“BECAUSE SOME STORIES *DO* LIVE FOREVER”: STEPHEN KING’S *THE DARK TOWER* SERIES AS MODERN ROMANCE

BY

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Abstract

Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series is a seven-volume work that contains elements from myths, fairy tales, American westerns, legends, popular culture, Gothic literature, and medieval romance. Few scholars have engaged with this series, most likely due to its recent completion in 2004 and its massive length, but those who do examine the *Dark Tower* focus on classifying its genre, with little success. As opposed to the work of the few scholars who have critically engaged with King's work (and the smaller number still who have written about the *Dark Tower*), I will examine the ways in which he blends genres and then go further than scholars like Patrick McAleer, Heidi Strengell, James Egan, and Tony Magistrale, to argue that King's use of motifs, character types, and structure has created his own contemporary version of a medieval romance in the Arthurian tradition. My analysis of King's work through this lens of Arthurian romance crosses continents and centuries in an attempt to bring together medieval studies and contemporary American fiction. My methodology includes looking at some of the most famous and commonly studied examples of Arthurian romance from England and France, so that I can examine the ways in which the culturally created version of King Arthur's court influenced King's series, and the ways in which King's reading of the Arthur myth illuminates the Arthur myth for a modern audience.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One: The Once and Future King

Though Stephen King is one of the best-selling authors of all time, the debate in literary study about his legitimacy as an author of literature (rather than low-brow drivel) has been raging for over thirty years. When he was awarded the National Book Foundation's award for "distinguished contribution" to literature in 2003, one of the most prolific literary critics in America, Harold Bloom, railed against this decision, calling King "an immensely inadequate writer" whose books "do little more for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat."[1] In spite of his ubiquitous place on the bestseller lists, this debate over King's status as an author of literature has resulted in a frustrating lack of academic material written about his writing. In comparison to other famous popular authors, such as J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis, relatively little has been written about King's work in terms of research-based literary scholarship, though much has been written about King himself, and his work, in the non-academic field. Generally speaking, compilations about King's work often contain short essays about one or two particular novels or stories, with few examples of longer critical or research-based analyses.[2] What criticism that does exist tends to focus on King's earlier works, notably *The Shining* (1977), *Carrie* (1974), *Pet Sematary* (1983), *'Salem's Lot* (1975), *The Stand* (1978),

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[1] Harold Bloom, "Dumbing down American readers," *Boston Globe,* 24 Sep 2003.

[2] See *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Stephen King, Updated Edition*, ed. Harold Bloom, 1st ed (New York: Chelsea House, 2007); Edwin F. Casebeer, "The Art of Balance: Stephen King's Canon," *Modern Critical Views: Stephen King*, ed. Harold Bloom, 1st ed (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998) 207-18 ; Tony Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King's American Gothic*, 1st ed (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1988); Tony Magistrale, *Stephen King: The Second Decade, Danse Macabre to The Dark Half*, 1st ed (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

Misery (1987), and *It* (1986). Considering that *The Dark Tower* series exists as a lynchpin to the entire Stephen King universe (complete with ties to nearly all of his other work), scholarly material on the series is an area that definitely requires development and expansion. Understanding the *Dark Tower* series, I argue, allows us to understand Stephen King's literary contribution in a more sophisticated way than critics like Bloom have allowed. My project seeks to add to this newly developing body of criticism by examining the ways in which *The Dark Tower* functions in much the same way as a traditional Arthurian romance, a genre that has thus far been ignored in attempts to classify the series' generic conventions.

The *Dark Tower* series is comprised of seven books, published intermittently between 1973 and 2004: *The Gunslinger* (1973), *The Drawing of the Three* (1987), *The Waste Lands* (1991), *Wizard and Glass* (1997), *Wolves of the Calla* (2003), *Song of Susannah* (2004), and *The Dark Tower* (2004). The series focuses on Roland Deschain, the last gunslinger and direct descendant of Arthur Eld, a king known for his mythical status and his fight for the forces of good, also known as the White. When Roland first hears of our world's version of King Arthur, he understands the connection between the two world's legends immediately, indicating that King purposely based Arthur Eld on the mythical King Arthur.[3] Roland is on a quest to reach the Dark Tower, which serves as the hub of all universes, a journey that takes him through a post-apocalyptic world that has "moved on." Roland's civilization has crumbled, time is running unreliably, and even

[3] Roland also seems to be aware of the difference between the Merlin of Arthurian legend and the sorcerer Maerlyn of his world, who created the 13 glass balls in Maerlyn's Rainbow. He even compares Marten Broadcloak, his father's treacherous magician and advisor, to Merlin. See Robin Furth, *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: A Concordance, Volume I*, 1st ed (New York: Scribner, 2003) 86; Stephen King, *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*, 2nd ed (New York: Signet, 2003) 129.

cardinal directions are becoming unfixed. Currently the Beams which hold the Dark Tower up like spokes in a wheel are crumbling; if all the Beams collapse, the Tower collapses, and every plane of existence goes with it. Roland "draws" three companions from different versions of New York to accompany him on his quest: a heroin addict named Eddie Dean of 1987; a woman from 1964 with multiple personalities named Odetta Holmes/Detta Walker, who later manifests a third, more stable personality, Susannah Dean; and Jake Chambers of 1977, a young boy whom Roland comes to love as a surrogate son. Roland trains all three to be gunslingers and together, along with Oy, a billy-bumbler (a talking dog/raccoon hybrid), they form a *ka-tet*, which is a group joined together by *ka*, or destiny.[4] They travel through deserts and forests and cities, meeting good and evil on their path to reach the Tower. The gunslingers stop the destruction of the Beams, and thus, save the Tower, but in doing so their *ka-tet* breaks through the deaths of Eddie, Jake, and Oy and the departure of Susannah through a door into another world. Roland finally reaches the Dark Tower, and with some help, defeats the Crimson King, the madman who had attempted to speed the Tower's destruction. The last gunslinger, Roland, enters the Tower, reaches the top, and realizes that he has completed this quest before, countless times. He is transported back to the Mohaine desert, where the first book began, with no memory of the events of the last seven books, to resume his search for the Dark Tower once again.

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[4] As it is an essential concept in King's series, it's worth quoting at length Furth's definition of *ka* in *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: A Concordance, Volume I*: "*ka* has multiple meanings and so is difficult to define precisely. It signifies life force, consciousness, duty, and destiny…The closest terms in our language are probably *fate* and *destiny*, although *ka* also implies karma, or the accumulated destiny (and accumulated debt) of many existences. We are the servants of *ka*. We are also the prisoners of it. As Roland knows, *ka* is a wheel; its one purpose is to turn, and in the end it always returns to the place it began." 197.

There is very little comprehensive scholarly work done on *The Dark Tower* series. Robin Furth has written two concordances that were released—the first in 2003, covering books I-IV, and the second in 2005, covering books V-VII—neither of which are distinctly academic. Furth's work, like an expanded index, is useful for finding specific definitions and references for characters, places, and concepts in the series as a whole, but it does not critically examine or interpret the text. *The Road to the Dark Tower: Exploring Stephen King's Magnum Opus* by Bev Vincent, like Furth's concordances, focuses much more on summary than it does on critique or engagement with the texts. Vincent provides character profiles, but the analysis given is cursory and his approach seems to be targeted to King's fan base rather than academics and scholars. These books add to the dozens of King biographies and profiles that have been written primarily to satisfy the curiosity of King's Constant Readers.[5] While these biographical studies are informative about King's life, none of them challenge, question, or critique his work.[6]

Furthermore, in most of the academic work done on King's oeuvre, Roland and his quest are relegated to cursory mentions in a laundry list of other works.[7] Sometimes

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[5] This is the name for devoted fans of his work that King coined in the Author's Note for *The Waste Lands*, claiming "THE FOURTH VOLUME IN the tale of the Dark Tower should appear— always assuming the continuation of Constant Writer's life and Constant Reader's interest—in the not-too-distant future." See Stephen King, *The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands*, 5th ed. (New York: Signet, 2003) 589.

[6] See George Beahm, *Stephen King: America's Best-Loved Boogeyman*, 1st ed. (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 1998); Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller, *Feast of Fear: Conversations with Stephen King*, 1st ed. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993); Stanley Wiater, Christopher Golden, and Hank Wagner, *The Complete Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of Stephen King,* 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006).

[7] It is worth mentioning that since 1981, thirty-nine dissertations/master's theses that directly involve King's work have been submitted to the ProQuest UMI Database, the leading database for the archival records and transcripts of online dissertations and

they warrant as little as one sentence, as in the anthology *Modern Critical Views: Stephen King*: "Similarly, his *Dark Tower* trilogy combines apocalyptic science fiction with Arthurian quest fantasy, itself subordinated to the western, and then introduces science fiction's alternate worlds concept."[8] The bulk of King scholarship focuses on his earlier works, such as *Carrie* and *The Shining*, but there are only a handful of academics who have turned this kind of detailed attention to the *Dark Tower*. Any attempt to write critically about *The Dark Tower* series would benefit from four main sources. The first, Patrick McAleer's *Inside the Dark Tower Series: Art, Evil, and Intertextuality in the Stephen King Novels*, was published in 2009 and is probably the most valuable contribution to *Dark Tower* scholarship because it is the first book-length work devoted to in-depth critical analysis of the complete series, but it is not without problems. Heidi Strengell's *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism*, James Egan's essay, "*The Dark Tower:* Stephen King's Gothic Western," and the brief explorations of the series done by Tony Magistrale, the most prominent and prolific King scholar in America are the only other works that explicitly analyze any part of *The Dark Tower* in any real depth. All of these works, except for McAleer's, only discuss a portion of the series rather than all seven books as a whole unit, because they were all written before the final book in the series was published.

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theses, with over 2 million documents and over 1,000 schools submitting. Only one of the thirty-nine directly involves *The Dark Tower*, which underscores the need for further research by students as well as professional scholars. While these numbers are a very small percentage of the total submissions, they do indicate a growing contemporary interest in analyzing King's work academically.

[8] Casebeer, "The Art of Balance," 208.

These four authors focus primarily on the blending of genres for which *The Dark Tower* series is famous. Strengell's analysis of the series focuses on its use of characters who are generic hybrids, specifically Roland and his antagonist the Man in Black, and the way that "King's reliance on mythical and fairy-tale themes throughout his writing career creates a balance between the Gothic and literary naturalism and thus unifies his fiction."[9] Egan also explores the cross-genre, comparing the traditional themes of the Gothic and the American Western as they play out in only the first two books in *The Dark Tower* series. Magistrale discusses the influence of myth on the first two books in the series in *Stephen King: The Second Decade, Danse Macabre to The Dark Half,* and the way that these books portray ambiguities and seemingly imbalanced elements, like "fantasy, science fiction, horror, western myth, icy realism, and romantic quests in a way unique to King's canon."[10] While these studies lay the groundwork for future analysis, they lack the context of all seven novels in the series.

McAleer is the only scholar who engages with all seven books of *The Dark Tower.* While Strengell touches on the conventions of the Gothic and literary naturalism as they apply to *The Dark Tower*, McAleer is the only scholar to attempt to explore *how* different genres might categorize the series. He examines whether the tale best fits into the framework of epic, Western, Gothic, post-apocalyptic, and science fiction. Science fiction, although not a perfect fit, is the genre that McAleer chooses as the best fit, based on the premise that

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[9] Heidi Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism*, 1st ed. (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005) 116.

[10] Magistrale, *Stephen King: The Second Decade,* 143.

> Science fiction considers imaginative realms that are unfamiliar but not entirely surprising; science fiction takes what is known and what is conceivable, regardless of its improbability, and…as science fiction implicitly deals with discovery and knowledge, the mysteries of the Dark Tower ask for nothing less than exploration and contemplation if not outright comprehension.[11]

Here, McAleer clarifies his methodology as generic exploration, and argues that the *Dark Tower* series is too complex to fit into just one category. His generic explorations are unsuccessful, not because the *Dark Tower* is impossible to categorize, but because the genres McAleer has chosen for comparison don't go back far enough. Epic comes close but McAleer admits that "many of the elements to be discussed fall into other categories, such as myth or romance," indicating that McAleer's definition of epic owes some of its qualities to romance.[12] The modern genres of Western, Gothic, post-apocalyptic and science fiction all contain conventions that began in medieval romance, which is why I am arguing that Arthurian romance describes the genre of the *Dark Tower* series better than any of the genres McAleer proposes.

Romance is an essential precursor to the conventions that science fiction privileges, and it also accommodates more of the content of the *Dark Tower* than McAleer's categories. Western heroes function as agents of civilization, taming an "underdeveloped [frontier]…in need of order,"[13] but that idea came to prominence with the civilizing influence of Arthur's knights, who uphold the laws of chivalry as they go

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[11] Patrick McAleer, *Inside the Dark Tower Series: Art, Evil, and Intertextuality in the Stephen King Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2009) 59.

[12] McAleer, 32.

[13] McAleer, 40.

out into the wild forest to have adventures. Key elements of the Gothic, including "the dark, the unknown, and the unstable"[14] were also presented first in the wild forest of Arthurian romances. One of the hallmarks of post-apocalyptic literature, the "examination and careful consideration of the causes and effects of ruination"[15] in the world, also owes a debt to Arthurian romance and its depiction of Camelot's disintegration as a result of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. Lastly, many Arthurian romances center on quests for knowledge of the unknown or supernatural (e.g. the Holy Grail) and these quests take place in unfamiliar, sometimes fantastic, territory. Science fiction appropriated many of these motifs and modified them, but at the root, the search for "discovery and knowledge" that McAleer cites is a direct descendant of the Arthurian romance tradition. McAleer is not wrong in his analysis of these genres and their contribution to understanding the *Dark Tower*, but romance encapsulates *all* of these ideas, and romance came first, which demonstrates the vital importance of examining romance in order to classify the *Dark Tower*.

The key aspect of McAleer's analysis focuses on which genre fits best with his interpretation that, upon reaching the top of the Dark Tower, Roland resumes his quest once again in the Mohaine desert but *not for the first time.* "Each time Roland ends up back in the sands of the West…time has slipped away…and Mid-World, as well as the universe, muse endure continual existence, for good or ill, until Roland determines how to avoid repetition of his quest."[16] McAleer cites the fact that "Gilead is long gone to

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[14] McAleer, 46.

[15] McAleer, 52.

[16] McAleer, 36.

destruction and not recently brought to ruin"[17] as evidence for time slipping forward with every repetition of Roland's quest. However, the final book ends with Roland once again chasing the Man in Black, even though Mordred killed the Man in Black in *The Dark Tower.*[18] If time has slipped forward past this point as Roland resumes his quest, there would be no Man in Black to follow. Although this progression of time makes sense given the constraints of time that exist within certain worlds which the Tower contains[19] the ending does not provide us enough information to determine definitively whether Roland is truly back where he started or whether, as McAleer argues, the world has continued to move on. Thus, although McAleer has written the most comprehensive and in-depth analysis of generic conventions of *The Dark Tower* series, his conclusions are based on what I consider a misreading of the ending. Instead, as this thesis will demonstrate, the cyclical quality of the text, wherein Roland returns to the true beginning of his quest, is a purposeful structural choice best understood through the lens of Arthurian romance.

King is best-known as a horror writer, which may explain the need to categorize his works that do not fit in to the standard horror genre.[20] Though he writes horror, King has shown that he is able to navigate many other genres, or at least borrow techniques

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[17] McAleer, 36.

[18] Stephen King, *The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 2006) 227.

[19] Keystone Earth is the only true version of Earth and it is the version of our world in which Stephen King lives and writes his books. Time flows in only one direction on Keystone Earth. See Robin Furth, *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: A Concordance, Volume II*, 1st ed. (New York: Scribner, 2005) 322-23.

[20] Strengell, 23-25.

from them.[21] Also, some of his best-loved film adaptations are not considered part of the horror genre at all (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *Stand By Me* and *The Green Mile* all come to mind). The tendency to pigeonhole King as "the master of horror"[22] or "America's boogeyman"[23] is part of the reason that the academics who do engage with King's work tend to focus on generic analysis. In the Introduction to the revised version of *The Gunslinger*, King admits that he read Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and fell in love with them; they inspired him to write his own "masterpiece" because, as he says, "I liked the idea of the quest—*loved* it in fact…[and] I realized that what I wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien's sense of quest and magic but set against [Sergio] Leone's almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop."[24] Tolkien is an apt comparison because his work "amounts to a statement that medieval narrative provides the forms through which the modern imagination can visualize the conflict between good and evil."[25]

Additionally, King cites Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" as inspiration, as well as T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Browning's poem was itself based on the famous "La Chanson de Roland," a medieval epic poem about the legendary deeds of the hero Roland in King Charlemagne's wars against the Muslims. The medieval Roland blows his horn three times before dying in battle, and is given a

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[21] Examples include memoir (*On Writing*), fairy tale (*The Eyes of the Dragon*), and nonfiction (*Faithful*).

[22] Anne Saidman, *Stephen King: Master of Horror*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1992).

[23] Beahm, *Stephen King: America's Best-Loved Boogeyman*.

[24] King, *The Gunslinger*, xiii-xiv.

[25] Tony Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 5.

hero's burial. Browning's Roland is also a hero, described as a knight on a quest for the Tower, and he must overcome both physical and mental obstacles on his journey. This Roland also carries a horn, which he blows when he reaches the Dark Tower, although the poem never reveals what he finds there. King's use of Browning's poem continues Browning's practice of adapting a medieval narrative by establishing Roland in a chivalric context and evoking the Arthurian meanings in the poem. In the last book of the series, the fictional Stephen King even refers to the gunslinger as "Childe Roland." When asked what that means, Roland responds, "it's a term that describes a knight—or a gunslinger—on a quest. A formal term, and ancient…it means holy, chosen by ka."[26] Eliot based "The Waste Land" on the Fisher King myth from Arthurian legend, and Tolkien was a famed medievalist who used medieval traditions like the quest in his works written for contemporary audiences. Even the Man with No Name featured in Sergio Leone's films like *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* functions in much the same way as a knight. He is a peacemaker traveling through an uncivilized world and defeating evil as he encounters it. Tolkien, Browning, Eliot, and Leone used the basic template of medieval romance and made variations to it in order to modernize the romance, reflecting their views about the modern world. Essentially, I make a similar claim for King and his *Dark Tower* series. King is following the tradition of these other authors by using the basic elements of Arthurian romance specifically to offer perspective about contemporary concerns for modern readers.

The cyclical structure and supernatural elements of Arthurian romances help illuminate the whole of the *Dark Tower* series. Romances allow for fantastical and

[26] King, *The Dark Tower*, 859.

otherworldly circumstances while simultaneously following a predictable order and structure based on the conventions of the genre. Although the series contains elements of science fiction, western, and gothic genres, the *Dark Tower* series follows this predictable order and structure as seen in these genres' precursor, Arthurian romances. Though by no means set in stone, the most well-known works in this genre usually include the complete romances of Chrétien de Troyes, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur.* These are the works that King would have been most familiar with as a student of English Literature at the University of Maine and more importantly as a student of American pop culture.[27] Not only would King know these versions of the Arthur myth, but they would be most familiar to King's Constant Readers, because these myths are the most well-represented in American culture. Looking at these works as a whole gives a working definition of Arthurian legend and its key themes and motifs. These themes and motifs, including the quest narrative, the chivalric code, character archetypes, escalation, intertextuality, and other tropes of these legends have continued to appear in literature for centuries, with a resurgence in their popularity taking place in twentieth century America.[28] King uses these same themes and motifs to examine and

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[27] Wiater, Golden and Wagner, 83.

[28] Angela Jane Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 1-33. Though the focus in this contemporary medievalism tends to be on depictions of Arthuriana on film, as in Kevin J. Harty's *Cinema Arthuriana* and Rebecca and Samuel Umland's *The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film: From Connecticut Yankees to Fisher Kings*, these same themes continue to appear in American literature as well. The themes and motifs discussed in Harty and Umland, like the ones I have listed, overlap consistently with discussions of contemporary appropriations of Arthurian legend in literature as presented in *Silk and Potatoes: Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy*, *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature*, and *The Return From Avalon*, by Adam Roberts, Jennifer R. Goodman, and Raymond M. Thompson, respectively.

manipulate perceptions of American culture. As I will describe in Chapter Two, medieval romance—but more specifically *Arthurian* romance—is the clearest parallel to the *Dark Tower* because of the practice in Arthur's world and our own modern world of glorifying and yearning for an ideal age or place that no longer exists.

King's work is designed to appeal first and foremost to modern American mass culture, which is why critics like Bloom hold him in such contempt. Linda Badley argues that King "tells ancient stories, filtering them through modern Gothic and fantasy conventions."[29] Instead, I propose that King tells a modern story filtered through the ancient conventions of Arthurian legend, because, although Roland is an artifact from an antiquated past, the last three novels and the revised version of *The Gunslinger* were written in our post-9/11 society. In our age of technology and fear, "the window into the gunslinger's world looks right back into the world in which King lives and writes" and demonstrates that King's use of Arthurian legend as a structural tool is both purposeful and artful.[30] Using the past to illuminate the present is also an homage to authors like Chrétien de Troyes, who combined "mysterious and magical elements from his sources with keenly observed contemporary social behaviour to create an atmosphere of mystery and wonder that is none the less securely anchored in a recognizable twelfth-century 'present.'"[31] The examination of Arthurian themes in contemporary literature is an area in medieval scholarship ready for expansion, and by using this approach as a lens to look at

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[29] Linda Badley, "The Sin Eater: Orality, Postliteracy, and the Early Stephen King," *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Stephen King* (Updated Edition). Ed. Harold Bloom, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2007) 102.

[30] McAleer, 67.

[31] William W. Kibler, "Introduction" in *Arthurian Romances* by Chrétien de Troyes, Trans. William W. Kibler, 1st ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 11.

King's *The Dark Tower* series, my project makes a significant contribution to both King scholarship and current Arthurian scholarship. In the following chapters I will examine what the slippery term "romance" means in relation to this project; then I will discuss the most pervasive motifs and characterizations that the *Dark Tower* series shares with Arthurian romances. Finally I will analyze the structure of the series against the typical structure of Arthurian romances in three distinct ways: patterns in the structure of the plot, similarity in form, and the use of the narrative technique of interlacing to organize the structure of the story.

Chapter Two: What is Romance?

I have chosen the romances of Sir Thomas Malory, Chrétien de Troyes, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to analyze in relation to the *Dark Tower* series because of the motifs, themes, and structural similarities they share with King's epic.[32] Moreover, these constitute the texts that have defined the Arthurian narrative and characters in American popular consciousness. Most of the common tropes found in any modern-day version of an Arthurian tale come from Malory, Chrétien and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and these are also the texts most commonly taught in schools, so these narratives hold the most familiarity for the modern reading public. *Le Morte Darthur* has had "a major influence on writers ever since [its publication in the late 15th century] as a classic summing-up of the Arthurian tales and a translation into the form most familiar to post-medieval readers of fiction, the long prose narrative."[33] Though Malory did not introduce the characters and themes of Arthur's world, he certainly solidified them in the public imagination. Of these works, Chrétien's might be the least familiar to the average reader, but he is considered "the father not only of Arthurian verse romance in particular but of medieval romance in general…and helped to establish [the genre's] norms."[34] Chrétien's romances also introduced Camelot, Lancelot, Gawain, and Perceval, all of which became

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[32] Throughout this project, I have used various spellings of the Arthurian characters' names according to their respective spellings in their original work. Thus, all of the character names I use from these romances will be spelled according to each work's particular spelling.

[33] Davenport, 146.

[34] K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, 1st ed. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008) 65.

hallmarks of later Arthurian romances such as Malory's.[35] Most importantly, the romances I have selected are the texts which King himself would likely have been most familiar with as a literature major at the University of Maine from 1966-1970.[36] This chapter seeks to understand romance, both as a general term and as a specific lens through which to view King's *Dark Tower* by defining it and also defining the more specialized subcategory of tragic-romance, which applies to both the romances I have selected for this project and the *Dark Tower* series. For the purposes of this chapter, I will define romance with references to the texts I explore in conjunction with the *Dark Tower* series, but I reserve the full textual analysis for chapters three and four.

To understand King's use of romance, it is essential to understand what "romance" meant for medieval writers and readers. Romance is a term that is "notoriously difficult to define, largely because there is so much of it that spills over and needs subcategories and overflow tanks."[37] Even titans in the field of medieval scholarship like Ad Putter prefer to describe romance as a loose or fuzzy term.[38] However, certain features emerge as consistent trends in romance narratives and are useful to exploring romance in general, and I will propose, King's *Dark Tower* series in particular.

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[35] "Chronologies," in *Le Morte Darthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2004) xviii.

[36] Wiater, Golden and Wagner, 83.

[37] Davenport, 130.

[38] Ad Putter, "A Historical Introduction," *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, Longman, 2000) 1.

First and foremost, the romance focuses on adventure.[39] John Finlayson claims that at its heart, the term romance should only apply to narratives about knights who go forth to find and achieve adventures.[40] Paul Strohm defines romance more specifically on the basis of the history of the origin of the word and its adaptation into English as

> *romaunce* (from its original identification of the vernacular, usually French, language in which a work was written developing in English mainly to refer to 'accounts of the deeds of a single hero, with emphasis not only on martial but also on amatory and fanciful episodes').[41]

This focus on the adventures of a single hero is particularly important to romance because, as Tony Davenport claims, romance marks the beginning of a move "away from the emphasis on national sovereignty or tribal loyalty that animated the epic and the *chanson de geste* towards exploration of individual ambition and satisfaction."[42] K. S. Whetter also believes that the individual hero pursuing adventures is a key component of romance, but he claims the "defining features of English romance are the combination and interaction of love and ladies and adventure, culminating in a happy ending."[43] Whetter, more than any of these other scholars, illuminates specific trends that most romances—in the broadest sense of the term—incorporate, including:

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[39] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism; Four Essays,* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 186.

[40] John Finlayson, "*Sir Gawain* and the Expectations of Romance," *Genre* 12 (1979), 1-24.

[41] Paul Strohm, "Middle English narrative genres," *Genre* 13 (1980), 379-88, quoted in Davenport, 25.

[42] Davenport, 131.

[43] Whetter, 7.

> the penchant for verse narratives, even amongst English redactions; a movement towards prose in many late romances; a lack of fixed length, with tales ranging from several hundred to several thousand lines (hence part of the definition problem); the compositional method of interlacing; the division between secular and religious romances; the role of the marvelous (long, as we shall see, taken as a definitive feature); the invocation of authority, as opposed to Muse; the quest; the favourite forest setting; and recognition and reunion or loss and restoration (or a combination of all four).[44]

Based on all of these scholars' definitions, in its most basic form, a romance is a work in either verse or prose of varying length which interlaces different tales of one or more individual knight heroes who fight but also love, and who encounter fanciful or marvelous circumstances in a forest during their quest, culminating in a happy ending. These qualities define the essential components of romance.

Within this general definition of romance, there are, as Putter mentions, subcategories, and Arthurian romance is one of those subcategories. Romances that deal specifically with the Arthur myth contain the essential components listed above, with one essential diversion from traditional romances. While romances traditionally have happy endings, Whetter quickly concedes that Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and other Arthurian romances do not quite fit into this template because they "mingle these romance conventions with features which more appropriately belong to tragedy. Since tragedy, far from belonging to romance, is its generic opposite, [this] intermingling…results in these

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[44] Whetter, 63.

instances in the creation of a hybrid genre" which he dubs a *tragic-romance*.[45] This term more accurately represents the romances selected for this project because of their lack of a happy ending—the ending may simply seem ambiguous or it may incorporate outright tragedy, but it is rarely completely happy. Because generic definitions are usually easier to accomplish when comparing two genres to each other, Whetter describes romance in terms of epic, while borrowing terms from Eugène Vinaver. Epic as Whetter uses it focuses heavily on tragedy and pathos, and on "humanity's tragic struggles against a hostile universe."[46] In addition, Whetter states, "epic is not meant to answer questions but to raise them, evoking emotive and affective narratives and scenes; romance, in contrast, is concerned not only with narrative but with the creation of *sens*, of 'purpose', 'skill' and '*meaning*'."[47] Arthurian romance emerges from the transition from this epic (and therefore tragic) tradition to the sentiment and understanding of romance, "in which heroes might seek adventure rather than always having it forced upon them by marauding invaders."[48] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Chrétien's *The Knight of the Lion (Yvain), The Story of the Grail (Perceval)* and *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)*, and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* demonstrate the defining characteristics of romance in general while also providing more specific details, such as the quest for the Grail, Mordred's conflict with Arthur, and circular plot structure, which contribute to their

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[45] Whetter, 7.

[46] Whetter, 62-63.

[47] Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 17, qtd in Whetter, p 62.

[48] Whetter, 63.

unhappy endings, and thus their classification as tragic-romances. These qualities of the tragic romance are useful to understanding the events of the *Dark Tower* series.

Both the general definition of romance and the more specific understanding of tragic-romance are essential for examining the five Arthurian romances in question. In order to understand these romances in terms of tragic-romance, a brief summary is necessary of each. Chrétien's *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)* marks the first appearance of Lancelot in literature and the tale that establishes his love with Guinevere. She goes into the forest and Meleagant captures her. Lancelot, at this time an unknown knight to Arthur's men, must accomplish many feats to rescue her, including the act that gives the story its title: riding in a cart to rescue her (a shameful act because carts were usually used as pillories for criminals). Initially, Gawain rides with Lancelot, but they part ways, and Gawain goes on his own adventures that are interspersed within the main story. On his own, Lancelot faces a number of challenges before he ever reaches Guinevere. He must cross the sword bridge, which is a bridge made of swords that wound him as he crawls across, then joins the battle between two rival regions, and defeats a proud knight, beheading him at a maiden's request. Finally, he reaches Meleagant's castle to rescue Guinevere and Lancelot and Meleagant fight. Guinevere goes back to Camelot but Meleagant imprisons Lancelot in a tower. With help from Meleagant's sister, Lancelot eventually escapes and makes his way back to Camelot to fight Meleagant on final time, resulting in Meleagant's death. This story demonstrates the kind of interlaced side quests that frequently occur in romance, which I will revisit in chapter four.

Chrétien's *The Knight of the Lion (Yvain)* earns his title by association with a lion he rescues from a dragon. The lion then becomes his lifelong companion. This story concerns Yvain's quest to first win and then keep the love of a lady, Laudine. It contrasts personal marital happiness with the demands of the knight, as it shows the recently married Yvain encouraged by Gawain to leave his home to embark on knightly adventures. When he does not return home within a year as he promised Laudine, she forbids him from returning. In response, he goes mad with grief in the forest, is cured by a noblewoman, and dedicates himself to rediscovering his own identity and finding a way to reconcile with Laudine. During this part of the quest he rescues the lion who repays him by assisting in battles against men, demons, and a giant. Like the Lancelot narrative, Yvain also aids ladies who require assistance. In the forest, he also encounters Lancelot and Gawain battling, but because of the strangeness of the forest, neither recognizes the others. Finally, Yvain accomplishes enough good deeds to earn back Laudine's favor, and they live happily ever after. For my purposes, *Yvain* illustrates the important romance convention of the knight's madness in the face of an intense personal loss.

The last of Chrétien's romances I consider, *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*, begins with a young Perceval in Wales, where his mother has shielded him from civilization and all mention of knights to protect him from following his deceased father's dangerous occupation. As a result, when he first meets knights, he regards them with disbelief, thinking them angels. The first part of the story traces his rejection of his mother and her forms of knowledge as he follows the knights and seeks to learn their ways. Regarded as provincial by the court, Perceval sets off on various adventures, many of which reinforce male knightly values above his mother's womanly rustic advice, and

one in particular specifically warns him to avoid talking too much. When Perceval arrives at the castle of the Fisher King, these lessons create problems for him. The King was long ago wounded in his thigh, and his lands had since fallen into ruin. At dinner, Perceval witnesses the Grail procession that includes young men and women carrying a bleeding lance, then candelabra. Finally, a beautiful young girl emerges bearing an elaborately decorated grail passing before him at each course of the meal. Heeding the knight's warning, Perceval says nothing, only to later be scolded by a maiden who reveals that had he inquired after the grail and lance, he would have healed the wounded king (and implicitly, his land). While the story remains unfinished, it also includes Perceval fulfilling an earlier prophecy that he would break Kay's arm in battle, Perceval being cursed at court by a loathly hag for not healing the grail king, and Perceval setting off on a mission to find the grail and heal the king. The story leaves Perceval, its supposed main character, to focus for a great deal of time on Gawain and his adventures. Even in its unfinished state, we can see the important concepts of the knight's capacity to heal a wounded king and kingdom with the right actions, and the importance of knowledge—not only what a knight knows from his lineage and from his training, but when and where he uses that knowledge. Perceval struggles to navigate the differences between his mother's advice and the vavasour's, and he must learn to *understand* the advice given to him, rather than following it blindly. This romance also uses the intertwined narrative format in which the "main character" disappears while other adventures take place, a common technique which I will discuss in more detail in chapter four.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight describes the adventure of Sir Gawain after a mysterious knight, green from head to toe, including his skin and armor, arrives at King

Arthur's court and challenges any knight willing to deal him one blow from an ax in return for the opportunity that the knight might return the blow in one year's time at his own castle. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge, and although he cuts the knight's head off, which the court assumed would yield victory, the Green Knight picks up his head and walks away. A year later, Gawain travels to find the Green Chapel, but he first stays for three days at a lord's house in the woods. The lord, Bertilak, and his beautiful wife offer Gawain exceptional hospitality. Lord Bertilak and Gawain make an agreement that whatever Lord Bertilak catches during his hunting trips he will give to Gawain, and whatever Gawain earns during his stay at the castle he will give to Lord Bertilak.

The first day, Bertilak kills a deer while Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce Gawain in his bedroom. He rebuffs her attempts and takes only one kiss, which he gives to Bertilak in exchange for the deer. On the second day, Bertilak takes down a wild boar. Again, Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce Gawain, and again he declines. He receives two kisses, and later gives them to Bertilak in exchange for the boar. On the third day, the lady of the house offers a gold ring to Gawain, which he declines. She then offers her girdle, a magical belt that is supposed to protect the wearer from any harm. Gawain accepts, and when Bertilak returns to give Gawain the fox he caught that day, Gawain keeps the belt a secret from the lord and only gives him the three kisses he received from the lady.

Finally, Gawain travels on his way to the Green Chapel, where he takes the blow he has been promised. Rather than behead Gawain, the Green Knight leaves him with only a small scratch on the neck; he never intended to hurt Gawain, and he reveals himself as Lord Bertilak. All of the events at the castle had been designed to test

Gawain's knightly virtues, and Lord Bertilak holds him to be as ideal as humanly possible. However, because of Gawain's dishonesty about the girdle, the Green Knight did have to leave Gawain with a slight injury as a reminder of Gawain's cowardice. Gawain returns to Camelot and wears the belt and nick on his neck proudly, as a reminder to never be cowardly or covetous again. At its core, the tale concerns the temptations that knights face during their quests, and the poem's careful structure is representative of the structure of most knightly adventures: leaving on an adventure, overcoming obstacles, surviving a trial after three attempts, and returning back home. This structure will also be revisited in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* remains the most well-known and complete account of Arthur's life from birth to death. I will not summarize each of the romance's twenty-one books here, but I will describe the narrative events that have influenced the enduring image of the Arthur myth in popular culture. The first book focuses on Arthur's childhood and young adulthood, starting with his birth and later his removal of the sword from the stone. This book also introduces the reader to Merlin as powerful sorcerer and parental figure in Arthur's life, who often predicts the future, and to Guenevere, Arthur's future queen. Merlin leads Arthur to Excalibur, the famous sword given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake. Also, Arthur sleeps with his half-sister Margawse and begets Mordred, whom Merlin prophesies will be the downfall of Arthur's kingdom.

Book three sees Arthur and Guenevere married and describes the creation of the Knights of the Round Table. The next eight books are a collection of various knightly adventures, including those of Gawaine, Launcelot, and Gareth, and battles against rival kingdoms. These knightly adventures usually involve fighting other knights on behalf of

damsels in distress, competing in jousting tournaments anonymously against fellow knights of the Round Table, and freeing prisoners. A woman named Elaine beds Launcelot twice under false pretenses (once pretending she is Guinevere), resulting in the birth of Galahad and Lancelot's madness in the forest once he realizes his "betrayal" of Guinevere's love. Launcelot is healed by the Grail and returns to Camelot when Galahad comes of age at 15. We are also introduced to the love affair between Launcelot and Guenevere, though in this section Malory takes pains to depict their love as courtly, based on Launcelot's service to Guenevere, rather than explicitly adulterous.

The next six books focus on the quest for the grail, following Galahad, Percivale, Launcelot, and Bors individually as they journey through the wilderness to find the Sankgreall. Each of these knights face trials and obstacles along the way. Galahad must overcome pride and covetousness when choosing which fork in a crossroads to take. Percivale and Bors both receive visions that depict temptation in the wilderness. For example, Percivale sees two women: one on a lion, who comes to warn him of a great battle that will befall him, and the other on a serpent, who offers herself in order to tempt Percivale to betray his baptism in Christ. Launcelot falls into a trance and has his armor, his clothes, his horse, and his weaponry taken away from him. Only when he asks forgiveness from God and atones for his sins can he continue in the grail quest. Finally, Galahad, Bors, and Percivale find the Sankgreall and use it to heal King Pellam, Malory's version of Chrétien's Fisher King, a ruler whose injury has caused his lands to become barren and desolate wastelands. Galahad and Percivale then die, and Bors returns to Camelot.

The last four books bring the Launcelot-Guenevere-Arthur love triangle to a head, culminating in the deaths of Arthur and many others. Because these events are so central to a modern understanding of Arthurian legend, I will describe them in more detail. Launcelot and Guenevere have grown careless in hiding their affair. Malory no longer depicts their relationship as following the chaste standards of courtly love, but as physical and sexual, and the kingdom becomes much more aware of their relationship. Launcelot saves Guenevere from being burned at the stake when she is accused of murder; he rescues her from the same fate again after Sir Meliagrance kidnaps her and accuses her of sexual treason; and when Agravaine and Mordred seize the long-awaited opportunity to reveal Launcelot and Guenevere's relationship, Arthur is forced to sentence Guenevere to burn at the stake and Launcelot rescues her a third time. In this last battle to save Guenevere, Launcelot inadvertently kills many of the Knights of the Round Table who were guarding the queen, including Gawain's younger brothers Gareth and Gaheris. Launcelot flees to France and Arthur takes the fight to him. Gawain, seeking revenge for his brothers' death, duels with Launcelot twice, but both times Gawain loses and asks Launcelot to kill him. Launcelot refuses both times.

Mordred has taken Arthur's absence as an opportunity to usurp the throne. When Arthur calls his troops back to Camelot, Gawain is dying from a wound Launcelot inflicted with a cursed sword and he writes to Launcelot to beg him to help Arthur defeat Mordred. Arthur and Mordred fight three battles, and in the final one, at Salisbury Plain, Arthur impales Mordred with a spear. As Mordred is dying, he impales himself further onto the spear so he can strike a killing blow to Arthur's head with his sword. Just before Arthur dies, he commands Bedivere to throw Excalibur into the lake, where the Lady of

the Lake seizes it. Then a boat appears, carrying ladies in black hoods who take Arthur to his grave. The inscription on Arthur's tomb—"*Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus"*—reads "Here lies Arthur, king once, king to be."[49] After Arthur's death, the company of the Round Table dissolves, Guenevere becomes a nun, and Launcelot becomes a monk. The most well known of all Arthurian romances, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* highlights all of the major elements of romance—love, adventures, madness, the quest for the Grail in the wilderness and wastelands, and of course, the interlaced narrative format.

Each of these romances illustrates clearly the standards Whetter proposes a romance must include, although nearly all of them incorporate tragedy. Although Whetter argues that a romance should always focus on "love, ladies, adventure and happy ending"[50] most of these romances that have captivated our popular culture have ambiguous or even tragic endings and are actually considered tragic-romances. Of all the romances that I explore, only *Yvain* achieves a traditional romantic ending, as Yvain happily reunites with his estranged wife. The other romances listed here are more problematic. Chrétien's other tales complicate the issue, because Chrétien did not complete the ending for either *Perceval* or *Lancelot*. The endings to these tales were added later by other authors, and given Chrétien's innovative experimentation with the possibilities of this genre, it is possible that he had something in mind other than a traditional happy ending for these tales.[51] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appears

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[49] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur,* ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2004) 689.

[50] Whetter, 95.

[51] Whetter, 88.

superficially to have a happy ending because Gawain survives his encounter with the Green Knight and returns to Camelot. However, Gawain is greatly upset by the cowardice and covetousness he displayed. He knows his failure as a knight will live on forever because, "one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit,/For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore."[52] So great is Gawain's "self-loathing that some critics consider him to remain in a state of sin at the poem's close, a fact which would undermine any possibility of a happy ending."[53] *Le Morte Darthur* ends with the death of Arthur and many of his Knights of the Round Table, as well as the disintegration of Camelot. The endings of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur* particularly focus on the loss of an ideal world or state of being, which is a quality unique to Arthurian romance. Gawain suffers a loss of his status as the perfect knight because of his cowardice and Malory's narrative ends with the dissolution of Camelot and most of the Knights of the Round Table dead or scattered. The most enduring stories of Arthur and his knights surviving in our culture contain these definitive qualities of the tragic. Because of the enduring popularity of these tragic-romances, Arthurian legend now connotes a complicated mix of emotions and generic conventions, a mixture that King manipulates in the *Dark Tower* series.

Romance is a good starting point for an examination of King's series, but as McAleer, Strengell and Egan have shown, the *Dark Tower* series resists fitting into one broad generic category. The same can be said of the subcategory of Arthurian romance.

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[52] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Simon Armitage, 1st ed. (London: Faber, 2007) lines 2511-12.

[53] Whetter, 95. See also J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge, 1965) 156; and W.R.J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, (London: Longman, 1987) 172-3.

Therefore, only a hybrid genre, like tragic-romance, can successfully accommodate the complicated nature of both Arthurian romances and the *Dark Tower*. James Egan confirms the tendency of the *Dark Tower* to embrace the tragic and ambiguous elements of the epic when he says, "The *Dark Tower*'s generic and thematic impulses, in fact, typically disrupt the reader's pattern of expectations, offering him questions, not solutions."[54] The comparison with tragic-romance suits the *Dark Tower* best because King's series ends in tragedies of death and a victory left hollow because the conclusion finds Roland starting over again without the opportunity to celebrate, or even remember, his victory. Therefore, the hybrid of tragedy and romance that Whetter defines better applies to King's series than any of McAleer's generic categories, likely because Arthurian romance is its inspiration, and Arthurian romances are themselves a generic hybrid, with elements of both tragedy and romance.

The problematic ending is a quality that King appropriates from these tragic-romances in the *Dark Tower* series. King takes the tragic ending one step further in that Roland doesn't actually have an ending; once he has reached his Tower, he must begin his quest all over again in the Mohaine Desert. This ending-as-beginning is one of the many ways that King modernizes the Arthurian romance while continuing its traditions at the same time. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner says in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, "The pleasure of romance is usually to be found in the play of

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[54] James Egan, "*The Dark Tower:* Stephen King's Gothic Western," in *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmare*, 1st ed., eds. Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987) 100.

resemblance spiced with difference."[55] Just as Malory borrowed and adapted from Chrétien, King borrows from these medieval authors and spices his tales with the differences of a modern novel. By using Roland's world to illuminate the same ideals of Arthur's world, King utilizes a common trope in modern-day Arthurian fiction, namely that despite technological progress, mankind has changed very little over the centuries.[56]

Perhaps the most important aspect of the romance, that which separates it from every other genre, revolves around the presentation of an ideal place and time, and the subsequent loss and yearning for that place and time. These particular tragic-romances praise the civilizing force of Camelot and its code of chivalry, and lament the destructive power of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair in destroying the kingdom, leading to the ambiguity and tragedy that ends the romances. The appeal of the love and light of romance is because of the inherent "view of romance as myth displaced in an anthropocentric direction, tales evoking a golden world."[57] The perfect worlds of Arthur's Camelot and Roland's Gilead are idealized as beacons of civilization in the midst of chaos and violence. In *Le Morte Darthur* when Arthur dies, Camelot does not fall in the same way that Gilead falls—there is no siege and the city is not overtaken by rebel forces. Rather, the Knights of the Round Table abandon the kingdom, as Bors, Galyhud, Galyhodyn, Blamour, Bleoberis, Wyllyars, Clarrus, and Gahallantyne come to

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[55] Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "The Shape of Romance in Medieval France," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, 1st ed. Ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 23.

[56] Raymond H. Thompson, The Return from Avalon: a Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction, 1st ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985) 171.

[57] Whetter, 63.

stay at the same monastery as Launcelot for seven years.[58] After Launcelot dies, Sir Constantyn then becomes King of England, and the remaining Knights of the Round Table go to their own countries. King Constantyn "wold have had them with hym, but they wold not abyde in this royame."[59] With the death of Arthur came the metaphorical death of Camelot, although the idea of Arthur as a once and future king makes it appear that perhaps a turn in the Wheel of Fortune will allow a return to those halcyon days sometime in the future. That restoration of an idealized past is what Roland is questing for as he seeks to heal the cancer affecting the Beams and the Dark Tower.

This idealized past, a key aspect of Arthurian romances, allows King to use the basic template of Arthurian romance in order to comment on the world of his contemporary readers, especially those readers who are as invested in American culture as King. King Arthur is simply an old fictional character in America, but there was another more recent Camelot in America's historical past—the administration of John F. Kennedy. King describes Kennedy as "the last gunslinger of the western world" and Susannah immediately grasps the parallel, claiming, "Roland possessed little of Kennedy's imagination, but when it came to romance…dedication…charisma…*And guile,* she thought. *Don't forget guile.*"[60] Comparisons between the Kennedy administration and Camelot were so prevalent as to become the stuff of American myth. When JFK's youngest brother, Edward, died in 2009, headlines read "Kennedy's death

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[58] Malory, 693.

[59] Malory, 697.

[60] King, *The Waste Lands*, 365.

marks the end of Camelot."[61] JFK was Arthur, his wife Jackie was the ideal Guinevere should have been, and his presidency, though rife with political turmoil, was viewed as a bright spot in the turbulent and violent environment of 1960's America. Readers of King's *Dark Tower* series will recognize Roland's longing to save the universe and return his world to the way it once was when Gilead still stood, because that same longing exists when speaking about the mythical grandeur of Kennedy's Camelot.

The problem with perfect civilizations like Camelot and Gilead is that the perfection is only on the surface. Each of these kingdoms had a seed of corruption planted within that eventually caused them to fall to ruin. In Arthur's Camelot, that corrupting force is the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere, and the resentment Mordred holds towards Arthur. In the *Dark Tower* series, the problems in Roland's world come from the hubris of the Old Ones, who invented the technology that is now crumbling and breaking down. The Old Ones created wonders of engineering and architecture but they were focused solely on creating more and more dangerous weapons—a goal they succeeded to attain so well that "they wiped out their own civilization and transformed Mid-World into a poisoned, desiccated wasteland."[62] Even an enlightened society like Gilead cannot withstand the slow effects of this poisoning and eventually the destructive slide toward entropy in Mid-World began. Time becomes slippery, and even cardinal directions are unfixed. Roland's world is slowly tumbling into chaos, and it seems to be because of a loss of something—the loss of reason, the Old Ones' abandonment of real magic (not magic made of electric lights and clockwork) and

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[61] Mike Celizic, "Kennedy's death marks the end of Camelot," *TODAY News,* Today.com, 26 August 2009.

[62] Furth, *Concordance, Vol. I,* 6.

the loss of the force of good in Roland's world known as the White. When Roland brings the other members of his *ka-tet* together, the force of the White grows stronger, and the quest to stop, and eventually reverse, the decay that has infested Roland's world truly begins. By reading Roland's journey through the lens of Arthurian romances, we reveal the ways in which King connects the *Dark Tower* series to a rich literary tradition and better understand how King's narrative functions as a modern tragic-romance.

Chapter Three: Knights and Gunslingers and Quests

"The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."
--*The Gunslinger/The Dark Tower*[63]

There are two main ways that any narrative can be similar to another: content and structure. The *Dark Tower* series has multiple similarities to *Le Morte Darthur,* Chrétien's Arthurian romances, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* on both of these levels. This chapter seeks to explore the motifs, themes, and character archetypes that are integral to both Arthurian romance and the *Dark Tower*, while my final chapter elucidates the structural debts the *Dark Tower* series owes to romance. While the parallels I draw between the *Dark Tower* series and Arthurian romance are broad at times, that does not make them insignificant. King's series stubbornly refuses simple generic definitions, and no study of King and Arthurian romance has ever been done, so even these broad parallels are important. Furthermore, by looking at specific details, such as the Grail/Tower quest and the prophecy surrounding Mordred's birth in both narratives, knowledge of Arthurian romance allows for great insight into King's status as a literary artist and adept reader of Arthurian legend. In this chapter I will examine the central figure of these narratives—in Arthurian romances, the knight, and in the *Dark Tower*, the gunslinger—as well as the primary source of a romance's adventure, the quest. Then I will explore the role of the supernatural, specifically in the form of prophecy and prophetic dreams, in both romance and King's series.

Possibly the most recognizable hallmark of Arthurian stories is the knight. The presence of knights in romances may have been politically motivated because the portrayal of knights working together under a great king like Arthur rather than for their

[63] King, *The Gunslinger*, 3.

own individual codes of honor helped to support feudal monarchies during the twelfth century.[64] Knights were ideals of earthly conduct, occasionally exaggerated. For example, when Perceval sees his first knight, he is "captivated and astonished, and said: 'Lord God, I give You thanks! These are angels I see before me.'"[65] Knights capture attention, and because of their armor they appear formidable and distinctive. One must become a knight; as the knight in the woods tells Perceval, "it's impossible for anyone to be born like this…King Arthur knighted me and gave me all these trappings."[66] All Arthurian romances center around knights, and K.S. Whetter even claims that Chrétien's *The Knight with the Lion (Yvain)* supports "the notion that romance is ultimately concerned with a self-portrait of knighthood, its ideals and customs."[67]

The figure of the knight also underscores the movement in romance towards individualism and singular heroes, because although the knights in these romances are united under Arthur's reign and by the code of the Round Table, each knight seeks to receive recognition for his individual accomplishments.[68] The idea of personal ambition and satisfaction is particularly appropriate for the quests that these Knights of the Round Table embark on, as well as Roland's quest for the Dark Tower. Though they may be bringing glory or recognition to the kingdom of Camelot or Gilead, ultimately the individual knight is the one who receives the accolades and personal knowledge or

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[64] Whetter, 62.

[65] Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler, 1st ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 382.

[66] Chrétien de Troyes, 385.

[67] Whetter, 66.

[68] Davenport, 131.

enlightenment. Often, Knights of the Round Table joust with each other in disguise, winning tournaments as individuals not necessarily affiliated with Camelot or King Arthur.

Le Morte Darthur, more than any of the other romances, explicitly enumerates the expectations of a knight. Malory lays out the customs that dictate the behavior of the Knights of the Round Table specifically during the Pentecostal Oath, wherein knights are sworn to give mercy to those who ask for mercy, always aid ladies and gentlewomen, take no battles in a wrongful quarrel "and every yere so were they sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste."[69] The oath is one that must be repeated annually, so that each year knights recommit to the ideals of Camelot and the chivalric code. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not explicitly mention the Pentecostal Oath, but Gawain's shield displays a pentangle which is "a token of truth."[70] The star is "a figure formed of five points, / And each line is linked and locked with the next" in a never-ending pattern, and for Gawain, these five points show that he is "ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion / …Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned in sight."[71] The pentangle represents perfection and virtue, which corresponds well with the values of the Pentecostal Oath because of the high standards it demands of the knight who wears it.[72] This call for perfection clearly reveals how idealized knights were in Arthur's world and why they were accepted as unquestionable authority figures.

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[69] Malory, 77.

[70] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 626.

[71] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 632-635.

[72] M. Victoria Guerin, *The Fall of Kings and Princes: Structure and Destruction in Arthurian Tragedy*, 1st ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995) 201.

After knights demonstrate their adherence to the code of conduct that Arthur requires, they must prove themselves worthy in some way to bear the title of knight. This requires two things: a noble bloodline and a demonstration of some strength. Unlike swearing the Pentecostal Oath, there is no set ritual that a knight must perform, and, in fact, at times it takes very little to be called a knight. This may be seen most clearly in Chrétien's *Perceval* when Perceval demands of Arthur to make him a knight, saying, "I'll never be a knight if I'm not a red knight. Grant me the armour of the knight I met outside your gate"[73] and when Kay sarcastically tells him to take the armor himself, Perceval kills the red knight and takes his armor. When Arthur hears of Perceval's victory, he lashes out at Kay, saying, "you've driven from me a knight who today has done me a great service."[74] This occurs before Perceval meets the vavasour who trains him in combat; at this point, the only claims Perceval has for the knighthood are his lineage, because his father was a knight, and his defeat of the red knight. Even though Perceval doesn't come back to court or speak to Arthur, because Perceval has proved victorious in a physical battle and won his armor Arthur refers to him as a knight. Similarly, in *Le Morte Darthur*, Launcelot dubs his son Galahad a knight before they even reach Camelot. Galahad performs a remarkable feat by pulling a sword from a stone, which is a clear sign that Galahad has earned his knighthood because of its inscription: "Never shall man take me hense but only he by whos side I ought to honge: and he shall be the beste knight of the worlde."[75] At this point Arthur proclaims that Galahad is the best knight ever, but

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[73] Chrétien, 393.

[74] Chrétien, 396.

[75] Malory, 498.

the fact remains that Galahad had the title of knight *before* he demonstrated any sort of achievement besides being Launcelot's son.

Nobility is thus clearly required to be a knight, and knighthood was a profession that passed through noble families. Arthur's nephews Gawain, Gareth, Agravain, and Gaheris are all Knights of the Round Table in *Le Morte Darthur*, as is Yvain, who is the son of Arthur's half-sister, Morgan la Fay. Malory's Gareth is a particularly telling example of the necessity of a noble bloodline. Gareth comes to Camelot and disguises himself as a kitchen boy. When a damsel comes to court asking for help, Gareth asks to go help her, and Launcelot accompanies them. After wounding Kay and nearly besting Launcelot in a friendly sparring match, Gareth asks that Launcelot knight him, but Launcelot demands, "Sir, than muste ye tell me your name of ryght, and of what kyn ye be borne."[76] Only then does Gareth reveal that he is Arthur's nephew, and Launcelot is pleased because "For evir me thought ye sholde be of grete bloode."[77] Launcelot then knights him right away. In this case, Gareth is only legitimized as a knight—despite nearly defeating Launcelot, the best knight in the world—after he has proved his nobility.

Knights are defined by their code of conduct, their nobility, and their demonstration of physical strength and worth, and these qualifications apply to gunslingers as well, with a few marked differences. The Pentecostal Oath seems to be the literary forerunner of the code of conduct which Roland is taught as a gunslinger in Gilead. Just like knights, gunslingers are required to live by a set of rules and expectations, complete with rituals and litanies that must be observed and spoken. Of all

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[76] Malory, 182.

[77] Malory, 182.

these rituals, the one that most exemplifies what it means to be a gunslinger is the litany that Roland teaches Eddie, Susannah, and Jake, just as his teachers taught it to him:

> I do not aim with my hand; he who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I aim with my eye. I do not shoot with my hand; he who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I shoot with my mind. I do not kill with my gun; he who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father. I kill with my heart.[78]

This oath privileges the patriarchal society of Gilead and the individual instincts necessary to be a killer. Again, value is placed on individual accomplishment contextualized within a larger network; in this case, each individual gunslinger is responsible for his/her kill, but that kill is connected to the legacy of that gunslinger's forefathers.

One of the fundamental differences between the knights of Arthur's world and the gunslingers of Roland's is the way their individual codes treat killing. Also like knights, gunslingers are the lawmakers and peacekeepers of their world. Whereas Arthur's knights pledge to give mercy and avoid battles if the quarrel is unwarranted, gunslingers are trained to view potential conflicts warily and as inevitably ending in violence. Roland explains the role of the gunslinger to a representative of the town of Calla Bryn Sturgis when they ask for help defeating the Wolves:

> "We're bound to do as you ask, if we judge your Calla in the White and those you call Wolves as agents of the outer dark: Beam-breakers, if you ken. We may take

[78] King, *The Waste Lands*, 26.

> *no* reward for our services, and you must not offer…I told you we deal in lead, and so we do. But that doesn't make us hired guns."[79]

This reinforces that gunslingers must follow rules of conduct, even when the end result is death to their enemies. The brutality that gunslingers deal out is part of their training and part of their oath to protect the ways of Eld and the ways of the White. Even when Gilead still stood, before the events of the series begins, the gunslingers charged with protecting the values of the kingdom believed that violence was an integral part of their work, saying, "First come smiles, then lies. Last is gunfire."[80] This inevitable violence stands in stark contrast to the Pentecostal Oath's requirement to avoid battles in wrongful quarrels.

Roland comes from Gilead, a kingdom similar to Camelot, where "the light of civilization was championed, [with] its ideals of fairness, justice, compassion—of fundamental human worth whatever class or land that person might come from."[81] King's narrative begins with Gilead now in ruins, in Roland's world that has moved on; here, violence is even more widespread and, for the gunslingers, welcomed. This unexpected quality of the gunslingers in King's series may be because "modern fiction tends to humanize traditional figures. One result of this is that characters are less often completely good or bad than in romance."[82] Although the gunslingers live by a code of conduct and ritual similar to knights, King's characters are much more complicated than their Arthurian counterparts because theirs is a world that was once civilized but is now in

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[79] Stephen King, *The Dark Tower V: Wolves of the Calla*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 2006) 144.

[80] King*, Wolves of the Calla,* xxi.

[81] Furth, *Concordance Vol. I*, 7.

[82] Thompson, *The Return from Avalon*, 176.

decay and chaos as a result of war and nuclear holocaust. Living in a post-apocalyptic world demands a more brutal brand of hero, like Roland and his companions.

Unlike knights, gunslingers have a very particular set of rituals and rites in which they must participate to transition from apprentice to gunslinger. Roland was 14 years old when he passed his test of manhood by challenging his teacher to a duel, as was tradition. The apprentice enters the yard from the west, beyond which lay the barbarian forests outside of Gilead. The teacher enters the yard from the east, "which faced the Great Hall and all of its symbolic civilization."[83] Then a series of questions must be asked and answered:

> "Have you come here for a serious purpose, boy?"
>
> "I have come for a serious purpose, teacher."
>
> "Have you come as an outcast from your father's house?"
>
> "I have so come, teacher."
>
> "Have you come with your chosen weapon?"
>
> "I have so come, teacher."
>
> "What is your weapon?"[84]

Once the weapon is stated, the apprentice and the teacher do battle, nearly to the point of death. The student must battle the teacher rather than a peer to prove superiority and to conquer the past generation. This suggests that progress occurs only through more and more brutal acts of violence, as gunslingers must become more bloodthirsty in order to best the previous generation. Again, gunslingers must highlight their individual skills first

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[83] Furth, *Concordance, Vol. I*, 214.

[84] King, *The Gunslinger*, 232.

and foremost, rather than their ability to function as part of a group, and the duel with their teacher echoes the many jousts that Knights of the Round Table perform in order to prove their individual excellence.

One fundamental difference between knights and gunslingers is that anyone can become a gunslinger if they show promise in the way of the gun, as long as they can pass the final test of manhood. Showing aptitude is more important than desire when it comes to the way of the gun; while Roland is training Eddie, Eddie asks "What if I told you I don't want to *be* a gunslinger, Roland old buddy?" to which Roland replies, "I'd say that what you want doesn't much matter."[85] This implies that in some ways, gunslingers are born, not made—the opposite of Arthurian knights. When Gilead still stood, only men were trained as apprentice gunslingers, but King also modernizes the character of the knight by allowing a woman, Susannah, to become a gunslinger. Raymond H. Thompson argues that women are paid more attention and given more agency in modern-day Arthurian fiction as a result of modern fiction's tendency to humanize traditional characters and make them more complex.[86] King accomplishes what Thompson is arguing by presenting traditional characters, like gunslingers, in new and complicated ways, and including more diversity in the types of gunslinger we see, like Susannah. As Roland discovers when he meets Susannah (and later the women of Calla Bryn Sturgis, who do not carry guns but sharpened metal plates with which they decapitate their enemies), women are more than capable of killing in the name of the White. In addition, unlike Arthurian knights, none of the members of Roland's *ka-tet* come from nobility;

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[85] King, *The Waste Lands*, 105.

[86] Thompson, 177.

Eddie is a recovering drug addict, Susannah is an African-American woman with multiple personalities, Jake is an 11-year-old boy whose parents ignore him, and Oy is an animal. None of these characters have the heritage of Arthur's knights, yet they all prove themselves capable of living up to the gunslingers' code. In this light, we can see King taking a broad approach to modernizing Arthurian knights.

This does not mean that lineage is not important in King's narrative. In many ways, for Roland, it is crucial. Roland becomes a gunslinger because his father was a gunslinger, and his father before him, and so on. Roland is a direct descendant of Arthur Eld. Much like King Arthur in our world, "[t]here appear to be two Arthur Elds—the mythical Arthur Eld, who was the first king to arise after the Prim receded and who was the ancestor of both the line of Deschain and the Crimson King, and the historical Arthur Eld, forefather of [Roland] Deschain."[87] Roland's royal lineage may be part of the reason he has survived longer than any of his fellow gunslingers; at times, Roland takes on the mantle of his ancestor king so well that his enemies have time to think "*Gods, it's him! It's Arthur Eld himself come to take me!*"[88] But by his own admission, Roland does not consider himself worthy to uphold the legacy of the royal blood in his veins. In *The Gunslinger,* he admits, "My father was the last lord of light."[89] Though Roland acknowledges his duties as a gunslinger, he does not consider himself a hero, or as being inherently worthy of saving the Dark Tower in spite of his royal blood.

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[87] Furth, *Concordance Vol. II*, 410.

[88] Stephen King, *The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass*, 2nd ed. (New York: Signet, 1998) 581.

[89] King, *The Gunslinger*, 207.

Roland is problematic to view as heroic, even though King explicitly describes Roland in the preface to *The Waste Lands* as "a kind of knight, one of those charged with holding (or possibly redeeming) a world Roland remembers as being 'filled with love and light.'"[90] He has the trappings of a knight-like figure, including his distinctive brand of weapon—the two guns with sandalwood grips that he inherited from his father and his father before him, all the way back to Arthur Eld. The guns are unlike any others in all of the worlds because of their history and also because of the scrollwork near the muzzle:

This is the mark of Arthur Eld, the only mark on the door of his tomb, and it means WHITE.[91] The guns are one of the ways that others identify Roland immediately as a gunslinger, and they are also the key to unlocking the door to the Tower. As one woman of River Crossing says when Roland and his *ka-tet* pass through on their way to the city of Lud: "'Behold ye, the return of the White. After evil ways and evil days, the White comes again! Be of good heart and hold up your heads, for ye have lived to see the wheel of *ka* begin to turn once more.'"[92]

In spite of his affiliation with the White, Roland resists classification as a hero—he slaughters the entire town of Tull because they stand in the way of the Tower, and he sacrifices people he's come to love over the course of the series so that he may continue on his quest. But, he is the last remaining representative of the only force of good that exists in his world. King presents us with a knight who in many ways lives up to what we

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[90] King, *The Waste Lands*, 9-10.

[91] King, *The Dark Tower*, 622.

[92] King, *The Waste Lands*, 327-28.

expect from an Arthurian knight; Roland is duty-bound to certain rituals, he values the love and light of the civilization he's left behind, and he always helps those in need. However, Roland commits unspeakable sins, including killing his brother-in-arms, his childhood friend Alain Johns. Just as Gawain dies from the wound Launcelot gave him[93] Alain "was shot in the dark the night before the final battle by his two best friends, a stupid error, a horrible death."[94] Among Roland's numerous slaughters, the betrayal of the bonds of *ka-tet* is his most egregious sin, as he commits it not once, but twice when he lets Jake fall into the darkness below the Cyclopean Mountains so that he may continue after the Man in Black.[95]

The cost for killing a fellow knight is high; both Launcelot and Roland are allowed to see the goal that they have been questing for, but neither of them actually achieves closure at the end of their respective quests.[96] Launcelot is allowed to see the Sankgreall but not to touch it or use it. When he approaches it, "he felte a breeth that hym thought hit was entromedled with fyre, which smote hym so sore in the vysayge that hym thought hit brente hys vysayge—and therewith he felle to the erthe, and had no power to aryse, as he that had loste the power of hys body, and hys hyryng and syght."[97] Roland is allowed to enter his Tower and understand its secrets, but only briefly; once he

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[93] Malory, 681.

[94] King, *Wolves of the Calla*, 220.

[95] King, *The Gunslinger*, 266-267.

[96] Launcelot sees the Grail, but is not allowed to go near it—see Malory, 576-77. Roland reaches the Dark Tower, but is forced to repeat his journey all over again with no memory of his past—see King, *The Dark Tower*, 996-98.

[97] Malory, 577.

understands that he has achieved his goal numerous times, he's back at the start again. For Roland, there is never truly an end to his quest—only beginnings.

Apart from the figure of the knight, the other most recognizable hallmark of Arthurian stories is the quest. The quest allows for knights to demonstrate their prowess and ability to exemplify the values of their code of conduct. Roland's quest is obviously to reach the Dark Tower, and the quest most famously attributed to Arthurian legends is the quest for the grail. King scholars often equate these two quests. Robin Furth, in her concordance to the series explains, "like a knight from the Arthurian legends of our world, Roland is on a quest. His 'grail' is the Dark Tower, the lynchpin of the Time/Space continuum, and his goal is to climb to its very top and question the god or demon who resides there."[98] At their core, though, the quest for the Dark Tower and the quest for the grail are both quests for knowledge.

For Arthur's knights, the quest for the grail is about understanding the grail—who feeds from it, where it came from, and how to use it to heal the Fisher King in Chrétien, or the Maimed King in Malory. However, knowledge is at times dangerous, because of the idea that "there are some things that individuals cannot or should not know, and that the pursuit of such knowledge is complete foolishness and encumbered with pride."[99] For a knight like Chrétien's Perceval, only knowledge can help him achieve his quest for the grail. When he visits the castle of the injured Fisher King, he sees the grail and a lance bleeding from its tip but does not say anything in spite of his curiosity. On the third day after he arrives back at Camelot, a damsel arrives and angrily scolds Perceval, telling

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[98] Furth, *Concordance Vol. I*, 2.

[99] McAleer, 63.

him, "you saw that it was the time and place to speak yet kept your silence!…Cursed be the hour you kept silent since, if you had asked, the rich king who is suffering so would already be healed of his wound and would be ruling in peace over the land he shall now never again command."[100] Perceval has received conflicting information from his mother and from the vavasour who trained him, and never evaluates the merits of this advice. He follows his mother's teachings blindly and then abandons those teachings for the vavasour's. Perceval seeks the grail to understand its mystery, but this quest also represents Perceval's growth as a knight, because he is attempting to discover knowledge himself and understand when and how to use it, rather than blindly following advice that has been given to him. Thus, quests of this magnitude are not only about finding knowledge, but also knowing when and where to use that knowledge.

Often, we think of quests as being tasks that are assigned to specific knights as a result of a challenge—for example, Perceval is explicitly told that he should be looking for the grail to help heal the Fisher King in Chrétien's *Perceval,*[101] and the Green Knight tells Gawain that he must come back in a year to accept the blow he is owed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[102] However, the grail quest is presented as somewhat arbitrary and self-imposed in the work that made it truly famous, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.[103] Though the Sankgreall appeared in the narrative previously, the first mention

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[100] Chrétien, 438.

[101] Chrétien, 438.

[102] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* lines 297-300.

[103] Though Chrétien's *The Story of the Grail* came first, Malory's inventions—namely that the Grail is a Christian artifact, and that multiple knights from the Round Table are questing for it—have entered into the popular culture to a much greater extent than Chrétien's version of the story has.

of the quest for the grail is when Launcelot says "And I woll that ye weyte that thys same day shall the adventure of the Sankgreall begynne, that vs called the holy vessel."[104] Later, when the knights of the Round Table are feasting at Camelot at Pentecost, the Holy Grail appears in the hall "coverede with whyght samyte, but there was none that myght se hit"[105] causing Sir Gawayne to claim that he will never "returne unto the courte agayne tylle I have sene hit more opynly than hit hath bene shewed here."[106] The other knights agree with Gawayne and the quest for the Sankgreall begins.

Roland's quest for the Tower seems equally arbitrary, but the dire circumstances in his world certainly beg for someone to take action. When we first join Roland in the narrative, Gilead has fallen to the rebel forces of a man named John Farson, who is himself a pawn of the Crimson King—the antagonist to Roland's protagonist, and the entity who is seeking to destroy the Dark Tower, and all of existence with it. Like Malory's knights, Roland is not given his quest; he explicitly states that he made the promise to himself[107] rather than to some outside source, and he voluntarily charges himself with finding the Tower after he has a vision of its impending destruction.[108] This speaks to the trend in Arthurian romance to the desire for individual achievement rather than for the good of society. Even though Roland is attempting to save the Tower, and in so doing, save all of the universes the Tower encompasses, he is ultimately questing for his own purposes that he never fully explains.

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[104] Malory, 498.

[105] Malory, 503.

[106] Malory, 503.

[107] King, *Gunslinger,* 295; *Wizard and Glass,* 597.

[108] King, *Wizard and Glass*, 596.

By saving the Tower, Roland attempts to bring about a restoration of sorts, or at the very least a move towards regaining the civilization that his world once knew. Roland speaks of Gilead with a longing for what it once was: "all light, it was an island of light."[109] But the wheel of *ka* has turned and the world has moved on, just as the Wheel of Fortune predicts the fall of Arthur and Camelot in Arthur's dream before his final showdown with Mordred.[110] It is more than simply destiny that brings about the ruin of these kingdoms. Mortal men put their faith in the wrong places—in Arthur's world, faith needs to be put in God, not in men, even men as great as Arthur. Thus, it "is not fate which destroys the Arthurian idyll, but…moral and spiritual forces generated by the characters themselves," according to Jane H.M. Taylor.[111] In Roland's world, a similar idea is true. The people of Mid-World put their faith in the machines of the Great Old Ones, who created wonders of engineering and architecture, rather than the strength of the Dark Tower and its natural magic, but in the end, the Old Ones' "technological wizardry was focused on one endpoint…the creation of more and more dangerous weapons."[112] They succeeded in their hubris and arrogance to destroy their civilization and transform Mid-World "into a poisoned, desiccated wasteland."[113] Roland must begin his quest in order to heal this poisoned world.

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[109] King, *The Gunslinger*, 205.

[110] Malory, 683.

[111] Jane H.M. Taylor, "The thirteenth-century Arthur," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend,* 1st ed. Eds Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 63.

[112] Furth, *Concordance Vol. I,* 6.

[113] Furth, *Concordance Vol. I*, 6.

Roland's experience in the top room of the Dark Tower speaks of the horror of living in our modern world—he is allowed to glimpse the truth of his many journeys to the Tower but is forced to forget that knowledge almost as soon as it is learned. Indeed, it is a moment of understanding that Roland is forced to go back to over and over, because he is not sent back to the beginning "(when things might have been changed and time's curse lifted), but to that moment in the Mohaine Desert when he had finally understood that his thoughtless, questionless quest would ultimately succeed."[114] For Roland and for those knights seeking the Grail, the pursuit of knowledge is what sets them on their quest and what curses them.

The thirst for knowledge that motivates these quests may also be influenced by the presence of the supernatural in both Arthurian romance and the *Dark Tower* series. The Man in Black tells Roland as much during their palaver in *The Gunslinger*: "Few if any seemed to have grasped the truest principle of reality: new knowledge leads always to yet more awesome mysteries."[115] Knights and gunslingers encounter unexplained and mysterious places, people, and events along their journeys, and understanding these phenomena is another attempt to gain knowledge. As Whetter explains, the "marvelous in romance tends to be preternatural rather than supernatural, a reflexion of magic rather than the gods or God…the marvelous should be considered *a* feature of romance, often one which instigates the action or adventure."[116] One of the most prominent supernatural

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[114] King, *The Dark Tower*, 1028.

[115] King, *The Gunslinger*, 287.

[116] Whetter, 96.

phenomena included in romance and the *Dark Tower* is the gift of prophecy, both spoken and in dreams.

The supernatural is often presented in the form of magic, primarily through the work of magicians or sorcerers, and this type of magic is present in the romances in question and in the *Dark Tower*. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Merlin is capable of performing spells of protection, of disguise, and of defense, but his gift of prophecy has the greatest impact on Malory's narrative. For example, Merlin prophesies the outcome of the quest for the Sankgreall: "By them which sholde be felowys of the Rounde Table the truth of the Sankgreall sholde be well knowyn…There sholde be three whyght bullis sholde encheve hit: and the two sholde be madyns and the thirde sholde be chaste."[117] These bulls represent Percivale and Galahad (both virgins) and Bors, who is chaste although he was once tricked into sleeping with a woman through magic. These three knights are the only ones who eventually achieve the Sankgreall. Merlin also warns Arthur that the enemy who will destroy him and his kingdom was born on May Day, which causes Arthur to send dozens of children born in the month of May to their deaths in an attempt to kill Mordred.[118] In spite of these precautions, Merlin's prophecy eventually comes true.

Prophecy is not limited to sorcerers, though. Nearly all of the Knights of the Round Table who journey on the grail quest in *Le Morte Darthur* experience prophetic dreams during their travels. Usually full of symbolism, the dreams require interpretation, and knights frequently ask holy men for help understanding these visions. Often these

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[117] Malory, 522.

[118] Malory, 39.

dreams are meant to tempt the knights away from their quest. For example, during the quest for the Sankgreall, Percivale dreams that two women come to him, one on a lion and one on a serpent. A priest explains the dream to Percivale later, explaining that the young woman on the lion, "for grete love she cam to the to warne the of thy grete batayle that shall befalle the" and the woman on the serpent "asked the amendis and to becom hir man, than thou saydist nay, that was to make the beleve on her and leve thy baptym."[119] The very next day, Percivale meets a beautiful woman who seduces him and nearly takes his virginity, but he remembers his dream and denies her in an effort to retain his purity. Nearly all of the knights Malory depicts questing for the grail have these dreams to tell the knights what they should do or warn them about the larger will of Fortune. The content of their dreams is less important than the fact that they have them at all.

Such prophetic dreams become re-imagined as literal, rather than figurative, warnings during Roland's quest. One of the main antagonists in King's series is a sorcerer who is always one step ahead of Roland on his quest for the Tower, a man who is known alternatively as Walter O' Dim, Marten Broadcloak, Randall Flagg, and the Man in Black. When Roland catches up to the Man in Black in *The Gunslinger*, the Man in Black tells Roland his future using Tarot cards, telling Roland, "You are the world's last adventurer…you have no idea how close you stand to the Tower now, as you resume your quest. Worlds turn about your head." Roland inquires "What do you mean, resume? I never left off."[120] Again, King utilizes a traditional Arthurian idea—the prophecy of the future—and twists it into something new, because the Man in Black knows that Roland is

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[119] Malory, 528.

[120] King, *The Gunslinger*, 275.

repeating this journey. When the Man in Black read's Roland's fortune, he is giving him a glimpse into his future *and* his past simultaneously. In this case, the Man in Black is capable of revealing more than Merlin ever did, because his prophecy is both a revelation of what's to come and a recollection of what has past.

The most striking prophecy in the *Dark Tower* is the prediction of the birth of Roland's son, Mordred. Similar to the prophecy surrounding Mordred Deschain's Arthurian parallel, legend says, "He who ends the line of Eld shall conceive a child of incest with his daughter, and the child will be marked, by his red heel shall you know him. It is he, the end beyond the end, who shall stop the breath of the last warrior."[121] Roland seduces a demon for information and it collects his seed. Later, Susannah also has sex with the demon, who impregnates her with a mixture of Roland's and the Crimson King's sperm. Susannah, being Roland's metaphorical daughter, delivers Mordred, who hunts down Roland to kill him in order to fulfill the prophecy. Because he is a child of both Roland and the Crimson King, his feelings for Roland "combine hatred, jealousy, and rage with a sad and hungry love."[122] He imagines joining Roland on his quest and embracing him as father, but rages against the idea of sharing Roland with the other members of the *ka-tet*: Eddie, Susannah, Oy, and especially Jake, because Roland views Jake as a surrogate son.

King demonstrates his usurpation of Arthurian romance most clearly in the figure of Mordred Deschain. Malory's Mordred attempts to steal Arthur's throne and he helps reveal Launcelot and Guenevere's affair, but his motivation is murky at best. Mordred is

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[121] Stephen King, *The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 2006) 396.

[122] Furth, *Concordance Vol. II*, 142.

"unhappy" and "had ever a prevy hate unto the Quene, Dame Gwenyver, and to Sir Launcelot" but Malory never explains why exactly Mordred feels this way.[123] Malory makes it very clear that Arthur even legitimizes Mordred when Arthur makes him chief ruler of England and puts Guenevere under his governance *because* Mordred is his son.[124] We are not allowed to see Mordred's thoughts or emotions towards Arthur, so his actions appear simply opportunistic and later, wicked for no clear purpose. By contrast, we are allowed inside the mind of Mordred Deschain, and see his conflicting feelings towards his father. He accepts his complicated parentage and as a child of two worlds, although he resents his outsider status, he understands it. Mordred can even imagine joining Roland's *ka-tet* and being welcomed, but if he did that, "he would be expected to set Roland above him, accept Roland as [leader and king], and that he will never do, never do, no, never do."[125] By showing that submission is what Mordred fears, King illuminates a missing piece of Malory's mythology, indicating once again that King is an author worth scholarly examination. The use of Mordred in the *Dark Tower* series reveals King's skillful interpretation of Malory, while at the same time offering modern readers a new perspective from which to read Malory's version of Mordred.

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[123] Malory, 646.

[124] Malory, 672.

[125] King, *The Dark Tower*, 207.

Chapter Four: The Structure of Romance

Ka was a wheel, its one purpose to turn, and in the end it always came back to the place where it had started.

--*The Waste Lands*[126]

But fortune ys so varyaunte, and the wheele so mutable, that there ys no constaunte abydynge.

--*Le Morte Darthur*[127]

Thus far, I have described the motifs, symbols, and characters that King borrows from romances, but these are smaller elements that make up a bigger picture. In this final chapter, I will consider how the overall structure of the *Dark Tower* series owes its patterns to the structure that Arthurian legends came to rely on, particularly the structure of the quest narrative. The wheel figures prominently in both, and the circular nature of both Arthurian romances and the *Dark Tower* allows readers to understand that King uses Arthurian romances to reveal several messages, namely that history is doomed to repeat itself and we are helpless to stop it. These wheels are circular and ever turning, as are the structures of the *Dark Tower* and Arthurian romances. This chapter examines three structural parallels in particular that exist between the *Dark Tower* series and these romances: patterns in plot structure, similarity in form, and the use of interlacing in the narratives. By taking the narrative structure of Arthurian romance and modernizing it, King demonstrates his adept ability to refresh and reinvent old patterns anew, lending a literary foundation to his work that is clear evidence for his legitimacy as an author of literature worth studying for its deeper engagement and experimentation with literary forms.

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[126] King, *The Waste Lands*, 552.

[127] Malory, 669.

The circular pattern of the quest narrative in which the knight leaves, encounters many adventures, and then returns to court is a particularly illuminating parallel to King's series given Foster Erwin Guyer's claim that *The Knight of the Lion (Yvain)* by Chrétien de Troyes was one of the precursors to the modern novel, based on its carefully paced and plotted structure, including a definitive beginning, middle, and end.[128] Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* also stands as a precursor to the English novel, because it is one of the first extended prose narratives in English literature. The circles emerging here are not relegated solely to plot structure. King also creates a circular pattern through literary history by incorporating structural similarities to Arthurian romance in his *Dark Tower* series, which speaks to a degree of consideration and artfulness that makes King worth critical study. In my view, King not only borrows themes and motifs from Arthurian myth, as detailed in Chapter Three, but also actually composes a full-fledged modern-day Arthurian romance.

The Dark Tower series is a circle in a very literal sense; the seventh novel ends as the first novel begins, with the line "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."[129] At the end of the cycle of seven books, Roland resumes his quest back in the Mohaine desert once again with no memory of his past achievements. However, as he returns to the beginning of his quest, there is one fundamental difference: he has acquired his horn, which he had lost long ago and did not have in the first book. In my reading, this detail indicates that this resumption of his quest will be different in some way. Though McAleer claims that this ending and the blending of genres in *Dark Tower*

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[128] Foster Erwin Guyer, *Chrétien de Troyes: Inventor of the Modern Novel*, 1st ed. (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957) 8.

[129] King, *Gunslinger*, 3.

series lead to a "structure of multiplicity [that] promises no structure at all,"[130] my purpose aims to show that there is actually a clear structure to the narrative as a whole. The circle is the clearest symbol that King uses to indicate patterns in structure and many of these patterns are used in Arthurian romances.[131] If Chrétien and Malory are forefathers of the modern novel, King creates novels that are romances in the same way that Chrétien's romances were novels, thus creating a circle through literary history as well. King's use of source material of such prestige for the *Dark Tower* keeps the traditions and contributions of Arthurian romance alive and well in our current society.

In order to discuss the circular form of the narrative, I will first establish the points along this circle that act as checkpoints throughout the typical narrative of the Arthurian romance, before exploring how similar structures function in the *Dark Tower*. To do so, I will use the romances I have selected—*Le Morte Darthur,* Chrétien's *Yvain*, *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)* and *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—as guides, namely because they are the most popular romances that still survive today. The common elements of the Arthur myth that they contain have become a part of our culture, especially the idealized knight and quest discussed in the previous chapter and the structural elements that are my focus here: knights leaving court on a feast day, encountering obstacles in the forest, and enduring trials that often come in threes at the end of each adventure. These romances are also the most likely candidates

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[130] McAleer, 68.

[131] The repeated description of *ka* as a wheel in the *Dark Tower* is paralleled in the image of the Wheel of Fortune, a literal wheel that Arthur dreams he is affixed to before his final battle with Mordred in *Le Morte Darthur.* The welfare of those who are set upon the wheel depends on the position of the wheel—either rising into good fortune, or falling into bad fortune. See *Le Morte Darthur*, 669, note 7.

for an English major like King to have studied, because of their popularity and place in the literary canon.

Sir Gawain is a useful place to start when evaluating the structure of a traditional quest narrative in Arthurian romance because it is about one self-contained adventure, rather than a series of escapades.[132] In establishing points of structure, a consistent element of the romance includes leaving on a holy day. The *Gawain* poet begins the tale at a feast at court "at Camelot at Christmastide"[133] and once Gawain has had his encounter with the Green Knight, "so to court in due course he comes safe and sound."[134] Feasts often go hand-in-hand with holy days and both often spark knightly adventures. Gawain's story begins on Christmas, and when he must leave to go face the Green Knight, he leaves on All-Hallows' Day.[135] This is a common trope in Arthurian romance. Holy days usually serve as turning points in the romance because they mark time for the reader and also act as catalysts for change in the narrative. For example, in Malory, Pentecost is the starting point for the knights who later go on the Grail quest, because Arthur gathers his Knights of the Round Table each Pentecost to establish their knightly company by reciting the Pentecostal Oath.[136] Of course the roots of this practice extend to Chrétien. In *The Story of the Grail* (*Perceval)* after Perceval has lost his memory, he goes to see a hermit in the woods, and discovers the cause of his suffering for the last five

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[132] For a detailed summary of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, see Chapter Two of this thesis, pgs 22-24.

[133] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 37.

[134] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 2489.

[135] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 536.

[136] Malory, 77.

years is because he sinned by letting his mother die of grief over his departure into knighthood. The hermit reveals himself as Perceval's uncle, and helps him become right with God, so that "Perceval acknowledged that God was crucified and died on Good Friday. On Easter Sunday Perceval very worthily received communion."[137] The narrator then informs us that "the tale no longer speaks of Perceval at this point; you will have heard a great deal about my lord Gawain before I speak of Perceval again."[138] Clearly, this communion is a transformative experience for Perceval and marks the end of one section of his tale.[139] Similarly, in *The Knight With the Lion* (*Yvain)* the tale begins at Pentecost with a feast and a story told by Calogrenant, whose cousin Yvain leaves to set off and find the mysterious spring in Calogrenant's tale that same day.

Though the Christian holy days are not a part of the *Dark Tower* universe, there are portions of the year marked by ritual that factor into Roland's quest for the tower and mark particular turning points in his journey. With autumn comes Reaping, a time of festival which includes the autumn harvest, stealing of Reap kisses, a Reap bonfire, and the crowning of a Reaping lass and Reaping lad.[140] In the time of Arthur Eld, it also entailed the burning of human sacrifices—by Roland's time, these were replaced by straw-men, or stuffy-guys, as human effigies—on the Reap bonfire.[141] Though the

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[137] Chrétien, 461.

[138] Chrétien, 461.

[139] Ordinarily, this would also indicated the beginning of a new section of Perceval's part of the romance, but Chrétien had not finished *The Story of the Grail* before his death. Further additions to this romance did include more content about Perceval's story written by other authors, but they did not take the same care and precision with structure that Chrétien did. For more information, see *Arthurian Romances*, 1-22.

[140] Furth, *Concordance, Vol. II*, xv.

[141] *Wizard and Glass*, 446-47.

mythology is never explained in the series, the seasonal holidays we see in Roland's world correspond to annual changes in season and crop growing. The act of human sacrifice seems to indicate a history of barbarism and pagan rituals in which nature was worshipped as a god that must be appeased. By Roland's time, these pagan rituals have been erased by the civilizing influence of Gilead, and have become simply celebrations of the coming season rather than explicitly religious festivals.

As a young man, Roland witnesses the Reaping rituals in the small town of Mejis, where he and his two fellow gunslingers had been sent to do reconnaissance during the war in their kingdom, Gilead. While looking through Maerlyn's Grapefruit, an object of powerful magic,[142] Roland witnesses the burning of his one true love, Susan Delgado, on the Reap bonfire, as she is offered up as a human sacrifice for the sin of sleeping with Roland when she was betrothed to the mayor of Mejis. This loss, and the subsequent madness that followed, was one of the driving forces behind Roland's decision to embark on his quest for the Dark Tower. This madness in itself echoes Arthurian legend, as I will discuss at more length below. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the season and its rituals mark a distinctive turning point in Roland's adventure.

A similar turning point occurs in *Wolves of the Calla,* book five of the series. Roland and his *ka-tet* have survived their encounter with the Man in Black and are now back on the Path of the Beam on their way to the Tower. When the *ka-tet* reaches the

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[142] One of the glass balls from Maerlyn's Rainbow, these magical orbs are for scrying. There are thirteen of them (one for each Guardian of the Beams and one for the Tower itself), and they allow the observer to look into the future, or into other worlds, or into other places in Mid-World. Roland looks into the pink ball, also known as Maerlyn's Grapefruit, which feeds on sexual energy. The balls are alive and evil, and will suck the life force of the user completely dry. See Furth, *Concordance Vol. 1* p 185-86; King, *Wizard and Glass* 437-39, 570-81.

small town of Calla Bryn Sturgis and meet the people there who require the gunslingers' help, it is springtime, and the time of sowing, called Commala. In the borderlands of Mid-World, Commala means a number of things, but its primary meanings refer to the type of rice grown in this portion of the world, sexual intercourse, and the commencement of a big feast.[143] It can also refer to a dance used in courting rites; Roland dances the Commala for the people of Calla Bryn Sturgis on the first night that the gunslingers arrive in town, and in doing so, he courts the town, leading them to ask the gunslingers' help.[144] There is a feast held to welcome the gunslingers, and the town allows the *ka-tet* to stay and take part in the activities of the sowing season. Again, this ritual and subsequent feast signal of the start of a singular adventure—helping the townspeople save the children of Calla Bryn Sturgis from the Wolves that come to steal them away every twenty-three years—in the midst of the larger narrative of Roland's quest for the Tower. Just as Arthur's knights may be distracted from their main quests by ladies who require aid, Roland and his *ka-tet* also partake in self-contained adventures to help those in need.

Of all the romances that feature knights leaving and returning, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents the most striking textual parallel to the *Dark Tower* series, because Gawain returns to Camelot at the same time of year as when the poem began, much like Roland returns to the Mohaine desert at the end of *The Dark Tower*. Moreover, both Gawain and Roland are changed by their adventures. Gawain returns with a symbol of his

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[143] Furth, *Concordance Vol. II,* 387. See also King, *Wolves of the Calla*, 587-89.

[144] Furth, *Concordance Vol II,* 387.

change: the green belt he received from Lord Bertilak and his wife. Gawain vows to display the green belt as a reminder of

> the cowardice and coveting that I came to [at Lord Bertilak's castle];
> This [green girdle] is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,
> And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last.
> For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit,
> For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore.[145]

The belt serves as a physical reminder of Gawain's moment of weakness, and he vows to keep it with him so as not to make the same mistake again. The belt publicly announces Gawain's desire to be a better knight.

In a similar turn, Roland emerges a changed man from his adventures, and he too acquires an object meant to rectify mistakes of his past. Though his memory has been wiped at the end of the seventh novel, he now has with him the horn of Eld, a horn that he lost at the battle of Jericho Hill. The horn is significant in that it indicates this particular quest to reach the Tower will be different than the previous iterations. Although it is ambiguous why Roland receives the horn, its presence seems to indicate that Roland has become, or will become, a better knight. Much as Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight informs his future decisions during the course of his knighthood, so the horn symbolizes that Roland's quest will be changed this time around.

Despite such resonances, King modernizes the knight's quest by using a distinctly bleaker ending in Roland's repetition of his journey over and over. Gawain's return to Camelot at the end of his adventure allows Gawain presumably to continue on to new

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[145] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 2508-12.

adventures with the knowledge he has gained from his encounter with Bertilak. Gawain goes back to where he started and is welcomed and celebrated. In contrast, Roland's return to where he began his adventure is horrifying—he must continue on endlessly, tirelessly enduring the *same* quest repeatedly. Given that King employs an old storytelling structure to create a tale for modern audiences, it is unsurprising that the *Dark Tower* series is "as a reflection of contemporary insecurities and worries."[146] King has taken romance's move towards the individual hero and twisted it to highlight "modern-day atrocities and horrors by way of the gunslinger, a character that seeks knowledge and the progression of his quest with little consideration for who is affected, neglected, and even cast aside in the wake of ambition and a myopic world view."[147] James Egan proposes, "beneath the mayhem which permeates King's fiction lie interrelated, troubling questions about…contemporary society."[148] For King's Constant Readers, the fans who faithfully devour each of his works, the world is full of fear, paranoia, and rapid progression. Thus, the Arthurian convention of leaving and returning to the same place becomes a way for Roland's seemingly hopeless cycle of repetition to reflect these modern issues, as he is forced to try to save the Dark Tower from deteriorating and collapsing over and over again.

Once knights or gunslingers depart on their adventures, they encounter the next checkpoint in their quest. Because knighthood, and the way of the gun, is a path that only

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[146] McAleer, 67.

[147] McAleer, 67.

[148] James Egan, "Technohorror: The Dystopian Vision of Stephen King," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Stephen King*, 1st ed. Ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998) 47.

few can attain, there are obviously trials that knights and gunslingers must endure and overcome in their various adventures. This brings us to the next checkpoint—the forest. Often the obstacles that are encountered in the forest take the form of either a formidable monster that must be destroyed or madness that has been caused by some sort of loss. Both are worthy of our attention, in turn.

The presence of monsters in Arthurian adventures is fitting given the supernatural elements to these stories. In these stories, "the world depicted…is the primary world with which we are familiar, and no explanation is offered for non-rational phenomena. Their impact, thus, tends to be mysterious and frightening."[149] These elements of the mysterious and frightening occur when Yvain defeats a giant, and when the Green Knight appears in Arthur's court, because he is a being who is completely green and can survive being decapitated.[150] In a world where sorcerers like Merlin practice magic and have the gift of prophecy, supernatural creatures or magical people are nothing unusual.

Roland and his *ka-tet* encounter numerous monsters as well—Slow Mutants, who are creatures poisoned by generations of radiation sickness; the horrifying creatures in the Waste Lands between the city of Lud and Topeka; the giant nocturnal worm with the gelatinous body and gaping mouth in the tunnel beneath Castle Discordia; and Mordred himself, who despite being Roland's son, is manifested as a were-spider that is big enough to envelop a man in its legs and suck him dry. The monsters are incidental, though, in terms of the actual story. King's may be described in more grotesque detail, but the monsters tend to be physical obstacles that must be overcome before moving on

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[149] Thompson, 88.

[150] Chrétien, *Yvain*, 348, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* lines 426-459.

to the next part of the journey.[151] The more compelling monsters that Arthur's knights and Roland's gunslingers must face come from within.

Madness or temporary insanity plagues the protagonists of both Arthurian romance and the *Dark Tower* series, and it often occurs after a terrible loss or some kind (usually the death or separation from a family member or lover). Perhaps this occurs because the men chosen for these adventures are more susceptible to madness, or perhaps they are forced to endure greater losses than others. Because the modern novel privileges insight into characters' psychology, we are allowed to see different depictions of madness in Arthurian romances and in the *Dark Tower*. Roland's childhood companion and fellow gunslinger Cuthbert admits that sometimes Roland scares him because "there was something in him that went beyond steel. Something like madness. If it was there, you were glad to have it on your side…but often enough you wished it wasn't there at all."[152] Madness is a blanket term used for erratic behavior that often occurs after a loss, and which in psychology now would most likely be diagnosed as schizophrenia. Symptoms include hallucinations, delusions, and passive episodes in which the person believes some external force is controlling his thoughts or actions.[153]

All of the occurrences of madness that occur in these Arthurian romances and in the *Dark Tower* are a direct result of personal loss. For Chrétien's Yvain, the loss occurs

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[151] The test in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the one exception, because Gawain's actual test of knighthood occurs in his bedroom when he tries to resist the advances of Lady Bertilak. The physical confrontation with Lord Bertilak takes place after Gawain has already failed his test in Bertilak's castle by cowardly accepting the green girdle.

[152] King, *Wizard and Glass*, 603.

[153] A.C. Spearing, "*Sir Orfeo*: Madness and Gender" in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, 1st ed. Eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) 263.

when his wife refuses to allow him to return home after breaking a promise to her.[154] Similarly, Malory's Launcelot goes mad when Guenevere shuns him because of his inadvertent sexual encounter with another woman. When Guenevere accuses him of being a false traitorous knight, he "lepte oute at a bay wyndow into a gardyne—and there wyth thornys he was all to-cracched of his visage and hys body—and so he ranne furth he knew nat whothir, and was as wylde [woode] as ever was man."[155] Though these may seem like overreactions, betrayal of one's beloved was a grave crime for a knight, especially considering the Pentecostal Oath's emphasis on a knight's obligation to serve ladies. Failure to satisfy the woman he loves indicates a failure of the man as a knight, and this is traumatic for knights who pride themselves on their excellence in knighthood. For Yvain and Launcelot, the rejection from their respective ladies is as damaging as a physical trauma, and they must go to the forest to heal. Because romance rarely delves into the internal thoughts or emotions of its characters, we only see the physical effects of this madness. For example, Yvain is observed by others ripping and tearing at his clothing, killing wild animals and eating their raw meat, and wandering around the forest naked.[156] There is no commentary about how these knights *feel*, and so their madness seems to be just another physical obstacle to overcome, like the monsters they fight.

One of the hallmarks of the modern novel remains its tendency to focus on the internal workings of its characters, and King's *Dark Tower* series does what these romances do not by illuminating this type of madness from inside the characters' minds.

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[154] Chrétien, 330.

[155] Malory, 472.

[156] Chrétien, 330.

For Roland and for Jake, their twin madness begins when Roland inadvertently creates two timelines, and thus, two warring sets of memories. In the first timeline, Jake was run over by a car in New York, appeared at the Way Station in the Mohaine Desert, and traveled with Roland until he let Jake fall to his second death under the Cyclopean Mountains. In the second timeline, Roland prevents Jake's death in New York—but if Jake doesn't die in New York, he never goes to the Way Station, never meets Roland, and never dies by the gunslinger's hand. The second that Jake avoids the speeding car, his mind contains two sets of memories: one that depicts his time in the desert with Roland, and one that depicts his life continuing in New York. Only when Jake is drawn into the gunslinger's world to join Roland, Eddie, and Susannah is this duality resolved.

King showcases the freedom of modern fiction to explore the psychological motivation of his characters by giving us first-person accounts of the madness as it consumes from within. Any insight into a character's thoughts and feelings modernizes Arthurian romance.[157] Similarly King is determined to provide a complete picture of his modern knight by providing a complex "back story that would…finally make Roland's wandering present clear to the patient reader."[158] The voices in Jake's head are constantly at war as he lives his life in New York, saying things like:

> *You're dead, Jake. You were run over by a car and you're dead.*
>
> *Don't be stupid! Look—see that poster? REMEMBER THE CLASS ONE*
>
> *PICNIC…Do you think they have Class Picnics in the afterlife?*

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[157] This trend towards illuminating characters' inner thoughts appears in other modern-day depictions of Arthurian legend, including novels like T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon,* and the BBC television series *Merlin*.

[158] King, "Foreword," in *Concordance, Vol. I*, viii.

I don't know. But I know you were run over by a car.

No!

Yes. It happened on May 9th, at 8:25 A.M. You died less than a minute later.

No! No! No![159]

Interestingly, we do not see inside Roland's head as this madness consumes him too. Instead, we are shown Roland's breakdown through the eyes of Eddie and Susannah. Through Eddie's ears we hear "the desolation and despair" in Roland's voice when he calls Jake's name in his sleep, and the sound "filled Eddie with horror."[160] Susannah is watching Roland's restless sleep when she whispers fearfully, "He sounds so far away. So far away from everything…It's driving him crazy."[161] In this way, King reveals more of the emotional and psychological effects of this madness by showing us more details about what Roland's madness makes him do. More importantly, these passages show how his madness makes Eddie and Susannah feel. The reader presumes Roland is experiencing the same torment that Jake is, and juxtaposed with Eddie and Susannah's reactions, we are shown how the madness is affecting him indirectly. This is a masterful blending of the medieval tradition with the modern technique on King's part; Roland's madness is seen from the outside because he is a knight of the past, a man from a bygone era, but Jake's madness and Eddie and Susannah's reactions to Roland are all revealed through internal monologue because King is telling a modern story in a modern world.

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[159] King, *The Waste Lands*, 132-33.

[160] King, *The Waste Lands*, 115.

[161] King, *The Waste Lands*, 116.

After leaving on the quest, and facing and overcoming obstacles, the last checkpoint in the plot of an Arthurian romance depicts knights enduring a trial, which usually takes three attempts to defeat, at the end of their quest. Three is a number of power in our world and in Roland's.[162] It represents the holy trinity in Christianity, and is the number most commonly used to establish patterns in Western culture ("on the count of three," "third time's the charm," etc). For Arthur's knights, the third attempt to defeat the trial is always the most difficult or has the highest stakes. The most obvious example of the trial that requires three attempts in *Le Morte Darthur* is Arthur's battles against Mordred. They meet at Dover, Barham Down, and finally at the Battle of Salisbury, which culminates in both Mordred's and Arthur's deaths. Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* stays at Lord Bertilak's castle for three days. Gawain actually encounters two trials marked by the number three. He must reject Lady Bertilak's advances three times, and on the third day he takes three kisses and the green girdle. Gawain also withstands three strokes of the Lord Bertilak's axe: the first time, Gawain flinches, the second time, Lord Bertilak feints and doesn't touch him, and the third time barely nicks Gawain's neck. Lord Bertilak explains that the two blows that did not land were because Gawain abided by the rules of their agreement for two days, but that Gawain "failed at the third throw" and thus must take the slight injury as a reminder.[163] Each knightly adventure requires a final test in order for the knight to exhibit that he is worthy of his knighthood and the quest he has undertaken. The use of the number three allows tension to build with each attempt to overcome the task at hand.

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[162] King, *Wolves of the Calla*, 145.

[163] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 2354.

In order for Roland to achieve the Tower, he must also survive the test of three. Three of his *ka-tet* die before Roland can enter the Tower: Eddie, Jake, then Oy. Unlike Arthurian knights, Roland does not have to perform three tasks or defeat a foe three times. Instead, his trial is to carry on in the face of his grief and suffering with each subsequent loss. When Oy dies, Roland is left alone just before he reaches the field where the Tower stands, and he has lost everything and everyone that he has ever loved. Because he is responsible for bringing the *ka-tet* together, he knows he is responsible for their deaths. When he began his quest, his vision in Maerlyn's Grapefruit warned him, "You will kill everything and everyone you love, and still the Tower will be pent shut against you."[164] As he ascends the Tower, all of his friends are dead, and though he reaches the top of the Tower, his victory is fleeting because he is forced to return to the beginning of his journey once more. King turns the trial at the end of Roland's quest into a horrible catch-22. If Roland's test of three is to keep going after his three friends die, he succeeds, but the prophecy indicates that until he is no longer responsible for their deaths in the first place, he will never be able to conclude his quest.

Once the trial at the end of the quest ends, the adventure concludes with the knight returning back to where the adventure began. For most of Arthur's knights, that is Camelot. Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Bors in *Le Morte Darthur* both return to Camelot after their respective adventures and tell their tales to the company gathered there. Malory's Launcelot makes his way back to Camelot after his two years of madness and also after he is imprisoned in Meleagant's tower. Chrétien's Yvain returns to Laudine's castle at the end of his tale because that is where he departed from when he

[164] King, *Wizard and Glass*, 597.

left her to go on his year of knightly adventures. The return to where the knight started reflects the motion of the Wheel of Fortune. Each adventure has its moments of good fortune and bad, but ultimately the wheel keeps turning and eventually returns back to where it started, and after returning home the knight is ready for the next adventure.

King appropriates the idea of returning to where the adventure began, but adds the horrifying twist of Roland having to begin the same quest over and over again. Rather than figuratively returning back to the start, Roland's circling back is literal. He is going back to the exact moment in time when he knew with certainty that he would reach the Tower. Again, this echoes the idea of *ka*, or destiny, as a wheel that turns endlessly. Unfortunately, Roland will never be able to move on to any other adventure.

Thus far, I have examined the checkpoints of the plot structure that both the *Dark Tower* and Arthurian romances use, but it is crucial to note that the *Dark Tower* series also contains similarities in form to one of the most famous Arthurian romances. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* showcases the types of patterns that King uses in the plotline of the *Dark Tower* series, but King also echoes the form of the poem. The alliterative long lines used in this poem do not rely on metric syllables or rhyme, but rather alliteration and the stressing of two chief syllables per half-line.[165] There may also be the stressing of minor chief syllables, and the "relations between stress and alliteration is very flexible…nonalliterating syllables may receive major stress while alliterating syllables may receive minor stress or none at all."[166] The stresses and alliteration are both flexible, but the rhythms of the poem come together as a cohesive whole through this

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[165] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, pg. 55.

[166] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* pg. 56.

system of alliteration and stresses. Marie Borroff's translation takes great pains to preserve the formulaic character and diction of the poem's language, as well as the metrical variety of the poem, which is extremely important when analyzing the effect of alliteration and stresses.[167] For example, take one of the most famous excerpts of the poem, describing the symbol on Gawain's shield:

> And why the *pen*tangl*e* is *proper* / to that *peer*less *prince*
>
> I in*tend* now to *tell*, / though de*tain* me it must.
>
> It is a *sign* by *Sol*omon / *sage*ly devised
>
> *To* be a *to*ken of *truth*, / by its *title* of old,
>
> *For* it is a *fig*ure *formed* / of *five* points,
>
> And each *line* is *linked* / and *locked* with the next
>
> For ever and ever, / and hence it is called
>
> *In* all *Eng*land, as I hear, / the *end*less knot. (lines 623-630, emphasis mine)

The / represents the divide between the two half-lines in each line, and the syllables that contain alliteration are marked in italics. The pattern of alliteration varies from line to line; the alliterative long line is a much more flexible form than iambic pentameter or other meters classified by syllable count. The one rule that is set in stone "is the presence of an alliterative link between the two half-lines, even if the only alliterating syllable in the second half-line is unstressed."[168] The one exception here is line 629, but in the original North West Midland dialect of Middle English it reads "and ayquere hit is

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[167] Marie Borroff, "Introduction," *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, xii-xiii.

[168] *Sir Gawain,* pg. 57.

emdelez and englych hit callen."[169] The repeated "l" sound in "emdelez," "englych," and "callen" would now follow the appropriate pattern.

In a potentially surprising turn, King's *Dark Tower* series resembles this alliterative structure. Each of the seven volumes in the *Dark Tower* series has a subtitle that also follows this pattern of cohesion. From one to seven, these subtitles are: Resumption, Renewal, Redemption, Regard, Resistance, Reproduction, Resumption. Just as the stressed alliterative syllables in *Sir Gawain* create unity in form, the subtitles of the seven volumes use alliteration to unite each of the seven parts together through similarity in language and sound. King himself admits, "these seven volumes were never really separate stories at all, but sections of a single long novel called *The Dark Tower.*"[170] King's use of this alliterative pattern creates unity between the seven volumes, strongly suggesting an homage to the alliterative patterns of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Finally, the last structural element I would like to examine is one of the hallmarks of the Arthurian romance—the technique of interlacing, sometimes called *entrelacement.* Chrétien was one of the first to experiment with this technique in his romance, as a way of "interrupting the linearity and varying the adventures."[171] In essence, this means the interweaving or alternating of different plot lines that focus on the adventures of different individual knights.[172] This technique is designed to control the narrative, to show "that the adventures of Lancelot and his companions, however multifarious, will remain

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[169] "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Representative Poetry Online (RPO), accessed 11 March 2012, http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/sir-gawain-and-green-knight.

[170] King, *Gunslinger*, xxv.

[171] Kibler, 15.

[172] Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009) 63.

coherent."[173] Eugene Vinaver describes the complex interweaving of multiple plotlines or episodes as interlacing[174] and praises the "aesthetic appeal of the richness of the composite, many-branched narrative, full of digression and return, repletion and parallel, change and shift, the uncertainty of adventure even when it repeats a pattern encountered before."[175] By putting together multiple stories, romances allow multiple segments to "echo each other through analogies and the interplay of repetition and variation."[176]

Interlacing can refer to different narrative structures. First, it can describe the start of one knight's adventure, that same knight starting a new adventure, and then that knight coming back to finish the first or it can describe two or more concurrent plotlines that are happening to different knights and the switching between those plotlines.[177] A perfect example of the former technique appears in Chrétien's *Yvain*. When Yvain agrees to help Lunete avoid being burned at the stake, he then has to find a place to stay for the night, and agrees to help defeat the giant that has been terrorizing his host's family. In the morning, Yvain kills the giant and then hurries to Laudine's castle to save Lunete from her fiery fate. One adventure interrupts another, which helps to create tension and suspense in the narrative, as well as allowing for the juggling of multiple plot lines. The second type of interlacing is very common in Malory, given that there are so many knights of the Round Table going out on adventures at any given time. The quest for the Sankgreall, for example, follows Galahad, Gawain, Launcelot, Percival, and Bors (to

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[173] Archibald and Putter, 63.

[174] Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, 69-71.

[175] Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, quoted in Davenport, 271.

[176] Bruckner, 23.

[177] Kibler, "Introduction," p 16.

name a few knights who appear) and the narrative switches in between their tales throughout.

Another way to think about interlacing is the interaction between two distinct stories. For example, Chrétien's *Lancelot* and *Yvain* both contain references to the events happening in the other romance, even though they do not incorporate those plotlines into their own romance. For example, in *Yvain*, the narrator interjects, "Only three days previously Queen Guinevere had returned from the prison where Meleagant had kept her and all the other captives; and Lancelot, betrayed, remained locked within the tower."[178] *Yvain* does not focus on Lancelot's captivity or the Queen's kidnapping, but this insert forges a connection between the events of *Yvain* and the events of *Lancelot*, placing them as concurrent adventures taking place in the larger Arthurian world. We might think of this as intertextuality, or a conversation *between* texts.

In addition, Arthurian romances often omit recounting specific adventures, indicating that the romance genre welcomes expansion and adaptation. When Galahad rescues Percevale, Galahad then "rode tho into a waste foreyste wherein he dud many journeyes and founde many adventures which he brought all to an ende, whereof the tale makith here no mencion."[179] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, many of Gawain's adventures are skipped over entirely, or barely mentioned. The poet only spends from lines 713-725 describing Gawain's trek through the forest on his way to Lord Bertilak's house and claims "so many were the wonders he wandered among/that to tell but the tenth part would tax my wits," leaving the reader to wonder what happened during this

[178] Chrétien, 354.

[179] Malory, 557.

omitted period.[180] Omitting these adventures invites future authors to fill in the gaps and continue to add on to the larger world of Arthurian romance.

King uses interlacing to switch between plot lines frequently in the *Dark Tower* series, especially in the seventh volume as the quest for the Tower is nearing its climax. Susannah leaves Calla Bryn Sturgis for New York to give birth to Mordred, and Jake and Oy follow her so that they can stop the birth of this prophesied nightmare. Roland and Eddie travel to Maine to talk to a writer named Stephen King to ensure that he continues to write Roland's story, all the while hoping that they can get back to Susannah as soon as possible. The three separate narrative threads—Susannah, Jake and Oy, and Roland and Eddie—alternate back and forth, escalating the tension and anticipation among all three. It is fitting that the quest for the Grail and the quest for the Tower both incorporate this type of narrative technique, because both quests involve multiple parties who are involved in the search in different places and/or times.

The *Dark Tower* series also has constant references to other works by King, demonstrating a trope that ultimately has its roots in Arthurian romance. Scholars and King consider the *Dark Tower* series as the lynchpin of all the stories that King has ever written in part because of its use of this type of intertextuality.[181] Examples abound of the conversations between King's other works and the *Dark Tower* series: characters from other novels like *'Salem's Lot* and *Insomnia* play pivotal roles in *The Dark Tower*; the gunslingers witness the aftermath of events from *The Stand* in *Wizard and Glass*; Roland mentions the kingdom from *The Eyes of the Dragon* as a neighbor of Gilead in *The*

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[180] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 718-719.

[181] King, *The Dark Tower*, 1048.

Drawing of the Three. The references between works maintain the Arthurian tradition in which medieval writers constantly borrowed from each other, because their texts needed to be authorized by having a declared source, "whether real or invented. So Arthurian writers draw on earlier sources, but some also introduce major new developments, such as Lancelot's love for Guinevere, or the quest for the Grail, and then later writers choose whether, and how, to respond to these developments."[182] King's *Dark Tower* series essentially derives the developments from Arthurian romance that he wants, all the while modernizing them and adding new material.

King's series also invites more stories to be told about Roland and his band of gunslingers, but rather than waiting for someone else to fill in the gaps in his narrative, King continues to follow up the *Dark Tower* series with additional stories. In addition to the seven novels, King has produced a short story, "The Little Sisters of Eleuria" and co-produced three miniseries of graphic novels about Roland's childhood and adolescence called *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger Born, The Dark Tower: The Long Road Home,* and *The Dark Tower: Treachery.* Perhaps most anticipated among *Dark Tower* fans and scholars is a new novel in the *Dark Tower* series, called *The Wind Through the Keyhole*, which will be released April 24, 2012. This novel will be set between books 4 and 5, as Roland, Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Oy wait out a debilitating storm before making their way to Calla Bryn Sturgis. In terms of structure, leaving space for new adventures indicates that there is always room for more interlacing, more interaction between stories, and the addition of new stories to the present narrative, an outlook shared by the medieval authors of romances and Stephen King.

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[182] Archibald and Putter, 1-2.

Conclusion

The *Dark Tower* series is a long, complex set of volumes that is difficult to classify because it attempts so many things. The few scholars who have engaged with it have felt the need to pin it down into one genre, with limited success. The purpose of this project is to show that reading the *Dark Tower* series through the lens of Arthurian romance elucidates layers of meaning that is missing from other proposed genres and this reading allows the audience to better understand not only King's series but Arthurian romance as well.

King continues the practice of many of his literary forefathers, including Tolkien, Browning, and Eliot by using Arthurian romance as a stencil and modernizing the basic elements of Arthurian romance in ways that fit his twenty-first century audience. Roland's world was once full of love and light, and now has tumbled into chaos as a result of revolution, war, and increasingly deadly weapons. King's series describes the difficulties in trying to reverse the decay that has caused Roland's world to crumble and the desire to return to his world's former glory. Roland's quest resonates with readers who see the dangers in our contemporary society's constant cries for new technology and more progress and yearn for the days of a bygone era, the era of Kennedy's Camelot or another idealized time in the past. They long for an irrecoverable time before terrorism, before school shootings, and before global warming, and many of King's Constant Readers mourn for the passing of that world just as strongly as Roland mourns for the fall of Gilead. Roland and his band of gunslingers are modernized knights appropriate for the violent, paranoid, damaged world in which King writes.

By using the conventions and structure of Arthurian romance to create Roland's tale, King is able to show modern readers a glimpse of the literary past as well as a vision of our society's future. King's series is at its best when it's illuminating King's reading of Arthurian romance, as in his interpretation of Mordred's motivations for action, or the use of the circle as a means of showing the horror and hopelessness of Roland's quest. This sophisticated reimagining of the source material further underscores the importance of King's work to the literary canon, and the need for more King and *Dark Tower* scholarship.

The sheer size of the *Dark Tower* series intimidates most readers, and it may be part of the reason that few scholars have chosen to engage with it, and with the new self-contained adventure coming out in April 2012, Roland's universe is still expanding. But neglecting this series is a mistake, and the sophisticated generic manipulation in King's work demands the same type of analysis and criticism as other canonical works. Because of the scope of this project, I have drawn broad parallels between Arthurian romances and the *Dark Tower* series and have only had the opportunity to pursue in detailed analysis a few of the crucial parallels; nevertheless, this thesis marks an important starting point for a new level of engagement with King's work. The number of motifs, character types, and structural similarities between King's series and Arthurian romance is no coincidence, and indicates the many ways in which the *Dark Tower* continues a literary tradition that began centuries ago.

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