Theatricality of the Chivalric World in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur**

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The paper presents various aspects of theatricality in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*. It explores the predominant performative character of the culture of shame and honour, in which ceremonious forms of knightly behaviour create public spectacle of chivalric ideals. The theatrical aspects of Arthur's world are analysed in the context of Erving Goffman's concepts of the self as a product of dramatic performance, an object of social ritual and a participant of a strategic game. Due to the insight provided by these sociological theories, chivalric performance is considered as an expression of tendencies towards idealisation and the assumption of its sincerity is shown as a necessary element of the gamelike nature of social interaction. Self-regulating procedures of this culture are provided by knightly rituals, whose theatricality is determined by their stylisation and the presence of spectators. Apart, however, from the overt theatricality of the chivalric display, the article also scrutinises the textual theatricality of *Le Morte D'arthur*, evident in the sensuality of the narrative style, abundant in visual and aural markers of combat intensity. Since Malory skilfully shifts the vantage point, which situates the evaluative frame within the narrative, the reader is presented with a complete spectacle, in which he may observe both the performers and the audience.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England were abundant in various ritualised and ceremonial forms of civic and courtly culture, which took the form of public spectacle. The chivalric world which Thomas Malory creates in *Le Morte D'arthur* also seems to manifest various aspects of theatricality. Whether applied to social life or literature, the concept of theatricality entails the interplay of reality and

illusion. It may imply the use of masks or various forms of the emphatic self-manifestation (Barish 1969: 1). Additionally, the idea of textual theatricality may embrace narrative self-consciousness as well as a variety of presentational techniques, deliberately emphasising the unreality of the literary world. It would be difficult, however, to attribute the theatricality of *Le Morte D'arthur* to the role of the narrator, since Malory creates a factual style of narration, which in comparison to his French and English sources, seems to reduce the number of overt narratorial appearances responsible for a direct relationship between the text and the reader. Creating rather an impression of chronicling the adventures of king Arthur's knights, Malory interrupts the narrative flow only to cite the authority of the "French book" or to give the presented events a sense of unalterable history (Field 1971: 145). What I mean, thus, by the theatricality in *Le Morte D'arthur* is not the dramatic immediacy dependant on the position of the narrator, who in this text actually claims little control over events described, but the abundance in Malory's work of ceremonious forms of knightly interaction, whose formalisation and social implications create the effect of public spectacle, in which the chivalric ideals are enacted. The dramatic effect is created by the ritualisation of these traditional forms of behaviour, which may also be described as performative, since they are sustained in public to achieve a specific effect, namely to increase a knight's worship and reputation. The theatricality of the chivalric world of the Round Table is evident, therefore, in the formalised nature of knightly deeds, as well as in Malory's strategies of constructing characters, who, lacking deep psychological motivation, fashion their roles in the chivalric community through the performance they give in front of both readers and fellow community members. The performative, hence also spectacular, character of *Le Morte D'arthur* is primarily determined by the mixture of heroic and chivalric features, which King Arthur's world exhibits and which situate it within the culture of shame and honour with its predominantly public quality. In this heroic-chivalric world personal value is tightly interconnected with reputation, and can be maintained or increased only through the public display of socially desirable, thus honourable qualities, such as prowess, loyalty, generosity, and mercy. Arthur's knights struggle hard to increase their worship, which may be taken to mean as D.B. Mahoney suggests " self-worth, a man's total self-concept, measured by what is known about him, publicly recognized" (Mahoney 1988: 530) When worship is at stake even prudence is not a factor, as it is apparent in the episode from the Roman campaign, when ten thousand of Arthur's men escorting Roman prisoners to Paris and led

by Sir Launcelot, Sir Cador, Sir Clegis are confronted by an army of sixty thousand. The dichotomy of honour and disgrace dictates a simple choice, pronounced by Sir Cador: "...fyght you behovys, other ellys shunte for shame" *(Works*, 213). Even if death takes a high toll and Arthur calls it "foly to abyde whan knyghtes bene overmacched" the decision to undertake the challenge is judged as honourable and worshipful according to the standards of their culture, which requires a public demonstration of any knightly virtue like prowess, valour, strength, and which compels the knights to recoil from anything which may make these virtues appear deficient.

Anthropologies, like J.G. Peristiany, demonstrate the external, outward orientation and, therefore, also the performative nature of the culture of shame and honour in contrast to the significance of the inwardness in the communities where the guilt/virtue dichotomy prevails:.

> Honour provides a nexus between the ideals of society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them. As such, it implies not merely a habitual preference for a given mode of conduct, but the entailment to a certain treatment in return. The rite to pride is the rite to status (in the popular as well as the anthropological sense of the word), and status is established through the recognition of a certain social identity (Peristiany 1966:22).

What this definition of honour implies is the need of recognition of individual excellence by society, in other words, the need of an audience, who can acknowledge an individual performance.

With few exceptions like Galahad or Perceval the knights of Arthurian romance seek to assert their value in this life. McCarthy observes that the virtues which constitute the paradigm of chivalry and for which Ector praises Launcelot in his threnody, are essentially public (*Works*, 1259):

> ...thou were never matched of erthely knyghtes hande, (...) the curtest knight that ever bare shelde, (...) the trueste frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors, (...) the trueste lover, of a sinful man, that ever loved woman, (..) the kyndest man that ever strake with swerde, .. the godelyest persone that ever com emonge prees of knightes, ...the meekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyest,... the sternest knight to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in reeste

These public values are ascertained in action, publicly expressing the knight's identity. Even the assumption of disguise practiced by the most distinguished knights of the Round Table cannot obliterate their stature, determined in the first place by their exquisite military performance, a feature publicly conspicuous.

As Launcelot's case demonstrates, the belief in the primary significance of public virtues allows, at least temporarily, to maintain a dichotomy between the demands of public and private life. In order to increase his worship in a tournament he may join the party opposing Arthur, or to satisfy his yearning he may meet the queen in private, and simultaneously declare his loyalty for the king as well as be considered his devoted champion. Peristiany suggests that such moral ambiguity is typical of shame culture, because the notion of honour is inherently vague, comprising both the ideas of honour derived from virtue, as well as honour situating an individual socially and determining his right to precedence (Peristiany 1966: 38). However, since it is difficult to maintain this dichotomy on a permanent basis, in the Grail Quest Launcelot fails to achieve a complete success due to his attachment to Gwenyver. Camelot judges the excellence of the external performance put at Corbenic a sin that does not prevents success. Launcelot can remain the best of sinful men, only owing to his readiness to undertake penance. Nevertheless, cast back into his public role on return, he is less capable, as Atkinson observes, to reconcile the public reputation with his private love and the knowledge of the abandoned divine service reduces him to tears at the healing of Sir Urry (Atkinson 1985: 149). Private redemption, seen as development rather then denial of earthly ideals, comes, however, only subsequently when the public world, which gave the meaning to earthly chivalry is gone (McCarthy 1988:78).

Camelot, in contrast to Corbenic, appears as a public domain, necessitating performative acts carried out to achieve a particular social effect. Launcelot's partial failure in the religious world of the Grail may serve as a benchmark against which the public nature of life in the Athurian world might be measured. Portraying Launcelot's career in Camelot, Malory deliberately downplays the implications of his hero's relationship with Gwenyver and maintains his role as Arthur's champion. The theatrical dimension of this world becomes even more conspicuous, when considered from the perspective of Erving Goffman's theory, according to which the self is simultaneously a product of dramatic performance, an object of social ritual and a

participant of a strategic game. Many of Goffman's observations, despite their temporal incongruence can, therefore, aptly illustrate the phenomena of Malory's chivalric world.

Goffman's suggestion that social performance does not necessarily have to be morally questionable helps to understand the implications of the show put on by the knights of the Round Table. He observes that the impressions individuals convey about their identities and actions do not necessarily stem from their craftiness but may be treated by the performers themselves as genuine, or may express the tendency towards idealisation spurred by the presence of spectators. This seems to be the rationale behind Lancelot's adherence to the role of Arthur's champion and his insistence on the best quality of his service, despite his involvement with Gwenvere. Goffman sees, thus, social life as drama revealing an interplay of manipulation and morality. The acceptance of impressions others produce, is according to him, of great social value as it conditions a smooth flow of society's life. The existence of characters within their community in *Le Morte D'arthur* depends entirely on their reputation confirmed in social interaction. Display here is an obligation and its sincerity is taken for granted by the narrative world. It is again easy to see why traitors are excluded from the king's lordship or even punished by death. They are seen as a threat to the stability of the social structure.

If this structure is to be preserved, the members of society should function as self-regulating participants in social interaction. Such discipline might be achieved as Goffman suggests by the ritual organisation of social encounters (Goffamn 1981: 111). Chivalric culture abounds in rituals upholding the value of knightly culture and celebrating the unity of fellowship. The large number of these in *Le Morte D'arthur* enhances the theatricality of the presented world. Their dramatic realisation is effected through the adaptation of tasks instrumental to a ritual as means of communication conveying attributes claimed by the performer.

One of the most frequently described ritualised forms of chivalric interaction in Malory's narrative is that of single combat between knights. This form of chivalric encounter involves individual achievement that has to be subsequently publicised and constitutes an integral part of the tradition of chivalric errantry. A single victory is not the aim in itself but rather a way to enhance worship and reputation,

which explains the need of repetitive and deliberate search for circumstances, in which "there wolde a knyght play his pageaunte," as Launcelot described Trystram's performance (*Works*, 748).   Since combat is the text's major evaluative framework, characters, who have already proved themselves in fighting, must seek new ways of reliving this experience to sustain their precedence.

One of the effective ways in which this aim might be achieved is the practice of donning a disguise, due to which Arthurian knights appear in a completely different light, namely as skilful masters of illusion. The assumption of disguise only temporarily obliterates their identity, enabling them to ride unrecognised and successfully challenge other members of their fellowship, who otherwise would refuse to fight, expecting certain defeat. Subsequent recognition or disclosure of their identity permits the knights to recreate themselves. These incognito encounters are, therefore, evident examples of chivalric self - staging. This practice, e.g. , enables Launcelot, riding in Sir Kay's armour, to triumph over Gawain, Ywain, Sagramor, and Ector, or to overcome a great number of Round Table knights at the tournament at Winchester held on the Lady's Day, where he is bearing Elayne's scarlet sleeve and her brother's shield, or at Cadlemas jousts, where he is identified as a knight with a golden sleeve, due to the token granted to him by Gwenyver. Sir Tristram even more frequently than Launcelot resorts to disguise as a means achieving his chivalric or even amorous aims. The knights stage their own spectacle, asserting their individual reputation through the display of prowess, which may also illustrate the competitive nature of honour. The theatrical character of the motif of the incognito battle cannot, therefore, obscure its disturbing implications. As Stephen Knight points out, it demonstrates "a private dynamic within the public world of honour...[and] an essential core of private aggression working within that imposed structure of control" (Knight 1983: 118).

Still, when considered from the sociological perspective, the practice of disguising oneself aimed at increasing the number of successful encounters can be explained by Goffman's idea of social life as a game, whose implicit allure of risk may provide the motivational frame for the chivalric search of new challenges (Goffman 1981:130). Yet, unlike the contemporary game of social interaction, whose problematic outcome sanctions official expression of externally relevant attributes within the milieu of an encounter, Malory's performative world of social externalities does not need an excuse for self–display. In contrast, it is a

world in which an ostensible demonstration of culturally desirable attitudes is encouraged, not shunned, and in which might symbolises right. Behind this assumption there is a general belief that all strength and success comes from God, about which a hermit reminds Launcelot during his quest of Sankgreal. The Round Table knights are bound by their oath of knighthood to exact justice, and prove it, if need be, with the sword. The most formalised and ceremonial way of achieving this aim is evident in the ritual of a trial by battle (Kennedy 1994: 47). This custom, which might be compared to a spectacle of justice, is employed by Malory quite frequently and for various purposes. As Trystram's defeats of the Irish Champion, Marhalt and the Saxon leader Elyas show, it might be performed in the name of the whole nation to defend it from wrongful claims of other communities. More often, however, it takes the form of a treason duel, in which it can be proved upon the body of the representative of the accusing party that the accused one is innocent. The necessity of judges, or at least witnesses, being present on such occasions create the impression of a public spectacle, observed and evaluated from the vantage point within the narrative, the notion of which will be further expanded when I come to discuss the similar effects of tournaments. Endowed with the structure of a theatre performance, trials by battle may also be perceived as narrative devices, which help Malory to construct/ mould/sustain dynamically the social identities of his characters. The growing ambiguity of the three victories achieved by Lancelot in defence of Gwenyver casts doubt, however, on the uprightness of the royal champion, and consequently may indicate, as McCarthy points out, the gradual failure of the ideal system in which moral right of the winner is taken for granted (McCarthy 1988: 88).

Much as the trials by combat may be recognised as spectacles of justice, another ritualised form of chivalric display, pas d'arms, or the passage of arms, may be seen as a public display of chivalric ideals. Its theatricality might be approached at least in a twofold manner. To start with, it involves one-to-one combat of two knights, one of whom issues an open challenge to every other knight passing his place in order to prove his invincibility. The opponent, who undertakes his challenge, proceeds in his turn to ascertain his own superiority over the challenger. Their encounter involves, therefore, the performative enactment of their prowess aimed at its public acknowledgement. Another aspect determining the theatricality of Malory's presentation of pas d'arms is its high stylisation. Both the actual medieval practice and its depiction by Malory owe their spectacular form to their literary paradigms, which

usually set the passage of arms at a fountain, water passage or crossroads, and portray the custom of hanging up shields to be struck by newcomers and the figure of a dwarf, signalling the inception of ceremony. The presence of the audience in most of the real and many literary passages of arms further increases the theatrical implications of this ritual. The spectacular character of this custom is evident in Malory's portrayal of Torre's successful encounter with a dwarf, who having cut off the head of his horse, demands Torre to fight against two knights, displaying their shields on the trees nearby. Another exquisite example of this ceremony is its staging by Launcelot at the "the Joyus Ile" near catle Blyaunte, during which Launcelot assumes the name of "Le Shyvalre Mafete" and having displayed his sable shield with the symbolic image of the queen and the kneeling knight and having spread the information about his challenge through a dwarf, defeats five hundred knights in three days, giving a spectacle of his knightly excellence.

What seems of particular interest, however, with respect to the question of theatricality is the integration of the ritual of single combat in Malory's work within a larger frame of a tournament, a traditional setting for chivalric display. The spectacle Malory creates is of a very specific character. All major tourneys of *Le Morte D'arthur* (the tournament at Surluse called by Galahalt the Haute Prynce, at Lonezep, where the horn is sounded for all those who should hold against king Arthur, and also the great tournament "at the Candelmasse," called by Arthur for more than a thousand participants) are referred to by Malory as melee tournaments, but little attention is given to the presentation of a disorderly crowd. Instead, as it is been pointed out above, these events are structured as a series of single encounters, and the outstanding performers are marked out. As A. Lynch observes Mallory's combat description lacks gruesome details, and does not resemble the style of an epic. It emphasises rather the observation and identification in the manner of a herald's judgemental eye singling out the exquisite performance of individual knights (Lynch 1998: 78).

> And than sir Trystram drew his swerde and rode unto the thychest prease ayenste them of Orkeney, and there he smote downe nkyghtes and race off helmys and pulled away their shyldis and hurteled down many of their knyghtes. And so he fared that kynge Arthure and all knyghtes had grete mervayle to se ony o knight do so muche dedys of army. And sir Palomydes fayled not yppon the other side, that he so mervaylously ded and well that all men had wondir; for kynge Arthure likened sie Trystram, that was on the black horse, uto a wood lyon; and he likened sir Palomydes upon the whyght horse, unto a wood lybarde, and sir Gareth and sir Dynadan unto egir wolves (*Works*, 734).

This glimpse at Trystram's performance at the tournament at Lonezep catches the traces of Malory's technique, identified by Lynch, namely his visualisation of knightly valour. Malory achieves this effect by providing signals of combat intensity, such as its duration, the damage inflicted upon the opponent, and the comparison of participants to animals. What emerges in the context of this description is the sensuality of language, which allows us to talk about textual theatricality as different from the narrative theatricality deriving from the performative behaviour of characters, considered before. The incorporation of the direct, visual markers, providing an evaluative framework for the characters' exploits not only adds up to the spectacular nature of the presented events, but also recreates the actual situation of tournament participants, subjecting themselves to a judgemental gaze of spectators.

Readers of Malory's work are, however, not the only observers of the fictional exploits. The theatricality of the world created by Malory is compounded by the actual presence of onlookers within the narrative frame. This way of presenting the chivalric exploits exposes the third type of theatricality present in Malory's work, namely the spectacular character narrative events, being watched as if in an actual theatre, where the performers are confronted by the audience. In Malory's case the presence of the reader's gaze even doubles the theatrical frame, making the presentation of the Round Table history similar to a drama involving the device of the in-set play. The consciousness of this evaluative gaze generates, what Goffman described as idealising tendencies, a spur to perform better than ever, especially when the gaze comes from a beautiful lady like Isolde watching Trystram and Palomydes from a window in the castle of Lonezep. Other instances when the judgmental gaze of onlookers is mentioned appear, e.g., when, on the third day of the tournament at Surluse, Palomydes accepts Lamerok's challenge: "queen Gwenyver, the Haute Prynce, and sir Lancelot ...were setted in scaffoldis" [to gyve the jugement of these two knyghtis] (*Works*, 660). Also before the beginning of the seventh day of jousting, Malory hastens to assure that: "... queen Gwenyver and all astatys were sette as joudges, armed clene with their shyldis to kepe the ryghtes" (*Works*, 660).

The theatrical effect of the presence of the audience on the textual level is, however, not limited to the visual sphere but extends to the aural one,

as the textual spectators reward winners with "noyse and cry" expressing their appreciation. The noise of the public accompanies every single encounter and its amplitude serves as an indication of the worship the knight managed to win. On the first day of the tournament at Lonezep, the prize is given to Palomides. The noise he receives both enhances his honour and serves as a spur to Launcelot's party and other competitors. Soon, however, public attention shifts to Tristam, who enters the stage, giving an outstanding performance that earns him the credit of Laucelot's and of the whole public. The cries of the audience provide acclamation of knightly worship. Together with the blowing of horns signalling the onset and the end of a day's game, and the sounds of feats celebrated after each day of fighting, they build up the aural sphere of Malory's narrative, which affect the senses of the reader in the manner of a real spectacle.

If Goffman,   investigating contemporary society, where reality and contrivance intermingles, ascertains that: "All the world is not, of course, a stage but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify" (Goffman 1981: 106), then it is much easier to see that the world of Malory's knights, where identities are constructed entirely through public expression and evaluation, can be described as a stage. Considering the nature of the culture of shame and honour, within which the characters of *Le Morte D'arthur* exist, as well as Malory's frequent portrayal of knightly ritual and ceremony, it is not difficult to perceive the theatrical character of chivalric interaction, especially if we look at the world of his work from the perspective of Goffman's metaphors of social life as drama, ritual and game. Malory's heroes enact their value by performing socially significant deeds, which earn them public recognition. Ritual and ceremonious character of this public self-staging enhances the theatricality of this performance by endowing it with conventional structuring and stylisation. Still, the spectacular character of late medieval rituals and ceremonies was not Malory's invention. The growth of pageantry and décor in late medieval jousting and tourneys, as well as the extravagance of chivalrous vows was a historical reality, due to the changes affecting the social system as well as the spread of literary patterns of knightly behaviour.

It might be therefore suggested that Malory's work owes its theatrical nature largely to its subject matter, the portrayal of chivalric world, with its inherent predilection for display and ritualisation of social interaction. Additionally, the effect of theatricality is enhanced by Malory's narrative

technique, which supplies the reader with a multitude of visual signals and craftily shifts the point of vantage, situating the evaluative frame within the narrative, and creating the impression that the reader observes and listens to a complete spectacle, having textual access to both its actors and its audience. It might be concluded that the theatricality in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur* is manifold and is evident on different levels of this text, surfacing in the narrative domain but also on the textual level and in the elusive sphere of reader's activity. All these elements amount to a simple but very poignant portrayal of the Round Table knight:

" yonder rydyth a man that playth his pageauntes (*Works*, 759)."

Notes

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1. The paper follows the spelling of characters' names adopted in E.Vinaver's (ed.) 1948 *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
2. All quotations from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur* come from Eugene Vinaver(ed.). 1948 *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, and will be referred to as *Works*
3. Paul Strohm, basing his reasoning on practice theory, encourages such enlargement of analysis circle to combine objects and experiences that were thought previously as having little in common, and he explains that a theory should be treated only as " an analytical vantage point too powerful and versatile fully to be contained or exhausted by any one discipline or field of study" (Strohm 2000: 34).

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