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Medieval and Modern Mythologies: Comparison and Contrast of *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars*

In both *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi* and *Le Morte d'Arthur*, spirituality, whether in the form of “the force” or theology, plays an important role in the characters’ lives. Faith, whether placed in fellow friends, “the force” or God, serves as the gateway for redemption in the main characters, such as Lancelot in *Le Morte d'Arthur* and Darth Vader in *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi*. Various textual features, such as visually-rich diction in written text and cinematic techniques including camera angles and visual effects in film, can enhance the message of the narrative — in this case, the importance of faith and the viability of redemption. Both of the texts’ focus on the idea of faith and atonement shows a shared value of hope and forgiveness for those who try to expiate their faults in both medieval and modern audiences. However, the differences in the redemption of the characters sheds light upon the contrasting values between medieval and modern audiences. These distinctions include faith in God for medieval audiences and faith in people for modern audiences.

The aspect of spirituality is illuminated in *Star Wars* with the idea of “the force” and is present in *Le Morte d’Arthur* with Christianity. Both texts portray their central spiritual entities as having definite good and evil sides. In Christianity, God is all good, all pure and all knowing; evil is only associated with the Devil, his schemes and his accomplices. Similarly, the force has a light (pure) and dark (evil) side.

In the two narratives, there is both external and internal conflict between these good and evil spiritual forces. The evil side relentlessly tries to entice characters to turn “bad”. Temptation in the Arthurian myth takes its form in various sins such as lust, greed and rage. The love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere represents lust, while Mordred’s seizure of Camelot in Arthur’s absence embodies greed. Gawain’s anger at Lancelot exhibits wrath. After learning that Lancelot accidentally killed his brethren, Gawain decrees to Lancelot “Therefore wit thou well, Sir Lancelot, I shall make war upon thee and be thy enemy all the while that I may live!”<sup>1</sup> Lancelot leaves because of Gawain’s unrelenting anger and the Knights of the Round Table are forced to choose between the two and split apart. Since both King Arthur and Lancelot are away from Camelot, Mordred easily takes over the land, without the rightful king present or the most fearsome knight to keep him in check. This leads to the downfall and death of King Arthur and the Round Table. Gawain’s refusal to make peace with Lancelot causes the kingdom to fall into the wrong hands and spiral downwards, resulting in the mightiest battle on Salisbury Plain with many deaths. Anger is the cause of this downfall.

Similarly, in *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi*, The Emperor attempts to lure protagonist Luke Skywalker to the dark side of the force, saying “Good, I can feel your anger. I am defenseless. Take your weapon. Strike me down with all of your hatred and your journey towards the

dark side will be complete!”<sup>2</sup> This illustrates the toxicity of fury and hate, used as the dark side’s weapons in the battle of good versus evil. In these two narratives, anger and hatred bring about downfall and thus, both texts criticize these two traits, which reflects a shared cultural condemnation of hatred and anger.

As anger is the cause of Gawain’s downfall in *Le Morte d’Arthur*, anger serves as a potential catalyst for Luke’s transformation to the dark side. However, Luke is able to control his rage, thwarting the dark side’s efforts. This difference brings to light distinctions between medieval audiences and modern-day audiences. The *Star Wars* saga ends on an uplifting note, with Luke Skywalker not only remaining on the light side of the force, but also bringing his fallen father back to the light side. The uplifting ending of *Star Wars* reflects our modern culture’s appreciation for happy endings, our belief in the viability of redemption, and a general hope that good will always triumph over evil. This is in great contrast to *Le Morte d’Arthur*, in which the sins of the characters — including Gawain’s wrath — bring about the destruction of many lives. Characters who survived the Battle of Salisbury Plain spend the rest of their days atoning for their sins by dedicating their lives to religion through living in hermitages. This illustrates the Middle Age’s value of religion and spiritual cleansing.

Redemption is an important aspect tied with spirituality prominent in both narratives. In *Star Wars*, Darth Vader is redeemed to the light side of the force. At the end of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, various knights who have sinned in different ways attempt to atone for their sins by living out the rest of their lives in hermitages devoting themselves to religion. Lancelot is the first male to do so, since Guinevere is the first person to devote her life to religion by staying in a nunnery. When describing his dream, the Bishop of Canterbury states “here was Sir Lancelot

with me, with more angels than I ever saw of men in one day. And I saw the angels heave up Sir Lancelot to heaven, and the gates of heaven opened before him.”<sup>3</sup> Lancelot’s soul is clearly spiritually cleansed from any sins committed during his time on Earth. The emphasis on heaven and angels reflects how important religion and the afterlife was to medieval audiences. The fact that the characters are morally or spiritually redeemed shows a shared value of redemption in both medieval and modern audiences. Both audiences appreciate the idea of someone being able to atone for their mistakes. Perhaps it is a shared value because it is an intrinsic part of human nature to make mistakes, and thus the audience empathizes with the faulted characters.

In the two narratives, redemption, along with the triumph of good over evil, is only possible because of faith. The end of *Star Wars* only concludes so happily because the characters had faith in each other, even when the situation looked bleak. Towards the end of the film, the rebel alliance attacks the Death Star, only to realize that they have been tricked and the advisor tells them to retreat. However, Lando states “Han will have that shield down. We've got to give him more time!”<sup>4</sup> If Lando did not believe in Han and the fleet retreated, they would not have been able to destroy the Death Star and ultimately overcome evil. Additionally, Darth Vader is redeemed because of his son’s faith in him. Luke had faith that his father, Darth Vader, still had good in him. No matter how many times other people, including Darth Vader himself, told Luke that it was too late to save Darth Vader, Luke still had faith in his father. As Darth Vader dies, Luke laments “I’ve got to save you,”<sup>5</sup> to which Darth Vader replies “You already have.”<sup>6</sup> This illustrates that Luke saved Darth Vader spiritually, which is reaffirmed by cinematic techniques in the film. During Darth Vader’s cremation ceremony, we follow the camera as we watch the flames burn up into the night sky towards the stars.<sup>7</sup> This upward movement of the flames —

cinematically emphasized by the upwards movement of the camera — symbolizes Darth Vader's soul ascending, affirming Vader's spiritual redemption. Additionally, we know that Darth Vader has been brought back to the light side of the force when we see him as a spiritual figure shrouded in a ghostly and transparent light, standing next to Jedi knights Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda watching over Luke.<sup>8</sup> In this way, camera techniques and visual effects aid in the representation of the story's themes and messages, in this case particularly those of the spiritual redemption.

Faith is also a prominent aspect of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. At the end, the knights devote the rest of their lives to religion because they have faith in God. There is a strong religious aspect to the written text, especially in the quest for the holy grail. This is especially illuminated at the feast of Pentecost, where “a sunbeam entered, brighter by seven times than ever they saw daylight, and they were all illumined by the grace of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>9</sup> This was one of the most supernatural elements of the text, and highlights the medieval audience's faith in a higher power. Faith proves to be an important cultural value for both medieval and modern audiences. However, faith in people seems to be the more modern-day audience view, whereas faith in God seems to be the more medieval cultural view.

Both texts heavily focus on violence and heroics. This aspect of violence and heroics appeals to the audience's visual sense, whether physically watching pre-constructed violence on a screen or creating a mental visual image with diction from the written text. *Le Morte d'Arthur* portrays mighty battles fought by knights with — you guessed it — lots of violence. When the final battle takes place on Salisbury Plain, Malory writes “Sir Lucan fell into a swoon and part of his guts fell out of his body, and therewith the noble knight's heart burst.”<sup>10</sup> The diction Malory

uses, such as “parts of his guts fell out” and “[his] heart burst” allows for the reader to construct an image of death and physical suffering.

*Star Wars* also has its fair share of violence, action and heroics. Jedi knights fight “epic” battles with lightsabers, which function as futuristic swords. Other episodes of violence include scenes portraying the torture of droids and many shots of machinery exploding.<sup>11</sup> The visual effects available because of video technology can visually transport someone and appeal directly to their visual sense. Additionally, sound that accompanies the visuals appeal to the viewer’s sense of hearing. By engaging the visual and auditory senses, it becomes easier for the viewer to feel physically transported into the world that fiction has constructed.

Not only are visual-accompaniment sounds utilized, but music is played as well. Different themes are played at specific parts to affect the mood or help the audience distinguish what is happening. Every time the Death Star or Darth Vader is shown, the Imperial March theme plays.<sup>12</sup> This theme sounds dark and suspenseful, and sets the tone that we have entered the world of the dark side. All of this visual and auditory stimulation is excitatory for the audience and helps to transport the audience into a different setting.

In both narratives, many people (especially background actors) die quickly and insignificantly by the hand of the protagonist. This casual slaying of other characters and extras establishes the main characters as “heroes.” The characteristics of this archetypal hero includes high moral standards, strength, capability and talent, both in physical strength and cunning that allow the hero to complete arduous and seemingly impossible feats. Thus, the character is deemed a hero because they are the best in the land and are the people’s protector. In the Arthurian myth, Lancelot is often described as the best knight, and is praised by Gawain, who states “for had that

noble knight Sir Lancelot been with you, as he was and would have been, this unhappy war would have never begun [...] for he, through his noble knighthood [...], held all your cankered enemies in subjection and control.”<sup>13</sup> In Gawain’s description, Lancelot possesses the characteristics of the archetypical hero. He shows a prowess for battle, as he wards off the king’s enemies. He is also described as noble, and thus, he is a good and true knight who aims to serve and protect his king.

This intermingling of the hero archetype and violence illuminates another shared cultural value between medieval and modern audiences. Fighting and violence were common back in the middle ages, and is still common today, as it seems to be a part of human nature. It is also part of human nature to seek safety and comfort. It is nice to believe in an archetypical hero that can always protect the innocents from the violence of the world. This fantasy is one shared by both medieval and modern audiences, since both face the threat of human violence.

<sup>1</sup>See Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur* (New York: Charles’s Scribner’s, 1982) pp. 710.

<sup>2</sup>See Lawrence Kasdan and George Lucas, *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi* (Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>Malory, 748.

<sup>4</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>5</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>6</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>7</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>8</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>9</sup>Malory, 528.

<sup>10</sup>Malory, 737-738.

<sup>11</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>12</sup>Kasdan and Lucas.

<sup>13</sup>Malory, 732.

#### Works Cited

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