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### WHAT THE MODERN WORLD REMEMBERS ABOUT MEDIEVAL HEROISM: T. H. WHITE'S ILL-MADE KNIGHT<sup>1</sup>

### MODERN DÜNYANIN ORTA ÇAĞ KAHRAMANLIĞI HAKKINDA HATIRLADIĞI: T. H. WHITE'IN ILL-MADE KNIGHT

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#### ABSTRACT

Literature has always been regarded as a vehicle of memory since both oral and written products have reflected the cultural, social, and even historical background of communities. All literary works establish a bridge between past and present, which is significantly strengthened through the rewriting and adaptation of previous works in each epoch. In this regard, medieval heroes become figures who occupy a place in collective memory since they contribute to transferring of cultural heritage. This is exemplified in the Arthurian legends, which never go out of date. King Arthur and his Round Table Knights have become the ideal heroes in every period and symbols of national heroism. However, the stereotyped knights are recreated in a new adaptation to deconstruct the concept of the charming knight in the medieval memory. In the third book *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), of his collection *The Once and Future King* (1958), the English author Terence Hanbury White twists the perception of Lancelot, one of the best knights of Arthur and the suitor of Guenever. Unlike Chrétien de Troyes, the first poet to introduce Lancelot, White portrays Lancelot as an ugly and untalented knight. After Chrétien, in the Vulgate cycles and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485), Lancelot was overshadowed by Arthur. Yet he was still an attractive and skilful knight with whom Guenever fell in love; therefore, his fame grew because of the love triangle, and he became an essential figure of the Arthurian legends. Within this context, this paper aims to discuss how White deconstructs the understanding of the archetype of the irresistible knight while transmitting medieval chivalric code and knighthood, and to explore how medieval memory becomes part of contemporary communicative memory. Moreover, the criticism of totalitarian regimes by means of a medieval rewriting will be explored.

**Keywords:** *Lancelot, Rewriting, Medieval Memory, T.H. White, The Ill-Made Knight.*

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## ÖZET

Edebiyat her zaman bir hafıza aracı olarak değerlendirilmiştir, çünkü sözlü veya yazılı eserler toplumların kültürel, toplumsal hatta tarihsel geçmişlerini yansıtmaktadır. Tüm edebi eserler geçmiş ile şimdiki zaman arasında bir köprü kurmakta ve bu bağ, her çağda önceki eserlerin yeniden yazılması ve uyarlanmasıyla güçlendirilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Orta Çağ kahramanları kültürel mirasın aktarılmasına katkıda bulundukları için kolektif hafızada yer edinmiş figürler haline gelmişlerdir. Bu durum güncelliğini hiçbir zaman yitirmeyen Arthur efsaneleri ile örneklendirilebilir. Kral Arthur ve Yuvarlak Masa Şövalyeleri her dönemin ideal kahramanları ve ulusal kahramanlığın sembolleri haline gelmişlerdir. Ancak, Orta Çağ belleğindeki büyüleyici şövalye anlayışını yıkmak için basmakalıp şövalyeler yeni bir uyarlamayla yeniden yaratılmaktadır. İngiliz yazar T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (1958) koleksiyonunun üçüncü kitabı *The Ill-Made Knight*'ta, Arthur'un en iyi şövalyelerinden biri ve Guenever'in talibi olan Lancelot algısını değiştirmektedir. White, Lancelot'u ilk tanıtan şair Chrétien de Troyes'un aksine çirkin ve yeteneksiz bir şövalye olarak tasvir eder. Chrétien'den sonra, Vulgate serisinde ve Malory'nin *Morte d'Arthur* eserinde Lancelot, Arthur tarafından gölgede bırakılmış olsa da Guenever'in aşık olduğu çekici ve yetenekli bir şövalyeydi; bu nedenle, ünü bir aşk üçgeni ile büyümüş ve Arthur efsanelerinin temel bir figürü haline gelmiştir. Bu bağlamda, makale White'ın Orta Çağ şövalyelik kodunu ve şövalyeliğini aktarırken karşı konulamaz şövalye anlayışını nasıl yıktığını ve Orta Çağ belleğinin çağdaş iletişimsel belleğin bir parçası haline nasıl geldiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca çalışmada totaliter rejimlerin Orta Çağ yeniden yazımı ile eleştirilmesi incelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Lancelot, Yeniden Yazım, Orta Çağ Hafızası, T.H. White, The Ill-Made Knight.*

## Introduction

Rewriting or adaptation, a popular literary form in contemporary writing, provides new versions of many memorable figures, which contributes to the collective memory as well. In popular culture, medieval elements, especially invincible heroes, convey old customs and refresh the understanding of heroism. The ageless Arthurian legends, with various heroes and quests became the favourite of the contemporary authors dealing with medievalism. Sometimes, the stereotyped knights or kings are recreated in new adaptations. In his rewriting of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* under the title of *The Once and Future King* (1958), the English author T. H. White twists the perception of Lancelot, one of the best knights of Arthur, and the new hero who overshadows all Round Table knights, even Arthur himself. The nostalgic connection through the Arthurian legend offers a mirror to the modern audience since it reminds them what their society had once upon a time. In White's writing, Lancelot is an ugly man with weaknesses rather than a knight whom everyone admires. With such an anachronistic character, White rekindles and re-establishes the memory of the twentieth-century people who witnessed two world wars, unfair governments, and unstable regimes in the hands of greedy leaders. In this paper, I discuss how White deconstructs the understanding of an

irresistible knight through the third book of his collection, *The Ill-Made Knight*, and examine how medieval memory becomes part of contemporary memory. The paper aims to elaborate how medieval rewriting, serves to critique totalitarian regimes through a nostalgic theme.

The rewriting of medieval texts or inspiration coming from the unrealistic medieval legends became popular in the 19th century, and this movement is considered an expression of nostalgia. Since the British Victorian authors were not content with their own reality, they transferred those forgotten legends to the Victorian period and even to the 20th century through reminiscence, as “memory ... has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the ‘pastness’ of its objects and insists on their continuing presence” (Novick, 1999, p.4). The continuity of medievalism is part of the collective memory in the 19th century as a lost utopia. The Victorian authors’ nostalgia for the Middle Ages resulted from the social changes of the Victorian period. The same understanding is observed in the writing of 20th-century authors. It is obvious that T. H. White applies medieval contents for the same reason because he could not adapt to the changing world in the modern era; according to him, this change was “a sway from man to men” (qtd. in Manlove, 1977, p.71), which means the loss of individualism. White is against the new ideas that appeared with the coming of communism and socialism, these ideologies, for him, undermine imagination and individuality by proposing the idea of equality. White does not believe that everyone is born equal; therefore, he laments the loss of medieval values which strengthen the hierarchical order and chivalric principles. The nostalgic narratives influence the revival of traditional themes in texts, motivated by the authors’ desire for a specific past topos. The desires reflected in the texts could vary and include various feelings that stem from past experiences. As Volčič points out, “nostalgic visions establish an emotionally charged relationship between an individual and the past insofar as nostalgia complements rather than replaces memory” (2007, p. 25). Nostalgia, which is interpreted as an integral part of memory, recalls the past under the influence of contemporary feelings. In *The Once and Future King*, White reintroduces the chivalric stories, offering a reminder to modern people of the chivalric values, since contemporary societies have already lost many values, and totalitarian authorities destroy ‘purity.’

### **Remembering the Medieval Hero**

Medieval stories, reinterpreted or adapted in the contemporary literature, are generally products of nostalgia. However, some contemporary fictions could be regarded as neither nostalgic nor escapist. The application of memory in works including medieval elements or dealing with medieval stories could have different purposes. According to Cassidy-Welch, memory has two functions for medieval commentators, namely, to store and to recollect, and she explains these functions as follows:

In Latin terminology these functions were differentiated by word: *memoria* (the memory) is the word associated with the place where information is stored, and *reminiscentia* (the act of recollection) was often the word used to denote the act of retrieving and activating stored information. Following Aristotle, who thought that

two bodily systems – one centred in the heart and one in the brain – were the places where memory resided, medieval commentators outlined a neuropsychology of memory which linked the somatic spatial qualities of storage with the perceptive abstract qualities of recall. (2017, pp.624-625)

As is seen, medievalists use two functions of memory in their writing by both the usage of the stored information and refreshing that stored data. The stereotyped medieval figures and setting are definitely centred in the heart whereas modern reinterpretation of medieval stories serves to cognitive creation. Within this context, the rewriting of the chivalric stories evokes the local memory. White, thus, gives rise to the chivalric ideals of “a time blessed by moral standards and social hierarchy” (Ross, 1985, p.298). His quartet could be regarded as a refreshing reminder of what people have lost. However, he does not present a pure medieval legend. It is not simple nostalgia. The well-known stories of King Arthur merge with White's individual memory and reflect the suffering of the modern people as well. In *The Ill-Made Knight*, the author presents individual memory through the character of Lancelot to his readers. White has witnessed the wars since his childhood; for that reason, he is familiar with oppressed and insecure people who could not resist the authorities. Through his observation, White creates “the best knight in the world,” Lancelot, as ugly, sadistic, self-critical, and “human” (White, 2016, p.354; Ross, 1985, p.329). In the original medieval texts, Lancelot's only fault is to fall in love with his king's wife, yet, even in this situation, the understanding of courtly love, which is the sublime devotion to a lady and the romantic atmosphere of narratives, makes Lancelot naïve and amiable. For instance, in Malory's text, as a consequence of a love potion that made him unconscious, Lancelot lost his virginity, an important attribute of being the best knight in the world. However, White does not present such an innocent Lancelot. In *The Ill-Made Knight*, he betrays Guenever and breaks his promise because of drunkenness, a human weakness. This unheroic action -his loss of virginity- costs him the title of “the best knight in the world.” At the very beginning of the novel, Lancelot calls himself “The Chevalier Mai Fet”, which means “the ill-made knight” because of his ugliness. But now he becomes “The Chevalier Mai Fet” because of his mistakes, and he explains the meaning of that French phrase as “the Knight Who Has Done Wrong” (White, 2016, p.451). From now on, regardless of how successfully he carries out the quests, he will fail because he has done wrong to his King since he falls in love with his wife and has done wrong to God since he could not avoid the sins of lust, and pride.

White presents a ‘Lancelot’ that the previous authors who have dealt with him in their works could not recognise. In the medieval texts and other adaptations, Lancelot was usually idealised for his chivalric values and success. In spite of his forbidden love with Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur, and adultery with Elaine, the daughter of the Grail keeper, Lancelot was still the best knight of Arthur. White depicts the hero in a way that deconstructs nostalgic memory. Since the author is aware that Lancelot is different from how he is remembered, White emphasises that the previous authors having included him in their works could not recognise him:

Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites would have found it difficult to recognize this rather sullen and unsatisfactory child [Lancelot], with the ugly face, who did not disclose to anybody that he was living on dreams and prayers. They might have wondered what store of ferocity he had against himself, that could set him to break his own body so young. They might have wondered why he was so strange. (2016, p.349)

The best knight of the previous chivalric writing becomes a 'strange' knight that no one could recognise. Though Lancelot "was a knight with a medieval respect for honour" and it is emphasised that "he will do what he promised", he is depicted as a 'promise-breaker' because he does not go back to Elaine (2016, p.369). His wrongdoings are brought to the forefront, and Lancelot is now in the grip of Seven Deadly Sins. For that reason, he introduces himself as "The Chevalier Mai Fet." Lancelot's misdeeds are not only lust but also pride.

Before accepting his new title "the ill-made knight," he prefers to be known as 'the best knight of the Round Table.' To defend that title, Lancelot challenges his own son during the quest for the Holy Grail. He tries to be remembered for this title instead of his sins. For that reason, he sees Galahad as a rival. In the Grail quest, it is understood that Lancelot's son Galahad is now the best knight in the world since he finds the holy relic before all the other experienced knights. Nevertheless, he was raised in an isolated environment, he lacks manners. For that reason, he is disliked by the others because of his "inhumane" attitude (White, 2016, p.505). As a father who is responsible for his son's being raised far away from all chivalric manners, Lancelot tries to defend him 'for a while.' However, he could not accomplish being a 'true father' for Galahad's success as a knight does not make him glad. He reveals he has struggled during the quest, even against his son, by stating, "[Galahad] was a lovely person really. I spent a long time in a boat with him, and I know. But this did not mean that we always had to be offering each other the best seat in the boat" (White, 2016, p.506). His words demonstrate he is reluctant to give up his title even for the sake of his son. Through these "best" knights, White blots out the memory of a chivalric hero. Pride overshadows the chivalric codes, including courteous competition.

White does not give every detail on the Quest for the Holy Grail; he leads his readers to Malory because that quest is mainly the adventure of Galahad, not Lancelot. Yet White picks up Lancelot's adventures from Malory's text and recalls that spiritual journey, full of Christian motifs. Through the selective memory transaction, White reminds modern people of how wrongdoings and sins could be associated with punishment in Christian terms. In the story, when Lancelot, on his way, arrives at a crossroad which evokes the memory of the Crucifixion, he is reminded of his spiritual journey. As it is known, the cross is the symbol of Christianity, and such a crossroad reminds Christians and Lancelot that their Lord, Christ sacrificed his life. In the original story, that division on the road is used to refresh the memory of readers about how sinful they are and remind them of performing more good deeds. According to their belief, being a true Christian always offers an award either in this world or in heaven, whereas committing sins is punished. Thus, with references to the cross throughout the text, White



foreshadows that Lancelot is a sinner. White uses this detail in his rewriting, to emphasise the sins of Lancelot as a Christian. We see that the cross serves as a medium for transmitting memory through theology. The symbol of the Crucifixion reminds sacrifices and the sinful lives of people, including the 'magnificent' heroes who devote their lives to being a good Christian.

The phenomenon of memory is not only the topic of modern writing; even in the Middle Ages, philosophers dealt with this issue in terms of theological existence and intuitive cognition, which are considered requirements for individuality and knowledge. For instance, the 13th-century Scottish philosopher Duns Scotus recognizes memory as intuitive cognition. In Duns Scotus' view, the act of 'remembering' consists of several phases and sensible memory which is associated with a "remote object" can provoke the intellectual memory relying on a fact or a desire and additionally in need for intellectual intuition of a "proximate object." Duns Scotus reveals "if there is something in the mind that is the parent of a word [i.e., of an actual thought], it must be so through something that is internal or that exists in [intellective] memory" (2016, p.187). Scotus emphasises that people do not only remember things they have personally experienced; some particular objects and/or events can evoke certain historic events which have been transmitted through memory of family, society, or religion. When Lancelot sees the cross-like road, his realisation that he ignores the rules of God results from the transmission of theological memory in his society. In Christianity, the image of cross is associated with the Holy Trinity that reminds Christians that God is always watching over them. For that reason, he believes God has witnessed all his sins and feels certain that he will lose all his talents, because being a good Christian, which is demanded of all the knights of the Round Table, conflicts with his abilities.

In this story, the cross is object that reminds people of their sins, and with this recall, Lancelot's quest transforms into a religious journey in which he finds himself and God: "It is a measure of Lancelot's alienation from the worldly values of chivalry" (Ross, 1985, p.347). In the quest that he starts alone, he faces his own reality and recognises true Lancelot by stating, "I have all my life been in another sin, the worst of all. It was pride that made me try to be the best knight in the world. Pride made me show off and help the weaker party of the tournament" (White, 2016, p.511). This enlightenment becomes the beginning of his transformation, which leads him to choose an isolated life devoted to God. Yet even this enlightenment ends soon, and he goes back to Guenever. Lancelot's choice of Guenever instead of God demonstrates his earthly desires as a human being. This character is much more like a twentieth-century human than any other historical figure. He gives up the spiritual journey and chooses what he can attain easily and consume. Lancelot is far from being an ideal hero since he betrayed God and his King and friend Arthur; for that reason, he is the 'anti-hero' of the story and deserves punishment. The reader is familiar with the happy ending in such medieval romances, and they expect an end where the traitor is punished because "the reader feels no need to change as 'evil' has been vicariously defeated by the text's hero and the need for social change effaced by nostalgic recollection. This is a tenet of affirmative literature" (Baker,

2012, p.440). It could be wrong to state that Lancelot is the villain in the story. In almost all versions of the legend, he is depicted as the victim of love. Nevertheless, he is expected to be punished as we see that generally in both the original and many other versions, he “sacrifice[s] everything – his loyalty to Arthur, his honour, his reputation as a fighting man – for love of Guenevere” and for the adultery with Elaine and the knight dies before coming together with his beloved Guenever (Pearsall, 2003, pp.26-27). In Malory’s version, by which White was inspired, Lancelot regains his healing talent, but dies at the end; thus, the ‘pure and true love’ is not rewarded. However, White changes that tragic ending so that the story concludes with Lancelot’s miracle, where he regains his talent. Death is not the end for the hero. Therefore, the author challenges the nostalgic memory of readers and presents Lancelot as a flawed hero who could protect what he holds dear despite all his sins. The reason for this is rooted in the difference between the priorities of White’s version and original Lancelot. According to Pearsall, “the tragic division of loyalties – loyalty to his [Lancelot’s] lord and loyalty to Guenevere – is centred, and it is from this division that the downfall of the whole system directly proceeds (2003, p.103). White’s Lancelot does not devote himself to his lord and queen; in fact, he is in search of a miracle which is essential for being the best knight. In the novel, Lancelot states “I prayed to God that he would let me work a miracle. Only virgins can work miracles. I wanted to be the best knight in the world. I was ugly and lonely” (White, 2016, p.412). Since his childhood, he has assumed that his ugliness and loneliness would be atoned for. Even in the search for the Grail, Lancelot seeks a miracle, not loyalty to his lord.

T. H. White benefits from this well-known story to reflect on his critical view of contemporary politics. Like the fantasy authors William Morris and Naomi Mitchison, White uses his writing as a means of intellectual revolt against the rapidly changing world. In this regard, the Arthurian story serves as a socio-political critique. Through the treachery of Lancelot and Guenever, White emphasizes the degradation of morals.

Morals are difficult things to talk about, but what has happened is that we have *invented* a moral sense, which is *rotting now* that we can’t give it employment. And when a moral sense begins to rot it is worse than when you had none (2016, p 476).  
[my emphasis]

The author emphasises that initially, people developed “a moral sense” and now ignore it; as they do not struggle to improve that sense. It is a summary of contemporary politics. Many believed in the ideologies of the leaders, and when they pursued their own interests, the masses became too blind to prevent the rise of those leaders. His criticism targets new regimes and especially new understanding of democracy: “White’s version of Malory’s events is [...] made into a commentary on the politics of the 1930s, in which White’s hatred of popular democracy is inscribed in the narration” (Pearsall, 2003, p.150). For that reason, his concern was not only morals; in the 1930s, and 40s, the rise of the fascist regimes, especially the rise of Hitler, shaped his writing. White’s medieval rewriting is a way to reveal the author’s thoughts about politics. In his letter to David

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Garnett, the author reveals, by referring to his *Once and Future King*, that “My Death of Arthur is going to end up as a treatise on war,” and he points out that “I have written an epic about war, one of whose morals is that Hitler is the kind of chap one has to stop” (1968, p.80; 103). Therefore, White reminds modern people of how they could control any danger when they unite like the Round Table Knights who finally fight against Modred, the enemy of Arthur, to defend the Kingdom of Arthur and Camelot. White believes that “[t]he hungry wolf would always attack the fat reindeer, the poor man would rob the banker, the serf would make revolutions against the higher class, and the lack-penny nation would fight the rich” (2016, p. 698). This statement reveals the author’s view on the modern world. Without struggling or fighting, they do not reach what they deserve. The view is a result of the changing political dynamics. White targets all authorities without exception; in one of his letters, he highlights the authorities who are unable to see what he tries to demonstrate through his book:

I would like a splendid battle scene, as the epic [The Ill-Made Knight] is really a book on war, and how to prevent it. Also it is a book on the next peace. I think I shall have to send presentation copies to Roosevelt, Churchill, Ghandi and Chiang -Kaishek. I would, if I thought there was the least hope that they would read it. Also Stalin. But I supposé they are illiterate. (Garnett, 1968, p.93)

These leaders and many more have struggled for their policies, and they have aimed to create more democratic societies according to their ideologies. Thus, *The Ill-Made Knight* reminds the authorities that it is not easy to protect the peace following challenges. White witnessed World War I and began to compose his collection *The Once and Future King* just before World War II and finalised it after the war. Therefore, war is an influential theme in his work. Originally Arthurian legends were interpreted as propaganda for the Crusades and used to encourage people to fight. White deconstructs this aim of the legends by conveying an anti-war message. In the collection, Arthur tries to establish peace, by destroying a world without a central administration. Like the other authorities that White mentions in his letter, Arthur wants to put an end to the wrongs, using the Round Table to gather the best knights in the world. Nevertheless, the knights focus on the quests more than their ultimate goal and their positions. In fact, Arthur is aware that “If people reach perfection they vanish, you know. It may mean the end of the Table. Supposing somebody were to find God?” (White, 2016, p.476). Bors, Galahad, and Percival disappear in search of the Grail; they forget that they are at Arthur’s service. Even Lancelot, the best knight, is engrossed in his quest, causing him to avoid Guenever and ignores the purpose of the Round Table. With all these knights, White refreshes the memory of the reader and emphasizes that protecting one's position is not peculiar to medieval heroes. It is obvious that some leaders could fail to remember their true responsibilities. They could not accept and reconcile the sins they committed as well as Lancelot could.



## Conclusion

Through *The Ill-Made Knight*, especially via the character Lancelot, the author communicates with the contemporary reader indirectly. A knight who is already enshrined in the collective memory as the best and most romantic knight becomes an insecure and self-critical character, like the people who lost their values after all the wars and transformation of the society. T. H. White depicts a human who is concerned with his position more than the mission he needs to accomplish. In this version, Lancelot is not an unreachable chivalric hero any longer. Lancelot is just a person who falls in love with the wrong person, who makes mistakes, and who can change easily. Yet he is also like the authorities who do not relinquish their positions despite all their mistakes. White, by benefiting from memory, deconstructs the chivalric attitude of a knight, placing him in the medieval world as an unsuccessful hero who could also challenge his own son. Therefore, the author portrays the contemporary leaders in the unsettled political world through a lament for the medieval chivalric values. The novel reminds us that without struggle no one could live under equal and democratic circumstances because the status or pride that arises from success can destroy all values.

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