

COMEDY IN LE MORTE DARTHUR



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COMEDY IN LE MORTE DARTHUR

An Abstract

Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
Austin Peay State University

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

by
Bryce Kent Coatney

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ABSTRACT

King Arthur is not a tragic hero in Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur. He precipitates his own fall and destruction, but the responsibility for his destiny ultimately belongs to Merlin. Arthur's destiny is completed by the combined actions of his subordinates, principally, Sir Gawain, Sir Gareth, and Sir Lancelot. For the above reasons, Le Morte Darthur is, essentially, a comic drama.

When I began to read Le Morte Darthur for the first time I was immediately struck by the tragic element taking shape early in the work. As I continued to read, however, I came to feel that the tragic impulse in the work is weak and that it is overshadowed by comic elements. Arthur's fall and destruction are tragic if, by tragedy, we mean "unhappy" or "unfortunate," but I am convinced that the pattern of action that leads to Arthur's destruction is essentially comic, however much a jolt to the reader's sensibility that may be. Le Morte Darthur contains many passages which are desperately funny--humor no reader could fail to miss--as well as one complete comic drama, The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney. While there has been sufficient critical commentary on Malory's tragedy, no one has yet mentioned Malory's comedy. The

purpose of my thesis is to point out comedy where it occurs in Malory and to illustrate the way in which comic action sustains and completes the whole drama.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Bryce Kent Coatney entitled "Comedy in Le Morte Darthur." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Albert J. Baker
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Edward E. Irwin
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Dean of the Graduate School

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Chapter 1

IDEAL VERSUS REALITY: THE VANITY OF HUMAN WISHES

King Arthur and his Round Table represent all that knighthood and chivalry ever proposed to be.¹ There never was such a king as Arthur, and knights never behaved quite as well or as heroically. But the legends concerning Arthur and Civalry seemed to serve a moral purpose, at least as long as the feudal system was intact. Barbara Tuchman says that when the gap between what is real and what is ideal becomes too wide, the system that exists between breaks down.

I see the situation in just the opposite way. War and politics inevitably evolve, and whatever fiction or propaganda that was necessary to glamorize the old way of doing things is eventually discarded and forgotten. Perhaps some significant number of persons will cling to the past or what they think is the past, and when that is no longer possible, we then have a clear point of division between one epoch and another.

Evidence of a fairly widespread belief in the chivalric ideal at a rather late period in history may be found in the diary of Jorg Von Ehingen, an Austrian knight of the fifteenth century. Of interest in the following excerpt is the naive expectation of a young man seeking

knightly adventure and honor where there is none to be found.

It happened in that year that his grace spoke frequently with me on many matters touching on my sea journeys, and I made his grace aware of my desire, that as soon as I heard of a worthy expedition of knights to attach myself to them, with his gracious consent, and to follow their fortunes, carrying myself therein in such wise as to bring distinction to his grace's name. With this the duke was well content. But at that time there were, so far as I could learn, no warlike disturbances in the country of any king or prince, for peace prevailed in all the kingdoms of the Christian world. And I began to think that it was useless for me to waste my time thus sitting still, for my gracious master also had then no particular business at hand, and spent the time at his court at Rottenburg or at Frieburg very pleasantly in racing, tourneys, and dancing; and suchlike pastimes, wherein I also took part as best I could, and applied my self very diligently thereto.²

The feudal system, like many other human endeavours, was doubtless hastened to an end by excesses of greed and violence. These, Tuchman says, are reflected in story and legend; thus the Round Table of legend is broken by inner strife. But man, she says, no matter how rotten he may be, "retains his vision of order and resumes the search."³

The Arthur of history, to the best of our knowledge, was a Romanized Celtic warrior of the sixth century whose valor in battle against the Anglo-Saxons inspired a strong sense of national pride among the Britons in spite of their ultimate defeat by the Germanic invaders. The hope of the Britons was that he would some day return to

liberate their island. Arthur became the epic centerpiece for any number of Celtic and Breton legends describing the marvelous deeds and exploits of a warrior-hero to the extent that, by the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth felt no compunction whatsoever in compiling a chapter for his Historia Regum Britanniae concerning one of England's greatest "kings." Sir Thomas Malory, writing in prison in 1469, attempted to compile a coherent narrative of Arthur's history out of the vastly complex body of French Arthurian Romance that followed Geoffrey's Historia. He recognized Arthur and his knights as characters of remote history, but he depicted them in terms of his own time.

An especially interesting illustration of this in Malory's text is the zeal that Arthur and his fellows have for the tournament and the obvious relish Malory takes in recounting the details of each one. The medieval tournament began as a dangerous but sporting free-for-all clash of men and arms, the supposed purpose of which was to hone the fighting man's skills between wars. In time it became a contest in the modern sense; the contestants separated themselves into "sides," observed a standard set of rules, were cheered on by a large crowd of spectators, and while it was never admitted to, could look forward to the prospect of material gain. The noblemen of late fifteenth century Europe, finding themselves with little or no need to protect their lands as government centralized under kings and finding themselves somewhat

outmoded in the evolution of warfare, gave themselves over, in some cases, to fighting in tournaments, sometimes following, as it were, a circuit like the rodeo.⁴ While Malory's characters are not anywhere near so listless as that, they do participate in just this sort of conventionalized contest. The harness they carry, the colors they don, the descriptions of tilts, doubtless correspond to what Malory knew of knighthood in the fifteenth century.

While it is doubtful that this modernization is deliberate on Malory's part, it does force him to see an important contrast between the knights of the romances and his own experience as a knight. England, by the mid-fifteenth century, had sunk into political strife, having lost almost all of its continental empire, its government tenuously held together under the reign of Henry VI, who had gone completely insane by 1453. Distrustful of central authority, land owners took to settling quarrels among themselves by violence, conducting savage personal wars.⁵ The ensuing Wars of The Roses, the civil war between the houses of Lancaster and York for succession to the crown, found Malory himself a participant, following the Earl of Warwick presumably before and after Warwick's breach with Edward IV.⁶ Malory died in prison before the end of the conflict, but he may have suspected what was coming. The conclusion of the civil war is the traditional dividing point between the medieval period and the modern; knighthood and chivalry were becoming

obsolete.

It is not difficult to imagine that Malory saw, in his redaction of Arthurian legend, the opportunity to paint a kind of "vanity of human wishes," well before Dr. Johnson had the idea for the poem, nor is there any danger of assuming too much in making this statement. Often, when Malory intrudes on the text he follows, it is to point out that his own age is lacking in grace, virtue, and honor. He does so in the introduction to "The Knight of The Cart," beginning with a lecture on Winter and Spring. Spring restores to the hearts of lovers, "olde jantylnes and old servyse, and many kynde dedes that was forgotyn by neglygence" (page 649, l.5). Winter, he says, is like unstable love in man and woman: " . . . for a lytyll blaste of wyntres rasure, anone we shall deface and lay apart trew love . . ." (page 649, ll.9-11). Presently he abandons his struggle with metaphor and gets to the point:

But nowadayes men can nat love
sevennyght but they muste have all their
desyres. That love may nat endure by reson,
for where they bethe sone accorded and
hasty, heete sone keelyth. And ryght so
faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote sone
colde. Thys ys no stabyltyé. But the old
love was nat so. For men and women coude
love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures
lustis was betwyxte them, and than was
love trouthe and faythefulness. And so in
lyke wyse was used such love in kynge
Arthurs dayes.

Wherefore I lykken love nowadayes
unto sommer and wynter:for, lyke as the
tone ys colde and the othir ys hote, so
faryth the love nowadayes. And therefore
all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre
remembraunce the monethe of May, lyke as

ded quene Gwenyver, for whom I make here
a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved
she was a trew lover, and therefor she
had a good ende. (page 649, ll. 22-35)

It is clear from this commentary that Malory is not paying mere lip-service to a literary convention; he believes in it.

In part ten of The Book of Sir Trystram de Lyones, Tristram chances to meet his clownish friend, Sir Dynadan, who fails to recognize him. Dynadan makes disparaging mention of a knight he has seen lying by a fountain neither yet asleep nor awake, meaning that he must have been some kind of lover. Tristram responds:

'A, fayre sir, '. . . 'ar nat ye a lovear?'
'Mary, fye on that crauffte!' seyde sir
Dynadan. 'Sir, that is yevell seyde,'
[seyde] sir Trystram, 'for a knyght may
never be of proues but yf he be a lovear.'
(page 420, ll. 32-35)

Tristram already knows Dynadan's disposition and is merely having fun with him, as he does later on when Dynadan comes to Joyous Garde looking for him. Having let Isolde in on his fun, Tristram sends her out to entertain Dynadan. She tells Dynadan that no man may be called a good knight unless he engages in some quarrel for a lady and requires him, for her love, to meet with three knights to do battle for her. Dynadan replies that he will do so for love of no one. Isolde has a good laugh with him and sends him on his way the next day. He overtakes Tristram, who has left Joyous Garde before him, and, knowing him for the "coward" he had met the previous day, proffers to joust. Tristram

bumbles the encounter purposely and then refuses sword play, much to Dynadan's irritation. Presently they meet Sir Gareth, who knocks Dynadan out of his saddle, because Tristram has once again refused to fight. Tristram's courtly rival, Palomides, arrives and, in turn, knocks Gareth out of his saddle, while Tristram sits idly by. Tristram tells Dynadan that he ought to revenge Gareth, but Dynadan refuses, Gareth being bigger than he is.

'A, sir Dynadan,' seyde sir Trystram, 'now I se and fele that youre harte falyth you. And therefore now shall ye se what I shall do.' (page 426, ll. 11-12)

Tristram proceeds immediately to unhorse Palomides, proving that the true lover is the better man of arms. Dynadan does not even have to ask him his name.

Geoffrey had attached the ideal of courtly love to Arthurian legend in his Historia, and it was already something to be satirized by Chaucer in the late fourteenth century, nor was there ever any basis in reality for it. As a corollary to the concept of chivalry, love was supposed to inspire a man to greater achievement; a man used his might most gloriously in the service of a gentlewoman. Thus Lancelot was always the servant of Guenevere, Tristram the servant of Isolde--these two the greatest knights of the world. Noblemen who read or heard the romances could see, by example, that true love made one courteous, valiant, and honorable. Following that example, these men may have modified their behavior ever

so slightly, but that would be the extent of their subjection to love's rule.⁷

Chivalry itself was an imaginary code of knightly behavior that made fighting men the champions of right and the avengers of wrong-doing in general. As a system of ethics, chivalry was dreamt up by churchmen of the twelfth century so that they could tolerate the beastliness of the crusaders and so that the crusaders could find spiritual reward in their own beastly activities.⁸ Hence they became pious cut-throats. As the code developed, knights officially became the servants of justice, right, piety, the church, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed.

The list compares evenly with the chivalric oath found in the episode of "Torre and Pellinore" in Malory's Tale of King Arthur. The oath is Malory's invention, he being, at least, the first among Arthurian chroniclers to state it directly.

. . . than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, 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 wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, bothe olde and younge, and every yere so were they[y] sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste. (page 75, 11.36-44; page 76, 11. 1-2)

The man who could live up to this oath would be a perfect gentleman. Malory has unending praise for Tristram, whose name belongs on the book of gentlemanly activities, as we see in The Book of Sir Trystram.⁹

And every day sir Trystram wolde go ryde an-huntynge, for he was called that tyme the chyeff chacer of the worlde and the noblyst blower of an horne of all maner of mesures. For, as bookis reporte, of sir Trystram cam all the good termys of venry and of huntynge, and all the syses and mesures of all blowing wyth an horne; and of hym we had fyrst all the termys of hawkyng, and whyche were bestis of chace and bestis of venery, and whyche were vermyns; and all the blastis that longed to all maner of game: fyrste to the uncoupelynge, to the sekyng, to the fyndyng, to the rechace, to the flyght, to the deth, and to strake; and many other blastis and termys, that all maner jantylmen hath cause to the worldes ende to prayse sir Trystram and to pray for his soule. AMEN, SEYDE SIR THOMAS MALLEORE (page 416, ll. 19-30)

But let us attempt to dispel the notion that real knights ever had cause to behave as the romances would have us believe they behaved. Hunting and hawking aside, some knights inevitably did get the notion that the romances were, indeed, suitable models of action, but not without it proving to be ruinous to health and political stability. The French lost the battle of Agincourt in 1415 by paying more attention to knightly valor than to fighting an intelligent battle, as their badly out-numbered English opponents were doing. At the battle of Calais in 1453, the English fell victim to the same kind of foolishness and were just about kicked out of France

altogether. The ranks of the Order of The Star, a band of knights organized under Jean II of France and too closely modeled on the Round Table fellowship, were obliterated because they refused ever to retreat in battle.¹⁰

Although their arms were in the service of the church, the crusaders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries tended to do whatever they pleased on their own time or when outside the church's domain. The following is an excerpt from an anonymous history of the first crusade:

THE SACK OF JERUSALEM

Entering the city [July 15, 1099], our pilgrims pursued and killed Saracens up to the Temple of Solomon, in which they had assembled and where they gave battle to us furiously for the whole day so that their blood flowed throughout the whole temple. Finally, having overcome the pagans, our knights seized a great number of men and women, and they killed whom they wished and whom they wished they let live. . . . Soon the crusaders ran throughout the city, seizing gold, silver, horses, mules, and houses full of all kinds of goods. Then rejoicing and weeping from extreme joy our men went to worship at the sepulchre of our Saviour Jesus and thus fulfilled their pledge to him. . . .¹¹

Even if a knight had sworn to some kind of oath, he was not restricted to honorable and sporting conduct in war. In the romances, it is always the wicked knights who gang up, two or more, on the single sworn knight. Sometimes a group of knights would gain entry to a walled city by declaring allegiance to its people, while once inside they would proceed to slaughter all inhabitants. They had

sworn no oath to these people and were thus not in violation of their knightly obligations.¹²

I would not propose to say that Malory knew all of this, nor would I say that he meant to indict his own age. He may even have been a bit dreamy-eyed like Jorg Von Ehingen. If flesh and blood knights were not capable of living up to the standard, there is some solace in knowing that the legendary ones could not either. Sir Gawain often means well but regularly misses the mark, even gaining a reputation of being a vengeful, wicked knight. Lancelot is the best knight of the world and a true lover but fails in the spiritual quest and returns to Guenevere. Aggravaine and Mordred care nothing for the order of knighthood except as it suits their selfish ends. Galahad is not really human but a divine entity. Gareth, who most closely approximates the moral standard of the oath, dies untimely at the hands of his best friend. Arthur's sins come home to roost, and the glory of the Round Table sinks into oblivion.

Eugene Vinaver notes in the introduction to his edition of Malory's works that the difference between Malory and his French sources is in the illumination of theme behind the story. The French, he says, cared less for the content of a story than for the way it was told. Malory's success lies in his ability to seize the message of the story and its relation to human experience, making these explicit within the form.¹³

The question remains then whether Malory's work

represents a tragic or comic view of life, and I would say that the distinction here is thin, more so than one might think. Either dramatic form may be morally or socially instructive. Certainly there is potential in Le Morte Darthur for tragedy after the Greek model. Some well-meaning dramatist might come along and pull the essential elements of the story into a good, spare, serious Greek "doom" as T. H. White calls it.¹⁴ There is, as we shall see, a degree of inevitability in Arthur's fate, an unconscious and willful transgression, on Arthur's part, of a higher order in the inscrutable universe, and, finally, the ennoblement that comes to Arthur in wilfully facing up to what he knows he has coming to him. There are also flaws in Malory's tragedy, flaws he doubtless inherits from his sources. Notwithstanding the dubious nature of Arthur's character in Malory's text, the overly manipulative nature of his mentor, Merlin, and the clumsiness of his subordinates, we might indeed have a real "doom" on our hands.

But there are, inescapably, elements of the comic in Malory's presentation. We do not have to look at this as a fault in Malory's planning; I doubt that he had any clear dramatic notions about the story when he started writing. The long and yet unsettled argument on Malory's unity says as much. Nor does the comedy necessarily result from a desire on Malory's part to illustrate the vanity of human wishes, although, even as an unconscious notion, the vanity theme strengthens what comedy there is in the book.

Although Arthur precipitates his own fall or appointment with destiny, and although he marches bravely forward to meet it, it is the combined actions of his subordinates that complete his destruction for him. Their stories, principally those of Gawain, Gareth, and Lancelot, are moved by comic action, not necessarily humorous, although there is some of that as well.

What tragedy and comedy reflect of the human experience is a distinction between our concepts of fate and fortune.¹⁵ Tragedy is action governed by fate, moving steadily toward an inevitable conclusion. Comedy represents the turning of fortune's wheel, which raises and lowers man's prosperity continually in its turning.

We might think of tragic action as proceeding in a straight line toward its destination and of comic action as proceeding rhythmically up and down toward some less specific or a haphazard conclusion. We may also speak of tragedy having rhythm, a syncopated or offbeat rhythm which stems from the disruption of the universal order of things. Once a protagonist has been thrust into this kind of situation, he is pushed along by this offbeat rhythm until he reaches a point at which he is destroyed or in some way absolved, wherein the action resumes the rhythm of universal order.

Suzanne Langer illustrates the dichotomy of fate and fortune in terms of individual and community life impulses. Individuals die; the community regenerates.

Tragedy is therefore representative of the individual life, comedy of the life of the species.¹⁶ If, as Northrup Frye suggests, tragedy is actually uncompleted comedy,¹⁷ then it represents a drama of the individual mind, apart from that of the species. The individual man, a creature of both fate and free will, is ennobled in asserting his will to act against his destructive fate. Nothing has ever come along to obliterate the species; it continues to live, falling and rising over and over again. This is why comic characters are often indestructible and amusing, as they are beaten down and rise again unharmed. The hope implicit in the sense of community life is expressed in the fact that comic action generally resolves on the upswing. The protagonist has then overcome all the obstacles and adversaries set against him; the community joins him in his jubilation, and, if he is lucky enough, he marries the girl of his choice.

Chapter 2

ARTHUR AS HERO

It is difficult to accept Malory's King Arthur as a tragic hero for four reasons: (1) Arthur cannot be considered responsible for his own fate--true, he slept with his sister Morgause unwittingly and by her begot the son who would be his undoing, but that action stems from the complicated circumstances of his upbringing; the responsibility ultimately belongs to Merlin; (2) Malory's Arthur, as a young man, is somewhat inept and comical; he ascends to the throne of England by dumb accident, not through any particular merit or valour; (3) Arthur is not a great King through any innate ability to be so; it is Merlin's ability as a military strategist that foils the rebel kings, thereby solidifying Arthur's control of England. Arthur's conquest of the Roman Empire owes much to the strength and skill of those men who serve him. He no longer has Merlin's assistance in that campaign, but Lancelot has by that time joined Arthur's retinue and figures heavily in the success of the campaign; (4) Arthur disappears from the narrative of Le Morte Darthur after "The Tale of King Arthur and The Emperor Lucius," while Malory develops the characters and pattern of events that lead to Arthur's downfall.

Arthur is not morally responsible for his fatal commission of incest because the circumstances of his birth and upbringing prevent him from knowing his sister. This is why T. H. White's Merlin runs around scratching his head before he goes to meet his own destiny. There is something he had wanted to tell Arthur. Brother and sister discover each other only after the fact of incest, and it is then that Merlin warns Arthur of the consequences. Arthur is a little bit like Oedipus in this respect, having been raised as an orphan, but Oedipus is sent away by his parents in the hope that he will not, as they have been warned, grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Ironically, it is because he has grown up not knowing his mother and father that he fulfills his destiny anyway. In Arthur's story there is no such ironic twist--just a set of unfortunate circumstances.

Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, lusts after Igraine, wife of the Duke of Tintagyl. Because he is so amorously disposed toward the duke's wife, Uther invites the couple to visit with him so that he may "have lyen by her." The project fails when Igraine realizes Uther's intentions and insists to her husband that they leave at once. They do so. Thus thwarted, Uther initiates a personal war on the Duke who, appropriately warned, installs his wife in the castle Tintagyl for safekeeping and himself in another from which to conduct his defense.

Uther besieges the Duke's castle, but in the course

of the siege grows ill to the point of death for both love-sickness and anger. He tells the cause of his malady to sir Ulfius, one of his knights, and Ulfius promises to bring Merlin to him. Merlin arrives and says that he can arrange for Uther to lie with Igraine that night. With Igraine, Merlin tells him, he will beget a child who must be delivered immediately into Merlin's keeping. Uther readily agrees and, finding his strength returned, leaves the battlefield with Merlin and Ulfius. Sensing an opportunity to exploit the situation, the duke comes out of his castle to fight but is killed almost immediately.

Later that night, Uther and Ulfius arrive at castle Tintagyl disguised by Merlin's art as the duke and one of his men. Merlin instructs Uther that he must not talk to Igraine and that he must leave by daybreak. Uther obeys his instructions and, once gratified, does not see Igraine again until several months later. She, at that time, is obviously pregnant and is as yet unable to say just who the father is, since she knows that her husband was killed the same night that someone who looked like her husband slept with her. Somewhat embarrassed, she tells this to Uther who, in turn, confesses his deception. The two are married, and when Arthur is born, they deliver the child to Merlin without much question.

Igraine already has two daughters by the Duke of Tintagyl, one of whom, Morgause, weds King Lot of Orkney at the same time that Igraine weds Uther. Lot later becomes

one of the rebel kings who, not knowing Arthur to be anything but a bastard pretender to the throne, refuses to accept the young man as king. In the course of the rebellion, Lot sends Morgause to Arthur's court as a spy. She ends up in bed with him.

The source of Malory's account of Arthur's conception is thought to be the Suite du Merlin, a branch of the pseudo Robert de Borron cycle of prose romances.¹ As its name suggests, the Suite is primarily a story about Merlin, as was the original poem by Robert de Borron. Robert's Merlin is in turn vicariously derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia, which was responsible for popularizing Merlin as a central character in Arthurian romance.² In the Historia, Merlin arranges for Uther to bed with Igraine, wife of Gorlois. Arthur is begotten just before Gorlois is killed, and Uther marries Igraine immediately after. Because only Merlin and Uther share the secret of Arthur's conception, Arthur grows up in his father's court and inherits the throne as a matter of due course. Robert de Borron gives even more importance to Merlin's role by placing the marriage of Uther and Igraine some two months after the conception. Thus to avert the possibility of scandal, Merlin gives the child into the care of a foster father.³ Malory himself makes changes in the story which assign virtually all responsibility for Arthur's conception and its consequences to Merlin. Uther makes love to Igraine with the understanding that the child they conceive

will be given to Merlin. Malory stresses the idea that the Duke of Tintagyl is killed three hours before the conception, later pointing out that this legality, combined with the fact that Uther eventually marries Igraine, makes Arthur a completely legitimate heir to the throne. There is no mention of the need to avoid scandal.

Merlin places Arthur in the care of Sir Ector, not out of any perceivable necessity, but for a reason that he does not disclose. Why, then, does Merlin not warn Arthur that Morgause is his sister unless, as T. H. White suggests, he plainly forgot. It hardly seems fair for Arthur to fall victim to this set of circumstances when, in Malory, it is Merlin who has contrived all--the conjoining of Arthur's parents, his foster upbringing, his ascendance to the throne.⁴ The reader must presume that although Merlin has insight into the future, it serves him only in teaching him how to act in accordance with destiny. He knows, for example, that he will become infatuated with Nyneve, that she will take advantage of his infatuation to learn the secrets of enchantment, and that he will then allow her to imprison him in the earth until the end of time. Just before he leaves Arthur for the last time, Merlin tells him why he is leaving and gives him some last advice. Arthur asks why, if Merlin knows what is going to happen to him, does he not do something to prevent it. Merlin tells him simply, "Nay . . . hit woll not be."⁵ Arthur apparently accepts this explanation and gives no more thought to what

Merlin has told him of his own destiny--that the son he begot by Morgause would one day destroy Arthur and his kingdom.

There is yet one complication; book one of the Tale of King Arthur concludes with an account of how, by Merlin's advice, Arthur conducts a purge of all children born on May Day in order to destroy Mordred. In the light of Merlin's commentary on his own fate, I can see no explanation for this senseless piece of advice except that, because Mordred survives, Arthur is forced to see the futility of trying to avert one's destiny.

What makes a tragic hero tragic is acceptance of fate. Nobility of character stands out when a hero perseveres in spite of inevitably overwhelming fate. But somehow this principle does not apply to Malory's Arthur. The difference in Malory is that because Merlin functions as an active and tangible agent of destiny, arranging Arthur's life for him, Arthur has little chance to assert his own will; he is too passive to be heroic. Thoroughly conditioned to his role in the universal order of things, he almost happily accepts it. He does not ruminate or make speeches about it. (I find this somewhat refreshing.)

Arthur's passivity at times makes him appear to be a bit obtuse, unthinking enough, for example, to take Merlin's advice and conduct the purge, thick-headed as the youth who discovers quite by accident that he is England's rightful king. Why else does T. H. White portray Arthur as a half-wit boy in The Once and Future King? There can

be no basis for the liberty he takes in so doing except that Malory's characterization of Arthur suggests such an interpretation. There is something lacking mentally in a young man who can perform the miracle of the sword in the stone and then fail to perceive its significance without being prodded.

As Uther Pendragon nears his death, Merlin asks him in the presence of a few witnesses if he is willing that Arthur should inherit his throne. (This should be a surprise to anyone else hearing the question, as no one, not even Sir Ector, knows that Uther has a son, but Malory does not consider the possibility.) Uther affirms that he is willing for Arthur to become king and dies shortly after. His kingdom falls into chaos for an indeterminate period of time. Malory says that the realm was a long time in jeopardy, there being a number of powerful lords and barons who were anxious to claim Uther's crown.

Merlin approaches the Archbishop of Canterbury and tells him to ask all the knights and lords of the kingdom to come to London at Christmas, that God will then reveal by miracle who is to be England's king. All is done as he asks. The nobles come to London and enter into Mass and prayer at the city's largest church. When the first Mass is done, there is discovered in the church yard a large stone into which is set an anvil bearing a "fayre sword naked by the point, and letters there were wryten in gold about the sword that saide thus: 'WHOSO PULLETH OUTE

THIS SWERD OF THIS STONE AND ANVYLD IS RIGHTWYS KYNGE BORNE OF ALL EN<G>LOND.'" A few men try their hands at removing the sword and fail.

In order to keep the nobles from leaving town and thereby learn who is to be king, the Archbishop ordains a tournament and joust for New Years Day. News of the tournament brings Sir Ector, his son Sir Kay (newly-made knight) and Arthur to London. Kay realizes at the last moment that he has forgotten his sword and asks Arthur if he will go back home and get it. Thoroughly enamoured of his "brother," Arthur joyfully agrees to do so. Returning home, he finds that everyone has gone to the tournament in London and that he has no way to retrieve the sword. Angry with himself, he vows that Kay will not be without a sword that day; it comes to his mind that the sword in the stone will do nicely. He returns to London and, finding the stone unguarded, removes the sword and takes it to Kay.

Kay is not much brighter than Arthur; he recognizes the sword for what it is but thinks he is to be king. He tells his father the news. Ector is surprised and asks where he got the sword. Kay replies that Arthur brought it to him. Asked where he got the sword, Arthur recounts his frustration at not being able to retrieve Kay's sword and confesses to having pulled the sword from the stone "without ony payn."

They return to the churchyard, and Arthur demonstrates how easy it is to pull the sword from the

stone. Ector and Kay are not able to do so. Arthur realizes the nature of the miracle only when Ector tells him. He does not seem too happy about it; rather he is pained at the revelation that Ector is not really his father. Slowly he accepts the idea of being King of England, and the three of them go to break the news to the Archbishop. It requires only a little imagination to see the comedy in what follows.

Not content to have a bastard child of low blood for their king, the barons agree to put off trying the matter until Candlemas when each will again try to pull the sword from the stone. When the barons reconvene, each fails the task while Arthur frustrates the lot of them by withdrawing and replacing the sword easily. The scene is repeated twice, at Easter and at the feast of Pentecost, the barons being each time "sore agreved" and indignant, no doubt feeling ridiculous, as Arthur patiently continues to withdraw and replace the sword. Were it not that the common people assembled to see the trial had at last proclaimed their will, "We wille have Arthur unto our Kyng!," the trial may have gone on indefinitely.

There remain five nobles, King Lot, King Nantres, King Uryens, the King of Scotland, and the King of the Hundred Knights, who refuse to accept the outcome of the trial. For Arthur's coronation these fellows offer gifts of "hard swerdys betwixt the neck and shoulders." Merlin explains to them that Arthur is the son of Uther Pendragon.

"Thenne is he a bastard," they say. Merlin points out that the Duke of Tintagyl was dead three hours before Arthur was conceived. Some of the kings are swayed by this information, but the rest just laugh and call Merlin names. Arthur finally agrees to meet with the five, fails at diplomacy (swearing to make them all bow), and finds himself with a war on his hands.

Merlin warns the rebels that they do not have a chance to succeed, but they ignore him. He also warns Arthur that he cannot win without help and tells him who to ask for it. From this point to the conclusion of Book I, Merlin is strictly in control of Arthur's affairs. It is he who leads the armies of Arthur's allies to the battlefield, and it is he who makes the battle plans which work so marvelously in quelling the revolution. The rebels are, in short, dispensed with, and Arthur is firmly established as king.

Before we too much discredit Arthur let us remember that he does, in Malory's text, often distinguish himself as a valiant warrior. There are numerous examples, foremost of which must be his battle with Accolon. His strength and resolve are all the more incredible because Accolon fights with Arthur's enchanted sword and scabbard. In spite of his disadvantage, Arthur endures, finally regaining Excalibur and defeating Accolon. Another example is to be found in the brief war with the five kings. Arthur and three of his knights are forced to retreat from battle

but finding their retreat cut off at the Humber River, turn to fight again. One by one they defeat the five kings who, too eager in their pursuit, have left their own armies behind. Finding their chieftains slain, the remainder of the invading armies surrender immediately. Although these battles demonstrate that Arthur is a valiant warrior in individual combat, they are not the political triumphs that the victory over the rebel kings or the conquest of the Roman Empire are. These latter make Arthur's court the most renowned in Europe.

Once Arthur is firmly in control of England, the greatest knights of the world are mysteriously drawn to his court, the name of each being magically inscribed in the Round Table. Although it is Arthur's personal resolve to answer the Roman Emperor's demands for tribute with war, it is the prowess of the knights of the Round Table that ensures the success of the Roman campaign. As Lucius's senators say in warning him against Arthur, the company of the Round Table is the greatest on earth.

'And of all the soveraynes that we sawe
ever he is the royallyst Kynge that
lyvyth on erthe, for we sawe on Newerys
day at his Rounde Table nine kyngis, and
the fayryst felyship of knyghts ar with
hym that durys on lyve, and thereto of
wysedome and of fayre speche and all
royalté and rychesse they fayle of none.'
(page 116, 11.28-32)

Nor does Arthur fail to recognize the grandeur of his company. During the Roman campaign, for example,

Lancelot and several other knights who have lately joined the Round Table lead a group of five hundred knights who are charged with taking Roman prisoners of war to Paris. They meet an ambush of sixty thousand Roman allies who are easily routed. When Arthur's knights return to the battlefield with news of the success, Arthur comments on his fortune as king.

'Be my fayth, there was never kyng sauff
myselff that welded ever such knyghts.'
(page 130, 11.16-17)

It is much to Arthur's credit that, having command of such a great company of men, he alone defines the code of ethics that governs his knight's behavior.⁶ Throughout Le Morte Darthur, Arthur's principal interest is maintaining the ideal. Although the conquest of Lucius's empire begins for Arthur as a matter of personal vengeance (claiming that his British ancestors were direct descendants of the Roman Emperors),⁷ it becomes a matter of establishing new social unity throughout the empire. Once Lucius is defeated on the battlefield, Arthur continues the campaign across Europe toward Rome, deposing, as he goes, tyrannical lords and establishing new laws "that dured long aftir" (page 135, 11.39-41).

It is clear then that the legend of King Arthur, in Malory's hands, follows the pattern of dramatic comedy--the establishment of social order through the efforts of the hero. Our concept of fortune, however, dictates that nothing is immutable. Great societies must inevitably

decline. Arthur's role as hero, finally, is to strive to keep his political gains intact.

So pervasive is Arthur's interest in maintaining the new order that all other interests, however personal, are secondary. Guenevere's infidelity, for example, means nothing to Arthur except for the political difficulties it causes. Realizing, finally, that he cannot avoid a costly war with Lancelot, Arthur regrets only the loss of good fighting men.

'And much more I am sorryar for my good
knyghtes losse than for the losse of my
fayre quene; for quenys I myght have
inow, but such a felyshyp of good knyghtes
shall never be togydirs in no company.'
(page 685, 11.29-32)

Beyond his commission of incest, Arthur does nothing to precipitate his own fall. He, in fact, largely disappears from Malory's narrative after The Tale of Arthur and Lucius, thereafter serving as a backdrop or point of reference for the adventures of other heroes. If Arthur has thus become a passive character, the completion of his destiny depends on the actions of those characters Malory develops in Arthur's stead, meaning that within the Round Table, the ideals that Arthur strives to preserve, are individual interests which serve to destroy the ideal.

Chapter 3

LANCELOT

In his notes to the second book of Le Morte Darthur ("Of King Arthur and The Emperor Lucius"), Eugene Vinaver makes the following assessment of Lancelot's character:

No reader of Malory's Tale would gather from it that he had been from the beginning a courtly hero, that he had first appeared in medieval literature as a champion of courtoisie, and that it was as the protagonist of Chretien de Troyes' Conte de la Charette that he had won his world wide fame.¹

Malory's initial depiction of Lancelot in Le Morte Darthur is more epic than courtly and is thereby inconsistent with the Lancelot of previous legend. Lancelot was from the beginning of his popularity a burlesque of the courtly hero. Chretien had drawn the character of Lancelot in the Conte de la Charette to a laughable extreme in order to satirize the rigid code of behavior that was supposed to govern the courtly lover.² Vinaver suggests that Malory "aggrandized" Lancelot in keeping with his obvious preference for him throughout Le Morte Darthur. Yet, he notes, the characterization is still internally inconsistent. Although Malory attempts to upgrade Lancelot throughout his narrative, continually referring to Lancelot's prowess, saying, for example, "for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other

knyghtes, and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement" (page 149, 11.6-9), much of the burlesque still survives.

Some of the comedy surrounding Lancelot in Malory's narrative is so obvious that it seems impossible that Malory should fail to recognize it as such. Consider, for example, the following scene from Malory's first account of Lancelot's adventures. Tired from his day's travel, Lancelot has gone to sleep in a pavillion he has found unoccupied.

Than within an owre there com that knyght that ought the pavylyon. He wente that his lemman had layne in that bed, and so he leyde hym adowne by sir Launcelot and toke him in his armys and began to kysse hym. And whan sir Launcelot felte a rough berde kyssing hym he sterte oute of the bedde lyghtly, and the othir kynght after hym. And eythir of hem gate their swerdys in their hondis, and oute at the pavylyon dore wente the knyghte of the pavylyon, and sir Launcelot folowed him. And there by a lytyll slad sir Launcelot wounded hym sore nygh unto the deth. And then he yelded hym to sir Launcelot, and so he graunted hym, so that he wolde tell hym why he com into that bed. (page 153, 11.25-35)

The scene is purely slapstick, marked by fast paced and physical humor. A similar scene occurs in the "Launcelot and Elaine" episode of the fifth book. Lancelot has gone mad, having been rebuked by Guenevere. Wandering in the forest he comes upon a knight's pavillion, arms himself with one of the knight's swords, and proceeds to create no small disturbance. The knight and his dwarf attempt to reason with him, but Lancelot breaks the sword on the

knight's head and rushes into the pavillion, scaring the wits out of a lady lying therein.

And than sir Launcelot ran into the pavelon, and russhed evyn into the warme bedde. And there was a lady that lay in that bedde; and anone she gate her smokke, and ran oute of the pavylon, and whan she sawe her lorde lye at the grounde lyke to be dede, than she cryde and wepte as she had been madde. And so with her noyse the knyght awaked oute of his sowghe, and loked up wekyly wyth his yen. (page 496, 11.21-26)

Lancelot's madness is supposed to be a serious matter, but the situation lends itself to chance humor.

One of the best examples of this kind of rough physical humor occurs in the third part of The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere. In order to atone for having worn the emblem of the Fair Maid of Astolat, Lancelot has promised to wear an emblem of Guenevere's at the next tournament. To rest and refresh himself for that tournament, Lancelot repairs to a hermitage where daily he naps by a well. By chance, a huntress of that region pursues a hind to the very spot where Lancelot is sleeping and prepares to kill the beast.

And anone as she had spyed hym she put a brode arow in her bowe and shot at the hynde, and so she overshotte the hynde, and so by myssefortune the arow smote sir Launcelot in the thycke of the buttock over the barbys.

Whan Sir Launcelot felte hym so hurte he whorled up woodly, and saw the lady that had smytten hym. And whan he knew she was a woman he sayde thus:

'Lady or damesell, whatsomever ye be, in an evyll tyme bare ye thys bowe. The devyll made you a shoter!' (page 643, 11. 32-40)

The comedy of the situation is heightened by the threatened possibility of Lancelot's inability to ride in the next tournament because of his injury. Guenevere has several times already demonstrated her unreasonable nature, and it is not difficult to imagine what her response would be if Lancelot failed to show up at the tournament with her emblem.

The consistent and comic feature of Lancelot's adventures is his hapless relationship with Guenevere. She is a volatile and jealous woman who demands unwavering perfection and loyalty from her lover, which, in spite of appearances, Lancelot always supplies. The comedy of their relationship is derived from the incongruous combination of Guenevere's frequent and wrongful abuse of Lancelot and his unfailing devotion to her. By good and ill fortune, he wends his way in and out of Guenevere's favor until their relationship comes to its disastrous climax.

It is ever the logic of Guenevere's thought that sustains the farcical tone of the lovers' relationship. She has once driven him to madness by refusing to believe in his sincerity. She rebukes him when, to allay suspicions at court, he has taken up the causes of other ladies in battle, and when they are again accorded, she blames him for not doing his utmost to quell rumors.

'Sir, ye ar gretly to blame thus to holde
 you behynde my lorde. What woll youre
 enemyes and myne sey and deme?' (page 622,
 11.12-13)

There is already a note of frustration and sarcasm in Lancelot's voice as he replies, "Hit ys of late com syn ye were woxen so wyse!" The lovers again fall out when Guenevere learns that Lancelot, following their new plan, has accepted the emblem of Elaine, the Fair Maid of Astolat. Guenevere does not forgive Lancelot until Elaine has made a large production out of killing herself for being so much in love with him. She then has the nerve to say:

'Sir,' . . . 'ye might have showed hir some
 bownte and jantilnes whych might have
 preserved hir lyff.' (page 641, 11.29-30)

No human being could really be expected to take the kind of treatment that Guenevere serves up to Lancelot; this is the satire of courtly love.

It is impossible to say just how Malory viewed the material he borrowed from his French sources, but I believe that Malory, on the whole, takes Lancelot seriously, not satirically. That the greatest of all possible legendary heroes should be beset with a number of trivial misadventures and comic difficulties is consistent with Malory's theme, the vanity of human wishes. In spite of their difficulties, Malory means for Lancelot and Guenevere to be the greatest of lovers and therefore the most virtuous of persons. I call attention again to

Malory's commentary in the beginning of "The Knight of The Cart."

And therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre remembraunce the monethe of May, lyke as ded quene Gwennyver, for who I make here a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende. (page 649, 11.32-35)

Whether or not Malory recognized the humor in the love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere, it is most important that he retains Lancelot as a steadfast courtly lover. It is in part because Lancelot keeps coming back to Guenevere with a forgiving heart that the round table falls apart.

The dramatic structure of Le Morte Darthur is a little unusual in this respect, that disaster is the result of essentially comic action, but Lancelot himself warns, in his own dictamen, what the result of having one's "pleasure with peramours" is:

' . . . that woll I refuse: in pryncipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advouters 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 thynges unhappy that is aboute them.'
(page 161, 11.5-11)

Ironically, Lancelot is describing the situation he later finds himself in during the Quest of The Holy Grail, wherein he can win no spiritual or earthly glory, and still later with Sir Gareth, wherein he slays a man he

loves while rescuing Guenevere from execution.

In spite of Lancelot's pronouncement, I am not altogether certain that Malory sees Lancelot's continued adultery as being wrong. Although the love affair is never directly mentioned in Lancelot's early adventures, it is often hinted at. Morgan Le Fay and her friends, while attempting to force Lancelot to choose among them for a paramour, tell him that it is well known that no one but Guenevere will ever have his love freely. Shortly thereafter an unidentified maiden who has sought Lancelot's help tells him "hit is noysed that ye love quene Gwenyvere, and that she hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that ye shall never love none other but hir" (page 160, 11.40-42). Although Lancelot denies the allegations, the regularity with which he sends his prisoners to yield to Guenevere suggests that they are already lovers. Yet Lancelot continues to be a superman, an avenger of wrongs and a very successful knight of adventures. It is not until the Quest that Lancelot's fortunes change and then only for the duration of the quest.

Malory's preference for Lancelot is such that his Quest of The Holy Grail might well be reentitled "The Penance of Sir Lancelot." While Galahad is a raging success in the spiritual quest, he is not the least bit interesting as a character. It is far more interesting to watch and pity as the invincible Lancelot is shamed and continually reminded that, were it not for his

grievous sin, no other knight could surpass him in the quest. Still, once Lancelot is properly shriven, he is privy to more divine revelation than any of the other knights except Sir Bors, Sir Perceval, and Sir Galahad. For a knight who has so greatly sinned (and remember that adultery is his only sin of consequence) Lancelot performs quite well in the Quest.

Many readers of Malory no doubt feel a great sense of relief once the matter of the Quest is put aside and Lancelot is again a champion among men. Malory himself seems to feel more at ease with Lancelot back in his proper place, including the fact that he immediately takes up with the queen again.

Than, as the booke seyth, sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste; for, as the booke seyth, had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so seete inwardly to the quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. But ever his thoughtis prevyly were on the quene, and so they loved togydys more hotter than they dud toforehand. . . .
(page 611, 11.10-17)

The important ideas in this passage are the ones about outward appearance and inward reality. It seems that all Lancelot had to do to make his "perfeccion" in the Quest was to admit to his sins. "Ever his thoughtis prevyly were on the quene" means that Lancelot never really gave up anything in the Quest, yet he was privileged enough to have divine mysteries revealed to him. Once he has

returned from the Quest he is again the queen's invincible champion in right and wrong quarrels.

Lancelot's crowning achievement is the healing of Sir Urry who, it is said, can be healed by the best knight of the world. As this tale is Malory's own invention, it is clear that he means to minimize any blame that may be placed on Lancelot for resorting to Guenevere again.

R. M. Lumiansky has suggested that Arthur commands Lancelot to attempt the healing of Sir Urry because he suspects Lancelot and Guenevere, knowing that if Lancelot were to fail, as all the men who have tried before him have, it will mean that he has gone back on the promises he made during the Quest.³ But this idea stretches the drama too far in the direction of intrigue. To suggest that Arthur would be so petty as to make the command on that basis is to deprive him of what nobility of character he retains in Malory's narrative. Urry's recovery would only be a secondary concern at best, and we would have to accept Arthur as, foremost, a vindictive cuckold. It is more consistent with the character who composed the chivalric oath to suppose that Arthur understands that Lancelot is too humble to presume his worthiness for the task and too loyal to refuse his king's command. Arthur, in fact, sets an example for anyone else in his company who might share Lancelot's reluctance by making the first attempt at healing Sir Urry.

'And for to gyff all othir men off worshyp a currayge, I myselff woll asay to handyll your sonne, and so shall kynges, dukis and erlis that ben here presente at thys tyme, nat presumyng uppon me that I am so worthy to heale youre son be my dedis, but I woll corrayge othir men of worshyp to do as I woll do.' (page 664, 11.27-32)

Following his command, Arthur eases Lancelot's conscience by telling him not to take the matter wrongly, that he must simply do as the rest of them have done. Even Arthur has a profound respect for Lancelot's nobility.

' . . . And wyte you well,' seyde kynge Arthur, 'and ye prevayle nat and heale hym, I dare sey there ys no knyghte in thys londe that may hele hym.' (page 668, 11.6-8)

Once Lancelot has succeeded in healing Sir Urry, he weeps, not because he has narrowly escaped Arthur's suspicion, but because he really does believe himself to be unworthy of the miracle he has performed. There is no finer dramatic moment in Le Morte Darthur.

Since Malory holds Lancelot in such high esteem, in spite of his comic difficulties and in spite of his dalliance with the queen, the reader must look elsewhere for a cause on which to lay the blame for the collapse of the ideal society. Arthur's Round Table coexists with and to some extent rests on the courtly love ideal. Both ideals are vain human wishes. Lancelot and Guenevere may be condemned only in that their adultery is to be exploited by petty and jealous men, to the detriment of all concerned.

The fate of the Round Table rests ultimately on

Sir Gawain's choice of action; he wavers between the pettiness and jealousy of his brothers Aggravaine and Mordred and his deep admiration for his brother Gareth throughout Malory's narrative. When the latter is killed, Gawain is deprived of his only link to virtue; he can only give in to the tendencies of the former pair. Vengeance, not adultery, undoes the Round Table.

Chapter 4

GARETH

It is possible that Malory had begun to grow impatient with his imprisonment by the time he wrote The Tale of Sir Gareth. At least it seems that he is showing a little despair at the close of the tale when he writes:

AND I PRAY YOU ALL THAT REDYTH THIS TALE
TO PRAY FOR HYM THAT THIS WROTE, THAT GOD
SENDE HYM GOOD DELYVERAUNCE SONE AND HASTELY.
AMEN.

It is as much of himself as he shows at any place in Le Morte Darthur. It is possible, although I cannot say how probable, that Malory took comfort in recounting this tale, a comedy, perhaps drawn to what Suzanne Langer calls a "pure sense of life" in the tale.

This human life-feeling is the essence of comedy. It is at once religious and ribald, knowing and defiant, social and freakishly individual. The illusion of life which the comic poet creates is the oncoming future fraught with danger and opportunities, that is, with physical or social events occurring by chance and building up the coincidence with which individuals cope according to their lights.¹

Danger and opportunity are at the heart of Gareth's tale. The young nobleman is an adventurer, and, largely through his own contrivance, he must overcome a series of obstacles before he achieves his desire. The action of the tale is derived, first, from the protagonist's

problem of equilibrium, the pattern of the upset and recovery of his balance, and from tension created by incongruity and irony in the various situations in which the protagonist finds himself.

The action occurs in three distinct blocks of time within the tale. The first is the initial situation that governs, directly or indirectly, all the remaining action within the tale. It covers the period of time from Gareth's arrival at Arthur's court to his victory over Ironside at the seige of the Castle Perelous. The next is the attraction of the lovers, Gareth and Lyonesse, their goal of union, and the series of obstacles they must face before they succeed. The last is the culmination of a new social order in the communal celebration of the lovers' union, covering the time from the cry of the tournament at the Castle Perelous to the wedding of Gareth and Lyonesse. If we think of fortune as the agent controlling comic action, it is appropriate that, in the conclusion of the tale, the action has come full circle, ending in the precise spot in which it began.

There seems to be a kinship between the action in The Tale of Sir Gareth and the characteristics of comedy derived from the Menandrine tradition which Northrup Frye describes in his "Argument of Comedy." Frye writes that New Comedy unfolds from a comic Oedipus situation, having for its main theme the successful effort of a

young man to out-wit an opponent and possess the girl of his choice. The girl is often a slave or courtesan and the plot turns on the discovery of birth that makes her marriageable. The plot then, since she is an accessible object of desire, takes on a wish fulfillment pattern. Frye later states that New Comedy has a social as well as an individual theme which must be sought in the atmosphere of reconciliation that makes the final marriage possible. "As the hero gets closer to the heroine and opposition is overcome, all the right-thinking people come over to his side. Thus a new social unit is formed on the stage and the moment that this social unit crystallizes is the moment of comic resolution."²

When Arthur holds court at King Kenadown by the seaside on the feast of Pentecost, Gareth arrives, a good boy sent by his mother to accomplish a specific task; i.e., to join his brothers, Gawain, Gaheris, and Aggravaine, as a knight in Arthur's court, but he makes no show of the gold or the harness given him. Instead, he enters court somewhat feebly, leaning on the shoulders of two attendants until, before the king's dais, "this yonge muche man pullyd hym abak and easily [stretched] streyghte upryght." It is just this sense of the dramatic (or prankishness) that allows the action of the tale to perpetuate itself until the boy Gareth can enter society with his own peculiar sense of style. (A character like Tom Sawyer operates on

the same principles.) Only when that action is near completion does his mother, Morgause, (somewhat before the fashion of an Aunt Polly) tell Arthur that "ever sytthen he was growyn he was [mervaylously wytted. . .]" (page 210, 1.25).

With no explanation of his identity or his intent, Gareth requests of Arthur only that he be given sustenance for a year and that he be granted two more requests at the end of that time. Cheerfully, he settles into life as a kitchen knave, allowing the scornful Sir Kay to give him his only identity, "Beawmaynes," meaning "Pretty Hands." This is an amusing set-up for the time much later in the tale when Pertolope, Perimones, Persaunte, and Ironside, each with his own retinue of knights, come to Arthur's court to yield themselves to a man known only as "Pretty Hands." Nor can we do anything but laugh when, Gareth having left to follow the quest of the seige Perelous, Kay rides after the boy he calls "Pretty Hands," challenges him, and comes away sorely beaten. Finally, the lack of identity is the right impetus for Lynet's continual rejection of Gareth. Imagine her horror when, having come to court seeking a knight to rescue her sister, she comes away with an unseemly young man who has been living on hand-outs for the past year. Lack of recognition functions doubly here to perpetuate the action and the situation; she has no way of knowing, as we do, that Gareth is of a noble house, and it is her own refusal to identify

herself at court that creates the situation. Arthur will allow no sworn knight to follow her quest as long as she refuses, so Gareth gets the second of his requests.

The pattern of rejection functions here as the rhythmic change of fortune that underlies comic action. As Gareth's tasks grow more difficult, since each knight he faces in the quest is more powerful than the last, Lynet's abuse grows proportionately. She tells him he stinks, calls him a coward and a traitor, says that each of his successes owes to mischance or treachery. The humor here is the horrible incongruity between that abuse and the prowess he has already demonstrated; he has fought Lancelot to a standstill and been knighted by him (his third request). Still, Lynet tries to scare him away from the quest on a curious turn of words: "Thou shalt anone be mette withall, that thou woldyst nat for all the broth that ever thou souped onys to loke hym in the face" (page 182, 11.18-19). She can even make him ride at a distance from her because of the imaginary smell of the kitchen. Gareth, meanwhile, calmly passes each stage of the Perelous Passages; defeating Gerarde and Arnold le Breuse, Perarde the Black Knight, Pertolope the Green Knight, and Perimones the Red Knight.

After each of these encounters, Lynet accuses Gareth of cowardly conduct. Each slurring remark is a setback of the reader's expectations. However the

situation may be, deliberately humorous or not, it is clear that Gareth uses each setback as a springboard to greater achievement and that this pattern, Lynet's abuse against his prowess, perpetuates the action until the final battle before the seige of the Castle Perelous. There Lynet finally relents in her abuse and admits that Gareth is probably a high-born fellow, and there Gareth tells her, "In the more ye seyde the more ye angered me, and my wretthe I wrekid uppon them that I had ado withall." Presumably, Gareth is inspired by the moral victory and defeats Perseaunte. Thereafter he fights for love, inspired in his battle against Ironside by just the sight of the beseiged dame Lyonesse.

What has transpired thus far in the tale is typical fare for Malory, descriptions of battle in minute detail with much talk about chivalry and honor. What follows is much more intriguing and certainly more complex. Having won the battle against Sir Ironside and rested himself for a few days, Gareth arms himself and rides up to Castle Perelous, full of expectations. Lyonesse refuses his obvious intentions and requires that he labor for a year to prove himself. Understandably, Gareth is upset but consents to do as she says. She promises him her fidelity; he nonetheless sets out, every bit the hanged-dog, to wander aimlessly. The dramatic problem now is to get the boy and the girl together, or better, to pose a sufficient number of problems to be overcome by the boy

and the girl before they are united, thereby sustaining the comic action and rhythm.

In spite of his actions up to this point, Gareth still faces a social barrier; the question of his birth, although he no longer labors actively to overcome it. It is Lyonesse who must satisfy herself that Gareth is marriageable, and to that end, she bids her brother Gryngamoure to follow and to find Gareth and, while he sleeps in his sadness, to steal his dwarf. Gryngamoure does just that. Gareth awakes just in time to see Gryngamoure leaving, arms himself and follows, but chooses his route badly, contending with the dark, the wood, the mire and the bog, which does nothing to improve his disposition. There is every possibility that Lyonesse and her sister would expect Gareth to come to his dwarf's rescue, meaning that something bigger is afoot. We expect the sisters, knowing that Gareth is coming, to question the dwarf civilly and reassuringly; they threaten to imprison him for life if he does not reveal Gareth's origin. Although it is possible to see this as a fail-safe ploy, the incongruity of the situation and the desperation of the inquest, are unavoidably surprising and funny.

Similarly surprising is the flippancy exhibited by the sisters and their brother Gryngamoure when the dwarf, having told them all they wish to know, begs his release, warning them that to detain him further will only anger his master. "Be as be may," Lyonesse replies, and the three

of them calmly sit down to dinner. It is perfectly normal, in the social context, for noble persons to have such light regard for a dwarf. It is surprising to find so little consideration for Gareth, whom they know to be a nobleman. The incongruity of the situation is better understood if it is protracted a little. The sisters have a nice chat during dinner. Lynet tells Lyonesse what a pig she has been to Gareth and how well he has taken it, this to confirm or add credibility to his noble character. Gareth, by this time quite angry, finally arrives and begins to shout his threats and promises toward the castle; we must bear in mind that he has no idea who Gryngamoure is or who is in the castle with him, aside from the dwarf. Gryngamoure leans out the window and tells him to shut up (but politely, in the language of chivalry: "leve thy bostyng wordys, for thou gettyst nat thy dwarf again"). Gareth tells him to come down and fight then, and Gryngamoure is just about to do so when Lyonesse, finally reminding everyone of the knightly service Gareth has done her, asks him not to. While it is true that almost any excuse will do for a fight between two knights in Le Morte Darthur, to let the situation get this far out of hand and come to the point of physical battle would have to seem extreme to even the medieval mind.

This is not all that Malory (or his presumed source) has to say about bringing the lovers together; not while there is more fun to be had with failure of recognition.

Lyonesse tells Gryngamoure to let Gareth in; she wants to talk with him, but she makes it clear that she does not want him to know who she is. Gryngamoure meets Gareth at the castle entrance and apologizes, but then tells an obvious lie, saying, "as sone as your dwarff tolde me what ye were and of what kynde ye are com and what noble dedys ye have done in this marchis, than I repented me of my dedys" (page 204, ll.9-12).

Gareth is led inside and, indeed, understandably, fails to recognize Lyonesse when he meets her face to face, since he has never had more than a glimpse of her from a distance. What is not forgiveable is the fact that he begins to wish that the lady of the Castle Perelous were as pretty as the woman he sees before him. The passion grows until, as Malory says, "he passed hymself farre in his reson." Gryngamoure notices his behavior and tells his sister that were she better than she is, she would still be well bestowed upon such a man. He then tells Gareth that his sister is as much in love with him as he is with her. He invites Gareth to stay as long as he likes. The height of irony is that Gareth is eager to do so, saying that this is easily compatible with his own plans since, remembering his promise to the lady of the Castle Perelous, he has to stay in the area for the next year anyway.

Gareth and Lyonesse meet, kiss, and promise to

love each other, and then Lyonesse tells him who she is. Not in love for each other, the couple arrange a tryst to "abate their lustys secretly." Lyonesse, because she is young, Malory tells us, is not terribly good at keeping a secret. Thus, sister Lynet is soon planning, by subtle crafts, to frustrate the lovers' intentions.

After supper that night, Gareth announces that he will be content to sleep in the hall. Bedding is provided, and, as appointed, Lyonesse comes and lies down beside him. Just as they embrace, Gareth sees an armed knight coming toward them and runs for his sword. They fight and Gareth strikes off the knight's head, but not before he has himself been badly wounded. When the confusion abates, Lynet glides in, rejoins the knight's head to his body, and takes him back to her room. In time Gareth heals. Another tryst is arranged, but this time Gareth is sharp-witted enough to have his armour nearby. Again the knight approaches just as the lovers meet. The strain of this battle opens Gareth's old wound. Bleeding, he knocks the enchanted knight down, strikes off the head, and this time cuts it into a hundred small pieces which he casts out the window, whereupon he faints from loss of blood. While Lady Lyonesse and Gryngamoure busy themselves in sorrow over Gareth, Lynet comes along and gathers the pieces of the severed head together. She annoints them, reconstructs the head, rejoins the head to the body, and revives the enchanted knight. All of this

action takes place in plain sight of everyone, including Gareth, who has by this time regained consciousness.

If the lovers are not able to control their passions before they are honorably united in marriage, Lynet will do it for them. Gareth is made to understand that his wound cannot be made whole again except by her that caused the enchantment. Lynet still has her enchanted knight, and, obviously, Lyonesse is still not able to keep a secret. It is a minor setback for the lovers, meaning that they must take steps toward marriage if their passions are to be satisfied.

The action of the tale shifts now to the formation of a new social order which culminates in the marriage of the lovers. The knights that Gareth defeated in the quest of the Castle Perelous, all of them having previously been sworn enemies of Arthur, have by this time come to Arthur and yielded themselves to his service. Anxious for news of the valiant young knight, Arthur summons Lyonesse to court. There she announces, according to Gareth's instructions, a tournament at the Castle Perelous, to be fought between the knights of the Round Table and a party of her own knights. "Than," she tells Arthur, "I am sure I shall hyre of sir Gareth."

A tournament among knights is nothing more than a friendly social gathering in which the participants choose sides and have a bit of sport for vainglory. This is especially true of the tournament at the Castle Perelous.

Where before there had been serious warfare there is now sport in earnest between former enemies. Perseaunte, perimones, Pertolope, and Ironside participate, not grudgingly or out of a sense of duty, but out of genuine love for Gareth and, hence, for all of Arthur's company. Even Malory seems to take more than the usual amount of delight in listing the names of each participant and detailing each encounter. The tournament brings all of society together, knights and ladies, for the larger purpose that Gareth may publicly win his lady's hand. Briefly said, he does so in his own peculiar and, for the most part, anonymous way. By the time he quits the field he has performed so well that all present are anxious to have him back, just, it seems, to celebrate his being.

It is obvious by now that this good-hearted young fellow is a unifying force who works through might and irresistible charm. Having quit the field at tournament, Gareth finds still more opportunity in his wandering to expand the social circle, rescuing thirty widowed ladies from the Brown Knight without Pity and winning the fealty of the Duke de la Rose, another previously sworn enemy of Arthur. It is Gawain who notes, after the unfortunate battle between the two brothers, that Gareth is personally responsible for sending more knights over to Arthur's side in the past year than any of the five best knights of the round table except Lancelot.

The wedding of Gareth and Lyonesse is, then, not only the culminating point of the lovers' desire for one another but of the formation of a new social order. Virtually all the characters we have met earlier in the tale participate in the wedding celebration and feast. Particularly notable are the principal knights he has defeated. Pertolope asks to be Gareth's chamberlain. Perimones asks to be chief butler at the feast. Perseaunte asks to be chief steward. Ironside wants only the privilege of carving the meat. The action has now come full circle, returning, as it began, to King Kenadown by the seaside, where a feast and tournament are held to celebrate the young man who had one time come limping mysteriously into court there.

Wilfred Guerin writes of the tale that the portrayal of Arthurian society at its flowering, the portrayal of the young knight, not the greatest hero of that society, who represents the spirit and letter of the chivalric oath, and the affirmation of life and Christian love found in the tale prepare the reader, by contrast, for the collapse of society, brought about by malice, vengeance, and adultery, as it is portrayed in The Most Piteous Tale.³ Malory plainly states near the end of the tale that Gareth recognized Gawain's vengeful and murderous nature and ever after refrained from his brother's company, drawing himself into camaraderie with the adulterous hero of Le Morte Darthur, Lancelot. It is

sadly ironic that the happy almost picaresque hero of this tale becomes the middle man between the forces that destroy the glory of Arthurian society in the latter tale, that the collapse should hinge on the death of this young man at his best friend's hands. But the fact remains that Gareth is more the victim of chance than of fate. It is chance that places Gareth in the court yard unarmed on the day that Lancelot comes to rescue Guenevere, and it is by chance that Lancelot fails to recognize his friend in the confusion, no matter how tragic the consequences of that action may seem.

The Tale of Sir Gareth, considered by itself, is a comedy. In the context of the entire Le Morte Darthur it is a comic moment, not the only one but the most complete. Its affirmation of life and comic rhythm serve to remind the reader that, when Arthur has departed for Avalon, and when Lancelot, Guenevere, and Gawain have died, the life impulse itself continues, and the ideal may again be reached for.

Chapter 5

GAWAIN

It may be said that Gawain's troubles begin with Arthur's ascendance to the throne. Gawain's father, King Lot of Orkney, opposes Arthur and is at last killed in battle by King Pellinore. For Pellinore, and not for Arthur, Gawain and his brother Gaheris reserve a special hatred. When Pellinore is made a knight of the Round Table, young Gawain vows to kill him. His younger brother Gaheris wants to put the matter off until he has, himself, become a knight, because he too wants the pleasure of revenge. Gaheris adds that, for the sake of prudence, they ought to put the matter off until they "may have hym oute of courte, for and we dud so we shall trouble thys hyghe feste" (page 63, ll.16-17).

Whether it has been thrust upon them by circumstance or whether they are naturally disposed to it, all the brothers from Orkney except Sir Gareth gain a reputation for being vengeful and wicked, as is evident in Tristram's speech to Aggravaine and Gaheris.

'But hit is shame,' seyde sir Trystram,
'that sir Gawayne and ye be commyn of
so grete blood, that ye four bretherne
be so named as ye be: for ye be called
the grettyste distroyers and murtherars
of good knyghtes that is now in the
realme of Ingelonde. And as I have harde
say, sir Gawayne and ye, his brethirne,

amonge you slew a bettir knyght than ever any of you was, whych was called the noble knyght sir Lamorak de Galys. And hit has pleased God,' seyde sir Trystram, 'I wolde I had bene by hym at his deth day.' (page 422, 11.33-39)

It appears most strongly that Gawain's character is shaped by the death of his father and that, as the eldest of Lot's sons, he bears considerable influence on the dispositions of his younger brothers. Having once given in to a wicked bent, Gawain finds it easier to do so again from time to time. There is in Malory quite a catalogue of less than honorable if not thoroughly outrageous actions conducted by Gawain in the course of his adventures. Gawain, from his first appearance in Le Morte Darthur, is a character not wholly to be trusted, and he maintains a pattern of reprehensible behavior throughout. Malory first mentions Gawain in reporting that he "revenged the deth of hys fadir the ten yere aftir he was made knyght, and slew kynge Pellynor hys owne hondis" (page 48, 11.42-43). Thereafter, Gawain regularly stumbles athwart the principles that make up the oath of chivalry, which may be set out briefly in five points:

1. 'never to do outerage nothir mourthir'
2. 'allwayes to fle treson'
3. 'gyff mercy unto hym that askyth mercy'
4. 'allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen[socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe.'
5. 'that no man take no battles in a wrongefull quarrell for no love ne for worldis goodis'¹

If Lancelot, for example, is able to answer

positively to each of these charges, Gawain is almost as consistently apt to fall short of the requirements. "THE FYRST BATAYLE THAT EVER SIR GAWAYNE DED AFTER HE WAS MADE KNYGHT" proves to be a rather inauspicious beginning for a young man of arms. Gawain and Gaheris have been sent in quest of a white hart, which is at last tracked down and killed by Gawain's hounds. The hart's owner, understandably upset, kills the hounds and proffers to fight with Gawain. Gawain overcomes the knight and, himself a little upset at the loss of his hounds, refuses mercy when asked. At the crucial moment, the knight's lady throws herself in the way and is beheaded for her troubles. Gawain and Gaheris are then set upon by four knights whose design is to punish Gawain for his shameful conduct. "And as they sholde have bene slayne," Malory says, "there com four fayre ladyes and besought the knyghtes of grace for sir Gawayne" (page 67, 11.1-2). The ladies require Gawain to return to Camelot with the body of the lady he has slain and to give a full account of his actions. Guenevere, when she has heard the matter, charges him "ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes and to fyght for hir quarels" (page 65, 11.38)

But Gawain does not reform so easily. In his next adventure, he befriends love-stricken Sir Pelleas, and, through no apparent force of logic, convinces Pelleas that he can win Ettarde's love for him merely by appearing before the lady in Pelleas's armor and claiming to have slain him.

On the strength of that claim, Gawain wins his way into Ettarde's bed and stays with her for three days. Being curious after Gawain fails to return, Pelleas discovers Gawain's betrayal, debates whether or not to kill the pair as they sleep, at last resolves to leave his sword across their throats, and vows to lie down and starve himself to death. As she recognizes Pelleas's sword, Ettarde realizes Gawain's deceit and tells him "that all ladyes and damesels may beware be you and me," but the full consequence of the deceit has not yet been seen. Pelleas is saved by the Lady of the Lake, who, through enchantment, causes Ettarde to fall hopelessly in love with him. Pelleas rejects Ettarde, and she dies broken hearted. Unscathed and apparently indifferent, Gawain returns to Camelot.

In a later episode, Gawain kidnaps a lady from a knight called Sir Froll, who has lately been befriended by Sir Lamorak. Lamorak accosts Gawain but excuses him on learning that he is Arthur's nephew. Gawain then turns on Sir Froll, "but the knyght wyth pure myght smote down sir Gawayne and toke his lady with hym" (page 280, ll.27-28). Lamorak feels duty-bound to avenge Gawain because "he woll sey me dishonoure in kynge Arthure's courte," he fights with Sir Froll, and kills him. It is bad enough that Lamorak is thus forced to kill a friend, but the fact is made worse when he remembers that Gawain repays Lamorak's "kindness" with murder.

Yet Gawain is not a completely evil man. Malory provides a number of accounts in which Gawain conducts himself honorably or even heroically. Gawain is paying more than lip-service to knightly ethics, for example, when he speaks out against the treachery of Morgan Le Fay.

'Fy for shame,' seyde sir Gawayne, 'that evir such false treson sholde be wrought or used in a quene and a kyngys systir and a kynge and quenys doughtir!' (page 315, 11.24-26)

And, in spite of Malory's preference for Lancelot, Gawain is still something of the epic hero in Malory's "Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius."

So by that tyme was sir Gawayne ware be the woodys syde men comynge woodly with all maner of wepon, for there rode the erle of Ethelwolde havynge on eyther halfe many more thousandys; and the deuke of Douchemen dressys hym aftir and passis with Pryamus knyghtes. Than Gawayne the good knight he chered his knyghtes and sayde,

'Greve you nat, good men, for yondir grete syght, and be nat abaysshed of yondir boyes in hir bryghte weedis, for and we feyght in fayth the felde is ours!' (page 141, 11.10-18)

Finally, Gawain is the first of Arthur's knights to volunteer for the quest of the Holy Grail, which is especially surprising, since the reader already knows of Gawain's participation in the murder of Lamorak and a number of other misdeeds. Gawain, because of his past actions and his refusal to repent, is unable to accomplish anything in the quest, but he is instrumental in moving the rest of Arthur's knights to enter the quest. Once Gawain has made his vow to enter the quest, all the other

Gawain is perhaps most blameworthy in that he allows his brothers to be infected with his vengeful disposition. Malory says that Gawain plots with his brothers to bring their mother to a castle near Camelot, thereby to entrap Sir Lamorak, Queen Morgause's lover. When he arrives, Lamorak goes immediately to the queen's bedchamber. Gaheris enters with the intent to kill Lamorak, but, apparently overcome with anger at seeing his mother in bed with Lamorak, he strikes off her head. Gaheris ironically declines to kill Lamorak because the latter is unarmed, and, following a heated exchange of words, he allows Lamorak to escape.

Gawain's reaction to the news of his mother's death is curious; he is "wrothe that sir Gaherys had slayne his modir and lete sir Lamerok ascape" (page 378, 11.26-29). Gawain's anger seems to be qualified. The wording of the passage implies that he could better accept his mother's death had Lamorak been killed as well. Gaheris himself justifies his mother's murder to Lamorak when he says "And now is my modir quytte of the, for she shall never shame her chyldryn" (page 378, 11.18-19).

By plotting and planning family revenge with his brothers, Gawain only encourages them to settle all their problems with violence. What finally prompts the brothers to kill Lamorak, for example, is jealousy. They are already upset with him (and perhaps rightly so) for

consorting with their mother. They like him even less for being Pellinore's son. But when Lamorak defeats each of them at tournament they make up their minds to kill him.³ Thus it is easy for Aggravaine and Mordred to make up for having been beaten in combat by Sir Dynadan:

And to make a shorte tale, sir Dynadan smote hym downe of his horse, that his necke was nye brokyn. And in the same wyse he smote sir Mordred and sir Aggravayne. And aftir, in the queste of the Sankgreal, cowardly and felonsly they slew sir Dynadan, whyce was a grete damage, for he was a grete bourder and a passynge good knyght. (page 379, 11.39-44)

Aggravaine and Mordred never distinguish themselves as men of arms. R. M. Lumiansky points out that Aggravaine never wins a battle in the whole of Le Morte Darthur, "a situation hardly conducive to his being a happy man."⁴ The combination of what he has learned from Gawain and Gaheris and his probable feelings of jealousy and frustration make Aggravaine the extreme opposite of virtuous Sir Gareth. Mordred's character is no doubt equally determined by the influence of Gawain, his lack of distinction as a knight, and a probable desire to get back at Arthur for having once tried to kill him. According to Malory, "all was longe" on these two for the destruction of "the floure of chyvalry of [alle] the worlde" (page 673, 11.7-10).

In The Most Piteous Tale Gawain becomes the most complex of Malory's characters; his position between the extremes of virtue and selfish evil force him to make several important decisions. We have already seen that

Gawain as often as not makes the wrong choice of action in any given situation; he tends to make mistakes. Aggravaine and Mordred plan to denounce Lancelot and Guenevere to Arthur, and, rightly, Gawain chooses not to side with them. When the brothers carry out their plan, Gawain is faced with a more difficult choice. Aggravaine is killed and Mordred badly wounded as they attempt to entrap Lancelot in the queen's bedchamber. Gawain's sons, Sir Florens and Sir Lovell, are killed as well. Even Lancelot dreads Gawain's vengeance. "I have slayne thys nyght sir Aggravayne, sir Gawaynes brothir . . . and for thys cause now am I sure of mortall warre" (page 680, 11.4-5). For a man so dedicated to family that he would murder for the sake of the family, the decision to let the deaths of his brother and his sons go unavenged has to be difficult. But Gawain says that inasmuch as he had warned them of the consequences, "I woll nat meddyll me thereoff, nor revenge me nothyng of their dethys" (page 683, 11.15-16).

Twice Gawain speaks in defense of Lancelot to King Arthur, before and after the aborted execution of Guenevere. He asks first that Lancelot be allowed trial by combat, but Arthur refuses. Guenevere "shall have the law." That Lancelot will come to Guenevere's rescue is a foregone conclusion. Thus Arthur asks Gawain to be present with armor at the execution. Gawain refuses, this time in defense of the queen's honor. Gareth and Gaheris agree to be present but without weapons, in deference to Lancelot.

When Lancelot has rescued Guenevere, Gawain again speaks in Lancelot's defense, saying "he hath done but knyghtly as I wolde have done myselff and I had stonde in lyke case (page 686, 11.3-5)," but he does not yet know that Gareth and Gaheris have been killed in the confusion.

Given what we know of Gawain's past actions, it is safe to say that he will make the wrong choice of action in at least one out of three situations. Could Gawain forgive Lancelot for the deaths of Gaheris and Gareth, Arthur might have a chance to keep his fellowship of knights and his kingdom together. Gawain would have to accept the deaths of his brothers as an unfortunate consequence of Lancelot's doing (as Gawain has already admitted) what he had to do. Gawain is partly justified in wanting revenge as long as Lancelot fails to explain his actions, but when Lancelot has made his explanations and Arthur is content to make peace, Gawain refuses to go along.

As Gawain's kinsman, Arthur has no choice but to continue the war with Lancelot. In refusing to be accorded with Lancelot, even at the behest of the Pope, Gawain unwittingly completes Arthur's destiny; by prolonging the war he allows his one remaining brother time to implement his plans for treason. Having already spent too much of his armed strength in the war against Lancelot, Arthur is ill prepared to battle Mordred at home. Gawain never realizes until his dying moment the futility and the ultimate cost of his vengeance; it will not restore his

cherished brothers Gareth and Gaheris to him. In his stubbornness he has only managed to facilitate the ruin of his last beloved kinsman, King Arthur.

'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 begunne . . .'
(page 709, 11.35-38)

The fall of the Round Table is the culmination of a series of accidents that begins with Arthur's commission of incest. Included in this series of accidents are the on-again-off-again relationship of Lancelot and Guenevere, the untimely choice Gareth and Gaheris make to attend Guenevere's execution unarmed, and Gawain's lifelong habit of getting his revenge. Before he could ever realize the consequences, Gawain has already taught Aggravaine and Mordred that one can overstep justice and order if it serves one's ends to do so. This is the most profound expression of the vanity of human wishes, that the most ideal system of justice and order should be so easily destroyed by the wrong combination of circumstances--ultimately by human nature, which makes mistakes in spite of the best intentions. Thus Malory writes, following his catalogue of Mordred's atrocities:

Lo ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kyng and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and moste loved the felyship of noble knyghtes, and by hym they all were upholdyn, and yet myght nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym.

Lo thus was the olde custom and usayges
of thys londe, and men say that we of thys
londe have nat yet loste that custom.
Alas! thys ys a greate defaughte of us
Englysshemen, for there may no thyng us
please no terme. (page 708, ll.36-41)

Malory evidently believed the legend of King Arthur
to be historical fact. Feeling as he did about the political
and social ills of his own age, it is not surprising that
he chose to make a contemporary rendition of Arthurian
legend. He had a moral purpose.

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

¹Textual references are to Eugene Vinaver, ed., Malory Works (Oxford University Press, 1977). Further references will be to Vinaver.

²James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, The Portable Medieval Reader (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), pp. 114-115.

³Barbara W. Tuchman, A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), pp. xix-xx.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

⁵M. H. Keen, England In The Later Middle Ages: A Political History (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1973), p. 436.

⁶Vinaver, *op. cit.*, p. v.

⁷Tuchman, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁹See also Vinaver, p. 232, 11.8-14.

¹⁰Tuchman, The Battle of Agincourt, p. 584; The Battle of Calais, p. 593; The Order of The Star, pp. 130-132.

¹¹Ross and McLaughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

¹²Tuchman, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹³Vinaver, *op. cit.*, viii-ix.

¹⁴T. H. White, The Book of Merlyn (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. xi.

¹⁵Suzanne Langer, "The Great Dramatic Forms: The Comic Rhythm," Comedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism, ed., Marvin Felheim (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1962), pp. 242-244. Further reference will be to Felheim.

¹⁷Northrup Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," op. cit., Felheim, p. 239.

Chapter 2

¹R. M. Lumiansky, Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 9.

²James Douglas Bruce, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, 2nd ed. 2 vols. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), pp. 132, 143.

³Ibid., p. 144.

⁴Malory is apparently unfamiliar or unconcerned with the view of tragedy shared by Chaucer, Dante, and Boccaccio--that doomed fatality is somehow linked to the turnings of fortune's wheel. The link between tragedy and fortune is illustrated in: Chaucer, "The Monk's Tale," 11.3181-3188; Dante, "Epistola X (to Can Grande della Scala)"; and Boccaccio, The Fates of Illustrious Men, "A Conversation Between Fortune and The Author." See also The Alliterative Morte Arthure, "The Second Dream," 11.3218 ff.

⁵Vinaver, op. cit., p. 76, 11.21-23.

Chapter 3

¹Vinaver, op. cit., p. 740.

²Roger Sherman Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1963), p. 54.

³Lumiansky, op. cit., pp. 217-232.

Chapter 4

¹Felheim, op. cit., p. 244.

²Ibid., p. 237.

³Lumiansky, op. cit., pp. 99-117.

Chapter 5

¹Vinaver, op. cit., p. 75, 11.38-44; p. 76,
11.1-2.

²Ibid., p. 522, 11.10-18.

³Ibid., p. 374, 11.42-44; p. 375, 11.1-9.

⁴Luminasky, op. cit., p. 212.

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