

# I

## COMMEMORATION IN LA MORT LE ROI ARTU\*

*Emma Campbell*

Commemoration – insofar as it is a conduit for private remembrance and public mourning – is situated between individual and communal fields of memory and marks their point of overlap. Commemoration is also situated at the intersection of individual and communal in another sense: it incorporates individual life – and death – into the public sphere and provides the means of celebrating it as exemplary. Yet, because of this peculiar status, commemoration poses the problem of what – or whom – one picks out as worthy of memory. As Judith Butler has pointed out, one of the primary functions of commemorative discourse is to designate individuals and behaviours that are considered worthy of public remembrance and thereby to identify what she terms ‘publicly grievable life’.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely because it determines what kind of life qualifies for collective forms of remembrance that such discourse is instrumental in nation- or community-building. In this respect, what is excluded from the arena of public grief is at least as important as that which is included, this exclusion being a necessary condition for gestures of remembrance that help to constitute the public sphere.

One reason for re-examining commemoration in *La Mort le roi Artu* is that the representation of remembrance in that romance seems both to draw upon and to complicate the pattern just described in ways that comment on the text’s own participation in the work of memory. Memory is represented as both an imperative and a problem in the *Mort*, a dynamic that manifests itself perhaps most clearly in the various monuments commemorating the dead. The romance seems repeatedly to highlight the interpretative, mutable nature of funerary text even as it asserts the relationship between historical events and the public discourse that guarantees their permanence. What is offered for commemoration within the

\* I should like to thank Simon Gaunt, Miranda Griffin and the anonymous reader for *Arthurian Literature* for their generous comments on this article.

<sup>1</sup> J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York, 2004), esp. pp. 34–40.

text thus continually shifts, as what is included or excluded from memorial discourse is revisited or revised. As I shall argue, this depiction of commemoration is, in turn, connected to the *Mort*'s awareness of its own investment in such a process, as a text that writes the final chapter of Arthurian history.

The *Mort*'s complex attitude to memory is at least partially related to its position within a particular textual tradition. The *Mort* appears in a number of manuscripts as the concluding part of a cycle of narratives: the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, the *Estoire de Merlin*, the *Lancelot*, the *Queste del Saint Graal* and *La Mort le roi Artu*.<sup>2</sup> These five texts are commonly known as the 'Vulgate Cycle' or 'Lancelot–Grail Cycle'.<sup>3</sup> Though it is generally thought to have been composed before the first two texts in the Vulgate Cycle grouping (i.e. the *Estoire* and the *Merlin*), the *Mort* self-consciously situates itself both as the continuation of the *Queste* and the story of Lancelot in general and also presents itself as the end of that narrative sequence. This much is apparent from the opening lines of the *Mort*, which apocryphally attribute the composition of the concluding part of the story ('ceste derrienne partie') to King Henry's desire to hear about how the accomplished knights of the *Aventures del Seint Graal* met their end (1, 1–16).<sup>4</sup> Yet, at the same time, the text seems reluctant to fix its subject and faces the problem of how to deal with the representational legacy of the text it follows.<sup>5</sup> Though the end of the *Mort* asserts that this is the conclusion to the *Estoire de Lancelot*, the opening lines make no mention of Lancelot, focusing instead on the death of Arthur as that which

<sup>2</sup> The complete cycle is transmitted in nine manuscripts. However, it is likely that many other manuscripts were originally full cyclic transmissions or were conceived as such.

<sup>3</sup> The genesis of the cycle is controversial. The *Lancelot* may have been composed independently then added to; alternatively, the *Lancelot*, *Queste* and *Mort* may represent a group of texts that were conceived as an ensemble from the outset. Similarly, though it is highly unlikely that the same author wrote all three texts, some critics have argued for an 'architect' who conceived of this ensemble as such and oversaw its production. E. Kennedy, *Lancelot and the Grail: A Study of the Prose Lancelot* (Oxford, 1986) and 'The Making of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle', in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. C. Dover (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 13–22; J. Frappier, *Étude sur La Mort le roi Artu* (Geneva, 1961), pp. 122–46; F. Lot, *Étude sur le 'Lancelot en prose'* (Paris, 1918), pp. 65–107. For a summary of critical views on this subject, see E. Kennedy, M. Szkilnik, R. T. Pickens, K. Pratt and A. M. L. Williams, eds., 'Lancelot with and without the Grail: *Lancelot do Lac* and the Vulgate Cycle', in *The Arthur of the French: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. G. S. Burgess and K. Pratt (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 274–324 (pp. 274–7).

<sup>4</sup> All references to the *Mort Artu* are taken from J. Frappier, ed., *La Mort le roi Artu. Roman du XIIIe siècle*, 3rd edn (Geneva, 1964, repr. 1996). Translations are my own. The king in question is supposed to be Henry II of England, though this attribution is fictional. See the introduction to Frappier's edition, p. viii and, at greater length, his *Étude sur La Mort le roi Artu*, pp. 21–4. On authorship and dating see M. B. Fox, *La Mort le roi Artus: Étude sur les manuscrits, les sources et la composition de l'œuvre* (Paris, 1933), pp. 39–43 and Kennedy *et al.*, 'Lancelot with and without the Grail', pp. 274–77 and 311.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see Kennedy *et al.*, 'Lancelot with and without the Grail', pp. 314–15.

gives the text its title.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, what might be seen as equivocation over whom the text is about is part of a broader dilemma in the *Mort* regarding what can be commemorated – a problem exemplified by Lancelot, though by no means confined to him. As others have indicated, the romance makes a sustained effort to reorientate the more negative depiction of Lancelot in the *Queste* and to redeem him as the best knight in the Arthurian world.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the *Mort* cannot altogether ignore what has come before and must therefore wrestle with what might, after Butler, be described as Lancelot’s problematically ‘grievable’ status as both the best knight in the world and one of the most seriously flawed.

Just how the *Mort* addresses what can be commemorated is also potentially affected by questions of narrative authority. The Vulgate Cycle as a whole draws on the historiographic models of writers such as Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth, while combining these with elements more clearly derived from romance traditions (most notably Chrétien de Troyes).<sup>8</sup> The choice of prose rather than verse is significant in this regard: in the thirteenth century verse was preferred for self-consciously fictional narrative, whereas prose was more commonly used for historiographical, legal and religious works. The use of prose for the writing of fiction thus implies a claim on the part of the authors of such texts to the kind of authority associated with more supposedly serious, ‘truthful’ genres of writing.<sup>9</sup> However, if the *Mort* asserts its own authority as a true account of the last phase of Arthurian history, the evidence it cites seems more open to question than that in the *Queste*. As in the chronicle tradition, the *Mort* reports inscriptions of various kinds as a guarantee of its own authenticity, yet these inscriptions – in contrast to those of the

<sup>6</sup> This may be partly because of the fusion that occurs in this text of the romance tradition of adultery (inherited from Chrétien and the earlier branches of the Vulgate Cycle) with the pseudo-chronicle narrative of Arthur’s death (exemplified by Geoffrey, Wace and the *Didot Perceval*): Kennedy *et al.*, ‘Lancelot with and without the Grail’, pp. 311–12. On the organization of material around the character of Lancelot in the Vulgate Cycle as a whole, see E. Kennedy, ‘The Figure of Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Graal*’, in *Lancelot and Guenevere: A Casebook*, ed. L. J. Walters (New York, 1996), pp. 79–104.

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, ‘The Figure of Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Graal*’; S. Gaunt, *Retelling the Tale: An Introduction to Medieval French Literature* (London, 2001), pp. 81–92. On the revision of the meaning of Lancelot’s adventures more generally, see Kennedy, ‘The Re-writing and Re-reading of a Text: The Evolution of the Prose Lancelot’, in *The Changing Face of Arthurian Romance: Essays on Arthurian Prose Romances in Memory of Cedric E. Pickford*, ed. A. Adams, A. H. Diverres *et al.*, *Arthurian Studies* 16 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 1–9.

<sup>8</sup> R. Traschler, ‘A Question of Time: Romance and History’, in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. C. Dover (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 23–32; Kennedy, ‘The Narrative Techniques Used to Give Arthurian Romance a “Historical” Flavour’, in *Conjunctures: Medieval Studies in Honor of Douglas Kelly*, ed. K. Busby and N. J. Lacy (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 219–33.

<sup>9</sup> J. Kittay and W. Godzich, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis, 1987). On the Vulgate Cycle’s implication in this, see M. Griffin, *The Object and the Cause in the Vulgate Cycle* (London, 2005), pp. 5–7.

text that precedes it in the cycle – cannot be relied upon as prophecy. In the world of the *Mort* inscriptions are, more often than not, the work of human agents and consequently lack the unquestionable authority of prophetic discourse. Indeed, the resurfacing of prophetic inscription in the *Mort*'s conclusion, as Helen Solterer has argued, both underlines the fallibility of other inscriptions and reaffirms prophecy as the sole valid documentary instrument.<sup>10</sup> What we are confronted with in the *Mort* is thus a supposedly authoritative account citing documentary evidence that – especially when seen in comparison with the *Queste* – is neither definitive nor unassailable.

As this would suggest, related to the issue of textual authority in the *Mort* is the more general matter of meaning and the problematic relationship between signifier and signified in this romance. Elizabeth Edwards has shown how this view of signification is something that distinguishes the *Mort* from earlier texts in the cycle: whereas cyclic romance tends to hold signs and marvels as reliable bases for judgment and action, the *Mort* repeatedly demonstrates the unreliability of signs, which have no revelatory power beyond what interested parties make of them.<sup>11</sup> This crisis of signification operates within a complex time-frame, not only complicating the way in which interpretation and action are underwritten by signs, but also disrupting characters' ability to know and remember the past. Miranda Griffin's elegant analysis of funerary inscription in the Vulgate Cycle has further revealed how such questions of signification are intimately connected to temporality and causation as these are implicated in memorial discourse, showing how the mutability of Lancelot's tomb, in particular, unsettles the appearance of permanence and authority that masks the contingency of the symbolic.<sup>12</sup>

Commemoration and its discontents in the *Mort* are thus part of a much broader set of problems which are, in important respects, specific to this romance. Such problems often crystallize in the establishment of commemorative discourse in the *Mort* as a process that attempts authoritatively to interpret the relationship between the individual and the public sphere. On a diegetic level, decisions over what can or should be considered worthy of memory in the *Mort* are made largely through the various epitaphs in the text. However, contrary to what one might expect, memorial text in the *Mort* is, in many cases, self-consciously interventionist and non-celebratory: as Régine Colliot observes, the funerary inscriptions that appear in this work do not serve the traditional function of laying the

<sup>10</sup> H. Solterer, 'Conter le terme de cest brief: L'Inscription dans la *Mort le roi Artu*', in *Actes du 14e Congrès international arthurien, Rennes 16–21 août, 1984* (Rennes, 1985), pp. 558–66.

<sup>11</sup> E. Edwards, *The Genesis of Narrative in Malory's Morte Darthur*, *Arthurian Studies*, 43 (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 118–42. Cf. E. J. Burns, *Arthurian Fictions: Rereading the Vulgate Cycle* (Columbus, 1985), pp. 151–67.

<sup>12</sup> Griffin, *The Object and the Cause*, pp. 19–29.

dead to rest.<sup>13</sup> While medieval epitaphs conventionally serve as a basis for moral reflections that are largely non-specific and unchanging, their Arthurian equivalents are personalized and, in many cases, actively intervene in the world of the living. Partly as a result of this dynamic relationship with the world of the living, the permanence and authority of commemorative discourse as it is represented in the *Mort* is continually undermined. Two examples can be briefly used to illustrate this point: the episode of the poisoned fruit and Gauvain's epitaph.

In the poisoned fruit episode, a knight called Avarlan attempts to murder Gauvain by passing him poisoned fruit via the queen, but she instead gives it to Gaheris – with fatal consequences – and is subsequently accused of the latter's murder. The Round Table, by common assent, places an inscription on the dead knight's tomb that reads: 'Ici gist Gaheriz li Blans de Karaheu, li freres Mador de la Porte, que la reine fist morir par venim' ('Here lies Gaheris le Blanc de Karaheu, brother of Mador de la Porte, whom the queen caused to die by poison'; 63, 11–13). When Mador, the dead man's brother, arrives, he is convinced of Guenevere's guilt by the tomb itself. In a way that leaves unresolved the question of the queen's culpability, the Scottish knight whom Mador asks for information simply refers to the funerary inscription that bears witness to what has occurred ('il est einsi comme li escriz le tesmoigne'; 67, 39).<sup>14</sup> Thus, in this example, the epitaph interprets events while also acting as a narrative catalyst. At the same time, the inscription that emerges from this process is partial and problematic. What is suppressed in the writing on Gaheris' tomb is the issue of intentionality in the action that has been witnessed: though, on the one hand, this is an accurate record of what has happened, on the other, it conceals a more complicated reality in which the queen unintentionally murders a man who is not even the intended target of the poisoning.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as well as providing a record of what has been seen, the tomb stands as an ambiguous accusation of murder that selectively glosses what we, as readers, know to be a more complex reality; as such, the epitaph not only offers an account of recent events but also acts as a spur to future revenge. Instead of consigning the memory of characters and events to the past, funerary text here operates dynamically within the present and future of the romance, and this accompanies a slip-

<sup>13</sup> R. Colliot, 'Les épitaphes arthuriennes', in *La Mort le roi Artu*, ed. E. Baumgartner (Langres, 1994), pp.148–62. On the dynamism of epitaphs in the *Mort* see also Solterer, 'Conter le terme de cest brief', p. 561.

<sup>14</sup> This is mentioned by Griffin: *The Object and the Cause*, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> See Karen Pratt's discussion in her *La Mort le roi Artu* (London, 2004), pp. 72–3, and R. H. Bloch, 'From Grail Quest to Inquest: The Death of King Arthur and the Birth of France', *Modern Language Review* 69 (1974), 40–55. Sarah Kay points out that the text never really illuminates distinctions between intention, outcome and responsibility: 'Adultery and Killing in *La Mort le roi Artu*', in *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s*, ed. N. White and N. Segal (Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 34–44.

periness in the meaning of written memorial that relies on an awareness of that which it excludes as well as includes.

Gauvain's epitaph provides a complementary example insofar as it demonstrates the close relationship between commemorative discourse and the events that give rise to it, while also revealing how the perceived permanence and authority of such discourse may be undermined by the establishment of memorial text. As he is dying Gauvain requests to be buried with his brother Gaheriet and gives instructions for the inscription that is to be written on their tomb. Whereas Gaheriet's epitaph named Lancelot as Gaheriet's killer, Gauvain's modification of the inscription reflects a changed situation in which Gauvain repents of his conduct towards Lancelot and indicates his forgiveness of his former enemy (172, 24–32). Gauvain's instructions thus mark publicly a shift in private attitudes that have had and continue to have significance for the Arthurian kingdom. The original inscription, which reads 'Ci gist Gaheriet, li niés le roi Artu, que Lancelos del Lac ocist' ('Here lies Gaheriet, nephew of King Arthur, whom Lancelot du Lac killed'; 102, 20–21) becomes in Gauvain's reformulation 'Ci gist Gaheriet et Gauvains que Lancelos ocist par l'outrage Gauvain' ('Here lies Gaheriet and Gauvain, whom Lancelot du Lac killed through Gauvain's excess [also: sin/transgression]'; 172, 29–30). Hence, a text that initially stands as an accusation of murder ultimately performs the work of repentance. Gauvain's instructions expose the interpretative, mutable nature of funerary text even as they re-establish the relationship between historical circumstance and public memorial. Though on one level this is a demonstration of the importance of the epitaph as an authoritative comment on the events of the story, on another level Gauvain's modification of the previous inscription points to the potential gap between the realities of changing personal and historical circumstances and the memorial texts those circumstances generate.

Two significant features of epitaphs in the *Mort* are worth underlining. The first is the subjective nature of the meaning of epitaphs in the romance – a fact that undermines their permanence as the last word and that sits in tension with more public, historical modes of signification. The second is the fact that the epitaph participates in constructing a causality that is either suspect or subject to revision (or both). What interests me here is how this relates to the constitution of historical – or pseudo-historical – narrative in the *Mort*. For, as Griffin's work suggests, the epitaph may be ambiguously situated between subjective and historical, logical and chronological modes. This is perhaps even more the case for the epitaphs of the *Mort*, which so consciously dwell upon questions of causality and responsibility in accounting for an individual's death as well as providing a memorial for a particular character. Even when funerary inscription is subject to revision, it claims an authority that relies upon an illusion of historical permanence and fixity. What this article will explore is how the *Mort* presents the process of commemoration for interpretation as part

of its attempt to produce a definitive account of the end of the Arthurian world and to impose a paradoxical – even impossible – closure on the cycle it concludes.

*Sex, Sin and the Public Sphere*

In the first half of the *Mort*, epitaphs comment on what can or cannot be disclosed in a public setting. Often focusing on questions of guilt and responsibility for the killing of certain individuals, funerary texts also point indirectly to sexual misdemeanours that are not openly acknowledged and for which characters are often not held publicly accountable. Though by no means confined to the lovers, this most obviously concerns Lancelot and Guenevere, whose adulterous relationship is privately tolerated until their imprudent conduct makes it impossible to ignore. Agravain's pursuit of evidence of their crime is the result not only of Lancelot's relapse into sin after the quest but, more importantly, of his uncharacteristic folly in the way he conducts himself with regard to the queen (4, 1–18; 5, 1–4); this pattern is reproduced following the Demoiselle d'Escalot's death and Lancelot's rescue of Guenevere, when the lovers' reckless behaviour is noticed by Gauvain and his brothers (85, 32–9).<sup>16</sup> The repeated failure to acknowledge the fact of the couple's adultery is partly attributable to the lack of verifiable evidence from a third party. Whereas other supposed crimes in the *Mort* are witnessed publicly, Lancelot's and Guenevere's passion initially lacks such empirical proof.<sup>17</sup> As Arthur indicates after seeing Lancelot's depiction of his love affair with the queen in Morgane's castle, this proof is required if he is to admit their adultery as a certainty rather than a possibility: the lovers must be caught together before he will accept he has been treasonously shamed (53, 53–63).<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting in this regard the implicit distinction here between different types of written record. Lancelot's paintings and the text they accompany reveal his adultery in a form that lacks the public authority of the epitaph. Whereas funerary inscriptions act as public records of acts of third-party witness, Lancelot's graffiti have the status of independently unsubstantiated testimony. As such, Lancelot's paintings do not follow the model established through other documentary evidence in the *Mort* whereby acts of witness are translated into written form or, in the case of

<sup>16</sup> A. D. Zuurdeeg suggests that Lancelot's sin is indiscretion rather than adulterous love *per se*: *Narrative Techniques and their Effects in 'La Mort le Roi Artu'* (York, South Carolina, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> On the importance of visible action over intent in the system of feudal justice that seems to operate in the *Mort* see Bloch, 'From Grail Quest to Inquest'.

<sup>18</sup> It is on the basis that Guenevere has not been caught in the act that the pope insists that Arthur take her back (117, 6–16).

the Demoiselle d'Escalot's epitaph, whereby text is confirmed by other evidence that can be verified independently. This is perhaps why Arthur speaks of the need to confirm what appears to be self-evident from the text and images he sees. The problem here is not that text and reality fail to correspond (this possibility is in fact never ruled out by Arthur); rather, what Arthur points out is that if the images do represent true events, those events have not been independently witnessed.<sup>19</sup> The paintings in Morgane's castle thus do not amount to a *public* revelation of the lovers' adultery; they therefore require third-party verification before the truth they potentially contain can be openly admitted. What this signals is the fact that, unlike the epitaphs of the *Mort*, Lancelot's paintings cannot directly intervene in narrative events because they do not have the same relationship with the public sphere. In order to be prosecuted, the lovers' adultery must be dragged into the public domain; though they might accurately record events, the paintings in Morgane's castle have the status of private testimony and cannot therefore do this independently.

Lancelot's and Guenevere's adultery – like numerous other affairs in medieval romance – is therefore a crime that can only be acknowledged as such if it enters the public sphere through a combination of imprudent publicity on the part of the lovers themselves and third-party witness. Indeed, there seems to be an assumption on the part of characters in the *Mort* that disclosure of this kind would necessarily entail the condemnation of the lovers, though the principle of judging on the basis of ocular proof alone is challenged elsewhere in the romance's depiction of legal dispute.<sup>20</sup> Either way, for much of the first half of the *Mort*, the lovers' adultery remains unspeakable in a public setting, hovering dangerously on the threshold of the public sphere until it eventually – catastrophically – oversteps the mark.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that Lancelot and Guenevere's affair is publicly inadmissible results in a displacement reflected in funerary inscriptions. As Sarah Kay has observed, Lancelot and Guenevere are never openly tried for the crime of adultery in the *Mort*, but are instead subject to legal challenges that accuse them of wrongful killing. According to Kay, the accidental killings of Gaheris (by Guenevere) and Gaheriet (by Lancelot) function as a displacement and metaphor for adultery; as such, they also share impor-

<sup>19</sup> Though this would not contradict the argument that Arthur is often deluded and weak in the *Mort*, it would qualify the view that Arthur is simply refusing to see what should be self-evident in this episode. An example of this view can be found in D. MacRae, 'Appearances and Reality in *La Mort le Roi Artu*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 18 (1982), 266–77 (esp. pp. 268–70).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the poisoned fruit episode mentioned earlier.

<sup>21</sup> E. Jane Burns comments that it is the revelation of adultery rather than adultery itself that is decisive: it is the lovers' inability to conceal deviant actions with deviant speech that is eventually their undoing. Burns, *Arthurian Fictions*, pp. 151–4.

tant features with the couple's adulterous passion, notably the fact that these are deaths that occur outside social norms, as phenomena that are censured yet nonetheless widespread.<sup>22</sup> The inscriptions that mark each of these deaths are remarkably similar in form, naming initially the dead individual, then their kin (and presumed injured party), and concluding with the name of the killer:

Ici gist Gaheriz li Blans de Karaheu, li freres Mador de la Porte, que la reine fist morir par venim (63, 11–13)

(Here lies Gaheris le Blanc de Karaheu, brother of Mador de la Porte, whom the queen caused to die by poison)

Ci gist Gaheriet, li niés le roi Artu, que Lancelos del Lac ocist (102, 20–21)

(Here lies Gaheriet, nephew of King Arthur, whom Lancelot du Lac killed)

Both of these epitaphs thus attribute homicidal responsibility to the lovers, recording in a public setting events which have been witnessed publicly and which can therefore – unlike their adultery – be openly stated as fact.

Though the attribution of responsibility for unlawful killings to each of the lovers negatively frames the crime for which they cannot (yet) be publicly accused, they are by no means the only characters for whom accidental death is a metaphor for other kinds of sin. The connection between sin and manslaughter is in fact present from the very beginning of the romance in Gauvain's account of his misfortunes during the Grail quest, where he openly admits before Arthur and the court that he has killed eighteen other knights for his sins ('par mon pechié'; 3, 16–25). Arthur's final moments also involve the tragic accident where he unwittingly crushes Lucan to death in his embrace – a moment preserved for posterity in Lucan's epitaph (192, 1–24; 194, 20–21). The fact that this episode follows the revelations concerning Mordred's true parentage and his association with the snake in Arthur's dream (164, 5–15) suggests that, in a similar way to the displacement of the lovers' adultery by unlawful killing, Lucan's death figures indirectly the publicly unspeakable sexual misconduct of the king. The way funerary inscriptions reflect implicit connections between sin and guilt thus points to a more general ethical problem in the post-quest world regarding how sin can be acknowledged in a public forum and integrated into historical record. If death by misadventure is a figure for other kinds of error, this seems to be the case because there is a language to express it publicly; by contrast, sexual misdemeanour must remain publicly unspeakable for as long as possible, being perceived only indirectly, through the omissions and obfuscations of written public discourse.

<sup>22</sup> Kay, 'Adultery and Killing', pp. 34–41.

This is a matter with a bearing on one of the most significant epitaphs in the *Mort*, namely that of the Demoiselle d'Escalot, whose death is also attributed to Lancelot in this section of the story. Though revenge is not the motivation for identifying love of Lancelot as the cause of death on the Demoiselle d'Escalot's tomb, her epitaph brings about a significant shift in perspective that removes much of the doubt surrounding Lancelot's adulterous love of Guenevere. The letter found with the Demoiselle d'Escalot's body makes clear that she wishes not to right the wrong that caused her death, but instead to name and shame Lancelot, who she claims is both the best and the worst of men for failing to acknowledge and reciprocate her love (71, 8–23). Her epitaph – ‘Ici gist la damoisele d'Escalot qui por l'amor de Lancelot morut’ (‘Here lies the Demoiselle d'Escalot who died for the love of Lancelot’; 73, 8–9) – reflects this desire, while also leaving tantalizingly unclear whether she has died for her love of Lancelot or his love of Guenevere, the latter being something that cannot be openly admitted even if it is secretly known to many. In the event, the Demoiselle d'Escalot's death reveals for those who care to look for it precisely that which her epitaph stops short of declaring, as her demise removes the suspicion – on the part of Guenevere as well as Arthur's followers – concerning Lancelot's love of the queen.

The equivocal epitaph of the Demoiselle d'Escalot thus stops short of naming the reason for Lancelot's indifference, while also hinting at it for those already in the know. This tomb connects more explicitly than the other funerary inscriptions an accusation of killing with love and dereliction of duty. Moreover, unlike Gaheris' and Gaheriet's epitaphs, it does this without nominating an avenger of the injured party, allowing it to stand alone as a statement that cannot be altered by the course of time. Whereas other epitaphs provide categorical, yet morally neutral, records of events that leave a margin of doubt when it comes to the guilt of the named offender, the semantic ambiguity of the reference to ‘l'amor de Lancelot’ on the Demoiselle d'Escalot's tomb points instead to a shocking fact that is known but not yet definitively proven. In this reference to the open secret of Lancelot's love for the queen, the Demoiselle d'Escalot's epitaph condenses what other characters have already stated: that Lancelot's adultery can only be tolerated if it is kept under wraps and that the open acknowledgement of his adultery will result in disaster because it will entail admitting something that is publicly unspeakable. Unlike the epitaphs of Gaheris and Gaheriet, that of the Demoiselle d'Escalot goes further in pointing to the adultery of Lancelot and the queen while never openly declaring it. As such, the Demoiselle d'Escalot's tomb marks the limit of that which can be publicly avowed at this point in the text, while also anticipating – and furthering – the future breaching of that limit.

*Sin and Posterity*

Even though Lancelot's relationship with the queen is discovered in the second half of the romance, the Demoiselle d'Escalot's epitaph is possibly the closest one gets to a declaration of their adultery in funerary inscriptions. This is perhaps because the focus on this crime is not maintained in the latter part of the text. After Guenevere's return to Arthur – which is taken as proof that Lancelot does not love her adulterously despite any previous evidence to the contrary – the war between Lancelot and Arthur is prosecuted on the basis of revenge for the killing of Gauvain's brothers. Lancelot's illicit relations with Guenevere are then rapidly overshadowed by Mordred's passion for the queen and treasonous overthrow of the king. Yet the persistence of the silence in written memorial regarding Lancelot's adulterous passion even after its public revelation is also part of a more general problem in the *Mort*. If, in the first part of the romance, the omissions of Arthurian epitaphs mark the limits of what can be admitted publicly, in the second half they concern how such limits have an impact on that which can – or should – be commemorated. What the silences, modifications and juxtapositions of funerary inscription in the final sections of the *Mort* point towards is an issue with which the romance – as the last text in the Vulgate Cycle – is forced to wrestle: the question of the extent to which the lives of its flawed, sinning characters can be publicly mourned and, if so, how they are to be remembered.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, in this respect, Lancelot poses a particular problem. As others have indicated, partly because of its position in the cycle, the *Mort* treads a fine line between the celebration of Arthurian values and the questioning of those values.<sup>23</sup> With regard to Lancelot, the *Queste* presents the *Mort* with a fundamental difficulty: given the fact that Lancelot's prowess as well as his failings as a knight can be attributed to his adulterous passion for Guenevere, to what extent does he represent a chivalric ideal that can be celebrated publicly? It is as if the *Mort* attempts to dodge this question even on the level of form, by postponing Lancelot's death for as long as possible and, in the prologue, by singling out Arthur's demise, rather than Lancelot's, as the focus for the narrative to come.<sup>24</sup> The essential problem is that what is to be celebrated of Lancelot's life is largely the result of that for which he must

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Pratt, *La Mort le roi Artu*, esp. pp. 67–85.

<sup>24</sup> According to Frappier there are six variants of this title. There is even more variety in the *incipits* and *explicitis* of the manuscripts, yet, in those examined by Virginia Greene in her study of the *Mort*, Lancelot's death is never singled out alongside that of Arthur (though the end of the cycle about Lancelot may sometimes be mentioned). V. Greene, *Le Sujet et la mort dans la Mort Artu* (Saint-Genouph, 2002), pp. 61–2. Typical variants include: 'Ici fenist la mort du roy artu et des autres' or 'Ici fenist la mort du roy artu et des autres, et tout li romans de Lancelot'.

be criticized. As the Demoiselle d'Escalot's letter indicates, Lancelot's adulterous passion directly informs his reputation as both the best and the worst of men. Lancelot's love – as that which makes him both great and flawed – is that which, even as it cannot be publicly spoken and celebrated, makes his life worthy of remembrance and celebration. The issue of whether or not Lancelot's love can be incorporated into memorial text is thus connected to the extent to which his life can be regarded as what Butler terms 'publicly grievable life': a life that can be considered worthy of remembrance in a public setting. His adulterous passion marks the boundary of public discourse while, at the same time, guaranteeing him a place in the sphere of public commemoration as that which underwrites his exceptional qualities as a knight.

This uncertainty over Lancelot's exemplary status is echoed in his epitaph, which is unable unequivocally to confirm him as the best knight in the world, even as it insists on his exceptional qualities:

Ci gist li cors Galeholt, le segnor des Lointaignes Illes, et avec lui repose  
Lancelos del Lac qui fu li mieudres chevaliers qui onques entrast el roiaume  
de Logres, fors seulement Galaad son fill. (203, 14–19)

(Here lies the body of Galeholt, lord of the Distant Isles, and with him rests  
Lancelot du Lac, who was the best knight who ever entered the kingdom  
of Logres, with the sole exception of Galahad his son.)

Lancelot's epitaph thus reinstates him as the best knight in the world, while also ranking him beneath his son Galahad. The reason why Lancelot's status as best knight must be qualified is of course his adulterous affair, which is implicitly evoked here while never being openly declared.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, even as this adulterous relationship is traced between the lines of the inscription, the love between Galeholt and Lancelot is reaffirmed, possibly as an alternative to its less acceptable heterosexual correlative. As an individual who has died for love of Lancelot, Galeholt's inclusion in Lancelot's epitaph nonetheless stands as a reminder of the Demoiselle d'Escalot's similarly fatal attachment to Lancelot and, as such, potentially underlines the exclusion this tomb performs. Not only is Lancelot's adulterous love a regrettable (if publicly unmournable) failing that undermines his status as the best knight in the world, but it is also something that has indirectly caused others' deaths – though not, significantly, his own. As Simon Gaunt has argued, Lancelot's failure to die for love can be seen as part of a more general tendency in the *Prose Lancelot* not to

<sup>25</sup> On the place of Lancelot's desire in the interplay of difference and similarity between him and his son Galahad, see P. V. Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance in Medieval French Romance: Ceci n'est pas un graal* (New York, 1995), pp. 162–70. See also Griffin, *The Object and the Cause*, pp. 120–22.

idealize his adulterous affair.<sup>26</sup> This may provide a further explanation for the omission of any explicit mention of Lancelot's love on his tomb. Lancelot's epitaph in fact suggests he is doubly outdone: on the one hand, he is surpassed as a knight by Galahad because of his adulterous love for the queen while, on the other hand, he is trumped as a true lover by Galeholt – not to mention the Demoiselle d'Escalot – who is more plausible as a true martyr to love.

Although Lancelot is an obvious focus for the difficulties of commemoration in the *Mort*, this is nonetheless part of a larger problem concerning how and what to remember of the figures who inhabit the now terminally declining Arthurian world. Arthur's death, unlike those of many other principal characters, occurs outside the main narrative frame of the text and his anonymously authored epitaph in many respects reflects this absence:

Il [Girflet] trouva devant l'autel deus tombes moult beles et moult riches, mes l'une estoit assez plus bele et plus riche que l'autre. Desus la meins bele avoit letres qui disoient: 'Ci gist Lucans li Bouteilliers que li rois Artus esteinst desouz lui.' Desus la tombe qui tant estoit merveilleuse et riche avoit letres qui disoient: 'Ci gist li rois Artus qui par sa valeur mist en sa subjection .xii. roiaumes.' (194, 16–25)

(He [Girflet] found in front of the altar two tombs, both of which were very beautiful and rich, though one of them was much more beautiful and more rich than the other. On the less beautiful one there was writing that said: 'Here lies Lucan the Wine Steward, whom King Arthur crushed beneath him'. On the tomb that was so very marvellous and rich there was writing that said: 'Here lies King Arthur, who by his valour conquered twelve kingdoms'.)

Arthur's epitaph thus seems to break with the custom of indicating the manner and cause of death on other tombs in the *Mort*. In this respect, it conforms more closely to what we might think of as the more conventional funerary inscription, which serves both to honour and to remember the deceased. This is underlined by the fact that Arthur's tomb is seen by Girflet alongside that of Lucan, whose death and its causes are explicitly mentioned.

Yet, despite the fact that Arthur's tomb seems more able to commemorate its occupant than some of the others in the romance, Arthur's epitaph is implicitly qualified by that which sits beside it. Lucan's tomb is less impressive than Arthur's: this not only reflects Lucan's inferior social status but also establishes a hierarchical relationship between the tombs that determines which epitaph's information about Arthur appears the

<sup>26</sup> Simon Gaunt discusses Lancelot's curious immunity to dying for love in a chapter on Tristan, Lancelot and Cligès. See S. Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 104–37. See also his discussion of Galeholt on pp. 168–204.

more significant. Nevertheless, Lucan's tomb provides a glimpse of a less impressive side of the king's legacy and, as mentioned earlier, potentially connotes the unspeakable sin that leads to Mordred's conception. The comparatively minor incident is here memorialized next to the major achievement, pointing to the less than glorious, potentially sinful aspects of Arthur's reign that we are enjoined to overlook if we wish to remember him simply as a powerful and successful king. This episode thus suggests that an unqualified celebration of the dead in this final chapter of Arthurian history is only a partial possibility. The tragic glossing of Arthur's epitaph, like the qualification of Lancelot's funerary inscription, implies that the remembrance of greatness is only achieved at the expense of what one is prepared to forget. Yet, whereas public memorial usually enables such a process of forgetting to take place, this is not the case here. Though what is truly unspeakable in public discourse remains largely excluded from Lancelot's and Arthur's funerary inscriptions, its traces are nonetheless perceptible in the way such inscriptions are disrupted or framed in the text. Remembrance as it is associated with monuments such as these is thus constantly overshadowed by what it seeks to exclude.

Gauvain's tomb is a partial exception to this rule in that it openly mentions the flaw that brings about his own demise as well as that of numerous others. As mentioned earlier, Gauvain's epitaph is grafted onto that of his brother and substantially alters the inscription to which it is attached. Gaheriet's epitaph initially identifies Lancelot as his murderer, immortalizing Lancelot's guilt in a way that has implications for the narrative that follows: Gaheriet's death and Lancelot's responsibility for that death will later be used as a rationale for an ultimately catastrophic war by Gauvain in his desire to avenge his brother's murder. Yet Gauvain's death causes the original inscription to be altered. Knowing that he is mortally wounded after the battle with the Roman army (from an old wound received from Lancelot), Gauvain repents of his behaviour and gives instructions for his burial in which he requests that the inscription be changed (172, 24–32). Although Lancelot is still named as the knight who has slain the brothers, both deaths – and especially that of Gauvain – are attributed to Gauvain's *outrage*: the excess that has led him mercilessly to pursue Lancelot and to have a hand in endangering the kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

The uniqueness of Gauvain's epitaph comes more clearly into focus when its similarities to other funerary monuments are examined. Gauvain's tomb, like those of Arthur and Lancelot, commemorates him alongside other men and uses this juxtaposition to create a text with complex significance. Like Lancelot, Gauvain is one of the few characters to give explicit instructions as to how he is to be buried and, perhaps, more importantly, is

<sup>27</sup> As indicated earlier, *outrage* can also mean 'sin' or 'transgression'.

able to determine what is written on his tombstone. Interestingly, both men use their say in how they are buried and commemorated to reaffirm homosocial connections over the more problematic relations with women that have impeded their progress in the *Queste*. This is further underlined by the fact that each of these knights are intimately associated with a woman whose epitaph goes unrecorded: Guenevere's tomb is never mentioned and the Dame de Beloé – who dies for love of Gauvain – fades from the picture shortly after her partially misheard request for burial alongside him (174, 22–41). Yet, if both Gauvain's and Lancelot's epitaphs gloss over their sexual misdemeanours, Gauvain's is nonetheless able publicly to acknowledge sin as a part of how he is remembered on his tomb. This, indeed, seems to follow a pattern established at the very beginning of the work, where Gauvain tells Arthur that he has killed several of the king's knights on account of his *pechié* rather than through any chivalric superiority (3, 18–25).<sup>28</sup> In contrast to Gauvain's shameful admission, Lancelot's sin – which is mentioned immediately after this passage – remains undeclared (if not unperceived) until he is finally caught in the queen's chamber. As argued earlier, the publicly unspeakable nature of Lancelot's crime at the outset of the *Mort* translates into the way it haunts funerary texts. In parallel to this, the humility that Gauvain is able to demonstrate in the opening lines of the romance and the sin that he must acknowledge as something that qualifies his reputation are similarly implicit in the funerary inscription that marks his final resting place.

Thus, Lancelot, Arthur and Gauvain are all buried in tombs that exhibit the exclusions of commemorative discourse to varying degrees. Gauvain's epitaph, though it does not openly acknowledge the sin that has resulted in his failure on the quest, nonetheless contains an explicit acknowledgement of the failings that contributed to his downfall (and to that of others). In this respect, it is worth noting that if the Dame de Beloé's tomb – which is never described in the *Mort* – were executed according to the lady's wishes, it would stand in the cathedral as a further qualification of Gauvain's funerary inscription. Lancelot's epitaph similarly glosses over his sexual misdemeanour while more indirectly hinting at that which qualifies his standing as the best knight in the world. Though not physically adjacent to Lancelot's final resting place in the Joyeuse Garde, the Demoiselle d'Escalot's memorial stands as an ambiguous reminder of the reasons for the hierarchy established by Lancelot's epitaph – though one that comes rather closer than Lancelot's to stating the truth that lies behind this hierarchy. Finally, Arthur's tomb – though it bears one of the most unequivocally celebratory epitaphs of the romance – is nonetheless

<sup>28</sup> Griffin mentions the fact that it is difficult to separate sin and misfortune (*pechié* and *mescheance*) in this passage: *The Object and the Cause*, p. 45. See also Zuurdeeg, *Narrative Techniques and their Effects*, pp. 63–75, and K. Pratt, 'Aristotle, Augustine or Boethius? *La Mort le Roi Artu* as Tragedy', *Nottingham French Studies* 30 (1991), 81–109 (p. 98).

juxtaposed with another, less impressive funerary monument that implicitly qualifies its commemoration of his achievements.

Thus, the tombstone inscriptions in the *Mort* can offer only unstable foundations for memory. The layering of text in the *Mort* – through the partial glossing of events within written memorial, or the juxtapositions of later funerary inscriptions – means that commemoration is never quite able selectively to remember and conveniently to forget. The work of constitutive exclusion in funerary inscriptions is frequently undermined by the fact that the obfuscations or omissions of memorial texts are available for interpretation alongside that which is supposedly offered to posterity. The *Mort* thus represents the impossibility of establishing an unequivocal public discourse of mourning even as it lays bare the process of attempting to construct such a discourse. In this regard, the writing of memorial text in the *Mort* leaves open the possibility of a form of commemoration that remains haunted by its limitations and suppressions, leaving the work of memory at least partially open-ended.

This said, if epitaphs are involved on a diegetic level in setting the limits of that which can be publicly avowed, celebrated or mourned, it should be remembered that those limits are also established by what the book that reproduces them recounts in its turn. The illusion of totality associated with the *Mort* as the final text of the cycle and the last word on the characters whose demise it recounts is shored up by the fact that what is excluded from written public discourse is preserved by the work we are reading.<sup>29</sup> It is precisely the representation of the process of selection and omission which informs memorial text in the romance that gives this account of the Arthurian kingdom a ring of truth for readers who can therefore be reassured that they – unlike the characters in the work itself – have heard it all. The invitation that the *Mort*'s depiction of funerary inscription implicitly makes to its readers to participate in the reconstitution of an Arthurian past that seems unable – or unwilling – to speak with a single, unified voice might thus be seen as an attempt to construct precisely such a voice for the text that contains those inscriptions. If the epitaphs of the romance are only ever partial representations of what we know as readers of the text, the final line of the *Mort* suggests that it is considerably surer of its inclusiveness, confidently asserting that '[Gautiers Map] fenist ci son livre si outretement que après ce n'en porroit nus riens conter qui n'en mentist de toutes choses' ('Gautier Map here ends his book so absolutely that afterwards no one may recount anything that is not in every respect a lie'; 204, 10–13). The confidence of this statement is nonetheless troubled by the fact that the *Mort* is a text predicated on the undermining of

<sup>29</sup> This might be seen as part of a more general attitude to textual authority in the cycle. Paul Vincent Rockwell argues that in the Grail Cycle the *conte* adjudicates between conflicting versions of the past in a way that generates suspicion of existing historical accounts, thereby enabling it to supplant the authority of these sources. Rockwell, *Rewriting Resemblance*, pp. 187–228.

notions of narrative completion. As the continuation of the *Queste*, the *Mort* adds what might be considered a superfluous last word to something that has already been finished, suggesting that the story of the Grail quest which sought to conclude Arthurian history did not (and could not) do so. As a result, despite the *Mort*'s anxious claims to totality, the closure it offers is by no means assured. The adverb *outreement* neatly encapsulates this in that it translates as both 'excessively' and 'absolutely'.<sup>30</sup> The act of completing is thus also a moment of excess; it is both an arrival and a movement beyond something else. It is fitting that, in this respect at least, the *Mort* ultimately seems to agree with the logic of commemoration it represents for its readers; for, if the funerary inscriptions of the *Mort* teach us anything, it is that there is always something more to say.

<sup>30</sup> This suggestion of excessive movement is also present in the verb *outrer* (to surpass). See *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IX<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. F. Godefroy, 10 vols. (Paris, 1880–1902), V.2, 670–71.