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THE DEFINITION OF VIRTUOUS LOVE IN THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* social and religious values coincide in the author's definition of virtuous love. Malory's work calls into question the social and spiritual appropriateness of indulgence in promiscuous or adulterous love, and evidence accumulated throughout the work shows the author to be a proponent of love relationships conformable both to God's law and man's needs. While not unsympathetic to the expression of natural human affection, Malory does condemn the destructive aspects of unvirtuous love in the private and public spheres both.

At the beginning of that episode in which Lancelot and Gwenevere's adultery is openly discovered to the reader,¹ Malory explains the nature of virtuous love, that love proper to a world in which Christian standards of good and evil apply to human actions.

Therefore, lyke as May moneth flowryth and floryshyth in every mannes gardyne, so in lyke wyse lat every man of worshyp florysh hys herte in thys worlde: firste unto God, and nexte unto the joy of them that he promysed his feythe unto; for there was never worshypfull man nor worshypfull woman but they loved one bettir than another; and worshyp in armys may never be foyled. But firste reserve the honoure to God, and secundely thy quarell muste com of thy lady. And such love I calle vertuose love. (791)

This love demands faithfulness on first the divine, next the human, level, and always places the duty owed God before that owed

¹ Eugene Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954). "The Knight of the Cart," pp. 790-808. All citations will be followed by page numbers in parentheses, and refer to the one-volume edition of the *Works*, 1954.

another person. Unlike the purely spiritual love required for success in the Grail Quest, this love does not of necessity demand virginity, voluntary chastity, or abstinence,² but finds its ideal expression in marriage based on mutual affection and desire. Such marriage combines the worldly virtue of personal faithfulness with the spiritual fidelity of Christian sacrament. In Malory's view, it displays none of the moral inconsistencies of adulterous love and results in none of the personally and socially tragic consequences of promiscuity or adultery. If he chooses to praise Gwenevere, "that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (791), he most likely does so in tribute to her initial earthly fidelity to Lancelot, her eventual recognition and acceptance of the proper precedence in love, and her renunciation of the evil acts of her former life.³

Malory's views on the subject of appropriate sexual affection remain demonstrably consistent throughout the *Morte*, as an analysis of love relationships in this work will reveal. His clear preference for married love reflects both a fundamentally Christian perspective and a particular sensitivity to the socially disruptive consequences of promiscuous sexuality (even if non-marital) or of adultery. *Le Morte Darthur*, among its other accomplishments and concerns, illustrates the effect of unvirtuous love on Arthurian

² See pp. 603, 678, 683 in re sexual purity demanded on the Quest.

³ I wish to emphasize the irrelevance of the whole confused issue of "courtly love" to an understanding of Malory's treatment of love relationships. He contrasts standards of good (Christian and social) and evil (Christian and social); he opposes promiscuous or illicit, and therefore surreptitious love, to marriages of consent and deep affection. He would have lovers marry if possible, and believes married people can remain passionate and devoted lovers, fulfilling simultaneously their vows to God and their obligations to Arthurian society. In light of the various serious critical and historical objections to the very existence of such a phenomenon as *amour courtois*, among them the impossibility of devising even a satisfactory definition of the term itself, and the lack of any need for this fuzzy concept in considering love in *Le Morte Darthur*, I shall henceforth dispense with the term. See, for example, among the various arguments, those collected in F. X. Newman, ed., *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany, N. Y., 1968); E. T. Donaldson, "The Myth of Courtly Love," in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), and D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, N. J., 1962).

society and explores the consequences of such behavior in the lives of its characters. Participation in the sort of love relationship advocated by Tristram and Isode, for example, according to which "prowess and all the virtues of knighthood are inspired by love, and the service of love is their highest motive,"⁴ provokes an unavoidable betrayal of the Arthurian code, a code that identifies honor with virtue rather than honor with reputation.⁵

[Arthur] charged them never to do outrage nothir morthir, and allways to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allways to do ladyes, damesels, 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 wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and yonge, and every yere so were they sworne at the hygh feste of Pentecoste. (91)

If he is bound by a code that distinguishes right from wrong in chivalry, a knight cannot place the commands of his lady-love first and still remain a good knight. He cannot serve righteousness and simultaneously participate in an adulterous or otherwise illicit love relationship.⁶ The result of trying to act out such contradictory motives is the eventual predominance of one set of values over the other. According to Malory the predominance of the practice of indiscriminate love can only have disruptive results.

Malory writes of the interrelation of chivalric behavior, unvirtuous love, and virtuous love. At least two important incidents in *Le Morte Darthur* overtly challenge the validity of illicit love relationships. The first occurs early in the work, in "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake." A damsel confronts Lancelot with the deplorable fact (in her opinion) of his wifelessness, and

⁴ P. E. Tucker, "Chivalry in the *Morte*," *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford, 1963), p. 69; see below pp. 30-31.

⁵ To do wrong causes one to forfeit Arthur's lordship, the visible sign of honor. See D. S. Brewer, ed., *The Morte Darthur* (London, 1968), pp. 12-19, 23-35.

⁶ See Charles Moorman, "Courtly Love in Malory," *ELH*, 27 (1960), 163-176.

tells him of the rumor that he loves Queen Gwenevere and cannot forsake her because she has cast an enchantment upon him. Lancelot responds thus:

“Fayre damesell,” seyde sir Launcelot, “I may nat warne peple to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem. 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 nother 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.” (194-195)

Lancelot's denial of any involvement at all, either with Gwenevere or any other willing woman, and his insistence upon the moral necessity of chastity (“in prencipall for drede of God”) argue against the established worldly standards of knightly conduct. The question of Lancelot's truthfulness or conviction may be skirted without detriment, for whether or not he was at that moment concealing a love affair is of less importance than the fact that he could easily find strong arguments against amorous involvement. Even if expressed hypocritically, these lines succinctly summarize Malory's objections to what he could only designate as adultery and lechery: immorality by Christian standards and unhappy influence over the sinner's public and private endeavors. In addition, the last part of this passage has a sadly prophetic appropriateness. The consequences of Lancelot's own adultery, of his love *peramours*, include the accidental murder of the good knight Sir Gareth. Gareth represents the outstanding example of a successful, married knight in *Le Morte Darthur*, and therefore in some respects appears a better man than Lancelot. As we shall note below, Lancelot errs in asserting that marriage ends knightly adventure: Malory gives many examples, Gareth principal among them, of the courage, fortitude, and unimpeded martial activities of married warriors.

The second instance of a character challenging the tenets of worldly love occurs well into the Tristram section, in that part

called "Joyous Gard," when Sir Dynadan meets first with Sir Tristram and soon after with La Belle Isode. The wandering Dynadan encounters Tristram but fails to recognize him. Tristram asserts that "a knyght may never be of proues but yf he be a lovear" (511), a proposition that Dynadan denies. To prove his point, Tristram involves Dynadan in a joust with Sir Epynogrys, a great lover. Dynadan is struck down by his opponent but maintains his opinion in spite of defeat, as we see from his words to Isode: "'Madam,' seyde sir Dynadan, 'I mervayle at sir Trystram and mo other such lovers. What alyth them to be so madde and so asoted uppon women?'" (515).

Isode, shocked at his statement, urges the view that a knight must of necessity be a lover or else be shamed. She tells him: "[W]herefore ye may nat be called a good knyght by reson but yf ye make a quarell for a lady" (516). As noted above, this criterion may contradict both the law of the Round Table and Malory's definition of virtuous love. The quarrels made by a knight must come first from God and only secondarily and righteously from a lady. A knight must not, for example, gratuitously seek quarrels at the request of a lady. According to Dynadan, lovers are mad and infatuated, and he seems to regard prowess more as a result of heredity than of love's inspiration. When Isode praises Sir Bleoberys de Ganys as a good knight and a lover, Dynadan responds: "For sothe, hit was so . . . for I knowe him well for a good knyght and a noble, and comyn he is of noble bloode, and all be noble knyghtes of the blood of sir Launcelot de Lake" (516). Just as Lancelot, in the speech cited above, referred clearly to the evil consequences of unvirtuous love, so too does Dynadan, and he prays to be spared them, "'for the joy of love is to shorte, and the sorow thereof and what cometh thereof is duras over longe'" (516). Even if some knights in *Le Morte Darthur* are spurred to greater valor by the presence of the women they love, Dynadan expresses his particular opinions on the source of prowess vividly enough to claim our notice.⁷

Even though Arthur's Pentecostal oath links worldly honor and true goodness, Malory wrote with the certain knowledge that

⁷ *E.g.*, Palomides, 545, 569, 578; Tristram, 457; Gareth, 239, 260.

in daily reality goodness and honor rarely coincide. In the oath the association of honor with goodness is very close, for to do wrong is to forfeit honor ("worship").⁸ In matters of surreptitious love, honor becomes a question of reputation rather than virtue. The protection of honor as reputation can instigate patently evil actions, for the distinction between wrong and right becomes irrelevant when exposure threatens such honor. Both Lancelot and Gwenevere recognize that their adulterous relationship⁹ caused them to fail according to the standards of virtue. Lancelot possessed a high degree of self-knowledge, and saw full well that worldly love and human pride deprived him of spiritual triumph in the Grail Quest. By renouncing the world after the destruction of the Round Table Gwenevere and her lover "substitute innocence and guilt (standards of goodness, not honor) for honor and shame."¹⁰

Both D. S. Brewer¹¹ and P. E. Tucker¹² suggest that Malory approves in some degree of the love between Lancelot and Gwenevere. Certainly Malory appreciates the value of personal loyalty, but his characterization, particularly of Lancelot, indicates that the chief figures of his story well understood the inferior quality of their earthly love. Lancelot's uneasiness about his relationship with Gwenevere antedates the final tragedy. Unlike her, he acknowledges and repents of his sin, even if he cannot avoid repeating it, before the Arthurian order dies. He confesses to a hermit while on the holy quest both his martial pride and adulterous love; he learns that were it not for his sin he would have neither physical nor spiritual peer; he prays to avoid deadly sin, but on his return to the court resumes his attendance on the queen (655-656, 672, 590, 673, 744). Although Lancelot tries to avoid her company, both to quiet the voice of scandal and to keep his vows of the Quest ("and ever as much as he myght he withdrew hym fro the company of queene Gwentyvere for to eschew the sclawnder and noyse" 744;

⁸ Brewer, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁹ See *Works*, p. 801 for the most unequivocal evidence of adultery.

¹⁰ Brewer, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24: "The love between Lancelot and Gwenevere is represented as in itself good . . . love was genuine, not merely lust."

¹² Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 81: "Malory finds fidelity in love praiseworthy in itself — ultimately, perhaps, because it is a form of loyalty."

“And therefore, madam, I was but late in that queste, and wyte you well, madam, hit may nat be yet lyghtly forgotyn, the hyghe servyse in whom I dud my dyligente laboure” (745), he does not succeed in restraining his passion.

If Lancelot or the other knights were possibly unaware of the conflict between God's law and behavior acceptable unto worldly eyes, the experience of the Grail Quest should have taught them about the inadequacy of earthly honors and love and the unsurpassable rewards of Christian devotion and service. Malory's work shows that this quest did not result in the permanent ennobling of all the Round Table knights. Most of them belonged to the world. But *Le Morte Darthur* shows as well that one can live in the world and yet be virtuous. Malory saw a middle path between ideal goodness and damnation.¹³

Malory's middle path reconciles the demands of both human social order and religious obligation. According to his standards, adultery is a worldly as well as a spiritual wrong, disruptive of the public and the private weal. The proper goal of romantic love is marriage.¹⁴ Marriage fulfills the definition of virtuous love, and allows the coincidence of honor and virtue. It binds not by constraint, but rather by mutual consent, being the natural and

¹³ Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 91: "To Malory there are two ways of life, that of the Quest, or perfection, and that of good [earthly] chivalry. The standards of the second way are influenced by and in a sense derive from the religious discipline of the Quest, but that discipline is not in itself a way of life for all men. Malory accepts the possibility of living virtuously in secular life."

Moorman, *op. cit.*, p. 167: "[Virtuous love] may be described as stable, loyal, not promiscuous or impetuous. It is marked by a realization that earthly love must come after love or God, and is perfectly compatible with the chivalric ideals of honor, and loyalty, and with marriage."

Stephen Knight, *The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian* (Sydney, 1969), p. 32: "[Malory] advocates a middle path, a way of life which recognizes spiritual things and worldly things and which, above all, knows how to rank them."

¹⁴ R. T. Davies, "Malory's 'Vertuose Love'," *SP*, 53 (1956), p. 459: "Romantic adultery is predominant in [Malory's] presentation of love. In this respect his work resembles rather the French than the English and Anglo-Saxon romances, where romantic marriage was more commonly the end of romantic love." Mr. Davies errs in his reading of Malory: adultery is foreign to Malory's presentation of true love.

right consequence of reciprocal love. Illicit, surrepetitious love imagines its own variety of constraint to be admirable, while exaggerating and condemning the constraint of marriage. Lancelot serves Gwenevere as a subordinate,¹⁵ and his passion for her leads him to moral failure ("...and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit ryght other wronge" 655). So long as they loved together he was bound by her whims and angers:

Than the quene sent for sir Launcelot and prayde hym of mercy, for why that she had ben wrothe with hym causeles. "Thys ys nat the firste tyme," seyde sir Launcelot, "that ye have ben displese with me causeles. But, madame, ever I muste suffir you, but what sorow that I endure, ye take no forse." (782)

A well chosen marriage of consent implies no such suffering. The union of Gareth and Lyones is the outstanding, though not the only, romantic marriage of *Le Morte Darthur*.

With the marriage of Gareth and with those of two of Gareth's brothers, Malory brings full stress upon the happiness of all concerned. As with the married love of Pelleas and Nyneve in the first "Tale," Gareth's is an index of the noblest elements of the chivalric ideal — and an effective contrast to the loves that will later wither the flower of chivalry. But for the moment, the "Tale of Gareth" shows the Round Table at its highest point: the oath is being fulfilled, there is a sense of well-being and security, and a type of happy love is established at court.¹⁶

Gareth and Lyones marry voluntarily, expressing faithfulness and lifelong commitment to one another (269). Their agreement to marry does not abate the sexual attraction they feel, and Lyonet prevents a too early consummation only to protect the reputation of the bride, her family, and her betrothed.¹⁷ So long as it takes place in the proper context, sexual enthusiasm draws no condemnation, and after they were married Gareth and Lyones "had their

¹⁵ Brewer, *op. cit.*, p. 15: "Lancelot himself *never* uses the second person singular to [Gwenevere]. There is much implicit here of their whole relationship and respective characters."

¹⁶ Wilfred L. Gerin, "The Tale of Gareth: The Chivalric Flowering," *Malory's Originality*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore, 1964), p. 111.

¹⁷ *Works*, p. 249: "'Sir knyght,' she seyde, 'I have nothyng done but I woll avow hit, and all that I have done shall be to your worsyp and to us all.'"

intents either with other as in their delights" (247). Arthur and the court rejoice in the decision of Gareth to marry for love, and provide both blessings and gifts for the couple.¹⁸

"What, newewe?" seyde the kynge, "is the wynde in that dore? For wete you well I wolde nat for the stynte of my crowne to be causer to withdraw your hertys. And wete you well ye can nat love so well but I shall rather encrease hyt than discrece hit; and also ye shall have my love and my lordeshyp in the uttirmuste wyse that may lye in my power." And in the same wyse seyde sir Garethys modir. (270)

In spite of Lancelot's assertion, marriage does not end this knight's career, and throughout *Le Morte Darthur* Gareth proves himself a good knight of surpassing prowess.¹⁹

Malory provides other examples of marriages in which the partners enjoy a large measure of personal contentment. Sir Torre lodges with a couple who offer him hospitality, spiritual refreshment, and an invitation to command their household at his need. The passage describing his visit reflects emotional calm and the expectation that the couple will long continue dwelling together (85). The knyght Sir Pelleas wed Nynve, the Damsel of the Lake, and they "loved togedyrs duryng their lyfe" (126). Nynve protected and cared for Pelleas, and he was known as a full noble knight.

. . . sir Pelleas that loved the lady Ettarde (and he had dyed for her sake, had nat bene one of the ladyes of the lake whos name was dame Nynve; and she wedde sir Pelleas, and she saved hym ever affir, that he was never slayne by her dayes; and he was a full noble knyght). . . (812-813)

And thys dame Nynve wolde never suffir sir Pelleas to be in no place where he shulde be in daungere of hys lyff, and so he lyved unto the uttermuste of hys dayes with her in grete reste. (872)

The parents of Sir Tristram shared a joyful and loving marriage that ended with his birth and his mother's consequent death.

So whan this kynge Melyodas had bene with his wyff, wythin a whyle she wexed grete with chylde. And she was a full meke lady, and well she loved hir lorde and he hir agayne, so there was grete joy betwyxte hem. (276)

¹⁸ Cf. *Works*, p. 815, the marriage of Lavayne and Fyleloly.

¹⁹ See *Works*, pp. 554, 777, 788, 832. In re another knight, p. 90.

In Malory's depiction of Arthur's society, marriage also promotes the public welfare by serving to maintain feudal peace and order. Uther's barons encourage his marriage to Igrayne as if it were a benefit to the realm (4-5). Arthur too is pressured by his barons to take a wife. He already loves Gwenevere (31) and Merlin confirms the nobles' opinion that a man of Arthur's "bounté and nobles sholde not be withoute a wyff" (71). Merlin considers love the basis of marriage, but disapproves of Arthur's affection for Gwenevere; he only permits the union because he knows it would be difficult to dissuade the king's passion, and secretly warns Arthur that Gwenevere will prove unfaithful (71). At times, Arthur bestows wives on knights to create alliances or as a reward for good service.

And uppon Myghelmas day the bysshop of Caunterbyry made the weddyng betwene sir Gareth and dame Lyonesse with grete solempnyté. And kynge Arthure made sir Gaherys to wedde the damesell Saveage, dame Lyonet. And sir Aggravayne kynge Arthure made to wedde dame Lyonesseis neese, a fayre lady; hir name was dame Lawrell. (270-271)

"Sir," seyde Merlion, . . . "hit ys my counceile: latte hym passe, for he shall do you good servyse in shorte tyme, and hys sonnes afftir hys dayes. Also ye shall se that day in shorte space that ye shall be ryght glad to gyff hym youre syster to wedde for hys good servyse." (42)

As the last citation indicates, marriages are also a source of hereditary loyalties, breeding sons to serve their fathers' lord or to take revenge on their fathers' enemies (e.g., Percival and Agglovale, 597-598; "Alexander the Orphan," 472-484; Alexander's son, Belengerus, 484).

While some of the personages in *Le Morte Darthur* display a disregard for marriage vows (e.g., Morgause, 32; Morgan le Fay, 59), others affirm the social or moral importance of such a commitment. Igrayne refuses Uther's first advances, holding a faith with her husband that she cannot lightly break (2). Elayne, mother of Galahad, berates Gwenevere for her faithlessness to her husband Arthur and her mistreatment of Lancelot, her lover.

"Madame, ye ar gretly to blame for sir Launcelot, for now have ye loste hym, for I saw and harde by his countenance that he ys madde for ever. And therefore, alas! madame, ye have done grete synne and youreselff grete dyshonoure, for ye

have a lorde royall of youre owne, and therefore hit were youre parte for to love hym; for there ys no quene in this worlde that hath suche another kynge as ye have." (594)

Arthur himself laments the death of his sister Morgause at the hands of her own sons, and tells her lover, Sir Lamorak, that their sorrow would not have come to pass had he married her instead of loving her illicitly (494). The feud between Lamorak and King Lot's sons sorely disrupted the peace of the Round Table by pitting Arthur's knights against one another. Its violence foreshadowed in small the larger horror of the final division of the Round Table brotherhood into factions. A question of adultery provided an occasion for Mordred to provoke the division that led to the cruel self-destruction of the Round Table knights.

Before considering Malory's treatment of the moral and social effects of adulterous, unvirtuous love, I would like to comment briefly on one of the points raised above. As noted in the discussion of Gareth's marriage, virtuous love does not preclude sexual attraction or enjoyment. This holds true throughout *Le Morte Darthur*. In fact, Malory only condemns sexual passion when it is immoderate and when it is made evil because it violates a prohibition such as incest. The love of Lancelot and Elayne, King Pelleas' daughter, was a glad and natural love, a "kyndely thyng," though not blessed by the sacrament of marriage: "And wyte you well this lady was glad, and so was sir Launcelot, for he wende that he had had another in hys armys" (593). So too the Fair Maid of Astolot acclaims sexual attraction as part of the natural order, for God had formed in her the inclination to love a man (see especially 777-779). She recognizes that the right end of physical attraction and spontaneous affection should be marriage, but because she loves Lancelot out of measure she offers to be his paramour when he rejects her request to become his wife. *Desmesure* was her great sin and the cause of her death; she erred not in loving, only in "the extravagance of her love."²⁰

"For, Swete Lorde Jesu," seyde the fayre maydyn, "I take God to recorde I was never to The grete offenser nother ayenste Thy lawis, but that I loved thys noble knyght, sir Launcelot,

²⁰ Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 465.

oute of mesure. And of myselff, Good Lorde, I had no myght
to withstonde the fervent love, wherefore I have my deth!"
(779)

"The idea of *measure* is the mark of virtuous love."²¹ Numerous incidents in *Le Morte Darthur* illustrate the violent and deadly consequences of immoderate and ill-placed love,²² in particular the madness of both Tristram and Lancelot and the final destruction of the Round Table.

Simple lecherous indulgence and promiscuity find no justification in Malory's work.²³ Morgan le Fay's adultery leads to the death of at least one of her lovers, Accolon (109), and the good knight Sir Alexander defies her lecherous intentions, preferring to suffer grave personal harm rather than sin:

"A, Jesu defende me," seyde sir Alysauindir, "frome suche pleasure! For I had levir kut away my hangers than I wolde do her ony suche pleasure!" (480)

Arthur's own incest with his sister breeds Mordred, a malignancy within the Round Table company and author of its military collapse.

The personages of *Le Morte Darthur* exist in the milieu of Arthurian society, and their private actions may affect this society either beneficially or adversely. Malory's emphasis on virtuous love arises, I think, from his disapproval of the socially and politically destructive effects of adultery as well as from his sense of Christian righteousness. The practice of adultery in *Le Morte Darthur* always represents a disharmony of private and public import. As a private vice it provokes the murderous ire of wronged husbands, suspicious relatives, or enraged sons. One knight, not untypically, wants to put another to shameful death, "For I founde hym with my wyff, and she shall have the same deth anone" (112). Sexual excess breeds the desire for excessive revenge in the wronged parties. The sons of Morgause took her life to expunge the shame done them by her adultery with Lamorak (458-459). Andret spied

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

²² Examples in *Works*, pp. 52, 66, 89, 106, 282, 366, 368, 371, 372.

²³ Especially, as would be expected, in the Grail section. Percival and Bors both endure tests of their chastity (668-670, 693).

on Tristram and Isode in an attempt to reveal their adultery to the king and bring about their death (323), just as Aggravayne would later do to Lancelot and Gwenevere.²⁴

When the adulterers have political claims or ambitions their private sin often carries public consequences or leads them to commit political crimes. The enmity of King Lot for Arthur, who had lain with his wife, led to Lot's death in battle at the hands of one of the Round Table knights, King Pellinor (58). The sons of Lot carried out their revenge against Lamorak both for adultery and for their father's death. Mordred, born of adultery and incest (a sin, albeit unintentional),²⁵ led forces into the field against his father and ended the fellowship of the Round Table. Accolon, lover of Morgan le Fay, dared to plot against Arthur's life at her instigation, and hoped to secure the kingdom to himself and his mistress (102). To further this plot, Morgan unsuccessfully tried to murder her husband, King Uriens (109).

Tristram and Isode enjoy the blessings of Arthur's court upon their love (505, 561). Nonetheless their relationship cannot be named anything other than unvirtuous and wrong. Percival, ignorant of what all others seem to know, defends Tristram against the true charge of adultery.

"That is trouthe," seyde kynge Marke, "but I may nat love sir Trystram, bycause he lovyth my quene, La Beall Isode."

"A, fy for shame," seyde sir Percivale, "sey ye never so more! For ar nat ye uncle unto sir Trystram? And by youre neveaw ye sholde never thynke that so noble a knyght as sir Trystram is, that he wolde do hymself so grete vylany to holde his unclys wyff. Howbehit," seyde sir Percivale, "he may love youre quene synles, because she is called one of the fayryst ladyes of the worlde." (503-504)

The moral Percival cannot even imagine that Tristram might be capable of so great a villainy as to love another's wife. Whatever public approval the lovers receive results from the obvious unworthiness of Mark to hold La Belle Isode as wife. Only Mark's

²⁴ For other examples, see pp. 207, 296.

²⁵ "But ye have done a thynge late that God ys displeyd with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme." (35)

own villainy mitigates their wrong, for had Mark been more noble, Tristram and Isode could not have been so open. If the cuckold lacks all worship, a lover may sometimes be less cautious about his own honor. In spite of general approval, however, a sin has only evil results: personal violence directed by Mark against Tristram finally caused the latter's death (812), and the long disharmony between these rivals eventually caused a public, political rift in Mark's kingdom, provoking uprisings against the king and division among his knights (500-505).²⁶

The love of Lancelot and Gwenevere may only be judged harshly when compared to Malory's ideal of virtuous love. Not only does their sinful relationship debase Lancelot, making him suffer spiritual humiliation for his pride on the Quest and preventing his avoidance of sin after returning to court, but it implicates them both in treason against their sovereign lord, King Arthur. When Mellyagaunce found evidence that Gwenevere had shared her bed with an injured knight, his accusation emphasized the political, public ignominy rather than personal, private misdoing.

"Sir, I wote nat what ye meane," seyde sir Mellyagaunce, "but well I am sure there hath one of hir hurte knyghtes layne with her thys nyght. And that woll I prove with myne hondys, that she ys a tratoures unto my lorde kynge Arthur." (802-803)

In order to defend Gwenevere, with whom he passed the night, Lancelot offers to prove her innocence by trial of arms.

"As for that," seyde sir Launcelot, "God ys to be drad! But as to that I say nay playnly, that thys nyght there lay none of thes ten knyghtes wounded with my lady, quene Gwenyver, and that woll I prove with myne hondys that ye say untrewly in that." (803)

As he will do later when accused of adultery by Arthur himself, and as he was wont to do in the past (by his own confession), Lancelot relies on his physical prowess and on circumstantial inaccuracies to defend the queen. A wounded knight did lie by her, and Mellyagaunce only failed to identify him correctly.

²⁶ Mark always finds Tristram a blight on his amorous intentions; even when he covets a courtier's wife he must first depose Tristram from her bed. See pp. 295-297.

Adultery corrupts Lancelot's soul. To hide their guilt, to protect the queen's honor and his own, he must persevere in his sin of pride. He triumphed over Mellyagaunce, even though the accuser was technically in the right, and used this victory in trial by combat as precedent proof of innocence when facing Arthur (837).²⁷ Generally the Arthurian court accepts the results of trial by combat as sufficient proof of innocence. Lancelot's dubious victory confirms, however, that by misadventure or overwhelming physical strength the wrong man may appear to uphold the truth. Witness another episode midway through *Le Morte Darthur*:

And the same day he founde there sir Amante, the knyght, redy that afore kyng Arthure had appelyd hym of treson. And so lyghtly the kyng commaunded them to do batayle. And by mysadventure kyng Marke smote sir Amante thorow the body; and yet was sir Amante in the ryghtuous quarell. (442)

Arthur knows of Lancelot's pride of arms and prohibits a test by battle (829-830). To the reader, if not to himself, Lancelot acknowledges the wrongness of his position by refusing to combat his king personally. To maintain a lie against another knight in order to protect your honor is one thing; to challenge your king and the man you have truly wronged is quite another (844).

At the end of *Le Morte Darthur* Lancelot and Gwenevere share a sense of responsibility for the destruction caused by the division of the Round Table into factions. The final split was instigated by the open discovery of their unvirtuous love, which forced the knights to choose sides in the quarrel, and was exploited by Mordred

²⁷ Malory refuses to write whether or not Lancelot and Gwenevere were abed at the time of Mordred's surprisal, and appears hesitant on this occasion to support Aggravayne's accusation of adultery: "For, as the Freynshhe booke seyth, the quene and sir Launcelot were togydirs. And whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyst nat thereof make no mencion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes" (821). This particular reluctance cannot be denied, yet he has already included one instance of certain adultery ("The Knight of the Cart") and will close *Le Morte Darthur* with Lancelot and Gwenevere acknowledging and repenting the role their love had in the destruction of Arthur's court. If Lancelot be innocent in this one case, he is undeniably guilty in another, and can offer only a circumstantial, and therefore inadequate, defense against a fundamentally true accusation.

until all the glory of Arthur's court lay ruined on a battlefield. Gwenevere finally sees the damage she had done her soul and her kingdom by loving unrighteously, and she urges Lancelot to leave her in seclusion and return to a virtuous life in the world.

"Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste nolle lorde slayne. Therefore, sir Launcelot, wyte thou well I am sette in suche a plyght to gete my soule hele. . . . And therefore go thou to thy realme, and there take ye a wyff, and lyff with hir wyth joy and blys. And I pray the hartely to pray for me to the Everlastyng Lorde that I may amende my mysse-lyvyng." (876)

Lancelot refuses this course and chooses to seek the spiritual heal he approached on the Quest, but lost for Gwenevere's sake. The instability of the world requires a spiritual stability in man, and Lancelot needed more than earthly virtues to avoid sin and corruption. Galahad warned him to "'remember of thys unsyker worlde'" (740), and now, after the consequences of his moral failure are played out, he pledges to do so:

"Now, my swete madame," seyde sir Launcelot, "wolde ye that I shuld turne agayne unto my contrey, and there to wedde a lady? Nay, madame, wyte you well that shall I never do, for I shall never be so false unto you of that I have promysed. But the selff desteny that ye have takyn you to, I woll take me to, for the pleasure of Jesu, and ever for you I caste me specially to pray."

"A, sir Launcelot, if ye woll do so, holde thy promyse! But I may never beleve you," seyde the quene, "but that ye woll turne to the worlde agayne."

"Well, madame," seyde he, "ye say as hit pleasith you, for yet wyste ye me never false of my promyse. And God deffende but that I shulde forsake the worlde as ye have done! For in the queste of the Sankgreall I had that tyme forsakyn the vanytees of the worlde, had nat youre love bene." (876-877)

Arthurian chivalry failed for a multiplicity of reasons, among them an abuse of divine law that disrupted the spiritual and social fiber of the society. Malory's ideal of romantic married love presents the possibility of fulfilling in this aspect of life both spiritual and worldly demands at once. A marriage of mutual consent and af-

fection keeps the social and the divine order, adheres to the proper precedence of virtuous love (God before man), assures private and public harmony, and guarantees the coincidence of honor and virtue. Malory's middle path avoids the asceticism of taking religious orders as well as the excess and self-indulgence of unvirtuous love, and guides one through a life of spiritual and secular righteousness.

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