

Morte Jack:
The Evocation of Malory's Arthur, Guenivere
and Lancelot in Graham Swift's *Last Orders**

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With the character of Jack Arthur Dodds, Graham Swift subtly slides myth into the middle of his 1996 novel *Last Orders*. The result is both comic and profound as the allusion to Arthur's mythic realm of Camelot mocks the fictional reality it is set against and simultaneously shows that reality in an ennobling light. Bermondsey butcher Jack's mythology-laden middle name alludes to King Arthur of British legend and matter of Britain romance. As his legendary namesake before him, Jack is a man loved and betrayed by both his wife and his most valued companion. Significantly, his death is as catalytic an event for his close-knit community as Arthur's was famously cataclysmic for his. Swift employs a technique reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's mythical method, formulated by the latter somewhat vaguely if fatalistically as the use of a "continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" which serves as a means "of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177; cf. Donoghue). Eliot's proposition is founded on his reading of Joyce's *Ulysses* and the explicit use of the *Odyssey* as a narrative gridwork in that novel; whereas Swift only subtly and implicitly evokes King Arthur, Queen Guenivere and Sir Lancelot as shadows lurking behind his novel's contemporary characters, Jack, his wife Amy, and their friend Ray. In employing this technique of subtle evocation, Swift lends his own novel an additional layer of meaning and also places himself in a British literary tradition that not only encompasses

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Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* but also claims Malory's *Morte Darthur* as a literary forebear. From a story-telling perspective, not only does the double name *Jack Arthur* serve as the absolute expression of the novel's juxtaposition of the profane and the sacred; it also poetically fuses these incongruous semantic fields at the very end of the novel with Ray's invocation of his friend's name. In the following, a comparison of passages from Swift's *Last Orders* and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* will confirm these intertextual relations and point out their narratological function.

The Contemporary and the Mythic

Pamela Cooper credits Swift with an inspired understanding of myth, and his characters with possessing both contemporary individuality and archetypal features, drawn from the wealth of Anglo-American storytelling traditions (see 18, 14). The juxtaposition of imagery pertaining to the sacred and the secular in *Last Orders* also shares in this double consciousness of the contemporary and the mythic—as when the seedy pub where the main characters meet takes on the air of a sacrosanct space in which “last orders” not only refer to the last beverage of the day but to passing rites accompanying more final passages.

Swift draws on mythological motifs, and it is notable in this context that nineteenth century fiction, saturated with Arthurian nostalgia (see Bryden),¹ is an acknowledged influence. Inga Bryden has stated that “as a British, Christian hero King Arthur represented moral order, yet [in the Victorian era] interest shifted to focus on his death” (2). This is poignant in view of the fact that *Last Orders* is structured around the death of *Jack Arthur Dodds*, whose friends Ray, Vic and Lenny as well as his adopted son Vince embark on a haphazard, pilgrimage-like journey from London to Margate where they intend to scatter Jack's ashes.

The rambling trip undertaken by Jack's friends encompasses “[t]wo detours, one fight, a piss-up and a near-wetting” (Swift 180), as well

as a stopover at Canterbury. Detours thus shape the contemporary experience of Swift's characters as much as they did shape life in the realm of Malory's Arthur, as pointed out by Terence McCarthy, who has argued that, if there were signposts on the road to Camelot, "the most frequent would be 'detour ahead'" (2). In *Last Orders* the diversions taken and suffered by Ray's group are equated with rituals of remembrance in a sequence of dialog among the men: "'That's why we're here, aint we? To remember the dead.' 'It means a detour,' Vic says" (115).² The ritualistic character of the company's trip down a diversion route of their own making, in fact, aids an interpretation of the novel in mythic terms. The topic of death and remembrance a priori situates the novel in the border regions of the sacred and the profane where the realities of this world meet with the hope for ultimate transcendence over matter. The invocation of Arthurian myth heightens this duality in *Last Orders*.

Swift's Arthurian touchstone is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), which has proved the most lastingly influential adaptation of Arthurian materials. Unlike other versions, Malory's opus still commanded interest in the seventeenth century and has directly or indirectly inspired almost every new Arthurian creation since the early nineteenth century. In his examination of Arthurian literature of the early to mid-twentieth century, Nathan Comfort Starr confirms Malory as the prime source of inspiration for writers aiming to reconcile Arthur's mythic world "with the pragmatic twentieth century" (4). In contrast to other early works of Arthurian literature, in the *Morte Darthur* Lancelot's presence is crucial. As Arthur's first knight he is not only superior in esteem and prowess to all other fellows of the Round Table, he is even, paradoxically, superior in his loyalty and devotion to Arthur. Contrary to the way the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Arthur's queen is portrayed in other treatments of the material, in the *Morte Darthur* Arthur does not react with jealous rage to the affair. He rather attempts to prevent talk of it at court, so that he may not be forced to sever ties with his first knight and punish the beloved offenders for their conduct. At the

same time, the concepts of earthly chivalry and of earthly love are not categorically rejected by Malory in favour of spiritual pursuits (see McCarthy 93). Lancelot, a sinner, still remains in the author's good graces and, although the affair between the king's first knight and his queen causes the downfall of Camelot, Malory does not condemn the lovers nor does he hold them responsible for the train of events they unintentionally set in motion, forcing Arthur into action against them. Instead, it is those knights who insist on stirring up conflict at court that Malory seems to find culpable.

Not only do Jack and Ray reflect the positions of Arthur and Lancelot in their respective narratives; both Swift's Jack and Malory's Arthur are characters who carry special significance through their very absences. Arthur is the once-and-future-king, the embodiment of a united Britain, whose death points beyond itself, toward the end of Camelot, the end of a peaceful union, and the end of chivalry. Jack, too, is a representative of an old order, and his death has been argued to reflect the demise of outdated concepts of masculinity and patriarchy (cf. Lea 11).³ Jack, though dead, and Ray are the central characters in *Last Orders*, just as Arthur and Lancelot figure prominently in the *Morte Darthur*.⁴ Ray, like Lancelot, is the focus of sympathy in a narrative structured around the demise of his closest friend. A divorced insurance clerk, Ray is an isolated character whose solitary passions are horse-racing and betting on horses. It is during his wartime service in North Africa that Ray first meets Jack, where, as a young foot soldier, Jack displays dominant courage paired with a sense of responsibility. In a critical situation he confronts an irresolute superior officer with the words: "What you have to do, sir, is assume command. If you don't, I will" (Swift 182). At the same time his outlook is egalitarian, giving voice to his belief that "we're all the same underneath, officers and ranks, all the same material" (Swift 27-28). Neither does Jack's stoic courage flee him on his deathbed, decades later, when Ray comes to realize that "he aint stopped being himself, just because. On the contrary" (Swift 152). It is also during the war in North Africa, soon after Jack and Ray meet, that Ray falls in

love with Jack's young wife, Amy; he sees a photograph which Jack carries with him. Amy Dodds, faithful yet tragic mother and faithless wife, is the remaining corner of the novel's central triangle.

Cooper has persuasively argued that "Swift depicts women ambiguously—as ideals, but also as destructive figures. They are at once redemptive and deceitful, like the fateful elusive temptress of certain Victorian misogynist works" (20). Roland Weidle concurs with Cooper's viewpoint, arguing that, in "a predominantly male narrative and thematic framework" (80), Swift's female characters are presented via narratological devices which are characteristic of the portrayal of female characters in high Victorian literature. The representation of Amy in *Last Orders* confirms both Cooper's and Weidle's assertions: she is an ideal, a focus of desire, and key to Ray's happiness, yet also an adulteress, conscious of the effect she has on men and not averse to using it in her own interest.⁵ A similar profound ambivalence characterizes the feminine in the world of King Arthur, where "women are divided into an aspect of malevolence and ill-will characterized by a threatening sexual voracity [...], and another aspect of mediation and guiding, and sometimes of healing" (Edwards 43). It may be noteworthy that Guenivere is unable to bear any children, while Amy gives birth to June, a severely disabled child whom Jack refuses to acknowledge.⁶ Thus, Amy and Guenivere share crucial features, both in terms of story and narratological presentation.

King and Knight—Jack and Ray

Jack and Ray's first meeting immediately results for Ray in a fateful rechristening: "It was Jack who first called me Lucky" (Swift 87), Ray recalls. Jack's choice of name is inspired by his professed belief that "[s]mall fellers have the advantage, small fellers have the luck, hope you understand that. Less of a target for the enemy, less weight to carry in this fucking frying-pan" (87). With these words short, slight Ray is taken under Jack's wing, feeling like, for reasons unknown, he

has been chosen: "He picked me," Ray muses, "[t]hat's how I became Lucky Johnson" (87). Dwelling further on the subject, he recalls Jack saying that

it was because I was lucky that he ought to stick with me, but it was the other way round. It was Jack who underwrote me. It wasn't that I was small so the bullets would miss me, it was that he was big, like a wall, like a boulder. And the bullets missed him anyway, they missed him so they missed me[.] (88)

Ray is set up by Jack to be special among all the rest of their regiment, to be invincible through his unique aura of luck. Their experiences in North Africa cement an enduring friendship which is commemorated in a photo, displayed in Jack's home, of the two of them sitting on a camel in front of the pyramids.

Corresponding to Jack's presupposition of Ray's amazing luck, Lancelot's knightly achievement is such that "in all tournaments, jousts, and deeds of arms, both for life and death, he passed all other knights; and no time was he overcome but if it were by treason or enchantment" (Malory 95). Warfare is also the foundation of Arthur's and Lancelot's friendship as they gain mutual admiration while fighting in Arthur's Roman campaign (see McCarthy 21). During the war Lancelot is a remarkable aid to Arthur, but it is back in Britain that he proves his status as the king's first knight in various tournaments and knightly adventures. The effect of the parallel, on the one hand, is comic as the immortal grandeur of Arthur and Lancelot may seem incompatible with the experiences of two working class foot soldiers who spend the Second World War advancing and retreating between Egypt and Libya—each of them a "small man at big history" (Swift 90). On the other hand, the echo of Arthurian myth may serve as a means to elevate a decidedly less than grand, often traumatic experience shared by thousands which, because of its very ordinariness at the time, is frequently underappreciated.

For Ray/Lucky the association with his wartime nickname has occasionally proven a burden. He knows that he is no more or less

lucky than the next person, yet he cannot help being taken in, occasionally, by the prophetic quality of Jack's choice of name for him. With Jack terminally ill, Ray fears that people will expect miracles, miracles which he knows are extremely unlikely to come to him. He dreads people's superstitious assumption that "Ray'll swing it, Ray'll fix it. All Jack needs is a dose of his old mate Raysy. And while we're at it, we'll take a bet on the surgeon doing a top-notch job. I thought, It's a terrible burden having all this luck" (Swift 220). Correspondingly, Lancelot, heralded as the foremost knight in the world, suffers from people's inflated expectations when he is asked to heal Sir Urry, a Hungarian knight who has been cursed so that his wounds can only be cured by the best knight in the world. Sir Urry is brought by his mother to King Arthur's court in hopes of finding a miraculous source of help there. In deference to her wishes, Arthur makes an attempt to cure the knight by touching his wounds, not expecting to succeed himself but to set an example for his knights. A hundred nobles follow in their king's lead but none of their efforts is rewarded with success. This leads Arthur to exclaim: "Mercy Jesu, [...] where is Sir Lancelot du Lake, that he is not here at this time?" (Malory 464). On cue, the great knight arrives and Arthur entreats him to lay his hands on Sir Urry. "Jesu defend me," an unwilling Lancelot stalls, "while so many noble kings and knights have failed, that I should presume upon me to achieve that all ye, my lords, might not achieve" (464). The pressure on Lancelot is immense, yet, he complies with Arthur's request, who tells his knight plainly that if "ye prevail not and heal him, I dare say there is no knight in this land that may heal him" (465). Thus, both Lancelot and Ray find themselves faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Jack confronts his friend with a similar challenge when he, while in hospital, tells Ray of his debts of close to twenty thousand pounds which he has amassed by taking out a loan in an unsuccessful attempt to keep his butcher shop from bankruptcy: "Some things are best not known" (Swift 223), Jack tells Ray in justification of keeping Amy in the dark about this. The statement, however, is ambiguous in the

overall context of the novel: Jack presumably not only refers to his own secret debts but also to the affair Ray and Amy believe they have been keeping from him. Discussing Amy's prospects after his death, Jack tells Ray suggestively: "Maybe you'd know what she's going to do" (223). Similarly, Malory's Arthur is unwilling to openly acknowledge the affair between Lancelot and Guenivere. As a consequence, when rumours spread at court, "the King was full loath that such a noise should be upon Sir Lancelot and his queen" (Malory 470). For the sake of the Round Table, for the sake of stability and order, "some things are best not known."

At Arthur's court, Lancelot succeeds in healing Sir Urry by a laying on of hands accompanied by humble prayer. In spite of what he sees as his previous sinful existence, Lancelot is granted the performance of this miracle. Overwhelmed by the magnitude and improbability of the event, he falls to his knees "and ever Sir Lancelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten" (466). Not only is Lancelot's healing of the wounded knight a miracle; "it is a singular demonstration that God has extended his grace" (Cole 40). Significantly, Lancelot only attempts the healing of the cursed knight after Arthur commands him to, as the king firmly believes in his first knight's power to work the miracle. Similarly, Ray is granted the miracle of winning twenty thousand pounds by following Jack's firm instruction to place money on a race horse of his choosing. Ray's selection aptly reflects the nature of the enterprise: "*Miracle Worker*" (233) is the chosen horse's name. Compared to Lancelot, Ray's may be a more secular miracle but a miracle it is nonetheless, and it does not end with the successfully placed bet. Moments before scattering Jack's ashes, Ray remembers Amy telling him that shortly before Jack's death:

He was sitting up in bed listening to the radio, and then, the nurse said, he took off his headphones, all neat and careful, and said, "That's it then. That's all right then," and she went off just for a moment to do something and when she came back he was dead. (Swift 293)

Ray infers, without stating it explicitly, that Jack has been listening to the horse race, well aware of Ray's bet and that, once satisfied of the

success of their project, he was ready to die. Ray not only accomplishes to perform a near-miracle on Jack's behalf, the very person who first called him *Lucky*, but Jack, miraculously, has been made aware of the fact. This is a double miracle for Ray, while there was, apparently, a single one for Lancelot. T. H. White, however, sees in Lancelot's act of healing also a double miracle in as far as Lancelot knows that "the miracle was that he had been allowed to do a miracle" (White 557). Set against an instance of spiritual healing, it would seem that Ray's miracle deed, this-worldly and morally ambiguous as it is, can only lose in the comparison. This is not so, however, as the precedence of Lancelot's miracle not only mocks Ray's achievement, but also makes it stand out as a miracle in the first place. By allusion to Arthurian myth the outcome of a sports bet acquires the dignity of a divinely sanctioned, rare wonder.

Out on Margate Pier, Ray has been granted the honour of carrying the urn containing Jack's ashes. Ever closer to the point of letting go, he counters the notion of farewell by thinking, "I hold on to Jack" (Swift 263). At the end of Margate Pier, at the end of the novel, in a literal and metaphorical double entendre, Ray states: "We're at the end and I'm holding Jack" (292). He then prepares for the final act of scattering his friend's ashes: "I get out the jar from under my coat, Jack Arthur Dodds" (292). Ray's ritualistic, silent articulation of Jack's full name, only two pages before the ending of the novel, is the first time that readers are made familiar with Jack's middle name. While *Jack* is the most common and solidly mundane of names, *Arthur* counterbalances *Jack's* associations of the profane with its own mythic weight. At the moment of the man's ultimate dissolution—as his ash is about to be scattered to the winds and into the ocean by four pairs of rain-wet hands—the revelatory articulation of his name dignifies a moment of crisis that may have otherwise been tipping into the grotesque. At the same time, Ray's use of his friend's full name, however poignant it is, highlights an incongruity between the grandness of the name and what is physically left of its bearer. The effects of Jack's Arthurian shadow are thus simultaneously pro-

found—in their potential to dignify and point beyond the mundane; and comic—in their potential to highlight the shortcomings of mundane reality. The late revelation of Jack’s middle name also reinforces a theme of termination, of death, and its aftermath. For Jane de Gay the closing words of the novel

encompass both salvation (“save our souls”) and desolation and human insignificance (we are “Jack,” slang for “nothing,” quite literally dust in the wind), thereby raising questions about the value of human life, what we are, and whether there is personal survival after death. (565)

The states of desolation and salvation referred to here tally with Jack’s two given names: Jack stands for the profane, the physical human being disintegrating into nothingness, while Arthur stands for the sacred, all that transcends, in whatever form, pure materiality. Jack’s last journey terminates in Margate, in Amy’s recollection a place synonymous with magic for her late husband (Swift 229). The site of Dreamland amusement park and the destination of multitudes of city-dwellers on a pilgrimage for the seashore, Margate implied pleasurable escape from the norms and restrictions of workaday life to the denizens of greater London until at least the mid-20th century. Jack’s Margate is Arthur’s Avalon: not only is each location a final resting place, but each also carries associations of paradise, of longing, and of passing from one sphere into another. Invoked by the name *Margate* is a passage from land to sea and Jack’s remains do make that passage but the transformations he undergoes are at the same time more profound and raise questions of a metaphysical nature.

On Margate Pier the friends scatter handfuls of Jack’s ashes simultaneously until there is not enough left to share among them, leaving Ray to cast to the wind what is left. Ray quietly eulogizes:

Jack Arthur Dodds, save our souls, and the ash that I carried in my hands, which was the Jack who once walked around, is carried away by the wind, is whirled away by the wind till the ash becomes wind and the wind becomes Jack what we’re made of. (Swift 294-95)

Arthur, too, is carried away, out of this world and away to Avalon where he “is reabsorbed into the source of the marvellous” (Edwards 43). Mortally injured, Arthur tells a companion on his departure: “I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wounds; and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul” (Malory 516). The king is carried onto a barge and shipped off into the mist by Queen Morgan le Fay, the Queen of Northgales, and the Queen of the Waste Lands. They later appear at a monastery where a hermit lives and inter a body, assumed to be Arthur’s. On this gravesite, “many men say that there is written [...]: Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus” (Malory 517). Arthur’s return from the dead is prophesied, while Jack, though not literally expected to make a return to the land of the living, does share in his namesake’s foretold fate. Though reduced to mere ash, though shared out among his friends in “[l]ucky dip[s],” and shaken from his urn like the remains at “the bottom of a box of cornflakes” (Swift 294), Jack’s immaterial presence remains felt as he undergoes a series of transformations—from man to ash to wind (see Swift 294-95). He ultimately, in his dissolution, becomes a part of the world and everybody alive in it. The end point of his metamorphoses is only reached when “the wind becomes Jack what we’re made of” (295).

Knight and Dame—Ray and Amy

On seeing Jack’s photo of his wife Amy for the first time, Ray’s immediate reaction is the covetous thought: “I want one of those. I want one like that” (Swift 89). From his very first glimpse of her, Ray is enamoured of Amy and seeks a kind of blessing or protection from her photograph which, he believes, helps him through the war as much as Jack’s company. While in Africa, Ray keeps furtively taking the picture from his friend’s wallet, wishing he was in Jack’s place (see Swift 279). Romantically speaking, Ray carries Amy’s token into battle, the mere knowledge of her existence protecting him. Corre-

spondingly, Lancelot frequently sends defeated opponents to report to Queen Guenivere in repentance; like Ray, he is often separated from the woman he loves, but the battles he fights are fought in tribute to her. In his mind, Lancelot links Guenivere and Arthur and the allegiance he owes to each of them: “Wit you well I ought of right ever in your quarrel and in my lady the Queen’s quarrel to do battle; for ye are the man that gave me the high order of knighthood, and that day my lady, the Queen, did me worship” (Malory 413), Lancelot tells Arthur. It appears that his love for one of them does not negate his love for the other but rather strengthens it.

Similar to Ray’s immediate infatuation, Lancelot and Guenivere fall in love instantly, and their love, too, remains constant throughout the decades of their acquaintance. Even if Guenivere is technically an adulteress, Malory is emphatic that her love is untainted, stating that “while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end” (Malory 444). In a further parallel, Lancelot and the Queen, like Ray and Amy, cannot act on their love for a long time, both for practical reasons and for reasons of conscience. After Jack’s death, Amy asks Ray to take care of her husband’s last wish—to have his ashes scattered from the end of Margate Pier—as she does not feel equal to doing it on her own, and neither can she bring herself to join Ray and his companions on their trip. Conscience-stricken, she wonders: “How could I have done it, Ray, stood there with you, sharing his ashes?” (Swift 230). While Ray is on his way to Margate, Amy dwells on her feelings for both Ray and Jack, thinking: “Oh Ray, you’re a lucky man, you’re such a *little* man. Oh my poor Jack” (230). Both her loves are on her mind on that day, both are connected, and devotion to one has not diminished devotion to the other.

Ray’s final actions on Jack’s behalf are reminiscent of how Lancelot is charged, by a vision, to bury Guenivere’s body by Arthur’s side:

And thus upon a night there came a vision to Sir Lancelot, and charged him, in remission of his sins, to hasten him unto Amesbury: “And by then thou come here, thou shalt find Queen Guenivere dead. And therefore take thy fellows with thee and purvey them of a horse and bier, and fetch thou the corpse of her, and bury her by her husband.” (Malory 522)

Lancelot does this, thinking not of spiritual matters but of the physical reality of the deaths of both Arthur and Guenivere. "When I saw his corpse and her corpse so lie together, truly my heart would not serve to sustain my careful body," he explains the fact of his collapse during Guenivere's burial (523). Later Lancelot cannot overcome his grief, neither eats nor drinks, and spends his time "lying grovelling on the tomb of King Arthur and Queen Guenivere" (524). Even after the death of two characters constituting its corners, the triangle of king, queen, and knight cannot simply be dissolved. Likewise, the triangle of Jack, Amy, and Ray remains a reality even after Jack's passing away—Amy fulfilling her role as widowed queen, Ray going on one last knightly mission in honor of Jack.

The Triangle

Even until the very end of his life, Jack and Amy avoid discussing Amy's relationship with Ray. With Jack on his deathbed, Amy feels that the time might finally be ripe to lay open the secret of her infidelity but then decides against it, her reason being that Jack continues to refuse to talk about their disabled daughter. "He won't mention June so I won't mention Ray" (Swift 268), she justifies her silence. Yet Jack already knows what Amy avoids saying, telling her, with some finality, "[a]ll a gamble, aint it? Ask Raysy. But you'll be all right" (268). With his death plainly imminent, Jack indirectly bestows his blessing on Ray and Amy's relationship, telling Ray purposefully that between Amy and him it is he who is lucky, being the first to go, while she will be left behind and will "need looking after" (183). In Egypt, Ray would pretend to himself that he was Jack and Amy was his. Forty years later, during his final conversation with Jack, he suddenly feels that his friend has been aware of his secret desire all along and is now about to step aside to let Ray take his place. He believes Jack's farewell message to be: "These are my shoes, Raysy, go on, step in 'em, wear 'em" (283).

Arthur, too, is accepting Lancelot's desire for Guenivere. Even though he "had a deeming" of the affair, Arthur for the longest time refuses to force it into the open because he loves Lancelot "passingly well" (Malory 470). Valuing Lancelot's companionship even over that of his wife, the king ignores their affair until it is no longer possible for him to do so, for reasons of courtly policy.⁷ Jack, on the other hand, is not forced to disclose Amy's and Ray's secret. He can remain quiet on the subject and does so, even implicitly giving the pair his blessing to take up the affair again. Still, Ray cannot shake off feelings of guilt. Holding the urn containing Jack's remains, he internally voices his pangs of conscience: "I'm holding the jar and I don't deserve. [...] I'm holding the jar, thinking, I don't deserve, I don't deserve" (Swift 284-86). Lancelot, too, harbours guilt over his illicit love affair and consequent betrayal of Arthur. It is for this reason that, on the grail quest, he cannot approach the holy vessel, "for he was overtaken with sin" (Malory 330). Yet, the experience of failure is not sufficient to make his love for Guenivere cease, and neither does this love ever extinguish his love for Arthur. In that, Lancelot is "the symbol of perfect loyalty and disloyalty at the same time" (McCarthy 20).

Shortly after they first meet, Jack tells Amy that she is beautiful, and Amy is powerfully affected by his words of admiration. She ponders that "[i]t turns you over to hear a man say that, fills you up. To be alive, to have lived to hear a man say that, any man, and to know, by his smile, that he means it" (Swift 240). Roughly twenty years later, she is the one to offer a compliment that has the same effect on Ray. At some point during their first intimate encounter in his camper van Amy calls Ray a "lovely man." Arguably, it is Jack who inspires Amy's words to Ray as he was the source of the original compliment. Ray recalls Amy's words in terms that echo hers:

To have lived and heard a woman say that to you, even if it aint true. You're a lovely man. The rain on the roof, the noise of the crowd like waves. With tears in her eyes and a flame in her throat: Oh Ray, you're a lovely man, you're a lucky man, you're a little ray of sunshine, you're a little ray of hope.

(284)

Amy's involvement with both Jack and Ray can be viewed as a link between the men, strengthening their connection rather than weakening it. This phenomenon can also be found in the *Morte Darthur*, where women involved in triangular relationships with two men serve "to uphold the 'homosocial' bonds between men who uphold the court" (Edwards 45). This means that the focus of desire,

here Guinevere, is produced as desirable by being valued or desired by another, here the king himself. Guinevere's value is that she is married to Arthur. In the triangles of male homosocial desire, the woman is the focus which enables the men who desire her to bond, to make social contracts, and, importantly, to enact their rivalries. (Edwards 45)

Terence McCarthy concedes that "Lancelot's devotion to the queen is an aspect of his loyalty to Arthur and the realm" (95). It is their relationship, he explains, that, sinful though it may be, binds Lancelot and Arthur more strongly together. Heading towards the lines of people waiting to enter Canterbury Cathedral, Ray reflects that "it's as if, because I'm carrying Jack, I have to go first and they make way for me, and [...] I feel like I felt at the Home when Amy said yes I could go in with her" (Swift 194). Ray's comparison establishes a parallel between his feelings for Amy and his feelings for Jack, yet it also remains mysterious as Ray never states exactly what his feelings were on that prior occasion.

McCarthy believes that the tragedy of Malory's Arthur lies in the fact that he is forced into action against Lancelot. Even after Arthur has been pushed to acknowledge his wife's infidelity, "the noble King Arthur would have taken his queen again and to have been accorded with Sir Lancelot; but Sir Gawain would not suffer him by no manner of mean" (Malory 486). The king bitterly complains: "Alas, that ever Sir Lancelot and I should be at debate" (482), but he cannot return to his previous stance of deliberate ignorance once events have been set in motion. Following Arthur's death, both Guenivere and Lancelot turn toward religion and refrain from taking up their affair once more. Yet, their earthly love for each other remains unbroken in the absence

of further bodily encounters. In Malory's world, the will to cause trouble by exposing the affair, as Sirs Mordred and Agravain attempt to do, is more despicable than the affair itself which, illicit though it may be, is also an expression of true and enduring love (see McCarthy 96). In a crossing of the Swiftian and Arthurian universes, it is almost possible to hear Lancelot thinking: "Agravain's a stirrer!"

While *Last Orders* ends on Margate Pier and Ray's future remains untold, the possibility that he will attempt to rekindle the affair with Amy is strongly suggested. What is certain is that Ray's and Amy's romance is endorsed rather than condemned by Swift, just as Lancelot's and Guenivere's love is approved of by Malory. Guilty secret that the affair may be, it is at the same time the novel's central source of hope, and with its possible renewal the future looks much brighter.⁸ In Swift's fictional universe things may well take a happier turn than the precedence of Camelot would suggest. As has been shown, there are certainly ways in which mythical precursor and contemporary narrative diverge, sometimes to comic effect. Equating small, timid Ray with physically powerful, bold Sir Lancelot is a humorous feat and so, on the surface, is imagining a Bermondsey butcher as king of the Britons. Yet as much as these parallels are apparently comic, they resonate on a deeper level. Ray's inner world, which readers are made privy to via his extra-homodiegetic narration, both retrospective and simultaneous with the trip to Margate,⁹ is rich and multi-layered. Beyond the surface, Ray shares with Lancelot the virtues of strength and loyalty. Corresponding to equestrian pursuits of a knightly kind, he has always had a deep passion for horse racing with its personal associations of freedom and self-fulfillment. As an old man he still harbors the passion, still thinks "like I'm the jockey and I don't have no choice" (Swift 258). Even quarrelsome Lenny recognizes in Ray unsuspected depths: "Just when you think he aint got no advantage he pops up and surprises you [...]. It's like he hides behind being small" (Swift 138).

The Jack/Arthur parallel, too, has profound effects. It imparts the themes of death and mourning, so central to the novel, mythic

significance beyond the bleak materialist view of “flesh being flesh” and people being “live meat” (Swift 209). The transcendence of death, which Arthur mythically achieves, is also a recurrent motif in the portrayal of Jack. During their lunch break in Rochester, for example, Ray and his travelling companions feel Jack’s presence strongly, leading Ray to speculate that “it’s as though, if we keep talking this way, Jack really will come through the door, any second now” (Swift 111). Arthur, too, remains a presence felt even after his passing, and with the mystery of his ultimate fate unresolved, “some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again” (Malory 517). Although his friends have confirmation of his death, the spectre of Jack lingers on in the world. The fact that he is given one brief chapter to narrate, despite the “handicap” of being dead, Tebbetts believes “suggests the survival of the spirit” (76), a notion which is heightened by the allusion to King Arthur.¹⁰ Recognition of the Arthurian template thus dignifies the narrative as a whole, while it simultaneously mocks the characters’ fictional reality. These incongruous effects are in alignment with the novel’s general juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane which reaches a peak, a few pages before the end, in the revelation of the name *Jack Arthur*. The double name not only forces together the opposed strands of imagery pertaining to the sacred and the profane, but also joins them in an equilibrium and so illuminates the sacred within the profane.

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NOTES

¹See Bryden. On the topic of Arthur’s importance in Victorian medievalism and the “Breton hope” for his return, Megan L. Morris has argued that “Arthur’s body became a material avatar of Victorian historiographical tradition,” as well as “a signifier of morality, manliness, and unity for the fragmented country of England” (6).

²Richard Pedot points out the significance of this exchange in his article "Dead Lines in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*."

³Lea has made the further point that Swift portrays the values of stability, continuity, and communal responsibility as ingrained in the World War Two generation (see 177). Veteran Jack epitomizes these values, for better or worse, and his death not only leaves a gaping hole in his social milieu, it also calls into question the continued validity of certain social concepts and their attached values.

⁴Reinhard Mischka sees both of them as the protagonists of Malory's narrative but believes Lancelot to be the focus of the author's sympathy and attention (see 81). In agreement with Mischka, Karen Cherewatuk describes Lancelot as Malory's favorite (cf. 68).

⁵While Cooper reads Amy as a semi-mythic figure of femininity and desire (cf. 20), and Adrian Poole sees her as "desirable wife-and-mother around whom the men all revolve," she is also one of Swift's "sexually unreliable and sometimes quite calculating women" (Malcolm 19).

⁶Pedot sees in June's condition "not only a horrible fiasco from the point of view of heredity—the transmission of life—it is also a defection from the point of view of filial transmission" (62).

⁷Arthur becomes "a prisoner of the system and cannot escape" (McCarthy 122).

⁸Tebbetts concurs that the novel ends on a hopeful note: "Indeed, the last orders of *Last Orders* may well be the new orders at last achievable in the individual lives and in the hitherto dysfunctional families of its characters" (86-87).

⁹The terms of narratological analysis are Rimmon-Kenan's.

¹⁰De Gay shares this view, stating that "[t]he possibility of personal survival after death is raised by the fact that Jack, who is dead for the whole of the narrative, is nevertheless present in important ways" (566).

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