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# The Suicidal Nature of Chivalry: A Study of Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur

Timothy A. Shonk

*Eastern Illinois University*

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THE SUICIDAL NATURE OF CHIVALRY:

A STUDY OF MALORY'S LE MORTE DARTHUR

(TITLE)

BY

TIMOTHY A. SHONK

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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Medieval chivalry was a set of ideas, standards, and behaviors that the warrior society was expected to obey. The first sets of ideas began to appear as early as the eleventh century.<sup>1</sup> The chivalric system began with the need for governing and organizing the bellicose warrior society which resembled the earlier German tribes of warriors. Naturally, the first signs of chivalry were seen on the level of the martial arts. Forces outside the warrior society then began to exert their thoughts and ideals upon the soldiers. As a result, true medieval chivalry is basically divisible into three parts. Painter terms these three main facets feudal chivalry, religious chivalry, and courtly love.<sup>2</sup>

Feudal chivalry came about from the Teutonic warrior system, that preceded this medieval era of English chivalry. In this society the warrior was the most important figure. A band of such warriors, the comitatus, made up the force necessary for defense of the tribe and provided the strength for attacks for plunder. Likewise, in England the most important people were knights, and the only soldiers considered reasonably effective during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries were the mounted warriors armed with a helmet, hauberk, shield, and lance.<sup>3</sup> Since these weapons were so expensive and since

<sup>1</sup>Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (John Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

it would have taken considerable time and practice to learn to use the weapons effectively, the peasants would probably not be considered for knighthood. There were always exceptions, however, in that occasionally a poor farmer's son would show a natural affinity for the martial arts and would be inducted into knighthood. But generally knighthood was restricted to those that inherited land, weapons, and physical prowess.

Prowess, the ability to wield weapons well as a result of training and natural strength and ability, became the primary factor used to determine good knights. The warriors naturally admired prowess since fighting was their main occupation. Prowess, however, was generally useless to the vassal lord without another key tenet-- loyalty. Painter points out that loyalty to the liege lord enabled a nation to avoid anarchy and, joined with prowess, formed the basic elements of chivalry.<sup>4</sup> Loyalty was also an extremely important factor since the lord was dependent upon the warrior sect to enforce his edicts, provide his wealth, and spread the reputation of his kingdom.

This desire for glory probably came about as a result of two important notions. First, the warriors used the goals of prestige and glory to rationalize the turbulence and violent nature of their society. Secondly, the songs of ancient warriors made these knights long for glory after death and gave these twelfth-century knights a more noble reason for battle.<sup>5</sup> The Histoire de Gullaume le Marichal portrays this desire for glory. In this history, we find William had no desire for plunder; his sole purpose for battle was glory.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.,

Thus the knights began to look for reasons to justify their violent tendencies. These noble thoughts also began to breed a desire for special treatment among warriors. From this special consideration grew ordinary politeness in battle, conversation, and social relations. Feudal opinion also seemed to point out that this mutual consideration would ameliorate the cruelty of war.<sup>7</sup> Thus the chivalric rules of warfare began to flourish. No knight should attack an unarmed man or join with others in attacking a smaller number. A hero always should show mercy to the vanquished and grant him a form of parole. Those knights who broke such rules would generally receive the reproach and scorn of others.

These "rules" opened the way for further refinement of the warrior class. The Church and women began to inflict their ideals and desires upon the knights. Thus courtesy began. C.S. Lewis sees this courtesy as "rather a civilization of the heart (by no means of the head), a fineness and sensitivity, a voluntary rejection of all the uglier and more vulgar impulses. We can describe it only in words derived from its own age, words which will now perhaps be mocked, such as 'courtesy, gentleness, chivalry.'"<sup>8</sup>

The Church, like the liege lord, was also dependent upon the warrior class for enforcement of its edicts and defense of its people and lands. It was very difficult, however, for the Church, which was rigorously opposed to violence, to bring the pugnacious knights into the folds of humility, patience, and peace. It was only when the

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>C.S. Lewis, "The English Prose Morte," in Essays on Malory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 9.

clergy began to preach that those knights who violated certain church rules were no longer worthy of knighthood that religious chivalry began.<sup>9</sup> The clergy also began to point out that the true knights were loyal not only to the lord but also to God. John of Salisbury said that the duties of the knight were "to defend the church to assail infidelity, to venerate the priesthood, to protect the poor . . . The high praises of God are in their throats."<sup>10</sup>

Ramon Lull in Le Libre del orde de Cavayleria, which is the fullest elaboration of chivalry in existence, says that the clergy and the knights hold the most honored professions, and they should cooperate. Lull even goes so far as to point out that the knight's equipment, like the clergy's garments, are symbolic. The sword is shaped like the cross, and the two edges are to remind the knight to defend chivalry and justice. The shield symbolizes the knight shielding blows from his prince and the Church. The lance symbolizes foresight and truth.<sup>11</sup>

The Church also had reasons, therefore, for the knight to show loyalty to God, but perhaps the strongest attraction for the knights was the crusades. The Church had previously been strictly opposed to violence. The crusades, however, allowed the knights to exert their bellicose desires in a righteous cause that the Church endorsed. The knights obviously accepted the challenge of the crusades but more often than not for the wrong reasons. Often a knight would follow

<sup>9</sup>Painter, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

the crusades for one of the following reasons: (1) a younger son hoping to conquer a fief; (2) a baron hoping to gain the Church's aid and protection; (3) a rebel fleeing the wrath of his lord; (4) a noble seeking adventure or fighting opportunity; (5) a warrior merely seeking plunder and ransom.<sup>12</sup>

Suffice it to say that the Church began to inject its ideas upon the knights, though not to any great extent. But often the desires of the Church came into conflict with the desires of the feudal lord or the knights themselves. There was also the conflict of loyalty to God and loyalty to the liege lord. As if these conflicts were not enough, courtly love provided still others.

Previously the deepest of worldly emotions in this period was "the love of man for man, the mutual love of warriors who die together fighting against the odds, and the affection between vassal and lord."<sup>13</sup> This love formed an existing mold into which romantic passion could almost certainly be poured. The emphasis upon courtesy would also result from the same causes.<sup>14</sup> The troubadour poets were also perhaps partly responsible for the rise of courtly love. The poets would sing their songs of great warriors who owed their fame partly to their prowess and partly to the ennobling nature of love. The reasons for the growth of courtly love are perhaps not as clear-cut as the other two concepts of chivalry, but the works of Chretien de Troyes and Guillame de Lorris certainly point out its significance.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>13</sup>C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 12.



Lewis points out that the main characteristics of courtly love were humility, courtesy, and adultery.<sup>15</sup> The lover was always abject. He was immediately obedient to his lady's wishes and always silent when being rebuked, however unjustly. Lewis also points out that often times the lover addressed his lady as "midons" which etymologically represents not "my lady" but "my lord."<sup>16</sup>

Courtly love was of course adulterous. Marriages were almost entirely arranged for alliances or other secular interests. Marriages had nothing whatsoever to do with love, and the lady who was "the dearest dread" of her vassals was often little better than a piece of property to her husband. Lewis points out that marriages were frequently dissolved.<sup>17</sup> Also, the fact that the lady became subservient to the man upon marriage was a complete reversal of the courting process. A woman who was subservient could no longer be expected to bring praise and glory upon the suitor.

The above discussion points out the basic aspects of medieval chivalry. The reader will note that these tenets were frequently at odds with each other. All three phases demanded primary loyalty. The Church was naturally against the sexual aspects of courtly love. Also, both the Church and the lady expected humility and subservience from knights who were living in an environment that stressed physical prowess and the importance of secular glory. The idealistic arrangement of these three tenets of chivalry was just that--idealistic.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

Malory was aware of this turbulent nature of medieval chivalry, and it was his intent to portray the conflicts and paradoxes of the system. Malory's Le Morte Darthur is nearly an exposé of the fallacies of chivalry. There are those who disagree with this premise. Pochoda, in her work Arthurian Propaganda, points out that "few critics deny that Malory sees chivalry as anything but an essential good."<sup>18</sup> If Malory saw only the good of the chivalric system, why does the book end tragically? The following discussion of Le Morte Darthur will, I believe, point out the fact that Malory was aware of the paradoxes and inconsistencies of chivalry, and exploited them to form the core of his tragedy. The pattern is clear. As Moorman points out, "Books I and II chronicle the establishment of Arthurian order and through the prophecies of Merlin and the beginnings of the Lot-Pellinore feud, sow the seeds of the downfall; books III, IV, and V are the Aristotelian middle; . . . books VI, VII, and VIII are denouement in which the civilization is tested, fails, and crumbles."<sup>19</sup>

Malory's work begins with the founding of Arthur's court. The symbolic removal of the sword from the stone at the Feast of Pentecost is probably meant to figure the birth of a new Christian society. Merlin, the voice of God and destiny on earth, guides Arthur to victory over the eleven kings. The tragic death of the admirable King Lot seems to further point out that even heroes cannot stop the inevitable. But Arthur's court, though erected through divine intervention, is

<sup>18</sup>Elizabeth T. Pochoda, Arthurian Propaganda (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup>Charles Moorman, The Book of Kyng Arthur (University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 11.

full of corruption. Arthur's incestuous relationship that begets Mordred and his attempt to kill those children born on May Day prompt Merlin to tell Arthur that he is "more nere . . . deth than I am, for thou goste to thy dethe warde and God be nat thy frende."<sup>20</sup>

With these rumblings in mind, Arthur subdues the rebellious kings through warfare and a bit of Merlin's magic. This victory points out that Malory was well aware of the two very basic tenets of chivalry--prowess and loyalty. Tucker points out that "there is discernible a greater concern with the glory of the action than the original evinces."<sup>21</sup> Ban and Bors also point out the prowess of Arthur's knights and the fact that having such knights in the court brings worship to Arthur (24-25). Arthur has to subdue the kings so that order and loyalty would be restored. Although he is destined to be king by God, Arthur must still prove it. The title of the second book, "The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself through Dignity of his Hands," ties together the need for prowess and loyalty as a basis for Arthur's court just as they are joined historically.

The need for loyalty is further stressed in the Book of Balin. Balin slays a damsel as a result of a personal grudge. He defies Arthur by placing his own feelings before those of the court. Pochoda points out that the Dolorous Stroke is a result of Balin's slaying of

<sup>20</sup>Eugene Vinaver, Malory: Works (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 33. All further references to this book will be enclosed in parentheses in the body of the text.

<sup>21</sup>P.E. Tucker, "Chivalry in the Morte," in Essays on Malory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 65.

the lady and this stroke ultimately jeopardizes unity and world peace.<sup>22</sup> Balin also fulfills a prophecy that he would kill his brother. Thus we see that the oath of chivalry will be expected to stop personal feuds, inhibit personal feelings, and end the fratricide that the Book of Balin points out.

It is indeed significant that the tale of Balin is followed by the tales of Torre and Pellinor, or the wedding guests, as Pochoda prefers to call them, which contain the stabilizing code. Arthur decides to marry Guenivere even though Merlin tells him that she will love Lancelot. Arthur's great joy lies not with Guenivere as a wife but with her dowry, the Round Table, consisting of one hundred proud and proven knights. Arthur reflects that "the Table Rownde pleasith me more than ryght grete richesse" (60). We see the emphasis of prowess upon the fellowship of knights who will bring worship and honor to Arthur and his court.

Thus it is hardly surprising that Gawain, Torre, and Pellinor leap at the chance to gain glory through the quest of the lady who comes to Arthur's court. On the quest, however, Gawain refuses to grant mercy to a knight and inadvertently slays a lady. Pellinor is indirectly responsible for the death of his daughter because he is too absorbed in his quest. It is this need to show mercy and fight the ladies' cause that will later be reflected in Arthur's code.

Torre is the only one who fares well on this quest. He slays a knight who pleads for mercy only because he is obligated to do so by an earlier promise to be true to his lady. The lady demands the head of the knight and Torre is obligated to obey.

<sup>22</sup>Pochoda, p. 81.

There is a very important point to be noted as a result of the quest. Gawain and Pellinor fail because they do not have an innate grasp of right and wrong. Torre, however, succeeds. Where Gawain and Pellinor must learn morality empirically, Torre has a natural sense of correct action in a situation that is far more difficult than the conflicts the other two face. This action, I believe, points out the fallacy of the impending code. Most of the knights must have artificial rules constructed to guide them during conflicts.

It is after these quests, at the wedding feast, that Arthur puts forth his code. It reads as follows:

the kynge . . . charged them never to do outeage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture (of their) worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes (socour) strengthe hem in hir nyghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of death. Also that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarrel for no love ne for no worldis goodis. (75)

Though this code seems simple enough and well-meaning in its context, there are some instances that it fails to cover or clarify. In the previously discussed quests we find one such problem. From this oath alone, what should Torre's decision have been? Should he follow one aspect of the code and grant the knight mercy, or should he follow another aspect of it and, granting the jantilwoman succor, behead the knight. The oath itself does not ameliorate such conflicts.

Another such conflict is the feud between the houses of Lot and Pellinor. Pellinor accidentally kills King Lot in "The Tale of Balin," and Gawain swears vengeance and promises to kill Pellinor (63). This is a feud that is very important throughout the tale. Gawain

and his brothers, Gaheris, Aggravaine, and Mordred are responsible for the shameful deaths of Pellinor and Lamerok. The immediate reason for Lamerok's death is that he was caught sleeping with King Lot's wife, but the bitterness of the feud is the real reason. As Gawain points out,

Whom that we hate Kyng Arthure lovyth, and whom that we love he hatyth. And wyte you well, my fair bretherne, that this Sir Lamerok woll never love us, because we slew his fadir, Kyng Pellynor, for we demed that he slew our fadir, Kyng Lotte of Orkenay; and for the deth of Kyng Pellynor Sir Lamerok ded us a shame tooure modir. Therefore I woll be revenged. (375)

As Moorman points out, the slaying of Lamerok is one of the great turning points in the book in that it divides the house of Orkeney and its supporters from those of Lamerok who look to Lancelot after Lamerok's death. Moorman further points out that the Orkeney group has hatred for "all good knyghtes and for Lancelot; they will not rest content with the death of Lamerok."

Thus we see that the code cannot force constraints upon those individuals who have stronger feelings of loyalty. Gawain and his brothers break the code because they commit the "sins" of murder and wrongful battles due to their overwhelming desire for vengeance. These stronger family ties figure significantly in the final tragedy. It is Aggravaine and Mordred who expose the love affair of Lancelot and Guenivere. It is also important to note that in the ensuing battle of Book VIII, it is Gawain and his followers who side with Arthur, and Bors and the more respectable knights who rebel with Lancelot against Arthur.

Another fallacy appears in the code itself. Arthur constantly

craves worship, the respect and honor given to a successful knight. The numerous battles that result in prisoners being sent to Arthur, and the descriptions of the battles that Arthur demands from each returning knight point this out. Because of this demand for worship, knights are constantly contesting for Arthur's recognition, and not unnaturally, jealousy and envy are ever-present. We find several examples of jealousy, but I feel a few examples will suffice. In the battle with Emperor Lucius, we find that "though they speak fayre many one unto other, yet whan they be in batayle eyther wolde best be praysed" (134). We find Gawain and Gaheris are very upset over Torre's being inducted first into the Round Table (63). Later we find Tristram and Gaheris in a battle over who is the better knight, Gawain or Lancelot (422). These events are symbolic of the fighting and jealousy that result from this desire for glory.

This need for glory also results in knights fighting among themselves. The true blackguards such as King Mark and Sir Brewnys Saunze Pit  are limited in number. Once Arthur's rule is solidified and absolute, the knights must fight each other in tournaments to gain prowess. The fact that on occasion Lancelot and others combat against Arthur is symbolic of the glory factor superseding undying glory to Arthur.

Thus the code of chivalry is paradoxical and overly idealistic. Characters such as Gareth, who serves as a foil to Gawain in that he has an innate grasp of right and wrong, quests against the Red Knight who directly attacks Arthur's loyalty, and abhors Gawain's vengeance (224), point out the idealistic and realistic gap of the code. Thomas Wright perhaps best sums up the weakness of the code,

It is too inflexible and too static; it cannot embrace enough of the contingencies inherent in the human situation. Indeed, though it may at first inspire order and impose justice, it becomes finally the weakest aspect of Camelot because the Arthurian demonology which it expresses is weak. The knights are aware of giants of evil; otherwise there would be no code to combat them. But visible demons are most quickly toppled, and the code is ineffective against other demons that move men from within: it fails to articulate the need of accommodating large disparities, of compromise, of expanding tolerance.<sup>23</sup>

These weaknesses alone are enough to blacken the character of the Round Table, but the Grail quest points out still others. It is important to note the fact that in Malory's source, Quest del Saint Graal, the Grail quest immediately follows Book I. Malory's delay of the Grail quest is probably meant to indicate that the workings of feudal chivalry do not encourage or produce any spiritual development or advancing idealism. Arthur does not stress religious piety to any great degree to his knights. In fact, his demand for worship does not allow the knights to develop the virtues of patience and humility necessary for a successful Grail quest. Perhaps Arthur himself realizes the knights are ill-prepared. He laments that they take up the quest. Even though the Grail is portrayed as the greatest possible achievement for the Round Table which is at its peak at this time, Arthur weeps,

Alas! . . . For whan they departe frome hense I am sure they all shall never mete more togydir in thys worlde, for they shall dye many in the queste. And so hit forthynkith nat me a litill, for I have loved them as well as my lyff. Wherefore hit shall greve me ryght sore, the departicion of thys felyship, for I have an olde custon to have hem in my felyship. (522)

<sup>23</sup>Thomas L. Wright, "The Tale of King Arthur," in Malory's Originality (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 62.



The knights themselves vow to fulfill the quest after being aware of its value. When the light of the Holy Ghost falls upon them, "Than began every knyght to beholde other, and eyther saw other, by their semyng, fayrer than even they were before" (521). By means of the Grail we see that Arthur's court is at its peak. By means of the Grail quest we find that they are destined to failure and impending doom. The knights must have the quest. The reader is mildly surprised, however, at Arthur's reaction. The completion of the quest could bring great worship to Arthur and should evoke great joy. Arthur, however, is full of great sorrow. The only possible answer to this puzzle is that Arthur is finally aware of the weaknesses of his realm and realizes the knights for the most part will meet with failure and death. Arthur cares little for anything other than his fellowship of knights and the secular values they symbolize and revere.

Gawain is the first knight to make his vow to gain the quest. Moorman points out that Malory has omitted the passage in his source, The French Grail, where Gawain repents having initiated the quest.<sup>24</sup> I feel this change is important because it shows that Malory is emphasizing Gawain's sole interests in the Grail quest--adventure and opportunity for glory. In fact, Gawain and his followers are constantly bemoaning the fact that there is little action on this quest and hence, little chance for glory or worship,

And so they tolde everyche othir, and complayned them  
gretely, that they coude fynde none adventure. "Truly,"

<sup>24</sup>Charles Moorman, "The Tale of the Sankgreall," in Malory's Originality (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 200.

seyde sir Gawayne, "I am ny wery of thys queste, and lothe I am to folow further in straunge countreyes."  
(558)

Thus Gawain wearies of the quest early because he lacks the patience necessary to complete the Grail quest. It should also be noted that Gawain and his followers are always seeking Galahad. They know that he is destined to achieve the Grail, and they feel that if they are with him, they will most assuredly find the Grail.

Galahad's refusal to ride with the other knights is obviously symbolic of the failings of Gawain and the others as a whole. Gawain's failings are that he is lacking in charity, abstinence, and truth. Gawain is also lacking in patience and humility. Perhaps the following incident best sums up Gawain's attitude. After the monk tells Gawain that he shall not attain the Grail because he lacks charity, abstinence, and truth, Gawain immediately asks the monk why he has not met with as many adventures as he usually does. The monk answers Gawain by telling him he is an "untrew knyght" and "a murtherar." The monk then begins to explain Gawain's failure, but Gawain cannot wait. Sir Ector is waiting for Gawain to ride with him for adventure, and Gawain does not want to keep Ector waiting (563).

Gawain signifies the basic faults of the Round Table. Not only is he lacking humility and patience, but he is also lacking any real desire at all to find God and religion. When Gawain is told by the monk that he will not achieve the Grail, he has no sorrow or feelings of guilt. Gawain only seeks adventure; he is completely absorbed in the chivalric code that he must repeat every year at Pentecost, and the code mentions none of the above necessities.

Lancelot, on the other hand, is the knight most likely to succeed. Lancelot is the most handsome, the strongest, the most courteous knight of the Round Table. And yet, Lancelot also fails. His tragic flaw is that of instability. Lancelot vows penance and agrees to give up his complete faith in his strength or prowess. Previously, Lancelot was referred to as the "flower of chivalry" on many occasions, yet now he is referred to as only the best of the sinful knights (520). It appears that Galahad has taken over his position as the best living knight. Lancelot should be the most pious of the knights because he owes so much to God, as the hermit points out,

And there is no knyght now lyvyng that ought to yelde  
 God so great thanks as ye, for He hath yevyn you beaute,  
 bownte, semelynes, and grete strengthe over all other  
 knyghtes. And there fore ye are the more beholdyn unto  
 God than any other man to love Hym and drede Hym, for  
 youre strengthe and youre manhode woll litill avayle you  
 and God be agaynste you. (538)

Lancelot does perform a good deal of penance and does achieve a partial success of the Grail, and yet he in no way equals the success of Bors, Percival, and Galahad. Lancelot does not possess the stability, the driving desire and faith needed to learn the secrets of the Holy Grail.

Lancelot sees the Grail rather early in the quest and yet he is in a semi-conscious state (537). This is an important aspect of Lancelot's character. For all of his power and might on the battlefield, Lancelot is helpless in sight of the Grail. Lancelot, without his armor and prowess, is nearly worthless, as the conversation of the two knights in this scene point out. Later, Lancelot is aware of

of his sinful nature that kept him powerless in sight of the Grail,

And all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for  
the moste parte was for the queenys sake, and for hir  
sake wolde I do battle were hit ryght other wronge.  
And never dud I batayle only (for) Goddis sake, but  
for to wynne worship and to cause me the bettir to be  
beloved, and litill or nought I thanked never God of  
hit. (539)

Lancelot is powerless because he has done what any chivalrous knight should do--win worship for his lord and always battle for his lady.

Lancelot does repent and vows to perform penance. He places the hair from a martyr's coat next to his skin as a reminder of his vow, but he does not possess stability. His "heart and his mouth do not accord" (539). Lancelot's travels bring him upon a tournament. The battle is between black knights who represent sinners and white knights who represent the virtuous. The white knights are defeating the black knights and Lancelot joins the fray on the side of the black knights. Obviously the decision that Lancelot makes is incorrect, but what is significant is the fact that his chivalric training forces him to aid the black knights without seeking whether their cause is right or wrong (557).

A similar incident occurs when Lancelot approaches a castle where the Sankgreall is resting (596). There are two lions guarding the door, and Lancelot immediately draws his sword in defense. He still does not have the faith in God necessary for a successful quest. His faith is still in his prowess and his arms. Later in the same scene Lancelot rushes into the room where the Sankgreall is resting to aid a holy man. Lancelot commits the sin of presumption and is stricken down by a forceful blow of fire. It is significant that

Lancelot's sin of presumption is committed because of his chivalric duty to aid the weak. It is also significant that he is kept from the Grail by the only method he understands--force. Lancelot has seen the Grail and this partial success is all that he will achieve.

The true importance of Lancelot's failure is best stated by C.S. Lewis,

Every word said in praise of Lancelot as a good knight "of a sinful knight," as the bravest, most courteous, most faithful in his love, but not hitherto seriously attempting that perfection of chastity and all other virtues which the Christian law demands of the knight . . . makes it all clearer that the Quest enters a region where even that that is best and greatest by the common standards of the world falls into abatement and low price.<sup>25</sup>

Lancelot did gain partial success in the Grail quest yet this is only reasonable due to the fact that he makes a valiant effort at penance. And yet the reader gets the feeling that Lancelot is not really aware of the significance of this quest. He is constantly portrayed as a wanderer who is overwhelmed by his situation. He is always having to go to hermits and monks for instructions and explanations. He is certainly overshadowed by Sir Bors in the quest.

Bors is the spotted knight who sees the importance of the Grail, vows penance, and remains faithful. Bors vows not to eat or drink and rejects his armor. Bors is tested by having to choose between a virgin who is about to be raped and his brother who is a foul knight. He chooses the virgin, which he is told is the correct

<sup>25</sup>C.S. Lewis, "The English Prose Morte," in Essays on Malory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 18.

decision. This act itself is significant because Bors is able to reject a brother in arms to defend chastity and virtue.

Bors makes clear his complete rejection of feudal chivalry by refusing to fight his brother Lionel who is sworn to vengeance (573-4). Lionel is angry because Bors has put the chastity of an unknown girl above his own brother and, in effect, the fellowship of the Round Table. Although he is about to be killed, Bors refuses to take up arms. Only after a holy man is killed in his defense does Bors pick up his sword, but divine intervention allows him to escape without battle. Bors' rejection of chivalry is so complete that he refuses to even defend his own life. Bors' success in the Grail quest needs no explanations when one compares his stability and faith in God to Lancelot's instability and faith in arms. It is important to note, however, that Bors is a lesser knight who achieves the Grail by faith and stability over a better knight, such as Lancelot.

Percival is also tested in the same manner as Bors. After Percival and Bors successfully complete their tests, they join Galahad and play the role of God's avenging angels. One cannot forget that of these three successful knights, Bors completely rejects chivalry, Percival rejects lust and women, and Galahad is never a real member of earthly chivalry to begin with. They kill, but they attribute their victories to God (598). These are the three that eventually gain the secrets of the Grail, see the body of Christ, and are fed from the Grail itself. Galahad, after hearing the secrets of the Grail, finds he can no longer live on earth. He asks to die and the angels bear him to heaven. But more importantly, before Galahad goes to heaven, God speaks to the three knights. God tells

them that other knights will not have success because "they be turned to evyll lyvyng, and therefore I shall disherite them of the honore whych I have done them" (604). Thus the Grail quest is a failure. The knights have fared so poorly in their lives that they have failed the Grail quest, and they have lost God's favor. It was God's will that the Round Table be established, but now He has withdrawn his blessings, and the Round Table will crumble in the remaining chapters.

Moorman sees in the Grail "a symbol not of mankind's general failure, but of the ultimate failure of Arthur's would-be ideal secular civilization."<sup>26</sup> Pochoda agrees with Moorman and further points out,

the experience of the quest tests the spiritual resources of the individual; one cannot see the Grail in the company of others. The substance of the hermits' explanations which remain in Malory's account emphasize that the Round Table's existence as a group ideal has seriously impoverished its members as individuals; the Arthurian code has not provided the knights with the individual virtues necessary for the spiritual quest.<sup>27</sup>

Pochoda's concern with individualism is well founded. As the knights ride after the quest we note their breaking up into smaller groups of similar philosophies. The glorious fellowship that seemed to prevail earlier is no longer present. The accent on individualism is also important to the earlier discussion of empirical learning. Again, as in the early books, the better knights naturally accept the proper procedures to follow. But the chivalric knights such as

<sup>26</sup>Moorman, "The Tale of the Sankgreall," p. 187.

<sup>27</sup>Pochoda, p. 116.

Lancelot and Gawain do not or cannot learn from their experiences as they are supposed to. For, as the very page after the "Tale of the Sankgreall" reveals, "Lancelot began to resort unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgute the promise and perfeccion that he made in the queste" (611). The point is that one does not need artificial codes, rules, or quests to learn morality. Those who will grasp the true nature of chivalry and religion will do so innately, naturally, and completely when the situations are faced.

The Round Table is staggered by this unsuccessful quest. The fellowship is divided into factions, and Lancelot, the flower of chivalry, the best knight of the order, is proven to be lacking and is really no better than the other knights spiritually. Lancelot is however still the best of the earthly or sinful knights. We find evidence of this in "The Healing of Sir Urry." In this tale all other knights fail to heal Urry, save Lancelot. Lancelot saves Urry but bursts into tears. As Pochoda points out, these tears "could be tears of relief that his adultery has not been discovered, but they also could indicate the realization that his spiritual powers . . . are still available to him by grace."<sup>28</sup> The fact that Urry's healing changes nothing for Lancelot points out the inability of the Arthurian knight to take the spiritual step insuring him and his fellows against disaster.

The Grail quest destroys half of the knights (599) and staggers the order. But it is the tradition of courtly love that deals the final blow. Lancelot's adulterous affair grows increasingly more

<sup>28</sup>Pochoda, p. 129.



prominent throughout Malory's work. In the final episodes, it is this love coupled with the previously discussed failings of the Round Table that undermines the very foundations of the chivalric code.

The first significant love affair that Malory portrays is that of Gareth. Interestingly enough, this episode occurs early in the book and has none of the trappings of courtly love. This tale appears just after the establishment of the Round Table and the chivalric code. Gareth, however, is not a trained knight. He has come to Arthur's court in poor dress and asks only for food and lodging. Kay gives him the name "Bewmaynes." Gareth has previously asked Arthur to grant him a favor. When the lady comes asking relief from the Red Knight, Gareth asks for the quest and receives it.

Gareth wins the quest for the lady, though he is constantly rebuked. But this is perseverance in a quest rather than the undying loyalty of a chivalric suitor. Gareth's feelings concerning such loyalty is made very clear. During the battle with the Red Knight, his lady's captor, Gareth tells him, "she lovyth none of thy felyship, and thou to love that lovyth nat the is but grete foly" (197). This is directly opposed to the courtly love doctrine which states that the lover should remain loyal to his lady no matter what. Gareth also demands that the lady give him her love when she attempts to rebuff his attempt to enter her castle, "I have nat deserved that ye sholde shew me this straungenesse . . . And well I am sure I have bought your love with parte of the beste bloode within my body" (201). According to the doctrines of courtly love, Gareth should be pleased with whatever the lady decides to grant him. He is not.

Gareth later displays his fickleness when he falls in love

with the "new" girl, the disguised Lyones. Lyones sees this fickleness and immediately drops her requirement that they be separated for a year. This fickleness is directly opposed to the primary tenet of courtly love--loyalty. Gareth's marriage also defies the characteristic adultery of courtly love.

As Moorman points out, the tale of Gareth "works toward the propositions that the true end of love is marriage, not adultery, that the young lovers may in fact be fickle, that wise maids best not tarry, and that young lovers sometimes need restraining. Gareth is a 'vertuose' rather than a 'courtly' lover."<sup>29</sup> Gareth's natural grasp of chivalric behavior and the freshness of his love affair lead the reader to believe that this is how the court should be.

Compared to the affair of Guenivere and Lancelot, the love of Gareth and Lyones is happier. At first Lancelot appears to be the same type of knight as Gareth when he rejects a wife or a paramour,

But for to be a weddyd man, I thynke hit nat, for than I muste couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis, batellys, and adventures. And as for to sey to take my pleasaunce with peramours, that woll I refuse: in prencipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advoutrers nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nothir fortunate unto the werrys; for other they shall be overcom with a sympler knyght than they be hemself, other ellys they shall sle by unhappe and hir cursednesse bettir men than they be hemself. And so who that usyth peramours shall be unhappy, and all thyng unhappy that is aboute them. (161)

But Lancelot himself forgets his own prophecies and insights. Instead of leaving his lady to win glory, Lancelot loses glory because of his

<sup>29</sup>Moorman, The Book of Kyng Arthur, p. 21.

lady, "And if that I had nat had my prevy thoughtis to returne to you(r)e love agayne as I do, I had sene as grete mysteryes as ever say my sonne sir Galahad, Percivale, other sir Bors" (611). It is also the case that had Lancelot completed the Grail quest, as Arthur hoped, he would not have returned to Guenivere.

It is also in these last two books that Lancelot directly opposes the earlier code for Guenivere. The degree of Guenivere's innocence also points out how Lancelot sinks deeper into the mire of courtly love. He defends Guenivere in the case of the poisoned apple when she is innocent; he defends her in "The Knight of the Cart" when she is technically innocent; and finally, he defends her in the last book when she is absolutely guilty. In the final defense of Guenivere against the accusations of Mordred, Lancelot places his loyalty to Guenivere above his loyalty to Arthur; he fights for Guenivere in "a wrongfull quarell;" and he commits "outrage," "mourther," and treason. In the Grail quest Lancelot placed his love for arms and his love for Guenivere over his love for God. Now he also places his loyalty to Guenivere over his loyalty to Arthur.

Malory distinguishes "vertuose" love from courtly love in his reminiscing of several paragraphs (649). In this discourse the important assets of "vertuose" love are primarily loyalty to God, stability, faithfulness, and chastity. Guenivere and Lancelot qualify for only one of these virtues--faithfulness. For this reason Malory calls Guenivere a true lover and "therefor she had a good ende" (649). She is able to transfer her faithfulness to Lancelot to faithfulness to God. Lancelot is eventually able to do likewise. As Lumiansky points out, this definition of springlike idealistic love and the

remembrance of the Gareth affair of long ago "form an ironic contrast to the covert adultery which Lancelot and Guenivere are conducting."<sup>30</sup>

Thus the stage is set for the final episode of Le Morte Darthur. Lancelot's avowed penance and vows to leave Guenivere in the Grail quest have not held up as Arthur hoped they would. In fact, Lancelot and Guenivere's love affair seems to be hotter than before. The effects of the Lot-Pellinore feud also enter importantly into the action. Aggravaine and Mordred hold against Lancelot because he sided with Lamerok, the son of Pellinore, during the feud, and they wish to destroy him. Previously, Aggravaine and Mordred did not have proof of this affair and they knew that Arthur would not accept their word even though Arthur was aware of the adultery, "for the kynge had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge loved hym passyngly well" (674).

Arthur's concern is only for his court; his world is that of feudal chivalry. When the affair becomes public due to the trap of Aggravaine and Mordred, Arthur has no recourse but to punish the lovers. Even after Lancelot has slain thirteen knights breaking out of the trap, Arthur only admires Lancelot's prowess and laments the break-up of his court, "Jesu mercy! he ys a mervaylous knyght of proues. And alas, me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever . . . that I may nat with my worshyp but my quene muste suffir dethe" (682). Arthur grows even more sorrowful

<sup>30</sup>R.M. Lumiansky, "The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere," in Malory's Originality (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 226.

after the battle begins, "And much more I am sorry 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" (685).

Lancelot knows that Guenivere will be burned to save Arthur's respect. And yet he must save Guenivere because of his duty to her and because he must save his own reputation. Here the failings of the Round Table are obvious. Arthur needs Lancelot for his Round Table, yet the knowledge of unpunished adultery will just as surely destroy it. Lancelot has no choice but to fight against Arthur's knights to save Guenivere. In doing so, Lancelot kills the unarmed Gareth whom Lancelot loves dearly, and who is one of the shining knights of chivalry. The irony is obvious. As Wilfred Guerin points out, "the stark contrast between the worth of his (Gareth's) character and the senselessness of his death points to the tragic confusion at this time in the moral order of the Round Table society."<sup>31</sup>

Gawain's vengeance comes as a result of Gareth's death. Gawain has a chance to rise to great heights if he stops Arthur from burning Guenivere or prevents his brothers from setting the initial trap. Gareth could have done likewise, but the code prevents it. The two knights love Lancelot too much to fight against him or aid in burning Guenivere, and yet they respect Arthur too much to go against his wishes. As a result, they could only stand idly by.

Gareth's death carries Gawain back to the pagan, instinctive desire for vengeance. He leads the attacks against Lancelot and will

<sup>31</sup> Wilfred L. Guerin, "The Tale of the Death of Arthur," in Malory's Originality (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 268.

not allow Arthur to stop. Lancelot, on the other hand, is torn between the respect he has for Arthur, the love and respect he has for Guenivere, and a subconscious desire to pridefully sweep Gawain and Arthur from the field. His pride forces him to fight Gawain, but he refuses to slay Gawain when he has the chance.

It is during this unceasing battle that Mordred, whom Arthur has left in charge of Camelot, seizes control. Arthur and his knights must return to fight him. Meanwhile, Gawain, who lies mortally wounded, rises to magnificent heights during these final scenes. He realizes the Round Table is lost unless Lancelot can join Arthur to defeat Mordred, and he makes his peace with Lancelot to save the Round Table civilization. But Lancelot arrives too late to save the kingdom.

Arthur and Mordred meet for a peace parley after a great destruction and massacre. The vulnerability of the Round Table is expertly symbolized in the chance occurrence that takes place. A knight at the peace conference draws his sword to slay a snake (712); other knights fear treason and the final battle is on. All the knights involved are destroyed, and Arthur and Mordred kill one another. The best scenes of the total destruction of the Round Table are the scenes showing the peasants robbing the bodies of once proud and powerful knights (714) and Sir Bedwere's disobedience to Arthur's last command to dispose of his sword (715). Prowess and loyalty lie smoldering on the battlefield mixed with decay and decadence.

It is important to note that after the battle, the body of Arthur is received by Morgan Le Fay who was constantly seeking to expose and destroy the Round Table. Evil and darkness receive the

defeated king of the fellowship. Guenivere goes to a nunnery and rejects Lancelot, acknowledging that the destruction was due in large part to their love affair, "Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the most nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow our love . . . ys my moste noble lorde slayne . . . for thorow the and me ys the floure of kyngis and knyghtes destroyed" (720). This is by no means the ennobling nature of love that the doctrines of courtly love claim love possesses.

Guenivere dies nearly a saint as does Lancelot, but it is only after Guenivere's death that Lancelot is freed from the bonds of courtly love to seek God. Lancelot does successfully do penance in the final scenes, but only after he is able to divorce himself from chivalric life completely, just as Sir Bors did in the Grail quest.

\* It is important to note that all of the main knights and ladies who survive--Lancelot, Bors, and Guenivere--eventually denounce chivalry. The two worthy knights who do not do so, King Lot and Sir Gareth, are killed accidentally or senselessly by others. Their deaths further point out the inconsistencies of the chivalric code. If those knights who embrace the qualities of chastity, prowess, courtesy, and stability fail, what is left?

These final scenes point out the paradoxes of the chivalric code. The knight of the Round Table, particularly Lancelot, is a "tragic figure, pledged to a set of vows and standards which are impossible to maintain even in the society that conceived them. Thus the knight is committed to respect for and protect women in a society dedicated to the seductions of fin amor; he is pledged to pursue a mystical Christian ideal armed with a set of values that elevates

physical prowess and the accumulation of glory into articles of faith; he is expected to maintain standards of loyalty and trust in a society split by the gossip and intrigue of a faction-ridden court."<sup>32</sup>

Even these paradoxes are not the whole tragic nature of the Round Table and of chivalry. The idealistic nature of chivalry covered up and repressed the vulgar and base tendencies of the knights themselves.

What is distinctive about this structure is that its chivalric code, in an attempt to keep such conflicts under control, has repressed them almost out of sight by idealizing itself and exaggerating the loyalty of the Round Table knights to each other. Arthurian society has lost sight of the dangerous impulses of self-interest and has set free other destructive impulses which are unrecognized . . . . we are faced with a society . . . living psychologically beyond its means; it is asking more of its members than it can return to them in the way of personal stability and fulfillment.<sup>33</sup>

This point is well taken when the reader reflects upon the work.

One remembers the lament of Arthur at the Grail quest, his dreadful sorrow in the last battles, Gawain's heroic actions near the end,

\*Guenivere's realization of the destructive nature of her love affair, and Lancelot's final rejection of chivalry. All of the above characters have realized the deadly nature of their pursuits, but it is too late. The confusing clouds of chivalry have kept them from acting when action was necessary. The characters are ultimately aware of their failings and the failings of chivalry and it is this knowledge which makes for tragedy.

<sup>32</sup>Moorman, The Book of Kyng Arthur, p. 72.

<sup>33</sup>Pochoda, p. 106.



Malory was obviously aware of this tragic nature of chivalry. Once the Round Table is completed, the loyalties to the liege lord, the lady and the spiritual Lord are constantly at odds with one another. Sprinkling in such problems as personal feuds, jealousy, envy, and pride which naturally grow from the nature of chivalry, Malory has all the makings for his tragedy. The preceding themes and motifs were skillfully woven throughout the work. The tragic ending of Le Morte Darthur was only tempered by Lancelot's and Guenivere's approach to sainthood. But they first must reject all the standards and ideals of feudal chivalry and courtly love. Malory was definitely aware of these pitfalls in the code of chivalry and wrote a "consistent tragedy rather than an inconsistent morality."<sup>34</sup> Malory's work can in no way be taken as a whimsical sentimental look at chivalry.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

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