Journal

Compassion, Care and Emotion in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

SOPHIE BANNISTER, School of English, University of Leeds
en14seb@leeds.ac.uk

The role of the 'carer' figure in Arthurian literature has only ever been briefly touched upon by critics. This article looks to rectify this, using two prominent literary texts as examples for its exploration. It will also consider emotion, specifically compassion, shown by characters who are placed in a situation where injury and care take over the narrative. This will enable a comparison of different attitudes towards detrimental injury and the care that such injury requires in literatures from different time periods.

Arguably, one of the most influential Arthurian literary texts from the fifteenth century is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. It has acted as a foundation for the work of many different Arthurian interpretations since its publication, right up to the present day. One of the authors influenced by Malory was Mark Twain; his novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, not only draws upon the stories Malory wrote, but also quotes large extracts of the book. However, Twain, writing in the nineteenth century, has a very different style of writing from the fifteenth-century Malory, and this difference, though both their books are based on the same set of stories, creates opposing 'takes' on the Arthurian legends. One of the most obvious differences is the way that compassion, care and emotion are portrayed by the authors. This portrayal affects the relationships between different characters in the books, and also between the reader and the stories themselves.

To develop ideas of care and compassion further, I want to incorporate aspects of disability studies, which I hope will shed new light on these texts. Focusing predominantly on the episode of 'The Last Battle', a pivotal point in both stories (though with further examples from other, highly prominent moments in the texts), I will consider the different approaches to compassion and care that Malory and Twain adopt, comparing how this affects the representations of characters in their texts, including changes in identity and kinships, and how the reader connects with and reacts to the characters. In order to do this effectively, I will consider these texts in light of Lennard J. Davis' introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*, entitled 'Normality, Power, and Culture', to argue that the moments in which the characters of these stories require care are actually necessary for narrative progression; moments of injury and temporary disability[1] create a different 'challenge' that needs to be 'overcome', and they also highlight any ulterior motives which the characters may have.

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[1] I have used the term 'temporary disability' to signify that this person is, at that specific point in the story, considered to be disabled, although they will regain their former strength and ability. I believe this is different to a character who has been injured but does not recover and subsequently dies.

Before we proceed to explore moments of compassion and care in these texts, we must consider how Malory and Twain perceived injury and temporary disability. The two authors are from entirely different time periods and so their concepts of 'disability' will depend upon the societal influences around them. Davis' essay is based on the idea that 'to understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body'.[2] It is a powerful consideration of how disability has functioned in literature over time, and provides us with a useful point of departure on which we can base the remainder of this essay. The two authors' views on the normal body are arguably divided by the industrial revolution; as Davis explains, before this time, physical or mental 'differences' were not seen as a barrier to work. When the industrial revolution came, the work it offered required an efficiency that employers decided only able-bodied people, who were sound of mind, could do. Those who could not carry out this work were deemed no longer 'useful' in society, and so 'the social process of disabling arrived with industrialization'. The definition of the word 'normal', used to describe people who physically and mentally conform to the expectations and standards of society, as calculated through scientifically calculated averages, was introduced in English around 1840.[3] This new, nineteenth-century concept of normalcy gave people a 'benchmark' to aspire to, with any deviation insinuating that they were flawed or unsatisfactory.[4]

It is this industrialisation that sculpts Twain's relationship with injury and temporary disability in his Arthurian novel, published in 1889. Hank, our metafictional narrator, is a nineteenth-century Yankee man who is accidentally transported into the world of King Arthur, where he convinces people that he has magical powers in order to take the socially prominent and highly influential place of Merlin. He has a position of great power and uses it to aspire to his own personal conception of normalcy, as defined by the industrial revolution occurring in his original, contemporary lifetime, and shown by his intention to change Arthur's medieval court into a nineteenth-century-style industrialised society. Davis claims that 'most characters in nineteenth-century novels are somewhat ordinary people who are put in abnormal circumstances,' and this is apparent in the text, as Hank is inexplicably transported from his present day back to the 'abnormal' (in regards to his definition of the 'normal') world of King Arthur. As a result, Hank subsequently attempts to enforce his ideas of normalcy onto this bizarre situation, yet struggles to normalise a society that works based on the ideal, a society which does not recognise a norm in terms of physicality or mentality.[5]

If we go on to consider injury and disability in *A Connecticut Yankee*, we can see that Hank is affected by scenes of injury and illness, attempting to 'normalise' these situations with explanations and interventions. One example of this is Sandy's potential mental illness, in which she sees a large group of pigs, and believes them to be the noble princesses she and Hank are rescuing. Hank desperately tries to see the logic in this belief; 'my land, the power of training! of influence! of education! It can bring a body up to believe anything. I had to put myself in Sandy's place to realize that she was not a lunatic'.[6] The reader may struggle to understand what he is explaining; have these medieval characters been taught to believe in these strange delusions? Would they all see these pigs as nobility? Twain makes it difficult to be sure, yet the primary function of this explanation is to normalise the situation for Hank himself.

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[2] Lennard J. Davis, 'Introduction: Normality, Power, and Culture' in *The Disabilities Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis, 4th edn, (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-14 (p. 1).
[3] Ibid., p. 1.
[4] Ibid., p. 3.
[5] Ibid, p. 9.

Davis explains that;

> When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants. This, as we have seen, is in contrast to societies with the concept of an ideal, in which all people have a non-ideal status.[7]

Hank's attempt to normalise Sandy is an attempt to avoid labelling her as 'deviant'; however, this is arguably the point at which Hank first realises that he will struggle to fully 'normalise' the people of Arthur's court, as they do not recognise what it means to adhere to a norm, as highlighted by the characters in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

In the fifteenth century, medieval society looked to an 'ideal', something that could not be attained by a human. As Davis explains, the ideal 'presents a mytho-poetic body that is linked to that of the gods […] This divine body, then, this ideal body, is not attainable by a human.'[8] Arthurian literature, including Malory's own work, frequently attempts to idealise chivalry and knighthood, yet simultaneously and consistently questions these ideals, presenting the many flaws of knights and knighthood to the reader. Elizabeth Archibald discusses in her essay 'Questioning Arthurian Ideals' how even the knights of the Round Table suffer from human flaws and, as a result, 'the Arthurian court is not always presented as glamorised or united, nor is Arthur always a dynamic, astute or effective monarch'.[9] To this end, no single knight of the Round Table can ever meet the 'ideal'; instead, their flaws are treated equally as barriers to success in their adventures.

As such, Lancelot is undone by his romance with Guinevere, which is just as much of a barrier to be overcome as his temporary disability in the 'Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere' episode. Once recovered from his debilitating injury, Lancelot is 'whole and sound', with little – if any – change from his condition before the injury.[10] He continues on as normal, seemingly unchanged by his near-death experience; however, Guinevere's anger creates a new, different challenge that Lancelot must overcome, in much the same way as the previous personal battle – with chivalric behaviour and patience. Therefore, injury, like any other battle that the knights face, is merely presented as something to overcome, and not something which can drastically affect the knight himself.

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[6] Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, ed. by Allison R. Ensor (London: Norton, 1982), pp. 104-05. All future references are to this edition and page numbers are placed between parentheses in the body of my essay.

[7] Davis, p. 3.

[8] Ibid., p. 2.

[9] Elizabeth Archibald, 'Questioning Arthurian Ideals' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp. 139-53 (p. 139).

[10] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. by Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 433. All future references are to this edition and page numbers are placed between parentheses in the body of my essay.

Malory's characters do react intensely to injury, yet without a norm or average to conform to, without a 'marker' to tell them they are deviating from their societal peers, it is a vastly different reaction to that shown by Twain's nineteenth-century-influenced characters. In Kenneth Hodges' essay 'Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*', we see that:

> Injuries [in Malory] are integral to masculinity as it is practiced and celebrated. Wounds not only provide meaning to knightly combats but also educate young knights. They also provide part of the basis for community, as knights errant bond with their healers or return to their companions and courts for healing […] the wounds are necessary for the narrative and part of the chivalric ideal of manhood.[11]

Thus, injury, at the time Malory was writing, was considered masculine, something to take pride in and, in some ways, something to aim towards in order to prove a knight's strength. As such, we see that injury and temporary disability was not necessarily a negative experience for Malory's characters.

Having distinguished between between Malory and Twain's concepts of disability and injury, we can now consider the representations of compassion and care that come as a result of temporary disability. Let us consider specifically *how* the two authors present the reader with different concepts of compassion and care, and how this subsequently affects the narrative. In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, compassion and care seem to be used mainly to gain a position of power over another character. In her essay, which considers ideas around the injured body in Malory, Catherine Batt observes that 'Malory appropriates the material to express the abstract…[he] uses the body as the focus for issues of integrity, and their full significance becomes apparent within this broader context'.[12] Here, we can view the body as a device used to highlight the (lack of) integrity of the carer by observing how injury and temporary disability are used to achieve power or control. If injury and temporary disability are treated simply as another challenge to overcome, caring for an injured person becomes a questionable way for the carer to 'defeat' a 'quest' and therefore achieve their own goals and desires. As such, injury is used in the narrative primarily as a way to try to gain – whether this gain is power, respect, or some physical object or person. There are many examples of this throughout Malory; we will consider three different, but prominent, situations of care.

When Lancelot is injured in 'Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere', he is cared for by the 'maiden Elaine [who] never went from Sir Lancelot, but watched him day and night, and did such attendance to him that the French book saith there was never woman did never more kindlier for man' (p. 427). Whilst Lancelot is determined to regain his health and fight in tournaments, Elaine seeks to gain Lancelot's love by placing herself in the role of carer. For her, like Lancelot himself, his temporary disability is something to be overcome in order to gain what she truly desires – marriage. However, throughout Malory, the

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[11] Kenneth Hodges, 'Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*', *Studies in Philology*, 1.106 (2009), 14-31 (p. 14).
[12] Catherine Batt, '"Hand for Hand" and "Body for Body": Aspects of Malory's Vocabulary of Identity and Integrity with Regard to Gareth and Lancelot', *Modern Philology*, 3.91 (1994), 269-87 (p. 270).

'central activity of the Arthurian world, romantic love, is presented as fatal.'[13] Elaine is not rewarded; Lancelot does not reciprocate her compassion and care, and though she 'never slept, ate, nor drank, and ever she made her complaint unto Sir Lancelot' (p. 433) he refuses to relinquish this power over him to his former carer, stating simply that 'I love not to be constrained to love; for love must only arise of the heart's self, and not by no constraint', and instead leaves her to die (p. 436). Although Elaine successfully cares for Lancelot, she is refused her reward, and instead suffers for her compassion and care.

Carers, their manipulation of the position of power they have acquired, and its effect on the narrative, are themes which are repeated throughout the *Morte Darthur*. In the 'Last Battle', the King cares for the mortally injured Gawain; 'he went unto him and so found him; and there the King made great sorrow out of measure and took Sir Gawain in his arms', before helping Gawain to write his letter to Lancelot (p. 508). Although he seems to be fulfilling the role of carer, Arthur actually gains a stronger control of the war through Gawain's death, as with that letter he can rely on a much-needed ally. Thus, Gawain's injury is ultimately in Arthur's favour, although it is not enough to save Arthur. Arguably, Gawain also stands to gain from his injury as he is 'rehabilitated by his repentant ending, acknowledging his responsibility', although it is only through death that he will reap any benefits.[14] In another example, at the end of the Last Battle, Arthur sustains a grievous head wound. Time is crucial; his carer Sir Bedivere is instructed to throw Excalibur into the lake and report what happens in an attempt to save Arthur's life. Bedivere fails in this instruction twice, finally throwing the sword into the lake on his third attempt, which proves too late to save Arthur's life. So what happens to allow this failure? Bedivere is taken by the sword's power and wishes to possess this power himself:

> [He] beheld that noble sword; and the pommel and the haft was all precious stones. And then he said to himself, 'If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss.' And then Sir Bedivere hid Excalibur under a tree (p. 514).

His inability to give up the glittering sword, and his attempt to gain the power that Arthur held as King, leads to Bedivere's failure as a carer; Arthur does not receive medical help in time and so dies.

As these examples highlight, being a carer in Malory's text is a position of power that can be exploited in order to gain power over the dependant. However, there are consequences to being one of Malory's carers, too, which do not emerge in the caring itself but in the compassion that pushes a character to take on the role of carer. For example, Elaine is not rewarded for her compassion towards Lancelot; instead, she is sentenced to a slow, fading death. She cannot take on the role of 'dependant' but remains a 'carer' even after her death, as it is this event that reunites Lancelot with Guinevere (p. 436). Compassion, therefore, is perceived as a dangerous emotion which can result in difficult consequences.

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[13] C. David Benson, 'The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*' in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), pp. 221-38 (p. 224).

[14] Barry Windeatt, 'The Fifteenth-Century Arthur' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 84-102 (p. 98).

On the other hand, a lack of compassion can also reap destruction and death, as shown by Gawain's lack of compassion towards Lancelot, who accidentally killed his brothers.

Compassion and care are presented differently in Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee* as a result of the different societal views on disability at the time of its publication. Hank plays the role of the ultimate carer as he tries to 'normalise' the technologically and intellectually 'disabled' medieval world around him; as such, many of the explorations into care in this novel focus on Hank and nineteenth-century thought. Hank views his circumstances as an opportunity to become the carer of a nation, exclaiming that Arthur's nation is the 'grandest field that ever was; and all my own; not a competitor; not a man who wasn't a baby to me in acquirements and capacities' (p. 40). Willingly, he takes on this role, which for him includes bringing the medieval world around him into the nineteenth century. However, he recognises that this task requires different forms of care for the different groups of people in the novel, in order to break old beliefs and habits rife throughout the kingdom. As such, Hank uses care and compassion in different ways when interacting with the nobility and the knights, and when caring for the peasants and slaves – a social group that is not fully explored or appreciated in Malory's work, yet plays a large role in Twain's novel.

First, let us consider Hank's care and compassion for the court. The downfall of Arthur and Hank comes after the latter temporarily removes his care from the knights, and they must suddenly fend for themselves in their new hybrid Arthurian/nineteenth-century world. Instead, he focuses on caring for his sick child and explains that 'in our deep solicitude we were unconscious of any world outside of [our child's] sick-room' (p. 234). Arguably, the 'Last Battle' in Twain's novel comes as a direct result of the removal of Hank's care, as he is unable to calm tensions, intervene or run the kingdom in Arthur's absence, leaving it to the traitor Mordred. Therefore, it seems that care in Twain is necessary to keep a nineteenth-century-style sense of order in the kingdom.

Twain's 'Last Battle' does not end with the deaths of Mordred and Arthur; the main battle in this tale is between Hank and the Church and is, in some ways, an internal battle for Hank, who is torn between the modernity of the nineteenth century and the life he has built for himself in the Arthurian court.[15] One way Twain presents the conflict between the two points in history is by presenting Hank as split on the care and compassion he shows to the peasantry and 'progressive' citizens who support his nineteenth-century enlightenment, and to the knights and nobility who do not. Mainly, as a result of this conflict, Hank 'cares' for the knights and aristocracy, which is shown by his attempts to 'go out and see if any help could be afforded the wounded [knights]' (p. 255), yet he does not show them any compassion whilst narrating the events of the battle:

> I shot the current through all the fences and struck the whole host dead in their tracks! *There* was a groan you could *hear*! It voiced the death-pang of eleven thousand men. It swelled out on the night with awful pathos (p. 255).

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[15] For more on Hank's internal conflict, see Henry Nash Smith, 'The Ideas in a Dream' in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, ed. by Allison R. Ensor (London: Norton, 1982), pp. 409-17.

As this extract shows, Hank demonstrates very little emotion when narrating the knights' demise, and little to no remorse. He uses words such as 'awful' and 'tragedy' during this narration which shows he recognises that his actions are terrible, yet he does not express a personal sadness or compassion for those he has killed.

Hank's compassion is, instead, reserved for his army of boys, for the peasants, whom he has devotedly trained; 'well equipped, well fortified, we number 54. Fifty-four what? Men? No, *minds* – the capablest in the world' (p. 251). There is a contradiction between the compassion he shows for his army of boys, and the fact that he allows them to die with him, trapped in Merlin's Cave. The only 'care' he shows them is through their training, which he conducts arguably more for his own personal care. Further, the strongest emotion Hank can muster during the episode is with respect to his own downfall, which he even fails to narrate himself, crying 'but how treacherous is fortune! In a little while – say an hour – happened a thing, by my own fault, which – but I have no heart to write that'; this emphasises how his own injury has affected him emotionally (p. 255). This event highlights exactly how much Hank, with his nineteenth-century ideals, perceives disability, even a temporary one, as a deviance from the normal body.

Besides the continual care and compassion he shows Sandy, whom he later goes on to marry, Hank strives repeatedly to separate compassion and care throughout the book. Take, for instance, the small-pox hut; there, he performs compassionate acts for the dying mother by listening to her sad story and making her comfortable before her death, yet Hank does not 'care' for her by providing her with medicine or food, or by nursing her in any way. His small attempts to revive her daughter are rebuked by the mother; she does not want his care, but prefers his compassion. Instead, Hank attempts to care for the King by trying to convince him to leave the infected hut. However, at many different points in the narrative Hank struggles to show compassion for him. When the King himself shows little compassion for the woman's sons, intending to send them back to the dungeons, Hank reveals his belief that a knight's compassion is limited, saying that Arthur's 'veins were full of ancestral blood that was rotten with this sort of unconscious brutality, brought down by inheritance from a long procession of hearts that had each done its share toward poisoning the stream' (p. 168). This goes some way to explaining Hank's lack of compassion toward the King but abundance of compassion for the slaves and peasantry, as Arthur himself is unable to fulfil this role of compassionate ruler to the poor.

Twain's King Arthur is not entirely compassionless; when he and Hank are captured as slaves, the King changes his view towards his slave population, agreeing to abolish slavery in his kingdom. Hank explains that he had 'asked years before and gotten such a sharp answer that I had not thought it prudent to meddle in the matter further…[this time] his answer was as sharp as before, but it was music' (p. 203). However, Hank still has little compassion for the King; the next moment Arthur is discussed is when the 'master', – the man who takes Arthur and Hank in order to sell them as slaves – offers him to a customer for free. Hank mockingly presents the King's reaction to this news, describing him as unable to 'get his breath, he was in such a fury. He began to choke and gag', which paints a comical picture of the regal Arthur. Here, though Arthur has previously been presented as capable of compassion for others, Hank still struggles to show sympathy for the aristocracy. This may be due to conclusions drawn in an earlier episode, when Sandy led him to rescue some 'princesses' that were, in fact, pigs, leading Hank to the 'vivid conclusion that the princesses (and by implication, all royalty and nobility) were hogs'.[16]

Twain mockingly takes the idea of the nobility lacking compassion from Malory. Through their portrayals of the King's non-compassionate nature (specifically towards the peasantry), we can see similarities between Twain's Arthur, who seeks to uphold the law of the land and therefore his own authority, and Malory's Arthur, who cares for others in order to gain power or control. Having said this, Twain's portrayal of the King is somewhat more complex; by allowing him to join in the adventures and 'quests' of Hank, who is not a noble, Twain allows his Arthur to grow as a person and later develop compassion for peasants and slaves in his kingdom. Here, we can see that Twain subverts the features of Arthurian literature in order to highlight problems of social injustices like slavery, that are ignored in earlier Arthurian texts such as Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

With this in mind, we can see that care and compassion are vital to plot progression in these Arthurian texts. Despite their different ideas surrounding disability, both of these texts use care and forms of compassion to add depth to their plot, and to propel the narrative forward; the uses of care and compassion discussed in this essay show them to be enabling rather than disabling features of the narrative. We can develop this further; David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's essay 'Narrative Prosthesis' focuses on the function of disability in literature as a narrative device that propels the story forward. They explain that '*narrative prosthesis* is meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.'[17] In our texts, there are very few instances where disability or injury is introduced into the narrative unaccompanied by a carer. These carers thus play a similar role to disability; we have seen how they use injury and temporary disability to gain power, disrupt the narrative, and provide insight into their hidden agendas.

Care and compassion counteract 'the body's unruly resistance to the cultural desire to "enforce normalcy"' by attempting to normalise the disabled body, typically for a personal, hidden intention.[18] As Catherine Batt explains, 'Malory's body imagery conveys something of the mystery of human motive and volition even as it serves as a powerful image of desired (and possible) integration and wholeness', and this, as we have seen, can be extended to other Arthurian authors, like Twain, who utilises the body to present conflict and a desperate attempt to grasp at a norm.[19] As such, we can see that care and compassion not only move the narrative forward, but also give the reader a deeper insight into the motives and personalities of the characters.

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16 Howard G. Baetzhold, 'The Composition of *A Connecticut Yankee*' in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, ed. by Allison R. Ensor (London: Norton, 1982), pp. 342-60 (pp. 346-47).
17 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, 'Narrative Prosthesis" in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis, 4th edn (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 222-35 (p. 224).
18 Ibid., p. 223.
19 Batt, p. 287.

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