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ENG 320

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Excalibur: the Sword of Legend

One of the most crucial elements in King Arthur’s final death scene is the return of Excalibur to the lady of the lake. In both Sir Thomas Malory’s novel *Le Morte Darthur* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Passing of Arthur”, King Arthur requests that his final knight Sir Bedivere take his sword Excalibur and toss it out into the water. This act is required because Excalibur is such a unique and exceptional sword that only King Arthur could and should wield it. Although both texts examine Excalibur’s unique and extraordinary qualities in order to reveal the swords ultimate greatness and majesty, Malory’s chooses to tie the sword to King Arthur in order to exalt it while Tennyson presents the sword as nearly an entity entirely by itself.

In both Malory’s novel and Tennyson’s poem, part of Excalibur’s majesty and importance is reflected in its description and details. Malory describes it as a “noble sword” embedded with “precious stones” (Malory, 514). By characterizing the sword as noble two ideas are made clear: first, the weapon is worthy enough to be wielded by somebody who is noble, such as King Arthur; however, attaching the word noble to Excalibur also implies that the sword itself actually manifests some sense of nobility, almost as though the metal is exuding a majesty equal to that of King Arthur. It is because of these rich and noble qualities that Sir Bedivere laments his duty to throw such a “rich sword” out into the middle of the water (Malory, 514). The temptation to keep the sword derives its power from the internal noble quality of such a prestigious sword as well as its lavish, expensive and beautiful design. The exquisite beauty of Excalibur is explored in further detail in Tennyson’s poem when he describes the weapon as incorporating a “haft” that “twinkled with diamond sparks, / Myriads of topaz-lights, and jacinth-work / of subtlest jewelry” (Tennyson, 4). This just expounds how beautiful and precious Excalibur is not just as a weapon but also as a priceless piece of art (Tennyson, 4). Because of the brilliant stones that grace the hilt, Sir Bedivere’s “eyes” are “dazzled” and he decides not to throw the sword out into the water where it would be lost forever (Tennyson, 4). In a sense, Sir Bedivere is hypnotized or put under a spell by the priceless gems embedded on the weapon. This description suggests that not only was Sir Bedivere drawn to keep the sword because of its nobility and prestige but he was also tempted to possess it himself because he knew it was an expensive weapon. In this aspect, both Malory and Tennyson utilize the same imagery and descriptions in order to reveal how unique and precious Excalibur is.

However, both authors differ in how they portray the swords autonomy, or lack thereof. In Malory’s novel, King Arthur refers to Excalibur as “my sword” repeatedly, indicating quite clearly that the sword belongs to King Arthur alone (Malory, 514). By reiterating the true ownership of the sword, it is suggested that perhaps Excalibur can only exist when King Arthur does. Thus, with the death of King Arthur, Excalibur must pass away as well. This statement ties back into the idea that because the sword itself is noble it must be wielded by a knight of equal nobility. Generally, the time of Camelot is considered one of the noblest eras and the noble King Arthur is a figure of greatness that every man is to aspire to. Everything following this idyllic time has been a decline in dignity and integrity. With this in mind, if King Arthur is the most noble of all men for all time and if Excalibur can only be wielded by him, it is logical to assume that Excalibur is the most noble of all swords. This close association with King Arthur increases the esteem and dignity of the weapon to a level unreached by any other blade. In contrast to Malory’s Excalibur, Tennyson presents Excalibur as nearly an entity entirely by itself. When King Arthur asks Sir Bedivere to throw Excalibur out into the water, he asks him to “take Excalibur, / And fling him into the middle mere” (Tennyson, 4). Rather than claim the sword as solely his own property, something tied to his very being, King Arthur personifies the sword, calling it “him”. This personification goes beyond just raising the significance of Excalibur to the level of King Arthur and actually creates a character. In this statement, King Arthur has judged the sword to be worthy enough to be like a brother in arms. For a sword, there can be no higher honor than being counted as human.

Although Malory and Tennyson employ both similar and different descriptive means in order to illustrate Excalibur, they both utilize those descriptions in order to reveal how unique and special Excalibur is as a sword. Therefore, despite the differences, Excalibur is clearly and successfully scene as irreplaceable and, ultimately, legendary.