contemporary, sometimes personal, anxieties and concerns. The nineteenth-century revival of interest in the myth, as exemplified in William Morris's 'Defence of Guinevere' (1858), Swinburne's 'Tristram of Lyonesse' (1882), and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1886)¹ in the main took the fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur* (1485) of Malory as its inspiration. However, in the twentieth century T.H. White is unusual in taking Malory's text as the inspiration for his Arthuriad *The Once and Future King*. As Elisabeth Brewer notes, White's epic 'is probably the last major retelling of the story based on Malory, set in the Middle Ages and in the chivalric tradition. Most subsequent writers have gone further back in time to a more primitive age.'² *The Once and Future King*, while far from being the only interpretation of the Arthur story in the twentieth century, is thus arguably the last successful adaptation of Malory's work as opposed to those other fictional Arthurs whose origins can be traced back to an earlier, less chivalric time.³

Where Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* imagines an essentially adult world, White's inspired notion was to construct what he called 'a preface to Malory (*sic*),'⁴ and imagine a childhood for Arthur. The gap in Arthur's story between his birth as documented in Malory and his later succession to the throne of England is accounted for in *The Sword in the Stone*, the first volume of White's Arthuriad. The successive volumes chart Arthur's progress into manhood and old age, culminating on the eve of his death, a progression which follows

the form of a biographical narrative: to some extent White's reinterpretation of the Arthurian myth functions as a biography. Further, the text has its own life story. The narrative structure which takes Arthur from childhood to maturity is paralleled in the textual structure; the five novels comprising the whole text themselves evolve from children's stories into adult fictions, an evolution that mimics the pattern of a biography and which positions childhood experience as the foundation of the adult subject. Within this context White used his own experiences of childhood, both positive and negative, the latter evidenced particularly in his portrayal of women. I suggest that *The Once and Future King* allowed White a textual space in which to explore his ambivalent feelings towards his mother and women generally, and to some extent project his own homoerotic and sadistic tendencies into the narrative. In the best psychoanalytic tradition, these feelings and tendencies are not overtly expressed, indeed, they are repressed, but it is well nigh impossible to read White's text without being aware of the psychoanalytic implications.⁵ Therefore, although my project here is not to attempt a psychoanalytic reading of *The Once and Future King*, the paper will be informed, but not structured, by Freudian analytic theory.

The most widely available version of White's text is based on the 1958 edition of *The Once and Future King*, which comprised four books: *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Ill-Made Knight*, and *The Candle in the Wind*.⁶ The first three volumes had been issued as individual texts in 1938, 1939, and 1940 respectively, but before their incorporation into the tetralogy of 1958 all three were revised. The alterations to book 3 were relatively minor editorial improvements, but book 1 had whole episodes deleted and new episodes inserted, and book 2 underwent a major restructuring: a change of title from the original *The Witch in the Wood*, a loss of over half its pages, and a rewriting of the remaining content. The first two books are concerned mainly with childhood, and in unrevised form contain portrayals of female power and sexuality, albeit in a largely negative light. The subsequent revised editions omitted or diluted these portraits of women in what amounts to a textual/sexual repression of the feminine. Following Malory, White's Arthurian world attempts to embody a masculine domain, where women are figured as either incidental or disruptive. Consistent with this ideology, the feminine as socially disruptive is, as Stephen Knight suggests, a central theme in Tennyson's *Idylls* and it could be argued that *The Once and Future King* is simply maintaining tradition.⁷ White had his own reasons for containing the feminine, but as Freud has said, the repressed always returns, and despite their textual excisions and narrative

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exclusions women play a greater role in White's text and the eventual downfall of Arthur than their constrained representation would seem to expect.

This paper has two interconnected strands: the textual evolution from children's story to adult fiction, and the representations of women and their subversive function within the texts and the myth. *The Sword in the Stone* is the depiction of an idyllic childhood, largely free from women. In *The Witch in the Wood/The Queen of Air and Darkness*, White introduces, in the character of Morgause, themes of sex and sexuality, constructing a textual and narrative adolescence, while *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Candle in the Wind* explore the convoluted social and sexual relationships of Arthur's adult life. The simple and fantastical narratives of childhood develop into the realism inherent in the complex psychological narratives of modern adult fiction. As White himself said, with reference to Malory's text: 'I read it...knowing how Launcelot would behave in any circumstances, how Arthur, how Gawaine. They were real people.'⁸ In his own interpretation of the story, White attempted to create a similarly real cast of characters. Within the fantasy world of *The Sword in the Stone*, the young Arthur is a believable child; in the two books concerned with the grown-up Arthur, despite the medieval setting, the masculine personae are equally credible to the adult reader. However, White found the portrayal of women more problematic, and where the fantastic nature of *The Witch in the Wood/The Queen of Air and Darkness* had allowed him a free rein in his portrayal of the caricatured mother-figure of Morgause, he had to enlist the help of a female friend, Ray Garnett, in the construction of a more realistic Guenevere.⁹

In text and manhood, growth proved difficult for Arthur and author, and the complex topic of woman functions as a focus for these textual and sexual difficulties. The extent to which White's women subvert their restricted narrative function is explored in this paper, which, following the text's own evolutionary pattern, is divided into two sections: children's stories and adult fictions.

CHILDREN'S STORIES

The Sword in the Stone (book 1 of *The Once and Future King*) has its genesis in Malory, but its creation of a childhood for Arthur is unique to White. He drew heavily on his own experience of childhood, concentrating on the happy time spent with his grandparents, his parents being stationed in India. The young Arthur, nicknamed the Wart by his foster-brother Kay, has no family of his own, and is the ward of Sir Ector: 'The Wart was not a proper son...it was different, not having a father and a mother...being different was wrong.'¹⁰

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of *Lancelot-Grail*, 5:10-11.

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'Catastrophe and Resolution,' *Malory's* Press, 1964), p. 255.

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Where Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* imagines an essentially adult world, White's inspired notion was to construct what he called 'a preface to Mallory (*sic*),'⁴ and imagine a childhood for Arthur. The gap in Arthur's story between his birth as documented in Malory and his later succession to the throne of England is accounted for in *The Sword in the Stone*, the first volume of White's Arthuriad. The successive volumes chart Arthur's progress into manhood and old age, culminating on the eve of his death, a progression which follows

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Even his nickname, purportedly the abbreviated West Country dialect version of his given name, is etymologically more suggestive of an unwanted growth on the family body. In Freudian terms, apparently possessing neither mother nor father, the Wart is outside the Oedipal triangle that is essential to the development of a normal gendered subjectivity: distortions of Freud's Oedipal construct are a recurring theme throughout *The Once and Future King*. White himself underwent psychoanalysis in an attempt to 'cure' his homosexuality, an experience which left him with some knowledge of Freudian methodology and which probably colored his perspective on women, particularly his mother. After her death he wrote in his diary: 'she managed to bitch up my loving women.'¹¹ In *The Sword in the Stone*, Sir Ector does not appear to have a wife, and indeed, the world of Arthur's childhood is almost exclusively masculine: the absence of women appears to guarantee the stability and happiness of the Wart's early life.

Remembering his own dysfunctional youth, White's construction of the perfect imaginary childhood rested on the exclusion of the feminine. This is made obvious from the very first page of the text: the opening sentences of the narrative depict the Wart's governess: '[she] had red hair and some mysterious wound...believed to be where she sat down.'¹² Such a wound is suggestive of menstruation and disorderly feminine sexuality; the governess succumbs to that female malady, hysteria, and is eliminated from the text on the first page. This prompt dismissal performs two functions: firstly it permits the narrative to construct the masculine domain which it posits as essential to an idyllic childhood, and secondly it creates a textual space for the introduction of Merlyn as the Wart's tutor. In *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlyn conflates the roles of authoritative father figure and caring mother figure with his educative function, obviating the necessity for a normative Oedipal structure.

The educational aspect of *The Sword in the Stone*, combined with the masculine setting, is strongly reminiscent of an English public school (i.e. a private educational establishment). This similarity is reinforced by the figure of the Nurse, who functions as a school matron. Within this scholastic environment, Merlyn seeks to educate the Wart, not, however, using conventional methodologies. Rather, using magic, he changes the young Arthur into a series of animals, allowing the experience of the natural world to act as an educational tool. Man, this process would seem to suggest, learns better from nature than from nurture. What might be considered normal lessons take place within the castle walls, a separation of locations that marks the divide between nature and culture. Not all of the Wart's adventures involve

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his transformation; he is sometimes allowed to be himself, although magic is usually involved somehow. Further, in each of the Wart's excursions masculinity is valorized and privileged, albeit through a screen of schoolboy humor appropriate to the public school atmosphere of his education. Where women are encountered, they are marginalized, masculinized or demonized: silly Mrs. Roach, with her hysterical illness and brood of little roaches; the goose Lyo-Lyok, who inspires fondness in the Wart 'in spite of her being a girl' (173); the militaristic female peregrine falcon in the mews; or Maid Marian, with her masculine skills and boyish attributes. But the most significant encounter with the feminine for the Wart is found only in the original version of *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), in an episode deleted from the revised edition, although retained in bowdlerized form in the Disney cartoon of the same title.

Here, the Wart meets woman as demon in the shape of Madame Mim, self-advertised specialist in necromancy. She is portrayed as a devouring mother-figure prefiguring Morgause in *The Witch in the Wood*, and reminiscent of the cannibalistic witch in *Hansel and Gretel*.¹² The encounter occurs when the Wart's best arrow is carried away in mid-flight by the gorcrow that is Madame Mim's familiar. The clumsiness of the deletion of this episode is evident in the 1958 edition, where the theft occurs, but is never properly explained, nor is the arrow retrieved.¹³ The unexpurgated 1938 version of the text relates how, in pursuit of his arrow, the Wart and Kay fall into the clutches, and hutches, of Madame Mim. In contrast to the traditional depiction of witches as ugly old crones, she is 'strikingly beautiful with coal black hair.'¹⁴ Here beauty functions as a mask concealing the negative aspect of the female. There are sexual and sadistic overtones in her treatment of the boys; she pinches Kay to check his plumpness and strips the Wart naked as she 'prepare[s] to have her will of him' (SS 91). Merlyn's subsequent rescue of the children offers the first direct portrayal of the male/female conflict recurrent throughout the four volumes of the text when he and Mim fight a wizards' duel. This is a battle between masculine reason and feminine guile, where Merlyn's victory is a triumph for phallogocentric rationality: he subverts the rules of wizardly duelling by refusing to make the proper and reciprocal response to Mim's various shape-changes. Instead, he uses the medical knowledge gained in his backwardly-lived life and, in 'a master stroke...turned himself successively into the microbes, not yet discovered, of hiccoughs (*sic*), scarlet fever, mumps, whooping cough, measles and heat spots' (SS 96), from which combination Madame Mim immediately expires. The world of White's narrative is only safe for the boys when women are absent. The later

edition of the book refigured Mim as Morgan le Fay, 'a fat, dowdy middle-aged woman with black hair,' (109) and the episode is stripped of its sexual connotations in an evident textual repression of feminine power.

The concentration on nature in *The Sword in the Stone* and the absence of sexuality are proper to a children's story: they are also evocative of a prelapsarian world, where sexuality, specifically female sexuality, would be disruptive, threatening the stability apparently offered by the masculine world created by White. This theme recurs later in the *Arthurian*, when the destruction of the Round Table and of Arthur's kingdom is directly attributed by him to the female line in history; while he stops short of mentioning Eve specifically, the biblical allusion is clear.¹⁵ Here, however, the Wart is firmly fixed into a masculine and homosocial context, defined through and by his relationships with positive masculine figures as opposed to the negative depictions of femininity. Appropriately, in leaving his idyllic, male-dominated childhood behind, the rite of passage that accomplishes the Wart's transition into manhood is exclusively masculine. The traditional drawing of the Sword from the stone is an acquisition of symbolic phallic power, enabling Arthur to take his rightful place in the patriarchal hierarchy of men. Arthur's childhood ends with the conclusion of the first book of *The Once and Future King*: with his kingship comes his history, and the secret of his birth is revealed. He is no longer differentiated by a lack of parentage, but through his acquisition of the royal heritage handed down by his now dead father, Uther Pendragon. The textual continuation of Arthur's narrative in *The Witch in the Wood/Queen of Air and Darkness* enacts in itself the conflict between the sexes, and the idyllic masculine childhood of Arthur is contrasted against the dysfunctional, matriarchal regime of Morgause.

The first part of White's *The Once and Future King* is a child's book and a story of a childhood: the Wart is a child and his concerns those of childhood. The second volume retains the childlike theme in the absurd antics of the protagonists and the schoolboy sense of humor that accompanies their actions, but, like an adolescent, the text veers between childishness and adult sexuality. Underneath the comedic and farcical depiction of Morgause there is an edge of misogynistic bitterness. If White used his imagination and his own experience of happy childhood for *The Sword in the Stone*, then it was the unhappy aspects of his youth that he worked out in *The Witch in the Wood*, specifically his relationship with his mother. Elisabeth Brewer suggests that White felt 'an overwhelming compulsion...to revenge himself on his mother, caricatured in the figure of Morgause.'¹⁶ It is in this text that the results of his psychoanalytic experiences are most evident. The original text of *The*

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in *The Sword in the Stone* and the absence of Merlin's story; they are also evocative of a femininity, specifically female sexuality, would be typically apparently offered by the masculine world. This theme recurs later in the Arthurian cycle, when the fall of Arthur's kingdom is directly attributed to the actions of the women; while he stops short of mentioning Eve as a clear. Here, however, the Wart is firmly situated in a social context, defined through and by his masculine figures as opposed to the negative femininity, in leaving his idyllic, male-dominated world behind that accomplishes the Wart's transition to adulthood. The traditional drawing of the Sword in the Stone as a phallic power, enabling Arthur's ascent to patriarchal hierarchy of men. Arthur's story, as told in the first book of *The Once and Future King*, and the secret of his birth is revealed to him by a lack of parentage, but through his inheritance of his now dead father. Other than the inclusion of Arthur's narrative in *The Witch in the Wood* enacts in itself the conflict between the childhood of Arthur is contrasted against the adult world of Morgause.

The Once and Future King is a child's book and a childlike theme in the absurd antics of the characters and the use of humor that accompanies their actions, the tension between childishness and adult sexuality. In the ideal depiction of Morgause there is an edge to her character. White used his imagination and his own experiences to create *The Sword in the Stone*, then it was the same theme he worked out in *The Witch in the Wood*, where the relationship with his mother. Elisabeth Brewer suggests that the character of Morgause is a 'pulsation...to revenge himself on his mother, a castration.'¹⁶ It is in this text that the results of this theme are most evident. The original text of *The*

Witch in the Wood is a long, sprawling narrative of 281 pages, divided into thirty-four chapters, of which only five are concerned with Arthur, marginalizing both him and the masculinity associated with him. The remainder is devoted to Morgause and her four sons in Lothian. Brewer posits the title *The Witch in the Wood* as a connecting device between Morgause and her textual prototype Madame Mim, finding no direct reference in the text to the 'wood' of the title.¹⁷ However, the first edition of the text mentions 'the melancholy pinewood from which the Queen derived her name,'¹⁸ a direct association of Morgause with untamed nature as figured in the forest whose wildness mirrors the disorderly life in the castle of Lothian.

White's alternative construction of childhood features four boys: Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Gareth. Unlike the Wart, they know their parentage, although their father is away for most of the narrative and they are left to the somewhat erratic mercies of their mother Morgause, for whom they have a blind and jealous adoration. She is Freud's narcissistic woman; her desire is centered on herself, but she seeks confirmation of her desirability in the mirror of the desperate affection of her sons and the lust she invokes in other masculine figures.¹⁹ Morgause conforms to Baudrillard's conception of woman as appearance; without depth, her femininity is a masquerade that includes a role as a mother.²⁰ A reincarnation of Madame Mim, Morgause is again represented as the devouring female, castrating rather than castrated. The Oedipal model absent from *The Sword in the Stone* is present in *The Witch in the Wood*, but in a distorted form; in a Freudian context, Morgause, simultaneously the object of desire to her sons and also the threat of castration, fulfills the mother-role and subsumes the role of the father, thus subverting the Oedipal norm. White's mother and father had finally divorced after a long and bitter battle, in which White found himself an object of contest. He later wrote:

Of hapless father hapless son
My birth was brutally begun,
And all my childhood o'er the pram
The father and the maniac dam
Struggled and leaped to pierce the knife
Into each other's bitter life.²¹

While there is no obvious struggle between Morgause and her husband King Lot, his departure from the court leaves her in sole charge of their four children, as White was eventually to be left in the sole custody of his mother.

In keeping with the construction of the narrative as a children's story, sexuality is concealed in comedy and farce, emerging slyly in episodes such

as that of the unicorn, where, in an attempt to seduce Sir Grummore, Morgause plays the virgin in a unicorn hunt. There is a darker side to the tale when, in trying to fulfill what they assume is their mother's desire, her sons try to capture the unicorn for her. A serving girl, Meg, is forced to take the role played originally by Morgause, a conflation of maiden and mother which leads Agravaïne to butcher the fabulous beast when he sees the unicorn's horn laid across the lap of Meg/Morgause. The symbolism is obvious, although understated: the death of the unicorn represents the loss of childhood innocence that follows the acquisition of sexual knowledge. Further, the episode conveys something of the confusion of the adolescent mind in matters of sex.²² Where sexuality is covert and implicit in the narrative, violence and brutality are overt and explicit: the slaughter of the unicorn is described in graphic detail, and there are other references to the seemingly mindless cruelty of children in the boys' fights and the calculated cruelty of adults in the beatings they receive from both mother and father.

Morgause's irrational alternation between suffocating love and cold indifference for her children leads to an inconstancy and uncertainty in the boys' relationship with her that will distort their future involvement with women. Gawaine's violent temper results in the death of a woman, while Agravaïne's implicitly incestuous involvement with Morgause makes him so possessive of her that he later murders her in a fit of jealousy, when, aged seventy, she takes young Sir Lamorak to her bed (451). In contrast to the plethora of masculine role models in Arthur's childhood, the Orkney boys' role models are parodic and ineffectual, not to say effete; their lessons come from culturally constructed humanity, not the natural world enjoyed by the Wart. The role of tutor, encompassed in the single figure of Merlyn in *The Sword in the Stone*, is, in *The Witch in the Wood*, divided between the incompetent Anglo-Indian Sir Palomides in the castle, and the heretical, drunken Irishman Saint Torealvac in the village.²³ The visiting knights King Pellinore and Sir Grummore are resistant to the blandishments of Morgause but have sexual problems of their own, as do all the adult male figures. Pellinore yearns for the dominatrix Piggy, and Saint Torealvac drunkenly and libidiously pursues Mother Morlan in direct contravention of his religious vows, while the physical problematics of masculine sexuality are parodied in the scene where Pellinore, Sir Palomides, and Sir Grummore attempt to toss the caber in the tournament arranged by Morgause. As Alan Macdonald suggests, '[t]he language which describes their attempt is full of double entendre,²⁴ and the efforts of all three men are required to raise the wooden pole: 'the caber rose magnificently erect...[t]he three knights who

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supported it gazed up along its barrel as if in adoration' (WW 152-53). This description of the co-operation in the erection and the ensuing adoration of the phallic symbol is both homosocial and homocrotic, albeit couched in schoolboyish humour.

In contrast to this disorderly, sexualized world, the chapters devoted to Arthur and his battles to become established as monarch and construct his capital of Carlion depict a masculine haven of rationality.²⁵ Arthur's success in his wars with the northern kings can be seen as the triumph of patriarchal Right over the Might represented by the matriarchal Celtic tribes.²⁶ The masculine domain of Arthur's childhood is here translated into the Round Table: a chivalric invention of Arthur's which promises to use Might only in the pursuance of Right. This seems to offer both stability and an outlet for aggression, a homosocial refuge from the dangerous and irrational femininity represented by Morgause. But the passage of time reduced the drama of the second book of *The Once and Future King*: in the revision of *The Witch in the Wood* into *The Queen of Air and Darkness* Morgause loses her status as a witch, with all the concomitant attributes of witchery, and is reduced to the more prosaic and less magical status of Queen. The more lurid elements of her character and actions are toned down, and her share of the fiction is reduced by more than half, retextually repressing her previously dominant role. The sprawling narrative of *The Witch in the Wood*, strained in its attempt to contain disruptive sexuality, is largely restored to order in the later version. Nevertheless, the *dénouement* of both versions brings the text and Arthur fully into the adult world in a climax which White considered to be the cause of Arthur's downfall: 'the real reason why Arthur came to a bad end was because he had slept with his sister.'²⁷ In her seduction of Arthur, it is unclear whether Morgause uses magic, or whether it is the maternal image that she presents, accompanied by her sons, which draws Arthur to her. Either way, the act is one of incest, literally as they are half-brother and sister, or metaphorically in Freudian terms if it is the mother figure that he desires. Arthur is presented as an innocent victim, but for Morgause it is a conscious act that initiates the eventual destruction of the masculine authority inherent in Arthur's Round Table. The product of their illicit union is Mordred, who will kill his own father.

There is a common assumption in many societies and cultures that childhood innocence ends with the subject's sexual initiation. White's representation of the relationship between Arthur and Morgause was tailored to the audience of children for which his book was designed. There are no salacious details, only the information that 'Morgause had a baby by her

half brother.' (323) However, with the sexual act, Arthur loses his innocence, and so does the text, and there can be no return to childhood stories. Arthur's sexual coming of age opens the way for the personal relationships of adult life, and the style and content of the remaining books of White's *Arthurian* are more serious in tone than their predecessors. This alteration in register not only enacts the maturity of the narratives and their personae, but is also the result of a closer adherence to the original tale penned by Malory. The early lives of Mordred and Lancelot are incorporated into the adult fictions that comprise the remaining two texts of the *The Once and Future King*, fictions which expose the private lives of the protagonists that Malory had subjugated to the demands of public life in *Le Morte Darthur*. Mordred's youth is briefly summed up in the fourth book, *The Candle in the Wind*: 'He had been brought up along with Morgause...she had loved him and forgotten him by turns, an insatiable carnivore who lived on the affections of her dogs, her children and her lovers.' (553) She inculcates him with her own hatred of his father, Arthur, who is also the key figure of Lancelot's boyhood. Lancelot had 'already fallen in love with Arthur' (328) before taking up his membership of the Round Table, after a childhood not dissimilar to that of Arthur in that it occupied a masculine space, with Uncle Dap replicating in a militaristic mode Merlyn's role as tutor and mentor. Women are absent from the initial relationship between Arthur and Lancelot, and the homoeroticism implicit in Lancelot's love for Arthur subverts the cultural construction of masculinity inherent in the Arthurian myth.

The narrative register of *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Witch in the Wood/Queen of Air and Darkness* is that of children's fiction, playful, imaginative, fantastic, and satisfyingly horrific in an appropriately childish way. The transition from the texts of childhood and the childhood of the texts to maturity for both texts and characters is accomplished in a neat segue which concludes the second volume and introduces the themes of the third. The final lines of the former are: 'in tragedy, innocence is not enough' (323). To complete his interpretation of the Arthurian myth it was necessary for White to leave the innocence of childhood behind and to concentrate on the problems that come with the onset of adulthood, problems which will culminate in death, and thus fulfill the requirements of tragedy. Already, the representations of the feminine can be seen to subvert the masculine authority of the myth; women wield more influence than is justified by their minor roles. The textual repression evident in deleting Madame Mim from *The Sword in the Stone*, and the reduction of Morgause's role in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* do not entirely destroy their subversive potential. While Mim's

with the sexual act, Arthur loses his innocence, and there can be no return to childhood stories. Arthur's death is the way for the personal relationships of adult fiction. In the remaining books of White's Arthurian cycle, the characters of their predecessors. This alteration in register of the narratives and their personae, but is also a departure from the original tale penned by Malory. The characters of Lancelot are incorporated into the adult fictions of the two texts of the *The Once and Future King*, the private lives of the protagonists that Malory had excluded from public life in *Le Morte Darthur*. Mordred's death is the fourth book. *The Candle in the Wind*: 'He had loved Morgause...she had loved him and forgotten him. He was a man who lived on the affections of her lovers.' (553) She inculcates him with her own values. It is also the key figure of Lancelot's boyhood. 'Love with Arthur' (328) before taking up his sword, after a childhood not dissimilar to that of the male protagonist, with Uncle Dap replicating in Lancelot's role as tutor and mentor. Women are absent from the narrative between Arthur and Lancelot, and the absence of Lancelot's love for Arthur subverts the cultural authority inherent in the Arthurian myth.

The Sword in the Stone and *The Witch in the Wood* is that of children's fiction, playful, but also disturbingly horrific in an appropriately childish register. The texts of childhood and the childhood of the characters is accomplished in a neat and tidy volume and introduces the themes of the next volume. In tragedy, innocence is not enough' and the re-creation of the Arthurian myth it was necessary to leave childhood behind and to concentrate on the problems of the onset of adulthood, problems which will not be able to fill the requirements of tragedy. Already, the characters can be seen to subvert the masculine authority of the narrative influence than is justified by their minor role. The decision in deleting Madame Mim from *The Queen of Air and Darkness* is a strategy to destroy their subversive potential. While Mim's

replacement Morgan le Fay remains a cartoon caricature of femininity, the increased realism in the portrayal of Morgause in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* confers an authority upon her which was lacking in the caricatured self-centred nymphomaniac of the earlier version. In *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Candle in the Wind*, the feminine will come to play an increasingly important role, specifically in the destruction of the Round Table. The women portrayed are no longer the grotesque creatures of childish fantasy, caricatured or cartoon-like and easily elaborated, easily dismissed; they are living, breathing beings, who elicit an adult response in the men of the text and in the mind of the reader.

ADULT FICTIONS

The Ill-Made Knight purports to be the story of Lancelot and his quest to be the best knight in the world; however, it reads rather as a love story, a romantic fiction in the modern tradition as opposed to the heroic romance of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In planning the third novel in his tetralogy, White gave much thought to the characterization of Lancelot. The earlier texts contained elements of his own childhood, real and imagined, and to some extent he identified with the youthful Arthur and the figure of Merlin. In *The Ill-Made Knight*, White openly declared his affinity and identification with the fictional Lancelot, directly comparing his hero to himself in a list of 'people he was like,' a list which included Hamlet and Lawrence of Arabia.²⁸ Further, he compiled a collection of Lancelot's character traits as he interpreted them from Malory's original text, a task which, as Sylvia Townsend Warner suggests, was not problematic for White: 'The fellow's character I understand already: it is my own.'²⁹ Among the eighteen traits listed, White specifically refers to Lancelot as 'probably sadistic... Aware of some big lack in himself... Homosexual? Can a person be ambi-sexual—bi-sexual or whatever?'³⁰ Lancelot embodies some of White's own troubling sexual proclivities, for which he had sought psychoanalytic help, and the text supports this: 'the boy thought there was something wrong with him. All through his life... he was to feel this gap: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was aware and ashamed' (129). White's own youthful anxieties are written into the portrayal of the young Lancelot. The title of the novel itself suggests the tensions inherent in Lancelot's sexuality; 'Ill-Made' can be read not only as physically unattractive, but also as 'made ill,' specifically psychically unstable. The repression of his homoerotic desire for Arthur literally sickens Lancelot.

This argument is supported by Alan Macdonald's proposition that '[t]he homoeroticism which White's language originally gave expression to still

informs the text in various coded ways—in Arthur and Lancelot's love.¹¹ Research suggests that White was aware of this coding; before its incorporation into *The Once and Future King*, his amendments to the original *The Ill-Made Knight* include the alteration of the adjective 'queer' to 'strange' in association with Lancelot, while 'Arthur's lover' becomes 'the hero-worshipper.'¹² Handsome, and straightforwardly heterosexual, Arthur represents the perfect alternative to the flawed persona Lancelot sees himself to be, and thus becomes initially the focus of his desire for normality, a desire that is subsequently complicated by repressed homocrotic overtones. This, however, is a desire for which there is no discursive space in the masculine culture of Arthurian myth, and it must remain unspoken, even if implicit in the text. Instead, Lancelot sublimates his love for Arthur into a love for Arthur's queen, Guenever. This sublimated love has its genesis in pain, albeit emotional rather than physical, when Lancelot deals roughly with Guenever: 'The young man knew...that he had hurt a real person, of his own age' (348). That their relationship should be founded in pain is in keeping with the sadomasochistic element of Lancelot's characterization, being also a displacement of his own pain onto another subject. The narrative moves away from the fantasy of childhood into the fantastic reality of adult life, a move encapsulated in the (temporary) elimination of Merlyn from the text. He also is affected by love, willingly entering into the imprisonment that results from his long foreseen affair with Nimue: effectively, the loss of innocence inherent in his sexualization removes him from the world of childhood. This is an anomaly; Merlyn is living backwards and therefore returning to the imagined asexuality associated with images of childhood. However, the mature and increasingly Christian world of the text and narrative has no space for Merlyn's wizardry and there is no other adult role available to him. With Merlyn's departure, the magic of the first two books of *The Once and Future King* is lost, to be replaced by the miracles which are the adult version of magic, a magic converted into and legitimated by religion.

The comedy of *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Witch in the Wood/Queen of Air and Darkness* is largely absent from *The Ill-Made Knight*. Marriage is the accepted end of comic works, symbolizing the union of opposites, resolving the tensions in society and making new life possible. The conclusion to *The Witch in the Wood/Queen of Air and Darkness* perverts this normative ending as the illicit union between Arthur and Morgause lays the seeds of later tragedy. The opening of *The Ill-Made Knight* appears to offer a more acceptable union when Arthur marries Guenever, but the outcome will still be tragic. The incestuous enactment of the Oedipus complex in *The Witch*

ded ways—in Arthur and Lancelot's love.³¹ He was aware of this coding; before his *Future King*, his amendments to the original alteration of the adjective 'queer' to 'strange', while 'Arthur's lover' becomes 'the heron and straightforwardly heterosexual, Arthur reverts to the flawed persona Lancelot sees himself as the focus of his desire for normality, complicated by repressed homoerotic overtones.

which there is no discursive space in the myth, and it must remain unspoken, even if Lancelot sublimates his love for Arthur into a quest. This sublimated love has its genesis in Lancelot's physical, when Lancelot deals roughly with a knight...that he had hurt a real person, of whom a relationship should be founded in pain is an intrinsic element of Lancelot's characterization, and he transfers his own pain onto another subject. The narrative of Lancelot's childhood into the fantastic reality of adulthood (temporary) elimination of Merlyn from the narrative, willingly entering into the imprisonment of Lancelot in an affair with Nimue: effectively, the loss of Merlin's realization removes him from the world of the myth; Merlyn is living backwards and therefore the unreality associated with images of childhood. Lancelot's Christian world of the text and Merlin's wizardry and there is no other adult role for Merlin's departure, the magic of the first two books must, to be replaced by the miracles which are effectively converted into and legitimated by religion. *The Stone* and *The Witch in the Wood/Queen of Air and Darkness* sent from *The Ill-Made Knights*. Marriage is a quest, symbolizing the union of opposites, and making new life possible. The conclusion of *Queen of Air and Darkness* perverts this normative quest. The relationship between Arthur and Morgause lays the seeds of the Oedipus complex in *The Witch*

in the *Wood/Queen of Air and Darkness*, where Arthur succumbs to a doubly forbidden desire for the mother-figure of his half-sister Morgause, reappears in a modified form in the triangular relationship between Arthur, Guenever, and Lancelot in *The Ill-Made Knights*. Guenever has elements of her predecessors Madame Mim and Morgause; she shares some of their physical features, being beautiful with 'hair so black it was startling' (344), and further, functions as a mother-figure, although she is childless. The text suggests that 'perhaps she loved Arthur as a father, and Lancelot because of the son she could not have' (498). Her marginal position in the world of the text, where her actions are circumscribed by the imagined medieval culture, does not prevent Guenever from sharing center-stage with Lancelot: her textual significance exceeds her allocated social role. Arthur, in contrast, becomes a more shadowy figure, being off-stage as often as on.

It is Arthur's observation of the burgeoning love between Lancelot and Guenever that prompts him to take Lancelot off to the Roman wars. Here, once more in an all-male environment, there is no personal conflict. But the return to England and the presence of the feminine disrupts this masculine contentment, as Lancelot realises: 'Queen Guenever was on the beach to meet them...she was able to come between them after all' (354). It is in an attempt to avoid confronting his own desires that he undertakes his quests, sublimating desire into violence.³² The descriptions, often detailed, of the injuries inflicted by one knight upon another, or of the punishments meted out to the vanquished, have strong elements of homoerotic sadism, as in the tale of Sir Turquine. His pleasure lay in taking his prisoners 'into his grimly castle, where he took off all their clothes and whacked them to his heart's content' (357). Following Malory, and contiguous with medieval traditions of Courtly Love and questing, in six of Lancelot's first seven quests women are involved either as deceitful opponents or as maidens requiring rescue. In the implicitly masculine practice of questing for adventure, women figure as disruptive or subversive factors. Most significant among these women is Elaine, who seduces Lancelot by getting him drunk and making him believe she is Guenever. Lancelot equates his loss of virginity with the loss of his chance to become the best knight, rather in the mode of a sportsman believing sexual intercourse the night before a big match will ruin his performance, fearful that feminine sexuality somehow depletes masculine power.

As a result of this encounter, Elaine bears Lancelot's son Galahad, who will achieve the chivalric perfection denied to his father. Here, deviating from Malory, White is conflating Elaine, mother of Galahad, with Flayne of Ascolat.³⁴ This combined figure functions as a cipher in White's text, enabling

the physical union of Guenever and Lancelot that he had previously resisted. Elaine is an unattractive character, rousing no sympathy or empathy in the reader of the text, and, further, is instrumental in causing Lancelot's descent into madness. It is the conflicting demands of Elaine as the mother of his child, and of Guenever as his lover, combined with his guilt in deceiving Arthur, which drive Lancelot temporarily insane. White borrows from medieval literary convention in which the man driven mad by love flees to the forest, and Lancelot becomes the Wild Man of the woods. When he recovers his sanity, the possibility of a normative family structure for Elaine, Lancelot, and their son is eliminated by the removal of Elaine from the narrative. Her textual conflation with the Lady of Ascolat enabled White to write her suicide into the narrative.³⁶ The distorted Oedipal triangle of Arthur, Guenever, and Lancelot is reinstated, with Guenever in the ascendant. Denying the role allocated to her within the narrative conventions of the genre, she refuses to be repressed or subservient to men, both textually and figuratively. White declared that 'Much more important than what sort of person was Lancelot is what sort of person is Guenever? She must have been a nice person, or Lancelot and Arthur... would not have loved her.'³⁷ Despite his own aversion to women ('I dislike the shape of women very much and can scarcely bring myself to draw it'³⁸), White's portrayal of Guenever attempts to be sympathetic and true to life. After the misogynistic sketches of women in the earlier books, Guenever, although possessing 'all the proper qualities for a man-eater [permits] both Arthur and Lancelot, the people whom she apparently devoured... full lives and... things of their own' (497), unlike her predecessors Mim and Morgause. However, the suggestion of permission implies that Guenever is in control, conferring upon her an authority more usually associated with the masculine and can be read as indicative of White's own confused conceptions of femininity. Nonetheless, the portrayal of a 'real' woman illustrates the text's maturity in the shift from cartoon story to psychological novel.

Depictions of knightly activities notwithstanding, the majority of *The Ill-Made Knight's* forty-five chapters are concerned with personal and sexual relationships, although the sexual activity is never explicit, rendering the book perfectly acceptable as children's fiction. The fun and the fantasy of *The Sword in the Stone* are missing, and the interpersonal dialogues and examination of personal motivations that replace them are more suited to an adult audience. But this is not all that is at issue. While White's descriptions of adult behaviour, particularly the love-talk between Lancelot and Guenever, are rather stilted and awkward, when he permits himself to speak of Malory's

r and Lancelot that he had previously resisted. Lancelot, rousing no sympathy or empathy in the reader, is instrumental in causing Lancelot's descending demands of Elaine as the mother of his lover, combined with his guilt in deceiving her, to temporarily insane. White borrows from Malory the man driven mad by love flees to the wilderness the Wild Man of the woods. When he is deprived of a normative family structure for Elaine, the removal of Elaine from the narrative with the Lady of Ascolat enabled White to write.³⁶ The distorted Oedipal triangle of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever in the ascendant, places her within the narrative conventions of the medieval or subservient to men, both textually and in Malory's text. 'Much more important than what sort of person is Guenever? She must have been loved by Arthur...would not have loved her.'³⁷ Despite her dislike the shape of women very much and 'draw it'³⁸). White's portrayal of Guenever is true to life. After the misogynistic sketches of Guenever, although possessing 'all the proper virtues' both Arthur and Lancelot, the people '...full lives and...things of their own' (497), and Morgause. However, the suggestion of Guenever is in control, conferring upon her an authority with the masculine and can be read as used conceptions of femininity. Nonetheless, White illustrates the text's maturity in the shift from the medieval to the modern.

Malory notwithstanding, the majority of *The Morte d'Arthur* are concerned with personal and sexual activity is never explicit, rendering the text children's fiction. The fun and the fantasy of Malory, and the interpersonal dialogues and actions that replace them are more suited to Malory's world than that is at issue. While White's descriptions of the love-talk between Lancelot and Guenever, when he permits himself to speak of Malory's

England, he waxes lyrical, and his prose flows free and uncluttered. The temporary peace between Guenever and Lancelot is reflected in the now-pacified Britain over which Arthur rules; in this adult world 'all the tyrannous giants were dead, all the dangerous dragons...where the raiding parties had once streamed along the highways...now there were merry bands of pilgrims telling each other dirty stories on the way to Canterbury' (445). The world has grown up with the narrative, and there is no space for the creatures of fantasy, only for the ribald realities of humanity. The peace brings with it an undesirable side effect, as Arthur notes: 'We don't get much of the old fighting in these decadent days' (448). The decadence is, though, still evident in the behavior of the Orkney brothers when Agravaine kills his mother Morgause for taking a lover, and Mordred in turn stabs her young lover Lamorak. The (masculine) violence and aggression, the Might that Arthur had routed through the Round Table in the cause of Right, denied the outlets of war, 'is working wicked channels for itself' (456).

The solution to the 'feud, open manslaughter...[and] bold bawdry' (456),³⁹ is decided between Arthur and Lancelot. The individual quests of earlier times will be replaced by a communal quest which will involve all the knights of the Round Table; a quest for the Holy Grail. The transition from children's story to adult fiction is complete as childhood fantasies of the magic found in nature are replaced by hopes for a miracle, a religious concept constructed in culture. The masculine ethos inherent in questing notwithstanding, the object at the center of this endeavor to unite the feuding knights and restore the Round Table to its purpose can be read as feminine. In his account of the quest for the Holy Grail, the close adherence of White's narrative to Malory's text with its associations with medieval convention places White's version in a feminized frame. The unobtainable object of desire in the tradition of Courtly Love was female, and in the knights' previous quests, women frequently figured prominently. The pagan religions of Britain which Christianity replaced had often centered on a female goddess figure,⁴⁰ and in Christian mythology, the Grail has been associated with the feminine, specifically the maternal: in Freudian analysis, the (unattainable) Grail would be the mother and the return to the security of the womb; in Jungian terminology, 'the vessel...has a maternal meaning.'⁴¹ The figure of the mother haunts White's text, even in the moment when it most strives to be masculine. Questing is a masculine pursuit, open only to the men in the narrative, who believe they are seeking a route to a union with a (masculine) God, but their access is through the feminized image of the Grail. Lancelot aspires to the Grail, subsuming his love for Guenever and his repressed desire for Arthur

into a legitimated passion for an idealized male God, but is barred from fully entering into the holy presence, ostensibly because of his sins of pride and lust.⁴²

Unsuccessful in the Grail Quest, Lancelot at length resumes his earthly union with Guenever, and the court at Camelot, with the Round Table much reduced in number by the Grail Quest, now entered 'the maturest or saddest phase, in which the enthusiasms had been used up...the court had "knowledge of the world" now, it had the fruits of achievement, civilization, savoir-vivre, gossip, fashion, malice and the broad mind of scandal' (504). These attributes are shared by the modern adult fiction that the text has become. As the novel, so 'the court was modern' (505). After maturity comes senescence and decay, and the fourth novel in the tetralogy, *The Candle in the Wind*, plays witness to the final disintegration of Arthur's ideals and hopes. The final chapters of *The Ill-Made Knight* see the arrival of Mordred at Camelot and the beginning of the end. Mordred sets in motion the events that will lead to the exposure of Lancelot and Guenever's adultery, an exposure which could result in the death of Guenever and the exile of Lancelot, and which will disrupt the delicate equilibrium at Camelot. With the coming of Mordred, both he and the court in their shared obsession with gossip and fashion become feminized: the text describes Mordred and his followers as 'sleak cats' (505), waiting the opportunity to denounce the lovers. There remains, nonetheless, a last victory for the masculine world of knighthood.

The Ill-Made Knight ends as it had begun, with Lancelot, and reverts to Malory's text for its closing words. The Round Table gathers for the final time at Arthur's bequest in an attempt to assist Sir Urre,⁴³ whose eternally bleeding wounds can be staunched only when 'the best knight in the world had tended them and saved them with his hands' (541). Lancelot is granted the miracle that had been denied him in the Grail Quest: as the perfect knight he felt he could not in the event be, he heals Sir Urre. Lancelot, the 'Ill-Made Knight,' despite the 'something at the bottom of his heart of which...he was ashamed' (527), and despite knowing 'a secret which was hidden from the others' (544), performs a miracle cure. "And ever" says Malory, "Sir Lancelot wept, as he had been a child that had been beaten" (544). The pleasure/pain association of sadomasochism is evident in White's text if not in Malory: for Lancelot, no pleasure is possible without a concomitant measure of pain. In figuring Lancelot as a chastised child, the final line in the novel returns briefly to childhood, but as the text itself states, *The Ill-Made Knight* is 'a story of love in the old days, when adults loved faithfully—not a story of the present, in which adolescents pursue the ignoble spasms of

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an idealized male God, but is barred from essence, ostensibly because of his sins of pride

Quest, Lancelot at length resumes his earthly court at Camelot, with the Round Table the Grail Quest, now entered 'the maturest or enthusiasms had been used up...the court had, it had the fruits of achievement, civilization, valice and the broad mind of scandal' (504). 'the modern adult fiction that the text has court was modern' (505). After maturity comes fourth novel in the tetralogy, *The Candle in the Wind*, the final disintegration of Arthur's ideals and *The Ill-Made Knight* see the arrival of Mordred of the end, Mordred sets in motion the events Lancelot and Guenever's adultery, an exposure of Guenever and the exile of Lancelot, and equilibrium at Camelot. With the coming of Mordred in their shared obsession with gossip and the text describes Mordred and his followers as an opportunity to denounce the lovers. There is a story for the masculine world of knighthood, but it had begun, with Lancelot, and reverts to the old. The Round Table gathers for the final attempt to assist Sir Urre,⁴³ whose eternally healed only when 'the best knight in the world came with his hands' (541). Lancelot is granted to heal him in the Grail Quest; as the perfect of the event be, he heals Sir Urre. Lancelot, the text says 'something at the bottom of his heart of Mordred', and despite knowing 'a secret which was Mordred's', performs a miracle cure. "And ever" says Mordred 'he had been a child that had been beaten' (544). 'The text of sadomasochism is evident in White's text if Mordred's pleasure is possible without a concomitant punishment of Lancelot as a chastised child, the final line in the text is 'Lancelot, the old days, when adults loved faithfully—when adolescents pursue the ignoble spasms of

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the cinematograph' (539). It is rather a fiction for and about adults, not children.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in view of his self-declared affinity with Lancelot, the third volume of White's tetralogy is the longest. The final volume, *The Candle in the Wind*, in contrast, is the shortest, or at least it was until the savage cuts made to *The Witch in the Wood* reduced it as *The Queen of Air and Darkness* to less than half its initial length. Where the first three texts were original works, planned and contrived as novels, as Sylvia Townsend Warner states '[t]he last volume of Arthur was not new ground. It existed already, in the form of a play, called "The Candle in the Wind."⁴⁴ Elements of the dramatic structure can be seen in the novel; dialogue outweighs narrative, and the plot evolves in a series of scenes, mostly set in interior locations. Outdoor action is reported in speech, rather than enacted on the page, and the introductory and closing chapters function as prologue and epilogue. This said, the necessity of enclosing a long story in the small temporal and physical spaces of the theatre adds dramatic impact to White's text. The emphasis on dialogue rather than action is appropriate for a modern adult novel and in keeping with the now mature characters, who speak rather than act, although Lancelot, and Arthur to a lesser extent, still perform their knightly roles. However, if *The Sword in the Stone* was Arthur's story, and *The Ill-Made Knight* Lancelot's, *The Candle in the Wind* belongs to Mordred.

The return of Mordred is to some extent the return of the repressed. For Arthur, Mordred is the physical reminder of past sin come back to haunt him. The sin is doubled by Arthur's misguided and youthful attempt to have the infant Mordred drowned, set adrift with other babies in a medieval story reminiscent of the biblical account of Herod's actions after the birth of Jesus. Full details of Mordred's childhood are not given in the text, merely that he had spent it as an only child in the company of Morgause. This sets up a direct contrast between Arthur's idyllic (masculine) childhood and the dysfunctional (feminine) boyhood of Mordred, the pattern of which has already been related in *The Witch in the Wood*. In this sense, Mordred is the feminized alter-ego of Arthur, a twisted black shadow of his father. The psychical representation is reflected in his physical appearance: 'latterly dressed entirely in black, he is 'a thin wisp of a fellow, so fair-haired that he was almost an albino...one shoulder was higher than the other. He had been born slightly crooked' (454-55). Deprived of positive male role models, inculcated by Morgause with a hatred of his father, Mordred's mission in life is to replace Arthur as king. Arthur's own antecedents are questionable; White suggests that Arthur's time with Sir Ector was more to cover the somewhat

premature date of his birth than for any other reason. But where Arthur surmounts this difficulty and becomes king, Mordred's illegitimate status and above all the unspoken but incestuous nature of his parents' relationship bar him from the throne.

Mordred plans to use Guenever as the instrument of his revenge by forcing Arthur to acknowledge publicly her adultery with Lancelot. For the first time, the topic of adultery and its implicit sexual activity is openly featured in the narrative, situating the text firmly as an adult fiction. There is no discursive space for childhood in this final volume, although the men retain a certain childishness: Arthur with his concern over fair play and Lancelot with his desire to be best, and even Mordred with his attitude of 'it's not fair,' all display a schoolboy nature. Their passions and concomitant actions are entirely adult, however. Lancelot and Guenever are trapped together in her boudoir, and while he escapes, she is left to face Arthur's justice. In his new codified legal system Guenever's adultery lays her open to charges of treason, and Arthur is forced to condemn her to death by burning. The recurring theme of sadism is evidenced in Mordred's apparent pleasure at the prospect of Guenever's suffering: 'It will be a cruel death... They are using seasoned wood, and there will be no smoke and she will burn before she suffocates' (607). Her last minute rescue by Lancelot and the lovers' subsequent escape to Joyous Gard (*sic*) forces Arthur's hand; he must be seen to retrieve his queen and punish the offense against his sovereignty and the state. The situation is finally resolved by the Church, which reinstates the queen and exiles Lancelot.

The focus in the narrative upon the relationship between Arthur and Mordred, and necessarily Guenever, disrupts the delicate equilibrium previously achieved by Lancelot, Guenever, and Arthur, a disruption completed by Lancelot's exile. The distortion of the Oedipal triangle of the previous texts is here returned to a simulacrum of the normative scenario: Arthur, Guenever and Mordred form a family grouping of father, mother and son, in function if not in fact. The original Oedipus story was a tragedy, and White uses both the structure of the classic tale to fulfill the demands of tragedy inherent in the Arthurian myth, and Freud's reconstruction of the story as an illustration of the effect of childhood on the adult subject. Mordred, left to care for Guenever in Arthur's absence, plots to kill his father and marry Guenever, his mother-substitute: 'My father committed incest with my mother. Don't you think it would be a pattern, Jenny, if I were to answer it by marrying my father's wife?' (652). His pattern would be an enactment of the Oedipus complex as theorized by Freud.¹⁴ Parallel to this

han for any other reason. But where Arthur becomes king, Mordred's illegitimate status and incestuous nature of his parents' relationship

ver as the instrument of his revenge by forcing her adultery with Lancelot. For the first time its implicit sexual activity is openly featured in the text firmly as an adult fiction. There is no such thing in this final volume, although the men retain their masculinity with his concern over fair play and Lancelot and even Mordred with his attitude of 'it's not my nature. Their passions and concomitant actions with Lancelot and Guenever are trapped together in the same spaces, she is left to face Arthur's justice. In his mother's adultery lays her open to charges of incest and to condemn her to death by burning. The evidence is evidenced in Mordred's apparent pleasure at her dying: 'It will be a cruel death... They are using Lancelot like no smoke and she will burn before she can be rescued by Lancelot and the lovers' and (sic) forces Arthur's hand; he must be seen to resolve the offense against his sovereignty and the matter is resolved by the Church, which reinstates the

upon the relationship between Arthur and Guenever, disrupts the delicate equilibrium between Lancelot, Guenever, and Arthur, a disruption of the Oedipal triangle. The distortion of the Oedipal triangle of the myth to a simulacrum of the normative scenario: Lancelot and Guenever form a family grouping of father, mother and son. The original Oedipus story was a tragedy, a story of the classic tale to fulfill the demands of the Oedipal myth, and Freud's reconstruction of the effect of childhood on the adult subject. Mordred, ever in Arthur's absence, plots to kill his father and his mother-substitute: 'My father committed incest with my mother and I think it would be a pattern, Jenny, if I were to marry my mother's wife?' (652). His pattern would be an incestuous complex as theorized by Freud.⁴⁴ Parallel to this

reconstruction of family relations as a destructive force, *The Candle in the Wind* reiterates White's insistence on the feminine as disruptive. Mordred is already feminized by his upbringing, with its lack of masculine example; here, in his gradual descent into madness, he appears to become his mother Morgause: 'robbed of himself...while the mother-character lives in triumph...She existed in him like a vampire' (647-48). Such a statement posits Morgause as the instigator of Arthur's downfall while Mordred functions merely as her instrument, permitting a displaced triumph of the feminine over the masculine.

It appears to be White's accusing voice that speaks through the narrator when he says 'it is the mother's not the lover's lust that rots the mind' (647), in a speech which is used to ascribe the cause of Mordred's madness. Arthur's voice, heard later in the text, is more reasoned, but his deliberations on the origins of war return repeatedly to the feminine, naming Guenever and Morgause and including 'Sisters, mothers, grandmothers' (668) in a retrospective matriarchal lineage. He stops short of adducing the blame in the final resort to Eve, the first mother and instigator of the Fall, but the implication is evident: the feminine, against which masculinity defines itself, is dangerous and disruptive. The threat to Guenever brings Arthur and later Lancelot back to England to face Mordred in what will be the last battle for father and son. Lancelot and Guenever will survive, but her disruptive femininity will be confined in a convent, and Lancelot will offer his devotion to the masculine God who was always a possible contender for Lancelot's love and a rival to both Arthur and Guenever. At the conclusion to *The Queen of Air and Darkness* the text suggests that Arthur's story is 'the tragedy of sin coming home to roost' (323), referring to the sin of incest. Despite this textual insistence, the narrative continually positions women as the agents of destruction. The Arthurian myth, like every other discourse, 'has its subtext, its underside or antagonist positioned within it, and this subtext speaks through the cracks.'⁴⁵ The subtext of *The Once and Future King* is feminine: the women in the text slip through the chinks in the knightly armor and displace the phallogocentric masculine authority of Malory's original text. In White's narrative, the repressed feminine subtext and the female figures through which it is articulated return with a vengeance to claim parity with the masculine surtext.

In the closing pages of *The Candle in the Wind*, perhaps in despair at the present, Arthur turns both to the future and the past. The story of the past is entrusted to a pageboy to be carried into the future. White uses this device as 'a farewell obedience to the old master [Malory] who had conducted

him for so long.¹⁴⁶ The pageboy is of course the young Thomas Malory who will ensure that Arthur's story is passed on through the male line to future generations, maintaining the homosocial context that is essential to the myth. Arthur's history as he relates it to the boy is couched in the language of children, and the adult fiction makes a gesture back to the children's stories that were its foundation, and to the perfect, largely masculine world of Arthur's childhood. This movement back to the past is further enhanced by the dreamlike reintroduction of Merlyn, that figure of fantasy firmly banished from adult life. In his dream, Arthur remembers the lessons learnt from nature in childhood, and concludes that the stateless existence of birds offers an end to war. On awakening, he plans a new Round Table, but, contradicting the drift of his dream, decides that 'the hope of making it would lie in culture' (676). Ultimately, it would appear, the cultural constructions and constrictions of adult life and fiction will triumph over the natural magic of children's stories.

TAIL-PIECE

In 1941 White submitted a fifth volume of his Arthurian epic for publication, *The Book of Merlyn*. Collins refused to publish it, and it was not in fact issued in print until 1977. The text, perhaps because unrevised, is confused, repetitive, and disorderly. It is patterned on the events of *The Sword in the Stone*, a return that seems to be the reversion to childhood experienced by the old and senile. It expands the brief, dreamlike appearance of Merlyn on the eve of the last battle in *The Candle in the Wind*, and takes the aged Arthur back to his childhood in a long and rambling attempt to analyze the warring nature of mankind. In the company of the animal friends of his boyhood, Arthur participates in an anthropomorphic round table discussion. All those present are male, yet the solution they decide upon, a world free of national boundaries and possessions, modelled on that of the White-Fronted Goose, is found in Arthur's memories of the female goose Lyo-lyok, and is expressed in her voice. Finally, then, nature and the feminine are seen to triumph—but only in the fantasy world of childhood.

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NOTES

- 1 *The Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson* (1886) was the edition in which the *Idylls* were presented in their final form.
- 2 Elisabeth Brewer, *T.H. White: The Once and Future King* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), p. 18.
- 3 There have been many twentieth-century reworkings of the Arthurian myth, but authors as diverse as Bernard Cornwell, Mary Stewart, Rosemary Sutcliff, Steven Monaco and John Berger have utilized earlier sources such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1156) and Nennius (*fl.* c.830), the author or compiler of the *Historia Britonum*, relating the story to the Roman occupation of Britain and the conflict between the old Celtic pagan religion and Christianity. Marion Zimmer Bradley interweaves elements of Malory's tale with Celtic mythology and a type of historicism in *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Ballantine, 1982, and London, 1986), which is a feminist reading of the Arthurian, but White is exceptional in his reliance upon and close adherence to Malory's interpretation of the myth in *Le Morte D'Arthur*.
- 4 Letter from White to L. J. Potts, January 14, 1938. Cited in Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 18.
- 5 Elisabeth Brewer's *T.H. White* makes reference to White's interest in and treatment with psychoanalysis, as does Sylvia Townsend Warner in *T.H. White: a Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Alan Macdonald's article 'A Last Story of Perversion: T.H. White's *The Witch in the Wood*' in *The Library Chronicle of the University of Texas, Austin* 23:4 (1993), pp. 106-129 also makes reference to psychoanalysis, while Florence Field Sandler's somewhat simplistic paper 'Family Romance in *The Once and Future King*,' in *Quondam et Futurus* 2:2 (1992), pp. 73-80, reads the text as a palimpsest of the Oedipal triangle that Freud referred to as 'the family romance.' See Sandler, p. 73.
- 6 A new edition of *The Once and Future King* which now includes *The Book of Merlyn* was published by HarperCollins (London) in 1996. However, this paper draws on the earlier 1958 edition of *The Once and Future King* and on the individual first edition volumes of *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Witch in the Wood*, *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Book of Merlyn*.
- 7 Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 157.
- 8 T.H. White's journal for April 28, 1939, cited in Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 17.
- 9 'Ray Garnett had come to White's rescue as he was struggling with the character of Guenevere.' Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 88.
- 10 T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958), p. 8. All references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
- 11 Warner, *T.H. White* p.28.
- 12 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 109.
- 13 See *The Once and Future King*, pp. 51-52. Chapter 6 ends with the theft, and

- chapter 7 goes on to talk of other, apparently unconnected matters.
- 14 T.H. White, *The Sword in the Stone* (London: Collins, 1938), p. 79. All references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text abbreviated as SS.
- 15 White, *The Once and Future King*, pp. 668-9.
- 16 Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 50.
- 17 'Morgause is... never seen in a wood: there are no woods in Dunlothian as far as one can tell.' Brewer, *T.H. White* pp. 51-2.
- 18 T.H. White, *The Witch in the Wood* (London: Collins, 1940), p. 139. All references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text abbreviated as WW.
- 19 Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 82.
- 20 Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (1979), trans. Brian Singer (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 10.
- 21 White's diary entry for December 1, 1938, cited in Warner, *T.H. White*, p. 21.
- 22 See chapters 10 and 11 in *The Witch in the Wood*.
- 23 This is in *The Witch in the Wood*; in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* the boys' tutor is solely Saint Toirdealbhach, which is the full Gaelic spelling of Torcalvac, while Sir Palomides is a companion of King Pellinore and Sir Grummore.
- 24 Alan Macdonald, 'A Lost Story of Perversion,' p. 128.
- 25 In chapter 2 and in subsequent chapters of *The Witch in the Wood*, Arthur's castle is called Carlion. (WW p. 19). In the multi-volume *The Once and Future King*, in the equivalent chapter of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, the same castle has the more usual name of Camelot. (SS p. 224).
- 26 Evan Lansing-Smith, 'The Narrative Structure of T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*' in *Quondam et Futurus* 1991, 1:4 pp. 39-52, p. 43.
- 27 White's letter to L. Ports, 28 June 1939, cited in Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 49.
- 28 White's journal of 27 September 1939, cited in Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 83.
- 29 Warner, *T.H. White*, p. 150.
- 30 Warner, *T.H. White*, pp. 148-49.
- 31 Macdonald, 'A Lost Story of Perversion,' p. 128.
- 32 Macdonald, 'A Lost Story of Perversion,' p. 126.
- 33 Denied the physical violence available to medieval knights, White sublimated his own repressed sadism into a lifelong affair with hunting of various kinds—shooting, hawking, fishing—and took refuge in alcohol. See Brewer and Warner.
- 34 Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 78.
- 35 The Lady of Ascolat is Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott.'
- 36 White's journal of October 10, 1939, cited in Brewer, *T.H. White*, p. 87.
- 37 Warner, *T.H. White*, p. 152.
- 38 White is here quoting from Roger Ascham's sixteenth-century criticism of Malory's text. *The Once and Future King* paraphrases, refers to, or quotes from many medieval texts, including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the *Peterborough Chronicle*, in addition to his close re-working of Malory.
- 39 For a fictional account of the displacement of pagan religion by Christianity, see

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of other, apparently unconnected matters.
in the Stone (London: Collins, 1938), p. 79. All references
 are given parenthetically in the text abbreviated as SS.
Future King, pp. 668-9.

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n in a wood: there are no woods in Dunlothian as far as
H. White pp. 51-2.

the Wood (London: Collins, 1940), p. 139. All references
 are given parenthetically in the text abbreviated as WW.
 'Circumcision: An Introduction' in *On Metapsychology: The
 Penis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson
 in 1991), p. 82.

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'Story of Perversion,' p. 128.

ent chapters of *The Witch in the Wood*, Arthur's castle
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 imelot, (SS p. 224).

: Narrative Structure of T.H. White's *The Once and
 Future King* 1991, 1:4 pp. 39-52, p. 43.

18 June 1939, cited in Brewer, T.H. *White*, p. 49.

18 June 1939, cited in Brewer, T.H. *White*, p. 63.

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'of Perversion,' p. 128.

'of Perversion,' p. 126.

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Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Ballantine, 1982, and
 London, 1986).

40 Emma Jung and Marie Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, trans. Andrea Dykes
 (Boston: Sigo Press, 1986), p. 127.

41 An alternative reading is that Lancelot's repressed homosexuality excludes him
 from the perfect union of masculine and feminine offered to the successful Grail
 seeker.

42 White's account has 'Urre' spelt without the acute accent on the 'e' that might
 perhaps be expected. (SS p. 541).

43 Warner, T.H. *White*, p. 175.

44 Sigmund Freud, 'Archaic Features and Infantile of Dreams' in *Introductory
 Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards
 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 235-49, p. 243.

45 Stephen Frosh, *Sexual Difference: Masculinity and Psychoanalysis* (London and
 New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 41.

46 Warner, T.H. *White*, p. 178.