

MALORY'S TREATMENT OF THE HOLY GRAIL IN  
MORTE DARTHUR

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MORTE DARTHUR

by

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## PREFACE

This discussion proposes to deal with one of the sections of Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur: the Tale of the Sankgreal. It will begin with a sketch of its place in the whole work, followed by an outline of the origin of the Grail legend, with especial reference to Malory's sources; then it will focus upon Malory's reshaping of the Grail legend in terms of his own concept of Arthurian chivalry, stressing the special role which he assigns to Launcelot. The goal of the investigation is to attempt to define Malory's methods and the extent of his success in fitting seemingly intransigent subject matter into his overall theme.

## CHAPTER I

### THE QUESTION OF UNITY IN MORTE DARTHUR

A central topic for students and critics of Malory's Le Morte Darthur is the question of unity. Although unity is not the main concern of this thesis, it is impossible to thoroughly discuss one of the tales (The Tale of the Sankgreal) without determining its relation to the whole work. The following chapter, therefore, is devoted to an examination of the concept and major theories of unity in Morte Darthur.

#### i. Malory, Caxton and the Winchester Manuscript

Sir Thomas Malory finished his work apparently while in prison some time between March 4, 1469 and March 3, 1470. His romances first appeared in print in 1485, in an edition published by William Caxton. Until 1947 this was the only text available. However, in 1934, W. F. Oakeshott, librarian of the Moberly Library of Winchester College, discovered a manuscript copy of Malory's work containing a much more complete version of the Morte Darthur than Caxton's edition, and clearly antedating it. This was not, of course, the original manuscript, but a fifteenth century copy of a copy of Malory's composition.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Caxton and the scribe of the Winchester manuscript seem to have used different copies of one version which was itself only a copy of Malory's original work.

Professor Eugene Vinaver was already engaged in re-editing Caxton's version when he was given the task of editing the newly-discovered manuscript. His finished edition was published in 1947. A valuable piece of scholarship especially with regard to source discussion and textual criticism, the new edition created a furor in academic and popular literary circles, for instead of using Caxton's title, Morte Darthur, which had become traditional, Vinaver entitled his edition The Works of Sir Thomas Malory. This alteration in the title indicated a new interpretation of Malory's composition.

As a result of his study of the Winchester manuscript, Vinaver came to the conclusion that its author clearly never thought of it as a single work, but as a collection of eight separate romances,<sup>2</sup> which Caxton as publisher rearranged and re-edited to compose a single book which he called Morte Darthur.<sup>3</sup> A comparison of the manuscript's contents with Caxton's 1485 edition convinced Professor Vinaver that much of the present-day conception of Malory's version of the Arthurian romances is attributable more to Caxton than to Malory. This is not to say that Caxton completely rewrote Malory's Works, but that through his method of

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Vinaver, introduction, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, (2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. xxxix.

<sup>3</sup> A title which Vinaver in his "Preface to The First Edition" considers "spurious and totally unrepresentative". p. viii.

handling the text, more by omitting than by actual rewriting, the editor changed the face of what the original author created.

When these volumes fell into Caxton's hands he realized that, as a matter of practical expediency, he had to make them into a single 'book of King Arthur', not only for reasons of editorial economy, but because in such a form the work would best answer the demand of 'many noble and dyvers gentylmen of thys royaume of England' for a 'history of the moost renommed crysten kyng, fyrst and chyef of the thre best crysten and worthy, Kyng Arthur'.<sup>4</sup>

Vinaver sees the basic dichotomy between Malory's treatment of the romances, and Caxton's, as the difference between the approach of a medieval author and that of a modern publisher. In the middle ages, a "book" varied in size and in subject material; it could be either one literary composition or a collection of different works bound in one volume. Vinaver feels that there is reason to believe that in its original form Malory's work was consonant with the second meaning of the term.

In his Preface, Caxton states his method:

I have, after the symple connyng that God hath sente to me, under the favour and correctyon of al noble lordes and gentylmen, enprysed to enprynte a book of the noble hystories of the sayde kyng Arthur and of certeyn of his knyghtes, after a cople unto me delyverd, whyche cople Syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduce it into Englysshe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vinaver, "Introduction", Works, p. xxxviii.

<sup>5</sup> Caxton, quoted by Vinaver, p. cxlv.

According to Vinaver, Caxton's "symple connygne" led him to do much more than merely print Malory's manuscript.<sup>6</sup> It was Caxton, rather than Malory, for example, who decided to publish the stories under a general title taken from the last romance, The Tale of the Death of King Arthur. Caxton's apology for it may be viewed as an indication of his realization of the inappropriateness of the title, or at least of the fact that it originated with him, and not with Malory:

Notwythstondyng [the title] it treateth of the byrth, lyf, and actes of the sayd kyng Arthur, of his noble knyghtes of the Round Table, theyr mervayllous enquestes and adventures, th' achyevyng of the Sangreal, and in the ende the dolorous deth and departyng out of thys world of them al.<sup>7</sup>

All modern standard texts have followed Caxton's edition, and considered Malory's composition a single work pretending to unity of design and structure, a practice which Vinaver condemns as error.

In support of his own theory that the manuscript that Caxton used contained eight separate romances, Vinaver cites the first editor's references to "many noble volumes" in his Preface.<sup>8</sup> Caxton consistently refers to his sources

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<sup>6</sup> "It is only now that the damage due to Caxton's 'symple connygne' can be partially repaired." Vinaver, Introduction, Works, p. xxxv.

<sup>7</sup> Caxton's colophon, quoted by Vinaver, p. 1260.

<sup>8</sup> "And many noble volumes be made of hym [Arthur] and his noble knyghtes in Frensshe, which I have seen and redd beyonde the see, which been not had in our maternal tongue; but in Walsshe ben many, and also in Frensshe, and some in Englysshe but nowher nygh alle. Wherefore, such as have late been drawn oute bryefly in Englysshe, I have...enprysed to enprynte ...." Ibid., p. cxlv.

in the plural, and mentions that he has published his book of the "noble hystories" of King Arthur "after a cotype.... whyche cotype syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced into Englysshe". The presence of seven explicits<sup>9</sup> in the Winchester manuscript, (as opposed to only one in Caxton's edition) is further proof for Vinaver that the work is "clearly divided into several sections.... each section....concluded by an explicit".<sup>10</sup> All the explicits conclude quite definitely the tales they follow. Of the seven, only the seventh, at the end of The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, refers to the tale that is to come; and Vinaver considers this particular passage in a category of its own, forming a link with the tale that follows it, mainly because of Malory's source. Caxton deleted all the explicits except the last, which neatly concludes the book; in this way, Vinaver argues, he created the illusion that the eight romances of his text formed a continuous narrative. In the final explicit Caxton found the inspiration for a further unifying effect, the use of one title for all eight stories. After Malory's "here is the ende of The Deth of Arthur",<sup>11</sup> referring to the tale just related, Caxton added his own colophon to conclude what he had fused into one volume: "thus endeth thys noble and joyous book entytled le morte Darthur".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Appendix.

<sup>10</sup> Vinaver, "Introduction", Works, p. xxxvi.

<sup>11</sup> Malory, p. 1260.

<sup>12</sup> Caxton, quoted by Vinaver, p. 1260.

In addition to the large role played by Caxton in the alteration of Malory's manuscript, Vinaver finds an insuperable obstacle to the theory of the unity of the Works in the inconsistencies and peculiarities within the original composition itself. He suggests that the fact that the author and scribe saw the material as separate and distinct romances explains why Malory's stories retained inconsistencies which would have been difficult to justify in a continuous narrative. Some of these peculiarities are indeed glaring: Arthur's expedition to Rome is related twice; Launcelot's story is split in two, the first part referring to a later period of his life than the second some characters appear as knights fully grown before their births are related (e.g., Sir Tristram); others reappear after their deaths (e.g., Sir Breunis Saunz Pity and Tarquyn). Vinaver attaches special importance to a significant feature of these incongruities, the fact that they are never found within any single romance, but invariably occur between two different works separated by at least one of the explicits. He argues that an author translating separate tales, as the explicits indicate Malory was doing, would feel no real need to make every detail in each of the different stories coincide exactly.

To summarize, then, Professor Vinaver believes that Malory wrote eight separate romances which were handled



(or mishandled) in such a way by Caxton, as editor, that they became erroneously thought of as a homogeneous literary composition, inappropriately titled Le Morte Darthur. The Winchester manuscript indicates that the composition consisted physically of several volumes; the explicits, which Caxton almost completely omitted, show, more by what they do not say of linking than by what they do, that the tales were not meant to form a continuous narrative. Various stylistic and chronological inconsistencies bear out this theory.

## ii. Theories of Unity

R. H. Lumiansky<sup>13</sup> and Charles Moorman<sup>14</sup> are the main critics of Vinaver's hypothesis. The question hinges on the kind of unity which each man claims for the composition. Basically, Moorman, Lumiansky and others claim an historical and critical unity which Vinaver denies.

Lumiansky, in his contention that there is unity in Morte Darthur, defines historical unity as the intent of the author to create a work with overall and integral unity; critical unity is that unified structure which a reader finds in the work. It is therefore possible for the Works to have critical unity even though Malory did not consciously intend such a unity. This distinction makes possible three

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<sup>13</sup> Malory's Originality; a critical study of "Le Morte Darthur", (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964).

<sup>14</sup> The Book of Kyng Arthur: The unity of Malory's "Morte Arthur", (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

different attitudes toward unity in Malory: for example, Vinaver believes that the Morte Darthur contains neither historical nor critical unity; R. H. Wilson, Helaine Newstead, Robert Ackerman and D. S. Brewer subscribe to the view that the book has critical but not historical unity: "it somehow has had unity thrust upon it well along in the process of composition";<sup>15</sup> finally, Lumiansky, Moorman and Thomas C. Rumble advance the theory that the Morte Darthur has both critical and historical unity, and that Malory did, in fact, plan a comprehensive and unified treatment of the Arthurian legend.<sup>16</sup>

Essentially, the question of historical unity, that is, of the intention of a particular author to write a unified book, is impossible to resolve, especially in works written in the Middle Ages. Vinaver's arguments against unity are particularly strong here. Even Moorman admits that Vinaver's belief that Malory was writing eight books rather than one cannot be historically disproved.<sup>17</sup> Lack of definite knowledge of Malory's sources, along with a paucity of accurate biographical data on Malory himself make it impossible to state positively what Malory's intent was.

Though Moorman and Lumiansky admit historical unity

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<sup>15</sup> Moorman, p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. xvii.

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

or unity of intent is impossible to prove, they maintain that the presence of what they call organic critical unity indicates historical unity. Moorman distinguishes between two kinds of critical unity, mechanical and organic, both of which he claims for Morte Darthur. While mechanical unity is "a joining together from the outside of incident, character, image, whatever, in a precise, workmanlike fashion so that part fits easily with part and the whole functions as smoothly as a well-oiled machine", organic unity "is the unity of living things, and though it includes within its definition mechanical unity, it is different in kind as well as degree. Organic unity is not arranged without, but decreed from within by a seminal principle of growth."<sup>18</sup>

Moorman and Brewer are the most convincing representatives of the two groups of scholars opposed to Vinaver's concept of the Works.

For Moorman, three themes act as unifying motifs and narrative strands throughout the Morte Darthur: the intrigues of Launcelot and Guinevere, the challenge and failure of the Grail quest, and the feud between the house of King Lot and that of King Pellinore; around these three themes, Sir Thomas Malory structured his romances. Moorman sees in Malory's tale of Launcelot and Guinevere "the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. xxiii.

gradual debasement of what might have been 'vertuouse' love into the adulterous relationship he observed in his sources".<sup>19</sup> The aspect of adultery and sin is evident in the Works; the Tristram tale is a means of defining this relationship by comparison and allusion, and the Tale of Sir Gareth is a definition of the relationship by contrast. As well as being a commentary on courtly love, the Morte Darthur, for Moorman, is Malory's observation on the failure of religion at Arthur's court. The Grail quest, he believes, represented to the English knight the height of the court's adventures and the ultimate testing of the Round Table.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the King Lot - King Pellinore feud is representative of the court's inability to maintain the ideals of loyalty and knightly service demanded by its own definition of chivalry. In the course of his three-fold thesis, Moorman tries to explain away most of the internal inconsistencies pointed out by Vinaver<sup>21</sup> by tying them into one of three specific structural themes. His efforts are not totally successful, however, for there still are inconsistencies which cannot be explained away in this fashion.

D. S. Brewer presents another theory of unity. He prefers the term "cohesion" to unity, and accepts the fact

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<sup>19</sup> Moorman, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> The Tristram story as a parallel to the Launcelot-Guinevere relationship, for example, offers a reason for its inclusion in the Works.

of critical unity in the Morte Darthur, with an acknowledgement that Malory's sources determined the form of much of what he created: "He has rehandled them, to be sure, in accordance with his own strong feeling for form and moral content, but he is also completely at their mercy. Unless they move him, he cannot move."<sup>22</sup> Brewer's view of unity is a compromise between two extremes.

Brewer's theory, with modifications, seems more acceptable than any of the other hypotheses proposed. Although both Brewer and Vinaver agree that the work lacks unity of intent, the very fact that one man set down all the stories in writing ensures a certain amount of character and atmospheric unity, since all the tales were at some stage reshaped in his mind. Malory undoubtedly had an image of each of the main characters in his mind, which he maintained throughout the romances. Brewer is particularly conscious of another obvious unifying element, the fact that the composition chronicles "growth, flowering, and decay; rise, supremacy, and fall".<sup>23</sup> This cycle is inherent in the Arthurian tradition which predated and co-existed with Malory's work, and is not necessarily something which he inserted or planned. Practically speaking, he could hardly have had Launcelot and Guinevere ride off

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<sup>22</sup> D. S. Brewer, "the hoole book", in Edward Vasta, ed., Middle English Survey, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), p. 235.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

into the sunset together, leaving a murdered, or even merely cuckolded husband behind. Unity of purpose, and perhaps of chronology, in general, can safely be claimed. Inconsistencies of chronology and the "peculiarities" of which Vinaver complains, can be reconciled often if viewed as flashbacks. Not all of them may be explained, but there is general chronological continuity of the major events of the book. In addition, Vinaver's reliance on the explicits loses a certain amount of value, when one realizes that there is no real proof that Malory himself, and not a scribe, included them.

Many twentieth-century critics of the Morte Darthur tend to judge it and its unity, or lack of unity, by twentieth-century standards. In this sense, Malory's composition is, of course, not a unity; Malory himself would have seen no reason for his story to be balanced and otherwise "unified".

### iii. The Tale of the Sankgreal

The manner in which Malory has handled his sources is, of course, of great interest in an examination of the writer's concept of the Grail itself. The source of his Tale of the Sankgreal was a French prose romance called La Queste del Saint Graal, the fourth 'branch' of the

thirteenth-century Arthurian cycle. Vinaver maintains that Malory's romance is a close translation of his source and the least original of his works. The fact that the actual text used by Malory is no longer extant, or at least, has not yet been discovered, is a hindrance to ascertaining the extent of Malory's originality in this tale. It appears that there is a difference between Malory's source and the two groups of manuscripts of the Queste now available. Malory's source belonged to neither group and was more closely related to their lost common original than any one of the extant French MSS can claim to be.<sup>24</sup>

The Queste was an exposition of the doctrine of grace, probably written by a member of the Cistercian order. It stressed the coming of the Grail as the ultimate test of good and evil and the triumph of heavenly over earthly chivalry at the Arthurian court. Malory was in unfamiliar territory here - he had little use for this type of interpretation, and, preferring to see the Grail story as an Arthurian adventure, he shortened the pages and pages of doctrinal comment, shifted the emphasis from theology to action, and turned the Grail quest into what Vinaver calls "a mere pageant of picturesque visions".<sup>25</sup>

Moorman suggests that Malory consciously tried to

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<sup>24</sup> Vinaver, "Commentary", Works, p. 1534.

<sup>25</sup> Vinaver, "Introduction", Works, p. xc.

link the Grail quest, an isolated adventure in the French source, with his unified Arthurian chronicle, by presenting the failure of the Grail knights as one of the major causes of the downfall of the Round Table. Because he considers the author's alterations as important thematically, Moorman denies two of Vinaver's key comments on the romance: he denies that the tale is the least original and the most closely translated of the romances, and that Malory "secularizes" the Grail itself.

It is interesting to note that Vinaver himself recognizes some thematic changes which clearly show that Malory is more than a translator, for example, the alteration in interpretation of Launcelot's character, the shortening of the theological explanations, and the dehumanizing of Galahad, but he disagrees strongly with Moorman's interpretation of such changes as an attempt on Malory's part to fuse the tale into a vision of the rise, glory and dissolution of the realm of Arthur.

All questions of unity aside, however, Moorman's description of Malory's approach to his source material as simplification is less useful than Vinaver's description of it as secularization. Vinaver's term "secularization" is a useful summary of many of Malory's alterations.

For example, Sir Bors explains the purpose of the



Grail quest by saying that "he shall have much erthly worship that may bryng hit to an end".<sup>26</sup> At the beginning of the quest, the French author refers to the apparently harmless pursuits of worldly knights as occasions of "pechié mortel", a concept which Malory either could not or would not understand, for he omits the reference. Again, after Sir Launcelot's first adventure with the Grail, when he sees another knight healed by the holy vessel, which he himself cannot see, Malory makes an important alteration in the story. In the French source, Launcelot bemoans his deadly sin "car puis que je fui chevaillier premierement ne fu il heure que je n'eusse de tenebres de pechié mortel, car tout adés ay habité en luxure en la vanité du monde plus que autres homs".<sup>27</sup> Malory, on the other hand, stresses Launcelot's former success in worldly adventures: "For whan I sought worldly adventures for worldly desyres I ever encheved them and had the bettir in every place, and never was I disconfite in no quarell, were it ryght, were hit wronge."<sup>28</sup>

Whether Malory changed his source in reworking the Grail story because he could not understand either the theology or the French of the Queste, because he did not agree with the concepts involved, or because he intended to forge the tale into an integral part of an Arthuriad, the

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<sup>26</sup> Malory, p. 955.

<sup>27</sup> Queste, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Malory, p. 896.

fact stands that he did alter the material of the source. The Tale of the Sankgreal still retains the essential characteristics of its source (although not necessarily its spirit), but the new conception of the Grail story enabled Malory to go beyond his source in the direction of characterization and achieve something aesthetically far more valuable than a consistent exposition of a doctrine.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GRAIL TEXTS

It is a difficult task to try to impose order and coherence upon what is one of the most confused and confusing areas of Arthurian scholarship: the texts of the legends of the Holy Grail; for there is no fixed Grail Legend, but many versions. The scholar is hampered further by the fact that some of the texts still remain in manuscript form,<sup>1</sup> unedited and thus unavailable to many investigators. In addition, where the texts are in print, not all have been translated from Old French into English, a further handicap for those who do not read Old French easily. This chapter will attempt to provide some framework for later discussion by giving a brief sketch of the pertinent data about the major Grail Texts in basically chronological order.

#### i. Chrétien and his Continuator

The earliest extant Grail text is Le Roman de Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal, a verse romance, written

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<sup>1</sup> Notably parts of the continuations of Chrétien's Le Roman de Perceval.

in 1180,<sup>2</sup> by Chrétien de Troyes. It is dedicated to, and was written at the request of Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders, who participated in the Third Crusade, and died at Acre in 1190.<sup>3</sup> In the introductory lines of the poem, Chrétien cites as his source a book given him by Count Philip:

Ne valt cil [Philip] mix que ne valut  
 Alexandres, cui ne chalut  
 De carité ne de nul bien?  
 Oïl, n'en doutez ja de rien.  
 Dont aura bien salve sa paine  
Crestïens, qui entent et paine  
 Par le comandement le conte  
 A rimoiier le meillor conte  
 Qui soit contez a cort roial:  
 Ce'est li CONTES DE GRAAL  
 Dont li quens li bailla le livre:  
 Oëz coment il s'en delivre.<sup>4</sup>

This claim of an authoritative source may be a fabrication like Geoffrey of Monmouth's highly suspect reference to a "certain very ancient book written in the British language"<sup>5</sup> in his Historia Regum Britanniae.<sup>6</sup>

Jean Frappier, however, believes that "the poet [Chrétien]

<sup>2</sup> Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Legends", in J. Burke Severs, ed., A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500 (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, Oeuvres Choiesies, ed. Gustave Cohen (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1936), p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, Le Roman de Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal, ed. William Roach (2nd ed.; Paris: Librairie Minard, 1959), p. 2-3, ll. 57-68.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of England, trans. Sebastian Evans; revised Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> It is a not uncommon mediaeval practice for an author to claim a source more or less arbitrarily, in order to gain added interest and authority for his own work. For example, Chaucer also adopts this common practice in Troilus and Criseyde where he cites Lollius (i, 394) as his source in the Legend of Good Women when he mentions Livy and Ovid as sources for "The Legend of Lucrece", (l.1684) but uses only Ovid's works.

was surely telling the truth in asserting that he had received from his patron a livre which contained the story of the Grail", either a Latin book, detailing a ritual surrounding a Christian relic, or, more probably, "a conte d'aventure, filled with Celtic marvels".<sup>7</sup>

Basically the Conte du Graal is a retelling of what is commonly called the male Cinderella or Dümmling motif,<sup>8</sup> for it relates the story of the gradual education and eventual success in the world of an often repulsively ignorant youth. An unnamed boy raised in a forest in Wales by his widowed mother, one day meets five knights of the Round Table, who expound to him the glories of knighthood. Filled with the desire to become a knight, the youth rushes home to his mother, and after receiving hasty advice about behaviour with ladies and prayer in churches, rides off, ignoring his mother who swoons as he leaves. After a brief misadventure with a damsel, whose tent he mistakes for a church, he arrives at Arthur's court, where he behaves in an uncouth manner to the king but pleases him by slaying with his javelin the Red Knight, who has insulted Arthur and Guinevere. He learns knightly skills from Sir Gornemant de Gohort, and receives a warning

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Frappier, "Chrétien de Troyes", in Roger Sherman Loomis, ed., Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 185. (Hereafter referred to as ALMA.)

<sup>8</sup> G. B. Woods, "A Reclassification of the Perceval Romances", P.M.L.A., XXVII (1927), 540.

against loquacity. Haunted by the image of his fainting mother, the boy sets out to return to her, but is delayed at the castle of the lovely Blancheflor, niece of Sir Gornemant. He rescues her from besieging enemies and swears to return.

His next adventure is one central to the study of the Grail. At a river he meets a mysterious fisherman in a boat who directs him to a nearby castle for a night's shelter. There his host, the fisherman, who has arrived before him, is lying on a couch injured; he presents the young knight with a sword which has been destined for him. During the course of the evening they witness a mysterious procession - a youth enters the chamber carrying a white lance with a white iron tip which bleeds onto his hand; two more young men come in carrying golden candelabra. In the middle of the procession, a young lady carries in her two hands a golden grail (graal) which brings a great brightness into the hall; she is followed by another damsel who holds a silver tray (tailleur). This group passes through the hall and into another chamber several times; and each time the grail passes, food and drink are provided to the guests. Although he is very curious, the young knight, remembering Gornemant's remonstrances against talking too much, does not ask what the Grail is or who is served with it. All

retire for the night, and when the young knight awakes the next morning, the castle is deserted. In a nearby wood he meets a female cousin who upbraids him vehemently for his silence in the castle, telling him that his host the Fisher King would have been healed and the land revitalized if he (no longer nameless, but now identified for the first time as Perceval) had asked about the graal. She informs him of his mother's death, and interprets his silence in the Grail Castle as a consequence of his sin in leaving his mother as she lay in a swoon of grief at his departure.

Eventually Perceval returns to Arthur's court, and the day after his arrival is castigated for his silence in the Grail castle by a loathly lady who also announces various adventures which are undertaken at once by Gawain, Girflez and Kahedin. Perceval, however, vows to repair his error and not to sleep two nights in the same spot until he has learned who is served with the graal and why the lance bleeds.

An adventure involving Gawain follows, its only relation to the Grail mysteries being the postponement of a duel for a year while Gawain seeks and brings back the bleeding lance.

The thread of Perceval's story is picked up again; he has been wandering in search of the Grail castle and,

unmindful of God, has not once been to church in his wanderings. He meets a hermit on Good Friday who hears his confession and reiterates the earlier explanation that Perceval could say nothing at the castle because he had deserted his mother. Regarding the Grail castle and its mysteries, the boy learns that the Fisher King is his cousin, and that the Fisher King's father has been an invalid for fifteen years, surviving on a single mass wafer brought to him in the graal:

D'une sole oïste le sert on  
Que l'en en cel graal li porte

(II. 6422-3)

The hermit, who turns out to be Perceval's uncle, gives the youth pious counsel, and a mild penance.

The rest of the poem concerns Gawain's adventures in a half-real, half-fantasy world, the story ending abruptly in the middle of one of Gawain's adventures.

From this brief outline of Chrétien's story, it is obvious that, although the centre of one important adventure and the object of a later quest, the graal in Le Roman de Perceval does not occupy a strictly central position in the tale. It is first described as a wide and slightly deep golden dish encrusted with precious stones which sheds a great light in the hall:

Atot le graal qu'ele tint,  
Une si grans clartez i vint  
Qu'ausi perdirent les chandoiles



Lor clarté come les estoiles  
Font quant solaus lieve ou la lune.

(II. 3225-9)

The graal itself does not seem as mysterious as the procession and the presence of food each time the vessel passes through the chamber:

Qu'a chascun mes que l'on servoit,  
Par elevant lui trespasser voit  
Le graal trestot descovert,  
Ne ne set pas cui l'en en sert...

(II. 3299-3302)

Various explanations have been given for the key incidents and characters in Chrétien's story as well as for the actual Grail vessel; these can be divided for simplicity into two broad fields of interpretation: Christian and pagan. Some proponents of the Christian ritual theory liken the Grail procession to an actual ritual, such as the Byzantine mass,<sup>9</sup> while other scholars see the Grail as allegorical, presenting, for example, the conversion of the sacred relics of the Old Testament into the symbols of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> The pagan theories show equal variety. Jessie Weston<sup>11</sup> recognizes ritual in the Grail mysteries

<sup>9</sup> G. Eugène Anitchkof, "Le Saint Graal et les inspirations religieuses du XII<sup>e</sup> Siècle", in Romania, LVIII (1932), 282f. Bruce, p. 257-8, mentions Konrad Burdach in connection with the Byzantine theory.

<sup>10</sup> Urban T. Holmes, Jr., and Sister M. Amelia Klenke, Chrétien, Troyes, and the Grail, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), Chapter Four.

<sup>11</sup> Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1957).

and attributes the origins to rites such as those of the Eleusinian mysteries. Celticists like Loomis,<sup>12</sup> and Frappier do not emphasize the ritual aspect of the Grail, but prefer to see it and its attendant objects as talismans of the Tuátha De Danann of ancient Celtic myth, the Grail being identified with a magical food-producing horn belonging to the euhemerized sea-god Bran.

Within forty years of the poet's death, Chrétien's basic story received six further additions, consisting of two prologues and four continuations. The Elucidation prologue contains 484 lines of rather pedestrian and confused verse strongly resembling certain passages in the First Continuation. The story it tells of well-maidens raped and robbed of their golden cups by the ruthless King Amangon and the resultant infertility of the land, seems an authentic piece of Celtic folk-lore, and some scholars have pointed to its close connection with a Grail romance as proof of the non-Christian origin of the Grail itself.<sup>13</sup>

The Bliocadran prologue purports to be the beginning of the Perceval and does serve as an excellent introduction. Bliocadran is the name given here to Perceval's father,

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<sup>12</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Origins of the Grail Legends", in ALMA, p. 287.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Wilder Thompson, "The Additions to Chrétien's Perceval", in ALMA, p. 209.

and it is in the description of Perceval's family that this prologue seriously contradicts Chrétien. In Le Roman de Perceval the boy's unnamed father becomes poverty-stricken after being wounded; he dies of grief in his manor in the Waste Forest after the deaths of Perceval's two elder brothers in tournaments. Bliocadran in this prologue has eleven brothers, all of whom have died in battle; when he himself dies before his only son's birth, his wife accompanied by a few faithful servants moves to the Waste Forest. In its straightforward narrative of 800 lines, this prologue lacks something of the charm of Chrétien's verse, but it is, on the other hand, coherent and realistic, particularly in its presentation of character and motives.<sup>14</sup>

The First Continuation, formerly called Pseudo-Wauchier, is probably the most competently written of all the additions to the poem. It exists in a long, a short and a "mixed" version, ranging in length from 9,500 to 19,600 verses. It is concerned principally with the adventures of Gawain, and only one of the six sections deals with a visit to the Grail castle, which is now situated at the end of a long causeway running out into the sea. The Grail is not seen in procession: it has become "an automatically moving food-producing vessel";<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Thompson's account, cited in note 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 213.

the lance, identified now with the spear of Longinus, stands in a rack dripping blood into a vessel. In addition, there is a corpse on a bier, as well as a broken sword which must be joined by Gawain.

Like the first or Gawain Continuation, the second or Perceval Continuation (originally called Wauchier) is left unconcluded. The extant longer and shorter redactions contain 13,000 lines of rather varied and worldly adventures, ending with Perceval at the Grail castle. In a return to Chrétien there is a procession with the Grail, lance and broken sword, but no corpse as in the First Continuation. Perceval joins the sword; yet a seam still shows and his Grail visit is not wholly successful. It is worth noting that in this addition the Grail is definitely said to contain Christ's blood.

A conclusion to the story was finally given by Manessier, after he had added 10,000 more lines. Writing for the Countess Jeanne of Flanders (1206-44), grandniece of that Philip for whom Chrétien wrote the original Perceval, Manessier again made Perceval a central figure, although Gawain and other knights do occupy a few episodes. Manessier seems to have borrowed motifs from his three predecessors as well as from the specifically religious Quest del Saint Graal. The procession of Grail, lance and tailleur reappears and the Grail is again a magical provider of

food instead of a blood relic. When Perceval dies, all three talismans are taken up to heaven.

In the final continuation, by Gerbert de Montreuil, the story is concluded for a second time, after 17,000 lines of adventures. Since Gerbert and Manessier offer independent conclusions to the Perceval, it is assumed that they did not know each other's work. (Gerbert, however, is thought to have known both the Queste del Saint Graal and Perlesvaus.)<sup>16</sup>

The first and second continuations were both written before 1200; Manessier's addition between 1214 and 1227 and Gerbert's after 1225. With all the additions written between 1190 and 1225, the Perceval reaches a length of 60,000 to 70,000 lines. Various authors and redactors contributed to it over at least four decades, and there is a noticeable decrease in literary quality with each new author. Yet, although inconsistent and sometimes tedious, the romance still contains passages of moving beauty and power.

ii. Robert de Boron (Borron)

The second major figure in the history of the Grail legend, and one representing a different aspect of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 215.

the Grail story altogether, is Robert de Boron. Grail texts in general may be divided into two groups - those dealing with adventures and the seeking of the Grail, and those relating the history of the Grail itself. Of Boron's works, the first, Le Roman de L'Estoire dou Graal or Joseph d'Arimathie, written before 1191,<sup>17</sup> is a chronicle or history of the Grail. (Another, the Didot-Perceval, contains knightly adventures in quest of the Grail.) The editor of Boron's Joseph d'Arimathie, William A. Nitze, offers the best account of the importance of this work:

...[il] fut composé, comme nous l'indique le titre, pour raconter les vicissitudes du Graal et les rattacher à l'Histoire sainte. Écrit plusieurs années après le Perceval de Chrétien de Troyes, il rapporte, pour ainsi dire, les enfances du vase ou plat sacré, identifié ici probablement pour la première fois, avec la relique de la Crucifixion, l'escuele de la Cène et le calice de la messe romaine.<sup>18</sup>

The romance tells of the vessel which Christ used at the Last Supper: it is given to Pilate, and by him to Joseph of Arimathea, who used it to catch the last drops of Christ's blood when he was taken from the Cross. The risen Lord visits Joseph in prison and entrusts the Grail to him. When Joseph is freed long after by the emperor Vespasian, he leaves Judea with his sister Enygeus and her husband

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<sup>17</sup> Newstead, p. 73.

<sup>18</sup> Robert de Boron, Le Roman de L'Estoire dou Graal, ed. W. A. Nitze (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1927), p. v.

Hebron or Bron and other followers of Christ. On their journey the Grail serves as a judge of the righteous and the sinners among the band. A man named Petrus is to go west to the vaus d'Avaron (the vales of Avaron) and await Bron's grandson. Bron, called the Rich Fisher because of a fish he once caught for the Grail Table, will receive the vessel from Joseph and also go to the west to await his grandson to whom the Grail will be ultimately delivered. Joseph remains behind.

The sources of this story present an intriguing problem. Robert refers in lines 932-6 to a great book, which contains the "grant secré...Qu'en numme le Graal".. yet later says in his epilogue that the story has never been told before. Certain parts of the story are taken from the apocryphal Evangelium Nicodemi, especially from Part I, the Gesta Pilati. Nitze mentions also as sources the Gemma Animae of Honorius d'Augsbourg and the Livre de Titus et Vespasianus, "un chanson de geste de la fin du douzième siècle".<sup>19</sup> These works contain seeds of the story, but the concept of the Grail as the one vessel of the Last Supper and the receptacle of Christ's blood shed on the Cross, and its identification with the chalice at Mass are almost certainly the poet's own invention.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., x-xl.

<sup>20</sup> J. D. Bruce, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from The Beginnings Down to the Year 1300, (2nd ed.; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), I, p. 238 ff.

Robert added a new dimension to the legend by emphasizing the eucharistic meaning of the Grail and by bringing the relic of the Last Supper to Britain.<sup>21</sup>

The Didot Perceval, whether the author intended it or not, forms a prose sequel to the Joseph d'Arimathie. It combines the romantic adventure of Chrétien's poem with Robert's ascetic and sacramental interests.<sup>22</sup>

### iii. The Vulgate Cycle

The Vulgate Version or Cycle of the Arthurian romances is a collection of French prose romances written between 1215 and 1230, and containing two Grail stories. The Cycle consists of five major parts, as follows:

- 1) Lestoire del Saint Graal, often called Le Grand Saint Graal to distinguish it from Robert de Boron's Joseph d'Arimathie, or Le Petit Saint Graal.
- 2) Lestoire de Merlin, consisting of a prose version of Robert's Merlin, combined with a continuation of the same often called the Livre d'Artus.<sup>23</sup>
- 3) Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac, containing three long parts of nearly equal length.
- 4) Les Aventures ou La Queste del Saint Graal, a thematic sequel to Lestoire, though written before it.
- 5) La Mort au Roy Artus, shortened to Mort Artus.

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<sup>21</sup> Pierre Le Gentil, "The Work of Robert de Boron and the Didot Perceval", in ALMA, p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> H. Oskar Sommer, The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances, vol. 1: Lestoire del Saint Graal, (Washington: The Riverside Press, 1909), p. vii.



This cycle, with its five or six "branches" (Lestoire de Merlin is sometimes divided into two romances, Lestoire de Merlin and Livre d'Artus), is the final stage in a process of fusing heterogeneous elements into a whole which is not totally harmonious.<sup>24</sup>

Both aspects of adventure and history of the Grail are included in this cycle. Noted scholars, among them Bruce, Nutt, Paris and Pauphilet are of the opinion that Lestoire postdates the Queste and the Lancelot section of the cycle. It is an amplification of Robert's Joseph d'Arimathie, with stories from the apocryphal Acts of St. Simon and St. Jude and the Passio Matthaei,<sup>25</sup> although it is possible that the author used as his source, the 'grant livre' to which Robert referred in verses 932 to 936. The Estoire, like the Queste, was probably the product of an ecclesiastical author, a fact indicated by the learning revealed in matters pertaining to dogma, ritual and Scripture, and the mastery of allegorical interpretation. The author pictures the Grail not as the chalice, but as the dish (lescuele) of the Last Supper, from which Christ and the Apostles ate. This history of the Grail exists in two Middle English translations as well: an anonymous alliterative fragment of the fourteenth century entitled

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle", in ALMA, p. 314.

Joseph of Arimathie, and Lovelich's History of the Holy Grail, a close verse translation of the Estoire written in 1450.<sup>26</sup>

The prose Lancelot of the Vulgate cycle makes mention of the Grail, and, indeed, leads up<sup>to</sup> the definitive book of the Grail, La Queste del Saint Graal. This romance is, in a sense, the culmination of the history of the Grail romances. The Queste has its source in Chrétien's Perceval, the first two continuations, and Robert de Boron's Joseph.<sup>27</sup> The author of the Queste, however, built on these sources and created a romance that is very different from its predecessors. Pauphilet in his Études sur la Queste del Saint Graal, has demonstrated quite clearly that this tale, obviously infused with the monastic spirit, is a direct product of the Cistercian Order founded at Cîteaux in 1098.<sup>28</sup> Even superficially, there are connections: for example, the counsellors which the knights meet are invariably "white Friars", that is, Cistercians, and the opening scene of the romance, describing the festivities of Pentecost at Arthur's court, closely follows the schedule of Cîteaux. In addition, the militant, ascetic Christianity which these counsellors preach, and which Galahad embodies, is typical of the energetic Crusading spirit for which the

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<sup>26</sup> Newstead, p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, p. 419.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Pauphilet, Études sur la Queste del Saint Graal, (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1921), p. 53-84.

Cistercians were noted. "La Queste est donc une description de la vie chrétienne telle qu'on la concevait à Cîteaux.... Cîteaux apparaît ici non seulement comme la plus haute expression de l'idéal chrétien, mais comme la conductrice même du monde."<sup>29</sup>

The authors of previous works concerning the Grail were primarily interested in merely telling a good story, full of mysteries and knightly adventures in an Arthurian and courtly frame. In the Queste, however, the knightly values current in contemporary literature are reversed:

L'auteur de la Queste manifeste en de nombreux passages son intention d'opposer son oeuvre à la littérature en vogue de son temps. Il méprise la vaillance, les exploits, purement chevaleresques, réprouve l'amour, dont il affecte de confondre la forme 'courtoisie' avec le 'vil péché de luxure'<sup>30</sup>

The Grail quest is given a new hero, as well as new meaning. Galahad, the perfect Christian knight, supplants Perceval as the Grail hero. There is no description of the Enfances or youth of either knight; and the first early visit to the mysterious Grail castle and the Fisher King, as well the question test so crucial in Chrétien, are omitted. Three heroes eventually emerge and achieve success: Bohort, "le type du saint laborieux, exact, qui gagne le paradis à la sueur de son front"; Perceval, "qui symbolise l'ingénuité, la candeur, la simplicité enfantine", and

<sup>29</sup> Albert Pauphilet, ed., La Queste del Saint Graal, roman du XIII siècle, (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1923), x.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., viii.

Galahad, "le héros parfait, conçu à l'image de Jésus".<sup>31</sup>

They reach the fabled city of Sarras, and attain the total vision of the Grail; there Galahad and Perceval die and achieve the bliss of heaven, while Bohort, greatly sanctified, returns to the world to tell of the Grail and the wonders of God.

The constant juxtaposition of earthly and celestial chivalry, with the condemnation of the former invariably stressed, gives this romance a different atmosphere from those which preceded it. In addition to combating the glories of worldly knighthood, the Queste also acts as a vehicle for the teaching of dogma. The doctrines of grace and transubstantiation are central to the many doctrinal commentaries which usually occur in the form of a hermit's sermon or pious counsel.

The Grail in La Queste del Saint Graal means many things: the mysteries of God, the Incarnation, and "divine grace communicated through the eucharist".<sup>32</sup> Many times the author of the Queste describes the presence of the Grail, without ever explaining completely what the sacred vessel is. However, as Pauphilet comments, one can infer from these passages that the author comes very close to identifying the Grail with God himself: "les

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle", in ALMA, p. 307.

attributes du Graal sont ceux mêmes de Dieu: immatériel, omniprésent, entouré des êtres célestes, il a la toute puissance et la grâce miraculeuse: c'est le symbole de Dieu".<sup>33</sup>

In essence, then, the author of the Queste uses the Arthurian court, which represented contemporary society as it loved to imagine itself, as a vehicle for a religious and moral message which ran counter to the traditional glories of that court. Courtesy, courtly love, rules of knighthood - all were insufficient to purify society and save one's soul. The regeneration of man would be accomplished only by answering the call to a higher Quest, by serving God rather than Arthur.

iv. Other texts: Parzival, Perlesvaus, Peredur, Sir Perceval of Galles

A German version of the Perceval story was written at the beginning of the thirteenth century<sup>34</sup> by a Bavarian knight and poet, Wolfram von Eschenbach. Although the author cites a Provençal poet, Kyot, as his source, many scholars (J. D. Bruce among them) believe that Wolfram's only source was Chrétien, since all of the Perceval appears in Parzival, re-introduced and concluded by Wolfram

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<sup>33</sup> Pauphilet, intro. Queste, p. ix.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce, p. 313.

in his own fashion. He creates a group or order of guardians for the Grail, and establishes them almost in their own world, at the castle of Munsalvaesche. The Grail is represented as a stone rather than a platter or chalice; he calls it lapsit exillis (possibly a corruption of lapis de celis), and attributes to it miraculous properties:

by its power the phoenix kindles its death-flame from which that bird rises into new life; no one, be he however ill, can die within a week after beholding the Grail; old age and physical decay, save for grey hair, are suspended in beholders; its greatest power derives from a small white wafer deposited upon it every Good Friday by a dove from heaven; it produces food and drink in any quantity for its company; to that chaste company boys and girls are summoned, and other momentous commands are issued, by messages which appear around its edge...and these letters vanish as soon as they have been read.<sup>35</sup>

There also exist a long French prose romance, Perlesvaus (Perceval le Gallois ou le Conte du Graal), which is independent of any cycle, Peredur, a Welsh tale of Perceval from the Mabinogion, and a crude Middle English alliterative romance of the early fourteenth century called Sir Perceval of Galles. The latter, unlike the other two tales, is simply an enfances, and makes no mention of the Grail. With the exception of the two Middle English romances already mentioned, a few fragments dealing with the Joseph

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<sup>35</sup> Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage, intro. Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1962), p. xliv.

of Arimathea motif,<sup>36</sup> and Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal, the legend of the Grail is not found in English vernacular literature.

### Conclusion

It is thus possible to trace the development of the story of the Grail from its first recorded mention in Chrétien to its final medieval glorification in La Queste del Saint Graal and its English version, Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal. Chrétien's romance was basically a chivalric tale of the enfances genre, relating the education and eventual success of its dümmling hero, Perceval. The Grail, acting as a focal point of this education and as the object of the question test, was important as such, and as a source of mystery enhancing the general interest of the story, but it had no particular significance in itself.

Although later romances tended to adhere to this magical adventure pattern, the Grail gradually gained importance and meaning. Perhaps the conteurs became intrigued with the meaning and origin of the mysterious graal; certainly, Robert de Boron's identification of the

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<sup>36</sup> Lyfe of Joseph of Armathy  
De Sancto Joseph Ab arimathia  
Here begynneth the lyfe of Joseph of Arimathia  
A prayng to Joseph.  
 Cf. Newstead, p. 74-75.

Grail with the cup of the Last Supper, of Calvary and of the Mass, coupled with the growing cult of the Blessed Sacrament, gave added impetus to an emphasis on the Grail as an object of wonder and holy awe. The question test, an important motif in the original Perceval story, eventually disappeared completely and the romances began to take the form of a quest for the Grail itself and its inner meaning, rather than for the enchanted castle and its suffering king, in what seems to be a shift from the Celtic to the Christian milieu. The Grail also evolved physically from Chrétien's deep platter to the holy vessel which, in the Queste, is vaguely identified with the Mass chalice and ciborium, but is nowhere described in any detail as a tangible object. The Grail in the Queste has become more than the Mass chalice or the cup of the Last Supper or a magical provider of food; it is the mystical symbol of God and of a way of life and death centred solely upon him.

The Grail texts, written in several languages, extend over at least three centuries. They represent not one legend, but many different legends, arising from divergent cultures, customs and mythologies. One may and should consider each legend in relation to the others, always understanding, however, that a true synthesis, a single coherent, orderly Grail story can never be created



from the various tales. Like few other Arthurian themes, the Grail story is recreated and shaped afresh by each new author.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE HOLY GRAIL AS HEALER AND DESTROYER IN MALORY

A discussion of the nature of the Holy Grail in Malory's works hinges quite naturally on what the critic believes to have been the author's relationship to his source. Professor Vinaver considers Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal "to all intents and purposes a translation of the French Queste del Saint Graal".<sup>1</sup> In his notes to the second edition of the Works, he indicates the various deviations which Malory made from his source, alterations which Vinaver attributes to Malory's style and manner and to his attitude to his source; he feels that Malory consistently secularized the Queste. This concept of Malory as translator is, of course, an accurate one; he was not an original creator of tales, but, like his predecessors, he took what was good and approved by society in general, and reworked or simply presented it for his contemporaries' pleasure and edification. The greatest artists of his time were not averse to this method, which was a highly praised technique and tradition. What was good and revered was worthy to be repeated and, if possible, incorporated into

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<sup>1</sup> Vinaver, "Commentary", Works, p. 1534.

an author's own work.<sup>2</sup> Malory did not pretend to be creating an original work: he did not need to, for such originality was not as desirable and valuable a feature for his contemporaries as it is for us. Again and again he tells us that he is quoting what "the Freynshe booke sayth",<sup>3</sup> and more often than not, unlike Chaucer, this is just what he is doing.

It is well to remember, however, that just as, to Malory's mind, there was no harm in using the material of other writers, there was also no harm in altering it, if necessary; for the written word at this time had not yet reached the high level of inviolability that it has today. Malory followed the general outline of the action of the Queste quite closely. It would have been impossible for him to change the crucial segments of the story which deal with the holy vessel without writing a completely new romance, but he attempted to make the story more attractive to himself and to his readers by altering parts of the French original. The monastic author's constant equating of knightly pursuits with mortal sin, for example, was unacceptable to Malory; it was not so much a question

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<sup>2</sup> Chaucer, for example, used this technique in his poem The House of Fame; he included a summary of the Aeneid - not because it had any crucial bearing on the rest of the poem, but because it was a good story from antiquity, and well worth hearing again.

<sup>3</sup> Malory, p. 540.

of Malory's inability to understand the theology of the Queste, as of his reluctance to accept the teaching propounded. His purpose was to entertain his audience, not to convert them from the glamour and sin of the court.

The manner in which Malory handles the first of the source's moralizing passages is indicative of his subsequent method: in the French, an old man enters the court as preparations are being made for the departure of the knights in search of the Grail. He warns the knights that they must be cleansed of sin before they begin their quest, and forbids them to take their ladies with them on the journey.

'Ce vos mande par moi Nascienz li hermites que nus en ceste Queste ne maint dame ne damoisele qu'il ne chiee en pechié mortel: ne nus n'i entre qui ne soit confés ou qui n'aille a confesse, car nus en si haut servise ne doit entrer devant qu'il soit netoiez et espurgiez de totes vilanies et de toz pechiés mortex.<sup>4</sup>

In this same passage in the Tale of the Sankgreal, Malory completely ignores the phrase which equates travelling in the company of the ladies with mortal sin, and omits the references to "totes vilanies" and "toz pechiés mortex", though he does use the word "synnes":

'...thus sendith you Nacien the eremyte worde that none in thys queste lede lady nother jantillwoman with hym, for

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Pauphilet, ed., La Queste del Saint Graal, roman du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1923), p. 19.

hit ys nat to do in so hyghe a servyse  
 as they laboure in. For I warne you  
 playne, he that ys nat clene of hys  
 synnes he shall nat se the mysteryes of  
 oure Lorde Jesu Cryste.<sup>5</sup>

It is only natural that there should be some change between La Queste del Saint Graal and its English version, if only because the two works were written by men separated by barriers of language and culture, as well as by geographical and temporal distance. Malory translated the Queste almost two hundred and fifty years after it had been written; he wrote in a different milieu from the creator of the original romance, in a different country and under different personal circumstances. Whatever the English knight's true identity may have been, it is reasonably certain that he did not live in a monastery, as the French author did. The material which Malory used comes to us filtered through his own personality, even as the original Grail story was influenced by the character and circumstances of the author of the Queste and was altered by him accordingly. The latter's alterations of his basic material were more extensive and rigorous than Malory's, undoubtedly because he was following a clearly-defined programme in his interpretation and re-casting of the traditional material. Malory changed only what he found unacceptable, leaving the basic structure and sequence of events intact. The

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<sup>5</sup> Malory, p. 868-869.

French author, however, very definitely set out to use the popular Arthurian material for religious purposes. The resultant theologically erudite romance, interspersed with homiletic comment, is far removed from Chrétien's story of the ignorant Percyvale's adventures in a thinly-disguised Celtic underworld. Malory tended to follow his source quite closely, in general, with certain deviations in the depiction of character, notably that of Sir Galahad and Sir Launcelot. Before character presentation is dealt with, however, Malory's treatment of the Grail itself must be examined.<sup>6</sup>

Although it is frequently mentioned, the Sankgreal actually manifests itself only six times in the Tale of the Sankgreal: veiled in white samite, it appears in the court of King Arthur; Launcelot is present in a half-waking state when it heals a sick knight; he is permitted later to see the holy vessel, still veiled at the castle of the Corbenic; it manifests itself at King Pelles' court at Corbenic before Launcelot and the castle's inhabitants: later an elaborate Grail procession and service take place in the same place; finally, the Grail appears to Galahad, Bors, and Percyvale in the magic ship which bears them and the Grail to the city of Sarras, the final earthly resting

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<sup>6</sup> In the discussion which follows, it is to be assumed that the French and English versions are identical, unless otherwise noted.

place of the mysterious vessel.

Possibly the most striking of the appearances of the Grail is its entry into the palace at Camelot. The stage has been set by mysterious events - Galahad's arrival, his claiming of the sword in the stone, and various predictions of the coming of the Grail. Malory makes the most of an impressive scene:

Than anone they harde crakynge and crynge of thundir, that hem thought the palyse sholde all to-dryve. So in the myddys of the blast entyrde a sonnebeame, more clerer by seven tymys than ever they saw day, and all they were alyghted of the grace of the Holy Goste. Then began every knyght to behold other, and eyther saw other, by their semyng, fayrer than- ever they were before. Natforthan there was no knyght that myght speke one worde a grete whyle, and so they loked every man on other as they had bene doome.

Than entird into the halle the Holy Grayle coverde with whyght samyte, but there was none that myght se hit nother whom that bare hit. And there was all the halle fulfilled with good odoures, and every knyght had such metis and drynkes as he beste loved in thys worlde.

And whan the Holy Grayle had bene borne thorow the hall, than the holy vessell departed suddeynly, that they wyst nat where hit becam. Than had they all breth to speke, and than the kyng yelded thankynge to God of Hys good grace that He had sente them.<sup>7</sup>

The Grail's first appearance in the court is strongly reminiscent of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles at Pentecost, as found in the second chapter of

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<sup>7</sup> Malory, p. 865.

The Acts of the Apostles:

And when the days of the pentecost were accomplished, they were all together in one place; And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty wind coming, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them parted tongues as it were of fire, and it sat upon every one of them: And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they began to speak with divers tongues, according as the Holy Ghost gave them to speak.

(Acts II, 1-4)

The parallels with Pentecost are unmistakable and undoubtedly intentional. The Grail appears on the feast of Pentecost; the general noise and power of the visitation in both cases is considerable; the human participants in both incidents are touched by the Holy Spirit. Even the "sonnebeame" which illumines Arthur's palace is reminiscent of the fire which appears to hover over the heads of the Apostles. There is a somewhat nebulous link in the fact that the powers of speech of the members of both groups are affected: the Apostles are given the gift of tongues, while the knights are struck dumb for a short time.

There the Scriptural parallel ends. The Grail, described only as something "coverde with whyght samyte", enters the hall bringing with it good odours and the food which each knight desires most. When it departs, the knights of the Round Table, led by Sir Gawain, vow to go on a quest in search of it in order that they may see it more clearly.



For much of the tale, the holy vessel remains hidden and unseen by human eyes until its final appearance in the court of King Pellès, when it is revealed to the worthy knights of the world.

Although up to this final appearance the Grail is an object of mystery, there does seem to be either a development of meaning or a progressive revelation of reality. There are, of course, two traditions at work: the Celtic and the Christian. (It is worth noting, perhaps, that the two elements never occur simultaneously in one appearance of the Grail.) As the tale unfolds, the Grail becomes more clearly defined, more closely identified with the chalice and the Eucharistic Presence at the consecration of the Mass. Yet twice the Grail is definitely said to provide food for its followers: at its first appearance, and at the fourth apparition in the castle of Corbenic; both times the food provided is real nourishment, in contrast to the spiritual fare of the Eucharist. On the other hand, there is the definite aura of Christian liturgy surrounding the holy vessel. This identification of the Grail mysteries with the Mass, initiated by Robert de Boron, was seized upon by the author of the Queste del Saint Graal and fully elaborated. There was no real reason why Sir Thomas Malory should have seen fit to alter such an interpretation in his English

version of the tale. If anything, he tended to make this identification more strongly than his source, and possibly saw the Grail merely as some kind of symbolic representation of the Eucharist.

In its first appearance, the Holy Grail gives the assembled knights food as well as spiritual grace. Except for the covering of white samite, there are no liturgical elements connected with this visitation, although the white cloth which covers the Grail may be likened to the chalice veil of the Roman Rite of the Mass.

The holy vessel which Sir Launcelot encounters near the wayside chapel has a few more liturgical accoutrements. Within the chapel, which he cannot enter, we are told that Launcelot found "a fayre awter full rychely arayde with clothe of clene sylke, and there stoode a clene fayre candyllstykke whych bare six grete candyls therein, and the candilstyk was of sylver".<sup>8</sup> These six candlesticks and a silver table form a sort of miniature Grail procession which goes to meet a sick knight who is seeking a cure for his illness, much as the Grail procession in Chrétien's romance aids the aging king in the inner room. The silver table is more or less a combination of the altar of the Mass and the table of Joseph of Arimathea as described by Robert de Boron.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Malory, p. 893-894.

<sup>9</sup> Robert de Boron, *Le Roman de L'Estoire dou Graal*, ed., William A. Nitze (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1927), p. 43.

Launcelot's vision of the Grail through the open door of a room in the castle of Corbenic has further connotations of the Mass. Because he is unworthy of the honour, he is forbidden to enter the room; but in the midst of the chamber he sees the Grail covered with red samite surrounded by angels, one holding a burning candle, another carrying a cross and "the ornementis of an awter".<sup>10</sup> Malory continues: "And before the holy vessell he saw a good man clothed as a pryste, and hit semed that he was at the sakerynge [i.e., the consecration] of the masse."<sup>11</sup> The table of silver is being used as an altar here, and the presence of what are vaguely termed altar ornaments (the customary cruets of water and wine?) along with what may be an altar crucifix, all point to the celebration of a Mass. Malory's comment on Launcelot's impression of being at the consecration of the Mass reinforces this argument. The French is much more specific: the surrounding angels carry censers (typical at High Masses) as well as burning candles, and the author mentions that it is at the Elevation of the Host that Launcelot has the vision of the three men ("Et quant il dut lever corpus domini, il fu avis a Lancelot que desus les mains au preudome en haut avoit trois homes").<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Malory, p. 1015.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Queste, p. 255.

The fifth appearance of the Grail in the court of King Pelles, the climactic vision, is the one in which identification of the holy vessel with the Mass is clearest. It appears to Galahad, Percyvale, and Bors, and nine other worthy knights from all over Christendom. The choice of the number twelve was hardly an arbitrary one; it inevitably reminds the reader of the chosen Twelve who ate, drank and lived in close communion with the Saviour, as well as calling to mind the intimacy of the apostles with Christ in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, when the Holy Eucharist was established. It is the latter which is echoed here: the setting for the coming of the Grail mysteries is a "chambir" rather than a hall, and one man, Joseph of Arimathea, is the centre of attention, even though he is not particularly identified with Christ:

And therewithall besemed them that  
 there cam an olde man and four angelis  
 from hevyn, clothed in lyknesse  
 of a byshop, and had a crosse in hys honde.  
 And thes four angels bare hym up in a  
 chayre and sette hym downe before the table  
 of sylver whereuppon the Sankgreall was.  
 And hit semed that he had in myddis of hys  
 forehede lettirs which seyde, 'Se you here  
 Joseph, the firste byssshop of Crystendom, the  
 same which oure Lorde succoured in the cité  
 of Sarras in the spirituell palleys'<sup>13</sup>

After the arrival of the bishop, there follows a Grail procession:

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<sup>13</sup> Malory, p. 1029.

So with that, they harde the chambir dore opyn, and there they saw angels; and two bare candils of wexe, and the thirde bare a towell, and the fourthe a speare which bled mervaylously, that the droppis felle within a boxe which he hylde with hys othir hande. And anone they sette the candyls uppon the table, and the thirde the towell uppon the vessell, and the fourth the holy speare evyn upryght upon the vessell.

And then the byssshop made sembelaunte as thoughe he wolde have gone to the sakeryng of a masse, and than he toke an obley [wafer] which was made in lyknesse of brede.<sup>14</sup>

At the "sakeryng" of the mass which follows, there appears to the assembled knights a figure in the likeness of a child which somehow becomes the bread so "that all they saw hit that the brede was fourmed of a fleyshely man. And than he put hit into the holy vessell agayne, and than he ded that longed to a preste to do masse".<sup>15</sup>

The procession which, with its candles, spear and solemn bearers, had slightly resembled the Grail procession in Chrétien, has become a definitely Christian service. The holy man who has appeared to the knights is celebrating Mass; in the passage which immediately follows that just quoted, the bishop kisses Galahad and his fellow knights, in what seems to be the traditional "kiss of peace" of the Roman Mass. The old man invites the knights to partake of the feast: "ye shall be fedde afore thys table with swete metis that never knyghtes yet tasted".<sup>16</sup> He then vanishes.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The scene which follows is undeniably Eucharistic:

Than loked thay and saw a man com oute  
of the holy vessell that had all the  
sygnes of the Passion of Jesu Cryste  
bledynge all opynly, and sayde,

'My knyghtes and my servauntes  
and my trew chyldren which bene come  
oute of dedly lyff into the spirituall  
lyff, I woll no lenger cover me frome  
you, but ye shall se now a parte of my  
secretes and of my hydde thynges. Now  
holdith and resseyvith the hyghe order  
and mete whych ye have so much desired.'

Than toke He hymselff the holy  
vessell and cam to sir Galahad. And he  
kneled adowne and resseyved hys Saveoure.  
And after hym so ressayved all hys felowis, and  
they thought hit so sweete that hit was  
mervaylous to telle.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, the Grail has provided food, but this time it is food for the soul - Holy Communion. The Lord reveals what the Grail actually is, describing it as "the holy dysshe wherein [He] ete the lambe on Estir Day...".<sup>18</sup>

When He adds "and now hast thou sene that thou moste desired to se", it is not clear if He is referring to himself or to the Grail.

"That thou most desired to se": the object of the Grail Quest must surely be Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>19</sup> Neither the Grail as a relic nor the Grail as the Eucharist can be the object of the Quest. Although the cup of the Last Supper was, next to the Cross, the most precious Christian relic of the period, its value was not intrinsic, but

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 1030.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Since both the author of the French source and Malory were Christians, and since the Queste is quite expressly Christ-centred, it is only logical to see the Grail in a Christian context.

came from its physical association with Christ: it was this cup that Christ held in his hands at the Last Supper, and it was in this vessel, through the mystery of transubstantiation, that he made himself sacramentally present to his apostles. Similarly, the Eucharist alone was not the object of the Quest, but Christ as revealed and comprehended in this Sacrament. Frequent reception of Christ in Holy Communion was a practice encouraged by the Church in the Middle Ages; a quest for something one could find any morning at any church or chapel seems therefore quite illogical. The object of the search cannot be simply the Sacrament of the Eucharist. It is my suggestion that the knights, in a spiritual pilgrimage, are seeking the Person of Christ - as he is connected with the cup of the Last Supper, with its Eucharistic overtones, and as this Person is found by the devout believer in Holy Communion. It is the Person of Christ, rather than its expression or symbolic presentation in the Grail, which is important. Routine and habit tend to dull one's senses; even the tremendous mystery of the Presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament can become meaningless after months or years of unthinking reception of Holy Communion. An awareness of the reality of the Eucharist is crucial for the health and growth of one's spiritual life; that life is a daily living in and with Christ. Mere intellectual

understanding is not sufficient; a true meeting with Christ is of supreme importance. This personal experience of the Lord in one's life is, to my mind, the real object of the Quest. It entails a re-awakening of the believer to a new commitment.

In Malory, the Sankgreal, as a symbol of Christ, never fails to have an effect on those who come in contact with it, even those like Sir Melyas, who do not intentionally seek it. This young knight initially wants only to follow and serve Sir Galahad in his quest; yet he is wounded near death for his sin of pride in taking upon himself "so rych a thyng as the hygh Order of Knyghthode ys withoute clene confession",<sup>20</sup> and for his sin of presumption in entering upon the quest of the Sankgreal, "for hit may nat be encheved but by vertuous lyvyng".<sup>21</sup> Seemingly unaware of the responsibility he has taken upon himself, and in that sense innocent, he nevertheless suffers the consequences of even such a remote contact with the Grail when he is wounded by the two mysterious knights who symbolize Sir Melyas' two sins of "covetyse and...theffte".<sup>22</sup> None but the purest can achieve the Grail, or even remain unscathed in its pursuit.

Such a severe and demanding ideal is very different

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<sup>20</sup> Malory, p. 886.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



from the Gospel image of Christ as a compassionate, loving God-man, and I believe that Malory was aware of the dichotomy. The English knight adopted this concept of the Grail from the Queste written by a French monk whose view of the Arthurian kingdom and the Grail was surely coloured by the condition of his life. The rigorous mortification, self-denial and sometimes Pharisaical interest in rules rather than the Rule, which religious communities forced upon themselves sometimes led to just such a hard and utterly terrifying view of the one who was the source of their lives and action - Christ. As they required more and more from themselves to please God, the figure of Christ became, for some, more and more exacting, unyielding and unreasonable. The just but loving Son of Man of the Gospels, whose most frequent act was loving forgiveness, became an exacting spiritual taskmaster demanding adherence to the letter of each rule, and punishing sinners sometimes without logic or reason. Jesus Christ emerged as the God of Anger one so often associates with the Old Testament after a superficial reading.

The God represented by the Grail is too often shown in this primitive light. There is, for example, a definite parallel between the Queste and an Old Testament episode in the story of King Evelake, who, according to Malory, came too close to the Grail so that "oure Lorde

was displeased with hym...[and] God stroke hym allmoste blynde",<sup>23</sup> and the fate of Uzzah, who, in the days of King David was struck down by God for touching the Ark of the Covenant. (2 Samuel, 6-8). Uzzah's act was one of disrespect, an offence against the holiness of the presence of God. Evelake's punishment is never really accounted for, in the French source or in Malory. One feels that the monastic author would require no other explanation than "the ways of God are not the ways of men", and he does include mention of the hand warning Evelake to keep away before he strikes him down. Perhaps repelled by the Queste's presentation of God through the Grail, Malory makes the destroying aspect of the Grail more definite and more illogical than it appears in the source. Malory omits the Lord's warning to Evelake, and heightens the unfairness of God's action with his own description (not found in the French) of a sick knight who is allowed not only to approach the holy vessel, but to kiss it - without punishment or censure of any kind. Malory seems to be underlining his dislike of the French author's "God" by a deliberately harsh rendering of this figure. The French author's Grail as a symbol of Christ, and Malory's intensified version of it reveal a God essentially of law not love.

In keeping with the concept of law, the Grail is

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 908.

an instrument of judgment throughout the tale. It is apparently a means of examining and judging on a spiritual rather than on a worldly level, the best of all earthly courts, the Round Table. The fellowship of the Round Table is undoubtedly the apex of knightly honour and achievement. Knights come from all over the world to be a part of it; "for all the worlde, crystenyd and hethyn, repayryth unto the Rounde Table, and whan they ar chosyn to be of the felyshyp of the Rounde Table they thynke hemselff more blessed and more in worship than they had gotyn halff the world".<sup>24</sup> This fellowship represents the highest level of man's earthly honour, symbolizing truth and justice, and including among its members only the best of men, in prowess and in character. There is a further connection of course within the Christian context; for the Round Table is traditionally identified with the first disciples of Christ, who also represented man's highest aspirations. In the Tale of the Sankgreal in particular, the members of the fellowship are presented as symbolic of the disciples of Christ. They too, according to both the Queste and Malory "have loste hir fadirs and hir modirs and hir kynne, and hir wyves and hir chyldren, for to be of [the] felyship".<sup>25</sup> In a sense, then, one might say that the court of Arthur should represent the best of both man's secular

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<sup>24</sup> Malory, p. 906.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

and his sacred aspirations.

It is the holy and pure knights of the Round Table who achieve the final vision of the Holy Grail; worldly and sinful knights like Gawayne fail and sometimes die miserable deaths. The kingdom is called into question on Christian spiritual grounds and found seriously lacking. This measuring of the court in new terms leads to a certain confusion in ideas and vocabulary. A way of thinking that includes at its heart paradoxes such as "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it." (Luke 9, 24) can accept healing in apparent destruction and many other seeming contradictions.

In the Works, the Grail heals on three specific occasions. The first two instances, found in The Book of Sir Tristram of Lyones, involve strictly physical cures. Sir Ector and Sir Percyvale mistakenly wound each other in battle and lie near death; the Sankgreal appears, "and furthwithall they were as hole of hyde and lymme as ever they wer in their lyff".<sup>26</sup> Later in the same book, Sir Launcelot is cured of his madness in the presence of the Grail: "and so they bare hym into a towre, and so into a chambir where was the holy vessell of the Sankgreal... And there cam an holy man and unhyllid that vessell, and

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<sup>26</sup> Malory, p. 816-817.

so by myracle and by vertu of that holy vessell sir Launcelot was heled and recoverde".<sup>27</sup> (Although the Tale of Sir Tristram has a different source from that of the Tale of the Sankgreal, the incident is of interest and value to us in this study, if only for the respect with which the Grail is treated, and the healing powers attributed to it.)

In the Tale of the Sankgreal itself, the sole clear example of healing by the Grail is definitely connected with spiritual as well as physical cure. This fact is no doubt explained by the religious bent of the author of the source for this tale, and by his specifically religious purpose in writing it. The author of the source for the Tristram story had no such purpose in mind, and for him the Grail was perhaps holy magic among secular marvels. In this third case of healing, Launcelot is a witness to the miracle; "half-wakyng and half-slepyng",<sup>28</sup> he sees a sick knight on a litter who laments: "'A sweete Lorde! Whan shall thys sorow leve me, and whan shall the holy vessel com by me wherethorow I shall be heled? For I have endured thus longe for litill trespasse, a full grete whyle!'"<sup>29</sup> In this last statement, the knight acknowledges that his illness is caused by some sin which he has committed. Having made his confession of personal guilt, and once again begging forgiveness and health of God ("'Fayre swete

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 824.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 894.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Lorde whych ys here within the holy vessell, take hede unto me, that I may be hole of thys malody!"<sup>30</sup>), he humbly and devoutly approaches the Grail on hands and knees, kisses it, and is made whole.

Launcelot's spiritual healing begins here; for in Malory's own words, "he toke repentaunce aftir that".<sup>31</sup> (In keeping with the spiritual viewpoint of the original author, many unpleasant and apparently unfortunate and harmful happenings are in reality occasions of healing in a spiritual sense.) A pointed comparison is made between the knight cured of his sinfulness and the sinful, unhealed Launcelot, who remains apparently asleep and unable to move throughout the entire Grail visit. The healed knight wonders at Launcelot's behaviour: "'I have mervayle of thys slepyng knight that he had no power to awake whan they holy vessell was brought hydir.'"<sup>32</sup> His squire rightly concludes that "'he dwellith in som dedly synne whereof he was never confessed'".<sup>33</sup> Shamed and grieved by what has happened, and finally realizing that his old sin defiles him and hinders his quest for holy things, Launcelot begins to repent, and, seeking out a hermit priest, confesses his sins, and sets out afresh on the quest.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 895.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

All of this knight's humiliations are for his spiritual betterment. Again and again hermits and priests tell him that he can not achieve the Grail because of his deadly sin, and urge him to penance: "'Seke ye hit ye may well, but thoughe hit were here 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...'"<sup>34</sup> He is also shamed by his defeats in jousts, an unheard-of event in the life of this, the best of all knights.

The final instance of healing in the tale involves Launcelot; on the surface, it illustrates the destroying power of the Grail, but, in reality, it is an occasion of redemptive healing and an excellent example of the paradoxical language and symbolism of the romance. This crucial appearance of the Grail to Sir Launcelot occurs in a chamber of the castle of Corbenic. Launcelot, burning with desire to see the holy vessel, is permitted only to kneel at the door and see it within the chamber, in a veiled manner; he is forbidden to enter. In his vision he sees a man dressed as a priest lift up a man and show him to the people gathered there. The priest seems about to fall to the earth under this weight, and, heedless of the warning given to him earlier, Launcelot rushes into the room to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 927.

aid him. He is immediately punished for his disobedience:

Ryght so entird he into the chambir and  
cam toward the table of sylver, and whan he  
cam nyghe hit he felt a breeth that hym thought  
hit was entromedled with fyre, which smote hym  
so sore in the vysayge that hym thought hit  
brente hys vysayge. And therewith he felle  
to the erthe and had no power to aryse, as he  
that was so araged that had loste the power  
of hys body and hys hyrynge and syght. Than  
felte he many hondys whych toke hym up and  
bare hym oute of the chambir doore and leffte hym  
there semyng dede to all people.<sup>35</sup>

He lies unconscious and apparently dead for twenty-four days as a "ponyshement for the four-and-twenty yere that he had bene a synner".<sup>36</sup> It is an act of destruction on the part of the Grail, perhaps, but the final result of the incident leads one to wonder if it is not rather an illustration of the sacred vessel's healing power. Sir Launcelot is stunned into unconsciousness, but he is not killed. His pain and his coma-like state are a purgative punishment for sin which should leave him a cleansed and holy man. He becomes "as a dede man",<sup>37</sup> but his soul is given life. He himself regrets being called from his stupor:

And whan he saw folke he made grete sorow  
and seyde,  
'Why have ye awaked me? For I was more  
at ease than I am now. A, Jesu Cryste,  
who myght be so blyssed that myght se  
opynly Thy grete mervayles of secretnesse  
there where no synner may be?'<sup>38</sup>

In his own measure, Launcelot has "encheved" the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 1016.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 1017.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



Sankgreal, and the healing of his soul has been achieved in the process. Perhaps this is the true meaning of the quest - the elect (Galahad, Percyvale, Bors), already holy, rise to greater heights of sanctity, while one of the worldly men (Launcelot) rises from sin and saves his soul. Each man achieves the Grail in his own way.

Undoubtedly, however, the overwhelming impression of the Holy Grail in the Works is that of a messenger of destruction, division and death. The Grail has a shattering effect on all that it touches - both society and individuals. One must determine carefully whether this shattering is for good or ill. Principally, of course, it destroys the fellowship of the Round Table as a physical and as a spiritual entity. The fellowship is broken initially when one by one the knights make vows to go on a quest for the Grail, and finally and irrevocably when less than half of them return from their adventures. Arthur predicts their doom in these words: "'I am sure at this quest of the Sankegreall shall all ye of the Rownde Table departe, and nevyr shall I se you agayne hole togydirs...'"<sup>39</sup> The king accuses Gawayne of betraying him by beginning the quest, and bemoans the fate of his beloved fellowship:

'Alas!' seyde kynge Arthure unto sir  
Gawayne, 'ye have nygh slayne me for the  
avow that ye have made, for thorow you ye

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<sup>39</sup> Malory, p. 864.

have berauffte me the fayryst and the  
 trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene  
 togydir in ony realme of the worlde.  
 For whan they departe frome hense I am sure  
 they all shall never mete more togydir  
 in thys worlde for they shall dye many  
 in the queste. And so hit forthynkith  
 nat me a litill, for I have loved them  
 as well as my lyff. Wherefore hit shall  
 greve me ryght sore, the departicion of  
 thys felyship, for I have had an olde custom  
 to have hem in my felyship.<sup>40</sup>

A deeper destruction of the fellowship ensues, one which involves the brotherhood of the knights upon which the Round Table rests. Many of the knights die fighting one another by mistake. There are two accounts of battle between blood brothers as well, events which symbolize the disintegration of ties of brotherhood among the knights of Arthur's Round Table. Gawayne, not recognizing his brother knight, Sir Uwayne, slays him; Sir Bors and Sir Lyonel are prevented from killing each other only by divine intervention. The latter episode is more than a single case of mistaken identity and senseless slaughter. Sir Bors, in true search of the Grail and the holy things of God's kingdom, consciously separates himself from his sinful brother - first by choosing to rescue a kidnapped maiden rather than aid his brother Lyonel, who is also in difficulty, and secondly, by refusing to raise a hand in his own defence when Lyonel tries to kill him in revenge.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 866-867.

Finally, Bors leaves his brother and continues his search for the Sankgreal alone.

The immediate effect on the coming of the Sankgreal upon the court at Camelot is one of separation: during the vision of the Grail in the hall, the knights are unable to communicate with one another for a time. This initial lack of communication, a minor feature of the experience, is quite indicative of the Sankgreal's further influence on the court. The king is soon separated from his beloved knights, for he alone does not go on this quest. Similarly the knights, having been forbidden by a holy man to take "lady nother jantillwoman" on the journey, are separated from their ladies, brother kills brother, and "every knyght toke the way that hym lyked beste".<sup>41</sup> Only Arthur and Guinevere, the ladies of the court, and the servants and children remain in Camelot. "And there was wepyng of ryche and poore, and the kyng turned away and myght nat speke for wepyng."<sup>42</sup>

These are physical, circumstantial divisions and separations. A more serious division soon begins: the separation of the holy from the worldly knights. The initial warning from Nacien the eremyte is given at the beginning of the quest in the great hall at Camelot:

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 872.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

"he that ys nat clene of hys synnes he shall nat se the mysteryes of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste".<sup>43</sup>

This division is reinforced by the author's use of a specific knight as the archetypal worldly knight. We find in Sir Gawayne a perfect antithesis to the ideal knight, Galahad. Indeed, these two knights are regularly contrasted, particularly in the Queste, as representatives of the two ways which lie before every man. Throughout much of the tale, Gawayne is seeking Galahad, in order to find the Grail, certain because of prophecies that this knight will be most likely to find it. A hermit, however, tells him "'[Galahad] woll nat of youre felyship,...for ye be wycked and synfull, and he ys full blyssed'".<sup>44</sup> With this comment, the antithesis between sacred and profane as exemplified by the characters of these two knights is established. It is understandable that Gawayne and his friends cannot find Galahad's trail. Malory tells us that "they loste the way that sir Galahad rode. And there everych of hem departed from other";<sup>45</sup> they can no more comprehend the inner way he follows than they can find the actual road he travels.

Certain contrasts are continually made between the holy knights (Galahad, Percyvale, Bors, and, in a sense, Launcelot), and the worldly knights who have Gawayne and

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<sup>43</sup> Malory, p. 869.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 890.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 891.

Lyonel at their head. The sinful knights, through stupidity or pride, have not seen fit to repent of their sins, confess themselves and purpose to amend their lives before setting out on the quest; as a consequence, they are doomed to failure in the quest, and, in some cases, die or are damned. The true Grail knights have understood the necessity of repentance and a new life, knowing that only through God's grace and pleasure will the quest be fulfilled. The Grail knights, unlike the others, do the will of God, and do not kill the adversaries that they meet along the way. This too has a spiritual significance, which is related to Gawayne by one of the ubiquitous hermits that he meets in his quest:

'hit apperith nat to no synners (wherefore mervayle ye nat though ye fayle thereoff and many othir, for ye bene an untrew knight and a grete murtherar), and to good men signifieth othir thynges than murthir. ... There bene an hondred such as ye bene shall never prevayle but to have shame'.<sup>46</sup>

It is interesting that the only time these two contrasted knights meet, is in a tournament at which Sir Galahad does battle with Sir Gawayne, and wounds him so severely that the worldly knight cannot continue in the quest. The symbol of the knight of God triumphing over the knight of the world is unmistakable. It is ironically fitting that the most worldly knight of the court, who

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 948.

initiated the quest, is the first to give it up.

A striking illustration of the dichotomy between the two factions of knights is found in the number of adventures that they encounter. If one were to believe the evidence of other romances with regard to various quests, the adventures met along the way are every bit as important as the quest itself. (In fact, many of these quests are never accomplished, and exist solely as a pretext for the knight to be on the road.) The knight errant cannot turn a corner without stumbling onto some exciting monster or knight or sorcerer. A plethora of adventures is, in most romances, a sign of fruitful living and of God's favour and approval, just as riches and sons were looked on as evidence of righteousness and Divine approbation in the Old Testament. In Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal, however, the quest is all-important, rather than subordinate and circumstantial, but the usual concept of adventures is still an efficient gauge of true success.

The three holy knights have adventures aplenty, both natural and magical. The others, however, have rather different luck. As Malory says, "And there sir Uwayne tolde sir Gawayne that he had mett with none adventures syth he departed frome the courte. 'Nother yet we' seyde sir Gawayne."<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere, Gawayne complains

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<sup>47</sup> Malory, p. 890-891.

to Sir Ector that he can find no excitement, "for he founde nat the tenthe parte of adventures as they were wonte to have".<sup>48</sup> Sir Ector sums up the situation succinctly: "Hit semyth me we laboure all in waste."<sup>49</sup> The majority of the knights meet this same problem, and turn back from the quest or are killed. The adventures, the former core of the knightly quest, have disappeared, and the knights, entangled as they are with the world and its emphasis on fame and praise, are not spiritually strong enough to continue seeking for "the holy thynges of God". Their fate, both spiritually and temporally, is failure.

At the end of the tale, Arthur's court, if not utterly destroyed, is at least decimated. Galahad, the best of knights, has died and is gone to his heavenly Father's kingdom; Percyvale has also died; Sir Launcelot, the best of worldly knights, has returned to the court chastened and supposedly reformed. "But many of the knyghtes of the Rounde Table were slayne and destroyed, more than halff".<sup>50</sup> The earthly kingdom, epitomized by the fellowship of the Round Table, is waning. The Holy Grail is the source of this destruction, but, for the fellowship as a whole, unlike Sir Launcelot, there is no real spiritual benefit derived from the havoc. The

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 941

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 943.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 1020.

best of King Arthur's knights are gone; there is nothing anyone can do to reclaim them, for the kingdom has not met the challenge of the Sankgreal and survived the encounter. In the original French, the story ends neatly, if rather abruptly, with Sir Bors' return to Camelot and the chronicling of the Grail Quest by clerks; it is a somber closing scene. Malory's tale ends on a homier, more comfortable note: he adds to his source material a message from Galahad to his father Launcelot delivered by Sir Bors, urging Launcelot to "remember of thys unsyker world" <sup>51</sup> and significantly includes a description of Launcelot and Bors swearing life-long friendship and love. The latter is perhaps an attempt to re-establish the lost brotherhood of the court, as well as an effort on Malory's part to soften the harsh, failure-clouded closing scene of the French.

The chief Grail knight, Sir Galahad, embraces both the healing and destroying aspects of the Sankgreal within his own person and actions in the tale. His very existence is inextricably tied up with the holy vessel. We are told that, before the boy's conception, King Pelles "knew well that sir Launcelot shulde gete a pusyll uppon his doughtir, whyche shulde be called sir Galahad, the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntrey shulde be brought

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 1036.



oute of danger; and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved".<sup>52</sup> As a champion of God, he is dauntless, relentless, and ruthless in the cause of his Lord's glory. He is a perfect example of the awful power of the holiness of God. Nothing can withstand him: on his first visit to Camelot, he sleeps in the king's own bed because of the reverence which the court and Arthur have for him; no one, not even his father, Sir Launcelot, acknowledged the best knight in the kingdom, can defeat him in battle.

"Perfect" is the best word to describe Galahad. As a knight, he is invincible; as a gentleman, he is perfectly courteous (for example, he releases rather than ransoms or murders all those whom he has defeated in battles or tournaments), he is always gentle and polite to ladies and to men of God. As a Christian, he is, of course, without peer: he alone of all the knights of the Round Table is privileged to see the Grail and experience its wonders without having to go through any period of temptation or purification, such as Sir Bors and Sir Percyvale must endure; there is no mention of this knight being tempted by the devil in any way, (although even Christ had to endure such temptation). He merely searches steadfastly for the Grail, trusting in the Providence of Almighty God to lead him to it, and

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<sup>52</sup> Malory, p. 794.

bringing the judgment of Christ with him wherever he goes.

Sir Galahad and the Sankgreal present a test to the unsuspecting world: they offer a choice which must eventually be made by every man, a choice between God and the world, between God and self. Launcelot chooses to listen, to repent, and to accompany the elect part of the way on their journey; Gawayne, who spends more time running away from hermits and holy men than listening to them, fails in his quest for the Holy Grail, and possibly is damned for his negligence and stubbornness.

Galahad is essentially an outsider in this story. He is not part of the court at Camelot, like the other knights, but, having been raised by nuns, comes from a sheltered world which has a different orientation from that of Camelot; he comes to redeem Arthur's kingdom, according to Pauphilet, who compares Galahad and his exploits to the Gospel story: "...son aventures révèlent en lui un saveur, un rédempteur, un juge: souvent elles laissent entrevoir une ressemblance symbolique avec les récits de l'Evangile".<sup>53</sup> The connection between this knight and Christ is hardly accidental, especially in the image of a redeeming force from without the society. Both Christ and Galahad come from another milieu, the former from the Eternal Now of the Blessed Trinity, the latter

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<sup>53</sup> Pauphilet, "Introduction", Queste, p. xi.

from the pious and holy world of a contemplative nunnery. Each young man took on the external trappings of the society which he was to enter: Christ became man, taking upon himself flesh and blood, and a human soul; Galahad became a knight of the Round Table, accepting all the conventions and rules included in the society, with the exception of those concerning courtly love. There the similarity ends - Christ the Man-god is certainly more human than Galahad appears to be.

In contrast to the image of redeemer, Galahad represents more the destroying than the healing properties of the Holy Grail. His arrival in Camelot initiates the disastrous quest, and results in Launcelot losing face and becoming the second best knight in the realm. He brings failure to all those who are foolish enough to do battle with him, for he is invincible, though he never kills any of his opponents, except, of course, those who are not baptized.<sup>54</sup> He is a rather ruthless source of spiritual and physical healing to those with whom he comes in contact. He rescues the young knight, Melyas de Lyle from death at the hands of two knights, and takes him to a priest for spiritual cleansing and medical assistance, in that order. He definitely does have power: he is the deliverer of the innocent and persecuted at the Madyns Castell, and

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<sup>54</sup> Malory, p. 996 ff.

in an abbey he exorcises a fiend from a tomb.<sup>55</sup> As the embodiment of the Grail, he gives physical healing to three people - Sir Mordrayns,<sup>56</sup> the Fisher King,<sup>57</sup> and, finally, in a scene reminiscent of Peter and John's curing of the lame man in the third chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Sir Galahad heals a cripple at the gates of the city of Sarras: "'Care thou nat', sayde sir Galahad, 'aryse up and shew thy good wyll!' And so he [the cripple] assayde, and found hymselff as hole as ever he was."<sup>58</sup>

Just as Galahad is continually being compared with Christ, so there is a constant identification throughout the tale of this knight with the Holy Grail. Galahad is not just the embodiment of the Sankgreal, which in turn, is a symbol of Christ, he is often described in much the same way as the holy vessel. For example, the colours which one comes to associate with the Grail are identical with those which characterize Galahad. The Grail first appears "coverde with whyght samyte";<sup>59</sup> Launcelot later sees it covered with red samite;<sup>60</sup> finally, it is seen in the magic ship veiled in red. These colours, red and white, are echoed in Galahad's clothing and armour:

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<sup>55</sup> Malory, p. 794.

<sup>56</sup> Malory, p. 882.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 1025.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 1033.

<sup>59</sup> Malory, p. 865.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 1015.

In the meanewhyle com in a good olde man and  
 an awnciente, clothed all in whyght, and  
 there was no knyght knew from whens he com.  
 And with hym he brought a yonge knyght, and  
 bothe on foote, in rede armys, withoute  
 swerde other shyldde sauff a scawberd  
 hangynge by hys syde.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, both Galahad and the holy vessel seem to be in flight from the rest of the world. The knights engaged in the quest for the Grail encounter considerable difficulty in finding it, for it eludes completely all those who are unworthy of it. Many of the knights also seek Galahad, some because he is good, and they desire his companionship (as Sir Melyas de Lyle does), others because they realize that following him or travelling with him is the surest way of finding the Grail. He too eludes all but the holiest of the knights. He refuses the fellowship of Sir Uwayne at the beginning of the quest, leaves Sir Melyas wounded at an abbey, flees Launcelot and Percevale in the waste forest, presumably because they have not yet been tried and made holy, and rides off whenever any knight recognizes him.

Finally, both Galahad and the Sankgreal have an effect on those they encounter. As a judge, as a warrior, and as a redeemer, Galahad touches the lives of everyone he meets, from the worldly knights like his father whom he

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<sup>61</sup> Malory, p. 859.

defeats, to the holy Grail knights whom he inspires and leads to the spiritual kingdom.

It is better to look at Galahad as a force or a symbol than as a person. He represents the power and holiness of God in the world, and has little defined character of his own. He is perfect, he is holy, he is inhuman. Never does he allow emotion or sentiment to deflect him from his goal, which is to find Christ as he is manifested in the Sankgreal.

Be not surprised if Galahad hearkens to no appeal of the world! He has been created and reared for a more arduous task than mere victory in a tourney or in a lady's bower like his father Launcelot. His eye is kept single upon the great Quest; where others falter and lose heart, he knows no discouragement. His eye is clear, his sword is keen, his heart is pure. Galahad is always in training. He will reach his goal. He will see God, and then gladly die.<sup>62</sup>

With this kind of singleness of purpose, it is no wonder that he has no time for any human relationships. Galahad has no love for any of the women he meets; he has no friends. (Bors and Percyvale accompany him, and achieve the vision of the Grail with him, but are really never anything more than Galahad's followers.)

An examination of the character of Galahad as a product of monastic piety and zeal serves to explain much

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<sup>62</sup> William W. Comfort, The Quest of the Holy Grail,  
(London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1926), p. vii.

that is unpleasant in his character. His utter lack of tact, for example, and his lack of reticence in proclaiming himself as the best of Arthur's knights, can be understood, if not completely explained, by a consideration of the monastic author's ideas on the virtue of humility. Humility, essentially, does not involve subservience and servility, but an understanding and an honest acceptance of one's own true character. Galahad is the best of all the knights; God himself has chosen him for this task; as a faithful son, Galahad has accepted this burden, and, along with it, the evaluation of his character. He is the perfect knight: any denial of this, either through words or silence, would be in direct opposition to the core of humility, which is truth. This may explain Galahad's actions and words, but it cannot really make them attractive for Malory. Sir Galahad emerges as a cold, rather priggish young man with an unpleasant habit of saying "I told you so", and little concept of some of the kinder, if more deceptive social amenities.

From a purely worldly point of view, Galahad and the Grail do destroy Arthur's kingdom; it is no longer the same as before, physically, mentally or spiritually. Half the knights are dead, and those who have returned have encountered and learned to their great cost the meaning of deep personal failure. They cannot possibly

still consider Logres the best of all kingdoms. God, through the Sankgreal, has passed judgment on the Round Table and found it wanting:

    this nyght [the Grail] shall departe from  
 the realme of Logrus, and hit shall nevermore  
 be sene here. And knowyst thou wherefore?  
 For he ys nat served nother wor-  
 shipped to hys ryght by hem of thys londe,  
 for they be turned to evyll lyvyng, and  
 therefore I shall disherite them of the  
 honoure whych I have done them.<sup>63</sup>

It is indeed the end; in none of the romances is there mention of a more spiritual fellowship which will arise in place of Camelot. Arthur's kingdom, the best of earthly kingdoms, has failed, and there is nothing to succeed it. The final view of the court in Malory is a peaceful scene: the king and queen, ladies and remaining knights gathered like little children around Sir Launcelot and Sir Bors listening to the adventures of the Grail. It is a gentle picture, but it is a tableau which masks the dying throes of a once ideal kingdom.

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<sup>63</sup> Malory, p. 1030.



## CHAPTER IV

### LAUNCELOT

The preceding chapter dealt with Malory's treatment of the Grail and the pre-eminent Grail Knight, and directed attention to Malory's apparent distaste for certain of the more austere attitudes he found in his source as revealed by omissions and alterations in his own version. One of the outstanding alterations that marks Malory's divergence from his source is his presentation of character. In his depiction of the character of Sir Launcelot, Malory gave the Tale of the Sankgreal a particular direction which the source did not have. As it has been indicated, Malory tended to follow the French Queste quite closely, with the noticeable exception of his handling of Launcelot. His view of the Tale of the Sankgreal and of this knight in particular differed from that of the French author in that Malory looked on the quest of the Grail as primarily an Arthurian rather than a religious adventure. The intrusion of the Grail upon the Round Table and upon Arthur's kingdom, was not a means of contrasting earthly and divine chivalry, and denouncing the former, but an opportunity for the knights to gain even greater glory in this world. It is

on this world that Malory's emphasis falls, again and again; for Malory this world is not an evil world - he even portrays it and its simple pleasures as a comfort to Launcelot in his despair: "So thus he sorowed tyll hit was day, and harde the fowlys synge; than somewhat he was comforted."<sup>1</sup> In the Queste it is as if the French author does not even see the world around him - for him only abstract concepts have any meaning or life. He uses colours, for example, only when they have symbolic meaning - red and white for Galahad and the Holy Spirit, black for "the fynde". It is love of or concern with earthly things that the author of the Queste finds abhorrent and sinful in Launcelot.

For the French monk, all chivalry that is bound to the earth and its vanities, and does not serve the heavenly King, is empty and sin-ridden; Malory tends to ignore the distinction between earthly and celestial chivalry, and, though he condemns pride in knightly adventures,<sup>2</sup> he elsewhere equates "knyghtly dedys and vertuous lyvyng" with the duties of a Christian.<sup>3</sup>

For the author of the French romance, Launcelot is the best of all worldly knights, to be sure, but he is also one who is condemned at every turn for neglecting the responsibility to serve his Creator imposed on him by his God-given strength, and for his adulterous relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Malory, p. 896.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 933.

<sup>3</sup> Malory, p. 891.

with the Queen. He is, quite simply, a sinner. The parable of the bad servant arises in a conversation between Launcelot and a hermit, and the knight admits that he has played this role:

Car je sai bien que Jhesucrist me garni en  
m'enfance de toutes les bones graces que onques  
nus hons poïst avoir; et por ce qu'il me fu si  
larges de prest et je li ai si mal rendu ce qu'il  
m'ot baillié, ai je bien que je en serai jugiez  
come li mauvés serjanz qui le besant repost en  
terre. Car j'ai servi toute ma vie son anemi et  
l'ai guerroié par mon pechié.<sup>4</sup>

He confesses his sinful love of the queen ("il est einsi que je sui morz de pechié d'une moie dame que je ai amee toute ma vie, et ce est la reine Guenievre, la fame le roi Artus"<sup>5</sup>) and, to win God's favour and love, resolves to refrain from further sin. This resolution is of little use, however, for strangers continue to revile him and taunt him with his failure in the quest. At Galahad's coming, for example, a maiden derides Launcelot as second best knight, and later, even after his repentance, a varlet calles him "uns des plus maleureus chevaliers del monde",<sup>6</sup> and foretells his failure in the quest of the Grail: "'vos avez perdue la joie des ciex et la compaignie des anges et toutes honors terriannes, et estes venuz a toutes hontes recevoir'".<sup>7</sup>

The general effect of all this is to paint a picture of Launcelot as almost an archetype of the sinful worldly

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

knight, convicted of sin by the taunts of others and by his own admission; he may achieve some kind of salvation, but he cannot succeed in the quest for the Grail.

Malory, however, by omission and addition softens greatly this hard, almost despairing outline. In the conversation mentioned above, between Launcelot and the hermit, Malory substitutes a brief and not totally accurate summary of the hermit's speech, emphasizing Launcelot's presumption in appearing before the holy vessel in the state of sin, rather than stressing his misuse of his knightly gifts. Launcelot admits his love of the queen, but again Malory shifts the emphasis from the sin of adultery (crucial in the Queste) to the knight's desire for fame and renown for the Queen's sake: "'And never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wyne worship and to cause me the bettir to be beloved, and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit.'" <sup>8</sup>

With regard to the general taunting of Launcelot, the English author ameliorates the maiden's condemnation by adding a modest little speech by the knight in reply to her: "'I know well I was never none of the beste.'" <sup>9</sup>, and omits the conversation with the rude young man altogether. Malory also inserts a statement about Launcelot's

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<sup>8</sup> Malory, p. 897.

<sup>9</sup> Malory, p. 863.

prowess into the explanation of his dream of the kings:

"'And thou ought to thanke God more than any othir man lyvyng, for of a synner erthely thou hast no pere as in knyghthode nother never shall have.'"<sup>10</sup>

A basic difference in the viewpoints of the French author and his English redactor is found in a section added by Malory, and completely inconsistent with his source. In a typical explication of a vision, a "good man" explains to Gawayne the difference between Gawayne and Launcelot and thereby gives us Malory's assessment of Launcelot's character:

'The adventure of the Sankgreall whych be in shewynge now, [ye and many other have undertaken the quest of hit and fynde hit not] for hit apperith nat to no synners (wherefore mervayle ye nat though ye fayle thereoff and many othir, for ye bene an untrew knyght and a grete murtherar), and to good men signifieth othir thynges than murthir. For I dare sey, as synfull as ever sir Launcelot hath byn, sith that wente into the queste of the Sankgreal he slew never man nother nought shall, tyll he com to Camelot agayne; for he hath takyn upon hym to forsake synne. And nere were that he ys nat stable, but by hys thoughte he ys lyckly to turne agayne, he sholde be nexte to encheve hit sauff sir Galahad, hys sonne; but God knowith hys thought and hys unstablenesse. And yett shall he dye ryght an holy man, and no doute he hath no felow of none erthly synfull man lyvyng.'<sup>11</sup>

It is obvious from this that Launcelot's sin, for Malory, is not his adulterous relationship with Guinevere;

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 930.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 948.

nor is it his role as worldly knight. His fault is "unstablenesse". This is a character delineation that the French author simply could not have accepted - especially when Malory adds that, if it were not for this fault, Launcelot would have accomplished the Grail quest along with Galahad. There is no mention of adultery or pride - just "he ys nat stable"; his virtue, the means of his being in some way worthy of the Grail, is not his willingness to repent, as in the French, but his abstaining from killing other knights on this quest.

The crucial difference in Malory's reshaping of the character of Launcelot is the fact that Malory's Launcelot does achieve the Grail - in his own way, and to a limited degree, perhaps, but he achieves a kind of success. Both the French and English Launcelot see the Grail, veiled at Carbonek, and share some of the experiences of the three Grail knights, but, burdened as he is by gibes at his "synfulness" and by forewarnings of failure, the Queste's Launcelot and the reader of the Queste must view his experience of the Grail as ultimate failure. The last picture the French monk gives of Launcelot is that of a saddened and shamed knight:

Celui jor remest Lancelot laiencz molt dolenz  
et corrociez por amor dou preudome qui mainte  
honor li avoit fete....Puis se parti d'ilec et  
erra tant qu'il vint a la cort le roi Artus, ou  
li un et li autre li firent molt grant joie, si

tost come il le virent, car molt desirroient  
 sa venue et çax des autres compaignons, dont  
 il i avoit encore molt poi de revenuz. Et cil  
 qui revenu estoient n'avoient riens fet en la  
 Queste, dont il ont grant honte.<sup>12</sup>

Malory's Launcelot, however, finds some measure of satisfaction - he is acclaimed several times as the best of all worldly knights, he experiences the Grail to a certain extent, and, when he returns to the court, he is greeted not only with joy, as in the French, but with respect and interest; he is invited to tell his story of the Grail, even though, strictly speaking, he is not one of the chosen knights. Launcelot really has the best of both the secular and sacred worlds - prowess and fame on the one hand, repentance and vision on the other.

One of the more interesting aspects of Malory's version of the Grail quest is the pre-eminence given throughout to Launcelot. The French Queste sets a precedent for this, since Launcelot, the best of earthly knights, must be present in order that celestial chivalry may be shown to prevail over him, and in his person, over the contemporary chivalric code. Malory, however, emphasizes Launcelot's role because this character is, for the fifteenth century English knight, the true hero of the tale. Attention is focused immediately on Launcelot at the beginning of the Tale of the Sankgreal - a damsel comes to the court and seeks him out from all the other knights. He is at once

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<sup>12</sup> Queste, p. 262.

involved in the mystery of the quest when he knights Galahad and thereby sets the formal chivalric seal on the Grail hero's education. In this first section ("The Departure"), Launcelot is very much in evidence; it is he who determines the date of the fulfilling of the prophecy of the Siege Perilous.<sup>13</sup> The king forgets his custom of not eating until an adventure has been seen, because he "had so grete joy of sir Launcelot and of his cosynes whych bene com to the court hole and sounde" after their absence.<sup>14</sup> When the sword in the stone is examined, the king urges Launcelot to try it, certain that he is the best knight in the world, but Launcelot refuses, and in the manner of a seer, warns of the penalty of touching the sword, and predicts the quest of the Grail: "' And I woll that ye weyte that thys same day shall the adventure of the Sankgreall begynne, that ys called the holy vessell.'" <sup>15</sup>

When Galahad arrives at Camelot, the court is in awe of him, of course, because of his connection with the Grail and its magic and miracles, but there is interest in him for a totally different reason, as well; he is of note because he is Launcelot's son - "'I may well suppose,' seyde the quene, 'that sir Launcelot begate hym on kynge Pelles doughter, whych made hym to lye by her by enchauntement, and hys name ys Galahad. I wolde fayne se hym,'"

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<sup>13</sup> Malory, p. 855.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 856.



seyde the quene, 'for he muste nedys be a noble man, for so hys fadir ys that hym begate...'".<sup>16</sup>

Noble as Guinevere considers him to be, Launcelot is soon rebuked by a damsel for having lost his position as the best knight in the world, but he indicates his prowess by being one of the two knights from among the entire fellowship whom Galahad does not defeat in jousting.<sup>17</sup> Again, in Guinevere's account to one of her ladies of Galahad's lineage, Launcelot is described as "com but of the eyghth degré from oure Lorde Jesu Cryst, and thys sir Galahad ys the nyneth degré from oure Lorde Jesu Cryst. Therefore I daresey they be the grettist jantillmen of the world.'".<sup>18</sup> Launcelot is given pre-eminence once more when he comforts Arthur in his grief at the prospect of losing his knights; there is kindness and a noble fatalism in his words: "'Comforte youreself! For hit shall be unto us a grete honoure, and much more than we dyed in other placis, for of dethe we be syker.'" <sup>19</sup> The king replies that it is because of the great love that he has always had for Launcelot that he weeps; the Queen is frantic with grief at his leaving; and Malory specifically states that it is when Sir Launcelot and his fellowship leave Camelot that everyone, "ryche and poore" and even the king, weeps.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 862.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 864.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 865. This passage, with its praise of Launcelot, does not appear in the French.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 867.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 872. The Queste does not mention Launcelot here.

By the end of this first section, Launcelot's importance in the tale is firmly established. In the following section, he has a semi-conscious vision of the Grail which moves him to repentance, a conversion which is deepened in the fourth part of the tale ("Sir Launcelot"), when he agrees to wear a hairshirt, eat no meat and drink no wine, and attend daily Mass until he find the Grail.<sup>21</sup>

Even in the next section, which is devoted to Sir Gawayne, Launcelot turns up, mentioned by Gawayne as a possible Grail knight at first, and later held up as a model to Gawayne by a hermit - in a passage which, as stated earlier, is original with Malory.<sup>22</sup>

Launcelot is absent from the adventures of the three chosen knights (Bors, Percyvale and Galahad), but reappears in the penultimate section, "The Castle of Corbenic". Here, at King Pelles' castle, he has his own vision of the Grail, but, because of his sinfulness, it is not a complete experience - he is not allowed within the chamber in which the mysteries are being celebrated, and the holy vessel remains veiled to him. Nevertheless, he achieves some measure of success in his quest.

As further evidence of the stress which Malory placed on Launcelot in the Tale of the Sankgreal, the last words of Galahad are a message to his father, a warning of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 927.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. p.84, where it is quoted.

the uncertainty of worldly things which is delivered to Launcelot by Sir Bors in the final lines of the story,<sup>23</sup> and the closing scene which originates with the English author depicts the swearing of friendship and love between Sir Bors and Sir Launcelot.

From the above examination of the role of Launcelot in the Tale of the Sankgreal, it is evident that Malory was stressing this knight's importance; it is hardly a coincidence that in Malory's redaction of the Queste, Launcelot plays an important part at the beginning and at the end of the tale. Was Launcelot Malory's personal ideal - brave and invincible, chivalrous and yet holy - but not too holy? Or was he just a more human, more attractive character than the perfect Sir Galahad?

It is quite possible that Malory is offering Launcelot as a third and more attractive alternative to the extreme poles of good and evil represented in the Queste by Galahad and Gawayne. Galahad seldom appears to be human: he is a walking symbol of a way of life - ascetic, singleminded and uncompromising. The only time he truly seems human, interestingly enough, is when he is with his father Launcelot, at their touching farewell: "Than Galahad wente to hys fadir and kyste hym swetely and seyde, 'Fayre swete fadir, I wote nat whan I shall se you more tyll I se the body of

<sup>23</sup> Malory, p. 1036-1037. The actual carrying-out of this mission by Bors is omitted by the French author.

Jesu Cryste.'<sup>24</sup> Galahad's chivalry is not of this world - it is oriented completely towards the holy things of God.

Gawayne represents the other extreme - worldliness, sin and unrepentance. In Malory's tale, this knight is the truly sinful man, rather than Launcelot. He is a murderer, who even slays a brother knight, among others. He flees the good counsel and pious exhortations to repentance offered him by holy men and hermits, always pleading as an excuse an urgent appointment elsewhere and riding off.

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

'Sir,' seyde sir Gawayne, 'and I had leyser I wolde speke with you, but my fellow sir Ector ys gone and abithe me yondir bynethe the hylle.'<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the tale, Gawayne acts as a foil for Launcelot; for example, although Gawayne initiates the quest, and makes the vow to seek the Grail which all the knights imitate,<sup>26</sup> he soon loses interest and enthusiasm, while other knights, like Launcelot, continue. Like Launcelot, Gawayne sees visions and is urged to repent, but he fails

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<sup>24</sup> Malory, p. 1013.

<sup>25</sup> Malory, p. 949.

<sup>26</sup> "'Wherefore I woll make here a vow that to-morne, withoute longer abydyng, I shall laboure in the queste of the Sankgreall, and that I shall holde me oute a twelve-month and a day or more if nede be, and never shall I returne unto the courte agayne tylle I have sene hit more opynly than hit hath bene shewed here.'" Malory, p. 866.

to take advantage of the opportunity. Launcelot's fasting and hair-shirt are not for Gawayne: "'Nay,' seyd sir Gawayne, 'I may do no penaunce, for we knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne.'" <sup>27</sup> Because Launcelot heeds the visions and the advice of the holy men who seek to counsel him on the quest, he is rewarded by a partial attaining of the Grail at Corbenic. Gawayne, the unrepentant sinner, will not change his life or his opinion of himself, and is therefore doomed to failure and pain in his search. His only experience with the holy vessel, with the exception of its initial appearance at Arthur's court, comes when its representative, Sir Galahad, wounds him gravely in a brief encounter at a tournament. <sup>28</sup> For Gawayne, the quest is over; he plays no further role in the tale.

Malory's handling of the tale is such that Launcelot emerges as the noble, dedicated hero faithfully striving for a goal which he knows he cannot achieve. He retains his knightly strength and prowess, and is further ennobled by the humility and holiness which he has gained in the course of his search.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 892.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 982-983.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have demonstrated Malory's techniques in handling his source and consequently, his attitude towards it. Basically, he denies the moral lesson of the Queste: he tends to transform other-worldly and ascetic religion into the morality of this world. His drastic pruning of lengthy sermons and boring theological explanations of visions and omens makes the story more enjoyable for the reader and enables Malory to focus on matters which are more interesting for him, personally. Malory's dehumanizing of Galahad, for example, indirectly gains more reader sympathy for the only other really attractive knight in the quest, Sir Launcelot. By means of the various alterations mentioned in the previous two chapters in particular, Malory defends and exalts Launcelot, offering him, rather than Galahad as a model for admiration and imitation. Success and failure in the quest are summed up in the person of this, "the beste knyght of the worlde", who becomes ultimately, for author and reader alike, the only ideal attainable in the tale.

## APPENDIX

### THE EXPLICITS

#### 1. The Tale of King Arthur

Here endith this tale, as the Freynshe booke seyth, fro the maryage of kynge Uther unto kynge Arthure that regned aftir hym and ded many batayles.

And this booke endyth whereas sir Launcelot and sir Trystrams com to courte. Who that woll make ony more lette seke other bookis of kynge Arthure or of sir Launcelot or sir Trystrams; for this was drawyn by a knyght presoner, sir Thomas Malleorré, that God sende hym good recover. Amen. Explicit.

#### 2. The Tale of the Noble King Arthur

Here endyth the tale of the noble kynge Arthure that was Emperoure hymself thorow dygnyté of his hondys.

And here folowyth afftyr many noble talys of sir Launcelot de Lake.

Explycit the Noble Tale betwyxt Kynge Arthure and Lucius the Emperoure of Rome.

#### 3. The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake

Explicit a Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake.

#### 4. The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney

And I pray you all that redyth this tale to pray for hym that this wrote, that God sende hym good delyveraunce sone and hastely. Amen.

Here endyth The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney.

#### 5. The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones

Here endyth the secunde boke off syr Trystram de Lyones, whyche drawyn was oute of freynshe by sir Thomas Malleorré, knyght, as Jesu be hys helpe. Amen.

But here ys no rehersall of the third booke.

But here folowyth the noble tale off the Sankegreall, whyche called ys the holy vessell and the sygnyfycacion of blyssed bloode off oure Lorde Jesu Cryste, whyche was brought into thys londe by Joseph off Aramathye.

Therefore on all synfull, blyssed Lorde, have on thy knyght mercy. Amen.

#### 6. The Tale of the Sankgreal

Thus endith the tale of the Sankgreal that was breffly drawyn oute of Freynshe - which ys a tale cronycled for one of the trewyst and of the holiest that ys in thys worlde - by sir Thomas Maleorré, knyght.

O Blessed Jesu helpe hym thorow Hys myght! Amen.

#### 7. The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere

And here on the othir syde folowyth The Moste Pyteuous Tale of the Morte Arthure Saunnz Gwerdon par le Shyvalere Sir Thomas Malleorré, Knyght.

Jesu, ayede ly pur voutre bone mercy! Amen.



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