

# MEDIEVAL CHIVALRY IDEALS MANIFESTED IN EXCALIBUR OF ARTHURIAN MYTHOLOGY IN SIR THOMAS MALORY'S "LE MORTE D'ARTHUR"

Imam Hendra Saputra<sup>1</sup>, Wulida Makhtuna<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>STKIP PGRI Banjarmasin, Banjarmasin

<sup>2</sup>STKIP PGRI Banjarmasin, Banjarmasin

[imam.hendra.s@english.stkipbjm.ac.id](mailto:imam.hendra.s@english.stkipbjm.ac.id), [wulida.makhtuna@stkipbjm.ac.id](mailto:wulida.makhtuna@stkipbjm.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

*Excalibur as the legendary weapon in Arthurian legend forges its own mythology. Hence from the presumption, it would be interesting to find out of 'what kind of power that enforces the Excalibur to be able to have the ability to contribute to Medieval chivalry value'? Which later, as the ontological form of the manifestation, the sword becomes the reflection of the medieval spirit, hence the big question related to the fact is 'how the Excalibur reflects the chivalry value of Medieval Age'? The first step is to gather accurate and sufficient data from the text, in which the text is 'Sir Thomas Mallory's Le Morte d'Arthur'. To gain the accurate data, the text is read carefully by using close reading. After that, the text is carefully chosen in accordance to the objective of the research, which are (1) what kind of power that enforces the Excalibur to be able to have the ability to contribute to Medieval chivalry value? and (2) how the Excalibur reflects the chivalry value of Medieval Age. Excalibur is entangled by the presence of magic and even with the spirit of chivalry, yet the power of Excalibur radiates outside itself, increasing the already strong chivalrous act of the characters. The medieval valued is injected and anthropomorphized into Excalibur, in recto verso, the sword also forge the type of the code of chivalry in the text.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chivalry has always been the source of either for romantic or fantastic imagination. It possesses the energy to fuel the wild imagination of man to be something that is not only meaningful, but also as something that is deemed to be hailed. The price of the act of bravery as shown in chivalrous act, invite many writers to exploits the code in their fictional works. It is a drug which always is craved by the readers and the writers understand it too well, hence, the repeated cycle of the theme keep popping up even to this days.

With different names, the chivalry code has actually always lived and breathed in many cultures. In Japan, the *bushido* code overshadowed the presence of *samurai* code. The codes characterized the typical ideology of Japanese period during the medieval era – which coincided to the same phenomena in Europe. In

Indonesia, similar code has also been adopted by the name *ksatria* which literally means the attitude of a warrior. All of the form of the code emphasize bravery as the main component of the code, continued with honesty and earnestness to be forged into the personal attitude in life.

The ingredients were very suited to war condition or just probably the wars were the one that bring forth the code into the surface to be adopted by the people. The European medieval civilization was the age when the recipes for the creation of the product of chivalry possible, since during the time, Europe was full of wars and demand a certain system of conduct which spurred people to enter the battle zone with proper attitude.

The spirit of chivalry in the medieval age gave offspring to the knighthood which was one of the distinctive feature to the age. This distinctive attitude was also then being reflected in – which was actually even infecting and altering the previous works – the literary works of the age. The most famous is the addition of chivalrous code within the already establish Celtic's folklore of *King Arthur*.

The Arthurian legend has long been the source of imagination from age to age, even to this moment Hollywood still seems so kind to retell the story by launching the soon to release movie of *Excalibur: The Legend of the Sword*. Despite the many variations it possesses, it seems that the foothold point is the code of chivalry – which closely related to patriarchal culture of battle. With the battle culture – which in this case is chivalry – is being landscape of the saga, talking about the arsenal as the apparel of war is inevitable, which it is the case here. *Excalibur* as the legendary weapon in Arthurian legend forges its own mythology which somewhat is more protruding even compared to the main character itself, despite the fact that the legendary sword was not actually bestowed into the early version of the legend.

This matter is really interesting to be discussed, mainly if the phenomenon is scrutinized epistemologically, given the fact that many versions have described the sword to be a certain entity that contains its own mysterious power. In relation to the spirit of battle hungry of chivalry, the power may be understood as an everlasting mysterious force – manifested into inanimate object – that drive the

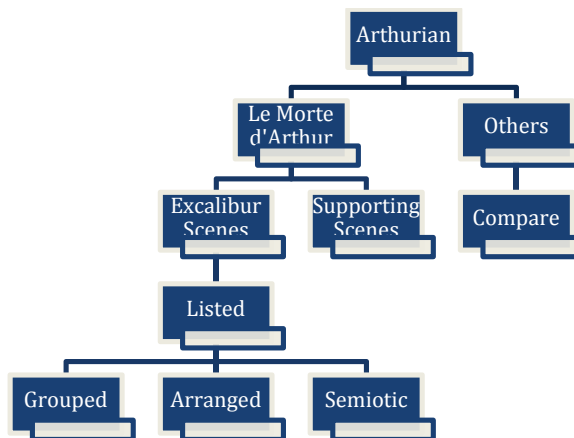
struggle to maintain the codes to be possible. Hence from the presumption, it would be interesting to find out of ‘what kind of power that enforces the Excalibur to be able to have the ability to contribute to Medieval chivalry value’? Which later, as the ontological form of the manifestation, the sword becomes the reflection of the medieval spirit, hence the big question related to the fact is ‘how the Excalibur reflects the chivalry value of Medieval Age’?

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Data Collecting Method

Before analyzing the text, the first step is to gather accurate and sufficient data from the text, in which the text is ‘Sir Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*’. To gain the accurate data, the text is read carefully by using *close reading*. After that, the text is carefully chosen in accordance to the objective of the research, which are (1) what kind of power that enforces the Excalibur to be able to have the ability to contribute to Medieval chivalry value? And (2) how the Excalibur reflects the chivalry value of Medieval Age? Subsequently, by carefully employing Chatman diagram of narrative, the collected data then grouped into several groups in accordance to the relation to the characters and/or scenes. Another source in which the information will later be used in analysis is the contextual condition of the text. To get the appropriate information, a comprehensive knowledge about the era in which the text was written is essential, which is why contextual information is gathered either from the historical text book, or from the internet sources.

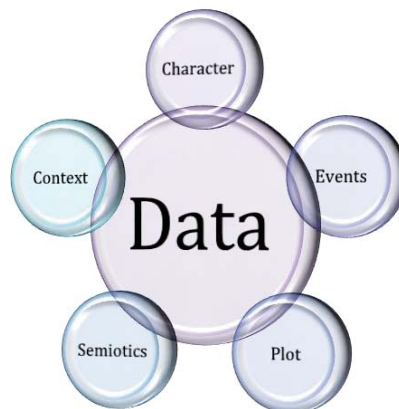
Diagram 1. Data Collecting



## 2.2 Data Analysis Method

To analyze the text, a full and comprehensive understanding toward the text, either textually or contextually is needed. Based on that a rationale is drawn to understand its structure, since “literary theory might well consider a rationalist and deductive approach rather than the usual empiricist one” (Chatman, 1978). Textually, the already grouped data is individually scrutinized semiotically, by adopting Roland Barthes’ and Umberto Eco’s semiotics approach. Later, the already cleared information is connected to other data to build extensive and holistic information upon the building model of relation of the Excalibur within the story. Finally, the conclusion of the analysis will be based on the comprehensive holistic interpretation of the ontological and epistemological structure of the Excalibur within the story. To push further than merely textual understanding, the interpretation will later be brought to the contextual level, in which the already formed understanding about the sword, will then be analyzed further based on its paradigmatic position against the mimetic world in which the story was produced.

**Diagram 2.** *Data Collecting*



## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Pentecostal Oath

Before diving into the realm of the sword, it is important to understand the view of chivalry of the realm. One of the best epitome to see this is by looking at their holy oath of *Pentecostal Oath* which literally summarize all the code of conduct

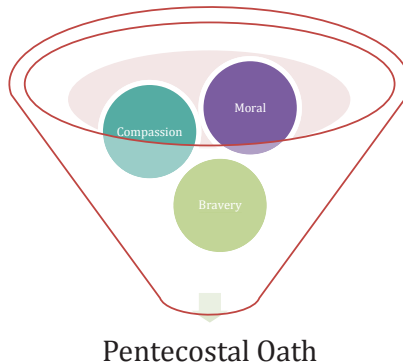
which all the Arthurian knights should possess. Starting of how bravery should become one of the discipline of the knight, the honesty that should become one with their life, to the gentle treatment to the ladies.

“The king stablished all his knights, and gave them that were of lands not rich, he gave them lands, and charged them never to do outrageousness nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no mean to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succor upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, ne for no world’s goods. Unto this were all the knights sworn of the Table Round, both old and young. And every year were they sworn at the high feast of Pentecost.”

(Sir Thomas Malory, 2009)

Sir Thomas Mallory put his ideas of chivalry by combining three elements into the oath: (1) the moral posture of the knight, (2) the compassion value, (3) the bravery that marked the military attribute of the knight. These three of elements together shaped the concept of idealism – as can be seen in diagram 3 – that somehow considered to reflect the living ideals of the age, yet on the contrary, the very situation that brought upon the very existence of the code dictated certain adjustment on the side of the knight while applying the code. The situation which reflect the how the guarantee of the survival either an individual with its bravery and also as communal with its bound of loyalty and honesty.

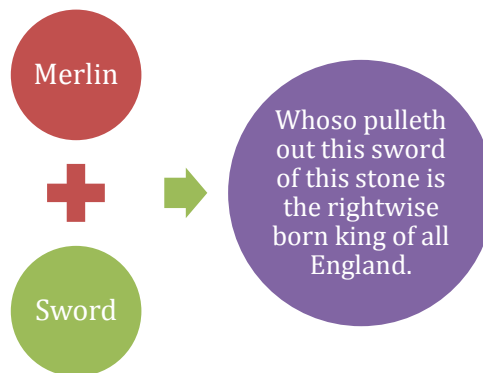
**Diagram 3.** *The Formula of Mallory’s Arthurian Chivalry*



### 3.2 Sword of the Stone

Some interpretation toward the two swords – Sword of the Stone and Excalibur – states that the two swords are actually the same, yet some other interpretation considers them to be two separate entity. This difference is noticeably determining the later understanding of the role of the two swords in the saga. The first one will consider that the total understanding will involve the incident where the actualization of chivalrous Arthur has been bound by single package, thus the birth of the roundtable knights is initiated by the sword, which make the sword as somewhat ultimate in its role within the saga. The relation with Merlin also bring upon the heralding feature of the sword to reveal the future king of Arthur, as it is encrypted in “Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone is the rightwise born king of all England.”

**Diagram 4.** *The Birth of the Sword of the Stone*

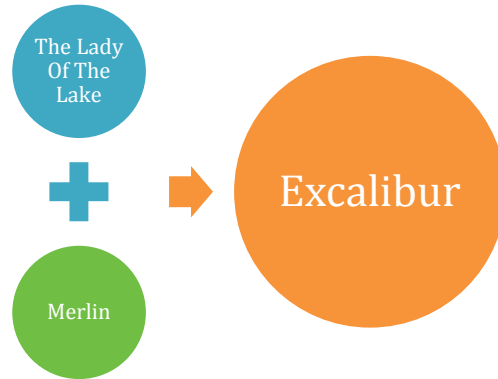


### 3.3 Excalibur

On the other hand, the idea that put the two swords to be different make Excalibur as a specialist entity, which role is separated from the obligation to create the ruler who later constitute the fate of the Camelot as the spatial realm of which the chivalrous acts are enacted and the round table knights who become the agent. The birth of the Excalibur is not merely to prove that Arthur is the king of England, but beyond that, is to preserve the position of Arthur by giving him certain super power. The characters who involve in the creation are also non singular, as unlike the birth of the Sword of the Stone, Merlin is not sole mage

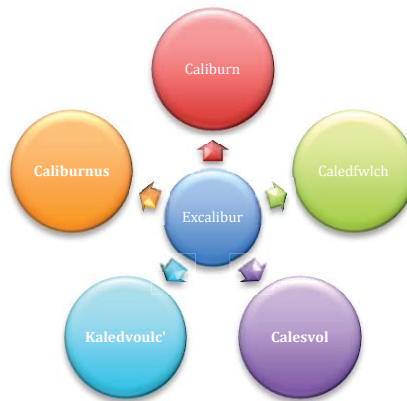
who conjure the sword, instead he is now enforce by another magical entity: the another mysterious The Lady of the Lake.

**Diagram 5.** *The Birth of the Excalibur*

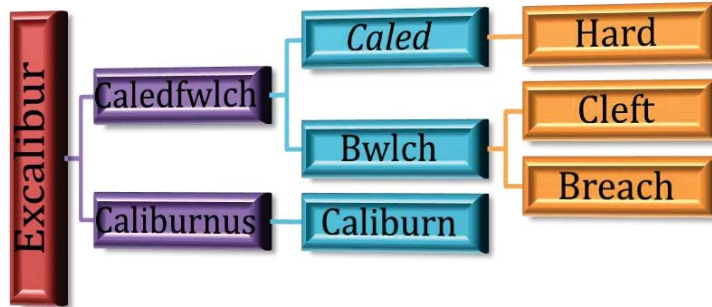


Etymologically, Excalibur did have many names since the idea of the sword sprung out. In diagram 6, we can see that Excalibur has been known by several names. While in diagram 7, the origin name contains meaning of “hard cleft”, which according to several sources, is coming from Celtic legendary mythical sword. In Mallory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* the sword is said to be “cut-steel”, which gives the stronger and more concrete feeling more than just “hard,” but instead it is steel which was the more common during the medieval and post rather than before.

**Diagram 6.** *The Historical Creation of Excalibur*



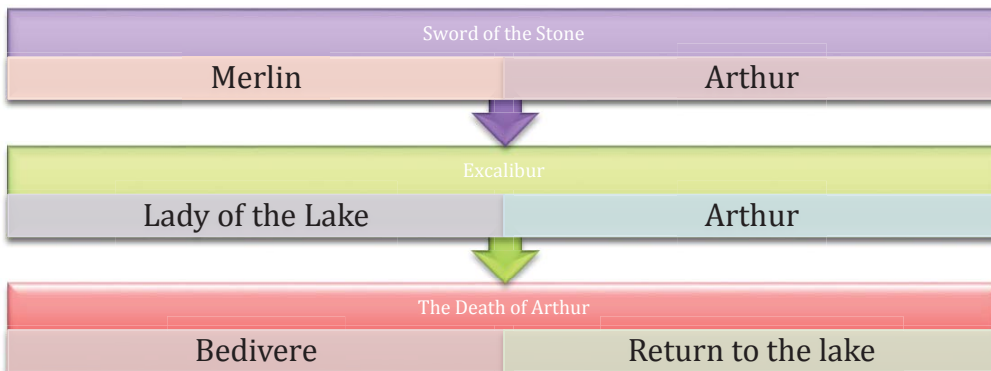
**Diagram 7. The Name of Excalibur**



### 3.4 Related Characters

There are four of the total characters of ever closely related to the Arthurian swords other than Arthur himself, they are of course Merlin, Lady of the Lake, Acolon, and Sir Bedivere. Merlin is deeply related in the appearance of Sword of the Stone, with his written prophecy. Lady of the Lake is one influential characters who has a hefty relationship with the sword, her appearance is somewhat mythical despite the fact that she is finally get killed by Balin. Bedivere is the character who during Athur is dying, given the assignment to throw Excalibur back to the lake, in which somehow, the previously had been killed Lady of the Lake reappears to collect the sword. Some of the relation can be seen in diagram 8.

**Diagram 8. The Birth of the Sword of the Stone**



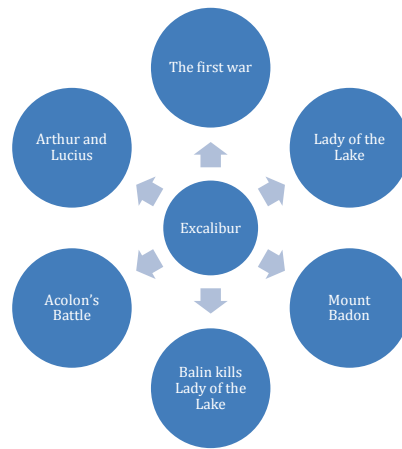


The characters, that gives the swords into existence are the mystical character who are seemingly looking for someone else worthy of the swords, because for some reason they do not deem themselves worthy of the sword. To meet the expectation, Arthur is the cross point to hold the magic swords. This may indicate that Arthur is the personifying the essence of Chivalry. Nevertheless, because of several of his mistakes, several troublesome events are created, starting from Mordred up to the affair of Lancelot. While Excalibur on the other hand, is strongly by his side to enforce the effort to right all the wrong deeds that he has done. Although several character has in direct contact with Excalibur, king Arthur is still the person who can used the sword with appropriate conclusion, since even Bedivere is having difficulties when he is trying to fulfil his duty to throw the sword into the lake.

### **3.5 Related Events**

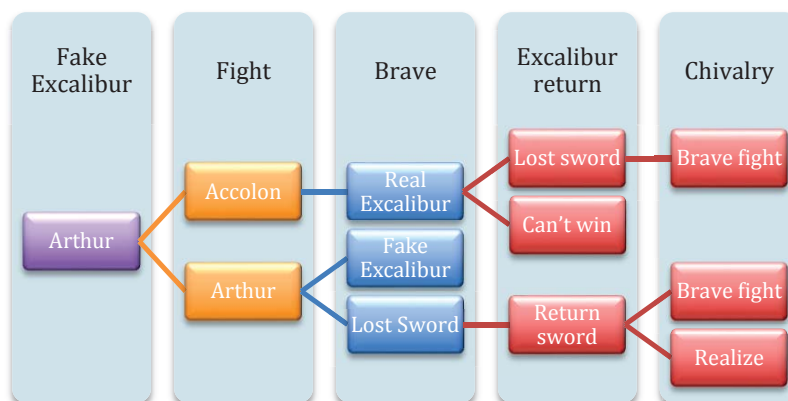
Excalibur is not the only entity that bound the whole narrative, many chapters are dedicated to separated story of Arthurian knights. Lancelot and Gawain are the knights who probably are exposed more than the other. Especially Lancelot, he is the one who outlive Arthur and intimately related to Guinevere, the queen of Arthur. Nevertheless, Excalibur is the entity that forge the possibility of the knights to have the change of existing. In diagram 9, we can see that Excalibur is heavily related to several important events in the saga, starting from the first war, where Arthur swing his sword to annihilate his enemy's army to the great battle between Arthur and Lucius, and finally when the sword is thrown back to the lake.

**Diagram 9. Excalibur and Events**



During his battle with Accolon – which he does not recognize at the time – Arthur is actually never realizing that he has been deceived to go into the fray while using a fake Excalibur. He even later breaking his fake sword during the fight, but still, the brave trait is still within him as he said “I have promised to do the battle to the uttermost by the faith of my body, while me lasteth the life, and therefore I had liefer to die with honour than to live with shame” (Sir Thomas Malory, 2009). In one occasion, Arthur manages to regain his sword, and later the fight is ended with Arthur as the winner, but with the acknowledgement that Arthur’s enemy is actually his own brave knight of Accolo.

**Diagram 11. King Arthur Battles Accolon**



The next great fight in which Excalibur is dominating the result of the battle is the battle with Lucius. This battle involves a lot of people from the both side, with conspicuously the Knight of the Roundtable on the side of Arthur and the Saracens in Lucius side. Despite massive amount of army that is go into the battle, but the battle itself is determined by the pinnacle duel of Arthur and Lucius, where Arthur is finally “.. smote him again with Excalibur that it cleft his head, from the summit of his head, and stinted not till it came to his breast” (Sir Thomas Malory, 2009).

**Diagram 12.** *The Great Battle between Arthur and Lucius*



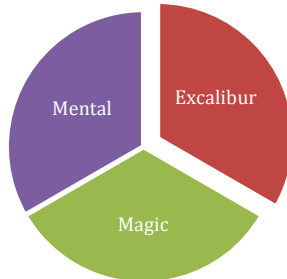
Most of the time the narrative told how the sword of Excalibur possess the power to solve the conflict that the hero is facing. The power of Excalibur conclude a happy ending for the side of Arthur, while the enemy most of the time is killed in gore. Nevertheless, the fight with Sir Accolon is something different, it is without the bloodshed to death of the enemy, who is in this case is actually Arthurian knight who fight with Arthur because of the deception of the Lady of the Lake. Furthermore, the act of mercy shows that the action is appropriate according to the Pentecostal Oath, which mercy is ought to be accompanied by honesty by “fleeing treason”. However, without the presence of Excalibur, apparently king Arthur and Accolon has internalized the meaning of Chivalry, that their share nobility either during the fight and winning, or when they are without Excalibur.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Ontologically, Excalibur is a mysterious sword, which is indicated either from the bestowal from the Lady of the Lake and the vision of Merlin to be imbued by magical force. The sword becomes Arthur’s instrument to enforce his authority of

chivalry. The code of Chivalry itself, hold determined long before the presence of the sword, yet the sword is with its power holding the preservation of the code. As it's shown in diagram 13, Excalibur is entangled by the presence of magic and even with the spirit of chivalry, yet the power of Excalibur radiates outside itself, increasing the already strong chivalrous act of the characters.

**Diagram 13.** *Mental/Magical Power Behind*



The medieval valued is injected and anthropomorphized into Excalibur, in recto verso, the sword also forge the type of the code of chivalry in the text. With the many battle it faces, the violence nature of the age become the characteristics that the sword seems to enjoy giving to the reader. However, the fight with Accolon shows mercy and the despise of treason as other ingredients of the code along with the independency and re-dependency of the code to the sword. The independency is finally shown when Excalibur is finally thrown into the lake.

**Diagram 14.** *Excalibur Becomes the Symbol of Power to Enforce Ideals*



## 5. REFERENCES

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