In ryght othir in wronge Malory's characters and a forgiving ideal.

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In Ryght Othir in Wrongs:
Malory's Characters and a Forgiving Ideal

by

David Hyttenrauch

A Thesis
submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of English
in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
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Abstract:
In Ryght Othir in Wrongs:
Malory's Characters and a Forgiving Ideal

Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur reveals ambiguity, both of form and of purpose, and one of the resulting difficulties is to understand his intent in taking an approach to the tales which precludes both idealistic and negative interpretations. An examination of his four central characters, Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot, and Gawayne, advances this understanding. Each demonstrates a continuing dedication to the pursuit of ideals, despite equal but conflicting demands placed upon them. Arthur sacrifices his elemental power to institute his code as a means of guiding the court in his values. With a lessened personal role, he allows Guinevere to act as symbol and judge, but her public duty collides with her volatile personality. Launcelot reveals equal loyalty to both king and queen, but when he is forced to choose, he provokes the long-anticipated conflict between Gawayne's loyalty to the clan and to the code. Each of the four moves through a process of effort, error, and enlightenment, which entitles them to a transcendence over death, a salvation of Malory's own making, and this returns the realm to equilibrium. In contrast to these four stand those on whom he places little value, whose dedication or level of perception is in doubt, or who effortlessly achieve perfection and lose their worldly significance. These do not share in an approach to characterization that stresses the human side of the four central figures.
To Beverley Stahlbrand
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Introduction

Perhaps the best approach is to pretend, for the moment, that we are simple readers, the sort who still believe that literature has something to do with human beings.¹

Although Sir Thomas Malory has certainly not yet received the volume of critical attention his *Morte Darthur* merits, he has at least slowly escaped the mire of negative opinion that has detracted from his popularity and perhaps from his validity as a subject for detailed study. The collected tales reveal much ambiguity, both of form and of purpose, and Malory himself has been viewed variously as both an idealist and a cynic even as his own character has remained an enigma. Malory's near-contemporaries considered the *Morte* to be a celebration of the ideals of chivalry, but notably even his first editor and critic, William Caxton, saw fit to emend and explain the original text in ways that are not necessarily explicit within it, and may in fact be contrary to Malory's intent. Seen as an exhortation to
knightly behaviour conveyed through a medium of both positive and negative exempla, the tales take on a character entirely different from that which appears on a surface reading. On the simplest level, the knightly ideal codified by Arthur and embodied in the Round Table proves impossible of attainment for even the most noble of his knights. While Malory shows himself to be aware of this failure, an awareness he explicitly reveals in the Grail episodes and in the events surrounding the collapse of the Round Table, he is often less critical of those who prove inadequate than an objective assessment would seem to require.

One of the great difficulties, then, facing the student of Malory is to understand his intent in taking an approach to the tales which precludes both an idealistic interpretation and a wholly negative one. The central characters, Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot and Gawaine, have remained among the most widely known in English literature, and Arthurian legend as a whole has become not only a continuing source of literary inspiration, but also the central body of secular myth in the English tradition. And Malory's own place in that tradition is secure. Whitworth, for example, has written that

The more that is learned about Malory's sources, the more he is seen as the receptacle into which all Arthurian literature of the previous three
hundred years poured, as well as the watershed from which most if not all English and American Arthurian literature and art or the subsequent five hundred years have flowed.² Morris adds that 

The whole legend might well have perished if Malory had not cut away the dead wood, and it is to Malory more than to any other that we owe the survival or the legend over the succeeding centuries.³ And yet, despite long-standing popularity and romantic belief to the contrary, the legends as they appear in the first comprehensive English prose version present tallible characters, flawed in their adherence to both conventional morality and to the chivalric code. These characters may argue for and strive toward perfection, but it effortlessly eludes their collective grasp. The unresolved question, then, centres on what the works mean and how Malory wishes us to perceive their outcome.

An examination of Malory's treatment of his characters, of their sins and successes, does much to advance this cause. At the centre of the morce are the four characters who are essential to its dramatic movement, and it is certainly not by coincidence that these four are distinguished both by Malory's characterization and by his judgement of their failures. Arthur, Guinevere and
Launcelot are all essential to the romantic and dramatic triangle that provides the tales' chief source of tension, and Gawayne is equally indispensable as the agent of primal revenge, of human emotion in conflict with a stringent and unyielding code. At the same time, and intricately intertwined with his tendency to distinguish these characters, is the fact that they are not simply replicas or each other, caricatures in which private desire conflicts with the code. Instead, there are important variations among them, through which Malory more thoroughly defines the qualities which set them apart from all the other members of society, and by which he suggests what is to be emulated, what avoided, in the pursuit of the ideal.

Those qualities, perhaps by chance, perhaps by design, are precisely those which seem to make these characters more human, and thus more admirable. Above all, Malory values the relentless pursuit of the ideal, even when, as it must, it exceeds human reach. This is not a simple requirement, for it is in the nature of the internal conflicts Malory develops in these characters that each struggles with two strongly held ideals that must ultimately collide, so that one must be sacrificed, even at the cost of the self, in order for the characters to ensure that the greater good prevails. Arthur, for example, fails to sustain the unity his almost elemental power creates when he uses the
fellowship as the primary agent of that unity. Guinevere, in taking on her role as judge of the fellowship's behaviour, encounters a division between her private emotional life and the public duties she must perform. Launcelot's absolute loyalty to her based on her public role is only matched by his loyalty to the king, but these must naturally collide. And when they do, it is the conflict between Gawayne's dedication to kin and his dedication to Arthur's ideal of knighthood that pushes the Round Table further along the path to destruction.

Inherent in these conflicts is yet another of the qualities Malory admires, for it is only with the development of insight and the re-ordering of values which have become corrupted through a faulty sense of their proportional merits, that a conciliation is possible. Malory ensures, however, that the reward for the sacrifice a reconciliation entails is great, and is in fact nothing short of transcendence over death, at least temporarily.

Thus, Malory distinguishes his four central characters by avoiding the full force of the condemnation each seems to deserve in light of their collective failure to uphold the explicit values of Arthur's society and to perpetuate them in a unified realm. His judgement of each is clearly favourable, especially if we realize that only these four transcend the fading of their civilization and even their
own deaths as a result of their final, it veiled, accomplishments. Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and Gawayne attain a nobility unmatched by Malory's other characters, as they strive consistently to fulfill the demands of conflicting codes and personalities. Their initial failures draw our attention firmly to their humanity, but the stigma of failure does not remain as they reconcile the conflicts amid general destruction and restore an equilibrium which, although it falls short of complete success, at least succeeds in defying anarchy.

It is this pattern, unique to these central characters, that truly distinguishes them and reveals them to be the bearers of Malory's message. Guerin has written that while the essence of the 'Tale of the Death of Arthur' [and by extension, of the whole Morte Darthur] is tragedy, this tragedy occurs in the material world only, for part of its essence is that spirituality which permits man to envision and aspire, and it is with enlightenment after long struggle that this spirituality comes to Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and Gawayne.
Notes


Chapter 1
Background and Foreground

It is perhaps possible to ascribe the popular perception of Arthurian civilization as the realization of an ideal to a variation on an old axiom: unfamiliarity breeds nostalgia. The legends themselves, however much they may be concerned with gallantry, courage, and unyielding passions, ultimately do not support such an interpretation, since the ascendance of Arthur is followed inexorably by the destruction of his court, his civilization, and his ideal. Malory too is required to follow this pattern by the demands of his sources, and yet the failure of his characters to perpetuate their accomplishment seems barely to concern the author of *Le Morte Darthur*, at least it we judge his interest by the severity of his criticism. He is certainly aware of their failings, as his implicit and explicit criticism of their behaviour reveals. Gawaine is railed for his excessive tenacity in pursuing the feud with Launcelot, just as the latter tails in the Grail quest because of his unwillingness to sever the ties to Guinevere that have reduced his status, however slightly, among
Arthur's knights. In fact, Malory acts carefully to vindicate the four characters at the centre of the tragedy, Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot, and Gawaine. The apparent moral ambiguity has troubled his critics for centuries, since, if we are to understand the motivation behind his writing a unique version of the tales, which were clearly revised in a deliberate and consistent fashion, we must first understand how he viewed their outcome.

Certainly his first editor and critic, William Caxton, had clear ideas about the interpretation of the text, its apparent failure to support his own approach notwithstanding. He makes a simple assertion in his "Preface" that the book is an exhortation to knightly conduct:

But al is writon for our doctorne, and for to beware that we talle not to vyce ne synne, but t'exersye and tolowe vertu, by whych we may come and atteyne to good fame and renomme in thys lyt, and after thys shorte and transytorye lyt to come unto everlastyng blysse in heven.¹

His sole concession to the dual or ambiguous morality of Malory's work is to admit that the great chivalric virtues which Caxton and his diverse gentlemen encouraged are intermingled in the Morte with "cowardyse, murre, hate... and synne"² which are notably outnumbered by virtues in
the same list. His only advice is to "doo after the good and leve the evyl."\(^3\) Subsequent critics have commented widely on Caxton's interpretation, since it did so much to shape the beliefs of later readers. Pochoda attributes his view to "peculiar tastes and interests of his own which may have led him to establish this moral reading of Malory." She also notes that

> We have...a strong hint...that he did not feel quite comfortable with Malory's book, that he felt the need to apologize for, or dismiss politely, those parts of it which did not square with his 'moral interpretation'.\(^4\)

Others, however, even in this century, have pursued similar arguments in favour of a moralistic, exemplary Morte.

P.E. Tucker is one such critic, and he serves as possibly the best (or more appropriately, the worst) example of this school of criticism. He suggests that the cumulative effect of Malory's modification of his sources is a rejection of a more permissive French courtly-chivalry, and that "What is his own is the strong moral tone which pervades his accounts of chivalric conduct and makes its various aspects coalesce into a single sentiment."\(^5\) Tucker may be correct when he notes that Malory has carefully separated his characters from ideas of courtly love in
favour of a code which is almost exclusively martial, but the virtues those characters retain are still undermined by that tradition, because the intricacy of Launcelot and Guinevere is so central to the tragedy.

In fact, since fallibility in the midst of aspiration to perfection seems to be the identifying mark of Malory's central characters, we must strongly question the claim of a purely didactic purpose. It may well be that an immoral exemplum serves as well as a moral one in order to convey truth, but ambiguity coupled with reticence is unlikely to provide any ideas beyond those the reader brings to the tale, which might explain Caxton's and Tucker's position. Malory, on the other hand, seems less concerned with perfection and more concerned with the qualities which give the four central characters nobility in the face of failure.

Perhaps of even less value in understanding Malory is a purely idealistic interpretation without reference to this inherent ambiguity. Pochoda also comments on proponents of this view, stating that

The first critical essays were most often written by enthusiasts who waxed lyrical over a work which 'arouses all the higher emotions of mankind'.... Their concern was wholly with the nationalistic [and, we might add, aristocratic] bias of the
book.\textsuperscript{7} Green traces this tendency to the Romantics, although he is willing to suggest a compromise in order to facilitate his own argument for irony, which is as vulnerable to criticism as the unjustified idealistic view. He says:

\begin{quote}
We run the same risk as the Romantics and...our sensibility to the note of critical dissent in the past is as much a product of our century's disillusionment as was the Romantics' need to glorify the past a reaction to the historical experiences of their day.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

He goes on to argue that both approaches are valid responses to elements in the literature, and yet such contradictory views can probably not be reconciled with a uniform sense of purpose in Malory.

Green's own claims for irony in the romances have drawn some attention, although he does not deal specifically with Malory. His stringent definition of irony in his book, \textit{Irony in the Medieval Romance}, includes the possibility of situational irony, as opposed to the more common rhetorical irony in medieval literature, and this possibility has allowed others to approach Malory using similar methods.\textsuperscript{9} For example, Barron sees irony in the \textit{Morte} as the means by which Malory tests the institution of knighthood and finds
it too fallible. He argues that the moral "uncertainty ironically undermines our confidence in the rightness of chivalric behaviour in all circumstances." He regards situational irony as the primary source of conflict in Malory, as fallible characters strive for unattainable perfection. One of his central claims is that "...irony can leave the ideal untouched while sharpening the reader's awareness of the demands which chivalry makes upon human nature." But his emphasis remains on their failure, as opposed to Malory's regard for their partial successes.

As happens universally with the moralistic approach, so critics espousing an ironic interpretation of the failure of the ideal in Malory tend to see in him a deliberate effort to present an unambiguous message through implicit reference, with the potential for condemnation either of knighthood or of the human failings which undermine it. Thus, the end result is virtually the opposite of the idealistic approach. The central assumption is that our expectations of chivalric perfection within Arthur's court are eroded through the subtle introduction of unambiguous failures. Thus, the ironic interpretation takes on negative connotations almost by definition, ignoring Malory's partial exoneration of his characters.

Yet another approach which leads to a pessimistic
conclusion is that proposed by Pochoda in her Arthurian Propaganda. While others have echoed her findings taintly, including some who have read political and historical allegory into the tales, she offers the most comprehensive defence of the Morte as a treatise on good government which ultimately condemns Arthur's style of rule, since he cannot continue to exact the loyalty of even his most trusted subjects. She examines the tales in terms of medieval-political theory, and discusses them as an example of a society where personal perfection is expected to provide social fulfillment and political stability. She argues that this creates an irreconcilable conflict when the state cannot command the private impulses of its citizens, after the situation has deteriorated because of "Arthur's ambiguous position as the 'leader' of an ideally fraternal society." Thus, the conflicts of loyalties that bring down the Round Table are seen not as the reason for that fall but as inevitable results of the leadership vacuum. The whole impetus of the tales therefore becomes the development of a social institution in the Round Table representative of and inseparable from the state, predicated on the perfection of its members, which collapses because the demands it makes are unreasonable.

Pochoda shows herself to be aware of the danger inherent in ascribing a motive to Malory which does not seem
to have explicit support in his work, as she relies primarily on medieval political theory and source study to separate the social, political strand from the other elements of the Morte. However, she undermines her own position by continuing to argue for a narrow, exclusive interpretation of Malory's intention. After acknowledging that her theory cannot explain the role of love in the tales, for instance, she tries to attach political significance to even the women. They not only become potential threats to the stability of the realm themselves, but also come to suggest the powerful demands the ideal places on its members. They may in fact do so, but it must be realized that Pochoda by no means adequately supports her point. She sees interpersonal relationships as primarily political phenomena, without fully justifying this claim, despite the fact that her narrow interpretation leaves little margin for error. And again, the central problem with those theories which see Malory's version of the legends as a condemnation of his ruling characters is that he does not seem to do so, and in fact treats each of the four honourably, especially at the ends of their lives when they have been collectively responsible for the fall of Arthur's civilization.

The last major critical school which has dealt with the
discrepancy between Arthur’s ideal and its application in his realm seems generally to be more descriptive than interpretative. Because of his extensive re-working of his sources, and especially of the Grail legend, it has been widely argued that Malory’s is a secular chivalry, from which the spiritual requirements and doctrine inherent in his sources have been removed. Barber, for example, has said that “he sees chivalry as a secular institution with moral rather than religious associations,” and as a result he can continue to defend those who fulfill his requirements despite their failure to achieve the spiritual perfection that removes Galahad from the world.

Some have argued that the doctrine proffered by his sources was incomprehensible to Malory and that he culled, occasionally with some confusion, a more simple, secular morality from them. Tucker, for example, relates that Malory discovers how to reconcile the interest of his material…with his own ideal of ‘pure knighthood’. He does this simply by taking the censure of chivalry in the Queste as an attack only upon its courtly aspect. Thus Launcelot is tauted for his adultery since it is immoral by either Malory’s definition or by that of his sources, and not for his aspirations to worldly glory, which, in Malory’s view, are exercised in a noble cause.
This tendency to dismiss the elaborate salvation doctrine which is so central to previous versions of the Grail quest is well documented, and yet it does little to explain why Malory is willing to be generous in his treatment of his central characters when they fail to keep their fundamental loyalties in balance. Certainly, his morality is more easily comprehensible and possibly a more practical gauge of Arthurian society than that which he found in his sources, but it is still not upheld by even the best of worldly, and therefore human, knights.

Krewe has countered these arguments by stating that the absence of doctrine does not necessarily distance Malory from the church. He writes, "for Malory...there is no essential incompatibility between the values of Christianity and those of the High Order of Knighthood, of ideal Arthurian chivalry." While its goals of peace and social stability vary little from those of Christianity, however, it remains true that the practice of knighthood is at times indistinguishable from the practice of killing. Malory himself seems less concerned with incompatibilities, though, than with the effort at reconciliation his characters finally make.

The problems and inadequacies of each of these critical approaches to the failure of idealism in Malory are apparent, although some are more valuable than others as
critical tools. The author of the *Morte Darthur* is certainly explicit in arguing for adherence to the chivalric code as he defines it, and yet his characters are generally poor examples in practice, and he is not ultimately as critical of their fallibility as they seem to merit objectively. The lapses which permeate the tales prevent us from seeing them as simply idealistic, but at the same time the author's permissiveness precludes a pessimistic, strongly ironic interpretation. And although Malory reveals secular sympathies and elements of political theories, the problem remains that he does not explicitly condemn any of the four central characters for their part in the tragedy, and in fact his ultimate treatment of each of them seems rather to be a vindication.

The situation of which Malory writes is inherently ironic, because the absolute and rigid values designed to maintain the state become those which, when applied against it, promote its downfall. This does not, however, necessarily imply that either the state or the code is being criticized. Ann Bertagnolli notes that "The heroic ideals that are traditionally upheld in romance...are...shown to be invalid measuring sticks of characters' actual behaviour."²⁰ Her irony does not require condemnation from Malory. Instead, she argues that "tensions within [the] text are themselves the source of meaning and cannot
be fully reconciled." In much the same vein, Brewer sees Malory as an archaic writer whose created world is "inherently connected on the basis of personal relationships... This connected world has inherent objective moral value, and is 'sacred'." The unifying thread is the bond of humanity. Malory may not develop character in the modern sense, although some modern developments have been noted, but he remains loyal to the central figures of his tales even when they do not survive to perpetuate their code and must leave behind a poorer civilization than they created. Miko has argued that

If mortal man is to take a significant position against eternal night, that position must somehow be recorded. Going to heaven is no reward here, for it is the earthly endeavour that seeks final significance through chivalry; that endeavour must endure in an earthly sense.

It is apparent that Malory ultimately is concerned more with the worldly accomplishments and renown of his characters than with their strict adherence to his code, and it is in those characters that we may find a clearer understanding of this ambivalence.
Notes


2 Caxton I: cxlvi.

3 Caxton I: cxlvi.


7 Pochoda also cites C.F. Looksey's article, "The Morte d'Arthur," Nineteenth Century Fiction (June 1924) 852-59 on p. 3 of her own study. Others continued to follow his approach well after the publication of Looksey's article. Tucker, for example, states that "The effect of the...Morte Darthur is to suggest that the Round Table is at the centre of the romances...because prowess and worship are
there at their highest" (66), a situation which he presumably (and wrongly) does not see in the sources.


11 Barron 194.

12 Further discussion of the subject of irony, in this case dealing with ironic vocabulary, can be found in Susan Elisabeth Leas's abstract, "'Worship-Wynnyng': Knighthood in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *DAI* 41 (1980): 1583A-1584A, Emory University.

14 Pochoda 107.
15 Pochoda 104-105.
16 Pochoda 93-94.
17 Barber 315.
18 Tucker 84.
21 Bertagnolli 1757A.
Chapter 2

King Arthur - Code and Character

It is unfortunate that Arthur is too often assumed to be simply the fountain of chivalric sentiment and the inspiration for the idealism of his court when, too often, contradictions between this portrayal and his own extant characteristics and behaviour are largely ignored. Certainly, the Pentecostal oath sworn at the Round Table by all its members is of his creation, and it is through his efforts that the code is applied within his society. But Arthur himself is well worth further examination, because his character is as replete as Gawayne's with inconsistency. The qualities that make him a caring, popular king ensure that he is as susceptible as is Guinevere to emotional strain when public duty collides with his private self, and yet he is also, at least in the early tales, given to acts of rash cruelty that make him appear anything but humane. It is even more striking that he fades into passivity even as he establishes a code encouraging the active demonstration of courtesy and the proper exercise of power throughout his realm. It is precisely because he
shares the traits of so many of the others who move the tales toward their conclusion that he is able to embody all, and in effect to act as the principal guiding force, though often virtually unobserved, of the tales' action. He is, in essence, and in accord with medieval theory, one with his kingdom, and frequently the difficulties experienced by the Round Table develop when he is divided within himself. And just as his society ultimately continues, though changed almost beyond recognition, so does Arthur, as he alone among Malory's central characters approaches immortality in the physical world. If we view Malory's treatment of his characters as essentially positive, this should come as no surprise, for in Arthur we can see the pattern of effort, enlightenment, and restored equilibrium. The outcome may not ensure continued primacy for the society, but we can trace through Malory's character the traits that allow anarchy to be averted.

The Arthur of Malory's early tales generally evinces a profound lack of experience coupled with boyish exuberance, and yet neither can fully explain the instances of surprising cruelty which he precipitates. Morris has characterized him as "affectionate, attractive, naive, grateful and desperately sincere,"¹ but at the same time as "over-emotional and malleable....The net result is a humanly attractive figure who normally retains sympathy."²
The apparent contradictions that drive him to pursue battles long after the slaughter is meaningful, heedless of the danger to his person, or to dismiss suits because their proponents are inconveniently loud, have been attributed by critics to Malory's own inexperience during the writing or the early tales. Kennedy, for example, has argued that While Arthur in Tale 1 is for the most part a good and just ruler he also has unkingly traits derived from the source, traits of a type that Malory would have deleted or altered in Tales 7 or 8. 

Such interpretations, however, fail to consider the possibility that an impetuous Arthur, at times too dependent on his own ability, at others on his advisers, was created for deliberate effect by Malory, and that these traits suggest a king who is at once inexperienced and uncertain of the application of his own extensive powers.

This combination leads Arthur to perceive the world in absolute terms, and this becomes evident almost from the moment his destiny is revealed. Upon drawing the sword from the stone before Ector and Kay, he is startled at their response: "'Alas!' said Arthur, 'myne own dere fader and broder, why knele ye to me?'" Even as the miracle transpires with him at the centre, he maintains a rigid perspective and is unwilling to put his duties as son behind him. His sincerity and loyalty have led him to the sword,
unaware of its significance, and it is these qualities that he maintains in his first acts as king, when he fulfills Ector's request and makes Kay seneschal.

This tendency to see only absolutes continues in his foreign relations as well. This is clear during his circuit of Wales, when the five kings, opposed to his coronation, bring troops to Carlyon. Malory writes,

And kyng Arthur was glad of their comynge, for he wende that al the kynges and knyghtes had come for grete love and to have done hym worship at his feste, wherfor the kyng made grete joye and sente the kynges and knyghtes grete presentes.\(^6\)

He is unprepared for their response, and must be guided by Merlin as to strategy, both in the ensuing battle and in the war which follows, and yet even when he has accepted his adviser's directions he must be restrained, when he continues to press an attack despite destroying three-quarters of his enemies' army.\(^7\)

The appearance, then, is of an impetuous youth, living for the moment and unconcerned about consequences, and to whom external control is a foreign idea since his own position, as the lawful king, is inviolable. We can interpret his behaviour in two ways. Either his inexperience has not permitted him to see beyond his actions to their consequences, or he has a sort of primal potency
that, because it derives from his position, transcends common morality. In practical terms, the sole separation between the two is Arthur's own awareness, and on this matter Malory remains characteristically reticent. Thus, it is possible to develop both positions without undermining either. Such an approach robs neither of its significance, though, for it is in justifying Arthur's early behaviour that we can determine his role in the collapse of his society and thus follow Malory's train of thought in supporting and immortalizing both the character and the body of literature to which he lends his name.

The incident that offers the greatest interest in this regard is the conception and birth of Arthur's second son. His firstborn is summarily dismissed by Malory, his existence perhaps only designed to emphasize Arthur's potency since, in the traditional view, the virility of the sovereign translates into the fertility of the land. Mordred, however, is another matter. For the king, his conception bears no stigma, even after Merlin has criticized his sin, and it is only the prediction that Arthur's kingdom will eventually be destroyed by his son that prompts him to act.

That action, however, constitutes Arthur's worst act of cruelty in the entire *Morte*, as the children of May-Day are killed in the shipwreck. If we are to believe that Malory
is not blindly following his sources, and thus discredit his narrative ability, then it is only in understanding Arthur's nature that we can justify the extreme to which he goes, and partially absolve him of blame for the tragedy. Despite the result, it is not the king's explicit intention to destroy the children, although, in the truncated account of the incident, he does not seem to make any provision for their survival. The scene is at best ambiguous, as Malory tells us that

Than kynge Arthur lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; for Merlyon tolde kynge Arthur that he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May-day. And all wer putte in a shyppe to the se; and som were four wekis olde and som lesse. And so by fortune the shyppe drove unto a castelle, and was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up, and a good man founde hym. If Arthur's intentions are not murderous, he is remarkably short-sighted in following Merlin's implied instructions. It may well be that 'fortune' is the key word in Malory's description, suggesting as it does something beyond Arthur's control. Taking it in that sense, we could argue that the deaths are an unforeseen consequence. But at the same time,
the intervention of external forces may be a manifestation of Arthur's own inherent power, since he is intimately connected on some level with what is emphatically his own environment. 9

As Malory portrays him here, the king is still immature, acts impetuously, and most importantly, he is unable to anticipate consequences or to discern the middle ground between the absolutes of destruction and self-preservation. In fact, these characteristics contribute depth to his character and accentuate Arthur's human fallibility. To Arthur, the threatened destruction of the realm is a tangible danger, one which must be thwarted as decisively as he has thwarted the kings arrayed against him in previous battles when the threat was the murder of his subjects and the devastation of their villages. But just as his reaction in the war with the five kings was excessive, so is his response to Merlin's warning about Mordred. Like Gawayne, Arthur has not learned fine control over his extensive power, and it is perhaps this that leads him to codify and limit its use.

The same belief in absolutes moves him to marry Guinevere. He cannot see love as anything other than an ideal to be pursued even in the face of Merlin's advice. As Kennedy says: "The king nevertheless ignores his adviser's warning and arranges to marry the woman he loves." 10 His
mentality will not allow for ambiguities or dichotomies, and nothing makes his continuing immaturity clearer than his response to the first adventure offered to the new order of knighthood established at their wedding feast. Malory writes,

So with thys there com a knyght rydyng all armed on a grete horse, and toke the lady away with torse wyth hym, and ever she cryd and made grete dole.

So whan she was gone the kynge was gladde, for she made such a noyse.\textsuperscript{16}

The scene is one of the most humorous in the tales, and yet it contains within it the seeds of Arthur's failure, because as his three knights set out to correct the situation at Merlin's insistence, he takes a dramatic step toward sacrificing his own potency. When they return, having failed dramatically because they, too, fail to discriminate between the pure force of will and the justification for its use, he feels bound to set limits which, to him, are unnatural, since his link with his realm makes any such justification unnecessary. He has surrendered his own power to ensure that theirs is controlled, and the Pentecostal oath binds all of them to an ideal which they cannot achieve.

Malory, like Arthur, "conceives the world as inherently connected on the basis of personal relationships extending
to the physical world." This traditional view is partly responsible for the tendency for Arthur to see "actions and people in terms of good and evil, rather than of individual personality." This in itself serves to explain some of the surprising opinions Arthur reveals as the tales progress, and also the reasons for his slow discovery of imperfections among his own followers. At the same time, this complete dedication to individuals comes to be at odds with the code, especially when he wishes to hold his knights back from the adventure of the Grail, or when he has become gradually aware of the relationship between his wife and his champion. Arthur sees goodness as an instinctive quality among those who share his blood or his personal bond of friendship, and it is only the realization that those around him function on less worthy levels that begins to bring him to maturity and, unfortunately by extension, to destruction.

By surrendering his nearly primal influence, Arthur has in effect made his own position redundant, because he has attempted to institutionalize the values he would otherwise represent. Guinevere, as will be seen, becomes the arbiter and patron of this new system, fittingly since she herself provides its primary symbol. But Arthur himself is without a role since he can no longer exercise his own power now that he has placed not one but two levels of intermediaries between himself and the realm, which is the raw source of
that power. It is little wonder, then, and certainly of thematic significance, that the Arthu who is personally involved in battles against his enemies becomes suddenly an administrator of tournaments and occasionally of justice.

Even in this last role, however, he proves inadequate, because the procedures are fundamentally alien to him now that he is denied simple retribution for crimes against his person and the state. The first evidence of this is his banishment of Balyn, which follows the murder of the Lady of the Lake. After obtaining his sword from her, Arthu is bound to grant her any request, and she arrives at court to claim Balyn's head. Arthu is unable to even enquire after her reasons, since Balyn remains his guest. Unable to determine the validity of the claims of either the Lady or Balyn, he loses control of the situation because he is paralysed by the restrictions he has placed upon himself. As a result, Balyn approaches her, "And with hys swerde lyghtly he smote of hyr hede before kynge Arthu." 14

Even at this juncture, Arthu is still prevented from meting out substantial justice, and instead can only banish Balyn. Just as the sword and scabbard the Lady provides are symbols of Arthu's strength and invincibility, so is her death a symbol of his own decline.

The pattern is only continued when, at the next significant trial over which he presides, Arthu, unable to
act against Morgain for her attempt to murder him, instead banishes her son Uwayne, whom Gawayne follows into exile. While the king is unaware of the significance of this protest, it is clear that Malory has set up one of his inevitable conflicts, in which the king's absolutes become obsolete. He has sacrificed unity with his kingdom for unity with his court, and yet already there are divisions even among his own kin, as Gawayne must choose between an uncle and a cousin.

The relationship with his men in fact virtually becomes Arthur's only concern at times. Kennedy has argued that "The theme of the king's love for his men becomes...of major importance in those tales that tell of the deterioration and destruction of the realm." In fact, the threat of dissolution, when it faces the Round Table, will first act to show Arthur's potency at its lowest ebb, after he has remained consistently ineffectual during the third through sixth tales. His decline is apparent, for example, when he restrains Gawayne at one tournament to prevent a battle with Launcelot, and continues when he first criticizes Gareth for deserting his comrades to aid Launcelot, then recants when Gareth's response is more sensible: "...when I understand that he was Sir Launcelot du Lake I shamed to see so many good knyghtes ayenste hym alone." This incident provides a strong indication that Arthur has begun to
recognize the possibility of conflicting loyalties, but as yet the scope of the problem is beyond his grasp.

The same weakness appears even more clearly when Arthur chastises Gawaine for leading the Round Table into the Graal quest, and insists on a final gesture of fellowship before allowing them to depart. Malory writes,

'Now,' seyde the kynge, 'I am sure at this quest of the Sankegreall shall all ye of the Round Table departhe, and nevyr shal I se you agayne hole togydir, and therfore ones shal I se you agayne hole togydir in the medow all hole togydir! Therefore I wolle se you all hole togydir in the medow of Camelot, to juste and to turne, that aftir youre dethe men may speke of hit that such good knyghtes were here, such a day, hole togydirs.'

The strength of his plea is apparent from the incessant repetition of its central phrase, and yet he remains unaware that his desire is inimical both to the values the Graal quest will embody and to his own restoration. He has not only allowed intermediaries to assume his rightful role as the defender of his realm, but he has also come to depend on their fellowship to such an extent that they are unable even to perform those duties without incurring his resentment.

For the king, loyalty is so unwavering and fundamental
that its maintenance is automatic, since it cannot be rendered if undeserved. Unlike those who experience conflicting loyalties, though, he is unable to see that they must, in Malory's world, arise. His beliefs, as Wright argues, are not realistic:

The shortcomings of the Arthurian code, and of the society which follows it, are to be found in the code's limitations. It is too inflexible and too static; it cannot embrace enough of the contingencies inherent in the human situation.¹⁹

In not coming to this realization, though, Arthur remains distanced from his power, and is unable to approach a conciliation among the demands that act on the central members of his court. As a result, Stephen Knight is able to state that

From the very beginning of Malory's series of chivalric adventures Arthur's own knights contribute to or even initiate disorder. Contemporary conflict is vividly realised, from within the very system that offers order.²¹

This, however, is inevitable, since those qualities which Arthur presumes to be fundamental to existence are in fact less common than he believes, and as a result his code imposes a veneer which is not only battered by external elements but quickly worn through from within.
His basic assumptions about loyalty can also explain his reaction to the adultery of Guinevere and Launcelot. One corollary of his loss of potency has been the development of complacency within his marriage. Morris notes that "Malory's Arthur is faithful and loving throughout the book. He indulges in no extra-marital affairs [and] his momentary interest in Ysult is not sexual, merely curious." But at the same time, there is a distinct lack of passion between them after 'The War with the Five Kings,' and he is only demonstrative toward, or even interested in, his queen when her life is at risk during the trials by combat in the later books.

We can attribute his lack of response to the continuing adultery to this lack of passion, or perhaps to his unflagging loyalty to both queen and champion. Regardless of his reason, though, he does demonstrate the ability to persevere in pursuit of the ideal, in this case the ideal of loyalty, and there is a marked contrast between his reaction and that of the character who most closely parallels his situation. Kennedy comments on their respective reactions:

Mark reacts by taking personal vengeance and killing his best knight; Arthur's attitude toward the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere shows willingness to forgive. Mark and Arthur... exemplify quite different types of kingship."
Arthur's attempt to maintain the situation without conflict delays the final dissolution of those bonds on which his court tenuously rests, but it is apparent, based on Malory's own selectivity in revealing details of the relationship, that he considers this to be an appropriate course to follow.

Thus, when threatened with permanent separation from those around him, and especially from Launcelot, Gawayne and Guinevere, in that order, Arthur sees this symptom of the general failure of his system as the central tragedy in his experience. While it is not clear that Arthur's only loyalty is to his knights and that he is serious, as opposed to overwrought, when he asserts that he would gladly replace Guinevere if he could restore the Round Table, the destruction of the fellowship weighs more heavily with Arthur than does the private behaviour of his subjects or even his own personal considerations. Bound up by the code he has created, the king is no longer able to avoid his public duty once quiet gossip has grown to a rumble forceful enough to dislodge him from his position. In fact, Morris has argued that

Arthur's stern maintenance of the law is not cruel in Malory. It is more impartial, less vindictive than in the source, and in any case, Arthur's judicial pronouncements come from his kingly
persona, not his human, suffering self. 24

If, as Guerin seems to claim, his intentional public
ignorance of the affair was "of long standing." 25 then we
can again see that Arthur's occluded vision is still the
basis for his court's stability, but it is equally apparent
that he can no longer be so certain, and the illusion of
control over the situation has been dispelled. His
inability to successfully regain control is demonstrated by
yet another disastrous judicial pronouncement, for when he
again sentences the queen to burn and denies Launcelot the
chance to fight on her behalf, he can no longer command the
obedience of his remaining supporters, and it is never more
obvious that "Confusion...confronts...the Round Table [as] a
result of Arthur's ambiguous position as 'leader' of an
ideally fraternal society." 26 Even in the face of a
near-total breakdown of the chivalric order, Arthur
continues to press for his ideal of unity. Guerin puts it
succinctly: "When action is forced upon him, his conflicting
emotions are clear....Arthur tries to preserve what is left
to him." 27

Having belatedly discovered that the Round Table and
the code which instituted it were a false hope, Arthur moves
on toward the conclusion of his story not with Guinevere's
slow development of insight but with a sudden and violent
realization that there is only one path to reconciliation.
With his surviving knights in France, now loyal only to Launcelot, and his own forces spread lifeless around him on the field of battle, he has seen the outcome of his imposition of chivalry on men who, even when their first loyalty was not to themselves, were not guided by his own inherent sense of values, despite the definitive requirements of the Pentecostal oath. And it is only at that moment of understanding that he is able once again to seize his own power and charge upon Mordred despite Gawayne's posthumous warning. And despite the dire predictions, the outcome of the conflict is clear, because in finally asserting himself Arthur has recovered his influence over the life of his kingdom, and over death itself. The most important feature of this final exertion is the suddenly refined control over the outcome that Arthur has established, and this time he does not fail to destroy Mordred. He must himself leave the world, but as the kingdom continues, so does Arthur, since his death is far from a certainty.

His departure is possibly the most ambiguous event in the *Morte Darthur* and bound up in this incident is the whole nature of Malory's reaction to the failure of his characters to live up to the Arthurian ideal. Stephen Niko, normally a proponent of a positive, humanistic view of the tales, says of their conclusion that
There is no dramatic resolution, no peripateia, merely a defeat. Man is defeated, chaos wins. Religion picks up the pieces, but there is little, if any, implication that religion solves the problems involved. A shroud of mystery descends, the voice of doom is heard and doom finally takes over what began as a human causal chain.  

But Malory's own view of the conclusion seems very different, not only because he allows his central characters a form of salvation, but because each, in his or her final significant action, takes steps to return the realm to equilibrium. Perfection may not have been perpetuated, but barbarism has been staved off.

In fact, Malory's ambiguity about Arthur's fate can be seen to conceal a positive interpretation, rather than weakening a negative view to make it more acceptable to a superstitious audience. Such a view does much to substantiate the argument that Malory ultimately feels his central characters to be as successful as humanly possible, and that they are worthy of emulation, elevation, and perpetuation. Roger Loomis, for example, has said that

There is a sort of corollary in the fact that these legends [of Arthur's survival] were largely ignored by the romancers who dealt with Arthur and his times, except for Malory... Most literary men
seem to have felt that they could not compromise their own credibility by taking such ridiculous notions seriously.\textsuperscript{29}

In expressing doubt about Arthur's fate Malory is, in fact, leaving the door open to hope, rather than sealing it against popular resentment. Morris, among others, has noted this emergence of hope,\textsuperscript{30} and we can attribute much of the confusion engendered by Malory's ambiguity to critics' false expectations regarding the author's own attitudes. Lappert adds that "Since Malory is very clear about death, and his terms for it, with respect to his other characters, it seems unlikely that the phrase 'in thys worlde he chaunged his lyff'\textsuperscript{31} is merely euphemistic."\textsuperscript{32}

It is apparent, then, that Malory's assessment of Arthur, as it is for each of his central characters, is ultimately positive. In Arthur we find a character who comes closest to the immortality denied to all but the perfect Galahad. If Malory indeed intends that we should see Arthur's departure as a worldly perpetuation, then his triumph is perhaps that of an almost elemental power derived from his relationship with his kingdom, coupled with a continuing dedication to dearly held ideals of interpersonal loyalty. Throughout every trial, he holds firmly in place the concept of a fellowship based on the bonds of loyalty and love. Only when those bonds come unravelled through the
actions of others does he show himself willing to act definitively, and even then, the demands of his public persona and of his remaining adviser, Gawayne, dictate his own withdrawal from part of the fellowship, which he cannot maintain once its restrictive nature has collided with the human emotions of his court. He is the last to surrender the ideal, and willingly sacrifices himself to avert anarchy in his society. That he is able to transcend even death in Malory's account is strong evidence of the value the author places on the qualities Arthur finally demonstrates, and a sure acknowledgement of the primal and primary nature of his character.
Notes

1 Morris 34.
2 Morris 119.
4 Discussion of this point is provided in Chapter 5, which deals specifically with the character of Gawayne.
6 Malory 11.
7 Malory 24.
8 Malory 37.
9 Ideas relating to Arthur's identity with his kingdom and of the possibility of his possessing an undefined power derived from that relationship were first suggested in an oral communication from Dr. Lois Smedick.
11 Malory 63.
14 Malory 41.
15 Malory 94.
16 Kennedy, "Mark" 214.
17 Malory 624.
18 Malory 648.
20 Malory 520.
21 Knight 113.
22 Morris 104.
23 Kennedy, "Mark" 117.
24 Morris 104.
25 Guerin, "'The Death of Arthur'" 263.
26 Pochoda 107.
27 Guerin, "'The Death of Arthur'" 264.
28 Miko 214.
31 Malory 717.
32 Lappert 354.
Chapter 3

Guinevere - Fidelity amid Fickleness

As has been argued, the institution of the chivalric code undermined Arthur's own power by weakening the link with his realm. He is not alone, however, in suffering the ill effects of that code on his person, as almost from its inception Guinevere, too, discovers that the role she willingly accepted sets her at odds with her own emotions. The inevitable pattern of conflict is thus again established by Malory, and yet in Guinevere's case, awareness develops much more gradually, so that from her first act as symbol and judge of the Round Table, she is able to set others on the correct path long before the need for reconciliation is obvious within the court. Her centrality is established equally early in the tales, despite her naturally limited involvement in knighthly adventures and her circumscribed position as a judge of knightly conduct.

As Holichek and Dobyns have both noted, it is dangerous to overlook the key role that Guinevere plays, both in relation to her liege and lover and in the general momentum of the tales as Malory has established it. As is readily
apparent, she shares with the others the demands of the chivalric code, and it is not simply as an adjunct to her role as Arthur's queen that she becomes a major proponent of his code. She helps to define it, and early in the tales takes some responsibility for ensuring that Arthur's knights adhere to it. As in Gawayne's case, the conflicting motivations that act on Guinevere derive alternately from her inner emotional state and from a code or conduct imposed from without. Her continuing struggle to reconcile private petulance and public duty determines the nature of her relationship with Launcelot and with Arthur's court.

Her tenuous position between Arthur and Launcelot is at the dramatic centre of the collapse of the Arthurian ideal. As Holchek writes,

Malory simply assumes that Guinevere is a necessary part of the triangle: without her there is no conflict. This seems thoroughly obvious, but what was clear to Malory in the fifteenth century appears to have escaped Malory critics in the twentieth. ¹

Guinevere is, in effect, the linchpin or the morte Wartnur despite the fact that she is more frequently a passive motivator and moderator of the court's actions than a deliberate instigator of its adventures. But such is her public persona. Although we may argue that she is
personally unsuited for the position, her primary purpose is
to act as Arthur's queen, and in that capacity to serve as
an arbiter of chivalry.

That this demand is pervasive and unavoidable is clear
almost from her first appearance in the tales. As Dobyns
notes, "Her wedding to Arthur provides the occasion for
establishing the fellowship and its code of behaviour....
[She] brings the Round Table as part of her dowry." Her
first real act as queen sees her thrust into further
importance when she joins Arthur in condemning Gawayne for
his transgressions against chivalry during his first quest.
Malory tells us that

Then the kynge and the quene were greteley
displeased with sir Gawayne for the sleynge of the
lady, and there by orderuynace of the queene there
was sette a queste of ladyes uppon sir Gawayne, and
they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be wien
all ladyes and to ryght for hir quarels; and ever
that he sholde be curteyse, and never to refuse
mercy to hym that askith mercy.³

The most striking feature of the judgement the ladies pass
at Guinevere's insistence is that the command that she serve
ladies throughout his life eventually becomes the source of
his own salvation.

Guinevere is clearly not a figure-head, since she is
called upon regularly to perform similar duties. As Dobyns again notes,

She acts, in the early tales at least, as a kind of judge of 'knightly' behaviour. Three particular instances show her speaking in this capacity. In the first, she pronounces blameworthy the unknighthly behaviour of King Pellinor; in the second, she praises Sir Kay's valour in the war of the five kings; in the third she finds King Pediver guilty of the murder of his wife. She herself proves capable of upholding the tenets of the chivalric code when she grants Melyngauent mercy and protection when he asks them of her, despite the fact that he has committed treason against her person, dethroned her guards, and humiliated Launcelot. It is a decision which, in the heat of the moment, she must justify even to her lover, who himself never fails in this requirement.

Her role as defender of chivalry defines her character throughout many of the tales, but the central conflict that must dominate our understanding is that which develops between this public duty and private emotion. As is readily apparent from her relationship with Launcelot, the queen is often petulant and demanding when she has put that public role behind her. While it has been argued that "Guinevere appears as a fairly complex personality, closely integrated
into her chief thematic role," it is clear that her personality is not ideally suited for the responsibilities she must accept as queen, and it is in the deviation between public duty and private emotion that the dramatic tension of her character develops. Hers is a personality which can easily inspire sympathy for Launcelot, as he is at various times driven from the court and from his own sanity by Guinevere. In fact, Dobyns writes that "Guinevere has often been seen to represent all that is wrong with the world or chivalry; she is jealous, covetous, quarrelsome and unfaithful." But at the same time, these traits often derive from the conflict between her roles.

The problem she faces is clear. The one man she loves is, in the final analysis, unattainable, and circumstances and Elaine conspire to call his own dedication to her into question. Her emotional responses are not often without motivation, even if we do not fault Launcelot for his behaviour in those situations which inspire her attacks. Thus, she does not act irrationally, despite acting emotionally. And it is equally important that when her statements are most contradictory she is in reality trying to reconcile the conflicting demands of her own emotions and her position as queen. While her reliance on Launcelot for her sense of self-worth is even more extreme than Arthur's (since in his case the stability of the kingdom is
predicated on that reliance), Malory does not fault her for this, and instead stresses her efforts at maintaining an equilibrium.

The most notable example of such behaviour is, of course, the contradictory reactions she has to the events surrounding Launcelot's decision to wear the favour of the Maid of Astolat at the Winchester tournament. Her initial response is to reject him completely:

Quene Gwenyver was woode wrote with sir Launcelot, and wolde by no meanys speke with hym, but estranged herself frome hym. And sir Launcelot made all the meanys that he myght tor to speke with the quene, but hit wolde nat be.7

Guinevere's anger at this apparent betrayal is nearly matched by her response a short time later when the maiden dies out of longing for Launcelot, although, as Dobyns notes, her reaction in this instance seems completely incompatible with the resentment apparent in her original rejection of Launcelot.

Malory writes, "'Sir,' seyde the quene, 'ye myght have shewed her som bownte and jantilnes whych myght have preserved hir lytt,'8 and Launcelot's response is earnest and fully intended to vindicate him, while his final comments on being constrained to love could almost be a hostile reaction to the queen's latest apparent venture into
the realms of the unreasonable. He may miss the
significance of the queen's reversion to her role as the
court's arbiter, but we must not. In this instance, rather
than being petulant or fickle in an attempt to torture her
lover, she is in fact putting aside her private emotion in
the face of a more important social requirement. In doing
so, she not only re-affirms her status within the chivalric
order, but she shows an unusual concern for public
appearances. Her own personal gains are no less important,
however. In suppressing her emotional response, she has
recognized the conflicting demands that are acting on both
caracterics, and she works toward a reconciliation. Even at
that point, Launcelot has not achieved the same level of
awareness she demonstrates, and instead rebukes her for her
"causeles" anger. His caprice has created the situation,
while her insight defends the honour of both. As has been
argued elsewhere, "Honour is a public expression of personal
obligation and depends on appearance and stance rather than
subjective feeling or actual truth." The queen's
apparent self-contradiction is in fact a continuing
aspiration to chivalric perfection in the face of more human
demands.

Guinevere's contradictory roles appear even in her
dialogue, and this too serves to distinguish her from minor
characters who receive less distinctive treatment from
Malory. The contrast, for example, between her speeches and those of Iseult, who closely mimics Guinevere's dramatic situation, is marked. Both display an appropriate relationship with their kings and with other knights, consistently using, for example, the expected forms of pronouns. But it has been noted that Iseult's "speeches never display the intimacy of Guinevere's private speeches to Lancelot," in which, "while she maintains formal decorum in public conversations, in private she expresses her emotional attachment to Lancelot and, indeed, displays a range of emotions." 

Not only does this unusual style of dialogue enhance the sense of a conflict within Guinevere, but it is one of those devices which have been cited by critics as achievements in Malory's characterization. It becomes more apparent the more his treatment of the queen is considered, that it was not his intention to condemn her, and that in fact she demonstrates an ability to strive for an ideal despite the impossibility of success. Peter Schroeder has argued that one of the interesting points about Malory's depiction of Guinevere is that it is simply a depiction, not a judgement. His technique of presenting characters from the outside, through action and dialogue, allows him to suggest, though
perhaps unwittingly, some of the latent ambiguity and inscrutability of human behaviour.¹⁴

He, too, discusses the Maid of Astolat incident, and also comes to the obvious conclusion that neither of Guinevere's reactions is without justification. What he adds to the critical view of the incident is the idea that Malory does not offer an explanation within the text, and instead "it is up to us as readers to make some sense of them, to find some connection."¹⁵ Furthermore, based on this unexpected demand on the reader's deductive abilities, he states that "at the same time, the incongruity seems humanly plausible: we can believe in the queen without really understanding her."¹⁶ His central argument is that Guinevere is distinguished as a character, whether such was Malory's intention or not, by a tendency to demonstrate such inscrutability, and that it makes her seem more nearly human than we might reasonably expect.

The effect is further enhanced in several scenes by the counter-productive dialogue in which the queen and Launcelot engage. Schroeder cites the scene at the beginning of 'The Poisoned Apple' in which Guinevere's insecurity prompts her to summon Launcelot. Her revelation of the problem is veiled in the language of jealousy, and he reacts less to her fears than to his own guilt, saying "If that I had nat had my prevy thoughtis to returne to youre love agayne as I
do I had sene as grete mysteryes as ever saw my sonne sir Galahad, Percivale, other sir Hors." Not only does he fail to respond to her implied request for reassurance, but he places oblique responsibility on her for his failure in the Grail quest and invokes the name of his son, which for her must act as another source of jealousy.

As Schroeder writes,

Lancelot's answer...follows logically but not emotionally from what the queen says; her reply follows emotionally but not logically from what she perceives in Lancelot's speech. The lovers are talking past each other in a way familiar to us from real life, and it is this characteristic that gives the conversation its air of verisimilitude. The net effect of Guinevere's contradictory responses, which derive from the conflict between her character and her public role, is one of realism.

Holchek has suggested the possibility of another narrative pattern in Malory which contributes further to the realistic portrayal by which Guinevere is distinguished from the lesser characters of the Morte. The critic argues that through Malory's rejection of many of the elements of courtly love that define the relationship between the lovers in the sources, a believable human relationship has been
approximated. When Guinevere is kidnapped by Mellyagaunt, which provides the dramatic background for the 'Knight of the Cart' incident, Launcelot's pursuit is not subject to her criticism. She does not use emotional outbursts merely to test him. As Hölichek says, this does not mean that Malory's Guinevere is incapable of jealousy, anger or petulance, but these emotions are never part of an elaborate game played between lover and lady to enhance and decorate their relationship. When Guinevere is shrewish or unreasonable, she is so genuinely. 19

The interpretation may be unflattering to the queen, but on the literary level it is quite complimentary, and it is an interpretation supported consistently by Schroeder, too, who sees Guinevere as "plausibly 'human,' but as fundamentally inexplicable and opaque as interesting 'real' people are." 20 Given time, we can of course explain her actions, but it is the appearance of complicated and believable human behaviour that is noteworthy.

Malory's tendency to thus distinguish Guinevere from the less developed minor characters around her is augmented by his treatment of her when Arthur's society has fallen and she has redeemed herself. Clearly, her withdrawal from the secular world is a re-assertion of the moral values inherent in her position as queen, which have been undermined by her
relationship with Launcelot, and in that withdrawal are the seeds of her own salvation. Dobyns writes that "though she is for a time divided against herself and inconstant in her fluctuations in emotions, Guinevere's final speech represents her role as queen." In fact, her last long speech serves as an acknowledgement of her own major role in the destruction of the Arthurian ideal, and it is Guinevere who convinces Launcelot that they must both turn from their former pursuits. Thus, she not only becomes the means to his salvation, which is the same service she performed much earlier for Gawayne, but she asserts herself as Arthur's queen on her death bed, and is buried in his tomb in a final gesture of regal and marital fidelity. Holczechek writes that "If Guinevere is occasionally condemned by her tongue, ...she is finally redeemed by it. In the end she is once again the spokeswoman for Malorian values and standards, although...those values have been eroded."22

Her role, even more than does Launcelot's, encompasses the whole history of the Round Table, and yet she is never condemned by Malory. In fact, her very survival and retirement out of the world is a form of earthly perpetuation denied to all but Launcelot and those of his kin who remain with him, although these last merely follow the head of their clan blindly and fail to develop her depth. Most notably, Guinevere ultimately recognizes her
own failings and elects to continue in pursuit of perfection despite her lover's offer of a new life together. While in the *Morte Darthur* she "can be seen as representing both the finest and the most ignoble characteristics of the Arthurian world," 23 it is clearly Malory's intention that nobility should finally win out.

Those who possess the highest degree of nobility in Malory are, ultimately, the four central characters. Their accomplishments are a product of a continuing struggle despite the presence, and their eventual recognition, or human fallibility. It is perhaps an inevitable result that they appear more human in consequence, although Malory's techniques of characterization seem also to play an important role. With Guinevere especially, it is the acknowledgement of responsibility that contributes most to the distinction of salvation granted by Malory. She says of Launcelot and herself,

Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the dethe of the most nobelst knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow ourere love that we have loved togydirys my moste noble lorde slayne. Therefore...wyte thou well I am sette in suche a plyght to gete my soule hele, 24 and it is this which Malory finally grants her, and through her to Launcelot, his great hero.
The difficulty of maintaining two opposing demands in equilibrium is, in Guinevere's case, that if the greater good is to triumph, the demand which is closest to the self must be sacrificed. Guinevere must, in the end, give up a final chance at worldly happiness in order to ensure that she and Launcelot can escape the morass of failed ideals and re-establish their nobility. It is a cost borne willingly by Guinevere at the end of the tales, and, augmented by a characterization that suggests her humanity and sets her above all but three others in the *Morte Darthur*, she carries a significant share of Malory's message: "It may be inevitable that men and women fail to live up to their ideals, but the quest, Malory shows us, is a glorious one."25
Notes


3 Malory 67.

4 Dobyns 348.

5 Raachel Jurovics, "Virtuous Love, Unvirtuous Queen: The Contribution of Theme and Characterization to the Unity and Originality of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur,"

*DAI* 37 (1976): 2198A.

6 Dobyns 337.

7 Malory 639.

8 Malory 641.

9 Malory 642.

10 C. David Benson, "Gawain's Defence of Lancelot in Malory's *Death of Arthur,"


11 Dobyns 340-341.

12 Dobyns 343.

13 Dobyns 345.

14 Schroeder 375.

15 Schroeder 377.
16 Schroeder 377.
17 Malory 611.
18 Schroeder 374.
19 Holichek 120.
20 Schroeder 384.
21 Dobyns 350.
22 Holichek 123.
23 Dobyns 340.
24 Malory 720.
25 Dobyns 350.
Chapter 4

Sir Launcelot - Loyalty before Enlightenment

In keeping with his central role in the Morte Darthur, Launcelot stands as the work's primary example of Malory's assertion that it is the human struggle and not the inevitable failure of the ideal that propels his central characters to greatness. For many, as he was for Malory himself, Launcelot is the single most heroic figure of the Arthurian canon, striving to remain steadfast in his loyalties even in the midst of the schism with Arthur, still, and ever, the greatest of his knights. Of course, it is also strikingly obvious that his twin devotions to his sovereign and the queen must finally collide, and that together they are inimical to the stability of the realm. As shall be seen, critics have explained Malory's ambivalence about the conflict between these two absolute loyalties as a secularization of those materials which in the sources most strongly condemn Launcelot, and as a willingness to acknowledge and excuse the human fallibility which draws Launcelot continually to the queen even after the intervention of supernatural bingers or disaster.
during the Grail quest. Thus, in Launcelot's character we can again see Malory's propensity to augment and celebrate the human side of his characters, while at the same time to manipulate his sources to temper their condemnation and allow for the development of understanding in the four central characters. Among these, Launcelot is perhaps the slowest to achieve any degree of enlightenment, and the salvation which accompanies it. That he is the last to achieve a new awareness and the last to depart after the cataclysm has ushered in a new, less brilliant order is almost certainly a product of the position, tantamount to secular perfection, that Malory has allowed him to achieve. Perhaps because his prowess is greatest he is slowest to admit his own insufficiency because, in the strict definition of the chivalric code to which he insistently adheres, prowess is the path to the ideal. What he must finally be shown is that his certainty about the code's validity in all situations represents a false hope, and does not always allow for the reconciliation of human emotions in conflict.

Malory's fascination with Launcelot (and such a description is probably not too strong) has been widely noted by critics, and especially by those who have studied the author's use of sources. Barber sums up their arguments aptly when he writes that
It would be no great exaggeration to say that, having chosen Lancelot as his ideal, he altered everything to harmonise with this, and to show him in a better light where necessary.¹

Such critics have further noted that the distinction awarded to him by Malory comes in two principal ways, at the cost of Gawain’s centrality in Arthur’s court and at the cost of much of the religious doctrine so important in the sources. Lumiansky, for example, has provided evidence for revisions of the first sort, and has suggested that such changes, while obviously deliberate, were also of early date in the writing of the tales and showed foresight and planning regarding the respective roles of the two knights that would become apparent in the final stages of the tales. He writes

> We may observe...that Malory borrowed episodes in which Gawain plays a leading role in the source, that he omitted Gawain's name from these episodes, and that he added Lancelot's name.²

The net result, after numerous modifications, is that Launcelot became Arthur's champion, the central figure of his court as an embodiment of both its military capability and the code which dictated the proper application of force.

> At the same time, however, the demands of the legends themselves required that this paragon of chivalry should carry within him the seeds of the Round Table's spiritual
failings, in his role as the defender and lover of the queen and as the father of Galahad, whose sole purpose is to reveal the spiritual weaknesses concealed behind the court's facade of idealism. Again, Malory's willingness to alter his sources leads to an augmentation of Launcelot's role at the cost of another's, in this case of the whole doctrinal significance of the Grail quest embodied in Galahad. Barber has stated that the most notable change is that Malory ruthlessly excises most of [the source's hermits], and abbreviates the moralisings of the surviving hermits. In doing so, he manages to make Lancelot, and the chivalry which Lancelot represents, emerge with much greater credit from the Grail adventures. He seems to have been concerned to diminish the distinction between religious and secular chivalry.

Lancelot's relative success is emphasised rather than his eventual failure at the vital stage.

The unifying feature that allows Launcelot to assume his central role in Arthur's society and to escape harsh judgement for his failure in the Grail quest is an unflagging dedication to the chivalric code instituted by Arthur, and yet, as the other knights led by Gawain discover during the Grail quest, martial prowess is of little value and is at times inimical to advancement in the quest.
Launcelot himself must be granted an authorial dispensation, in that he is allowed partial success simply because he has surpassed all other sinful knights in those qualities he has chosen to pursue, for, as Whitworth argues, "Lancelot's failure is not due to any shortcomings he may have in the way of chivalry or prowess." But even at this point, Launcelot has not been faced with opposing demands, since he has elected to remain integrated by atoning for his relationship with the queen. He, as Malory seems to intend, has not yet achieved the level of awareness that would allow him to envision a situation in which his human and chivalric selves cannot be so integrated.

What Malory accomplishes by these techniques is to draw our attention away from the failure of the ideal and firmly towards the aspirations that allow the very concept to exist. In many ways, Launcelot becomes the embodiment of these aspirations, and a symbol for the direction of the society as a whole, for even as Merlin stated, "his first name is Galahad, that I know well...and syn ye have conformed hym Launcelot." Arthur's champion is, as his names suggest, potentially perfect but, perhaps fortunately, finally human. Moorman argues that "In Lancelot's failure lies the failure of the whole system, since Lancelot...himself represents the sins which are to lead to the destruction of the society."
It has further been argued that Launcelot follows "a middle way, a way neither ignoble like that of King Mark, nor holy like that of Galanad,"\textsuperscript{7} in short that Malory has led him carefully away from extremes of perfection and fallibility, while allowing more or less tenuous links to each. His inability to withdraw utterly from the queen is evidence of a human weakness that no martial skill or absolute faith in a code can correct, and it is this which Launcelot is the last to understand. Since "he is himself the personification of the secular chivalric way of life...to abandon it would be to abandon his own identity."\textsuperscript{8}

The sharp division between private and public personae which at times creates a dichotomy between the attitudes and actions of Arthur and more notably Guinevere is, for this reason, less apparent in Launcelot, although this is not necessarily a commendation, for as we have seen, their appearance of humanity is enhanced by the conflict. The ability to function creditably in both roles eludes Launcelot because his personality is completely defined by the task of pursuing perfect chivalry which Malory has set for him. The absolute certainty and confidence that contribute to his military stature ultimately lead to tragedy, however, when they are applied to this central dichotomy.
The difficulty is that the effort to attain his status leaves Launcelot in a position where appearances are everything, and where he attempts to extend this argument to every facet of his life. Elizabeth Pochoda cites his comments to the anonymous damsel who leads him to the battles with Tarquyn and Perys de Foreste Savage, when he argues that:

For to be a weddyd man, I thynke hit nat, for than
I muste coucne with nyr and leve armys and
turnamentis and batellys and adventures. And... who that usyth permours shall be unhappy, and all thynge unhappy that is aboute them.  

It is apparent that the extremes to which his quest drives him leave virtually no room for simple sentiment or for any aspirations to emotional completeness. Pochoda says, He has managed to concentrate wholly on matters of public life, honour, and reputation. He has not relegated women to the appropriate private sphere, but he has ruled them out of his life altogether. Such idealized behaviour obviously involves so significant a degree of deprivation that it eventually undermines its own purpose.  

The disastrous result is that he is drawn to the one woman in the court who approaches his own dedication to chivalry, the woman who has contributed the tangible symbol of
Arthur's order to the court and who has become a judge in her own right of his code. And, as Holichek points out, "Lancelot articulates a sense of obligation to Guenevere that is predicated on her conduct"\(^11\) when he describes to Arthur the circumstances under which he became her champion. He reveals for the first time that on the day he was knighted he lost his sword, and she discreetly returned it to him.\(^12\) Thus, he was saved from dishonour on that day, and the emphasis on the avoidance of public shame, while not noted by Holichek, is certainly no accident here. Unable to see beyond his own facade, Launcelot is unaware that the final but as yet unimagined cost will be his relationship with both Arthur and the queen, and that the facade itself will be eroded beyond repair. That he will continue to maintain it even when this is so is further evidence of the tenacity Malory admires. But that very tenacity precludes the development of insight, which is so essential in the process of salvation for Malory's characters.

This adherence to his public persona dictates most of Launcelot's actions throughout the *Morte Darthur* and can serve to explain further the curious crossed conversations noted in the chapter on Guenevere. He allows no distinction between his roles, and lives only one of them. And this same stunted conflict has led Miko to argue that

Shame...is essentially a matter of public
knowledge. When Lancelot bloody Guinevere's bed he has no compunction in denying the spirit of the law to ring casuistical variations on the letter.... Malory does not criticize this, he justifies it.\textsuperscript{12} The situation reveals much about Launcelot, and we must wonder whether he even recognizes the dissonance between his personal truth and the objective facts. Certainly, his understanding of justice is tainted by his absolute faith in his own skill at arms, which becomes increasingly clear as the Mellyagaunt incident progresses and is revealed in the much-quoted promise to be the queen's knight "in ryght othir in wronge."\textsuperscript{14} But even if Launcelot is fully justified in circumventing shame by maintaining the literal truth, Malory provides in this incident a strong suggestion that if strict justice is ever applied, then Launcelot will have no recourse other than to meet one demand at the cost of his public appearance.

Despite his obvious evil, Mellyagaunt appears as a pitiable figure, not least because he is motivated by love for the queen as much as Launcelot is. Only their methods differ, in that Mellyagaunt's crimes are more public than Launcelot's. Certainly, he has committed treason not only in the original attack on the queen's retinue but in entering her chamber on the following morning, and his treatment of Launcelot is un-knightly in the extreme. But
his basic assertions on that morning are not incorrect. He has detected blood, but when it is his own that flows the previous stain seems to be expunged from the public consciousness. Miko has summed up the general attitude in writing that

To refuse to the death admission of what might to other ways of thinking be called a moral failing is in some sense to deny that such a failing exists. This is precisely the change that takes place in Launcelot as he becomes tragically involved in the fall of the Round Table. He would die before admitting any possibility that he was himself involved in shame.¹⁵

Launcelot faces no disasters as long as the pure dedication that springs from his struggle for chivalric perfection is not tainted by a division between the king and the queen, but naturally just such a situation develops, and equally naturally Launcelot himself is the agent of that division.

Malory's own support for Launcelot's position is clear, although his character's single-mindedness leaves no room or, for that matter, motivation, for self-examination. At the point where the single demand becomes separate demands to remain loyal to king or queen, even Gawayne, soon to be mortally opposed to Launcelot, defends his decision to rescue the queen. Yet it is clear that the chief knight of
the Morte does not understand even at this point that his protestations of innocence and willingness to right for the queen's honour are inadequate once the king is forced to act out of his public role as chief justice rather than as the husband of the queen.

The deaths of Gawayne's brothers cause the fatal division of Arthur's nephew's own loyalties, and he seems to lose the veneer of civilization that the code has tenuously provided up to this point. But even when the king has been pressured into a war he has no heart to fight, Launcelot is unable to distinguish between the code he follows and the human beings it restrains. Gawayne has abandoned its protections when he pursues Launcelot into France and repeatedly challenges him to fight to the death, and is no longer concerned with public appearances once his private pain has surpassed his ability to control it. Miko suggests that it is Launcelot's adherence to the facade of perfection that prolongs the war, and that Launcelot, "were he not absolutely committed to preserving the appearance of perfection, might have realized" that Gawayne was outside the chivalric pale, "and either continued his refusal to fight or challenged Gawain to single combat."¹⁶ One of Malory's points with respect to Launcelot seems therefore to be that his devotion to the code both elevates him and limits his ability to become completely human, and that he
is the slowest to see this primarily because his martial gifts are so impressive. Certainly he has an emotional level that appears most often in the presence of the queen or when he participates in miracles, but he is unable to let it influence his behaviour until he is pushed toward enlightenment by the destruction of Arthur’s society.

Launcelot’s inability to perceive the true nature of his situation is never more clear than when he has, with partial success, completed the Grail quest. In fact, until that point he seems blissfully unaware of his moral failings, which prohibit him from achieving the Grail as Bors and Percival do. As will be seen, Galahad’s success cannot reasonably be used as a standard to measure the other knights of the Table, since Malory acts to dehumanize him. But Launcelot is clearly warned of his fallibility by a hermit in the course of his quest: "Ye shall have no power to se hit, no more than a blynde man that sholde se a bryght swerde. And that ys longe on youre synne." \(^{17}\) Is it only a coincidence that Launcelot’s inability to see should be so explicitly suggested here by Malory?

The warning brings Launcelot to tears, but he soon forgets any insight or humility the situation has taught him. Forcing himself into the Grail chapel in defiance of a disembodied voice, he is stricken and falls senseless for twenty-four days. On his awakening, he rebukes those around
him for disturbing his vision, saying:

I have sene...grete meravies that no tunge may telle, and more then ony herte can thynke. And had not my synne bene beforetyme, ellig I had sene much more.18

His understanding of his own failure is immediately clouded by his belief that the heavenly vision he has received, in recognition of his knightly, chivalric aspiration to aid the struggling Grail priest, is in fact a form of penance:

Than hym thought hit was ponyshemente for the four-and-twenty yere that he had bene a synner, wherefore oure Lorde put hym in penaunce the four and twentygydes and nyghtes.19

Only one living knight can claim to have seen a more holy vision, and yet, bent on perfection, Launcelot sees his own premature vision of heavenly mysteries as punishment, since they do not rival the sight of the Grail itself.

Malory does not condemn his hero for his partial failures if only because they reveal by their very existence that his characters are distinguished by the degree of success permitted to them. In support of this, for example, Lumiansky points to the incident in which Launcelot, after praying for the mainstaincance of his worship, which is again a facet of his public persona, is able to heal Sir Urry despite his continuing moral failure. He writes, "That
Launcelot is able to heal Urry, despite the recommenced adultery, is understandable in accord with Malory's definition of 'the best knyght of the worlde.' He is sinful, but at the same time unchallenged in his role as the champion of chivalry. And in contrast to Galahad, the fallible Launcelot is allowed to continue in the world, earning public and spiritual rewards based solely on his unflagging quest for an imperfect perfection. This incident reveals, however, an awareness on Launcelot's part that there is a growing gap between his public worship and his private actions. In his terse prayer to the Trinity asking that he be spared the shame of public humiliation we see again Malory's suggestion that it is this ideal which Launcelot will prove unable to maintain, just as we see early on that Gawayne's loyalty to family will collide with his loyalty to Arthur's Round Table and its code.

That Launcelot is slow to recognize with any permanence his own immorality does not reduce the importance of his doing so, and it is this recognition which finally allows him to escape the fall of Arthur's society with distinction. He has striven toward an unattainable perfection only to fall short because he is unable to surrender his dedication when it stands in the path of reconciliation. But it is this dedication which sets him apart and defines his character, so that to surrender it would perhaps avert the
tragedy, but it would also almost certainly deny him the transcendent awareness and the assumption into heaven which complete Malory's portrait of him in the *Morte Darthur*. As one critic has noted, "He is like other knights unless he takes pains to raise himself," which leads to "another storey in Malory's standards: not only good-bad-best, but also human in the sense of a common denominator of knighthood which one must strive above in order to excel."  

Launcelot's confessional speech before the tomb of Arthur and Guinevere does much to suggest that he has finally attained an awareness of his own role in the fall of the Round Table, and it provides the first overt admission that his private guilt has contributed to the public dishonour. He says,

I remembre me how by my defeute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were perelles that ever was lyvyng of Cristen people ... This remembred, of their kyndenes and myne unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself.  

The same willingness to accept personal responsibility, for the tragedy evinced by Guinevere and Gawayne appears in Launcelot, and considering the nature of his character, it is perhaps fitting that he is the last to realize the
repercussions of his own failings. As Barber has argued, though,
Malory has achieved a reality that requires no moral stand-point as its excuse or purpose, and has turned to the interplay of character and situation instead. Yet this absence of moral does not mean that he has no hero, but that his hero is all too fallible.\textsuperscript{25}

and he goes on to say that this is "an important step towards the modern novel."\textsuperscript{26} This fallibility, apparently inescapable within Malory's Arthurian society, places above all the mark of humanity on his characters, and at the same time the author stresses that an awareness of that fallibility and of the role each individual plays in the destruction of the Round Table is crucial to the internal suggestions of salvation he provides. In Launcelot's case, that salvation takes the form of a final assumption into heaven, witnessed in a dream by the bishop.\textsuperscript{27} whose circumstances seem remarkably similar to those Launcelot himself experienced after his lengthy vision at the end of the Grail quest:

'A, Jesu mercy!', sayd the myssnep, 'why dyd ye awake me? I was never in ai my lyf so mery and so wel at ease.... Truly, ... here was syr Launcelot with me, with mo angellis than ever I sawe men in one
day. And I sawe the angelys heve up syr Launcelot unto heven, and the yates of heven opened ayenst nym. 28

And such is the ending of Launcelot that the salvation Malory offers, based on the recognition of the reasons for failure, is virtually equated with the mysteries of the Grail which Launcelot has experienced earlier. In effect, he has made his characters' humanity the equal of spiritual perfection, and the pattern is one repeated in each of Malory's four central characters.
Notes


2 Lumiansky 6.

3 Barber, *King Arthur* 127-128.

4 Whitworth, "Sankgreall" 19.

5 Malory 76.

8 Moorman, "Sankgreali" 192.
9 Malory 161.
10 Pochoda 94-95.
11 Holichek 117.
12 Malory 620.
13 Miko 215.
14 Malory 620.
15 Miko 215-216.
16 Miko 225.
17 Malory 553.
18 Malory 597.
19 Malory 597.
22 Evans 258.
23 Malory 722.
24 Holichek 125.
25 Barber, King Arthur 129.
26 Barber, King Arthur 131.
27 Davies 364.
28 Malory 724.
Chapter 5

Sir Gawain - Trouble and Tragedy

Deservedly or not, the character of Gawaine as he appears in Malory has been highly regarded by neither editors nor critics. In fact, he is possibly the best-known example of the failure of Arthur's chivalry to act as an amelioration of behaviour in the face of emotional and personal demands. As a result, Gawayne becomes a representative figure among Arthur's knights, as well as one of the principal movers, of the failure of the Arthurian ideal. He has generally been cited for his inconsistency, as he wavers widely between noble aspirations and unmitigated barbarism, and this apparent weakness in Malory's characterization has been widely faulted. It is, however, possible to see Gawain in a different light, not as a product of divergent qualities which Malory failed to draw into a coherent focus, but rather as the result of an intense, single-minded dedication which comes to interfere with itself when it collides with two equally demanding facets of Gawaine's character, his loyalty to kin and his loyalty to Arthur's Table.
Among those critical of Malory is Vinaver himself, who discusses the character unfavourably in his Commentary, noting that Malory found in some sources "a noble, generous, and valiant knight"\(^1\) while others, whose influence is perhaps clearer in the *Morte*, revealed "a vindictive criminal, guilty of several offences and noted for his cruelty."\(^2\) He further claims that Malory does not attempt to reconcile these two conceptions of Gawain’s character; he blindly accepts the verdict of each of his sources and so produces a picture full of inconsistencies and contradictions.\(^3\)

This tendency to demigrate Gawayne has been fundamental to previous interpretations of Malory, and his actions and characteristics in the earlier tales certainly merit criticism. He has not, however, been successfully dismissed from critical attention, it only because the behaviour which stands in opposition to his earlier corruption seems partially to redeem him, both from Malory’s perspective and our own.

Martin Shichtman, for example, has attempted to refurbish Gawayne’s reputation. While he notes the general tendency toward the negative in scholarly opinion about the character’s failings, he has also argued that
...he is far from the worst of the knights in Camelot. His ironic failures are simply exaggerations of the shortcomings of virtually every knight in the kingdom and of the Round Table itself. Like most of his colleagues, Gawain dreams of chivalric perfection, only to fail short of achieving it. He should not be faulted too severely for his hopes or his failures. He should be appreciated as a character who, with limited abilities, has done his best.

Malory's own treatment of Gawaine seems to share this sympathetic approach, and the fact that he eventually allows redemption and even salvation for the character is not so much a blind recitation of source material as a deliberate acknowledgement of Gawaine's admirable determination. As much as any other character does, Gawaine embodies the human fallibility that prevents the attainment of the ideal, and yet Malory nevertheless reveals through him the qualities that render the failure far less than total.

Barbara Bartholomew has further suggested that the inconsistencies in Gawaine's character are far from being a product of authorial incompetence and are instead a carefully developed thematic device. She argues that Gawayne, in his role as Arthur's chief adviser, military champion, and failed proponent of the chivalric ideal,
becomes a figure for the whole body of lesser Round Table knights who, like Launcelot, are corrupted by the world, but will never attain the martial prowess he so effortlessly demonstrates. She sees in the character a twofold purpose:

Malory creates Gawain as an inconsistent character in order that the knight may (1) serve as a focal figure, representing a typified image of the Round Table knights and thus (2) provide a basis for Malory's judgement upon the failure of the ideal, specifically as it is brought to life in the society of the Round Table. 5

Such interpretations are in keeping with the general trend to see Malory as being more original than Vinaver and the earlier critics believed, and in the case of Gawayne they suggest that he does not necessarily deserve critical censure.

Certainly, Vinaver is not incorrect in asserting that the early tales, and the Gawayne extant there, show evidence of Malory's excessive dependence on sources. Perhaps only in the eighth and final section does Malory break away from their control and definitively assert his own interpretation of the legends. As a result, we can see the worst behaviour of Gawayne's career beginning in the third chapter of "The Tale of King Arthur", but many of the notorious incidents in which he participates seem to prefigure later events,
limiting the extent to which we can regard the characterization of Gawayne as poorly planned, haphazard, or disjointed.

As an indication of how relevant these incidents seem to be to the development of the tales and of Malory's message, we must immediately note that in his first joust Gawayne kills his opponent, and his victory is accompanied by graphic description. The events occur within a page of his being knighted at Arthur's wedding feast, which is itself the event that allows the founding of the Round Table. Malory writes "Than aythir dressed their shylces and smote togydir, but sir Gawayne smote hym so harde thorow the helme that hit wente to the brayne and the knyghte relle downe deede." The death of his opponent sets the tone for Gawayne's whole career, because it establishes the character himself as a sort of blunt weapon of uncertain capabilities, treacherous to all involved when excessive strength or emotion take hold. In the first real action of his life, Gawayne has committed the sin that will relegate him to the ranks of the failed knights and deny him the Grail.

The incident has additional significance in that excessive zeal, abetted perhaps by the hand of fate, leads to a graphically described head wound which is certainly fatal to the recipient, but also to the ideal being pursued. Just as it presages Gawayne's behaviour throughout the early
part of his career and sets him apart from Launcelot, for example, who has finer control, the death of the knight at the ford is markedly similar to those of both Gawayne and Arthur, which are both events central to Malory's positive interpretation of his characters' humanity. The death is not justified, but perhaps the zeal is. And perhaps it is noteworthy that these wounds are dealt by the sword, the weapon dependent on force, rather than the lance, which is dependent on fine control.

Gawayne's relationship with Pellinore also has significance with respect to later events, and in this instance Malory frequently refers to the eventual outcome, even at times, outside the context of their encounters. The battle in which "the Knignt with the Strange Beste" kills Gawayne's father, King Lott, reveals a Pellinore notably failing to uphold chivalry, much as Gawayne will fail in his own first significant test. As Malory describes the battle, Pellinore

strike a myghty stroke at kynge Lott as he tought with his enymyes, and he fayled of hys stroke and smote the horse necke, that he foured to the erte with kyng Lott. And therewith anone kyng Pellinor smote hym a grete stroke thorow the helme and hede unto the browis.

Malory's immediate comment, after the host of Orkney has
fled, is that "Gawayne revenged the deth of hys fadir the
ten yere aftir he was made knyght, and slew kynge Pellynor
hys owne hondis." 9

This straightforward acknowledgement of Gawayne's
intransigence establishes, even before his appearance among
Arthur's knights, his absolute loyalty to family, which
Malory never condemns simply because he accepts that the
demands of kin are more deeply rooted and as valid as are
those of Arthur's code. Certainly Gareth rejects his
brother's violence and draws closer to Launcelot than to his
own kin, but chivalry and family ultimately seem to place
equal demands on Gawayne, each of which is limited in the
amount of resistance it allows. These conflicting demands
appear even in Gareth, for, as Lumiansky has argued,
the relationship between Gareth and his older
brother is complex but by no means contradictory.
He is proud of Gawain, yet quite capable of
speaking out against the latter's faults. This
seeming inconsistency has been seen as an artistic
fault, but it is defensible when one recalls that
while Gareth regularly espouses good and shuns
evil, he is also faithful to friends and relatives. 10

In fact, the conflict between the older, primal demand of
the clan and that of the chivalry superimposed on it becomes
central to later events.
Also, without implying any identity between the incidental victims of Pellinor's and Gawayne's chivalric failings, there is a clear parallel between the unknighthly slaying of Lott's horse and the accidental death of the lady of Blamoure of the Maryse. Pellinor has executed his stroke in a good cause, and concludes by destroying Arthur's chief enemy, to establish the realm. His loyalty to his liege is supreme, even at the risk of shamefully killing a fallen adversary. Gawayne's blow is purely a product of personal loyalty. That he is willing to abandon chivalry in the pursuit of personal revenge clearly suggests the direction of future events, and the inherent irony of the situation is strengthened if we note that it is Pellinore himself who nominates Gawayne to the Round Table.

The appearance of Gawayne's name in relation to Balyn further serves to unite the tales' elements. After Garion, the invisible knight, has murdered a knight under Balyn's safe-conduct, the last must bear the body to a nearby church.

and there the ermyte and Balyn buryed the knyght undir a ryche stone and a tombe royall. And on the morne they founde letters of golde wretyn now that Sir Gawayne shall revenge his fadirs dethe kyng. Lot on kyng Pellynore.\textsuperscript{11}

As Gawayne does against Pellinore and Launcelot, Balyn sets
out to avenge a death, and although he succeeds he unwittingly strikes the Dolorous Stroke, which creates the Waste Land. Gawayne's final effort against Launcelot is almost equally disastrous, causing as it does the fall of Arthur's society, and yet the equation of the two which Malory appears to suggest by relating Gawayne's vengetfulness to Balyn's own legitimizes both. Their respective motivations reveal different loyalties, but the association portrays them both as honourable and justified. Many of these incidents that reflect Gawayne's reliability are related in such a way that they foreshadow and are inextricably linked to later events which indicate Malory's recognition of the respective validity of conflicting codes and, by extension, of his characters' humanity.

This sense of forethought in the cause of understanding is heightened by the developments of character which Gawayne undergoes in the course of the tales. Most striking among these is the appearance of temperance and a more sound judgement in contrast to his early impetuosity. The latter is revealed early in his career, when Kay, not known for wisdom himself, is correct in his assessment of the danger to Arthur's encampment one night:

'Sir, sayde sir Kayyus, hit is nat beste we be unarmed.'

'We shall have no nede,' sayde sir Gawayne and sir
Gryflet that ley in a lytyll pavylyon by the kynge.
So with that they harde a grete noyse and many cryed 'Treson!'\textsuperscript{12}

With the sudden assault on the camp, those who are unprepared are slain, and eight positions are opened at the Round Table. The contrast between Gawayne's inexperience and Kay's practicality continues almost immediately, when the latter insists that they attack the five kings in open battle, and when by doing so Arthur's forces win the day. Gawayne's early rashness is further demonstrated when he leaves Arthur's court over the banishment of his cousin Uwayne.

Much later in his career there is a time when a balance develops between rashness and prudence, as Malory avoids an abrupt change of character. The Gawayne who must be restrained by Arthur to avoid his defeat at the hands of Launcelot is a far cry from the character who later advises Arthur during the Great Tournament that his forces will win no worship against the same opponent. Gawayne's clear immaturity is gradually replaced, until we find him in the role of Arthur's chief advisor when Launcelot is absent from court and especially, though by default, after the great schism drives Arthur's champion away permanently. The favourable qualities he does develop are all products of
this new-found percipline, which, although foreign to the young Gawayne, is gradually assimilated.

Once his maturity has been established, he takes on an important role in the court, disseminating advice. He acts quickly to defend the honour of the queen when an enemy tries to assassinate him at a dinner she has planned, saying "Madam, I drede me leste ye woll be shamed"\(^{13}\) while showing little concern for the proximity of his own death. He is often hesitant to obey the king when his decisions are ill-considered, and as Kay was shown to be correct in Gawayne's early display of rashness, so is Gawayne when Arthur is unreasonably insistent.

In fact, at one point he becomes the central proponent of unity in the kingdom when Arthur is prepared to condemn Guinevere. Gawayne says, "My lorde Arthure, I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty, but that ye wolde put hit in respite, thys jugemente of my lady the quene."\(^{14}\) This advice closely follows that which he has offered his brothers, that they should avoid a confrontation with Launcelot for the sake of the realm, and in each case he is shown to be correct.

His foresight in these instances shows that even his instinct for revenge has been tempered, making him a more sympathetic character. The deaths of two of his sons and of Aggravaine are dismissed because he had advised each of them...
not to pursue the conflict with Launcelot. When family loyalty does resurface, it is in reaction to Launcelot's own sudden incarnation as a blunt instrument of destruction, and it is exercised as retribution for the deaths of innocents. Stephen Miko writes that the chivalric code "is based, of course, on fidelity, with a few basic assumptions about who deserves that fidelity." Gawayne's interpretation may differ from Launcelot's and from the critics' about who ultimately deserves that loyalty, but Malory appears to provide a congenial, accepting climate for Gawayne. His escape from condemnation is subtle and, as is reasonable, not complete, but it does occur and is justified by Malory.

Recognizing Malory's subtle but deliberate development of this climate, in which he is willing to accept the human difficulties that arise from a conflict between codes, is central to an understanding of his interpretation of the Arthurian legends as a whole. In fact, a number of critics have noted the possibility of an attempt by Malory to reconcile the conflicts inherent in the legends, and the natural result of this is an approach which seeks those qualities of character worthy of emulation concealed behind the crude dramatic situation of the sources.

Wilfred Guerin, for example, has noted that the shifting relationship between Launcelot and Gawayne is anything but "the simple blunder some have thought." In
fact, the ambivalence apparent in Malory, which does not allow for a clear condemnation of any of the central characters despite their roles in the fall of the Round Table, is a reasonable literary solution that allows the reader to maintain sympathy for all of Malory's heroes, and for his heroine.

Others have commented on Malory's technique of characterization, and it has indeed contributed greatly to the general ambience of his works. The traditional school among Malory's critics argues that "medieval writers never have a 'novelistic' interest in character for its own sake, and as applied to Malory the commonplace is probably true." 17 Certainly source studies have revealed that character in Malory is often a practical convenience, with personality a justification for action, effectively reversing the modern view of causal relationships. However, it is also true that a number of critics have seen in the chivalric romances, Malory's among them, precursors of character in the modern sense. Eugene Vinaver allows that this might be possible in the case of Malory, where the "foundations of the story of 'character and motive'" 18 are laid, but he also argues that romance writers were lacking in cohesion and unity of purpose.... Perhaps the major importance of Malory's work lies in the fact that it is an example of...
harmonization.\textsuperscript{19} The possibility has been raised that realistic characterization in Malory is little more than an accident,\textsuperscript{20} but this view of inadvertent verisimilitude is relatively weak compared to some of the concrete examples of character development Malory provides.

First among these is the fact that his characters do change, and in the case of Gawayne the change is dramatic. As has been argued, he moves realistically from a state of inexperience and impulsiveness toward a more mature understanding of cause and effect. The nature of development varies from character to character, but it is the gradual appearance of insight that heralds transcendence for the central figures in the tragedy.

Miko has suggested other techniques employed by Malory which further accentuate the sense of character in the Morte. Portrayals of courtesy, mercy, love and grief that avoid becoming caricatures serve to soften not only the harshness of the military class of Arthur's society, but also to inspire sympathy for the characters.\textsuperscript{21} Naturally, these emotions are central to the story which, by its very nature, demands each of them at various times. But the task Malory accomplishes is to avoid the caricatures of emotion in his central characters. Gawayne's grief, and hatred for Launcelot, after the death of Gareth are almost tangible.
At the same time, they are not only justified, but accentuated when juxtaposed with his placid reaction to the death of Aggravaine, whom he had previously warned.

Malory's characterization encourages the view that he is interested in the human responses of his characters to the conflicts between codes. As Bartholomew states, One of Malory's basic points seems the impossibility of such perfection as Lancelot [whom we might omit from her list] and Galahad exhibit. Even noble humanity is more like Gawain, forged from contradictions and enigmas, than it is like to ideal figures.22

Gawayne's failures are inherently human, and yet "judgement in Malory is neither so rigorous nor so easy as a moral system would imply."23 Malory avoids the doctrine of his sources possibly because it was beyond his comprehension, but possibly also because he did not set out to find his characters wanting, and instead to recognize their partial accomplishments in spite of their failings.

In many ways Gawayne's brother Gareth becomes the touchstone by which we can determine Malory's own reaction to the character, and again the end result is, at the least, accepting of Gawayne's unique nature. His proximity to Gawayne and his tendency to respond to his brother's actions are the keys to this, inasmuch as it is Gareth who
accompanies his brother on his first quest and who censures him for his conduct throughout most of his career. As Guerin notes, "Gareth is used to demonstrate the depth and breadth of Malory's Gawain." He criticizes Gawayne's tendency toward vengeance, perhaps appropriately, since it is in trying to avenge his brothers' deaths that Gawayne destroys himself and must accept much responsibility for the fall of Arthur's civilization. Vengeance, however, is a product of intense, almost primal emotion and family loyalty, and the death of his brothers serves more than any other incident to portray Gawayne as a complete individual undergoing a realistic response to conflicting demands.

Wenson has characterized Gawayne's reaction not only as one that is personally motivated but also as a legitimate response within the context of chivalry to an unknighthly killing. He says,

Malory's Gawain argues that Lancelot must rescue the queen or die in the attempt in order to preserve his 'worshyp'...His claim is immediately put to the test when he learns of the deaths of his unarmed brothers, for then he must take vengeance in order to preserve his own 'worshyp' and act 'knightly'.

It has been suggested that his personal vendetta is couched in ironic terms in that he uses a formal chivalric oath to
confirm his personal quarrel, but Benson's assertion is that he is not corrupting the code here, and is in fact reconciling both. If we accept his argument, then we have a firm indication that Malory is sympathetic to his character's position and is not, as is generally assumed, condemning Gawayne's action. If, on the other hand, we argue that Gawayne is responding to an older, more tribal code, then he is perhaps acting as Launcelot has done earlier, and may be maintaining the letter of the chivalric code in order to subvert it in favour of a more emotional, personal response. In either case, Malory does not condemn Gawayne in absolute terms, since his motivation is, one way or the other, valid.

Clearly Malory does not assert that Gawayne is in the wrong, although there is blame to be shared by all of the principal figures in the tragedy for the extent of the damage to the society. Perhaps it is an awareness of the validity of Gawayne's emotional response, coupled with a recognition of his developing insight, through which Malory allows Gawayne salvation after his death, along with a final chance to counter the divisions among the surviving knights. The extent of this insight is revealed in his dying speech to Arthur, an acknowledgement of his own failings:

'A, myn uncle,' sayde sir Gawayne, 'now I wolle that ye wyte that my deth-dayes be com! And all I may
wyte myne own hastynes and my wyrffulness, for
thorow my wyrffulness I was causer of myne owne
dethe; for I was thys day hurte and smytten uppon
myne olde wounde that sir Launcelot gat me, and I
fel me selff that I muste nedis be dede by the
ouer of noone. And thorow me and my pryde ye have
all thys shame and disease....But alas that I
wolde nat accorde with mym!26

That he does attempt on his death-bed to allow such an
accord suggests that he is still pushing toward the ideal,
although it has surely escaped him, and it has raised
completely in the wider world. His request for Launcelot's
return barely precedes his own death, but almost as a last
gesture Malory allows him to transcend his mortal existence,
as he warns Arthur in a dream to avoid battle with Mordred
lest he, too, be destroyed. Few of Malory's characters are
explicitly admitted to heaven, and among those that are,
perfection allows no return to the human world.

Surprisingly, his intercessors are the ladies he has
served during his lifetime. We might read this as ironic,
or perhaps only as a convenient device to allow the vision
to occur. It seems more likely, however, that Malory has
waited until this moment to confirm the favourable
interpretation of Gawayne for deliberate effect, by
providing a startling revelation of a Gawayne we have not
been permitted to see through the haze of his other failings. He has accomplished, long before we hear of it, a reconciliation of his early crimes with his conscience and with the demands placed on him by Guinevere at the beginning of his career, and has in fact become a champion of ladies to rival Launcelot.

Bartholomew has written that "perhaps the key to Gawain as representing Malory's verdict on the ideal is that Gawain is redeemed in death."²⁷ It human fallibility is a necessary and accepted element in the pursuit of any ideal, then Gawayne's "is the necessary human failure of that dream" of chivalry.²⁸ It is apparent that Malory makes a deliberate effort to portray Gawayne positively, despite the obvious difficulties his crimes of passion create. As Charles Moorman writes, "to blame Gawain for not being a saint would have been in this context contradictory,"²⁹ and it is increasingly clear that Malory sought to resolve such contradictions.
Notes

III: 1433.
2 Vinaver III: 1433.
3 Vinaver III: 1433.
6 Malory 65.
7 Malory 48.
8 Malory 48.
9 Malory 48.
11 Malory 51.
12 Malory 78.
13 Malory 614.
14 Malory 682.
15 Miko 212.
16 Guerin, "'The Death of Arthur'" 265.
17 Schroeder 374.


20 Schroeder 375.

21 Miko 213.

22 Bartholomew 266.

23 Miko 211.

24 Guerin, "Gareth" 112.

25 Benson 269.

26 Malory 709.

27 Bartholomew 267.

28 Bartholomew 267.

29 Moorman, "'Sankgreall'" 190.
Chapter 6
The Minor Characters - Immortal or Inadequate

While it may be possible to dispute the selection of Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and Gawayne as the central characters of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, either by arguing that others should be added to this short list or even by suggesting deletions or replacements, their respective positions remain relatively secure based on Malory's dramatic situation. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the story as he tells it could be advanced almost without supporting figures, as the four characters' temperaments and conflicting motivations drive the whole action of the tales. To select them as Malory's central characters is not to imply, however, that no other significant figures in the *Morte* enhance its literary value or that all others are simply redundant. Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, those who surround the principals in Arthur's court stand in sharp contrast to them, and thus they reveal almost by a process of deduction and elimination the qualities that set Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and Gawayne apart. We have seen that Malory
celebrates even the partial successes of these characters, based on their unflagging dedication to their causes and despite possible conflicts even within a single character; that he is willing to accept their inevitable failures, and within the context of his work to grant each of them a triumph over death that is felt even in the physical world; and that this can be accomplished when they have returned the world to a state of equilibrium because their ability to perceive their own roles in the tragedy has allowed a belated reconciliation.

The code's individual adherents may have failed, but this does not provoke Malory's condemnation. That is instead reserved for those who fail in the quality of dedication, or for those who never attain the degree of perception he demands of them. Running parallel to this idea of condemnation (since parallel paths do not have to travel in the same direction) is Malory's explicit approval of the qualities the central characters do possess. This is granted to them when they are able to transcend the tail of Arthur's society and, even if temporarily, their own mortality. The magnanimous gift Malory grants them is denied to all his other characters with but one exception, despite the fact that many of them are more holy, for example, than any of the central four.

Galahad stands as that sole exception, in that his soul
is explicitly borne up into heaven after he has achieved the Grail: "And so suddenly departed hys soule to Jesu Crysste, and a grete multitude of angels bare hit up to hevyn even in the syght of hys two felowis."¹ The typical view of Galanad's place in the scheme of the Morte Darthur is best summed up by Barber—and Moorman. The former writes that characters such as Galanad and Perceval are "unearthly seekers after spiritual perfection, for whom Malory does not greatly care."² Moorman supports this view of Launcelot's son, pointing out that Galanad's limited role in the Morte Darthur is a product of this unearthly status:

Malory must treat Galanad, not as a regular knight of the Round Table, but as a heavenly knight, sent to Arthur to accomplish this one mission, and, by example, to reveal the inadequacies of the other knights and of the secular civilization which they represent."³

The position Galanad assumes is in keeping with the omens and portents that proclaim his advent, which first appear at Arthur's wedding feast when the Round Table is formed.

Merlin advises the king of the significance of the empty place at the Round Table, telling him that

In the Segé Perelous there shall nevir man sitte but one, and yf there be ony so hardy to do hit he shall be destroyed, and he that shall sitte therein
shall have no felowe.⁴

The revelation acts to set Galahad apart from the human knights long before his birth, when Merlin prophesies a mystical destruction for any other knight who presumes to usurp the seat. Such supernatural intervention is extremely rare in Malory, and the appearance of the letters of gold on the chairs of the Round Table, linked fundamentally to Galahad's mark of distinction, indicates that with respect to Launcelot's son there are forces at work beyond the grasp or control of the Round Table knights.

Even he and Launcelot, his nearest challenger, are operating on different planes. Launcelot is beyond doubt the best of earthly knights. In fact, Launcelot loses little to Galahad, who does not pursue the same goals and whose role, while necessary to the narrative development of the tales as a whole, is reduced to that of an unattainable ideal of purity. The failings of even the four central characters are not to be condoned, even if by the same token they are to escape condemnation. Moorman would agree with such an interpretation, arguing as he does that Malory uses Galahad only as a supernatural object lesson in heavenly chivalry, as a knight whose deeds do not in any way affect the fate of the Round Table.⁵

In effect, Galahad is "predestined" and thus can succeed
"invariably and with no hesitation." His is an unrealistic incarnation of spiritual perfection in human form, viable as a moral absolute against which to measure the other members of Arthur's society, but ultimately unsympathetic to their fallible, human natures. And it is for this reason that his supreme accomplishment is markedly cheapened, if viewed in those absolute moral terms, by Launcelot's own partial success, which in many ways becomes the more important. Launcelot endures in the world and works toward prolonging its relative success, while Galahad contributes nothing lasting.

That the moral victory which allows Galahad to achieve the Grail is of only temporary significance in Malory is clear from the aftermath among those who succeed. Perceval seems primarily to act as window dressing, a third knightly body to fill out the requirements of the quest. He is unable to share in Galahad's miraculous assumption into heaven, and dies quietly in a hermitage after retiring from the world, and even after Bors has returned to Camelot to reveal their success in the quest, his death goes unmourned. Arthur has the events recorded, but there is more celebration in Camelot at the return of Arthur's knight than at the news of the miraculous visions he reports to the court.  

Sir Bors himself is a significant figure in the legend
as Malory presents it, but despite his presence even after
the departures of the four central characters and despite
achieving the Grail himself, Malory never sets him above the
vast majority of other minor characters. Dichmann says of
his development beginning in Tale II that

He is, indeed, an important figure in the total
history, playing a large part in subsequent tales,
particularly in the Grail quest, though he never
attains the stature of Lancelot, Tristram or
Gawain.9

In fact, he comes across as an interchangeable supporter for
the eternal champion, although it is true that he is almost
always in the camp of Launcelot or his son, Galahad. It is
as if he were never worthy of a significant adventure or his
own, unless it contributes to the wider quest of the whole
court. For example, in the Grail quest, he takes the
requisite part of the successful knight who must return to
the human world to relate the events for posterity,
sacrificing some of the glory and mystery the others
maintain to do so.

The role is continued as the Morte progresses, and he
is called upon increasingly often to act as supporter and
place-holder for Launcelot. Malory's 'The Poisoned Apple'
shows him in this light, for, as Launcelot's kinsman, he
becomes both Launcelot's confidant and his link with the
court during his absence. When, for purposes of suspense, Launcelot is apparently not available to defend the queen in combat, Bors is pressed into service instead, at least until the timely arrival of the queen's champion.

In the final tale, Bors continues in this duty of loyalty to Launcelot, and he becomes the chief symbol of the kinsmen and allies who withdraw to France to hold it against Gawayne and Arthur. The parallel between the two camps is apparent, as both Arthur and Launcelot are advised by nephews impatient for war. But Bors is soon shown to have none of the discernment or internal conflict that distinguishes the central characters, for his loyalty is undivided, and Launcelot must restrain him from slaying Arthur.10 His motivations are unambiguous and uncomplicated, and as a result he seems less human.

Moorman has further suggested that there is a relationship between the relatively minor position Bors plays in Malory and his ability to adapt to new demands placed upon him. He writes, "A lesser knight, Bors, can substitute the celestial standard for the courtly and so achieve the Grail, but Launcelot cannot so shift values."11 Perhaps precisely because his values are not as firmly entrenched, because he is not as persistent in adhering to his beliefs even when they conflict, he is a lesser character. By analogy, we could argue that were
Launcelot to abandon his dedication to the queen and serve
only the moral or chivalric goals embodied in the quest, he
too would be lessened, perhaps to the level of a Bors,
perhaps to that of the forgotten Percival.

Bors, then can stand as an example of the vast majority
of Round Table knights who are indistinguishable one from
the other, of "the great crowd of minor characters who cross
and recross the stage [and] are in many instances only
understudies of the principal heroes." In general, they
fail to acquit themselves as well as the central characters,
and even fail to recognize the nature of the struggle which
finally engulfs the Round Table as they follow one camp or
one obligation blindly. On one side stand Launcelot's kin,
on the others those jealous of or with no particular loyalty
to him; or simply with continuing loyalty to the king. But
none of them have the independence, perception, or impact or
those at the centre of the conflict

Galahad and Bors represent, respectively, the upper end
and middle of at least the moral spectrum in Malory,
although, as has been argued, this is not the major standard
by which he judges his characters. Those who fall at the
lower end of that spectrum, however, further reveal those
qualities possessed by the central characters which he does
commend. Most notably, it is often the aspiration to rather
than the attainment of perfection that Malory supports, and
characters such as Mordred and King Mark stand as examples of the degradation of knighthood that occurs when such aspirations are lost.

Knight argues that "King Mark is the major force of autonomous evil. He is especially violent towards Tristram, but also to King Arthur and Round Table knights in general."¹³ Not only does he possess all the characteristics of the tyrant,¹⁴ but he also represents a repetition of the external threats to the stability of the kingdom that Arthur has overcome in the past. He has no aspirations to uphold chivalry, which, although it is explicitly an Arthurian tradition of knighthood in Malory, is also expected of other knights. At the same time, he lacks Arthur's ability to perceive the importance of both his queen and his first knight, and driven by jealousy rather than by a diplomatic balance of emotions, he undermines his own position to the point where he is assassinated. Kennedy writes "Mark dies in a manner appropriate for a tyrant: he is murdered by a knight who wants to avenge the death of Tristram, and no one expresses regret."¹⁵ He differs only slightly from those kings who at the beginning of the Morte d'Arthur, refuse to acknowledge Arthur's legitimacy and are defeated in return, then attacked incessantly by vikings in their own lands. Malory assures that their collective defeat is absolute and its
aftermath clearly punitive.

The other major example of knighthood corrupted by
selfish and petty motivation appears in the figure of
Mordred, Arthur's illegitimate son, the instrument not only
of Arthur's departure out of the world but indirectly of
Gawayne, his half-brother's death also. Malory relates that
he and Aggravaine "had ever a prey hate unto the quene,
dame Gwenyver, and to sir Launcelot; and dayly and nyghtly
they ever waccned uppon sir Launcelot."¹⁶ Driven by this
ill-founded hatred and perhaps in Mordred's case by
resentment against the king, they become the agents who
precipitate the court's collapse and, most notably, their
actions lead to the extermination of the house of Orkney.
Thus, they fail not only in their chivalric duty and in
their loyalty to the Table, but they place their personal
concerns even ahead of family, in sharp contrast to their
brother Gawayne whose personal concern is most often to
defend that very family.

Mordred, the pretender, is driven by a need for revenge
that strips him of his humanity, making him a mere
caricature, much as Mellyagaunt becomes one when his own
emotions lead him to commit treason. Miko argues that "both
Mordred and Aggravayne remain without character for...they
are little more than symbols of the sort of reality...that
chivalry must by its very nature ignore."¹⁷ Morris goes
even farther in condemning Mordred as he appears in his final scene:

*Whan sir Mordred felte that he had hys dethys wounde he threste hymselff with the myght that he had upp to the bure of kyng Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote his fadir, kyng Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys.*

She writes, "The image is of a wild beast, a boar, using his own death to encompass that of his slayer," that Mordred has in effect sacrificed his humanity for his base desires. Her interpretation seems more likely the more we consider that Malory does use humanity to set his central characters apart, and that he is willing to accept even their failings if these are the product of a single-minded struggle toward perfection. Mordred, Mark, Mellyagaunt and Aggravaine are as alien to his concept of an admirable example of knighthood or humanity as is Galahad at the other extreme.

Thus, there are still only three basic qualities that set Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and Gawayne above all or Malory’s other characters. At the lowest end of the scale, the truly evil characters cannot approach them because they fail to display an aspiration to perfection. Galahad loses his worldly significance because he does not share their fallibility, and the great body of other knights fails to achieve distinction because of equal parts lack of
perception and unconsidered, undivided loyalty. If Malory celebrates the humanity of his characters, it is a celebration of realistic hope.
Notes

1 Malory 607.
2 Barber, King Arthur 131.
3 Moorman, "'Sankgreall'" 196.
4 Malory 62-63.
5 Moorman, "'Sankgreall'" 197.
6 Ihle 74.
7 Ihle 74.
8 Malory 607-608.
9 Mary E. Dichmann, "'The Tale of King Arthur and the
Emperor Lucius': The Rise of Lancelot," Malory's
Originality, ed. Robert M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns
10 Malory 691.
11 Moorman. "'Sankgreall'" 192.
12 Jessie L. Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain
13 Knight 123.
14 Kennedy, "King Mark" 190-234.
15 Kennedy 231.
16 Malory 673.
17 Miko 218.
18 Malory 715.
19 Morris 132.
Conclusion

It is a measure of Malory's literary competence that the *Morte Darthur* functions on multiple levels and that the myriad incidents and implications of his work can coalesce in various combinations into patterns of meaning. While it is generally possible to determine empirically how he made use of his source materials, it is also true that we are faced in the *Morte* with a characteristic tendency to show rather than tell. Malory often fails to provide explicit guidance to lead us toward his own interpretation. It is therefore as dangerous to ascribe but a single meaning to the *Morte* as to deny that there is any. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Malory does develop in his four central figures, Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and Gawaine, definite patterns of characterization and development, and from these we can infer much about his reaction to the tragic outcome of the Arthurian story.

Such inferences are especially significant if we realize that the ending of the tales must define our understanding of all that has gone before. Knight writes that the effect of Malory's conclusion
is to provide a convenient resolution. It does not apportion blame, does recognise human error; but Malory does not let it obliterate knighthood and the values of chivalry.¹

It is not simply a convenience, though, for the ending is fundamental to the whole process of character development revealed in the Morte. The end of his work remains true to the precedents set throughout the tales, for it is not Malory's purpose to portray Arthur's society as perfect, nor to undermine the value of his characters' achievements by means of an attack on their inability to attain the ideal. Each has gone through a process of failure and discovery, leading to a final reconciliation of the powerful forces acting on them.

At the centre of the tales and of the chivalric ideal itself is Arthur's own dilemma, as he attempts to impose a code which will guide others in the same absolute values which motivate him and derive from his elemental link to his realm, and from his inherent concern for its welfare. He is slow to discover that the code can be perverted by those whose values are selfish, and directed to personal causes rather than the stability of the kingdom. Only in re-asserting control, in his final assault on Mordred, can he escape the cycle of decline created by his own decision to subject his elemental power to the external control of
the code.

Since this diminished status is foreign to his whole being, it is Guinevere who must fill the void and become one of the chief arbiters of the chivalric system. She is virtually a symbol for its values, but we see in her a conflict between these external demands and her own volatile personality. In public, she is denied the expression of those emotions which define her character, and she is alone in noting that such conflicts must be minimized if the kingdom is to remain united. Her level of perception is unparalleled, but she is still willing to sacrifice her private needs for the benefit of her husband's ideal, and in so doing she allows both Launcelot and Gawayne to achieve salvation.

Launcelot, as the knight who comes closest to upholding the ideal, is the last to understand that the inevitable cracks in the chivalric armour cannot be concealed forever. Guinevere has made a habit of self-sacrifice, but Launcelot's identity is so thoroughly dependent on his adherence to the code that he seems unaware of the impossibility of remaining loyal to both the king as sovereign and the queen as lover. He may be the champion of both, but when the two are in opposition, and combat is denied, then he must abandon one for the other. Guinevere is the symbol of his code, yet it is only after he has made
his choice and the society has faded that he realizes the inseparability of symbol and source, and when he acknowledges for the first time his own fallibility, he attains an awareness that admits him into heaven.

Gawayne, too, shares in this reward, based on his own confession of responsibility for the war that has allowed Mordred's opportunity to usurp power. Gawayne's motivations are unique among the central characters, for his conflict is a product of the collision between two equally valid demands, that of chivalry and that of his clan. He is clearly unfamiliar with external restraint even from his first adventure in Arthur's court, and yet he discovers the necessity of forgiveness when he has reached the end of his life. He is perhaps the most fallible of the central characters, but in meeting the demands Malory places on him and in following the pattern of conflict, division, enlightenment and salvation, he offers ample testimony to the value Malory places on his characters' humanity.

In Malory's view, these central characters are worthy of sympathy and emulation based on the whole range of their development. The pattern is emphasised by his deliberate efforts to separate their personalities and the conflicts each experiences, so that they can even be seen to represent the extent of human capability. While the substance of Malory's effort to distinguish his characters has been
discussed in the preceding chapters, it is worth remembering that his approach is neither formulaic nor repetitive. Each of his four central characters encounters unique conflicts, ranging from the primal, nearly elemental influence of Arthur to the complex, refined, and civilized dilemma that faces Launcelot. Only the pattern of error, enlightenment, and transcendence remains constant, as each of the characters, in spite of fallibility, moves toward a reconciliation which entitles them collectively to a salvation of Malory's own creation.

The importance of this final escape from the imminent total disaster contained in the possibility of Mordred's final victory should not be underestimated when we come to examine our own reaction to the tales. Patch, in examining the literary manifestations of heaven in medieval literature, has written that:

Man seems always to have cherished, in vision or imagination, strange thoughts of a mysterious country to which he longs to go. Whether this takes the form of a supposed realm of delight which he may actually wish to visit, though the journey be difficult, or whether it is like a memory out of the past or a dream of the future, he has his ideas of a golden age in the perfect milieu, or of a utopia, or of a region he will attain to after
death if he fares well and the gods are propitious. Malory, in accepting the humanity of his characters and crediting it with their success in the world, does much to create a literary vision of such a place. His is not a realm of undiminished goodness and purity, and in fact he recognizes the impossibility of that even as he condemns those who do not aspire to it. Ironically, he is able to construct his vision using the flawed but noble characters essential to the story, but this only contributes to his success.

It has been argued that the development of realistic human characters is unlikely in an author as early as Malory. Schroeder, for example, cites Field's comment that "Malory's tales 'may be the work of a man who wrote better than he knew.'" There is, however, a growing critical consensus that realistic characters do, to some extent, appear in his writing. Vinaver has argued that in altering his sources, Malory "realized - perhaps for the first time - that a story was incomplete without some account of its human motives or some emotional content." Barber is willing to go even further when he writes that

He made its protagonists real people once more, stripped off the moralising to restore the unrelenting onset of the tragedy, and gave to the climax a befitting majesty and grandeur which it
had never before attained. The power of his ending is bound up inextricably with the strength of his characterization, as we are able to fully recognize the significance of Arthur's achievement, and that of those closest to him, despite their inability to maintain the former glory of Arthur's kingdom.

Throughout the Morte, it has been the struggle which is significant, and the realization that it is impossible to maintain the ideal has led to the central characters' final efforts at a reconciliation. This, however, is not simply the subject of the work, for these qualities are embodied in Malory's own accomplishment as well. Perhaps the success and continuing influence of Sir Thoams Malory's Morte Darthur alluded to at the beginning of this study can be credited to precisely this quality. Above all, it is a testament to the value of human endeavour.
Notes

1 Knight 145.


3 Schroeder cites this comment by P.J.C. Field on p. 384 of his essay. Field's work is *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971) and the comment appears on p. 141.

4 Vinaver, Introduction I: lxxxii.

5 Barber, *King Arthur* 133.
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Vita Auctoris

David Edward Hytttenrauch was born in Leamington, Ontario in 1964, by his calculation about five hundred years too late. But since academic work allows him to enter the spirit of the times without actually having to live in them, he has completed an Honours Bachelor of Arts (1987) and a Master of Arts (1988), both in English Language and Literature at the University of Windsor. His last substantial summer project was Where It's At: Pertinent Publications on the Arts, a research bibliography compiled for the Arts Council of Windsor and Essex County. Virtually on completion of this sentence, he and his wife (1987) will travel to Oxford, where he will begin study toward the M.Phil.