

From Thebes to Camelot: Incest, Civil War, and Kin-Slaying in the Fall of Arthur's Kingdom

PAUL BATTLES AND DOMINIQUE BATTLES

This article argues that medieval retellings of Theban legends, particularly of the war between Polynices and Eteocles, exercised a profound and sustained influence upon Arthurian tradition. The Theban themes of incest, civil war, and kin-slaying furnished a classical precedent for exploring the darker side—and destruction—of Camelot. (PB & DB)

Because the legend of Thebes enjoyed great popularity in France when many Arthurian texts were being composed, critics have long sought to unearth connections between Camelot¹ and Thebes. To date, however, they have turned up only a few isolated parallels.² In the early twentieth century, scholars investigating the Arthur-Mordred relationship sought after, but failed to find, significant borrowing from the story of Laius and Oedipus;³ subsequent editors and critics have all but dismissed the influence of Theban legend upon Arthurian tradition.⁴ The standard source-studies of the relevant Arthurian works, such as the *Mort Artu*, do not record the influence of Theban narratives.⁵ More recently, M. Victoria Guerin has pointed out a number of parallels between the *Roman de Thèbes* and the Vulgate cycle, but even she hesitates to definitively assert a source-influence relationship.⁶ One reason why scholars have found so few Theban resonances in Arthurian literature is that they have mostly looked for them in the wrong places, concentrating on Oedipus and the Vulgate cycle's Mordred. Yet Oedipus is not the central protagonist of the legend of Thebes in the Middle Ages. Ultimately basing their works on Statius' *Thebaid*, medieval authors instead focus upon the conflict between Polynices and Eteocles, the incestuously born sons of Oedipus whose struggle to claim the rule of Thebes tears apart the kingdom. Oedipus, whose story figures so prominently in the ancient Greek legend of Thebes, barely features in the *Thebaid* and its medieval retellings. Once one looks beyond Oedipus to the characters, scenes, and motifs that loom largest in the medieval reworkings of Theban legend, their extensive influence upon Arthurian texts becomes obvious. As this article will show, Theban narratives

constitute one of the most important bodies of literary intertexts for the medieval Arthurian tradition.

Alongside Troy, the city-state of Thebes furnished a famous classical antecedent to which authors and audiences looked to make sense of the history of Arthur's kingdom. However, whereas connections to Troy cast a mantle of fame and legitimacy upon the monarch's shoulders, references to Thebes served as a means for Arthur's biographers to explore the darker side of Camelot. The Theban elements in Arthurian tradition grow progressively stronger in successive retellings of Arthur's biography. A nascent general parallel to the story of Thebes can already be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, for civil war and kin-slaying destroy Arthur's kingdom. The authors of the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles solidify this link by adding increasingly detailed references to Theban motifs of incest, fraternal war, and patricide; subsequently, these elements become a fixed part of Arthurian tradition, appearing in the works of many later authors. The references are sparsest in the earliest work of the original *Lancelot-Grail* trilogy, the Prose *Lancelot*; they grow stronger and more explicit in the *Mort Artu* and *Estoire de Merlin*; and, finally, in the Post-Vulgate revision of the Merlin-story, the *Suite du Merlin* (also known as *Huth Merlin*), they become central to plot and theme. This suggests that the authors of the later works recognize the allusions present in the earlier texts and expand upon them.⁷ Thus, the interweaving of Arthurian and Theban legends occurs in several phases: the *Lancelot-Grail* trilogy introduces the motifs of incest and patricide; these are developed more fully in the *Estoire de Merlin*; then, the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin* makes them central to the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. Moreover, the engagement of Arthurian writers with the matter of Thebes does not stop there; later authors, such as Sir Thomas Malory and the poet of the Middle English Alliterative *Morte Arthure* add Theban echoes of their own. Throughout the Middle Ages, Arthurian writers keep drawing connections between Camelot and Thebes, furnishing their stories with motifs and scenes that evoke the distinctly Theban constellation of incest, civil war, and kin-slaying. Indeed, these 'Theban' elements become so deeply absorbed into the literary biography of King Arthur that, by the end of the Middle Ages, they become characteristically 'Arthurian.'

Before describing the particular authors' use of Theban material in greater detail, it will be helpful to briefly describe the medieval legend of Thebes.

THEBES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Medieval readers encountered the legend of Thebes in a handful of classical texts, of which by far the most influential was Statius' *Thebaid* (c. 90 CE).⁸ In the medieval schoolroom, Statius ranked alongside Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Juvenal as a canonical author, and the *Thebaid* survives in over one

hundred and sixty manuscripts.⁹ The *Thebaid* also engendered commentaries by Lactantius Placidus (c. 350–400) and Pseudo-Fulgentius, as well as Latin poems such as the *Planctus Oedipi*.¹⁰ The most important vernacular descendant of Statius' epic is the Old French *Roman de Thèbes* (c.1155–60). This poem survives in five manuscripts that derive from two substantially different ancestors, attesting both to the popularity of the story and the variety of means by which a thirteenth-century audience might experience this story.¹¹ The poem underwent a further permutation in the thirteenth century when it was adapted into prose for inclusion into a universal history, *L'Histoire Ancienne Jusqu'à César*. Here, too, variety abounds, as scholars have identified four redactions, two of which were composed in the early to mid-thirteenth century, roughly at the same time as the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles; some thirty manuscripts of these first two prose *Thèbes* redactions survive.¹²

The writers of the Old French *Roman de Thèbes* and Prose *Thèbes* bring innovations to the story of the Theban war that not only accord with the concerns and tastes of their twelfth and thirteenth-century audiences, but also make this legend an obvious analogue to the tale of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. The *Roman de Thèbes* changes the ethical and political dynamics of the poem to resemble a crusade.¹³ In keeping with its crusading ethos, the *Roman de Thèbes* also provides a more dichotomous depiction of characters than Statius' *Thebaid*. Whereas Statius implicates Eteocles and Polynices¹⁴ equally in the shame of civil war predicated by incest, the *Roman de Thèbes* turns Polynices' attempt to regain the rule of Thebes into a 'just cause' and casts Eteocles as the poem's villain, for Eteocles refuses to yield the city's rule as he has vowed to do.¹⁵ Polynices does still suffer from the intractable condition of being the incestuous offspring of Oedipus and Jocasta, but he and his army (who become simply *le Grieu*, 'the Greeks') command the audience's sympathy. One way the poet rehabilitates the cause of Polynices is by ameliorating the character of Tydeus, his comrade and brother-in-law. Like one of Charlemagne's paladins, or one of the knights of the Round Table, Tydeus serves as focal character for much of the story.¹⁶ Although the prose *Thèbes* cuts many of the specific crusading elements—such as the names of Eastern peoples and places—it maintains the moral dichotomy established by the poem and even strengthens the role of Tydeus as the story's hero.¹⁷ These changes open the way for an association between Arthur and his knights with Polynices and the 'Greeks,' while Mordred and his rebellious barons are linked with Eteocles and the treacherous Thebans.

Arguably the most important aspect of the medieval legend of Thebes—including as it applies to the legend of Arthur—lies in its emphasis on the civil and political consequences of incest and kin-slaying. Whereas modern interpretations of the story focus on its significance for the individual (Freud's 'Oedipus complex,' the sexual rivalry that the son feels toward his father),

medieval authors use it to show how the sins of leaders are visited upon their people: conceived in incest, Polynices and Eteocles lay waste to Thebes and end as fratricides. Like Cain and Abel, they serve as a powerful negative exemplum of brotherly conduct. An aristocratic audience would find added relevance in this tale because its protagonists are kings and princes and its action involves a siege, civil war, and familial strife on an epic scale. These are also the elements of the legend that would have had obvious relevance to the writers of Arthurian story, for the fall of Arthur's kingdom as depicted by early writers features a similar configuration of elements. As the following analysis will show, the authors of the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles increasingly heightened these parallels by making aspects of Arthurian history conform ever more closely to Theban patterns.

PROSE LANCELOT AND MORT ARTU

Not surprisingly, much of the Theban influence on the Arthurian legend involves the dark figure of Mordred. Mordred's association with the destruction of Arthur's kingdom has its roots in early tradition, but his role therein and his relationship to Arthur change over time. The earliest-known reference to Mordred (Medrawd) comes in the *Annales Cambriae* (compiled in the mid-tenth century), which mention his and Arthur's fall at the Battle of Camlann in 537;¹⁸ however, the entry is so telegraphic that it is not clear whether Arthur and Mordred fight against one another, or whether both fight a common foe. Today most scholars view the latter as more likely, for Mordred's portrayal in early Welsh literature appears quite positive.¹⁹ However, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1135), Mordred assumes the role of villain. Geoffrey associates Mordred with three motifs that have since then defined his character: rebellion (he usurps the throne while Arthur campaigns on the continent); illicit sexuality (he beds Arthur's wife); and kin-slaying (the *Historia* makes Mordred Arthur's nephew, and Arthur is mortally wounded in the process of putting down his rebellion). These three themes also dominate the story of Polynices and Eteocles, making Thebes a natural analog to Camelot. However, in Geoffrey's version of the story, the parallels remain general.

The Vulgate cycle develops these broad resemblances into a specific and systematic likeness. The trajectory of Mordred's career becomes distinctively more Theban as the story progresses. For example, Mordred goes from indirectly causing Arthur's death to personally killing him in gruesome hand-to-hand combat. Likewise, the relationship between Mordred and Arthur becomes closer by virtue of them being not merely uncle and nephew, but father and son, which makes Mordred's betrayal all the more heinous. Finally, and related to this change, is the fact that the sexual taint adhering to Mordred's person goes from seducing his uncle's wife—in the eyes of medieval

writers, a kind of incest²⁰—to himself being the offspring of Arthur and his sister. Some scholars argue that Mordred's incestuous birth goes back to an early Celtic tradition,²¹ but it is also perfectly in keeping with the general amplification of Mordred's villainy in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles.

The earliest definite reference to Mordred's incestuous origin occurs in the Prose *Lancelot*, the first narrative in the Vulgate cycle (ca. 1215–1220), written roughly fifty years after the *Roman de Thèbes*.²² The motif is not fully developed in this text. Throughout most of the Prose *Lancelot*, Mordred is known as the son of King Lot. However, in one episode, Mordred encounters a hermit who predicts that he will destroy the Round Table, kill his father, and in turn be slain by his father: 'Ensi sera mors li peres par le fil . & li fils par le pere' ('thus the father will die by the son, and the son by the father').²³ When Mordred objects that King Lot has already died, the hermit states that Lot was not Mordred's father; a far greater king sired him.²⁴ Later, the hermit reveals in a letter to Lancelot that this king was Arthur. Since Mordred was born to Lot's wife—Arthur's sister—he is therefore the product of an incestuous union. This episode occurs in the 'Agravain' section of the Prose *Lancelot*, which serves as a bridge between the chivalric adventures of the Knights of the Round Table and the Grail Quest, therefore announcing the beginning of Camelot's end. Because this episode is the only reference to Mordred's incestuous origin in the Prose *Lancelot*, some critics have taken it as a later interpolation, added after the *Mort Artu* developed this motif.²⁵ In either case, the scene functions to foreshadow the destruction of Arthur's kingdom.

It is in the work that narrates this destruction, the *Mort Artu* (ca. 1225–1230), that Camelot becomes inseparably linked with Thebes. The *Mort* makes incest, civil war, and kin-slaying the central themes in the closing act of Arthurian drama, reshaping the fall of Arthur's kingdom to mirror the destruction of Thebes at the hands of Polynices and Eteocles. As discussed above, the tale of Polynices and Eteocles is central to the medieval reception of Theban legend, and the relationship between Arthur and Mordred as depicted by earlier Arthurian writers contains some nascent parallels to their story. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, when the king leaves Britain to campaign on the continent, he makes his nephew Mordred regent.²⁶ Mordred soon sleeps with the queen, makes an alliance with the Saxons, and sets himself up as rightful ruler. Hearing of this, Arthur interrupts his campaign and returns home. He and Mordred fight several pitched battles, which conclude with Mordred defeated and killed, many of Britain's best knights dead, and Arthur mortally wounded. Similarly, both Polynices and Eteocles wish to rule Thebes. Eventually they reach an agreement to annually alternate the kingship. Eteocles takes the first stint as king and Polynices goes into temporary exile. At the end of the appointed time, Eteocles refuses to give up power. Polynices

gathers an army and lays siege to Thebes; in the ensuing conflict, the rival forces are virtually annihilated and the two brothers kill one another.

In both stories, the rightful ruler of realm goes abroad and hands over power to a designated ruler, with the understanding that it will be relinquished upon his return. When his rival refuses to cede control, the legitimate king gathers an army and invades his own kingdom. After a long and bitter conflict, both the rightful ruler and the usurper die in battle and their kingdom lies in ruins. While Geoffrey of Monmouth may or may not perceive similarities between Arthur's realm and Thebes, he certainly makes it easy for subsequent authors to juxtapose Camelot and Thebes. The *Mort Artu* obliges, drawing clear and detailed connections that pull Camelot into Thebes' orbit.

To do so, the *Mort Artu* turns Mordred from a disloyal nephew into a Theban-style incestuously born patricide. This makes Mordred's crime both more severe and also more clearly motivated: his origin, which runs contrary to nature's laws, causes him to commit unnatural deeds — attempting to usurp his father on the throne and in the marriage bed. There are occasional parallels between Arthur and Oedipus here, though less with Oedipus-the-son than Oedipus-the-father. For instance, when the Arthur of the *Mort Artu* learns of Mordred's betrayal, he reacts quite differently than in Geoffrey, who does not reveal Arthur's feelings at all. The *Mort Artu* instead has the king show open and immoderate rage, saying, 'mes onques peres ne fist autretant de fill comme ge ferai de toi, car ge t'ocirrai a mes deus meins, ce sache touz li siecles, ne ja Dex ne vueille que tu muires d'autrui meins que des moies' [but never has a father done to a son as I will do to you, because I will kill you with my own two hands. May the whole world know this! God forbid that you die at anyone else's hands but mine].²⁷ This is very similar to Oedipus' reaction in the *Roman de Thèbes* when his sons show open contempt for his decision to blind himself by crushing his eyeballs beneath their feet: angrily he prays that Jupiter take vengeance on his sons (547–52): '[L]es orgueilleux me destruisiez / qui mes eulz mistrent soz lor piez. / Entre'eus sourde descorde taux / que pesme leur soit et mortax, / que le regne qu'ont a baillir / ne puissent ja em pes tenir' [Destroy for me those proud ones who put my eyes beneath their feet. Between them let such discord well up, disastrous and deadly for them, that they can never rule in peace over the realm that is theirs to govern].²⁸ In both texts, fathers wrathfully ask divine help in seeking the deaths of their incestuously born sons who have transgressed against them.

The Theban elements in the *Mort Artu* grow increasingly frequent and detailed as the narrative approaches its climax and denouement, with Arthur playing the part of Polynices (the protagonist who returns after an absence to claim the realm whose rule is rightfully his) and Mordred that of Eteocles (the treacherous villain who would do anything to hold on to power). Just as Polynices and Eteocles are evenly matched as warriors, the *Mort Artu* makes

Mordred Arthur's equal on the battlefield. This departs from earlier narratives, which do grant Mordred courage—according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, he is '*omnium audacissimus*' (251.47–48, 'the boldest of men')—but decidedly not prowess. His boldness serves to explain his rebellion against the king, but, despite having numerically superior forces, he loses one battle after another to Arthur. In addition to being an ineffective general, Mordred also never personally defeats enemy knights or commanders, unlike Arthur, Gawain, and other genuinely heroic figures. Geoffrey's Mordred is quite different from the character we encounter in the *Mort Artu*, where Mordred leads his army energetically and fights in its front ranks. He not only hastens to engage Arthur in hand-to-hand combat, but he personally kills two of the leading knights of the Round Table, Sir Sagremour and Sir Yvain—'*dont ce fu domages doulereus, quar a celi termine tenoit l'en monseigneur Yvain a un des bons chevaliers qui fust el monde et au plus preudomme*' [which was a great misfortune, for at that time Sir Yvain was thought to be one of the best and bravest knights of the world]. In this, the Mordred of the *Mort Artu* is very similar to Eteocles, whom the *Roman* describes as *mout proz* (ll. 4647, 'very valiant') and as the best warrior fighting on the Theban side (ll. 4647–48). Eteocles does not shy away from engaging his brother, and he fights duels that result in the deaths of several enemy champions, including Parthenopeus (ll. 8679–8712) and Tydeus (ll. 6363–6386).

The climactic Battle of Salisbury Plain, in particular, follows a specifically Theban choreography. In both narratives, the doomed protagonist (Arthur/Polynices) seeks out a preliminary duel with his adversary (Mordred/Eteocles) that ends inconclusively, as they are separated before either can land a killing blow. Then, each charges toward the other on the battlefield, with the more sympathetic character driving a lance into the villain, only to receive a lethal sword-wound in return. The narrative parallels become clearest in tabular form:

Roman de Thèbes, ll. 9763–9816

1. Polynices and Eteocles engage in battle
2. Polynices drives a great lance through Eteocles
3. Polynices dismounts
4. Eteocles *bien set que lui estuet morir* 'knows well that he must die' (l. 9789)
5. Eteocles thrusts a sword through Polynices' gut

Mort Artu, c. 190 (p. 245)

1. Arthur and Mordred engage in battle
2. Arthur drives a great lance through Mordred
3. —
4. Mordred *pense bien qu'il est navrez a mort* 'understands well that he is mortally wounded'
5. Mordred uses his sword to give Arthur a vicious head-wound

6. Tableau: the mortally wounded brothers lie side by side on the battlefield

6. Tableau: the mortally wounded father and son lie side by side on the battlefield

Verbal parallels heighten the likeness of both encounters. The description of the wound that Arthur deals Mordred with his spear in the *Mort Artu*, 'li met par mi le cors le fer de son glaive' [he thrust his spear through the middle of his body], echoes the wording of Eteocles' wound in the prose *Thebes*, 'le feri par mi le cors d'un glaive'²⁹ [he struck him through the middle of his body with a spear].

The aftermath of the battle in the *Mort Artu* similarly departs from the 'chronicle' tradition established by Geoffrey of Monmouth but exactly parallels the story of Thebes. After Polynices and Eteocles kill each other, Eteocles' successor, Creon, assumes power in Thebes. The victorious army is too greatly weakened to challenge his rule and leaves the field. Eventually an embassy reaches the ruler of Athens, Theseus, to plead for his intercession. Moved by these news, Theseus marches on Thebes and defeats Creon, bringing an end to the Theban war. The *Mort Artu* closely follows this story, with Lancelot—who is obviously not in Geoffrey of Monmouth—playing the part of Theseus:

Roman de Thèbes,
ll. 9817–10,542

Mort Artu, c. 196–198
(pp. 252–57)

1. The army of Eteocles is routed
2. On Polynices' side, only three survive the battle: King Adrastus, Acastus,³⁰ and an unnamed soldier
3. The successor of Eteocles, Creon, unlawfully clings to power
- 4a. A messenger is sent to Argos to tell news of the defeat
- 4b. The widows of Argos appeal to Theseus in Athens for vengeance
5. Theseus leads a great army to Thebes, defeats and kills Creon, and restores order to the realm

1. The army of Mordred is routed
2. On Arthur's side, only three survive the battle: King Arthur, Lucan, and Girflet
3. The successors of Mordred, his two sons, unlawfully cling to power
- 4a/b. A messenger is sent to Gaunes to tell Lancelot news of the defeat
-
5. Lancelot leads a great army to Britain, defeats and kills the sons of Mordred, and restores order to the realm

The three survivors, the embassy abroad, and the subsequent second invasion have no counterpart at all in previous Arthurian tradition, where Constantine assumes power after Arthur and puts down Mordred's sons. The *Mort Artu* shapes the aftermath of Arthur's death to more closely resemble the end of the Theban war. Thus, the whole Arthurian end-game from the Battle of Salisbury to the defeat of Mordred's sons shows the strong and sustained influence of Theban legend.

THE ESTOIRE DE MERLIN

The manifold Theban allusions in the *Mort Artu* are not lost upon later authors and redactors of the Vulgate cycle, who continually extend the parallels between the two story lines. This begins with the *Estoire de Merlin*, composed ca. 1230–35 as a prequel to the *Lancelot-Queste-Mort* trilogy. The Vulgate *Merlin* relates the history of Arthur's realm prior to Lancelot's arrival at Camelot, but one of its major functions is to impose coherence upon the vast and sprawling cycle. It sets up key episodes in the trilogy through foreshadowing, back-stories, and explanatory passages. True to form, the *Estoire de Merlin* makes explicit connections between Camelot and Thebes. As mentioned above, the *Roman de Thèbes* makes Polynices and his 'Greek' army—especially Tydeus—more sympathetic than they are in the *Thebaid* and associates them with Arthur and his knights, while linking Mordred and his traitorous barons with Eteocles and the Theban army. The Vulgate *Merlin* explicitly picks up on these connections in the story of Marmiadoise, the sword Arthur bears after loaning Escalibor to Gauvain—for Marmiadoise is none other than the weapon of Tydeus.

The sword of Tydeus is one of the most famous weapons of the *romans antiques*, receiving the most detailed description of any sword in the *Roman de Thèbes*. Its possession marks Tydeus as a hero of great stature, akin to one of Charlemagne's paladins in the *chanson de geste*. In Statius' *Thebaid*, this sword is briefly described as Tydeus' 'ensem / Bistonium . . . Mavortia munera magni / Oeneos'³¹ [Bistonian sword, the martial gift of great Oeneus]; Tydeus uses it to defeat the men who set an ambush for him after his embassy to Thebes. The *Roman* greatly expands the ambush scene and compares Tydeus and to the greatest figure of the *chanson de geste*, Roland: 'Coux donne merveillex et granz, / onc nel donna meillor Rollans' [{Tydeus} deals great and powerful blows, / Never did Roland deal better' {ll. 1711–12}]. Tydeus's elevated status and his Roland-like nature are given symbolic expression by his sword. The *Thèbes*-poet indicates that 'Galanz le fevre la forja / et Vulcanus la tresgita' [Wayland the smith forged it / And Vulcan cast it' {ll. 1579–80; Coley 1561–2}]. Vulcan famously crafts Aeneas' arms,³² while Wayland is named as the maker of many heroic weapons in the *chansons de geste*, including Roland's

Durendal and Charlemagne's Joyeuse.³³ Like Durendal and Joyeuse, Tydeus' sword also contains a holy relic (1680)—an obvious anachronism for a story set in classical antiquity, but one that clearly marks Tydeus as a notable and sympathetic hero.

By having this sword come into Arthur's possession, the *Estoire de Merlin* establishes a physical link between Thebes and Camelot that reifies the thematic associations established in the *Mort Artu*. As shown by its reference to Vulcan, the description of Marmiadoise explicitly recalls the description of Tydeus' sword in the *Roman de Thèbes*:

& li contes dist que vulcans forga lespee qui regna au tans adrastus qui
 fu rois de grece
 qui maint ior lot en son tresor. cele espee ot tideus li fiex le roy de
 calcidoine le iour quil
 fist le message al roy ethiocles de tebes.

[And the story says Vulcan forged the sword, who reigned at the time of Adrastus, who was king of Greece and who had it in his treasure house many a day. This is the sword Tydeus, son of the king of Calydon, bore on the day he brought the message to King Eteocles of Thebes.³⁴]

Possession of this sword also foreshadows Arthur's death. Just as Tydeus is killed fighting Eteocles before the gates of Thebes, so Arthur will fall by the hand of Mordred in trying to reclaim his kingdom.

The *Estoire de Merlin* further heightens these Theban resonances by detailing the origins of Mordred. The Prose *Lancelot* and *Mort Artu* merely state that Mordred is Arthur's son by incest. As with so many other episodes in the *Lancelot-Grail* trilogy, the author of the *Estoire* turns this into a full-fledged story. He begins by stating that he wishes to narrate its particulars because, if readers do not know the story, they might think poorly of the king.³⁵ While still a squire and ignorant of his true identity, Arthur stays in the same house with King Lot and his beautiful wife. Falling in love with her, young Arthur tricks her into sleeping with him. When Lot gets up in the middle of the night and rides off, Arthur climbs into the bed he has vacated. The queen, assuming that he is Lot, consents to his amatory advances. The next day, Arthur remorsefully confesses his trick to her; though she is ashamed, the lady gladly forgives him. Neither knows that they are related. However, the lady from then on bears a special fondness toward Arthur, which is only reinforced when she later learns that he is her brother (pp. 128–30). Clearly, she feels no shame about what happened, which mitigates Arthur's guilt. The text mentions that Mordred is conceived during the fateful night Arthur spends with his sister, but provides no further commentary and never explicitly blames the king for this youthful indiscretion.

THE SUITE DU MERLIN

Shortly after the composition of the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin*, an alternate version of the story appeared, the *Suite du Merlin* (or *Huth Merlin*). To a much greater extent than its Vulgate counterpart, the *Suite du Merlin* anticipates the impending downfall of Arthur and his kingdom. This story of beginnings becomes thoroughly obsessed with the end. Not least for this reason, it greatly elaborates the Theban elements in Arthur's early biography. In place of the individual parallels found in the *Estoire de Merlin*, the *Suite du Merlin* makes Arthur's Theban characteristics central to its plot and theme. Whereas the *Estoire* relates Mordred's birth-story parenthetically and in such a way as to excuse Arthur's conduct, the *Suite* retells the same tale in a more lurid fashion and places Mordred's conception at the center of the narrative. It describes Arthur's seduction of his sister in greater and more sordid detail, while also giving it greater prominence in Arthur's early reign, along with the civil war Arthur fights against the barons who refuse to recognize his right to rule. This, too, already looks ahead to the *Mort Artu*: Arthur's rule now begins and ends in civil war, just as it begins with him fathering Mordred and ends with him being killed by Mordred.³⁶ The emphasis upon Arthur's violation of the incest taboo also amplifies the parallels between Thebes and Camelot. Theban narratives such as the *Roman de Thèbes* use the story of Oedipus' incest to generate an atmosphere of pollution within which every action takes place. Because his rule originates in sin, Oedipus himself, his descendants, and also his kingdom must suffer the consequences: civil war, death, and destruction. The *Suite du Merlin* applies the same pattern to Camelot.

One way the author of the *Suite* intensifies the political ramifications of Arthur's incest is by changing the timing of Mordred's conception. Unlike in the Vulgate cycle, the *Suite* has Arthur meet Lot's wife as a crowned king, thus situating his sexual transgression in a context of royal power. Lot's wife comes to court with four children in tow, yet Arthur falls so madly in love with her that he keeps her there for two months, at the end of which period he sleeps with her. This story has none of the mitigating circumstances of the Vulgate version: Arthur is a man, not a youth (he has been knighted); he is a king, not a squire; the lady is not tricked, but knowingly commits adultery; the episode unfolds over two months, not a single night; and, finally, the lady's four children are present, which lends the whole episode a deeply unsavory air.

To underscore the sinfulness of this union, the narrator condemns it in the harshest possible terms and connects it directly with the destruction of Logres. Already at its opening, the story looks ahead to the bitter end:

[Arthur] gut a li et engenra en li Mordrec, par cui tant grant mal furent puis fait en la terre de Logres et en tout le monde. Adont conut li freres carneument sa

serour et porta la dame chelui qui puissemi le traist a mort et mist a destruction et a martyre la terre, dont vous porrés oïr viers la fin dou livre.³⁷

[Arthur slept with her and engendered on her Mordred, by whom so many great evils were later committed in the land of Logres and in the whole world. Thus the brother carnally knew his sister, and the lady carried the one who later betrayed him unto death, and who brought destruction and torment to the land, whereof you can hear toward the end of the book.]

Later on, when Merlin reveals to Arthur that he and Lot's wife are brother and sister, the wizard echoes the narrator's words:

Artus, tu as fait si tres grant desloiauté que tu as geu carnement a ta serour germainne que tes peres engendra et ta mere porta, si as engené un fil qui iert teuls coume Diex set bien, car par lui verra moult de grant mal en terre. (p. 8)

[Arthur, you have committed such a great misdeed that you have lain carnally with your bodily sister, whom your father engendered and your mother carried, so that you have begotten a son who will be such a person as God knows well, because through him will come many great evils to the land.]

Not only does this set the tone for Arthur's reign, occurring immediately after his coronation, but it also recalls the opening of the *Roman de Thèbes*, which similarly announces at the outset that

rois Eduppus les engendra
 en la roïne Jocasta.
 De sa mere les ot a tort
 quant ot son pere le roi mort.
 Pour le pechié dont sunt crié
 felons furent et enragié;
 Thebes destruisirent, lor cité,
 et degasterent leur regné;
 destruit en furent lor voisin
 et il ambedui en la fin. (ll. 23–32)

[King Oedipus engendered {Eteocles and Polynices} upon the queen, Jocasta. By his mother he wrongfully had them after he had killed his father, the king. Because of the sin in which they were begotten, they were wicked and unrestrained in rage; they destroyed their city, Thebes, and ravaged their realm; {that sin} destroyed their neighbors and, in the end, both of them.]

Like Thebes, Arthur's realm is doomed when its sovereign unwittingly commits incest.

As several critics have noted, the details of Mordred's birth-story have been shaped by various medieval narratives of incest, exposure, and infanticide. The legends of Pope Gregorius and of Judas, in particular, probably furnished key details, such as Mordred's exposure at sea; likewise, Arthur's plan to kill the infants born during the same month as Mordred recalls the Massacre of the Innocents.³⁸ However, the overall role that this character plays within Arthurian narrative has a distinctly Theban cast, combining the elements of incest, civil war, and kin-slaying. Moreover, the story of Mordred is by no means the only reference to Thebes in the *Suite du Merlin*.

To underscore the theme of kin-slaying, the *Suite* introduces an entirely new episode into the chronicle of Arthur's early reign, the tale of Balin and Balan, whose ultimate inspiration comes from the *Roman de Thèbes*. The episode's placement—immediately after Mordred's birth and the exposure of the May infants—indicates its thematic significance. Balin, the episode's viewpoint character, functions partly as a surrogate for Arthur;³⁹ the fratricidal duel between Balin and his brother anticipates the final combat of Arthur and Mordred (as well as the factionalism that destroys the Round Table more generally). In this way, the *Suite* further deepens the connections between Camelot and Thebes.

The story of Balin and Balan draws inspiration from a scene in the *Roman de Thèbes* involving the duel of two royal brothers (5691–5734), the grandsons of Creon. Since Creon is also uncle to Polynices and Eteocles,⁴⁰ their genealogy invites us to see these brothers as surrogates for the feuding would-be kings. The elder of the two brothers joins the army of Polynices, while the younger remains in Thebes and is knighted by Eteocles. When they meet on the battlefield, they do not recognize each other. They give each other mortal wounds and knock one another to the ground. Lying there, each recognizes the other, at which point they lament their fates and forgive one another, weeping and praying. Finally, they die. With much grief, their bodies are disarmed and taken from the battlefield. The overall choreography of the scene mirrors the combat of Polynices and Eteocles, with the notable exception that the young princes are reconciled before dying. Not polluted by the sin of incest, they are not *felons . . . et enragié* (28). Still, they cannot escape the larger doom that hangs over the city of Thebes, thus ending as fratricides.

The *Suite du Merlin*'s use of this story becomes especially clear in the fatal battle between Balin and Balan. In both texts, the clash takes place outside the walls of a fortified city or castle. While the older brother acts the part of the intruder or aggressor, the younger brother, who in both cases wears notably elaborate equipment, defends these walls. Below are the commonalities between these scenes, presented in outline form and broken down into three parts (1. the approach to battle, 2. the fight itself, and 3. its aftermath):

Roman de Thèbes, ll. 5717–62

1a. ‘Greek’ knight is older, attacks the walled city; Theban knight is younger, sallies forth from city

1b. The younger brother is distinguished by his fine equipment

1c. But they do not recognize each other

2a. They give each other fearful blows, so that ‘their hauberks broke and rent’ (l. 5720, *les hauberz rompent et desmaillent*)

2b. Each unhorses the other

3a. Lying on the ground, the brothers recognize each other

3b. They grieve for and forgive each other

3c. They weep and pray for each other

3d. They die

Suite du Merlin, pp. 185–192

1a. Balin is older, must fight knight of the castle; younger brother Balan⁴¹ sallies forth from castle

1b. The younger brother is distinguished by his fine equipment

1c. But they do not recognize each other

2a. Each unhorses the other

2b. They give each other fearful blows, so that *li hauberc sont ja desmailliet et desrompu* (p. 188, ‘their hauberks were already rent and broken’)

3a. Balan recognizes Balin and faints, falling to the ground; Balin, already on the ground, recognizes Balan

3b. They grieve for each other; Balan says that both should be forgiven

3c. They weep and receive last rites

3d. They die

Beyond the detailed correspondences between the two scenes, which are—apart from two motifs appearing in swapped order (2a and 2b)—even presented in the exact same sequence, both play a proleptic function in the narrative. Just as the encounter between Creon’s grandsons anticipates the deadly duel between Polynices and Eteocles, so the tale of Balin and Balan foreshadows the fight between Arthur and Mordred.

The *Suite du Merlin* represents the final step in the ‘Thebanization’ of Arthur’s biography in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles. It heightens the sinfulness of Mordred’s incestuous conception and also more explicitly connects Arthur’s death to this sin. In the tale of Balin and Balan, a pair

of characters inspired by the grandsons of Creon, the *Suite* also furnishes Arthurian legend with an entirely new set of Theban echoes, thus strengthening the ties between Camelot and Thebes.

THE ALLITERATIVE *MORTE ARTHURE*
AND MALORY'S *MORTE D'ARTHUR*

To illustrate how the Theban elements introduced by the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles evolve in later Arthurian tradition, we close by examining two English works, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (ca. 1360–1400) and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1469/70). In keeping with its generally idiosyncratic approach to its sources, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* modifies the Theban elements in unusual ways; the nature of these changes suggests that its author was well versed in Theban lore. Indeed, the poem takes an almost scholarly approach in 'correcting' the Vulgate cycle's Theban allusions. Malory, by contrast, modifies the Theban elements for reasons of theme, characterization, and effective story-telling. Because *Le Morte Darthur* occupies such a central role in the Arthurian canon, Malory's version of key episodes—Mordred's birth, the story of Balin and Balan, Arthur's death—is also the one most familiar to later readers, illustrating the importance of *Le Morte Darthur* in transmitting the Theban elements of Arthuriana.

Although the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* follows in the chronicle tradition of Arthurian legend, it handles the familiar characters and scenes in an idiosyncratic manner, making the exact source for any particular motif difficult to determine;⁴² for example, uniquely among Arthurian authors, the poet gives Guinevere and Mordred children.⁴³ The poem's Theban allusions follow this trend: their nature and placement suggests that they are inspired by the Vulgate cycle and the *Suite du Merlin*, but their specific articulation is unique. In addition, the poet's treatment of the relevant passages reveals an intimately familiarity with Theban narratives, and his changes further heighten the parallels between the two bodies of legend.

Two scenes of mortal combat illustrate the poet's use of Theban allusions. The first involves Gawain's death. In its broadest outline, this episode follows the pattern established in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*: While fighting abroad, the king learns that Mordred has usurped the throne; furious at this betrayal, he returns home with his army, but the coast is defended against him; after a drawn-out battle that claims the lives of many knights, Arthur's forces finally manage to land, but Gawain is killed. In most versions of the story, his killer is not named; Lawman is more specific than most in reporting that he was 'an eorl Sexisne,' some Saxon earl.⁴⁴ In the *Mort Artu*, Gawain already bears a great wound from his fight with Lancelot, which reopens when he is struck on the head during the landing, but here too his immediate killer goes unnamed. By contrast, in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,

he is slain by none other than Mordred—a detail unparalleled elsewhere in medieval Arthurian tradition.

By having Gawain die at the hands of his brother, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* highlights the Theban motif of fratricide. A closer examination of the battle between Gawain and Mordred reveals that it is primarily modeled on the *Mort Artu*'s Arthur-Mordred duel, but it also echoes the inspiration for the scene, the final duel between Polynices and Eteocles before the gates of Thebes. In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Gawain takes the place of Arthur as the hero slain by Mordred because he and Mordred, like Polynices and Eteocles, are brothers. Thus, the Middle English poet rewrites this scene with one eye on Arthurian tradition and the other on Theban legend. The immediate source is the *Mort Artu*, as the following comparison shows:

Alliterative <i>Morte Arthure</i> , ll. 3840–3863	<i>Mort Artu</i> , c. 196–198 (pp. 252–57)
1. Gawain and Mordred engage in battle	1. Arthur and Mordred engage in battle
2a. Gawain strikes Mordred in the middle of the shield (<i>mydeschelde</i>) and runs him through with a lance	2. Arthur strikes Mordred 'through the middle of the body' (<i>par mi le cors</i>) with a lance
[b. Mordred swerves, so his wound is not deadly]	
3. Mordred falls to the ground	3. Mordred falls to the ground
4. Gawain approaches to give him his death-blow, but his dagger slips	4. Mordred realizes that his wound is fatal
5. Mordred strikes Gawain on the head, cutting through the helmet	5. Mordred strikes Arthur on the head, cutting through the helmet

The one significant difference between the two scenes concerns the fourth element. In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Gawain approaches Mordred and bends over him (trying to finish the kill with a knife), and this has no parallel in the *Mort Artu*. However, it does recall the death of Polynices at the hands of Eteocles. Gawain approaches Mordred just as Polynices in the *Roman de Thèbes* approaches Eteocles, and each is fatally wounded by his fallen brother, who strikes one final treacherous blow to bring down his sibling.

By reconfiguring the scene's family dynamic from father and son to brother and brother, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* pays homage to Theban tradition. Statius' *Thebaid* famously takes as its theme, as its opening words indicate, the strife of brothers: *Fraternas acies*. Similarly, the narrator of the *Roman de Thèbes* announces as his subject the story of *deus freres* (l. 19). The

duel of Polynices and Eteocles is the Theban equivalent of the clash between Achilles and Hector, the long-awaited finale toward which the story's events have been building. While the *Mort Artu* recreates this famous encounter in the battle between Mordred and Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* recasts the encounter as a fraternal clash between Mordred and Gawain. In short, the Middle English poem deliberately restores the *fraternas acies* to this 'Theban' scene.

Other Theban family dynamics also emerge in the Middle English poem, with Arthur taking on some characteristics of Laius and Mordred those of Oedipus. First, by giving Mordred and Guinevere children,⁴⁵ the poem replicates Theban genealogy, with the classical legend's three-generational pattern of Laius—Oedipus—offspring (Polynices, Eteocles, Antigone, Ismene) mirrored by the Middle English poem's Arthur—Mordred—children sequence. Second, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* has Mordred emasculate Arthur in a manner calculated to recall Oedipus' treatment of Laius. Critics have rightly noted that the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* casts Mordred's rebellion in sexual terms. Mordred not only usurps Arthur's bed and throne, but also deals him a deadly wound to the genitals:⁴⁶ 'The felettes of þe ferrere syde he [Mordred] flassches in sondyre / Thorowe jopown and jesserawnte of gentill mailes' [the groin on the further side Mordred slashes apart, through surcoat and mail; ll. 4237–38]. The legend of Thebes features just such a dual emasculation. While there are varying medieval accounts of how Oedipus kills Laius (the *Roman de Thèbes* has him cut off his father's head), the anonymous twelfth-century *Planctus Oedipi* ('Lament of Oedipus'), which survives in fifteen manuscripts,⁴⁷ has Oedipus confess, 'Incestavi matris cubilia / Vibrans ferrum per patris ilia'⁴⁸ [With lust I have defiled my mother's bed, and slashed steel through my father's loin; ll. 29–30]. Even the phrasing of the two passages is very similar. The Latin *vibrare* denotes a rapid, back-and-forth motion, in this case of a slashing blade.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Middle English *flashen* refers to a darting, flitting movement⁵⁰—here, 'to slash, strike swiftly.'⁵¹ Both *ile* (acc. pl. *ilium*) and *fil(l)et* (acc. pl. *felettes*) in context denote the loins or groin, and therefore also, metonymically, the genitals.⁵² Mordred, like Oedipus, figuratively and also literally emasculates the father/monarch, displacing him in the marriage bed and wounding his genitals.⁵³

Malory's use of Theban motifs is more subtle than that of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. *Le Morte Darthur* does not transmit every Theban scene found in his sources. For instance, Malory drops the story of Marmiadoise, the sword of Arthur and Tydeus; unlike in the Vulgate cycle, Excalibur remains Arthur's sword throughout the *Morte Darthur*. He does, however, retain the three major Theban scenes from the *Suite du Merlin* and the *Mort Artu*: Mordred's conception and birth; the tale of Balin and Balan; and Arthur's death. In comparison with his sources, Malory's version of each lessens King

Arthur's culpability and apports a greater share of the blame to Mordred. To further heighten Mordred's guilt, Malory also highlights the theme of treason in the three scenes.⁵⁴

In narrating Mordred's origin, Malory preserves the outline of the story as told in the *Suite du Merlin* but de-emphasizes its importance to the overall plot; he shortens it, makes it no longer responsible for causing civil war, and also cuts or alters most of the moralizing passages that assign blame to Arthur. Merlin himself also subtly deflects blame from Arthur in a passage where the magician upbraids the king for sleeping with his sister. After foretelling the end of his reign, as in the *Suite*, Merlin then adds:

'Mervayle nat,' seyde Merlion, 'for hit ys Goddis wyll that youre body sholde be punysshed for your fowle dedis. But I ought ever to be hevvy,' seyde Merlion, 'for I shall dye a shamefull dethe, to be putte in the erthe quycke; and ye shall dey a worshypfull dethe.'⁵⁵

By favorably contrasting Arthur's end with his own ignominious death, Merlin shifts the emphasis from away from the themes of incest and kin-slaying, which in the *Suite du Merlin* tarnish Arthur's character.

Malory similarly downplays the role of incest in 'The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthure Saunz Guerdon,' where Arthur and Mordred kill one another. Malory focuses our attention on Mordred's treachery. Both the French *Mort Artu* and the Middle English Stanzaic *Morte Arthure*, on which he primarily draws here,⁵⁶ frequently connect Camelot's doom and Arthur's death with his incestuous begetting of Mordred. Malory cuts most of these references, removing, as Larry D. Benson puts it, 'as much as possible, Mordred from his role as agent of divine retribution for Arthur's incest.'⁵⁷ Instead, when the two at last confront one another on the field of battle, Malory focuses on the magnitude of Mordred's treachery in causing his father's fall:

Than the kynge gate his speare in bothe hys hondis, and ran towarde sir Mordred, cryng and saying, 'Traytoure, now ys thy dethe-day com!'

And whan Sir Mordred saw Kynge Arthure he ran untyll hym with hys swerde drawyn in hys honde; and there Kyng Arthure smote Sir Mordred undir the shyld, with a foyne of hys speare, thorowoute the body more than a fadom. And whan Sir Mordred felte that he had hys dethys wounde he threste hymself with the myght that he had up to the burre of Kyng Arthure's speare, and ryght so he smote hys fadir, Kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne. And therewith Mordred daysshed downe starke dede to the erthe (923.28–924.5).

'Traytoure, now ys thy dethe-day com'—these are the first and only words that Arthur addresses to Mordred once conflict erupts between them; nor does Mordred utter a reply, implicitly accepting the charge. Mordred's treachery, not Arthur's incest, is foregrounded here.

Two details in this scene suggest that Malory here may be recalling the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, 'by far Malory's most important English source.'⁵⁸ First, in this poem Arthur similarly calls Mordred a traitor and vows to kill him: 'Turne, traytoure vntrewe— þe tydys no bettyre; / Be grete Gode, thow sall dy with dynt of my hands!' (ll. 4227–8); as in Malory, Mordred offers no reply. Neither the French *Mort Artu* nor the Middle English stanzaic *Morte Arthure* have Arthur speak with Mordred at this point. Also, the retaliatory sword blow inflicted by Mordred upon Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and upon Arthur in Malory's *Morte Darthur* specifically cuts into the hero's brain, a small but telling detail not found in the other accounts.

When Malory does reference the biological relationship between Arthur and Mordred, he recasts it in terms more favorable to Arthur, using it to reinforce the theme of treason. For instance, whereas the *Mort Artu* highlights the reciprocal nature of the parricide—'Einsi ocist li peres le fill, et li filz navra le pere a mort' [Thus the father killed the son, and the son wounded his father unto death] (p. 245)—Malory elides the fact that Arthur kills his son, only mentioning that Mordred 'smote hys fadir, Kynge Arthure.' This further magnifies Mordred's treachery, since he owes Arthur, his father and king, a double allegiance. Commenting upon the rhetorical significance of the phrase 'hys fadir, Kynge Arthure,' Helen Cooper notes that 'it is the only time in the work that Malory uses the dual formulation, and he holds it back until the stroke that cuts down the whole Arthurian world.'⁵⁹

In employing this particular phrase, Malory also seems to evoke Theban legend, for it occurs in virtually identical form in the prose *Sege of Thebes* (composed after 1422). As Megan G. Leitch has recently shown, this retelling of Lydate's *Siege of Thebes* (1421–22) shares many qualities with *Le Morte Darthur*.⁶⁰ In addition to several parallels of theme and genre, the Prose *Sege of Thebes* also contains a portrait of Oedipus (Edippes) that is strikingly similar to Malory's Mordred. In maturing, the child Edippes 'grew ful of wicked and cursed condicions, so þat no man with him myȝt dele ne accord.'⁶¹ When his foster father reveals the truth about his origin, Edippes furiously rides for Thebes. On his way, he stops at a castle where King Layus happens to be holding a tourney. Edippes knocks at the castle gate; because it is not immediately opened, he kills the porter. When the king approaches and asks why the porter was slain, the son kills his father: 'Edippes holding his swerde drawn in his honde, withoute eny more, smote þe king his fader, and pere slowe him' (p. 48). As Leitch points out (p. 74), Malory echoes this language in stating that Mordred 'smote hys fadir, Kynge Arthure, with hys

swerde holdynge in both hys hondys.’ Edippes’ slaying of his father occurs *without eny more*: there are no words, no explanations, no gestures—Edippes wordlessly strikes down Layus, just as Malory’s Modred does Arthur.

Appropriately, then, Malory gives Mordred the bloodiest death in the entire *Morte Darthur*. After Arthur pierces Mordred’s body with this spear, the latter ‘threste hymselff with the myght that he had upp to the burre of kyng Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote hys fadir . . . And therewith Mordred daysshed downe starke dede to the erthe.’ Mordred thrusting himself up the spear to deliver his last, deadly blow is an unforgettable detail, and just one of many touches that Malory uses to provide Arthur a suitably piteous yet worshipfull death. It also gives Mordred a fittingly gory end for a character so powerfully shaped by Theban legend.

From the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles down to later works such as the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, Theban texts have played a crucial role in the development of medieval Arthurian tradition. Since then, incest, civil war, and parricide have remained prominently linked with the biographies of Arthur and his knights. Some later authors, notably Alfred Lord Tennyson, attempted to suppress elements such as Mordred’s incestuous birth, but with only brief and partial success. Even during the Victorian era, some writers daringly upheld Malory’s version of the story,⁶² and later authors overwhelmingly followed suit. Many of the best-known later novels and films that chronicle Arthur’s life, from T.H. White’s *Once and Future King* (1958) to John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981) and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Mists of Avalon* (1983), give prominent place to the Theban motifs of incest and kin-slaying, as do retellings of the legend that focus upon Mordred, such as Nancy Springer’s *I am Mordred* (2002) and Douglas Clegg’s *Mordred, Bastard Son* (2006). Knowingly or not, these authors perpetuate the Theban elements in Arthurian legend.

HANOVER COLLEGE

Paul Battles is Professor of English at Hanover College. His research interests include, among other things, intertextuality and all facets of the Arthurian tradition. His recent work includes an edition of, and several articles about, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Dominique Battles is Professor of English and Chair of Medieval-Renaissance Studies at Hanover College. In addition to *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes* (2004), she has written about *Cultural Difference and Material Culture in Middle English Romance* (2013). Her most recent work concerns Anglo-Scottish relations in Middle Romance, notably in the Middle English *Sir Degrevant*.

NOTES

We would like to thank our colleagues Virginie Greene and Ann Kirkland for their helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

- 1 Throughout this essay, 'Camelot' is used metonymically for Arthur's seat of power, despite the fact that various narratives situate his chief court at Caerleon, Carlisle, Cardueil (probably a variant of Carlisle), or other locations.
- 2 For instance, Chrétien de Troyes' portrait of Laudine draws upon Jocasta's portrayal in the *Roman de Thèbes*; both are grieving widows easily persuaded to remarry. First discussed by A.G. van Hamel in 'Jocaste–Laudine,' in *Mélanges Chabaneau*, *Romanische Forschungen* 23 (Erlangen: Fr. Junge, 1907), 911–918, this parallel has been examined especially by critics interested in the development of twelfth-century French poetry and in Chrétien's depictions of love; see, for instance, Foster E. Guyer, 'The Chronology of the Earliest French Romances,' *Modern Philology* 26 (1929): 257–277, and Rosemary Jones, *The Theme of Love in the Romans D'Antiquité* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1972).
- 3 Ferdinand Lot argued that the relationship of Arthur and Mordred developed under the influence of the Roland-legend: *Étude sur le Lancelot en prose* (Paris: Champion, 1918), p. 444. J.D. Bruce favored the legend of Gregory as likely source: *Mort Artu*, ed. Bruce (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1910), pp. 294–95. Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich, in their edition of the *Suite du Merlin—Merlin: Roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*, vol. 1 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1886)—mention Plutarch (pp. XLI) as well as the legend of Gregory (n. 3).
- 4 See, for instance, Jean Frappier, *Étude sur La Mort le roi Artu, roman du XIIIe siècle*, 3rd rev. ed. (Geneva: Droz, 1972), pp. 203–204; Alexandre Micha, *De la Chanson de geste au roman* (Geneva: Droz, 1976), pp. 371–72.
- 5 Marjorie B. Fox, *La Mort le roi Artus, étude sur les manuscrits, les sources et la composition de l'œuvre* (Paris: Boccard, 1933), pp. 47–118; Frappier, *Étude sur La Mort le roi Artu*, 149–215. Fox does not mention the *Roman de Thèbes* at all, while Frappier sees only a 'ressemblance vague de ton ou de couleur' (p. 203) between the two works.
- 6 M. Victoria Guerin, *The Fall of Kings and Princes: Structure and Destruction in Arthurian Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Guerin argues that the influence of the *Roman* upon the Vulgate cycle is 'not implausible' (p. 33).
- 7 See Elspeth Kennedy, 'The Making of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*,' in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. Carol Dover, *Arthurian Studies* 54 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 13–22, as well as Fanni Bogdanow, 'The *Vulgate Cycle* and the *Post-Vulgate Roman du Graal*,' pp. 33–51 of the same volume.
- 8 The others are two tragedies by Seneca (*Oedipus* and *The Phoenician Women*). See Lowell Edmunds, *Oedipus* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 57–79. This stands in stark contrast to the many Greek sources treating the legend of Thebes (pp. 32–56).

- 9 L.D. Reynolds, *Texts and Transmissions: A Survey of Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 394.
- 10 See Dominique Battles, 'Statius in the Middle Ages,' in *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes: History and Narrative in the OF Roman de Thèbes, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Lydgate*, Studies in Medieval History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1–17.
- 11 On the manuscripts of the *Thèbes*, see Renate Blumenfeld Kosinski, 'The Traditions of the Old French *Roman de Thèbes*,' Diss. Princeton University (Princeton, NJ, 1990); Léopold Constans, *La Légende d'Oedipe étudiée dans l'Antiquité, au Moyen-Age et dans les Temps Modernes* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1881), 156–70; and Alain Renoir, *The Poetry of John Lydgate* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 119–35 and 161n.
- 12 Paul Meyer, 'Les Premières Compilations Françaises d'Histoire Ancienne,' *Romania* 14 (1885): 35–81, 36–63.
- 13 On the poem's crusading elements, see Dominique Battles, 'The OF *Roman de Thèbes*: The Ancients vs. The Moderns,' in *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, 19–59.
- 14 To avoid confusion, characters' names throughout will be given in their commonly used English forms (Polynices, Gawain) rather than text-specific forms (Pollinices / Polly(n)icés, Ga(u)vain / Gawayn(ne) / Wawayne, and so on).
- 15 See Jean Charles Payen, 'Structure et Sens du *Roman de Thèbes*,' *Le Moyen Age* 76 (1970): 493–513; Dominique Battles, *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, 26–29.
- 16 Battles, *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes*, 28–9.
- 17 See Molly Lynde-Recchia, 'Narrative Strategy as *Auctoritas* in the Thirteenth-Century Prose Version of the *Roman de Thèbes*,' *Proceedings of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 3 (1995): 69–79, at 70–2.
- 18 Nennius, *British History and The Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris, History from the Sources (London and Chister: Phillimore; Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980). On the date and structure of the Welsh Annals, see N.J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 193–216.
- 19 O.J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 87–88.
- 20 See Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), p. 6.
- 21 For instance, Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 337–340, as well as Amy Varin, 'Mordred, King Arthur's Son,' *Folklore* 90 (1979): 167–77.
- 22 A useful discussion of the cycle's composition remains Jean Frappier, 'The Vulgate Cycle,' in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 295–318. On the Prose *Lancelot* specifically, see Elspeth Kennedy, *Lancelot and the Grail: A Study of the Prose Lancelot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

- 23 *Le Livre del Lancelot del Lac*, part 3, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances* 5, ed. H. Oskar Sommer (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1912), p. 284.
- 24 Unless otherwise noted, translations are from *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, gen. ed. Norris J. Lacy, 5 vols. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993–1996). These quotes are from *Lancelot*, part VI, trans. Carleton W. Carroll, vol. III, p. 260.
- 25 See especially James Douglas Bruce's multi-volume essay on 'The Composition of the Old French Prose *Lancelot*,' *Romanic Review* 9 (1918): 241–268, 353–395 and 10 (1919): 48–66, 97–122; the relevant section occurs in volume 10, pages 108–109. Bruce's views were for a time championed by Jean Frappier, who however later reversed course, ascribing the motif to the 'architect' of the *Lancelot-Grail-Mort* trilogy; see *La Mort le Roi Artu*, 3rd rev. ed. (Geneva: Droz, 1964), xvi.
- 26 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of De gestis Britonum*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright, *Arthurian Studies* 69 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2007), p. 223, ll. 14–15.
- 27 *La Mort le Roi Artu, Roman du XIIIe Siècle*, ed. Jean Frappier, 3rd ed. (Geneva: Droz, 1964), p. 211.
- 28 Unless otherwise noted, references to the *Roman* are to *Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. Guy Renaud de Lage, 2 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1968).
- 29 The Prose *Thèbes* is cited from Molly Lynde-Recchia, *Prose, Verse, and Truth-Telling in the Thirteenth Century: An Essay on Form and Function in Selected Texts, Accompanied by an Edition of the Prose Thèbes as Found in the Histoire ancienne jusqu'à Cesar*, Edward C. Armstrong Monographs on Medieval Literature 10 (Nicholasville, KY: French Forum, 2000), p. 186 (chap. 94).
- 30 Some manuscripts give 'Capaneus' for Acastus. See the note to line 9852 in *Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. and trans. Aimé Petit (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008).
- 31 Text cited from Statius, *Thebaid*, ed. and trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library 207 and 498 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 32 The best-known example occurs in book 8 of the Aeneid. See Virgil, *Opera*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 8.439–453, 615–625.
- 33 Aron Sternberg, *Die Angriffswaffen im altfranzösischen Epos*, Diss. Marburg (Marburg: Universitätsdruckerei R. Friedrich, 1886), pp. 17–19.
- 34 *Lestoire de Merlin, The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances* 2, ed. H. Oskar Sommer (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908), p. 230.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Bogdanow, *The Romance of the Grail*, pp. 176–178.
- 37 *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, ed. Gilles Roussineau, 2nd ed. (Geneva: Droz, 2006), pp. 1–2.
- 38 See especially Elizabeth Archibald, 'Arthur and Mordred: Variations on an Incest Theme,' in *Arthurian Literature VIII*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1989), pp. 1–27, as well as Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, pp. 199–229.

- 39 The tale of Balin and Balan is polyvalent, allowing meaningful comparisons to several other characters in the Post-Vulgate Cycle. For instance, Balin can also be seen as an anti-Galahad; see, for example, Robert L. Kelly, 'Malory's 'Tale of Balin' Reconsidered,' *Speculum* 54 (1979): 85–99, at 98–99; Ralph Norris, 'The Tragedy of Balin: Malory's Use of the Balin Story in the *Morte Darthur*,' *Arthuriana* 9 (1999): 52–67, at 53–55. Other critics find interesting parallels between Balin and Balan and Lancelot and Gawain; see Fanni Bogdanow, *The Romance of the Grail: A Study of the Structure and Genesis of a Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Prose Romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 177.
- 40 This episode differs substantially in the different manuscripts of the *Roman de Thèbes*. In the short version (including ms. C, the base manuscript for de Lage's edition), the scene runs to about forty lines, the princes' encounter ends with their deaths, and they are not identified. In the long version, the episode is about twice as long, they are given an elaborate burial, and they are variously identified as nephews of 'Meneceus,' (ms. S), 'Menesteus' (A), or 'Menelaus' (P). Léopold Constans identifies 'Meneceus' as the correct reading; see *Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. Constans, 2 vols., Société des anciens textes français (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1890), 'Table des noms propre,' II: 355. For the text of S, see *Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. Francine Mora-Lebrun, Lettres gothiques (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1995), where Meneceus is named in line 6264.
- 41 The *Suite du Merlin* identifies Balan as the younger brother only once, namely in this passage (which is the one closely modeled on the *Roman de Thèbes*): he is *plus juvenes* (p. 187) than the Knight with Two Swords, Balin.
- 42 The problem is well summarized by William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 32–33. The text is cited from *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. Valerie Krishna (NY: Burt Franklin, 1976).
- 43 See Maureen Fries, 'The Poem in the Tradition of Arthurian Literature,' in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment*, ed. Karl Heinz Göller, *Arthurian Studies* 2 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981), pp. 30–43, at 38.
- 44 Layamon, *Brut*, ed. G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, vol. 2, EETS 277 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1978), line 14,141 (Caligula ms.).
- 45 The details are difficult to determine: in line 3552, Arthur is told that Mordred has made Guinevere pregnant; in 3907, Mordred writes that Guinevere should flee with *hir childire*; and, in 4320, Arthur asks that *Mordrede children* be killed. In her edition, Mary Hamel speculates that line 4320 may refer to these offspring and that the plural in 3907 could be a scribal error, meaning Mordred and Guinevere would have one child together and Guinevere would have charge of Mordred's older offspring. See *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, *Garland Medieval Texts* 9 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), note to 3907–10. While this is possible, the poet's very free handling of many traditional motifs should caution against relying too heavily on earlier texts in reconstructing his meaning.

- 46 On this point, see Jan Ziolkowski, 'A Narrative Structure in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* 1–1221 and 3150–4346,' *Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 234–45, at 237 and 242; Jeff Westover, 'Arthur's End: The King's Emasculation in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,' *Chaucer Review* 32 (1998): 310–324, as well as John William Sutton, 'Mordred's End: A Reevaluation of Mordred's Death Scene in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,' *Chaucer Review* 37 (2003): 280–285. Karl Heinz Göller, 'Reality versus Romance: A Reassessment of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,' in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. Göller, comments on several passages throughout the poem describing genital wounds (pp. 15–29, at pp. 23–24).
- 47 Lowell Edmunds, *Oedipus* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 65.
- 48 Cited from Paul Maurice Clogan, 'The Planctus of Oedipus,' *Medievalia et Humanistica* 1 (1970): 233–39.
- 49 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s. v. *vibro*.
- 50 *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s.v. *flashen*.
- 51 *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, Oxford University Press, 8 May 2015, s. v. *flash* (v. 1).
- 52 Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s. v.; *OED*, s. v. *fillet* (n. 1), 5d, and compare the entry for *loin*, 2b.
- 53 The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* does not explicitly reference Mordred's incestuous birth, though his title 'the Malebranche' (4062, 4174) probably refers to this; see J.N.L. O'Loughlin, 'The English Alliterative Romances,' in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, pp. 520–27, at 524. For a contrary interpretation, see Hamel's edition, note to 4062. English authors often gloss over the details of Mordred's conception because this undermines Arthur's character, even as they implicitly acknowledge its reality.
- 54 For the significance of treachery as theme in the story of Balin and Balan, as well as thematic links to the conflict between Mordred and Arthur, see Deborah S. Ellis, 'Balin, Mordred and Malory's Idea of Treachery,' *English Studies* 68 (1987): 66–74, as well as Megan G. Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), pp. 92–137. On the changes Malory makes to the *Suite du Merlin's* version of the story, see especially Ralph Norris, 'The Tragedy of Balin: Malory's Use of the Balin Story in the *Morte Darthur*,' *Arthuriana* 9 (1999): 52–67.
- 55 Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P.J.C. Field, vol. 1, *Arthurian Studies* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), p. 36, ll. 22–25. Subsequent references to this text will be parenthetical by page and line number.
- 56 See Eugène Vinaver's discussion in *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 1615–28 (generalities) and 1650–1653 (the particulars of the section under consideration).
- 57 Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 239.

- 58 Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Studies 71 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 29.
- 59 Helen Cooper, 'Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances,' in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 141–162, at 155.
- 60 Leitch, *Romancing Treason*, pp. 132–137.
- 61 Friedrich Brie, 'Zwei mittelenglische Prosaromane: *The Sege of Thebes* und *The Sege of Troy*.' *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 130 (1913): 40–52 and 269–285, at 48.
- 62 See, for instance, Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, 'King Arthur Plays from the 1890s,' *Victorian Poetry* 28 (1990): 153–176.