

Sabbatical Report – Fall 2020
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In Winter 2018 I had an article published in the medieval journal *Arthuriana* arguing that the Arthurian court as it is depicted in much medieval literature is unsustainable. I used the World Commission on Environment and Development’s definition from its 1987 report: sustainable development is that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Engaging ecocriticism and one of its subfields discard studies, I showed that the excessive behaviors of the aristocracy in the anonymous fifteenth-century poem *The Awntyrs off Arthure* precipitate both material (and thus environmental) and metaphorical waste which has the potential to disrupt both present and future generations’ ability to meet their needs. For my sabbatical independent project, I undertook to expand this investigation, as I believe the Arthurian court is unsustainable in other ways. Further, and paradoxically, I see this very unsustainability as part of what attracts readers to the genre – both medieval and contemporary audiences are drawn to the excess and glamor of the court itself, but also to its inevitable tragic end. My sabbatical project thus expands my theory of Arthurian paradox: the very unsustainability of the court as depicted in literature is what sustains the genre.

Much research and work in sustainability studies focuses on the environment. Because I wanted to expand my understanding and the application of the idea of “sustainability,” in this project I deliberately moved away from environmental issues and instead focused my research in part on Arthurian courtly society. I hypothesized that the very structure of the court – a male-centered society defined by the Round Table and the parameters of idealized medieval knighthood – made that same court unsustainable in two ways: biologically and socially.

Biologically, Arthur's Round Table knights are typically unmarried – in some texts they are even referred to as “bachelors” – which means they are not producing legitimate heirs and thus by extension may only sustain their line until the end of their own lifetime. As I began to read primary texts, however, I noticed that many romances concluded with the knightly protagonist's marriage and his subsequent departure from the Round Table and Arthur's court. If indeed marriage offers a conclusion to knighthood, then the social structure of Arthur's court is also unsustainable – knights are only present for their own stories, or limited other appearances, but then marry and take on a new social role as husband and often lord of their own territory, weakening the Round Table with their departure.

As I delved further into primary source material, I noticed that it was romances more than chronicle accounts in which this “happy ending” of married knights disappearing from Arthur's court took place. Therefore I decided to focus specifically on romances for my literary analysis, and narrowed my field to three poems: *Erec et Enide* by Chretien de Troyes, a twelfth-century French author who is extremely influential for Arthurian romance, *Ywain and Gawain*, an anonymous fourteenth-century English adaptation of another of Chretien's romances called *The Knight with the Lion*, and finally *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, another anonymous English romance, this one from the fifteenth century. Each of these romances depicts a knight who is or becomes married during the course of the story, and each knight, once married, experiences considerable problems. I posited these stories inferred marriage and knighthood, even in the fantasy world of medieval romance, were incompatible.

To supplement my own analysis of these poems, I then endeavored to locate secondary source material. This was extremely challenging as a result of COVID-19. I had intended to make use of UCLA's resources for this project, but because I am not affiliated with that

institution, I was not eligible for log-in credentials to their research databases, and of course their physical location was closed and thus all print volumes I could have accessed with my community library card were off-limits. El Camino College's print collection as well as its interlibrary loan program for faculty were likewise unavailable. I therefore had to depend upon articles that were either freely available online, or those which I was able to access through El Camino's database collection. It was fortunate I had notes from research and reading I had done previous to the official start date for my sabbatical, or I would not have been able to complete the project. At the end of this explanation I have included my bibliography, which represents the reading I did for the project.

My secondary research took several directions: first, I wanted to find out why romance seemed so often to conclude in marriage for knights, as opposed to chronicles in which their marital and knightly statuses did not seem interdependent. Contrary to our current understanding, "romance" for medievals was initially about knightly adventure, often in magical or otherworldly locations, rather than a story of finding love. However, I discovered that the Catholic Church instituted several new reforms in the twelfth century, including one called *consensus*: a mandated agreement from both the woman and the man in order to marry. Previously marriage was an arrangement between the groom and the bride's father, and her consent was not required. Suddenly love matches became more common, and idealizing marriage as a romantic union as well as driven by property and inheritance became advantageous. Because Chrétien and numerous other romance writers were clerics or had clerical training, it makes sense that they would privilege such an "end goal" for their knights.

I next needed to determine why knights, after marrying, would disappear from the story. This led me to both historical and literary scholarship about knighthood, as well as into the field

of masculinity studies. Knighthood necessitated close ties between men; the close companionship they historically experienced, usually during military campaigns but also in training, would likely have made the “brotherhood” of Arthur’s Round Table ring true – if a bit idealistic and recognizable as fiction – for medieval readers. Despite that closeness, I discovered that after marriage a man’s social priorities changed. In part because knighthood was often undertaken by men whose marital prospects were not secure, but in part because it was physically dangerous, knights were usually single. If they did marry, their priorities became producing heirs and managing an estate. The kind of wounds they could sustain in tournaments or in war could render them incapable of procreation, adding a new angle to the idea of biological unsustainability I was considering.

I realized as I read that knighthood, in both its idealized and historical form, was tied to conceptions of masculinity. Although knightly society was single sex in the sense that it consisted of exclusively male groups, heterosexuality and the potential for demonstrations of sexual prowess within those groups was important. The connections this truth carries for Arthur’s Round Table and for romance led me to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theoretical work on homosociality from her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. “Homosocial” became a useful vocabulary term for me to clarify that I was not eroticizing knightly Arthurian relationships, but that as knights, they were part of a homosocial or same-sex social group, and that the disruption of that group by women – when homosocial becomes heterosocial – caused problems for their knighthood.

This theoretical frame guided me into my literary analyses: using Sedgwick’s vocabulary, I speculated that for both Erec in *Erec et Enide* and Gawain in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, heterosociality – that is, when their “society” becomes not a group of knights,

but a husband and wife together – disables knighthood. While Erec is able to regain his knightly status by treating his wife poorly and pretending to no longer love her, Gawain is only restored to his esteemed place at the Round Table when his wife dies.

For both Erec and Ywain, I was further able to conclude that marriage not only disrupts their knightly careers, but that the two states cannot be occupied simultaneously. Erec's attempt to be both knight and husband results in his poor treatment of his wife and then near-death, which I would argue shows the symbolic death of his knighthood, as after he recovers he forgoes knightly pursuits, settles into his marriage, and essentially disappears from the Arthurian canon. His name appears in a small number of other texts, but in these he is most frequently just a bystander. Ywain's case is similar: his marriage leads to ridicule from his fellow knights, and an attempt to maintain his relationship with them leads to his wife rejecting him, which drives him into temporary madness. His eventual resumption of sanity quickly precedes a renunciation of knighthood, and again, the character as written in this text fades out of Arthurian romance. I was at first dismayed to discover that there are several other characters with this or a similar name within Arthur stories, but they do not seem to be connected to this incarnation of the character – his experiences and qualities are not referenced in others with the name. It may be that it was easy for other authors to use a pre-existing name in epic catalogues or for minor characters without holding themselves accountable to this character's narrative history.

My discoveries and analyses during this project allow me to look toward a larger issue of unsustainability within the Arthurian canon. Again working with the World Commission on Environment and Development's definition from its report, I have now found that from both social and environmental angles Arthur's court suffers from unsustainable practices. Within the genre, those practices lead directly or indirectly toward the Round Table's dissolution and

Arthur's death. This is complicated, however, by the legendary designation of Arthur as "the once and future king"; within the canon his "death" is sometimes unconfirmed, and instead he is proposed to have traveled to the magical island of Avalon where his wounds will be healed and he will return when Britain most needs him. This speaks, I feel, to the larger paradox I mentioned above: Arthuriana as a genre is sustained by its own unsustainability. We are so fascinated by and drawn to these practices that render the story so tragic that we continue to return to it, and have done so for hundreds of years since its first mention in early medieval texts. We cannot, it would seem, bear to let Arthur die.

Eventually I would like to expand my research further, perhaps formalizing my discoveries into article or monograph form. Particularly important will be drawing connections from these medieval romances to our own unsustainable practices – our deep attraction to a story such as this has serious and concerning bearing on our own habits whether social or environmental. If we love and romanticize the unsustainable, how will we be able to build a more sustainable world?

Though my Arthur research formed the bulk of my sabbatical work, the time free from classroom obligations, and the odd circumstances precipitated by COVID-19, also allowed me to attend a number of medieval conference and webinar presentations (one, ironically enough, about the resonances between COVID-19 and the Bubonic Plague during the High Middle Ages). Several of these panels examined the intersections of race and medieval studies, which is crucial to my field and my role as an instructor for two reasons: first, a better grounding in critical race studies helps me craft a more equity-minded classroom. Integrating ideas about equity and racial realities in the Middle Ages improves my knowledge within my field as a

medievalist, and by extension makes me better able to teach English 15A, a class for which the literary offerings are predominantly white and male. Secondly, medieval studies has for a very long time been dominated by white scholarship. Unfortunately, this has made it vulnerable to co-option by white nationalists and other racist groups, who mine medieval texts for a “racially pure” history that does not realistically exist. Learning more about race and racialization in the Middle Ages allows me to bring my knowledge to the classroom and combat these false narratives.

Finally, my sabbatical allowed me to complete the SPOCK certification for online instruction using Canvas. I feel fortunate that I was able to concentrate on the in-depth requirements of the training during my time away from the classroom. Completing the lessons and assignments required by the program while also teaching, lesson planning, and grading would have been quite challenging, so I am grateful that the sabbatical allowed me an opportunity to work through the training asynchronously.

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