

A Nominalist Reading of the Ending of Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Ockham's Notion of the Metaphysical Freedom of the Will and Earthly Emotions

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Abstract: Unlike the romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which portray heroes who display exemplary characters, Malory's *Morte Darthur* is marked by its depiction of heroes who surrender to their extreme love, grief or anger. Yet, this shift towards the portrayal of faulty characters who experience imperfect emotions is not abrupt, but rather a result of the gradual development of the medieval poetic discourse of emotion over the centuries. This paper proposes that the bleak sentiment which characterises the ending of *Morte Darthur* can be better understood if read within the cultural context that contributed to the shaping of the period's discourse of emotions. The paper suggests that Malory's choice to conclude his book in this way cannot be viewed in isolation from the text's immediate political context represented by the turbulence that accompanied the Wars of the Roses, and which resulted in the spread of a utilitarian, humanist sentiment that revolves around the individual's basic human needs. The paper, accordingly, suggests a correspondence between the nominalist discourse of emotions and the text's decadent discourse of emotions.

Keywords: Arthurian literature, decadence, emotions, nominalism

1. Introduction

Addressing Bedivere, the last surviving knight of the Round Table, King Arthur in his farewell speech stresses the fact that his "time hieth fast" (Malory 1996:791; henceforth referred to as the *Morte* and cited parenthetically in the text by page number). This realisation is shortly followed by the suggestion that he himself has died. Regardless of the degree of certainty whether King Arthur has actually died or not, the scene that depicts Bedivere's fainting upon discovering the tomb in which King Arthur might have been buried alludes to the fall of the Round Table. Brief as it is, this scene is very revealing in the way it epitomises the desolate sentiment that controls the ending of the *Morte*, and, maybe, the zeitgeist of fifteenth-century England. It implies that Malory "tells a story of tragedy" (Brewer 1968:1, 9, 12; see also Roland 2023) where no space is left for any idealised emotions.¹ This paper thus proposes that the bleak sentiment which characterises the ending of Malory's *Morte Darthur* can be better understood if read within the wider cultural context that contributed to the shaping of the period's discourse of emotions. In fact, Malory's choice to conclude his book in this way cannot be viewed in isolation from the text's immediate political context represented by the

turbulence that accompanied the Wars of the Roses. These wars were fought over the control of the English throne in the mid-to-late fifteenth century, and resulted in an eventual collapse of the institution of chivalry and its exemplary ideals and the spread of utilitarian, humanist ideals (see O'Brien 2012). These utilitarian, humanist ideals were also a product of the spread of nominalism as the “the most powerful intellectual trend of the fourteenth and fifteenth century” (Russell 1986:275). As a cultural movement, nominalism promoted a celebration of the individual and an endorsement of utilitarian secular ethics. The nominalists’ validation of relational values generated a sentiment that revolves around the individual and his basic human needs. It is, therefore, against this cultural background that this paper aims to analyse the sentiment that controls the ending of Malory’s *Morte*. The paper suggests a correspondence between the late-fourteenth century nominalist discourse of emotions, which revolves around the individual’s metaphysical freedom, and the *Morte*’s decadent discourse of emotions. It argues that the ending of Malory’s book presents an Ockhamist nominalist universe where imperfect human emotions are prioritised over exemplary, collectively oriented emotions.²

2. The medieval philosophical discourse of emotions from the intellectual to the affective pole

The medieval discourse of emotions alternated between intellectual and affective poles. While Thomas Aquinas’s intellectual approach of emotions had dominated the scholastic debate up to the late thirteenth century, the emergence of John Scotus’s philosophy of voluntarism was accompanied by an affective turn which influenced the study of emotions for centuries. Significantly, this affective approach to the study of emotions gained a powerful advocate with the emergence of William of Ockham and his nominalist philosophy. Though a student of Scotus, Ockham is viewed as an extreme voluntarist, a nominalist as opposed to the realist Scotus.³ Unlike Scotus, Ockham believed that the liberty of the will is that of indifference and contingency, and that it should not be identified with the affections towards justice (Adams 1995:31). As a voluntarist, Scotus suggested that the *affectio commodi* motivates the self to seek its own advantage, mainly its pleasure and self-preservation. On the other hand, the *affectio justitiae* urges the individual to direct his affections towards the love of God and the common good (Scotus 2018: II, d. 6. q. 2). However, the nominalist Ockham did not restrict the freedom of the will to the experience of virtuous emotions and argued that a free man is more of an autonomous than a virtuous individual (Clark 1978:136-8). Ockham thus emphasised the fact that “no act is virtuous or vicious unless it is voluntary and in the power of the will” (Ockham 1990:145). In granting the individual a freedom of indifference where his/her will is never necessitated by any affections towards higher, virtuous ends, Ockham suggested an absence of essences and ideals (Woods 1998:348-9). Unlike the voluntarists who believed in universals, the nominalist Ockham denied the existence of universals, including universal emotions.⁴

The nominalist prioritization of the particular over the universal resulted in a sentiment which revolves around particularised human emotions instead of

communal spiritual emotions (Clark 1978:148). In his *Philosophical Writings*, Ockham acknowledges the individual's freedom to desire the advantageous and to dismay the general good if it does not satisfy what the particular good would satisfy (1990:146-7). In fact, this interest in particularised human emotions was first initiated by the late fourteenth-century nominalists' focus on the humanity of Christ. Ockham was one of the earliest philosophers to suggest that Christ's emotional conflict at the time of the crucifixion is an indication of his humanity. In his discussion of the experience of Christ, Ockham points out Christ's human vulnerability, the pain he suffered and the sadness he felt at the time of crucifixion (Perler 2017:73). Significantly, this new conception of Christ's emotional experience spawned an increased tendency towards the portrayal of human emotions, both in medieval religious and vernacular art.⁵

3. The overlap of the late-fourteenth century philosophical and poetic discourses of emotions

Evidence about the identity of Sir Thomas Malory and the socio-political context in which the *Morte* was written supports this paper's analysis of the *Morte* as a text that answers some of the philosophical preoccupations of its time. Being an English gentry author who was writing in the period from 1460-1470, Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire is believed to have been engaged in the political and philosophical debate of his time.⁶ The fact that he knew French and had access to expensive manuscript suggests that he was a cultured author. Some scholars argue that he was politically active as a member of the gentry group to whom the Vicar of Anstey granted everything he owned (Field 1993:2, 84).⁷ Others also suggest that he had his own standing in Warwickshire, due to being a member of the parliament who enjoyed strong ties with prominent political figures such as the Duke of Buckingham (Lynch 2012:299-300; see also Nall 2019).

The nominalist possible philosophical impact on the *Morte*'s immediate context can be supported by the fact that Ockham used to react to contemporary politics as early as the reign of King Edward II. He was one of the earliest thinkers to advocate the right of the people to depose their rulers, and the kings of late medieval England were well aware of his political discourse (Spencer 2015:45). The predecessor of King Henry IV, King Richard II was known for his "legal obsession" and his preoccupation with political philosophy. More specifically, he was a supporter of civilian kingship, a form of kingship discussed by Ockham and his followers, who argued that the king should rule by will alone (Saul 2003:48). King Richard II's belief in the value of royal prerogative is, thus, believed to have been informed by late-fourteenth century ideas about Angevin kingship developed by contemporary nominalists (see Saul who suggests that King Richard II's emphasis on the prerogative "recalls the Angevin world of *vis* and *voluntas*", 2003:37). Interestingly, and what suggests a possible Ockhamist influence on King Richard II, is the fact that Ockham himself was involved in England's politics during the later years of the reign of King Edward III, King Richard II's grandfather.

Ockham's first political writings were directly addressed to King Edward III of England (Boer 1995:240). Yet, his political philosophy remained influential throughout the late fourteenth to the early fifteenth century and could have had an impact on King Edward IV's approach to political governance, the doctrine which reflects the core of Ockham's political theory and his interest in law and human rights.⁸ Significantly, it is believed that the *Morte* "draws together many of the legal concern of the romance", and that Malory had a "unique personal knowledge of the law" (Saunders 2019:193). It is hardly surprising then that the *Morte* adopts a realistic discourse of emotions where the people are given freedom to express their feelings towards King Arthur as a ruler, and towards his political legacy. This article suggests that Malory's literary choices do not seem random, and should thus be examined in the context of the cultural revolution that was initiated by thinkers such as Ockham and enacted by figures such as King Edward IV.

The wider cultural context of the *Morte* seems to support this paper's reading of it as a text that reflects the spirit of the late Middle Ages. The fifteenth century's religious setting was, for example, marked by the secularisation of the clergy, an event that was accompanied by an advent of new ideas towards religion and ethics. This reformed outlook to the religious institution was substantially initiated by Ockham and his fellow nominalists. In fact, the constitutional papacy that was established in the fifteenth century was originally proposed by Ockham in the fourteenth century (Ockham discussed the significance of constitutional papacy and believed that the state should have supremacy over the church; see Kenny and Smyth 1997:315). Interestingly, this attitude towards the religious institution is shared by Malory himself, who is believed to have been hostile about the authority of the church. Malory's writing portrays Rome as a corrupt, menacing power and reflects a degree of questioning the entire Christian mindset.⁹

In fact, Malory's awareness the theological and philosophical debate of his time is a reflection of late medieval culture's general public awareness of the scholastic discourse. Strongly supporting an intersection between nominalism and the literature of the late Middle Ages, Richard Utz asserts that late medieval culture was characterised by a high degree of public awareness of philosophical debate. In trying to establish a relationship between Ockham's nominalism, as a theory, and the literature of the later Middle Ages, he proposes that a nominalist thinker can be a "direct (textual) source". Yet, Utz is more inclined to support the possibility that nominalism represented a typical late medieval mindset or zeitgeist (1995:10-15). A direct influence of nominalism on literary texts is also suggested by Hugo Keiper who argues that Ockham "soon came to hold the stage in quite lop-sided ways" (1997:29). Other critics have argued that it is nominalism, rather than Scotus's voluntarism, that was influential from the mid-to-late fourteenth century. William Courtenay, for instance, asserts that nominalism was dominant in the universities in England throughout the later Middle Ages. Given the fact that the nominalist theology was preached widely, Courtenay argues that it had a great impact on the period's literature (1974). In addition to this, there appeared a serious tendency to popularise philosophical ideas and to bridge the gap between academic and popular discourses. For example, some books, the aim of which was to make philosophical

ideas more accessible to lay readers, were published. An example is the English Dominican Philosopher Robert Holcot's (d. 1349) commentary on the *Book of Wisdom, Super Libros Sapientiae*. The major aim of this book was to spread nominalism among the non-specialist population and was a best seller in the late Middle Ages (Utz 1995:14; see also Coleman 1981:263-65; on the wide circulation of the book and how it was available in any good library, see Pantin 1995:145).

4. Review of related literature

A review of earlier scholarship on emotions in English literature shows a tendency to focus on the early modern period and the periods that follow, and to disregard the medieval period. Significant as they are, most of the studies which discuss emotions in medieval literature either lack a methodological framework or tend to be context-less. For Instance, Felicia Ackerman (2001) argues that Malory portrays his characters as coherent individuals with a psychological depth that cannot be denied. Yet, though one of the pioneering studies to suggest the need to adopt a psychological approach, along with the textual approach, to the reading of the *Morte*, Ackerman's study lacks a theoretical framework. In fact, the article occasionally touches on the topic of emotions or discusses it in reference to the contemporary medieval moral philosophical discourse of emotions.

Studies which express an interest in contextualising the discussion of emotions in medieval literature mostly tend to focus on the sociology of emotions rather than the psychology of emotions. An example of this kind of scholarship is Stephanie Trigg's (2019) study which explores how figurative expressions of emotions can give us an insight into the ways medieval people coded emotions. Kevin Grimm (2001) also chooses not to analyse the psychological depth of Palomides's emotions, and to rather focus on how his love and envy are defined by certain thematic concerns. Significantly, the review reveals that studies which adopt a theoretical framework to investigate emotions, usually draw upon modern critical approaches. It seems that Ackerman's interest in the overlap between the ethical and poetic discourses in the *Morte* was early expressed through her argument that the *Morte* is endowed with a philosophical depth that did not receive the needed scholarly attention (1998). She is one of the earliest scholars to shed light on the romance's philosophical concerns, but in so doing she does not adopt a medieval philosophical framework. Rather, in its analysis of the text's philosophical concerns, the study quotes the opinions of modern theorists such as Richard Brandt and Alfred Mele.

Partially similar to Ackerman, Andrew Lynch (2019) discusses the *Morte*'s discourse of emotions in the context of modern theories of affect which treat emotions as both embodied and cognitive. In an earlier study in which Lynch (2018) analyses the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, which represents a source material for some of Malory's tales, he suggests that emotions and affect receive higher priority in the *Morte* than in the French source material. The study offers a detailed textual analysis, but it never draws upon the *Morte*'s immediate intellectual context to discuss the ethics that informed the characters' expression of emotions. Except for an occasional reference to the medieval conception of the physiology of joy, the

study does not consult with the medieval philosophical literature on the association between will and emotions. Invaluable as they are, studies which express a serious interest in foregrounding the overlap between the literary and ethical discourses do not focus exclusively on emotions in Malory's *Morte*. An example is Malek Zuraikat's (2022) study of the concept of destiny and free will in Chauntecleer's dream. Though not focusing on analysing the relation between free will and emotions, Zuraikat purveys an interesting reading of how destiny and free will connive together in Chaucer's writing. The article describes how the narrative reflects an interplay between free will and destiny, describes the role of human agency within divine intervention, and reflects on how the individual's destiny is informed by free will.

Despite the fact that a number of scholars have highlight how the *Morte* is shaped by the taste of the time, none have analysed the psychological dimension of the characters' attitude in conjunction with the historical aspect of the text; namely within the moral-philosophical framework of the text. In fact, the correspondence between the outlines of Ockham's discourse of emotions, which revolves around the individual's metaphysical freedom, and the book's portrayal of basic human needs as the prime controller of characters' emotions is worthy of being explored. This paper argues that in its emphasis on the characters' human desires, the *Morte* suggests an Ockhamist universe where earthly human emotions are celebrated.

5. Earthly emotions and the freedom of the will

Shortly before the suggested death of King Arthur, the *Morte* describes how the people express their preference to be ruled by Mordred rather than by Arthur, because the latter is leading a life of fighting:

For then was the common voice among them that with Arthur was none other life but war and strife, and with Sir Mordred was great joy and bliss. Thus was Sir Arthur depraved, and evil said of ... And so fared the people at that time that, they were better pleased with Sir Mordred than they were with King Arthur; and much people drew unto Sir Mordred, and said they would abide with him for better and for worse (p.783).

Though brief, this commentary is alarming as it suggests a shift in the values that used to inform the attitude of the English people during the High Middle Ages. Despite not being an ideal king, Arthur is still presented as more endowed with moral integrity than Mordred, who plans to usurp the throne and marry his father's wife. The peoples' celebration of Mordred as a ruler implies that the *Morte* depicts a world different from the one we encounter in the Middle English chivalric romances of the thirteenth century, where the pressure to portray heroes who display exemplary attitude was persistent (The early thirteenth-century *King Horn* can be discussed as an example).

This article suggests that the people's reaction and the whole sentiment that controls the ending of the book can be better understood in the context of the Ockhamist nominalist discourse of emotions. Ockham not only argues for the supremacy of the will and its passions over reason, but also proposes that the freedom of the will is that of indifference to goodness. He explains that the will is

neither determined nor activated by the mind, but rather moved by desire (Clark 1978:142; Pinckaers 1995 also explains Ockham's notion of the liberty of indifference, its relation to self-hood, and how it is "impregnated with a secret passion for self-affirmation": 339). Ockham thus argues that an act of the will "can be indifferently laudable or blameworthy", and he rejects the identification of the freedom of the will with the affections for justice (Ockham 1990:145-46). In his discussion of the nature of the will, he insists that the will can choose good or evil, happiness or unhappiness. While according to Scotus's voluntarism the will overcomes its selfish affections through the inclination towards the intrinsically valuable, Ockham views this as a constraint on its freedom (Clark 1978:138).

The people's positive attitude towards the possibility that someone such as Mordred, who is known to have shamed himself and the Round Table, might rule them betrays strong affections towards the self not towards justice or the common good. This community's love for life, and their perception of the life of fighting that King Arthur is leading as a threat, accords with Ockham's definition of amicable love. In his analysis of emotions, Ockham discusses amicable love as the kind of affections through which people can equally love God or their own lives (Ockham discusses amicable love in 'Using and Enjoying' 2000:352; for a further analysis of Ockham's theory of amicable love, see Hirvonen 2004:154-6). Ockham also explains that while the love of life is an amicable passion, it necessitates another lesser type of love which he calls "wanting love". As an example of wanting love, Ockham discusses the love of health which is desired only because of the life of the human being which is loved by amicable love. He thus adds that the amicable love of life is an efficient cause of an act of hatred towards death and infirmity (Hirvonen 2004:155). Ockham argues that because of the individual's detestation of death, his/her will can cause volition to do whatever is required for health, like having a bitter medicine (Ockham 2000:360; Hirvonen 2004:155). Accordingly, if analysed in the context of Ockham's conception of amicable and wanting love, the people's affections seem not to be directed towards Mordred, but rather towards the preservation of their own lives. Bitter as it is, their choice of Mordred is informed by their desire for a stable reign where their lives are not at stake.

As it is alluded above, this paper argues that the *Morte's* sentiment and its depiction of human unidealized emotions come as an eventual result to the cultural development that accompanied the Civil War, the event that presents the political setting of Malory's book. Akin to the people portrayed in the *Morte*, who supported Mordred's rebellion against King Arthur, a number of English people perceived the mid-fifteenth century rebellion against King Henry VI as a much needed and advantageous event. Also, the division between the knights of the Round Table and their effort to competitively prove their loyalty mirrors to a great degree the division among the Yorkist and Lancastrian lords during the Wars of the Roses. It sounds logical, thus, to suggest that the *Morte's* portrayal of the English peoples' clashed loyalties is informed by the actual concerns of the gentry in fifteenth-century England (Radulescu 2003:144).

Highlighting the specific cultural context of Malory's book and its impact on the departure from the French source material is critical to the understanding of the *Morte's* discourse of emotions. The realistic unidealized sentiment that characterises the people's reaction to Mordred's plan to dethrone King Arthur is one of the features that distinguish the English version from the source material. Although the French Vulgate Cycle was a major source for Malory's final chapters, namely the reunion of Lancelot and Guinevere and the death of King Arthur, the differences between the French and English versions involve more than a change from one language to another. The *Morte's* portrayal of Lancelot as an excellent knight, though a sinner, suggests a shift in the values that inform the behaviour of individuals. In fact, it is only in the *Morte* that Lancelot's failure in the Grail quest is followed by an episode where he is described as one of the best knights. Also, despite Lancelot's ongoing adulterous relationship with the queen, Malory allows him to perform the healing of Sir Urry. In Book Nineteen, not only King Arthur commands Lancelot to perform the healing of Sir Urry, but also the wounded knight himself and the people around him urge him to do so. Hence, though aware that he does not deserve to "do such a high thing", Lancelot submits to the will of his community and performs the healing (p. 740). The *Morte's* positive attitude towards Lancelot and his human frailty is further stressed through presenting his death as a tragic event lamented by his fellow knights, an episode that does not appear in the French source, and which will be discussed below. Such a lenient attitude towards the characters' slips suggests an interest in the portrayal of realistic human, rather than exemplary, emotions.¹⁰

6. The Arthurian knights and human emotions

Malory's focus on unidealized human emotions and the individuals' freedom to express them is further manifested in his portrayal of major characters. As discussed above, he portrays Mordred as a faulty knight who does not stick to the ethics of chivalry, yet is still celebrated by the people as a potential future king.¹¹ Mordred is even given the freedom to express his emotions towards institutions such as the church freely. He freely shows his disrespects to the bishop who criticised him for his plan to marry his father's wife, and he even threatens to kill him. His reaction to the Bishop shows that his emotions are far from being directed towards universal concerns. Overwhelmed by his desire for authority, Mordred's emotions cannot be directed towards any abstract love, be it the love of God or the common good.

Mordred's violation of Christian and chivalric ethics can be cast as an example of Ockham's belief that the "development of higher moral and spiritual values lies in the choices made by individuals, not in a pattern of correct behaviour enforced from above" (McGrade 1947:189).¹² In his analysis of subjective emotions, Ockham comments on the individual's desire for the advantageous and states that the individual, even if he/she has a clear vision of the divine essence, might reject the love of God if he/she perceives it as disadvantageous. He also discusses the possibility that the individual might dismiss the general good if it does not satisfy what the particular good would satisfy (Ockham 1990:146-7). For Mordred, Christian and chivalric ethics presents an obstacle to the achievement of

his plan of usurping the throne. He thus exercises a form of liberty similar to Ockham's notion of liberty through which humans can "do diverse things indifferently and contingently", and which should not be suspended by papal authorities (Ockham 1991: I, q.16, 87). That Mordred's passions are directed towards the fulfilment of his subjective desires is articulated in his diction. When the bishop tries to remind him that he is displeasing God, he replies using impulsive language: "Do thou thy worst, said Sir Mordred, with thou well I shall defy thee" (p. 783). In fact, there is an intensification of the nominalist diction that is mostly expressed through the domination of the first person and the words which reflect Mordred's self-consciousness and free will: "Peace, thou false priest, said Sir Mordred, for an thou chafe me anymore I shall make strike off thy head" (p. 783). The examples above show that Mordred's speech is far from courtly. It reflects a focus on his desire for authority and signifies a detachment from what is universally perceived as virtuous; such as the virtues of loyalty and faith in God.

This commitment to the self and dismissal of what is universally perceived as virtuous is also encountered in other characters; a more contentious example than Mordred is Lancelot. Given the fact that Lancelot enjoys many traits that make him a perfect knight, such as courage and generosity, it might be controversial to cast him as an example of a self-centred character. Yet, Malory portrays Lancelot's ability to control his emotions towards Guinevere as weak, and shows how the decisions he rationally makes prove futile once he is around Guinevere. Lancelot is known for having an adulterous relationship with Guinevere, because of which he abandoned the fellowship of the Round Table (on the ethics of courtly love in medieval literature, see Zuraikat 2023b). This relationship has also caused the suicide of the mother of his child. What suggests that Lancelot is completely controlled by his subjective desires is the fact that all his attempts to repent prove unsuccessful. Even on his quest for the Holy Grail, he could not stay away from Guinevere, and once the quest is over he recommits his sin.

In fact, Lancelot's negligence of chivalric virtues is mostly obvious after the death of King Arthur. He goes to the Hermit where Guinevere retired and she bluntly blames herself and him for causing the war and the death of many knights including King Arthur himself:

Through this man and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain...Therefore, Sir Lancelot, I require thee and beseech thee heartily, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, that thou never see me more in the visage (p. 797).

However, despite the Queen's appeal, and instead of feeling sad for the death of his lord and guilty for the war this love has caused, he asks Guinevere for a kiss while she is in the hermitage mourning the death of her husband. It thus becomes clear that Lancelot's weeping and his decision to do penance after being denied the kiss are not solely triggered by his sadness for the death of King Arthur, or by his feeling of guilt because of causing the collapse of the Round Table, but rather seem induced by his love-sickness.

Lancelot's desire for a kiss suggests that his sentiment revolves exclusively around his subjective emotional experience. In fact, Lancelot's inability to control his desires and to reflect on the universal moral order to which he is supposed to stick can be better understood in the light of Ockham's definition of universals as intellectual abstractions that remain outside the self and lack extra-mental reality. Ockham argues that the universal is "only a mental content or conventional sign, not a substance". Given the fact that the existence of universals needs a council of intellect, in an immediate and urgent situation where the intellect is not working, the universal moral order becomes inaccessible to the individual (Ockham 1990:37, 43-5, 35). This might explain why at this critical time where he sees Guinevere overwhelmed by her grief and farewelling him, Lancelot is unable to divert his attention away from his desire for her and he begs for a kiss: "I pray you kiss me and never no more" (p. 798). His disregard of the chivalric ethics that should govern his attitude towards the widow of his lord suggests that "virtue and vice are centred in an inner region that the external coercion of secular power does not touch" (McGrade 1974:189). If analysed in the context of Ockham's discourse of emotions, we can argue that at this emotionally charged moment of farewelling Guinevere, the possibility is lessened that Lancelot's intellect will guide him to do the right action and redirect his attention towards repenting his sins immediately. In fact, instead of expressing solace for Guinevere's death as a repentant, Lancelot's emotions are presented as informed by earthly concerns. Thinking of Guinevere's "beauty, and of her noblesse", he thus swoons (p. 800). This presentation of Lancelot's embodied expression of grief as triggered by secular rather than spiritual feelings, insinuates an unidealized portrayal of human emotions (on Lancelot's swooning, see Jensen 2023).

Significantly, the text's attitude towards Lancelot's human nature is evident in the final chapters. The last chapter suggests a celebration of the individual and a tolerance towards human weakness and emotions. The fact that Malory chooses to narrate how the bishop saw a vision of Lancelot received in heaven and how "the gates of heaven opened against him" (p. 802), signifies a forgiving tone. Despite all the killings Lancelot did for Guinevere, he dies while smiling. Though used to be sinners, both Lancelot and Guinevere are buried with great devotion. The dole that was made for Lancelot was not made for any man before, even for Arthur who died anonymously. After his death, we never see him blamed for having this relationship with Guinevere. Instead, he is put on the same horse bier that Queen Guinevere was laid in, and in praising him Sir Ector mentions how he was "the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman" (p. 803). The book even concludes with celebrating Lancelot as a knight who continued to impact his fellow knights even after his death, and how their later achievements are but a fulfilment of their promises to him.

As a matter of fact, this forgiving tone is very suggestive of the orientation of the text and how it emulates the spirit of the age. That Malory is not condemning his faulty characters reveals a conscious attempt to reshape the Arthurian story to satisfy the taste of the time. An examination of the last words on Lancelot reveals that the emphasis is put on his earthly deeds rather than on his status as a Christian.

For instance, Sir Ector does not mention repentance, and instead focuses on how Lancelot was “never matched of earthly knight’s hand”, and how he was “the kindest man that ever struck with sword” (p. 803). The examples above all suggest that King Arthur and his knights are portrayed as average humans preoccupied with their subjective desires and basic particulars. So we see Mordred carrying out his will until he is punished and Lancelot choosing to stay close to Guinevere though he is given the freedom to go back home and take himself a wife.¹³

Among the other examples that the *Morte* offers, Arthur’s case is the most revealing of the individual’s relationship with the divine. Arthur’s decision to ignore God’s warning and to take revenge suggests a free will moved by affections towards the self. Gawain is sent to Arthur with a clear message: “God hath sent me to you of his special grace, to give you warning that in no wise ye do battle as to-morn, but that ye take a treaty for a month day” (p. 787). Yet, despite this, Arthur is moved by his desire for revenge and he ignores God’s message for the second time when Lucan reminds him of the dream: “Good lord, remember ye of your night’s dream, and what the spirit of Sir Gawaine told you this night, yet God of his great goodness hath preserved you hitherto. Therefore, for God’s sake, my lord, leave off by this”. (p. 789). He does not only break the truce, but also insists on taking revenge and killing Mordred; the reason why he received his death wound:

Then the king gat his spear in both hands, and ran towards Sir Mordred, crying: Traitor, now is thy death day come...And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death wound ...he smote his father Arthur, with his sword holden in both his hands...and therewithal Sir Mordred fell stark dead on the earth; and the noble Arthur fell in a swoon to the earth (p. 789).

Arthur’s choice to satisfy his immediate desire for revenge rather than being eventually rewarded by God for following his orders suggests that when Christian values are at conflict with the chivalric values, it is the chivalric code that might win (See Hill 1996:268). The type of the relationship between man and God that the *Morte* portrays seems to be informed by the late fourteenth-century Ockhamist perception of the divine. The image of God in the *Morte* seems similar to “Ockham’s God” who is powerful and free, yet detached from his creatures (Kwasniewski 2004:70). Believing that we love God only because he ordered us to do so, Ockham argued that a free will might not stick to God’s orders (Irwin 2007:399). This outlook explains why after nominalism the focus of morality was no longer beatitude as much as human earthly concerns (Grabowski 2003:15-16).

The above discussed examples suggest that religion is not presented as a strong impact on characters’ actions and emotions. The sense of loss that controls the ending of the *Morte*, even in the chapters that follow the repentance of some of the characters, implies that Malory’s book is not celebrating penance as much as lamenting the fall of the Round Table. The penitential tone thus fails to “negate the sense of loss created by the sight of a potentially ideal society built up and then destroyed” (Field 1999:246). The world of the *Morte* seems, therefore, to exemplify the late medieval world which “under the influence of Ockham, involved a fusion of radical epistemological scepticism and ‘fideism’” (Aers 2000:8). The characters’ wilful actions, and their subsequent emotional experiences, can thus be cast as

examples of Ockham's notion of metaphysical freedom. According to this notion, and as shown above, individuals' emotions are mainly connected to their basic human needs such as the need to survive and to preserve possessions.¹⁴

7. Conclusion

Though fictional and cannot be treated as history, the *Morte* provides an insight into the late medieval socio-cultural zeitgeist. Hence, reading its portrayal of emotions in the context of nominalism helps us trace the development of the medieval poetic discourse of emotions and understand the cultural implications of the representation of emotions in poetry. The *Morte* can, thus, be studied as a source of normativity essential to the understanding of the ethics that used to govern the world of fifteenth-century England and the shift that underwent the medieval poetic discourse of emotions towards the end of the Middle Ages. Its interest in human, private emotions generates an argument central to other Middle English Arthurian romances from the same period. Its portrayal of worldly ideals, along with its focus on the individual, are characteristics that are shared by other romances of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. Malory's depiction of the decadence of the ideals of King Arthur and his knights is, for instance, a characteristic of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1400). Its focus on the portrayal of King Arthur's and his knights' worldly imperfect emotions is also present in the late fourteenth-century stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (1350) and the early fifteenth century alliterative *Morte Arthure* (1400), the texts which are believed to have provided source material for Malory's book. Significantly, this advent of new attitudes towards emotions cannot be viewed in isolation from the cultural development that took place towards the end of the medieval period, represented by the decline of chivalry, the spread of witchcraft and the emergence of mercantile and nominalist values. The interdisciplinary approach that this article adopted is thus an attempt to explain why the pressure to portray heroes who display exemplary emotions reduced in the texts that depict the death of King Arthur and the fall of the Round Table. Placing the *Morte* within its wider intellectual and cultural context can, thus, help us understand how the shift towards the portrayal of faulty characters who experience imperfect emotions is not abrupt, but rather a result of the gradual development of the medieval poetic discourse of emotions over the centuries, and its relation to the ethics that govern the texts' immediate context.

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Endnotes

¹. Other scholars believed that the tragic ending of the *Morte* had an impact on its generic identity. Terence McCarthy, for instance, argues that Malory's concerns are more historical than romantic (1988:148). Helen Cooper also proposes that the *Morte* is notable for its bleak sentiment (1997:150). Similarly, Sandra Ness Ihle suggests that the realism of Malory's *Morte* has resulted in a generic shift from "the cyclic towards the non-cyclic romance" (2000:255).

². Within this paper, the category of "affection" will be used to refer to the voluntarist account of the dual inclinations of the will. Believing that willing is an act of loving, the voluntarists argue that the will is weighted by desire which can either be directed towards the self or towards others. While in the affections towards the self, *affectio commodi*, the individual's desire is directed inward, in the affections towards others, *affectio justitae*, desire is directed outward. The *affectio commodi* motivates the self to seek its own advantage. On the other hand, the *affectio justitae* urges the individual to direct his affections towards the common good (See Scotus 2018). For an explanation of the voluntarist account of dual affections, see Vos (2006:452-3). It is, yet, worth noting that despite its wide usage in the medieval period, the category of 'affection' is not frequently used in recent criticism on medieval emotions. However, its closest derivation, "affect", has been widely used, and sometimes interchangeably with "emotions". Downes and McNamara comment on the significance of the term to medievalists and argue that it carries a special critical significance as it describes an interdisciplinary field of study concerned with the analysis of emotions in literature or art (2016:444).

³. On how Ockham's school of thought is described as the *via moderna* in contrast to Scotus's school of thought which is described as the *via antiqua*, see (Gilbert

1974; Oberman 1974:12). Aquinas and Scotus are also classified as realist as opposed to the nominalist Ockham. Here, the term ‘realism’ refers to the medieval philosophical school which, following Aristotle. Nominalists, on the other hand, denied the existence of universals. On this, see (Panaccio 2012:395). Henceforth, the term ‘realism’ will be used to refer to this medieval school of thought.

⁴. In his *Philosophical Writings*, Ockham argues that the universal is “only a mental content or conventional sign, not a substance” (1990:37). Ockham, thus, explains that in an immediate and urgent situation where the intellect is not working, the universal moral order becomes inaccessible to the individual (p. 35). Also, on the prioritisation of the particular over the universal see, (Ockham 1994: q. 4, 130-1).

⁵. Kathleen Ashley argues that the religious art of the late fourteenth century started to stress the humanity of Christ as opposed to the earlier literature which tended to stress his divinity (1978:387-404). This view is also shared with Robert Marshall (1974).

⁶. Different candidates have been identified as possible authors of the *Morte*, but Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel is the only one whose biography correlates the most to the prisoned knight who wrote the *Morte*. On the identity of Malory and his social class see Field (1993).

⁷. Here it is important to explain that the gentry class used to refer to the class that comes immediately below the nobility (see Pugh 1972:96).

⁸. On King Edward II’s attitude towards the governed, see Richmond (1992:12-18).

⁹. On how Malory is believed to be dubious about the authority of the church see Appendix II in Lewis’s book (2011). On how the fifteenth century was marked by scepticism, see Wright (2010:52).

¹⁰. On the *Morte*’s departure from the French source material and its promoting of Lancelot as an excellent knight, see Malory (2015:11-13). On how Malory’s contemporaries did not perceive the Grail story to be holy, see Hodges (2005:20).

¹¹. The portrayal of faulty knights who transgress chivalric ethics is not unique to the *Morte*. In Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (1390) Albinus, for example, is portrayed as a self-centred knight who is blinded by his rage, pride and sensual pleasures. Similarly, in the *Canterbury Tales* (1400) Chaucer presents us with different examples of knights who defy chivalric values. Commenting on the failure of chivalry in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Zuraikat (2023a) contends that acts of violence in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, rape as an example, suggest a violation of the chivalric and aristocratic code of conduct. Significantly, the choice of the *Morte* as an example of nominalist texts is informed by the fact that that Malory is neither purely moralising as Gower in his *Confessio Amantis* nor satirizing as Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*. What justifies the nominalist reading of the representation of emotions in the *Morte* is, in fact, the text’s forgiving tone towards human weakness and human emotions.

¹². It is worth mentioning here that we have traces of this violation in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and scholars such as Zuraikat have discussed how rape in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” is a form of violence that signifies a violation of chivalric values.

¹³. This is a feature that distinguishes the *Morte* from earlier sources, where the space given to the characters to express their free will is relatively limited. For example, it is only in the *Morte* that Arthur is given the opportunity to reflect on his actions and then decide to dismiss Lucan's advice. On this, see Corrie (2013:708-9).

¹⁴. This reading might provide a counter argument to the argument presented by some earlier scholars who believed that Malory is an idealist hoping for a revival of chivalric ideals. It suggests that Malory was aware of the decline of chivalry and was consciously portraying the decadence of chivalric ideals. On this, see Chambers (1945). Here, it is significant to note that what distinguishes the *Morte* is the fact that it does not provide an aftermath to Arthur's death. Such an ending might explain why the title of the book, since the copy of Caxton, was the 'Death of Arthur' not the 'Life of Arthur'. On this, see Riddy (1996:55-74).

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