

## Maximum Humor: Sir Dinadan's Post-Medieval Capers

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In the hefty middle section on Sir Tristram, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* features a knight named Sir Dinadan,<sup>1</sup> who, unlike some of his more famous literary cast members, is hardly a household name. His relative obscurity can be attributed to the fact that college curricula tend to bracket out the Tristram section of Malory as a digression to the progression of the major Arthurian characters of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Gawain, and Mordred. Describing him as "a grete skoffer and gaper and the meryste knyght amonge felyship that was that tyme lyvyng,"<sup>2</sup> Malory shows a tripartite portrayal of Dinadan: his aversion to pointless fighting, his rejection of courtly love, and his comic talent. Yet, when Sir Dinadan first appears in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *French Prose Tristan* as an unknown knight, he is not yet depicted with his "principled indifference to fighting for its own sake,"<sup>3</sup> but as a typical Arthurian knight looking for the famous Sir Tristram for jousting and fighting. His rejection of courtly love develops through his friendship with Tristram and after the tragic death of another of Isolde's suitors for love sickness: Kahedin.<sup>4</sup> Stefano Mula argues that in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Italian *Tavola Ritonda*, however, Dinadan is a known quantity with a pedigree and already initially described as "wise and loveless."<sup>5</sup> Mula further concludes that Dinadan, "unpredictable, and often hilarious . . . is very appealing to a modern audience for his individual characteristics."<sup>6</sup> Scholars have studied mostly the Malorian Dinadan as a misfit, destructive linguistic force, Arthurian antagonist, spokesperson on chivalric values, rational man, good judge of character, counter-hero, and comedian.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am norming the variant spellings of Dynadan/Dinadan and Tristan/Tristram to Dinadan and Tristram throughout the essay except in quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 396, ll.29-31.

<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Rovang, *Malory's Anatomy of Chivalry: Characterization in the Morte Darthur* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 102.

<sup>4</sup> See Stefano Mula, "Dinadan Abroad: Tradition and Innovation for a Counter-Hero," *Arthurian Literature* 24 (2007): 50-64. For other Dinadan-related articles concerning the *Prose Tristan* and *Tavola Ritonda*, see Alfred Adler, "Dinadan, Inquiétant ou Rassurant?" in *Mélanges offerts à Rita Lejeune, professeur à l'Université à Liège* (Gembloux: Ducolot, 1969), 935-43; Eleonora Stoppino, "Lo più disamorato cavaliere del mondo: Dinadano fra Tristan en prose e Tavola ritonda," *Italica* 86.2 (2009): 173-88; Francesco Zambon, "Dinadan en Italie," *Arthurian Literature* 19 (2003): 152-63. Additionally, see Leslie C. Brook, "A Knight with Reservations: The Role of Sir Dinadan in 'Escanor'," *Studi Francesi* 49.3 (2005): 477-85; and E. Vinaver, *Études sur le Tristan en prose* (Paris: Champion, 1925), 93-98.

<sup>5</sup> Mula, "Dinadan Abroad," 57.

<sup>6</sup> Mula, "Dinadan Abroad," 51, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Busby, "The Likes of Dinadan: The Rôle of the Misfit in Arthurian Literature," *Neophilologus* 67.2 (1983): 161-74; Joyce Coleman, "Fooling with Language: Sir Dinadan in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthurian Literature* 23 (2006): 30-45; Karl Heinz Göller, "Zur Aktualität des Artusstoffes heute," in *Fiktion und Geschichte in der anglo-amerikanischen Literatur: Festschrift für Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. Rüdiger Ahrens and Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1998), 1-16; D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., "Characterization or Jumble? Sir Dinadan in Malory," *Medieval Perspectives* 2.1 (1987): 167-76; Donald L. Hoffman, "Dinadan: the Excluded Middle," *Tristania* 10.1-2 (1984): 3-16; Rebecca L. Reynolds, "Sir Dinadan's Knightly Language," *Medieval Perspectives* 27 (2012): 137-44.

Even though post-medieval written or artistic output involving Dinadan has been sporadic and elicited no scholarly response, Dinadan represents a unique Arthurian figure that deserves further critical attention, especially in relation to humor. The 19<sup>th</sup>-, 20<sup>th</sup>-, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century writers concentrating on humorous depictions of Dinadan are the American, British, and Canadian authors William Morris, F. B. Money-Coutts, Ernest Rhys, Morley Steynor, Mark Twain, Millicent Peirce Potter, Theodore Goodridge Roberts, and Gerald Morris. Dinadan often instigates humorous situations but sometimes also becomes the target of humor by others. The three main trajectories of Dinadan primary material—as composer of lays, as a humorist or prankster, and as the butt of the joke—combine in varying constellations with superiority, incongruity, and relief humor theories.<sup>8</sup> These three theories “characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other,” but rather “supplement each other quite nicely.”<sup>9</sup> Humor generally breaks convention and can express criticism or even hostility. The primary text and humor theory combinations in this essay depict aesthetic and cultural versions of Dinadan based on their historical periods, especially in young adult literature, with humor as the driving force.

Nineteenth-century Welsh author Ernest Rhys (1859-1946), proponent of an “Anglo-Welsh ‘renaissance’”<sup>10</sup> that did not materialize during his lifetime, takes the first poetic stab at both Dinadan as a lay maker and King Mark as a villain. In what amounts to one of the first literary nasty-grams, in Malory “the harpers went straight into Wales and into Cornwall to sing the lay that Sir Dinadan made of King Mark, which was the worst lay that ever harper sang with harp or with any other instruments.”<sup>11</sup> This event establishes Dinadan as minstrel in some post-medieval minds. Since Malory does not provide us with the text for the lay, Rhys has artistic license to create it in “The Lay of King Mark.”<sup>12</sup>

Now King Mark rode beneath the leaf,  
 Unto a fountain in the green shade;  
     When by there came Sir Lamorak,  
 And grievous the complaint he made, —  
 Great dolour, piteous grief.

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He tied his horse unto a tree,  
 He set him down by the fountain-side,  
     The langour of Sir Lamorak,

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<sup>8</sup> There is a fourth trajectory of post-medieval Dinadan material: as a heteronormative character in relation to his refusal to participate in courtly love. William Morris, Marion Ames Taggart, and Max Adeler expound on this strain and they will be the topic of another essay.

<sup>9</sup> John Morreall, *New Directions in Aesthetics: Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Hoboken, GB: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 22. ProQuest ebrary.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kimberley Roberts, *Ernest Rhys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983), 65.

<sup>11</sup> This Malorian sentence precedes Rhys’s poem.

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Rhys, “The Lay of King Mark,” in *Lays of the Round Table and Other Lyric Romances* (London: J. M. Dent & Co, 1905), 21-22.

The great complaint with which he cried,  
Were such, the King he could not see. 10

And this the cross of his complaint,  
“Oh, queen of Orkney, King Lot’s wife,”  
Cried aloud Sir Lamorak, —  
“Now for thy love’s sake, all that life  
Which waxed in me, doth wane and faint!” 15

“Fair knight,” said Mark, “tell me thy name,  
“Complain more piteous, no knight could!” . . .  
But at that voice, Sir Lamorak  
Remembering Tristan — Belle Isoud —  
Forgot his woe in King Mark’s shame. 20

“Of coward knights, the king and chief  
King Mark is known, that Sir Tristan  
Has put to shame!” cried Lamorak,  
“To shame!” the stream cried as it ran;  
“TO SHAME!” cried out the forest leaf. 25

Rhys’s lay uses superiority humor, but its usage is both subtler and more damning than in other pieces. Advocates of this humor theory claim that “when something evokes laughter, it is by revealing someone’s inferiority to the person laughing,” but this laughter also “serves as a social corrective.”<sup>13</sup> Lamorak pines for Morgause, King Lot’s wife; when Mark kindly asks after Lamorak’s identity, Lamorak recognizes him and the parallel Tristram and Isolde context, a young knight in love with a king’s wife. Any ethical qualms Lamorak might have had about his own situation get trounced by the abject reputation of King Mark in the last stanza. Even nature encodes Mark’s shame and Lamorak can preserve his own quandary in the subtle irony of this parallel and encounter.

In Morley Steynor’s 1909 play *Lancelot and Elaine*, Dinadan plays a minor role that also reprises his lay making. Ironically, in Act V, Sir Dagonet—often stylized as Arthur’s fool—clues in the newly arrived Sir Lavaine to some of the characters at court. As Dinadan passes by “surrounded by a troupe of laughing Girls,” Dagonet exclaims:

A bard, sir, a juggler of words, a breeder of verse; and yet, if you will believe me, an honest gentleman. Never was child so spoilt as this Sir Dinadan. He is loved more for his faults than

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<sup>13</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 7-8.

for his virtues, more for his intentions than for his deeds, and less for his bravery of heart, nobleness of character, and sweetness of disposition, than for his bad verse. He will make the king laugh by the very audacity of his rhymes; and he has lately achieved a world-wide reputation as the author of the worst lay extant. I would as soon he won as another.<sup>14</sup>

It is not entirely clear here if Dagonet is jealous of Dinadan and his humorous successes because they trespass on Dagonet's turf, or whether Dagonet is more seriously concerned about Dinadan's reputation. The usage of the word "child" suggests a young Dinadan still forming an identity. Incongruity theory and intratextual humor collate in a scene at the beginning of act three that has Dinadan, the "poet laureate" trying to amuse Guinevere, but all his choices of lays are too masculine and martial for Guinevere. Not surprisingly, Arthur is taken by this humor. Standard incongruity theories—a more contested form among the theorists—posit "that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations. Once we have experienced something incongruous, of course, we no longer expect it to fit our normal mental patterns. Nonetheless, it still violates our normal mental patterns and our normal expectations. That is how we can be amused by the same thing more than once."<sup>15</sup>

The humorist and prankster sides of Dinadan are portrayed by F. B. Money-Coutts (1852-1923), 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Latymer. An English patron of the arts, he penned the poem "Dagonet's Quest" (1897) that closely versifies a prank, in Malory, that Dinadan plays on King Mark, the perennially inept and vicious ruler of Cornwall. Preying on both Mark's ignorance and fear of Lancelot, Dinadan, whom Mark meets on the road but does not recognize as the "merry," "courteous" and "jesting wight"<sup>16</sup> he is, pretends to see Lancelot in the distance. This pretense sends Mark, who is on a mission to find and kill Tristram, scurrying away. Dinadan joins the party of Arthurian knights he had spotted and informs them of his plan "to shape a jest and jape, / That cowardly King to school."<sup>17</sup> Sir Dagonet, "Arthur's fool," whose heraldic emblems Mark mistakes for Lancelot's, happily chases the fleeing Mark through the forest to the accompanying laughter of the other knights. Here, as in Malory, superiority theory and incongruity theory apply. The laughing knights demonstrate their superiority over the cowardly Mark. The incongruity between the pursuing Dagonet and the presumed Lancelot exposes the extremes of the incongruity gap in the reputations of these two knights.

The tables also turn on Dinadan, as William Morris and Mark Twain depict him as the target of humor. Morris (1834-1896) alludes to a comic but humiliating episode in Malory where Dinadan is the butt of the joke in his 1858 poem, "King Arthur's Tomb." The rather reflective and somber poem written from Arthur's perspective hits this happy note:

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<sup>14</sup> Morley Steynor, *Lancelot and Elaine: A Play in Five Acts* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1909), *The Camelot Project*, accessed 16 September 2016, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/steynor-lancelot-and-elaine>.

<sup>15</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> F. B. Money-Coutts, "Sir Dagonet's Quest," *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* (1897): 107-9, ll. 3, 4, *The Camelot Project*, accessed 17 September, 2016, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/money-coutts-dagonet-quest>.

<sup>17</sup> Money-Coutts, "Sir Dagonet's Quest," ll. 19-20.

Thoughts of some joust must help me through the vale,

Keep this till after: How Sir Gareth ran

A good course that day under my Queen's eyes,  
And how she sway'd laughing at Dinadan.

No. Back again, the other thoughts will rise.<sup>18</sup>

The line about her laughing at Dinadan refers to the rather puzzling episode in Malory during the Tournament at Surluse when Galahalt, the Haute Prince, and Lancelot conspire to humiliate Dinadan in an especially rough application of superiority humor. Lancelot, dressed as a maiden prancing on the tournament field accompanied by Galahalt, smites down Dinadan, something Galahalt failed to achieve, and then forcibly dresses up Dinadan in women's clothes. When they parade him around, Guinevere laughs so hard she falls off her chair. Donald L. Hoffman, examining the humor in the episode, concludes that this joke does not measure up to Dinadan's more classy pranks informed by wit, but is "essentially a soldier's joke, bluff, brutal, and not entirely successful."<sup>19</sup>

Dinadan also gets savaged by particularly harsh treatment in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Twain (1835-1910) strips Dinadan of two of his four major attributes: his aversion to senseless jousting and knight-errantry fighting as well as his rejection of courtly love and service to women, leaving only the humorist part—which he then trounces thoroughly. Twain alters the Malorian source Dinadan in this fashion because he transfers Dinadan's critiquing functions to his protagonist Hank Morgan, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Colts Arms Factory foreman transported to Arthurian England by the unkind whack of a crowbar, and his "medieval" right-hand man Clarence. Hank becomes a type of Fair Unknown, and the alterity that Dinadan embodied in Malory is now personified by both Hank and Clarence. The egomaniacal and progress-oriented Hank Morgan makes it his mission to destroy knight errantry, which he considers an outdated and senseless activity. In chapter 40, he pronounces its death: "When I broke the back of knight-errantry that time, I no longer felt obliged to work in secret."<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, courtly love and service to ladies is being lampooned in the chapters with Sandy, the Damsel Alisande, who comes to Arthur's court to find a champion who will help her free captive princesses. In the vein of Arthurian stories where such requests are given to the most recent arrivals at court in search of glory, King Arthur conveys this quest to the newly minted Sir Boss, who,

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<sup>18</sup> See especially the eighth and ninth stanzas, from the beginning, of William Morris, "King Arthur's Tomb," in *The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1858), 19-42, *The Camelot Project*, accessed 17 September 2016, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/morris-king-arthurs-tomb>.

<sup>19</sup> Hoffman, "Dinadan: the Excluded Middle," 10.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 364.

Dinadan-like, “had not asked for it at all,”<sup>21</sup> and Hank describes the princesses as merely a herd of swine. Additionally, back in chapter 4, Twain evidences this transfer of a Malorian Dinadan characteristic to Clarence by calling him a “scoffer”: “Everybody laughed at these antiquities [the jokes Dinadan told]. . . . However, of course, the scoffer didn’t laugh—I mean the boy. No, he scoffed; there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t scoff at. He said the most of Sir Dinadan’s jokes were rotten and the rest petrified.”<sup>22</sup> The proverb goes that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but in this case the imitation and transference of Dinadan’s scoffing attitude to Clarence means that the Malorian Dinadan has to be destroyed.

To the destruction of Dinadan’s reputation as a humorist Twain devotes chapter 4, “Sir Dinadan the Humorist.” Twain invents this scenario, focusing on comic relief humor. Among others, Freud discussed this type of humor, distinguishing “three laughter situations: joking, ‘the comic,’ and ‘humor.’ In all three, laughter releases energy that was summoned for a psychological task, but then became unnecessary when that task was abandoned.”<sup>23</sup> Thus Dinadan devises

a practical joke of a sufficiently poor quality. He tied some metal mugs to a dog’s tail and turned him loose, and he tore around and around the place in a frenzy of fright, with all the other dogs bellowing after him and battering and crashing against everything that came in their way and making altogether a chaos of confusion and a most deafening din and turmoil; at which every man and woman of the multitude laughed till the tears flowed, and some fell out of their chairs and wallowed on the floor in ecstasy. It was just like so many children.<sup>24</sup>

The two underlying episodes in Malory for this scene are Dinadan’s practical joke on King Mark with Dagonet chasing him: this dog ballyhoo evokes horses crashing through the woods while the knights look on and laugh. The laughter and people falling off their chairs evoke the forced cross-dressing scene with Dinadan and Guinevere’s parallel reaction. Hank Morgan, however, if not Twain, is a prude and surely would not have utilized this episode to illustrate this laughter. Dinadan does end up the butt of the joke in the cross-dressing scene as well as in the Twain scene since Hank wants to humiliate him. Hank’s action against Dinadan is especially problematic because it runs counter to his main mode of humor: verbal quips. As John Morreall explains, “Freud’s term for joking, *der Witz*, is not limited to ‘joke-telling,’ the recitation of prepared fictional narratives, but includes spontaneous witty comments, bon mots, and repartee as well. In all of these, he says, there is a release of psychic energy, not the energy of repressed feelings, but the energy that normally represses those feelings.”<sup>25</sup> It is this witty type of humor that Dinadan is the master of, and Twain annihilates it because he, too, is master of the same humor.

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<sup>21</sup> Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 17-18.

<sup>24</sup> Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 18.

For further superiority humor, Twain depicts Dinadan as having been especially pleased with himself about this prank, dissecting the idea and execution endlessly: “as is the way with humorists of this breed, he was still laughing at it after everybody else had got through.”<sup>26</sup> Twain, however, piles on having Dinadan give a “humorous speech,” which is “old played-out jokes strung together . . . He was worse than the minstrels, worse than the clown in the circus.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, in chapter 40, “Three Years Later,” Hank, proclaiming the progress of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, kills him off:

Even authorship was taking a start; Sir Dinadan the Humourist was first in the field, with a volume of gray-headed jokes which I had been familiar with during thirteen centuries. If he had left out that old rancid one about the lecturer I wouldn't have said anything; but I couldn't stand that one. I suppressed the book and hanged the author.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Hank's satirical and vicious action of incongruity humor, this is also an inside joke by Twain, as he considered himself a humorist as well as a lecturer.<sup>29</sup>

American author Millicent Pierce Potter in her 1899 book, *Tales of the Round Table: Adapted for the Young People from the Morte D'Arthur of Sir Thomas Malory*, depicts Dinadan as a jokester, the butt of the joke, and heroic comrade. Potter, an unusually early woman writer of Arthurian material, redacts and miniaturizes Malory's Arthuriad by rendering stories of six Arthurian characters and two material objects: Arthur, Merlin, Gareth, Tristram, Dinadan, Lancelot, the Round Table and the Holy Grail. The inclusion of Dinadan may be surprising on the one hand, since more prominent characters, such as Gawain, Morgan, and Mordred, do not have chapters titled after them. On the other hand, since Potter specifies a young adult audience, the comic elements around Dinadan make him an attractive choice. In Potter's book, Dinadan takes on almost Lancelot-like characteristics. He was a “Round Table favorite,” and “No knight ever left the court to ride upon adventures without asking

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<sup>26</sup> Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 364-65.

<sup>29</sup> In Sebastian Evans's 1875 “The Eve of Morte Arthure,” Dinadan gets mentioned: “Sir Dinadan lets loose his fooling mood /And prates how old-world beauty wont to smile.” See *In the Studio: A Decade of Poems* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), *The Camelot Project*, accessed 18 September 2016, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/evans-eve-of-morte-arthur>. In William Morris's 1858, “Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery,” Sir Bors delivers the bad news that Dinadan had been killed during the Grail quest. He is described with the Malory-derived “jape and scoff”:

With many-colour'd raiment, but far off;  
And so pass'd quickly: from the court nought good;  
Poor merry Dinadan, that with jape and scoff  
Kept us all merry, in a little wood

Was found all hackd and dead. (43-56, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza from the end.)

See *The Defence of Guinevere*, 43-56, especially the second and third stanzas from the end. Accessed 18 September 2016, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/morris-sir-galahad-a-christmas-mystery>.

Dinadan to go along too, for he was a great fighter and a jolly companion.”<sup>30</sup> Potter focuses on the episode of the cross-dressing Lancelot and Dinadan. First Dinadan succeeds in amusing the court by sporting a thorn tree twig as a token on his helmet instead of a lady’s scarf. Since he was spurning Guinevere with this caper, Lancelot disguised as a woman then punishes Dinadan by unseating him in the tournament and forcing him to dress up as a woman. Dinadan quips: “O, Launcelot, thou old shrew, I never can beware of thee!”<sup>31</sup> Everything is lighthearted and in good fun. Potter closes out her chapter with Dinadan both trying to protect Sir Tristram from King Mark and dying while avenging Sir Tristram’s murder. With these adjustments, Potter raises the chivalric importance of Dinadan to justify including him in her highly selective list of main Arthurian characters. Her work presents a significant precursor to the current young adult novels by two other North American authors: Theodore Goodridge Roberts’s *The Merriest Knight* (2001) and Gerald Morris’s *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan* (2003).<sup>32</sup>

Theodore Goodridge Roberts (1877-1953), author of over a hundred poems and short stories as well as thirty-four novels, debuted his Dinadan in his own serial, the *Red Haggard*, where Dinadan appears in the story as Bertram de Sallas’s sidekick and guide.<sup>33</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, Roberts penned eight stories about Sir Dinadan, all published in *Blue Book*, “one of the more sophisticated fiction magazines of the early 1950s.”<sup>34</sup> Mike Ashley calls Roberts’s stories “clever and sophisticated explorations of the Arthurian world . . . with a wry and satirical look . . . through the eyes of a quick-witted, ingenious, and literary man.”<sup>35</sup> Since Roberts died before he could publish his collected stories as a book, Ashley edited Roberts’s oeuvre into the 2001 volume, *The Merriest Knight*, which contains Roberts’s other Arthurian works as well.<sup>36</sup> Ashley took the editorial license to arrange the stories in an order that suggests a chronological progression from Dinadan the squire to Dinadan the landed knight.

Fun was a distinct reason for the stories’ existence. We are lucky to have a statement by Roberts about his predilection for Dinadan:

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<sup>30</sup> Millicent Peirce Potter, *Tales of the Round Table: Adapted for the Young People from the Morte D’Arthur of Sir Thomas Malory* (North Adams, MA: Press of North Adams News, 1899), 61, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Potter, *Tales of the Round Table*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> After these early works, Dinadan does not receive much special attention. *McClure’s Magazine* published a story titled “The Decadence of Sir Dinadan: The Third Adventure of the Industrious Chevalier” by S. Squire Sprigge. The story is about Rupert Mallory who is looking for a publisher of the book by the same title. See *McClure’s Magazine* 41 (1913), 129-38. In 1958, T. H. White has two references to the humorous Dinadan in *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958). In the offshoot of this novel a few years later, the musical *Camelot*, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe slightly increase Dinadan’s role, albeit in not much of a comic way. See *Camelot: A New Musical* (New York: Random House, 1961).

<sup>33</sup> Mike Ashley, introduction to Theodore Goodridge Roberts, *The Merriest Knight: The Collected Arthurian Tales of Theodore Goodridge Roberts*, ed. Mike Ashley (Mountain View, CA: Green Knight Publishing, 2001), 11.

<sup>34</sup> Georges T. Dodds, “The Merriest Knight: Theodore Goodridge Roberts,” *SF Site*, accessed 18 September 2016, <https://www.sfsite.com/05b/mk128.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Ashley, “Introduction,” 11-12.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts even started a novel about Dinadan that remains unfinished. See Ashley, “Introduction,” 14.



A cynic, Sir Dinadan! But that was not all. The charm of his character and wit has not received its just recognition. To my mind he was one of the best, and by far the most attractive, of all the knights of the Round Table. He was loved by all good knights, despite his somewhat acrid humor.<sup>37</sup>

This quotation echoes Malory's "and there was none that hated Sir Dynadan but tho that ever were called murtherers."<sup>38</sup> Roberts also provides an interauctorial "Author's Introduction" in which he posits omission: "the key to the character and foibles of the Dinadan we know lies hidden in some legends or songs overlooked by the good Sir Thomas Malory. The fact is, Malory did not know all about Sir Dinadan. To prove my statement, I shall now tell you some things that he did not know."<sup>39</sup> All the stories have epigraphs, many of them from *Morte Darthur* in an announced intertextuality that demonstrates what Malory wrote and how Roberts expanded it, as he promised. Not all of the stories have recognizable Arthurian characters, as some stories deviate vastly from known Arthurian materials, although they generally keep a recognizable motif.

Ashley starts Roberts' story collection with "A Purfle for a King," a typical Fair Unknown setup when a challenge comes from King Rience demanding King Arthur's beard. The unobtrusive squire Dinadan volunteers to infiltrate King Rience's castle disguised as a troubadour, to which Sir Kay cautions: "I must warn you, sir, that this young squire has a local reputation as a joker and jiber."<sup>40</sup> In his troubadour performance at King Rience's, he sings an Andrew Marvell "To His Coy Mistress"-like lay that discourages lovers. The last line of each stanza sums it up:

Pain and Age will have your lover. . . .  
Age and frost will chill my wooing . . .  
Ere frosty Age possess your lover.<sup>41</sup>

He concludes his quest successfully by bringing Arthur Rience's beard—with the help of soporific shaving cream—and his daughter. Arthur knights him for his trouble.

The second quest falls into his lap: "The Quest of the Saracen Beast," the thinly veiled Questing Beast. Dinadan is a most reluctant quester: "But who am I—full young and untried—to follow those illustrious princes and noble questers?"<sup>42</sup> In this episode and others, when he finally finds the feared animal or giant, it turns out to be less than hyped. This way, Roberts can use incongruity humor with Dinadan to critique the many chivalric exaggerations embedded in the medieval Arthurian romance. Lanval-like themes of poverty hound Dinadan, who, as reviewer Georges L.

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Ashley, "Introduction," 13.

<sup>38</sup> Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 370, ll. 28-30.

<sup>39</sup> "Author's Introduction," *The Merriest Knight*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Roberts, *The Merriest Knight*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, *The Merriest Knight*, 27, ll. 5, 10, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *The Merriest Knight*, 39.

Dodds writes, “is basically a nice guy who likes to help out where he can, but isn't getting rich or famous doing it.” His decency, almost “regular guy” type appearance, and democratic behavior make him an attractive person to modern readers. As Dodd further suggests: “Sir Dinadan is a particularly endearing character from the very fact that he isn’t a superstar.”

The final and most recent work in my analysis, American author Gerald Morris’s *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan* (2003), is a compelling piece of young adult fiction and the most integrated and psychologically motivated treatment of him. Morris (1963–), an erstwhile religious studies professor, likes to expand characters, as he puts it in an interview: “Arthurian literature, face it, doesn’t deal with well-rounded characters. They’re all pretty much paper cut-outs. . . . But putting together the different ways that characters are pictured in different eras one can end up with a multi-faceted personality.”<sup>43</sup> The fifth installment of Morris’s ten-volume *The Squire’s Tale* series, the *Ballad* is a *Bildungsroman* which features a young and dissatisfied Dinadan, the second-born son of Baron Meliodas of the Fens and, in a nice twist, younger brother to the glorious Sir Tristram. Since fantasy writers can rearrange and invent stories as they like, Morris offers us a curious but effective *mélange* of two medieval Arthurian stories: the Tristram and Isolde story and the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen*. After Dinadan tricks his drunken father into knighting him—an anti-heroic episode—he essentially runs away from home to find himself. He does not have much truck with knight-errantry, nor the church, saying “I respect the church too little to be a priest, but it too much to be a bishop”; instead wanting to be a troubadour, as he is of “quick wit and humor.”<sup>44</sup>

The pains of the coming-of-age process resonate with young modern readers who also face the difficulty of growing up and finding their own path. Nikki Friedman, a 13-year-old reviewer of the novel, writes:

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” All of us children have been plagued by that awful question time and time again. Either we dutifully dole out a rehearsed answer, or we smile, saying we haven’t decided quite yet. But what if we really didn’t have a choice? What if our future had been chosen for us, before we were born, and we couldn’t change it, no matter what happened? I’m sure most children today would hate to be in a situation like that.<sup>45</sup>

Dinadan ends up at the Arthurian court where, Gareth-like, he does not mention that he is related to the famous Sir Tristram. He wants to make his own mark on the world, unencumbered by the fame

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<sup>43</sup> Morris makes this comment in an email interview with Raymond H. Thompson. Although the interview transcript assigns these words to Thompson, it’s clear from the order of the exchange that they belong to Morris. See “An Interview with Gerald Morris,” 28 January 2012, *The Camelot Project*, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/thompson-interview-gerald-morris>.

<sup>44</sup> Gerald Morris, *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan* (Boston: Sandpiper, 2003), 5, 3. There is also a German translation: *Triumph dem tapferen Troubadour* (Hamburg: Carlsen, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> Nikki Friedman, “Book Review of *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan*,” *Stone Soup* 33.2 (Nov-Dec 2004): 36.

of his big brother—another trope young readers can empathize with. His fame precedes him via the lay he composes about himself and his (accidental) dispatching of the murderous Sir Annui, sung by another minstrel who beats him to Arthur’s court. Arthur sends him out to accompany Culloch in his quest to woo the daughter of the Giant Isbaddadon. Sir Kay and Sir Bedivere, also along on this quest, provide some comic relief. Culloch is a simpleton overly fond of food (“If he could fight as well as he ate, he would have no trouble achieving knighthood”),<sup>46</sup> whose silly tasks to appease the Giant are juxtaposed to Dinadan’s quiet, behind-the-scenes, practical resolutions to Culloch’s quest problems. Thus Morris provides a double Bildungsroman for foil purposes. While Dinadan succeeds in coming of age and becomes the troubadour he wanted to be, Culloch makes a fool of himself during most of the novel and Dinadan flees his company.

Most of the humor is incongruity mode and comic relief and much of it at the expense of the noble characters: Mark, Isolde, and Tristram. Mark is still vicious and mad; Isolde is portrayed as an adulterous, murder-minded ditz with a lisp. And Tristram gets the worst of it. This is part of Morris’s strategy of “counter-characterization,” turning noble characters into buffoons. Dinadan, who has chafed all his life under the heroic reputation of his much older knightly brother in a one-sided sibling rivalry, is aghast when he meets him during his love-besotted period of madness. Tristram never recognizes his brother and during their first meeting calls him a “paltry, skinny waif of no skill and no promise.”<sup>47</sup> In a new pairing by Morris, Sir Palomides, in search of the epitome of western knighthood, becomes Dinadan’s companion. When Palomides and Dinadan encounter Tristram, Dinadan explains that Tristram “isn’t an enemy but an annoyance.”<sup>48</sup> In another episode, Dinadan looks at Tristram and wonders “how he could possibly be related to this clodpole.”<sup>49</sup> When Palomides figures out that Dinadan is Tristram’s brother, Dinadan states: “Yes. A traitor and an ass and now a madman, but he’s also my brother.”<sup>50</sup> The somber note in the novel comes when Dinadan cannot save Tristram from the treacherous and deadly attack by Mark, as Potter had also depicted. Like Potter, Morris elevates Dinadan because Palomides states that in Dinadan he has found the epitome of western chivalry and can now safely leave England.

Dinadan, like many Arthurian personages, is an elastic character portrayed in multi-faceted ways in the medieval and post-medieval material. He is the locus and provider of maximum humor, either as perpetrator or as recipient. Humor, I argue, is what makes him human, appealing, and attractive to modern audiences, especially young adults. D. Thomas Hanks posits about the Malorian Dinadan that “only with Dinadan come humor and practical jokes in Malory. These humorous circumstances, then, automatically distinguish him from the myriad of knights in the *Morte* and call him to our

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<sup>46</sup> Morris, *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Morris, *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan*, 77.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan*, 143.

<sup>49</sup> Morris, *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan*, 175.

<sup>50</sup> Morris, *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan*, 196.

attention.”<sup>51</sup> Humor, despite being context dependent, is thus uniquely associated with Dinadan, then and now, and refocuses the often tragic outlook of the Arthurian works, especially in post-medieval texts.

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<sup>51</sup> Hanks, “Characterization or Jumble?”, 169.