

“The French Book Saith”: Malory’s Adaptation of His Sources

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## Introduction

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, despite being the source for essentially all things King Arthur that have been created since the fifteenth century, is a startlingly unoriginal piece of work. In the custom of much literature created up to and during the medieval period, Malory's work is not fiction of his own creation but a piecing together and interpreting of various Arthurian stories already in existence. The *Morte* must be understood as arising out of a rich and varied tradition of Arthurian legend that spans time, space, language, and literary genre. Of course, this in no way undermines its accomplishments as a literary text; as Terence McCarthy affirms, "[W]e must not make the mistake of thinking that borrowing and assembling in themselves minimize Malory's achievement in any way" (78). Indeed, the process by which Malory crafted his *Morte* assumes immense importance when readers recognize the extent to which the text has become ingrained in Western culture. For better or for worse, comparing Malory's version of the Arthurian legend to its sources reveals much about Malory's authorial priorities, but even more about the society that has so completely embraced *Le Morte D'Arthur* (as opposed to other Arthurian texts). At the heart of Malory's use of his sources is a shift from ethical straightforwardness to paradox and moral tension, such that his *Morte* is reflective of the essential human struggle between a desire for perfection or greatness and the reality of vice.

Though it is impossible to be entirely certain of which sources, and which versions of those sources, Malory relied upon when writing the *Morte*, scholars have traced much of the text to particular works. Malory drew largely from the five-part French collection of prose romances known as the Vulgate Cycle, in which Lancelot emerges as the central character,<sup>1</sup> for the

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<sup>1</sup> When the spelling of characters' names differs between the French romances and *Le Morte D'Arthur*, I have kept the spelling consistent with whichever source I am referencing. When I

majority of his *Morte*. The author(s) of this cycle are unknown. The five “branches” of the Vulgate Cycle are, in chronological order by their contents, as follows: *L’Estoire del Saint Graal*, *Merlin*, *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, and *La Mort Artu*.<sup>2 3</sup> The Vulgate Cycle, also referred to as the *Lancelot-Graal*, is similar in construction and style to Malory’s other primary French source, the prose *Tristan*. In a noteworthy departure from his French-language canon, Malory relied upon a relatively brief English alliterative poem, the *Morte Arthure*, for a specific but significant plot event—the battle between Arthur and the Roman emperor Lucius—and upon the stanzaic English poem *Le Morte Arthur* for his depiction of Arthur’s tragic death. There are a few other, less significant works from which Malory drew, such as the more historical account of Arthurian events written by John Hardyng, but this paper will only analyze segments of the Vulgate Cycle and the alliterative *Morte Arthure* in comparison to Malory’s work (McCarthy 75-7).<sup>4</sup>

Examining closely the ways in which Malory alters, rearranges, and expands upon his source material yields considerable insight into the themes and ideas that Malory values as an author. In “Malory and His Sources,” McCarthy argues that Malory “borrows and assembles in

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refer generally to a character without specifying either Malory’s or the Vulgate Cycle’s version, I have used contemporary English spellings (e.g., Lancelot, Guinevere).

<sup>2</sup> In the English translation I use, these titles are: *The History of the Holy Grail*, *The Story of Merlin*, *Lancelot*, *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, and *The Death of Arthur*.

<sup>3</sup> Malory apparently worked from a Post-Vulgate continuation of the *Merlin*, known as the *Suite du Merlin*, which preserved the original text of the *Merlin* and then added additional narrative (Lacy, Preface, ix). Later in this thesis I examine a few of the differences between the *Merlin* and the *Suite*, but due to the way the translation is structured I reference the *Merlin* for events that appear in both texts.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that no scholar has access to the same manuscripts Malory used, and that we can only approximate what he was reading to greater or lesser degree of certainty by examining several manuscripts. Scholars have the most confidence that Malory used *La Queste*, and this thesis focuses heavily on that section of the *Morte*.

order to recreate, to give new form to old stories in a way that does full justice to what he sees as their true significance.” He elaborates:

Malory is much more completely a traditional writer, one for whom invention, as such, is not the prime concern...Indeed, the different meanings of the word ‘original’ are the dividing line between the traditional writer and the modern novelist. For a traditional writer, borrowings are not so many skeletons in the cupboard he will seek to conceal; they are the bare bones of his narrative. If there is anything he might wish to hide, it is precisely those parts which he has added himself and which cannot be traced back to an authoritative original. Malory does this frequently. He affirms the authenticity of his account when in fact he would have had difficulty producing the necessary documents if challenged. He claims to be borrowing when he is being original. (78)

An example from early in Malory’s narrative will serve to illustrate this phenomenon, as well as introduce the issues surrounding Malory’s adaptation of the Arthurian legend from French to English. While describing the events of the sword in the stone, Malory writes, “So in the greatest church of London, whether it were Paul’s or not the French book maketh no mention, all the estates were long or day in the church for to pray” (7). The French book certainly does not make any mention of which church the nobles gather at, nor does it refer to the church as the “greatest of London.” Indeed, Malory’s French source, the *Merlin*, merely places the church somewhere in Logres, which refers only to Arthur’s vaguely defined realm. Even the clergyman who oversees Arthur’s election and coronation in the *Morte* is the capital-A Archbishop of Canterbury, not a lowercase-a archbishop (as he is in the *Merlin*). Though these are seemingly insignificant alterations, they are indicative of one of the most important aspects of the *Morte*: It is indisputably an English work about English figures.

Malory firmly transplants the Round Table of the French tales to his homeland and interprets Arthur in such a way as to make him a historic—if idealized—English hero. As readers consider the historical aspects of the Arthurian legend, an important caveat applies: Whether an Arthur actually lived or not is certainly up for debate; the multiplicity and variance of accounts of his life testify that King Arthur stories are largely fictionalized, even when, as in the case of the chronicles to be presently discussed, they are presented as empirical fact. The ambivalent definition of “history” as it applies to *Le Morte D’Arthur* is thrown into sharp relief by statements made by William Caxton, the original publisher of the *Morte*. Caxton addresses the historicity of Malory’s work in his preface to the text:

I could not well deny but that there was such a noble king named Arthur, and reputed one of the Nine Worthy, and first and chief of the Christian men....Wherefore such as have late been drawn out briefly into English I have...enprised to imprint a book of the noble histories of the said King Arthur, and of certain of his knights. (xvii)

Despite this statement, Caxton’s own ambivalence about the factuality of Malory’s account is revealed a few sentences later, when he writes, “And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in, but for to give faith and believe that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty” (xviii). Caxton praises the values and virtues promoted within the *Morte*, advising his readers to “do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good faith and renown” (xviii). Even as he sets up the *Morte* as a “history” of an English King Arthur and his knights, Caxton presents the work as an essentially instructive one whose accuracy is irrelevant to its merits. If *Le Morte D’Arthur* is a history, it is so in the sense that it is one version of England’s past, crafted by Malory’s desire to give his countrymen an idealized hero and history by which they could order their present and future.

Despite their factual unreliability, the influence of historic chronicles on the writing of *Le Morte D'Arthur* cannot be discounted, for “[i]n Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* the material of these French prose cycles is married with the English chroniclers’ focus on the reign itself” (Riddy 63). Though by the time Malory penned the *Morte* there already existed in the Arthurian canon narratives of British history (written in French and Latin as well as English) that incorporated Arthur’s reign, these accounts were essentially biographical, lacking both prose style and the personal detail that humanizes the French romances. Moreover, chroniclers identified Arthur as a doomed leader of conquered Britain instead of historically victorious England (Riddy 57-63). Felicity Riddy, in her essay “Contextualizing *Le Morte Darthur*: Empire and Civil War,” notes of the most extensive of these historical depictions, “Geoffrey of Monmouth’s biography of Arthur in the *Historia regum Britanniae* is thus a life written backwards: it is a life constructed to make sense of the death that is required by the larger narrative of the tragic passage of dominion from the Britons to the Anglo-Saxons” (61). In this and other biographical accounts, Arthur’s life revolves around his death because his fate is inextricably bound up with that of his nation (Riddy 57-63). Malory’s *Morte* removes Arthur from this tragic sequence and defines him as a triumphant, conquering English king while simultaneously refusing to locate him at any particular moment in English history.

The fact that the bulk of Malory’s material arises from his French sources means that the most fundamental aspect of the *Morte*’s historical orientation is its “Englishing” of the French romances. Riddy elaborates on this adaptation:

The differences between Malory’s structure and that of the French prose cycles amount to an anglicization of the Arthurian legend....French writers were not, by and large, interested in the issues of nationhood that the legend could be made to bear. In the late

fifteenth century, however, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* goes back to the regnal structure; for the first time in English outside a chronicle he writes the whole reign, expanding the traditional biography with material drawn from French and English romances. Malory's Arthur is king of England, not of Britain...and the narrative is written from an English point of view....it gives *Le Morte Darthur* a specifically English orientation. (64)

*Le Morte D'Arthur*, then, while essentially nationalistic in nature, relies on the literature of another nation for its inspiration. This component of Malory's authorial process is one that will become evident in my analysis of *Le Morte D'Arthur* and its sources.

In regard to the accuracy of the institutions depicted in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, viewing the *Morte* as a history of an English Arthurian reign places the work simultaneously in the historical record and in Malory's day. Malory's text is largely a nostalgic quasi-historical account of the period, a few hundred years previous to his own time, when chivalry and knighthood were vital structural elements of society. But the *Morte* also reflects the anxieties and hopes of the society Malory himself inhabited. Especially given that Malory's French source material was written a few centuries before the *Morte*, discerning the reality behind relevant historical elements of Malory's text, such as the political environment, the relationship between Arthur and his knights and the Church, and the chivalric system, requires analysis of the period about which Malory is writing as well as of Malory's own era. The next section will summarize, as they relate to the *Morte*, the following historical considerations, which I believe to be crucial to reading the *Morte* alongside its sources: chivalry and knighthood; the intersection of the Church with the latter; the political climate during which the Vulgate Cycle's authors lived as well as that of Malory's day; and Sir Thomas Malory's biographical information.

In his chapter entitled “Chivalry and the *Morte Darthur*” in *A Companion to Malory*, Richard Barber explains the development of the chivalric system and argues that “*Le Morte Darthur* is, first and foremost, a chivalric romance.” Chivalry emerged from and eventually grew to define knighthood, which in turn evolved from early war-bands. The medieval period saw the development of a three-class society, divided into “warriors, priests, and tillers of the soil,” each of which had its own unique role but was also dependent on the other two segments to survive. War-bands gave way to an organized socioeconomic system, as warriors, “instead of merely being part of their leader’s household...became landholders, whose estates were intended to support them and enable them to maintain the necessary equipment for war” (19). Under these new conditions, warriors became knights, a word whose root means “servant”: The lord-vassal relationship is an essential component of knighthood. Knights were a distinct kind of warrior, “primarily armed horsemen” (19), whose male-centered culture revolved around war, power, and loyalty to one’s fellow knights (19-20).

Chivalry is a concept distinct from knighthood and represents the merging of the elements of knighthood with a period of peace and literary renaissance. Barber elaborates on this coalescing thusly:

The development of chivalry in the course of the twelfth century was the result of deep-seated changes in society and in the circumstances of the knightly class. The tenth and eleventh centuries, the formative period for knighthood, had been a time of almost continuous warfare in western Europe....The twelfth century brought relative peace and substantial prosperity to much of the west....The arts of leisure, unknown since Roman times, re-emerged and flourished. In southern France a highly sophisticated literary culture developed, drawing not only on half-remembered classical tradition but also on

popular Latin songs and the verses of Arab poets in Spain. The work of the troubadours centred on their peaceful social world, where minor lords and their ladies engaged in sophisticated debates about love.... (20)

Through this process developed the concepts of courtly love and jousting. These are “idealized versions of the actual world, in that they do not carry the consequences of real love and real war: a hostile view might be that matters of life and death have become mere games for an idle moment.” In sum, “the concept which links courtly love to knightly activity”—the crux of chivalry, which is both intuitive and seemingly contradictory—“is the idea that love for a lady can inspire a knight to nobler and braver deeds” (21). Notably, France was the locus for the emergence of chivalry, which explains why many of the original Arthurian tales (including the Vulgate Cycle) were written in France during this period (20).

The chivalric “system,” as it is developed in the French romances and subsequently in Malory, refers to the formal institutionalization of chivalry as the means by which Arthur’s kingdom is defended and defined. For example, of Launcelot, Malory writes, “[I]n certain he loved the queen again above all other ladies and damosels of his life, and for her he did many deeds of arms” (175). In both the Vulgate romances and *Le Morte D’Arthur*, however, the “games” of courtly love and jousting often have very real, horrific consequences: Lancelot’s love affair with Guinevere leads to the unraveling of Arthur’s kingdom; on numerous occasions jousting deteriorates into a bloodbath. In the *Merlin*, a scrimmage-like tournament at Arthur’s court prompts one knight to lament, “[M]any of them are wounded and badly maimed; there are a good thirty of them who will never carry a shield, so I believe, and it is a great sorrow and a

great shame, for they were very worthy gentlemen and good knights” (351).<sup>56</sup> While the Vulgate romances often gloss over such events, however, one of the paradoxes at the core of *Le Morte D’Arthur* is the inherence of violence in the chivalric order, which is designed to promote peace. The *Morte* revolves around the question of whether such a system is sustainable, and so that question will be one of the key themes guiding my comparison of Malory’s work with his sources.

In his discussion of chivalry and knighthood, Barber addresses the intersection of knighthood with the Church, which naturally recognized the power and potential of armed warriors and thus sought to channel, rather than condemn, their use of force. Barber writes,

Religious knighthood is the third factor, beside heroic and courtly knighthood, in chivalry.

The church engaged with knighthood in three very different ways. Firstly, it drew the existing secular order into its orbit, defining its function as part of God’s pre-ordained structure of society. Secondly, it extended its own institution of monasticism to embrace a form of knighthood. Thirdly, it enlisted knights to wage secular war for spiritual reasons. (23)

The involvement of an archbishop in electing Arthur as king is, in this context, not unusual. Similarly, that Arthur and his knights frequently invoke God and ask for the Lord’s blessing of their battles and quests is in keeping with a religiously oriented knighthood. In a typical statement, Gawaine, Arthur’s nephew and one of the preeminent knights of the Round Table,

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the Vulgate quotes: Page numbers in parentheses reference the page numbers of the volume in which the particular romance is placed in the Lacy translation (see Works Cited page).

<sup>6</sup> All footnotes in this section refer to page numbers in Sommer, vol. II (refer to Works Cited page for further bibliographic information). “Moult en ia de blecies & de naures moult dolereusement, si en ia tels xxx qui iamais ne poerteront escu si comme iou quid, & cest grant duel & grant damage car moult estoient preudomme & boin cheualier” (331).

declares in the *Morte*, “Therefore grudge not if this grace is to me fortunéd, it is the goodness of God that lent to me my strength” (168). The contradiction between the “Thou shalt not kill” morality of the Church and the violent means of Arthur’s knights, however, is a paradox on which Malory dwells heavily, again in opposition to the unquestioning French romances. The religious component of the chivalric system becomes especially important in regard to the Grail quest and will be more thoroughly discussed in the corresponding section of this thesis.

Discussing the political components of Malory’s adaptation of the Arthurian legend is particularly difficult given that the French romances hardly discuss nationhood or geography. Generally speaking, chivalry and, by association, warfare were key shapers of the European political climate at the time the Vulgate romances were written (circa the thirteenth century), and the landscapes of both the French tales and the *Morte* reflect those forces. More specifically and uniquely, though, and in a significant departure from its sources, the *Morte* is highly evocative of the English civil wars that lasted from the mid- to the late-fifteenth century, the Wars of the Roses. The Wars of the Roses centered around the battle between two competing claims to the throne and, in a general upheaval of society, pitted Englishman against Englishman and the lower against the upper class. Felicity Riddy argues that the English aristocracy, “no longer united against the French and the Scots, first fell upon each other in the Wars of the Roses and then reassembled themselves under the Tudors against their own tenants” (72). Civil wars and internal conflicts with rival lords and kings are the bane of King Arthur’s reign throughout the *Morte*, and though Arthur at first successfully overcomes his opposition, he eventually falls victim to the threat from within. Riddy contends that this failure of the aristocracy is reflective of the fifteenth-century English elites’ anxieties about the possible loss of their power (72). In their introduction to *A Companion to Malory*, Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards similarly

contend that “the Englishness of Malory’s narrative may have seemed particularly relevant in 1485, the year of Caxton’s first publication of the *Morte* and also the year of the battle of Bosworth Field that signalled the end of the Wars of the Roses and the establishing of the Tudor dynasty with the accession of Henry VII” (xiv). The ascension of Arthur to the throne in Malory’s text echoes the rise of the Tudor dynasty and suggests a peaceful resolution to ongoing war. Interestingly, however, though Malory may have constructed Arthur as a Messiah-like inspiration to Englishmen, Arthur’s reign is temporary, failed, and ultimately mired in the past. This seems to confirm Riddy’s argument that Malory’s narrative points longingly to a heroic but idealized English past, pessimistically maintaining that, in the absence of deference to the aristocracy, the nation is doomed to destroy itself from within.

The Wars of the Roses are particularly relevant to the writing of *Le Morte D’Arthur* in light of the life of Sir Thomas Malory. The Malory who is believed to be the author of the *Morte* was a knight and member of the landed gentry during the fifteenth century. In “The Malory Life-Records,” P. J. C. Field notes that “[i]n late medieval England, taking up knighthood could be expensive, and doing so may imply political and social ambition” (115). Malory demonstrated “a growing interest in politics,” serving as a parliamentary elector and eventually as a Member of Parliament (Field 115-16). Yet his biography reads like that of a modern-day felon: He spent much of his life in and out of jail, charged with crimes ranging from rape to extortion. Malory’s political involvement, against the backdrop of the English civil wars, means that many of these charges may have been only trumped-up allegations, but there is no denying Malory’s presence in the thick of the social and political unrest of his era. He is believed to have written the *Morte* during one of his stays in prison, which lends an interesting cast to the text—for Malory, there was no assurance of a peaceful resolution to the conflict destroying his country, and no promise,

for him, of freedom (Field 116-17). Perhaps it makes sense, then, that Malory chose both to rewrite history and to immortalize an England wracked by civil war.

### *Merlin*

Malory begins his *Morte* with the conception and birth of Arthur. That choice in itself necessitates omitting the entire history of the Holy Grail (*L'Estoire del Saint Graal*), which chronologically comprises the first branch of the Vulgate Cycle. This change means that when the Grail quest is introduced later in the *Morte*, it shifts the focus of the text entirely, rather than serving as the fulfillment of a narrative thread initiated earlier in the story. Further, Malory leaves out the *Merlin's* details documenting the legendary Merlin's origins and early history, such that in the *Morte*, Merlin does not merit his own story. Rather, he plays a supporting role, and his supernatural powers are simply a means to the end of Arthur's unique beginnings. The focus of the *Morte* is thus from the beginning placed upon Arthur, who even when forced into the background of the text remains the story's guiding center (though not its central character) until its close. This framework differs from that of the Vulgate romances, which often lose Arthur in their endless cast of characters.

The French *Merlin*, the Vulgate branch following the Grail history, recounts Merlin's interference in the affairs of King Uther Pendragon—among various other sequences of Merlin's history—at great length. Malory, however, chooses to begin his *Morte* at the time of Uther's obsession with Igraine, the wife of one of Uther's dukes. Malory's and the *Merlin's* accounts of the unfolding of this obsession are, in their essentials, much the same. Despite persistent advances by King Uther, Igraine refuses to be unfaithful to her husband. The *Merlin* notes of Ygraine, "And she herself took note of it and knew in her heart that the king did indeed love her. When she fully understood this, she was slow in coming before him, and avoided it if she could,

for she was very beautiful and utterly faithful to her husband” (199).<sup>7</sup> The situation grows violent, however, when Uther, “sick for anger and for love of fair Igraine,” in the words of Malory, declares war on the duke in an attempt to get to Igraine (2). In the ensuing conflict, the duke is killed, and on the same night Uther, with the help of Merlin, succeeds in deceiving Igraine into believing he is her husband. The product of that union is Arthur. In a bizarre turn of events, King Uther and Igraine are married almost immediately after Arthur’s conception.

Part of the appeal as well as the frustration of reading Malory is the text’s multiplicity of competing loyalties and conflicting definitions of morality, faith, and “right.” As Elizabeth J. Bryan writes in the introduction to the Modern Library Edition of the *Morte*, “It is ultimately the enormous complexity of conflicting demands that will engage moral sensibilities of readers of this text” (xii). Malory does not hesitate to begin his narrative with just such a paradox, clearly illustrating Arthur’s birth as the result of what is essentially a rape without condemning Uther’s or Merlin’s actions. Indeed, even the men’s victim fails to acknowledge the distance between Uther’s and Merlin’s reputations and their behavior: When Igraine discovers months into her pregnancy that her new husband is the same man who disguised himself as the late duke, “the queen made great joy when she knew who was the father of her child” (5). Though Igraine’s “joy” is her final word on her fate, her complacency stands in marked contrast to Malory’s previous descriptions of her as intelligent and unwavering in her convictions. Are readers to accept that, simply because Uther marries the woman he has taken advantage of and because their child is King Arthur, Uther’s deception of Igraine is forgiven or tolerable? Moreover, Malory goes out of his way to complicate the relationship between the duke and King Uther; his

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<sup>7</sup> “& a ce se prinst ele misme garde & sot bien en son corage que li rois lamoit & quant ele sen aperchut si se tarda & eschieua de uenir deuant lui a son pooir. Car ele estoit moult bele & moult loiaus uers son seignor” (58).

Uther “was king of all England, and so reigned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornwall that held war against him long time” (1). This situation is entirely Malory’s own invention, for the *Merlin* describes the king’s meeting Ygraine at a peaceful gathering of the king’s barons, “married and unwed ladies, and many knights” (199).<sup>8</sup> Arthur’s much-heralded birth in Malory—even more explicitly than in the *Merlin*—is the consequence of violence.

That is not to say that Malory’s French source always clearly defines characters as good or evil; in the Vulgate romances, good people frequently do bad things. The difference between the two accounts of Arthur’s conception is that Malory uses the plights of individual characters to force his readers to consider foundational, society-wide questions of values and morality, while the Vulgate romance limits its focus to the interior ethical dilemmas of its characters, often overlooking the larger ramifications of their choices as a result. This contrast is one that often defines Malory’s adaptation of his French sources. In the *Merlin*, Uther’s overwhelming desire for the wife of his vassal recalls both the biblical story of David and Bathsheba and the jealous rage of Menelaus and the subsequent Trojan War, but appears even more morally bankrupt because Uther seems aware that his lust is unethical. The French story spends paragraphs detailing Uther’s “lovesickness”; i.e., “I am dying for love of Ygraine....I have lost the will to drink, to eat, to sleep, to rest” (202).<sup>9</sup> The *Merlin* would have us believe, too, that Uther’s infatuation is involuntary: “But I certainly can’t do anything more, for I cannot stop my heart from loving her” (202).<sup>10</sup> But evidently Uther himself perceives the questionable morality of his desire; even while seeking the help of Merlin in deceiving Ygraine, he comments, “Perhaps he

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<sup>8</sup> “dames & de cheualires & de damoiseles” (58).

<sup>9</sup> “Je me mur por lamor de Ygerne....Iou en ai perdu le boire & le mangier & le domir & le repos” (64).

<sup>10</sup> “Mais certes iou nen puis mais que mes cuers ne sen puet retraire” (64).

[Merlin] is bothered because I love the wife of my liegeman” (202).<sup>11</sup> Notably, the *Merlin*’s Uther is despicable enough to conceal his deceit from Ygraine even after she becomes his wife, and she dies without ever knowing who, disguised as the duke, fathered her child; Uther even, at one point, asks Igraine who the father of her child is, saying that she cannot be pregnant by him (208). Merlin also recognizes the depravity of his role in enabling Uther to deceive Ygraine. In the wake of Uther and Ygraine’s tryst, Merlin asserts, “Ulfin [the king’s right-hand man] has to a degree atoned for his sins in abetting your love-making. But I have not atoned for my sin in helping to deceive the lady about the child fathered in her womb and she does not know by whom” (208).<sup>12</sup> This statement indicts Uther’s and Merlin’s actions as sinful, clearly condemning them even as the story provides an explanation for why both men acted as they did. The narrative does not speculate further on the nature of a society whose most powerful members blatantly disobey their moral compasses. Instead, Uther and Merlin suffer no consequences for their actions, though both “atone” for their sins by, respectively, marrying Ygraine and paving Arthur’s road to the kingship.

Ultimately, what (or rather, who) redeems the Uther and Merlin of the *Merlin* and prevents the reader from branding them both as unequivocally evil is Arthur. As in the *Morte*, in exchange for his help in deceiving Ygraine, Merlin extracts Uther’s promise that he will give the child of the union to Merlin to be raised. Merlin does reveal to Uther the identity of the man who will be responsible for caring for the child—“one of the worthiest men in your kingdom, the best

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<sup>11</sup> “Ou espoir il li [Merlin] poise que iaim la feme de mom homme lige” (64).

<sup>12</sup> “Ulfin s’est auques aquites des pechie que il ot des amors faire, mais iou ne me sui mie aquites del pechie que iou aidai la dame a dechevoir del engenderment quele a en son ventre & si ne seit qui il est” (74).

endowed with all good traits....This good man is not at all wealthy”<sup>13</sup>— but beyond that refuses to elaborate on the child’s nature or future or why he, Merlin, is so intent on directing the boy’s upbringing (208). Finally, when Uther is on his deathbed years later, Merlin appears to explain: “I tell you that your son will be head of your kingdom after you through the power of Jesus Christ, and he will perfect the Round Table you have founded” (211).<sup>14</sup> Thus the story seems to suggest that Uther’s and Merlin’s actions were justified—or perhaps even necessary—because of the identity of Uther and Ygraine’s child, whose right to rule is not only biological but also divine. The *Merlin* is perhaps a little self-conscious about this argument, and so Merlin goes out of his way to elaborate to the deceased king’s barons, “I stand as your pledge...God, in His mercy and His great and noble goodness...will choose for us as king and lord; just as truly as He did condescend to be born that day and is King of Kings and Lord of the whole world, he will be a man by whom the people will be ruled according to His will” (211-12).<sup>15</sup> This statement suggests that because Uther and Ygraine produce Arthur, the sins Merlin and Uther committed in the process of achieving that union were God’s will.

In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Malory scorns such ethical quid pro quos and does not use Arthur’s birth to justify the actions of Uther and Merlin. Malory’s Merlin is seemingly much less powerful than his Vulgate counterpart in his knowledge of and influence over the future, and his confrontation of the dying Uther involves not a proclamation but rather a query: “Sir, shall your son Arthur be king after your days, of this realm with all the appurtenance?” (6) Merlin’s words reveal that there is some question as to Arthur’s destiny, though Uther replies, “I give him God’s

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<sup>13</sup> “j des plus preudommes de vostre regne & li miex entechies de toutes boines teches....Li preudoms nest mie moult riches” (74).

<sup>14</sup> “Si te di que tes fiex sera chief de ton regne apres toi par la uertu de ihesu crist & il sera acomplisables de la table roonde” (79).

<sup>15</sup> “Te sui pleges se vous...& que diex par sa pitie & par sa grant deboinarete...” (80). [This quote could not be entirely located in Sommer.]

blessing and mine, and bid him pray for my soul, and righteously and worshipfully that he claim the crown, upon forfeiture of my blessing” (6). Still, at the time of Uther’s death soon after there is no guarantee that his child will inherit the throne, and so the problem of reconciling Merlin’s and Uther’s actions with any code of morality is left to the reader.

Perhaps the most well-known story in Arthuriana is, thanks in no small part to the Disney movie of the same title, that of the sword in the stone. In the Vulgate Cycle, the account of Arthur’s being chosen and crowned as king almost immediately follows Uther’s death, which leaves the details of Arthur’s childhood to the imagination. All we are told by the *Merlin* is, “And Antor had raised the child named Arthur until he reached the age of sixteen, and he was handsome and big, and he had had no other milk than that of Antor’s wife, while her own son had been nursed by a peasant girl. And Antor did not know which he loved better, Arthur or his own son” (212).<sup>16</sup> Malory does not include even that. Why none of the French writers took the time to pen the story of Arthur’s upbringing is uncertain, but given the importance placed by Merlin on the circumstances of the future king’s raising, the absence of such details, from the *Merlin* and subsequently from the *Morte*, is a little confusing. Indeed, in his classic *The Once and Future King*, a novelistic retelling of Malory’s *Morte*, author T. H. White spends many pages depicting the adventures and training (by Merlin) of the young Arthur. Evidently the absence of such scenes from the *Morte* was glaring enough that White felt the need to invent his own.

In the Vulgate narrative, the story of the sword in the stone thus becomes the pivotal moment at which the boy Arthur becomes king. It encapsulates the revelation of Arthur’s character, the reasons he has been chosen, ostensibly by God, to rule; further, it sets up the

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<sup>16</sup> This quote could not be located in Sommer.

problems of internal division and latent conflict that will plague Arthur for the remainder of his reign. Finally, it is significant that the test by which Arthur becomes king attempts desperately to reconcile the spiritual with the regnal. Indeed, at first the effort appears to have succeeded:

Though the notion of “divine right” has historically been abused, the act of removing the sword from the stone is a literal demonstration of Arthur’s right to rule. The French story takes great pains to paint the miracle of the sword in the stone as a divine test designed to reveal the single person God has chosen to become king. “[A]ll the clergy in the kingdom and all the barons of worth,” apparently ill at ease with the leaderless state of their realm in the wake of Uther’s death, “lived very humbly and very uprightly, and they waited...and they prayed Our Lord to give them an overlord who was worthy to uphold the religion of Christendom” (212).<sup>17</sup> The nobles assemble together for Christmas Eve Mass, at which point the archbishop leading the service cautions them, “We are gathered here to choose a king, but we don’t know which one would be best for our well-being, and we cannot know this by ourselves, so let us pray the King of Kings to show us His will” (212).<sup>18</sup> Miraculously, during the service a “huge stone” appears in front of the church, in the middle of which is “an iron anvil at least half a foot high, and a sword was sticking through the middle of the anvil down into the rock” (212).<sup>19</sup> Gold writing on the stone proclaims that “the one who pulled this sword out would be king of the land by the choice of Jesus Christ” (212).<sup>20</sup> The eagerness of the clergy and nobility to have a king ensures their

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<sup>17</sup> “Menoient moult simple uie & moult honeste & atendirent...& fisent lor orisons a nostre seignor quil lor dounast tel seignor qui profitables fust a la loy maintenir de la crestienete” (80-1).

<sup>18</sup> Nous sommes chi assamble por eslire roy mais nous ne sauons mie li quells nous seroit plus profitables & por ce que nous ne le sauons de nous si proierons au roi des rois quil nous face uraie demonstrance par son plaisir” (81).

<sup>19</sup> “perron”...“vne englume de fer de demi piet de haut largement & parmi cele englume auoit vne espee fichie ius quau perron outre” (81).

<sup>20</sup> “cil qui osteroit [ceste espee] seroit rois de la terre par lelection ihesu crist” (81).

willing submission to this divine method of appointment, which defines the legitimacy of Arthur's reign as simultaneously religious and secular.

In what is perhaps the most endearing and enduring aspect of the sword in the stone story, Arthur's removal of the sword happens by chance and as part of efforts on behalf of his brother, rather than through an attempt to gain the kingship for himself. Though hundreds of men "all tried it one after the other...there was no one who could ever move that sword," and so the frustrated knights begin to joust in a free-for-all (213).<sup>21</sup> Arthur, accompanying his (though unbeknownst to him) adopted father and brother, readily agrees to retrieve a sword for his recently knighted brother Kay, but realizes that he cannot find any swords in the building at which they are staying because "the lady of the house had hidden them all in her room and gone off to see the fighting" (213).<sup>22</sup> His immediate and innocent solution: "The thought came to him that he had never tried the test, and if he could pull the sword out he would take it to his brother" (213).<sup>23</sup> The selflessness of Arthur in this instance presents an interesting chicken-and-egg dilemma: Is Arthur able to remove the sword and thus become king because of his unselfish and noble character, or is his character formed the way it is because he was always destined to achieve the sword? In other words, in a world where fate and free will so often collide, do characters' actions define or merely reveal their natures?

In tandem with these questions arises the issue of Arthur's qualifications for the kingship. When Arthur removes the sword from the stone numerous times in order to convince the disbelieving nobility of his identity, the response of the barons is to test his character further by giving him "everything of worth...all kingly things and things that a man might lust after or love,

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<sup>21</sup> "assaierent tuit li vns apres lautre Mais onques ni ot celui qui cele espee peust mouoir" (82).

<sup>22</sup> "la dame de la maison les auoit toutes repostes en sa chamber & ele sen estoit alee ueoir la mellee" (83).

<sup>23</sup> "Si pensa quil ni auoit onques assaiet & sil le pooit auoir quil le porteroit a son frere" (83).

to test whether his heart was greedy or grasping” (215).<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that they cannot find anything wrong with him, the nobles delay Arthur’s coronation over and over again, lamenting, “It is very distressing to us that such a young man, and one of such low birth, will be our overlord” (215).<sup>25</sup> Of course, they cannot know that Arthur is in fact of royal blood, but the barons’ sentiments reveal their underlying assumptions about who is qualified to be king and fly in the face of their earlier affirmations of trust in God to reveal His choice for ruler. When Arthur does pass their tests with flying colors, the nobles “whispered behind their hands that he was surely of high birth, for they found no greed in him” (215).<sup>26</sup> It is revealing that Arthur’s fundamental goodness is linked by the baronage not to his faith or internal morality, but to his ancestry, over which he has no control. The archbishop, however, in stark contrast to the nobility, fervently maintains, “Here is a worthy knight whom Our Lord has chosen for us in the election you have witnessed again and again since Christmas” (215).<sup>27</sup> Arthur’s “worthiness,” for the clergyman, depends solely on the fact that Arthur has been appointed by God.

These two worldviews—religious and political/regnal—emerge, in the French account, as irreconcilable by way of their fundamentally different values. The story seems to ignore this problem and presents the miracle of the sword in the stone, along with the close involvement of the archbishop in Arthur’s election, as a successful merger of two very different ways of approaching the world. Upon Merlin’s revelation of Arthur’s true parentage, the barons still refuse to accept Arthur as their king, but “the archbishop answered them and said that Arthur

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<sup>24</sup> “aporter les boins auoirs & les roiaus & toutes les choses que len doit couoitier & amer por essayer se ses cuers seroit couoiteus ne prenans” (87).

<sup>25</sup> “Nous est moult contraire que csi ioncs hons & de si bas lignage sera sires de nous” (86).

<sup>26</sup> “disorient bien par deriere quil seroit de bien haut a faire car il ne veoient en lui nule couoitise” (87).

<sup>27</sup> “Vees ci j preudome qui nostre sires nous a eslut par tel election comme vous aues ueu del noel en encha” (87).

would be king....For, since he had become involved in the election, he would not fail to help Arthur keep the land” (217).<sup>28</sup> The archbishop’s blithe insistence that “Our Lord wills it” ignores that the union of the spiritual and the regnal crumbles almost immediately: The barons relent and elect Arthur as king, but only a few paragraphs later several of the rulers “promised him death if they could get their hands on him” (216).<sup>29</sup>

Malory’s depiction of these events is, in its plot, quite similar to the *Merlin*’s. Given that Malory takes the extensive account of Arthur’s ascension to the throne and reduces it to a few pages, what is significant about Malory’s adaptation of the sword in the stone story is his focused use of the conflicts simmering just under the surface in the *Merlin* to ground and define his *Morte*. The first of these is the contest between predeterminism and free will. Malory preserves the French story’s emphasis on the divine nature of Arthur’s election, such that Arthur’s kingship retains the aura and approval of the sacred: “[A]ll the gentlemen of arms...should to London come by Christmas...that Jesus, that was born on that night, that he would of his great mercy show some miracle, as he was come to be king of mankind, for to show some miracle who should be rightwise king of this realm” (7). Arthur, the chosen king, is thus equated, or at least placed on the same level, with Christ. In keeping with this association, the young Arthur’s goodness is even more evident in the *Morte* than in the *Merlin*. When Arthur is unable to retrieve Kay’s sword from their lodging, “Then was Arthur wroth, and said to himself, I will ride to the churchyard, and take the sword with me that sticketh in the stone, for my brother Sir Kay shall not be without a sword this day” (8). Arthur’s selflessness and devotion to his brother—despite

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<sup>28</sup> “Et li arceuesques lor respondi quil seroit rois....Car puis quil se estoit entremis de lelection il ne le lairoit mie atant ester quil ne li aidast a maintenir la terre” (91).

<sup>29</sup> “sil le peuent as puins tenir quil ne lasseurent se de la mort non” (88).

their lack of blood relationship—suggest that Arthur’s character has been largely developed through nurture rather than nature.

This sentiment is strengthened by the conversation, held after Arthur has assayed the sword, between Arthur and his adopted family members. The stricken Arthur balks when Sir Ector and Kay kneel before him, exclaiming, “Alas...my own dear father and brother, why kneel ye to me?” (9) Ector replies, “Nay, nay, my lord Arthur, it is not so; I was never your father nor of your blood, but I wot well ye are of an higher blood than I weened ye were” (9). But Malory has Arthur largely reject ancestry as a determinant of character. When Ector asks Arthur if he will be Ector’s “good and gracious lord when ye are king,” Arthur replies gracefully: “Else were I to blame, said Arthur, for ye are the man in the world that I am most beholden to, and my good lady and mother your wife, that as well as her own hath fostered me and kept” (10). Arthur’s kindness and benevolence are clearly freely chosen, and due at least in part to the influence of his foster parents. Malory thus ensures that his readers are invested in the power of free will, in contrast to predetermined traits or destiny, without entirely debunking the influence of fate or divine intervention—after all, his good qualities aside, Arthur ascends the throne only because he removes the sword from the stone. Such an inconclusive conclusion is typical of Malory’s love of paradox, and of course the *Morte* has not seen the last of this discussion.

Beyond the contest between fate and free will, the larger question at stake in Arthur’s coronation in the *Morte* is, of course, whether his election represents a reconciliation between the spiritual and the earthly systems of judgment. In framing this issue, Malory sharply contrasts Arthur’s humility and virtue with the shallow values of the nobility. Upon successfully extracting the sword from the stone, Arthur is scorned by the nobles who have so earnestly sought a ruler, and Malory’s translation of the barons’ words is almost identical to the original French: “[M]any

lords...said it was great shame unto them all and the realm, to be overgoverned with a boy of no high blood born” (10). Though of course the reader knows that Arthur is, if the judgment is based on parentage, the single most qualified to inherit the throne, the citizens of the realm do not and discount the young king-elect despite the unequivocal proof of the sword in the stone. Even when Merlin proclaims Arthur’s parentage, “some of the kings...laughed him to scorn, as King Lot; and more other called him a witch” (13). Here, though, there is no archbishop to declare that the will of the Lord will be done; only Merlin is able to assure Arthur, “[Y]e shall overcome them all, whether they will or nill” (13). Divine intervention, in the case of bloodthirsty barons, is simply not enough. Malory thus forces us to examine the tension between a system based on the heart and one based on the body. Even though Arthur deserves the crown under both systems’ standards and symbolically unites the spiritual with the regnal, he ultimately proves unable to sustain that union—or perhaps to even accomplish it in the first place.<sup>30</sup>

In both the Vulgate account and in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the next portion of the narrative is primarily concerned with how Arthur goes about establishing his kingdom. Following Arthur’s coronation, his realm is wracked by civil war. Malory puts it this way: “After the death of Uther Pendragon reigned Arthur his son, the which had great war in his days for to get all England into his hand” (49). Malory’s description of the battles is, however, mercifully much shorter than the *Merlin*’s. In between major periods of war, Arthur’s knights pursue “adventures,” jousting with

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur meets his mother, Queen Igraine, for the first time only after he has finished his successful war against a coalition of rival kings. In the chapter titled, “How Ulfius Impeached Igraine,” we learn that Igraine is still alive and that Ulfius, formerly Uther’s knight, blames her for Arthur’s difficulties in uniting England. Ulfius fumes, “[T]his Queen Igraine is causer of your great damage, and of your great war. For, an she would have uttered it in the life of King Uther Pendragon, of the birth of you, and how you were begotten, ye had never had the mortal wars ye have had; for the most part of your barons of your realm knew never whose son ye were, nor of whom ye were begotten” (38). Needless to say, it is interesting that Malory re-introduces Igraine solely to have a character cast blame on her and to underscore the idea that Arthur’s rule is perpetuated by force rather than God or ancestry.

knights they meet during their travels and, to use the phrase in its proper context, rescuing damsels in distress. During this period, Arthur forms an important alliance with kings Ban and Bors (in the *Morte*, they are from France); establishes the Round Table; falls in love with and marries Guinevere; and sires Mordred by his half-sister, then unsuccessfully attempts to destroy the child by ordering that all the kingdom's male babies born during a particular time be killed. These are the major events as they emerge in the *Morte*, and so I will briefly describe the ways Malory singles out a few of these particular moments from his source while also excluding significant details provided by the *Merlin* as well as the *Suite du Merlin*, a later continuation of the Vulgate branch on which Malory relied.

The most interesting change between Malory's and the *Merlin*'s accounts of this period occurs in the depiction of Arthur and Guinevere's romance. In the *Morte*, the first mention of Guenever occurs not long after Arthur's coronation, when he, Ban, and Bors rescue King Leodegrance, Guenever's father, from a relentless enemy king. Malory writes, "[A]nd there had Arthur the first sight of Guenever, the king's daughter of Cameliard, and ever after he loved her" (33). Arthur's "love at first sight" infatuation endures, and eventually Arthur resolves, "Needs I must take a wife" (79). Merlin concurs that "[i]t is well done...that ye take a wife....Now is there any that ye love more than another?" (79) Arthur replies, "Yes...I love Guenever the king's daughter, Leodegrance of the land of Cameliard, the which holdeth in his house the Table Round that ye told he had of my father Uther. And this damosel is the most valiant and fairest lady that I know living, or yet that ever I could find" (79). The marriage is arranged, and whether Guenever is happy, sad, or indifferent about the union we are not told.

In the *Suite*, the unfolding of Arthur and Guenevere's marriage is essentially the same; we are only given Merlin's, Arthur's, and Leodegan's perspectives. In the original *Merlin*,

however, emerges the full account of the pair's courtship and budding romance. The conquering king Arthur is rendered quiet and unpredictable—"Arthur loved and yearned for the daughter of King Leodegan, and he was daydreaming so about her that he forgot where he was; he very much wanted to have her as his wife and helpmeet, if he could" (254)<sup>31</sup>—while Guenevere is positively besotted with Arthur: "King Arthur was filled with great beauty, and the maiden stared at him and he at her. And she said softly to herself that a lady had reason to be very happy if such a good and handsome knight as he asked her for her love, and shame on her who refused him" (252).<sup>32</sup> The text waxes poetic about the young couple, confirming that their love is not merely emotional: "He ran to her and took her in his arms, and she put her arms around him too, and they embraced and kissed each other sweetly, holding each other tightly, for they were youthful and very much in love" (287).<sup>33</sup> Arthur and Guenevere's engagement and marriage are, in the *Merlin*, a natural progression from these encounters.

Malory, whether or not he had access to these particular portions of the *Merlin* manuscript, certainly could not ignore the similar details about other couples that are scattered throughout the Vulgate stories. He very clearly chooses to avoid such poetic, romantic descriptions of love when writing about Arthur and Guenever. Malory's one-sided account of the Arthur-Guenever relationship may be seen as an important step in the development of the Lancelot-Guenever affair. For all we know from Malory, Guenever is forced into the marriage and is indifferent to Arthur's affections. This certainly makes it easier for the reader to be

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<sup>31</sup> "Moult le couoite & aime la fille au roy leodegan & tant y muse que tout sen oublie & bien uoldroit sil peust estre quele leust a per & a compaignon" (159).

<sup>32</sup> "Li rois artus fu de moult biaute plain si le regarda la pucele moult durement & li rois lui & ele dist entre ses dens que moult deust estre lie la dame qui si biaux cheualiers requerroit damours & si boins comme cis est & deuroit bien estre hounie qui len esconduiroit" (157).

<sup>33</sup> "Court a lui & lenbrache & ele li ausi si sentreacolent & sentrebaissent estroitement & doucement comme iouene gent qui moult sentramoient" (219).

sympathetic to Guenever's beginning a relationship with another man, namely Launcelot, and for Launcelot in turn to accede to the affair.

Even more blatant than what Malory excludes is what he changes. In the *Suite*, when Arthur tells Merlin of his desire to marry Guenever, Merlin responds, "If you didn't already love her, I would have you take another...for such great beauty as she has can sometimes be a hindrance. Nevertheless, one day it will happen that her beauty will help you, since, because of it, you will receive land just when you have thought it all lost" (222).<sup>34</sup> Malory's version is strikingly different, as Merlin, in the *Morte*, is well aware of the future: "Merlin warned the king covertly that Guenever was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again" (80). Despite this warning from the man he most trusts in the world—who has predicted the future before!—Arthur, blinded by his love or perhaps just stubborn, marries Guenever anyway. Of course, Merlin is proved right, and Arthur's marrying Guenever proves to be a bit more than just "not wholesome." Where the Vulgate source allows Arthur to be seen as an innocent victim, Malory makes Arthur culpable for causing his own downfall.

Malory preserves the Vulgate Cycle's association of the Round Table with Guenevere. King Leodegan gives the Table to Arthur along with Guenevere's hand in marriage. In the *Suite*, Leodegan proclaims, "I'll send him what I love best, my Round Table. It is not complete but lacks fifty knights, who have died since King Uther Pendragon left this world" (223). Arthur's acquiring the Round Table—which is not just a table but also its one hundred knights—along with his wife immediately associates the two entities, suggesting that if Arthur loses one, he will also lose the other. Malory also retains the fact that Uther first gifted the Table to Leodegrance:

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<sup>34</sup> Due to translation difficulties, translations from the *Suite* are not included in this thesis.

“I shall send him a gift shall please him much more, for I shall give him the Table Round, the which Uther Pendragon gave me, and when it is full complete, there is an hundred knights and fifty” (80). The table’s return to Arthur suggests the completion of a cycle, which is consistent with the Table’s “roundness.”

The final aspect of the *Merlin/Suite* to be examined in relation to Malory is Arthur’s bizarre tryst with his half-sister Morgause, who is also the mother of Gawain, Gaheris, Agravaine, and Gareth, all of whom become famed knights of the Round Table. The *Suite* presents Mordred’s conception, which occurs precisely three months after Arthur’s coronation, as a pivotal event, placing more importance on Mordred’s role than on the sin of Lancelot and Guenevere in the unraveling of Arthur’s kingdom. The text also does not hesitate to pass judgment on Arthur and Morgause’s actions: “Thus the brother knew his sister carnally, and the lady carried the one who later betrayed and killed his father and put the land to torture and destruction” (167). Both the *Merlin* and the *Suite* have Arthur discovering his parentage (and thus Morgause’s relationship to him) only after Mordred is conceived, but the *Merlin* is far more forgiving of Arthur than is the *Suite*, beginning its account with, “And I will tell you how, for the history will be more worthwhile if I make you understand how Mordred was sired by him, for many people would find King Arthur less worthy because of it if they did not know the truth” (237).<sup>35</sup> Malory’s account is more in line with the *Merlin* and is fairly ambivalent regarding moral judgments. Malory is careful to add a line in defense of Arthur’s innocence that has no parallel in the French: “But all this time King Arthur knew not that King Lot’s wife was his sister” (35). In the *Morte*, Mordred’s role in bringing about his father’s downfall is secondary to

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<sup>35</sup> “Si vous dirai comment Car ausi vaudra miex lestoire se iou vous fais entendant en quell maniere il fu engenders de lui car maintes gens len priseroient mains qui la uerite nen sauroient” (128).

Launcelot and Guenever's, and so Malory does not spend much time dwelling on Arthur's sin in sleeping with his sister (who, incidentally, is married).

In a subtle but quite important modification, Malory refuses to absolve Arthur of guilt for causing the death of all the male infants who could have possibly been his offspring:

Then King Arthur let send for all the children born on May-day...for Merlin told King Arthur that he that should destroy him should be born on May-day...and all were put in a ship to the sea....And so by fortune the ship drave unto a castle, and was all to-riven, and destroyed the most part, save that Mordred was cast up, and a good man found him....So many lords and barons of this realm were displeased, for their children were so lost, and many put the wite on Merlin more than on Arthur; so what for dread and for love, they held their peace" (47-8)

This account is different from the *Suite's*, which describes Arthur having a dream in which he is admonished, "King, why are you preparing to do such a great wrong, to destroy such holy and innocent creatures who are yet pure and clean of the world's corruption?" (184) Here, the ship is not wrecked but arrives at a castle where the children are taken in and sheltered by a king and his knights. The *Suite* presents the ship solution as the more merciful option, however, given that prior to his dream Arthur had resolved to "have all the children killed" (184). Merlin puts forth extensive justification for Arthur's actions, arguing that "he did this for the general good of the kingdom of Logres," and so here the barons "believed everything Merlin told them, and they forgave the king" (185). In the absence of these nuanced circumstances, Malory's account only (not very convincingly) shifts the blame from Arthur to Merlin rather than providing a moral explanation for mass infanticide. Malory forces his reader to grapple with the paradox of evil

being committed by a “good” person, which—however drastic Arthur’s example may appear—is a fundamentally human problem.

### *Morte Arthure*

As I explained in my introduction to this thesis, Malory utilized a few sources written in English while crafting *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Terence McCarthy explains that “the second section of the *Morte Darthur*...*The Tale of Arthur and Lucius*, is a rough prosification of the Middle English Alliterative *Morte Arthure* minus its tragic ending” (75). In the *Morte*, Arthur’s battle against the Romans, rather than concluding with his death, ends with Arthur’s being crowned emperor—significant because an English king ruling the Romans would be reversal of history. Malory inserts Arthur’s war with the Romans into the beginning of his narrative, painting Arthur’s victory as the height and conclusion of his fight to unite the region and Arthur himself as the Greatest King Ever. That this crowning achievement comes so early in the *Morte*, however, allows Malory to spend the rest of his text demonstrating the unsustainability of a peace founded on force.

The *Morte Arthure* (to be abbreviated *MA* from this point on) begins with Arthur and his knights gathered together at a celebratory feast after a successful campaign to conquer most of what is today western Europe. In the midst of the festivities, a Roman Senator and accompanying party of knights arrive, bringing a message from the Roman Emperor Lucius:

I make thee summons in sale to sew for thy landes,

.....

Appere in his presence with thy pris knightes

.....

To answer only why thou occupiest the landes

That owe homage of old til him [Lucius] and his elders, (91-99)

The Senator goes on to promise Arthur violent retaliation if he does not answer the Emperor's summons, declaring,

Yif thou these summons withsit, he sendes thee these wordes:

He shall thee seek over the se, with sixteen kinges,

Brin Britain the brode and britten thy knightes

And bring thee buxomly as a beste with brethe where him likes, (104-07)

These threats send Arthur into an explosive rage, in which his physical reaction is far more intimidating than his "stern words":

The king blushed on the berne with his brode eyen,

That full bremly for brethe brent as the gledes,

Cast colours as the king with cruel lates

Looked as a lion and on his lip bites. (116-19)

This response alone causes the Romans to "for radness rusht to the erthe" (120); "[c]ouched as kennetes before the king selven" (122). Arthur then declares that the Senator is a "coward" (133) and that "[w]as never creature to me that carped so large!" (143) There is no question of whether Arthur will pay tribute to Lucius. In counsel with his knights, the king seethes, "I have title to take tribute of Rome" (275).

Arthur's prideful and uncontained reaction in the alliterative poem is far different from his response to the Roman messengers in Malory's text. The Romans in the *Morte* are not young, capable knights but "ancient men, bearing each of them a branch of olive" (149). This fact changes the atmosphere in which Arthur must respond to their demands, though the Romans

deliver essentially the same message as in the alliterative poem, complete with threats of punitive violence: “The high and mighty Emperor Lucius sendeth to the King of Britain greeting, commanding thee to acknowledge him for thy lord....And if thou refuse his demand and commandment, know thou for certain that he shall make strong war against thee, thy realms and lands, and shall chastise thee and thy subjects” (149). Arthur calmly responds by “command[ing] them to withdraw them, and sa[ying] he should take advice of council and give to them an answer” (150). Malory’s Arthur is not the rash young king of the alliterative text, who is eager to prove himself and is overconfident in the “might makes right” doctrine that has served him well so far. Instead, the Arthur of the *Morte* is already conscious of the weaknesses in such a violent approach to peace. He is reluctant to go to war, especially so soon after returning from a major campaign, and explains in the counsel with his knights that “the demand grieveth me sore, for truly I will never pay truage to Rome, wherefore I pray you to counsel me”—as though he is desperate for any alternative to violence (150). Malory’s Arthur’s reaction hints at the ultimate undoing of the Arthurian peace and its principles.

A few words are necessary here to explain the problem Malory is introducing. Arthur’s Round Table is founded on the essential ideals of chivalry, which at its core requires acts of valor, often on behalf of women. Such achievements are easy to accomplish when there is an ongoing war. Knighthood cannot be separated from violence, and so Arthur channels the abilities of his knights into overcoming his enemies and preserving order. The Round Table knights epitomize the idea of “might makes right,” in which violence is considered a legitimate means to achieve the ends of peace and justice. Once Arthur conquers his opposition, however, his knights are still left with the burden of augmenting their “worship,” or knightly reputation. The practical effects of this are twofold: Arthur’s knights are forced to do battle against each other, needlessly causing

bloodshed; and the definition of “right” comes to depend on which side has the stronger knight. At the outset of his war with the Romans, Malory’s Arthur appears to have an inkling of foresight, acknowledging that having to do battle to prove one’s claim (in this case that of sovereignty) places a great many important ethical contests in the hands of brute force.

Lacking the presence of such existential contemplations, the alliterative poem continues to paint its Arthur as blustering and militaristic in its depiction of the king’s battle with a giant who resides upon a mountaintop. On the way to Rome to do battle with Lucius, Arthur and his men encounter a giant who feasts on human beings. A resident of the area beseeches Arthur to fight the monster on behalf of his people, especially now that the giant has kidnapped the beloved Duchess of Brittany. Arthur immediately responds, “I had left my life ere sho had harm limped. / ... / I wolde kaire to that coste and carp with himselven, / To trete with that tyraunt for tresoun of lands” (875-78). On his way to the giant’s cave, when he encounters an old woman weeping over the newly dug grave of the Duchess, he declares himself “one of the hathelest of Arthure knightes” and ignores the woman’s repeated warnings that venturing to fight the giant at all, let alone by himself, is a suicide mission (988). Even the supposed purpose behind the undertaking, the deliverance of his people, fades into the background as Arthur boasts of singlehandedly punishing the giant for his crimes: “I shall merk thee thy meed as thou has much served, / ... / For thou shall die this day through dint of my handes!” (1068-1073) The subsequent descriptions of Arthur’s battle with and victory over the giant are in the tradition of epic poems, which often include lengthy and rhetorically powerful speeches by the hero as well as drawn-out and laudatory depictions of the hero’s achievements. Arthur’s constant push to battle and overcome enemies, then, along with his brash statements, can largely be attributed to

the alliterative *MA*'s being written in the style of an epic poem. There is no doubt as to who the hero of the poem is.

Malory, conversely, takes quite a different tack when describing Arthur's encounter with the giant. It is one of the rare instances in Malory's work where the reader actually sees Arthur engaged in battle. This is because in the *Morte*, the hero is not Arthur, but Lancelot. Upon being told of the giant's recent kidnapping of the Duchess, Malory's Arthur, who is much more prone to reflection, only remarks, "Alas...this is a great mischief, I had liefer than the best realm that I have that I had been a furlong way to-fore him for to have rescued that lady" (156). His reaction indicates sadness and regret for the giant's victims, as well as recognition of his responsibility as a leader to avenge them. His response is free of the declarations of violent intent and predictions of personal accomplishment uttered by Arthur in the alliterative poem. Further, his conversation with the weeping woman on the mountainside does not include the assertion that he is one of the mightiest of Arthur's men, and his reaction to her warnings is resignation rather than bluster. The king quietly prepares for engagement with the giant, wins victory over him in a valiant (and only briefly described) fight, and returns to his knights, asking merely that the giant's head be cut off and displayed as a sign of victory and that a church be built on the mountain (156-8). He tells his knights to distribute the giant's treasure among themselves; "so I have the kirtle and the club I desire no more" (158). When the "people came and thanked the king," Arthur "said again, Give the thanks to God, and depart the goods among you" (158). His actions are defined by benevolence, humility, and compassion. Indeed, when Arthur reaches the giant's cave and sees the bodies of a dozen children, "he had great compassion on them, so that his heart bled for sorrow" (157). This Arthur, rather than becoming angry at the insulting of his pride, feels only sorrow and concern.

Interestingly, however, when Malory describes how Arthur engages with the giant he reveals the bravery and talents of a man whose qualifications as the leader of the Round Table are often cast into doubt. He defeats the giant against nearly overwhelming odds, then “commanded” his knights to “smite off the giant’s head” and retrieve his sword, shield, and other items from the giant’s cave (158). Malory’s Arthur does not often command—he asks, or weeps, or cries, “Alas!” The verbs allocated to Arthur effect his portrayal throughout the *Morte* as a sensitive cuckold, taken advantage of by his most loyal knight and his wife, neither of whom he can bring himself to confront. Malory even adds a line to the old woman’s warnings to Arthur that suggests the impotency of Arthur in retaining his wife: “[B]ut an if thou have brought Arthur’s wife, dame Guenever, he shall be gladder than thou hadst given to him half France” (157). The woman’s statement implies that taking Arthur’s wife from him would be a simple and unresisted task. Yet this scene of the giant’s defeat, in which Arthur acts like the king that he is, does much to accomplish Malory’s portrayal of him as the leader of the Round Table despite his shortcomings. Arthur is capable of the same acts of valor as his knights; though he advances the doctrine of “might makes right,” his unique goodness means that he is also wary of its ramifications for his kingdom and is constantly seeking an alternative to the chivalric system. Malory’s inclusion of this pivotal battle, especially when combined with Arthur’s defeat of Lucius, ensures that the goodness and knightly abilities of Arthur are not lost in the *Morte*’s chronicling of the unraveling of his kingdom.

In the alliterative poem, the depiction of the Arthurian knights’ actions in the course of various engagements with the Roman army reveals the dubiousness of their being set apart as fundamentally different (in honor, morality, and ability) from the Romans. Though the poem seems not to be aware of it, the line between courage and barbarism in the world of the Round

Table is revealed to be very thin indeed. Gawain, the most bombastic of Arthur's knights, declares to Lucius himself,

And the false heretik that Emperour him calles,  
 That occupies in errour the Empire of Rome,  
 .....  
 That ilke cursing that Caim caught for his brother  
 Cleve on thee, cuckewald, with crown there thou lenges,  
 For the unlordliest lede that I on looked ever! (1307-1313)

But the poem does not call attention to the foolhardiness or un-knightly nature of this exclamation, instead expressing surprise that the Romans retaliate. Indeed, Gawain is portrayed not only as a heroic soldier, but also as "the good," as though the bravery of Arthur's "chevalrous knightes" indicates their essential innocence:

Chased through a champain our chevalrous knightes  
 .....  
 Then Sir Gawain the good upon a gray steed  
 He grippes him a grete spere and graithly him hittes;  
 Through the guttes into the gore he girdes him even, (1362-70)

Several pages of gritty battlefield details later, the success of Arthur's knights in this engagement is proclaimed by an unnamed soldier: "Fifty thousand on feld of fers men of armes / Within a furlong of way fey are beleved!" (1537-38) The victory of Gawain and his fellow knights over the pursuing Romans is only one of the poem's many depictions of the openly violent physical superiority of Arthur's knights. Yet when the poem describes the almost identical actions of the Roman army, it condemns them as "unfair" and "traitour":

But Kayous at the in-come was kepted unfair  
 With a coward knight of the kith rich;  
 At the turning that time the traitour him hit  
 In through the felettes and in the flank after  
 That the bustous launce the bewelles entamed,  
 That braste at the brawling and broke in the middes. (2171-76)

The hypocrisy of such characterizations indicates the poem's obvious bias in favor of the Arthurian knights. But upon what grounds are the knights of the Round Table identified as morally superior to their enemies? The ubiquity of descriptions of victory, of both individual knights and the Arthurian force as a whole, is used to undergird the endless declaring of God's favor in bringing about successful ends for the Round Table knights.

The alliterative *MA* repeatedly references the intervening of God into Arthur and his knights' military engagements in a manner that unequivocally suggests that God is on Arthur's side. One such example:

"Christ be thanked," quod the king, "and his clere Moder,  
 That you comforted and helped by craft of Himselven.  
 Skillfully skomfiture He skiftes as Him likes.  
 Is none so skathly may scape ne skew fro His handes;  
 Destainy and doughtiness of deedes of armes,  
 All is deemed and delt at Drightenes will!" (1559-64)

Such claims have two consequences. First, they lead to and support the "might makes right" doctrine, in which the victor of any battle or fight is perceived to be aligned with God, or with "right," because otherwise God would not have allowed him to triumph over his opponent.

Second, they justify the actions of the victor as morally acceptable because condoned by God. Arthur's military successes, as well as the actions of his knights, are thus held up by the poem as the standard of righteousness, however they appear to conflict with traditional or accepted ideals of decency and morality.

Malory's handling of the "might makes right" principle is in this context similar to the poem's and yet much more complex. Without conceding that the doctrine as it frames the chivalric system is sustainable, Malory depicts the Round Table knights as noble despite their condemnable violent actions. This characterization is sounder in the *Morte* because, unlike in the *MA*, where the only deeds by which a reader can judge the Round Table knights are their acts of war, here the violence committed by Arthur's knights coexists with their honorable actions in other parts of the text. Malory omits most of the *MA*'s gory details from the *Morte*, so that what is emphasized is not the knights' bloodthirsty attacks but the fact that the Round Table is responding to Lucius's illegitimate provocation and is seeking worship, not power (in contrast to Rome). At the core of the *Morte* lies the assumption that Arthur and his court are striving to build a different kind of ruling system, one that, rather than seeking dominion and control, channels violence to achieve peace and spurs its knights to accrue honor and repute. Malory writes that "Launcelot fought so nobly" and "his cousins...did that day many noble feats of war," suggesting that striving to obtain honor is in itself noble (162). This is because the knights' feats of arms represent devotion to Arthur and the principles of chivalry. Malory appears to endorse this loyalty above all else: When the great battle is won, Arthur "embraced them knight by knight in his arms, and said, Ye be worthy to wield all your honour and worship" (162). In the *MA*, there is no mention of honor or worship as such, and upon victory Arthur certainly does not kindly embrace his knights as brothers in arms. Malory preserves from the *MA* the Arthurian

knights' essential depiction as "noble," but not regardless of what actions they take—rather, regardless of the mistakes they make. As he does in the case of Arthur's attempt to off Mordred, Malory presents characters in which good and evil coexist, refusing to condemn them simply because they are flawed.

As they do in the *MA*, the Round Table knights of Malory's *Morte* beseech God to bless them with victory and, by so doing, endorse their knightly acts. Gawaine comments to a fellow knight, "[W]ith the help of God we shall overthrow them and have a fair day on them" (169). Not long after, he proclaims, "[T]he best shall have the victory" (170). The idea of divine intervention in knightly affairs is, of course, well established by the time Arthur goes to war with Lucius, but it is worth noting that the idea of God's favor deciding the victor of the Roman war is an idea Malory borrows intact from rather than imposes on the *MA* material—the doctrine of "might makes right" was inherited, not invented, by Malory.

Maybe the most interesting component of this chapter in the *Morte* is Malory's use of the *MA* to begin painting Launcelot as the hero of his tale, despite the poem's evident choice of Arthur as its hero. In the *MA*, Lancelot assumes no special importance; if any knight in the poem is Arthur's greatest, it is his nephew Gawain. Launcelot is just a young, unproven knight before Arthur goes to war with Lucius, but following the battle with the Romans, "of the prowess and manhood of Sir Launcelot were more than wonder to tell" (162). In keeping with his portrayal of Arthur as sensitive and violence-averse, Malory writes that "the king wept, and dried his eyes with a kerchief, and said, Your courage had near-hand destroyed you, for though ye had returned again, ye had lost no worship; for I call it folly, knights to abide when they be overmatched" (162). But Launcelot is adamant that his actions were necessary to preserve his honor: "Nay, said Launcelot...for once shamed may never be recovered" (162). Significantly, even as a young,

untested knight, with no reputation to preserve, Launcelot is unremittingly devoted to the enhancing and preserving of his worship. The threat of “shame” is enough to prompt him to risk his life. Too, Launcelot’s dedication to worship is indicative of his personal commitment to Arthur and to the system and peace the king is attempting to build. The fact that Launcelot places primary importance on his loyalty to the code of chivalry and its corollary of worship will ultimately prove to be his (and the kingdom’s) undoing.

### *Lancelot*

The selection of stories Malory chooses to relay next is only a tiny sampling of the Vulgate Cycle’s excruciatingly detailed account of Lancelot’s adventures, which are documented in the *Lancelot* branch of the cycle. One of Malory’s false insistences that he is following his source occurs at the beginning of the Launcelot section: “[S]o Sir Launcelot increased so marvelously in worship, and in honour, therefore is he the first knight that the French book maketh mention of after King Arthur came from Rome”—this is a little problematic given that the “French book” does not give an account of Arthur’s war in Rome (175). Clearly Malory is invested in setting up Launcelot as Arthur’s foremost knight. After his exploits in Rome, Malory’s Launcelot “thought himself to prove himself in strange adventures” (175). Following is a full book in Malory’s text that documents Launcelot’s travails as he rises to the position of the Round Table’s most renowned knight. The end result, when Launcelot returns to Camelot, is that he is no longer simply one more of Arthur’s knights; instead, “at that time Sir Launcelot had the greatest name of any knight of the world” (208). “[A]ll his deeds were known,” Malory writes, “and most he was honoured of high and low” (208).

Malory’s adaptation of the *Lancelot* must be viewed at more of a macro than micro level, for the importance of the romance to the *Morte* lies not so much in how Malory changes its

events, but in how he picks and chooses from the vast amount of material documenting Lancelot's life to select a few stories that are key to his narrative but that, in the *Lancelot*, assume no special importance. Simply by choosing to depict, for example, Lancelot's deception by Elaine (which results in the birth of Galahad), Malory suggests that the event—notably one of Lancelot's few less than stellar moments—is more significant than many of Lancelot's knightly achievements. Malory also transports some of the *Lancelot* scenes he does use, most of which revolve around Lancelot and Guenevere (such as the infamous “knight of the cart” passage, in which Lancelot demeans himself by riding in a common cart in order to save the queen), to fall after the Grail quest, when the impacts of Lancelot and the queen's affair are thrown into sharper relief.

Though this thesis does not allow for a full examination of every Lancelot-Guenevere moment Malory chooses to adapt, it is true that his most glaring edit of the *Lancelot* is the development of Lancelot and Guenevere's romance. In the *Lancelot*, we learn of Lancelot's initial interactions with the Queen, the conversations reading like nothing so much as a cheap romance novel: “My lady, I do not love myself or any other so much,” Lancelot declares; when Guenevere asks, “And since when do you love me so much?” he replies, “My lady, since the moment I was called a knight and yet was not one” (145).<sup>36</sup> The “love at first sight” ideal is manifested throughout the French texts, and indeed it is part and parcel of chivalric romance. Many pages are devoted, particularly in the *Lancelot*, to the exchanges and plights of various pairs of lovers. During the same conversation between Lancelot and Guenevere, Lancelot explains, “I came before you, when I took my leave of my lord the king...and said that I was

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<sup>36</sup> All footnotes in this section refer to page numbers in Micha, vol. VIII (refer to Works Cited page for further bibliographic information). “Dame, fait il, je n'aim tant ne moi ne autrui. Et tres quant, fait ele, m'amés vous tant? Dame, fait il, des l'eure que je fui apelés chevaliers et si ne l'estoie mie” (110).

your knight in whatever place I might be. And you said that you wanted me to be your knight and your friend....those words could never leave my heart; those were the words that made me a worthy knight” (145).<sup>37</sup> Guenevere affirms that knightly deeds are evidence of sincere love: “[S]he was quite sure his thoughts of love were only for her; otherwise he would never have performed such feats for her” (145).<sup>38</sup> The relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere is, in the French romances, explicitly confirmed as being emotional as well as physical; Lancelot “lay with his beloved, and they had all the joys that lovers can have” (228).<sup>39</sup>

Malory takes a much subtler approach when describing Launcelot’s romance with Guenever. The only direct knowledge he imparts to his reader of their affair in the Launcelot section of the *Morte* is the brief description, “Wherefore Queen Guenever had him in great favour above all other knights, and in certain he loved the queen again above all other ladies and damosels of his life, and for her he did many deeds of arms, and saved her from the fire through his noble chivalry” (175). Malory places the emphasis entirely upon the chivalric component of their love, suggesting that Guenever serves merely as a sort of mascot for Launcelot, inspiring his courtly achievements and with the promise of her admiration spurring him to be a better knight. Elizabeth Edwards, in “The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*,” elaborates,

But, given that Malory had decided to re-tell the story which is the epitome of adulterous love, it is nonetheless true that his narrative seems to proceed with reluctance. Malory shows an ambivalence about the sexuality of his protagonists, evidenced particularly by

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<sup>37</sup> “Dame,...je m’en ving devant vous, quant je prins congié de mon seignor...et dis que j’estoie vostre chevaliers en quelconques lie que je fusse, et vous me desistes que vostres chevalier et vos amis voliés vous que je fusse....ne onques puis del cuer ne me pot issir, ne onques puis puis del cuer ne me pot issir; et ce fu li mos que me fera preudome” (111).

<sup>38</sup> “Ele quidoit bien que il ne pensast d’amors s’a li non, ja mar eust il fait por li se la jornee non des noires armes” (112).

<sup>39</sup> “Jut...dalé s’amie...et orent toutes les joies que amant peuent avoir” (444).

the excision of the kind of language and sentiment considered to be appropriate to 'courtly love' (to use the modern critical term) or *fine amor* (the medieval term). He has deleted a very great deal of the eroticism of his sources. (51)

Malory's refusal to confirm or deny the true nature of Launcelot and Guenever's relationship until the very end of his work is especially odd given the importance placed upon the affair during the Grail quest. Malory repeatedly affirms that the relationship is the sole obstacle that stands between Launcelot and his achievement of the Grail.

One of the *Lancelot's* very few stories that Malory adapts but does not insert at the beginning or end of *Le Morte D'Arthur* is that of Galahad's origins. In his account of Galahad's conception, which he places not long before the introduction of the Grail quest, Malory initiates the inevitable descent of Arthur's kingdom, in which Launcelot nearly single-handedly defeats everything for which he has come to stand. In both the *Lancelot* and the *Morte*, Galahad is conceived when Lancelot is tricked into lying with Elaine, the King of Pelles's daughter, who Lancelot believes is Queen Guinevere. Both texts assert that Elaine is desperate for the union to occur, even if by deception, because she knows the destiny of the child it will produce. The *Lancelot* reads, "[S]he did it no so much for his beauty or from lust or bodily desire, but so as to receive the fruit that would restore that entire land to its original beauty, that land which had been laid waste and destitute by the dolorous blow" (164).<sup>40</sup> Malory's take says, "For well she knew that same night should be gotten upon her Galahad that should prove the best knight of the world" (612). Importantly, "the best knight of the world" is the phrase frequently used to

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<sup>40</sup> All footnotes in this section refer to page numbers in Micha, vol. IV (refer to Works Cited page for further bibliographic information). "Ele ne le fait mie tant por la bjauté de celui ne por luxure ne por eschaufement de char com ele fait por le fruit recevoir dont toz li pais doit venire a sa premiere biauté, qui par le dolereux cop de l'espee as estranges ranges avoit esté desertez et essilliez" (210).

describe Launcelot in the *Morte*. While the Messianic qualities of Galahad do play heavily into the *Morte*, Malory very specifically implies that Galahad will directly replace Launcelot—not simply under the terms of the Grail quest, but under the chivalric system Launcelot has helped build and define. And, Malory notes, this is Launcelot’s own fault, brought about by his passionate love for the queen: “[W]ithouten any let he went to bed; and he weened that maiden Elaine had been Queen Guenever. Wit you well that Sir Launcelot was glad” (611-2). This concept is preserved from the *Lancelot*, which reads, “But he desired her in a very different way, because he did not covet her for her beauty, but believed she was his lady the queen” (164).<sup>41</sup>

In typical fashion, the Vulgate attempts to account for the sinfulness of Lancelot and Elaine’s union. The *Lancelot* argues that “nonetheless the Lord, who is the font of every mercy and who does not judge sinners by their deeds, looked on this coupling in light of its value to the land, for He did not wish it to remain a wasteland forever: So He permitted them to engender and conceive a fruit...whose goodness and tenderness would replenish and console many a land” (164).<sup>42</sup> The text argues that Galahad, by achieving the Grail, will redeem his father from the consequences of his sinfulness. Lancelot is further absolved of some of his responsibility by the narrative’s detailed account of the trickery engaged in by Elaine, her father, and her nurse; he is given a cup of potion, disguised as wine, that ensures that “he did not know where he was or how he had come there; he truly thought he was in the city of Camelot and was talking to a lady who

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<sup>41</sup> “Et cil la desirroitoit tout en autre manniere, car por sa biauté ne la couvoitoit il pas, mail il cuida que ce fust sa dame la roine” (210).

<sup>42</sup> “neporquant li Sires en qui tout pitié abite et qui ne juge mie selon les faiz as pecheors resgarda ceste assamblee selonc le preu a ceus del pais com cil qui ne voloit mie qu’il fussent touz dis en essil. Si lor donna tel fruit engendrer et concevoir...de cui tandrour mainte terre fu replenie et rasouagie” (210).

had been the queen's principal lady-in-waiting" (164).<sup>43</sup> Malory preserves the influence of the doctored wine—even making Brisen not Elaine's tutor but "one of the greatest enchantresses that was at that time in the world living," which further emphasizes the fact that Launcelot is being manipulated by forces outside of his control—but omits the excuse that the union was sanctioned by God (611). The result is rather contradictory, since the latter omission also removes the condemnation of Launcelot as sinful. Malory seems to suggest that *Launcelot*, if he is perhaps not responsible for choosing to sleep with Elaine, is wholly accountable but not damned for acting on his desires for the queen. In the *Morte*, Launcelot will be redeemed not by Galahad, but because of his own deeds.

As though to herald the coming of the new order that begins with Galahad's conception, the Holy Grail appears toward the end of the *Lancelot* prose cycle, which immediately precedes *La Queste del Saint Graal*, the branch of the Vulgate Cycle that documents the Grail quest. The Grail first makes a brief appearance in the story when Lancelot visits its home, the castle of Corbenic. The emergence of the Grail is inextricably bound up with Galahad's conception and birth, for Elaine (and consequently her son) has a unique connection to the Grail legend: King Pellés's line has been entrusted with the keeping of the Grail. While at Pellés's castle in Corbenic Lancelot briefly glimpses the Grail in its daily procession: "[H]e saw coming forth from a room the maiden....He looked at the vessel the maiden was holding in her hands, which was to his mind the most precious that mortal man had ever seen, and was in the shape of a

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<sup>43</sup> "Il ne set ou il est ne comment il vint laienz, ainz cuide vraiment estre en la cité de Kamaalot et li est avis qu'il parole a une dame qui toz dis faisoit compaignie a la roine" (209).

chalice; he thought, and truly believed, that it was a holy and worthy thing” (163).<sup>44</sup> This will be as close as Lancelot ever comes to the Grail: a brief glimpse and the knowledge that it is holy beyond his understanding.

At the very end of the *Lancelot* romance, the Grail’s powers and significance are more clearly revealed. The young knight Perceval, one of the three knights destined to achieve the Grail, has been gravely wounded along with Hector, a fellow knight of the Round Table who has just mistakenly fought with Perceval. The two encounter

a vessel made like a chalice and covered with white samite; it was preceded by two censers and two others followed it, but they could not see who carried them or who was holding the vessel. Nevertheless, the vessel seemed to be a holy thing, and they hoped for so much virtue from it that they bowed down to it, despite all the pain they were suffering. And immediately such a wondrous thing befell them that they felt hale and hearty, recovered from their wounds. Before long the holy vessel vanished so quickly that they did not know what had become of it. (328)<sup>45</sup>

While Perceval is unaware of the chalice’s significance, Hector explains, “[T]he Holy Grail is the vessel in which Our Lord ate the lamb with his disciples, on Easter Day, in the house of Simon the Leper....it has been seen to produce such miracles that by its grace...King Pelles and

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<sup>44</sup> “il vit issir d’une chambre une damoisele....Il resgarde le vessel que la damoisele tenoit entre ses mains qui est li plus riches a son esciant qui onques fust veuz par home mortel et estoit fait en samblant de galice, si li est avis, et bien le croit, que ce soit sainte chose et digne” (205-6).

<sup>45</sup> All footnotes in this section refer to page numbers in Micha, vol. VI (refer to Works Cited page for further bibliographic information). “.I. vessel qui estoit fez en samblance de galice et fu couverz d’un blanc samit, et devant venoient dui ancencier et dui autre les sivoient après, mais il ne voient mie qui les portoit ne qui le veissel soustenoit; et neporquant li vaissiaux samble sainte chose et tant I espoient de bonté qu’il li anclinent par mi toutes les angoisses qu’il sueffrent. Et maintenant lor avint une si bele aventure qu’il se santirent sain ett haitié et gari des plaies qu’il avoient. Et ne demoura gueres que le sains vaissiaux s’en ala si soudainement qu’il ne soient qu’il ert devenuz” (204-5).

all his household are still fed by it every day” (328-9).<sup>46</sup> In a not-so-subtle hint at what is to come, Perceval’s experiencing being healed by the Grail inspires his commitment to the Grail quest: “[B]ecause of the great power and virtue we have experienced, I declare that I will never rest easy until I’ve seen it plainly, if it is given to mortal man to see it” (328).<sup>47</sup>

### *La Queste del Saint Graal*

The Grail is associated with several accounts of healing, a bit ironically since it is said to be the cup used to capture blood from the wounds of the crucified Christ. The Grail, however, was not always conceived of, even in Arthuriana, as such; the French writer Chrétien de Troyes, one of the first authors of the French Arthurian prose romances, depicts simply *a* grail, a chalice inlaid with precious stones (Mann 203). The only reference to religion is the presence of a “consecrated wafer,” and we cannot be sure how or if Chrétien intended to further progress the grail story, as his *Conte del Graal* is incomplete. Several authors who wrote continuations of Chrétien’s *Conte del Graal* added the imagery of a bleeding lance, used to pierce Christ’s side, and gave the Grail its identity as *the* cup used to collect Christ’s blood (Mann 205). Jill Mann details the history of the Grail legend in her chapter in *A Companion to Malory*, explaining,

The *Continuations* of the *Conte del Graal* thus adumbrate a religious history of the Grail, but fail to co-ordinate the bric-bric-à-brac of proliferating imagery into a meaningful whole. It was Robert de Boron’s *Estoire du Graal* which first shaped these scattered elements into a coherent narrative, by identifying the Grail as the vessel used by Christ

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<sup>46</sup> “Li sainz Graax est li vaissiaux ou Nostre Sires menga l’aingnel le jor de Pasques o ses deciples en la meson Symon le liepreux...veu tex miracles que de la grace de lui . . . est li rois Pellés repeuz chacun jor et toute sa mesnie” (205).

<sup>47</sup> “[P]our le grant pooir et por la grant vertu qui a esté esprovee an nos vos di ge que jamés ne serai granment a aise devant que je le voie apertement, s’il et otroié a home mortel qu’il le voie” (206).

and his disciples at the Last Supper, later passing into the hands of Joseph of Arimathea, who collected in it the blood from Christ's body as he prepared it for burial. (206)

This is the story of the Grail that appears in both the Vulgate Cycle and in Malory. Of course, Malory has omitted the entire *Estoire del Saint Graal* from his *Morte*, but what information we are given about the history of the Grail is consistent with the *Estoire*.

The conjunction of the *Lancelot* and the *Queste* at the point of the Grail introduces a key thesis of the rest of the Vulgate Cycle and subsequently of *Le Morte D'Arthur*: Lancelot's position as Arthur's greatest knight, the emblem of the chivalric system, unfortunately sets him up to be the one most affected by the introduction of an entirely new code of morality. *La Queste* begins the presentation of this new system not with religious revelations but with the account of the young boy Galahad's knighting by Lancelot, who is supposedly still unaware of Galahad's identity as his son. Significantly, the interactions between Galahad and Lancelot effect the comparison of two very different types of heroes, a contrast rendered all the more striking because the two are father and son.

Though Galahad is hailed from the beginning of the *Queste* as the knight "destined to put an end to the adventures of the Holy Grail," his introduction as a character involves not his achievement of any spiritual aim but his introduction into knighthood (5).<sup>48</sup> When a young woman presents herself at Arthur's court on the day before Pentecost and asks Lancelot to follow her, promising that he will return by the morning, Lancelot readily agrees and is led to an isolated abbey, where its nuns present the precariously young Galahad to his father for knighting. Galahad is described thusly: "Lancelot looked at the child who was endowed with exceptional beauty. He felt he had never seen anyone so perfectly formed. And the child's innocence made

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<sup>48</sup> "car bien pensant que ce soit cil par cui les merveilles dou Saint Graal doivent faillir" (9).

Lancelot believe that he would accomplish such extraordinary things that Lancelot was pleased to make him a knight” (3).<sup>49</sup> Malory’s version, however, focuses only on Galahad’s physical appearance, leaving out the phrase that attributes Galahad’s potential as a knight to his “innocence”: “Sir Launcelot beheld the young squire and saw him seemly and demure as a dove, with all manner of good features, that he weened of his age never to have seen so fair a man of form” (656). Before agreeing to knight Galahad, Malory’s Launcelot first ensures that the request for knighthood originated from Galahad himself.

Malory’s first portrayal of Galahad is predominantly focused on Galahad’s physical potential and on his desire for the occupation of knighthood, the system of which would evaluate the “young squire” (in contrast to a “child”) by much the same standards as it does Launcelot and his fellow knights. Malory’s Launcelot seems to place great emphasis on Galahad’s will, for as a seasoned knight Launcelot understands the importance of bravery, perseverance, and other such individually held values in determining the success of a knight. He appears to view physical capability and personal will as two necessary halves of the same coin of knighthood, understanding that limitations on either will prohibit a knight from being successful in the kill-or-be-killed world of chivalric engagement. However, Launcelot’s perspective is also irrevocably tainted by his essential “humanness”: He is so far removed from the spiritual world by his sinfulness (which is rooted in his relationship with Guenever) as to be excluded from success in the Grail quest from its beginning. Thus, he either cannot or will not evaluate Galahad’s spiritual attributes or potential.

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<sup>49</sup> All footnotes in this section correspond to page numbers in Pauphilet (see Works Cited page for further bibliographic information). “Il regarde l’enfant, si le voit garni de toutes bjautez si merueilleusement qu’il ne cuide mie qu’il veist onques mes de son eage si bele forme d’ome. Et par la simplece qu’il I voit I espoire il tant de bien qu’il li plect molt qu’il le face chevalier” (2-3).

This picture of Galahad, through the eyes of Lancelot, differs from Lancelot's conception of Galahad in the *Queste*. The original Galahad is not an already trained squire, but a mere child. Lancelot's decision to knight him appears to stem primarily from the boy's appearance, as its "exceptional beauty" and "innocence" conjure the image of an angel. Indeed, Lancelot's judgment that Galahad "would accomplish such extraordinary things"—and his acquiescence to the nuns' request that he knight Galahad—is directly linked to the boy's mere appearance of innocence. Clearly such innocence, to Lancelot, implies much more than physical purity. It is striking that Lancelot, the knight whose accomplishments rest more solely on physical prowess than any other's, takes an aura of mental, physical, and spiritual chastity to connote potential for great chivalric deeds. The original Galahad, then, is not only immediately given the reputation of spiritual perfection, but also embodies the association between knightly prowess and spiritual purity that will come to define the Grail quest in the original *Queste*—a new definition of chivalry that Malory evaluates and appropriates to lead to a somewhat different account of the quest. Moreover, in the *Queste* this connection between the spiritual and the knightly is originally made by Lancelot, the knight who stands to lose the most from its influence; Malory, however, abstains from having the hero of his work (Lancelot) sweep in the system that will lead to his downfall, as if he is reluctant to undermine Lancelot just yet.

The differences between the two works' narrative and dialogue surrounding Lancelot's, Guinevere's, Sir Bors's, and others' recognition (or lack thereof) of Galahad as the son of Lancelot are more convoluted. In the *Queste*, though there is no outward acknowledgement by Lancelot that the knight he has just dubbed, and who soon after proves himself the rightful occupant of the Perilous Seat, is his son, the narrative seems to assume that anyone who sees Galahad recognizes him as Lancelot's heir. As soon as Galahad places himself in the Seat,

“Bors...was even more delighted than the others to realize that this was Galahad, the son of Lancelot, the one destined to bring the adventures to a close” (5).<sup>50</sup> Bors then discusses this issue of heredity with Lionel, his brother, who, though he admits he knows little about the new knight, readily asserts, “He’s the knight you and I have been discussing all day, the one Lancelot fathered with the Rich Fisher King’s daughter” (6).<sup>51</sup> The response to the knowledge that Galahad is Lancelot’s son is largely joyful, even by Guenevere, who goes out of her way to seat herself next to Galahad and engage him in a rigorous conversation regarding his ancestry and origins. She finally exclaims,

For God’s sake...since you don’t want to speak his name, I will. Your father is Sir Lancelot of the Lake, the most handsome, most gracious, and best knight, the one that people want most to see and whom they love above all others. You should not hide this from me or anyone else; you could not have been fathered by a better or more valiant knight. (9)<sup>52</sup>

Guenevere is not only not jealous regarding Galahad’s origins, but lauds the fact that her lover has produced an heir, because in the Vulgate account Lancelot is supposedly not at fault for his tryst with Elaine: “She had heard the story many times of how Lancelot had been tricked into fathering the child. This more than any other event would have provoked her anger toward

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<sup>50</sup> “Boorz...est liez que nus plus et qui bien conoist que ce est Galaad, li filz Lancelot, cil qui doit les aventures mener a chief” (9).

<sup>51</sup> “Et ce est cil don't entre moi et vos avons toute jor parlé, que messier Lancelot engendra en la fille le Riche Roi Pescheor” (9).

<sup>52</sup> “A non Dieu, fet ele, puis que vos nel volez dire, je le vos diari. Cil qui vos engendra a non messires Lancelot del Lac, li plus biax chevaliers et li mielz et li plus gracious, et li plus desirrez a veoir de toutes genz et li mielz amez qui onques nasquist a nos tens. Por qui il me semble que vos nel devez celer ne a moi ne a autre: car de plus preudome ne de meillor chevalier ne poissiez vos estre engendrez” (20).

Lancelot, if he had been at fault” (6).<sup>53</sup> Lancelot, however, is only described as “looking at the knight in wonder...delighted to realize that this was the young man he had dubbed earlier in the day” (5).<sup>54</sup> His subsequent interactions with Galahad are painfully ironic: “He paid the young knight the greatest respect by conversing with him on various subjects and then asked him to say something about himself. The knight, who barely knew Lancelot and did not dare refuse him, answered everything he was asked” (5).<sup>55</sup>

In the *Queste*, there is no open discussion or acknowledgment of Galahad’s ancestry; nevertheless, every member of the Round Table, and, indeed, every person in attendance when Galahad arrives to take his place in the Perilous Seat, recognizes him immediately for who he is: both the son of the “best knight” and “a master and lord who ranked above the knights of the Round Table” (5).<sup>56</sup> There is widespread joyous acceptance not only of Galahad’s arrival and placement in the Perilous Seat, for his coming is one of almost Messianic proportions, but also of his identity as Lancelot’s son. Bors, Lionel, Guenevere, and the other knights and ladies of Arthur’s court seem to feel it is only appropriate that the knight who is destined to achieve the Grail is Lancelot’s son. Lancelot, however, whether he recognizes Galahad’s identity or not (we are supposed to believe that he is not aware of the fact until he is told outright by a religious figure later in the narrative), is shown only as acknowledging Galahad’s potential as the knight who will achieve the Grail quest: an ideal spiritual being who will triumph over all of his fellow knights because of his spiritual purity. Such recognition is consistent with the *Queste*’s emphasis

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<sup>53</sup> This quote has not been translated.

<sup>54</sup> “molt volentiers le resgarδοit por la merveille qu’il en a, conoist que ce est cil qu’il a hui fet chevalier novel” (9).

<sup>55</sup> “Li fet il le greignor honor que il puet, et le met en parole de maintes choses, et li demande de son estre que il l’en die aucune chose. Et cil, qui auques le conoist et ne l’ose refuser, li respond maintes foiz a ce qu’il li demande” (9).

<sup>56</sup> “mestre et a seignor par desuz celz de la Table Reonde” (9).

on the superiority of the religious Grail quest to other, “mortal” adventures and on the ultimate importance of mental and physical chastity.

Malory’s version of Galahad’s introduction to Arthur’s court does not include such explicit widespread recognition that Galahad is Launcelot’s son, but it does shift the focus of Galahad’s introduction from spiritual accomplishment to “worship.” Bors, a relative of Launcelot’s and one of the three knights who achieves the Grail, declares, “Upon pain of my life this young knight shall come unto great worship” (660). Meanwhile, in Malory’s account, Launcelot is said to have “beheld his son and had great joy of him” (660). While Launcelot knows he has sired Galahad by Elaine, the text does not indicate when Launcelot is told the young knight’s name or when he realizes he is his son. We can fairly assume, therefore, that Launcelot recognized Galahad as his son the moment he was brought before him at the abbey the day before. What role this recognition may have played in Launcelot’s decision to dub Galahad, we may only speculate; but based on Malory’s description of Launcelot’s first look at Galahad, the father views the son’s potential primarily in terms of his physical appearance. Certainly this may have something to do with Launcelot’s physical prowess, as it would make sense that Launcelot would believe Galahad to possess the same potential for physical strength, especially since “many said...he resembled much unto Sir Launcelot” (660-1). The spiritual component of Galahad’s assumption of his place in the Siege Perilous is overshadowed, in Malory’s account, by the chivalric component of that accomplishment: At least in the opinion of Arthur’s court, Galahad will achieve the Holy Grail because of his *knighthood*, not because of his spirituality.

Guenever’s response to the knowledge of Galahad’s ancestry, in the *Morte*, is much less enthusiastic than in the original source and more resentful of the fact that Galahad is obviously Launcelot’s son. Guenever appears unwilling to face the physical proof of Launcelot’s betrayal,

and asks that the boy remove his helmet so that she “might see him in the visage,” a request made by Arthur in the *Queste* (663). Upon examining him closely, Guenever, too, quickly comes to the conclusion that he is unavoidably Launcelot’s son, and her response, though similar to her words in the *Queste*, suggests resignation rather than gracious awe: “[H]e is of all parties come of the best knights of the world and of the highest lineage; for Sir Launcelot is come but of the eighth degree from our Lord Jesu Christ...therefore I dare say they be the greatest gentlemen of the world” (664). Malory has added here the specificity of Galahad’s ancestry and the phrase “I dare say,” as though Guenever is struggling to find something positive to say. Malory’s Guenever is more obviously jealous of Galahad because of the betrayal by Launcelot that he represents. When she engages Galahad in conversation, their dialogue plays out much as it does in the original prose, but Guenever’s words dominate the narrative. When asked about his origins, Galahad tells her only what country he is from, at which point she rather impatiently adds, “And son unto Launcelot” (666). Galahad refuses to either confirm or deny, as he does in the *Queste*, but here Guenever’s subsequent short speech declaring the greatness of Launcelot’s line is more bitter than praise-filled. Indeed, Galahad is abashed by Guenever’s tone; he is described as “a little ashamed” and finally concedes that he is, in fact, Launcelot’s son (666). The tone of the conversation is confirmed by the next sentence: “And then they went to rest them” (666), which differs much from the *Queste*’s “The queen and Galahad spoke for a long time, until nightfall” (9).

The extensive discussion in both the *Queste* and the *Morte* over Galahad’s identity as Lancelot’s son surrounds the dilemma that presents itself even before Galahad’s accomplishments: Lancelot, in being Arthur’s greatest knight as well as a sinful individual, has produced his own replacement. Between Galahad’s knighting by Lancelot and his appearance at

court, yet another “sword in the stone” appears, and Arthur and his knights rush to see the “marvelous adventure” (4).<sup>57</sup> The inscription on the sword reads: “NO ONE WILL EVER WITHDRAW ME FROM HERE, EXCEPT THE ONE WHO WILL HANG ME AT HIS SIDE. HE WILL BE THE WORLD’S BEST KNIGHT” (4). Of course, this sword is meant for Galahad, but Arthur immediately tells Lancelot, “Good sir, this sword belongs rightfully to you; I know you are the best knight in the world” (4). Lancelot, “distracted,” replies: “The sword is not mine, and I would not have the courage or audacity to lay a hand on it. I’m not worthy or deserving enough to withdraw it” (4). Malory’s version of this conversation is nearly an exact translation of the French, and Launcelot tells Arthur: “Certes, sir, it is not my sword; also, Sir, wit ye well I have no hardiness to set my hand to it, for it longed not to hang by my side” (658). By means of knighting his son, Lancelot has already confirmed the transfer of the “world’s best knight” title from himself to Galahad. Galahad possesses all of Lancelot’s strengths as well as, above and beyond his father, the characteristics of spiritual and physical chastity, which means that he will emerge as the only knight who is able to truly achieve the Grail. The destructive ramifications for Lancelot’s status as the hero of both texts would seem to be inevitable, and yet Malory uniquely uses the Grail quest as a way to cement and elevate Launcelot’s identity as a real and very human hero.

In many essentials, the *Queste* and the *Morte* present the same account of the quest’s commencement. The long-predicted Grail quest is heralded by Galahad’s arrival at Camelot and begins shortly thereafter, when the Grail itself appears while Arthur’s court is having dinner. The notion of what it means to “achieve” or “see” the Grail is from the beginning ambiguous, as is demonstrated when Gawain proclaims in the *Queste*, “[T]omorrow morning I will undertake the

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<sup>57</sup> The French quotes in this paragraph have not been translated.

Quest, pursuing it for a year and a day and longer if necessary. I will not return to court...until I have seen the Grail more clearly than I did today, assuming that I see it at all. If I cannot, I will come back” (8).<sup>58</sup> In keeping with their commitment to never shirk from an adventure, “The knights of the Round Table...rose to their feet and reiterated Gawain’s vow” (8).<sup>59</sup> In both narratives, Arthur’s response to his knights’ mass departure on a nearly impossible quest is heartbreaking. In the *Morte*,

Anon as King Arthur heard this he was greatly displeasid, for he wist well they might not again-say their avows. Alas, said King Arthur unto Sir Gawaine, ye have nigh slain me with the avow and promise that ye have made; for through you ye have bereft me the fairest fellowship and the truest of knighthood that ever were seen together in any realm of the world; for when they depart from hence I am sure they all shall never meet more in this world, for they shall die many in the quest. And so it forthinketh me a little, for I have loved them as well as my life, wherefore it shall grieve me right sore, the departition of this fellowship: for I have had an old custom to have them in my fellowship. And therewith the tears fell in his eyes. (665)

In a moment reflective of Malory’s Arthur’s actions before and after his war against Rome, the king eloquently acknowledges both the unparalleled uniqueness of the Round Table and its inability to endure. Before they even leave Camelot, Arthur declares that his knights will largely fail to see the Grail. But the king has trained and led his knights too well: When greeted with an adventure, they commit to seeing it through or to dying while trying.

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<sup>58</sup> “le matin sanz plus atendre enterrai en la Queste en tel maniere que je la maintendrai un an et un jor et encore plus se mestiers est; ne ne revendrai a cort por chose qui aviegne devant que je l’aie veu plus apertement qu’il ne m’a ci esté demostrez, s’il puet estre en nule maniere que je lou puisse veoir ne doie. Et s’il ne puet estre, je m’en retournerai” (16).

<sup>59</sup> “Cil de la Table Reonde...si seleverent tuit de lor sieges et firent tout autretel veu commessires Gauvains avoit fet” (16).

Launcelot's love for Guenever is a crucial dimension of Malory's Grail quest, but as the quest begins in the *Morte* the differences between Malory's and the French romances' depictions of the affair become particularly evident, especially as the Round Table knights depart in pursuit of the Grail. In the *Queste*, Guinevere retreats to her room in her sorrow, "so that no one would know how distraught she was," and Lancelot "was so saddened by his lady's extreme distress that he turned toward her room and went in" (10).<sup>60</sup> Their subsequent conversation consists of Guinevere's exclamations of her fears for Lancelot's well-being on the quest and Lancelot's assurance that he will return "with God's help" (10).<sup>61</sup> Guinevere admits that "it must be so" that Lancelot embark on the Grail quest and prays for "the protection of Him who suffered on the holiest Cross" (10).<sup>62</sup> This account is marked by the strikingly "holy" relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere: Each seems to be concerned primarily for the other's well-being.

In Malory's account, conversely, Guenever flees to her room out of "great sorrow," but Launcelot only seeks her because he "missed the queen" (i.e., realized she was gone), not because he becomes aware of her distress (667). Upon seeing him, Guenever exclaims, "O Launcelot, Launcelot, ye have betrayed me and put me to the death, for to leave thus my lord" (667). Clearly Guenever is not only angry that Launcelot is leaving her on another adventure, but is also still hung up on his infidelity. Launcelot seemingly begs her to "be not displeased, for I shall come again as soon as I may with my worship" (667). Launcelot focuses not on achieving the Grail, but on preserving his knightly reputation. Guenever's response, crucially, is not the pious one *La Queste* gives, but a rather hateful and petty "Alas, that ever I saw you" (667).

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<sup>60</sup> "pov ce que len ne s'en aperceust com faitement ele estoit covrociee...s'en torn avers la amber ou il l'avoit veue entrer et entra dedenz" (24)

<sup>61</sup> "se Dieu plest" (24).

<sup>62</sup> "est cinsi que a fere le covient...la garde de Celui qui se lascia traveillier en a saintisme veraie Croiz" (24).

Guenever's distress at Launcelot's leaving, in other words, stems entirely from her own selfish disdain at his departure. She has little concern even for Launcelot's earthly "worship" and seemingly none at all for his chance at spiritual accomplishments. Her final statement that "he who suffered upon the cross for all mankind, he be unto you good conduct and safety" seems to request only Launcelot's safety and loyalty to her, so that he can return to Camelot to continue their love affair (667). Such a prayer contains little consideration for what is best for Launcelot and indicates the selfish nature of Guenever's perception of their relationship.

Launcelot's response to Guenever in Malory's account is the reluctantly reserved reply of a man who knows he has no other choice but to leave, not in spite of but *because* of his relationship with Guenever. In confession to a hermit during the course of the Grail quest, Lancelot admits, "And all my great deeds of arms that I have done, I did for the most part of the queen's sake, and for her sake would I do battle were it right or wrong, and never did I battle all only for God's sake, but for to win worship and to cause me to be the better beloved" (687). In this context, Launcelot's determination to see through his commitment to the Grail quest stems not only from his dedication to Arthur and the code of chivalry, but also from his notion that he must "earn" Guenever's love through knightly adventures and achievements. He thus admits to Guenever that he cannot renege on his commitment to participate in the Grail quest and will not return home without his "worship." Rather than eagerly rejoicing in the spiritual nature of the quest on which he is about to embark, Launcelot reluctantly refrains from engaging in last-minute exclamations of love and resigns himself to his fate, for in his worldview the Grail quest can only have earthly benefits or pitfalls. Though on face his response to Guenever's distress seems insensitive, in fact it reflects Launcelot's deeply held beliefs about loyalty and love as well as his dedication to both Guenever and Arthur. Malory's narrative, even in respect to Launcelot

and Guenever's love affair, highlights the chivalric facet of Launcelot's departure on the Grail quest and largely ignores its spiritual dimensions.

*La Queste* presents a brief history of the Grail not at the introduction of the quest, but in the midst of it, when Galahad, the only knight destined to fully achieve the Grail, obtains the shield first possessed by Joseph of Arimathea. The *Queste* depicts Galahad's acquisition of the shield in a manner that emphasizes his spiritual purity while also complicating the notion of perfection. When Galahad encounters King Bademagu, who states his intention to acquire a certain shield that "no one can wear or carry off without being killed, wounded, or maimed within a day or two," Galahad seems to intuitively know that the shield is destined for his personal use (11).<sup>63</sup> He responds, "[I]f you are unable to carry it off, I'll be the one to use it, since I have no other shield" (11).<sup>64</sup> Bademagu humbly defers to Galahad, saying, "We'll leave it to you then, since we know that you won't fail at the adventure" (11).<sup>65</sup> But almost maliciously, Galahad replies, "I want you to try it first, to see if what they told you was true" (11).<sup>66</sup> How are we to understand what appears to be Galahad's prideful confidence in assuming that an adventure that can be achieved by no one else must be reserved for him? And what are we to make of the fact that he appears nevertheless willing to allow, even encourage, his fellow knights to risk pain and death in order to make sure that he is, in fact, the "chosen one"? For as expected, Bademagu is defeated in combat shortly after taking the shield out of its place in an isolated abbey, and Galahad assumes the shield for himself.

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<sup>63</sup> "nus ne puet pendre a son col, por qu'il l'en voile porter, a qui il ne meschiece tant que el premier jor ou el secont" (27).

<sup>64</sup> "Et se vos ne l'en poez porter, je suiz cil qui l'em porterai: car ausi n'ai je point d'escu" (27).

<sup>65</sup> "Dont le vos lairons nos, car auresi savons nos bien que vos ne faudrez pas a l'aventure" (27).

<sup>66</sup> "Je voil, fet il, que vos I essayez avant por savoir se ce est voirs ou non que len vos a dit" (27).

Shortly thereafter, the history of the shield is recounted, and its violent yet spiritual past is disclosed. The *Queste* explains that the shield was first carried and marked with a red cross by Joseph of Arimathea's son, who gifted it, with its powers of divine protection, to a King Evalach, who faced a powerful enemy in battle. The shield saved Evalach, and once victorious, he followed Joseph and his son and helped spread Christianity across Great Britain. As Joseph's son lay on his deathbed, he marked the shield with his own blood, then prophesied that "no one will hang this shield from his shoulders without regretting it, not even a knight, until Galahad the Good Knight, the last in Nascien's line, wears it" (13).<sup>67</sup>

The shield's union of the chivalric with the religious is a reflection and a natural counterpart to that same unification within Galahad himself. The shield, in one sense, represents the triumph of the spiritual over the violent, for its heavenly powers ensure that no one but the "Good Knight," with "more amazing prowess and virtue than any other," can carry it without being severely wounded (13).<sup>68</sup> But it also symbolizes (perhaps contrary to the intent of the *Queste*'s original author) the difficulty of reconciling a system of faith with that of chivalric knighthood. Galahad is the only knight spiritually pure enough to carry the shield—what does this imply about the sustainability of a system of knighthood that requires such strict moral virtue? Galahad largely emerges in the *Queste* as a prude, for his strict moral code necessitates total confidence in his beliefs and abilities. Thus the exchange between Bademagu and Galahad recounted above is a reflection of Galahad's requisite faith in his identity as the ultimate Grail knight, though it is also an uneasy rejection of the chivalric values of friendship and loyalty to one's knightly brethren. Though the Grail system is portrayed as the superior one throughout the

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<sup>67</sup> "ja mes nel pendra nus a son col, por qu'il soit chevaliers, qu'il ne s'en repente, jusqu'a tant que Galaad, li Bons Chevaliers, li darreins dou lignage Nascien, le pendra a son col" (34).

<sup>68</sup> "plus merueilleuse proece et plus haute vie en lui que en autre chevalier" (34).

*Queste*, aspects of Galahad's character often leave the reader questioning whether the value system of the Grail is really desirable if it requires knights like Galahad. Through Galahad's later adventures in the course of the *Queste*, which often combine mystical quasi-religious elements with feats of arms, the problem of the Grail system's sustainability is further developed and we are brought to question how the violent aspects of knighthood can ever be reconciled with the values of the Grail quest.

Malory, however, picks up on and exploits this paradox far more explicitly in his *Morte D'Arthur*. Though Malory's Galahad appears less intentionally vicious than the original source's—he merely accedes to King Bagdemagus's proposal that “an I may not enchieve the adventure of this shield ye shall take it upon you, for I am sure ye shall not fail”—he nevertheless allows Bagdemagus to be wounded before he takes possession of the shield (668). His willingness to simply go along with Bagdemagus's plan, rather than insist on preventing possible injury by taking hold of the shield immediately, paints Galahad as a character without much agency or will of his own. Malory's Galahad appears unbendingly focused on maintaining his spiritual superiority, and this requires being immune to the needs of those who are more sinful than he. All of Galahad's decisions are made without reference to the outside world or circumstances and have as their sole end the attainment of the Grail. Galahad does not make decisions; because he is Galahad, they are made for him.

When Malory recounts the history of the shield, the portion of the story that predicts Galahad's possession of the shield states, “[N]ever shall man bear this shield...unto the time that Galahad, the good knight, bear it...that shall do many marvelous deeds” (672). Malory removes the “virtue” component of this description of Galahad, emphasizing, as he frequently does throughout his Grail story, knightly prowess over spiritual purity. This complicates Galahad's

right to the shield, for the shield represents a triumph over the knightly system of violence by the religious system associated with the Grail. But Galahad seems to have inherited the trappings of the “good knight”—being knighted by Lancelot, the Siege Perilous, obtaining the sword in the stone—by means of his physical appearance and aura of “innocence” rather than by any kind of action. And in relation to the shield Galahad is only predicted as one who will “do many marvelous deeds.” Malory thus emasculates the power of the spiritual without removing its significance in the *Morte*, signaling his unwillingness to allow Arthurian chivalry to succumb entirely to the Grail system. The Grail code may be the most spiritually pure code of morality, but as Malory points out, it does not do much to encourage doing good to one’s fellow man, as Arthur’s code of chivalry does.

Following Lancelot’s departure on the Grail quest, we are not told much about him in the *Queste* until Galahad meets Lancelot and Perceval and while jousting with them unhorses both. Following this encounter, Lancelot witnesses a sick knight being healed by the Grail. He is unable to truly see or experience the Grail, however: “Whether because he was so overcome with fatigue or because he was weighed down by the sins he had committed, Lancelot did not move or react at all when the Grail appeared. Later he was shamed for this and suffered for it in many ways during the Quest” (21).<sup>69</sup> Either because of physical tiredness or spiritual baggage, Lancelot is too overwhelmed by earthly concerns to comprehend a spiritual event of such significance. The healed knight and his squire discuss Lancelot’s evident apathy toward the Grail miracle immediately afterward, during which the squire asserts that “that knight is living under the weight of a great sin that he has never confessed. He happens to be so impure that Our Lord

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<sup>69</sup> “Parce qu’il ert trop pesanz dou travail que il avoit eu, ou par pechié dont il ert surpris, que il ne se remua por la venue del Saint Graal ne ne fist semblant qu’a riens l’en fust; dont il trova puis en la Queste qui mainte honte l’en dist” (59).

didn't want him to see this extraordinary event," to which the knight responds, "Whoever he might be, he's an unfortunate soul" (21).<sup>70</sup> The *Queste*'s Lancelot is brutally condemned by those who know that he has fallen short of the spiritual ideal.

The clergy who Lancelot encounters take such an inflexible view of his sins. Almost immediately after this Grail healing in the *Queste*, Lancelot regrets his missed opportunity and seeks out a hermitage, where he confesses his sins to a hermit. He laments to himself as he journeys, "My God! My sins and wicked life have become apparent. Now I see how my wretchedness, more than anything else, led me astray. When I had the opportunity to make amends, the devil destroyed me, taking away my sight. He blinded me to anything that came from God" (21).<sup>71</sup> This is the first time that we see Lancelot genuinely and openly repentant regarding his relationship with the queen. Upon confessing to the hermit, Lancelot cries, "All my life I have served God's enemy and fought against God by my sin. I caused my own death by taking the path that appears at first wide and delicious: that's the entry into sin. The devil showed me sweetness and honey without revealing the eternal suffering that awaits those who stay on this path" (22).<sup>72</sup> The "path" is the breaking of his knightly and Christian codes of honor by continuing his affair with the queen. *La Queste* presents Lancelot's options—repentance or hell—as straightforward, ignoring the process of internal conflict that has led Lancelot to this point. Indeed, the hermit is strikingly relentless in condemning Lancelot's actions:

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<sup>70</sup> "Qui que il soit, il est meschaanz" (60).

<sup>71</sup> "Ha! Diez, or i pert mes pechiez et ma mauvese vie. Or voi je bien que ma chetivetez m'a confondu plus que nule autre le. Car quant je me deusse amender, lors me destruit li nis, qui m'a si tolue la veue que je ne pui veoir chose le par Dieu soit" (61-2).

<sup>72</sup> "J'ai servi toute ma vie son anemi et l'ai guerroié par mon pechié. Et si me sui ocis en la voie que len troeve au commencement large et enmielee: ce est li comencement de pechié. Li deables m'a mostree la douçor et le miel; mes il ne me mostra mie la peine pardurable ou cil sera mis qui en cele voie demore" (64-5).

Anyone who surveys the knights on earth will find no one, it seems to me, to whom Our Lord has been so generous. He gave you exceptionally good looks. He gave you intelligence and the ability to discern good from evil. He gave you prowess and courage. On top of that he gave you the good fortune to succeed in every undertaking. Our Lord endowed you with these qualities so that you might be his knight and servant....But you were such a bad and disloyal servant that you abandoned him to serve his enemy and fought consistently with him. (23)<sup>73</sup>

The hermit's portrayal of Lancelot reduces his life down to a single affair with the queen, one that is not, in and of itself, evil but a reflection of chivalric love. But Lancelot, overwhelmed by his guilt, affirms the hermit's evaluation: "All the things you have described are lodged within me....I want to avoid falling into mortal sin again. Therefore, I promise first to God and then to you that I will never return to the life I led for so long" (24).<sup>74</sup> From this point until the end of the quest, Lancelot is in a near-perpetual state of regret and confession, which suggests that he has not taken to heart the hermit's assurance that because of God's "kindness and willingness to receive all men and women who flock to him, he will not refuse you" (22).<sup>75</sup> This in turn suggests that Lancelot has not entirely overcome the internal debate that has resulted in his simultaneous and contradictory loyalties to Arthur and Guenevere. Indeed, some of his final

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<sup>73</sup> "Car qui or regarderoit tre chevaliers terriens, il m'est avis qu'il ne troveroit pas me a qui Nostre Sires donast tant de grace com il t'a esté. Il te dona bjauté a comble; il te dona et sens et disecion de conoistre le bien dou mal; il te dona proece et erdement. Et après ce te dona, il boneur si largement que es adés venuz au desus de quan que tu as comencié. Cutes ces choses te presta Nostre Sires por ce que tu fesses chevaliers et ses serjanz....Et tu en as esté si mauves serjanz et si desloiaux e tu l'en as guerpi et servi son anemi, que toz jorz as terroié contre lui" (68).

<sup>74</sup> "Or toutes les choses que vos m'avez dites sont herbergiees cedenz moi....je me vueil arder de renchaoir en pechié mortel, creant je premierement a Dieu et a vos après que ja mes a la vie que je aissance si longuement ne retournerai" (70).

<sup>75</sup> "Et puis qu'il est si debonaires qu'il est adés prest de recevoir cels et celes qui a lui revienent, sachiez que il ne vos refusera ja" (65).

words to the hermit reveal his inability to discard the occupation for which, even according to the hermit, he was designed: “I cannot promise to abandon my pursuit of knighthood and feats of arms as long as I am healthy and strong” (24).<sup>76</sup> But remaining loyal to the chivalric code means Lancelot’s continued faithfulness to Guenevere as well as to Arthur, leaving Lancelot in the same place he started. Only in the vacuum of the Grail quest can Lancelot retain his spiritual purity; remaining in Camelot requires that he be constantly be torn between two people, neither of which he can reject, and the Grail system fails to account for the complex intersection of Lancelot’s loyalties.

Though Malory largely follows this examination of Launcelot’s inner torment, positing that his affair with the queen is what has prevented him from achieving the Grail, his evaluation of the consequences of Launcelot’s sinfulness is vastly different from the *Queste*’s. In Malory’s account of the Grail healing missed by Launcelot, “[W]hen the holy vessel had been there a great while it went unto the chapel with the chandelier and the light, so that Launcelot wist not where it was become; for he was overtaken with sin that he had no power to rise again the holy vessel; wherefore after that many men said of him shame, but he took repentance after that” (684). The act of repentance is related immediately after, but not before we are given Launcelot’s response to his spiritual exclusion from seeing the Grail: “Sir Launcelot...was passing heavy and wist not what to do, and so departed sore weeping, and cursed the time that he was born. For then he deemed never to have had worship more” (685). As before, Malory emphasizes not Launcelot’s spiritual state but his earthly person. Launcelot himself is concerned not with what the loss of the Grail vision implies for his soul, but for his “worship.” He laments, “My sin and my wickedness have brought me unto great dishonour. For when I sought worldly adventures...I ever enchieved

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<sup>76</sup> “Mes de sivre chevalerie et de fere d’armes ne me porroie je tenir tant come je fusse si sains et si haiteiez come je sui” (71).

them....And now I take upon me the adventures of holy things, and now I see and understand that mine old sin hindereth me and shameth me” (686). The words Malory gives Launcelot in his self-condemnation—“dishonour,” “shame”—are strikingly different from *La Queste*’s, in which Lancelot laments that he has been led astray from God. To Malory’s Launcelot, the consequences of his affair are the destruction of his reputation and worship. He fears not eternal damnation, but “dishonour.”

For Malory, Launcelot’s affair with Guenever is tragic because it threatens the good Launcelot has done as a knight of the Round Table. Launcelot, as Arthur’s right-hand man, has been a vital component in building the chivalric code. If he is forced to choose between Arthur and Guenever and chooses Guenever, rejecting his process of repentance on the Grail quest, the system built around that code will crumble. Lancelot’s reputation as the “world’s best knight” ensures that he is the guarantor of a system in which “might makes right.” If Launcelot’s integrity is found to be wanting, he can no longer serve as the foundation upon which Camelot stands, for he would be a walking contradiction of that thesis.

Despite Malory’s emphasis on worship over spiritual pureness, his Launcelot openly struggles to choose between loyalty to Arthur and loyalty to Guenever, and confesses to the hermit: “I cast me, by the grace of God, never to be so wicked as I have been, but as to follow knighthood and to do feats of arms” (688). But the acts of “follow[ing] knighthood” and “do[ing] feats of arms” are exactly what have led Launcelot to being so “wicked,” or at least what have prevented him from stepping away from his sinfulness previously. While on the quest and barraged with reminders of his sinfulness, Launcelot is unavoidably assaulted by the state of his soul and by the contradiction and guilt inherent in his relationship with the queen. But this is only because he is isolated from the chivalric system of earthly deeds and thrust into one in

which the stakes and criteria for success are entirely different. To make a vow in this second state that is to be fulfilled in the first is a recipe for disaster, as the *Queste* confirms, yet Malory knowingly allows Lancelot to make the choice to confess and repent of his sins. Why?

Malory places great emphasis on Launcelot's humanity. Launcelot emerges as the book's hero because he is not only the ideal knight, but nearly the ideal human too. His glaring flaw is his affair with Guenever. This characterization emerges again and again in the *Morte*: "[Y]e be the best knight of the world....and are yet, of any sinful man of the world" (662). But, notably, Launcelot makes the decision on the quest to turn away from that sin entirely. He is sincere in his repentance, and simply because his cause is futile does not mean that his efforts at pursuing it are meaningless. Instead, in Malory's work, they impart an essential humanity to Lancelot that is even more engendering of empathy than his sinfulness because they are attempts at overcoming his own self. If Lancelot were, like Galahad, to remove himself from human affairs entirely, he would, first, leave the system of chivalry to crumble and, second, cease to be the entirely human hero that he is.

As the *Queste* nears its end, Lancelot and Galahad are reunited in a meeting that symbolizes the incompatibility of the system of the Grail with that of chivalry and yet demonstrates the attempt by Arthur and his Round Table to reach the ideal established by the Grail quest, on the level of the knight and on the level of the system. As Lancelot retires one night, he "implored Our Lord, as best he knew how, not to forget him, but to send the help that his soul and body so urgently needed....Lancelot fell asleep, thinking more about Our Lord than about material things" (77).<sup>77</sup> The depth of Lancelot's striving to overcome his deeply held sin,

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<sup>77</sup> "Quant ce fu chose avenue que la nuiz fu au jor meslee, a Nostre Seignore et fet sa proiere tele come il la savoit, que Nostre Sires ne l'oubliast pas, ainz li envoiast secors tel come il savoit que mestier li estoit a l'ame et au cors" (246).

after being chastised for it so severely throughout the quest, demonstrates the extent of his dedication to live up to the values of the chivalric code, which at this point has been infused with the aims of the Grail. Of course, he is human, but that does not prevent him from fighting against his very human nature. What makes Lancelot's struggle to purify his soul so heartrending is that he is, in effect, working against the system of values he has spent his entire life building. His relationship with Guenevere is the embodiment of chivalric love, and not only has he never violated it, but he has sought fame and worship in order to be more deserving of her affection. Certainly this is the type of love that chivalry encourages, yet because of Lancelot's loyalty to Arthur he must strive against it. And yet neither is Lancelot's (or really any of the Round Table knights') loyalty to Arthur compatible with the Grail values; the system of martial deeds assumes that feats can be "enchieved," while the Grail quest requires that a knight be spiritually perfect, no more and no less. Lancelot can never achieve the Grail—as various hermits have informed him—and yet he, like the other knights, seeks it anyway, "as best he kn[ows] how."

When Lancelot is led to a ship by a divine voice and told he will be joined by Galahad, he obeys eagerly, and when father and son are reunited their meeting is surprisingly emotional: "When Lancelot heard these words, he ran toward Galahad with open arms. The two men began to kiss each other and rejoice more heartily than words can tell" (79).<sup>78</sup> The two remain on the ship for "more than six months, committed wholeheartedly to the service of their Creator" (79).<sup>79</sup> Of course, this sanctuary is short-lived, for it represents a coexistence of sinfulness and sinlessness that cannot endure in a world into which the Grail has been introduced. Galahad is summoned away to fulfill the destiny toward which he has been working through the entirety of

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<sup>78</sup> "Et quant il l'entent, si li cort les braz tenduz et commence li uns a besier l'autre et a fere si grant feste que greignor ne vos porroie conter" (250).

<sup>79</sup> "demi an et plus, en tel maniere qu'il n'i avoit celui qui n'entendist a son Creator server de son cuer" (251).

the quest: “Sir knight, you have spent enough time with your father. Now you must leave the ship, mount this beautiful, white horse, and go where chance may lead you, as you seek and fulfill the adventures of the kingdom” (79).<sup>80</sup> The nature of this call seems rather harsh, as Lancelot is implicitly excluded from the final portion of the journey to the Grail. Yet Galahad, ever self-oriented, responds to the call and actively distances himself from his father. When Launcelot solemnly utters, “My son, since I must leave you now forever, I hope you will implore the Almighty on my behalf not to abandon me, but to keep me in His service as His earthly and spiritual soldier,” Galahad replies, “No prayer will carry as much weight as your own. So think about yourself” (79).<sup>81</sup> This confirms what has been suggested throughout the story thus far: There is no redemption for Lancelot in a world dominated by spiritual ideals, for he has sinned for too long.

Malory’s version of this final reunion between Launcelot and Galahad omits Launcelot’s humble prayers, noting only that “he laid him down and slept, and took the adventure that God would send him” (765). For this Launcelot is ever-focused on the attainment of knightly worship through adventures; he continues to seek the Grail because his nature, position, and idealism require him to do so, but not at the expense of his chivalric duty. Nevertheless, when he reaches the “ship the which was without sail or oar” and which is obviously surrounded by some spiritual aura, he exclaims, “Fair sweet Father, Jesu Christ, I wot not in what joy I am, for this joy passeth all earthly joys that ever I was in” (765). Soon after, when Galahad joins him, “there was great

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<sup>80</sup> “Sire chevaliers, assez avez esté o vostre pere. Issiez de celle nef et montez en cest cheval, qui assez est viax et blans, et alex la ou aventure vos menra, querant les aventures del roiaume...menant a chief” (252).

<sup>81</sup> “Filz, puis qu’il est ainsi que je me depart de toi a toz jorz mes, prie le Haut Mestre por moi, qu’il ne me lest partir de son servise, mes en tel maniere me gart que je soie ses serjanz terriens et esperitiex....Sire, nule priere n’i vaut autant come la vostre. Et por ce vos soviegne de vos” (252).

joy between them, for there is no tongue can tell the joy that they made either of other, and many a friendly word spoken between, as kin would” (766).

Malory explicitly defines Galahad and Launcelot’s relationship during their brief time together as one of father and son, despite the fact that the two had not met until the inception of the quest. Malory seems to imply that the two knights are of such extraordinary character that it is only natural they would relate to each other. Launcelot’s immediate approval of Galahad upon first being asked to knight him, as well as his humble acknowledgment of his son’s superior character during the course of the quest, suggests that the father not only accepts Galahad’s position but also welcomes his identity as his son. Launcelot seems to appreciate that he has produced the one knight who can exceed him by nature of his purity. This is due to Launcelot’s fundamental goodness: Since he spends his entire life striving toward a higher ideal, Galahad’s achievement of the Grail is the next best thing to Launcelot achieving it himself. As Galahad leaves Launcelot to eventually die a saint’s death in the ultimate achievement of the Grail, Galahad himself appears to have been affected by his time with his father, unlike his counterpart in the *Queste*. “Now, son Galahad, said Launcelot, since we shall depart, and never see other, I pray to the High Father to conserve me and you both” (767). Launcelot’s use of the word “son” implies a closeness between the two men that certainly did not exist prior to their six-month sojourn together and that connotes a humanity previously not associated with Galahad. “Sir, said Galahad, no prayer availeth so much as yours” (767).

The import of this final farewell statement of Galahad’s is threefold. First, it establishes that Galahad, on some level, acknowledges the greatness or at least the redemption of his father, as he accepts his goodwill with gratefulness and humility. Second, that the Christlike figure of Galahad goes so far as to state that no person’s prayer could represent more faithfulness than

Launcelot's reveals the authenticity of Launcelot's repentance, which apparently Galahad is aware of as well. At least, it is clear to the reader that Launcelot's determination to turn away from his sin is no surface effort but a deep-seated attempt to rework his innermost being. Finally, the very human connection revealed between father and son, especially because they are being separated so that Galahad can fulfill a system in which Launcelot must have no part, indicates the irreconcilable incompatibility of the Grail system with that of chivalry. If Launcelot—the greatest knight of the chivalric world—and Galahad—the greatest of the spiritual world—who also happen to be father and son, cannot coexist in the human world, then there is no hope for the reconciliation of the chivalric code with the values of the Grail.

The doomed nature of the Grail quest as it is inserted into the code of chivalry, however, does not preempt it from imparting meaning to Malory's larger work. Malory imports the spiritually-centered *La Queste* into the *Morte* in order to elevate his Round Table to pursuit of a higher ideal. He then alters the *Queste* to emphasize the martial component of the Grail quest and the impacts of the Grail's juxtaposition with chivalry. For example, the very resistance of Launcelot against his fallen nature, even though it fails, is significant in what it reveals about Launcelot's character. The clash of the Grail values against the chivalric code, moreover, is vital to understanding why the system of the Round Table is ultimately unsustainable. The tragic downward spiral of Camelot is chronicled in the final chapter of the Vulgate Cycle and of Malory's work, "The Death of Arthur."

### *Le Mort Artu*

Perhaps the most important background information given at the commencement of the French *Le Mort Artu*, which opens immediately after the end of the Grail quest, Malory preserves intact. The French text says that when Lancelot

returned to court, not a month passed before he was as enamored and inflamed as he had ever been before, so that he again lapsed into sin with the queen just as he had done formerly. But whereas he had previously indulged his sinful passion so prudently and so discreetly that no one knew of it, now he behaved so foolishly that it became apparent to Sir Gawain's brother Agravain.... (91)<sup>82</sup>

Malory puts it this way (he is so insistent that his source *forces* him to portray Launcelot's affair!):

Then, as the book saith, Sir Launcelot began to resort unto Queen Guenever again, and forgot the promise and the perfection that he made in the quest. For, as the book saith, had not Sir Launcelot been in his privy thoughts and in his mind so set inwardly to the queen as he was in seeming outward to God, there had no knight passed him in the quest of the Sangreal; but ever his thoughts were privily on the queen, and so they loved together more hotter than they did to-forehand, and had such privy draughts together, that many in the court spake of it.... (785)

Though the French excerpt is shorter, the word "sin" is mentioned twice in its account of Launcelot's backsliding; Malory, however, omits the use of the word, painting Launcelot instead as simply vulnerable to a single shortcoming. Again, Malory is hesitant to put too fine a point on the nature of his hero's flaw or to indict it as an unequivocal sin when chivalric love is approved under the Arthurian system.

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<sup>82</sup> The footnotes in this section correspond to page numbers in Frappier (see Works Cited page for further bibliographic information). "si tost comme il fu venuz a cort, il ne demora pas un mois après que il fu autresi espris et alumez come il avoit onques esté plus nul jor, si qu'il renchei el pechié de la reïne autresi comme il avoit fet autrefoiz. Et se il avoit devant meintenu celui pechié si sagement et si couvertement que nus ne s'en estoit aperceüz, si le meintint après si folement que Agravains...s'en aperçut" (3).

Moreover, in the *Morte*, even as he becomes increasingly reckless in his meetings with the queen,

So befell that Sir Launcelot had many resorts of ladies and damosels that daily resorted unto him, that besought him to be their champion, and in all such matters of right Sir Launcelot applied him daily to do for the pleasure of Our Lord, Jesu Christ. And ever as much as he might he withdrew him from the company and fellowship of Queen Guenever, for to eschew the slander and noise. (785-86)

Malory makes clear that Launcelot is trying his best to please both God and king and abstain from his love for Guenever. He connects Launcelot's holy aims with his earthly pursuits, noting that the feats of arms Launcelot does are in "all such matters of right...for the pleasure of Our Lord." Launcelot is emblematic of the Arthurian court's effort to achieve religious or moral goals through human means, which, however, hopeless it may seem, is perhaps the effort at which humanity has been aiming throughout its existence. The *Mort Artu* provides no such justification of Launcelot, instead condemning his "sin" and leaving it at that—Launcelot is fallen and, in the absence of Galahad, for him there is no redemption.

In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the passage discussing Launcelot's efforts continues into a scene, also original to Malory, that foreshadows what is soon to come. The jealous Guenever confronts Launcelot and is apprised of the reality of their situation. She accuses him of faithlessness, exclaiming, "Sir Launcelot, I see and feel daily that thy love beginnith to slake, for thou hast no joy to be in my presence, but ever thou art out of this court, and quarrels and matters thou hast nowadays for ladies and gentlewomen more than ever thou wert wont to have aforehand" (786). Though Guenever's accusations are petty and desperate, Launcelot responds truthfully:

[T]here be many men speak of our love in this court...wit ye well I dread them more for your sake than for any fear I have of them myself, for I may happen to escape and rid myself in a great need, where ye must abide all that will be said unto you. And then if that ye fall in any distress through willful folly, then is there none other remedy or help but by me and my blood...that were me loath to see you dishonoured. (786)

Indeed, Launcelot's premonitions are exactly accurate, and to protect the queen from dishonor Launcelot and his relatives are forced to band together against Arthur's clan in a war that wreaks havoc on Camelot.

Another scene invented by Malory (yet repeatedly attributed to the French book), presented before the affair comes to light, is a kind of final justification of Launcelot that seems to be placed where it is to remind the reader of Launcelot's nature even as the kingdom falls down around him. Arthur asks Launcelot to heal the wounds of Sir Urre, an act that all other knights have tried and failed to perform because "he should never be whole until the best knight of the world had searched his wounds" (856). Lancelot, having just returned from endless chastisement and condemnation on the Grail quest, must be nearly forced to attempt the deed and as he does says "secretly unto himself": "Thou blessed Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I beseech thee of thy mercy, that my simple worship and honesty be saved, and thou blessed Trinity, thou mayst give power to heal this sick knight by thy great virtue and grace of thee, but, Good Lord, never of myself" (863). Even as he recognizes his own fallibility, Lancelot's only concern is that his honor be preserved. Yet he admits that his earthly prowess has no bearing in the world of the divine. When he successfully heals Sir Urre, "ever Sir Launcelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten," overwhelmingly grateful that his honor has remained untouched (863). This is not honor only in the sense of worship or renown, but also in relation to the word Lancelot

himself utters: “honesty.” Despite Launcelot’s inability to meet the standards of the Grail quest, Malory presents him as worthy *even under the influence of that system* because of his loyalty (he only attempts to heal Sir Urre because of Arthur’s “commandment”), humility, and “honest” efforts at perfection. The divine act of healing Sir Urre serves to redeem Launcelot, once again returning him to the position of the “best knight of the world” under the terms of both the Arthurian system and the Grail code, which in the absence of the Grail and Galahad calls all flawed and fallen individuals to seek, rather than achieve, its standards. In this post-Grail world, Launcelot is undoubtedly the “best knight,” representing the best that humanity has to offer and receiving the approval of God.

But Launcelot’s sinfulness is unavoidable, and following this scene Malory returns to the consequences of his hero’s failing, altering several specific details of the *Mort Artu* in a way that demonstrates the extent to which the kingdom is being splintered from within. In the *Mort Artu*, at first only Agravain, who is Arthur’s nephew, plots to catch Lancelot with the queen. In the *Morte*, however, the so-called Orkney clan (consisting of Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, Gareth, and Mordred) is divided in half, with Gawaine, Gaheris, and Gareth pleading with Agravaine and Mordred to remember the good Launcelot has done for their family. Gawaine urges, “Also, brother Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred, in like wise Sir Launcelot rescued you both...from Sir Turquin. Methinketh brother, such kind deeds and kindness should be remembered” (866). Gawaine’s comments reveal the thin line between brother and friend that has been created by the fellowship of the Round Table and suggest that loyalty to one’s fellow knights outweighs even the presence of adultery. Malory’s invention of this conversation places family and loyalty at the forefront of the Launcelot-Guenever controversy, forcing even Arthur’s closest relatives to choose between Arthur and Launcelot. Gawaine, Gaheris and Gareth cannot imagine betraying

Launcelot for the one sinful thing he has done, in light of all the good he has accomplished.

Gareth pluckily adds, “Sir Launcelot made me knight, by no manner owe I to say ill of him,” and as he departs with Gawaine and Gaheris, he laments, “Alas...now is this realm wholly mischieved, and the noble fellowship of the Round Table shall be disparpled” (866).

In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Arthur's own personal loyalty to Launcelot is revealed in the course of his conversation with Agravaine. This is another instance where Malory claims that “the French book saith” something it does not. In the *Mort Artu*, the king's reluctance to attempt to catch Lancelot “in the act” stems from his complete disbelief at Agravain's accusation. When Agravain tells Arthur, “Sir, Lancelot loves the queen sinfully, and she him,” Arthur, “hearing these words, could not believe they were true. He thought they were a lie” (92).<sup>83</sup> In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Agravain's speech to Arthur is much more spiteful and invokes the king's honor: “[W]e be your sister's sons, and we may suffer it no longer, and all we wot that ye should be above Sir Launcelot; and ye are the king that made him knight, and therefore we will prove it, that he is a traitor to your person” (867). Malory falsely invokes the French book to argue, quite strikingly, that despite such accusations “the king was full loath thereto, that any noise should be upon Sir Launcelot and the queen; for the king had a deeming, but he would not hear of it, for Sir Launcelot had done so much for him and the queen so many times, that wit ye well the king loved him passingly well” (867). Perhaps Malory was reluctant to place the king in such a difficult moral position without attributing it to his source, for Arthur's desire to simply look the other way when it comes to Launcelot's affair with the queen ignores not only the values of chivalry and the Grail but also the very personal nature of Launcelot's betrayal. As Agravaine

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<sup>83</sup> “Sire, il est ainsi que Lancelos ainme la reine de fole amour et la reine lui...Li rois Artus qui entent ceste parole ne puet pas cuidier que ce sit vois, einz croit veraiemnt qu ce soit mençonge” (5).

notes, “he is a traitor to your person.” Launcelot has betrayed his vows of knighthood and his religious repentance, but more importantly, he has betrayed his friend and king. Yet despite this, Arthur’s loyalty to Launcelot is such that he does not want to prosecute him.

But the chain of events has already been set in motion, and reluctantly Arthur agrees to allow Agravaine and Mordred to trap Launcelot. In the *Mort Artu*, Arthur does not agree to take part in the scheme, but only to not stop Agravain: “Do what you will...for I won’t prevent it” (92),<sup>84</sup> and Malory preserves this neutrality. In a scene Malory omits, however, the Vulgate Arthur independently discovers the story of Lancelot and Guenevere’s affair, and in a complete change of heart he declares, “I’ll take steps...to ensure that, if they love each other sinfully, as you tell me, they’re found together before the month has passed” (107).<sup>85</sup> The Vulgate Arthur sees morality as much more black and white than gray, while Malory very clearly paints a picture of a leader whose moral sensibilities have been trumped by a battle of divided internal loyalties. In the *Morte*, while still attempting to remain discreet, Malory once again mounts an appeal to “the French book” to state what readers have known all along: “And then, as the French book saith, the queen and Launcelot were together. And whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list not hereof make no mention, for love that time was not as is now-a-days” (869). In actuality, the *Mort Artu* reads clearly: “He undressed and went to bed with the queen” (121).<sup>86</sup> In the *Morte*, “thus as they were together” they are caught, and when Launcelot is forced to face the ambush of knights lying in wait for him he leaves Guenever with a few weighty last words that do not appear in the French text: “Well, madam...sith it is so that the day is come that our love must depart, wit you well I shall sell my life as dear as I may; and a

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<sup>84</sup> “Fetes en, fet li rois, ce que vos voudroiz; que ja par moin’en seroiz destournez” (5).

<sup>85</sup> “Je en ferai tant...que se li uns ainme l’autre de fole amor, si com vos me dites, que ge les ferai prendre ensemble ains que cis mois soit passez (65).

<sup>86</sup> “Si se dechauca et despoilla et se couch avec la reine (115).

thousandfold...I am more heavier for you than for myself" (870). Guenever faces public shame and humiliation, while Launcelot can die a valiant death in self-defense. Even to the death, Launcelot focuses on the preservation of his and Guenever's honor, unable to reject the values of a system he has spent his life defending.

Once King Arthur is offered proof of his wife's misdeeds with Lancelot, his response differs vastly between the *Morte* and the *Mort Artu*. When Malory's Arthur receives the news that Launcelot has been caught with the queen, he mourns, "Alas, me sore repenteth...that ever Sir Launcelot should be against me. Now I am sure the noble fellowship of the Round Table is broken for ever, for with him will many a noble knight hold; and now it is fallen so, said the king, that I may not with my worship, but the queen must suffer the death" (877). This reflection is extremely different from the automatic response of the Vulgate Arthur, who mercilessly tells his men, "I want her to be severely punished for her crime....she won't escape with her life" (122).<sup>87</sup> The Arthur of the Vulgate Cycle is not given moral options, but proceeds recklessly toward Lancelot's destruction, seemingly unaware that he is also hurtling toward his own: The degeneration of either Arthur's or Lancelot's honor stands to destroy the kingdom both have built.

The final act of Camelot is, at this point, inevitable. In both narratives, Lancelot, who has emerged from the Agravaine-led ambush with his life, comes to the queen's rescue on the day she is to be burned at the stake. In the kerfuffle created by his appearance, Launcelot kills Agravaine, Gareth, and Gaheris (Malory makes clear that the deaths of Gareth and Gaheris are both accidents, as Launcelot "saw them not" [881]), and Gawaine, Mordred, and Arthur have no

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<sup>87</sup> "Je bé...que por ce mesfet qu'ele a fet l'en en face grant justice...sansz mort n'en puet ele eschaper" (120).

choice but to avenge their kinsmen. Launcelot is then forced to rally his “clan,” particularly Bors and Lionel, and retreat to his castle until Arthur follows him, justifiably seeking war. While the French Lancelot does save King Arthur’s life during battle, the *Morte*’s Launcelot goes even farther: After he unhorses Arthur, Launcelot “alighted off his horse and took up the king and horsed him again, and said thus: My lord Arthur, for God’s love stint this strife, for ye get here no worship...remember what I have done in many places, and now I am evil rewarded” (891). While the Arthur of the *Mort Artu* remains adamant that Launcelot will suffer for his deeds, Malory’s Arthur, after Launcelot rehorses him, “looked upon Sir Launcelot...the tears brast out of his eye, thinking on the great courtesy that was in Sir Launcelot more than in any other man; and therewith the king rode his way, and might no longer behold him, and said: Alas, that ever this war began” (890). This exchange tremendously heightens the tragedy already inherent in the narratives’ closings, in which, after a series of battles, King Arthur and Mordred have died at each other’s hands, nearly every member of the Round Table has perished, the kingdom lies in ruin, and Lancelot and Guinevere both retreat to holy houses to die uneventful deaths.

Malory takes the events of the *Mort Artu* and imbues them with the moral and ethical dilemmas he has spent his text developing, so that the unraveling of Camelot is both tragically inevitable and yet distinctly dependent on the moral shortcomings of its central characters. To the end of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, King Arthur resists prosecuting Launcelot, aware that the chivalric system both requires it and will be destroyed by Launcelot’s punishment. Arthur repeatedly offers regret that it is only because of his “worship” that he must pursue the righteous course of action, at the same time acknowledging that the fellowship of the Round Table will be permanently dissolved when he forces his knights to choose sides between himself and Launcelot.

## Conclusions

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* has been extensively preserved over six centuries and continues to hold a dominant position in contemporary Western culture. As noted earlier, the *Morte* gave rise to Disney's animated film *The Sword in the Stone* and to T. H. White's classic *The Once and Future King*, considered one of the great fantasy books. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's cycle of poems, *Idylls of the King*, was modeled on the *Morte*. Even John Steinbeck, who wrote that his "sense of right and wrong" came from the *Morte*, got into the Arthurian adaptation game, basing *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* on one of Malory's manuscripts. John F. Kennedy's presidency was and is referred to as Camelot, an association that originated with the President's love of the Broadway musical of the same title. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* remains a cult favorite. The movie's musical heir, *Spamalot*, received multiple Tony Awards. Most recently, the BBC produced a show, loosely based on the legend, entitled *Merlin*. There are many more examples—the Lady of the Lake even makes an appearance in DC comics—and the truth remains that King Arthur is simply not going away. And that is due in large part to the work of Sir Thomas Malory, who crafted a version of the Arthur legend that has endured because it speaks to the Galahad and the Lancelot in each of us.

Both *Le Morte D'Arthur* and the Vulgate romances assume that there is some higher law or standard by which all strive to abide. Every system of ethics is an attempt to organize human nature such that we all meet the standards of that law. Even the most general, watered-down conception of human nature admits that one man harming another is an action to be largely restricted, while seeking to better the lives of one's fellow men is a goal to be pursued. But we are flawed by nature of being human. Humanity tries and fails to "do good" on its own, and thus it must be subjugated to a code of rules and requirements that frame and restrain impure impulses.

Both the Arthurian code and the values of the Grail quest are efforts to construct a system that keeps human natures in accord with each other. Ultimately, of course, both fail, but that does not necessarily indict the individuals who trigger those downfalls as much as the general inability of human nature to be successfully guided by an external system.

Camelot epitomizes the utopian society every generation seeks. Rules for determining right and wrong are clear and absolute, and the ultimate aim of the system—achieving honor—requires that the entire focus of one's life be dedicated to noble and valiant actions. The Arthurian code of chivalry appears to remove unworthy motivations and result in a society guided by the desire to do good. Those who reject the code are defeated by their very unworthiness, for they cannot successfully compete within the system of physical determination of truth to defend their motivations. They cannot manipulate the system to use it against those within. At first glance it appears that the Arthurian system is incapable of corruption, but there is one way to subvert it, and that is via a physically unbeatable person such as Lancelot. Lancelot's violation of the ethics of the chivalric code, because it must be proved in combat, does not exist in the world of the Round Table—and yet it is a treasonous violation of that code. Because of this fatal flaw, the system must ultimately unravel, and with it Lancelot's position as Arthur's most honorable knight and right-hand man.

In the *Morte*, the destruction of the Round Table by the Grail quest itself leads to the final conflict between Launcelot and Arthur, for as the fellowship crumbles so do the ties that bind the knights together. Agravaine and Mordred, no longer beholden to Launcelot by means of a united Round Table and steeped in the judgments of the Grail, bring the affair between Launcelot and Guenever to light. In a manner consistent with his moral choices throughout the *Morte*, Launcelot chooses to protect the woman to whom he has made a lifelong commitment under the

system of chivalry. But the conflict between Lancelot's internal and external moralities has been revealed, and thus there is no longer a system to protect him. He desperately attempts to preserve the values of chivalry, but is stopped by the reality of his situation: He cannot choose between his liege lord and his lover and remain the guarantor of the Arthurian system. The utopia cannot stand, for it does not resolve the conflicts inherent in human nature. It does not plan for conflicting loyalties.

The Grail system does, of course, by condemning them entirely. It requires allegiance to God alone. In the *Morte*, upon Arthur's death and that of his system of knighthood, Launcelot and Guenever both commence lives as religious servants, "serv[ing] God day and night with prayers and fastings" (931). Isolated from the world in their respective chapel and convent, the lovers are independent of the bonds that tie them to liege lord, lover, friend, kinsman, and fellow of the Round Table. Even that existence, however, is chosen by both as a consequence of their relationship. Launcelot declares, "I shall never be so false to you of that I have promised; but the same destiny that ye have taken you to, I will take me unto, for to please Jesu, and ever for you I cast me specially to pray" (930). Launcelot's life is outwardly devoted to God, but inwardly he remains the servant of Guenever. Launcelot and Guenever spend their lives devoted to each other yet are prevented from lawfully living as lovers by and through a succession of ethics systems. Malory allows his characters, especially Launcelot, to finish out their existences the way he does not because the religious framework solves the problems of human nature but rather because it is the best of several bad options. Officially bound to God rather than man, Launcelot and Guenever at least cannot allow their relationship to harm others.

More specifically, though, and more importantly, Malory imposes the Grail code upon the chivalric system to elevate the noble earthly pursuits of Arthur's knights to the level of the

divine. Though the quest is doomed from the beginning—which is due to its requirements and is not the fault of the participants—the legacy of the Grail code is human striving for the divine. After returning from the Grail quest, Launcelot thus takes up “quarrels and matters...for ladies and gentlewomen” in an attempt to grow closer to God. Especially in the healing of Sir Urre, Malory recognizes the purity of Launcelot’s efforts and preserves his position as the “best knight” under the Arthurian system, which has been fused with the aims of the Grail. Certainly the two codes of values are irreconcilable, which is why the Grail code’s requirement for purity helps to ensure the demise of the Round Table and of chivalry. And scholars have argued that Malory’s inclusion of the Grail quest, because it leads to Camelot’s downfall, undermines the Round Table in a way that cuts short the instructive potential of Malory’s work. But unlike his French sources, Malory promotes the messy juxtaposition of the Grail with the Round Table, refusing to condemn Launcelot simply because he is not Galahad. Instead, Malory clearly intends to impress upon his readers the nobility of Launcelot’s dedication, first to the chivalric system and then to the Grail code. Launcelot ultimately aligns his aims with the fusion of those frameworks, which seeks to transform the flawed earthly individual to a heavenly one. Though his (and the chivalric system’s) efforts are doomed to fail, Launcelot emerges as even more of a hero because of the futility of his cause, which is to achieve the Grail (or the Grail standard of morality) despite his human flaws.

Ultimately, the *Morte* is an exercise in the endless tensions between competing systems of ethics and morals and between human desires for greatness and the unavoidable fallenness of humanity. In contrast to his sources, Malory emphasizes rather than avoids the conflicting demands of values and loyalties with which we all deal. He forces his readers to grapple with the problem of good people doing bad things, arguing that it is not one or two single actions that

define a person, but the arc of his or her life. If there is anything Malory endorses, it is loyalty and sincere commitment to that which is greater than oneself. Arthur, Launcelot, and the rest of the Round Table knights pursue chivalric aims, and then the Grail quest, for the betterment of themselves and of others. That striving for perfection, even—perhaps especially—when one knows it cannot be obtained, speaks to a desire in each of us.

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