

MALORY'S SENSE OF TRAGEDY
IN LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

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An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Jeanie Page Randall

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ABSTRACT

In Le Morte D'Arthur (1467), Thomas Malory presents the first great prose work in English literature. Certain critics have credited Malory with a sense of tragedy, but have not established the place Le Morte D'Arthur holds in the evolution of tragedy from Aristotle to the medieval period. It is possible that Malory conceived tragedy in an original way exemplified in Le Morte D'Arthur. Malory's tragic sense is influenced by Aristotelian tragedy through the wheel of fortune and De Casibus forms prevalent in medieval literature and is colored by the power of the medieval Church in man's life. However, Malory's statements concerning the tragedy of man's wasted potential, embodied in the character of Lancelot, are unique in the literary history of tragedy as it existed in the Middle Ages. This totally new concept, an understanding of the devastation caused by man's failure to achieve his potential, is the focal point of Le Morte D'Arthur and the basis of Malory's novel sense of tragedy.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Jeanie Page Randall entitled "Malory's Sense of Tragedy in Le Morte D'Arthur." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Albert J. Bekus
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We have read this thesis and
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INTRODUCTION

Sir Thomas Malory does not make exclusive use of any particular theory of tragedy in Le Morte D'Arthur, even though a general tone of tragedy prevails. Rather, he has combined the physical structures of the wheel of fortune and the De Casibus with the Christian ideals of his age and with his own comments on the value of man's life. The reader must study the tragedy of Le Morte D'Arthur in terms of its literary heritage, the influence of the medieval Church, and Malory's own statements concerning man's potential for achievement. Even then, one concludes that the sense of tragedy in Le Morte D'Arthur belongs solely to Malory.

Le Morte D'Arthur utilizes the wheel of fortune, influenced to some extent by the De Casibus theory of a noble man's fall from a high position. The wheel of fortune is a medieval interpretation of Aristotle's Poetics. The classical treatise includes a hero caught in a predicament that occurs because of his own actions, the plotting of others, the situation in which he lives, or the movement of fate in his life. Aristotelian tragedy focuses on the hero's response to challenge: how he faces his destiny, how change takes place because of his actions and decisions, how he recognizes his responsibility, and how he copes with the events that result.

Aristotle suggests that a noble hero's flaw, hamartia, is a counterpart of his most admirable qualities. Hybris, pride that makes a man believe in his own ability to dare fate, also helps him face the forces that menace him. The hero's nobility and flaw clash, producing an inevitable tone of doom, loss or chaos.¹

Modern research indicates that Aristotle's treatise was not available to Malory; at least, no conclusive evidence suggests that he did read it. However, the wheel of fortune takes its frame of reference from the Aristotelian concept and does influence Le Morte D'Arthur.

The wheel of fortune presumes a circular movement of man's experience, directed by Fate's whim, that takes him to glory from which he must fall. In one sense, Arthur's life exemplifies this motion: conceived out of wedlock and reared by foster parents, Arthur faces an unexceptional future; but, Fortune turns the wheel which takes Arthur to the apex of the glory of the Round Table. However, the wheel does not remain stationary; its downward course takes Arthur from the days of true chivalry to his death. Tragedy controlled by the wheel of fortune does not require the hero's death, but rather focuses on the loss of that height he has attained; consequently, the loss must be severe, as in Arthur's case. Not only does he lose his kingdom,

¹R. J. Dorius, "Tragedy," and O. B. Hardison, Jr., "Tragic Flaw," Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 1965.

but he also loses his wife, his best friend, and the culmination of his life's work, seemingly as a result of Fortune's turning wheel.

The influence of De Casibus tragedy is more important than the wheel of fortune in the literary heritage of Le Morte D'Arthur. Malory may have been familiar with Boccaccio's Latin work, De Casibus Virorum Illustrium. If not, he, like other medieval writers, did recognize, Farnham notes, "the story of a fall from felicity into misfortune" as tragedy. The essence of De Casibus tragedy is contained in the title which translates as The Fall of Noble Men or The Fates of Illustrious Men. Unlike Aristotelian tragedy, De Casibus assumes the active and fickle movement of Fate that orders the lives of noble men in such a way that men are powerless except when they embrace total humility.²

Although Arthur falls from a high position, much more is involved. The De Casibus influence appears in the ordering of Arthur's kingdom from chaos to unity, and, then, in the increasing tension and conflict, ending with the division of the kingdom. Fate and prophecy, as well as portents and dreams, affect Arthur's life and maintain an inevitable doom. The lives of Lancelot and Gawain parallel Arthur's rise

²Willard Farnham, The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 71. Chapter 2 is a complete discussion of Boccaccio's understanding of the Fall of Princes, 69-128.

and fall. Each man exhibits a personal flaw which causes him to make certain choices: Arthur, proud, especially of the Round Table; Lancelot, excessive in his love for Guinevere; and Gawain, unable to change his stubborn nature. When conflict forces decision, each man, influenced by his flaw and blinded in his action, brings about his own fall in the expected manner of Aristotelian tragedy.

As a 15th century author, Malory combines both of the tragic theories prevalent during his time with the influence of the Church, not as an addition, but as the natural result of his being a medieval man. Although one associates this influence primarily with the Quest of the Sankgreal, the reach of the Church's power over medieval life permeates all of Le Morte D'Arthur and, therefore, affects the nature of tragedy as Malory views it.

Tragedy must contain some conflict that forces man to choose a certain action. The Quest of the Sankgreal provides such a conflict because each knight is confronted with the basic human dilemma: the question of his nature as a man. The values and principles of the medieval Church make it extremely difficult for him to be both human and ideally spiritual. Consequently, the Quest, which demands spiritual perfection, becomes an impossible attempt for all but three knights: Bors, Percival, and Galahad, the totally perfect knight. Unlike Galahad, Gawain

possesses worldly attitudes so strong that he refuses to change and therefore has no hope of seeing the Sankgreal.

However, Malory suggests an even more complex tragedy. He reveals man's real dilemma through Lancelot, whose nature causes him to sin in his love for Guinevere and in his failure to end their relationship as a part of his penance, but whose spirituality takes him to the door through which he sees the Sankgreal and gives him the power to heal Sir Urry. In Lancelot, Malory maintains that denial of one's nature is as great a tragedy as denial of one's spirituality. God has given both humanness and spirituality to man for his life, and only certain individuals such as Galahad, an allegorical figure, are lifted out of their humanness by God Himself, not by any action of human will. Malory focuses attention on the real medieval man who, like Lancelot, sins, but confesses; errs, but forgives; falls short of the Church's rules, but continues to abide by its laws.

Through Lancelot, Malory makes his most significant statement about the possibility of man's achievement. In Arthur, one sees a man whose love for and pride in the ideal of the Round Table blind him to its inadequacies; the Round Table cannot take the place of meaningful relationships with his wife and knights. Gawain's stubborn adherence to duty alienates him from others. Galahad's lack of any human flaw excludes him from any understanding of human nature in other men. For

Malory, only Lancelot ranks as the greatest knight on earth, because only Lancelot does not waste his potential. Even his love for Guinevere is not wasted; it becomes the major expression of his human frailty, but does not keep him from being an honored knight.

Malory does not base the nature of tragedy on Fortune or Chance nor on the question of salvation; tragedy occurs if one has wasted his only opportunity to reach fully his potential as a man. Malory's tragedy, influenced by the wheel of fortune and the De Casibus themes, combines with the medieval Christian concept of the duality of man and an understanding of the dilemma all men face. Malory presents ways of dealing with tragedy in the lives of the knights; his answer comes in Lancelot, who lives, as Malory believes man should live, to the fullness of his potential. Lancelot's example causes the failure of the others to live as they could to be tragic. All that might have been done by such men in the fellowship of the Round Table and in the glory of the Quest for the Sankgreal is wasted. What could have been more than a glorious moment in time returns to disorder because men would not or could not recognize the immense possibilities of their lives.

CHAPTER I
LITERARY HERITAGE

In Le Morte D'Arthur, Malory reflects prevalent tragic views, exemplifying the medieval tendency to reiterate themes and ideas that occur in classical and contemporary literature. However, neither the wheel of fortune nor the De Casibus is dominant in Malory; he uses, but does not imitate, the tragic forms of his sources.

The wheel of fortune provides the primary medieval tragic motif. The thematic order of the wheel's turning at Fortune's push gives the writer a ready-made structural movement from chaos to unity. In a discussion of Malory's sources, Eugène Vinaver writes that "the idea of the relentless motion of the fatal wheel causing the downfall of those who rise too high-- a christianized conception of Fortuna--had been common enough throughout the Middle Ages. . . ." ³ The fact that the wheel was so well-known causes Moorman to believe that

In all probability, Malory thought of tragedy in the familiar medieval terms of Dame Fortune and her wheel, by which even the most deserving of heroes were eventually overthrown by forces outside themselves and by events which they had

³Eugène Vinaver, ed., The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, xciv. Further reference to the editor's remarks will be indicated as Vinaver, Works. Reference to the original material will be indicated as Malory.

neither precipitated nor deserved. The wheel of Fortune itself appears once in Malory (1233), and certainly the strong element of fate, articulated most strongly in the prophesies of Merlin, bears witness to Malory's belief in the transitory nature of all earthly felicity.⁴

The literary path of the wheel of fortune moves through the greatest of the medieval authors--from Boethius, through Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer to Malory. As a scholar of both Greek and Roman literature, Boethius becomes the definitive source of classical themes for the Middle Ages. According to Patch, Boethius is "the first among medieval writers to set forth the picture of the Goddess Fortune and her wheel with anything like a full and proper characterization."⁵ In a study of Boethian influence on Chaucer, Jefferson notes that

Fortune, as represented in medieval art and literature was a living, potent, and terrible force. Wars, violence of all kinds, and plagues made life very uncertain. The position of kings was especially hazardous. As Chaucer translates a passage of the Consolation, 'the olde age of tyme passed, and eek of present tyme now, is ful of ensaumples how that kings be changed in-to wrecchednesse out of hir welefulnesse.'⁶

⁴Charles Moorman, The Book of King Arthur; The Unity of Malory's Morte D'Arthur (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 68.

⁵Howard Rollin Patch, The Tradition of Boethius: A Study of His Importance in Medieval Culture (New York: Russell and Russell, 1970), 121-2.

⁶Bernard L. Jefferson, Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius (New York: Haskel House, 1965), 49.

Boethius' own definition of tragedy appears as a question in The Consolation of Philosophy: "What other thing doth the outcry of tragedies lament, but that fortune, having no respect, overthroweth happy state?"⁷

In a letter to Can Grande della Scala, Dante discusses the turning of fortune's wheel in terms of the movement of "its subject matter": "Tragedy in its beginning is admirable and quiet, in its ending or catastrophe foul and horrible."⁸ Boccaccio continues the same theme in The Fates of Illustrious Men when he writes:

Whenever anyone's situation seems to be taken for granted by everturning Fortune, then in the midst of this unfortunate credulity, she is preparing a trap. For as we seem to be carried up to the stars, in the same way our hopes are very carefully planted in the depths. . . . And if it happens that you are overthrown, then know it occurred not because of your gift, but rather by the iniquity of changing Fortune.⁹

⁷Boethius: The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 181.

⁸Dante Alighieri, Dantis Alagherii Epistolae, 2nd ed., trans. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 196.

⁹Giovanni Boccaccio, The Fates of Illustrious Men, trans. Louis Brewer Hall (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 242-3. Other important sources concerning the wheel of fortune are "The Second Dream," The Alliterative Morte Arthure, 3-113, and The Parliament of the Three Ages, 133-151, in The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Owl and the Nightingale, and Five Other Middle English Poems in a Modernized Version with Comments on the Poems and Notes, John Gardner (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971).

Chaucer closes his collection of vignettes of tragic heroes in the Monk's Tale by saying:

Tragediës noon oother maner thyng
 Ne kan in syngyng crie ne biwaille
 But that Fortune alwey wole assaille
 With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;
 For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
 And covere hire brighte face with a clowde.¹⁰

For Malory's purpose, the wheel of fortune appears primarily in the tales about the early years of Arthur's reign when the independent lords join together to stabilize a nation and when Arthur evolves from bastard child to King of England, Emperor of Rome, and Lord of the Round Table. Malory's use of the wheel as a literary device for plot construction is not original, but results from centuries of literary heritage.

Malory's agent of Fortune is Merlin, described by Moorman as "the practical strategist, who carefully manages both the diplomatic maneuvers by which Arthur achieves maturity and the throne and the actual tactics of the wars which establish his power over a united Britain, and he is also the spokesman of God, the Forecaster of the immutable tragedy to come."¹¹

¹⁰ The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., "The Monk's Tale," ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 198. See also Chaucer's allusion in Troilus and Criseyde, Book V, 459-479.

¹¹ Moorman, 70.

Malory's characterization of Merlin is one of his most important innovations; no longer solely magical as in previous works, Merlin develops as Christian, human, a political advisor who helps push the wheel to its highest point--the glorious momentary fellowship of the Round Table.

There are a few years at the zenith of the wheel when the enemies of the Round Table are subdued in Britain and Europe. Mordred, the hand Fate will use to push the downward turn of the wheel, has not begun to plot Arthur's fall. The relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is in its infancy; the ideals of the Round Table are at their highest. Malory fills this structural hiatus with The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney, for which no known source exists. Although the tale may appear a microcosm of the adventures, quests, and loves of the Round Table knights, in it Malory questions the ideals of chivalry and courtly love. Gareth is judged fit for the Round Table company by his actions and merits, not by his name or blood. He loves his lady as other knights love theirs, but he sees his love resulting in Christian marriage, not in a secret relationship between two unmarried people.

From this tale onward, Malory turns attention away from the excitement of establishing and maintaining the chivalric ideals of the Round Table to a closer study of personalities: Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, and Gawain. Consequently, the structural value of Fortune's turning wheel takes second

place to De Casibus tragedy; tension and conflict are increased by the choices each character makes under the influence of his personal flaw, and an inescapable sense of doom begins to gather. No longer can Bors, echoing Chaucer in Troilus and Criseyde,¹² advise Lancelot that "Sytthyn hit ys fallyn as hit ys, . . . ye shall take the woo wyth the weall."¹³ No longer are all things right in Camelot.

De Casibus tragedy requires that a strong, noble, admirable hero is forced, by circumstances beyond his control, to make what he believes to be a decision for good, but one which instead results in chaos, loss, and possible death, both for himself and for others. The hero must be aware of the potentially dangerous outcome of his decision; he must weigh his choices, trusting that he alone can decide the best for everyone; he must feel a foreboding sense of preordination in his actions; and he must face the consequences of his actions, with no hope of escaping the devastating knowledge of his mistakes.

After The Tale of Sir Gareth, the De Casibus feeling of doom, foretold by Merlin, increases with each succeeding tale. Moorman notes that "Malory uses Merlin to establish the fact that while the tragic fall of Arthur's kingdom is predetermined, in proper medieval fashion, by the rise and fall of Fortune's

¹²Chaucer, 389.

¹³Malory, 1171.

wheel, it is also due to particular actions of particular knights."¹⁴ Merlin foresees how the knights will make decisions and choices that will flaw the Round Table. Vinaver writes, describing the changed atmosphere that develops as a result of these actions in De Casibus tragedy, that "On the familiar bright landscape with its shining meadows, on the glittering armour of knights riding in search of adventure, dark and ominous shadows begin to fall. We no longer see Arthur's companions perform endless feats of bravery; we hear less of their glorious record, of their ultimate reward."¹⁵

Although Lancelot, Gawain, and Guinevere are noble, have flaws, and fall, to some extent, from high places because of their decisions, Malory's primary De Casibus hero is Arthur. In his desire to realize his dream of the Round Table, Arthur is the hero Kerr describes, "at the heart of tragedy, feeding it energy, [who] stands godlike . . . passionately desiring a state of affairs more perfect than any that now exists."¹⁶

¹⁴Moorman, 70.

¹⁵Vinaver, Works, xciv.

¹⁶Walter Kerr, Tragedy and Comedy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 107. For more information concerning the hero figure in medieval literature refer to Bernard F. Huppé, "The Concept of the Hero in the Early Middle Ages," 1-26; Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Problem of the Hero in the Later Medieval Period," 27-48; and R. R. Bolgar, "Hero or Anti-Hero? The Genesis and Development of the Miles Christianus," 120-146, in Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975).

In the first tales, Malory views Arthur's total commitment to achieving the Round Table as the best possible good for all men; however, once Arthur attains the ideal, Malory knows that Arthur and the others must now try to live in the perfection they have fought so hard to build. Leisure causes boredom and quarreling among the knights. In an attempt to arouse interest in a new cause for the Round Table company, Arthur endorses the Quest of the Sankgreal. However, he immediately regrets approving the Quest and, in a flash of premonition, he says to Gawain, who has encouraged the others to take up the Quest,

"Alas! ye have nygh slayne me for the avow that ye have made, for thorow you ye have berauffte me the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the worlde. For whan they departe from 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 for-thynketh 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 had an olde custom to have hem in my felyship."¹⁷

Arthur is so consumed by his love for the knights and his dedication to the Round Table code that he is unable to entrust any meaningful part of himself to a relationship with Guinevere. Not recognizing that he is describing himself, Arthur says, "With many knyghtes love ys fre in hymselffe, and never woll be bonde; for where he ys bonden he lowsith hymselff," as Arthur has lost himself to his love for the

¹⁷Malory, 866-7.

Round Table.¹⁸ Even when Lancelot rescues Guinevere at the last moment from death by burning, a punishment given the king's tacit approval since a queen's adultery is treason, Arthur says of the knights who died in the escape or allied themselves with Lancelot,

"Wyte you well, my harte was never so hevy as hit ys now. And much more I am soryar 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."¹⁹

Arthur's unwavering devotion to the ideal of the Round Table makes him blind to the value of any other relationship. Even the knights of the Round Table are important to him only by virtue of their membership in the company.

The powerful commitment to the fellowship of the Round Table that makes Arthur a victorious king and leader in the early tales becomes the flaw which brings about his De Casibus fall in the end. Malory sees Arthur's fixation as a weakness that endangers first his personal relationships and, then, the whole structure of the Round Table; a king must be more than one-sided. Pochoda notes that "it is a measure of Malory's tragic sense and evidence of his political concerns that Arthur's tragedy is directly attributable to his weaknesses as a king."²⁰ A fall is inevitable and the devastation great:

¹⁸Malory, 1097.

¹⁹Malory, 1183-4.

²⁰Elizabeth T. Pochoda, Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 138.

the Round Table collapses; the knights die or scatter; the kingdom once again divides; Arthur is beaten, faced with a complete realization of his part in the tragedy. Vinaver writes that "only Malory's Arthur can gauge the full depth of his grief at the destruction of his fellowship, the equal of which has not been seen in any Christian land. . . ."21

To make Arthur's tragedy even more powerful, Malory does not maintain that Arthur dies; rather, Malory makes possible the belief that Arthur is living somewhere in the constant memory of his own part in the tragedy and in the hope of forgiveness and grace:

Yet som men say in many p[ar]tys of Inglonde that kyng Arthure ys not dede, but h[ad] by the wyll of oure Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wyne the Holy Crosse. Yet I woll nat say that hit shall be so, but rather I wolde sey: here in thys worlde he chaunged hys lyff. And many men say that there ys wrytten uppon the tumbre thys:

HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS. 22

Malory's statement that "here in thys worlde he chaunged hys lyff" indicates the personal responsibility the De Casibus hero has in his fall and, at the same time, hints at a new sense of tragedy that Malory is developing.

Malory does not limit the De Casibus theme to Arthur; he blends together what Moorman calls "three Dark lives": Lancelot,

²¹Vinaver, Works, xcviiii.

²²Malory, 1242.

of knights and knyghtes bestid
 Guinevere, and Gawain.²³ Although not De Casibus heroes
 as Arthur is, each one adds his actions and decisions to
 the De Casibus form. Lancelot and Guinevere share the same
 flaw, an uncontrollable devotion to each other and an in-
 ability to give up the pleasures of their affair. Lancelot
 recognizes the destructive force of their love when he pro-
 poses rescuing Guinevere from execution, saying,

"Peradventure I shall there destroy som of
 my beste fryndis, <and> [that shold moche
 repente me. And peradventure there be som,
 and they coude wel bryng it aboute or dis-
 obeye my lord kynge Arthur, they wold sone
 come to me, the whiche I were loth to hurte.] "²⁴

His love for Guinevere is so strong that he willingly con-
 fronts the court's condemnation of his treatment of the
 "Fayre Maydyn of Astolate"²⁵ and explains to the queen:
 "I love nat to be constrayned to love, for love muste only
 aryse of the harte selff, and nat by none constraynte."²⁶

Both Guinevere and Lancelot come late to a realization of
 the consequences of their actions, and each faces a self-
 inflicted exile from the other and a time of conscience-
 stricken repentance. When Guinevere finally refuses to see
 Lancelot again, she says, "Thorow the and me ys the fl[ou]re

²³Moorman, 67.

²⁴Malory, 1172.

²⁵Malory, 1096.

²⁶Malory, 1097.

of kyngis and [knyghtes] destroyed."²⁷ After Guinevere's death, Lancelot says,

"My sorow was not, nor is not, for ony rejoyssing of synne, but my sorow may never have ende. For whan I remembre of hir beaulté and of hir noblesse, that was bothe wyth hyr kyng and wyth hyr, so whan I sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders, trully myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body. Also whan I remembre me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were pereles that ever was lyvyng of Cristen people, wyt you wel . . . this remembred, of their kyndenes and myn unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself."²⁸

Sad as Lancelot's story is, it is not De Casibus tragedy, as Benson notes:

Unlike the usual tragic hero, a Hector or Alexander, Lancelot has suffered neither death nor loss of wealth or prosperity. He remains the King of Benwick, a knight of such prowess that even Gawain with his supernatural strength cannot avail against him. Lancelot is brought passing low by being deprived of his lady and his king. The measure of his tragic fall is the measure of his virtue, for it is only his loyalty to Arthur and Guinevere that leads him to regard his situation as tragic.²⁹

Gawain, whose flaw is his uncontrollable temper and stubborn nature,³⁰ adds his part to the De Casibus motif by swearing,

²⁷ Malory, 1252.

²⁸ Malory, 1256.

²⁹ Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 243.

³⁰ Malory, 207.

"I wolle be revenged uppon sir Launcelot."³¹ Unable to weigh his past friendship with Lancelot against the fateful death of his brothers at Lancelot's hand, Gawain rouses other Round Table knights in an attempt to defeat Lancelot through Guinevere. It is only in a deathbed confession that Gawain admits his responsibility in weaving the web of destruction that overtakes the Round Table when he says to Arthur,

"And all I may wyte myne owne hastynes and my wy[]fulnesse, for thorow my wylfulnes I was causer of myne owne dethe; for I was thys day hurte and smytten uppon myne olde wounde that sir Launcelot gaff me, and I fele myselff that I muste nedis be dede by the owre of noone. And thorow me and ~~my~~ pryde ye have all thys shame and disease, for had that noble knyght, sir Launcelot, ben with you, as he was and wolde have ben, thys unhappy warre had never ben begunne."³²

It is interesting to note that Boccaccio, who was acquainted with some of the Arthurian romance, writes in De Casibus Virorum Illustrium that

the triumphant glory of King Arthur and his brilliant renown gave way to shame and obscurity by this rebellion and destruction. From this example people can learn, if they wish, that in this world only the humble things endure,

which is a typically medieval response to De Casibus tragedy.³³

³¹Malory, 1186.

³²Malory, 1230.

³³Boccaccio, 218. Although Lydgate is post-Malorian, he discusses Arthur in this same context in Book VIII, The Fall of Princes, Early English Text Society, Extra Series. ed. H. Bergen (Nos. 121-4, 1924-7).

Since few can be kings, it is better to be content with humble things that endure than to yearn for the momentary glory of even the best of worlds.

Although Malory's notion of tragedy is not bound by either wheel of fortune or De Casibus exclusively, each tragic form certainly influences Le Morte D'Arthur. The wheel appears primarily in the structural development of the "hoole book," while De Casibus gives Malory a larger range of characterization.³⁴ As they function in Le Morte D'Arthur, both motifs are a result of Malory's literary heritage, garnered from his sources; but neither in itself is sufficiently influential to determine Malory's own sense of tragedy.

³⁴

Malory, 1260.

CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

There must be conflict in order for tragedy to occur; two opposing forces must meet in the same man and cause him to choose certain actions. This prerequisite poses no problem for the medieval author, for man is by nature a dual being, both physical and spiritual. These aspects of man's nature wage a constant battle. A writer of medieval tragedy need only examine the life of a man whose human frailties are stronger than his spiritual endowments; such a man is sure to fall tragically short of God's grace. Although Le Morte D'Arthur is not essentially religious tragedy, Malory's sources and spiritual education make it impossible to disregard the influence of the medieval Church on his writing; in fact, he is unaware that he expresses dogma and doctrine that are naturally a part of his life.

In a discussion of the Church's influence, Guerin writes that

The tragedy of the Round Table as a social unit is in its unsuccessful attempt to create on earth an idealistic state. Since the Round Table is a society flourishing in the midst of medieval Christianity, its characteristics are steadily seen against the backdrop of other-worldly philosophy where the function of man is to aspire to an eternal reward. And since the Round Table exists in an era when the historicity of original sin and the reality of the seven deadly sins are accepted, its members

find it difficult always to live in accord with the strictest dictates of their consciences.³⁵

Not only does medieval society have to consider such dogmas as original sin, the seven deadly sins, the fourteen articles of faith, the ten commandments, and the seven sacraments, but there are also the doctrines of the two evangelical precepts of charity, the seven principle virtues, the seven works of mercy, plenary and temporal indulgence. No segment of life is exempt from the influence of the Church, and Malory's characters reflect this condition.

Knights who have achieved, however temporarily, their goal of "an idealistic state" are dissatisfied with inactivity. Into this context Malory places the ultimate adventure, the Quest of the Sankgreal with its goal of eternal perfection. He studies medieval man's struggle with his dual nature and uses the theme of the Quest to emphasize his sense of tragedy. Pochoda writes that

From the beginning the implicit duty of the Round Table court (and by implication all good governments) was the creation of a social climate which would make the quest for spiritual perfection possible. The Christian life is seen as a pilgrimage towards salvation and the kingdom of God.

³⁵Wilfred L. Guerin, "The Tale of the Death of Arthur; Catastrophe and Resolution," Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 271.

The journey or quest metaphor implies the necessity of movement and growth, and these are made possible by political and social conditions. Far from establishing such conditions, the Arthurian community has interfered with and frozen spiritual movement.³⁶

The Quest as a metaphor, what Moorman calls "a symbol not of man's failure, but of the ultimate failure of Arthur's would-be ideal secular civilization,"³⁷ extends the value of the Quest theme beyond plot development. In a discussion of the levels of interpretation in Letter XI and in the Convito, Dante defines the literal sense of a work as "the simple narration of the thing of which you treat." Malory uses the structure of the Quest of the Sankgreal to narrate action and adventure. However, as Pochoda and Moorman have both noted, there is an allegorical interpretation, that can be applied to the Quest, one that Dante says "is the meaning hidden under the cloak of fables, and is a truth concealed beneath a fair fiction." For the medieval Christian this allegory must also be understood in Dante's moral interpretation that "readers should carefully gather from all writings, for the benefit of themselves and their descendants."³⁸ Christian symbols color the action of the Quest, hermits interpret dreams, and the knights may be seen in terms of biblical exegesis, especially of penance, as a result of Malory's Christian heritage;

³⁶Pochoda, 137.

³⁷Moorman, 33.

³⁸Dante, 194.

consequently, the reader interprets the actions of the Quest of the Sankgreal in terms of morality.

Just as there is a duality in man's nature, so is there a duality in the symbols in Le Morte D'Arthur. The Round Table joins men together for the purpose of uniting a kingdom. In contrast to the Round Table is the Sankgreal, "THE SYGNYFYCACION OF BLYSSED BLOODE OFF OURE LORDE JESU CRYSTE," seen only when one is alone. One of Christ's possessions that remain in the world, the "Holy Vessell"³⁹ is a source of healing, both of physical and spiritual illness, and was brought to England by Joseph of Arimathea, ancestor of Lancelot, the perfect chivalric knight, and Galahad, the perfect spiritual knight.

Excalibur, pulled from a stone by Arthur, is the power of man's might that brings about peace in England and belongs to the "RIGHTWYS KYNGE BORNE OF ALL EN(G)LOND."⁴⁰ Galahad also pulls a sword from a stone and is recognized as "THE BESTE KNYGHT OF THE WORLDE,"⁴¹ the only one who fully achieves the Sankgreal.

In medieval Christianity, biblical exegesis interpreted prophetic dreams in which all information was conveyed allegorically. The knights encounter hermits who explain the dreams.

³⁹Malory, 845-6.

⁴⁰Malory, 12.

⁴¹Malory, 856.

Lancelot must deliberately seek out an "ermyte" when he dreams while on the Quest of the Sankgreal.⁴² He learns that his prowess and knightly glory are worthless on the Quest of the Sankgreal which measures man's spiritual perfection, not his physical power.

Dante's moral interpretation applies to the major knights of Le Morte D'Arthur just as a hermit's interpretation applies to dreams; in a sense, each life is a Christian allegory. Arthur is not a sinful man; he is a single-minded man who fails to see beyond his goal. In fact, he is a good man who can be admired, as Kerr states, for "the purity, the worthiness, the absolute value of the thing he seeks."⁴³ He recognizes his weakness too late and suffers more than any other knight in Le Morte D'Arthur. Interestingly enough, Jefferson notes that "according to Boethius good men often suffer the most" in a tragic situation.⁴⁴ Even though the tragedy is beyond anyone's control, Benson is correct when he states that "Arthur does bear a part of the blame for the tragic fall of the Round Table." Arthur, however, is not involved in the Quest of the Sankgreal; he does not have to test his life against the perfection required of the Grail knights. At the end Arthur has, as Benson continues, "a form

⁴² Malory, 921-31.

⁴³ Kerr, 99.

⁴⁴ Jefferson, 52.

of forgiveness, and our last view of the king is one that suggests divine approval."⁴⁵

Of all the knights Lancelot has the most complex nature. His worldliness occurs in his love for Guinevere and in his satisfaction with knightly glory; his spirituality appears in the near perfection of his life that allows him a brief glimpse of the Sankgreal and in the healing of Sir Urry.

Lancelot's pride, however, is his downfall. The seven deadly sins are based on pride and usually involve excessive love, misplaced love, or lack of love. Lancelot misdirects his love toward worldly fame and Guinevere. His love for Guinevere is excessive even by courtly love standards. He confesses that he "loved a quene unmesurably and oute of mesure long," when he says,

"And all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste party was for the quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit ryght other wronge. And never dud I batayle all 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."⁴⁶

In order to receive forgiveness, one must recognize his sin, confess it, and willingly accept and perform the penance. Lancelot does confess and agrees to do as the "ermyte" instructs: "Ye shall ensure me by youre knyghthode ye shall no more com in

⁴⁵Benson, 240.

⁴⁶Malory, 897.

that quenys felyship as much as ye may forbere."⁴⁷ However, Lancelot does not keep his vow; he merely pretends. As Malory states, "had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall."⁴⁸ Because he does not have true penance, Lancelot "had grete wylle for to entir into the chapell, but he coude fynde no place where he myght entir."⁴⁹ Benson notes that Guinevere is a "more admirable character, truly repentent for her sin and yet a 'trewe lover.'" By her good example she brings Lancelot to salvation."⁵⁰ Even so, Lancelot's salvation could not have occurred if his great devotion to his lady had not led him to save her from a fiery death.

Lancelot is not concerned about his failure to touch the Grail because he does not view his life as a failure. He believes he has been as faithful a knight as is humanly possible. After wearing a hair shirt for a year as an act of penance for breaking his first vow, Lancelot is allowed to see the Sankgreal

⁴⁷Malory, 897.

⁴⁸Malory, 1045.

⁴⁹Malory, 894.

⁵⁰Benson, 242.

at the castle of Corbenic and is told that "the queste of the Sankgreall ys encheved now ryght in you, and never shall ye see of Sankgreall more than ye have sene." Lancelot replies, "Now I thanke God for Hys grete mercy of that I have sene, for hit suffisith me. For, as I suppose, no man in thys worlde have lyved bettir than I have done to enchyve that I have done."⁵¹ Vinaver, who notes that there is no conflict in Lancelot's mind between good and bad or between good and best, writes that Lancelot "knows that his former life was 'good'; it matters little to him that because it was not 'best' the supreme reward of the Grail is denied him."⁵²

Lancelot is much more concerned about his ability to act in the episode of Sir Urry than he is with achieving the Grail. There are three forms of penance: by act, by blood, and by hope or desire. Lancelot has already done his act of penance by wearing the hair shirt; he has fought against evil knights, been wounded, and has completed a penance by blood. His penance of hope occurs when he prays "secretely unto hymself,

'Now, Blyssed Fadir and Son and Holy Goste,
I beseche The of Thy mercy that my symple
worshyp and honesté be saved, and Thou
Blyssed Trynyté, Thou mayste yeff me power
to hele thys syke knyght by the grete vertu

⁵¹Malory, 1017-8.

⁵²Vinaver, Works, xci.

and grace of The, but, Good Lorde, never
of myselff."⁵³

This prayer is extremely humble for the best of all knights; however, Lancelot successfully completes his penance and Sir Urry is miraculously healed.

Unlike Lancelot's life, Gawain's reflects the idea of medieval tragedy. He is an allegorical figure whose human frailties overshadow any possible spiritual endowments he might have. Guerin writes:

In Malory's view the bad in Gawain stems from his emotional and instinctual characteristics, the good from the civilizing Christian influences around him. Gawain's tragedy is that the opposing forces within him come into strong conflict, and the baser side prevails long enough to have catastrophic effects.⁵⁴

Gawain's attitude toward the Quest of the Sankgreal is totally out of place in the religious context of the Quest, which means nothing more to him than a feat of arms, another adventure he intends to achieve because he is in competition with the other knights, an endeavor that holds no other purpose for him. In fact, he is bored by the Quest. In The Tale of Sir Gawain, Malory writes:

Whan sir Gawayne was departed frome hys felyship he rode longe withoute ony adventure, for he founde nat the tenthe parte of adventures as they were wonte to have. For sir Gawayne rode from Whytsontyde tylle Mychaellmasse, and founde never adventure that pleased hym.⁵⁵

⁵³Malory, 1152.

⁵⁴Guerin, 265-6.

⁵⁵Malory, 941.

Gawain dreams and has his dream explained by "Nacien the ermyte," who tells him that he has not been God's man and is not now, even though he participates in the Quest. Nacien says,

"Hit ys longe tyme passed sith that ye were made knyght and never synnes servyd thou thy Maker, and now thou arte so olde a tre that in the ys neythir leeff, nor grasse, nor fruyte. Wherefore bethynke the that thou yelde to oure Lorde the bare rynde, sith the fende hath the levis and the fruyte."⁵⁶

Even this attempt to make Gawain recognize his sin is unsuccessful, and he fails in the first important test for forgiveness. He also refuses to do penance, when he says, "I may do no penaunce, for we knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne,"⁵⁷ as if being a knight absolves him of the need for penance.

It is only on his deathbed that Gawain acknowledges his faults, making no attempt to seek God's forgiveness. For the medieval Christian despair, or the disbelief that God will forgive, is, perhaps, the greatest sin. In a discussion of Augustine's influence, Huppé notes that "True grief for the Christian is caused only by separation from God."⁵⁸ Gawain is separated from God. In this sense Gawain is a victim of

⁵⁶Malory, 949.

⁵⁷Malory, 892.

⁵⁸Bernard F. Huppé, Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry (New York: State University of New York, 1959), 235.

Christian tragedy. Arthur has to make "sir Gawayne to resceyve hys sacrament," and Malory gives no assurance that Gawain does achieve grace.⁵⁹

Three knights actually complete the Quest of the Sankgreal: Bors, Percival, and Galahad. Bors is the only knight who sins and yet is allowed in the presence of the Grail. He agrees to partake only of "brede" and "watir" as a penance and wears a "scarlet cote" instead of a shirt "tylle he . . . fulfilled the queste of the Sankegreall."⁶⁰ Each of the series of tests which Bors experiences represents some quality the knights of the Round Table cannot attain. Moorman writes that Bors is "the minor knight who . . . is able to achieve the Grail by following the path leading from temporal values to spiritual values. . . ."⁶¹

For the medieval Christian, Percival is an example of the admonishment to keep oneself pure in flesh. He recognizes temptation, calls himself "wrecche of all wrecchis," and says, "How nyghe I was loste. and to have lost that I sholde never have gotyn agayne, that was my virginité, for that may never be recoverde aftir hit ys onys loste." He pronounces his own penance: "Sitthyn my fleyssh woll be my mayster I shall punyssh hit," and proceeds to "roofe hymselff thorrow the thygh."⁶²

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Malory, 1232.

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Malory, 955-6.

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Moorman, 42.

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Malory, 919.

His wound is an example of penance by blood, a physical pain that cleanses and purifies the soul.

Only Galahad is virgin, pure, perfect; even his killing knights while on the Quest is God's will.⁶³ He is armed as no other knight, with sword, girdle, and scabbard of spiritual power. With Bors and Percival, Galahad receives communion from the Sankgreal, served by Christ Hymself, who calls them "My knyghtes and my servauntes and my trew chyldren which bene com oute of dedly lyff into the spirituall lyff." Because of his purity, Galahad is allowed to perform a miracle, the healing of the "Maymed Kynge."⁶⁴ In answer to his prayer that "at what tyme he asked, he myght passe oute of this worlde,"⁶⁵ Galahad is granted an ascension: "suddeynly departed hys soule to Jesu Cryste, and a grete multitude of angels bare hit up to hevyn evyn in the syght of hys two felowis."⁶⁶

Seen within the Quest structure with its Christian symbols and holy messengers, the people of Malory's Camelot are characters in Christian allegory: Arthur, unable to develop close personal relationships, doing anything to establish and to maintain the Round Table, dedicated to his own concept of

⁶³Malory, 997.

⁶⁴Malory, 1030.

⁶⁵Malory, 1032.

⁶⁶Malory, 1035.

perfection; Lancelot, lacking true penance, overly proud of his own abilities, excessive in his love for Guinevere; Gawain, not truly believing in God's power, stubbornly adhering to his own idea of duty, blindly following tradition and heritage; Guinevere, not revering her marriage vows, adulterous, loving a man before God; and the three Grail knights: Bors, the perfect worldly knight, sinning only once, but willingly penitent; Percival, an example for others, resisting temptation; and Galahad, totally and spiritually pure. Doctrinal values and dogmatic rules of the Church cause conflict and failure; yet, at the end, all are forgiven and each life emphasizes the importance of dealing with Christian values in a secular world and of understanding the duality of man's nature.

In this sense the Quest of the Sankgreal can be seen on Dante's anagogical level, "that is, beyond sense; and this is when a book is spiritually expounded, which, although [a narration] in its literal sense, by the things signified refers to the supernal things of the eternal glory." ⁶⁷ However, except for the conflict provided by the duality of man's nature, the influence of the medieval Church on Malory's notion of tragedy in Le Morte D'Arthur is primarily structural. Malory is not concerned with Christian tragedy; in fact, his

⁶⁷ Dante, 194.

answer is understandably medieval: there can be no tragedy for the truly penitent Christian. Malory's tragic sense goes beyond the influence of the medieval Church to a totally original concept.

CHAPTER III
MALORY'S VIEW OF MAN'S POTENTIAL

Although influenced by his literary heritage and the doctrines and dogmas of medieval Christianity, Malory is not concerned with a hero limited by classic or Christian tragic dimensions. He understands that any concept of human tragedy must have a dilemma of choice but not one dictated by uncontrolled chance or concerned solely with man's ultimate eternal perfection. Whether a man makes the right choice is not the question; all men make choices and all men make mistakes. Neither is Malory overly concerned with the question of whether a man is saved; the medieval Church maintains that any man, good or bad as his life may be, is forgiven if he repents. For Malory, the consequences of circumstances beyond man's control are not the essence of tragedy. The failure to achieve one's potential is tragic, as seen in Malory's characters.

Arthur has an opportunity to reach a pinnacle no other ruler before him has. With Merlin's guidance and God's blessing, Arthur is prepared for and openly attempts not only to unify a nation, but also to establish a chivalric ideal of the highest order ever known, the Round Table; and, he succeeds. Malory's oath of the Round Table is not in his sources; he describes the circumstances in this manner:

The kynge stablysshed all the knyghts and gaff them rychesse and londys, and charged them never to do outrage 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 ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wronge-full quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and younge, and every yere so were the [y] sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste.⁶⁸

Arthur does not intend any spiritual purpose in this wholly worldly oath; all retribution for oathbreaking is vested in Arthur, not in God. Arthur may have chosen Pentecoste for the original oath and its renewal simply because it marks the end of Lent, the beginning of spring, and a time for new adventures for the knights who need to be reminded annually of their promises. However, Pentecoste is important; it celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to men. Consequently, the oath takes on a spiritual context even though God is not specifically called upon to witness the honesty of of the oathtakers..

Arthur, like other of the knights who depend on the oath as a code for life, is caught in the dilemma of the inadequacies of an ideal that cannot accommodate an individual's desire for spiritual perfection. When a choice must be made, it is the

⁶⁸Malory, 120.

case, as Moorman notes, that "mere chivalry is not enough, however fine-sounding the courtly ideal may be, it is not a sufficient basis for the life of a kingdom nor can its virtues prevail against the tragic destinies its sins have spawned."⁶⁹ The spiritual aura that has gradually become associated with the Round Table is found to be only an invention, not a reality.

Not only is the ideal of the Round Table spiritually deficient, but the knights also find that they are, as Moorman continues, "pledged to a set of vows and standards which are impossible to maintain even in the society that conceived them."⁷⁰ Arthur is blinded to the inadequacies of the Round Table by his love and pride in it. He cannot understand why his knights are failing in their quests of the Sankgreal when they have the companionship of the Round Table company, with all of its supposed spiritual power, to uphold them. He does not see that, no matter how closely one is joined with others, there must come a time, a final moment of total isolation, in which one must act without the aid of anyone else. When this moment comes to Arthur, when he is finally forced to face the consequences of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, it is a

⁶⁹Moorman, 72.

⁷⁰Moorman, 72.

dilemma in which he lacks the ability or the desire to act. The loyalty of the Round Table company is divided, Mordred and Aggravayne seize power, and Arthur comes too late to the realization of his failure. Guerin states:

The tragedy of the Round Table as a society exists in the discrepancy between its idealistic aspirations to fulfill a great potential, and the realistic understanding that reliance upon human beings must necessarily and ultimately defeat its purpose. Furthermore, in the spiritual orientation of the medieval mind, salvation, the pre-eminent goal, is an individual matter.⁷¹

It is in the conflict between the ideal of the Round Table and the perfection required in the Quest of the Sankgreal that the other knights face, alone, their own failures or achievements of potential. The Round Table demands unity of goals and companionship in arms; the Quest of the Sankgreal calls on the spiritual resources of each knight. Pochoda writes:

The Arthurian code has not provided the knights with the individual virtues of patience and humility necessary for the spiritual quest. And it is the very deficiency of such qualities which in turn causes the individuals to panic, to betray and desert Arthur in the last tale. . . . It must be emphasized, however, that Malory presents the "Quest" as the Round Table's one opportunity to preserve itself. The Grail appears at the outset, and in a sourceless line Malory says that by its light "eyther saw other, by their seemynge, fayrer than ever they were before."⁷²

In this momentary glimpse of each other, the knights also see the possibility of a Round Table ideal "fayrer than ever . . .

⁷¹Guerin, 271.

⁷²Pochoda, 116-7.

before."

Malory presents Gawain and Galahad in a dramatic polarity of characterization that personifies the conflict between the ideal of the Round Table and the Quest of the Sankgreal. Gawain alienates himself from his fellow knights by stubbornly adhering to his duty and to his oath of revenge. On the Grail quest he refuses to hear Nacien's instructions of penance because he has not "leyser" to spare from his knightly adventures.⁷³ His vow to avenge his brothers' deaths is a statement of single-minded purpose: "I shall make you a promyse which I shall holde be my knyghthode, that frome thys day forewarde I shall never fayle sir Launcelot untyll that one of us have slayne that othir."⁷⁴ Always the knight of the Round Table, he swears by his "knyghthode," not by God.

Galahad, however, is just as single-minded in his quest. He has no human flaw, no sin, no need for the very human experience of confession and repentance; but he also has no understanding of the nature of his fellow men. He is so removed from the world, so intent on seeing the Sankgreal, that he is never aware of the real struggle other men have in their lives.

If one were to draw a line between the extremes of Gawain and Galahad, he could place Lancelot exactly between the two;

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Malory, 949.

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Malory, 1186.

for, in Lancelot, Malory personifies the fragile balance between worldliness and spirituality. Thus, Lancelot is Malory's example of potential that is not wasted. Sir Ector calls Lancelot the "curtest," "sternest knyght," the "truest frende" and "lover," and the "kyndest," "godelyest," "mekest," and "jentyllest" man.⁷⁵ Just as Gawain personifies the physical aspects of the Round Table and Galahad the spiritual aspects of the Quest of the Sankgreal, so Lancelot "is himself the personification of the secular chivalric way of life," the greatest knight, an example to the others, according to Moor-
⁷⁶
 man.

Unlike Arthur, Lancelot is capable of close personal relationships; he is, as Moorman states, "both the lover of Guinevere and the sworn companion and vassal of her husband."⁷⁷ Whitehead writes that "a Lancelot who loves Arthur much and Guinevere more is a somewhat dubious character. Nevertheless, it seems that we are meant to admire him in both of these in-
⁷⁸
 compatible roles." Such admiration is not difficult because Lancelot's love for Guinevere is an expression of his own humanness; it makes him, the best of knights, like other men.

⁷⁵Malory, 1259.

⁷⁶Moorman, 37.

⁷⁷Moorman, 73.

⁷⁸F. Whitehead, "Lancelot's Penance," Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 107.

He is also dedicated to the fellowship of the Round Table and remains true to his best friend in the Round Table knight-hood, Gawain, refusing "to smyte a wounded man that may not stonde" when he is forced to fight Gawain.⁷⁹

Lancelot's nature is the most complex of all the characters; in him Malory balances the best of man's duality, human and spiritual. Arthur cannot experience close personal relationships, Lancelot can; Gawain cannot forgive, Lancelot can; Gala-had cannot know true suffering; Lancelot can. Guerin writes that

Lancelot is an unusual and complex blend of good and evil. Malory seems to conceive of him as having the highest potential virtue of all the knights--the Grail knights not excluded; his sensibilities and passions are equally great. The combination of good and evil makes him a representative man, but the caliber of his personal attributes raises him to heroic levels.⁸⁰

In a discussion of tragedy, Kerr writes:

Tragic man's quest for a state of spiritual perfection which will make him even more godlike than he now is does engage him, inevitably, in a break with those of his fellow men whose concern is mainly for security, in a surrender of his person to the painful experience of fully exercising his freedom, in an act of self-destruction which may end as mere destruction,⁸¹ or as sacrificial immolation, or as a new birth.

Such a situation is seen in the totally original tale, The Healing of Sir Urry, in which Malory makes his last grand

⁷⁹Malory 1221.

⁸⁰Guerin, 259.

⁸¹Kerr, 142.

comment on the greatness of the Round Table and what it could have been. All the knights have returned from the Quest of the Sankgreal; Sir Bors has reported how he, Galahad, and Percival triumphed on the Quest; the realm is peaceful once again; and, for one moment, the Round Table succeeds. Arthur sets a test by which he hopes to convince the court, and himself, that Lancelot is still the best knight, purified by the Quest of the Sankgreal, and no longer having an affair with Guinevere. He commands Lancelot, as a "fellow of the Round Table," to try to cure Sir Urry's wounds.⁸² Lancelot, humbling himself for the first time in his life, prays that God's will be done. Then, laying his hands on Sir Urry, Lancelot heals the wounds. To Malory God's miracle is a sign that the sins of the Round Table are forgiven. The best of knights becomes the best of men, a new birth that contains a hope for the future even though, as Rumble writes, "an entire and almost perfect system of human endeavor, begun with highest aspirations, has degenerated and collapsed."⁸³

Wright notes that what gives Le Morte D'Arthur "its tragic character is the sense of wasted potential; what will relieve it of mere futility is the idea, urged by Malory, that even in the smoke of ruin the men and women involved understand what

⁸² Malory, 1151.

⁸³ Thomas C. Rumble, "The Tale of Tristram: Development by Analogy," Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 165.

they have lost." No one understands better than Lancelot what has been wasted. His healing of Sir Urry has opened Lancelot's eyes once and for all to tragedy, due not to fate, fortune, or flaw, or even to the lack of salvation, but to the wasted opportunity for something to happen that does not occur. Just as he "loste the power of hys body and hys hyrynge and syght" at the glimpse he was allowed of the Sank-greal,⁸⁵ so Lancelot now cries "as he had bene a chyld that had bene beatyn" when he momentarily experiences the power, now lost, that could have been every knight's if the Round Table had truly reached its highest potential.⁸⁶ So great is Lancelot's personal achievement in life that Malory writes "whan syr Bors and his felowes came to his bedde they founde hym stark dede; and he laye as he had smyled, and the swettest savour about hym that ever they felte."⁸⁷ If this "savour" is the odor of sanctity left in the air when a saint's soul passes from his body, then Malory is saying that the tragedy of wasted potential has not occurred in Lancelot's life.

⁸⁴ Thomas L. Wright, "The Tale of King Arthur: Beginnings and Foreshadowings," Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 65.

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Malory, 1016.

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Malory, 1152.

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Malory, 1258.

CONCLUSION

No one can know just how Malory's own experiences affected his sense of tragedy. What starts as a translation of Arthurian romances into English to pass the time soon becomes an effort to express his own ideas about man's dual nature, the conflict it causes, and the tragedy of wasted potential. Influenced by his literary heritage and medieval Christianity, Malory nevertheless develops an appreciation of man's dilemma that results in a unique concept of tragedy. As Vinaver notes: "there is nothing to suggest that either the doctrine of the Grail or that of the wheel of Fortune was in Malory's mind when he wrote this 'most piteous tale'."⁸⁸ Not content with wheel of fortune or De Casibus, not concerned with Christian tragedy, Malory involves himself so deeply in his characters, especially in Lancelot, that he produces original episodes, such as The Healing of Sir Urry, that give a new dramatic force and tragic beauty to the Arthurian romance.

Malory does not change the traditional plot: Arthur's kingdom is united; the Round Table is established; Lancelot and Guinevere love adulterously; the Quest of the Sankgreal is begun; strife and conflict overcome the knights; Arthur's kingdom falls.

⁸⁸ Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 135.

However, Malory adds a new dimension, what Vinaver calls a "preference for emotional motivation."⁸⁹ Malory's close attention to the emotions that motivate the knights and their ladies brings him to an understanding of each character's basic loneliness. He knows that Arthur cannot act alone; he depends entirely on the human fellowship and power of the Round Table. Malory understands that Guinevere's excessive love for Lancelot is so steadfast that she voluntarily accepts total loneliness in order to redeem herself. He recognizes Gawain's fear of loneliness and the way he stubbornly clings to his oaths and his duty in an attempt to escape having to act on his own. Malory sees the utter isolation of the perfect man, Galahad, who has no way of empathizing with his sinful companions.

In a most penetrating study of emotional motivation, Malory presents the best man, Lancelot, who, through his experiences, comes to know the value and the beauty of achieving his potential by his own merits. In Lancelot, Malory establishes a new sense of tragedy, an awareness that man must accept responsibility for his actions, recognize his failings, and strive to be all that he can be. Each man acts alone, regardless of his relationships with others, his prowess, or his devotion to an ideal. Although Lancelot falls short of his full potential, God allows him two moments of achievement,

⁸⁹Vinaver, Works, lxxxvi.

seeing the Sankgreal and healing Sir Urry. Each moment is a reward for the beauty of his life, a momentary completeness; each is also a punishment for his failure, a reminder of what life could have been.

Along with his original sense of tragedy, Malory develops a new tone, not the inescapable doom of De Casibus, but similar to the touching sorrow in some of the Anglo-Saxon elegies. From The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney on, this tone grows until Excalibur vanishes into the water and Sir Bedivere loses sight of Arthur's barge.⁹⁰ Slowly comes awareness that the Round Table cannot survive, that the best of knights is only a man, that wasted potential is the greatest tragedy of all. At the end one realizes that, for Malory, it is not so important that the Round Table fell or that the Quest of the Sankgreal was not reached by all the knights, but that the Round Table existed at all, that even a few knights saw the Grail. In the face of disaster, consolation lies in one man, Lancelot, who, for a brief moment, gives every man the hope of achieving his full potential.

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Malory, 1240-1.

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