

5-2019

The Value in Vanité: The Benefits of Pleasure Reading and Viewing in Le Morte d'Arthur and Star Wars Rebels

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The Value in “Vanité:” The Benefits of Pleasure Reading and Viewing in *Le Morte D’arthur* and
Star Wars Rebels

A Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Classical and Medieval Studies

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Lewiston, Maine

December 6, 2018

Acknowledgements

There are several people who were important in helping make this thesis possible. First of all, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, José Villagrana. All of the time you spent giving me tons of helpful suggestions has been invaluable in making my thesis the best it can possibly be. Thank you for making thesis-writing such a positive experience. I have really enjoyed working with you this semester.

Thank you to my parents, my sister Sarah, my dog Ellie, and my cats, Middy, Bizzy, and Fred – you guys are all such a great family and I always look forward to seeing you when I come home.

Lastly, thank you to Dave Filoni for creating the show that is *Star Wars Rebels*. Your storytelling is a large part of what has made it the amazing story that it is, and an essential part of the *Star Wars* universe.

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Introduction – Vanité Then and Now

During the medieval period, a genre of story known as ‘romance’ began gaining popularity with a variety of different writers and consumers. Contrary to what its name suggests, ‘romance’, in generic terms, does not have to be a love story, although love is often involved in some way. Instead, a romance is a story that can contain many different elements, making the genre difficult to define or explain coherently. However, some common themes do emerge. A romance almost always involves a hero of some sort, who has to complete a task or quest, often in order to defeat an evil and/or save those they care about, sometimes traveling far from their starting points and facing trials and hardships along the way. In addition, the story is usually set in a world that is not our own, a world with unrealistic, fantastical elements such as strange creatures or magic. This type of story gained popularity during the medieval period with stories such as *Morte D’arthur*, this thesis’ medieval focus. The romance genre has persisted through the ages, still existing today in many forms, including the Star Wars TV show, *Star Wars Rebels*, which will be the modern focus of this thesis.

However, while many romances in both medieval and modern societies are extremely popular and well-known, they have been simultaneously thought of as time-wasters, and unable to teach their readers and viewers when compared to other works of their time. In her book *Expectations of Romance*, Melissa Furrow writes that in the medieval period, romances were referred to as “troffils” or “vanités.”¹ Today, criticisms of stories such as *Star Wars Rebels* often center around their more childish aspects, and

¹ Melissa Furrow, *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2009), 27.

suggest that adults cannot and should not attempt to get anything out of them. I will be examining the reasons for the criticisms that these romances received, what was said about them, and discuss the story elements that the *Morte* and *Rebels* had which caused them to be looked down on by many. In particular, I will look at the idea that consuming these stories is a waste of time, and that they contain nothing of value, nothing that we are able to learn from and take with us.

Should romances like *Morte d'Arthur*, and modern ones like *Star Wars Rebels*, really be thought of as “vanités,” and not as worthy of our time and attention when compared to other works of different genres? Although commonly looked down upon by many for their lack of valuable information, romances such as *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* in actuality contain important lessons and deal with difficult moral concepts. Because of this, we, as well as those living in the medieval period, can relate to and learn from these stories, despite their implausibility in many other areas, and classification among many as simply pleasure reading. The fact that these romances, despite the criticisms they have received, are loved by countless different people, across different points in time, strongly suggests that they do contain something of value to us, and that they do have the ability to instruct their consumers in a positive manner. This thesis will therefore demonstrate that this perceived weakness of many stories belonging to the romance genre - their classification as pleasure reading, and therefore a waste of time, because of the “trofils” that they contain - is actually one of their greatest strengths. By enjoying what they are consuming, readers and viewers are able to connect better with these stories and learn more from the messages present in them. In addition, it will examine some story elements present in the *Morte* and *Star Wars Rebels*, which convey

moral lessons that people can take with them. These two elements together - the joy gotten from consuming the romances, as well as their ability to teach us important lessons - are what makes stories such as *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* so valuable.

In order to show how these stories do this, I will first be examining the medieval opinions of romances, with a focus on *Morte d'Arthur* in particular. I will discuss what was said about the stories contained in Malory's romance, and what elements and storylines would have been especially unappealing to many. I will then show how many people's attitudes towards the Star Wars saga mirror those of medieval critics. I will draw a parallel between medieval people's opinion that romances like *Morte d'Arthur* are simply "vanités" and "trofils," and the claim that *Star Wars Rebels* is a show that only kids should be enjoying, and something that adults can get nothing of value out of. I will discuss how *Star Wars Rebels*' ability to appeal to children is sometimes looked down on by critics, who believe that because of *Rebels*' accessibility to children, adults won't be able to get anything out of the show. I will demonstrate how this criticism the show has gotten is similar to medieval romance's classification as a "trofil" or "vanité." I will discuss how the perception of this show among many as 'for children' influences people's opinions of it and gives it a reputation among many as something that only children should be watching.

Using examples of particular storylines from *Star Wars Rebels*, I argue that the fact that this show can be enjoyed by children is a strength rather than a weakness. I will also look at how, despite the criticisms that some have given the show, some modern reviewers of *Star Wars Rebels* are beginning to show a growing acceptance and enjoyment of elements that some would consider more childish, and therefore a waste of

time to watch in the opinions of some. Although these reviewers still show an awareness that these elements are present, the words they use to describe them are positive, showing their appreciation for, and enjoyment of them. As people like these reviewers demonstrate, *Star Wars Rebels*' appeal to children and adults alike makes its stories as a whole an important part of our world, just as medieval "troufils" such as *Morte d'Arthur* were read by medieval people despite the frivolity of many of its own storylines, as well as the criticism by many for these elements.

However, *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* contain more than just "troufils" and "vanités." Because of the intriguing moral elements and questions that episodes of *Star Wars Rebels* often contain, adults and children alike are able to gain something important, aside from simple pleasure, from what they are viewing - just as those living in medieval times were able to find joy in and learn lessons from the sometimes implausible, but still inspiring, stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. *Star Wars Rebels* is a modern example of how stories from the romance genre, just as they did in medieval times with romances such as the *Morte*, help to uplift and inspire people because of the positive messages that they are able to bring to us through their stories, and the simultaneous enjoyment received from them. The ability of *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* to bring their consumers pleasure while at the same time teaching valuable lessons is something that they are able to do so well precisely because these are the kinds of stories that people would choose to read of their own accord and for their own enjoyment. I will look at how the *Morte* and *Rebels* are able to send important messages to people and teach them valuable lessons, no matter the ages of the readers or viewers in question or the perceived frivolity of the story. The consumption of these

romances for pleasure causes the *Morte* and *Rebels* to speak to their readers and viewers and stay with them long after they finish the story. Despite their definitions as “trofils” and “vanités,” it turns out that romances can convey information that is valuable to us.

By looking at the reception of *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels*, it is evident that they have earned the negative reputation as “vanités” among some critics because of the fact that they, being science fiction/fantasy stories about unrealistic worlds, are very often the type of story that people consume for pleasure rather than for conscious learning. Although the *Morte* was harshly criticized by many medieval readers because of this, as some modern opinions of *Star Wars Rebels* show, there is a growing realization that these kinds of stories should not be simply written off simply because of the “vanités” that they contain, as well as the fact that they are consumed chiefly for the purpose of enjoyment. Online reviews of episodes of *Rebels* demonstrate the opinion that it should not be believed that they contain nothing of value because of the “trofils” and “vanités” that are often present in them. And, because of the powerful messages contained in similar storylines present in both the *Morte* and *Rebels*, it is evident that information can be conveyed through these stories, and people can learn something of value from them, while also enjoying their “trofils” and “vanités.” These two romances, conceived of during very different time periods, both show that learning from a story can take many forms, and that, even when consuming a fictitious romance for pleasure, there can still be messages present in them that are able to teach the reader or viewer something of value.

Chapter One – *Morte d'Arthur* as a Vanité

The modern opinion that some works of fiction, often romances in particular, are stories to be consumed solely for pleasure and have no real value, was also evident in the reception of romances such as *Morte d'Arthur* in the medieval period. And, just like today, the act of consuming stories only for pleasure's sake was sometimes frowned upon. Furrow, when discussing the medieval receptions of the Romance genre as a whole, writes that stories of a romantic nature were often referred to as “trofils” (trifles) or “vanités” (vanities), both demeaning adjectives suggesting that these stories' only use was for leisurely pastime, and that this kind of pastime was not something people should engage in, especially excessively.² The word “vanité” is particularly interesting here. Some definitions of ‘vanity’ from the *Oxford English Dictionary* are, “that which is vain, futile, or worthless; that which has no value or profit,” “unprofitable conduct or employment of time,” and “the quality of being foolish or of holding erroneous opinions.”³ Therefore, when the description “vanité” is applied to romances, it presents a good picture of what those critical of them during the medieval period thought of these stories: that they were worthless and a waste of time.

The medieval opinion that romances are “vanités” is evident in the writing of the time. Furrow discusses Philippe de Mézière's 1389 *Songe du Vieil Pelerin*, which included instructions to young King Charles VI of France on what he should be reading. The king was 21 at the time the letter was written, so would still have been considered young and impressionable by many. The instructions warned him of stories he “ought to

² Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 27.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*. “Vanity (n.)” Def. 1.a., 1.b., 2.b, accessed October 15, 2018. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/221396?redirectedFrom=vanity#eid>.

beware”, and that he should “keep [himself] from delighting too much in apocryphal scriptures, and especially in books and romances that are full of *bourdes*, and that often attract the reader to the impossible, to folly, vanity, and sin”⁴ Furrow suggests that the word “bourdes” likely means “incredible adventures.” *Morte d’Arthur* would undoubtedly be a story that contains these “bourdes” that the letter speaks of; King Arthur and his knights go on many “incredible adventures” throughout the course of the *Morte*. The use of the word “sin” in relation to the excessive reading of romance especially emphasizes the idea that reading romances could be extremely damaging to someone, is not a practice that should be engaged in, and is even in some way evil. It also brings in the idea that what is contained in these stories is frowned upon in a religious context, giving them an even more negative connotation in the eyes of many. In addition, the word “vanity” is once again mentioned in relation to romance. Mézière’s use of the word “attract” with “vanity” suggests that vanity is a bad habit that Charles could get into as a result of reading too many romances. Therefore, it was acceptable, Furrow writes, for Charles to read romance stories once, although not at all would be preferable.⁵ The books that are suggested to Charles instead, Furrow writes, are those that “suit his station in life and the roles he will be expected to play”.⁶ These instructions to the king suggest that romances contain elements, such as “incredible adventures,” that are not appropriate for someone of Charles’ status to be caught reading. This once again hints at the idea of “vanité,” that Charles would be wasting his time, and would even be exposing himself to sinful acts, by indulging in romances as opposed to the books that “suit his station in life.”

⁴ Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 190-191.

⁵ Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 191.

⁶ Furrow, *Expectations of Romance*, 192.

Another important point in Mézière's instructions is his assertion that romances "attract the reader to the impossible." This point shows that likely the fantastical, unrealistic storylines present in many romances were not thought of as beneficial to those consuming them, and likely contributed to their reputation as "vanités." Throughout *Morte d'Arthur*, many fantastical, "impossible" elements can be seen. One especially well-known example of the "impossible" comes when Arthur pulls the sword from the stone and is therefore destined to become king. Malory writes of the sword, "...there was seen in the churchyard, against the high altar, a great stone four square, like unto a marble stone; and in the midst thereof was like an anvil of steel a foot on high, and therein stuck a fair sword naked by the point, and letters there were written in gold about the sword that said thus: 'Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England.'" ⁷ The very idea that there is a sword that only one person is able to release from the stone would certainly, as Mézière put it, "attract the reader to the impossible"; this is not the kind of phenomenon that would be seen in real life. Additionally, the one who is able to pull out the sword turns out to be Arthur, who was a boy at the time, as Malory's description of him as "young Arthur" demonstrates. Malory writes of Arthur pulling out the sword, saying that he "handled the sword by the handles, and lightly and fiercely pulled it out of the stone, and took his horse and rode his way." ⁸ The simple way that Malory describes Arthur's acquiring of the sword would show readers how easy it was for Arthur to pull it out. Malory's use of the word "fiercely" suggests Arthur's determination to get the sword. However, the word "lightly," also used to describe Arthur pulling out the sword, gives the impression that this took no effort for

⁷ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

⁸ Malory, *Morte*, 9.

him. On the other hand, Malory writes of Sir Ector and Sir Kay's failed efforts to get it out, when it was placed back in the stone: "therewith Sir Ector assayed to pull out the sword and failed....and anon [Sir Kay] pulled at the sword with all his might, but it would not be."⁹ Unlike Arthur, who was quickly and easily able to get the sword out, Ector and Kay were using all their strength, likely pulling "fiercely" themselves, and still getting nowhere. This occurrence is one that would certainly be deemed impossible in reality, therefore making it one of the "vanités" people such as Mézière were so opposed to. Stories containing unrealistic elements such as this would certainly have been considered a foolish waste of time by many.

The opinion that medieval romances were "vanités" was also evident in the early sixteenth-century reception of Arthurian Romance, showing the persistence of this attitude through time. In *The Popularity of Middle English Romance*, Velina Bourgeois Richmond writes that the Humanists Erasmus of Rotterdam and Juan Luis Vives both disapproved of *Morte d'Arthur*. Erasmus "objected to stories of Arthur and Lancelot - 'fablae stultae et aniles' - because they distracted the student from his proper concern with classical poetry and history." Here, Erasmus is making clear that he believes some works to be more important and worthier of attention than others, and that stories such as the *Morte* served as distractions from them. In the case of history, it concerns events that actually happened, as opposed to the "impossible" Arthurian romances, making it more valuable in Erasmus' mind. As evidenced by his statement, Erasmus would clearly agree with the labeling of romances as "vanités," or time-wasters. Vives was of a similar mind, having written a "treatise dealing with the conduct of women, who are not to defile their

⁹ Malory, *Morte*, 10.

minds with such books.” This treatise, the *De Institutione feminae christianae*, contained a “list of forbidden romances.” The story of Arthur was among them.¹⁰ Although Vives was aiming specifically at women rather than the medieval community at large, it is still clear that he believed there was something about the stories romances told that was damaging, as evidenced by his belief that women would “defile their minds” by reading them.

Along with the opinions of Erasmus and Vives, Richmond also provides a translation of Montaigne’s first book of *Essays*, which also demonstrates a negative view towards *Morte d’Arthur*. In this book, Montaigne discusses the stories of Arthur and Lancelot, both of whom play important roles in *Morte d’Arthur*, and talks of them in a less than favorable way: “For of King *Arthur*, of *Lancelot du Lake* . . . and such idle time consuming, and wit-besotting trash of bookes wherein youth doth commonly amuse it self, I was not so much as acquainted with their names, and to this day know not their bodies, nor what they containe: So exact was my discipline.”¹¹ This passage shows its author’s utter contempt of the stories present in the *Morte*. His naming them as “wit-besotting trash” especially gets his opinion across that these stories are completely worthless, and are even able to make people dumber, as evidenced by his description of them as “wit-besotting.” He also makes sure to include the fact that he has not consumed these stories and therefore does not know much about them. His statement “so exact was my discipline” suggests that he is assuming his readers think that keeping yourself away from the “vanity” of these stories is good thing, shows proper restraint, and is something

¹⁰ Velina Bourgeois Richmond, *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975), 11.

¹¹ Richmond, *The Popularity of Middle English Romance*, 12.

that he was proud of doing himself. Another interesting word that Montaigne uses in his vilification of romance is “youth.” He is suggesting that romances are stories that younger people often read for the purpose of amusement. This brings to mind the idea that romances are a foolish waste of time that younger people read, not knowing any better. The belief that romances are “vanités” can be related to this idea that they are something that youth reads “to amuse it self.” The association Montaigne makes between youth and “wit-besotting trash” and “idle time consuming” suggests that youth are often the ones most susceptible to the foolishness of romance, and therefore to “vanité.” This association would support what was articulated in the letter written to the 21-year-old King Charles. Because Charles was young himself at the time the letter was written, people would have felt the need to advise him against consuming this “wit-besotting trash” read by others his age.

Having examined the opinions on medieval romances by contemporary writers, what are some storylines in the *Morte* that would especially have been considered “vanités?” Arthur’s “impossible” pulling the sword out of the stone would likely have fallen into this category, but what other story elements in the *Morte* would have been especially frowned upon for their foolishness and their ability to waste time?

One thing about the *Morte* that would have been considered a “trofil” or a “vanité” to medieval critics is the presence of love stories, especially when this love is dramatized and forbidden. Likely the most well-known love story in the *Morte* is that of Lancelot and Guinevere. The love between the two is adulterous, since Guinevere was Arthur’s wife. It is somewhat understandable, therefore, that people did not like that stories containing adultery were becoming popular, especially considering the fact that

Lancelot is often depicted as the hero of the story. In addition, Malory is effective in dramatizing the feelings the two have for each other, adding to the story's classification among many as a "vanité."

The love between Lancelot and Guinevere is often displayed in a very emotional manner, bringing to mind the opinion that romances were "troffils" and could attract vanity and foolishness to their readers, especially if they were young and impressionable. This love affair was likely a reason why Montaigne thought Lancelot's story especially "wit-besotting." Malory is very vivid when describing Lancelot's love for Guinevere, writing that his mind was "so set inwardly to the Queen as he was in seeming outward to God", and that "ever his thoughts were privily on the Queen."¹² These thoughts of Lancelot's would show readers that his mind is fixated on his love for Guinevere, showcasing how deep his feelings went. The mention of Lancelot's outward love for God, and the suggestion that his inward love for Guinevere was greater, brings to mind what was said in the letter to King Charles in the *Songe du Vieil Pelerin* about romances' associations with sin. Religion, being a large and important part of many medieval (and modern) people's lives, would likely have influenced how they view the elements present in stories. Lancelot's greater love for Guinevere, an already married woman, when compared to his love for God, would have been seen by many of the time as a "sin," and therefore not something that people, King Charles least of all, should be reading.

Malory also uses great detail in describing Guinevere's love for Lancelot. When Lancelot became gravely injured, and was lying "sick and pale in his bed," Guinevere

¹² Malory, *Morte*, 403.

“fell down to the earth in a swoon, and there she lay a great while.”¹³ Showing Guinevere’s grief in this way would dramatize her love for Lancelot, greatly emphasizing it for the *Morte*’s readers, and this description would be thought of all the more as a “vanité” considering the adulterousness, and therefore forbidden quality of the love.

The story of Lancelot and Guinevere, because of its dramatization and the presence of adultery, would have contributed to the *Morte*’s reputation as a “vanité.” Stories like these would have been among the “wit-besotting trash” that “youth doth commonly amuse it self,” to the dismay of people like Montaigne, who believed themselves to be above such stories. The adulterous, dramatized love story between Lancelot and Guinevere would have been one of the reasons why critics such as Montaigne believed that *Morte d’Arthur* contained nothing of value to its readers, and therefore should not be something people indulge in.

Because of stories like that of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, “impossible” happenings, such as Arthur pulling the sword out of the stone, and all of the “incredible adventures” of the Knights of the Round Table, *Morte d’Arthur* became known among many medieval readers as a “vanité,” a simple, “wit-besotting” amusement for youths, and a story that was a waste of time to read because it contained nothing of worth. Although romances such as *Morte d’Arthur* were enjoyed by people of the time, such as the “youth” Montaigne spoke of, they were simultaneously looked down upon because of the “vanités” they contained, as well as their perceived ability to “attract” readers to “folly, vanity, and sin.” It is clear from these criticisms that *Morte d’Arthur* was simply a “vanité” in the minds of many, something that was consumed idly. simply

¹³ Malory, *Morte*, 427.

for pleasure's sake, and would contain nothing of value for its readers, nothing valuable that they could learn from or take with them.

Chapter 2 - *Star Wars Rebels*: A Modern Vanité

Today, many people have retained the medieval attitude that stories in the romance genre are “vanités,” and foolish wastes of time often engaged in by youths - or people acting like youths through consuming the stories. Today, the association of romances with youth, vanity, and time wasting is often very apparent. Therefore, any adult who enjoys them is often looked down upon as someone who engages in stories that serve them no good purpose in life and contain no value, stories that are only meant for children. This demonstrates that an attitude similar to that of Montaigne’s still exists: that many modern romances are stories that are enjoyed by youths, for the chief purpose of amusing themselves, and that nothing of value can be gained from them. Therefore, adults getting pleasure out of these stories are often frowned looked down on and are said to be wasting their time.

In this chapter, I will use the animated TV show *Star Wars Rebels* as a specific example of a modern romance in order to study the modern reception of the romance genre, and how it, although similar in many ways to medieval reception, is also changing with the times. I will examine, using examples from the show, modern versions of the “vanités” present in medieval romances such as the *Morte*. However, I will also draw attention to the fact that many people have begun questioning these ideas, and have become more accepting of the act of consuming a story simply for pleasure, and for shows, like *Rebels*, that young children and adults alike can find enjoyment in.

The stories told in the animated medium have frequently been ones that are designed so that kids are able to enjoy them. *Star Wars Rebels* is no exception, as evidenced by its TV-Y7 rating, and the fact that it completed its four-season run, from

October 2014-May 2018, on Disney XD, a network targeted at children. In addition, Ezra, the protagonist of the show, is a teenage boy who possesses Jedi powers, but still has a lot to learn. He joins a group of five other characters, Kanan, Hera, Chopper, Zeb, and Sabine, another teenager about Ezra's age, who go on missions on their spaceship known as the *Ghost*, fighting the Empire, and in many ways resembling a family. These characteristics might be an instant warning sign to some that this show is not one adults would get anything out of. In a 2015 article from the news website Tech Times, Robin Parrish wrote about *Star Wars Rebels*, which, at the time, had recently finished up its first season. Parrish writes that "Disney's own ads for the show feature a kid's voiceover, recommending it because it has 'so much cool stuff!'"¹⁴ Parrish points out that this ad does not "[instill] one with hope for the kinds of storytelling that adults can enjoy." By saying this, Parrish is implying that the show's association with children would be an instant turn-off for some adults watching this ad, and that they may believe that *Star Wars Rebels* contains nothing of value to them - therefore they would categorize it as a poor use of their time.

As Parrish suggests, the negative feelings toward this type of story is still present, just as it was in the medieval era. *Star Wars Rebels* is no exception. For instance, on the message boards of the website Reddit, user "simon_thekillerewok" wrote that *Star Wars Rebels* is "dumb[ed] down significantly to hit [it's] target audience," and that "Rebels is first and foremost for the children."¹⁵ The phrase "dumb[ed] down" suggests that this

¹⁴ Robin Parrish, "Why 'Rebels' and 'The Clone Wars' Are The Best Star Wars Material In 30 Years," *Tech Times*, July 31, 2015, accessed October 2018,

<https://www.techtimes.com/articles/73204/20150731/why-star-wars-rebels-clone-best-30-years.htm>.

¹⁵ simon_thekillerewok, comment on "How come Star Wars Rebels gets so much hate?" by

WackyModder84, *Reddit*, February 22, 2018, accessed October 2018,

https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWars/comments/7zdof4/how_come_star_wars_rebels_gets_so_much_hate/.

user believes that *Star Wars Rebels* is a story that doesn't take any thought to understand, and the description of *Rebels* as "for the children" demonstrates the belief that only children are able to truly enjoy it because of its lack of thought and depth as a result of being "dumb[ed] down." Another online reviewer, commenting on the website Rotten Tomatoes, wrote, "I feel as if I lost IQ points," and calls the characters "shallow."¹⁶ This again brings up the idea that the show is "dumb[ed] down," and even can make viewers less smart than they were before. By using the word "shallow," this reviewer, just like "simon_thekillerewok," is suggesting that the show has no depth to it. Their view is therefore very similar to Montaigne's beliefs about the tales in *Morte d'Arthur*, when he called them, and stories like them "wit-besotting trash." Both of these users' scathing comments about *Star Wars Rebels* are suggesting that they believe the show is worthless, as well as mentally damaging to viewers (except for children) because of its "dumb," childlike qualities.

Despite the existence of comments such as these, many people, at least among *Star Wars* fans, are becoming more accepting, even of the silly, "childish" aspects sometimes present in *Star Wars Rebels* that contribute to its classification as a modern "vanité." However, the word choice often used in describing some of the show's episodes indicates that there still remains an awareness that childishness and "vanité" is present in some way, even if many people have begun to enjoy and appreciate these elements.

The *Rebels* Season One episode "Fighter Flight" is an excellent example of this awareness and simultaneous enjoyment of "vanité." This episode centers around Ezra,

¹⁶ Raby J., "Star Wars Rebels: Season One Reviews," *Rotten Tomatoes*, February 25, 2018, accessed October 2018, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/star_wars_rebels/s01/reviews/?page=2&type=user&sort=.

and Zeb, a large, furry, somewhat Wookiee-like creature known as a Lasat, another member of the “*Ghost* crew.” These two characters, in a manner similar to brothers, have been constantly arguing and causing a commotion around the *Ghost*, annoying the other characters. Hera, the leader, pilot, and ‘mother’ of the *Ghost* crew sends them outside with a shopping list, including a fruit called a “meiloorun,” which they end up stealing from Imperial Stormtroopers. They also end up stealing a Tie Fighter and become closer with each other along the way.¹⁷ Although the episode’s plot elements might earn the label of “goofy” or “childish,” and is likely a contributing factor in some people’s opinions that the show is “dumb[ed] down,” most reviewers used more positive descriptions than these when writing about it. For instance, in an episode review for the website Den of Geek, Megan Crouse writes that although the episode is “cutesy” and “goofy” at times, she enjoyed the “humorous writing.”¹⁸ And in another review, this one for the website Flickering Myth, Chris Cooper writes that the episode is “enjoyable,” and says, “you’ll be entertained.”¹⁹ Rather than using negative adjectives to describe the lighter aspects of “Fighter Flight,” these reviewers chose positive ones, showing that some people at least have come to appreciate the enjoyment and humor storylines such as these can bring to a TV show, despite them also being able to appeal to children.

The same thing can be seen in reviews for the Season Two episode “The Forgotten Droid.” This episode focuses on Chopper, the droid member of the *Ghost* crew, as he defies Hera’s orders to stay on the *Ghost* while she and the others are out and steals

¹⁷ *Star Wars Rebels Season One*, episode 4, “Fighter Flight,” directed by Steven G. Lee, written by Kevin Hopps, performed by Taylor Gray and Steve Blum, aired October 20, 2014, on Disney XD.

¹⁸ Megan Crouse, “Star Wars Rebels: Fighter Flight Review,” *Den of Geek*, October 20, 2014, accessed October 2018, <https://www.denofgeek.com/us/tv/star-wars-rebels/240415/star-wars-rebels-fighter-flight-review/>.

¹⁹ Chris Cooper, “Star Wars Rebels – ‘Fighter Flight’ Review,” *Flickeringmyth*, October 23, 2014, accessed October 2018, <https://www.flickeringmyth.com/2014/10/star-wars-rebels-fighter-flight-review/>.

a replacement “leg” for himself being sold at a nearby shop. While running away from the vendor, he ends up trapped on an Imperial ship, where he befriends and rescues an abused Imperial droid named AP-5, who helps locate a new base for the Rebel fleet to hide out on and becomes a new friend for Chopper.²⁰ Because of its simple plot, and its focus on a non-human character, this episode could have been pushed into the “wit-besotting” category by its reviewers. However, just as the case was with “Fighter Flight,” many people enjoyed its light, humorous qualities for what they were, as demonstrated by online reviews of the episode. Eric Goldman, a reviewer for the website IGN, writes that he thought parts of the episode to be very funny: “The early portion, with Chopper just Choppering around was amusing and sometimes laugh out loud funny - I especially loved that Ugnaught [(the creature selling the leg)] looking around for the missing Droid leg and instead of Chopper being long gone, he was just staring into space a few feet away, holding the leg.”²¹ Goldman’s description of this scene as “laugh out loud funny” shows his appreciation and enjoyment of the humor present in this episode. His comments also demonstrate his willingness to take pleasure in this scene simply for what it is - a funny moment in a show, a moment which can be understood and appreciated by adults and children alike. Goldman wasn’t the only one who enjoyed this episode. On the website The Wookiee Gunner, Johnmarie Macias wrote that “The Forgotten Droid” was “fun,” and that it “wasn’t a silly side adventure because....Chopper is just as integral as any other *Ghost* crew member.”²² By saying this, Macias is suggesting that even though

²⁰ *Star Wars Rebels Season Two*, episode 19, “The Forgotten Droid,” directed by Mel Zwyer, written by Matt Michnovetz, performed by Dave Filoni and Stephen Stanton, aired March 16, 2016, on Disney XD.

²¹ Eric Goldman, “Star Wars Rebels: ‘The Forgotten Droid’ Review,” *IGN*, March 16, 2016, accessed October 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/21/star-wars-rebels-fighter-flight-review>.

²² Johnmarie Macias, “Review: Star Wars Rebels: ‘The Forgotten Droid,’” *Thewookieegunner*, March 23, 2016, accessed October 2018, <https://thewookieegunner.com/2016/03/23/review-star-wars-rebels-the-forgotten-droid/>.

Chopper is a droid, communicates in his own, sometimes hard to understand language, and often provides the comic relief of the show, his stories contain just as much value as those of the other five central characters, and should be appreciated just as much as theirs. The acceptance and enjoyment of the stories of characters such as Chopper, as well as for Zeb and Ezra's brotherly bickering in "Fighter Flight," suggests a growing appreciation of the lighter, more childish side of modern "vanités" like these episodes. As the reviews of these two episodes demonstrate, there remains a simultaneous awareness that these elements do exist, as evidenced by the use of words such as "enjoyable" and "humorous" to describe them. However, Macias' comment about Chopper "being just as integral as any other *Ghost* crew member" implies that maybe there is something of value in these lighter moments and comic characters, which goes contrary to the belief shared by many medieval readers. In her review of this episode, Macias is suggesting that enjoying stories or characters simply because they are humorous or fun is not a bad thing - something that Montaigne would definitely disagree with. Reviewers such as Macias demonstrate that viewers of episodes such as "Fighter Flight" and "The Forgotten Droid" are aware of the more "goofy," "humorous" storylines and characters that *Star Wars Rebels* often contains, but enjoy them, finding them fun to watch and valuable in their own ways.

Reviews of *Star Wars Rebels* such as those on Reddit and Rotten Tomatoes demonstrate similar opinions to those of medieval readers such as Montaigne still exist today, showing the persistence of the attitude that romances are "wit-besotting trash" that do harm to the minds of their consumers. Similar to the way that medieval critics scorned the *Morte* for being a "vanité," these modern viewers believed that *Rebels* was a dumb

kids' show that was not worthy of their time. However, in other reviews of *Rebels*, there is evidence of a growing acceptance, and even appreciation of this kind of story, showing that more and more people are willing to indulge in stories such as romances simply for pleasure. When describing certain *Rebels* episodes containing lighter elements, even though reviewers acknowledged the presence of aspects that might be considered "vanités" or "trofils" by others, they used words with positive connotations such as "fun" and "humorous" to describe them, showing the enjoyment they were able to get out of these episodes. This is contrary to the opinions of medieval readers such as Mézière that romances such as the *Morte* were "wit-besotting" and a waste of time, and something that important figures such as kings should not be reading frequently. These modern reviewers are suggesting that there is nothing wrong with people reading or viewing romances, like *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels*, simply because they enjoy them and get pleasure and humor out of their lighter, more fun elements and characters. *Star Wars Rebels* demonstrates how a story can appeal to both children and adults, and that both age groups can enjoy the "fun," "humorous" elements and characters it contains.

Chapter 3 - What Vanité can Teach Us

Despite the fun, childish storylines that are often present in both the *Morte* and *Rebels*, often earning them the reputation of “vanité” and “wit-besotting trash,” both stories also contain elements that can be thought-provoking on a deeper level than their outward “vanité” or childishness might suggest. The fact that these stories are ones that we read or view for pleasure is an essential aspect of their importance to us: they do not proscribe as their mission to instruct their consumers, but because of the way that they can be enjoyed simply for pleasure, they do have the ability to instruct, and to speak to readers and viewers, often better than those stories that put learning at the forefront. Mixed in with the “vanité” and childishness that these stories often possess are important elements, and even lessons that people can learn from and take with them.

One important aspect about both *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* is that amid these stories’ “vain” and “childish” elements, there are questions of how to interpret characters and events that bring up important concepts of culpability, forgiveness, and redemption. Two storylines, one from the *Morte* chapter “The Death of Arthur”, and the other from the *Rebels* season two finale, “Twilight of the Apprentice,” and the first three Season Three episodes “Steps into Shadow (Parts One and Two)” and “Holocrons of Fate,” illustrate how these themes come up, and how they present dilemmas for their consumers because of the choices made by their heroes. However, although the actions of the characters in both scenes lead to negative consequences, the subsequent events in both stories would also give readers the idea that redemption for these actions is possible, a powerful message for mere “vanités” to contain. The fact that *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* contain such elements calls into question the statements of both medieval

and modern reviewers, that these stories are “wit-besotting trash,” that cause consumers to lose IQ points. Storylines like the two I will lay out show that the *Morte* and *Rebels* have storylines and characters that can speak to us on deep levels and teach us more than some reviewers would like to admit.

The story from the *Morte* depicts Lancelot sneaking into Guinevere’s bedroom, despite there being guards attempting to prevent him from doing this very thing. Joyce Coleman, in “Reading Malory in the Fifteenth Century: Aural Reception and Performance Dynamics,” writes of her experience listening to a modern reading of the *Morte*, with an emphasis on this scene in particular. She wonders,

... how would a reader have represented the complexity of motive and consciousness that manifests itself in the... *Morte*? Heading for Guinevere’s chamber despite Bors’s warning, Lancelot proclaims: ‘[W]yte you well, I woll nat be so much a cowarde, but she shall undirstonde I woll se her good grace.’ The [story] continues: ‘So Sir Launcelot departed and toke hys swerde undir hys arme, and so he walked in hys mantell, that noble knyght, and put hymselff in grete jouparté.’ Here we have classic phrases of heroism applied to a knight keeping a particularly ill-advised assignation with the king’s wife. Should these lines be read heroically, as the words themselves suggest? Or are those heroic phrases to be read ironically?... It is hard to believe that Malory would surrender his hero completely to irony, or transform him into an exemplum of ‘manifest evil.’ Should the prelector, then, portray Lancelot as simply deluded or foolish? Would a good reader insert a note of desperation into Lancelot’s reply to Bors? My personal solution... was to (try to) express Malory’s faith in Lancelot; though his

favorite knight was setting off to do an arguably stupid thing, Malory would not abandon his belief in Lancelot's essentially heroic spirit.²³

Coleman's lengthy analysis details the dilemma Malory puts his readers in during this scene, and it only becomes more complicated: Lancelot ends up being discovered in Guinevere's room, causing him to kill several of Arthur's knights in an attempt to cover his tracks:

And then Sir Lancelot set all open the chamber door, and mightily and knightly he strode in among them; anon at the first stroke he slew Sir Agravain, and anon after twelve of his fellows - within a while he had laid them down cold to the earth, for there was none of the twelve knights might stand Sir Lancelot one buffet.²⁴

Later, Lancelot kills two more knights, Gaheris and Gareth, in order to prevent them from putting Guinevere to death for her love affair with him. This leads Gareth's brother Gawain, who had formerly had a lot of love and respect for Lancelot, to want to avenge his brother's death, saying that he "will be revenged upon [him]" and that "[he] shall slay [Lancelot], or else [Lancelot] shall slay [him]."²⁵ Malory's description of Lancelot as "mighty" and "knightly" contrasts sharply with his actions against his fellow knights. As one of the Knights of the Round Table himself, Lancelot is supposed to behave in a morally good, chivalrous manner, rather than murdering people. In addition, Lancelot's killing of all of these knights had larger implications, contributing greatly to

²³ Joyce Coleman, "Reading Malory in the Fifteenth Century: Aural Reception and Performance Dynamics," *Arthuriana* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 62-63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870562?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

²⁴ Malory, *Morte*, 472.

²⁵ Malory, *Morte*, 483.

the eventual fall of the Round Table and the ‘death’ of Arthur. Lancelot’s decision to kill his fellow knights, and the subsequent events this action causes, presents a dilemma to readers of the *Morte*. How should they view Lancelot, a major hero of Malory’s story who has done good things in the past, as they read about him going off to “do an arguably stupid thing” that leads to so much violence and death?

A similar story is presented to viewers in “Twilight of the Apprentice”, the final episode in the second season of *Star Wars Rebels*. In this episode, Ezra, Kanan (the Jedi member of the *Ghost* Crew who has served as a mentor and father figure for Ezra), Chopper, and Ahsoka (Darth Vader’s apprentice when he was still a Jedi) journey to the planet Malachor, seeking answers on how to defeat Darth Vader and his Imperial Inquisitors, who have posed great danger to them throughout the previous episodes. On Malachor, Ezra becomes separated from the others, encounters the former Sith (Darth) Maul, befriends him, and helps him to obtain the Sith Holocron (a device holding information and power), from an ancient Sith temple.²⁶ Viewers who have seen the *Star Wars* Prequels and/or *The Clone Wars* TV show would be aware that Maul is a villain, and therefore not someone whom Ezra should trust. This knowledge would lead viewers to wonder whether to feel relieved or apprehensive as they watch Ezra and Maul work together to succeed in retrieving the Sith Holocron. To add to viewers’ misgivings, after Ezra reunites with the others, bringing Maul with him, Kanan warns Ezra that Maul isn’t someone he should trust. This causes an argument – instead of listening to Kanan, Ezra

²⁶ *Star Wars Rebels Season Two*, episode 21, “Twilight of the Apprentice Part One,” directed by Dave Filoni, written by Dave Filoni, Simon Kinberg, and Steven Melching, performed by Taylor Gray and Sam Witwer, aired March 30, 2016, on Disney XD.

snaps at him asking, “Are you ever going to trust me to think for myself?”²⁷ This comment demonstrates that Ezra, unlike Kanan, is ready to put his faith in Maul, and is confident in his decision. Because Ezra is the focus character of the show, and has shown himself to be someone who wants to help others and do what is right, his trust in Maul, willingness to help him get what he wants, and his happiness at their success might make some viewers unsure what to think of the events playing out - should they, like Ezra, trust Maul, despite what they know about him from previous *Star Wars* stories? Or should they, like Kanan, be warier? By the end of the episode, viewers would have their answer - just as the case was with Lancelot, Ezra’s actions lead to more harm than good. Maul ends up turning on Kanan and cutting his eyes with his lightsaber, rendering him blind for the two future seasons of the show. Kanan is only saved from further harm by Ahsoka stepping in before Maul could attack again. Maul was also hoping to use the knowledge he would gain from the Sith Holocron to his own ends (however Ezra ends up with it at the end of the episode, thwarting this plan for the time being). Even worse, their stalling on the planet specifically so that Ezra could do what Maul suggested indirectly led to Ahsoka facing Darth Vader in battle and her apparent death following that confrontation.²⁸

Just as medieval readers were confronted with the dilemma of how to view Lancelot “setting off to do an arguably stupid thing,” which ended up leading to so much death and destruction, how should viewers of this *Rebels* episode view Ezra, who also did an “arguably stupid thing” in trusting Maul and obtaining the Sith Holocron, itself a very

²⁷ *Star Wars Rebels Season Two*, episode 22, “Twilight of the Apprentice Part Two,” (4:20-4:34), directed by Dave Filoni, written by Dave Filoni, Simon Kinberg, and Steven Melching, performed by Taylor Gray and Freddie Prinze Jr., aired March 30, 2016, on Disney XD.

²⁸ “Twilight of the Apprentice Part Two,” (9:56-10:09, 19:22-19:36), performed by Ashley Eckstein, Taylor Gray, James Earl Jones, Freddie Prinze Jr., and Sam Witwer.

dangerous artifact? In his review for the episode on the website Mynock Manor, ‘Head Butler Ryan’ writes, “no matter how much I knew Maul was always in it for himself somehow, I sort of believed his ‘reformed’ act....But....the trust I had almost started putting in Maul faded.”²⁹ Similarly, in a review for Den of Geek, Megan Crouse writes that “the constant uncertainty about whether [Maul] is a frightening variable or a dependable ally is well done.”³⁰ Just as Coleman demonstrated the uncertainty presented to readers of the *Morte* in her analysis of Lancelot’s actions, these two reviewers show that as they were watching “Twilight of the Apprentice,” they were uncertain of what to believe about Maul - and therefore also uncertain about whether or not Ezra was right to put his trust in him. These analyses of the storylines in the *Morte* and *Rebels* show how challenging the situations they present are to interpret. However, no matter how difficult it is for viewers to judge Lancelot and Ezra’s decisions, it cannot be argued that negative consequences resulted from them, consequences that hurt those they care about. The presence of concepts like this in these “vanités” suggests that they are more than simple “trofils,” and contain something of value to readers and viewers.

Despite these stories’ classifications among many as “vanités,” the stories of Lancelot and Ezra also present viewers with challenging questions surrounding blame and forgiveness. Whether we, as readers and viewers, decide to name Lancelot and Ezra “simply deluded,” “foolish,” or something else for the mistakes that they made, both *Morte d’Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* keep faith in their central characters’ “essentially

²⁹ ‘Head Butler Ryan’. “Star Wars Rebels Season Two Finale Review: “Twilight of the Apprentice,”” *Mynock Manor*, April 1, 2016, accessed October 2018, <http://mynockmanor.com/star-wars-rebels-season-two-finale-review-twilight-of-the-apprentice/>.

³⁰ Megan Crouse. “Star Wars Rebels: Twilight of the Apprentice Review,” *Den of Geek*, March 31, 2016, accessed October 2018, <https://www.denofgeek.com/us/tv/star-wars/254170/star-wars-rebels-twilight-of-the-apprentice-review>.

heroic spirit[s],” and in doing so, show that redemption and forgiveness should be possible, even for those who, like Lancelot and Ezra have made grave mistakes.

The final pages of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, the last scenes of “Twilight of the Apprentice,” and the first three episodes of *Star Wars Rebels’* third season set about redeeming Lancelot and Ezra, despite the questionable choices they made and the harm they caused to others by making these choices. One way that both stories do this is by showing the sorrow and guilt that both Lancelot and Ezra feel as they come to terms with the damage they have caused as a result of their actions, and the impact it had on people they care about. The characters’ demonstrations of guilt show that they understand that they made bad decisions which caused harm to others, and desperately wish they had made different choices, and could make up for their mistakes in some way. By depicting the two characters in this way, the *Morte* and *Rebels* demonstrate that in order for someone to be forgiven for the mistakes they have made, they need to recognize that what they did was wrong.

One place in the *Morte* where Lancelot’s guilt is especially apparent happens after he receives a letter from Gawain, in which his old friend forgives him, asking him to come and visit his tomb. Lancelot had also just heard of the battle in which Gawain was killed, where Mordred, the villain of the story, fought with Arthur and his knights. Arthur was apparently killed in this confrontation as well. Lancelot laments all of these events, saying, “Alas... that ever I should live to hear of that most noble king that made me knight thus to be overset with his subject in his own realm,” and that the words in Gawain’s letter will “never go from [his] heart,” showing how much they impacted him. He also says, “and in an unhappy hour was I born that ever I should have that mishap to

slay first Sir Gawain, Sir Gaheris the good knight, and my own friend Sir Gareth that was a full noble knight.”³¹ Not only does Lancelot blame himself for the deaths of Gaheris and Gareth, who he killed himself, but he also blames himself for Gawain’s death, because of the role he had in breaking up the Knights of the Round Table and allowing Mordred a better chance to try and take over. In addition, when he and Gawain had fought each other earlier, Lancelot gave Gawain a wound that hindered him during his last battle. Lancelot’s implication of himself in Gawain’s death shows that he is aware of the effects that his actions had on events still to come, and his sorrow over his role in them.

Just as with Lancelot, Ezra feels terrible about the choices he made on Malachor, and the consequences it had for Kanan and Ahsoka. The final scenes of “Twilight of the Apprentice” make it clear to viewers how horrible Ezra feels. Being in a visual format, the *Rebels* is able to accurately depict Ezra’s guilt during these final scenes largely without words. First, as he, Kanan, and Chopper fly away from Malachor, under the belief that Ahsoka is dead, Ezra looks up at Kanan with an extremely sad expression and, although Kanan comforts him, then puts his arm around him, obscuring Ezra’s face, it is implied that he begins crying. Next, when they arrive back on the planet where their rebel base is located, Ezra watches as Chopper guides the now-blind Kanan over to a worried Hera, who embraces him. Ezra’s guilty and sorrowful expression only increases as he makes eye contact with Rex, a character who had been very close with Ahsoka and who has been assisting the *Ghost* crew over the course of the show’s second season.³²

³¹ Malory, *Morte*, 518.

³² “Twilight of the Apprentice Part Two,” (19:56-20:38), performed by Dee Bradley Baker, Taylor Gray, Vanessa Marshall, and Freddie Prinze Jr.

Although barely any words are uttered in these final clips, Ezra's expressions are enough to indicate to viewers his sadness at what happened on Malachor, as well as his feelings of responsibility for it.

Although both Ezra and Lancelot made choices that resulted in harm for their friends and extreme feelings of guilt and responsibility, the *Morte* and *Star Wars Rebels* show that through their own actions and the forgiveness of others, they can both be redeemed. This is a very powerful message to be contained in apparent "vanités," indicating how important and impactful these stories actually are.

In the final pages of *Morte d'Arthur*, Malory shows his readers that Lancelot, despite his prior actions, can be forgiven. He shows this through Lancelot's own actions, as well as those of Gawain. Lancelot visits the tomb of Gawain, something that Gawain asked him to do in his letter. Malory writes that once at his friend's tomb, Lancelot "kneeled down...and wept, and prayed heartily for his soul." Next, Lancelot gave money to others while wearing a mourning gown.³³ Lancelot's actions, both at Gawain's tomb, and in his willingness to give to others, show his confrontation of his mistakes, his willingness to take responsibility for them, and his desire to do something good to make up for his previous actions. These are things that can be very hard for someone to do, even if they do feel guilty about the mistakes they've made before. Lancelot next goes to a chapel at a hermitage, where he prays to a bishop for his forgiveness. The bishop grants his wish, and Lancelot next "served God day and night with prayers and fastings."³⁴ Lancelot's actions here also show his desire to make up for his mistakes in some way,

³³ Malory, *Morte*, 519.

³⁴ Malory, *Morte*, 521.

choosing to live out the rest of his life doing good things. Lancelot's words also indicate his willingness to admit his guilt, when he later proclaims outright his responsibility for what happened to Arthur, Guinevere, and the Knights of the Round Table. He says, "also when I remember me how by my fault, my orgule, and my pride that they [(Arthur and Guinevere)] were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living...this remembered of their kindness and my unkindness sank so to my heart, that I might not sustain myself."³⁵ Here, Lancelot's willingness to spell out his actions shows that he is ready to take responsibility for them and admit that they were wrong, although the immense guilt that he feels is clear.

Gawain also plays a key role in Lancelot's redemption because of his willingness to forgive his old friend, despite the fact that he murdered his brother Gareth. Gawain, who had previously vowed to avenge Gareth's death by killing Lancelot, has a change of heart in his final moments. As Gawain is dying, he tells Arthur, "alas that I did not accord with [Lancelot]! And therefore.... I pray you that I may have paper, pen, and ink, that I may write unto Sir Lancelot a letter written with my own hand." In this letter, Gawain calls Lancelot "flower of all noble knights" and "most famous knight of the world," and asks that he come visit his tomb.³⁶ Gawain's praise of Lancelot, as well as his wish for his old friend to see the place where he will be buried, shows that despite Lancelot's actions that hurt Gawain, as well as Gawain's previous feelings towards Lancelot, he has chosen to forgive him, and wishes that he had been able to tell him before his death. Gawain's ability to forgive is an essential part in Lancelot's redemption. As someone who was negatively affected by Lancelot's actions, Gawain could have chosen to

³⁵ Malory, *Morte*, 523.

³⁶ Malory, *Morte*, 508-509.

continue feeling angry at Lancelot, but instead, he helped to redeem him by offering him forgiveness.

In *Morte d'Arthur*, Malory suggests that because of his own actions, as well as Gawain's ability to forgive him, Lancelot was able to forgive himself, and be redeemed despite that harm that his decisions caused others. He writes that upon Lancelot's death, his fellow knights "found him stark dead; and he lay as he had smiled, and the sweetest savour about him that ever they felt."³⁷ This description of Lancelot, smiling to himself in his final moments, suggests that he was totally at peace with himself, despite the mistakes that he had made in life. By depicting Lancelot in this way, Malory is showing his readers that although he made some bad decisions, it is still possible for him to be redeemed, and forgiven by those he hurt, as well as by himself. Because of Lancelot's ability to admit that what he did was wrong, and Gawain's willingness to forgive him, Lancelot was able to be redeemed and stay true to his "essentially heroic spirit." Readers would have indulged in the story of Lancelot for pleasure; however, they would have been moved by the story of Lancelot, and felt for him as he came to terms with his mistakes. When Lancelot was ultimately forgiven, both by those he harmed and in his own mind, they would come away from this "vanité" with a message of hope that they can take with them and apply to their own lives.

Just as Lancelot did, Ezra attempts to make up for his prior actions. In many ways his path to redemption is rockier than Lancelot's, and he doesn't always make the best decisions, often due to his guilt. During the six-month period between "Twilight of the Apprentice" and "Steps into Shadow Part One," the first episode of Season Three, he

³⁷ Malory, *Morte*, 525.

began using the Sith Holocron to learn ways to become more powerful. His intention in doing this was to be more prepared to help his friends if trouble arose (therefore avoiding another situation like the one on Malachor); however, the Holocron started to corrupt him, feeding off the negative feelings already present inside him due to his guilt and anger with himself.³⁸

To increase Ezra's feelings of responsibility, Kanan, who is coming to terms with his blindness, had begun to shut himself off from the others, at a loss for what to do. Ezra incorrectly interprets this as a sign that Kanan blames him for what happened and therefore doesn't want to be around him anymore. This makes Ezra feel worse than he already does, as evidenced by this conversation Hera has with Kanan. Following a comment Ezra made to her about Kanan never being around anymore, she confronts Kanan about it:

Hera: Kanan, I was hoping to see you at the briefing.

Kanan: I hear Ezra's doing well.

Hera: He has been stepping up, but, you know, he blames himself for what happened to you and Ahsoka.

Kanan: Well, I don't.

Hera: I wish you'd tell him that.³⁹

Hera makes the important point that if Kanan were to tell Ezra he doesn't blame him, it would go a long way in lessening Ezra's feelings of guilt and responsibility. Just

³⁸*Star Wars Rebels Season Three*, episode 1, "Steps into Shadow Part One," (6:55-7:51), directed by Bosco Ng, Mel Zwyer, and Justin Ridge, written by Steven Melching and Matt Michnovetz, performed by Nika Futterman and Taylor Gray, aired September 24, 2016, on Disney XD.

³⁹ "Steps into Shadow Part One," (10:29-11:20), performed by Vanessa Marshall and Freddie Prinze Jr.

as in the case with Lancelot and Gawain, a statement of forgiveness from one of the people who Ezra (indirectly) harmed would go a long way for him. Although, unlike Gawain, Kanan did not openly declare anger at Ezra, his actions were able to have an effect on him and make him feel worse than he would have otherwise, something that Hera recognizes and points out. Although Kanan did not want Ezra to feel responsible for what happened to him, his actions were still able to influence how Ezra felt, showing how important it is that Kanan tell Ezra himself that he doesn't blame him. Even after Kanan makes himself present again, saving Ezra from a rebel mission gone wrong and discussing the dangers of using the Sith Holocron, it is clear that Ezra is still unsure of how Kanan feels toward him, and still feels responsible for what happened on Malachor.⁴⁰ Throughout the beginning of the next episode, "The Holocrons of Fate," Ezra is very protective of Kanan, and seems worried that he is unable to do things for himself because he can no longer see. This attitude demonstrates his guilt, and his desire to not allow anything else to happen to Kanan. In this episode, they must venture into a cave full of dangerous, spider-like creatures. Ezra tells Kanan to stay outside and not to help him. However, Kanan follows him anyway and saves him when he is in a tight spot, pulling him up to another level of the deep cave. When another spider approaches them, Kanan is able to use the Force to calm it down, making it cease its attack and go away peacefully. The conversation they have afterwards is an essential part of Ezra's ability to feel redeemed within himself:

Ezra: How did you do that? I can't even do that.

Kanan: Well I've been forced to see things differently since Malachor.

⁴⁰ *Star Wars Rebels Season Three*, episode 2, "Steps into Shadow Part Two," directed by Bosco Ng, Mel Zwyer, and Justin Ridge, written by Steven Melching and Matt Michnovetz, performed by Taylor Gray and Freddie Prinze Jr., aired September 24, 2016, on Disney XD.

(At this point, Ezra watches Kanan with a guilty look on his face)

Ezra: About what happened, I'm sorry for it. For everything, Kanan.

Kanan: It wasn't your fault. I never blamed you Ezra. It's time for you to forgive yourself.

Ezra: Yes Master.

(They hug)⁴¹

Kanan's forgiveness of Ezra, just like Gawain's forgiveness of Lancelot, was vital in lessening Ezra's feelings of guilt and responsibility. Kanan could have blamed him, since it was a result of Ezra's own choices that Maul blinded him. Instead, Kanan was never angry with him in the first place. However, his assertion of this to Ezra's face, rather than not saying anything about it, was very important for him to hear. This shows that Kanan played an important role in helping Ezra to forgive himself. In addition, although it turned out that Kanan didn't blame him after all, Ezra's willingness to own up to his mistakes and apologize directly to Kanan showed his desire to no longer hold in his feelings of guilt, and state how much he regrets his actions, and how he knows they hurt Kanan, whether he blames him or not. Just like Lancelot, Ezra acknowledged his mistakes and was ready to admit to and apologize for them. And, hearing directly from Kanan that he doesn't blame him for the events that Ezra feels so responsible for is also very important in lessening his guilt.

The moment when Ezra hears Kanan tell him he is blameless in his eyes is similar to the moment in *Morte d'Arthur* when, at Lancelot's death he is found to be smiling.

⁴¹ *Star Wars Rebels Season Three*, episode 3, "The Holocrons of Fate," (11:15-12:31), directed by Steward Lee, written by Henry Gilroy, performance by Taylor Gray and Freddie Prinze Jr., aired October 1, 2016, on Disney XD.

When Kanan tells him he never blamed him for what happened, Ezra relaxes, the guilty expression on his face goes away, and a relieved look takes its place. In both instances, these characters were finally able to feel at peace with and forgive themselves for their past mistakes. Ezra and Lancelot, through their own actions as well as through the forgiveness they received from Kanan and Gawain, were able to feel redeemed within themselves and let go of their guilt.

Just as with the story of Lancelot, viewers would have watched *Rebels*, enjoying its exciting action and humorous storylines. However, they would likely find themselves unexpectedly moved by this particular storyline, feeling for Ezra despite his mistakes, wanting him to stop being angry with himself, and feeling hopeful when Kanan helps take the blame off him and they become as close as they were before the incident on Malachor. Despite its status as a “vanité,” *Star Wars Rebels* possesses the ability to move viewers in unexpected ways and insert important messages into its episodes.

Along with presenting hopeful messages, the stories of Lancelot and Ezra, and Gawain and Kanan’s roles in them, would be very thought-provoking ones because of some intriguing questions they pose for readers and viewers. If readers and viewers inserted themselves into the position of Gawain or Kanan, would they be able to forgive Lancelot and Ezra? Were Gawain and Kanan right to forgive them? Should people who make mistakes like those of Lancelot and Ezra be forgiven? The message that both *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* present to their consumers is that they should be able to be forgiven by those who they have hurt, but both Lancelot and Ezra’s willingness to confront and admit responsibility for their actions is also an essential step towards this forgiveness. These messages are very powerful, and ones that can stick with readers and

viewers and even be applied to their own lives. People can be comforted in the fact that even the best of us can mess up, and we can help make things right by admitting we were wrong and doing what we can to make the situation better. And, as Gawain and Kanan both demonstrate, it is important to be able to forgive others, even if their actions and decisions have harmed us. The fact that “vanités” such as *Morte d’Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* contain these messages makes them all the more accessible and meaningful to people, since these are the stories that people consume simply for sheer enjoyment.

The stories of Lancelot and Gawain, and Ezra and Kanan, show us that these two “vanités” are not merely “wit-besotting trash,” and, even though they do sometimes possess lighter, more fun storylines that younger consumers would enjoy, they are not as “dumb[ed] down” as some people believe. The inclusion of these two similar plots, as well as many others, amid the larger story shows that neither *Morte d’Arthur* nor *Star Wars Rebels* contain mere “trofils” - there are valuable messages there for us, and these can stay with us long after we finish the stories.

Conclusion - A New View of Vanité

The reception of romances such as *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* shows that throughout time, these stories have been considered simply “vanités,” stories to be consumed for pleasure. Therefore, there exists the belief among some that these stories do not contain anything of value, or material that anyone can gain knowledge from. This reaction towards these “vanités” has been unfortunately common throughout time, as seen by the reactions of medieval readers of *Morte d'Arthur* and online reviewers of *Star Wars Rebels*. As people such as Montaigne, Mézière, and modern online reviewers demonstrate, romances such as *Morte d'Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels* have gotten, and still do get, a reputation as valueless, time-wasting “vanités” among many. *Morte d'Arthur* was scorned for its “impossible” elements, such as Arthur being the only person able to pull the sword out of the stone, automatically making him a king, despite the fact that he was only a boy at the time. Stories such as that of Lancelot and his love for Guinevere were considered to be “idle time consuming,” “wit-besotting trash,” and stories which “youth” amused itself with. Consuming stories simply for pleasure was looked down upon - nothing apparently could be gained from stories that were fun to read, and which contained “trofils” and “bourdes.” Some viewers of *Star Wars Rebels* share similar opinions about this modern “vanité.” Because of its status as a romance, as well as an animated show that can be accessible to children, *Rebels* is apparently “dumb[ed] down” so that only kids can enjoy it, has “shallow” characters, and can even lower IQ points. Both sets of reviews of these romances, one medieval and one modern, show that there have been many negative opinions on stories like the *Morte* and *Rebels* throughout time, because of their status as stories consumed for pleasure and their

association with youth. As these reviews show, it has been believed by many that there is nothing of value contained in this type of story.

Despite the existence of these opinions, as well as the presence of “trofils” and “vanités” in these stories, their content is still extremely worthy of attention. As reviews of the *Rebels* episodes “Fighter Flight” and “The Forgotten Droid” demonstrate, viewers of *Star Wars Rebels* are able to appreciate the show, “trofils,” “vanités,” and all. Rather than use negative words such as “wit-besotting trash” or “vanités” when discussing the episodes, viewers instead called them “humorous,” “enjoyable,” and “laugh out loud funny.” This indicates these modern viewers’ willingness to simply take pleasure in *Star Wars Rebels*, and enjoy its lighter, funnier elements, rather than label these stories as “wit-besotting” or “idle time consuming,” or only for kids. Despite the medieval opinions of romances as “vanités” and as attracting “folly, vanity, and sin,” many modern viewers of *Star Wars Rebels* are willing to enjoy the elements that gave these stories that reputation during medieval times, as well as today. This acceptance, and even enjoyment, of “vanités” demonstrates an openness to consuming things simply for pleasure, and the belief that there should be nothing wrong with simply enjoying the fantastical, impossible stories often present in romances like the *Morte* and *Rebels*.

The episode review of “The Forgotten Droid” written by Johnmarie Macias, particularly her assessment of the character of Chopper shows how pleasure viewing and comic characters have their own value.⁴² Despite being a “fun” episode with some humorous moments, it also showed Chopper making a friend and helping him get out of a bad situation. Macias is correct in saying that Chopper’s stories, such as the one

⁴² Macias, “Review: Star Wars Rebels: ‘The Forgotten Droid.’”

presented in “The Forgotten Droid,” have their own kinds of value, even if they often seem simply humorous and fun. The fact that “fun,” humorous stories such as “The Forgotten Droid” can contain their own value is something that I believe the reviewers of *Morte d’Arthur* such as Montaigne, when he labeled the stories “wit-besotting trash,” were unable to see, but something that viewers such as Macias are able to recognize as a positive trait.

As the analyses of the similar storylines in “The Death of Arthur” and “Twilight of the Apprentice,” as well as the three subsequent *Star Wars Rebels* episodes “Steps into Shadow Parts 1 and 2” and “Holocrons of Fate” demonstrate that both *Morte d’Arthur* and *Star Wars Rebels*, along with their more humorous, pleasurable storylines, contain important ideas and valuable lessons that readers and viewers can take with them. These plots demonstrate that learning from “vanités” is possible. The stories’ very classification as “vanités” or pleasure reading is what allows readers and viewers to connect so deeply to Ezra and Lancelot as they struggle with the mistakes that they made that hurt Kanan and Gawain, among others. Because they care about Ezra and Lancelot as characters, they will feel for them despite their bad decisions and feel uplifted when both Kanan and Gawain are able to forgive them, helping both characters to forgive and be at peace with themselves. The pleasure that people get from consuming these romances would allow plots such as these to penetrate them more deeply, and stay with them longer than those of other stories which they do not consume simply for pleasure.

The fact that people are reading *Morte d’Arthur* and watching *Star Wars Rebels* simply for pleasure, and no other reason, allows them to connect more fully with the stories. Because people consume the *Morte* and *Rebels* for the purpose of enjoyment, it is

these romances that stay with us, and speak to us on levels that other stories cannot. Whether we are amazed at Arthur's ability to pull the sword out of the stone, laughing as Zeb and Ezra argue like brothers, or watching as Ezra and Lancelot struggle with the costs of their questionable decisions, and subsequently are forgiven by Kanan and Gawain despite this, these fictional, "impossible" romances are giving us something of value, are capable of being instructive, and, despite the beliefs of many, are not mere "vanités."

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