



THE STRUGGLE FOR PERFECTION:  
LANCELOT, MALORY'S NOBLE SINNER

by

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## DEDICATION

With my love, to my mother and father, without whose support I could never have begun this thesis, and to my husband Donald, without whom I certainly would never have finished it.

## ABSTRACT

Of the three "beste" knights in the *Morte Darthur*--Balin, Galahad, and Lancelot--it is the knight Lancelot who possesses the combination of qualities that seemed to Malory to constitute the most complete expression of nobility in chivalric man, and it is through Lancelot that we can trace Malory's journey towards the full expression of the nature of that nobility.

Malory's definition of nobility, expressed primarily in terms of knighthood, alters as his story moves through the various stages of the Arthurian world: the pre-Pentecostal Oath, Pentecostal Oath, transitional, Grail, and post-Grail periods. Lancelot at first embodies the chivalric ideal suggested by the Pentecostal Oath, combining courage and strength with gentleness and courtesy, and an attractiveness which is all his own.

In Malory's final books Lancelot, his character enhanced by his comprehension of his Grail experiences, takes on a new dimension as representative of both the greatness and the limitations of humankind.

Malory was, without doubt, a Christian. Yet Malory's faith is characterized by a deeply felt recognition of the spiritual nature of the bonds between men, and it is always the concerns of humankind which occupy the foreground of his stories. Malory does not present a way of life in which earthly chivalry is seen as

complementary to heavenly chivalry. Instead, in Malory's chivalric man the spiritual and the secular coalesce on earth. The reverence accorded Malory's greatest knight, Sir Lancelot, is not a result of his perfections as a Christian but of his struggles and attainments as a noble, yet necessarily flawed, human being.

Malory's concern with human relationships creates a deep connection of feeling between the romances which make up *Le Morte Darthur* in a way that makes inconsistencies irrelevant. It is tempting to see in Malory's work an incipient humanism, a reflection of the trend towards the celebration of the sacrosanct worth of man that was to burst into full flower in England during the Renaissance.

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## INTRODUCTION

As A.E. Guy reminds us, there are three 'beste' knights in *The Morte Darthur*: Balin, Galahad, and Lancelot (86). Both Balin and Galahad are established as best knight by the objective test of a sword. Balin's qualities as a knight earn him a sword that has been cursed by the Lady of Avalon and that subsequently involves him in what Guy calls "a career of unrelieved misery" (88). Corpses accumulate as the well-intentioned Balin is forced to fight and kill a fellow knight and is unable to prevent a lady's suicide or to protect two knights under his safe-conduct. He is also the indirect cause of the death of two more people, and at last kills his own brother. Later, in the hands of Galahad, Balin's sword becomes an instrument of salvation. Galahad undoes the harm unwittingly wrought by Balin, healing the Maimed King and thus presumably bringing life back to the three kingdoms laid waste by Balin's dolorous stroke. Guided by God, he achieves the Grail and beatification. In Balin, a pagan figure characterized by clan-interest and a blind confidence in the power of his own will, and Galahad, pure and submissive to the will of God, the ultimate Christian knight, we are presented with the two extremes of chivalric perfection in Malory. Neither Balin nor Galahad survives for long after his first appearance in Malory's history. Balin is killed in a disastrous battle with his much-loved brother, and Galahad at his request is taken by "a grete multitude of angels" (*Works* 1035) to heaven not more than a year after his coronation at Sarra. Lancelot, on the other hand, requires no test, magical or

miraculous, to confirm him as best knight in the pre-Grail world between the death of Balin and the birth of Galahad. The most enduring of the three, Lancelot establishes his own reputation by dint of numerous acts of prowess and nobility, and it is not until after his return from the Grail quest that any overt supernatural confirmation of his stature is required. It is, I believe, to Lancelot that we must turn to find the combination of qualities which seemed to Malory to constitute the most complete expression of earthly knighthood, and it is through Lancelot that we can trace Malory's journey towards this final definition.

In this thesis I intend to examine, through the character of Lancelot, how Malory's definition of chivalric nobility alters as his story moves through the various stages of Arthurian history. Lancelot appears in the first of these stages--which I shall call the pre-Pentecostal Oath period--as a young knight filled with the energetic loyalty and battle wisdom so necessary to Arthur as he struggles to establish an ordered kingdom from the chaos consequent upon Uther's death. This is the period in which the supernatural plays a large part in the affairs of men, yet it is also the time when Malory makes the dangers and values of the human bonds of love and loyalty clear. Balin epitomizes the primitive standards of chivalry of his time. A great knight, in fact, according to the test of the sword, the greatest knight at Arthur's court, he is nonetheless bound by a narrow set of loyalties which demand that he slay an unarmed woman (though an enchantress, the lady is

unprepared for his attack and defenceless against it) to avenge his mother's death. Loyalty to his kin outweighs any considerations of mercy or even of loyalty to his king. Although there is no logical connection between Balin's murder of the Lady of the Lake and the disasters which befall him later, the violence of this action is unavoidably linked with the increasing violence which surrounds him to the time of his death and even beyond to the bed of insanity erected by Merlin in his memory. Balin's is the kind of loyalty that divides a kingdom. Yet the love between Balin and his brother compels our admiration and provides the only consolation in an otherwise dark and hopeless tale. Human emotions, then, are presented as a powerful force both consolatory and destructive. Merlin, who repeatedly protects and guides the young Arthur on the battlefield, is unable to protect him from the consequences of his passion for his own sister and, for all his prescience, himself falls victim to an infatuation which costs him his life.

The second Arthurian period is that of the Pentecostal Oath, which demands an allegiance that supersedes blood ties yet retains much of the loyalty and love which were their strength. Arthur, in establishing the Oath, creates a group of knights loyal to each other and to a set of ideals which promote the welfare of a kingdom. New demands are made upon knights. Now not only must they be strong and courageous fighters, but they must also show mercy to and compassion for the weak and defenceless. In this period Lancelot embodies the chivalric ideal suggested by the

Pentecostal Oath, combining the old requirements of courage and strength with gentleness and courtesy, and an attractiveness which is all his own.

In *The Book of Tristram* Malory depicts a time of transition for chivalry. Knighthood, deprived of its *raison d'être* by the peace Arthur has established, begins to degenerate into a courtly pastime. Knights, their energies no longer absorbed by the demands of war, turn to courtly intrigue, and the chivalric ideals of the Pentecostal Oath prove inadequate in the face of an increasing onslaught by the passions which are an unavoidable part of being human. Lancelot mirrors the degeneration of knighthood, as he forgets the conditions of the Oath in petty squabbles, and ultimately loses his very identity in the oblivion of insanity. In this book Galahad is conceived, under conditions which link his conception both to the enchanted pre-Grail world of Merlin and the miraculous world of the Grail, the next period in Malory. For, to retrieve chivalry from the morass into which it has idly wandered, Malory has his knights set out on the Grail Quest, during which they are presented with a new set of values not addressed by the Pentecostal Oath. Here Malory, in defiance of his source, exalts Lancelot, endowing him with a spiritual dimension and re-establishing him as a great knight. In doing this, Malory makes a choice between the orthodox Christianity of the French *Queste del Saint Graal*, in which Galahad represents the chivalric ideal, and a more liberal definition of knighthood which allows Malory to

glorify Lancelot while admitting his human frailty. Lancelot's sojourn in the Grail world allows Malory to expand upon the definition of chivalry suggested by the Pentecostal Oath and to present in Lancelot a picture of chivalric greatness that is both human--because it allows for fallibility and even for what is seen as sinfulness in Christian terms--and spiritual--because Lancelot's affections and endeavours have been sanctified during his Grail quest.

In the Post-Grail period covered by the last two books of *Le Morte* Lancelot returns to Camelot, re-entering the world of passion and intrigue. Here the demands of love and loyalty are complicated by Lancelot's devotion to Guinevere, yet he retains his stature as a great knight because Malory focuses the reader's attention on Lancelot's unswerving fidelity to Guinevere. Lancelot is set apart from his fellow knights by a spiritual aspect which is the result of his Grail experience, and which is most apparent in the tale of *The Healing of Sir Urry*. In Lancelot the human and the spiritual are ultimately intermingled as he dies beatified but, to the last, the loyal lover of Queen Guinevere.

Knighthood in fifteenth-century England had changed considerably from the time of its emergence in ninth-century France. Early knights were far from noble, so crude, violent and uncontrollable that, in self-defence, the Church, originally unconnected with training for knighthood, sought to contain the knight's behaviour with the Peace and the Truce of God, in consequence of which

knights were required to defend the Church and its properties, and to protect the local citizenry. Ultimately the Church, recognizing the usefulness of the knights, set aside its pacifist theories and enlisted knights as warriors of Christ, paid by the promise of remission of their sins. In this guise knights took part in the Crusades of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, and the great religious orders of Temple, Hospital, and Teutonic Knights came into being.

From then until the decline of chivalry as a result of the political and military changes of the fifteenth century, religion played, in theory at least, a significant role in the duties of a knight as protector of the Church.

In the earlier years of chivalry the girding on of the sword, traditionally performed by the knight's sponsor, was of considerable importance as part of the ceremony of initiation into knighthood (Gies, *The Knight in History* 86). By the mid-fifteenth century, however, in indication of the knight's dwindling role on the battlefield, the whole ceremony had lost its significance, becoming "more honorific than substantive" (Gies 196). The Hundred Years War had brought into prominence what Gies refers to as "the fundamental ambivalence of knightly attitudes" (183) evident in the dual perception of war as a sport with the knight as its hero, and war as a business with the knight as participator in the pillage of churches, the torture of the peasantry, and the capture of wealthy prisoners for ransom. Money

fees had replaced the old ties of feudal loyalty, and tournaments were displays more of pageantry than of prowess.

Chivalric literature had, of course, helped to establish the image of knighthood, both for the general public and for the knights themselves. The knights of the eleventh-century *chansons de geste* had to be brave, loyal and honourable. The troubadours of the twelfth-century, concerned primarily with social conduct, depicted the ideal knight as "courteous, generous, well-spoken, discreet, faithful in the service of love . . . [possessing] . . . excellence . . . worth . . . good sense" (Gies 78).

In addition to all these attributes, the knight of the French Arthurian romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was given a religious, 'soldier of Christ' aspect. He was to protect the Church and be the Lord's servant. Among the works closer to Malory's own time which contain chivalric elements there are Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, whose pilgrims include a "verray, parfit gentil knyght" who loves "chivalrie/Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" and is "worthy . . . wys . . . meeke" (17-18), The Stanzaic and Alliterative *Mortes* (sources for Malory) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, all written in the middle or latter part of the fourteenth century. However, in *Gawain and the Green Knight* at least, there is evidence of a recognition similar to Malory's of the frailty of a naïve yet noble chivalric life, divorced from and uncomprehending of the realities of a savage and ambiguous world. Like Malory, the Gawain-poet acknowledges the

value of the ideals and affection implicit in the chivalric nobility of Arthur's closed world.

Also of assistance in providing an idea of medieval attitudes to chivalry are chivalric handbooks and biographies of knights such as William Marshal (c.1144-1219) of England, Bertrand du Guesclin (c.1320-1380) and the famous Chevalier Bayard (Pierre Terrail, c.1473-1524) of France. All were celebrated for their courage and skill in battle, and for their courtesy, generosity, and loyalty. The late thirteenth-century *Libre del orde de cauayleria* by Raimon Llull, Spanish knight and courtier, printed in translation by Caxton in 1484 as *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry or Knyghthode*, sets out the ideals of chivalry from a poet-philosopher's point of view. Not only had a knight to be devoted, loyal, and obedient to his order (of knighthood), serving God by serving his prince, defending the Catholic faith and upholding justice as a "lover of the comyn wele" (Caxton, quoted in Barber *The Knight and Chivalry* 146), but he also had to be noble in spirit and lead a virtuous and religious life, an example to others. In contrast, Geoffroi de Charny, a French knight of the mid-fourteenth century, offers in *Le Livre de Chevalerie* a more down-to-earth view of knighthood in which he advises that young men-at-arms be "gay and handsome, and versed in the social graces, should avoid drunkenness and vanity, neither be miserly nor spendthrift, and keep away from brothels . . . also shun solitude and melancholy and honour their word, if they are to become good knights" (de Charny, paraphrased in Barber

147). Finally, in Alain Chartier's fifteenth-century *Breviare des nobles* twelve knightly virtues are listed: "nobility, loyalty, honour, righteousness, prowess, love [of one's lady, one's king, and one's country], courtesy, diligence, cleanliness, generosity, sobriety, and perseverance" (Barber 148).

What then is Malory's position on chivalry in *The Morte Darthur*? Without a doubt he shares with Caxton and others of his turbulent time a certain nostalgia for the great days of thirteenth-century knighthood. His pre-Pentecostal Oath period could be seen to go back even further, representing, perhaps, the early, anarchic days of knighthood. Yet the order which Malory chooses to impose on his knighthood is religious only by association with the festival of Pentecost. The terms of the oath taken by Arthur's knights are wholly secular, with no trace of the Church's Peace of God, which is so apparent in the Vulgate *Lancelot* (Gies 79). Malory also rejects, or at least ignores, the notion of the knight as soldier of Christ (there is no mention in his version of the Grail Quest of the knight's function as God's 'serjanz' (*Queste* 69)). Although Malory shares something of de Charny's pragmatic attitudes to the hardships of warfare, there is nonetheless an enthusiasm in his depiction of battles reminiscent of the glorification of the *Chansons de geste*. Malory rejects the artificialities of courtly love celebrated by the twelfth-century troubadours, yet the women of the *Morte* are forceful and independent, and his favourite knight Lancelot is the most faithful lover of his lady. In his *Book of*

*Tristram* Malory, in the manner of de Charny, emphasizes and applauds *Tristram's* social skills, yet warns in the same book of the dangers of inactivity for knighthood, and *Tristram* is killed while indulging in a courtly pastime.

In *The Morte Darthur* Malory holds up for our inspection an image of chivalry in which idealism and reality are combined. There may indeed be in his preference for action over appearance an implicit condemnation of the increasing elaboration of chivalric form at the expense of substance, just as there may be in his presentation of noble characters like *Tristram*, *Bors*, and *Lancelot* some contribution to a contemporary desire to return to the good old days of knighthood, yet his work is neither a satire on, nor a glorification of chivalry. The chivalric world of the *The Morte Darthur* is both more dangerous and more glorious than our own, or presumably, Malory's own world. He uses such a setting, peopled with characters of great passion and nobility, to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of humanity. What he appears to be suggesting, through his favourite knight *Lancelot*, is that for him, as for the *Gawain*-poet, the only hope for humankind lies in perseverance, in the continued effort to live by a code of conduct which one believes to be right. *Lancelot's* guiding principle, given validity by Malory, is fidelity to *Guinevere*, with *Arthur* his sponsor into knighthood as the bestower of his sword. His fidelity is, in chivalric literature generally, and in Malory in particular, the exception rather than the rule. That *Lancelot's* guiding

principle involves him in disloyalty to the king he loves, the man who made him a knight, is an integral part of Malory's depiction of existence as ambiguous and of passion as both consolation and despair.

The events of Malory's time (and his own social position) may have helped determine the form his romance took, but they are not its focus. Malory's work contains none of the witty satire we see in Chaucer, nor any of Langland's moralizing, nor does Malory romanticize chivalry in the way that Spenser does. Richard Barber says that in *La mort le Roi Artu* "adultery and pride are balanced by a simpler greatheartedness: forgiveness of enemies, generosity, justice" (122). To tip the scales Malory adds in *The Morte Darthur* perseverance and fidelity, to create in Lancelot a human being who is familiar because fallible and admirable because he remains faithful, a virtue probably uncommon in Malory's time. While denying none of its attendant difficulties, Malory gives validity to Lancelot's fidelity by taking a number of measures to ensure our continuing admiration of Lancelot. This includes altering or adding to his sources, and, ultimately, bestowing upon Lancelot the greatest reward of true knighthood--a life in Paradise--at the same time ensuring a good end for Guinevere, the object of his love. Through Lancelot, his greatest knight, Malory accepts and forgives the weaknesses of humanity and gives meaning to the futile struggle towards perfection of its nobler representatives.

## CHAPTER 1

Lancelot and Chivalric Perfection in the Pre-Grail World

Early in the story of Arthur, Merlin informs Arthur that Lancelot is to be the lover of Arthur's wife (*Works* 96) and later tells Lancelot's mother that her son will also be "the moste man of worship of the worlde" (*Works* 126). His first appearance is at the time of Arthur's struggles to establish his new kingdom, and he is presented simply as a young knight, selflessly and enthusiastically loyal to Arthur:

Than lepe in yong sir Launcelot de Laake with a lyght  
harte and seyde unto kynge Arthure, 'Thoughe my londis  
marche nyghe thyne enemyes, yet shall I make myne avow  
aftir my power that of good men of armys aftir my bloode  
thus many shall I brynge with me: twenty thousand helmys  
in haubirkes attyred that shall never fayle you whyles  
our lyvis lastyth.' (*Works* 189)

His martial aspect is stressed throughout the story of Arthur's battles with the forces of Rome, in which Lancelot plays in Malory the heroic part assigned to Gawain in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Malory's source for this tale. M.E. Dichmann points out that "in naming Sir Lancelot second only to the king among the members of the Round Table Malory sets the pattern that he uses throughout the *Morte Darthur*, the pattern of Lancelot's supremacy" (74).

In the *Morte Arthure* it is the "good" (Benson, *Alliterative Morte Arthur* 155) and "gracious" (158) Gawain who kills the Emperor Lucius's kinsman, rescues his fellow knight Sir Boyce, avenges the

death of his ward Chastelayne, and is eventually killed by the traitor Mordred. Lancelot is "mentioned only six times" (Dichmann 74). In Malory's *Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*, however, Gawain's achievements pale beside those of the "good sir Launcelot" (*Works* 221) who performs great deeds of arms, often in company with Sir Cador of Cornwall, or with Lancelot's kinsman, Sir Bors. Lancelot, placed at the head of Arthur's troops, earns Cador's praise: "Sir," says Cador to Arthur, "there was none of us that fayled othir, but of the knyghthode of sir Launcelot hit were mervayle to telle" (*Works* 217). Gawain does not die, mourned by all, at the hands of Mordred. Instead, the story ends with Arthur rewarding Lancelot and Bors for their services, cementing the alliance between them.

Even earlier evidence of Lancelot's abilities has been provided: he is one of only six knights capable of outmatching the (supernatural) strength of Gawain, and Merlin's successor, the Lady of the Lake, is so impressed by Lancelot's prowess that she takes care that her favourite, Sir Pelleas, never jousts with him. Thus, in accordance with the atmosphere of the early stories of the *Morte*, the supernatural is used to emphasize the extent of Lancelot's chivalric ability.

However, Lancelot is more than just a great warrior, brave and loyal like Balin. Balin lives by a primitive code whose greatest virtue for Malory appears to lie in its emphasis on loyalty among blood kin, exemplified in the close relationship between Balin and

his brother, Balan. Balin is banished from Arthur's court after the murder of the Lady of the Lake. When Balan learns of Balin's determination to win back Arthur's love, he unhesitatingly offers to help his brother: "I woll ryde with you and put my body in adventure with you, as a brothir ought to do" (*Works* 72). Both "manly knyghtes" (*Works* 78), each is characterized by a certain fatalism (each is under the impression that the adventures he engages in are ordained by God), accompanied by considerable confidence in his physical prowess to solve his problems. Although both regret the death of the Lady of the Lake, neither questions its necessity. The brothers' names are repeatedly linked in praise of their prowess. So well matched are they that when they meet in battle neither is able to emerge victorious--their prowess is turned against them. Lancelot and the other Round Table knights are guided by the more complex requirements of a code that seeks to create a loyalty and a responsibility which extend beyond the demands of kinship.

In the *The Tale of King Arthur*, according to T.L. Wright, "Malory depicts a society of untried ideals, one which faces an initial, rather than a final, venture" (39). The Pentecostal Oath, which all Round Table knights are required to take at the conclusion of Arthur's wedding festivities, is a reflection of this society, and it is in Lancelot above all that we see the ideals of the oath in action:

than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff

them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do  
 outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson,  
 and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon  
 payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship  
 of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do  
 ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes  
 [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never  
 to enforce them uppon payne of dethe. Also, that  
 no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell  
 for no love ne for no worldis goodis. (*Works* 120)

We have been prepared for the presentation of such a code by Malory's approval or condemnation of a variety of actions preceding its appearance. "Outerage" (*Works* 120), for example, or excess of aggression, is what is displayed by the young Arthur during an early battle, and for this he is chastised by Merlin: "Thou hast never done. Hast thou not done inow? Of three score thousande thys day haste thou leffte on lyve but fyftene thousand!" (*Works* 36). This, Merlin warns, is an offence against God. "Mourthir" (*Works* 120), too, is condemned under the conditions of the oath; that is, not the killing of an enemy in honourable battle, but the destruction of an unarmed, unsuspecting, or much weaker foe. Gawain, Gaheris, Agravain and Mordred, who kill "by treson" (*Works* 810) the noble Pellinor, his son Lamorak, and the good Sir Dinadan, are all later referred to as murderers, as are the "two good knyghtes" (*Works* 317), Gararde and Arnolde le Bruse, and the

treacherous King Mark who kills an unwary Tristram as he sits playing his harp to Isolde. We are reminded, too, of the horrors of the murder of the May Day children ordered by Arthur. Although presented as a matter of political expediency, this episode in Malory is more shocking than that in his source, where the children are saved by "divine intervention" (Vinaver, *Works* 1302).

The Round Table knights are also required to "fle treson" and to "gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy," to protect all women, and to "take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell" (*Works* 120). These conditions, like the ones before them, are evidently intended to act as a control upon the violent passions, which are often encouraged by a primitive code of conduct and which we have seen expressed in earlier adventures, and to bind the Round Table knights together in loyalty to one king and one country. Predictably, Malory often uses the deeds of Gawain or one of his brothers as illustrations of knightly misconduct. Gawain, carried away by an excess of rage at Blamoure's slaughter of his hounds, defeats him in battle but refuses to heed his subsequent pleas for mercy. For this Gawain is justly, though humiliatingly, reproved by his younger brother who is acting as his squire: "ye sholde gyff mercy unto them that aske mercy, for a knyghte withoute mercy is withoute worship" (*Works* 106). Gawain's dishonourable conduct, an example of excessive behaviour ("outrage"), involves him in still greater shame when he inadvertently slays a woman, another transgression against the chivalric code. His behaviour is

contrasted with that of Sir Torre, Pellinor's bastard son, who, though young and inexperienced, manages to find an honourable resolution to a difficult situation involving the same requirements of the Pentecostal Oath: to give mercy when requested, and to defend a lady's interests. Sir Torre's father fares less well. Driven by the prior claims of his quest, which occurs just before the oath is taken, he ignores the appeals of a lady for assistance and is severely punished for his lack of chivalry.

In Gawain's fiery reaction to the death of his hunting dogs, and earlier, in Lancelot's battle with Balin, we are given a hint of what may be meant by a "wrongefull quarell" (*Works* 120). For although Lancelot receives permission from Arthur to challenge Balin, ostensibly for the insult which the latter has offered to the court by slaying the Lady of the Lake, Malory makes it clear that Lancelot is motivated above all by an overweening personal pride: "Launceor . . . was an orgulus knyght and accompted hymselff one of the beste . . . . And he had grete despite at Balyne . . . that only sholde be accompted more hardy or more of prouesse" (*Works* 67). The focus of the Pentecostal Oath is clearly on the needs of a society rather than of an individual.

But the Oath is not even at this point in his romances a complete picture of what Malory appears to see as the chivalric ideal. A nobleman himself--P.J.C. Field tells us that it was Malory's grandmother Chetwynd's family descent "that made it possible for Sir Thomas to see himself, like his characters, as 'of

jantill strene of fadir syde and of modir syde'"--Malory is understandably biased in favour of noble birth for his knights. The link between birth and chivalric ability, presented more fully in *The Book of Sir Tristram*, is already apparent in the adventure of Torre. Although Arthur agrees to knight Torre before his true origins are revealed, Merlin later informs Arthur that Torre's birth ensures his worth: "he ought to be a good man for he ys com of good kynrede as ony on lyve, and of kynges bloode" (*Works* 100-101). A connection is also made between outer beauty and inner worth, a common idea in Malory's time, when leprosy, or any physical blemish or deformity, was considered to be the outward manifestation of an inner sin. Arthur is moved to knight Torre despite what he believes to be his low birth, partly because of his appearance: "he was passyngly well vysaged" (*Works* 100). Later, the insane Lancelot will nonetheless be adjudged a worthy man because of his looks: "whan they behylde hym and loked uppon hys persone, they thought they never sawe so goodly a man" (*Works* 822). This emphasis on physical appearance has nothing to do with the "araymente" (*Works* 63) or outward show against which Malory repeatedly warns. Balin tells Arthur that "worship and hardynesse is not in araymente" (*Works* 63), yet refuses to abandon the sword he has won, thereby condemning himself and his brother to death. Arthur, too, receives his second Excalibur eagerly and with little thought for the nature of the bargain he is making with the lady who gives it, or for the fact that the scabbard is of greater

power.

Malory, then, expects his knights to look noble and to be of noble birth, but is impressed more by action than by appearance, hence the frequent incidence in his romances of knights assuming disguises in battle that they might be judged by their deeds alone.

Another condition of knighthood in Malory must be mentioned, although it is implicit in the ideals expressed by the Oath. Throughout his work Malory places great emphasis on the human bonds of kinship and affection. The brotherhood of his Round Table knights (and indeed of all his warriors) is revealed in the support they offer each other in battle, in the dismay with which they regard serious battle encounters between two Round Table knights, and in the anger with which they react to any affront or injury offered to a fellow knight of the Round Table. The links of loyalty, repeatedly expressed through professions of love and devotion, and based on recognition of nobility, are most evident in the relations between Malory's greatest knights: Lancelot and Tristram, Lamorak and Tristram, Lancelot and Gareth, and Lancelot and Arthur. The link between a knight and his sponsor into knighthood is especially strong. Gareth's loyalty to Lancelot is greater than his loyalty to his family, and he will not fight against Lancelot at the Assumption Day tournament. Even when pursued in battle by Arthur after his rescue of Guinevere, Lancelot refuses either to harm Arthur or to permit another to harm him: "I well never se that moste noble kyng that made me knyght nether

slayne nor shamed" (*Works* 1192). After a battle together, Lamorak and Tristram, each acknowledging the other's worth, swear "that never more of hem sholde fight agaynste othir, for well nother for woo" (*Works* 484), and later Lancelot and Tristram sit down after discovering each other's identity "and aythir kyste other an houndred tymes" (*Works* 570). Earlier, grieving for the death of his knights in battle, Arthur acknowledges the bonds which bind him and his knights together in a relationship stronger than his ties to Guinevere:

And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse  
 than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I  
 might have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes  
 shall never be togydirs in no company . . . alas that  
 ever sir Launcelot and I shulde be at debate!

(*Works* 1184)

The greatest transgressions and the harshest punishments of Malorian society involve the rupturing of the bonds which link humanity. Thus in the early books Arthur's great sin is to beget a son upon his own sister, and Morgan's is to desire her brother's death. Balin is punished by a malignant fate and is obliged to fight and kill unrecognized the man he loves best in the world; the death of Balan is the culminating horror in a story dominated by the themes of fratricide, betrayal, and revenge. Later in the Grail story, Gawain receives a similar punishment for his more obvious transgression and is the cause of Sir Uwain's death. For

Malory at this point, then, loyalty to one's brothers-in-arms is a prerequisite of noble knighthood.

The final requirement of chivalric perfection, not mentioned in the Oath, is dealt with only briefly by Malory. The ideal knight is also a Christened knight. Both Sir Priamus and Sir Palomides must be baptized before they can be formally admitted into the fellowship of Arthur's knights. Elsewhere, however, Malory refers to the Round Table as a meeting place for knights both "crystenyd and hethyn" (*Works* 906), suggesting that the fellowship bestows its own more inclusive sanctification upon its members. Then, too, baptism in Malory is in each case a reward for excellence in battle, a sort of divine seal of approval on an otherwise secular chivalry. To T.L. Wright, Malory's Pentecostal Oath reflects just such an emphasis on secular rather than spiritual concerns, and he compares Malory's version of Arthur's wedding with that in his probable source, *La Suite du Merlin*: "there is no similarity between Malory's concept and the type of spiritual chivalry which is operative in the *Suite's* account of Arthur's wedding in which Merlin exhorts the knights 'to piety, peace, and brotherhood '" (37-38).

The principles behind Malory's oath--of justice, mercy, the defence of the weak and innocent, the condemnation of murder (but not all killing), and of excess--are all in accordance with the teachings of an orthodox Christianity, yet we will be hard-pressed to discover much more than lip-service to the demands of

established religion even in Malory's early romances.

E. Vinaver calls the Pentecostal Oath "the most complete and authentic record of Malory's conception of chivalry" (*Works* 1335). I see it, instead, as a skeleton, requiring the flesh and blood of human interaction to bring it to life and reveal the idealism and, eventually, the inadequacy of its conditions. Malory does not deal in abstractions. The active examples of chivalric conduct which precede the Oath are essential to our appreciation of its application to the chivalric world of Malory's creating. Of the examples which follow it, in no single knight is there so clear a presentation of the code in action as in Lancelot.

Lancelot, of course, is more than the sum of the parts of the Pentecostal Oath. In *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake* the definition of chivalric excellence exemplified in Lancelot includes chastity, a Christian virtue which Malory will later abandon, and fidelity. Fidelity, although limited and complicated by the demands of his oath of allegiance, will continue to characterize Lancelot throughout the remaining romances and give him a stability in human terms that outweighs the narrow Christian judgement of the Grail world which condemns his adultery without recognizing the value of his unswerving fidelity to Guinevere.

It is appropriate that in *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot* Lancelot's adventures almost all involve women. In his confrontations with enemies and well-wishers of the female sex Lancelot is not so much a great warrior as a chaste and courteous

knight, faithful to his queen. Encounters such as the one with Sir Perys de Foreste Savage establish Lancelot as a defender of women in strict accordance with the Oath of Knighthood. Sir Perys is a "false knight" (*Works* 269) who "dystressis all ladyes and jantylwomen" (*Works* 269) and he stands, therefore, in direct opposition to Lancelot's code of conduct. Lancelot's reaction to the news of Sir Perys' crimes is indicative of his deep respect for the order to which he belongs: "What? . . . is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravyssher of women? He doth shame unto the order of Knyghthoode and contrary unto his oth. Hit is pyté that he lyvyth!" (*Works* 269). Lancelot is, as a damsel he encounters tells him, "the curteyst knyght . . . and mekyste unto all ladyes and jantylwomen" (*Works* 209). He is discourteous to a woman only three times in the *Morte*--to Morgan le Fay, to Hallewes the sorceress, and to Elaine, Pelles' daughter--and each time his discourtesy reveals his fear or his anger or both in the face of an onslaught by the supernatural. Both Morgan and Hallewes suggest that he is Guinevere's lover. When the damsel he rescues from Sir Perys makes a similar suggestion, Lancelot replies courteously and at length in a passage where the requirement of virginity for effective knighthood is first mentioned:

But for to be a weddyd man, I thynke it nat, for than  
I must couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis,  
batellys and adventures. And as for to sey to take my  
pleasure with paramours, that woll I refuse: in principall

for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures  
 shoulde not be advoutrers nothir lecherous, for than  
 they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys.

(Works 270)

S.C.B. Atkinson points out that the beliefs Lancelot expresses here are "closely similar to those that emerge at the demands of the Grail Quest" (131). In the Grail world chastity is presented in purely Christian terms, as the most important requirement of perfect heavenly knighthood. In *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot*, however, chastity, as described by Lancelot himself, is a curious mixture of the sacred and the secular. Sexual contact with a woman, with or without God's approval, is seen by an obviously youthful Lancelot to be detrimental to a successful life as a knight. Despite his reference to God's anger Lancelot has in mind an entirely secular knighthood. If he offends his God, he will be cursed in his activities as a knight on earth; therefore, he must not offend God. (At this point it must be noted that there is no evidence in Malory's text that clearly indicates the nature of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. Given Malory's treatment of Lancelot, here and earlier, as young, enthusiastic, idealistic and uncompromising, it is reasonable to assume that during this period of his life Lancelot is, as he suggests, a chaste knight, dedicated to the service of his king and devoted to his queen who has given him his sword). As chaste as Lancelot is throughout this story--he curtly refuses to take one of the four

queens as a paramour though his life is at stake, and he denies the fair Hallewes even a kiss--his purity is always most evident in scenes which connect his name to Guinevere's: "we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is quene Gwenyvere" (*Works* 257); "hit is noysed that ye love quene Gwenyvere, and that she hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that ye shall never love none other but hir" (*Works* 270); "there may no woman have thy love but quene Gwenyver" (*Works* 281). The result is to confuse the question of the source of Lancelot's chastity. Is it devotion to knighthood, or devotion to Guinevere? Lancelot's chastity is thus given a particularly human and secular aspect, quite distinct from the Christian chastity embodied by Galahad in the world of the Grail.

Lancelot's nobility is contrasted with the behaviour not only of Sir Perys, but also of other characters: the giants who keep sixty "ladyes and damesels" (*Works* 272) imprisoned at Tintagel, Sir Phelot, who uses his wife to trick Sir Lancelot into an unfair battle, and Sir Pedyvere, who kills his wife in a fit of jealous rage. The encounter with Sir Pedyvere provides us with yet another example of Lancelot's worth as a knight, for Lancelot is obliged, under the conditions of his oath to Arthur, to grant Sir Pedyvere the mercy he requests. Lancelot would rather slay Pedyvere for his cowardice and treachery, and Malory makes the struggle between inclination and duty quite evident. So desperate is Lancelot to defeat Sir Pedyvere in fair combat that he offers to fight in his shirt. Lancelot's control over his feelings when Pedyvere refuses

to fight bears witness to his worth. Lancelot's decision to spare Sir Pedyvere is justified not only by the requirements of his oath of knighthood, but also by the circumstances of Pedyvere's later life as "an holy man and an hermyte" (*Works* 286).

Similarly indicative of Lancelot's ideal knighthood is his cautious response to the offer of freedom made by Bagdemagus' daughter in exchange for his services in a tournament. Although terrified and unhappy in Castle Chariot, Lancelot is careful not to commit himself to fighting for the girl's father until he knows who he is. Only when he is confident that her father is "a noble kyng and a good knyght" (*Works* 259) does Lancelot agree to joust on his behalf. Lancelot will not involve himself in a "wrongful quarell" (*Works* 120) even to save his life.

Lancelot not only assists women in this book, but also uses his skills to rescue Gaheris and Kay and (in disguise) to prove his superiority over fellow Round Table knights. When Lancelot exchanges his armour for Kay's, he proves not only the extent of his generosity but also the power of his reputation. It is Lancelot's reputation that leads him to adventures which seem to be destined for his accomplishment, as those in the Grail world are destined for Galahad's. Recognized by the four queens as he lies sleeping as "the noblest knyght lyvyng" (*Works* 257), it is because of his reputation that Lancelot is captured. It is Sir Lancelot for whom Hallewes now waits in her unholy chapel and Sir Lancelot alone who is capable of healing Sir Meliot: "yf you spede not,"

Meliot's sister tells him, "I know no knyght lyvyng that may encheve that adventure" (*Works* 279). Lancelot's name is synonymous with courtesy, "bounté" (*Works* 258), and prowess. The damsel he meets riding on a white palfrey is impressed by Lancelot before she learns his identity. When she discovers who he is, she too emphasizes the uniqueness of his abilities: "no man I know but ye do overmache hym [Tarquyn]" (*Works* 264). So well-known and well-respected is Lancelot's prowess that his armour alone affords Kay an almost supernatural protection for his journey back to Arthur's court: "Sir Launcelot toke my harneyse," says Sir Kay, "and leffte me his, and I rode in Goddys pece and no man wolde have ado with me" (*Works* 287). To the power of Lancelot's reputation is added, perhaps, the suggestion that Lancelot's knighthood, even his armour, has God's approval. Lancelot uses the exchange not only to safeguard Kay, but also to beguile unwary knights into jousting with him, bringing once more to our attention the danger of trusting too much to "araymente" (*Works* 63) as an indicator of the "manhode and worship" (*Works* 63) which, according to Balin, and apparently to Malory, "[ys hyd] within a mannes person" (*Works* 63).

Lancelot, then, is a perfect illustration of the Pentecostal Oath in action. He is courageous and merciful, a defender of womanhood, and a loyal brother-in-arms. Nobly born and well-made, he is, in addition, courteous, chaste, and generous in his forgiveness of those who have wronged him. He is also intelligent. In *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur* Sir Cador praises Lancelot for

his "wyse wytte" (*Works* 217). His ability to think and act quickly in difficult situations is revealed in the adventure of the lady and her falcon. But Lancelot's intelligence is given depth by a certain rueful self-awareness that will be more fully developed in the Grail Quest. "I woll do what I may to gete youre hauke," he tells Sir Pelleus's lady, "and yet God knowyth I am an evyll clymber, and the tre is passynge hyghe" (*Works* 282). Though humourously presented here, Lancelot's ready comprehension of his shortcomings will, in the Grail story, distinguish him from his fellow knights and play an important part in Malory's redemption of his character.

There is one further aspect of Lancelot's ideal knighthood that is not included in the requirements of the Pentecostal Oath. As a result of his encounters with Sir Meliot's sister, Lancelot meets with Hallewes at the Chapel Perilous, and is subsequently able to heal Sir Meliot using what bears all the appearance of sympathetic magic--a bloody cloth and the sword of Meliot's erstwhile opponent, Sir Gilbert the Bastard. Lancelot's confrontation and defeat of the obviously evil supernatural forces of Hallewes, combined with his role as healer, prepare us for the later development of Lancelot's spiritual aspect in the Grail story. However, just as Lancelot's chastity is not presented in unequivocally Christian terms, so the healing in which he is involved is a predominantly secular chivalric achievement. Lancelot's adventures are his by right of his pre-eminence as a knight in the secular pre-Grail

world of Arthur. His success is a result, not of divine intervention, but of purely human qualities: courage, which enables him to overcome his fear of the supernatural, and faith in his knighthood, revealed in his reliance on his shield and sword. It is, as Catherine Batt points out, "as though his chivalry functioned as some kind of protective grace" (91). By contrast, there is far greater evidence of a divine predestination in Galahad's almost effortless, and certainly fearless, progression through the miracles awaiting his completion in the Grail world. Lancelot's achievements remain on a human level, albeit a noble one, and Lancelot himself is not the healing medium; for that he must wait until after his experiences on the Grail quest. Nonetheless the particular combination of elements in this story, Lancelot's goodness and purity, the healing, the supernatural manifestation and even the name of the Chapel Perilous (Guy reminds us of its association with the Seige Perilous reserved for Galahad (83)), all take us briefly into a world evidently outside the secular compass of the Pentecostal Oath.

Lancelot's chivalric supremacy is maintained throughout *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney*. With the advent of a younger knight modelled on Sir Lancelot, Lancelot himself takes on a new dimension as the exemplar of knighthood to whose standards all young knights aspire. The story's heavy emphasis upon the contrast between appearance and reality also allows Malory to highlight Lancelot's more human aspect. In his dealings with Gareth he is both generous

and perceptive. Lancelot's kindness towards the disguised Gareth is contrasted with the behaviour of Sir Kay and even of Sir Gawain. Kay, judging Gareth's condition by the humility of his request for only food and drink, despises him for "a vylayne borne" (*Works* 294) and treats him accordingly. Gawain, on the other hand, is kind to Gareth, but Malory suggests that this might be an instinctive response linked to his relationship with Gareth: "As touching sir Gawayne, he had reson to profer hym lodgyng, mete, and drynke, for that proffer com of his bloode, for he was nere kyn to hym than he wyste of" (*Works* 295). On the other hand, Malory makes it quite clear that Sir Lancelot's kindness to Gareth is a result "of his grete jantylness and curtesy" (*Works* 295), qualities which are not revealed only to women. Lancelot chides Kay for his mean-spirited treatment of Gareth and reminds him of other occasions when he has misjudged someone on the basis of appearances, to his later discomfiture. (The reference here to La Cote Male Tayle (*Works* 295) suggests an overlap in the chronology of the tales of Gareth and Tristram, to which the presence of Tristram and Lamorak at the end of Gareth's story contributes).

Subsequently, at the Assumption Day tournament, Lancelot refuses to joust with the disguised Gareth, explaining that he has had "travayle inow" (*Works* 348) and that "hit is no good knyghtes parre to lette hym of his worshyp" (*Works* 349-349). Although he does not recognize Gareth, he nonetheless knows him for "a good knyghte" (*Works* 349) and declares to Arthur that he would not steal his

glory even if he were able to do so. In fact, Lancelot is unusual among the Arthurian knights in that he learns from his experiences, unassisted by any form of supernatural guidance. His perceptiveness is enhanced by a certain analytical ability not possessed by knights like Gawain and Tristram--or Sir Kay, who ignores Lancelot's warning, to his future cost.

Through the person of Gareth, Malory continues to elaborate upon his definition of knightly excellence. Gareth is characterized by his courtesy and by his patient endurance--a quality, as we will discover in *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, also possessed by Lancelot. Like Lancelot, Gareth is intelligent. Though young, he carefully plans and carries out his deception at King Arthur's court with the definite and noble aim of proving his worth without relying on his relationship to the King. His mother later tells Arthur that "ever sytthen he was growyn he was [mervaylously wyttd]" (*Works* 340). Every indication of goodness in Gareth reflects upon Lancelot as his mentor, and Gareth's instinctive recognition of nobility in others is used as further confirmation of Lancelot's superiority. Gareth's battle with Lancelot is proof both of Gareth's abilities as a fighter and of Malory's continuing presentation of Lancelot as chivalric yardstick. Lancelot, hard-pressed to hold his own against Gareth, is generous enough to admit it. Gareth, having measured himself against the best, is proved worthy of knighthood. That he turns to Lancelot to be made knight and not, as might be expected, to Gawain, the head of his house and nephew to King

Arthur himself, is testament to Lancelot's worth and Gareth's own integrity. Gareth's heart does not incline to his brother Gawain because he recognizes that Gawain "was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther" (*Works* 360). Gawain is the perpetual representative of the older, more primitive order that preceded the Arthurian age, whose very different ideals are summarized in the Pentecostal Oath, and brought to life by knights like Lancelot and Gareth. It is an order that is repeatedly threatening to bring down the Arthurian world, and that is, in the post-Grail world of the *Morte Darthur*, eventually successful.

Gareth repeatedly lays stress on the value of having been knighted by Lancelot. When Sir Persaunte, ignorant of Gareth's state, offers to make him knight, Gareth replies, "Sir . . . I thanke you for [your good will for] I am bettir spedde, for sertay[n]ly the noble knyghte sir Launcelot made me knyght" (*Works* 316). Sir Persaunte is not offended and, indeed, approves of Gareth's choice of sponsor: "of a more renommed man myght ye not be made knyghte of, for of all knyghtes he may be called cheff of knyghthode" (*Works* 316). Later, Tristram tells Ironside that Gareth is "much the bettir" (*Works* 350) for having been knighted by Lancelot. But the value to a young knight of Lancelot's sponsorship is seen not only in terms of a secular chivalry. Shortly afterwards, the spiritual aspect of chivalry, and of Lancelot himself, is fleetingly brought to our attention once more. After his first successful venture as a new-made knight, Gareth is

offered a reward for his services, but will take nothing. "This day," he says, "I was made knyght of noble sir Launcelot, and therefore I woll no rewarde have but God rewarde me" (*Works* 301). To Gareth, only the blessing of heaven is greater than Lancelot's blessing on earth. Lancelot's gift of knighthood is too sacred to be sullied by worldly considerations.

Lancelot's sponsorship is the culmination of three phases of initiation that Gareth must undergo in order to become a knight. Arthur, rebuked by Gareth's mother for his treatment of Gareth, tells her that Gareth asked him for "three gyfftes" (*Works* 339): "mete inoughe" (*Works* 339) for a year, "that he myght have the adventures of the damsel Lyonett" (*Works* 339), and "that sir Launcelot sholde make hym knyght whan he desyred hym" (*Works* 339). The first two gifts allow Gareth to display all the qualities now demanded of a knight--patience, endurance, and gentleness: "he endured all that twelve monthe . . . allwayes he was meke and mylde," (*Works* 296)--as well as courage, mercy, courtesy, and chastity. His gentle treatment both of the damsel Lyonette, who reviles him, and the daughter of Sir Persaunte, who is sent as a test of his purity, reveals his noble birth: "Ever curtesyly ye have suffyrde me," says Lyonette, "and that com never but of jantyll bloode" (*Works* 312). When Sir Persaunte learns of Gareth's consideration towards his daughter, he tells her, "Truly . . . whatsomever he be he is com of ful noble bloode" (*Works* 315). Finally, Lancelot's hard-won approval confirms both the physical

and moral stature of the newcomer to the world of chivalry. One can have no greater reward as a knight on earth.

Established as the pre-eminent knight according to the standards prevailing in the period of the Pentecostal Oath, Lancelot will continue to set the standards by which younger knights measure their achievement in the earlier transitional period of *The Book of Sir Tristram*. We have been prepared, however, for the inevitable downfall of the chivalric system he represents by Malory's insistence on the power of human emotions, both positive and negative. The Pentecostal Oath is a pre-eminently earthly set of guidelines, noble yet, because created within a human framework, doomed to failure. When this failure becomes apparent in *The Book of Sir Tristram*, Malory must re-evaluate his rules of conduct. By providing his reader with a carefully structured spiritual viewpoint from which to judge Lancelot's behaviour in the Grail world, Malory ensures our ultimate approval of Lancelot as a human being both fallible and noble, in whom earthly and heavenly chivalry are inseparable.

## CHAPTER 2

### Tristram's World of Transition

At the end of *The Tale of Sir Gareth* Lancelot is at the height of his chivalric career, the greatest knight of the Arthurian world and second only to Arthur in authority. By the end of *The Book of Sir Tristram* Lancelot has slain a fellow Round Table knight and has challenged another to fight in a "wrongeful quarell" (*Works* 120). He has threatened an unarmed woman and has been tricked by his passion for Guinevere into begetting a son who is to take his place as first knight in the Grail world. Lancelot fails, both in terms of the Pentecostal Oath, and, later, in terms of an orthodox Christianity. To understand how we are to view this failure, and how Malory prepares us not only to accept but also to excuse it, we must re-examine the Pentecostal Oath in the light of the chaotic, passionate world Malory has created.

The world Malory creates for his knights is a world of extremes in which the mysteries and dangers of the real world are magnified. In this world Arthur's sister learns necromancy in a convent, a scabbard provides more protection than a sword, and a man deemed noble and without treachery is hounded to death by a fate beyond his comprehension. There is no great controlling force in Malory's creation; God is manifest only in the circumscribed world of the Grail. In the pre-Grail world only the supernatural power of characters like Merlin offers any protection against the destructive power of the human emotions that play such an important part in Malory's romances. Yet this is a limited protection. Merlin is unable to prevent Arthur from committing the sin of

incest and is himself ultimately defeated by the power of an infatuation which he recognizes to be beyond his control. Malory's pre-Grail world, and Lancelot's, is magnificent and unstable, peopled with characters of noble ideals, but rife with the passions of envy, hatred and love kept barely in check. Even in the stories of Lancelot and of his younger counterpart, Gareth, the dangers of uncontrolled emotion are never far away. Hallewes, the tormented, necrophiliac sorceress, represents perhaps the darkest side of obsessive love, but even Gareth, so patient and so courteous throughout most of his story, must be restrained by a dramatic and violent magic from sacrificing his hard-won honour to an equally violent lust for Lyonesse. *The Tale of Sir Gareth*, for all its celebration of the golden years of Arthurian knighthood, contains numerous indications of just how precarious the balance is between good and evil, order and chaos, in Malory's world. For here, as in the story of Balin, "good knights may yet be murderers" (*Works* 317), and the love between the good knights Gareth and Lancelot is shadowed by the tension between Gareth and his brothers, explained later by Gareth himself in the *The Book of Sir Tristram*:

Well I undirstonde the vengeaunce of my brethirne, Sir Gawayne, sir Aggravayne, sir Gaherys and sir Mordred. But as for me . . . I meddyll not of their maters and therefore there is none that lovyth me of them. And for cause that I undirstonde they be murtherars of good knyghtis I lefte there company. (*Works* 699)

Humanity in Malory's romances is shown to be increasingly at the mercy of its own passions, and Lancelot is no exception. For all his prowess, Lancelot is never portrayed as a superman, above the frailties of other mortals. Such a portrayal is reserved for Galahad. We see Lancelot afraid, angry, and even embarrassed (in his aggressive reaction to his encounter in the dark with Sir Belleus is more than a touch of a young man's mortification). Lancelot is terrified of the four queens who imprison him, and of Hallewes' dark sorcery, but his battle with Sir Gareth reveals a different kind of fear. Gareth proves himself so powerful in that encounter that Lancelot, dreading "to be shamed" (*Works* 299), calls upon Gareth in the name of friendship to fight "nat so sore" (*Works* 299). Although Lancelot quickly retrieves his position in our esteem by his frank acknowledgement of Gareth's strength, his status as first knight has been shown to be assailable. What would have happened had Gareth ignored the claims of friendship? Lancelot's request that Gareth moderate his aggression--"Your quarrell and myne . . . is not [so] grete but we may sone leve of," (*Works* 299)--though born of Lancelot's fear of failure, is nonetheless eminently reasonable in light of the affection between them. Lancelot's appeal to reason here contrasts with his attitude later in *The Book of Tristram* when he is rebuked for attempting to provoke a unreasonable quarrel with another Round Table knight.

From early on in Malory's work, then, Lancelot is shown to share in the weakness of humankind. His name is repeatedly linked with

Guinevere's in a world where passion is revealed as potentially destructive. The combined effect is to prepare us for Lancelot's participation in the common lot of humankind which, in the pursuit of perfection, must be failure.

When we compare the ideals of conduct presented in the Pentecostal Oath with the conditions of existence within which these ideals are to be upheld, Lancelot's failure becomes even more comprehensible. All around him good knights, and even great knights, driven by envy, hatred, or desire, are committing acts of murder, betrayal, and excess. Balin, Pellinor, Gawain, Tristram, and even Gareth, all act, or seek to act, dishonourably according to the established standards of chivalry outlined in the Pentecostal Oath and exemplified in Lancelot. In Malory's eminently human and therefore imperfect world such standards of conduct cannot possibly be maintained forever. The very position of the Oath in Malory's text is indicative of its fragility. It is part of a passage original to Malory and is placed between the punishment of the noble Pellinor and the fate of the great Merlin. Both episodes bear witness to the power of human desire, Pellinor's desire to succeed in his quest and Merlin's desire for Nenyve. Pellinor's transgression is against the bonds of love and loyalty that are so important in Malory's world, and his twofold punishment mirrors his crime. Merlin informs Pellinor that it was Pellinor's own daughter who killed herself after Pellinor ignored her cries for help, and that God has therefore ordained that he himself

will suffer a similar fate and be betrayed to his death by his best friend. Pellinor is, in fact, killed offstage by the fellow Round Table knights Gawain and Gaheris "not manly, but by treson" (*Works* 810). Pellinor's hope that God will "fordo desteny" (*Works* 120), and allow him to avoid such a fate, is unrealized. Malory's Arthurian world is dominated by human interest and God is never shown to have the capacity to alter a man's destiny. Indeed, on the only occasion when God expresses, through the surprising medium of Gawain, an obvious inclination to intercede for good in the affairs of men, all His warnings are rendered useless by the chance appearance of an adder. Similarly, all the powers that Merlin commands cannot save him from the fate he so clearly foresees. He too is condemned to betrayal by someone he loves.

Impossible as it may be to maintain the ideals of the Pentecostal Oath, they are yet essential to the growth of Arthur's new society and, like Lancelot, act as a touchstone by which chivalric ability may be measured. They, like Lancelot in the Grail world, are a perpetual reminder of both the potential and the limitations of humankind, because the ideals expressed in the Oath are themselves limited. They relate solely to the conduct expected of a secular knight. It is left for Lancelot to provide the emotional and spiritual component which will make Malory's picture of knighthood on earth complete, yet far removed from the rather one-dimensional picture of perfection presented in Galahad of Malory's Grail romance.

As we move into *The Book of Sir Tristram*, the longest and most complicated of Malory's romances, the limitations of the Arthurian code of conduct upheld so nobly thus far by Lancelot and Gareth become apparent. The world of Sir Tristram is above all one of recreation and knight-errantry, of necessity a peace-time occupation. The three great knights of this period of Arthurian history are Lamorak, Tristram, and Lancelot, in an increasing order of importance suggested by their performance at the end of *The Tale of Sir Gareth*. The qualities displayed in Tristram reflect the demands of a new world, where peace is established and there is time for relaxation. Through him Malory introduces a new dimension to knighthood, in keeping with the more light-hearted social requirements of a civilized courtly setting. Tristram is not only a noble and wealthy knight, but also the epitome of a courtier, a skilled huntsman and musician. In *The Book of Tristram* the supernatural element is considerably diminished, giving place to scenes of companionable human activity in which even the great Sir Lancelot has his share.

In the stories of Lamorak, La Cote Mal Tayle, and of Tristram, Malory continues to flesh out his ideal of chivalry. Lamorak's refusal, even at the risk of his own life, to kill Sir Belliaunce, who once saved him, is an illustration of "jantylnesse" (*Works* 451) which moves Belliaunce to forgiveness and an expression of eternal brotherhood. Lamorak's steadfast loyalty defeats the cycle of revenge set into motion by Gawain. Yet at the same time Lamorak's

initial involvement in the cycle is clearly shown to be a result of another loyalty--to Arthur and his Round Table knights. Gawain's appropriation of another knight's lady is in direct violation of the chivalric code of conduct expressed in the Pentecostal Oath. Recognizing this, Lamorak challenges him, but drops his challenge when he learns who Gawain is. Gawain is justly punished for his actions by the lady's own knight, as a result of which Lamorak feels reluctantly impelled by his honour to revenge him: "but I revenge my felow he well sey me dishonoure in kynge Arthurs courte" (*Works* 450). As a consequence he slays the brother of the man who sacrificed his son to save Lamorak's life. The question of loyalty is no longer straightforward, and it is only Lamorak's goodness which prevents more bloodshed.

*The Tale of La Cote Male Tayle* is much like the story of Gareth in that a young, strangely-dressed unknown comes to Arthur's court to be knighted, is mocked by Sir Kay, but subsequently proves himself in a quest with a sharp-tongued damsel, whom he eventually marries, and is finally admitted to the ranks of the Round Table. Lancelot, however, plays a more protective role in the *Tale of La Cote* than in Gareth's story, rescuing La Cote from insult, attack, and imprisonment, and at times, as Benson points out, appearing to take over La Cote's adventures (*Malory's Morte* 122). La Cote is closely identified with Lancelot, and is used to throw new light upon Lancelot's beginnings as a knight. When La Cote first appears at Arthur's court requesting knighthood, Lamorak and Gaheris advise

that his request be granted, reminding Arthur that "evyn suche one was sir Launcelot whan he cam fyrst into this courte and full fewe of us know from whens he cam" (*Works* 459). Later, Mordred rebukes the damsel Maledysaunte for her scorn of La Cote, who has been unhorsed early in his quest, first by Sir Bleoberis and then by Sir Palomides. Mordred reminds her that good horsemanship comes with experience, and that, on the other hand, many older knights are reluctant to fight on foot with younger, stronger, newcomers. Sir Lancelot, he tells her, was no exception: "when he was fyrste made knyght he was oftyen put to the worse on horsebacke but ever upon foote he recoverde his renowne" (*Works* 466). Vinaver points out that there is no parallel to this "description of knightly usages and exercises" in Malory's source (*Works* 1468). The identification of Lancelot with the awkwardness as well as the vigour of youth, and the memory of an older Lancelot's battle with Gawain on foot, remind us that Lancelot is mortal, and place his chivalric achievements in a human context. La Cote's story has none of the spirituality hinted at in *The Tale of Sir Gareth*. His knighthood, requested of Arthur and not Lancelot, is unequivocally secular and begins and ends on a note of revenge which is entirely absent in the more idealistic Gareth, and seems to herald a return to the old values of clan warfare.

Finally, although Tristram is the ostensible hero of the romance which bears his name, it is, as L. Benson points out, his relation to Lancelot which "informs the entire tale" (*Malory's Morte* 122).

As usual Lancelot's are the standards for which young knights strive. He is praised repeatedly as the "good knyghte" (*Works* 388,396,407) and, according to Lamorak and Gaheris, has brought more fame to Arthur's court than any other knight. "All your courte," they tell Arthur, "is by sir Launcelot worshypped and amended, more than by any knyght lyvyng" (*Works* 460). His name has become legendary and his are the standards by which acts of chivalry are judged and to which other knights are compared: "she demed that there was no knyght in the worlde that myght do suche dedis of armys but yf hit were sir Launcelot" (*Works* 388); "I dare sey he is one of the noblyst knyghtes that beryth lyff but yf hit be sir Launcelot du Lake" (*Works* 417); "we know none so good a knyght but yf hit be sir Launcelot du Lake" (*Works* 427) "Welle concidered, hit were inow for sir Launcelot du Lake" (*Works* 428). Like Gareth, Tristram is drawn to Lancelot: "I woll se Sir Launcelot and infelyship me with hym, for of all the knyghtes in the worlde I moste desyre his felyshyp" (*Works* 418). Again Malory uses Lancelot to reveal the inner worth of a new knight, whose nobility reflects in turn upon Lancelot, the older, established knight. "I am nat sir Launcelot," says Tristram, " . . . for I was never of suche proues" (*Works* 388). Tristram's subsequent expression of the hope that God may make him such a good knight suggests that Lancelot himself may have been so favoured, another indication that Malory's definition of ideal knighthood will include a spiritual aspect. Lancelot's name, whose glory is

shared by all his kin--"all be noble knyghtes of the blood of sir Launcelot" (*Works* 694)--is even presented as a passport to peace: "sir Launcelot ys called pereles of curtesy and of knyghthode," Tristram tells Bleoberis, "and for his sake I wyll nat with my good wylle feyght no more with you for the grete love I have to sir Launcelot" (*Works* 401).

Lancelot's knighthood is celebrated in *The Book of Tristram*, but it is his activities as a lover that become increasingly important and that set the stage for Lancelot's mental and physical disintegration towards the end of the story. For now Lancelot's relationship to Guinevere is such an open secret that Isolde can say there are "but foure lovers, and that is sir Launcelot and dame Gwenyver, and sir Tristrames and quene Isode" (*Works* 425). But Tristram's rather cavalier approach to his relationship with Isolde brings into prominence Lancelot's unwavering fidelity to Guinevere. When Tristram forsakes Isolde for the daughter of King Howell, Lancelot is outraged. Tristram's act of infidelity reflects upon the quality of his knighthood: "that so noble a knyght as sir Trystrames is sholde be founde to his fyrst lady and love untrew" (*Works* 435). This shocked reaction from Lancelot echoes his earlier response to the news of Sir Perys' crimes. For Lancelot, evidently, Tristram's transgression is as serious as Sir Perys', and Lancelot declares himself henceforth Tristram's enemy. Tristram is eventually able to explain his situation and thus receive Lancelot's forgiveness. No longer the chaste young knight of *The*

*Tale of Sir Launcelot* (as D.S. Brewer remarks, neither Guinevere nor Isolde passes the magical test of the drinking horn (44)), Lancelot has become *de facto* the lover of another man's wife, and that man his king. Yet, as we have seen, Malory maintains Lancelot's superiority as a knight. Unlike Lancelot, Gawain is given little to set in the balance against his failings, and in consequence it is not difficult for the reader to condemn his frequent impulsive transgressions against the chivalric code. Yet despite what we know to be Lancelot's greater transgression, that is, treason against his king, we are continually reminded by Malory of Lancelot's nobility as a knight and faithfulness as a lover (a virtue definitely not shared by Gawain!).

In such a situation unequivocal condemnation of Lancelot becomes impossible. Nonetheless, what is happening in *The Book of Tristram* is that chivalric idealism is being overwhelmed by a reality that is incomprehensible to the inhabitants of Arthur's world. In a seemingly peaceful world of politics and courtly amusements, human passion, unchecked by any supernatural power, is becoming increasingly destructive. It is this complication that is being reflected in Lancelot, so obviously human and therefore erring, yet at the same time so evidently noble. In *The Book of Tristram*, Lancelot's nobility is called repeatedly into question as a result of the destructive aspect of passion, the superficial control imposed by the Round Table's code of conduct begins to break down, and the unpredictable nature of existence resurfaces. Thus the

cowardly and treacherous Mark is able to win a battle against the good Sir Amaunte: "by mysadventure kynge Marke smote sir Amaunte thorow the body; and yet was sir Amaunte in the ryghtuous quarell" (*Works* 592). Two maidens voice the court's perplexity: "A, swete Jesu that knowyste all hydde thynges! Why sufferyst Thou so false a traytoure to venqueyshe and sle a trewe knyght that faught in a ryghteous quarell!" (*Works* 593). In consequence of this battle Lancelot pursues and captures Mark, but is obliged by his oath of knighthood to grant him mercy. Arthur also deals with Mark according to the code of conduct obtaining in the chivalric and courtly world of Camelot and makes "a brokyn love day" (*Works* 595) between Mark and Tristram. But Mark is a "fayre speker and false thereundir" (*Works* 595) and the Arthurian code is not his, as Lancelot angrily points out: "Now fye on that acorde! For ye shall here that he shall destroy sir Trystram other put hym into preson, for he is the most cowarde and the vylaunste kynge and knyght that is now lyvyng" (*Works* 609). Lancelot's perception here contrasts with the blinkered idealism of Arthur and Tristram who ignore Lancelot's warnings, and seem unaware that the passions around them cannot be controlled by a set of rules, however noble. Lancelot has acted in strict accordance with the conditions of the Pentecostal Oath, but this is no longer the world of *The Tale of Sir Launcelot* in which Lancelot's display of mercy to an ignoble character is justified by the later circumstances of the man's life. Mark remains unreformed and eventually destroys Tristram.

It is more than ever apparent in *The Book of Sir Tristram* that knighthood--even Round Table knighthood--is no guarantee of good conduct. Here men may be "noble knyghtes of their handys" (*Works* 717) yet "falsse and full of treson" (*Works* 717). While the real enemies escape unrecognized, friends fight with friends. A knight disguised now becomes unquestionably sinister, no longer seeking, like Gareth or La Cote, to establish his worth through noble deeds, but fighting and killing inexplicably. We learn that Sir Lancelot is the strange knight with the "coverde shyld" (*Works* 569) who has been challenging fellow Round Table knights, wounding his own kinsmen and killing young Sir Galardene "that would have prevyde a good knyght" (*Works* 564). His conduct is equally reprehensible later when, apparently driven by the "grete maystry" (*Works* 740) of love, he seeks to prove by force against Lamorak that Guinevere is "the fayreste lady . . . in the worlde" (*Works* 487). For this uncharacteristic display in the finest tradition of courtly love he is justly rebuked by Bleoberis:

My lorde Sir Lancelot, I wyste you never so  
 mysseadvysed as ye be at thys tyme, for sir Lamerok  
 seyth to you but reson and knyghtly. For I warne you,  
 I have a lady and methynkith that she ys the fayryste  
 lady of the worlde. Were thys a grete reson that ye  
 sholde be wrothe with me for such langage? And well  
 ye wote that sir Lamorak ys a noble knyght as I knowe  
 ony lyvyng, and he hath oughte you and all us ever

good wyll. Therefore, I pray you be fryndis. (*Works* 487)

Bleoberis' speech, notable for its sturdy common sense is, as Vinaver points out, part of a scene original to Malory. According to Vinaver it contains "an argument which, if used consistently by knights-errant, would have saved them many a battle and destroyed the whole fabric of courtly chivalry" (*Works* 1470), and he suggests that Malory was unconscious of its implications. Yet this is the only example of such a quarrel in Malory, and is a clear violation of the Pentecostal Oath by one of its greatest adherents. It is an obvious rejection of the concept of courtly love by a writer whose knights are motivated more by their desire for honour and glory than for the love of a lady. Lancelot, as ever the mirror of chivalry, is being used here to reflect what is happening to chivalry in the world of *The Book of Sir Tristram*. His challenge to Lamorak illustrates the potential for destruction of a passion that cannot be controlled by an ideology divorced from reality. It is in this book of human emotion and human companionship that sexual jealousy drives King Mark to destroy a once-favoured nephew, and causes Palomides to sacrifice his honour as a knight. Here both Lancelot and Tristram, exiled from the women they love, suffer the worst of fates for a Malorian hero and lose their identities in the oblivion of madness.

The strengths and weaknesses of the principles of chivalry represented by Lancelot, Tristram, and Lamorak are highlighted by the comments of Sir Dinadan. Dinadan in Malory is a light-hearted,

reasonable man whose observations on knightly conduct reveal both the nobility and short-sightedness of Arthurian idealism. Dinadan is set apart from knights like Lancelot and Tristram by his common-sense approach to knighthood, yet his undoubted courage and good humour are a passport to the respect and affection of the Round Table brotherhood to which he belongs. He is thus given a certain objectivity which lends credibility to his assessment of chivalric ideals and of the knights who live by them. Although he does not have quite the authority of the magical or miraculous tests of worth scattered through Malory's romances, he provides a more human evaluation of what constitutes good and bad knighthood in Malory. Dinadan, for example, strikes shrewdly at the heart of King Mark's jealousy and cowardice when he berates him after his failure to beat Lamorak: "because ye are not of worshyp, ye hate all men of worship" (*Works* 581), he tells Mark. Mark reminds Dinadan that he refused to fight Lamorak, but to this taunt Dinadan sensibly replies that "hit is ever worshyp to a knyght to refuse that thyng that he may not attayne" (*Works* 581). Dinadan calmly recognizes, and accepts, his own limitations, and renders ridiculous the code that demands that men ignore these and imperil their lives. Dinadan's own code of honour is manifest a little later when he is assailed by Sir Berluse while conducting Mark to Arthur. Because he has promised to accompany Mark, Dinadan swallows his distaste for Mark's company and defends him against the vengeful Berluse. "Thorow the grete force of sir Dinadan"

(Works 583) Berluse is defeated, whereupon Dinadan is obliged to save Berluse from Mark who is "but a murtherer" (Works 583). Dinadan repeatedly attempts to get Mark to joust with hostile knights they meet on their way, but Mark refuses, revealing his cowardice, which contrasts with Dinadan's valour. Eventually Mark runs away, ridding Dinadan of a most unwelcome companion, and preventing him from having to break his word. Later Dinadan refuses to joust with a knight who challenges him, because he has no wish to joust. When the knight admits that he has challenged Dinadan "for loove and nat of hate" (Works 604), Dinadan points out the illogicality of such "harde love" (Works 605). He then avoids the charge of cowardice by suggesting they joust at King Arthur's court, whereupon his challenger asks him his name. On learning who he is, the knight tells Dinadan that he knows him for "a good knyght and a jantyll" (Works 605), and he declares his love for Dinadan. Dinadan's gentle wisdom has revealed the value of a very human common-sense in any code of conduct. Unlike many of his fellow knights, Dinadan is able to understand the limitations of man's control over his life. Because of his own observance of high standards of conduct, he is able to comment upon these limitations without jeopardising his reputation or his relationship with good knights like Tristram. Thus he is able unrebuked to tell Tristram, unhorsed by Palomides, that "here may a man prove, be he never so wyse but he myght be oversayne, and he rydyth well that never felle" (Works 516). Knights in *The Book of Sir Tristram*,

then, may be judged to some extent by their friendship with Dinadan, who loves "all good knyghts that were valyaunte" (*Works* 614) and consequently hates "all tho that were destroyers of good knyghtes" (*Works* 614). Agravain's and Mordred's positions on the scale of evil can thus be gauged by their hatred and eventual murder of Dinadan.

Agravain, Mordred, Gaheris, and Gawain have a significant presence in *The Book of Sir Tristram* as dark reminders of an earlier world governed by violence and revenge. Although capable of a limited loyalty and even, at times, of nobility, they represent in Malory the world of passion uncontrolled by a code of conduct that seeks to establish a brotherhood beyond the narrow confines of clan. When the Pentecostal code breaks down in the post-Grail world, the Arthurian fellowship descends into a primordial chivalric chaos in which both Arthur and Lancelot are caught up in a conflict neither of them wants. In *The Book of Sir Tristram* the importance of the Round Table ideals is recognized even as their inadequacies are exposed.

It is towards the end of the same book that the story of Lancelot and Elaine occurs, a story, as Benson remarks, "of seduction, illicit love, adultery and jealousy" (*Malory's Morte* 131). It contains a curious mixture of the magical and the miraculous, and appears to be set somewhere between the Arthurian world and the world of the Holy Grail. The begetting of the perfect knight Galahad is encompassed through a combination of

passion and enchantment in which even Morgan le Fay plays a part. This time Lancelot, pre-destined to be the father of Galahad, cannot escape the enchantment of women. His passion for Guinevere causes him to fall victim to Brusen's deception, yet Malory makes it clear that Lancelot is "ovircom" (*Works* 253) more by his destiny than by his sins:

The kynge knew well that sir Launcelot shulde gete a  
pusyll uppon his doughtir whyche shulde be called sir  
Galahad, the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntry  
shulde be brought oute of daunger; (*Works* 794)

Eleyne . . . knew that that same nyght sholde be bygotyn  
sir Galahad uppon her, that sholde preve the beste  
knyght of the worlde. (*Works* 795)

By frequently placing more emphasis than his source on both Lancelot's destiny and the greatness of the child that is to be conceived, Malory makes of Lancelot a victim and retains our sympathy for him. C. Batt remarks that "Malory . . . registers Lancelot's distress, in equal measure with the redemptive aspect of his deception, the resultant 'good knight' Galahad. Lancelot seems here . . . to be resisting his traditional narrative definition" (92). Lancelot is presented as an individual, protesting at a sexual betrayal. But although Elaine participates in the deception of Lancelot, she too is a victim:

I have obeyde me unto the prophesye that my fadir  
tolde me. And by hys commaundemante to fullfyl

this prophecie I have gyvyn the grettyst ryches  
and the fayrest floure that ever I had, and that  
is my maydenhode that I shall never have agayne.

(*Works* 796)

The expression of Elaine's devotion to Lancelot, however, makes it clear that she is a willing victim: "I woll lyve and dye wyth you, only for youre sake," she tells him, "and yf my lyff myght nat avayle you and my dethe myght avayle you, wyte you well I wolde dye for youre sake" (*Works* 825). Elaine's great love, allied with her youth and beauty, Lancelot's anguish, and Guinevere's jealousy, place the events immediately preceding the Grail Quest in a human context which takes precedence over the suggestion of supernatural interference, engaging our admiration for Lancelot's continuing powers of attraction and our sympathy for his predicament at a time when his pre-eminence as a knight is being called into question.

For while Lancelot languishes imprisoned by Morgan le Fay, Bors takes the adventures at Pelles' castle that should have been Lancelot's "had nat bene hys synne" (*Works* 801). During his sojourn there, Bors is informed by Pelles of the new requirements of worshipful knighthood in his "forayne contré" (*Works* 793): "here shall no knyght wynne worshyp but yf he be of worshyp hymselff and of good lyvyng, and that lovyth God and dredyth God" (*Works* 799). Malory is preparing us for Lancelot's entry into a new chivalric world where allegiance to God is of primary importance and an unequivocally Christian chastity is the greatest virtue. Emphasis

is placed upon the connection between Bors' purity--"for all women sir Bors was a vergyne sauff for one . . . . And sauff for her sir Bors was a clene mayden" (*Works* 799)--and his success in the adventure at Corbenic. Later, the Grail appears in direct response to the prayer of Sir Percival who, we are told, "has a glemerynge of the vessell . . . for he was a parfyte mayden" (*Works* 816). This connection is reinforced by Ector's later remark that the Grail "may not be sene . . . but yff hit be by [a parfyte] man" (*Works* 817).

In this new world Lancelot is abased and shamed. In a reversal of his previous adventures he is entrapped by two women, both enchantresses, and he threatens a defenceless maiden with death. No longer the protector of damsels, he is instead their victim. His passion for Guinevere causes his greatest humiliation. Informed of Lancelot's adventure at Corbenic, Guinevere banishes him. Out of his mind with grief, he wanders half-naked and the object of ridicule until discovered by Elaine and healed by the Holy Grail. No longer proud of his name, he conceals his identity from all who once knew him, calling himself "Le Shyvalere Mafete, 'the knyght that hath trespass'" (*Works* 827). Lancelot sees his trespass in purely secular terms; he has broken his oath of knighthood by threatening Elaine: "I know well I have done fowle to you whan I drewe my swerde to you to have slayne you" (*Works* 825), he tells her, and he grieves at his unwitting infidelity to Guinevere. In this book, Lancelot's passion for Guinevere draws him

away from the Grail world and back into the pre-Pentecostal Oath world of treason and enchantment. His Galahad aspect--we are told he was once christened Galahad "at the fountayne stone" (*Works* 796)--is submerged by the passionate pagan world of the Lady of the Lake, who afterwards named him Lancelot. Sir Bors is asked to inform Lancelot of his new status as one who "in . . . spyrytuall maters . . . shall have many hys bettyrs" (*Works* 801) and we must assume that he does so: "he founde sir Launcelot and tolde hym of the adventures that he had sene wyth Kynge Pelles at Corbyn" (*Works* 802). The implication is that, because of his illicit love for Guinevere, Lancelot has lost God's favour, yet without that love, Lancelot would never have been tricked into becoming the father of Galahad. The conflict between Lancelot the lover and Lancelot the great knight, first suggested in *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot* and brought into prominence in *The Book of Sir Tristram*, is to be further developed within the Christian framework of the Grail Quest, and ultimately resolved. A. Welsh points out the paradox of Lancelot's situation in which by choosing love he also chooses virtue: "For Guinevere he [Lancelot] attains and embodies all those chivalric values which at the end of Malory's story are commemorated in Sir Ector's eulogy over Lancelot" (491).

Both in this story, and afterwards in the *Tale of the Sankgreal*, Malory takes care to maintain our sympathy for the erring Lancelot. When Lancelot runs mad, such is the concern at his disappearance from court that twenty-six of Arthur's best knights go in search of

him. Sir Bors berates the queen for her treatment of Lancelot, reminding her (and the reader) of his "noblenes and curtesy . . . hys beauté and hys jantylnes" (*Works* 808). The chaste Sir Percival's concern for Lancelot is set side by side with his angry message to Kay and Mordred, who had mocked him when he was first made knight. We are thus reminded of Lancelot's kindness to Gareth and La Cote, and of his perception of nobility beneath an unimpressive exterior. Kay's mockery highlights Lancelot's goodness. Both Bors and Percival show promise in this new world. After his adventure at Corbenic Bors is told, "full worshypfully have ye encheved this, and bettir shall ye do hyreaftir" (*Works* 801) and Percival is pure enough to glimpse the Grail beyond the confines of Pelles' castle. Yet Bors says of Lancelot that he is "the beste knyght of oure bloode . . . all oure leder and oure succoure" (*Works* 808). And after a determined two-year search Percival finds Lancelot, but discovers his identity only after fighting with him. Horrified, Percival begs, and is immediately granted, Lancelot's forgiveness in an exchange that suggests Lancelot's superiority: "'for Goddys sake forgyff myne offencys that I have here done'. 'Sir, hyt ys sone forgyvyn', seyde sir Launcelot" (*Works* 830).

Throughout the period of his madness Lancelot's innate nobility is apparent despite his rags. "Doute ye nat," says Sir Blyaunte's dwarf, "he [Lancelot] hath bene a man of grete worshyp" (*Works* 819). Later, a hermit, even after being attacked by Lancelot,

describes him as "the goodlyeste man that ever I sawe" (*Works* 822). Wherever he goes, Lancelot's condition incites a pity that is mixed with admiration for his strength or for his powers of attraction, and in this way Malory encourages a similar response from his readers. This is strengthened by the love Elaine bears for Lancelot. Because of his love for the queen, Lancelot is denied the happiness of a relationship with a woman both good and beautiful who worships him and who has already borne him a son.

In the story of Lancelot and Elaine we are shown Lancelot at the nadir of his career as a knight. At the same time we are given further indications of the spiritual dimension that is to be added to his character in the Grail Quest. Lancelot is the only knight worthy to father Galahad, "the beste knyght of the worlde" (*Works* 795) who will "wynne the Sankgreall" (*Works* 791). He is himself permitted to see the Grail within Corbenic, and is afterwards healed by it.

In the story of the Sankgreall Lancelot will begin the slow climb back to a Malorian pre-eminence as Malory's definition of knighthood is clarified and reaffirmed in the light of the new conditions imposed on chivalry in the Grail world.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Rehabilitation of Lancelot

In *The Tale of the Sankgreall*, says S. Ness Ihle, "Malory's emphasis on earthly morality and human brotherhood causes him to be most concerned with the sincere but flawed quest of the best of all earthly knights" (127). In the following chapter Malory's presentation of Lancelot is examined in relation to other Grail characters, and as compared with the Lancelot of the French Vulgate *La Queste del Saint Graal*. Through Lancelot's confrontation with the demands of the Grail world we see how the deeply spiritual nature of Malory's reverence for earthly relationships becomes apparent. Malory uses the Grail world to give new depth to his conception of knighthood, a knighthood founded on the human loyalty and love extolled in earlier romances. He repeatedly rejects the more orthodox interpretation of Lancelot's character found in the *Queste*, and ultimately abandons Galahad's heavenly chivalry in favour of a noble, but human, and therefore imperfect, knighthood that yet retains an element of Christian approval. Predictably, Malory uses his "beste" (*Works* 267) knight, of proven nobility, to typify the human quest for perfection at its highest level. Lancelot is not in Malory the sinful, worldly knight of the *Queste* left behind by more worthy Grail seekers, humiliated and chastised at every turn. Rather, he is the epitome of a noble, though erring, human being, striving to achieve the impossible. Malory is less concerned than the *Queste* with explaining the nature of perfection. He therefore omits or condenses many of the *Queste's* lengthy Christian interpretations of the various dreams, visions

and adventures experienced by the Grail seekers. Lancelot's struggles engage our sympathy because Malory allows him to retain his dignity while revealing Lancelot's very human limitations. To this end Malory uses several of the characters in his Grail story to reflect directly or indirectly upon the character and actions of Lancelot. Guinevere, Bors, Percival, Gawain, and even Galahad contribute to the continuing glorification of Lancelot in this new spiritual setting. Guinevere is the first to attribute Galahad's evident nobility to his lineage--specifically his relationship to Lancelot. When Galahad first appears at court, she tells her ladies "he must nedys be a noble man for so hys fadir ys that hym begate" (*Works* 862). Similarly Lancelot's pre-eminence over Galahad is maintained by her in a far more significant genealogical hierarchy:

for sir Lancelot ys com but of the eyghth degré frome  
oure Lord Jesu Cryst and thys sir Galahad ys th[e]  
nyneth degré frome Oure Lord Jesu Cryst. Therefore I  
dare sey they be the grettist jantillmen of the worlde.

(*Works* 865)

Malory's very English preoccupation with social position, implicit in many of his tales, is particularly evident in *The Book of Tristram*, where a noble knight must be of gentle birth, where all true knights are noble, and where Tristram is extolled as the product par excellence of this fusion of birth and character.

This, however, is the first explicit connection, not mentioned in the *Queste*, between religion and a noble knighthood of which Lancelot and his son Galahad are prime examples. Even Bors' achievements do not, in Malory, overshadow Lancelot's. We are never allowed to forget Lancelot's social position as head of the clan to which Bors belongs. Bors' respect for and loyalty to Lancelot are never diminished, although he succeeds for once where Lancelot fails. Bors' innate goodness and determined chastity are as essential to his success as is his deep affection for his brother Lionel which keeps him from the sin of fratricide until God intervenes to part the brothers. Yet despite all these qualities he remains in the end subordinate in our eyes to Lancelot. At the conclusion of the Grail story he takes part in a touching exchange of loyalties with Lancelot, in which Lancelot takes the initiative and where each reassumes his accustomed position in the social order:

Than Sir Lancelot toke sir Bors in hys armys and seyde  
 'cousyn ye are ryght well com to me! For [all that  
 ever I may do for you and for yours, ye shall fynde my  
 poure body redy atte all tymes whyle the spyryte is in  
 hit, and that I promyse you feythfully, and never to  
 fayle. And wete ye well, gentyl cousyn sir Bors], ye  
 and I shall never departe in sundir whylis oure lyvys  
 may laste.' 'Sir,' seyde he, 'as ye woll, so woll I'."

(Works 1063)

The establishment of Bors as one of the worthiest knights in terms of the Grail quest reflects upon Lancelot, his clan leader, and invests their relationship with a significance at once spiritual and human as it is confirmed within the Grail world, strengthened by their experience of the Grail, yet limited by their mortality. The Grail quest over, Lancelot goes on to inspire the love of a good and beautiful maiden, and to perform the miracle of healing, while Bors' achievements fade gently into the background.

Malory's delineation of the character of Percival also seems aimed at enhancing the character of Lancelot. Percival's instinctive and occasionally blundering innocence allows him none of the anguish of the flawed Lancelot. His speeches and prayers are condensed, and Malory omits the efforts at interpretation allowed Percival in the *Queste*. Having narrowly escaped temptation in the guise of a beautiful maiden, Percival is confronted by a priest-like visitor who explains to him that the maiden was, in fact, the devil. Percival, healed in soul and body by the visitor's presence, attempts to explain who he must be:

Si sai de voir, se vos demoriez toz dis o moi, je  
n'avroie ja ne fain ne soif; et se je l'osoie dire, je  
diroie que vos estes li Pains vis qui descent des ciex,  
dont nus ne menjue dignement qui pardurablement ne  
vive. (Pauphilet *La Queste del Saint Graal* 115)

(And I know beyond question that if you stayed  
with me forever I would be neither hungry nor thirsty,

and if I dare say it, I would say that you are the Bread of Life which descends from Heaven, which is a pledge of everlasting life to all who partake worthily thereof.)

(All translations from French are my own.)

Only Lancelot, remarkable for his perception in the pre-Grail world, has the capacity for unassisted interpretation. An example of this ability occurs in the Lancelot section of Malory's Grail romance, where Lancelot leaves the house of a hermit and meets with an old white-robed man, presumably a nobleman-knight turned hermit. He tells Lancelot that he will have no power to see the Sankgreal, "and that ys longe on your synne, and ellys ye were more abeler than ony man lyvyng" (*Works* 927). Lancelot appears to understand immediately what his sin is and, weeping, asks what he must do to atone for it. By contrast, in the *Queste* the hermit with whom Lancelot has been staying spends three days praising Galahad and warning Lancelot against mortal sin. Having left the hermit and arrived at a chapel where he is shown a corpse, Lancelot is unable to see the fiend who appears beside it: "Sire, fet Lancelot, qui fu cil qui tant a parlé a vos? Son cors ne poï je veoir" (*Queste* 122). ("Sir," said Lancelot, "Who was it that spoke to you at such length? I could not see him.") In Malory, Lancelot's vision is linked with the holy man's: "And with that they saw the fyende in in an hydeous fygure" (*Works* 925). Having exorcised the fiend, the *Queste* hermit then spends five and half pages informing Lancelot

(and the reader) how lustful, proud, and impatient Lancelot has become as a result of his illicit love for Guinevere. All of this is omitted in Malory. Lancelot then, in both texts, dons a hair shirt, promises to abjure meat and wine and to hear mass each day, and departs. Malory thus shifts the emphasis from Lancelot's sinfulness to his desire for atonement, from his weakness to his worthiness. In further confirmation of this the damsel Lancelot meets promises him an adventure (always a good sign in the Grail world where more sinful knights wander adventureless and lost), saying:

I wote what adventure ye seke, for ye were before  
tyme nerar than ye be now, and yet shall ye se hit  
more opynly than ever ye dud, and that shall ye  
undirstonde in shorte tyme. (*Works* 928)

Not long after this Lancelot meets, and in Malory challenges, the knight who had stolen his horse and arms in an earlier humiliating incident. In the *Queste* it is the other knight who issues the challenge, and after defeating him, Lancelot does not retrieve his own horse and arms as he does in Malory. The *Queste* author clearly considers these accoutrements unnecessary to heavenly knighthood, and Malory just as clearly sees them as symbols of knightly worth. Lancelot is allowed to retrieve his dignity and is re-established as a knight within the context of the Grail world.

Gawain is not so fortunate. Established in Malory as the type of what B. Kennedy refers to as the "Heroic knight" (95)--violent,

primitive, and governed by clan interest--Gawain loses much of the stature he possesses in earlier tales, where his heroism, early innocence and courtesy are on a par with Lancelot's in the *Morte*. In Malory Gawain is lustful, envious, vengeful, and frequently hot-headed and is repeatedly used as a foil for Lancelot. Interested only in the worldly concerns of knighthood, he sees no need for penance, feeling that an errant knight's sufferings are enough: "I may do no penaunce, for we knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne" (*Works* 892). Gawain's impatience places him in direct contrast to the penitent, soul-searching Lancelot. Later Gawain refuses to listen to the counsel of one of the many good men that are scattered throughout the Grail forest: "'Sir,' seyde Sir Gawayne, 'and I had leyser I wolde speke with you, but my felow Sir Ector ys gone and abithe me yondir bynethe the hylle'" (*Works* 949). In Gawain's impatience is implicit his incomprehension of the values of the Grail world, where sinful knights meet with no adventures that are not "mysadventures" (*Works* 945). Gawain represents here, as in the rest of Malory's romances, a primitive, violent and pagan world. He makes no attempt to understand the Grail world, and although he is punished by being obliged to kill a man who turns out to be a fellow Round Table knight, he comprehends this "mysadventure" (*Works* 945) only in terms of his own world of loyalty: "the tone sworne brother hath slayne the other" (*Works* 945). There is no indication that he understands the reason for his punishment, although he feels its depth, nor does he

request enlightenment from Nasciens, to whom he makes his confession. The *Queste's* Gauvain approaches Nasciens very differently. When asked by Nasciens what has brought them to him, Gauvain replies for himself and Hestor: "la grant fain et le grant desirrier que nos avions de parler a vos por estre counseillié de ce dont nous estions desconseillié et por estre certain de ce dont nos somes en error" (*Queste* 155) (the great hunger and the great desire that we had to talk to you to be enlightened where we were in darkness and to be made aware of what we are doing wrong).

Gawain's inadequacies in the Grail world place Lancelot's efforts within a human perspective. Gawain reminds us that Lancelot, too, is human, and that even one of the most fallible Round Table knights has a certain nobility. Gawain is above all loyal--to members of his own clan, one of whom is his uncle, King Arthur, and even to Lancelot, against whom he refuses to plot. If unable to emulate the great nobility of such knights as Lancelot and his own brother Gareth, he can at least recognize their worth. It is Gawain who links Lancelot with the other Grail knights, Bors, Perceval and Galahad: "they foure have no peerys" (*Works* 941), he says, and it is Gawain who in the same breath reminds us of Lancelot's brotherhood in humanity with the rest of the Round Table knights: "And if one thyng were not [in] Sir Lancelot he had none felow of an earthly man; but he ys as we be but if he take the more payne uppon hym" (*Works* 941). Gawain's comments and his actions focus our attention on the "payne" (*Works* 941) Lancelot is taking.

S.C.B. Atkinson points out that the black and white knights Lancelot encounters represent earthly knights, unconcerned with penance or confession, and heavenly knights chaste and receptive to God's will (139). Lancelot falls between Gawain's uncomprehending sinfulness and Galahad's enlightened purity. As Malory continues to defend Lancelot's position we begin to understand how his definition of a noble chivalry encompasses human fallibility and at the same time celebrates human endeavour. It is by reminding us of Lancelot's human nature that Malory makes both poignant and significant Lancelot's struggle to attain perfection. To this end, in the midst of divine chastisement and mortification of the flesh, Malory's Lancelot occasionally finds some very human consolation denied to his counterpart in the more ascetic world of the *Queste*. Thus the grieving Lancelot, prevented mysteriously and frustratingly from approaching the Grail (the *Queste* chapel has a more comprehensible, hence less emotive barrier of bars), "sorowed tyll hit was day and herde the fowlys synge; than somewhat he was comforted" (*Works* 941). In the *Queste* the birdsong has quite the opposite effect:

Et quant li jorz parut biaux et clers et li oiselet  
 commencerent a chanter parmi le bois et li soleux  
 comença a luire par mi les arbres, et il voit le biau  
 tens et il ot le chant des oisiaus dont il s'ert maintes  
 foiz esjoiz, et lors se voit desgarni de toutes choses,  
 et de ces armes et de son cheval, et bien set de voir

que Nostre Sires s'est corrociez a lui ; si ne cuide james venir a cel pointe qu'il truist chose ou monde qui sa joie li poïst rendre. (*Queste* 62)

(And when the day dawned clear and beautiful and the birds began to sing in the forest and the sun to shine amidst the trees and he saw the fair weather and heard the birdsong which had been so many times his delight, and then saw himself, deprived of everything, of his arms, and of his horse, then he realized that Our Lord was indeed angry with him and he thought that never again would he find anything in the world which could bring him happiness.)

Yet Lancelot's awareness of his sin remains undiminished in Malory: "he wyst well God was displesed with hym" (*Works* 896). A similar reminder and acceptance of Lancelot's mortal frailties occurs later when Lancelot boards a mysterious ship where he discovers the body of Perceval's sister. After sailing for a month sustained "with the grace of the Holy Ghost" (*Works* 1011) and with only a corpse for company, Lancelot seeks a little diversion and "on a nyght wente to play hym by the watirs syde, for he was somewhat wery of the shippe" (*Works* 1011-1012). The *Queste*, on the other hand, makes a point of the fact that "il ot einsy lonc tens alé sanz nul foiz issir fors de la nef" (*Queste* 250) (He continued in this way for a long time without once leaving the vessel). Although critics are divided as to the significance of this passage in Malory,

Vinaver believing it to indicate Lancelot's spiritual or religious instability (Tucker 87-88) and C.S. Lewis seeing it as no more than an understandable human desire to "stretch the legs" (15), confirmation that the passage is not intended to be a criticism of Lancelot's conduct is given by the subsequent appearance of the man he most wishes to see--his son Galahad--with whom he is permitted to spend the next six months on the same ship in perfect happiness.

The most obvious differences between Malory's treatment of the Grail story and that of the author of the French *Queste* lie in Malory's handling of the respective positions of Galahad and Lancelot. If Lancelot's chivalry is to be given a spiritual dimension, it is as essential to Malory as to the French author that the religious atmosphere of the story be maintained. It is equally important to Malory that that spirituality remain linked to the Arthurian world of ideals and earthly knighthood, since it is to that world that Lancelot must return, and it is in that world that Lancelot's heart lies. The author of the *Queste*, however, with no continuation of his story to consider and no earthly concerns to hinder him, was at liberty to end his story at the gates of heaven. In the relationship between Lancelot and his son are contained the themes of knighthood, brotherhood, and the bonds of love so familiar in Malory's earlier romances and now invested with the deeper significance of the Grail world. It is a significance which remains--beyond Arthur's death and beyond Lancelot's. Yet their relationship reminds us also of the darker

side of the human condition in Malory, the incomprehensibility of existence, the destiny so closely linked with identity, and even, as we saw in the tale of Galahad's conception, the power of human passion. Galahad is established not only as he who "shall wyne the Sankgreall" (*Works* 791), but also as the child who takes his father's identity. Lancelot, once also named Galahad, is informed at the commencement of the Grail adventures that his identity, his reputation, and hence, by implication, his destiny, have been usurped:

ye were thys day in the morne the best knyght of the worlde. But who sholde say so now he shelde be a lyer for there ys now one bettir than ye be, and well hit ys preved by the adventure of the swerde whereto ye durste nat sette to your honde. And that ys the change of youre name and levynge. (*Works* 863)

In this last sentence Lancelot's past, present and future become one. What he was he is no longer; what he is now determines what he will be. We learn that Lancelot's destiny, once undecided (Balin's sword, according to Merlin, was for Galahad or Lancelot), has been determined by his own actions, and his actions, we discover in the Grail quest, have been ruled by the passions which make him who he is. It is the intensity of the struggle of the will over passion, Lancelot's desire for a Christian perfection set against his devotion to Guinevere, Bors' wish to help a maiden beset by her cousin complicated by his love for his brother, which

gives such human interest to Malory's Grail story. When Lancelot learns from a hermit that the good knight he has been following is his son Galahad, he suggests that Galahad's prayers might help him in his endeavours as a knight in the Grail world. The hermit's reply--"thou faryst mucche the better for hys prayer" (*Works* 931)--echoes an earlier comment by Tristram, when Lancelot's sponsorship had been a passport to true knighthood. Sir Ironsyde tells Tristram that Gareth "of sir Launcelot . . . was made knyght" (*Works* 350). "Therefore," responds Tristram, "is he mucche the bettir" (*Works* 350). Galahad has assumed the role played by Lancelot in the pre-Grail world.

Galahad, predestined even before his conception to fill the Siege Perilous and achieve the Holy Grail, is later described by Percival's aunt as one who "worthith all by myracle" (*Works* 906) and who "shall never be overcom of none erthly mannys hande" (*Works* 906). Perpetually in contact with the Grail's "grete clerenesse" (*Works* 1015), with no human weaknesses and no earthly commitments to overcome, he sails through the adventures waiting for him. He knows, and we know, his destiny. Even the drawing of the sword has given up its mystery to destiny--the sword is for Galahad alone. Galahad, in short, is not very interesting, and Malory seems not very interested in him. Yet Malory's characters, even Galahad, have a human forcefulness lacking in their *Queste* counterparts which makes them appear more than puppets of an manipulative destiny, providential or pagan. Thus Galahad, silent in the

*Queste*, is allowed, in Malory's text, to express his desire to become a knight. His refusal to accompany Lancelot to Camelot is accepted, whereas in the *Queste* Lancelot turns to the nuns with whom Galahad is staying and seeks their permission to take Galahad to Arthur's court. When he confronts the entombed fiend, at the abbey where Evelake, his ancestor, has left him a shield, Malory's Galahad is authoritative and decisive. He comes unprompted to the abbey where he heaves up the tombstone, exorcising the fiend within. He subsequently orders that the false knight's body be removed from the holy ground. In the *Queste* Galahad returns to the abbey at his squire's request and the fiend leaves the tomb before Galahad has a chance to move the stone. Galahad then asks for instruction as to what he should do next, and it is an old man who gives the command for the body's removal. In the *Queste* Galahad acts at the request of others.

Percival and Bors display similar moments of Malorian independence to add a little knightly leaven to the dough of their submissive piety. Led astray by his passions, Malory's Percival declares: "Sitthyn my fleyssh woll be my mayster I shall punyssh hit" (*Works* 919), and stabs himself in the thigh as a deliberate, if rather drastic, act of atonement. In the *Queste*, the wound he inflicts upon himself is more an expression of his grief. It is only afterwards that he decides to offer it as atonement for his sin:

Si est tant dolenz qu'il voldroit estre morz. Lors

trest s'espee dou fuerre et s'en fiert si durement  
 qu'il l'embat en sa senestre cuisse.... Et quant il  
 voit ce, si dist: << Biax sire Diex, ce est en amende  
 de ce que je me sui meffet vers vos.>> (*Queste* 110)  
 (He was so miserable that he wanted to die. Then he  
 drew his sword from its scabbard and struck himself so  
 fiercely that he drove it deep into his left thigh.  
 And when he saw what he had done he said, "Blessed  
 Lord God, this was in atonement for the affront I  
 have done thee.")

Bors' unhesitating acceptance as one of the conditions of his quest that he must fast until he sits at the table of the Grail underlines a determination that is absent in the equivalent episode in the French text. There Bohort is more practical, and awaits assurance from the priest that what he asks "vaudra a l'ame et . . . sostendra assez le cors" (*Queste* 166) (will benefit the soul and provide adequately for the need of the body) before granting the priest's request. Percival's sister is allowed her own share of determination in Malory, and as a result is more strikingly human than her less independent counterpart in the *Queste*. Although she is no less pious in Malory's version, her piety seems to be more an act of will than a submission to destiny. This is particularly evident in the story of the bloodletting. Malory's damsel urges her attendant knights, Galahad, Bors, and Percival her brother, to go to the castle to learn the reason for its unpleasant custom

despite the danger to herself: "for Goddis love," she says, "go we thydir and spare not for me" (*Works* 1002). The *Queste's* damsel is less forceful: "alez i, puis qu'il vos en prie" (*Queste* 239). (go there, since they beg it of you). Having learned that a maiden's blood is required to heal a sick lady, Malory's damsel makes a rapid decision to help her and, although Galahad warns her that it may mean her death, she declares to the knights of the castle: "to-morne I shall [yelde] you your custom of this castell" (*Works* 1003). In the place of the *Queste* damsel's request for instruction--"Or me dites que j'en feré" (*Queste* 240) (Now tell me what I should do)--and, afterwards, permission to do what she feels is right--"Si vos pri por Dieu que vos le m'otroiez" (*Queste* 240), (I beg of you in God's name to let me do this)--Malory emphasizes his maiden's assertiveness:

And than there was made grete joy over there, [more  
than] was made tofore, for ellis had there bene  
mortall warre uppon the morne; natwithstondynge  
she wolde none other, whether they wolde or nolde.

(*Works* 1003)

Evidently Malory favours a more active Christianity than the author of the *Queste*. More importantly, however, Malory's alterations to the delineation of these virtuous characters give them a human reality--determined, decisive and independent--which has little in common with the traditional medieval ideal of a meek and passive acceptance of God's will. In this fusion of self-

determinism and Christian piety, as in his continuing praise of Lancelot at every opportunity, we can see Malory working towards a definition of chivalry which, though based in Christianity, allows for the inclusion of more earthly failings and virtues.

Yet at the same time we are continually reminded of the limitations of even the noblest of mortals, and in this the miracles of the Grail world play an important role. Galahad never asks the meaning of the miracles in which he plays a part, and the explanations nonetheless offered by the various monks and hermits are frequently so condensed as to leave the reader more perplexed than enlightened. However, the essentially religious nature of these experiences is never obscured. We are, in effect, placed in the position of the majority of Malory's Grail seekers who are required, as John F. Plummer puts it, "to feel and believe the true and holy, but not necessarily to understand it" (117). As Plummer says, when Malory's knights pass Grail tests it is because of purity, not understanding (117). This is, of course, particularly obvious in the case of the naïve and almost blundering Percival, whose safety lies in his instinct towards good, but it is also apparent in the more painstaking Bors, who, forced to choose between saving a loved brother and a defenceless and innocent maiden, makes the right choice because of an innate impulse towards purity. The adventures that await Galahad--concerning the shield that "behovith unto no man" (*Works* 878) but him, the fiend who recognizes him from the tomb, the two knights who defeat Sir

Melias, and the voice which bids him do away the evil customs of the Castle of Maidens--not only provide strong evidence of a predestination which Ihle believes Malory removes from the Grail story (112) but also serve the purpose of separating Galahad from the other, more fallible, Round Table knights, many of whom, including Bors and Percival, and especially Lancelot, suffer physical and emotional torment or even death in the pursuit of the Grail.

In this way Malory maintains within the new Grail world the essential incomprehensibility and ambiguity of the human experience and prepares us to accept and sympathise with Lancelot's failures and appreciate his successes in such a world. For Galahad it is a world of "grete clereness" (*Works* 999,1011,1015) and purpose, where the Divinity is immanent and His will clear. For the majority of his fellow Round Table knights, however, it is a dangerous world of dreams and visions where the rules and ideals they have lived by are no longer adequate. It is, no less than the Arthurian world of knight-errantry presented in *The Book of Sir Tristram*, the unstable world of Galahad's last message to his father, where uncontrolled passion, now called sin, may lead a man to his doom. Perfection cannot exist in an imperfect world, and the perfect knights Galahad and Percival can never return to Arthur's court. Of the Grail knights only Bors, with one stain on his purity, and Lancelot are able to resume their former lives at Arthur's court when the Grail has gone, but it is Lancelot alone

who, for all his human failures, brings the healing power of the Grail world back to Camelot.

By dint of minimising references to Galahad's near-divinity and moderating the *Queste's* insistence on Lancelot's failings, Malory manages to shift the focus of the Grail story from Galahad's perfection as a heavenly knight to Lancelot's noble humanity so that the story of the Sankgreal becomes not so much an exploration of what it is to be a true Christian as of what it is to be human. Although Galahad loses none of the perfection that is his in the *Queste*, Malory pays less attention to him than to Lancelot, and avoids praising his perfections at Lancelot's expense. Galahad's impressive introduction to Arthur's court in the *Queste* as "Le Chevalier Desirré" (*Queste* 7) (The Desired Knight) is omitted in Malory where he is referred to simply as "a yonge knyght" (*Works* 859). The departure of the Grail seekers in Malory ends not with Galahad's leading role as the one "por ce que comencemenz avoit esté de la Queste" (*Queste* 26) (by whom the Quest was begun) but with Lancelot's parting from Guinevere to join "hys felyship that abode hys commyng" (*Works* 872). The entombed fiend addresses Galahad not as "sainte chose" (*Queste* 36) (holy creature) but by his name. Malory reduces the number of comparisons between Galahad and Christ, and rather than refer to him as "li Bons Chevaliers" (*Queste* 34,35,36) (the Good Knight) prefers to call him Galahad. Lancelot's role, on the other hand, is enhanced by Malory as much as the confines of his source will allow. Confronted by a

hermit who bids him "hyde none olde synne" (*Works* 897) Lancelot, albeit reluctantly, confesses his love "oute of mesure longe" (*Works* 897) for the queen. Malory thus retains a sympathy for his Lancelot which the reader cannot feel for the Lancelot of the *Queste*, who has to be threatened and cajoled before he will admit to a sin he fears to reveal:

Et Lancelot pense un petit, come cil qui onques ne  
reconnut l'afere de lui et de la reine . . . Et neporec  
il le diroit volentiers, mes il n'ose, come cil qui  
plus est coarz que hardiz. Et li preudons l'amoneste  
toutevoies de regehir son pechié at de laissier  
le tout, car autrement est il honiz s'il ne fet ce  
qu'il li amoneste, et li promet la vie pardurable  
por le gehir et enfer por le celer." (*Queste* 65)

(And Lancelot hesitated, for no-one had ever known  
about his relationship with the queen before.

Nevertheless he would have gladly spoken but he did  
not dare, being more fearful than courageous. And  
the hermit kept urging him to confess his sin and  
renounce it utterly, for unless he did he would be  
shamed. He promised him eternal life if he confessed  
but hell if he refused.)

Malory shifts the *Queste's* heavy emphasis on concupiscence in this episode to unknightliness; Lancelot has taken up his battles not for God but to win Guinevere's love, and such is his devotion to

her that he has been willing to "do batayle were hit ryght other wronge" (*Works* 897), in direct contravention of the Round Table oath. But the extent to which the French and English authors regarded Lancelot's liaison with Guinevere as contaminating is revealed in the severity of the counsel offered by their respective hermits: "vos requier je . . . que vos me creantez que ja mes ne mefferoiz a vostre creator en fesant pechié mortel de la reine ne d'autre dame ne d'autre chose dont vos le doiez corrocier" (*Queste* 67) (I require of you that you swear to me that you will never again trespass against your Maker by committing mortal sin either with the queen or with any other woman, nor in any other way that would anger Him); "ye shall no more com in that quenys felyship as much as ye may forbere" (*Works* 817). When Lancelot has sworn in each case to adhere to the course of action required of him, the English hermit tells him: "loke that your harte and your mowth accorde . . . and I shall ensure you ye shall have the more worship than ever ye had" (*Works* 897), an assurance not offered in the *Queste*. Although Malory does not omit the explanation of the "mervayles wordes" (*Works* 897) of rebuke spoken to Lancelot at the Grail chapel, the explanation begins with words of comfort: "for hit semyth well God lovith you" (*Works* 897), and the subsequent elucidation is largely taken up with a list of the virtues and abilities with which God has endowed Lancelot. The *Queste's* Biblical reference to Matthew's good steward is omitted: "Toutes ces choses te presta Nostre Sires por ce que tu fusses ses

chevaliers et ses serjanz" (*Queste* 68-69) (with all these things were you endowed by Our Lord that you might be His knight and His steward). In Malory, Lancelot does not suffer the humiliation of being castigated by his social inferior, and whenever his sins defeat him, he is immediately re-established in our good opinion by his ready understanding of his fault, his humble acceptance of his punishment, and his determination to improve. His potential is continually placed before us side by side with his limitations--indeed neither is evident without the other. When Lancelot informs one of the holy men with whom he stays that he is seeking the Grail, his host replies: "ye shall have no power to se hit . . . . And that ys longe on your synne, and ellys ye were more abeler than ony man lyvyng" (*Works* 927). Yet another hermit tells Lancelot that he has good cause to be grateful to God "for of a synner erthely thou hast no pere as in knyghthode nother never shall have" (*Works* 930). Not long afterwards Lancelot is described in very similar terms by an anchoress: "of all erthly knyghtes I have most pit   of the, for I know well thou haste not thy pere of ony erthly synfull man" (*Works* 934). None of this emphasis, albeit conditional, on Lancelot's worth is found in the *Queste*. And although Malory's Lancelot does penance, hears Mass and bears "mekely" (*Works* 931) the chafing of his hair shirt, he does not spend hours contemplating his sinfulness, and, as a result, neither do we.

In elevating Lancelot beyond what the *Queste* author would

consider his due, Malory nevertheless does not obscure his fallibility. Lancelot, as we are continually reminded, is unstable in Christian terms and cannot approach the perfection of Galahad. This instability is a result of his inability to give up the relationship with Queen Guinevere which has led to his "vayne glory and . . . pryde" (*Works* 934) and forgetfulness of God. Yet Malory repeatedly glosses over the exact nature of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere; there is none of the French insistence on lusts and fever of the flesh ("eschaufement de char et . . . mauvese luxure" (*Queste* 80)). Instead, Lancelot is condemned largely for his pride and praised for abstaining from murder. Indeed it is to the latter that one hermit attributes Lancelot's achievement in the Grail quest:

the Sankgreall . . . apperith nat to no synners . . . and to good men signifieth othir thynges than murthir . . . as synfull as ever Sir Launcelot hath byn, sith that he wente into the queste of the Sankgreall he slew never man nother nought shall, tylle that he com to Camelot agayne; for he hath takyn [upon] hym to forsake synne.

(*Works* 948)

Malory repeatedly stresses the connection between knighthood and virtue, bringing into prominence knighthood's sacred aspect. Yet it is clear already that virtue for Malory is not the virtue extolled in his source. Gawain is chastised for not having taken "to knyghtly dedys and vertuous lyvyng" (*Works* 891) but in the *Queste*

he is told that he has failed in the duties of a knight to defend the church and serve God (*Queste* 54). Lancelot is advised to do "penance . . . and to sew knyghthode" (*Works* 899) and promises to be less wicked and "to sew knyghthode and to do fetys of armys" (*Works* 899). In the French source, Lancelot swears never to sin again with Guinevere "ne en autre" (*Queste* 71) (or with any others) and knighthood is never mentioned. Ihle feels that the insistence in Malory on the connection between an earthly brotherhood and the Holy Grail brings the Grail to the secular level of human relationships (132-133). Yet she also acknowledges that Malory's focus is on this brotherhood (127). Where, then, does the spiritual atmosphere of Malory's Grail romance, "one of the truest and one of the holiest in this world" (*Works* 847), come from? Malory does not, like the *Queste* author, use a *chevalerie terrienne* as a point of departure for the more significant exploration of "*chevalerie celestienne*" (*Works* xci). Instead, he uses a Christian framework to reveal the spiritual foundations of an earthly chivalric brotherhood. The world of the Grail allows him to spiritualize his Round Table fellowship, and the greatest example of that fellowship is not Galahad but Lancelot. For the author of the *Queste*, to be a good knight one must be above all a good Christian and abandon worldly considerations in God's service. Malory's emphasis is different: to be "a good trew lyvar" (*Works* 886) one must above all be a good knight, and strive to follow the path of virtue on earth, a path required not by Christianity but by

a knighthood founded in Christianity perhaps, but characterized above all by a human independence and nobility of spirit. Goodness, then, is still for Malory centred in the qualities displayed by Lancelot.

The central part played by Malory's Round Table brotherhood in this Grail story is underlined by the importance in it of the Round Table itself. In the French text the significance of the Round Table is that it is third in a line of sacred tables which includes the table of the Last Supper and the table of the Holy Grail. The sacred nature of the Round Table is thus confirmed and placed firmly within the framework of Christianity. By omitting any reference to Christian theology and repeating almost word for word the French description of the Round Table, Malory places it alone at the centre of his belief and his world. To be admitted to the fellowship of the Round Table, whether one be Christian, or pagan, is to be blessed. It is a fraternity to which all other ties of kinship, to father, mother, children, are subordinate. In earlier books Malory has hinted at the sacred nature of the High Order of Knighthood. In *The Book of Tristram* we see the Pentecostal ideals of knighthood proven inadequate to cope with the reality of human passion and fallibility, yet at the same time we are encouraged to admire the existence of such ideals. In the Grail story the secular ideals of humanity, as contained in the Pentecostal Oath, are given an explicit spiritual dimension which demands not only admiration but reverence. Malory's spirituality, centred in a

human and therefore imperfect brotherhood, has none of the asceticism of the *Queste's*. After the "unkyndely" (*Works* 973) battle between a reluctant Bors and his angry brother Lionel, Bors does not, as in the French, advise his brother as to the proper disposal of the men that he has killed. Instead, he reveals the nobility of his character, and the steadfastness of his love for Lionel by asking his forgiveness. They part on a note of reconciliation that does not exist in the French text, and which seems as typical of the loyalty and affection between Malory's brothers-in-arms and blood as it is of an active Christianity.

But it is the final parting between Lancelot and Galahad that serves as the clearest example of Malory's man-centred spirituality. In what S.C.B. Atkinson calls "a complex interplay of piety and love, which exalts Lancelot and Galahad together" (*Malory's Lancelot* 144), Lancelot and Galahad say their farewells:

Fayre swete fadir, I wote not what I shall se you  
more, tyll I se the body of Jesu Cryste.'

'Now, for Goddis love,' seyde Sir Lancelot, 'pray to the  
[Hyghe] Fadir that He holde me styll in Hys servyse'  
And so he toke hys horse, and there they hard a voyce  
that seyde, 'Every of you thynke for to do welle, for  
nevermore shall one se another off you before the  
drededeful day of doome.' 'Now, my sonne, Sir Galahad,  
sith we shall departe and nother of us se other more,  
I pray to that Hyghe Fadir, conserve me and you bothe.'

'Sir,' seyde Sir Galahad, 'no prayer avaylith so much as youres.' (*Works* 1013-1014)

Malory intermingles the human "fadir" (*Works* 1013) Lancelot and the heavenly "Fadir" (*Works* 1013) God, the love between Lancelot and his son Galahad, with the love of God for His Son "Jesu Cryste" (*Works* 1013). The reminder of eternity--possible through prayer and salvation--is set beside the recollection of mortality in the "dredeful day of doome" (*Works* 1013). Lancelot's horse, one of the trappings of earthly knighthood, is placed side by side with Lancelot's hope to remain in the "servyse" (*Works* 1013) of God. Thus Malory makes the human aspect inseparable from the divine, and the mortal bond between father and son, reflecting the bond between the heavenly Father and Son, becomes unmistakably sacred. The respect and reverence shown by the perfect knight Galahad the son to Lancelot the father confirm Lancelot as worthy of our reverence. In the French *Queste*, although the affection between them is undeniable, Lancelot is clearly placed in a position spiritually subordinate to that of Galahad:

Quant il ot ceste parole, si cort a son pere et le  
bese molt doucement et li dist tout en plorant:<<Biax  
doux sires, je ne sai se je vos verrai ja mes. Au vrai  
cors Jhesucrist vos comant, qui vos maintiegne en son  
servise.>> Et lors comence li uns et li autres a  
plorer. En ce que Galaad fu issuz de la nef et montez  
el cheval, vint une voiz entr'ax qui lor dist:<<Or

penst chascuns de bien fere, car li uns ne verra ja mes l'autre devant le grant jor espoantable que Nostre Sires rendra a chascun ce qu'il avra deservi: et ce sera au jor del Juise.>> Quant Lancelot entent ceste parole, si dist a Galaad tot en plorant: <<Filz, puis qu'il est einsì 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.>> Et Galaad li respont: <<Sire, nule proiere n'i vaut autant come la vostre. Et por ce vos soviegne de vos.>> (*Queste* 252)

(When he heard these words he ran to his father and kissed him gently and, weeping, said "Good and gentle sir, I know not if I will ever see you more again. I commend you to the care of Jesus Christ, may He keep you ever in his service. And they both began to weep. When Galahad had left the ship and was mounted upon his horse there came a voice between the two knights which said to them "Now take heed each of you that you do virtuously, for you will not see each other again until the great and terrible day when our Lord shall render unto each that which he has deserved. And that will be the day of judgement." When Lancelot heard these words he wept, saying to Galahad, "Son, because it is that I must part from you for the rest of my days pray to the Lord

for me that he never allow me to leave His service,  
 but keep me ever close that I may be His servant on earth  
 and in heaven." And Galahad replied, "Sir, no prayer  
 is so effective as your own and therefore take heed  
 unto yourself.")

In the *Queste* version of this scene religious dogma overshadows human love and the dialogue ends, as Atkinson points out, on a "moralizing note" (*Malory's Lancelot* 144).

I have reproduced both versions of this scene at some length here because I believe them to be vital to a complete understanding of the primary place Malory gives to human affection in the spiritual scale of values obtaining in the Grail world. In exalting Lancelot, he exalts all that he has chosen Lancelot to represent: an erring, passion-driven, yet noble humanity; in exalting Lancelot, Malory is also investing knighthood, the greatest of institutions, with the ideals and human loyalties which make it a brotherhood. In allowing the light of religion to shine on human love, the true spiritual nature of human love is revealed, and made even more precious by the shadow of mortality that necessarily accompanies it. It is the humanity of Malory's parting scene which gives it a poignancy and haunting beauty incompatible with the relentless voice of a determined Christianity ever present in the French text Malory took as his source.

## CHAPTER 4

The Exaltation of Lancelot in Malory's Post-Grail World

From a depiction of chivalry both earthly and heavenly, Malory moves to a presentation of the human condition mirrored in Lancelot, still, and always, his best knight. By re-establishing Lancelot in Arthur's world as an object of admiration on a new, more spiritual level in the face of Lancelot's adultery with the queen and treasonous behaviour towards his king, Malory replaces the conceptions of knighthood in his earlier works with a new definition characterized as much by an understanding of human weakness as by a reverence for human ideals and human love.

In his last two books Malory presents the complexity, beauty, and anguish of human relationships, with a renewed insistence on the primary value of earthly love and loyalty in a world bereft of supernatural or divine protection. In this chaotic time, the only source of consolation for Malory is the affection that exists among humankind and the only stability is the loyalty that is a result of that affection. Yet in such a complex world even loyalty and affection are no longer straightforward.

In keeping with Malory's renewed insistence on the dual aspect of human relationships as both a sorrow and a joy, we are reminded, amidst homecoming celebrations, of those who will never return to the Round Table: "all the knyghtes that were leffte on lyve were com home agayne" (*Works* 1045); "kynge Arthur and quene Gwenyvere made grete joy of the remenaunte" (*Works* 1045). Lancelot's love for the queen is now complicated by "sclaundir and noyse" (*Works* 1053) and by his remembrance of the holy mysteries he has seen.

Unlike the Lancelot of *Le Mort le Roi Artu*, Malory's source for this tale, who continues his affair with Guenievre "si folement que Agravains . . . s'en apercut" (Frappier 3) (so indiscreetly that Agravain . . . noticed it), Malory's more thoughtful Lancelot incurs the Queen's wrath for the care he takes to avoid giving rise to gossip despite his obvious passion. (Malory remarks that, upon Lancelot's return, the two lovers "loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde" (*Works* 1045).) Although Lancelot forgets "the promyse and the perfeccion that he hade made in the queste" (*Works* 1045) he cannot forget God. "Hit may nat be yet lyghtly forgotyn," he tells Guinevere, "the hyghe servyse in whom I dud my dyligente laboure" (*Works* 1046). Lancelot's lingering awareness of this "hyghe servyse" (*Works* 1046) invests him with a spiritual aspect which isolates him from the other Arthurian characters in the post-Grail world and increases the tension in his relationship with Guinevere in a way that is not evident in the *Mort Artu*, where Lancelot succumbs to Guinevere's attractions without any apparent struggle: "il ne demora pas un mois après que il fu autresi espris et alumez come il avoit onques esté plus nul jor" (*Mort* 3) (it was not a month before he was as deeply and ardently in love as he had ever been). Thus Lancelot in Malory is motivated from the beginning of his life in the post-Grail world by an increasingly complicated mixture of spiritual and earthly concerns which, as he progresses through Malory's final work, eventually merge into an expression of devotion that is more spiritual than anything

required by the Pentecostal Oath and on a more human level than that demanded by the standards of the Grail world.

In the story of *The Poisoned Apple* Malory establishes a sound chivalric basis for Lancelot's devotion to Guinevere, creating a new parallel between chivalric loyalty and human love, and providing a new perspective on Lancelot's undoubtedly questionable behaviour as lover of his king's wife. In this passage which, as Vinaver points out, has no parallel in the *Mort Artu* (Works 1599), nor in the later *Stanzaic Morte*, Lancelot explains that, because the queen saved him from dishonour by finding his lost sword on the day that he was knighted by Arthur, he "promysed her at that day ever to be her knyght in ryght othir in wronge" (Works 1058). His words recall the "wrongefull quarell" (Works 120) condemned by the Pentecostal Oath, but here a new set of values appears to be in operation. Arthur expresses no surprise at Lancelot's statement, but thanks him for his efforts in the queen's defence.

Emphasis is placed upon Lancelot's loyalty to the queen above all else. Any lingering discomfort we may feel at Lancelot's single-minded devotion to Guinevere at this point is removed by Nineyve, who "ever . . . ded grete goodness unto kynge Arthure and to all hys knyghtes" (Works 1059) and who arrives shortly afterwards to offer supernatural confirmation of Guinevere's innocence and, hence, to absolve Lancelot from any hint of blame as her defender. Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere is presented as a matter of honour--he is as much the queen's knight as the king's.

His adherence to that loyalty is seen, as Benson remarks, as "a positive virtue, a necessary part of the perfect chivalry that is rewarded in *The Healing of Sir Urry*" (*Malory's Morte* 23).

However, to contribute to the continuing emphasis on Lancelot's superiority, Malory is obliged repeatedly to evade or confuse the question of Lancelot's relationship with the queen. His reluctance to commit himself extends even to the last book of the *Morte*, where Lancelot and Guinevere are caught together by Mordred and Agravain (*Works* 1165). Lancelot himself insists that he was with the queen only because he was "sente[for]" (*Works* 1197), as a queen's knight, and makes an appeal to the old law of chivalry in her defence, according to which his accusers "in their querell . . . preved nat hemselff the beste" and are, therefore, "nother in the rygth" (*Works* 1197). But the old values have no relevance now even among Arthur's knights, and Gawain angrily dismisses Lancelot's claim.

When in *The Knight of the Cart* we see Lancelot and Guinevere in bed for the first time, Malory once more shifts the focus from Guinevere's adultery and Lancelot's disloyalty to Arthur, concentrating, instead, on the contrast between Lancelot's noble (and quick-witted) loyalty to the queen and Meleagance's unknightly and unworshipful behaviour. The ride in the cart, which represents the incompatibility of the demands of love and honour in the French *Le Chevalier de la charrette* (Chretien de Troyes 11-12) is in Malory a symbol of Lancelot's faithful and noble love, reinforced

by the moving image of Lancelot's wounded horse which follows him though "ever he trode hys guttis and hys paunche undir hys feete" (*Works* 1127). Guinevere focuses on the idea of fidelity in her defence of Lancelot's cart-ride: "Now I may preve and se that well ys that creature that hath a trusty frynde" (*Works* 1127) and Malory later further reduces its associations with dishonour by telling us that "sir Launcelot was called many dayes after 'le Shyvalere de Charyotte', and so he ded many dedys and grete adventures" (*Works* 1130). Yet the perception of the horse as a symbol of self-destruction cannot be dismissed. Lancelot's love for Guinevere places him in an increasingly dangerous position, an easy prey for the envy, treachery and hatred which surround him and involve him in situations where the demands of the Oath of Knighthood now run counter to the demands of his loyalty to the Queen. Thus Lancelot, in obedience to the queen's "sygnys that she wolde have hym dede" (*Works* 1139) refuses to give mercy to Melliagance and offers instead to fight him in partial armour. Melliagance's ready acceptance of Lancelot's offer condemns him as a coward and removes some of our discomfort at Lancelot's passion for revenge. Yet at the same time Malory never allows us to forget the dangers of the passion that consumes Lancelot. In *The Great Tournament* Lancelot is wounded in the thigh, a symbolically sexual and debilitating wound, by a huntress (in Malory's source he is wounded by a man). In *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* we are permitted, for the first time, access at some length to a private conversation

between Lancelot and Guinevere and allowed to witness both the intensity and the bitterness of their relationship. Guinevere is not an attractive character in Malory, but she is a forceful one. In her jealousy, anger and spitefulness towards Lancelot is a tramelled and tormented energy. Condemned by her sex and social position to sit and wait, she finds an outlet in the power she has to torment in her turn the man she loves the most. The intensity of her anger and jealousy expresses quite naturally the intensity of her love:

'Sir Lancelot now I well understonde that thou  
arte a false, recrayed knyght and a comon  
lechourere, and lovyste and holdiste othir  
ladyes, and of me thou haste dysdayne and  
scorne. For wytt thou well, now I undirstonde  
thy falsehode I shall never love the more, and  
loke thou be never so hardy to com in my syght.'

(Works 1047)

Guinevere's love for Lancelot is, as I. Joynt remarks, "a tormentive and destructive force" (94). When she finds herself in need of a champion to defend her against the accusation of murder, Lancelot is no longer there because she has ordered him away from the court. When he eventually returns and twice rescues her from harm, their love places them both in still greater danger from the enmity of Mordred and Agravain who seek to expose them both as traitors to their king. Guinevere alternately weeps over and

castigates Lancelot, thus allowing him the opportunity to display his nobility and forbearance. Yet Lancelot's occasional lapses from courtesy towards Guinevere endow their relationship with an intimacy far removed from the stately convention of courtly love. Informed in a later episode by the queen, held prisoner by Meleagant, that she has the situation well under control, an outraged Lancelot, her would-be rescuer, says tartly: "And, madame . . . and I had wyste that ye wolde have bene so lyghtly accorded with hym I wolde nat a made such haste unto you" (*Works* 1129). When Guinevere, having at first refused to listen to Lancelot's reasons for paying attention to other ladies, later advises Lancelot how to conduct himself so as to avoid scandal, his response is delightfully and understandably sarcastic: "Have ye no doubt madame . . . I alow youre witte. Hit ys of late com syn ye were woxen so wyse!" (*Works* 1066).

A counterpoint to this theme of doomed but exalted love is the story of Elaine of Ascolat. Malory uses the love of an innocent and beautiful maiden to display the wonder and mystery of one human being's devotion to another and to draw our attention once more to Lancelot's powers of attraction. Elaine's love for Lancelot seems to have been engendered by an innate quality of his that compels devotion and is felt by others of her family: "much my harte gyvith unto you, that ye sholde be a noble knyght" (*Works* 1067), says her father Sir Barnarde, and her brother Lavayne is equally captivated: "Sir what sholde I do," he tells Lancelot, "but folow you, but if

ye dryve me frome you or commaunde me to go frome you" (*Works* 1090). To the purity and intensity of Elaine's unrequited love-- "he ys the man in the worlde that I firste loved, and truly he shall be the laste that I shall love" (*Works* 1078)--is added a pathos that only a finite existence can give.

The story of Elaine in the *Mort Artu* has considerably less impact than is the case in Malory, intertwined as it is in the French text with the threads of other events. Elaine herself has none of the immediacy of Malory's Elaine. Continually referred to as "la pucele" or "la demoisele," (*Mort* 10,23,24,25,26,27) (the damsel) she is a faint, sad creature who believes it is her fate to die for love of Lancelot: "il m'est . . . destiné que je muire por lui" (*Mort* 43) (I am . . . destined to die for him). She lacks the passion of Malory's Elaine, whose forceful innocence is made so apparent in an early conversation with Gawain at her father's house. In the same passage the Elaine of the *Mort Artu* conceals her joy at the news of Lancelot's prowess: "si en a moult grant joie, mes semblant n'en ose fere por ceus qui devant li sont" (*Mort* 23) (and she is delighted at this, but does not dare to show it because of those who are around her). Malory's Elaine, however, responds with a frank avowal of her love: "Now blyssed be God . . . that that knyght sped so welle! For he ys the man in the worlde that I firste loved, and truly he shall be the laste that ever I shall love" (*Works* 1078).

Both in the *Mort* and in Malory, Elaine offers to take Gawain to

her chamber to show him Lancelot's shield, but in Malory Elaine's father intervenes: "'Nat so', seyde sir Barnarde to hys daughtir, 'but sende ye for that shyld'" (*Works* 1078). Malory thus neatly reminds us of Gawain's dubious reputation, so different from Lancelot's, and at the same time displays Elaine's youthful innocence. Yet this same young, sheltered maid, upon hearing of Lancelot's injury, rides impulsively off to look for him, shrieking and swooning with shock when she sees him lying "syke and pale" (*Works* 1082) in bed. In the *Mort Artu* the damsel's arrival is more a matter of chance, "si avint que la damoisele . . . vint la" (*Mort* 40) (it happened that the damsel came there), and although she then stays with him "et de nuiz et de jorz" (*Mort* 41) (both day and night), she has little of the bedside energy of Malory's Elaine who "ded ever hir dyligence and labour both nyght and day unto sir Launcelot" (*Works* 1085). Later Elaine will, in the desperation of love, offer herself as "paramour" (*Works* 1090) to Lancelot, a notion unthinkable to the more controlled damsel of the *Mort Artu*.

There is no suggestion in the *Mort Artu* version of the relationship between Lancelot and Elaine of the irresistible power of love. The Elaine of the *Mort Artu* blames destiny and Lancelot's wickedness for her death. Similarly, in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* Elaine accuses Lancelot of heartlessness and discourtesy: "His gentilness was all away / All churlish manners he had in wone;" (*Stanzaic Morte* 33). Elaine in Malory attributes her end to her love "oute of mesure" (*Works* 1094) for Lancelot. Her dying speech

has all the fervency of a martyr's as she assures her priest that she dies a maid for the love of a noble knight--a good love which comes from God himself and which she has "no myght to withstonde" (*Works* 1094). Elaine's suffering, her "unnumerable paynys" (*Works* 1093) and her determined refusal to be ashamed of her love ("Why sholde I leve such thoughtes? . . . my belyve ys that I do none offence," (*Works* 1093)) give her character a tragic impact and a human nobility which make her death sublime.

*The Story of the Fair Maid* both emphasizes Lancelot's fidelity to Guinevere and intensifies the atmosphere of incipient tragedy. Bors, seeing how much Elaine loves Lancelot, and how "fayre and well besayne and well taught" (*Works* 1084) she is, wishes Lancelot could love her, but knows he will not. Bors, who later reprimands the queen for her treatment of Lancelot ("Madame . . . ye have ben oftyntymes displeased with my lorde sir Launcelot, but at all tymys at the ende ye founde hym a trew knyght" (*Works* 1087)), understands, as the relative to whom Lancelot is closest, the dangers and difficulties of his relationship with Guinevere and would evidently be glad to see him free of her, but Lancelot's devotion makes that impossible. The power and mystery of love explored in *The Story of the Fair Maid* is linked with an unavoidable doom that has stretched across the stories of Arthur's knights and now seems to loom ever nearer, its connections with man's own passions having become increasingly evident.

In *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* Lancelot

returns from the Grail world to be plunged back into the chaotic world of humankind. He is received with joy and shortly after dismissed by his mistress whom he must later defend against a charge of treason. A beautiful maiden dies for love of him, and he is almost killed by his closest kinsman, Sir Bors, "by myssefortune" (*Works* 1072) in a tournament. Lancelot blames himself for this accident and evidently recalls, albeit belatedly, something of the lessons learned during his Grail quest: "I wolde with pryde have overcom you all," he tells his cousin Bors, "And there in my pryde I was nere slayne, and that was in myne owne defaughte; for I myght have gyffyn you warnynge of my beynge there, and [than] had I had no hurte" (*Works* 1084).

Lancelot's punished pride is a reminder of his experience in the Grail quest, which in its turn is a reminder of his human instability. It is also a reminder that we are no longer in the world of *The Tale of Sir Gareth* where one may fight disguised against one's kin to prove one's worth and do no great harm to any friend. Yet Lancelot is never allowed to lose his stature as great and noble knight.

Bors' relationship with Lancelot in the post-Grail world is a clear indication that the values of the Grail world have little relevance here and have been replaced by a less divine evaluation of nobility. Bors' pre-eminence as achiever of the Grail is forgotten, and he is presented in Malory as Lancelot's practical and devoted advisor. The stress placed in the *Mort Artu* on Bors'

great reputation ("Boort qui lors estoit de plus haute renomée, de bone vie et de bone chevalerie que chevaliers qui fust el roiaume de Logres" (*Mort* 38) (Bors, who had at that time a greater reputation, led a better life, and was the finest knight in the kingdom of Logres)), is omitted in Malory, and Bors is thus maintained in a subordinate position to Lancelot. Bors' apology to Lancelot in Malory for the wound he inflicted on him expresses clearly his dismay at having hurt "the moste noblyst knyght of the worlde!" (*Works* 1083): "Now I may calle myselff unhappy, and I drede me that God ys gretely [displeasyd] with me, that He wolde suffir me to have such a shame for to hurte you that ar all our leder and all oure worship" (*Works* 1083).

Similarly, Lancelot's recapitulatory eulogy of Gareth in *The Fair Maid of Ascolat* reminds us of the love between the two knights, and summarizes the qualities required of a knight:

he ys . . . a myghty man and well-brethed . . . he ys  
 jantill, curteyse and ryght bownteuous, meke and mylde,  
 and in hym ys no maner of male engynne, but playne,  
 faythfull an trew (*Works* 1089).

As Joynt reminds us, "to show a man's worth by the measure of loyalty he evokes from others is a common literary device" (96). This description, which echoes so much that has already been said about Lancelot, links Lancelot's single-minded fidelity to Guinevere to the behaviour of Gareth.

Gareth's loyalty to the man who made him knight outweighs any

other considerations, even his duty to Arthur, his king and uncle. Seeing Lancelot beset in a tournament by Arthur's knights, Gareth goes to his assistance. Rebuked by Arthur for abandoning the "felyship" (*Works* 1114), Gareth replies: "My lorde . . . he made me knyght, and . . . methought it was my worshyp to helpe hym" (*Works* 1114). Arthur's response confirms the value of this kind of loyalty, and the scene ends on a note of conviviality in which the primary values are more social than chivalric: "And he that was curteyse, trew, and faythefull to hys frynde was at that tyme cherysshed" (*Works* 1114).

Malory presents presents us with three kinds of loyalty in the *Morte*: loyalty among blood kin, loyalty among a group of unrelated people, as in the Round Table fellowship, and a more personal loyalty between two unrelated individuals. Each is shown to be both admirable and dangerous. Balin's and Gawain's clan loyalties cause destruction and death, Round Table loyalties oblige knights like Lamorak to become involved in battles in support of fellow knights against their better judgement, Gareth's loyalty leads to his death, and Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere involves him in a battle against his king.

E. Archibald comments upon the significance of the word "felyship" in Malory, with "its double sense of the bond between members of the Round Table as well as the friendship between individual knights" (317). She also points out that knights are usually identified in relation to this fellowship rather than to

Arthur himself (313) and that the word "felyship" is also used in the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere (322). This helps to complicate the question of Lancelot's disloyalty to Arthur, since Guinevere, fair and "valyaunte" (*Works* 97) is thus linked with other members of the Round Table. Carol Hart talks about Guinevere's "heroic image" in Malory ("Reinventing Guinevere" 2) and points out that she has considerable moral authority in Arthurian society; her judgements of Gawain and Pellinor, for example, are incorporated into the Pentecostal Oath (Hart 6-7).

Ultimately Malory replaces chastity with a personal loyalty as a requirement of his more human knighthood, and in doing so departs from the hierarchy of values expressed in orthodox Christian teachings in which chastity takes priority. Malory does not condemn Lancelot for adultery. Instead he appears to reserve his displeasure for the "lycouris lustis" (*Works* 1120) which seem to him to typify "love nowadays" (*Works* 1120) and the "lechory that was at that tyme much used" (*Works* 1025), so evident in Gawain. Although he does not deny the necessity for chastity or virginity in one who desires to approach the Grail, "vertuous lyvyng" (*Works* 886) for Malory is not so much concerned with abstinence as with fidelity. "Vertuous love" (*Works* 1119) is above all faithful or stable love. "Lycouris lustis" (*Works* 1120) seems to mean, for Malory, evanescent passion. The bonds that unite humankind are sacred to Malory, as he reveals in his famous May passage. As Brewer says, "Loyalty, that great traditional virtue

of medieval thought and feeling, creates the stability which Malory so much cherishes" (109). A stable love between man and woman is a gift from God which should never be forgotten but always "blossom and burgeyne" (*Works* 1119) in an eternal spring. This is the stability that Malory values and this is the nature of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, to which Lancelot's instability in the Christian world of the Grail takes second place.

The strong connection Malory makes between God and faithful love and between faithful love and honour allows us to see that Lancelot's steadfast devotion to an earthly object is in fact an act of worship. Yet at the same time Malory is using Lancelot to express the paradox of existence because Lancelot has, of course, ruptured, by his treasonous behaviour towards Arthur, the equally sacred ties of loyalty and fealty which unite men.

Malory highlights the importance of loyalty in relationships by comparing Arthur's world and his own:

But nowadayes men can not love sevennyght  
 but they muste have all their desyres . . .  
 But the olde love was nat so. For men  
 and women coude love togydirs seven yerys,  
 and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them,  
 and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes;

(*Works* 1120)

In this passage, and the confused passage which precedes it, all Malory's invention, Malory appears to be stressing stability in

love above all other considerations of virtue. His reasons for doing so become apparent not long after when he makes "a lytyll mencion" for Guinevere who "whyle she lyved . . . was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (*Works* 1120). Evidently this is a form of apologia for the love--definitely stable and without other object ("lycouris lustis")--which exists between Lancelot and Guinevere. The love between Guinevere and Lancelot, only hinted at in Malory's early tales, the time of its consumation unknown and its sexual element unemphasized, has been allowed to develop in the background and has been given a validity in stability that makes it an acceptable example of the "trouthe and faythefulnes" of the "love in kynge Arthurs dayes" (*Works* 1120), unlike the transitory passions of Gawain, or even of Arthur for his own sister. Malory is drawing us into his own set of values, according to which Lancelot's treason against Arthur, though recognized, is of little importance compared to Lancelot's fidelity towards Guinevere. And although Lancelot's love, because he places Guinevere above God, is not truly "vertuous," Malory nonetheless has God reward Lancelot for his faithfulness.

Not long afterwards, when Lancelot goes to visit Guinevere in the King's absence, Malory is compelled by the demands of his source, to skirt the issue of adultery: "And whether they were abed other at other manner of disportis," he says coyly, "me lyste nat thereof make no mencion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadays" (*Works* 1165). By contrast, in the *Stanzaic Morte* there

is no doubt about the lovers' behaviour. Lancelot "was not busked in his bed, / . . . in the queenes bower," when they are suprised by Agravain and Mordred (*Stanz. Morte* 50). Similarly, in the *Mort Artu* Lancelot "deschauca et despoilla et se coucha avec la reine" (*Mort* 115) (took off his shoes and undressed and got into bed with the queen). Malory means us to admire Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere, yet recognizes that it is complicated by disloyalty to Arthur. The complex nature of existence is reflected in Lancelot's situation, yet Malory does not allow his nobility to be overwhelmed. Eventually Malory's world and Arthur's meet in the inexplicable preference of Englishmen for an evil man over a noble one, and we witness the collapse of Arthur's society and the values which it once represented:

Lo all ye Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and nobelyst of the worlde, and moste loved the felyship of noble knyghtes, and by hym they all were upholdyn, and yet myght not thes Englysshemen holde them contente with hym, lo thus was the olde custom and usayges of thys londe, and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom. Alas! thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thyng us please terme.

(*Works* 1229)

However, Lancelot will survive the general destruction to die in his own time, leaving a legacy of love and loyalty.

Malory presents us in *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* with a succession of adventures in which Lancelot or Guinevere, or both, narrowly escape discovery and death. Each successive incident increases the dramatic tension of the book and impels the characters towards their inevitable destiny. The story of *The Healing of Sir Urry*, apparently original to Malory, provides us with a brief moment of relief--of calm before the storm--and also reinforces the spiritual aspect of Lancelot's chivalry, an aspect somewhat in abeyance during *The Knight of the Cart*. This episode summons up for a last inspection the might and glory of the Arthurian world. The great Tristram and Lamorak are gone, as are Galahad and Percival, but Bors is present; yet it is Lancelot who is granted the power to heal Sir Urry, a power only accorded one other knight--Sir Galahad. Lancelot's success is cause for great rejoicing at Arthur's court, confirmed as the seat of the noblest knights in Christendom. A light-hearted tournament is organized, love-matches are made, and Sir Urry and Sir Lavayne live at King Arthur's court in Carlisle "wyth grete nobeles and joy longe tymes" (*Works* 1153). Danger, however, is never far away. Mingled with a timeless nobility, loyalty, and devotion are envy, treachery, murder and a sense of time passing. Arthur's time as king is now subject to the restrictions of mortality: "sir Cadors son of Cornwayle that was kynge aftir Arthurs dayes" (*Works* 1149) is also present, and Agravain waits to trap Lancelot with Arthur's queen.

What is perhaps the most discordant note in the whole episode

is, however, struck by Lancelot himself. In the name of Lancelot's "felyshyp" (*Works* 1151) with other Round Table knights Arthur calls upon Lancelot to attempt the healing, and it is because of loyalty to this fellowship rather than to the King as an individual that the reluctant Lancelot agrees. Lancelot's secret prayer to the Holy Trinity for success is an interesting mixture of pride and humility. It is evident that he has not forgotten all the lessons of the Grail: he knows the power of the healing will not be his but God's. But his prayer is a very human one. What he asks above all is that he not be shamed before his peers: "I beseche The of Thy mercy that my symple worshyp and honesté be saved" (*Works* 1152). Lancelot's humility is not in question; he does not believe himself better than other "noble kyngis and knyghtes" (*Works* 1151), nor does he think he has the ability unassisted "to do so hyghe a thyng" (*Works* 1152). At the same time it is pride that makes him fear the shame of failure and dictates the form his prayer will take. In granting Lancelot a positive answer to his prayer Malory vindicates and sanctifies Lancelot's pride in who he is and Malory's own evident pride in what Lancelot represents. Lancelot, "the beste knyght of the worlde" (*Works* 1145), and the lover of Guinevere, has received divine sanction. Lancelot's reaction to that blessing has been the subject of much discussion among critics. A.E. Guy Jr. feels that Lancelot's tears are tears of joy. He "weeps because he sees the healing of Sir Urré as a sign of acceptance when he had previously been judged unworthy" (84).

Vinaver, too, sees no indication of failure in the text, and agrees that Lancelot's tears express his "joy and gratitude" (*On Art* 38). Lumiansky, for once not at odds with Vinaver, feels that Lancelot is simply relieved that his unworthiness has not been exposed (231), while Atkinson sees in Lancelot's reaction a reflection of what he describes as the central opposition in Malory between the secular and spiritual ideals represented by the worlds of Camelot and the Grail respectively (*Malory's 'Healing'* 351). The isolation of Lancelot in this tale, his reluctance to attempt the healing, the nature of his prayer, which reveals his awareness of his unworthiness, all contribute to the tension and uncertainty of this episode in Malory's *Arthuriad*. Lancelot prays for success, as Atkinson points out, from a position of "moral relapse" (*Malory's 'Healing'* 348). Lancelot's tears of relief when he succeeds in the task set him are therefore understandable. Tears of joy, however, are not. Vinaver is, I believe, mistaken when he says that there "is not the slightest indication in the text" that Lancelot has thoughts of his failure in the Quest (*On Art* 38). If he is aware of his lack of worth in a way that the others present are not, it is because of his Grail experiences. Yet at the same time his primary concerns relate to his life on earth. After the healing, while "all the kynges and knyghtes" kneel to thank God, Lancelot weeps, "as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn" (*Works* 1152), humble, sorrowing, apart from the rest. The overwhelming impression is one of isolation and loneliness. No one, with the

exception of Bors, who has been relegated by Malory into the background, has experienced what Lancelot has experienced. In *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney* we encounter a very similar expression, but in which a childlike sincerity of emotion is untainted by any consciousness of wrongdoing. Arthur, relieved and delighted by Gareth's safe return to his court, weeps "as he had bene a chylde" (*Works* 358). Lancelot, as Joynt points out, "has always been conscious of his sin" (1110) and it is this consciousness of unworthiness, combined with relief that he has been spared the shame of failure, and gratitude for what he knows to be beyond his due, which provokes his very human reaction. He weeps, as Field says, "because he [has] a bad conscience" (174). But instead of focusing our attention on Lancelot's sinfulness, Malory uses the incident as an expression of Lancelot's greatness within his human limitations. Throughout this scene Lancelot is set above and apart from the great nobility gathered at Arthur's court and, by extension, from the lesser nobility of the rest of the world, unable to provide a knight worthy to heal Sir Urry. As Atkinson remarks, Urry's healing is not an image of the wholeness of the Round Table fellowship (*Malory's 'Healing'* 350-351). Malory deliberately builds up his effects, increasing the splendour of the gathering with each new name until one hundred and ten great knights have attempted to heal Sir Urry. Finally, in desperation, Arthur asks where Lancelot could be and, as if on cue, Lancelot appears belatedly, and all eyes are upon him as he rides amidst a

sudden silence to where the king awaits him. The mystical aura of attraction and power that has always surrounded him is enhanced by the reactions to his appearance of two people to whom he is unknown, and isolates him still further from the crowd:

And anone as the damsell, Sir Urryes syster, saw Sir  
 Launcelot she romed to her brothir thereas he lay in  
 hys lyttar and seyde, 'Brothir, here ys com a knyght  
 that my herte gyveth gretly unto.' 'Fayre syster,'  
 seyde Sir Urre, 'so doth my hart lyghte gretly ayenste  
 hym, and my harte gyvith me more unto hym than to all  
 thes that hath serched me.' (*Works* 1151)

Tension continues to build as Lancelot expresses his reluctance to attempt the healing, and is released only when his success is apparent. Malory has ensured that Lancelot's relief is to some extent shared by the reader. Yet Lancelot remains an isolated figure, weeping amidst the general rejoicing. His consciousness of his unworthiness emphasizes his mortality and, paradoxically, his worth. It is this great consciousness, possible only to one who has been granted a glimpse of perfection, and thereby understands his own imperfection, that sets Lancelot apart from the world of Camelot or Carlisle, and it is this awareness that makes his story tragic. The magnificent, swirling, Arthurian world of passion, destiny, nobility and spirituality takes form for a moment in the kneeling figure of a weeping knight before we are swept back into the joyous, treacherous world of humankind.

The descent into the maelstrom of human emotions is abrupt. Lulling the reader into a false sense of security with his opening lines on the comfortable spring season full of the promise of summer "with his freyshe floures" (*Works* 161), Malory suddenly startles the reader with a sharp change of tone in which these "floures" of regeneration are contrasted with the destruction of the "floure" of knighthood. For in this same comfortable, promise-filled month of May occurs a "grete angur and unhapp[e] that stynted not tylle the floure of chyvalry of [alle] the worlde was destroyed and slayne" (*Works* 1161). In the final book of Malory's *Arthuriad*, Lancelot and Guinevere are finally trapped by Agravain and, as predicted by Gareth and Gawain, Arthur's realm is destroyed and the Round Table fellowship finally dispersed. Slander, vengeance, battle, destiny, and death are the subjects of this final book. Arthur's lust, Lancelot's love, Agravain's enmity, Gareth's loyalty, Gawain's desire for vengeance, and Mordred's thirst for power all contribute to the destruction of Arthur's world. The adder that precipitates the final battle during which Arthur slays and is slain by his own son, is rendered almost superfluous as a catalyst by this accumulation of passion, but its unexpected appearance serves as a reminder of the incalculable nature of existence beyond the control of the greatest of men or magicians, or even of God.

As usual, Malory continues to glorify Lancelot, and therefore lays a large portion of the blame for this destruction on the

hatred of the house of Lot: "all was longe uppon two unhappy knyghtis whych were named sir Aggravayne and sir Mordred, that were brethirn unto sir Gawayne" (*Works* 1161). In the *Stanzaic Morte Agravain* is motivated to reveal what he calls Lancelot's "tresoun" (*Stanz. Morte* 1679) by his concern for his family's honour:

"Alas!" then said Sir Agravain,

"How false men shall we us make?

And how long shall we hele and laine

The tresoun of Launcelot du Lake?

"Well we wote, withouten ween,

The King Arthur our eme sholde be

And Launcelot lies by the queen;

Again the King traitour is he,

And that wote all the court bydene,

And iche day it here and see;

To the king we sholde it mene,

Yif ye will do by the counsel of me."

(*Stanz. Morte* 1676-1697)

In the *Mort Artu* Arthur has to threaten Agravain and his brothers with death before they will reveal the nature of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere (*Mort* 108-109). In Malory, however, Agravain and Mordred seek to discredit the lovers not from any concern for Arthur, but because they "had ever a prevy hate unto the quene, . . . and to sir Launcelot" (*Works* 1161). Lancelot and Guinevere are thus presented as victims of malice

rather than as adulterers shaming their king.

At the same time, during this period of chaos the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is exalted and purified by their suffering. At the moment of discovery past quarrels and jealousies are forgotten and the depth of their love for one another revealed. When they are taken together in Guinevere's bedchamber, Lancelot's first concern is for the queen's well-being, his second for his honour. He comforts the queen with assurances of the protection of his cousin Bors and (in the Caxton edition) Sir Urry--a timely reminder of the divine sanction afforded Lancelot earlier. The queen responds in kind, declaring that if he is slain she will accept death herself "as mekely as ever ded marter take hys deth for Jesu Crystes sake" (*Works* 1166), and that if it pleased God she would give her life for Lancelot's sake. Her impassioned declarations elevate her love for Lancelot to the level of a belief for which she would gladly sacrifice herself and recall a similar devotion elicited by Lancelot in Elaine. That she is truly courageous and not simply hysterical is proven a little later when she refuses to allow Lancelot to add to his crimes by carrying her off to safety. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., remarks upon the "added Christian elements of the Launcelot-Guinevere dialogue" in this scene (88) and the exchange of rings which gives "sacramental overtones" (85) to the passage.

The same scene in the *Mort Artu* contains little of the mutual tenderness which animates Malory's version and none of his

intermingling of love, honour, and Christian values. Although the *Mort's* narrator reports the queen's concern for Lancelot's safety "que qu'il deüst de lui avenir" (*Mort* 117) (no matter what should happen to her), Lancelot's speeches to her are courteous but terse: "Dame, ceste guerre est finee; quant vos plera, ge m'en irai" (*Mort* 117) (Madame, this fight is over, I will leave when you wish); "Dame, puis que ge sui armez, je m'en devroie bien huimés aler seürement" (*Mort* 117) (Madame, since I am armed I should be able to get out safely). Malory's Lancelot is no less courteous, but far more affectionate:

Madame, now wyte you well, all oure trew love ys  
broughte to an ende . . . . And therefore, madam, and  
hit lyke you that I may have you with me, I shall  
save you frome all maner adventures daungers.

(*Works* 1168)

In this episode, Bors is once more characterized by his loyalty to Lancelot rather than by the Christian purity he had displayed in the Grail quest. Although we know from the story of Elaine of Ascolat that he does not approve of Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere (this disapproval, however, seems born of common-sense rather than of Christian morality), he will not pass judgement on him, but simply offers practical advice on how best to deal honourably with the situation: "Inasmuch as ye were takyn with her," he tells Lancelot, "whether ye ded ryght othir wronge, hit ys now youre parte to holde wyth the quene" (*Works* 1171). Bors'

great concern is not morality but honour: Lancelot will be shamed for ever should the queen die. As the most important of the "Quenys Knyghtes" (*Works* 1121) Lancelot has a duty to be loyal to Guinevere, and "two and twenty" (*Works* 1170) of Arthur's great knights advise him to rescue her. It is in the context of the knightly world of honour and shame, upheld by the only surviving achiever of the Grail, that Lancelot's defence of the queen and consequent quarrel with Arthur should be read. It is thus that Malory maintains the focus on Lancelot's courage and pride in himself during his highly specious defence of Guinevere. Malory must recognize that Guinevere and Lancelot have committed treason. Guinevere is, after all, sentenced to be burned at the stake. Yet Lancelot's refusal to do battle against his king, the king's own desire for accord, frustrated by Gawain's enmity, and Lancelot's offer of penance for the death of Gareth, by which all but Gawain are moved, serve to increase Lancelot's stature at a time when his actions might reasonably be considered suspect. Moreover, as E. Kay Harris astutely remarks, the *Morte Darthur* suppresses altogether any connection between the judgement of the Queen and the act of adultery; Malory's Guinevere is sentenced to die "by cause sir Mordred was ascaped sere wounded, and the dethe of thirtene knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (204).

Malory ensures that there is no clear proof of Lancelot and Guinevere's guilt or innocence at this point. Even Gawain, before

he learns of Gareth's death, cautions Arthur against proceeding too hastily against the Queen (Harris 203), reminding him of what Malory has already shown so clearly: the unpredictability of an existence beyond man's control--"oftyntymys we do many thynges that we wene for the beste be, and yet peradventure hit turnyth to the warste" (*Works* 1175). Later, of course, Gawain will forget his own advice.

Never permitted the stature he is given in the *Mort Artu* as the king's confidant and, frequently, his mouthpiece, Gawain is in the latter part of Malory's text blindly obsessed with revenge. His fierce intransigence ("uppon the morn there cam sir Gawayne, as brym as any boore" (*Works* 1193)) contrasts with Lancelot's courtesy and tenderness towards Arthur and Gawain. When the Pope intervenes to make peace it is because "of the grete goodness of kynge Arthur" (*Works* 1194) and also "the hyghe prowes of sir Launcelot that was called the moste nobelyst knyght of the worlde" (*Works* 1194). Arthur is affected by the repeated expressions of Lancelot's love and loyalty towards him: "So when kynge Arthur was on horsebak he loked on sir Launcelot; than the teerys braste oute of hys yen, thynkyng of the grete curtesy that was in sir Launcelot more than in ony other man" (*Works* 1192). Gawain, however, rejects every offer of reconciliation made by Lancelot, with an insistence on Lancelot's falseness that borders on madness. No longer can the cycle of revenge be stopped. Gawain's rejection of Lancelot's explanation of Gareth's and Gaheris' deaths, and of Lancelot's

generous offer of penance, discredits Gawain. Gawain's repeated accusations allow Lancelot the opportunity to explain his actions, to present himself as the queen's rescuer, and to reveal his superiority. Lancelot's offer of penance in Malory reveals his comprehension of a higher level of values than the ones motivating Gawain and hence Arthur. Having sworn that he killed Gareth and his brother by accident, Lancelot offers restitution in spiritual terms which mean nothing to Gawain: "thys were fayrar and more holyar and more perfyte to their soulis than . . . to warre uppon me" (*Works* 1200). The Lancelot of the *Mort Artu* makes an equally generous offer, but with no indication of the spiritual awareness shown by Malory's Lancelot. Gawain is set apart by his reaction to Lancelot's nobility: "all they wepte as people oute of mynde, excepte sir Gawayne" (*Works* 1202). As a result we forget whatever is dubious in Lancelot's conduct and focus on the contrast between Gawain's primitive desire for revenge at any cost and Lancelot's spiritual nobility. During this period of unrest the fidelity and unity of Lancelot's "felyship" (*Works* 1202), illustrated by their determination at Joyous Garde to "do as he wolde do" (*Works* 1202), contrasts with the broken fellowship of the Round Table lamented by a grieving Arthur: "now have I loste the fayryst felyshyp of noble knyghtes that ever hylde Crystyn kynge togydirs" (*Works* 1183). As Lancelot leaves Logres for his own lands, he displays once more his shrewdness at assessing character. He fears that Mordred will cause problems, a situation evidently

not envisaged by Arthur. When Lancelot arrives in France, the scene in which he rewards his followers establishes him as a mighty lord in the manner of Arthur in his early days, except that Lancelot gives up his lands. The rejection of worldly values implicit in Lancelot's action is indicative of a movement away from the earthly considerations of Arthur's pre-Grail world towards a more spiritual leadership, and a more spiritual brotherhood, yet in which human loyalty and devotion continue to play a significant part.

In these last books the rupturing of one bond of love and loyalty after another intensifies the tragedy of the battle between Arthur and Lancelot, and the speed at which the characters rush upon their doom increases. Both Lancelot and Arthur are borne along by the tide of human emotion against their better judgement: "'Alas,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'I have no harte to fyght ayenste my lorde Arthur, for ever mesemyth I do not as me ought to do'" (*Works* 1193), and Arthur grieves at the greatest loss of all: "much more I am sorryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company . . . alas, that ever sir Launcelot and I shulde be at debate!" (*Works* 1184). The death of Gareth at Lancelot's hands, but not by his "wyllynge" (*Works* 1199), and the subsequent loss of all reason in Gawain who misuses his close kinship with the king to spur Arthur into a battle he later admits to be an "unhappy warre" (*Works* 1230),

culminate in the horror of the combined deaths at each other's hands of Arthur and Mordred. The strange vision granted Arthur in which the spirit of Gawain is brought to warn him of the danger to him and "many mo other good men" (*Works* 1234) of the Battle of Salisbury places God clearly on Arthur's and Lancelot's side and reaffirms the love between them: "within a month shall com Sir Launcelot with all hys noble knyghtes, and rescow you worshypfully, and sle Sir Mordred and all that ever wyll holde wyth hym" (*Works* 1234). Malory increases dramatic tension by repeatedly offering false hope of a satisfactory conclusion that his treatment of the link between passion and destiny has clearly made impossible. Once again Malory has used Christianity as a dramatic device to give impact to a point he is trying to make. The Gawain vision may indeed be proof of Jesus' "grace and goodness" (*Works* 1234) towards Arthur, but it offers no evidence of God's ability, as Pellinor puts it, to "fordo desteny" (*Works* 120), since the appearance of one small reptile makes a mockery of all God's warnings. It is hardly surprising, then, that Arthur, gravely wounded and bereft of all but one of his fellowship, should inform a desolate Bedyvere that he must take care of himself as best he can for in him (Arthur) "ys no truste for to truste in" (*Works* 1240). Arthur dies in the inexplicable, violent world first presented in the books of Merlin and Balin. In the strange appearance of Morgan in the boat that bears Arthur to Avalon is a sense of completion which nonetheless preserves the mystery of existence. An era is over,

a circle completed. Morgan's presence and her renewed tenderness for her brother bring the story of Arthur's world full circle and draw it backwards into the mist.

But Lancelot and Guinevere live on a while, Guinevere as a nun, never "myry" (*Works* 1234) but penitent and fasting, a shadow of the cheerful Guinevere of Tristram days. In the final farewell between her and Lancelot there is only guilt and bitterness and grief. The source of Guinevere's guilt is not her adultery, however, but the destruction of "the f[lou]re of kyngis and [knyghtes]" (*Works* 1252), a destruction which Malory, with his emphasis on human passion--love, hate, envy, sexual jealousy--has shown to be inevitable. As Brewer says, "Guinevere and Lancelot express sorrow for the tragic loss of the group rather than for their sinfulness" (*The Traditional Writer* 108). Guinevere's farewell speech to Lancelot is remarkable for its selfishness and cruelty. Belatedly taken up as she is with concern for her own salvation, "I am sette in suche a plyghte to gete my soule [hele]" (*Works* 1252), Guinevere is insensitive enough to advise Lancelot to take "a wyff, and lyff with [hir] wyth joy and blys" (*Works* 1252). When Lancelot, instead, vows to follow the path she has chosen, she questions his ability to do so, forcing him to remind her that he has never given her cause to doubt his word: "Yet wyste ye me never false of my promyse" (*Works* 1253). There is for Guinevere, however, no real comfort in God and her guilt makes her merciless. Yet that she still loves Lancelot is evident from the intensity of her grief at

the moment of separation. Lancelot's response is typical. Loyal to Guinevere as ever, he vows that if he can no longer have her he will betake himself to a life of perfection. But he embraces that life as a faithful lover, and not as a Christian: "sythen ye have taken you to perfeccion, I must nedys take me to perfection, of ryght" (*Works* 1253). A life of prayer is evidently second best, to be embraced only when all else fails. In the *Mort Artu* there is no parting scene. Lancelot never meets Guinevere again and only hears of the queen's death. In the French text the "main theme in the Lancelot story," as James Cable remarks, "seems rather to fade out at the end" (15). Lancelot becomes a hermit and dies penitent. In Malory, although Lancelot endures six years of prayer and fasting, he dies as the faithful lover of Guinevere, expressing at the last his loyalty to the brotherhood represented by both Arthur and Guinevere.

Advised by a vision of Guinevere's death, Lancelot arrives in time to look upon her face before she is buried. Malory's description of his reaction is all the more moving for its expressive understatement: "than Sir Lancelot sawe her vysage, but he wepte not gretelye, but syghed" (*Works* 1256). Reproved by a hermit for the grief he displays at Guinevere's burial, Lancelot defends himself in a manner reminiscent of Elaine of Ascolat. He remarks that there is no sin in his sorrowing memory of the beauty and nobility of Arthur and Guinevere. On the contrary, the remembrance is an act of worship appropriate to Malory's centre of

reverence. Lancelot in his grief cannot be comforted by God or by His representatives, the Bishop or the good Sir Bors. Malory continues to use the Christian faith to celebrate Lancelot's transcendent humanity. The pathos of Lancelot's heartstricken decline "ever . . . groveling on the tombe of kyng Arthur and quene Guinevere" (*Works* 1257), and his subsequent translation accompanied by a multitude of angels, confirm the spiritual dimension of the love for the Guinevere and the reaffirmed loyalty to Arthur which have characterized Lancelot from his first appearance in Malory's *Arthuriad*. As P. Waldron says, "Malory forgives Lancelot and Guinevere for an abundance of humanity" (60). Lancelot's influence as the greatest knight of the Arthurian world is maintained even after his death. To the end Malory combines in the figure of Lancelot the themes of earthly loyalty and an active spirituality. The love and spiritually-based loyalty of his kin is manifest both in the magnificent threnody spoken by his brother Ector, once more seeking Lancelot, but this time, and forever, too late, and in the continuation of their knight-errantry by his four kinsmen, commanded by Lancelot to fight against the miscreant Turks, and rewarded by a holy death "upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake" (*Works* 1260).

## CONCLUSION

Malory's presentation of Lancelot reveals to us Malory's own journey towards an understanding of the nature of achievement in chivalric man. Lancelot, the great exemplar of knightly accomplishment in the pre-Grail world, is humbled but not humiliated in the spiritual world of the Grail. It is in that world that Malory's preference for human fidelity over Christian chastity becomes apparent. In the ensuing adventures in the post-Grail world of Arthur, Lancelot, his character enhanced by his comprehension of his Grail experiences, takes on a new dimension as representative of both the greatness and the limitations of humankind.

In Lancelot's sufferings and strivings Malory has portrayed the darkness and the delight of human existence. In his final books, fidelity, whether it be in love between a man and a woman, or in the devotion among men bound to one another by the ties of fellowship, is raised to its most spiritual level. Lancelot, given a spirituality in the Grail quest that enhances, not denies, his human aspect, approaches sainthood, smiling at his death, in a manner reminiscent of martyrs, with "the swettest savoure aboute hym" (*Works* 1258).

Malory was, without doubt, a Christian. His reverence for the story of the Grail, "one of the truest and one of the holiest that is in this world" (*Works* 847), and his choice of heaven as the greatest reward for his greatest knight, bear witness to the influence upon him of Christian thought. Yet for all the

evidence of Christian values within his stories it is always the concerns of humanity--its loves, aspirations, and ideals--which occupy the foreground. Malory uses the religion for which he has evident respect to bestow accolades upon characters whose adherence to Christian ideals is highly questionable; Malory, in effect, compels Christian readers to accept Lancelot on Malory's own terms. Understandably Malory, a knight himself, uses the active chivalric life to represent the ideal for humanity, but he does not, as some critics have suggested, present a way of life in which earthly chivalry is seen as complementary to heavenly chivalry. Chivalry is represented primarily by the Round Table knights, that is, by a group of men bound in brotherhood by human ties of love and loyalty. In this brotherhood, represented by the greatest knight of all, Sir Lancelot, the spiritual and the secular coalesce on earth. Lancelot may receive his ultimate reward in heaven, but the reverence accorded him by Malory and his readers is not a result of his perfections as a Christian, but of his struggles and achievements as a noble man. We are told, for example, and on supposedly good authority, that Lancelot is unstable, yet what we feel is how unswervingly faithful he is--a testament to the strength of Malory's belief in the value of loyalty and to its expression in the *Morte*. It is the "worship . . . within a mannes person" (*Works* 63) we remember above all in Malory's story, not the transient light of the Grail, nor even the magic swords, but the greatness and the grief of human existence. Malory's treatment of

humanity creates a deep connection of feeling among the stories which make up the *Morte Darthur* in a way that makes inconsistencies irrelevant. Malory's reverence is, ultimately, man-centred. His creation is an act of worship, in which we as readers, called upon to witness the greatness that once was and to regret its passing, are deeply involved. It is tempting to see in Malory's work an incipient humanism, a reflection, perhaps, of the trend towards "the celebration of the sacrosanct worth of man" (Gusdorf 1180) that was to burst into full flower during the Renaissance.

Because of the obscurity which surrounds the identity of Sir Thomas Malory, it is impossible to reconstruct with any certainty details of his personal life. P.J.C. Field, in the latest of a series of attempts to determine Malory's identity, proves, at least to his own satisfaction, that he must have been the Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire. Yet despite his extensive research, and numerous careful reconstructions of the paths Malory's life may have taken, Field cautions against any attempt to link Malory's life with his *Arthuriad*. And although Malory lived in a time of great political unrest, we can have no way of knowing which of the historical events of Malory's own time may have been referred to in his book, or, if any were, "whether Malory alluded to an event out of sympathy for the people concerned, or just because the event was strikingly memorable" (Field 123).

Nevertheless, Malory, whoever he was, must have lived through the war between the royal houses of York and Lancaster. He must

also have felt the repercussions of England's costly Hundred Years' War with France and shared the subsequent disappointment of the English who had hoped to rebuild the empire created by Henry II. In addition, the then King of England, Henry VI, was suffering intermittent periods of insanity. In all, it was a time of instability and disillusionment, especially for Malory, a prisoner, if we are to credit Field, for the better part of eight years (105). Small wonder, then, to find in Malory's works so strong an emphasis on idealism and cohesion. Yet by the end of *The Morte Darthur* the Round Table brotherhood is divided and Arthur's kingdom destroyed. There is, as Arthur himself says, nothing left to trust in any more--except, of course, for what is represented by Lancelot, sinful, fallible, yet in the end, still noble, still loved. "That's why I love Lancelot I guess," wrote Steinbeck. "He is tested, he fails the test and still remains noble" (Welsh 499).

Malory, I believe, sets out to re-tell the story of Arthur because it is the story of a golden age in which knights lived, or tried to live, according to a set of ideals. There is a strong feeling of nostalgia throughout Malory's works, never more so than at the end, where Arthur's world, like Malory's own, is on the brink of disintegration and Malory seeks consolation in the reminder of the faithfulness of lovers in days gone by (*Works* 1120) and of a time when men were linked in holy fellowship. But Malory finds himself, perhaps because of his comprehension of human weakness, unable to sustain this vision, and his story becomes

instead one of noble men whose attempt to follow a set of ideals is limited by their human fallibility and by the complicated nature of existence. However, what Field describes as Malory's "generosity of spirit" (124) informs the romance, and through Lancelot, allows us too to recognize and celebrate what is noble and to forgive what is not.

The state of humanity depicted in Malory's *Morte* lies somewhere between the "almost incurable folly and waywardness" (Goodrich 13) depicted in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, in which humanity is weighed down by original sin, and the rediscovery of divinity in humanity and consequent exploration of humanity's potential excellence and complexity in the works of Renaissance humanists. Malory's characters live in a mysterious and dangerous world, yet maintain their independence and vitality. Their struggles to live by ideals they cannot attain merit our sympathy and admiration as we recognize in them our own failings and are stirred to a desire to emulate their efforts.

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