

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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Israa Qallab

The University of Jordan, Jordan

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Abstract: In contrast to the romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which portray heroes who exhibit commendable traits, Malory's *Morte Darthur* is conspicuous for its depiction of heroes who surrender to their extreme love, grief or anger. Yet, this shift towards the portrayal of blemished knights who experience imperfect emotions is not abrupt, but rather a result of the gradual evolution of the medieval poetic discourse of emotion over the centuries. This paper proposes that the sombre tone which defines the ending of *Morte Darthur* can be better understood if read within the cultural backdrop 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, posits a correlation 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 situated within the broader cultural context that influenced 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 backdrop represented by the turmoil 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 fostered a reverence for individualism and advocated for the validation of utilitarian secular ethics. The nominalists’ validation of relational values generated a sentiment that revolves around the individual and his basic human needs. Hence, it is against this cultural background that this paper seeks to examine the sentiment that features the ending of Malory’s *Morte*. The paper posits a correlation between the late-fourteenth century nominalist discourse of emotions, which centres on the individual’s metaphysical freedom, and the *Morte*’s decadent discourse of emotions. It contends that the conclusion of Malory’s work presents an Ockhamist nominalist framework in which imperfect human emotions are given precedence 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 oscillated between intellectual and affective poles.³ While the Thomist intellectual approach of emotions had been predominant in scholastic discourse until the late thirteenth century, the emergence of John Duns Scotus’s philosophy of voluntarism introduced an affective dimension that impacted the study of emotions for subsequent centuries. Significantly, this ascendancy of the affective approach to the study of emotions was bolstered by the emergence of William of Ockham and his nominalist philosophy. Though a student of Scotus, Ockham is perceived as an ardent voluntarist, a nominalist as opposed to the realist Scotus.⁴ Unlike Scotus, Ockham believed that the freedom of the will is characterised by indifference, 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 iustitiae* urges the individual to direct his affections towards the love of God and the common good (Scotus 2018: II, d. 6. q. 2). 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).

The nominalist emphasis on prioritising the individual over the collective resulted in a sentiment centred on subjective human emotions rather than communal spiritual emotions (Clark 1978:148). In his *Philosophical Writings*, Ockham acknowledges individuals’ liberty to pursue personal advantage and to dismay the common good if it fails to align with their specific interests (1990:146-7). In fact, this interest in particularised human emotions was originally sparked by the late fourteenth-century nominalists’ examination of the humanity of Christ. Ockham

stands among the earliest philosophers to propose that Christ's emotional turmoil at the time of the crucifixion serves as evidence of his humanity. In his analysis of Christ's ordeal, Ockham highlights Christ's human susceptibility, the pain he endured and the agony he felt at the time of crucifixion (Perler 2017:73). Significantly, this new conception of Christ's emotional experience prompted a heightened inclination towards depicting human emotions in both 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 Anstley 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 renowned for his "legal obsession" and his keen interest in political philosophy. Particularly, he was a supporter of civilian kingship, as espoused by Ockham and his adherents, who advocated for a form of kingship where the ruler's holds paramount importance (Saul 2003:48). It is suggested that King Richard II's belief in the value of royal prerogative was, thus, influenced by late-fourteenth century notion of Angevin kingship propagated 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). Notably, what indicates a possible Ockhamist influence on King Richard II is the historical association of Ockham with England's politics during the latter part of the reign of King Edward III, the grandfather of King Richard II.

Ockham's first political treatises were specifically directed towards 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 of the theological and philosophical debate of his time is a reflection of late medieval culture’s general public awareness of the scholastic discourse. Strongly advocating for an intersection between nominalism and the literature of the later Middle Ages, Richard Utz contends that this period was marked by a heightened public consciousness of philosophical discourse. While exploring the connection between Ockham’s nominalism, as a theory, and the literature of the later Middle Ages, he suggests the potential for a nominalist thinker to serve as “direct (textual) source”. However, Utz leans more towards supporting the belief that nominalism represented a typical late medieval mindset or *zeitgeist* (1995:10-15). Hugo Keiper also proposed a direct influence of nominalism on literary texts and argued that Ockham “soon came to hold the stage in quite lop-sided ways” (1997:29). Due to the widespread dissemination of nominalist theology, Courtenay argued that it had a great impact on the literature of the period (1974). Furthermore, there appeared a serious inclination towards popularising philosophical concepts and bridging the divide between academic and popular discourses. This trend was exemplified by the publication of books aimed at rendering philosophical ideas more comprehensible to lay readers. One such example is the commentary on the *Book of Wisdom*, *Super Libros Sapientiae*, authored by the English Dominican Philosopher Robert Holcot’s (d. 1349). The primary objective of this book was to disseminate nominalism to a broader audience beyond specialists, making it a widely popular publication throughout 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

An examination of prior scholarship on emotions in English literature reveals a tendency towards focusing on the early modern period and the periods that follow, often overlooking 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.

Research endeavours that aim to contextualise the discussion of emotions in medieval literature primarily lean towards exploring the sociological aspects of emotions rather than delving into 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 convergence of 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.

While several scholars have noted the influence of contemporary taste on the *Morte*, none have examined the psychological dimension of the characters' attitude alongside the historical aspect of the text; particularly within the moral-philosophical framework of the text. Indeed, the alignment between the outlines of Ockham's discourse of emotions, which emphasises the individual's metaphysical freedom, and the text's depiction of basic human needs as the prime determinants of characters' emotions warrants exploration. 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 comprehending the people's reaction and the overarching sentiment that shapes the conclusion of the book can be enhanced by considering the Ockhamist nominalist discourse of emotions. Ockham not only advocates for the dominance of the will and its passions over reason, but also proposes that the freedom of the will entails indifference to goodness. He elucidates

that the will is neither determined nor guided by the mind, but rather propelled by desire (Clark 1978:142; Pinckaers 1995 also elaborates on 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" p. 339). Ockham thus argues that an act of the will "can be indifferently laudable or blameworthy", and he rejects the notion that the freedom of the will is synonymous with a disposition towards justice (Ockham 1990:145-46). In his exploration of the essence of the will, he maintains that it possesses the capability to choose either good or evil, happiness or unhappiness. While Scotus's voluntarism stresses that the will transcends its self-centred affections by inclining towards intrinsic value, Ockham perceives this inclination as a limitation on its autonomy (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 King Arthur's combative lifestyle as a menace aligns with Ockham's definition of amicable love. In his examination of emotions, Ockham delineates amicable love as a form of affections whereby people can equally prioritise their love for 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 further explains that while the affections for life constitutes an amicable passion, it necessitates another secondary form of affection termed as "wanting love". As an illustration of wanting love, Ockham discusses the love of health which is prioritised by amicable love. Consequently, he asserts that the amicable love of life serves as the motivating force behind the manifestation of aversion towards illness and death (Hirvonen 2004:155). Ockham contends that due to the individual's aversion to death, his/her will can cause volition to do whatever is required for health, such as enduring the bitterness of medicine (Ockham 2000:360; Hirvonen 2004:155). Accordingly, when viewed through the lens of Ockham's conceptualization of amicable and wanting love, it appears that the people's affections are not aimed at Mordred, but rather at safeguarding 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. Mordred's response to the Bishop underscores how his emotions are not aligned with universal interests. Driven by a fervent longing for power, Mordred's emotions cannot be directed towards any abstract love, whether it be for the love of God or the collective welfare.

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 discusses the individual's inclination towards what is advantageous, stating that even if people possess a profound understanding of the

divine essence, they may reject the love of God if they perceive it as disadvantageous. Furthermore, Ockham explores the scenario where an individual may disregard the common good if it fails to fulfil what the particular good would fulfil (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, p. 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 longing for a kiss indicates that his sentiment is solely centred on his personal emotional state. Indeed, his incapacity to regulate his desires and consider the universal moral order to which he is expected to adhere can be more comprehensively interpreted in accordance with Ockham's conceptualisation of universals as intellectual constructs devoid of external reality. Ockham argues that the universal is "only a mental content or conventional sign, not a substance". In situations of immediate urgency where rational thought is impaired, the accessibility of the universal moral order becomes compromised, this is mainly because the existence of universals requires the functioning of the intellect (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 examined in the context of Ockham's discourse of emotions, it can be contended that during this emotionally-charged farewell to Guinevere, the likelihood diminishes that Lancelot's intellect will steer him towards taking the correct course of action and shifting his focus 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. Hence, 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 relationship between man and God that the *Morte* portrays appears to be influenced by the late fourteenth-century Ockhamist conception of the divine. The depiction of God in the *Morte* bears resemblance to “Ockham’s God” who is potent and autonomous, yet distant from his creations (Kwasniewski 2004:70). Believing that our love of God is contingent upon His command, Ockham argued that a free will might not consistently adhere to divine directives (Irwin 2007:399). This perspective explains why, following nominalism, moral emphasis shifted away from beatitude towards human earthly matters (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 deliberate actions of characters, along with their ensuing and emotional responses, can thus be interpreted as examples of Ockham's concept of metaphysical freedom. In accordance with this concept, and as demonstrated earlier, individuals' emotions are primarily linked to their basic human needs, such as the instinct for self-preservation and the desire to safeguard possessions.¹⁴

7. Conclusion

Though fictional and cannot be treated as history, the *Morte* provides an insight into the late medieval socio-cultural zeitgeist. Therefore, examining its depiction of emotions within the framework of nominalism enables us to chart the evolution of the medieval poetic discourse of emotions and comprehend the cultural significance of the representation of emotions in poetry. The *Morte* can, thus, be studied as a source of normative principles crucial for comprehending the ethical standards that governed the world of fifteenth-century England, as well as the transformation witnessed in the medieval poetic discourse of emotions towards the conclusion of the Middle Ages. The book's exploration of personal human emotions forms a central theme shared with other Middle English Arthurian romances of the same era. Its portrayal of worldly aspirations, and emphasis on individualism, are common characteristics found in other romances dating from the late fourteenth to the 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, the emergence of novel perspectives on emotions cannot be considered independently from the cultural development that occurred towards the conclusion of the medieval period, marked by the decline of chivalric ideals, the proliferation of witchcraft beliefs and the rise of mercantile and nominalist principles. Contextualizing the *Morte* within its broader intellectual and cultural milieu can, thus, facilitate our comprehension of how the transition towards depicting flawed characters experiencing imperfect emotions is not sudden, but rather stems from the gradual evolution of the medieval poetic discourse of emotions over time, and its intricate link to the ethics that govern the immediate context of these literary texts.

Isra'a Khlaif Qallab – Assistant Professor of Medieval English Literature
Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan
ORCID Number: 0000-0003-2579-5404
Email: i.qallab@ju.edu.jo

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 term "affection" will be employed to denote the voluntarist concept of the dual inclinations of the will. The voluntarists argued that the will is influenced by desire which can either be directed towards the self or towards others. In the affections towards the self, known as *affectio commodi*, the individual's desire is directed inward. On the other hand, in the affections towards others, termed as *affectio justitiae*, the individual's desire is directed 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, noteworthy that despite its prevalence in the medieval period, the term 'affection' is not commonly utilised in contemporary scholarship on medieval emotions. However, its closest equivalent, "affect", has been widely used, and sometimes interchangeably with "emotions". Downes and McNamara emphasise the significance of the term to medieval scholars and assert that it holds significant critical value as it encompasses an interdisciplinary field concerned with the analysis of emotions in literature or art (2016:444).

³. In this article, I employ the nominalist theoretical framework originally developed in the third chapter of my doctoral thesis, which provided a comprehensive foundation for examining the late medieval poetic discourse of emotions, see (Alqallab 2019).

⁴. Regarding the characterisation of Ockham's philosophical approach as the *via moderna* in contrast to Scotus's approach, described as the *via antiqua*, see (Gilbert 1974; Oberman 1974:12).

⁵. Kathleen Ashley contends that the religious art of the late fourteenth century increasingly emphasised the humanity of Christ, diverging from earlier literature that predominantly stressed His divinity (1978:387-404). This view is also echoed by 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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