

"Go forth from hence
Great Arthur, keeper of thy people's peace,
Go forth to right all wrong and guard all right,
In home and mart, in castle and in cot,
Meting the same to high and holy lot,
Go forth in name of God to build a realm,
Built up on chastity and noble deeds,
Where womanhood is gentle and austere,
And manhood strong in its great innocence.
Go, blessed of God and all thy fellow men,
Go in the strength of thy most high resolve,
Thou wondrous soul unto thy wondrous work,
The glory of the after days to be."

It is the wreck of this great state that constitutes the action of the play. Arthur goes forth from the hermit with mind all clear. Shortly afterwards, Merlin the wondrous magician and Arthur's patron, introduces the misshapen Mordred, of whose existence Arthur had not hitherto known. The king who loves best of all the manly beauty of Launcelot, revolts from the malformed youth who asks a father's love. Mordred, who up to this time was simply a soul full of mighty possibility, now begins to choose between the good and evil courses, and, egged on by Vivien whose love Arthur had scorned, falls into dark plots against the king—and steepes his soul in envy and ambition. Arthur, unable to bear his own thoughts, shrinks from the preparations for his approaching marriage, and sends Launcelot to bring the bride. Guinevere and Launcelot unwittingly fall in love themselves: thus fresh disaster settles in and waits the reckoning. For the rest the story is that which bards and troubadour sang in the dawn of literature, and which has attracted poets ever since. But the character of Mordred is a creation.

Merlin describes him in an appeal for Arthur's love

"But knowing further that a deeper feeling
That holdeth rule in every human heart
That knoweth greatness, would uppermost in
thee

Acknowledge of the fate of thy poor son
Who madeth not himself but bore thy sin
In outward simile in his whole life's being,
As Christ did bear men's sins upon the tree:

Who knowing all the ills that thou hadst done
him,
Still had sufficient sense of inward greatness
To love the father who begat him thus;
I feel if thou art that great Arthur dreamed
Of me this many years of toil and care
That I have worked to make thee what thou
art,

That knowing this son of thine, distorted, wry
Diminutive in outward human shape
And void of all those graces thou hast loved
To group about thy visions of thy court,
Hath such a soul within him like a jewel
In some enchanted casket, that were rare
In all the love and wisdom of this age,
That thou wouldst love him only all the more
For that poor wry, misshapen shell of his."

Arthur's reception of him is the crisis of Mordred's life. The father's love he craved denied him, short time is necessary for the stirrings of ambition.

I am persuaded much
To make a stir to remedy my wrongs,
And yet my loftier nature cries me no.
Oh! Mordred, what art thou, misshapen devil?
Thou wilt be sweet as Launcelot in the grave,
Though thou canst never smile on Guinevere,
Or, other star of brightness, stand by Arthur
Like lofty pine that girds the hills of snow.
Yea, I am half constrained to be a devil,
And take this mighty kingdom by the walls
And shake it till its deep foundations thunder.
There is no love for Mordred in these precincts;
Took he the lonely road to-morrow morn,
They'd cover his face and laugh the world along,
Unmindful of his setting.

The transition into an arch-conspirator is rapid, the success of the plotting is complete. Arthur goes to war with Launcelot, and Mordred proclaims himself King. Then having arrived at the goal of ambition he finds at last,

'Tis but a petty thing to be a king
And strut an hour to crown a people's will
And make them think they wield a Majesty,
And hold a phantom rule; then pass and be
A little dust in a forgotten heap.

We are not surprised when at the end this man who is as much Hamlet as he is Richard, has himself placed beside Arthur's dead body, there himself to die.

"Blame not Oh King
If thou somewhere may know what I here feel.
Thy poor misshapen Mordred. Blame him not
The turbulent, treacherous currents of his
blood