

## Project Narrative Podcast Episode 6 Transcript

### **Karen Winstead** 00:10

Arthur can't do anything but sputter, I mean, it's a kind of silly moment. And I think we can almost see a violence that is bleeding into a slapstick, you know, you wanted to behead me? Well, I'm going to behead you, lop off with a head. So, there's just something that, that is faintly ridiculous there, that is at odds with some of the more serious political undercurrents in this episode.

### **Jim Phelan** 00:56

Good afternoon. This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University. And I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative, or two, to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Karen Winstead, who has selected two excerpts from Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, how Arthur was born, and Balin, the knight with the two swords. Karen will give us more context for these excerpts before she reads them. After Karen reads the first excerpt about Arthur's birth, she and I will discuss it. Then she'll read the second excerpt about Balin, and we'll discuss that, doing some comparing and contrasting of it with the story of author's birth. Karen Winstead is professor of English, and a core faculty member of Project Narrative at Ohio State University. Karen's research interests include medieval literature and popular culture, life-writing, gender and sexuality studies, medievalism and Arthuriana. Karen is the author of four monographs: *The Oxford History of Life-Writing, Volume One: The Middle Ages*, *John Capgrave's Fifteenth Century*, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, and *Fifteenth-Century Lives: Writing Sainthood in Medieval England\**. Karen has also written essays on Geoffrey Chaucer, Margery Kempe, and on appropriations of the Middle Ages in film and contemporary novels. Karen is also a distinguished teacher, who offers courses on subjects ranging from medieval literature to contemporary film and popular culture, including courses on monsters, and on vampires. Karen is a repeat winner of teaching awards given by both undergraduate and graduate students. She's twice been selected as the winner of the English Undergraduate Organization's Professor of the Year Award and has twice won the English Graduate Organization's Professor of the Year award. So, Karen, could you tell us why you chose Malory, especially these excerpts to read and discuss for today's podcast?

### **Karen Winstead** 03:14

Well, Malory is one of my all-time favorite works. His *Morte d'Arthur* was composed in the late 15th century in Middle English. It's a massive work. In the excellent translation by Dorsey Armstrong that I'll be reading from, it runs to 636 pages. And I think what is particularly attractive about reading from the *Morte d'Arthur*, is that it's a work that was certainly consumed orally. So, its most likely reception was not somebody sitting by themselves reading silently, but rather somebody reading aloud to companions. And in that process of reading aloud, people would discuss, the text would be performed, perhaps altered through performance, and so that seemed to be an ideal text for us to be reading and discussing here. We'll be replicating some of the original conditions of production.

### **Jim Phelan** 04:21

Yeah, okay. I don't know if I can stand in for the original audience, but I'll do my best. So, is there anything else you'd like our listeners to know before you begin reading the first excerpt?

**Karen Winstead 04:33**

I think one of the things that ties these extracts together, and one of the things that attracts me most to Malory, is what I call his “poetics of ambiguation,” and narratologically, this is very interesting. He does not resort to an omniscient narrator who tells the reader, you know, what the motivations are for why characters are behaving as they should. And this is what many of the original authors of the stories he's retelling did do. But instead, when you listen to Malory's stories, you have to figure out why characters are doing what they're doing, by examining, you know, what they do, what they say about what they do, what other people deduce about what they're doing. And I think Malory has this incredible respect for the complexity of the human mind. And we don't really know what's happening with these characters any more than in real life we know what's really happening with the people that we are interacting with. And so, it's that element that intrigues me and I hope we'll get to talk about a little

**Jim Phelan 05:50**

Okay, terrific. So now here's Karen Winstead reading how Arthur was born, from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

**Karen Winstead 05:59**

“It came to pass in the days of Uther Pendragon, when he was king and ruled over all England, that there was a mighty Duke in Cornwall, who had opposed him for a long time. He was called the Duke of Tintagel. Uther summoned this duke to his court, ordering him to bring his wife with him. She was a beautiful woman, and very wise, and her name was Igraine. So, when the duke and his wife came into the king's court, several great lords mediated an accord between them and Uther. The king liked and loved this lady greatly, and he entertained them both lavishly. He desired to lie by her, but she was a passing good woman, and would not assent to the king's advances. She told the duke, her husband, this, and said, I suppose that we were sent for by the king so that I should be dishonored. Wherefore husband, I counsel that we depart from here quickly and ride all night until we come to our own castle. And just as she suggested, they departed, so that neither the king nor any of his counsel were aware of their departure. As soon as King Uther knew of their sudden departure, he was exceedingly angry. He called to him his privy council and told them of the sudden departure of the duke and his wife, then they advised the king to send an order to the duke and his wife to return; and if he will not come at your summons, then you may do whatever you like. You will have just cause to make war against him. So that was done, and the messengers had their answer, and that was this; that neither the duke nor his wife would come to him. Then the king was wondrously angry and sent the duke a brisk message back. He bid him be ready and provision himself, for within 40 days he would fetch him out of the biggest castle he had. When the duke received this warning, he immediately went and supplied two of his strong castles. One of these was called Tintagel, and the other was called Terrabil. He put his wife Dame Igraine in the castle of Tintagel, and positioned himself in the castle of Terrabil, which had many exits and posterns. Uther came in all haste with a great military host and laid siege to the castle of Terrabil, and there set up many tents and pavilions. Both sides fought fiercely, and many people were slain. Then, due to this great anger at the duke and to his great love for the fair Igraine, King Uther became sick. Sir Ulfius, a noble knight, came to King Uther and asked him why he was sick. I shall tell

you, said the King, I am so sick for great anger and for love of the fair Igraine, that I am unable to be well. Well, my lord, said Sir Ulfius, I will seek out Merlin. He shall provide you with a remedy that will please your heart. So Ulfius departed and by chance he met Merlin disguised in beggar's clothes. Merlin asked Ulfius whom he sought, and Ulfius replied he had little cause to tell him. Well, said Merlin, I know whom you seek, for you seek Merlin; therefore, seek no further for I am he, and if King Uther will well reward me and promised grant my desire, then it shall be more for his honor and profit than for mine, for I shall cause him to have everything he desires. I shall try to arrange it so, said Ulfius, so long as your request is reasonable, you shall have your desire. Well, said Merlin, he shall have his intent and desire, therefore ride on your way and I shall not be far behind. Then Ulfius was glad and rode on for a while until he came to King Uther Pendragon and told him how he met Merlin. Where is he? Sir, said sir Ulfius, he will not be long. Then Ulfius was aware that Merlin was standing on the porch at the door of the pavilion intending to come in to the king. When King Uther saw him, he said he was welcome. Sir, said Merlin, I know every part of your heart. If you will be sworn unto me as you are true king anointed to fulfill my desire, you shall have your desire. Then the king was sworn upon the Four Evangelists. Sir, said Merlin, this is my desire: the first night that you lay with Igraine, you will conceive a child on her, and when it is born, you shall deliver it to me to raise wherever I please. It shall be greater worship for you and better for the child because of the great importance of this child. I will agree, said the king, to allow things to be done as you wish. Now make you ready, said Merlin, this night you will lie with Igraine in the castle of Tintagel. You shall look like the duke, her husband, Ulfius will look like Sir Brastias, one of the duke's knights, I will look like a knight called Sir Jordanus, another of the duke's knights. But be careful that you do not ask questions or speak with her other men, rather say that you are sick, and so, her you to bed and do not arise until morning until I come to you, for the castle of Tintagel is just 10 miles from here. This was done as Merlin had devised. But the duke of Tintagel saw how the king rode away from the siege of Terrabil, and therefore, that night he came out of the castle at a postern to attack the king's army, and through his actions, the duke was slain before the king arrived at the castle of Tintagel. So, King Uther lay with Igraine more than three hours after the death of the duke, and conceived Arthur on her that night. Before daybreak, Merlin came to the king and ordered him to get ready. So, Uther kissed the lady Igraine and departed hastily. When the lady heard the news concerning her husband, that by all accounts he was dead before King Uther came to her, she marveled at who it might have been who had lain by her in the likeness of her lord, but she mourned secretly and kept her peace. Then all the barons got together and urged the king to make an accord between himself and the lady Igraine. The king agreed to this, for certainly he wished to be accorded with her, and designated Ulfius to act as mediator between them. So, by a negotiation, she and the king at last met together. Now it will be well for us, said Ulfius, our king is a lusty knight and wifeless, and my lady Igraine is a passing fair lady. It would be great joy to us if it should please the king to make her his queen. They were all in accord and urged the king to agree. Then, like a lusty knight, the king assented with goodwill. So they were very quickly married on a morning with great mirth and joy. Then queen Igraine daily grew larger and larger. And it happened that within half a year as King Uther lay by his queen, that he asked her by the faith she owed him, whose was the child within her body. She was too embarrassed to give him an answer. Do not be dismayed, said the king, but tell me the truth, and I shall give you all the better by the faith of my body. Sire, she said, I shall tell you the truth. The same night that my lord died at the very hour of his death, as his knight's claim, there came to the castle of Tintagel a man like my lord in speech and appearance, and with him were two knights who looked like his two knights, Brastias and Jordanus. So I went to bed with him as I ought to do with

my husband, and the same night as I will swear before God, this child was begotten upon me. That is the truth said the king, just as you say; for it was I myself that came in the likeness of your husband. So it dismay you not, for I am the father of your child. Then he told her how Merlin had arranged it by his counsel. And the Queen made great joy when she knew who was the father of her child.”

**Jim Phelan 14:35**

Okay, great. So, Malory packs a lot into that. Oh he does. Right. And I think what you were saying before the reading about, you know, the way the narration is handled, right, we're not getting interior views, we're not getting motivations, we're getting external action, and we're getting dialogue. Right. and as you were saying, I think that sort of invites the audience to do a lot of inferencing about motivation and these kinds of things. So maybe we could start to talk a little about that combination of, you know, narration, reporting of action, dialogue, and readerly inferencing in relationship to characters. Right, so, you know, one that stands out and one we might start with then is Igraine, right. What seemed to be her motivations here, and how, you know, how do we think about some of the decisions she makes?

**Karen Winstead 15:43**

Well, you know, she's a really interesting character, and this story was told a couple of times before Malory had it, and the first time we knew nothing about her. It was a story of two men, who were at odds with each other, and the duke was concerned that he would be dishonored. And in the other, it was a story of a woman who loved her husband and did not want to sleep with somebody else because she was devoted to the man that she was married. And Malory gives us something very, very different. And from the beginning, this is Igraine's story, and she is the one that will not assent to Uther, and she goes to her husband, and she says, you know, I think we need to get out of here because I feel that we have been brought here so that I would be dishonored. So, it's her honor that we're concerned with. And

**Jim Phelan 16:34**

But she's the agent that gets them away, right. Yes, exactly. She perceived it, like, the Duke is like, secondary.

**Karen Winstead 16:39**

Yeah, exactly. We don't know whether he noticed it at all, whether he cared, whether he was flattered, whether he would have been fine if his wife slept with the king. We don't know anything about him. Yeah, he is just really out of the story, except as, in his function as her husband. And it's all about her, and she does not want to be dishonored. And so, she is the one that says, we need to get out of here, and so, we get out of here. And she was from the beginning, very important, because the king needed to make peace with the duke *and her*, so she was always an agent in here and she was, you know, and she and he, the duke, were partners in this marriage and not a lord and his subordinate. And so, we don't know what her feelings for her husband are, we don't know whether she loves him too, but we do know about her concern for honor. Yes. And I think

**Jim Phelan 17:38**

Yeah, I mean, right away, I mean, he bought us here to dishonor me, right. Yeah.

**Karen Winstead 17:43**

Yeah, it's all about me. And I think that, then, her character doesn't really come into focus until the very end, that last sentence that I read, where Igraine is happy when she finds out. Because then, you know, I might, and many other people might be just absolutely appalled at the thought that they were deceived in that way, or that the murderer of her husband had slept with her in this way, somebody that she had repudiated early. But she doesn't respond to that. Right. We're told that she was happy. And that for me is an aha moment. All of a sudden, I understand Igraine. She is somebody who is concerned with *her honor*, she doesn't particularly care about these guys, but it's about her, it's about her honor, and she makes sense as a character, you know. I get her when I read, and then she was happy.

**Jim Phelan 18:52**

Yeah. Yeah, I guess the other thing too is her consenting to the marriage with Uther right after this, right, and I mean, we get this Ulfius, you know, uses the phrase about Uther being a lusty knight, and the narrator repeats that I think, but then, you know, they were quickly married with great mirth and joy. And so, there's no objection there, but we don't really get a strong sense of Igraine's reaction there.

**Karen Winstead 19:27**

No, we don't get a sense that she was torn apart by the death of her husband, that she particularly mourned him. She might not have liked him, you know, that's perfectly consistent with the narrative that they had a partnership, but she might have found him rather distasteful. She might have been, you know, had she not been married, she might have been perfectly happy to sleep with the king, we don't know any of that, or to sleep with Uther, we don't know any of that. Until again, the very end suggests that, you know, she is a woman who just is not particularly emotional about her marriage.

**Jim Phelan 20:06**

Yeah, yeah. All right, well, let's keep that in mind and come back to maybe some of the other characters. So, what about Uther here? How do you make sense of him? You know, throughout.

**Karen Winstead 20:22**

We don't really know a whole lot about Uther, except that he is incapacitated by his love for Igraine, which I think the readers of Malory would not have considered a particularly good sign in a king, you know, for somebody to be completely incapacitated, to be so bent out of shape that he can't really function without bedding this woman.

**Jim Phelan 20:56**

Right, and you just used the word love, I mean, do you think it's love or lust or desire? Or, you know, what's, you know, what are we invited to infer about, you know, the nature of his incapacity, the cause of his incapacity.

**Karen Winstead 21:12**

I think, love blends into lust in these medieval texts just as they do in in modern texts, you know, you talk about people who are, oh I'm dying for your love in pop songs and things like that, and oh, what do they mean love? Nobody takes that seriously, it's just a convention. But there, I mean, there was deep

affection and love between spouses in the Middle Ages. But what Uther is talking about would not have been recognized, I think, then or now, as this deep profound attachment, it's really something more akin to desire. Yeah.

**Jim Phelan 21:55**

Yeah. Right. And then I think in comparing Uther and Igraine, sort of on the, sort of variable of agency, right, we talked about the great agency that Igraine takes, but Uther seems to be more like, he says to Ulfius you know, I'm sick and so on. And then it's Ulfius and Merlin really who, you know, arrange everything. Right. So, you know, what about that? And what are we seeing Malory thematizing something about Uther's kingship, or?

**Karen Winstead 22:30**

Oh, I think so. Yeah. Yeah. And I think, you know, we don't know a whole lot about Malory. He was a knight; he was in the service of great lords. And I think you can certainly see maybe a commentary on how great lords and princes work, you know, that they have their desires, and other people figure out how to fulfill those desires. And sometimes that's not very easy to do, and sometimes that's inconvenient, and sometimes these great lords, you know, they are behaving in very ill-judged ways. But somehow, it's the people like Ulfius and to a lesser extent, Merlin, who's always kind of a wild card in Malory's text, but they have to figure out how to deal with these lords.

**Jim Phelan 23:18**

Right. Right. And so, they come up with a plan. And, you know, there's a way in which, you know, Merlin becomes really interesting to me anyway because of, he nearly devises the plan, right? But he seems to have the power to, you know, control the conceptions and also that he participates, right. I mean, this schema that he comes up with, I mean, you know, it's thinking about *Harry Potter* and polyjuice potion. Right, it's like they drink the polyjuice potion, and they pretend to be these other people. There's no particular reason why Merlin has to be there. Right, I mean, but he puts himself there, right.

**Karen Winstead 24:04**

Yeah, and Merlin in Malory is a very dark and ambiguous character. And we don't exactly know what his motives are, we don't exactly know whether he is an agent of, you know, Providence, or of mischief. And in this way, Malory again ambiguates his sources which present Merlin very much as an agent of God, who is God's agent in working out the divine plan through human history. And there's none of that in Malory, I mean Merlin is ambiguous, the deity is you know, who knows. But Malory is not willing to, is not willing at all, to suggest that Apennine deity is directing and guiding human behavior.

**Jim Phelan 24:58**

Yeah, yeah. Okay. Yeah. So that's really, I think, powerful in the sense of how Malory is changing the source material and sort of giving it his own particular vision. There's two other things I want to get to touch on here and then we'll move on to the to the next one. So, the first of the two is sort of this kind of casual matter of fact way in which deaths gets reported, right? There's a lot of violence and killing in this very short tale, but it's, that's like, this is part of the condition it seems of living at this time with, you know, knights and dukes and kings and stuff.

**Karen Winstead 25:45**

Yeah, and violence in the *Morte d'Arthur* is, you know, quite varied. And here you get a detached matter of fact reporting of the violence, elsewhere you get the same detached reporting of violence that's so over the top that it almost seems to be slapstick or parody. So, there's a range of how this is done. And I want to, I do want to say that this is not an indication of medieval sensibility or anything like that, because medieval people were not just inured to the horrors of war, and indeed you see plenty of evidence that you have trauma that was induced by the kinds of acts of violence just as it's induced by acts of violence today, but yeah, I mean this is, Malory is just this happened, this happened, this happened, this happened, and he is very hands off.

**Jim Phelan 26:48**

Yeah, okay, interesting. And then the other question is, what do we make of this as sort of the, you know, birth story for Arthur right? How might this information, this narrative about how Arthur came to be sort of influence our understanding of Arthur's identity and you know, who he is, what he's inheriting, etc?

**Karen Winstead 27:14**

Well, I think that for Malory and for others who wrote Arthur's story, Arthur was an ambiguous figure. I mean, our ideal of a paragon of a king was not shared by everybody in the Middle Ages. And for Malory, Arthur is very much a mixed bag. He is, in certain respects, a very poor king, and I think Malory used the figure of Arthur to explore what makes a good king and what makes a bad king. And Arthur makes good choices, he makes bad choices, and it's that ambiguity that really attracted, it really attracted Malory. He had absolutely no desire to portray somebody who was a perfect, ideal, wonderful king, you know.

**Jim Phelan 28:13**

Right so, if he starts, you know, he arrives as a result of all this, you know, intrigue and deception, etc. Then right from the beginning, we can have these questions. Yeah, right. Exactly. Yeah. Okay, good. Well, why don't we move on then to the Balin one, where we do see Arthur as king in action.

**Karen Winstead 28:36**

"So, when the king had arrived at Camelot with all his barons, and they were comfortably lodged, there came a damsel who was sent from the great Lady Lyle of Avalon. When she came before King Arthur, she explained from where she had come and how she had been sent as a messenger to him, for a particular reason. Then she let her richly furred mantle fall and revealed that she was girt with a noble sword. The king marveled at this and said, damsel, why are you girt with that sword? It is not appropriate. Now I shall tell you, said the damsel, this sword with which I am girt has an encumbrance that causes me great sorrow. The sword cannot be removed except by a knight, and his deeds and actions must prove him to be a noble knight without villainy, treachery, or treason. If I may find such a knight that has all these virtues, he will be able to draw this sword out of its sheath. I have been in King Rience's land, for I was told there that I might find passing good knights, and he and all his knights tried and none of them were able to draw the sword. That is a great marvel, said Arthur. If this is true, then I would like to try myself to pull the sword out. Although, I do not presume that I am the best knight here,

but I will try to draw your sword as an example to all the barons, so that every one of them will try after I have tried. Then Arthur took the sword by the sheath and girdle and pulled at it strongly, but the sword would not come out. Sir, said the damsel, you don't need to pull so hard, for he that is able to pull out the sword will be able to do it quite easily. You are right, said Arthur, now all my barons you try. But beware if you are tainted with shame or treachery or guile, for then it will be no use, said the damsel, for he must be a pure knight without any villainy and of noble birth on both his father and his mother's side. The greater part of the barons of the roundtable who were there at the time tried one after another, but none of them had any success. Because of this, the damsel made great sorrow out of measure, and said, Alas! I thought in this country I would find the best knights in the world without treachery or treason. By my faith, said Arthur, I believe the knights here are as good as any in the world, but it is not their fortune to be able to help you, for which I am sorry. It happened that there at that time, there was a poor knight at King Arthur's court, who had been prisoner for a year and a half because he had killed a knight who was King Arthur's cousin. The name of this knight was Balin, and through the influence of the barons, he was brought out of prison. He had a reputation as a strong knight, and he had been born in Northumberland. So, he went secretly to the court and saw the marvel of the sword which lifted his spirits. He would have liked to have tried as the other knights did, but as he was poor and poorly outfitted, he did not put himself forward. But in his heart, he believed he could do as well as any knight there, if luck was with him. As the damsel took her leave of King Arthur and all the barons, Balin called out to her as she was departing and said, damsel! I pray of you your courtesy to allow me to try as these other lords have. Although I am poorly outfitted, in my heart I believe that I am as likely as any of the others to succeed. This damsel looked at the poor knight and saw that he was a handsome man, but his shabby clothes made her think that any honor he had achieved was done through villainy and treachery. Then she said to that knight, sir, you don't need to bother, because I doubt you would succeed where all these knights have failed. Ah! Fair damsel, said Balin, worthiness and good character and good deeds are not to be found in one's outward appearance, manhood and worship are found within a man's person. Many a noble knight is unknown to the people as honor and fortune are not to be found in clothing. By God, said the damsel, what you say is true. Therefore, you may try if you would like. Then Balin took the sword by the girdle and sheath and drew it out easily. And when he looked at the sword, he was very pleased with it. Then the king and all the court marveled that Balin had achieved that adventure, and many knights were upset with him. For certain, said the damsel, this is a very good knight, the best I have found, and one who is of greatest worship without treason or felony. He shall perform many marvels. Now gentle and courteous knight, give the sword back to me. Nay, said Balin, I will keep this sword unless somebody takes it to me by force. Well, said the damsel, you are not wise to do so, for with that sword you will slay your best friend and the man whom you love most in this world, and that sword will cause your destruction. I will take the adventure, said Balin, that God will ordain for me. You should not have the sword at this time by the faith of my body. You will repent of this shortly, said the damsel, for I ask for the sword back more for your benefit than mine. I am very sad for you because if you will not give up that sword, it will cause your destruction and that is a great pity. With that the damsel departed, making great sorrow, and at once Balin called for his horse and armor as he wished to depart from the sword, and he took his leave of King Arthur. Nay! said King Arthur, do not think you will depart so easily from this fellowship. I suppose that you are unhappy that I have treated you unkindly, but don't blame me, as it seems I was misinformed about you. I did not know that you were such a noble knight of worship and prowess, as you obviously are. If you would stay in this court among my fellowship, I will raise your status as it may please you. God thank you your

highness, said Balin, no man is able to praise even half the value of your generosity, but at this time, I must depart, although I ask your good grace to do so. Truly, said the king, I am quite upset at your departing, but I pray you fair knight, not to stay away too long. You will be very welcome by me and my barons, and I will make amends for all that was wrongly done to you. God thank you your good grace, said Balin, and made himself ready to depart. Then most of the knights said that Balin had succeeded in his adventure, not through might, but through witchcraft. As Balin was making himself ready to depart, the Lady of the Lake came to court, and she arrived on horseback richly outfitted, greeted King Arthur, and asked him to grant her the gift he had promised her when she gave him the sword. That is true, said Arthur, that I promised you a gift, but I have forgotten the name of the sword you gave me. The name of it, said the lady, is Excalibur, which means cut steel. You say well, said the king, ask what you would like, and you shall have it if it lies in my power to give it to you. Well, said the lady, then I ask for the head of this knight who has won the sword, or else the head of the damsel who brought the sword to court. It would be fine for me to have both of their heads for he killed my brother who was a good and true knight, and that gentle woman has caused the death of my father. Truly, said King Arthur, I cannot grant you either of their heads and keep my honor. Ask for something else and I will grant your desire. I will ask for nothing else, said the lady. As Balin is getting ready to depart, he saw the Lady of the Lake who had been the cause of his mother's death. He had been seeking her for three years and when he was told that she had asked King Arthur for his head, went straight up to her, and said, evil be found. You would have had my head so you shall lose yours. And with his sword, he quickly struck off her head right in front of King Arthur. Alas! For shame, said the king. Why did you do that? You have shamed me in all my court for this was a lady to whom I owed a great deal, and she came here under my safe conduct. I will never forgive you for this crime. Sir, said Balin, I am sorry about your displeasure, but this lady was the falsest lady alive. Through enchantment and sorcery, she has destroyed many good knights, and she caused my mother to be burned through her falsehood and treachery. Whatever reason you had, said Arthur, you should have restrained yourself in my presence. Don't dare think the contrary. You will be sorry for this for I have never had such a foul act committed in my court. Therefore, leave my court as quickly as you are able. Then Balin took up the head of the lady and carried it with him to his lodgings. There, he met up with his squire who was sorry that he had displeased the king, and they rode out of town.

**Jim Phelan 37:50**

Okay, so we have another short tale in which so much happens.

**Karen Winstead 37:57**

Yes, indeed.

**Jim Phelan 37:58**

Maybe we can start with just some similarities or differences between this and the story about Arthur's birth.

**Karen Winstead 38:06**

We can see in a way a repeating pattern. And Malory is extremely happy with repeating patterns, very fond of implementing them, especially with the genders reversed. And so, in the first vignette that we looked at, we see Igraine who is trying to function, caught between two very powerful men who have

their own interests, their own agendas, their own vendettas. And here you can see a man who is Balin, and I think by extension you might see the whole of Arthur and his court caught between two extremely powerful women, the Lady of Lyle, who has sent her damsel to Arthur's court, and then of course, the Lady of the Lake. And Balin is trying to assert himself less successfully, I think, than Igraine actually did. Balin did not succeed, things end up really badly for him. But they are both figures who are caught in conflicts that they did not make, that maybe in Balin's case, he does not fully understand. And so, the action plays out in that framework.

**Jim Phelan** 39:33

Right. Okay, good. So, one of the things that, you know, kind of jumps out is that only someone who is good, right, and without treachery, villainy, and so on, should be able to extract the sword from the sheath. Right? And

**Karen Winstead** 39:52

Ah, but wait. That's what she says. That's what she says. We don't know if she's lying. And here's where, you know, we were talking a little bit earlier about how much hinges on dialogue. Because Malory could have narrated it and then the damsel sent by the Lady Lyle, came into Camelot, girded with a sword that could only be pulled out by a man without treachery or treason. That would be a very different narrative. And yet, that's not what he said. All you have is the word of the damsel who, who knows, might believe it, it might be true, Balin might be the person who was pure without guile, treachery, or treason, although what he does doesn't really make us really confident that he is that man. But it could be for any other reasons that the sword was enchanted, and he was able to pull it out.

**Jim Phelan** 40:46

Yeah, and the revelation of his characters is quite striking, right. So, you know, we have this exchange between him and the Lady Lyle about, you know, she's thinking, well he's an unlikely, you know, unlikely to succeed because he's poor clothes and so on, that would be a sign of his, you know, treachery. And then he says, well no, you know, that the clothes are not a sign of that and so on. And she says, oh, that's true, all right, go ahead, and he pulls it out. And she says, okay, give me this, give it back to me, and immediately he says, no, I ain't doing that. And then she tries to tell him why he should, and he says, no, and I was like, who is this guy?

**Karen Winstead** 41:32

He's not very smart. We know that he was in, that he was in prison for killing a relative of the king. And, but that seems like it would be an act of treachery or in treason. But of course, maybe he had his reasons and maybe those reasons were legitimate, maybe this guy needed killing. Arthur immediately jumps to the conclusion that Balin was wrongly imprisoned, but I don't think the reader should jump to that conclusion or the auditors. And I think that's something that Malory's audience would have debated. Did the king, you know, is the king way way way too quick to say, oh well, you know, this must be a noble and honorable man. Right. Which gets back to the idea that Arthur is not a perfect king. Yeah. And you know, he's barely able to keep order in his own court. He can't keep Balin from leaving, which he wants to do, Balin just pays no attention to him. He can't protect the woman who he owes so much to, who has come to his court assuming that she would be safe in his court. Instead, she is beheaded in front of his very eyes. So, Arthur does not appear as the brightest king.

**Jim Phelan 42:51**

Right, exactly, and sort of most in control and all that. Right. Right. Yeah. Just to go back a little bit with this sort of the unfolding of the characterization of Balin, right. So then, you know, when the Lady of the Lake comes, and she says, well, he killed my brother, right. And then so again, we have again, dialogue, right. But, but this, like, you know, this is more evidence about this guy's just sort of, you know, off the charts in terms of what we would think of as knightly behavior.

**Karen Winstead 43:30**

Sword happy, you know, you're getting a picture of a guy who has killed some people, and maybe he was justified, maybe they did horrible things, maybe he was in a circumstance that made the killing honorable and even necessary, but we don't know that.

**Jim Phelan 43:50**

Yeah. Right. And then, you know, the sword happiness comes out again when he beheads the Lady of the Lake, and so, you know, Arthur's completely, you know, shocked and so on. It's interesting that both Balin and his squire characterize Arthur's reaction as, oh he's displeased, and I'm sorry that you're displeased and so on, but it seems like it's an enormous, kind of under evaluation of what just happened, and Arthur's response and so on.

**Karen Winstead 44:36**

Yeah, it's all kind of understated. And Arthur can't do anything but sputter, I mean, it's a kind of silly moment. And I think we can almost see a violence that is bleeding into a slapstick, you know, you wanted to behead me? Well, I'm going to behead you, lop off with a head. So, there's just something that, that is faintly ridiculous there, that is at odds with some of the more serious political undercurrents in this episode.

**Jim Phelan 45:09**

Okay, yeah. Yeah, so you're, could you maybe just elaborate a little bit more on this more serious undercurrents?

**Karen Winstead 45:16**

Well, I think that you're seeing a world in which you don't quite know what's what. And you have lots of death here that's being alleged and not denied, people causing other people's deaths, people being upset at the deaths that are being caused, accusing each other of acting dishonorably, and we do not have the wherewithal to make the judgement of what is right and what is wrong and what is justified and what is not justified. And I think that Malory is really getting at the uncertainty that he said, she said, he said, he said, she said, she said, that is a condition of the civil war world that he lived in. And again, he was imprisoned, we know that about him, justly or unjustly, some pretty nasty things were alleged against him. And I think that you get a real sense of moral ambiguity and uncertainty about the world. You know, how does the world operate? You know, to what extent is justice served either by the court or by a deity or by individuals? And really, ultimately, it seems like individuals are just out for what they can do, muddling their way through a reality, a human condition that they don't really understand.

**Jim Phelan** 46:57

Yeah, good, good. So, there's a way in which he's sort of using the fiction to comment on or to sort of comment on, give insight into, what you said, the political situation, not just in the text, but outside the text.

**Karen Winstead** 47:16

And I think that one of the major achievements of this and very very important narrative strategy in terms of giving us this, this uncertain world vision, is that Malory never clarifies for the readers, we don't know. We never find out about Merlin, about Balin.

**Jim Phelan** 47:41

But he succeeds in drawing us into it, right. And. Yes. Its sort of opening, think about this, think about this, think about this. I'm not gonna hand and give you answers here, but I want you to be sort of in the middle thinking about these possibilities.

**Karen Winstead** 47:57

Yeah. And we inhabit an existence in which bad things happen, strange things happen, mystifying things happen, and it's not like some fiction where we find out how everything works at the end. No, we don't. We never find out. And that's the profundity, I think, of the *Morte d'Arthur*.

**Jim Phelan** 48:18

Yeah. Well, that's great. That may be a good note to end on. But let me ask if there's anything else that you wanted to get to that we haven't. I think we've covered it. Yeah. Well, Karen, that was that was really wonderful, and I thank you so much for doing this. And thank you for having me, Jim. It was a pleasure. Yeah, okay, and listeners, we invite your feedback, either on our Facebook page, just Project Narrative or on our Twitter account, @pnohiostate. And we'll be doing this again in April, with Julia Watson. More information about that will be forthcoming. Thank you all for listening.

\*Karen Winstead's book is titled *Fifteenth-Century Lives: Writing Sainthood in England*