SIR THOMAS MALORY AND THE ENGLISH GENTRY:

ROMANCE, SOCIETY, IDENTITY

By

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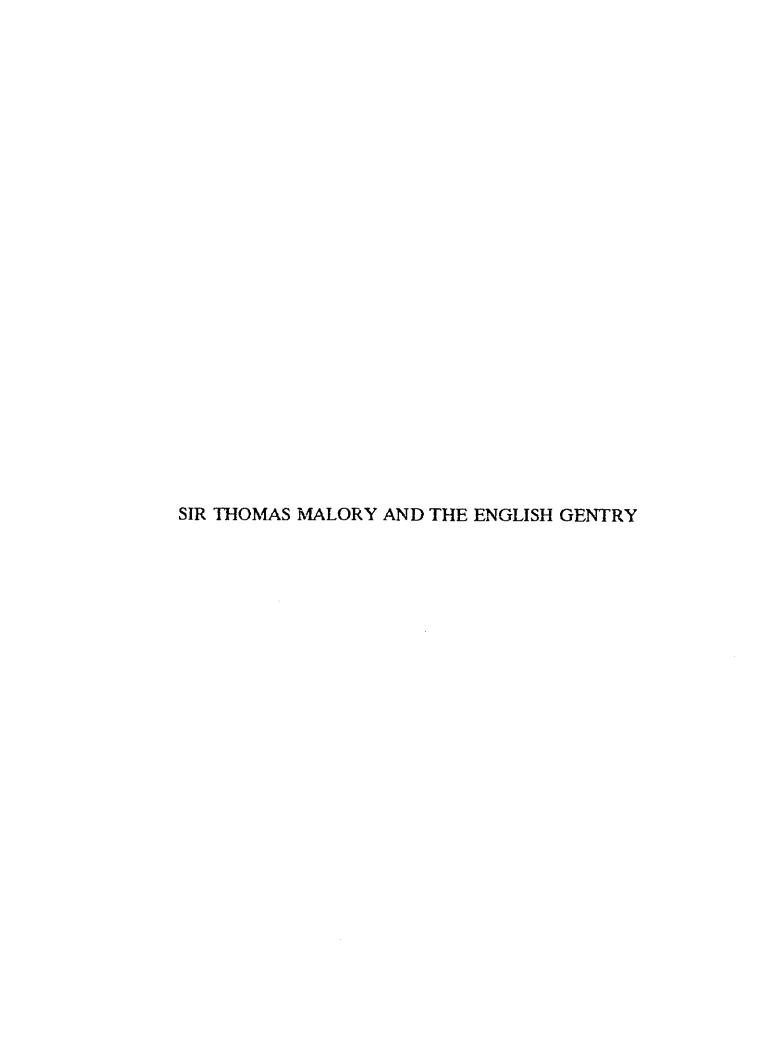
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Abstract

Due in part to romantic, epochal theories of history, Sir Thomas Malory has conventionally been thought of as the last voice of authentic feudalism and of traditional chivalry. This thesis challenges that reputation of the nostalgic writer, and argues that his work reflects the social mobility that was transforming England's landed class in the late Middle Ages, when knighthood was in decline, and the identity of gentleman were becoming correspondingly more important. Through the term "gentry writer", the thesis attempts to link Malory more closely with the readers and writers of English romances, as represented by the many unadorned manuscripts of provincial provenance. Typically the heroes of these romances carve out successful careers at the expense of haughty lords and mean-spirited burgesses, and in the process demonstrate that their honour and virtue are individual qualities, not necessarily dependent on the office of knighthood.

While the theme of social mobility and careerism has been noted as a theme of Middle English romance, its prominence within Malory's work has received little attention. This thesis finds that the standards by which Malory judges his heroes are not prowess or martial ability so much as a combination of ethical and moral qualities which he calls "jantylnesse". Gentleness is exemplified by the great knights such as Lancelot and Tristram, but is also the cause for the success of the numerous Fair Unknowns who come to Arthur's court. In determining that Malory ultimately regards his characters as independent gentlemen rather than as extensions of a corporate identity, the thesis concludes that Malory's work reflects the same desire to define an honourable and individual identity which is seen in the romances, courtesy books, and correspondence of the gentry.

Acknowledgements

In a process which has sometimes seemed as if it would never reach completion, I was never really conscious of the debts incurred until near the end. This thesis began as a vague desire to do something with Malory, and the keenly critical eye of my first supervisor, Dr. Maureen Halsall, saved me from the gauzy speculations which mark the worst of Arthurian scholarship. After Dr. Halsall's retirement, Dr. Laurel Braswell-Means took over the supervision, and her encouragement and courtesy have sustained me where many others might have been sceptical of my progress. My research in medieval social history could not have progressed without the kind assistance of Dr. J. Alsop, of McMaster's history department. Any errors of historical judgement or fact are my own. My students in medieval literature at McMaster and at Trent also deserve credit for the assumptions about romance that they forced me to articulate and to revise.

Private and public spheres did not really overlap in the writing of this thesis, but my wife has my gratitude for her faith in what must at times have seemed a dubious cause, and for ignoring me whenever I was a "fyndely, horryble dragon". Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to Anne-Marie, who came at the end of the writing and put the process into its proper perspective.

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Note on Sources and Documentation

   In my references to Malory's text, the edition used is the third edition of Eugène Vinaver's *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, as revised by P.J.C. Field. In acknowledging this text, the first half of the citations refer to page and line number. I have also followed the lead of Beverly Kennedy (1985), in that the second half of the citations also give references to Caxton's book and chapter divisions, for the benefit of those readers using an alternate edition. In referring to the interior divisions of the work by title and by book number, I am following the arrangement of Vinaver's edition.

Preface

"Since literary anonymity is not tolerable, we can accept it
only in the guise of an enigma."
Michel Foucault

While Sir Thomas Malory remains a shadow figure after a century of

biographical investigation, there has always been a strong desire among his

readers to learn enough about Malory's life and age to resolve some of the

interpretive difficulties of his large and sometimes perplexing Arthurian cycle,

which has become known as *Le Morte Darthur*. Since 1893, when Sidney Lee

observed that "there is no definite information respecting him outside his book",[1]

considerable research has documented the lives of the several knighted or landed

Thomas Malorys alive at the time of writing,[2] but has failed to settle the mantle

of authorship upon any one individual. The famous "farewell to the reader"

preserved in Caxton's edition (xxi.13) remains our only trustworthy document in

the matter, and it merely preserves his name, social standing, and the completion

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[1] *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Malory, Sir Thomas."

[2] Several recent and reliable summaries of the biographical research have appeared since William Matthews' classic study *The Ill-Framed Knight* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966). See Robert Lumiansky, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, 1947-1987: Author, Title, Text" *Speculum* 62 (1987): 878-899; Terrence McCarthy, *Reading the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, D.S. Brewer, 1988), 171-178; and James W. Spisak, "Introduction: Recent Trends in Malory Studies" in *Studies in Malory*, ed. Spisak (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Western Michigan University, Medieval Publications, 1985), 1-12.

date of the *Morte Darthur*, in the ninth regnal year of Edward IV (4 March 1469 to 3 March 1470). The biographical explicit in the Winchester manuscript (70v), in which the author identifies himself as a "knyght-presoner", provides further information by confirming longstanding suspicions that Malory was imprisoned for most if not all of the time of writing. Otherwise there is very little sense of an author upon which to base a reading of the *Morte*, although an impression of Malory as a *fin de siècle* writer has gained a certain orthodoxy. In its earlier years this view can be attributed to a nineteenth-century romanticisation of chivalry, combined with a rather horrified view of the dynastic turmoil and apparent lawlessness of Malory's England. As one Edwardian scholar told his readers, one year "In the rude civilisation of the fifteenth century ... would put most of us in our graves".[3] In the later twentieth century chivalry suffered in an intellectual climate increasingly likely to see it as ideology rather than as idealism, and revelations about the criminal career of the most famous authorial candidate reinforced a sense of the *Morte Darthur's* illusory nature.

Until the last twenty years the shape of Malory studies has been determined in large part by our changing understandings and assumptions about the biographical record, and the shift towards more structurally and culturally based studies of the *Morte Darthur* seems to reflect the diminution of the author's importance to recent critical theory and practice. Even so, impressions of Malory as an aristocratic and conservative spokesman of a waning ethos, or

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[3] William Blades, Introduction, *The Book of St. Albans* (London: Elliot Stock, 1901), 24.

alternatively as the rebellious herald of a new order, still dominate the scholarly debate, and together suggest the prevalence of what Michel Foucault calls the "author function", the need of criticism to deny the ambiguities and "the proliferation of meaning" of a text by imposing the author's life as "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses".[4] Foucault also suggests in the same essay that some authors enjoy a privileged status in criticism as the inaugurators of a set of literary or philosophical propositions, such as the Gothic novel or Marxism, which dominate subsequent writings in a discursive practice that keeps returning to the inaugural or "transdiscursive" author as its "center of gravity".[5] In reviewing the body of work on Malory, I have been led to modify Foucault's terminology, and to suggest that Malory enjoys a particular and privileged status in our understanding of the discursive practice of chivalric literature as a terminal-discursive author. It is surely the case that discussions of this practice inevitably begin with seminal or "transdiscursive" texts, such as *The Song of Roland* or the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, and seek closure with Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and that this rearguard positioning of Malory has had an undeniable effect upon our reading of his work. As Robert Adams puts it, Malory's is "the last major voice of authentic

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[4] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 159.

[5] *Ibid.*, 153-157.

feudalism",[6] his book an evocation of a passing age, what A.B. Ferguson has memorably called, in his book of the same title, the Indian summer of English chivalry. The romance, long thought by critics to depend on the vitality of chivalric institutions for its own health, was in corresponding decline and, after the fifteenth century, as is often said, could only survive in displaced forms such as parody (Cervantes) or allegory (Spenser).

The temptation to read Malory as a terminal-discursive author is indeed strong, for perhaps no other work in English literature seems to stand so clearly on epochal boundaries as does the *Morte*. The bibliographical evidence alone makes this point dramatically. As Felicity Riddy notes, the Winchester text survives from the age of the medieval manuscript, while the two extant specimens of William Caxton's 1485 printing anticipate a new age of literacy and technology.[7] The fact that Caxton finished his edition of Malory on 1 July, twenty days before the battle of Bosworth Field and the end of the Plantagenet era, further emphasises the book's singular position in history. Although no one in Caxton's workshop would have thought of it in these terms, the methods of their labour seem to us to inaugurate a new era, the Tudor period of intellectual and technological innovation, while the content of the book they produced seems indelibly a part of their past. The *Morte* also straddles the boundary of poetry and prose, conveying resonances of England's alliterative romance tradition in

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[6] Robert M. Adams, *The Land and Literature of England: An Historical Account* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 104.

[7] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden, Neth.: E.J. Brill, 1987), 1.

its Tales of *Arthur and Lucius* and of *Gareth*,[8] yet merging its English verse sources with the prose of the thirteenth-century French cycles. Finally, and on the grandest of scales, there is the generation born in the years surrounding Malory's death in 1471, a generation which included Erasmus, Machiavelli, da Vinci, Columbus, Michaelangelo and Copernicus, minds that would change the very foundations of Western culture.

Of course, the above statements all derive their power from generalisation and, as Edmund Reiss has observed, it is a cliché to call Malory's age one of transition.[9] Upon closer examination Caxton's edition seems no more epochal than his other, less well-known chivalric publications of the period, *The Siege of Jerusalem* (1480-81) and *Charles the Great* (1485), which combine with *King Arthur* (as he named Malory's work) to give the lives of the three Christian Worthies. These choices, and indeed the printer's entire career, reflect an outlook which N.F. Blake has described as being "more medieval than modern".[10] It is in fact the very traditionality of Caxton, Malory and their contemporaries throughout the fifteenth century, and their nearness to the vague but portentous

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[8] P.J.C. Field argues that the latter book was based on an English version of a French *bel inconnu* romance, in long alliterating lines that were either fully or partially rhymed. See "The Source of Malory's *Tale of Gareth*" in *Aspects of Malory*, eds. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 1981), 57-60.

[9] Edmund Reiss, *Sir Thomas Malory* (New York: Twayne, 1966), 19.

[10] N.F. Blake, *Caxton and His World* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), 1². See also Jennifer Goodman, "Malory and Caxton's Chivalric Series, 1481-85", *Studies in Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1983) 257-274.

boundary of the Renaissance, that impresses us the most. Charles Moorman
writes that this age

> is not transition, not ferment, not shifting values, but simply
> stasis, paralysis, stagnation, the yearly, daily I suppose,
> grinding repetition of the same pattern of events over a
> hundred years of a civilisation without change or the will to
> change or really the knowledge of what to change to.[11]

Moorman's view of the period is essentially the one made popular by
Johan Huizinga's influential book *The Waning of the Middle Ages.* Huizinga
paints a brilliant, if impressionistic, portrait of a tired and nervous society which
unconsciously sensed the inadequacy of cultural forms that had decayed or
crystallised. Through the depiction of dozens of spectacles and vows, pieties and
ecstasies culled from the chronicles, he portrays an age of mindless cruelty and
extravagant faith, whose taste for elaborate display revealed an inherent
superficiality. He tells us, for example, that in 1452 the citizens of Abbeville are
called from their beds to pray for the ailing Duke of Burgundy. They remain in
the church all night, "kneeling or prostrate on the ground, with 'grandes
allumeries merveilleuses' while the bells keep tolling".[12] One also finds the
people of Mons purchasing a condemned man in order to enjoy the spectacle of

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[11] Charles Moorman, "Notes Towards A Speculative Literary History of the
Fifteenth Century," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 7 (1983): 266-67.

[12] Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (1924;
reprint, Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, Penguin Books, 1955), 21.

his execution, "more than if a new holy body had risen from the dead",[13] or a congregation weeping at every consecration of the Host, "insomuch that a general wailing was heard as if in the house of one dead".[14]

All of this material is coloured by Huizinga's theory that late medieval culture was essentially retrospective and "to a large extent negative".

> Culture denied itself by starting from the deep-rooted assumption that everything was better in earlier times, that there had to be a return to the original purity in morals and in law. A shunning of the present day, a longing to flee from hatred and misery, injustice and conflict, a turning away from earthly reality ... that was the fundamental link uniting the aspirations of earthly happiness and that of heavenly bliss.[15]

While he often asserted the importance of chivalry as a social and political force, the tendency of figures such as Charles the Bold to imitate classical or Arthurian heroes further convinced Huizinga of the nostalgic impulse at the heart of medieval culture. The ideals of chivalry, he argued, were too lofty to survive close contact with day-to-day reality, so that the form was bound to express itself as a series of revivals of a purer age. [16]

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[13] *Ibid.*, 22-23.

[14] *Ibid.*, 185.

[15] Johan Huizinga, "Historical Ideas of Life" in *Men and Ideas: History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance*, trans. James S. Holmes and Hans van Marle (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1959), 82.

[16] *Ibid.*, 89.

Today Huizinga's view of the middle ages has been largely discredited, as his broad canvas of cultural history has give way to tightly focused and highly localised studies uninfluenced by his use of seasonal metaphors.[17] His work has not lacked impact, however, and has reinforced, either unconsciously or directly, the many critics who have noted the regretful tone of the *Morte Darthur*. W.H. Schofield has called it "a work of retrospect, tinged with sadness for the passing of the good old days; a work of idealism, troubled with knowledge of miserable facts daily divulged".[18] Margaret Schlauch similarly characterises the *Morte* as "a vast prose panegyric on the dying institution which had attempted at least to inculcate principles of loyalty, generosity and bravery among feudal aristocrats".[19] She finds a central irony, however, in that "the world of knighthood is involuntarily shown to be shadowy and archaic in the very work which invests it with its greatest attraction".[20]

This last observation touches upon a quality which, for many readers, has been central to the aesthetic experience of the *Morte Darthur*, namely the way in which its celebration of chivalry is consistently tempered with an awareness of

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[17] Malcolm Vale, "The Civilisation of Courts and Cities in the North, 1200-1500" in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 339.

[18] W.H. Schofield, *Chivalry in English Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), 87.

[19] Margaret Schlauch, *English Literature and its Social Foundations* (Warsaw: Pánstwowe Wydanwictwo Naukowe, 1956), 297.

[20] *Ibid.*, 299.

its fragility and transience. In no scene is this more apparent than the assembly of the Round Table in its attempt to heal Sir Urry, the last chapter of the Book of *Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenevere* and our last look at the fellowship before it is fragmented by the war between Arthur and Lancelot and the rebellion of Mordred. As Larry Benson observes, this incident crowns the sense of finality that permeates a book which tells of "the last tournaments, the last quests, the last happy union of Lancelot and Guenevere" [21] and the last scenes in which the Round Table is seen "holé togydirs", to use Arthur's words from the eve of the Grail Quest (864:5-12;xiii.6). The epic roll-call of knights introduces strangers as well as recalling figures from the reader's memory of earlier tales, and intriguingly hints at stories yet to be told, such as that of "sir Marrok the good knyght that was betrayed with his wyff, for he made hym seven yere a warwolff" (1150:27-29;xix.11). These stories must remain untold, however, for Malory , who now must "overlepe grete bookis of sir Launcelot", signals us that time has run out for the fellowship. Some, such as Gareth, "that was of verry knyghthod worth all [his] brethirn", will soon be dead, and the rest are destined to fall on Arthur's last battlefield, to the number of "an hondred thousand" (1236:9;xxi.4). The sense of great camaraderie and cohesion created by the roll-call, and its

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[21] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 227.

proximity to the coming carnage, creates an effect of poignancy similar to Kipling's stories of the old Victorian army, written in the shadow of 1914.[22]

It is worth noting, however, that this final review of the fellowship presents an impression of unity that has already been shown to be illusory. The betrayals of Aggravaine and Mordred yet to come follow a precedent established in an earlier book, for as Malory reminds us, some of the best knights are not alive to answer the roll-call (1149:25-35;xix.11). Tristram and Alexander the Orphan have already been murdered "falsely and felonsly" by king Mark (648:9-10;x.40), and Lamerok has been killed "felounsly, unto all good knyghtes grete damage!" (688:10;x.54), a victim of the ongoing Lot-Pellinor feud. The sense of loss seems most intense when we learn that the appealing Dinadan also dies in this feud, in circumstances that emphasise the failure of the Round Table in its greatest challenge.

> And aftir, in the queste of the Sankgreal, cowardly and felonsly they slew sir Dynadan, whyche was a grete dammage, for he was a grete bourder and a passynge good knyght.
>
> (615:4-8;x.25)

In each case the actual death occurs "offstage" and the reports are brief, as if Malory can not bring himself to dwell upon this steady erosion of the fellowship, preferring instead to focus on the deeds and adventures of his heroes in life. An

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[22] I am thinking in particular of the short stories in *Soldiers Three* (1888; Nr. Frome, Somerset: R.S. Surtees Society, 1986) and in *Life's Handicap*, ed. A.O.J. Cockshut (1891; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

elegiac tone nevertheless haunts the *Tristram*, paradoxically Malory's longest and most extensive celebration of chivalry.

The irony observed by Schlauch has not been lost upon others, for one of the consistent themes of Malory criticism in the second half of this century has been the apparent inability of chivalric idealism to prevent itself from being destroyed from within. Most recently Robert Merrill has pursued this irony to the point where he believes that the cultural union of religious and secular values, which he calls the "medieval synthesis", is plainly seen in Malory to be no longer viable. An example par excellence of this breakdown occurs for Merrill in Lancelot's accidental killing of Gareth during his third rescue of the Queen. Arthur immediately recognises both the tragedy of the event ("For I dare say, as for sir Gareth, he loved sir Launcelot of all men erthly"), and its incendiary effect upon Gareth's brother Gawain, but is powerless to avert the consequences. However, the apparent approval in Malory's declaration that the rescue is performed "as a noble knyght shulde" (1178:15;xx.8), a comment which flies in the face of the disastrous consequences of this action, suggests to Merrill that the code of knighthood "has lost all meaning, become destructive". The phrase "as a noble knyght shulde" persists, however, "because the institution and its ideology now have their own inertia and subsist irrespective of what the knights do".[23]

One of the consistent themes of Malory criticism has been this very concern for the apparent inability of chivalric idealism to prevent the feuds and

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[23] Robert Merrill, *Sir Thomas Malory and the Cultural Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 97.

treasons which bring about catastrophe. Charles Moorman has described the

Morte as a tragedy in the Aristotelian (and to some extent medieval) tradition

as the punishment of *hamartiai* in the great, with the proviso that there is no

final revelation or enlightenment as we see in *Oedipus at Colonnus*.

> The folly of the court, predicted by Merlin and
> foreshadowed by Balin, persists to the end. Granted that the
> chivalric code by which the knights live is itself shot through
> with contradictions - that they must swear to respect and
> protect women in a society which regularly indulges in the
> practises of courtly love, that they go off to search for the
> Grail armed as if for battle, that they plot against a king to
> whom they yearly pledge fealty - they fail ever to rise above
> the code, to examine it and themselves in the light of its
> obvious failures and so they perish clutching to a way of life,
> to a system that they can no longer bend to meet events and
> that has failed to meet its promised ends.[24]

While this comes very close to Merrill's view of the *Morte* as an "analytic

tragedy", by which he means the ruthless exploration and exposé of a

disfunctional social arrangement, Moorman sees tragedy primarily as a unifying

principle in Malory's book, each major section progressing from "naive innocence

and hope" to experience, "dissolution, decay".[25] Such a reading, Moorman argues,

is more convincing than to cite support for chivalry in parts taken in isolation,

and also takes into account Malory's debt to the longstanding presence of the *de

casibus* theme in Arthurian literature, which has, since Geoffrey of Monmouth,

presented Arthur's downfall as the result of *hubris* and worldly mutability.

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[24] Charles Moorman, "Malory's Tragic Knights," *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965): 125.

[25] *Ibid.*, 122

William Caxton's Preface to his edition of Malory reminded his more sceptical public that "ye shall se also in thystorye of bochas in his book de casu principum parte of [Arthur's] noble actes and also of his falle", and if this affinity with Boccaccio's work led him to think of the book as a tragedy, he was still able to present it as an instructive work of chivalry. Caxton was well aware that the *Morte Darthur* included both "vycious" and "Jentyl and vertuous dedes", and his Preface expresses the hope that, just as Arthur's better knights avoided the evil and came to "honor", so too will the reader. "Doo after the good and leue the euyll", he advises, "and it shall brynge you to good fame and renommee".[26] Here was one attempt to present chivalry as a viable means of conducting one's life on earth and of gaining admission to "euerlastyng blysse in heuen", and there were many other defenders of chivalry besides Caxton in this period. These included translators such as Stephen Scrope and Sir Gilbert Hay, pamphleteers such as William Worcester, chivalric enthusiasts and collectors such as John Tiptoft and Sir John Paston II, and the anonymous authors of a host of manuals on courtesy and etiquette.[27] Their activities were sufficient to have created

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[26] W.J.B. Crotch, ed., *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 175 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1928), 94-95.

[27] Stephen Scrope (c. 1396-1472), translator of Christine de Pisan's *Epistle of Othea to Hector*, ed. Curt F. Buhler, Early English Text Society no. 264 (London 1970); William Worcester (d. c.1482), author of *The Boke of Noblesse* (London 1860); both were members of the household of the Norfolk knight Sir John Fastolf, considered a chivalric paragon by Caxton. Sir John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester (1427-1470), translator of Buonaccorso's *De Vera Nobiliatae*, ed. R.J. Mitchell (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1938); as Constable of England he

among scholars the impression of a fifteenth century chivalric revival, although a sharp divide is conventionally drawn between the cultural manifestations of chivalry in this period and the relevance of the institution as a social and political force.

Disruptions at both the national and local levels figure prominently in fifteenth-century English history. The ongoing dynastic struggle known as the Wars of the Roses, which had been mostly dormant since 1461 when Edward IV had been proclaimed king after the Lancastrian defeat at Towton, rekindled in 1469-70, the very years Malory was completing his work. News of Edward's conflict with the Earl of Warwick and the royal brother Clarence, and his near defeat at Edgecote in 1469, may well have led Malory to make his famous lament that disloyalty and rebellion "ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshmen" (1229:6-14;xxi.6). The dwindling of England's possessions in France and its resulting loss of prestige also coincided with this conflict, and was decried by hawkish writers such as Worcester. Unrest and disturbances in the counties and shires, as described by contemporaries of Malory such as the Pastons, were often

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was also author of ordinances for tournaments: see H. Nickel, "The Tournament: An Historical Sketch" in *The Study of Chivalry*, eds. Howell Chickering and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1988), 248-49. Sir Gilbert Haye, translated Ramon Lull's *Libre de l'Ordre de Cavalleria* (also translated by Caxton) as the *Buke of Knychthede*, also wrote romances. Sir John Paston (1442-1479), courtier and member of the well-known Norfolk family, collected ordinances and other chivalric items in his "Grete Boke of Knighthood": see G.A. Lester, *Sir John Paston's "Grete Boke": A Descriptive Catalogue* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 1984). A useful survey of courtesy books is found in Diane Bornstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1975).

the local manifestations of rivalry between powerful magnates and their retainers. The fifteenth century saw the predominance of retinues or affinities in which lesser men attached themselves to a peer or magnate on the basis of fees and indenture, replacing the older system of service in return for land tenure which was already waning in the 1300's. While this system could and did satisfy local demands for good lordship, in times of conflict it could be a dangerous game for men of Malory's stature,[28] and was regarded with suspicion by Victorian historians whose term "bastard feudalism" suggests their disapproval of what they saw as a corruption of the traditional feudalism they rosily ascribed to earlier centuries.[29] At first glance, the historical picture further heightens the impression that late medieval chivalry existed primarily in the realm of ideals and reinforces the "transdiscursive" sense of Malory.

As noted above, the life of Sir Thomas Malory has been the subject of much investigation and has been seen as a means of explaining tensions and ambiguities of his book. The records available are of little use to literary criticism; like the documents pertaining to most men of his time, they are restricted to witnesses of weddings and transactions, criminal charges, and birth records. The criminal charges in particular, those found in the records pertaining to the Sir Thomas Malory of Warwickshire (ca. 1395-1471), have both

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[28] See Christine Carpenter, "Sir Thomas Malory and Fifteenth-Century Local Politics," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 53 (1980): 31-43.

[29] K.B. McFarlane, "'Bastard Feudalism'" in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays* (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), 24-25

shocked and fascinated scholars in this century, as this individual managed to combine a career of military and parliamentary service with (apparently) an inclination to rape, rustling, assault and attempted murder. Much has been written, perhaps naively, on what William Matthews has called the "moral paradox", the apparent incongruity that such a villain could have produced such a long book in which, as Caxton claimed, "al is wryton for our doctryne". It is not necessary to rehearse here this Malory's many indictments, and it is perhaps not possible to resolve this paradox, although I would note that it has been linked by some critics to the larger, cultural contradictions of the fifteenth century and to the apparent breakdown of chivalry in the *Morte*, as suggested above. Robert Merrill sees the career of the Warwickshire knight as an example of the collapse of "the medieval synthesis", a collapse most powerfully symbolised in the targeting of this man's attacks. During the summer of 1451, when he was in conflict with a number of powerful secular and religious figures, this Malory led a band to the Blessed Abbey of Coombe, where they abused and robbed the monks and vandalised the abbey, breaking down eighteen doors in the process.

> Why would one need to break down so many doors? Malory's real interests, it appears, were in destruction and aggressive self-assertion for the sake of belittling and humiliating the authority he must have hated in his heart. ... As it eventually comes to be in the romance, the institutional authority and the individual are in irremediable opposition so that the survival of the individual depends upon his destructive acts against the ideology and its enforcers.[30]

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[30] Robert Merrill, *Sir Thomas Malory and the Cultural Crisis*, 8.

A less extreme view of this incident is taken by the historian Christine Carpenter, who places Malory's crimes and misdemeanours within the context of intrigue and factionalism which resulted when the Warwick family was unable to hold its allies together following the death of the earl, Richard Beauchamp, in 1439. The county gentry took sides between the Beauchamps on the one hand and the Duke of Buckingham and Grey family on the other, and Malory appears to have sided first with the young Henry Beauchamp, the heir to the earldom, and then with his successor by marriage, Richard Neville. Carpenter argues that some of the charges brought against Malory, those from 1442 to 1454, can be interpreted as factional activities, including his famous attack on Coombe. The aggrieved abbott, Richard Atherstone, far from being merely a symbol of the medieval synthesis, was an energetic partisan of the Grey family and an active player in the local game of litigation and land disputes, much to the annoyance of his neighbours.[31] While she admits difficulty in accounting for the subsequent indictments and "almost continuous incarceration" of this individual in the years following 1454, Carpenter sees in his career up until that year an example of "the local game of politics, a game where the stakes were high, for they were no less than the land without which a gentry family could have no existence".[32]

The significance attached by Merrill to the Coombe Abbey incident, which to an historian appears as a common aspect of county life of the period, thus

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[31] Christine Carpenter, "Fifteenth-Century Local Politics": 37.

[32] *Ibid.*, 37.

appears as exaggerated. More importantly, this interpretation reflects an understanding of the fifteenth century as a time of decline and cultural contradictions, an understanding, fixed in the cultural historical tradition begun by Huizinga, which deserves reexamining, as it can be a curiously dissatisfying instrument with which to the evaluate the *Morte Darthur*. Aside from the one outburst about his countrymen's "greate defaughte", Malory is curiously silent on the matter of York and Lancaster, and it is generally agreed that his book should not be understood as a *roman à clef*. If he is seen in a more general context as one of the "chivalric revival" writers offering a remedy for his country's troubles, then there are obvious problems, for it must be assumed that he is unaware of chivalry's destructive effects as revealed in his book. If one decides to read the *Morte* as an indictment of chivalry, a warning that the ideal no longer meets England's needs, then Malory's obvious enthusiasm for his characters, his willingness to recount their seemingly endless jousts and wanderings, is there to be awkwardly explained away or overlooked. Malory does not have an ironic, detached relationship with his text, obscuring his narrative presence with deceptive self-portraits in the manner of Chaucer or Dante. Quite the contrary is true, for as P.J.C. Field argues in his study of Malory's narration, the *Morte*'s narrator does not enjoy a sophistication or level of knowledge measurably greater than that of his characters. Field observes that Malory's narratorial intrusions are so few that we are surprised when they add information or an explanation beyond that supplied by dialogue and plot, and notes that more normally he allows his characters to speak for themselves

because so many of Malory's knights are obviously taciturn,
capable men of action, worthy of respect, they seem to stand
independent of an author who only observes them from the
outside, much as they might observe one another. The nar-
rator's admiration for Lancelot comes to seem more like
that of a man for his friend than the affection of a puppet-
master for an interesting puppet.[33]

Most readers of Malory will acknowledge the experience that there are

times when his characters seem to speak for him, not, to pursue Field's simile,

in the manner of the ventriloquist's doll, but like peers who share the same

class, outlook, and value system. The famous speech of Lancelot when advised

of the misdoings of Sir Perys -- "What? ...is he a theff and a knyght? And a

ravyssher of women? ... Hit is ptyé that he lyvyth!" (vi.10) -- even when shorn

of its modern punctuation, betrays an emotion that appears wholly genuine,

without any hint of contradiction or ironical undercutting on the part of the

narrator. The "moral paradox" debate thrived on the apparent strangeness of the

Warwickshire Malory's having written passages such as this one,[34] because that

debate had as its goal a single individual whose career could comfortably be

meshed with the idealism of the book, so that the one could be used,

presumably, to explain the other. A more profitable line of inquiry may well

lead from Field's recognition that the narrative persona in the *Morte*, "naïve

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[33] P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style*
(London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971), 150.

[34] See E.K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages*
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 205.

enough to be trusted implicitly",[35] accepts his characters as fellows, sharing the same vocabulary and values. The author's deep affinity with his subject matter thus suggests that we might better understand him as a representative of his class than as a shadowy individual for whom the records are incomplete and treacherous.

As Arthur Ferguson notes, Malory was to the manor born,[36] although we do not know exactly which manor it was and it perhaps does not matter. Besides the Warwickshire family there were at least two other landed families bearing the name of Malory in the 1400's, one in Yorkshire's North Riding, and another seated in Cambridgeshire. None of these families made especially notable achievements during this period. They counted no members among the titled nobility, though men from all three were engaged in the various tasks by which the gentry made local government possible: soldiering, representing the county in parliament, and in the case of the Warwickshire man holding a shrievalty. If they were not often honoured publicly, these families could at least enjoy the private distinction of an impressive pedigree. Of the four hundred occurrences in medieval times of the name Malory known to him, P.J.C. Field notes that four-fifths "can be attributed with greater or lesser certainty to one or other of

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[35] P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, 155.

[36] Arthur B. Ferguson, "The Revival of the Fifteenth Century" in *The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986), 37.

eight branches of a single family traceable back to about 1100".[37] While not all men of the gentry enjoyed or could afford the honour of being a dubbed knight, a lineage such as the Malorys' could be an important distinction in a class that was not especially cohesive, divided between the city and the country, between old families and *arrivistes*, eager to secure a coat of arms that would signal their success. Malory's preference for the former group, "that beryth olde armys" (375:23-29;viii.3), suggests a conservatism which, as we shall see, is curiously ill at ease with his interest in a social hierarchy that is still non-restrictive enough to grant success to young and unknown knights.

The goal of this thesis is to show how Malory's approach to his Arthurian material reveals concerns about social structure and mobility, and an attitude towards chivalry and knighthood which indicates the unique outlook of the fifteenth-century English gentry. The project is indebted to historically-oriented studies of Malory, such as those by Elizabeth Pochoda, Larry Benson and Beverly Kennedy, who have developed a detailed and useful understanding of late-medieval knighthood and chivalry. An oversight common to these investigations, however, is a failure to recognise that Malory's social perspective, that of someone within gentle society but by no means at its centre, shapes his understanding and even appropriation of his subject matter. Malory, it should be recognised, was a provincial writer, whose work betrays no familiarity with

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[37] P.J.C. Field, "Sir Robert Malory, Prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England (1432-1439/40)," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 28 (1977): 257.

literature outside his Arthurian and romance interests, nor any formal education. His taste runs more towards vivid depictions of tournaments than to the complaints of lovers or Boethian philosophy. In this respect Rossell Hope Robbins's comments on the alliterative *Morte Arthure* are relevant here, for Robbins associates that work with the lesser magnates and gentry of the counties, far from the court circle, where English was the language of the majority and where the "high style" of Chaucer or the Gawain poet was largely unfamiliar.

> It is an interesting exercise in the influence of audience on style to observe how the French "society romances" were rendered into English for the gentry and their entourage. *Ywain and Gawain*, for example, written between 1325 and 1350, substitutes stories of battles for the talk of niceties of lovemaking and the manners of knightly conduct, so prominent in the French original of Chrétien de Troyes. A later example of the removal of the court-oriented ploys in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is seen in *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, a decade or so before 1400. The popular English version lacks both sophistication and refinement of feeling, yet it is a boisterous enough story to entertain men (and women) with glasses of ale in hand.[38]

While the most recent editor of the *Morte Arthure* has observed that its author was in fact impressively well-read,[39] Robbins' picture of a somewhat isolated, less educated audience remains valid in the fifteenth century, and is useful to our discussion of Malory and his probable circle.

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[38] Rossell Hope Robbins, Introduction, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Valerie Krishna (New York: Burt Franklin, 1976), xi.

[39] Mary Hamel, ed., Introduction, *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition* (New York: Garland 1984), 59-62.

In his study of audiences as part of the "social matrix" of medieval literature, Richard Green makes a clear distinction between his subject, those fifteenth century writers employed by royal and princely households, and the literary and cultural society of the "middle classes". While we have a wealth of primary material documenting the lives and interests of families such as the Pastons, and while their reading habits and interests, like those of their wealthy urban counterparts, may at times have consciously emulated that the habits of the court, Green reminds us that the Pastons and their like "represent an extension of the aristocratic reading public, rather than a replacement for it".[40] In other words, the gentry, who were separated from the court by degree rather than by class exclusion, were not necessarily boors and *parvenus*, but their status, even in the case of Sir John Paston and his brother, who attended the royal courts of England and Burgundy, was more akin to that of spectator than participant in the inner circles of noble society. Readers of Malory may thus use material such as the Paston correspondence to their advantage, as it clarifies matters of perennial interest such as the representation of chivalry and knighthood in the *Morte Darthur*. Whereas previously Malory has been seen as a prescriptive writer in the tradition of John of Salisbury and Sir John Fortescue, offering (or disavowing) chivalry to his country as a remedy for its turmoil, it may well seem more likely that Malory was seeing his subject matter from below, from the point of view of the gentry. As Arthur Ferguson puts it, "interest in

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[40] Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 10.

things chivalric could thrive on aspiration as well as on actual status".[41] Malory, I will argue, may best be seen in the context of the English romance tradition with which he was highly familiar, and has much in common with the authors of texts such as *Perceval of Galles*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, and *Sir Degrevant*, as well as the families who collected them. The world of the gentry was uncertain and sometimes dangerous, and their place was subordinate to the high nobility whose position was increasingly inaccessible to lesser men. Romances, including the *Morte Darthur*, offered the gentry a simpler and more comforting realm of the imagination, confirmed their reader's sense of identity, and realised, at least in the mirror of fiction, their ambitions.

[41] A.B. Ferguson, "Revival of the Fifteenth Century", 37.

Chapter One
Medieval Romance and the Representation of Reality

The Realism of Malory

"In all my lyff mette i never with such a knyght that was so bygge and so well-brethed. Therefore," sayde sir Trystramys, "hit were pit that ony of us bothe sholde here be myscheved."

"Sir," seyde sir Lamerok, "for your renowne and your name I woll that ye have the worship, and therefore I woll yelde me unto you." And therewith he toke the poynte of hys swerde in hys honde to yelde hym.

"Nay," seyde sir Trystrames, "ye shall nat do so, for well I know youre profirs are more of your jantilnes than for ony feare or drede ye have of me."

And therewithall sir Trystramys profferde hym hys swerde and seyde, "Sir Lamerak, as an overcom knyght I yelde me to you as a man of moste noble proues that I ever mette!"

"Nay, seyde sir Lamerok, "I woll do you jantylnes: I requyre you, lat us be sworne togydirs that never none of us shall aftir thys day have ado with other."

And therewithall sir Trystrames and sir Lamorak sware that never none of hem sholde fyght agaynste othir, for well nother for woo.

And thys meanewhyle com sir Palomydes, the good knyght, folowyng the questyng beste that had in shap lyke a serpentis hede and a body lyke a lybard, buttokked lyke a lyon and footed lyke an harte. And in hys body there was such a noyse as hit had bene twenty couple of houndys questynge, and suche noyse that beste made wheresomever he wente. And thys beste evermore sir Palomydes folowed, for hit was called hys queste.

And ryght so as he folowed this beste, hit cam by sir Trystram, and sone aftir cam sir Palomydes. And to breff thys mater, he smote downe sir Trystramys and sir Lamorak bothe with one speare, and so he departed aftir the Beste Galtyssaunte (that was called the Questynge Beste),

> wherefore thes two knyghtes were passynge wrothe that sir
> Palomydes wold nat fyght with hem on foote.
>   Here men may undirstonde that bene men of worshyp
> that man was never fourmed that all tymes myght attayne,
> but somtyme he was put to the worse by malefortune and at
> some tyme the wayker knyght put the byggar to a rebuke."

(483:16–484:22;ix.11-12)

This passage is only one of the many combats and encounters that make up

Malory's Book Five, *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, a sprawling narrative

which comprises one third of the entire *Morte Darthur*. This incident's importance

to the plot lies in its marking the end of enmity between Tristram and Lamerok,

and in its developing the role of Palomydes, who acts as a foil to Tristram until

his baptism brings a degree of closure to the Tale. The first combat here follows

the usual protocol of meeting and challenge, mounted and dismounted fighting,

a pause during which names and identities are revealed, and a resolution which

reveals as much about the contestants' characters as it does about their physical

prowess. The exaggerated courtesy of the mutual offers of surrender, and

Lamerok's statement, which suggests that "jantylness" transcends "noble proues",

are characteristic of the chivalric ethic as it is developed in this Book. These

patterns, both of structure and of values, are readily apparent to the reader, and

are in keeping with our general understanding of medieval romance. What is

unusual about the passage, I think, is the way in which the narrative aside seems

to violate the integrity of the text's fiction by invoking the laws of the readers'

world of experience, laws which we do not expect to find within romance.

No reason is given why Palomydes should intrude at precisely this moment, and none seems necessary. Events unfold in Book Five, and in the *Morte* generally, according to the peculiar law of romance which was known in the Middle Ages as *aventure*. Tristram himself has, appropriately enough, been blown to North Wales by a "contraryous wynde" (481:17;ix.10) and deposited within a zone of chance occurrences which Malory aptly names by inventing a place name, "the Foreyste Perelus" (481:18-19).[1] It is thus not surprising that Palomydes should also be here, or that he should be engaged in the pursuit of the Questing Beast. The beast's description combines the attributes of several creatures, both real and exotic, thus making it sufficiently marvellous, and indeed its very existence is tailored to the demands of romance conventions: the Questing Beast exists so that knights may quest. The entire passage is thus faithful to romance, perhaps too faithful, as its conventions seem to be at odds, or at least slightly conflicting. There is a surreal quality in Palomydes' absorption in his quest, a detachment which prevents him from fully participating in the ritual of knightly combat honoured by Lamerok and Tristram, and hence their annoyance with him.

Malory's interruption of the story comes as a surprise after this pronounced degree of unreality. As Tristram and Lamerok are two of his favourite characters, he seeks to diminish their loss of face by attempting to

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[1] The name is Malory's addition, although Vinaver (Commentary, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3.1469) notes that in the French original it is called "la forest de Darnantes", and that Malory may have borrowed the name from a hermit's warning that it is "moult perilleuse et adventureuse".

place their defeat in context. At first, this explanation is couched in the language of commonplace, proverbial wisdom ("that man was never fourmed that all tymes myght attayne") with which the *Morte*'s characters are fond of counselling one another.[2] In the latter part of the aside, however, the language becomes more substantial and specifically military in its vocabulary, as the proverbial tone generated by the non-extant subject and demonstrative pronoun ("that man was never fourmed") yields after the conjunction to a concrete subject ("the wayker knyght put the byggar knyght to a rebuke"). As a result of this chivalric turn of phrase the explanation has the knowing tone of the veteran about it. In that sense it resembles an earlier observation on jousting, made by Mordred, "for oftyn tyme I have seyne the olde preved knyghtes rebuked and slayne by them that were but yonge begynners" (466:29-30;ix.4). In his own statement Malory also seems to be speaking from experience, either of his own tourneying days or from his reading of other combats in romance and chronicle.

While this might seem an over-fanciful assumption, given what little we know as fact about the author's life, it is important to note that he assumes that the same experience is shared by his audience, "men of worshyp" who presumably have seen similar upsets. "Worshyp" here certainly has the large meaning of aristocratic or noble, and may also have the more specific meaning of reputation won by knightly activity, as it has in Tristram's challenge to Marhalte, "I caste me to geete worshyp on thy body" (381:29;viii.7). This latter meaning seems

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[2] P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, 125-27.

especially appropriate here, as a degree of technical and professional knowledge seems to be expected of the reader in many of the *Tristram*'s jousting scenes. Indeed, Malory writes throughout as a gentleman and for an audience composed of "jentylmen and jentylwymmen" (1260:20-23;xxi.13), with the expectation that his knowledge and prejudices are held in common, and "that narrator, reader, and fictional character actually share a common experience of the chivalric life".[3]

Malory's narratorial digression thus seems to suggest that the fictive world of his narrative exists in some proximity to the world of his aristocratic audience, and that it reflects something of his readers' reality. This process of reflection may be further seen in his Questing Beast. As mentioned above, it is a hybrid drawn in part from the medieval bestiary tradition, a cousin of the lions and hippogriffs found in metrical romances such as *Isumbras*, *Octavian*, and *The Squire's Tale*. The Beast's unreality is so pronounced that it does not even have a clear narrative function, for while Palomydes swears that he will not be baptised until he fulfils the Quest (717:11-17;x.63), Malory seems to forget it when he describes the Saracen's conversion. It does however have a particular reality for an aristocratic audience as a symbol of one of their favourite activities, the hunt, and assumes such an audience in the expectation that the reader knows what "twenty couple of houndys questynge" sounds like. The hunt in medieval literature is a prominent symbol of the noble life,[4] and the Beast represents the

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[3] Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, 138.

[4] Edward Duke of York, in the preface of *The Master of Game*, ed. W.A. and F. Baillie-Grohman (London, 1904), declares that hunting is "to my thenkyng

hunt to perfection. Catherine Batt describes it as "a strangely self-contained image, a compound of the quarry and the hunter".[5] She goes on to observe that in translating the French name Glatissant, Malory chooses an English word, queste, with a range of meanings. In a technical sense it can refer to the action of hunting, or more particularly to the baying of the huntsman's hounds,[6] so that the name has the possible and appropriate name of "barking beast". In the context of genre the word denotes an action suitable for a romance character, as in Gawain's declaration to the hermit that "I am a knyght of kynge Arthures that am in the queste of the Sankgreall" (891:22-24; xiii.16). All of these connotations are thus fused together in an image which is fantastic and yet essentially recognisable for Malory's aristocratic audience.

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to euery gentils hert oftenest most disportful of alle games" (3). In an epitaph for this peer, who was killed at Agincourt, John Shirley wrote that

For as of huntyng, here to fore,
Was never taught so truwe lore
To alle that beon gentyl of kynde,
Beon bounde, to have his soule in mynde

English Verse Between Chaucer and Surrey, ed. E.P. Hammond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Pres, 1929), 195, ll. 50-60.

[5] Catherine Batt, "Malory's Questing Beast and the Implications of Author as Translator," *The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Ellis (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 151-52. I am indebted to Dr. Nicholas Watson for bringing this interesting article to my attention.

[6] *M.E.D.* s.v. Quest(e n. 6b).

In this one passage, then, we note a blurring of boundaries between the fictive and the real. The three knights all act their parts along the lines of convention, Lamerok and Tristram in their fight and Palomides in his quest. However, the second fight, because it goes contrary to the hierarchy of prowess as developed in the world of the text, provokes the usually silent narrator to draw a comparison with the norms of his readers' world. The questing beast, rendered even more mysterious by its absence from the scene, is nevertheless a paradoxically familiar thing, given the culture of the original audience. Governing all, bringing together the familiar and the fantastic, is the dreamlike associative principle of *aventure*. It is a striking instance, but not the only point in Malory in which there is the similar sense of competition between fictive and real, between the modes of romance and realism. The word "conflict" is of course used in an highly imprecise manner, as this is an opposition maintained to a large extent by widespread assumptions about the nature of the two modes, the foremost being that they are inimical to one another. While the *Morte Darthur* has always been considered a romance, its realistic tendencies have long been considered worthy of comment, for they seem to give the work a degree of authenticity which distinguishes Malory from vague tags and formulas of the anonymous Middle English verse romances, which have not been noted for their mimetic capability.

The realistic tendencies in Malory can be outlined as three types or "layers" of realism. The first and most obvious of these layers is a practical realism, and involves such physical details as Guenenver's distinctive cough or

Gawain's taste for fruit, which play a purely functional role in the narrative[7] and in any case tend to originate in the source material. A second layer is the thinly-disguised realism of the historical allusion to battles or personages of the Wars of the Roses, although the search for such references, especially for those which might reveal the author's partisan sympathies, has usually been based upon premises drawn from the treacherously scanty biographical record(s).[8] The third, and I think most interesting, layer might be described as a socio-historical realism such as the aside on jousting discussed above, or Malory's casual reference that Arthur's knights find Alys la Beall Pylgryme attractive because "she was passynge fayre and ryche, and of grete rentys" (645:3-5;x.38). This latter comment could conceivably be taken as a note of warning, an indication that the Round Table has forsaken "vertuouse love" for unions of mercenary self-advancement, but a less judgemental evaluation is also available. Given what we know about the perennial appetite of the gentry and nobility for advantageous

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[7] Terrence McCarthy, *Reading the Morte Darthur* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 1988), 110-112.

[8] An annotated survey of this type of Malory scholarship is provided by Bert Dillon, *A Malory Handbook* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978), 2. Dillon himself thinks it likely that "Malory will never be extricated from one side or the other in the Wars of the Roses". Of these biographical efforts, Richard R. Griffith's is the most useful for its cautious and rigorous approach; "The Political Bias of Malory's *Morte Darthur,*" *Viator* 5 (1974): 365-86.

marriages,[9] this latter comment, especially considering its seeming offhandedness, strikes one as the natural remark of a member of one class speaking to his own.

Of course, the fantastic or supernatural, traditionally considered to be hallmarks of the medieval romance, are present elsewhere in Malory, despite some critical consensus that his taste did not incline much towards the magical. While supernatural elements found in the sources are sometimes included without elaboration, as is the horn of Morgan le Fay that detects adultery (429-30:30-1;viii.34), others are adapted with some skill. The rather frightening speech of Hallewes the Sorceress to Lancelot, who would have his embalmed body as a lover "dispyte of quene Gwenyvere" (281:4-20;vi.15), does not appear in the French *Perlesvaus*, Malory's probable source for the Chapel Perilous episode in his *Lancelot*,[10] and effectively adds a ghostly dimension to this minor character. Two of the *Morte*'s most memorable passages, both apparently of original composition, are also illustrative of Malory's interest in the supernatural. The "Healing of Sir Urry" is not a story of magic, but like many of the didactic romances it maintains the sinful man's hope of enjoying the miraculous power

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[9] See Keith Dockray, "Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?" in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Jones (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 61-80. While he agrees that many gentry marriages were business transactions, Dockray tempers this conventional view by noting that love and affection could also inspire unions, as the Paston family history suggests.

[10] R.H. Wilson, "Malory and the *Perlesvaus*," *Modern Philology* 30 (1932-33): 13-20, and "Notes on Malory's Sources," *Modern Language Notes* 66 (1951), 23.

and grace of a divine providence.[11] While Eugène Vinaver was dismissive of the "inventive power" displayed on this occasion,[12] Malory's handling of the scene reveals considerable skill. His decision to delay Lancelot's entry into the scene until the great muster of Arthur's knights attempts the deed gives the miracle considerable impact. He then develops suspense by having Lancelot confide his doubt and guilt "secretely" in prayer, and achieves a powerful effect with his hero's startling reaction, weeping "as he had bene a chylde that hade bene beatyn" (668:35-36). Malory's treatment of the dying Arthur's departure in the barge also reveals a command of the supernatural. The lament of the queen on whose lap the king's head rests, "A, my dere brothir! Why have ye taryed so longe from me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coulde!" (761:21-22), has a primitive, ballad-like melancholy and, like the black hoods Malory assigns to the ladies, lends a grave dignity to the scene. His decision to identify the women -- Morgan le Fay, the Queens of North Galis and the Waste Londis, and Nynyve -- while it contradicts the initial statement that only one queen is in the barge, further heightens the mystery of the scene. Although their presence goes unexplained, the union of these powerful and magical figures

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[11] *Sir Gowther, Sir Amadace,* and *Sir Isumbras* are useful examples of the pious romance. Laurel Braswell notes an essential irony in the commonplace clerical condemnations of romances such as *Isumbras,* and demonstrates how effectively these secular pieces "covey to 'lewed men' the nature of God's providence and the endurance of man's faith", in "'Sir Isumbras' and the Legend of Saint Eustace", *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965):128-151, 151.

[12] Vinaver, Commentary, *Works of Sir Thomas Malory,* 3.1591.

seems to indicate that the opposing forces of Arthur's kingdom have been laid to rest.

These two scenes, however, do not rely solely or even primarily upon the supernatural for their effect. In the first, Lancelot's guilty tears show as Malory is trying to understand the flawed character whom he so evidently admires, and provide a rare moment of psychological depth in a narrative peopled with terse and single-minded characters. In the description of the death of Arthur, it is not only the departure of the queens but also the slaughter of his surviving knights by "pyllours and robbers" and the graphically described death of sir Lucan (714:19-42) that makes the sense of things ending so profound. In both cases the human dimension is prominent, and the use of magic here is exceptional in part because of its rarity in the later books. As Terrence McCarthy notes,[13] with the removal of Merlin from the plot the importance of magic in the *Morte Darthur* diminishes considerably, and in any case Merlin is made to play the role of the good counsellor more than that of the wizard. Malory's adaptation of the *Suite de Merlin*, which cuts the account of the wizard's conception by an incubus and his childhood prophecies, further illustrates this point. In the absence of this account, which is a major component in the *Suite*'s discussion of fate and providence, the *Morte*'s opening "Hit befell" forgoes cosmology and reveals a debt to the Arthurian chronicle tradition. The initial tone in Malory is sharp, the action military and political; only in the later stories of Tor, Balin and Balan

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[13] Terrence McCarthy, *Reading the Morte Darthur* 14.

does his pace begin to resemble the leisurely cadence of the French source.
Moreover, while his setting is still a place where magic and *aventure* are possible,
Malory's landscape, unlike the vague topography of the *Suite*, has recognisably
English contours. For example, although "the Frensshe booke maketh no
mencyon" (12:26-27;i.5) of the London church where the sword in the stone was
located, he holds out the possibility that it was found outside of St. Paul's.
Elsewhere the geography is quite definite, as in the mention that the petty kings
hold "the Northe fro Trent forwardes" against Arthur (16:35-37;i.7). This
precision does not however characterise the *Morte*'s settings as an invariable
rule, for a comparison of the geographies in Book II (*Arthur and Lucius*) and
Book III (*Lancelot*), the first set in a recognisable Europe, the second in the
unmapped world of *aventure*, will reveal the influence of source material in this
regard.

Malory's landscape does nevertheless seem at times to exhibit a surprising
degree of concreteness for a medieval romance, and here we return to our initial
point about the *Morte Darthur*'s conflicting invocations of the realistic and
romantic. Hitherto I have spoken of the "romantic aspects" of Malory's book as
a means of designating those characteristics which it shares with similar medieval
texts that we today classify as romances, without attempting any formal definition
of the terms "romance" and "romantic". Modern understandings of romance
tend to assign the genre a place bordering fairy tale and folklore: an ethereal
location given to the ideal rather than to the particular. Critics thus seem
surprised and even disappointed to discover elements of material realism

in Malory: these include details such as the sum of twenty thousand pounds which Guenever spends to recover Lancelot (831:31-33:xii.9), as if such elements partake of vulgarity. Vinaver, thinking of the Warwickshire Malory's reputation for robbery and rustling, makes a clear distinction between such references to material wealth in the *Morte* and the untarnished idealism of its sources.[14] As the first passage from the *Tristram* at the head of this chapter has suggested, however, Malory's realism extends beyond actual English place names and economic details, and can be characterised as a degree of similitude between the aristocratic life as experienced by readers and by characters. a process of reflection or realism which is a fundamental aspect of romance.

John Finlayson has observed that the characteristics of a genre are to a large extent determined by its readers' expectations of that genre, and that our modern habit of expecting to find dragons and other fantastic elements in medieval romance, a notoriously amorphous collection of texts, may well be at variance with the expectations of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century readers. While the fantastic may well be found in those romances which do originate in folklore, such elements are subordinated to the genre's common interest in heroes representative of a very real social rank. In all romances, Finlayson argues, the hero is "a feudal, aristocratic chevalier", and subgenres, courtly romances or

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[14] Vinaver, Introduction, *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1.xxviii. Mention of costs and expenses is actually not uncommon in Middle English romance. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), for example, Guenore's dais is covered "wyth þe best gemmes/ þat my3t be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye,/ in daye" ll. 79-81).

chansons de geste, differ only in their conception of the knight's function. These differing conceptions "are controlled by a total attitude (in fiction at any rate) to the individual world and its experiences".[15] Pamela Gradon's comments on Malory's characters tend to concur with Finlayson's general description of the romances:

> [Malory's] characters are not individualised but draw their vitality almost entirely from their social milieu. It is in relation to their social milieu that they have meaning.[16]

A brief survey of romance scholarship will reveal that the resemblance of life portrayed in the text to the audience's life has often been noted, and is one of the few common denominators in studies of this variegated literature. That medieval romance as a genre is not readily definable has become a conventional introduction to the efforts of the many scholars attempting to bring some order to this variegated field. Efforts to survey and catalogue the field have recognised that its generic boundaries must be flexible enough to include a number of works, including chivalric biography, certain chronicles, epics, saints' lives and ballads, sufficiently similar to one another to merit consideration as romances. The editors of the revision of *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, who group the romances by their topic or *matière*, assign twenty-one titles to their "Miscellaneous" category, suggesting, as Derek Pearsall has noted, the

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[15] John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," *Chaucer Review* 15 (1980-81): 168.

[16] Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971), 269.

obvious shortcomings of using subject matter as a method of classification.[17] Detailed studies of shared motifs, plots and narrative structures in the Middle English romances have taken us beyond the preliminary but vital cataloguing of Severs' *Manual* and of other pioneers, but still rely upon definitions and characterisations of romance worth reexamining.

The Postulates of Romance

Medieval definitions of romance are varied and evolved over several centuries of literary discourse. In many cases it is difficult to fix an exact meaning to a particular usage, as in Chaucer's description of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a "romaunce" (*BD* 48). This description could easily be taken to have the common medieval meaning of "a work written in the vernacular", or it might have a more precise sense of genre, a certain type of book. In the *Yvain* of Chrétien de Troyes the narrator describes the lord of Pesme Avanture and his family listening to "un romans, ne sai de cui" [a romance, of whom I do not know] (ll. 5356-63), and Paul Strohm suggests that by the thirteenth century the word was in use in France as a generic term, indicating a story focused upon one hero and meant for a gentle audience.[18] At the beginning of the fourteenth

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[17] Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965): 96.

[18] Paul Strohm, "The Origin and Meaning of Middle English Romaunce," *Genre* 10 (1977):4.

century the word "romaunce" found its way into Middle English, sometimes being used merely to acknowledge a French original. The Auchinleck version of *Beves of Hamtoun*, for example, uses both "So hit is in Frensch y-founde" (l. 1782) and "þe romounce telleþ" (l. 1537) as a means of drawing authority from its source. As a generic term Middle English "romaunce" bears a general semantic resemblance to the Old French usage from *Yvain* cited above, although one may observe in its many occurrence= a certain uncertainty as to whether it designated a story of an historical or fantastic nature.

An example of the use of romance to indicate a type of historical narrative occurs in the fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, in which we are told that Youth favours

Riche Romance to rede and rekken the sothe
Of kempes and of conquerours, of kynges full noblee,
How tha3 wirchipe and welthe wanne in thaire lyues...[19]

The introduction of *Richard Coer de Lyon* uses romance interchangeably with "geestes" (ll. 5,9), a term originally associated with a type of heroic saga in Old French known as the *chanson de geste*, to describe stories of the lives of famous historical, Arthurian, and ancient warriors such as Charlemagne, Arthur and Achilles.[20] Barbour, the Scottish poet, describes his *Bruce*, a fourteenth-century

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[19] M.Y. Offord, ed., *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, Early English Text Society no. 246 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), ll. 250-52.

[20] Bradford B. Broughton, trans. & ed., *Richard the Lion-Hearted and Other Medieval Romances* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966), 149-229, ll. 5,9.

account of the deeds of Robert the Bruce, as a "romanys",[21] further suggesting that the term was in use to denote a biographical or historical narrative.

The *Cursor Mundi* speaks of the "dyuerse manere" of romances that men "3emen ...for to here", and mentions not only stories of the past but also of the marvellous:

> Of kyng Arthour þat was so riche
> Was noon in hys tyme him liche
> Of wondris þat his kny3tes felle
> And aun es duden men herde telle[22]

Some romance writers were evidently aware of an impression that the romances were idle and fictitious stories, as the rather severe poet of *Cursor Mundi* implies, and attempted to distinguish their works from others. The poet of *King Alisaundir* declares of his text that "þis is nou3th romaunce of skof,/ Ac storye ymade of maistres wyse".[23] Similarly, the introduction to the *Avowing of Arthur* makes the claim that "þis is no fantum ne no fabull".[24] The *Gawain*-poet, however, unashamedly promises to entertain his audience with "an aunter in erde I attle to schawe,/ þat a selly in si3t summe men hit holden,/ And an outtrage

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[21] W.W. Skeat, ed., *The Bruce*, Early English Text Society e.s. nos. 11,21,29 (London: 1870, 1874, 1877), Bk. 1, l. 446.

[22] Sarah M. Horrall, ed., *The Southern Version of the Cursor Mundi*, 3 vols. (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1978), ll. 9-12.

[23] G.V. Smithers, ed., *King Alisaundir*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 227 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), ll. 668-69.

[24] Roger Dahood, ed., *The Avowing of Arthur* (New York: Garland, 1984), l. 17.

awenture of Arthurez wonderez".[25] A form related to romance, the lay, was also considered to be a light or entertaining story about love and magic. The preface of the Auchinleck version of *Sir Orfeo* gives a short history of the form, of "Layes þat ben in harping/ Ben y-founde of ferlie þing", written and performed so that "kinges mi3t our y-here/ Of ani meruailles þat þer were".[26]

Clearly the term "romance" had a variety of meanings to medieval readers, and was equally applied to works to which varying degrees of veracity were attributed. It is interesting to note, however, that the evolution of our contemporary understanding of "romance" and of its companion adjective, "romantic", as literary terms seems to be founded primarily upon an emphasis of fantastic or unreal qualities in a given work. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that the word "romantic" does not appear before the seventeenth century, when it had the sense of something "Of a fabulous or fictitious character, having no foundation in fact". As an aesthetic term, describing a work of literature and music, "romantic" is not used until the early nineteenth century. It is in this period that our understanding of the nature of medieval romance was first shaped. As John Finlayson observes, early critics, especially those of the last century, displayed "an eagerness to label anything to do with knights and the supernatural as romance".[27] A nineteenth-century emphasis upon the

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[25] Tolkien & Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 27-29.

[26] A.J. Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), ll. 3-4, 17-18.

[27] Finlayson, "Definitions Of Middle English Romance": 177.

supernatural and the power of the creative imagination, writes Finlayson, persisted in modern criticism. In his survey of the medieval romances George Kane declared that "[w]hat is, however, necessary to the literary excellence of the romances, and was necessary at the time of their composition, is the ability of the author to induce in his public, by some means, a ready surrender to the experience of fiction".[28] Kane, one suspects, was influenced by the same version of literary creativity which Wordsworth celebrates in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* as the miraculous "power of the human imagination",[29] and consequently he found very little in the medieval romances that met with his aesthetic approval. Similarly, W.P. Ker found in these texts very little of "imaginative beauty", the quality he admired in Spenser and in Coleridge, and dismissed the bulk of the medieval romances as the work of uninspired hack poets. He noted with regret that "it is a disappointment to find that romance is rarely at its finest in the works that technically have the best right in the world to be called by that name".[30]

Since Ker, it has become almost commonplace for scholars to note that the romances in Middle English are singularly lacking in imagination and in that skilfully achieved remove from the reader's world of experience which constituted

[28] George Kane, *Middle English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1951), 101-02.

[29] William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. W.J.B. Owen (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 86.

[30] W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York: Dover, 1957), 325-26.

Kane's standard of literary excellence. Certainly the romances maintain a stock of fantastic elements, including giants, magical objects, and damsels transformed through enchantment, but invariably those elements are either overcome or acquired by conventional heroes whose behaviour and methods were thoroughly familiar to the romances' primarily aristocratic audience. *Lybeaus Desconus*, a fourteenth-century metrical romance attributed to the shadowy Thomas Chestre, offers a brief example of this phenomenon. In this English version of the Fair Unknown story, the hero must defeat a powerful baron, a giant, and a pair of enchanters in order to free the lady who is the object of his quest. Lybeaus' first encounter with the baron, whom he defeats by knightly prowess (physical ability), sets the tone for the subsequent conflicts. Knights, giant, and enchanters are all described uniformly -- all, for example, ride "stedes prowde of prys" (Cotton 1291) -- and Lybeaus vanquishes them using his limited repertoire, "With sperys doughtely of dynte" (Lambeth 1925). As a result, while *Lybeaus Desconus* contains elements that we might habitually think of as being romantic, a curious chivalric levelling effect reduces them to the status of props in a series of martial escapades; the giants and enchanters become rather like the quintains used by medieval knights to practise their jousting skills. The same can be said of most Middle English romances with the exception of a few such as the remarkable *Sir Orfeo*, whose simplicity is unmarred by tournaments and combats.

A.C. Gibbs has written that if we think of romantic qualities according to our contemporary usage of the word, so that romance is something we associate with tropical islands, then the uniformity of a *Lybeaus Desconus* may deter and

disappoint readers.[31] Those who disparage Malory for writing little more than a long succession of skirmishes and noble athletics unconsciously emphasise Gibbs' point. A chivalric tone and ethic act as the governing force in the great majority of medieval romances, shaping their presentation of magic, the exotic and the supernatural -- precisely those elements that we might in an uninitiated way think of as being "romantic". The result is that the world of romance is not an alien or totally fantastic place, but one which is dominated by a very specific ethos, marked by what many critics have described as a "heightened" or "refined" quality. According to Northrop Frye, this is true of romance generally. In Frye's historical account of Western fiction as a series of modes, the earliest and highest stage is the myth, a story about a divine being. As rival mythologies were supplanted by Christianity in the pre-medieval period, this mode gave way to the legend or romance, where the hero is superior to others but is now recognisably human. This heightening or enhancement effect of romance also applies to the hero's world,

> ...in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to [the romance hero], and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established.[32]

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[31] A.C. Gibbs, Introduction, *Middle English Romances* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 1-27.

[32] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 33.

Frye was most interested in the enhanced quality of romance because of its effect upon the hero's power of action, one of his key indices, while for medievalists the exaggerated qualities of the romance world are primarily of interest in that they seem to be a reflection of the medieval present. With an understandable degree of generalisation, Helaine Newstead defines medieval romance as "a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or prose", which may exhibit didactic intent but which is always written to entertain.[33] It is in the romances' description in heightened terms of a world that was essentially familiar to its audience, a coming together of unreal and mimetic tendencies, that the romances' appeal to their first readers is best understood. This was the view of Dorothy Everett who, in her now classic essay, wrote of the romances' "medievalisation" of their settings and backgrounds. The romances, she argued, must have provided their audience with "an escape from the failures or partial successes of life as it was lived by showing them that life idealised".[34] This idealisation informs many descriptive passages in the romances, where the beauty of women, the quality of banquets and the strength of a blow are often described in superlative terms, with the narrative solemnly assuring the reader as to the truth of the exaggeration.

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[33] Helaine Newstead, "Romances, General" in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English; Fascicule I: Romances*, ed. J.B. Severs (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), 11.

[34] Dorothy Everett, " A Characterization of the English Medieval Romances," *Essays on Middle English Literature*, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon 1959) 8.

In the case of Malory we find the same tendency of romance towards hyperbole, although his laconic style and the constraint of prose do not allow him to engage in the elaborate descriptions which the poetic arsenals and wordhoards of the alliterative and metrical poets allowed.[35] He is content to use simple words such as "best" and "most", casting events in the superlative but avoiding any elaborating description, so that letters requesting aid from Ban and Bors are written "in the most plesauntist wyse accordynge unto kynge Arthurs desyre" (20:30-32;i.10), and the Archbishop of Canterbury has Mordred excommunicated "in the moste orguluste wyse that myght be done" (1228:16-17; xxi.1). Many of his characters have the conventionally attractive qualities of appearance which Chaucer spoofs in his parodic romance hero, Sir Thopas (*CT* VII 724-729). One thinks, for example, of Malory's most engaging couple, Alysaundir le Orphelyne and Alys La Beale Pellaron, whose mutual beauty is such that they fall in love on first sight of each others' faces (396-97:41-9;x.37). Several of the *Morte*'s Tales, Book III (*Sir Lancelot*), Book IV (*Sir Gareth*), and Book V (*Sir Tristram*), closely follow conventional definitions of romance such as Newstead's, namely a tale of prowess and adventure focusing on a single knightly hero, and to these we might add sections of Book I (*King Arthur*) and

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[35] Two examples of the verse romances' capability for extended and exaggerated description are the jewelled cloak in *Emaré*, in *Middle English Metrical Romances*, eds. W.H. French and C.B. Hale, (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1930), and the feast given by Arthur to impress the Roman ambassadors in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, ll. 176-230.

Book VI (*The Sankgreal*) where the scope narrows to follow individuals on their quests.

While these aspects of Malory's work constitute only a few of the qualities that allow us to consider his work within the romance tradition, there are also a number of obstacles which lie in the way of determining, to use Frye's term, the "romance postulates" of the *Morte Darthur*. As noted in the Preface, Malory's scope is such that interesting problems of generic categorisation arise. To what extent is it in fact a romance? In most romances the emphasis is on a solitary figure, a Lancelot or a Lybeaus, who is free to test and establish himself as an heroic figure. The words of Calogrenant in Chrétien's *Yvain*, who describes himself as a knight seeking "Avanture, por esprover/ ma proesce et mon hardement" [Adventure, to test my skill and my courage] (ll. 362-63) could, as John Stevens suggests, "serve almost as a classic definition of chivalric romance".[36] Book II, however, like its alliterative source and violent thirteenth century cousins such as *Arthour and Merlin* and *Richard Coer de Lyon*, shares the corporate and military focus of chronicles. The knights following Arthur's banner are motivated by feudal loyalty and nationalistic pride, although, as Sir Cador observes with simple-minded pleasure, they will have in France ample opportunity for "warre and worshyp" (187:21;v.1). Like parts of Book I, especially "Merlin" and "The War with the Five Kings", Book II could easily be described as a chronicle of Arthur's young kingdom rather than as a romance.

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[36] John Stevens, *Medieval Romances: Themes and Approaches* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 107.

While Malory evasively attributes the belief in Arthur's return as *rex quondam et futurus* to "some men" (1242:22-29;xxi.7), he does not challenge the truth of the *rex quondam*, and elsewhere he displays the same faith in the historicity of his narrative, as is evident in his concern for the state of Tristram's soul (682-83:25-4;x.52). Caxton also asserts in his Preface, albeit with some commercial rhetoric, that "there can no man resonably gaynsaye butt here was a kyng of thys lande named Arthur". Clearly the border between romance and chronicle in Malory is an intangible one. As Mark Lambert writes, Malory's style is not that of the "omniscient fictionalist", but is instead, as with the St. Paul's reference, that of "a man who respects his subject matter and believes finding the truth about these events important enough to point out where that truth is uncertain".[37]

Another difficulty in classifying Malory's work, related to its sharing qualities of both romance and chronicle, is in its use of varying literary modes. The story of Balin and Balan, for example, is predominantly written in the romance mode as described above by Frye. That there should be a "traytoure knyght that rydith invisible" (81:11-12;ii.13), or that Balin should make the fatal mistake of giving up his shield, and that a weirdly prescient damsel should immediately recognise that "ye have put yourself in grete daunger, for by your sheld ye shold have ben knowen" (88:36-37;ii.17) seem to the reader to be entirely consonant with the romance mode. The haunting sense of fate working

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[37] Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 41.

remorselessly to bring the two brothers together, a quality which Malory captures in his translation from the French, and the powerful motif of the Dolorous Stroke, even in this rather garbled transmission create an atmosphere where the demands of plausibility are effectively suspended.

At other points in Malory, however, there are moments in which the characteristics of the romance mode seem strangely absent and we seem to descend into Frye's mimetic mode, where the hero is "superior neither to other men nor to his environment".[38] A striking example of this transition occurs when Lancelot is ambushed by Mellyagaunte's archers on his way to rescue the Queen and her knights, in Malory's version of Chretien's *Lancelot*. Here the aristocratic hero is deprived of his horse and despite his threats is powerless to retaliate:

> So than they shotte sir Launcelottis horse and smote hym
> with many arowys. And than sir Launcelot avoyded hys horse
> and wente on foote, but there were so many dychys and
> hedgys betwyxte hem and hym that he myght nat meddyll
> with none of hem.
> "Alas, for shame!" seyde sir Launcelot, "that ever one knyght
> shulde betray anothir knyght! But hyt ys an oldeseyde saw:
> 'A good man ys never in daungere but whan he ys in the
> daungere of a cowhard.'"
> Than sir Launcelot walked on a whyle, and was sore
> acombird of hys armoure, hys shylde, and hys spere. Wyte
> you well he was full sore anoyed! And full lothe he was for
> to leve onythynge that longed unto hym, for he drad sore
> the treson of sir Mellyagaunce.
> (1125-26:32-11;xix.4)

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[38] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 34.

Here for the first time in Malory mundane difficulties such as impassable terrain and the weight of a knight's armour, physical realities which hitherto have no presence in the world of the *Morte Darthur*, now interfere with the possibility of heroic action. That this should happen in Book VII (*Launcelot and Guinevere*) is appropriate, as the reader is drawn throughout this section away from the world of romance into another one of court intrigue and violence, so that events seem to be cruel parodies of the more fantastic earlier books. As Felicity Riddy memorably writes, the death of Gareth in Book VII pointedly reminds us of Book IV, the most youthful and vivid of Malory's books, only to show how that world is irretrievably lost:

> ... Gareth will die meaninglessly; the brother whom he has outgrown by the end of this story will conceive a perverse and murderous passion on his behalf; the armed men who come to Lancelot's and Guinevere's bed will not be -as here - magical powers who can be quickly reassembled, but old enemies and old friends who are left corpses, "cold to the erthe".[39]

The difficulty in discussing Malory as a mimetic writer lies, first, in identifying where beneath the Arthurian fiction we can legitimately claim to see an allusion to or reflection of fifteenth-century England, and then in asking ourselves what sort of reality it is that we think we see? Is, for example, the reference to Mordred's supporters coming from "Kente, Southsex and Surrey, Esax, Suffolke and Northefolke" (1233:5-7;xxi.3) a reference to a particular phase in the dispute between York and Lancaster, or, on a larger scale, does Malory's

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[39] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 62.

evident reverencing of knighthood reflect a contemporary social and cultural view of that institution? To answer this question, it will be fruitful to consider in more detail the question of the mimetic capability of the romances, lest we read into them a realism which may well have been at best a secondary concern of their original authors and audiences. If I here abandon Malory temporarily to consider two texts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it is because of Erich Auerbach, whose study of the *Chanson de Roland* and of Chrétien's *Yvain* has, almost exclusively, lent a theoretical base to modern romance scholarship.

Romance's Two Poles: *Vasselage* and *Cortoisie*

Auerbach's *Mimesis* is primarily a study of stylistics, of the evolution of representation in literature, with only cursory consideration of those social and cultural forces which play a role in the shaping of literary history. Nevertheless, his discussion of these two texts, which are close to one another in date but highly distinct in nature, manages to identify two of the most important axes of chivalric literature. Ker identified these as epic and romance, and I have referred to them above as chronicle and romance. Auerbach identifies these two aspects as feudalism (*Roland*) and courtliness (*Yvain*) and does not see them as clearly defined institutions per se, but rather as the values, both political and ethical, which animated the society of their readers. Feudalism may be briefly defined here as the close union of a lord and the man (vassal) who swore to

assist and obey him (hommage) in return for the lord's protection.[40] This system provided the basis of early medieval political and military organisation, and the word *vasselage* combines a number of the values expected of a vassal, particularly military virtues such as courage. Courtliness is a rather more intangible term, and represents, both in *Yvain* and in subsequent texts, an ideal of conduct with a full range of shadings in between etiquette and morality. While social and military structures would change considerably between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, the values associated with them would persist in chivalric literature, in varying proportions, up to Malory's time.

Some accounts of the Battle of Hastings mention that the story of Roland was read or recited to the Norman army in order to raise its spirits before the fight. While probably apocryphal,[41] the anecdote does convey a sense of why the

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[40] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961), 145-47.

[41] William of Malmesbury (*Gesta Regum*) reports that the Normans advanced to a song (*cantilena*) about Roland. Subsequent accounts by Benoit de Sainte-Maure and Wace attribute the song to a minstrel named Taillefer:

> Taillefer ki moult bien chantout
> Sor un cheval ki tost alout
> Devant le duc alout chantant
> De Karlemaigne et de Rollant
> Et d'Oliver et des vassals
> Ki morurent en Rencesvals

> [Taillefer, who sang very well, on a swift horse rode before
> the duke and chanted the story of Charlemagne and Roland,
> of Oliver and the vassals who fell at Roncesvaux.]

Le Roman de Rou de Wace, ed. A.J. Holden. 3 vols. (Paris: A.& J. Picard, 1970-73), ll. 8013-18. David C. Douglas writes in *William the Conqueror* (Berkeley and

legend must have been valued by its audiences. As Auerbach observes in his discussion of *laisses* fifty-eight to sixty-two, the poem's paratactic style and loosely sequential narrative structure prohibit the exploration of motive or the consideration of alternatives; "everything must happen as it does happen, it could not be otherwise, and there is no need for explanatory connectives".[42] In these *laisses* Ganelon has already arranged for the Saracen army to descend upon Charlemagne's exposed rearguard, and it only remains for him to manoeuvre his stepson and rival, the emperor's nephew Roland, into accepting the post. In publicly nominating Roland for the command as a "baron de si grant vasselage" [baron of such great valour] (lviii.744), Ganelon invokes the ethic of *vasselage*, as his stepson cannot evade the nomination without calling into question both his loyalty and his bravery. Earlier, when Charlemagne required a man for a dangerous post of ambassador to the Saracens, Ganelon had accepted his nomination by Roland with poor grace (xxi-xxiii), a sign of fear upon which Roland capitalises by declaring his own readiness to go:

Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964) that "it is a good story and it might even be true, though it has the elements of a myth" (199n.5). Michel de Boüard, in *Guillaume le Conquerant* (Paris: Fayard, 1984) thinks that if there was singing at Hastings, it was either a psalm or "un de ces petit poèmes en langue commune qui précédèrent la *Chanson de Roland*" (326).

[42] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 101. Subsequent references to the *Roland* are to the edition by Cesare Segare (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1989), to *Yvain* are from the editon of Mario Roques (Paris: Campion, 1971).

>   Orgoill oi e folage;
> Ço set hom ben, n'ai cure de manace.
> Mais saives hom, il deit faire message:
> Si li reis voelt, prez sui por vus le face.
>   (xx.292-295)
>
> [I have heard pride and foolishness:
> men know well that I am unmoved by threats.
> A worthy man must take this message:
> if the king desires it, I am ready to deliver
> it in your place.]

Ganelon has no choice but to accept the mission when thus rebuked, and now, in the pass of Roncesvaux, uses the same expectations of the brave and loyal vassal as a weapon against Roland. Charlemagne himself realises that his nephew must accept the implied challenge, but in an a near-prophetic manner recognises the scope of the coming tragedy, calling Ganelon a "living devil" and weeping (lxi.771-73).

Charlemagne's authority and great age do not, however, give him the ability to save Roland, who is bound by duty to go to his death, and the incident serves to illustrate the great power of the feudal ethos in the early medieval imagination. While Auerbach notes that the restrictive focus of the *laisse* and the use of parataxis prohibit the *Roland* from developing any situations of great sophistication, it also fixes motivations and social relationships with the greatest of precision.

> ... for the men who figure in it nothing of fundamental significance is problematic. All the categories of this life and the next are unambiguous, immutable, fixed in rigid formulations. ... They live safely and confidently in the rigid

and narrow established order within which the duties of life,
their distribution according to estates (cf. the division of
labor between knights and monks, ll. 1877ff.), the character
of supernatural forces, and mankind's relationship thereto
are regulated in the simplest way.[43]

In the world of the text there is no conceivable political community
outside of feudalism. In the opening *laisses* we are at the court of the Saracen
king Marsile (ii-v) and then at Charlemagne's headquarters (viii,xi-xii), and the
two courts virtually mirror each other. Both are located in orchards, with the
kings seated in the shade and surrounded by their nobles. Charlemagne's wise
counsellor, Naimon, has his opposite number in Marsile's adviser Blancandrin,
who is described as "De vasselage fut asez chevaler: Prozdom i out pour sun
seignur aider" [A knight of great courage, a worthy man fit to support his lord]
(iii.25-26). The poem's even-handed approach to the enemy is sometimes
matched by the French, who will remark that an especially able opponent would
have a worthy knight if only he had been Christian. Like the French, the
Saracens attach great importance to the emblems of command which represent
a lord's trust in his vassals. Marsile gives his nephew Adelroth command of the
attack on Roland, and like the French uses a glove as token (lxx). Adelroth is
followed into battle by twelve companions, matching the twelve peers who join
the rearguard because "Hom sui Rollant, jo ne li dei faillir" [I am Roland's man,
I must not fail him] (lxiv.801).

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[43] *Ibid.*, 110.

Auerbach found the realism of the *Roland* in the concentrated focus and terse exchanges of certain *laisses*, "in which only a very few characters confront one another, in which the gestures and speeches of a brief occurrence come out in sharp relief" (120). Other than this "visual plasticity", he wrote, the poem's readers would not have found within it their own lives. There are "isolated moments" of practical, military realism, such as Roland's ordering Count Walter to mount a flank guard, but they are seen through "the shimmering veil of legend".[44] Because the tone of the *Roland* is heroic and elevated, and its characters are representative only of the very apex of feudal society, it has rather the exemplary nature of propaganda. We do not see feudalism as an economic or agrarian system, but rather, in what little of society we do see, as a bond of feudal loyalty, made all the more important by the treason of Ganelon, that lends the characters what Auerbach calls "their historico-political function".[45] By this he means that the *chanson de geste* functioned in its time as a vernacular chronicle, preserving a national memory, and also offered the secular ideals of loyalty and bravery which appealed to those Norman adventurers, such as William the Conqueror, who transformed Western Europe through feudalism.

Unlike the *Roland*, in which the orientation of characters is vertical, according to the hierarchy of lord and vassal, the characters of *Yvain* interact as equals within one social group, with the exception of Laudine and Yvain, who

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[44] *Ibid.*, 121.

[45] *Ibid.*, 122.

are placed in the new hierarchy of love, which subordinates the knight to his lady. From the introduction we see, besides the older values of bravery and loyalty, a new value is embodied by Arthur, "la cui proesce nos enseigne/ que nos soiens preu et cortois" [whose prowess teaches us that we might be brave and courteous] (2-3). In the world of the courtly romance sheer knightly ability (prowess) will still be necessary, but, in addition to establishing his individual worth, the code of courtesy also demands that the knight prove himself in a social context. As Auerbach understands them, the aims of *corteisie*, "refinement of the laws of combat, courteous social intercourse, [the] service of women", may not be achieved simply by noble birth, but "by constant and tireless practice and proving" of the individual knight.[46] The result is a type of heroism which is as much ethical as it is martial, which is paradoxically individual despite being centred upon King Arthur and his court, and whose energies are sometimes unfocused and ethically ambiguous in comparison with the clearly defined oppositions of the *chanson de geste*.

Yvain begins with Arthur, the paragon of chivalry, strangely absent from the story. The king has retired uncustomarily after the feast of Pentecost, a self-absenting of power which causes unease and consternation among his courtiers, and which signals the relative unimportance of the sovereign to the plot of courtly romance. The knight Calogrenant then entertains a small group with an account of his adventure at a magical spring, revealed to him by a strange, ogrish

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[46] *Ibid.*, 134.

herdsman. His description of the spring does not give the knight much reason to go there, except for the vague promise that if he escapes "sanz grant enui et sanz pesance,/ tu seras de meillor cheance/ que chevaliers qui i fust onques" [without great trouble or grief, you will enjoy better fortune than any other knight who went there] (405-07). However, as we noted earlier, Calogrenant has put himself into the hands of *aventure* "por esprover ma proesce et mon haredmant", and accepts the challenge without hesitation. Defeated by the spring's fearful guardian, he is ignominiously sent home without his armour.

Calogrenant's cousin Yvain is stirred by the story, and he resolves to avenge his relation's defeat. Subsequent developments, however, suggest that there is more to Yvain's excitement than a simple desire to maintain familial honour. When the story of the spring is told to Arthur he too resolves to experience its magic, underlining his intention with "trois sairemanz antiers" [three great oaths] (661-72?). All the court admires the king's resolution, with the exception of Yvain, whose irritation and unhappiness at the news is an index of how far we have come from the *Roland*'s simple world of *vasselage*. As Yvain has already determined to travel there alone, and to have the honour of fighting the guardian solely for himself, he is not pleased to imagine himself competing with Arthur, Kay or Gawain. Accordingly, he swears his squire to secrecy and leaves well ahead of the court. In the world of *aventure*, therefore, knight and sovereign are equally free to act, as there is no sense that Arthur's wishes have political primacy over those of his knights. Individual pride and desire do of course play a part in the *Roland* as well, for Roland seems to delay sounding his

horn for aid out of pride and his desire to be immortalised in song, and even Ganelon, when he is threatened by Marsile, swears by his sword that it will not be said "Que suls i moerge en l'estrange cuntree;/ Einz vos avrunt li meillor cumperee" [That I died alone in a foreign land, before you will have paid with the lives of your best] (xxxiv.447-49). In its context, however, desire must be weighed against larger political and religious loyalties, whereas in *Yvain* desire has an immediacy and a primacy which, if constrained at all, is only regulated by more individual obligations, such as the knight's lady's wishes.

Vasselage and *cortoisie*, as illustrated in these two texts, are the predominant values of medieval romance and are present in all romances from the twelfth-century to Malory's day, often simultaneously, in major and minor keys. The freedom of action allowed in romances of *cortoisie* allows individual knights to achieve rewards for themselves, rather than serve the large ends of the sovereign, and the realm and religion he embodies. In *Yvain* this freedom results in a certain ethical ambiguity. Yvain's activities after he becomes the guardian of the spring make him a paragon of knightly service, and the list of those he aids or rescues includes the lady besieged by Count Alier, Laudine's damsel Lunette, the younger daughter of Noir Espine denied her inheritance, and the three hundred damsels of Pesme Avanture. Prior to this philanthropy, however, Yvain had defeated Calogrenant's nemesis, the guardian of the spring, energetically pursuing his mortally wounded opponent despite the latter's groans (794-906). The ritual of challenge and combat at the spring, the ferocity of the fight, and Yvain's mercilessness are all narrated in a neutral tone that prevents

the reader from assuming that there is a right or wrong in this incident, and this neutrality, as Auerbach notes, often leaves us uncertain of the symbolic or ethical significance of events in *Yvain*. All that seems important in the second fight at the spring is that Yvain is able to defeat the guardian and profit by winning his kingdom and grieving widow Laudine, whom he wins through a series of arguments worthy of Andreas Capellanus (1589-2036). If there is any sense of incongruity in Yvain's success, it is only noted obliquely by Chrétien:

> Mes or est mes sire Yvains sire,
> et li morz est tos obliez;
> cil qui l'ocist est mariez;
> sa fame a, et ensamble gisent;
> et les genz ainment plus et prisent
> le vif c'onques le mort ne firent.
> (ll. 2166-71)
> [But now my lord Yvain is seigneur, and the dead man is
> completely forgotten; he who killed him has married his
> wife, and shares her bed, and the people love and respect
> their new lord more than they ever did the dead one.]

In the Middle English descendants of the *chanson* tradition, including Malory's Book II, the law of *vasselage* allows us to read events, even the frightful cannibalism of Richard in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, within a clearly defined ethical context, usually that of Christian versus Saracen. By its very inclusiveness, however, the *Morte* draws on practically all the threads of the romance tradition, and in the sections which reveal a clearer debt to *cortoisie* events are often more resistant to ethical interpretation. In Book IV, Lancelot enters a tournament to aid King Bagdemagus, in keeping with a pledge made to the king's daughter, and we are told that eighteen knights are killed, besides four that Lancelot "brake

their backys" (262:30-31;vi.7) and twelve whom he "smote down .. and the most

party of hem never throof aftir" (263:24-26). While it seems excessive to the

reader, as such casualties are not mentioned in the book's later tournaments, the

loss of life here goes without comment, and seems designed to provide substance

to the Tale's opening claim, that "in all turnements, justys, and dedys of armys,

both for lyff and deth, [Lancelot] passed all other knightes" (253:9-10;vi.1). As

in *Yvain*, violence here is the necessary means of the knight's success, for without

his arms the hero of chivalric romance is nothing. In romances of *cortoisie*,

however, violence often lacks the containment provided by the simple binary

oppositions of the *chansons*, so that it is always potentially unmanageable, even

fratricidal. In Malory's *Lancelot* the hero's roving philanthropy rivals that of

Chrétien's Yvain, yet his prowess also isolates him from the companionship of

the Round Table, to the point where he must wear another knight's coat of arms

because his own is so feared. As Sir Raynolde tells Lancelot, "yf I myght wyth

my worshyppe I wolde not have ado with the" (276:11-12;vi.12). Raynolde and

his brothers are defeated but treated graciously by Lancelot, whom they

acknowledge for his "goodnesse", the conventions of chivalry thus mediating the

hierarchy of brute force somewhat. Elsewhere in the *Morte*, however, the

compulsion to prove one's self brings sworn friends and brothers -- Gareth and

Gawain, Tristram and Lamerok, Lancelot and Tristram -- together in battle,

catastrophes being averted by the conventional last-minute recognition. Of

course, in the last two tales violence runs beyond any constraints, the romance

of *aventure* becoming a tragedy of Fortune.

The contribution of Auerbach to romance scholarship thus largely consists of his clear demonstration that medieval romance was not simply an outlet for the medieval imagination, and that it was animated by values central to its audience, or more particularly, audiences. Chrétien's audience was most likely one of courtiers, and probably, if as is often thought he enjoyed the patronage of Marie, Countess of Champagne, it included many noblewomen. In *Yvain*, Calogrenant is graciously received at the castle lying on his route to the spring, especially by its lord's daughter, whose hospitality, says Auerbach, reflects an "established custom, ... a ritual which shows us courtly society in its setting of highly developed conventionality",[47] a conventionality in which women have an important place. On the other hand, Wace's anecdote of Taillefer at Hastings, even if only partly correct, suggests that the *Roland* and the *chanson* tradition it represents were intended for a predominantly male, military audience. As Larry Benson points out, Marie's husband, Count Henry, preferred to act as patron to literature more to his taste, including the *Vengeance Alexandre*, "a good old-fashioned *chanson de geste*, in which religion, loyalty to one's lord, and the smashing of heads are the main concerns".[48] This distinction in tastes serves as a useful reminder that the audience of medieval romance was not monolithic in

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[47] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 131.

[48] Larry D. Benson, "Courtly Love and Chivalry in the Later Middle Ages" in *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Press, 1984), 240.

nature, any more than romance was, and by Malory's time the diversity of this audience reflected the diversity of English society itself.

Romance Audiences

Besides satisfying the more individual tastes of courtiers and soldiers, the romances fulfilled the general function of articulating an ideology for the feudal classes of Western Europe. Northrop Frye has observed that "in every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance", in which the hero's ability to meet the villain's challenge provides an assurance to the audience of its ascendancy.[49] Usually the villain is some form of the Other, the Grendel or Saracen who has little sympathy with or understanding of the social values he challenges, and is merely a nihilistic force.[50] When the villain comes from within the social structure and betrays it, as does Ganelon in the *Roland*, he is a more frightening menace, and the chaos he threatens to allow into the fold must be graphically and ceremonially eradicated. Such villains are paradoxically necessary to the group, however, as they tend to clarify the values they attempt to undermine, as in medieval romance's

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[49] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 186.

[50] Eugene Vance notes of the Saracens in the *Chanson de Roland* that "their terribly strange, uncanny names ... are emanations of oblivion, obscurity, and nonsense, signifying nothing"; "Roland and Charlemagne: Remembering Voices and the Crypt" in *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1986), 67.

convention of the envious seneschal who inadvertently validates the courtesy,

renown, or romantic love which he despises in others. In the Alliterative *Morte*

Arthure the most powerful rehearsal of the text's values comes, ironically, from

the traitor Mordred.

1

> "This was sir Gawain the gude, þe gladdeste of othire
> And the graciouseste gome that vndire God lyffede;
> Mane hardyeste of hande, happyeste in armes,
> And þe hendeste in hawle vndire heuen riche,
> Þe lordelieste of ledynge qwhylls he lyffe myghte,
> Fore he was [a] lyone allosede in londes inewe.
> Had thow knawen hym, sir kynge, in kythe thare he lengede,
> His konynge, his knyghthode, his kyndly werkes,
> His doyng, his doughtynesse, his dedis of armes,
> Thow wolde hafe dole for his dede þe dayes of thy lyfe!"
>   (ll. 3876-85)

It is interesting to note that Mordred's epitaph, like Ector's famous threnody for

Lancelot in Malory, draws on both the military and political values of *vasselage*

and the social values of *cortoisie*. Gawain is remembered both for his swordplay

and for his legendary courtesy, and his death leaves Mordred to weep with the

knowledge that he is now an outcast, excluded from the "reuerence and ryotes

of þe Rownde Table" as Grendel is excluded from Heorot. Earlier in this poem,

which is predominantly drawn from the epic, *chanson* tradition, there is a

startling influence of the *cortoisie* tradition, which occurs during the foraging

expedition led by Gawain, who suddenly abandons his duty to replenish Arthur's

army.

1

Thane weendes owtt the wardne, Sir Wawayne hym selfen,
Alls he that weysse was and whighte, wondyrs to seke.
(2513-24)

We have noted this chivalric motive before in Chrétien's *Yvain*, and this passage

could almost be a Middle English translation of Calogrenant's slogan, "Avanture,

por esprover/ ma proesce et mon hardement".

It is thus not possible to separate *vasselage* and *cortoisie* entirely, even in

individual romances, and especially in Malory's comprehensive text. The ethic

in the *Morte Darthur* is at times individual, as in Balin's beheading of the damsel

despite the protection offered to her by King Arthur (66:5-9;ii.3), and at times

corporate, as in Bor's loyal declaration to his kinsman Lancelot that "as ye woll,

so woll I" (1037:7;xvii.23). Clearly these complex and somewhat undefinable

values were simultaneously important to the romances' readership throughout the

middle ages, as we see in Caxton's statement that Malory's book contains "noble

chiualrye Curtosye Humanyte frendlynesse hardynesse loue [and] frendshypp".[51]

However, in the considerable period separating the *Roland* and *Yvain* from

Malory, a period which witnessed changes in the military foundation of chivalry

as well as a broadening of literacy and literary audiences, it is reasonable to

expect changes in the readership of romance as well as to the reception of

romance values by that readership.

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[51] W.J.B. Crotch, ed., *Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, 94.

Susan Crane begins her study of the Anglo-Norman and early Middle English romances with a definition of romance borrowed from Chaucer's playful advice to his more discriminating readers, that they turn over the Miller's tale and move on to a "storiall thyng that toucheth gentillesse" (1.3179). Romances, she argues, "are secular fictions of nobility", texts which "do not claim to be coextensive with the contemporary world, as do chronicles, but to reshape and meditate on the world".[52] Up to the fourteenth century, the romance audience was primarily the Anglo-Norman baronial class, landholders and soldiers who enjoyed a more peaceful and stable climate than their aristocratic counterparts in the French provinces. As a result of the uniquely English situation, Crane argues, Anglo-Norman romance developed distinctly "insular" characteristics, namely a tendency to separate the disruptive and anti-social potential of *fin amor* from courtesy and politeness, an emphasis upon the legal and landholding rights of the barony, and a strong desire for stability and lawful administration. Frequently insular romances preserve the strongly individualistic emphasis of *cortoisie* romances such as Chrétien's. In romances such as *Havelok, Bevis* or *Horn* the hero is typically dispossessed of his rightful inheritance, sometimes by a corrupt or oppressive central authority, and while his quest to regain his patrimony entails the restoration of communal stability, "it is the hero's program of landed and lineal fulfilment, not the nation's need, that determines events".[53]

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[52] Susan Crane, *Insular Romance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 10-11.

[53] *Ibid.*, 218.

In her conclusion, Crane suggests that by their emphasis upon personal autonomy and success, upon a self-improving courtliness and the private goals of spiritual salvation, the romances anticipate the competitive ethic of mercantilism:

> In celebrating the noble hero's ability to make very social ideal serve personal ends, the insular romances reinforce the barony's image even as they intimate that the barony's time is passing.[54]

The transition from a baronial to a mercantile ascendancy is not an even one, however, and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we see the romances becoming increasingly the cultural property of the lesser aristocracy and the gentry, men and women of Malory's approximate rank, both knighted and unknighted. A reasonable account of this shift in audience is suggested by Thorlac Turville-Petre, who notes that the Middle English version of *William of Palerne* seems to have been commissioned by Humphrey de Bohun, "þe hende erl of Hereford", for the gentry in his Gloucestershire retinue:

> He let make þis mater in þis maner speche
> For hem þat knowe no Frensche, ne neuer underston.
> (5532-33)[55]

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[54] *Ibid.*, 223.

[55] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1977), 40; Norman Toby Simms, ed., *William of Palerne: A New Edition* (Norwood, Pa.: Norwood Editions, 1973). See also Jutta Wurster, "The Audience" in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. Karl Heinz Göller (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981), 44-56.

While the nobility may thus have encouraged its affinities and retinues to read romances, there is also strong reason to believe that a new audience was emerging on its own initiative. Manuscript evidence in part shows the gentry's increasing interest in romances, although this is not a completely reliable index, as the large majority of extant romance manuscripts are the work of fifteenth-century scribes.[56] Accordingly it is difficult to characterise romance audiences prior to 1400. Of the fifteenth-century manuscripts containing romances still extant, particularly those from the North and Midlands regions, the relatively modest natures of collections such as Cotton Caligula A.II (ca. 1450, SE Midlands) or Cambridge University Library Ff.2.38 (late 15th/early 16th century) suggest provincial readers, devoted to the genre but not possessed of untoward wealth.[57] One such reader was Robert Thornton, who owned a manor in Yorkshire's West Riding, and who is thought to have compiled two collections of romances and devotional material. The better known of these manuscripts, Lincoln Cathedral Library MS. 91,[58] is an important romance collection and the only known text of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the source for Malory's Book II. Thornton was certainly not alone among the gentry in his literary interests,

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[56] Derek Pearsall, "The English Romance in the Fifteenth Century," *Essays and Studies* 29 (1976): 56-58.

[57] Harriet Hudson, "Middle English Popular Romances: The Manuscript Evidence," *Manuscripta* 28 (1984): 67-78.

[58] The other, the "London Thornton" (British Library Additional MS. 31042), also contains a number of romances, including *The Sege of Melayne, Rowlande and Ottuel*, and *King Richard*. See John J. Thompson, *Robert Thornton and the London Manuscript* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987).

for George Keiser presents evidence of romance ownership by other Yorkshire

gentlemen,[59] and it has recently been suggested that Malory himself was one such

gentleman collector.[60] Related to these collections are those manuscripts which

are of an urban, mercantile provenance, including the famous Auchinleck

Manuscript as well as British Library MS. Harley 2252, which was compiled in

the early 1500s by a London mercer and which contains another of Malory's

sources, the stanzaic *Morte Arthure*.[61] As we shall see in later chapters, both

gentry and mercantile readers shared considerable ambition and a common

desire to establish themselves and their status in the increasingly stratified society

of the fifteenth century.

Whereas in the Anglo-Norman romances the hero is usually, like Havelok,

engaged in a quest to regain a throne or a kingdom, in the fifteenth century the

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[59] George R. Keiser, "Lincoln Cathedral Library MS. 91: Life and Milieu of the Scribe," *Studies in Bibliography* 32 (1979):174-76.

[60] Carol M. Meale, "Manuscripts, Readers and Patrons in Fifteenth-Century England; Sir Thomas Malory and Arthurian Romance" in *Arthurian Literature IV*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 105-06. This new and favourable assessment of the literacy of the gentry obviates earlier assumptions that Malory would have needed access to a magnate's or royal library for his French sources. Proximity to such libraries was a criterion in William Matthew's search for Malory the author, despite the fact that Matthews himself notes one Fifteenth-Century gentry family, the Maulverers of Yorkshire, who were in possession of one of Malory's sources, the *Suite de Merlin*; *The Ill-Framed Knight* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 110-113.

[61] Derek Pearsall and I.C. Cunningham, *The Auchinleck Manuscript* (London: Scolar Press, 1977), viii. Carol M. Meale, "The Compiler at Work: John Colyns and B.L. MS. Harley 2252" in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 1983), 82-103.

hero's quest is often for lesser stakes, such as a well-born wife or the integrity of a manor, and there is often a greater sense of urgency in his struggle for recognition and a place in noble society. While Havelok's course entails a temporary descent into a much more humble station, the hero of the later romances, as in Malory, is often the *bel inconnu*, the young man who begins in a position of obscurity and forces his way upwards. This motif is of course a traditional one in medieval literature, and is employed as early as Chrétien's *Perceval* (ca. 1185). While the foolish youth who wishes to be a knight may well have been a figure of fun to Chrétien's courtly audience, by the time of his Middle English incarnation in *Perceval of Galles, Lybeaus Desconus* and Malory's *Tale of Gareth* the Fair Unknown has become a serious figure who represents the ambitions of an audience at several degrees of remove from the court. The successes and accomplishments of these new romance heroes lead us, finally, to an important recognition, namely, that late-medieval romance may only have been mimetic in the way that our dreams our mimetic.

Derek Brewer has very recently suggested that we have been unduly influenced by modern culture's assumptions, dominant until only recently, that "the phenomenal world, the material world, has been taken to be the ultimate and indeed the only real world", and that fiction can and should capably imitate the actions, words, and causalities of ordinary life.[62] He advises students of medieval romance to forgo the search for its realism and to focus instead on the

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[62] "Escape from the Mimetic Fallacy" in *Studies in Middle English Romances: Some New Approaches* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 1-3.

strong affinity to folktale and dream, becoming more sensitive to romance's implausibilities, its formulaic narrative sequences, and seemingly preordained outcomes. This approach has much to recommend it, for Brewer offers a valid alternative to the disappointment, which features in so many critical discussions of the subject, with the artless and repetitious nature of much of Middle English romance. A text such as *Gamelyn*, for example, exhibits many of the qualities of a pre-genital fantasy, in which an elder sibling and other figures representative of familial authority are violently punished by a youthful protagonist who makes his escape to the lawless and free world of the greenwood, where he joins other outlaw-playmates in feasting and heroic exploits. Like the warrior heroes of a current pre-adolescent saga, who dwell in sewers, fight exaggerated villains, and have no parental figures to regulate their diet, which is conspicuously non-nutritious, *Gamelyn* offers an essentially childish vision of a world in which desire is uncomplicated and satisfaction attainable. Malory's *Gareth* might be seen as the development of the adolescent ego, which frees itself of a domineering mother (who vainly comes to court seeking to return him to childish dependence) and proves himself to the father-figure represented by Arthur, establishing his own household according to the dictates of the super-ego. In this light, the infelicities and repetitions of Malory's plotting, or the parallels between Gareth and historical figures such as Richard Beauchamp,[63] seem highly

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[63] See Eugène Vinaver, *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3:1439-40 n.348.5-10.

irrelevant, and the narrative becomes intelligible instead as the inexorable progression of an ancient motif.

The outlines of folklore and dream are thus very close to the surface of these texts, and we are well advised, as Brewer suggests, to consider this presence in our readings. I do not suggest, however, that a psychoanalytic approach to medieval romance should take precedence over an historical reading, for in fact the two may be complementary. While its reliance upon certain, perhaps timeless, narrative elements suggests that this genre was not realistic in the mimetic sense, the closeness of romance to dream and wish-fulfilment may have been crucial to its cultural place in late-medieval society. The place of romance in medieval culture is explored by Stephen Knight, who shares Susan Crane's theory that romances "confront problems seen from the viewpoint of a landowning class",[64] although Knight's approach is in specifically Marxist terms. He locates romance in the "imaginary", utilising a concept of the "imaginary" developed by the Marxist critic Louis Althusser, which describes culture as a realm "in which people produce for themselves an ideological relationship with actual events and forces"[65]. According to Knight, English romances such as *Sir Perceval* and *Lybeaus Desconus* follow a pattern in which the hero starts as an acquisitive and upwardly mobile "incursionary thug", but becomes acceptable to the aristocracy by acquiring the courtesy which lends

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[64] Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances" in *Medieval Literature*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 102.

[65] *Ibid.*, 101.

legitimacy to the power he has won by brute force.[66] This analysis usefully reminds us of romance's potential to mediate and make acceptable social mobility within a society in which the conservatism and rigidity which was the legacy of feudalism was still strong. However, Knight's understanding of the imaginary leads him to dismiss romance values such as gentility and courtesy as a chivalric veneer applied once the Fair Unknown has hacked his way to prominence, "a euphemistic cover for the brutal practices of feudal cavalry".[67] Similarly, Knight's use of the phrase "feudal cavalry" to describe romance's readership presupposes a powerful and unified audience, and thus seems over-simplistic to me, for while I agree that there was a substantial connection between the success of its heroes and the interests of its audience, this readership was neither as unified nor as elitist as Knight suggests. The position of the gentry within the English aristocracy was a complicated one, and their power was nowhere near as formidable as the somewhat clichéd phrase "feudal cavalry" would suggest. A more detailed definition of the gentry as a group will therefore be the goal of my next chapter. Second, while Knight's view of chivalry as the self-serving illusion of the medieval ruling classes, an ideal scarcely able to withstand contact with reality, is commonly held by students of Malory, it is too broadly stated to define properly the gentry's understanding of chivalry. As the Preface has suggested, traditional understandings of late-

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[66] Stephen Knight, "Social Function of the Middle English Romances", 105.

[67] *Ibid.*, 106.

medieval chivalry tend to see it as an institution in decline, an illusory ideal whose fading signals the end of an epoch. I would argue instead that as a class that was seeking to further empower and advance itself, the gentry did not understand chivalry as an institution but rather as a code centring around the all-important notion of gentility, which could be appropriated in the quest for self-definition and self-advancement. For the gentry, therefore, chivalry was important and very much alive, and it was this understanding of the ethic which Malory would bring to his writing.

Chapter Two
Gentle Readers: Social and Literary Definitions
of the Gentleman

And he hath levere talken with a page
Than to commune with any gentil wight
Where he might lerne gentillesse aright.
                Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*

"Madam, I could make him a nobleman, but God almighty
could not make him a gentleman."
                Remark attributed to Charles II
                Daniel Defoe, *The Compleat Gentleman*

The Emergence of the Gentleman

The summer of 1465 was a difficult time for the Norfolk gentleman John

Paston I. His family's claim to the sizeable estate of the late Sir John Fastolf

was being disputed aggressively by its other neighbours, and that summer the

Pastons' mightiest adversary, the Duke of Suffolk, had his eye on the profitable

estates of Drayton and Hellesdon. On July 13, after Suffolk had sent armed men

onto the disputed properties, the angry John Paston I wrote to his wife:

> ... let my lord of Norwich wete þat it is not profitable ner þe
> comen well of gentilmen that any jentilman shuld be
> compellid be an entré of a lord to shew his evidens or tytill
> to his lond, ner I nil not begine þat exsample ne thralldam
> of gentilmen ner of other. It is god a lord take sad cowncell
> or he begyne any sech mater.[1]

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[1] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2
vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 1976), 1:135. See also Colin Richmond,
The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1981), 239-240.

This passage, from history, is of interest to us because of its use of a term, "gentleman", that was in the fifteenth century beginning to designate a fixed position within aristocratic society, and which in literary discourse was increasingly functioning as a new centre for the values which for centuries had coalesced around the office of knighthood. It is curiously similar in usage and tone to a passage from Malory's Book IV, the *Gareth*, occurring at the point when the young knight is moved to respond to his abusive guide, Lyonet. Lyonet of course is outraged that Camelot can only give her a "bawdy kychyn knave" to help her sister. After suffering her indignation for some considerable time, Gareth finally explains why he has assumed the disguise of "Beaumaynes", and tolerated her scorn :

> I ded hit for to preve my frendys, and that shall be knowyn
> another day whether that I be a jantyllman borne or none;
> for I latte yow wete, fayre damesell, I have done you
> jantyllmannys servyse, and peraventure bettir servyse yet woll
> I do or I departe frome you.
> (313:8-12;vii.11)

Both are statements expressing considerable pride, and both employ the term "gentleman" as a social distinction. In the passage from the *Gareth* it simply means gentle or noble born, whereas John Paston I's location of that rank is much more precise, below the station of "lord" but nevertheless possessed of a dignity and independence which distinguishes the gentleman from servile status, or "thralldom". In both passages we also note the term "gentleman" assuming an

identity which is at least competitive with that of knight. John Paston was never knighted, and while his practical view of life allowed little room for the knightly interests of his son, he nevertheless had a firm sense of his own dignity. Gareth's utterance is equally dignified, and is one of the first in Malory to wed the term "gentlemen" to the chivalric ideal of service to others, an important function of knighthood in romance. As we shall see, the term "jantilnes" is the source of good conduct in the *Morte*, and it plays an important role in the *Gareth* as the quality or measure of nobility which distinguishes the hero's true identity from that of his servile alter ego. It is the same quality which the books of polite instruction endeavoured to develop. As the author of the *Babees Book* assured his readers, if they mastered the principles of proper table manners, respect for superiors and polite speech, "ywys yee shalle a name deserve/ Off gentylnesse and of good governaunce".[2] To be a "gentleman" in the fifteenth century was thus to be possessed of "gentleness", although a number of opinions existed as to the origins and acquisition of the this all-important quality.

This chapter argues that the increasing prominence of the term "gentleman" in both social and literary spheres was a parallel development with one cause, namely the rise of the English gentry. Both the *Morte Darthur* and other English romances of the period evince a marked interest in the elusive quality of gentility, which invests their heroes with a stature lacking in their powerful antagonists. Often the antagonist is beyond the pale of gentle society,

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[2] F.J. Furnivall, ed., *English Meals and Manners*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 32 (London: 1868), 257.

particularly the wealthy merchants and burgesses of romances such as *Sir Amadace* and *Sir Launfal*, although they can also be found within the ranks of the high aristocracy, as represented by the tyrannous and cowardly peers who are the villains of *Sir Degrevant* and *Sir Eglamour*, or by Malory's Kay. The hero's struggle in these romances to define his gentility in many ways mirrors the situation of the English gentry in the fifteenth century, and it is this social and literary context that we shall examine in preparation for our discussion, in the final chapter, of Malory himself as a gentry writer.

The gentry in this period were attempting to carve out a clear place for themselves in society, an effort that was resisted from above by the entrenched position of the few families of the titled nobility, and undermined from below by the many ambitious and wealthy individuals who had not quite arrived in gentle society. The slow emergence of a virtual oligarchy of great peers, in the process of establishing control of the parliament based on hereditary right, restricted the gentry's social and political ambitions for advancement. Simultaneously, the diminishing importance of knighthood as a military and social institution led to a surfeit of people with aspirations to gentility, especially among the urban mercantile class, and to an inflation of armigerous honours. The combination of an exclusive peerage, an ambitious minor nobility, and an emerging middle class generated pressures within England's elites which provoked an ongoing debate on the nature of gentility, both as a formal and legally definable status, and as an inner quality. To literary historians the latter aspect of this debate is of the most interest, as it created a profusion of courtesy handbooks and

manuals which complemented the development of English romance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The audience of both genres was anxious to be recognised as gentle, and by their reading they sided automatically with those who argued that gentility was not restricted to the fortunate few with old and distinguished lineages, but could instead be learned and demonstrated by proper actions. The author of the *Book of Curtesye*, printed by Caxton, undermined the conservative ideal of gentility conferred by birth when he informed his readers that who "wil not lerne nedely he must be lewed".[3] Handbooks specifying good table manners and etiquette thus came to have a more immediate appeal than traditional chivalric manuals on war and the warrior's virtues such as the *De re militari* of Vegetius, for as Diane Bornstein observes, the knight of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance was coming to be seen "as a cultivated gentleman rather than as a professional soldier".[4] Chivalry had originated in the time of Norman cavalry, and, as its military role faded in the years following the disasters of Nicopolis and Agincourt, its ethical component became correspondingly more important. A.B. Ferguson has written that chivalry always complemented the medieval taste for the didactic, and attempted to engage the feudal class in "the problems of secular life, [forming] a sort of secular annex to the main structure of Christian

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[3] F.J. Furnivall, ed., *Caxton's Book of Curtesye*, Early English Text Society e.s. no. 3 (London: 1868), 21.

[4] Diane Bornstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), 9.

thought."⁵ In late medieval England knighthood and gentility were becoming detached from one another, and members of the gentry were beginning to marry the traditional virtues of chivalry to a new identity, that of gentleman.

Both this chapter and the next will examine the importance of "gentilesse" in this period, and will examine the importance of this idea to the *Morte Darthur* and to other late-medieval romances, in whose pages the gentleman was emerging to mirror the new confidence of the English gentry. In particular they will examine the figure of the *bel inconnu* in these texts, a figure and a motif known to audiences from the time of Chrétien de Troyes. English romancers of the late middle ages, however, were especially interested in this motif, and it was not coincidental that this interest was made manifest during a period in which Malory's class, the gentry, was being redefined as a result of considerable social fluctuation. The hero of these late romances is often, as in *Perceval of Galles* or *Lybeaus Desconnus*, literally unkown, or, as in *The Squire of Low Degree* or *Degrevant*, is an established but junior member of gentle society. Both types of heroes enjoy meteorically successful careers, owing in part to their martial skill but largely to their innate "gentilesse", and represent a type which I have labelled the "gentleman hero". As the fourth chapter will argue, these figures can be seen as cousins to the many disguised, obscure, and "poure knyghtes" in Malory who successfully prove their credentials as gentlemen. Such heroes undoubtedly confirmed in romance audiences a sense of their own worthiness and prestige in

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⁵ A.B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry*, xvi.

a dangerous period when, as the Pastons' experiences testify, their political and social power was often inadequate to support their aspirations and claims of gentility.

The Shape of Noble Society

"There be in þis world þre maner of men, clerkes, kny3thes and commynalte".[6] Such was the definition of society offered by one late medieval preacher, who was drawing upon a topos whose origins have been traced back to the eleventh century.[7] The trifunctional ordering of humanity into those who pray (*orant*), work (*laborant*), and fight (*pugnant*) may have shown a pleasing reflection on earth of the tripartite nature of God, but was inadequate at representing the increasing complexity of medieval society. Sylvia Thrupp has noted that the topos of the three estates relied upon an idealised and organic understanding of society, set forth in "dramatically contrasting types", which failed to capture the ambiguous position of what she has called England's "middle strata".[8] Geoffrey Chaucer, one medieval Londoner who rose from the Vintry Ward to service in a royal household, is a famous reminder that the

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[6] Woodburn O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 207.

[7] See Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

[8] Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London 1300-1500*, 299.

boundary between the nobility (who sometimes fought) and the merchant class (who worked) was a blurred and tenuous one. Similarly, while the General Prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* embodies the traditional three estates in the persons of Knight, Parson, and Plowman, there are other figures who threaten the distinction between the working and noble classes. The five guildsmen with their ambitious wives, and the weaver Wife of Bath and the Franklin with their self-serving definitions of "gentilesse", may be seen as representatives of the urban and landed gentry at its most *arriviste*. Their status and identity largely derive from wealth and driving ambition, and is not simply dependent upon their function.[9]

Noble society in England in Malory's time should be visualised as a pyramid, at the apex of which were a handful of lords and peers, and below which were approximately ten thousand families, known collectively as the gentry, whose holdings and income set them above the bulk of the population.[10] Historians are uncertain as to the exact composition of the gentry, although they agree on broad definitions of this sub-class. A useful starting point is Thrupp's description of the gentry as "a hereditary landed class which acted as a connecting and balancing mean between the baronage and the yeomanry".[11] Like

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[9] For a recent survey of the mixed opinion on the Franklin's social status, see Susan Crane, "The Franklin as Dorigen": 240-43.

[10] See T.B. Pugh, "The Magnates, knights, and gentry." *Fifteenth Century England, 1399-1509: Studies in Politics and Society*, ed. S.B. Chrimes et al. (Manchester: Manchester U.P. 1972), 86-128.

[11] *Ibid.*, 234.

Chaucer's Franklin, the bulk of the gentry lacked any formal title or honours, although many were knights, but all of them shared in the ideology and culture of the titled nobility. The estates of the landed gentry allowed them the income and leisure to emulate the behaviour of the high nobility, but those without land, employed as crown servants or in the service of greater lords as soldiers or household officers, would have also been confirmed in their gentility by the privilege and prestige of such positions and by association with their lords. Gentility also depended upon income. A statute of Richard II grants a pension to a crown servant sufficient "to enable him to support the estate of a gentleman to which the king has advanced him".[12] Attempts to establish a legal means for defining gentility usually employed income as a measurement, with £10 *per annum* being the customary minimum that separated the *gentilis homo* or *generosus* from common society.

Within the gentry there were three gradations, descending in prestige from knight to esquire to gentleman. These positions were in theory determined by income; for example, sumptuary legislation of 1363 speaks of "esquiers et toutes maneres des Gentils desouth lestat de Chivaler, qe nont terre ou rent a la value de Cent livres par an [esquires and all manner of gentlemen beneath the dignity of a knight not possessed of lands or rent to the value of £100 p.a.].[13] In practise

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[12] *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth Century Political Community* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 70.

[13] Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 6.

the relationship of status to wealth was a confused one,[14] and as Nigel Saul notes, "the late-medieval esquire yielded nothing to the knight in wealth and distinction".[15] The near parity of esquires and gentlemen with knights reflects the new importance of the gentry in late-medieval England, and it is in the evolution of these social distinctions that the rise of the gentry may be charted. Georges Duby has noted that in late twelfth-century France the proliferation of honours and coats of arms led to the creation of a new term, *armiger*, to designate a class of men who had not been formally knighted but who considered themselves superior in status to the common people.[16] In the England of 1300 armiger, like esquire, was among the military terms (*valletus, scutifer, homines ad arma*) which designated mounted soldiers of good families, paid at half a knight's wage. The Latin term *valletus*, which appears in the early 1300's to have been considered equivalent to the French *gentil homme*, diminished in status throughout the fourteenth century. The young Chaucer, who served in the 1359-60 royal expedition to France, appears as a *valletus* in a list of ransomed prisoners, and the context suggests that the term was reserved for relatively humble personages.[17] By Malory's time the term had fallen out of gentle society

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[14] Christine Carpenter, "Political Society in Warwickshire: 1401-1427" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1976), 23.

[15] Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires*, 24.

[16] Georges Duby, *The Three Orders*, 294-95.

[17] Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 23-28. Chaucer's ransom in this campaign, £16, was considerably less than the £50 paid for the release of the esquire Richard Sturry.

and had come to be equivalent to yeoma؏، indicating one who owned and worked a farm or small freehold. Instead of *valletus*, the English word gentleman was used increasingly to designate the lower members of the gentry.

The adjective *gentil* had for many years been synonymous with "noble" and was used to describe any landed person. The gap between the great magnate and the country esquire was always one of degree rather than of class, and both would have regarded themselves as *gentil hommes*. Richard Duke of York expressed this shared identity in 1405 when he made a vow "as y am trewe gentilman".[18] As the gradations of aristocratic society became more clearly defined in the fifteenth century, however, the gap between peers and gentry began to widen, and nobility and gentility became less synonymous. An edict issued by Richard Duke of Gloucester as Constable of England urged heralds to report any wrongdoing or slander "by reson therof that the hole company myght falle and have thindignacion of noblemen and gentilmen of name and of armes".[19] Gloucester's distinction establishes a precedence of nobles over gentlemen, a precedence which was fostered by society's increasing use of the latter term to identify the frontier or threshold of gentility. Below the rank of gentleman were the franklins, sergeants and yeomen, men whose often considerable wealth might allow them to maintain a dignity which their pedigrees

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[18] D.A.L. Morgan, "The Individual Style of tne English Gentleman" in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Jones (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 17.

[19] *Ibid.*, 29n.13.

alone usually could not have supported. Nigel Saul observes that an earl, "though *noble et gentil* in 1300, would have been insulted if described as a 'gentleman' in 1415".[20] His indignation would have stemmed from the suspicion that the term's dignity had been devalued by oversubscription, a sort of social inflation famously embodied by Chaucer's Franklin. While the border between gentleman and wealthy commoner was a porous and imprecise one in late-medieval England, the boundary between peer and gentleman was hardening, and the increasing isolation of the nobility is an important cause of the emergence of the gentry as an identifiable and distinct social group.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have been described by K.B. McFarlane as a period of "exclusion, definition, and stratification", at the end of which noble society consisted of a handful of families invested with immense power and privileges.[21] The establishment of the peerage, which T.B. Pugh has described as having the characteristics of an "exclusive oligarchy",[22] has been ascribed by McFarlane to changes in the inheritance practices of great landowners. Briefly stated, the magnates increasingly resorted to "tail male", by which lineal male descendants were preferred to all other heirs, in order to protect better the integrity of a family's estates from generation to generation. This practice had the effect of strengthening certain families' possession of

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[20] Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires*, 28.

[21] K.B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 268-269.

[22] T.B. Pugh, "The Magnates, Knights and Gentry", 94.

honours and dignities, including writs of summons to parliament, leading to the creation of a small but select group of lords known as "barons by writ". As the possession of England's great titles and the parliamentary privileges which went with them increasingly came to be seen as a hereditary right, so did the distinction between peerage and gentry become more clearly defined. John Paston I refers to this distinction when he mentioned in a letter to James Gloys, the family clerk and chaplain, that he was "not vsid to meddel wyth lordis materis meche forther than me nedith"[23] Despite his brave talk about resisting the "thralldom of gentilmen", for men such as John Paston I conflict with a peer was invariably on unequal terms. The unhappy life of Sir Thomas Malory of Warwickshire, the most famous of the authorial candidates, shows the disastrous consequences that might befall gentlemen caught up in the feuds of the nobility.

It should not be assumed, however, that the dominance of the peerage was the cause of excessive resentment or even of class consciousness on the part of the gentry. John Paston I, while normally proud of his independence from "lordis materis", was not above petitioning the Duke of Norfolk "to be a good lord and supporter" to his family "consideryng that the seid Paston is my lordes homager and was neuir ayens his lordship".[24] The affinities of bastard feudalism remind us that lords and gentry were natural political allies. Gentry families

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[23] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:84-85.

[24] *Ibid.*, 1:114.

sought places for their children in noble households, and while these positions were nominally servile in nature, they actually played an important role in education and in the cementing of alliances.[25] The Pastons placed the eighteen-year-old John III among the "servauntes of howsholde" of the Mowbray Dukes of Norfolk, and in 1465 when John Mowbray reached his majority as the fourth Duke he invited Paston's attendance at the ceremony with the stern warning that "ye fayle vs not, as ye woll have owre good lordeshyp".[26] Norfolk's rather haughty tone suggests the stratification of relations between the gentry and their superiors. As K.B. McFarlane has observed, in 1300 a great landowner and the owner of a small estate would have shared in a common estimation of their own nobility, but by Malory's time they would no longer have considered themselves equals:

> [The lords'] appellations and the modes in which they were
> to be addressed multiplied, became increasingly elaborate
> and expressed the servility of those who did not share their
> privileges. Men were now expected to know their place.[27]

The exact nature and location of this place remained uncertain. The search for good lordship may have been a necessity of political life for the gentry, but dependence upon the goodwill and generosity of the nobility undoubtedly acted as a spur to ambition. G.L. Harriss suggests that the

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[25] Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household, 1250-1600: Good Governance and Rule* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 30-31, 59-60.

[26] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 2:430.

[27] K.B. McFarlane, *Nobility of Later Medieval England*, 275.

complaint of an impoverished gentleman of the mid-seventeenth century would have been appropriate to late-medieval England:

> ... to serve noblemen in most unnoble offices, to pull off their boots, brush their clothes, wait at table with a trencher in their hand, ride with a cloak bag behind them, dine and sup with footmen and grooms, is the ordinary course of gentlemen in England, whilst in other countries they go to wars and scorn to ... wait upon anyone.[28]

Complaints such as this one and that of John Paston's to the Duke of Suffolk's invasion of Hellesdon did not originate in any sense of egalitarian outrage. Paston's troubles with the Duke had originated in his ambitious design to appropriate the Fastolf estate and thus crown his own family's fortunes, and in this respect the only thing that differentiated Paston from his fellow gentlemen was the scale of ambition. What united all of the lesser gentry, from professional careerists to country squires to younger sons in service, was their ambition to become men of substance. As D.A.L. Morgan has written, "It was because they were dependents that the prospect of independence attracted them so strongly."[29] As we shall see, certain English romances in which villainous peers are supplanted by humbler but virtuous protagonists may reflect in terms of fantasy the gentry's very real desire to establish their independence while emulating their more powerful neighbours.

While their political power remained limited, the gentry were active and

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[28] G.L. Harriss, Introduction, K.B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays*, (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), xiv-xv.

[29] D.A.L. Morgan, "The Individual Style of the English Gentleman", 27.

assertive in laying claim to culture as they understood it to be led by their social superiors. The literary interests of a gentleman such as Sir John Fastolf, postponed until retirement from a profitable military career, may suggest a desire to add a cultural gloss to his material success, although, in translating Christine de Pisan's learned and edifying *Epistle of Othea* for Fastolf, his stepson Stephen Scrope was primarily interested in the welfare of the old man's soul.[30] George Cely, a member of the prosperous mercantile family, was able to find the time and money for instruction in music and dance, as well as for French lessons.[31] Cely was also an enthusiastic falconer, and was regarded as something of an authority on the sport by other lesser gentlemen-devotees, as a letter from the Vicar of Watford attests:

> I pray you to remembre me in thys seson for a goshavke or
> a tarsel, the wyche lykyth beste you, ffor I wote wele I schall
> haue non but hyt come from yow.[32]

After the death of John Fastolf in 1459 Margaret Paston was anxious to learn the correct etiquette for observing Christmas in a time of mourning, and inquired through her sons of one Lady Stapleton concerning the observance that "sche

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[30] Another Norfolk soldier, Sir Miles Stapleton, acted as patron to John Metham, author of several pseudo-scientific works and the romance *Amoryus and Cleopes*, which is dedicated to "Thys excellent knyght"; Hardin Craig, ed., *The Works of John Metham*, Early English text Society o.s. no. 132 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[31] See Alison Hanham, *The Celys and their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 33-35, 49-50.

[32] Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 273 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29-30.

hadde seyn br̄syd in placys of wvrschip þere as sche hathe beyn".[33] Commenting upon this passage, and upon the similar uncertainties which generated the many courtesy books of the period, Felicity Riddy suggests that "at a time of social fluidity, many parents ... were not wholly confident that they had mastered the social skills of the class to which they aspired for themselves or for their children."[34]

A high degree of fluidity in the lower and middle strata of English society in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries made it possible for some families to rise from relative obscurity and to establish themselves within the gentry, often within the span of several generations. While the *nobles* were an increasingly exclusive group, the *gentils* were less well defined. Business acumen, both in trade and in marriage negotiations, and successful professional careers brought new families into relationships of patronage and affinity with older ones, thus diversifying and expanding the gentry. This expansion was owing in part to the declining importance of knighthood, which had traditionally defined the lesser aristocracy of *milites* by its military function. Knights and esquires had customarily formed the English cavalry, but, as the costs of this service increased and its practicality diminished, fewer men were desirous of attaining knighthood and consequently the distinction between knights, esquires and gentlemen in

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[*] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:257.

[*] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 71-72.

civilian life became blurred.[35] Land, wealth, and the administrative functions which the gentry increasingly were assuming all contributed to the eclipse of knighthood as a source of status, as Christine Carpenter observes, "by and large in the early decades of the fifteenth century knighthood was not regarded as an essential distinguishing mark for a great man".[36] Historians use the term squirearchy to describe the families whose income and dignity made them equivalent to knights, and which the crown targeted for distraint of knighthood. Chris Given-Wilson divides the gentry into knights and potential knights,[37] reminding us once again of the uncertainty of status and precedence among the wealthier gentry. The fluidity of society threatened its traditional hierarchic structure by encouraging some to define their own status, and the crown responded with measures such as the Statute of Additions of 1413, which required all writs and indictments to state an individual's estate and degree as well as his place of residence. David Storey has observed that after this date an increasing number of men are described as gentlemen, sometimes even

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[35] Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires*, 10-11, and A.B. Ferguson, *Indian Summer of English Chivalry*, 113-116.

[36] Christine Carpenter, "Political Society in Warwickshire", 16.

[37] Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 17-18. English legislation of the period tends reflects the blurring between knights and gentlemen; an election statute of 1445 speaks of "notable knights ... other ellus such notable squyers and gentilmen of birth of the same shire as able to be knights"; see D.A.L. Morgan, "The Individual Style of the English Gentleman", 19.

straddling the boundary of gentility as "gentleman *alias* yeoman".[38] While he does not think that this increase heralds the arrival of a new class, Storey does suggest that it indicates how rank had become dependent upon the image one could present to society. Such was certainly the case with the Pastons.

An anonymous genealogy complied in the fifteenth century by an enemy of the Pastons, and entitled, as Colin Richmond puts it, with "ponderous" irony,[39] "the wurshypfull Kyn and Auncetrye of Paston" begins with one Clement Paston, described as "a good pleyn husbond" and as the owner of a plough, a water mill and "a fyve skore or a vj skore acrys of lond" in the vicinity of Paston. While these holdings qualified him as a farmer of some means, the genealogy makes him out to be, like Chaucer's Plowman, a "trewe swynkere and a good", although the Pastons would not have taken the comparison favourably:

> The seyd Clement yede att on Plowe both wynt' and sõmer, and he rodd to mylle on the bar horsbak wyth hys corn und' hym, and brought hom mele ageyn under hym.
> And also drove hy: carte with dyv'ʳ cornys to Wynt'ton to selle, as a good husbond ought to do.[40]

It is then reported that through marriage to "a bond wommane" Clement had a son, William, and with his brother-in-law gave the boy an education in the law. William served his wealthy neighbour Sir John Fastolf as his legal consultant and

[38] R.L. Storey, "Gentleman-bureaucrats" in *Profession, Vocation, and Culture in Later Medieval England*, ed. C.H. Clough (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 91-97.

[39] Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century*, 3-22.

[40] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:xli-xlii.

later became a Justice, and by purchasing land established his "Senery" in Paston, which his son increased to a "Lord^cype". As is often the case in newly-moneyed families, a humble ancestor can be a skeleton in the closet, especially as a "distaste for manual labour" was, as Thrupp observes, one of the few certain distinctions between a gentleman and a yeoman.[41] While the picture of Clement's hard-working life may have been exaggerated through maliciousness, Norman Davis has noted that the skill with which William Paston delivered his family from obscurity was real enough.[42] Like many other families in late-medieval England, both rural and urban, the Pastons thus achieved considerable success over a relatively short span of time through the ladders of careerism and patronage. English society was however still sufficiently hierarchial that such success could leave one vulnerable to attack by one's betters.

Anthony Woodville, Lord Scales, is said to have twice publicly called John Paston I a serf,[43] while his son Sir John Paston II was accused by his enemies of being a "bondeman".[44] In fact there was no shortage of men whose gentility did

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[41] Sylvia Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 238.

[42] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:xlii.

[43] See William Worcester, *Itineraries*, ed. John H. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 188, and Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, xlvi.

[44] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 2:389. The exposure of their plebian background was a stinging blow to the Pastons, as we see from John Paston's angry report that neighbours "have blaveryd here of my kynred in hodermoder, but be þat tyme we have rekned of olde dayes and late dayes myn shull be found more worchepfull than hys and hys wyfes"; *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:95.

not bear close examination. Scales and his Woodville family were themselves considered notorious upstarts by many who felt, as Shakespeare's Gloucester expresses it, that "Since every Jack became a gentleman, / There's many a gentle person made a Jack".[45] John Paston I himself could not resist pointing out that his opponent, the Duke of Suffolk, was descended from "William Pool (de la Pole) of Hull, whech was a wurchepfull man grow be fortune of þe world, and he was furst a marchant and after a knygth, and after he was mad baneret."[46]

One is led to suspect that there was something of a "glass houses" mentality among the gentry with regard to one another's lineages. Such quarrels tend to confirm Thrupp's observation that the only effective check on the assumption of arms and the other hallmarks of gentility was the opinion of one's neighbours,[47] and in this case it was the neighbours' use of the epithet "bondeman" which moved the Pastons to seek royal acceptance of family pedigrees proving their gentility. In 1466 the Pastons secured a royal warrant from Edward IV upholding their rights to the Fastolf lands, and in which the king also declared that "[we] take and repute them as gentlemen descended lineally of worshipfull blood sithen the Conquest hither".[48] In another document which seems to date from the same period, the proofs of gentility submitted to the Crown by the

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[45] *Richard III*, 1.3.72-73.

[46] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:135.

[47] Sylvia Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 307.

[48] Norman Davis, ed. *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:549.

Pastons are summarised:

> Also they shewed a great multitude of old deeds, without date and with date, wherein their ancetors were alwaies sett first in witnes and before all other gentlemen. Also they shewed how that their ancetors had in old time and of late time married with worshipfull gentlemen, and proved by deeds of marriage and by other deeds how their ancetors had indowed their wives, and by discents of livelyhood and by testaments and wills of their ancestors under seale; and made open by evident proofe how they and their ancetors came linealy descended of right noble and worshipfull blood and of great lords sometime liveing in this our realme of Ingland. And also they made open proofe how they were nere of kin and blood to many of the worshipfullest of the country, and also nere to many and sundry great estates and lords of the realme, and was openly proved and affirmed without contradiction or proofe to the contrary.[49]

In an age in which genealogies commonly stretched back to prove kinship with Noah it was obviously easier to claim a noble lineage than to disprove such a pedigree, a cynical observation which does not rule out the possibility that the Pastons believed in their own case.

By seeking official validation for their claims to an old and distinguished lineage, the Pastons were looking to something more intangible and more mysteriously impressive than the possession of land or the holding of office, namely ancestry as the fount of family honour. Throughout the Middle Ages lineage was an essential part of the noble mystique with which the Western European aristocracy had justified its dominant position in society, although in earlier centuries the cult of chivalry had subordinated the nobleman's individual

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[49] *Ibid.*, 2:551-52.

identity to the function or vocation of knighthood. The *Perceval* (ca. 1185) of Chrétien de Troyes affords us a useful example of this process of subordination, for while the hero has been raised as a rustic, the influence of his parents' nobility inevitably transcends his simple upbringing. As his mother tells the boy, he need not be ashamed of his descent, "Que je sui de chevaliers nee,/ des meillors de ceste contree" [for I am of a knightly family, among the best of the land] (420-24).[50] This breeding allows Perceval to master effortlessly the complicated skills of horsemanship and riding, but nevertheless, when he is knighted by the nobleman Gornemon, the boy is reminded that the individual will and identity must be curbed by the obligations which knighthood entails:

> Et li preudom l'espee a prise,
> Si li cainst et si le baisa,
> Et dist que donee li a
> Le plus haute ordene avec l'espee
> Que Diex ait faite et comandee:
> C'est l'ordre de chevalerie,
> Qui doit estre sanz vilonie.
> (1632-38)

> [And the nobleman took the sword and belted it to the boy
> and kissed him, and said that with it he had given it the
> highest order that God had created and ordained, the
> order of chivalry, which must be kept clean of wickedness.]

As Nigel Bryant observes, this ceremony marks only the beginning of the secular and spiritual education which will make Perceval worthy to attain the Grail, and thus the romance "is about the making of a knight - in the most complete

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[50] *Roman de Perceval*, ed. William Roach (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1959).

sense";[51] in this respect Perceval's individual nobility is almost irrelevant to his knightly education. However, with the rise of the squirearchy in England, part of a larger process of diversification among the lesser nobility of Western Europe,[52] the subsuming nature of knighthood diminished accordingly as the individual identity began to be linked to new terms such as esquire and gentleman. The Pastons' attempts to attach their legitimacy as a gentle family to history and to lineage suggest that a new definition of gentility was emerging in late-medieval England.

Defining Gentility

While the word "gentleman" has today been so democratised as to have become virtually meaningless, it still retains an archaic resonance which can be traced back through the centuries to medieval chivalry. In the eighteenth century Daniel Defoe defined it in exclusively ethical terms, as a disposition towards virtue and virtuous conduct:

> It may serve in the schools for a good *Thesis*, and long learned Dissertations may be made upon it, that the word *Gentleman* being instituted and legitimated in our Language, as signifying a Man of generous Principles, of a great generous Soul, intimates a kind of an Obligation upon those who assum'd the Name to distinguish themselves from the

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[51] *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 1982), xii.

[52] M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, 144-45.

rest of the World by generous and virtuous Actions.[53]

Defoe's association of the term with a somewhat abstract generosity of spirit which may be "assum'd" by the like-minded precludes a social definition. Unlike this aristocracy of the spirit, an earlier definition of "gentleman", offered by Sir William Vaughn in 1626, posits a social station which allows one the military leadership and financial capabilities to support the rank:

> ... the means to discern a gentleman be these. First he must be affable and courteous in speech and behaviour. Secondly, he must have an adventurous heart to fight and that but for very just quarrels. Thirdly, he must be endowed with mercy to forgive the trespasses of his friends and servants. Fourthly, he must stretch his purse to give liberally unto soldiers and unto them that have need; for a niggard is not worthy to be called a gentleman. These be the properties of a gentleman, which whosoever lacketh deserveth but the title of a clown or of a country boor.[54]

Vaughn's use of the qualities of courteous conduct, a martial temperament guided by moral discernment, and a generous disposition are recognisably medieval in nature; they are basic to Malory's vision of chivalry as expressed in the Pentecost oath or in Ector's threnody for Lancelot. The final sentence of the passage suggests the author's contempt for provincials and rustics, but we detect no great anxiety that such men threaten the estate of gentleman. Moving closer to Malory's own time, however, we find that such a threat is the occasion for a

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[53] Daniel Defoe, *The Compleat Gentleman*, ed. Karl D. Bülbring (1729; London: David Nutt-Folcroft Library Editions, 1972), 12.

[54] H.A. Lloyd, *The Gentry of South-West Wales, 1540-1640* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1968), 17.

cynical passage by the Tudor antiquarian, William Harrison:

> Whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, whoso abideth in
> the university giving his mind to his book, or professeth
> physic and the liberal sciences, or, beside his service in the
> room of a captain in the wars or good counsel given at
> home, whereby his commonwealth is benefitted, can live
> without manuall labour, and thereto is able and will bear the
> port, charge, and countenance of a gentleman, he shall for
> money have a coat of arms bestowed upon him by heralds
> (who in the charter of the same do of custom pretend
> antiquity and service and many gay things), and thereunto
> being made so good cheap, be called master, which is the
> title that men give to esquires and gentlemen, and reputed
> for a gentleman ever after.[55]

The fifteenth-century canon and retired herald Nicholas Upton expressed a

similar concern regarding self-made gentleman. While he did not explicitly

condemn those who assumed arms "by their owne auctorite", Upton ranked such

arms with those given by heralds without proper royal authorisation,[56] and the

susceptibility of the heralds to ennoble men for money was well known.[57]

The uneasiness of Harrison and Upton were common, both in Tudor times

and in Malory's century, when many felt that the proliferation of honours and

of the armorial bearings which had come to signify gentility were elevating

individuals who had no proper right to such a dignity. Another Tudor view of

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[55] William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen, Folger Shakespeare Library Documents of Tudor and Stuart Civilization (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 114.

[56] F.P. Barnard, ed., *The Essential Portions of Nicholas Upton's De Studio Militari* trans. John Blount (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 48.

[57] See Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 66-69.

this inflation is provided by Thomas Dekker's play *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1600), in which one plot line tells the story of a guildsman who rises to become Lord Mayor of London and whose table can do justice to the King himself. In portraying his shoemaker-hero in broadly comic terms Dekker was drawing on a tradition of medieval narratives such as *King Edward and the Shepherd* and *Rauf Coilyear*, which posit a superficial equality between the disguised monarch and a sturdy yeoman figure, but actually derive their humour from the intrusion of a bucolic clown into courtly society.[58] Dekker's hero is an urban equivalent of these medieval yeomen-rustics, who boldly steps out of the churl's place: "Are not these my brave men? Brave shoemakers, all gentlemen of the Gentle Craft? Prince am I none, yet am I nobly born, as being the sole son of a shoemaker".[59] In this comically non-threatening and carnivalesque manner, Dekker was putting his finger on the same problem which troubled Vaughn, Malory, and even Chaucer before them, namely, the flux and uncertainty of place which marked English society in these centuries and which led to such measures as the Statute of Additions and perennial attempts at sumptuary legislation. While it would be inappropriate to speak of class conflict among the gentry and would-be gentry of late-medieval England, it would be fair to speak of inter-class rivalry. As F.R.H. DuBoulay writes in his aptly titled study, *An Age of Ambition*, life in this

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[58] *The Tale of Ralph the Collier*, ed. Elizabeth Walsh (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

[59] Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, ed. J.C. Stearne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 2.3.47-50.

period was marked by a ongoing comparison and emulation between individuals and groups, on the principle that status "is not an objective thing but depends upon what other people think of you".[60] Much the same point is made by Henrik Specht, who observes that conditions which allowed entry into the gentry for some were viewed by others as a threat to their status:

> As class barriers were thus in a sense rapidly disintegrating, there seems, paradoxically, to have been a parallel development which made for an increasing awai..ness of, and insistence upon, the social status of individuals. This is probably accountable by reference to an understandable desire on the part of the long-established, privileged groups to assert and defend their superior status ... At the same time, the *novi homines* are likely to have wished to dissociate themselves from those "common" masses to which they had recently belonged.[61]

In addition to threats and encroachments upon their manors and rights from the more powerful nobility, the gentry were thus hard-pressed to maintain what they felt as an appropriate distance from their ambitious inferiors. John Paston I may have reflected upon this difficult situation when in 1436 he and his fellow Justices attempted to decide if a ploughman of considerable means ("grand gainage") was permitted to call himself a gentleman simply on the basis of his wealth.[62] Even though the Pastons' own gentility did not bear the close

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[60] F.R.H. DuBoulay, *An Age of Ambition* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1970), 70.

[61] Henrik Specht, *Chaucer's Franklin in the Canterbury Tales* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1981), 103.

[62] R.L. Storey, "Gentleman-bureaucrats", 91-92.

examination of their neighbours, their correspondence suggests that the family

was anxious to maintain it against erosion from below. In 1462 the family's

servant John Russe wrote to John Paston I that "I prey God bryng you onys to

regne among youre cuntré-men in love, and to be dred", and wrote again in 1465

to warn John that the family's prestige in the region had declined to the point

where they stood "in no gret awe with the comowns".[63]   As Philippa Maddern

points out, an underlying theme of the correspondence is a concern for winning

the respect of equals and betters, and for maintaining the "favour wyth

jentylmen" and the "awe" and dred" of its lesser neighbours by which a gentry

family's position was upheld.[64]   The well-known marriage of the independently

minded Margery Paston to the shopkeeper and family servant John Calle was

horrifying to the family for the precise reason that such a connection with the

"comowns" threatened the aura of gentility which the Pastons were attempting

to cultivate. John Paston III thus wrote to his brother John II that Calle "shold

neuer have my good wyll for to make my sustyr to selle candyll and mustard",

and Sylvia Thrupp suggests that his bitterness may indicate "a discernible

prejudice" which the gentry held for the mercantile class, despite the fact that

Calle was playing by the accepted rules of self-advancement through an

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[63] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 2:282, 2:308.

[64] Philippa Maddern, "Honour among the Pastons: gender and integrity in Fifteenth-century English provincial society," *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988): 360-64.

advantageous marriage.[65]   Dekker's shoemaker-prince and his medieval equivalents would thus not have amused the Pastons, whose success was too recent and too precarious to be worn with comfort.

Two schools of thought existed in late-medieval England regarding the definition of gentility. As M.H. James notes, one school held that true honour and nobility stemmed from virtuous conduct, while the other believed that the behaviour which distinguished a nobleman was the result of his lineage.[66] As can be imagined, this was a debate between those who could only gain from the process, and those who felt threatened by too liberal a definition of gentility. For families such as the Pastons, dignity and respectability, however dependent upon the reputation and the opinion of the community, were derived in principle at least from ancestry and lineage. However, for those newly embarked upon the process of consolidating their success in commerce or the professions, gentility was naturally a more flexible quality, largely stemming from personal virtue. Literature which reflects this later view tends to give away its audience. A contemporary fable entitled *The Childe of Bristowe* (also known in another version as *The Merchant and His Son*) embodies the traditional landed class, whose power stems from rents and estates, in the figure of the hero's old and sinful father:

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[65] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers* 1:541; Sylvia Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 244-45.

[66] M.H. James, *English Politics and the Concept of Honour, 1485-1642* (Oxford: Past and Present Society, 1978), 2-3.

> ... a squyer mykel of myght;
> he had castels, tounes and toures,
> feyre forestis, and felds with floures,
> beestis wilde and wight.
> (15-18)[67]

The father's dying wish is that his son become "lernyd in clergie" [law] in order to protect his wealth, but the boy refuses to risk his soul through "treson and dedis lither" (23) and resolves instead to enter the honest and honourable profession of the merchant:

> Hit hath ever be myn arise
> to lede my lyf by marchandise
> to lerne to bye and selle;
> that good getyn by marchantye
> it is trouthe, as thenketh me,
> therwith wille y melle.
> (61-66)

While John Paston II would certainly have been startled by this declaration that "marchantrye" was an honourable profession, this simple tale, in its equation of honour with virtuous conduct rather than with inherited wealth, was drawing upon an argument with a truly impressive lineage.

The belief that virtue is more important than riches and noble birth (*virtuus, non sanguis*) may be traced back at least as far as Seneca (*Epist.* 44.2-5), and was influential in the Middle Ages due in large part to Boethius. In the *De consolatione*, Lady Philosophy numbers nobility of birth among the false happiness of the temporal world, and concludes that its only good is "an

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[67] W. Hazlitt, ed., *Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of England* (London: John Russell Smith, 1864), 110-131.

obligation imposed on the noble not to let it [nobility] degenerate from the virtue of their ancestors".[68] Dante developed this idea in the third *canzone* and fourth book of his *Convivio*, as a refutation of Emperor Frederick II's opinion that nobility (*gentilezza* or *nobilitade*) consists of "age-old wealth, together with pleasing manners".[69] Following Boethius and Proverbs (4.11-14), the *Convivio* compares the example of virtuous ancestors to a path through a difficult terrain, by which one should willingly be guided (4.7). Dante defines nobility and virtue as sharing a common property, and maintains that both are divine in their origin, "because the Apostle himself says, 'All the highest favours and every perfect gift come from above, descending from the Father of lights" (4.20). Reflecting the influence of both Boethius and Dante, Chaucer's short lyric "Gentilesse" directs the reader to the "firste stok", God or Christ, whose "dignitee" eclipses that of "mytre, croune, or diademe":

> He that desireth gentil for to be
> Must folowe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse
> Vertu to love and vyces for to flee
> (2-4)

Of course, the most famous exponent of "gentilesse" in Chaucer's works is the hag of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, who reminds her noble and reluctant husband that "Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse, / Nat of oure eldres for hire

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[68] "Quod si quid est in nobilitate bonum, id esse arbitror solum, ut inposita nobilibus necessitudo videatur ne a maiorum virtute degeneret" (Bk. 3, Pr. 6); *Tractates, De consolatione philosophiae*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. H.F. Stewart et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[69] Dante, *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan (Saratoga, Calif.: Anman Libri, 1989), 119.

old richesse" (*WBT* 1117-18), and who defines a gentleman as he who "moost entendeth ay / To do the gentil dedes that he kan" (1113-16). Much the same position is taken by the Franklin, who defines "gentilesse" in his tale as the capacity to "doon a gentil dede" (*FrT* 1611), and while both of these figures abuse this concept in the pursuit of their own peculiar goals, the argument itself is respectable enough.

One English writer who took up this theme in Malory's time was John Tiptoft, the Earl of Worcester (1427-1470), whose *Declamacion of Noblesse* is a translation of Buonaccorso's *De vera nobilitate*, and was printed by 1481 by Caxton together with Cicero's *De amicitia* and *De senectute*. The *Declamacion* is a debate between two suitors who must prove their worthiness to marry Lucresse, daughter of a distinguished Roman nobleman. Complicating the rivalry is a gap in degree between the suitors, for Publius Cornelius is "of the worshipful hows and stocke called Cornelii" and is "gretely stuffed of Richesse", while Gayus Flamyneus, although of a lower "stocke", is an exemplar of "vertue and good maners".[70] Besides the "goodes of fortune" which permit liberality and the "playsaunt ydelnes" which allows him to cultivate the aristocratic pursuits of hunting and dancing, Cornelius defines nobility as "auncestres of whom [one] may recounte and reherce the noble dedes many tymes worshipfully achieued and parfyghted truly & without colour" (220). Responding scornfully, Flamyneus observes that his rival is nothing like his noble ancestors: "all this booste that

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[70] "The Declamacion of Noblesse", printed in R.J. Mitchell, *John Tiptoft* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1938), 215-16.

thou makest of thy kynne, it sowneth moche rather to theyr lawde and worship than thyn" (231). In a passage heavily indebted to Boethian ideas, Flamyneus observes that true liberality consists of service to the commonwealth which is motivated by virtue, man's only gift which is immune to the deprivations of fortune. He concludes by defining "noblesse" as "a free and noble courage, whiche is neyther seruant to vyce ne vnclennesse, but is excersised in connyng and vertue" (234) and, instead of offering Lucresse wealth and idleness, invites her to join him in his well-stocked library, where they will together devote themselves to the study of philosophy. The *Declamacion* concludes with the reader invited to choose the better of the two orations, an invitation which Caxton repeated in his epilogue,[n] although the choice would be clear to the reader versed in the tradition of Boethius, Dante, and Chaucer.

The definition of spiritual nobility thus became a literary topos in the late Middle Ages, and while valued for its moral utility, the political implications of this topos were considerable. Perhaps the most radical Christian understanding of spiritual "gentilesse" is represented by Chaucer's Parson, who, in his discussion of Pride, warns that "the gentrie of the body binymeth the gentrie of the soule; and eek we ben alle of o fader and of o mooder; and alle we been of on nature, roten and corrupt, bothe riche and povre" (*ParsT* 460-65). This is of course a view which anticipates the more extreme social positions of Lollardy, and is worth comparing with another passage on Pride, from the *Mirour de l'omme* of

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[n] W.J.B. Crotch, ed., *Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, 46.

Chaucer's literary friend, John Gower. Pride is the Vice to which nobility is most susceptible, and the *Mirour* warns the aristocrat who prides himself in his "gentilliese" that "terre [tu] es et terre au departie/ Serras" [dust you are, and dust you will be at your going-forth] (12091-92). Here however the resemblance to the Parson's use of the word ceases. Whereas the latter's emphasis upon a universally shared ancestry has affinities with the famous couplet attributed to John Ball -- "when Adam delved and Eve span/ Who was then the gentleman?" -- the conservative Gower was free of such sentiment. Egalitarianism was an apocalyptic nightmare for him, as the *Vox clamantis* attests, and Gower conceives of gentleness as a value specific to the estate charged with the rule and stability of society. Wealth, he argues, is a form of testing ordained by God, for the rich who practice "les vertus que sont gentiles" (*MO* 23508), aiding the homeless, the widowed and orphaned, will be rewarded at the Judgement. The cautiously orthodox handling of this argument suggests, as Susan Crane has observed, that by the fourteenth century such definitions of "moral gentilesse" had become a literary topos which, in a time of social mobility, "offered the aristocracy a new ground on which to base its claims to superiority when its more fundamental economic and political superiority were being eroded."[72] Even so, in the hands of Dante, Chaucer, and Gower, the Boethian conception of spiritual or moral gentility remains a literary theme, largely isolated from social reality. Taken up by others, however, this topos acquired a particular immediacy as it was

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[72] Susan Crane, "The Franklin as Dorigen": 243.

employed by both sides in the late-medieval debate to define gentility.

A bluntly conservative definition of gentility is found in *The Book of St. Albans*, a rag-bag of hunting lore, chivalric virtues, and heraldic rules, precisely the sort of aristocratic how-to manual which Malory commends his hero Tristram for having written so that "men of worshyp may discever a jantylman frome a yoman and a yoman frome a vylayne" (375:17-27;viii.3). Printed by the anonymous St. Albans printer in 1486 and again by Wynkyn de Worde in 1496, it is thought that the material was assembled in the fourteenth century, perhaps by the Juliana Berners whose name appears at the end of the section on hunting. While the book reflects in large part the interests of the sporting nobility, E.F. Jacob reminds us that it also seems to have been designed to meet a larger social need, as a primer on the complex terms of hunting and falconry intended to save readers from being taken for an "ignorant *nouveau-riche* sportsman".[73] As we have noted above, members of the merchant class and lesser gentry such as George Cely and his friend the Vicar were avid falconers, and while they can be imagined as appreciative readers of Berners' hawking tips and veterinary advice, the chapter of *St. Albans* entitled the "Liber armorum" rather curiously threatens to exclude such men from its definition of gentility. This chapter begins by seeming to follow the traditional Boethian definition of nobility by maintaining that "all gentilnes cumys of god of heuyn", but as if in response to the famous couplet attributed to John Ball and the Peasants' Revolt, it goes on to defuse the

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[73] E.F. Jacob, "The Book of St. Albans" in *Essays in Later Medieval History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 199.

social implications of this definition:

> A bonde man or a churle wyll say all we be cummyn of
> adam So lucifer with his cumpany may say all we be
> cummyn of heuyn. Adam the begynnyng of mankynde was as
> a stokke unsprayde and unfloreshed and in the braunches is
> knowlegge wich is rotun and wich is grene.[74]

As Jacob observes, Adam the "stokke" is morally neutral,[75] and only as a result

of the murder of Abel and the punishment of Cain, when "devyded was the

royall blode fro the ungentill", did gentility became a hereditary quality. The

same division between "gentilnes and ungentilnes" was made manifest in the

conduct of the sons of Noah, for in the post-diluvian division of the world Cham,

because of his rudeness to his father, was assigned Europe "where sorow and

care cold and myschef as a churle thow shalt have". Jafeth, who was a

gentleman like his father, earned Asia as his portion (from which the Trojans

came to settle in England) and it was from his line that Christ was born as "kyng

of the londe of Jude & of Jues gentilman by is modre mary prynce of cote

armure".

The simple equation of gentility with virtue, transmitted through

bloodlines, thus had a highly restrictive potential in the hands of the politically

and socially dominant. The religious application of this argument for exclusion

is apparent in Langland's account of the Jews' loss of favour with God:

> The Jewes, that were gentil men, Jesu thei despised -

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[74] *Boke of St. Albans* (London:1901), n. pag.

[75] E.F. Jacob, "The Book of St. Albans", 206.

Bothe his loore and his law; now are thei lowe cherles.[75]

The explanation of divine disapproval as a reason for the perpetuation of difference between races was equally useful in justifying the medieval social order, for the social and moral ascendency of the European nobility could readily be maintained as the reward of the descendants of Abel and Jafeth for their virtue.

According to M.H. Keen, the many defences of inherited nobility made in the late Middle Ages were reactions to the decline of knighthood and to the competition of the mercantile class and lesser gentry, and these arguments worked to redefine the aristocratic identity in such a way that it "boasted no right of initiation beyond the childbirth pangs of a noblewoman".[77] In distinguishing several types of gentlemen, the "Liber armorum" thus admits that heralds may grant arms to men (making them "gentilmen of cotearmure") at the wish of the crown, but it gives pride of place among the nobility to the gentleman "of awncetrys: wich muste nedis be a gentilman of blode". Ramon Lull's definition of "noblesse" similarly declares that "parage [noble birth] and chyualrie accorden to gyder / For parage is none thynge / but honour auncyently accustomed", and Lull is adamant that knighthood not be given to "vylayns and ... peple of lytyl

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[75] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 1978), XIX 34-35.

[77] M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, 146.

lygnage" if the honour of chivalry is to be preserved.[30] Caxton printed this treatise not long after Malory's death, and another work of the period, the rambling essay on war and military leadership entitled *The Boke of Noblesse* (ca. 1472), offers this definition of gentility "by auctoritee of the noble cenatoure of Rome Kayus son":

> Hoc igitur summum est nobilitatis genus, posse majorum suorum egregia facta dicere posse eorum beneficiis petere honores publicas, posse gloriam rei publicae hereditario quodam jure vendicare, posse insuper sese eorum partes vocare, et clarissimas in suis vultibus ymagines ostendere. Quos enim appellat vulgus nisi quod nobilissimi parentes genuere.

> [This then is the highest kind of nobility: to be able to name the noteworthy deeds of one's ancestors, to be able to seek public honours to one's distinction, to be able through a certain hereditary obligation to safeguard the glory of the commonwealth, to be able to call oneself, moreover, part of them; to be able to exhibit in one's own features their most noble images. For the people call them commoners, unless descended from the most noble.][29]

This equation of nobility with virtue expressed in civic responsibility, in keeping with Roman tradition, is similar to the more thoughtful defences of inherited nobility which concede the importance of individual worth. The Burgundian knight Oliver de la Marche thus tempered his claim that "ancient nobility comes from ancient riches" with the qualification that "he is the happier, and is to be the more esteemed, who conquers his nobility in virtue than he who

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[28] A.T.P. Byles, ed., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 168 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 57-59.

[29] *The Boke of Noblesse* (1860; New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), 1. Bühler attributes the writing to Stephen Scrope; *Dicts and Sayings* (EETS OS 211) xl.

brings his nobility to an end in vice".[80] The need for such qualifications meant that the debate between innate and inherited gentility often resolved itself in a compromise that allowed individuals into the nobility by reason of their merit, for as William Harrison concedes, gentlemen "be those whom their race and their blood, or at the least their virtues, do make noble and known".[81]

The language accompanying heraldic grants of arms frequently resorted to this compromise; one such grant, given by the Garter King of Arms in 1450 to one Edmund Mylle, declares that "lez hommez vertuelx et de noble courage soint pour leurs meritez par renomee renumerez" [virtuous and noble-spirited men should for their merits be rewarded with renown], but goes on to exhort others to do well in arms "pur acquirer la renomme d'ancienne gentillesse en leur legnee et posterite" [that they may gain for their line and posterity the fame of ancient gentility].[82] Nicholas Upton agrees that virtue alone may be sufficient reason for ennoblement, and writes that a lord who wishes to award arms to a herald in recognition of his "industriusnes, fidelite, diligence, honeste, & secretnes In kepying hys [lord's] cowncell" may "so nobiltate hym" and reward him lands and "certen aremes Accoredyng for hym & heyres".[83] As the heralds were principally employed by the crown to reward the exemplary services of its

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[80] M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, 150.

[81] William Harrison, *The Description of England*, 113.

[82] A.R. Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 125-26.

[83] F.P. Barnard, ed., *Essential Portions of Nicholas Upton's De Studio Militari*, 3.

servants, and as the rewards they dispensed were the outward tokens of gentility, it was of course necessary to avoid too strict a definition of the quality which had earned those signs. In 1389, for example, Richard II had arms given to his servant John Kingston, presumably as a reward for accepting a French knight's challenge to fight. The language of the grant suggests that the inherent worthiness which Kingston had demonstrated by accepting the challenge is taken for granted, and that the award merely provides formal recognition of that worthiness "in order that our said liege may be received honourably and may be able to perform the said deeds [of arms]".[84] English kings were anxious that their power to confer gentility as a reward for service not be diminished by the unauthorised adoption of arms, and both Henry V and Henry VIII ordered commissions to investigate the unlawful use of the "scochens squares or lozenges [which] be tokyns of noblenes".[85] Instructions of Henry VIII to his heralds, issued in 1530, authorise them to grant arms to "personnes spirituall ... accordyng to their merites" and to "persons temporall" for "service doon to us" provided "that they be not issued of vyle blood rebelles to our persone not heritiques contrary to the faythe But men of good honest Reputacyon".[86] The lowering of standards for the recognition of gentility by grant of arms to the rather vague criterion of "good honest Reputacyon" represents a relaxing of the inflexible

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[84] *Ibid.*, 66.

[85] Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires*, 27-28, and A.R. Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry*, 9-11.

[86] A.R. Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry*, 9-10.

definitions of gentility offered by Lull and Worcester, and the need of successive monarchies to intervene in the affairs of heralds suggests that in actual life gentility was easier to attain than the more conservative writers on the subject were prepared to admit. In practice, the literary debate thus resolved into a compromise of sorts, and as M.H. Keen has noted, the linkage of nobility to personal worth "modified the rigidity of class exclusiveness, and ensured the recognition of the desirability of some degree of social mobility."[87]

Before leaving this subject, we should note that one group of texts which worked indirectly but powerfully to undermine the theory of ancestral gentility was the courtesy book, which abounded in late-medieval England in a variety of forms. Training in the social skills famously embodied by Chaucer's Squire (*GP* 95-100) formed an important part of the upbringing of young people in noble families. The most well-known example of a "curriculum" for such studies concerns the training of young squires in the royal household of Edward IV, who in the evenings were expected to "kepe honest company aftyr theyre cunyng, in talkyng of cronycles, of kinges and of other polycyez, or in pypyng, or harpyng, syngyng, other actez marciablez, to help ocupy the court and acompany straungers".[88] The more immediate needs of less august families are reflected in the number of books which give instruction in the basic arts of eating, grooming, and serving at table. Some of these books, such as *The Boke of*

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[87] M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, 177.

[88] A.R. Myers, ed., *The Household of Edward IV: Black Book and the Ordinances of 1478* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 129.

Nurture (ca. 1460) by John Russell, self-described Usher and Marshall to Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, seem to have been limited in address to domestic servants,[89] while the author of *The Boke of Curtasye* (ca. 1460), printed by Caxton, assumes a more universal audience:

> Qwo so wylle of curtsay lere,
> In this boke he may hit here!
> Yf thow be gentylman, [y]oman, or knaue,
> The nedies nurture for to haue. (1-4)[90]

A common feature of these handbooks, as we note above, is the self-advertisement as a work of instruction, suggesting that the qualities which are necessary to be taken as gentle can be mastered through diligent study. John Russell ended his treatise with a formal envoi, perhaps copied from the style of the courtly poets, addressed to "alle yong gentilmen, þat lust to lerne or entende" (1236). Similarly, the author of *The Babees Book* (ca. 1475) commences with the hope that "god wolde this Book myhte yche man plese, / And in lernynge vnto yow donne somme ese" (34-35), and the rhymed courtesy handbook *Urbanitatis* begins with the promise that "In halle, in chambur, ore where þou gon, / Nurtur & good maners makeþ man" (33-34).[91] The goal of this "lernynge" was entry into noble society, and each of these texts offered the promise to the reader that if

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[89] Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *The Boke of Nurture* (Bungay: Roxburghe Club, 1867).

[90] F.J. Furnivall, ed., *Caxton's Book of Curtesye*.

[91] For both texts, see Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *The Babees Book* (1868; New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

its precepts were followed, "men wylle say therafter / That a gentylleman was heere".[92]

The courtesy books, therefore, give the final answer on the debate over gentility, at least as upwardly mobile families such as the Pastons and the lesser gentry they represent were concerned. These texts served to reduce the qualities which distinguished the gentleman to tangible and appreciable skills which could be refined in the immediate context of the manorial hall and local community. In a society which functioned by means of influence and networks the utility of the courtesy books becomes obvious. They served to smooth the passage of new families into the landed aristocracy, and they equipped the young man for the noble or royal court, or the prospective bride for the marriage market, arenas where a gentry family's fortunes could be built and consolidated. The courtesy books were not literature as such, but in many ways complement the romances which, as we have noted above, were favoured reading among the lesser nobility, particularly in their English, metrical versions. Both genres tend to reflect the gentry's concern with personal and familial success, but while the function of the courtesy books was utilitarian, that of the romance was imaginative. In the concluding section of this chapter I will argue that the special, half-fantastic, half-mimetic vision of romance gave expression to this desire for self-advancement, establishing an English tradition which, as we shall see in the final chapter,

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[92] *The Young Children's Book* (ca. 1500) 89-96; Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals and Manners*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 32 (London: Oxford University Press, 1868).

Malory drew on together with his French Arthurian sources.

Middle English Romance and the Gentleman Hero

The increasing literacy of the fifteenth-century gentry occurs at a time when that upwardly mobile group was seeking to define its place in English society, and, as George Keiser has noted, romance was prominent in that new literacy.[93] The connection between romance and social mobility resided in the genre's ability to tell the same story repeatedly, and that story was one of simple wish-fulfilment. Medieval romance relied upon a number of traditional narratives and plot devices, such as the calumniated queen who must endure a number of ordeals before reunion with husband and family (*Emaré, The Man of Law's Tale*), the dispossessed hero who must recover a lost inheritance (*Havelok, Gamelyn*), and the hero whose apparently humble nature disguises a noble lineage (*Sir Perceval of Galles*, Malory's *Gareth*). English poets frequently structured their romances from these stock elements, to the extent that their work often has a patchwork quality. The editor of one such romance, *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (ca. 1400), comments that the poet appears "to have been playing a game of 'that reminds me' with his memories of medieval romance", as this work borrows the unjustly accused mother and her lost children from the "Constance" romances, and draws upon the "Eustace" legends for the motif of the

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[93] George R. Keiser, "Lincoln Cathedral MS 91: Life and Milieu of the Scribe" : 158.

reunited family.[94] In her structural analysis of the genre, Susan Wittig notes that a recurring and important narrative unit or type-episode concerns the hero who must reclaim or establish his lineage and gentility in order to gain his inheritance and prove himself worthy to marry a noble lady. The hero of *Sir Eglamour*, for example, is compelled by his love for Cristabelle, the daughter of his lord the Earl of Artois, to meet a number of challenges, a narrative pattern which makes this romance similar to others in which a noble lady is sought by or seeks a less well-born hero. Wittig suggests that the prevalence of this "male Cinderella" type-episode may indicate romance's sensitivity to the pressures and contradictions within a society:

> ... [romance] serves as a means by which the culture can resolve certain conflicts it feels about the restrictiveness of its class system. In one sense, the romance serves as an apparent vehicle for upward mobility; it offers the hope to the lower class that even a princess can be won by a worthy man, whatever his economic and social status. But at the same time, it endorses the upper-class belief that worth and birth are synonymous, that only a nobleman can be a noble man, fit by nature to gain the princess and the kingdom and to rule over both.[95]

Analysis of *Sir Eglamour* seems to bear out Wittig's hypothesis, for like many English romances of the late Middle Ages it establishes a mediation of sorts between the two positions of the gentility debate described above. It is

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[94] Frances E. Richardson, ed., *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 256 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), xxxix.

[95] Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Elements in the Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 189.

found in four late-medieval manuscripts and appears to have been a favourite for inclusion in family miscellanies.[96] The poet appears to have been a Northerner, possibly a Yorkshireman, and his unornamented style and lack of interest in descriptions of hunting and courtly life suggest a relatively humble and provincial background. The hero, Sir Eglamour, is a "gentyll knyght" and a gentleman of the household of Frensamour, the Earl of Artois, whose daughter, Cristabelle, is his only heir. Upon confiding his love for her to his squire, Eglamour is warned that as "a kny3t of lytyll lond" (C. 64) he would have no chance of winning her favour, for she disdains far nobler suitors:

> 'Syr, beþinke þe of þys þynge:
> Ther wowes here emperour and kynge
>   And dukes þat ar bolde;
> Erles, barouns and kny3its also -
> 3itt wyll sche none of all þo
>   Butt euur in goodnes her holde.'
>   (C. 73-78)

The poet is however anxious to assert his hero's worthiness, for the squire reassures Eglamour that "ye ar on of þe noblest kny3th/ That ys knowen in cristyante", worth five other men (C. 92-95). This reassurance establishes the hero's credentials as a worthy suitor and prepares us for the lady's warmly returned love:

> The lady swere, 'Be Crystus my3t,
> For þou art a nobyll kny3te
>   And comen of gentyll blode,

> And euer trewe vndur þy scylde
> Þou wynnes pe gre in euery fylde,
> Worschypfully, be þe rode.
> (C. 157-62)

Frensamour grants Cristabelle and his earldom to Eglamour on the condition that he can perform three apparently impossible tasks, thus thinking himself rid of the knight. Eglamour's successes are recounted in full, and as is typical of Middle English romance they are achieved by brute force rather than by wit or by the courteous and graceful talking which we might expect from a hero of "gentyll blode". Nevertheless, the simple and violent world of the text makes provision for the recognition of gentility, as the lineage of Cristabelle's and Eglamour's illegitimate child is clearly apparent when the infant is found by strangers, who "swere by þe rode, / The child was comen of gentyll blode" (C. 862-63). The magically apparent quality of gentility does not however translate automatically into polite speech or into courtly manners, for when Eglamour returns after completing the third and final task, killing the dragon of Rome, he greets Frensamour rudely and abruptly:

> 'Haue here þis dragons hed!
> All ys myn þat here ys leued-
> Thow syttys in my plas.'
> (C. 988-90)

The simple morality of medieval romance in fact mandates such a challenge, for the Earl has set Cristabelle and her child adrift on the ocean in the Constance tradition. This act of villainy is followed by one of cowardice, for upon the hero's return he flees in terror to a tower, from which he later falls and is

ludicrously but conveniently killed, prompting the poet to observe that "Wyth God may no man stryfe!" (C. 1347). Frensamour's actions thus render him manifestly unfit to retain his seigneury, and create a moral and political vacuum which is neatly filled by the reunion and marriage of the lovers, the traditional ending of Middle English romance.

A very similar romance is *Sir Degrevant* (ca. 1400). Malory may have known of this text, as its hero's name appears in the roll-call of knights assembled for the healing of Sir Urry (1148:33 - 1150:32;xix.11). *Sir Degrevant* survives in two texts, one in Robert Thornton's Lincoln manuscript and the other in a collection associated with another gentry family, Cambridge University Library Ff.i.6, the Findern manuscript. Its presence in the latter is rather anomalous, as it is the only romance in a collection otherwise dedicated to lyrics and excerpts from Chaucer, Gower, and Clanvowe. While it appears somewhat old-fashioned in contrast to the other contents, *Degrevant*'s superior alliterative style and its elaborate descriptions, particularly of Melidor's bower with its many literary allusions (1441-1520), no doubt appealed to the compiler's sophisticated taste. Like *Sir Eglamour*, it is a romance of socially mismatched lovers. The hero of the title is somewhat superior to Eglamour in status, a Round Table knight and nephew to Arthur and Guenevere, although the Arthurian theme is summarily discarded after the thirty lines and the setting which follows is notably English. Several critics have noted the realistic quality of *Sir Degrevant*, and its feuding barons and their retinues have earned it comparison with historical

poems such as *The Hunting of the Cheviot*.[97] Although details such as the predominance of longbowmen in Degrevant's army suggest that the poet was attempting to picture military and social life accurately, and while there are no giants or dragons, as in *Sir Eglamour*, the work shares the exaggeration and hyperbole of romance generally.

Degrevant's degree is left somewhat unclear. Besides being a knight he is described as a "baron" (L. 1033) and a "baneret", and among his many virtues the poet emphasises the hero's wealth and his concern for his tenantry:

> Wher he herd of anny cry,
> Ever he was redy;
> He passede never forth by
> In lond wher þey were.
> (C. 77-80)[98]

Degrevant's neighbour is clearly defined as his superior, an earl "of mechell pryd" who wages a campaign of devastation against the knight's estates, servants, and tenants. As is typical of romance villains the earl is drawn in broad and uncomplicated strokes, for in response to a courteous request for redress he informs Degrevant's messenger that "I will noghte mend my mysse / For all his grete pryde" (L. 207-08). After defeating his forces Degrevant chases the earl back to his castle, where he meets the Earl's daughter Melidor and immediately

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[97] See A.C. Gibbs, *Middle English Romances*, 38-40, and Dieter Mehl, *Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 93-99.

[98] L.F. Casson, ed., *Sir Degrevant*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 221 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944).

falls in love with her. The feud, as well as the rival host of well-born suitors, thus complicates the conventional social barrier between the lovers, for as Melidor's sympathetic maid warns the hero,

> Hyr proferrys par amoure
> Boþ dukes and emperoure,
> Hyt were hyr disonowre
>   For to taken þe.
>   (C. 857-60)

Degrevant has however established his worthiness by his victory over the earl and his gentility by his courteous treatment of his wife, sparing her castle from siege as it would be against "gentriese / To do swych roberyse" and thus frighten women (C. 497-500). If there was any doubt remaining he dispels it by entering the tournament organised to select Melidor's husband, and by defeating the most prominent suitor, the Duke of Gerle, in humiliating fashion. At length a reconciliation is reached between the earl and Degrevant, who marries Melidor attended by "Kyng and cardynale" (C. 1858), and who after the earl's death is left "With brod londus and fair" (C. 1902).

The heroes for which *Sir Eglamour* and *Sir Degrevant* are named may thus be seen as representative of a type which I have chosen to call the "gentleman hero", for both advance themselves through marriage and vanquish opponents who are initially their social superiors. Both romances display, if only in the oblique manner of wish-fulfilment, a sense of frustration with the existing restrictions and stratifications of society. The aggrieved giant whose hart is stolen by Eglamour sounds suspiciously like an aggrieved gamekeeper, such as

those who patrolled the estates of great lords (C. 304-06),[99] and the hero's successes at the expense of Frensamour attract a host of "Gentyllmen ... þat odure of kny3t woll haue" (C. 1001-02). Degrevant's desire for redress on behalf of his aggrieved tenantry (L. 137-160) reflects the importance which gentry families such as the Pastons attached to being seen as just landlords, in imitation of greater families,[100] although the humiliation of the Earl in battle ("Y take my leve for eueremare / Swych worngc., to wrythe" C. 384-84) indicates a power of action which the gentry could not hope to exert in their own affairs. These texts are thus not mimetic or imbued with social realism. While I have called Degrevant a gentleman hero, he brings "þre hundred kny3ttus" with him to the tournament for Melidor (C. 1087), as an example of romance's tendency towards hyperbole. Nevertheless, these texts share a concern for class, social position, and mobility which as we have seen reflects the ambiguous position of their gentry readership. They illustrate what Susan Crane describes as romance's capability to imagine "the possibilities and the constraints of self-definition",[101] and in this respect they are typical of many other Middle English romances.

By "possibilities and constraints" I believe that Crane has in mind the way

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[99] Regarding parks and gamekeepers, see William B. McColly, "Chaucer's Yeoman and the Rank of his Knight," *Chaucer Review* 20 (1985): 14-27. Among the many crimes which the Warwickshire Malory is alleged to have committed are several incursions into the game parks owned jointly by the Dukes of Buckingham and Norwich, and the Archbishop of Canterbury; see William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight*, 21.

[100] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:133, 2:282.

[101] Susan Crane, "The Franklin as Dorigen", 237.

in which romance often qualifies the hero's self-advancement with the suggestion that the opportunities for such self-advancement are limited to a deserving few, in keeping with the compromise which heraldic language proposed as a solution to the gentility debate. Romance also seems to have been willing to compromise in this debate for, as Lee Ramsey has observed, it was able simultaneously to express dissatisfaction with class restrictions on the one hand and resistance to increased social mobility on the other. Ramsey reminds us that while "the typical romance hero is a social climber", possibly indicating lower-class dissatisfaction with class restrictions, inevitably the social climber is revealed as a disguised nobleman, suggesting romance's "desire to believe in the validity of the existing social order".[102] As noted above, Degrevant prides himself on his "gentrise", while the power of noble lineage in *Eglamour* makes the identity of the hero's infant son unmistakable. Similar scenes in which a noble ancestry becomes almost magically apparent, or is hidden only with difficulty, are common in romance. John Gower's version of the Appolonius of Tyre story in the *Confessio Amantis* has such a scene, in which the heroine hears her disguised lover speak and sing and exclaims that "He myte noght have such manere / Of gentil blod bot if he were" (*CA* 8.793-4), and as Sylvia Thrupp notes, it was believed in the Middle Ages that elegant speech and singing were skills "that the great

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[102] Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 189.

gentleman had a special facility for acquiring".[103]

Chrétien's *Le Roman de Perceval* is the classical example of the romance in which noble lineage reveals itself as a near-supernatural quality. As we have noted earlier, the boy-hero's mother, while herself descended from a line of fine knights ("nee, / des meillors de ceste contree"), has raised her son as a rustic, and so when he sees some armoured knights for the first time he thinks them "plus biax que Diax" [more beautiful than God] (179). The humour of the work's early stages stems from the cooly ironic handling of the boy's simplicity. Perceval is unmoved, for example, by his mother's request that he not seek knighthood, which was the death of his father and two brothers both died as knights: "A mengier, fait il, me donez; / Ne sai de coi m'araisonnez" ["give me something to eat," he said, "I don't know what you're talking about"] (491-92). After making his way to court the boy addresses himself to Arthur with a complete disregard for his monarchical dignity and a fine display of impatience:

"Faites moi chevalier", fait il,
"Sire rois, car aler m'en weil."
Cler et riant furent li oeii
En la teste au vallet salvage
(972-75)

["Make me a knight, lord king", he said, "for I
have to be going." The eyes in the head of this
wild boy were clear and laughing.]

As the last two lines suggest, there an appealling innocence to Perceval which

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[103] Sylvia Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 303-04. See also Joel Rosenthal, *Nobles and the Noble Life: 1295-1500* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 19-20.

impresses those of discernment (unlike the rude Kay) who meet him. Thus the nobleman Gorneman agrees to instruct Perceval in arms, even though he realises that he is "niche et sot" [a fool and a simpleton] (1365-66). Chrétien of course emphasises the hero's extreme simplicity in order to make the transcendent emergence of his breeding all the more surprising, for Gornemon is amazed that Perceval acquires the martial skills so effortlessly: "Com s'il eust toz jors veschu / En tornoimens et en guerres" [As if his whole life had been spent in tournaments and wars" (1476-77). This inbred worthiness to be knighted, while it does not prepare Perceval to seek the Grail, reveals the fundamental conservatism of the work, a conservatism which is perhaps apparent from the start in the laughter which Chrétien seems to invite at the expense of the peasant come to court. The English romances which adopt the theme of the fair unknown (*bel inconnu*) from the French are however considerably removed in audience from Chrétien's courtly circle, and while their heroes are often considerably more rough-hewn than Perceval, the underlying conservatism and occasions for laughter are much less apparent.

The Middle English *Sir Perceval of Galles* (late fourteenth-century) is an analog of its French namesake, completely missing the Grail story and with curious differences in tone. It is preserved among the romances of Robert Thornton's Lincoln manuscript, the only surviving version, and is written in tail-rhyme in a northern dialect. The hero's father, "a noble man" and King Arthur's brother-in-law, is killed by the Red Knight, and his mother raises him in the woods as a hunter. Like the French Perceval, the boy meets some of Arthur's

knights and resolves to be one too, and when he returns home on a horse, despite his inexperience at riding, his mother sorrowfully realises that his aristocratic heritage has won out over his simple upbringing:

> Scho saw hym horse hame brynge;
> Scho wiste wele, by þat thynge;
> Þat þe kynde wolde oute sprynge
> For thyng þat be moughte.
> (353-56)[104]

Perceval's entry into Arthur's hall is a slapstick version of Chrétien's gently ironic scene. Both enter while still mounted, and in the French Arthur is so abstracted that he does not notice until the horse's tail knocks his cap off, and even then remembers his courtesy. The boy's speech, as we have seen, is more impatient than rude. In the English text the boy rides so closely that his horse "Kyste þe forheude of þe kynge - / So nerehande he rode!" (495-96), and Perceval demands that he be made knight before the king touches his meat, threatening to kill him if he declines (510-28). When Arthur attempts to speak to the boy he is told to cease his "iangleynge", much to the horror of the court, who:

> Hadden ferly of þe Kyng,
> Þat he wolde suffre siche a thyng
> Of þat foull wyghte
> (530-32)

The scene is interrupted by the arrival of the Red Knight, and after Perceval kills him to avenge his father he sends word to Arthur that he no longer needs to be

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[104] W.H. French & C.B. Hale. eds, *Middle English Metrical Romances* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1930).

knighted, for "I am als grete a lorde als he" (814). The romance ends with Perceval defending the Lady Lufamour of Maydenlande from a Sultan, and marrying her.

As one can see from these short excerpts, *Perceval of Galles* is a considerably less accomplished work than Chrétien's, although it is notable for its bellicosity of tone, a quality which it shares with other English variations on the *bel inconnu* theme. While the "semely" young hero of *Lybeaus Desconnus* impresses Arthur others question his worthiness to take the adventure which comes to court, drawing this spirited, if somewhat incoherent, response from the boy:

> That man that fleyeth by wey or strete,
> I wolde the devyll had brake his nek,
> Wher-euer he hym take;
> Also I wolde he were to-drawe
> And wyth the wyne to-drawe,
> Till the devill him take.[105]

Following the pattern of Malory's *Gareth*, Lybeaus is assigned to help a damsel, and while he is dismissed initially by her servant as a "Lorell, caytyffe" (L282) he establishes his worth to be her champion, although unlike Gareth his nobility is almost entirely a function of his fighting ability. Similarly, the English Perceval is a force of energetic boorishness with no social graces to speak of:

> Grete wondir had Lufamour
> He was so styffe in stour

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[105] Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Lybeaus Desconus*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 261 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

> And couthe so littill of nurtour
> (1566-68)

Both heroes seem to have been intended to appeal to a relatively unsophisticated audience, for while the English Perceval is frequently described as "the fole on the felde" or as the "childe" these tags seem formulaic in nature, and there is little if any trace of the amused narratorial tone which marks Chrétien's relationship with his simple hero. *Perceval of Galles* and *Lybeaus Desconus* both employ the motif of the noble inheritance disguised, but neither romance offers a coherent vision of what it is that constitutes true nobility besides a strong sword-arm. We might speculate, therefore, that at the level which these and other English *bel inconu* romances were being read the idea of inherited nobility had lost much of its restrictive potential, and was merely a condition of the narrative.

The romance *Gamelyn*, a mid-fourteenth-century forerunner of the Robin Hood ballads, is as vigorous as the English *Perceval* and *Lybeaus*, but grounds its vision of gentility in something other than physical prowess. The hero is a younger son of a knight, deprived of his inheritance by his elder brother, "a moche schrewe" (6).[106] Gamelyn indignantly protests that penury is beneath his dignity, arguing that "I am no worse gadelyng ne no worse wight, / But born of a lady and geten of a knight" (106-08). In keeping with the spirit of rough justice which characterises many English romances, Gamelyn and a faithful

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[106] W.H. French & C.B. Hale, eds., *Middle English Metrical Romances*.

servant soundly beat his brother's guests with staves, and then escape to the woods, where they encounter a band of outlaws at their feast. Gamelyn appeals to the courtesy of the outlaw chief, for as he reassures his servant:

> He may neyþer mete ne drynk werne vs for schame.
> If that he be heende and come of gentil blood,
> He wol [y]eue vs mete an drink and doon vs som good.
> (662-64)

While this passage seems to echo the now-familiar theme of inherited nobility, the romance's point of view is actually a surprisingly marginal one, for it is only in the lawless greenwood that Gamelyn encounters a courtesy and charity which far exceeds that of his brother and his noble guests and prelates. The poet also displays some sensitivity to the often precarious position of lesser sons of landed families, for in describing Gamelyn's unfair treatment he makes the editorial comment that "Selde 3e se ony eyr helpen his broþer" (40). Gamelyn may thus be considered a gentleman hero in that he progresses from a marginal or oppressed situation to one of restoration, at the expense of a socially superior figure, and in a text whose relationship to social realities, while not strictly mimetic, does show some awareness of its frustrations and a strong tendency towards wish-fulfilment.

Dieter Mehl has observed that the rich and fabulous world glimpsed in a more courtly romance such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would have seemed alien to many English knights, whose conditions would have been closer

to those of "impoverished warriors, like Amadace, Launfal and Ysumbras".[107]

Like Gamelyn, the heroes of *Launfal* and *Amadace* are marginalised by social forces, but unlike romances where these forces are embodied in a powerful feudal adversary, the villains of these texts exert a financial power which threatens the traditional prestige of gentility. *Sir Launfal* (ca. 1350) is an Arthurian romance and the most famous example of the motif in which a knight gains the patronage of a fairy mistress, a motif which Chaucer satirised in *Sir Thopas*. As in many other romances, notably *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Amadace*, the hero's liberality is such that he quickly expends his fortune, and rapidly discovers that he has expended his influence as well. Having left court because of the unwelcome attentions of Guenever (a memorable shrew in this incarnation) Launfal seeks lodging with the mayor of Caerlon, who quickly perceives the knight's poverty and hesitates, prompting this rueful remark:

> Launfal turnede hym self and low3:
> Þerof he hadde scorn inow3;
>   And seyde to hys kn3tes tweyne,
> "Now may ye se, swych ys service
> Vnþer a lord of lytyll pryse -
>   How he may þerof be fayn!"
> (115-20)[108]

Launfal is given an undignified hut where he lives too poor and ashamed even

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[107] Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, 5.

[108] W.H. French & C.B. Hale, *Middle English Metrical Romances*. In *Sir Cleges* there is a similar comment on the fickleness which new-found poverty causes, for when Cleges must mortgage his lands the poet reports that "His men that wern mekyll of pride / Gan slake awaye on euery syde" (French & Hale, ll. 79-80).

to go church, although when he is made rich by his fairy mistress the mayor again seeks his influence, only to be soundly rebuked. The hero of *Sir Amadace*, a contemporary romance, has likewise expended his wealth in giving more to the poor "Thenne did a nobull knyghte" (158-59),[109] and spends the last of his money on the funeral of a stranger, a merchant denied burial by his creditor. After paying for the funeral banquet Amadace's courtesy is approvingly reported by the poet as a further demonstration of his gentility:

> Thenne sir Amadace kidde he was gentilman borne;
> He come the grattust maystur beforne.
> Toke leve, and wente his way.
> (334-36)

The knight's generosity is however misunderstood by the mean-spirited burgesses, who betray their *nouveaux-riche* roots by criticising Amadace as a spendthrift who fails to understand the value of money (340-46), and in a manner similar to Launfal the hero observes that "A mon that litul gode hase, / Men sittus ryghte noghte him bye" (386-87). Amadace's generosity is later vindicated by the ghost of the buried man, who reassures him that God will reward his charity, be it given "to gentilmen or to schrewis" (448-56).

Launfal and *Amadace* both display a wry awareness of the ways in which the world operates, although they cannot be called works of social criticism and can only offer their readers fantastic escapes. As in *Gamelyn*, however, the heroes of these romances are challenged by obstacles that are considerably more

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[109] Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Six Middle English Romances* (London: J.M. Dent, 1973), pp. 169-92.

immediate and menacing than the stock giants and enchanters of *Lybeaus Desconus*, and all three texts are sensitive to the often precarious place of the knight and gentleman in the late-medieval world. Like *Degrevant, Gamelyn* suggests the importance of power in landed society, and the corrupt judiciary in the latter text may well suggest the frustration of lesser players whose influence was inadequate in the game of local affairs. *Launfal* and *Amadace* suggest the same prejudice towards the mercantile world which we noted earlier in John Paston III's opposition to Calle's marriage to his sister, and while these texts reveal the prejudice of the "gentilman borne" (in both texts the heroes are repeatedly described as gentleman) one leaves them with a strong sense of the importance of wealth. It is certainly significant that the impoverished knights, who do not understand the mercantile world, can only acquire their money from a fairy mistress or a fabulous shipwreck. Perhaps their greatest appeal to their gentry readers, then, was an ability to combine an essentially traditional vision with a sense that all things were possible.

Finally, the clearest and most interesting example of the gentleman hero romance is *The Squyr of Low Degre*. As we have seen in this chapter, gentility in this period had a way of being all things to almost all people, and *The Squyr* illustrates the social flexibility of the concept as it was expressed in literature. Like Eglamour, the hero is a household knight, in this case serving the king of Hungary, and predictably falls in love with the king's daughter. While he is "curtteous and hende", a good soldier, and loved by all, the squire labours under the disadvantage of poverty:

> He was not ryche of golde or fe;
> A gentyll man forsoth was he.
>   (19-20)

In fact the squire is not even that "gentyll", for he comes of "simple kynne" (611), although his worthiness is such that the king cannot help but be impressed by the squire's bearing in court, and thinks him "the semylyest man / That euer he in the worlde sawe or than" (335-36). In contrast to *Eglamour*, it is the lady who imposes a severe test of "dedes of armes to done / Through whiche ye may wynne your shone" (171-74) so that the squire can prove his worthiness to win her, but like the fairy maiden in *Launfal* gives him arms and money to ease his way. While there is the conventional jealous steward who opposes the union, a marked air of optimism pervades this simple and rather likeable romance. The king is anxious to make her suitor "squyer and knight" if it will please his daughter (723-28), and himself takes a tolerant view of social mobility:

> For i haue sene that many a page
> Haue become men by mariage;
> Than it is semely that squyer
> To haue my doughter by this manere,
> And eche man in his degre
> Become a lorde of ryaltye,
> By fortune and by other grace,
> By herytage and by purchace
>   (373-80)

The tone of this speech is reminiscent of Dekker's madcap Simon Eyre, and its definition of gentility is a broad and tolerant one; we can even imagine Richard Calle drawing courage from this romance prior to doing battle with Margery Paston's stuffy brothers.

It seems appropriate to end this chapter with *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*, for it captures the mood of optimism and social ambition prevalent in the fifteenth century, and which is reflected in many romances of the period. The texts in which I have identified the gentleman hero or described as typical of the gentry's point of view are not without contradictions, but neither was the gentry an homogeneous group. The romances discussed above suggest both the ambitions and the prejudices of the landed gentry, and perhaps echo some of their tensions and preoccupations. While they are not in any sense of the word democratic, as a group they tend to articulate an understanding of gentility which was flexible enough to appeal to those with the means and the will, like the Pastons, to consider themselves gentle. These works would thus have appealed to the rural squirearchy, to professionals in large households and to gentlemen servants, and even to the urban families which by the end of the century were buying the courtesy books printed by Caxton, de Worde, and others. The concern with defining gentility in practice and in fiction was thus an important part of English aristocratic culture, and as we shall see in the final chapter, forms an important part of Malory's work and approach as a gentry writer.

Chapter Three
Malory and the Nature of Fifteenth-Century Chivalry

[Malory] reports the celebrated tournaments in full, with the score of each knight, and the name of the man who bowled him over, or knocked him out. But the accounts of old cricket matches are inclined to be boring for those who did not actually play in them, so we must leave it unreported. The only things which are apt to be dull in Malory are the detailed score-sheets, which he gives two or three times - and even they are not dull for anybody who knows the form of the various smaller knights.
T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*

Spectacle and Illusion

In July of 1468, probably at the same time as Malory was at work on his last two tales, Sir John Paston wrote to his mother from Bruges to describe his impressions of the Burgundian court. As a contemporary "superpower" and a potential ally Burgundy was politically important to England; Sir John was there among the emissaries accompanying Edward IV's sister Margaret of York to her wedding with Charles, Duke of Burgundy. Culturally it was no less important. Burgundy was very much the *fons et origo* of late-medieval chivalry, and the pageantry and ceremony of its court set a standard for aristocratic society which was to endure into the sixteenth century.[1] The young Paston was suitably

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[1] This subject is discussed by Gordon Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour: Burgundian Origins of the Elizabethan Renaissance* (The Hague: Leiden University Press, 1977).

impressed, and informed his mother that "Many pagentys wer pleyed in hyr wey in Bryggys to hyr welcomyng, the best that ever I sye".[2] Margaret's wedding celebrations lasted for over a week, and included jousts that featured one of the great tournament idols of the day, Charles' son Antoine, the Grand Bastard of Burgundy. He and the other participants, as John reported, were "as rychely beseyn as clothe of gold, and sylk and sylvyr, and goldsmyths werk, myght mak hem". While he himself was a courtier, a sometime London resident, and therefore no rustic, Sir John's letter betrays something of the excitement of a young squire from the provinces finding himself in high society. "And as for the Dwkys coort," he told his mother, "as of lords, ladys and gentylwomen, knyts, sqwyers, and gentylmen, I hert never of non lyek to it, save kyng Artourys cort".[3] Paston's choice of a literary simile, and an Arthurian one at that, is of interest in that it shows a member of the gentry drawing upon a cultural paradigm to describe a real-life event which had itself been created from literary models. It is thus appropriate to explore further this apparent conflation of fiction and reality, and to determine whether Sir John's rather awestruck approval reflects in any way the gentry's relationship to courtly or "high" culture.

E.K. Chambers once wrote that the England of the fifteenth century "as we find it depicted in the *Paston Letters*" with its warfare and intrigue, corruption and anarchy, is nowhere to be found in the pages of Malory, who was more

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[2] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 1:538-41.

[3] *Ibid.*

concerned with storytelling than with politics.[4] Chambers' association of the Paston correspondence with the world of prosaic reality has since been followed by others; in the opinion of Larry Benson, it is "as vain to look in the pages of Malory for the Pastons' England as it is to search the Pastons' letters for Malory's world."[5] The underlying assumption of Chambers' statement is that romance imagines an innocent and idealised world, distinct from unpleasant reality, when in fact, as we have seen in the earlier chapters, the relationship of medieval romance to ideology and society was complex, with the conjunction of real and imaginary explaining in large part romance's appeal to its audience. While Benson acknowledges this relationship in that he speaks of the realism of late-medieval romance, with the exception of enthusiasts such as Sir John he limits its appeal to a small and elite coterie of noblemen whose idealistic and antiquarian interests had little appeal to supposedly hard-headed gentry families such as the Pastons. What unites the views of Chambers and Benson is an acceptance of the "chivalric ideal", the belief that Malory's work embodied a reforming spirit in the values of knighthood and chivalry, and that these ideals were presented by men such as William Caxton as a means of rejuvenating England. Here the Paston documents become relevant, for even though they apparently fail to illuminate Malory, they do reveal in local terms the disorder and uncertainty which characterised English life for much of this century, and

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[4] E.K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages*, 197.

[5] Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, 200.

which a return to chivalry would supposedly have remedied. This chapter considers the validity of discussing chivalry as if it were a modern political program or social blueprint, a position which A.B. Ferguson has dismissed as anachronistic, since, according to him, the fifteenth century had no other set of secular values for society to consider.[6] It argues that critics of Malory have been unduly influenced by views of fifteenth-century chivalry as a decadent and spent force, no longer able to contain the violence of the period, and suggests that it remained very real for the gentry as a class, and not just for select enthusiasts.

Sir John Paston, like his younger brother, is in many respects illustrative of the culture which produced Malory and the audience of "jentylmen and jentylwymmen" whom he addresses in his final explicit, *pace* Benson. As did the "knyght presoner", they came from a proud family which possessed (or claimed to possess) a distinguished lineage, and while not as unlucky as the oft-imprisoned Malory they too were soldiers who at least once found themselves on the losing side after Barnet in 1471. They were, therefore, equally familiar with the dangers of civil war and with the enmity of great lords. Like Malory they appear to have been steeped in chivalric and Arthurian literature, and John's enthusiasm for courtly spectacle and his seemingly instinctive invocation of the standard of "Artourys cort" appear in many ways to be typical of late-medieval chivalry. Burgundian chivalry, with its near-theatrical display and its self-conscious use of historical and classical antecedents, has become a byword for

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[6] A.B. Ferguson, "The Revival of the Fifteenth Century", 21-22.

the obsolescence and decadence which we still associate today with the high culture of the late Middle Ages.

The willingness of the English court to fashion itself along Burgundian lines, and of men such as Caxton to supply it with the latest in chivalric reading material during a period of unrest and apparent stagnation, might seem to us to be a wilful turning away from reality. Illusion has, until recently, been a word frequently employed by modern historians to describe late-medieval chivalry, following Huizinga's scornful pronouncement that an "unheard-of amount of dissimulation was ⸗ded to maintain the fiction of the chivalric ideal in real life".[7] A much darker view of chivalry, perhaps owing in part to the intellectual disillusion with ideological systems which is the legacy of our own century, largely supplanted the near-Victorian reverence for the subject held by critics such as W.H. Schofield and C.S. Lewis. In Malory scholarship one orthodoxy replaced another, and Schofield's view of the *Morte Darthur* as a work full of "the virtue of chivalry - its beauty and holiness" gave way to descriptions of its world as "violent and unforgiving, intolerant of weakness and disdainful of compassion".[8] As seen through the eyes of modern critics, Malory's book can thus be an especially confusing one. Perhaps no other English writer is so fully associated with chivalry, although, as the Introduction has suggested, the ideals of medieval

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[7] Johan Huizinga, "Historical Ideals of Life", 89.

[8] W.H. Schofield, *Chivalry in English Literature*, 87. Michael Stroud, "Malory and the Chivalric Ethos: The Hero of Arthur and Lucius," *Mediaeval Studies* 36 (1974): 339.

chivalry as they are widely understood have often seemed at odds with his book and with the period in which it was written. Discussions of chivalry in the *Morte* thus differ widely, ranging from P.E. Tucker's description of the code as a "kind of excellence", a combination of values such as prowess, loyalty, and faithful love, to Merrill's dark view of the ideal as irrational and ultimately self-destructive competition.[9]

Another discussion of Malory and chivalry might thus be legitimately expected to cloud the issue further rather than to clear it, or at best to be superfluous after the major contributions of late.[10] However, much work remains to be done before we clearly understand the gentry's relationship to and participation in the ideals of chivalry, and Paston's letter from Bruges introduces many of the problems to be addressed in this chapter. To what extent was fifteenth century chivalry merely empty display and ceremony, as we might infer from this document, and was Paston's proximity to this courtly spectacle unusual for one of his degree? The other members of his family, as Larry Benson notes, had little patience with Sir John's chivalric enthusiasms; his father had himself declined the expensive honour of knighthood, and saw his son's presence at court

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[9] P.E. Tucker, "Chivalry in the *Morte*" in *Essays on Malory*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 103. Cf. Robert Merrill, *Sir Thomas Malory and the Cultural Crisis*, 103-06. Bryan Rivers also takes the view that the individual's quest for chivalric "worship" undermines the "precarious unity of the Round Table". See "Malory's Lamerake and the Perils of 'Prouesse'", *English Studies in Canada* 8 (1981): 24.

[10] Especially important discussions of Malory and chivalry are found in Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, 137-201, and Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*.

primarily as an opportunity to win influence that might aid the family fortunes back in Norfolk.[11] While the pageantry and near-theatrical display of the courts may have been largely irrelevant to men such as John Paston I and a rare spectacle for his sons, chivalry remained very real to the lesser nobility and gentry families, especially as English society became more stratified. As the peerage became a more exclusive and powerful group, and as knighthood became more closely associated with burdensome obligations rather than with real prestige, the gentry seem to have turned to chivalry and its associated values of nobility and gentility as a means of defining their own identity.

Defining Chivalry

Chivalry, like romance, is a difficult term to define, as it also had several meanings in medieval usage. The Middle English *chevalrie*, a loanword from Old French, had five general meanings.[12] Two of these definitions have a corporate sense, referring to (*MED*1) a body of armored and mounted knights or cavalry, and (*MED*2) the nobility as a class or estate. Related to the second meaning, chivalry can (*MED*3) denote the rank of knighthood which, when conferred in

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[11] In a grumbling letter dated January 1465, John Paston (the Christian name was ubiquitous in this family) wrote that his son failed to see the opportunities of being a courtier: "And in the kynges hows he could put hym self foorth to be in favour or trust with any men of substauns that myght forther hym"; Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:128.

[12] *Middle English Dictionary*, Pt. C, 233-35.

the ceremony of dubbing, admits the individual to feudal society. A usage (*MED4*) which has not survived the medieval period refers to martial skill, prowess, or feats of arms, as is seen in an occurrence in the romance *The Squyre of Lowe Degre*, when the hero's lady sets out the demanding conditions her suitor must fulfil:

> For and ye my loue should wynne,
> With chyualry ye must begynne,
> And other dedes of armes to done,
> Through whiche ye may wynne your shone;
> (171-74)[B]

The most general definition (*MED5*), which lingers today in our archaistic use of the adjective "chivalrous" to designate a gentlemanly action, embraces the ethical dimension of chivalry, which tempers the original, military function of knighthood through obligations such as the granting of mercy to a beaten opponent. This is the chivalry loved by Chaucer's Knight (*CT* 1.45) and which is held up by the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women* in his reproach to Tarquin, the rapist of Lucrecia:

> Tarquinius, that art a kynges eyr,
> And sholdest, as by lynage and by ryght,
> Don as a lord and as a verray knyght,
> Whi hastow don dispit to chivalrye?
> Whi hastow don this ladye vilanye?
> (*LGW* 1819-23)

In modern scholarship the term has three broad applications: as a military term, reflecting the knight's original function as a mounted warrior; as a social grouping, designating the feudal ruling class; and in an ideological sense,

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[B] W.H. French & C.B. Hale, eds., *Middle English Metrical Romances*.

summing up the ethical and political values which animated knighthood and the ruling class.[14] None of these sub-meanings may be readily disentangled from the word chivalry, for one could not aspire to the chivalric virtues, such as skill at arms or generosity, without noble birth and its attendant privileges and resources. Chivalry in its largest sense seems primarily to have been a literary construct, the combined product of romances, chronicles, "handbooks" and manuals. In his survey of three popular medieval chivalric treatises, the anonymous *Ordene de chevalerie*, Ramon Lull's *Libre del ordre de cavayleria*, and Geoffroi de Charny's *Livre de chevalerie*, M.H. Keen points out that all three describe chivalry as "a way of life", an "ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together".[15]

Prior to Keen's explanation of chivalry as a conglomerate of codes and values, it was common for historians and literary critics to attempt to separate chivalry into its component parts. The influential model presented by Sidney Painter divides the subject into three ethics: the feudal or military, as represented by Froissart and the chivalric biographies, the courtly or amatory, represented by Chrétien and the *De amore* of Andreas, and finally the religious, represented by Ramon Lull and the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury. In Painter's opinion, these three conceptions of chivalry "were too incompatible to be combined in any

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[14] Jeremy duQuesnay Adams, "Modern Views of Medieval Chivalry, 1884-1984" in *The Study of Chivalry*, eds. Howell Chickering and Thomas H. Seiler, (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1988), 41-89.

[15] M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, 16-17.

single ideal of knighthood that would satisfy everyone".[16] Malory criticism has tended to work with this segregated schema of knighthood, following the lead of its dean, Eugène Vinaver, who explained chivalry in the *Morte Darthur* as a secular, predominantly military code. According to Vinaver, chivalry is a moral system moderating the behaviour of a warrior society, embodied in Arthur, a literary cousin of Henry V and an example of "man's heroic devotion to a great cause".[17] While this military understanding of chivalry served Malory well in Books I and II, Vinaver argued that in the later books it heavily influenced his handling of the French sources. Adopting the spirit of the French prose *Tristan* in which, unlike Beroul's verse romance, Tristan's virtue is clearly opposed to Mark's villainy, Malory makes his Tristram "a true knight and Mark an enemy of knighthood".[18] Similarly in Book VI, the *Sankgreal*, according to Vinanver's influential reading, the *Morte* dispenses with the exalted *chevaillierie celestiale* of the French *Queste del Saint Graal* and its monastic disapproval of earthly passion and honour, rendering the Grail quest into yet another Arthurian adventure, "an opportunity offered to the knights of the Round Table to achieve still greater glory in *this* world".[19]

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[16] Sidney Painter, *French Chivalry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1940), 166. A similar and mutually exclusive typology of Heroic (military), Worshipful (courtly), and True (religious) knighthood is used by Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*.

[17] Eugène Vinaver, Introduction, *Works*, 1.xxxii.

[18] Eugène Vinaver, Commentary, *Works*, 3.1445-48.

[19] *Ibid.*, 3.1535.

As Elizabeth Pochoda has noted, Vinaver's use of words such as "misreadings" and "inconsistencies" betrays his method of assessing the *Morte* "as if [Malory] were attempting to give the same interpretation and emphasis to a story as the one he found in his source".[20] In arguing for an approach to Malory based on his book rather than its sources, one which addressed its "political implications" and the historical and social aspects of the Arthurian tradition, Pochoda challenges the longstanding view that Malory was attempting "to commemorate in terms of imaginary knight-errantry some of the great declining traditions of his own age".[21] Using Huizinga's concept of the historical ideal, she argues that Malory and his contemporaries were looking to the idea of chivalry found in Arthurian romances and chronicles to give a political foundation to a troubled England. As Huizinga explains in his essay "Chivalric Ideas in the Middle Ages", the authors of texts such as *Le livre des faicts du mareschal Boucicaut* turned to chivalry and the traditional duties of the nobility when the complexities and evils of the present threatened to overwhelm them.

> [T]his vision of a world ruled by chivalry, however superficial and mistaken it may be, was the clearest conception the secular mind of the Middle Ages could attain in the domain of political ideas. It was the formula with which man was in those days able to understand in his poor way the appalling complexity of events. What he saw about him was nothing but violence and confusion. ... Thanks to the chivalric fiction, history was reduced for them to a grave spectacle of honor and virtue, to a noble game with edifying and heroic

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[20] Elizabeth Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1971), 10.

[21] Eugène Vinaver, Introduction, *Works*, 1.xxxiii.

rules.[22]

Malory's version of the historical ideal, Pochoda claims, is centred upon
the legend of Arthur, a monarch whose legitimacy as the "RIGHTWYS KYNGE
BORNE OF ALL ENGLOND" (12:36;i.5) is clearly demonstrated by the test of
the sword in the stone and by the acclamation of the commons, whose welfare
he swears to uphold as "a true kyng, to stand with true justice fro thens forth the
dayes of this lyf" (16:20-23;i.7). The quests of Arthur's knights extend his justice
throughout the kingdom, and their actions are, ideally, in fulfilment of the
famous oath which they swear annually at Pentecost, and which is in effect "a
code of public service":[23]

> ... than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them
> rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage
> nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy
> unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of
> their] worshir and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore;
> and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and
> wydowes [sucour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to
> enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take
> no batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no
> worldis goodis.
>
> (120:15-24;iii.15)

Both P.J.C. Field and Stephen Knight agree that the Pentecost oath makes the
knights into Arthur's peace-keeping force, although Knight argues that the
ideological purpose of the *Morte* is not to glorify the sovereign's stabilising

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[22] Johan Huizinga, "Chivalric Ideas in the Middle Ages" in *Men and Ideas*,
199.

[23] Elizabeth Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda*, 84.

function, but rather is to justify the aristocracy's dominant role in society.[24] Knight does note, however, that even from its inception the Round Table is threatened as much from within as from without, threatened by the treason of Accolon or the ominous failure of Gawain and Pellinore in the early quests. As an ideological text, reflecting the point of view of "the landowning class in the fifteenth-century", Knight argues that the *Morte* must conceal the shortcomings of chivalry rather than expose the Round Table as "a divided and uncertain social group confronting its own weakness and divisiveness", with the result that the disruptive and treasonous behaviour of knights such as Gawain and Accolon is not fully acknowledged or critically interrogated.[25]

While she does not employ Knight's Marxist methodology, Pochoda also sees the *Morte* as an ideological text, and her conclusions are startling. Despite the first five tales, in which knights such as Lancelot and Gareth defeat Arthur's enemies and establish his order, Pochoda argues that Malory's ultimate goal is to expose chivalry as a system unable to contain the conflicting loyalties that bring about the Round Table's destruction. Having "run out of enemies" by *The Tale of Tristram*, the knights engage in increasingly elaborate tournaments which cause them to fragment into rival cliques, and a process of "social dissolution" continues throughout the Grail Quest. Pochoda argues that because Arthur has

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[24] P.J.C. Field, Introduction, *Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 14-15. Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society*, 112-15.

[25] Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society*, 116.

chosen a fraternal relationship with his knights, unlike the paternal role of his father Uther, he is drawn into their feuds and so loses his power of governance. Malory's testing of the historical ideal thus yields negative results, and his last three tales are thus to be read as an exposé of chivalry.

> We are thus in the end faced with the futility of reviving a tradition and a morality and imposing them from the outside on a later age. By the end Malory has shown so much about what makes Arthurian society operate that it can not be morally compelling for his own time.[26]

The phrase "for his own time" reveals Pochoda's view, following Huizinga, of the *Morte Darthur* as an ideology recovered from history and made to serve the needs of the present. This view also extends to Caxton's approach to his material, for as Pochoda argues, the printer lacked Malory's critical view of his material and was anxious to offer the "seedy virtues" of chivalry to the merchants then replacing the old feudal aristocracy, which had mostly killed itself off during the Wars of the Roses.[27] An assumption central to this thinking is that chivalry, by the time of the fifteenth century, was a spent force if not a dead one, and that literary treatments of it were inevitably of a "revivalist" nature. Furthermore, chivalry is thought of primarily as the political system which organises Arthur's kingdom, and which may, or may not, offer some hope to the turbulent England of Malory's time. The fifteenth century, with its feuds, baronial armies, and

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[26] Elizabeth Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda*, 109.

[27] *Ibid.*, 20; see also Margaret Schlauch, *Social Foundations of Medieval Literature*, 285.

royal depositions, was probably no more violent than earlier eras of English medieval history, yet it maintains a strong hold on the modern imagination. As one historian describes the period, "there followed the dreadful War of the Roses, in which all rules of honour and mercy were swept away in a diabolical orgie of dynastic hatred".[28] If we are to understand Malory properly, then these assumptions require careful scrutiny.

Chivalry and Society

Northrop Frye has said that romance "is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space".[29] The nostalgic quality in Malory's work has long been remarked on, and is most vivid in his famous comparison of the "lycoures lustis" which pass for love "nowadayes", to the "trouthe and faythefulnes" that marked love "in kynge Arthurs dayes" (1119:31-1120:6;xviii.25). However, few readers of the *Morte Darthur* would risk calling it an imaginative work; when Malory introduced the story of the Grail as "one of the truest ... that is in this world", or when he scornfully dismissed the "favour of makers" (1260:5-7;xxi.13), it seems clear that he was thinking of himself as an historian of Arthur's reign. In this respect he shared the approach of his first editor, for Caxton's prologue to *Kyng Arthur*

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[28] F.J.C. Hearnshaw, "Chivalry and its Place in History" in *Chivalry*, ed. Edgar Prestage (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1928), 27.

[29] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 186.

presents it as one in a sequence of "hystoryal and worldly actes of grete conquerors", and as a subject "whyche cught moost to be remembred emonge vs englysshemen tofore al other crysten kynges".[30] Much of the prologue, it will be recalled, goes on to offer proofs of Arthur's existence, although Caxton shrewdly avoids committing himself to belief therein.

The medieval mind understood history as a record of events remembered primarily for their didactic usefulness, and this is the approach which guided Caxton in all of his publishing ventures. In the Proheme to his 1482 translation of the *Polycronicon*, the great history compiled by Ranulf Higden in the fourteenth century, Caxton praised historians "that shewe vnto the reders and herers by the ensamples of thynges passyd what thynge is to be desyred And what is to be eschewed".[31] While the Puritan Roger Ascham would not see it this way in the sixteenth century, Caxton likewise defended the story of Arthur as being "wryton for our doctryne and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne but texcersyse and folowe vertu".[32] In the same year, 1485, he began the prologue to *Charles the Grete* with a similar statement, including the life of Charlemagne among "the werkes of the auncient and olde peple [that] ben for to gyue to vs ensaumple to lyue in good & vertuous operacions".[33] While it may

[30] W.J.B. Crotch, ed., *Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, 92.

[31] *Ibid.*, 64.

[32] *Ibid.*, 95.

[33] *Ibid.*

be argued that, as a businessman, Caxton had a vested interest in promoting the edifying qualities of his books, similar sentiments in the prologues of other translators may well temper cynical explanations of Caxton's motives.

The boundary between history, chivalric biography and chivalric romance is an imprecise one, for as Pamela Gradon observes, all can be characterised by a reverential approach to an idealised past. The fourteenth-century French writer Froissart began his *Chroniques* with the stated intention of recording deeds of arms during the wars between France and England "so that brave men should be inspired thereby to follow such examples",[34] and the same sentiment animated Lord Berners, Froissart's early Tudor translator. Berners wrote in his preface that when we read of old deeds "and with what labours, daungers, and paryls they were gested and done, they right greatly admonest, ensigne and teche us howe we maye lede forthe our lyves."[35] As Gradon puts it, this "could stand as an appropriate comment on romance and chronicle alike".[36] Caxton, Froissart, and Berners all valued history for didactic purposes, and if there is a formulaic quality to their prefaces, and a sameness to their choice of material, then we should be especially cautious of any attempt to read any one work as evidence of a chivalric revival. Caution may be especially necessary with Caxton's well-

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[34] Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Brereton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 37.

[35] *The Chronicle of Froissart, Translated out of French by Sir John Bourchier, Lord Berners*, 6 Vols. (1901; New York: AMS Press, 1967), 1:3.

[36] Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*, 272.

known epilogue to his translation of Ramon Lull's chivalric treatise, which has

on more than one occasion been cited as proof of the decadence of fifteenth-

century English chivalry. The epilogue, which assumes a select audience of "noble

gentylmen", rehearses the old fame of England in Arthur's time and then makes

this famous address:

> O ye knyghtes of Englond where is the custome and vsage
> of noble chyualry that was vsed in tho dayes what do ye now
> but go to the baynes & playe att dyse And some not wel
> aduysed vse not honest and good rule ageyn alle ordre of
> knyghthode leue this leue it and rede the noble volumes of
> saynt graal of lancelot of galaad of Trystram of perse forest
> of percyual of gawayn & many mo Ther shalle ye see
> manhode curtoyse & gentylnesse And loke in latter dayes of
> the noble actes syth the co[n]quest as in kyng Rychard dayes
> cuer du lyon Edward the fyrste and the thyrd and his noble
> sones Syre Robert knolles syr Iohan Hawkewode Syr Iohan
> cha[n]dos & Syre gualtier Manny rede froissart And also
> behold that vyctoryous and noble kynge Harry the fyfthe and
> the capytayns vnder hym his noble bretheren Therle of
> Salysbury Montagu and many other whoos names shyne
> gloryously by their vertuous noblesse & actes that they did
> in thonour of thordre of chyualry[.] Allas what doo ye but
> slepe & take ease and ar al disordred fro chyualry[?]ʳ⁷

By placing this exhortation at the end of the treatise, Caxton was cleverly

offering an implied compliment to those few "noble gentlemen" who were not

idly dicing, but instead had taken the trouble to read diligently all the way to the

epilogue. We can thus speculate that, for the original readers, besides the

obvious pleasure derived from being part of a socially elite group, they realised

an additional satisfaction from being recognised as a moral elite, "that by their

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ʳ⁷ A.T.P. Byles, ed., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, 122-23.

vertu entendeth to come & entre in to the noble ordre of chyualry".[38] In other words. Caxton did not issue a blanket condemnation of his readership as knights of the baths, but rather flattered them by assuming a shared concern for the moral state of the realm's knighthood. As the historical personages he cited are all associated with the bygone days of English success in the wars with France, and as *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, unlike contemporary military treatises,[39] dispenses moral instruction rather than soldierly advice, it is evident that Caxton was following a well-established medieval tradition of equating military defeat with moral decline. The obvious literary lineage of his epilogue should thus caution us from thinking of it as an especially pointed or topical piece of social criticism.

Nobles and knights have been singled out for criticism since at least the time of St. Bernard, and in each case the critics held up the knighthood of their day to a shared ideal of knighthood. As M.H. Keen notes, the criticisms are repeated "so often as to suggest a *topos* - a theme for elegant literacy or poetical exercise which did not necessarily reflect real unease about contemporary

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[38] *Ibid.*, 121.

[39] Honoré Bonet, *The Tree of Battles*, trans. G.W. Coopland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1949). The *De rei militari* of Vegetius, was translated, with selections from Bonet, by Christine de Pisan, whose French was in turn translated and printed by William Caxton as the *Book of faytles of armes and of chyualrye*, ed. A.T.P. Byles, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 189 (London: Oxford University Press, 1932). An earlier English translation was also made for Thomas Lord Berkely; see *The Earliest English translation of Vegetius' De Re Militari*, ed. Geoffrey Lester, Middle English Text Series no. 21 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1988).

mores".[40] Alain Chartier, a French courtier of the early fifteenth century, was doubtless inspired by the disaster of Agincourt when he wrote *Le Quadrilogue Invectif* and the *Breviaire des Nobles*, works which both recall his countrymen to chivalric ideals, but like Caxton he was working with a topos. The introduction to Chartier's *Breviaire* resembles the printer's flattering epilogue to Lull in that it addresses readers "qui ont volonté de valoir" [who would be valorous], and distinguishes them from the many who "ont leurs cuers avilez et deffaiz/ Et enclinez a mesdire et meffaire" [who have disgraced and corrupted their hearts, and think well of slander and wrongdoing].[41] The English moralist of the fourteenth century, John Gower, by no means exempted knighthood from his index of social evils in the *Mirour de l'omme*. Among the abuses of chivalry chronicled in the *Mirour* are the exploitation of the poor, covetousness and the neglect of arms to engage in commerce, and dissolution of energy seeking glory overseas to impress ladies.[42] Like Caxton, Gower felt that England's knights had forsaken their traditional military vocation:

> Ne quieront point l'onour de France,
> Ainz font a l'ostell demourance
> Et leur voisins vont guerroiant
> *(MO* 23671-73)

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[40] M.H. Keen, "Huizinga, Kilgour and the Decline of Chivalry," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 8 (1977): 6.

[41] J.C. Laidlaw, ed., *The Poetical Works of Alain Chartier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 395.

[42] G.C. Macaulay, ed., *The French Works*, vol. 1 of *The Complete Works of John Gower* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), ll. 23593-24180.

[They do not seek honour in France,
but rather stay at home making war on their neighbours.]

From Gower there is little distance in spirit, if not in time, to the condemnation of twelfth-century knighthood in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*,[a] or to St. Bernard's distinction between *militia* and *malitia* in distinguishing the Knights Templar (*militiae Christi*) from the knights of the world.[a] The topos even extends to "fiction", for in the *Historia regum britanniae* of Gregory of Monmouth, when Arthur embarks on the war with Romans, his counsellor Cador welcomes the war that will rescue the English from the vitiating effects of peace and return them instead to sterner virtues.[a]

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[a] John of Salisbury complains that the English have lost the knowledge of defending themselves from the Welsh, and complains that:

"The practice of this discipline has fallen into disuse either
from the enjoyment of long peace or in consequence of the
assaults of effeminacy and luxury which break the spirits of
men, or else by reason of the cowardice of our youth and
the inertia of the leaders of the present age."

Policraticus; The Statesman's Book Of John of Salisbury, trans. John Dickinson (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), VI.6.

[a] Quis igitur finis fructusve saecularis hujus, non dico, militiae, sed malitiae; si et occisor letaliter peccat, et occisus aeternaliter perit? [I speak, not of knights, but of rogues, and if the killer commits a deadly sin and, having killed, perishes eternally, to what end therefore has he gained the fruits of this world?] "De Laude Novae Militiae" in *Sancti Bernardi Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1839), 2:1256.

[a] Quippe, ubi usus armorum videtur abesse, aleae autem et mulierum inflammationes ceteraque oblectamenta adesse, dubitandum non est ne id quod erat virtutis, quod honoris, quod audaciae, quod famae, ignavia commaculet. [Certainly, where the use of weapons is seen to have diminished, and men instead take up games of dice, the consuming pleasures of women, and other delights of that sort, their virtue, their honor, their bravery and reputation will

The retrospective and even artificial quality of late medieval chivalry is enhanced by its decidedly literary nature. The chivalric writers consistently urge their audience to *read*, giving the impression that the knight's place is as much in the library as in the saddle. Ramon Lull fashions his influential treatise in the manner of a dialogue between a young squire and an aged knight-hermit, who will instruct the youth in "the Rule and ordre of Chyualrye [which] is wreton in this lytel booke that I hold here in myn handes".[46] Similarly we find in Thomas Hoccleve's officious poem of advice to Sir John Oldcastle, the prominent Lollard knight and rebel, a suggested program of reading which includes chivalric romances.

> Rede the storie of Lancelot de lake,
> Or Vegece of the aart of Chivalrie,
> The seege of Troie or Thebes thee applie
> To thynge at may to thordre of knyght longe!
> To thy correccioun now haaste and hie,
> For thow haast been out of ioynt al to longe.[47]

Christine de Pisan's highly popular treatise the *Épître d'Othéa la déese à Hector* is a series of one hundred mythological anecdotes presented in a scholastic manner, each illustrating a chivalric virtue. As well, a system of glosses draws

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be stained with cowardice.] *Historia regum britanniae, A Variant Version*, ed. Jacob Hunter (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 165-66, ll.436-443.

[46] A.T.P. Byles, ed., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, 11.

[47] Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Thomas Hoccleve: The Minor Poems in the Huntington Library Manuscript*, Early English Text Society o.s. no. 61 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

upon biblical and patristic authorities to provide a religious interpretation for each story. It is, as James Gordon points out, a book of moral teaching rather than a book of military lore and statecraft,[48] a secular equivalent of the devotional reading which was then becoming increasingly popular with the lettered laity. One of several English translations of the Épître, thought to be the work of the Tudor gentleman Anthony Babyngton (d. 1537), urges the reader of "þat estat of noble chyuallrye" to keep this "lytle bibell" in mind "wher-so he goe or ryde" for "Thencres of vertew & vices to echew".[49] Even Malory's Lancelot, we find, has read "many olde cronycles, as of noble Ector of troy and Alysaunder, the myghty conquerroure, and many mo other" (1201:14-19;xx.17). Finally, it might be noted that while Malory made no such claims for the improving quality of his book, he displays in his explicits a high degree of awareness of its textuality, and speaks of having "drawyn" together only one account from among the many "other bookis of kynge Arthure or of sir Launcelot or of sir Tristrams" (110:10-13;iv.29).

While chivalry thus appears to have been perennially literary and revivalist in nature throughout the Middle Ages, the fifteenth century appears to us to have had especial need of a chivalric revival. Thanks in no small part to Shakespeare's history plays, we are often tempted to envision the period in terms similar to those used by Richmond in the final speech of Richard III.

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[48] James D. Gordon, The Epistle of Othea to Hector, edited from Harleian Manuscript 838 (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania University Press, 1942), xxvi.

[49] Ibid., 4-5.

England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself.
The brother blindly shed the brother's blood;
The father rashly slaughter'd his own son;
The son, compell'd, been butcher to the sire.
All this divided York and Lancaster -
Divided in their dire division.[50]

The degenerated form of chivalry known today as "bastard feudalism" is often cited as the cause of this "dire division". Unlike the arrangements of earlier centuries, when knights owed military service in exchange for land tenure, late-medieval English armies were mostly composed of men retained by indenture, a system which had come to dominate dealings between the aristocracy and their more important servants. To many scholars, bastard feudalism (the name is a Victorian creation) has appeared to be a corruption of the original ideals of chivalry and of a pure feudalism. Michael Stroud describes the fifteenth century as a time of "chivalric schizophrenia", when "[t]o praise a man as a perfect knight might mean that he was either an ideal gentleman or a hired bully in livery", although the fourteenth century, and doubtless earlier ones still, has also been pinpointed as a time of chivalric decline.[51]

The system of livery and maintenance, as this newer feudal arrangement came to be known, was certainly open to abuses, as the experiences of the

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[50] *Richard III*, 5.5.23-28.

[51] Michael Stroud, "Malory and the Chivalric Ethos", 339. See also Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980) and Louis Brewer Hall, "The Breakdown of Chivalry in the Fourteenth Century" in *Approaches to Teaching Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* eds. Miriam Youngerman Miller and Jane Chance (New York: MLA, 1986), 87-92.

Pastons attest. Following the death of Sir John Fastolf in 1459, the Pastons were among their neighbour's executors, and as Fastolf's estates were extensive and all sides were nothing if not ambitious, open and ongoing conflict soon followed. In March 1469 Margaret Paston wrote to her son John II, warning him that the men of Sir William Yelverton, a rival executor, were oppressing Paston tenants on one of the disputed estates; "thei ride wyth speres and laungegays like men of werre, so that the seid tenauntes arn a-ferd to kepe there owyn howses."[52] The dispute culminated in a private war, in which the Pastons tried unsuccessfully to hold Fastolf's prize castle of Caister against the Duke of Norfolk, and at least one family retainer was killed in the siege. Such conflicts do nothing to enhance the image of the fifteenth century as a time of great stability and order, but the causes of such disorder may not necessarily be a collapse of chivalry as the conscience of the knightly class. The dean of English historians of the Middle Ages, K.B. McFarlane, reminds us that livery and maintenance flourished during the strong administrations of Edward III and of Henry V, and argues that its abuses only became chronic when the crown was unable to restrain them, as was proved during the reigns of Richard II and of Henry VI. While contemporaries of Malory, such as the jurist Sir John Fortescue, did denounce the dangers of "overmighty subjects" with their private armies,[53] McFarlane associates their criticisms with the same nostalgic impulse

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[52] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:336-37.

[53] Charles Plummer, ed., *The Governance of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 126-30.

which, as we have already noted, is fundamental to chivalry.

> Being men of their time they believed that the evils with which they contended showed a contemporary falling-off from a more perfect past. In thinking so they were usually wrong. All medieval moralists, and indeed most modern ones, are what we may call saturnians; the dim past is always golden to them. ... it was their sense of order which made them welcome the active kingship which the Tudors once more offered them.[54]

Should Malory be numbered among these "saturnian" moralists, and was he offering a social blueprint for a reformed England? If we compare the *Morte Darthur's* lengthiest explanation of the duties of knighthood, the famous oath sworn each Pentecost by the Round Table (120:15-24; see above p.81), we may find some reason to doubt that Malory's vision of chivalry was as prescriptive or complete as that of other chivalric writers. The oath's articles, with its use of phrases such as "never to do" and "fle treson", are designed to regulate the actions of individuals and say little about the role of the knightly class in society, as we can see by paraphrasing them:

1) Never commit injury, murder, or treason.
2) Always be merciful.
3) Always respect and assist ladies, noblewomen, and widows, and never rape or abduct them.
4) Never take up an unjust cause, either for love or for profit.

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[54] K.B. McFarlane, "Bastard Feudalism" in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays* (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), 42. See also Joel Rosenthal, *Nobles and the Noble Life: 1295-1500*, 74-77. Rosenthal too points out that private armies were hardly a new invention in the fifteenth century, and that the armed retainer was but one component of the noble family's household staff, "the military arm of baronial private government".

In her detailed study of Malory's understanding of knighthood, Beverly Kennedy argues that this passage is central to the Morte's concern "with the problems of governance in a late feudal monarchy",[55] and like Field and Knight she sees it as a "peacekeeping oath". Kennedy is correct to compare this arrangement to the practices of English monarchs, for like Edward III and Henry V, Arthur demands the oath from his knights in return for giving them "rychesse and londys", but her reading may overestimate the oath's political and judicial significance.

In the *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury writes that one is only a "true soldier" if one swears an oath similar to that of the ancient Romans, as described by Vegetius:

> The soldiers swear by God and His Christ and by the Holy Ghost and by the prince's majesty, which according to God's commandment is to be loved and worshipped by the human race. For when anyone receives lawful princely power, faithful devotion is to be accorded to him and ever watchful service as to God present and manifest in the flesh. Both the private citizen and the soldier serve God when they loyally love him who reigns by the authority of God. They swear, I say, that they will do the best of their ability all things which the prince shall enjoin upon them; that they will never desert from military service nor refuse to die for their commonwealth, of which they are the enlisted soldiers. After they have taken this oath, they are presented with the soldier's belt and become entitled to the soldier's privileges.[56]

John was a churchman, and the defence of the Church was foremost in his stern

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* Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 12.

[56] *Policraticus*, trans. John Dickinson, VI.7.

understanding of the soldier's role in society.[57] Subordination to the Church as

its obedient protectors would be a consistent theme in subsequent writings on

knighthood. Two centuries later, William Langland's Piers explains to a willing

knight that he will support the aristocracy materially if they will act as guardians

of the Church and its flock,[58] while John Gower explains that "a knight, wherever

he goes, sustains as his duty the rights with which Holy Church is enfranchised".[59]

Such sentiments are of course alien to Malory's oath at Pentecost, as is John's

requirement that the man about to be knighted go to church and lay his sword

upon the altar "like a sacrificial offering", pledging to God "never-failing

obedience" in the use of his weapon.[60] Malory says nothing about the knight's

subordination to the needs and authority of the Church, and as Kennedy

observes, "it does not occur to [Arthur] to require that [his knights] pray to God

for sufficient grace to practice and persevere in virtue".[61]

This lack of emphasis does seem to indicate Malory's very secular view of

knighthood, but there is also a notable unwillingness to emphasize the obedience

owed by the knight to secular authority. In John of Salisbury's soldier's oath the

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[57] "But what is the office of the duly ordained soldiery? To defend the Church, to assail infidelity, to venerate the priesthood, to protect the poor from injuries, to pacify thee province, to pour out their blood for their brothers (as the formula of their oath instructs them), and, if need be, to lay down their lives" (*Policraticus* VI.8).

[58] A.V.C. Schmit, ed., *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, VI.25-32.

[59] G.C. Macaulay, ed., *Mirrour de l'Omme*, ll. 23593-604.

[60] *Policraticus* VI.x.

[61] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 68.

authority of the prince, which is an extension of divine majesty, is paramount, and the soldier exists primarily to preserve that authority. Three centuries later the knight's subordination to the crown was asserted in very similar terms by Alain Chartier in his *Quadrilogue Invectif*, a work which was well known in England. In this debate between the estates it is the allegorised figure of Clergy, like Holy Chirche in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, who spells out the duties of knighthood.

> Now I aske a question: what is knyghtly discipline? Nothing
> ellis but to kepe the lawe that is ordeigned in exersyscing of
> armes and of batils vndir the commaundement of him that
> is chief and for the profight of the comon wele.[62]

Like Malory, Ramon Lull understood chivalry as an ethical code, for a knight is "lasse enclyned to doo a vylaynous fait or dede than another man", but Lull also maintains that "Thoffyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende his lord worldly or terryen".[63] Arthur's oath at Pentecost does not spell out this subordination to the secular authority with anything approaching this certainty, and seems designed to regulate the behaviour of questing knights, like *Yvain*'s Calogrenant, rather than the class of knightly baillifs and judges envisioned by Lull.

The final "article" of the oath at Pentecost requires that the knights "take

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[62] Margaret S. Blayney, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Translations of Alain Chartier's La Traité de l'Esperance and Le Quadrilogue Invectif*, 2 Vols., Early English Text Society o.s. nos. 270, 281 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974, 1980) 1:226. Cf. *Piers Plowman* B I.94-99.

[63] A.T.P. Byles, ed., *Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, 29.

no batayles in a wrongefull quarell", and is interpreted by Beverly Kennedy to regulate the practice of trial by battle, which, as she notes, is "the only judicial process in King Arthur's realm".[44] While trial by combat is a prominent feature of the *Morte Darthur* (Kennedy notes sixteen instances), this last clause of the oath may equally have a wider, more general sense, referring to the charity and ethical judgement which Arthur's knights should ideally possess on the frequent occasions when they are called on for assistance during their adventures. When this judgement is absent the consequences can be disastrous, as Pellinor learns when the urgency of his quest compels him to leave his daughter and her wounded lover to die (118:29-120:10;iii.14-15). The ideal of knight errantry thus tempers the Round Table's desire to attain "worshyp", and is an ideal fundamental to chivalric romance. In Chrétien's *Yvain* the hero champions an impressive number of oppressed chatelaines and falsely accused damsels, including Laudine's sister Lunette, the younger daughter of Noire Espine denied her inheritance, and the three hundred maidens forced to work at embroidery in the castle of Pesme Avaunture. As we noted earlier, the thematic concerns of *Yvain* do not seem to include the glorification of Arthur's monarchical authority, and its ethic can be reduced to Yvain's simple motto, "Nenil ... de reposer,/ Ne se peut nus hon aloser" [No one ever became famous by being idle] (5059-97). The adventures of Arthur's knights in the first and the third tales may, as Kennedy argues, "suggest the judicial and peace-keeping activities of

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[44] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 39.

king's knights operating from the court as part of the centralized system of royal justice",[65] but they also appear to have much in common with the highly individualistic knight-errantry practised by Chrétien's Yvain. While Malory's Yvain agrees to defend the Lady of the Roche from two "perelous knyghtes" because "I am a knyght of kyng Arthurs" (177:10-15;iv.27), his motives are essentially the same ones which send Lancelot up the tree to retrieve a hawk for Sir Phelot's wife. While he grumbles that "I am an evyll clymber, and the tre is passynge hyghe", Lancelot recognises that the lady has invoked the code of knighthood (falsely, as it transpires), which he must honour.

Lancelot here responds to a very general principle of chivalric charity which, in this limited context, has very little to do with the maintenance of the sovereign's authority. A.B. Ferguson describes him as "essentially an apolitical figure", and notes that while Lancelot's enemies, like Phelot and Tarquin, "were presumably also enemies of the commonweal ... insofar as he meted out justice, it was of a highly private sort, the rightings of wrongs done to individuals."[66] In fact a certain amount of narcissism is at play here, for the lady's request of Lancelot, "as thow arte floure of all knyghtes" carries within it an appeal to his vanity; Lancelot must honor the request in order to maintain his "worshyp". The concern most knights display for their reputation reveals Malory's tendency to favour the individualistic emphasis of the romance of *cortoisie* rather than the

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[65] *Ibid.*, 51.

[66] A.B. Ferguson, "Revival of the Fifteenth Century", 33.

corporate focus of the epic or *chanson*. It is true that Arthur's authority is strengthened by the adventures of knights such as Marhalt, who defeats the Duke of the South Marches and his sons but spares them if they will "putt them in the kynges grace" (175:5-8;iv.26). Malory's preference, however, appears to have inclined towards the portrayal of Arthur as a *primus inter pares* who is often difficult to distinguish from his vassals.

During the tournament of Lonezep, Arthur decides to see the renowned beauty of La Beall Isode for himself, despite Lancelot's warning that their visit might be interpreted by her companions as a hostile action. Like the young and headstrong monarch of Malory's first tale, Arthur displays a marked impetuosity, and declares that "I woll se her, for I take no forse whom I gryeve" (743:16-26;x.73). Arthur also seems to revert to his libidinous youth,[67] for he is so transfixed by Isode ("the kynge behylde her, and lyked her wondirly well" 743:30;x.73) that he does not notice the angry Palomides bearing down on him, and is rudely unhorsed. While Lancelot feels compelled to avenge his lord's fall, he cannot prevent Arthur from looking decidedly foolish, even though Tristram, with more than a little jealousy, reproaches Palomides "that [it] ys every good knyghtes parte to beholde a fayre lady, and ye had nat ado to play suche

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[67] Shortly after the battle with the eleven kings, Arthur meets the noblewoman Lyonors, ("And kynge Arthure sette hys love gretly on hir, and so ded she uppon hym" 38:31-33;i.17) and has a bastard son, Borre, by her. He then meets Guenevere for the first time ("and ever afftir he loved hir" 39:16-18;i.18), although this does not stop him, of course, from conceiving his nemesis, Mordred, with his half-sister Morgawse ("Wherefore the kynge caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her" 41:17-18;i.19). Malory reports Arthur's amorous youth without any apparent comment or disapproval.

maystryes for my lady" (745:6-10:x.73).

Palomides defends himself by suggesting that he did not recognise the king, and is surprised "that kynge Arthure woll ryde so pryvaly as a poure arraunte knyght" (745:26-27;x.73). Arthur's habit of going about as an "arraunte knyght" indicates his willingness to forgo monarchical dignity, which results in the same loss of political power that we noticed earlier in *Yvain*. It is significant that Tristram's reproach to Palomides makes no reference to treason or *lèse-majesté*. Tristram is concerned instead with the potential for conflict that now exists between Arthur's party and his own, for as he tells the Saracen, "Wyte thou well hit woll turne to angir, for he that ye smote downe was kynge Arthure, and that other was the good knyght sir Launcelot" (745:10-12;x.73). Just as Lancelot felt compelled to avenge his lord and thus unhorsed Palomides, so Tristram felt it necessary to requite the fall of his man, although he forgoes this intention when he realises that the knight in question is Lancelot, whom he admires greatly. To some extent the conflict which Tristram fears is an extension of the athletic rivalry through which Round Table knights test themselves, either as individuals on their quests as Marhalt does when he defeats four knights "of Arthurs courte" (176:24-29;iv.26), or in teams during organised tournaments. Palomides' relationship to Tristram seems to be an athletic rather than a feudal one, for after he unhorses Arthur the Saracen's desire for "worshyp" leads him to compete by himself, causing Tristram to remark with some amusement that "Methynkyth he is wery of my company" (747:10-12;x.74). Nevertheless, these alignments suggest that Malory may not have been attempting to illustrate a

centralised monarchical governance, the goal attributed to him by more than one critic.

The young knight Gareth's battle with Ironside, the "rede Knyght of the rede Laundis", is described by Kennedy as "his most explicitly judicial act", and she argues that "no other knight enacts so fully the role of a royal justice".[68] While it is true that Ironside has been a "tirraunte" and has murdered many knights while besieging Lyonesse. Gareth does not deal with him in the same manner as Marhalt, who forces the Duke of the South Marches to seek the "kynges grace". Once defeated, Ironside pleads, rather fecklessly, that all of his misdeeds have been done for the sake of a "lady fayre" who desired revenge against "sir Launcelot du Lake othir ellys sir Gawayne" (325:1-3;vii.17). Gareth forgives Ironside and sends him to court to seek pardon from those two knights, but he does not require him to swear loyalty to Arthur. Instead, Gareth accepts the advice of Ironside's retainers, who advise the young knight that "hit were fayrer of hym to take omage and feauté and lat hym holde his londys of you than for to sle hym, for by his deth ye shall have none advauntage"(325:16-21;vii.18). In accepting Ironside as his man, Gareth's brief career is practically culminated, for he already enjoys the fealty of men he has previously defeated -- of the Green Knight and his thirty men, the Red Knight and his fifty men, and of Persaunte and his hundred men -- and will shortly win Lyonesse and her estates. While this sequence of successes illustrates the *Gareth*'s narrative

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[68] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 137-38.

structure of incremental repetition, it also establishes Gareth as a power to be reckoned with. On the advice of Lyonet, Gareth summons his new vassals to the tournament for Lyonesse, "and than shall ye be able to macche wyth kynge Arthure and his knyghtes" (342:27-28;vii.27). At his wedding all of these lords and more formally swear homage to Gareth, in the presence of King Arthur, who then accepts them to the Round Table and gives them lands (361-363;vii.36). Malory thus prevents Arthur from becoming completely irrelevant to the narrative, but he leaves us in no doubt that these new Round Table knights are Gareth's men first and the crown's second.

To summarise this discussion thus far, the inherently nostalgic and idealized nature of the chivalric vision, and the bad press which the fifteenth century has consistently received, may well lead us to exaggerate the importance of chivalry in the *Morte Darthur* as a political system. The success of the hero in *The Tale of Gareth* results in the creation of the very social arrangement, the private retinue, which was the building block of bastard feudalism and which has so often been identified as the scourge of the period. Malory gives no indication of alarm or disapproval while narrating this tale, which is not surprising considering that the offices Gareth assigns to his men -- chamberlain, butler, sewer, and carver -- whose duties are so elaborately spelled out in the myriad courtesy manuals of the period, would have been familiar to any reader acquainted with a noble household. Furthermore, Gareth's private army is not injurious to the commonweal, for as we have seen, Arthur is able to integrate it into his own governance and establish his own ties with his nephew's men.

Christine Carpenter has argued that these networks of retinues, or affinities as she and other historians call them, rather than being "inherently vicious", were a normal and respectable means of political organisation in late-medieval society. They gave security both to the magnates and to the lesser men who looked to them for good lordship, and also served the crown, which could draw on the strength of these affinities in times of need.[69] The affinity system may be said to be universal in the world of the *Morte Darthur*, for as Carpenter notes, Arthur's Round Table is also structured in a very "modern" fashion, composed of direct retainers and household officers such as Kay the Seneschal, relatives and their own retinues such as the nephews Gawain and Gareth, and feudal tenants such as Bors and Lancelot, who are given their father's lands "so that ye ... to the Rounde Table make your repeyre".[70]

The political organisation of society in the *Morte*, in so far as we may speak of such a thing,[71] thus bears some resemblance to the feudalism practised in the fifteenth century, but it is doubtful that this apparent mimesis was Malory's primary concern. As we have seen, Gareth exists in a world of fairy tale, where amazing success is practically a matter of course, and in the *Tristram* even Arthur seems infected by that tale's atmosphere of *aventure*, forgoing his regal majesty to wander as "a poure arraunte knyght". Malory consistently

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[69] Christine Carpenter, "Political Society in Warwickshire", 58-66.

[70] *Ibid.*, 70n.1.

[71] See A.B. Ferguson, "The Revival of the Fifteenth Century", 22.

preferred the individual-centred romance of *cortoisie*, and it might well be argued that, had his interest inclined towards presenting a strong and divinely sanctioned monarch with a clearly defined judicial apparatus, he would have turned to other sources. In *Havelok*, for example, the exiled hero's royalty is announced by an angel (1247-74), and there are convincing accounts of legal institutions, particularly of the order sternly kept by Birkabeyn (27-96) and later by his steward Godrich (263-73), and of formal oathswearing (2013-16).[72] While trial by combat is, as Kennedy notes, a prominent occurrence in the *Morte Darthur* and its only portrayal of a judicial process, it may well have seemed anachronistic to contemporaries. Many of the gentry were obliged by their rank to serve in a legal system that was considerably more complicated, to the point that William Worcester complained, in the now-familiar rhetorical lament for bygone chivalry, that such duties had supplanted the traditional role of knighthood:

> But now of late daies, the grettir pite is, many one that ben
> descendid of noble bloode and borne to armes, as knightis
> sonnes, esquirers, and of othir gentille bloode, set hem silfe
> to singuler practick, straunge facultees from that fet, as to
> lerne the practique of law or custom of londe, or of civile
> matier, and so wastyn gretlie theire tyme in suche nedelesse
> besinesse, as to occupie courtis holding, to kepe and bere
> out a proude contenaunce at sessions and shiris holding, also
> there to embrace and rule among youre pore and simple
> comyns of bestialle contenaunce that lust to lyve in rest.[73]

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[72] W.W. Skeat, ed., *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, Early English Text Society e.s. no. 4 (London: Kegan Paul, 1868).

[73] J.G. Nichols, ed., *The Boke of Noblesse* (1860; New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), 77.

Clearly Worcester, like other chivalric enthusiasts, found life to be considerably more complex than his ideal allowed for, and so the pamphleteers' work tends to display a frustration which is foreign to the romances. Malory, in contrast, was not interested in addressing the burdens of knights' judicial obligations, and his characters enjoy a vigour and freedom which Worcester, who saw England losing her gains in France because of bureaucratic obligations, "sensualite of lustis" and "lak of finaunce", could only envy.[74]

Malory and the Tournament: Armchair Chivalry

If chivalry in the *Morte* is not presented, either approvingly or critically, as a political or judicial system *per se*, wh*/*t did it represent to contemporary readers? Larry Benson has suggested that the chivalric events depicted by Malory, specifically the many tournaments, are faithful representations of fifteenth-century aristocratic culture, a culture that was, in its outward manifestations, largely the enactment of literary events. In Malory's day, writes Benson, "for the first time in Western civilisation, noble gentleman actually jousted to gain honour and please their ladies ... and attempted to realise in their

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[74] *Ibid.*, 33. Worcester includes Arthur among the "many worthi kinges of this roiaume", including William the Conqueror, Edward I, and Henry V, whom English knights should emulate (9-10) instead of being sheriffs and J.P.s. We might also note that Worcester exhorts Edward IV, to whom his work is nominally addressed, to read about his martial predecessors in "many histories, cronicles, and writinges" (20), which reinforces suspicions that late-medieval chivalry existed primarily in the written page.

own lives the ideals of romance chivalry".[75] In fact, the intertwining of romance and real life characterised noble culture for centuries prior to the 1400s. Storytellers writing or composing for an aristocratic audience naturally sought to glamorise the lives of their patrons in fiction, while that audience strove in turn to emulate this imagined glory, as is well illustrated in the history of the tournament. Originally a martial exercise which, like the hunt, allowed the nobility to hone their professional skills as cavalrymen, the tournament evolved from practical exercise into pageantry and theatre. The thirteenth-century tournaments with Arthurian themes, organised by enthusiasts such as Ulrich von Lichstenstein and England's Edward I, show that this process was well under way long before Malory's time.[76]

The jousts witnessed by Sir John Paston at Bruges in 1468 suggest the degree of artificiality which distanced the late-medieval tournament from the rude scrums of earlier centuries. The Pas de l'Arbre d'Or, as it was known, was an enactment of the *Roman de Florimont*, a Burgundian prose romance from the Alexander cycle, and it "starred" the Bastard of Burgundy in the role of Florimont, Le Chevalier de l'Arbre d'Or.[77] As Florimont, he had his opponents dedicate their arms to his lady, the Lady of the Ile Celée, by hanging their

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[75] Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, 138.

[76] M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, 90-94.

[77] Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, 181. See also G.A. Lester, *Sir John Paston's "Grete Boke": A Descriptive Catalogue*, 118-22, and Gordon Kipling, *Triumph of Honour*, 119-20.

shields on a golden tree as a symbol of his love, a convention which the *Gareth's* Ironside honours in a macabre fashion by hanging his opponents themselves. This Burgundian event thus epitomized all the characteristics of the late medieval tournament – the literary inspiration, scenes and props, disguisings and the role-playing participants -- and such spectacles naturally entailed considerable costs and required the support of prosperous mercantile centres such as Bruges. One herald praised the city as "the one city among all the others of this world where one finds most easily everything necessary to make a great feast".[38]

While Benson and others are therefore correct to point to tournaments such as the Pas de l'Arbre d'Or as proof of chivalry's continuing vitality in the fifteenth century, we should not automatically conclude that Malory's lengthy descriptions of tournaments reflect anything of the rich Burgundian tradition. Spectacles such as this one, which required the patronage of royal and ducal courts, were by no means commonplace, and as they were often designed to further diplomatic ends, we cannot assume that Malory shared Sir John Paston's experience of one. Unless he had been a member of a royal embassy or part of a magnate's retinue overseas, and there is no record of this in the life-records of the authorial candidates, we must assume that he was familiar only with the less dramatic English tournament, and almost certainly as a non-participant.[39]

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[38] In Jennifer Goodman, *Malory and William Caxton's Prose Romances of 1485* (New York: Garland, 1987), 11.

[39] Sydney Anglo notes that, while English tournaments in the reign of Edward III featured participants disguised as the Seven Deadly Sins, or the Pope and his cardinals, the Burgundian quasi-allegorical tradition, with its pageant cars

Even by the fourteenth century the tournament had developed to the point at which it was extremely elitist in nature, even among the nobility. The "harneyse [gear] that longed unto jostenynge" which Malory mentions (864:14-15;xiii.6) had become so specialised and so expensive that, as Juliet Barker notes, "tourneying society became smaller and more select than it had been in the early days".[80] Local jousting fraternities, sponsored by noblemen such as Thomas Lord Berkeley or the Duke of Lancaster, may have given the gentry some opportunity to emulate the sport of the peerage,[81] but it is significant that the men most associated with the English tournament of the fifteenth century –Richard Beauchamp, the Earl of Warwick and Anthony Woodville, Lord Scales – were among the most powerful in the realm.

Malory's exclusion from the circle of court and nobility is in fact suggested by some notable differences between his tournaments and those actually practised in his day. Chaucer speaks of "thise subtile tregetoures" (FranklT 1140-61) who stage entertainments for noble audiences, but such figures and their art

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and masques, does not clearly appear in England until the tournaments of Henry VIII; *The Great Tournament Roll of Westminster: A Collotype Reproduction of the Manuscript* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1:24-27. See also Juliet Vale, *Edward III and Chivalry* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1982), 62-73, and Kipling, *Triumph of Honour*. 123-136. Regarding Malory's travel, the Warwickshire man may have soldiered in Gascony in 1442-43, but otherwise he and the other candidates appear to have spent their lives in England; Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 3.

[80] Juliet Barker, *The Tournament in England: 1100-1400* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1986), 187.

[81] Juliet Vale, *Edward III and Chivalry*, 60-63.

are conspicuously absent from Arthur's court. At the intervals in Malory's tournaments it is simply stated that the heralds recall the participants to lodgings and dinner ("blowe to lodgynge" is a common phrase), and these banquets are devoid of amusements, with the possible exception of Dinadan's joke with the fish (668:5-16;x.48) or his being forcibly dressed as a woman by Lancelot (669-70;x.49), events which are in any case found in the French. Those knights who do fight disguised do so for tactical advantage rather than for aesthetic reasons, although as Sydney Anglo sensibly points out, "[k]nights in romances could scarcely impersonate knights in other romances".[12] Still, stripped away of the ornamentation which accompanied contemporary tournaments, Malory's descriptions concentrate almost exclusively upon the fighting, reporting which knights were unhorsed and by whom, who did "grete dedis of armes", and who lost his temper and behaved poorly. These combats also differ from the practice of the day.

Like the elaborate challenges and responses, parades and processions into the lists which preceded fifteenth-century tournaments, the actual fighting could be quite formal in nature. Illustrations from the period show the tilt, a plank barrier of four to five feet in height, separating the jousters in order to regulate the horses' charge and decrease the likelihood of the lance piercing armour.[13]

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[12] Sydney Anglo, *The Great Tournament Roll of Westminster*, 1:23.

[13] Sydney Anglo, *Great Tournament Roll of Westminster*, 41-42. In a depiction of the jousts commemorating the coronation of Henry VIII (Anglo, vol.2, pl.16) the tilt obscures all but the helm of the king's opponent on the other side, presumably protecting the horse and lower body of the participants. Good

Malory makes no mention of the tilt or barrier, and his knights engage in what was known as "running at large", which in actual practise was less spectacular than encounters in the *Morte*. At their 1467 tournament in Smithfield, The Bastard of Burgundy and Anthony Woodville agreed to one course at large with sharpened spears, followed by thirty seven sword strokes and foot combat until one had fallen to the ground or been wounded.[84] While this program sounds dangerous, both spears missed their mark, and the sword combat ended anticlimactically when the Bastard's horse was accidentally killed. A drawing from the illustrated life of Richard Beauchamp shows a very formal-looking foot combat with pole arms, the contestants flanked by their squires with swords ready for the next round. A reader's later embellishment of blood spurting from the Earl's opponent gives an impression of ferocity, but in fact the contest was ended at the first injury, as it was at Smithfield in 1467.[85] As the personages involved in these contests were invariably important and, as at the Smithfield tournament, were engaged in diplomatic negotiations at the time, it was in no one's interests for anyone to be killed.

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depictions of the tilt are also found in the *Pageant of the Birth, Life and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick KG*, eds. Viscount Dillon and W.H. St. John Hope (London: Longmans, 1914) plates 5 and 29-31.

[84] Sydney Anglo, "Anglo-Burgundian Feats of Arms: Smithfield, June 1467," *Guildhall Miscellany* 2 (1965): 271-83.

[85] *Pageant of the Birth, Life and Death of Richard Beauchamp*, Plate 14. This drawing, like another showing a mounted tourney with blunted swords (Plate 22), gives a good impression of the highly formal nature of the late-medieval tournament. They contrast sharply with the same artist's violent depiction of the battle of Shrewsbury (Plate 7).

Malory's tournaments, therefore, are significantly different from the grand affairs of his day. Not only do they lack the customary courtly trappings and entertainments, but they are considerably more rough and tumble. Malory makes no mention of tilts or prearranged numbers of blows, and in general the actual combats are old fashioned melees, with no formal scoring system such as the one adopted by John Tiptoft, the Earl of Worcester.[86] A likely reason for these differences, as we have noted, is his social status as a member of the less powerful and less prominent gentry, which probably prevented him from direct participation. Like other gentlemen, however, Malory probably had second hand knowledge of tournaments. Sir John Paston, who actually did joust with Edward IV and other courtiers on at least one occasion, kept what we might today call a scrapbook, revealing his interest in challenges, rules of war, and results from famous tournaments of the past.[87] This manuscript, Lansdowne 225, suggests a

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[86] H. Nickel, "The Tournament" in *The Study of Chivalry*, eds. Howell Chickering and Thomas H. Seiler, 248-49. While success in Malory's tournaments is primarily measured by a knight's ability to unhorse his opponent, Tiptoft's ordinances award points for the breaking of lances (Anglo, *Great Tournament Roll* 1:41-42), suggesting again that the tournament of romance can afford to be more dangerous than the tournament of real life.

[87] For Sir John's account of this "torney", see Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1:236. The *Grete Boke*, as he calls this commonplace manuscript, includes an English translation of vegetius, accounts of courtly ceremonies, information on tournaments of the present and past, and several non-chivalric items. See G.A. Lester, *Sir John Paston's Grete Boke*. A similar "scrapbook" (Pierpont Morgan Library MS. M 775) was kept by the fifteenth-century knight Sir John Astley, KG, and contains several interesting illustrations of jousting at the tilt; see Viscount (Harold Arthur Lee) Dillon, "On a Manuscript Collection of Ordinances of Chivalry of the Fifteenth Century, Belonging to Lord Hastings," *Archaeologia* 57 (1900) 29-70. Astley also pursued a successful tournament career, but he was by no means typical of the average

tradition of vicarious interest in tournaments among the gentry, and it is likely that Malory, especially if he was the Warwickshire knight, would have been raised on stories of Richard Beauchamp's jousting achievements. Such a heritage would explain in part his willingness to translate the lengthy tournament accounts from the Prose *Tristan*, a willingness comparable to fans of modern sports. As Marc Bloch has noted, chivalric romance uses athletic terms – "big boned", "large of limb" -- to describe its heroes, and he suggests that the pleasure which its audience derived from accounts of jousting and combat "was the attitude of the sedentary enthusiast to reports of sporting events".[88] This suggestion seems extremely useful in understanding Malory's preoccupation with the tournament.

With its elegiac patriotism, *The Once and Future King* was very much a recasting of the Arthurian legend for its times, the desperate years of the Second World War, but T.H. White was also a perceptive reader of Malory. His fanciful comparison of jousting to cricket, while not in the least bit scholarly, captures much of the tireless energy and afficiando's devotion which Malory, whom White compared to "one of those old gentlemen ... at Lord's", brought to his depictions of the sport.

> It was like cricket in many ways. There was a scorer's pavilion at a tournament, with a real scorer inside it, who made marks on the parchment just like the mark for one run which is made by the cricket scorer today. ... It took a

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gentry; his substantial income of rents and annuities included £40 p.a. from the Crown to maintain "the sustenation of the Order of the Garter (Dillon 32).

[88] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 294.

frightfully long time - Sir Lancelot's innings frequently lasted all day, if he were battling against a good knight - and the movements had a feeling of slow-motion, because of the weight of armour. When the sword-play had begun, the combatants stood opposite each other in the green acre like batsman and bowler - except that they stood closer together - and perhaps Sir Gawaine would start off with an in-swinger, which Sir Lancelot would put away to leg with a beautiful leg-glide, and then Lancelot would reply with a yorker under Gawaine's guard - it was called "foining" - and all the people round the field would clap. King Arthur might turn to Guenever in the Pavilion, and remark that the great man's footwork was as lovely as ever.[89]

White's use of a specialised sporting terminology (leg-glide, in-swinger, yorker) which is alien to the non-devotee creates the same sense of exclusion which modern readers might acknowledge when working their way through yet another of the *Morte*'s tournament and battle descriptions, with its use of archaic terms such as "foyning" and "traversyng". Malory's choice of adjectives to describe Gareth and Ironside, exhausted and winded during their combat -- "they stoode waggynge, stagerynge, pantynge, blowynge" -- like his mention that Lancelot was "bettir brethid" than Tristram (415:31-33;viii.26), have a technical and authentic quality which suggests an old soldier's experience and habits of evaluation. Like Malory the *Morte*'s characters share his terminology and enthusiasm for jousts. Tristram, for instance, spends an evening at the castle of an "olde knyght" talking shop and discussing the form of various Round Table knights (556-57;ix.43), and after close of play at Lonezep spectators and participants gather to talk "of many thynges and of all the hole joustes" (757:21-22;x.78).

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[89] T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (Glasgow: William Collins, Fontana, 1958) 314.

This quality of authenticity distinguishes the work from the prefunctory combats of the metrical romances on the one hand, and from the more self-consciously literary romances of writers such as Chrétien and Chaucer. In comparison to Malory's style, Chaucer's description of Palamon and Arcite in *The Knight's Tale*, who "Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood" (*KnT* 1660), is revealed for what it is, as the playful invocation of a romance convention. The ludicrousness of the cousins' combat, a duel fought for the sake of a lady oblivious to the duellists' existence, is heightened because we know that their injuries are not so life-threatening that the narrator does not have time to describe the approach of Theseus, as well as give a short dissertation on destiny. His willingness to cut away from their combat does not however disguise an underlying seriousness, for given the unmistakable Boethian echoes of the cousins' initial captivity and their long laments, the three animal similes in as many lines (1656-58) suggest the degree to which cupidity has undermined their reason. The cousins' first combat thus has a thematic point as well as being a literary joke, and while the tournament which Theseus substitutes for their private duel is as elaborate and lengthy as anything found in Malory, its *descriptio* is crafted for a very particular end. Chaucer's vivid portrayal of the assembling retinues, the last-minute preparations of blacksmiths, the speculation of the crowds, the careful regulations of Theseus and "al his busy cure" is made pointless by the startling intervention of Saturn and the death of the victor, Arcite. While the Duke attempts a political and philosophical salvage job in his "Firste movere" speech, it is the haunting words of his father, Egeus, which

remain with the reader.

> "This world nys but thurghfare ful of wo,
> And we been pylgrymes, passynge to and fro.
> Deethe is an ende of every worldly soore."
> 		(*KnT* 2843-49)

The entire tournament may thus be read as testimony to "this worldes transmutacioun" and, like the heralds who continuously call upon "gentil lady Fame" in her palace (*HF* 3.1308-40), Chaucer's handling of this contest suggests a sceptical if not openly critical opinion of the chivalric ethos.

Malory of course did not share Chaucer's Boethian sophistication, and his guileless vision seems aptly captured by T.H. White's depiction of chivalry as sport. His description of the tournament suggested by Gareth to determine Lyonesse's husband, so that "what knyght that prevyth hym beste, he shall welde you and all your lande" (341:21-22;vii.27), may serve as a case in point. Malory describes its proclamation in all parts of the kingdom, and carefully lists its participants in the device of the rhetorical "roll-call" device to which he is partial, naming Arthur's knights and those who decide to fight against them. Like Chaucer he describes the preparations, although he employs his typical superlative laconism ("grete aray", "plenté to be had for gold and sylver" 341:31-344:6;vii.28) rather than the poet's cinematic portrayal of the preparations. After the heralds "blow to the felde" Malory describes the proceedings as a series of jousts between individuals or pairs, with the heralds acting as scorekeepers, noting "who bare hym beste, and their namys" (347:18-19;vii.29). During the jousts and later, when "there was drawynge of swerdys, and than ... began a sore

turnemente" (349:9-10;vii.30) Gareth performs notably, using Lyonesse's magic ring to keep his identity unknown, although later he inexplicably forgets it and rides off when his identity is discovered, even though it is widely acknowledged that he has won the contest. A series of adventures follows, in which Gareth defeats a series of petty tyrants and is saved from a near-fatal duel with his brother Gawain by Lyonesse's resourceful sister. The wedding that should have followed the tournament, which was organised to that end, thus occurs in a seemingly ad-hoc fashion, reflecting the curiously patchwork quality that numerous critics have noted in the *Gareth*. The investment of narratorial energies in this lengthy description of the tournament does little except to strengthen Gareth's already impressive credentials to be the husband of Lyonesse, and unlike the tournament in *The Knight's Tale* one is hard pressed to demonstrate its thematic importance. It does however reveal an enthusiasm and a willingness to narrate such scenes, almost for the pleasure of narration alone.

It seems clear, then, that Malory was either unwilling or unable to use the grand tournaments of his day as a model for his own literary tournaments. All of his tournaments are in fact found in his sources, although there can be no denying the enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment with which they are handled and often elaborated. In my opinion, however, the prominence of jousting and recreational combat in the *Morte Darthur* may be explained by reasons greater than merely authorial self-gratification. While these descriptions are in some ways the fictional equivalent of the "clippings" preserved in Sir John Paston's *Grete Boke*, they go beyond the scrapbook in significance and play an important

part in the *Morte*'s instruction to its readers. Sport has always played a role in defining societies' moral and civic identities. As we have seen, chivalry in its literary manifestations was primarily concerned with self-improvement, and Malory's tournaments have as much to do with proper behaviour as they do with martial skills. In the lengthy tournaments of Book V Malory presents a number of knights -- Darras, Tristram, Dinadan, Lamerok, and Lancelot -- who are willing to forgive old injuries, who resist the "unkyghtly" impulses of envy and revenge, and who exemplify the moral intitiative, which Malory calls "jantilnes", that contains the emotions of the tournament and the quest for "worshyp".

In conclusion, it is important to realise that Malory does not envision chivalry as an institution, but rather as a moral code. He does not appear to have been greatly interested in the ceremonies of dubbing or the formal duties of knighthood, and offers instead, particularly in his tournament descriptions, a heartfelt (if somewhat abstract) model of knightly conduct. Because so many previous discussions of Malory and chivalry have been unduly influenced by views of the late Middle Ages as a period of chivalric decline, they have presented the *Morte Darthur* as a prescriptive text, as either a social critique or as a call for reform. This emphasis is, in my opinion, mistaken. Malory undoubtedly believed that his work would improve his readers, as did Caxton, although the latter drew, as we have seen, on a moral *topos* which is as old as chivalry itself. The locations of Caxton and Malory in society, however, were fundamentally different. Malory was not in a position to address national concerns, and such an address was not his primary concern. He assumed, almost unconsciously, that

his audience was a gentle one, but as the second chapter has shown, gentle society in fifteenth-century England was extremely diverse. Not all gentlemen could afford to participate in the honours and obligations of knighthood, nor could they participate in the elitist sport which the tournament had become. They were, however, all in agreement as to their gentility. The value of "jantilnes" which Malory's tournaments illustrate had the appeal of accessibility, for a moral definition of the self is in some ways easier to maintain, at least in one's own eyes, than are social definitions determined extrinsically by power and privilege. The value of "jantilness" was essential to the gentry's defining itself as a group, and for the gentry, like the many poor knights in the *Morte* who find their way to Arthur's court, being recognised as "jantyl" was the essence of chivalry in the fifteenth century.

Chapter Four
"Poure knyghtes" and Fair Unknowns:
The Hero as Gentleman

I myght haue said he shold go hauke & honte
For that shold be a gentilmans game
To swich disportes gentil folkes be wont.
    Caxton's *Book of Cortayse*

Alle vertues arne closide yn curteyse
And alle vices yn vylonye.
    The Little Children's Little Book

Malorian Heroism

In his book on the *Morte Darthur*, Mark Lambert offers the valuable

comment that while knights in the French sources such as the *Vulgate Lancelot*

carefully tend to their horses and bridles before a battle, such mundane

preparations are beneath Malory's heroes:

> The Malorian knight does nothing of the kind, and we feel
> that he *should not* do anything of the kind, that for Malory
> such actions would be bathetic. When most truly himself, a
> Malorian hero may wonder whether his equipment will
> reveal his identity, but not whether that equipment is in
> good working order. Malorian combats are won by the
> better knight, and Malory usually does not think of the
> better knight as the better craftsman.[1]

The better knight wins quite simply because he is the better knight, and we know

he is the better knight because we are told so unequivocally, an aspect of the

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[1] Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision*, 90.

work's use of consistent moral and ethical standards which Lambert describes as its "qualitative vision". In attempting to define the nature of this "qualitative vision" further, this chapter explores Malory's extensive use of adjectives, such as "jantyl", which simultaneously convey rectitude and social standing, and which often posit a link between the two. To be sure, the moral imperatives central to the work, and articulated most fully in the Pentecost oath, still stem from knighthood, but knighthood in the *Morte Darthur* is never an entirely stable indicator of worth. Arthur's knights achieve mixed results in their quests, particularly before the institution of the oath, and often the most successful are the young upstarts who come to court with a hidden or non-extant noble pedigree. Inevitably such Fair Unknowns owe their success to their "jantyl" and "curteys" natures, and the consistent use of these important and value-laden terms, or keywords, to explain their successes lends Malory's work much of its unity. These keywords are also associated with mature exemplars of knightly conduct such as Lancelot, Tristram, and Lamerok, but in his frequent choice of the *bel inconnu* narrative, and through his alterations and additions to his French sources, Malory links gentility to social mobility in a more coherent and fuller manner than in any of the English romances examined in Chapter Two.

The most famous of Malory's *enfance* narratives, *The Tale of Sir Gareth*, is wholly dedicated to the testing of the Fair Unknown's "courtesy" and "jantylness", and to the definition of what it is that makes a "jantylman". Scholars who have used chivalry as their starting points have tended to approach the *Gareth* as a work about the attainment of knighthood, noting the hero's

"sponsorship" by Lancelot, who makes him a knight, and seeing his subsequent

adventures as illustrative of proper judicial and military conduct. In Gareth's

mind, however, his identity is linked to something much more personal than the

abstraction of knighthood:

> And therefore all the mysseyyng that ye mysseyde me in my
> batayle furthered me much and caused me to thynke to shew
> and preve myselffe at the ende what I was, for peraventure,
> thoughe hit lyst me to be fedde in kynge Arthures courte, I
> myght have had mete in other placis, but I ded hit for to
> preve my frendys, and that shall be knowyn another day
> whether that I be a jantyllman borne or none; for I latte yow
> wete, fayre damesell, I have done you jantyllmannys servyse,
> and peraventure bettir servyse yet woll I do or I departe
> frome you.
>   (313:3-12;vii.11)

This torrent of words takes the reader by surprise, for Gareth has hitherto

patiently and quietly suffered the abuse of Lyonet, and as he comes to the point

we notice that an interesting elision has occurred, for whereas at first he refers

to himself as a knight (312:35), he ends by calling himself, emphatically, a

gentleman. Moreover, the prominent phrase "jantyllmannys servyse", suggesting

a social status with an inherent obligation of good conduct, takes us from the

vague landscape of Gareth's adventures into the fluid world of contemporary

English society, with its anxious attempts to redefine its hierarchies according to

the new code of gentility. As we have seen, with the importance of knighthood

as a military and administrative position in decline, the title of gentleman

increasingly came to identify those gentry and would-be gentry as holding a rank

between the lords and the commons, and closer to the former than to the latter.

In this passage, Gareth's use of the word "servyse" is consistent with earlier uses

of the word to mean the obligations which Arthur's knights owe to those around them, in keeping with the ideals of the Pentecost Oath. However, in earlier books such as Book IV, which can be read as a systematic attempt to illustrate the ideals of the Oath in action, "servyse" is explicitly linked to the office of knighthood. For example, after fighting for King Bagdemagus to repay his daughter, who released him from Morgan and the other queens, Lancelot tells "is deliverer that "Yf that ye have nede ony tyme of my servyse, I pray you let me have knowlecche, and I shall nat fayle you, as I am trewe knyght" (264:3-5;vi.7), and later another damsel will call on him for aid "of your knyghthode" (279:15-16;vi.14). Gareth's harnessing of this traditional chivalric term to the identity of gentleman, an identity which in the fifteenth century was becoming clearly localised in the social spectrum, is a notable break from the Book III's emphasis upon knighthood, and is an important aspect of the realism for which Malory's work has often been noted. It is even more important when one considers its occurrence in the most fully developed of several "rags to riches" narratives in the *Morte Darthur*.

This chapter argues that the prominence of the Fair Unknown narrative within the larger work is closely linked with Malory's use of terms or keywords, such as "courtesy" and "gentleness", which express the moral and ethical values he attempts to illustrate in the adventures of Arthur's knights. However, as the above example from the *Gareth* suggests, the vague institution of knight-errantry as a vehicle for the dispensation of justice and charity, a convention of romance since Chrétien's *Yvain*, is not always sufficient to supply motivation to these

knights. The values of courtesy and gentleness also have a social dimension, and the prominence of one such as Gareth, who practices these values because he is a gentleman, would not have gone unnoticed by readers to whom, in the nuances of the period, the word gentleman would have had a precise and immediate relevance. In my second chapter I argued that the upwardly mobile "gentleman hero" of the English romances appeared at a time when literacy and self-advancement were, as many historians have noted, increasingly the properties of the lesser and would-be nobility such as the Pastons. The network of keywords which signifies true worthiness in Malory frequently coalesces around figures typical of the "gentleman hero", and the "rags to riches" success of these Fair Unknowns demonstrates that the values of gentleness and courtesy are accessible ones because they are not exclusively the property of great lords. In demonstrating that the successful practising of these values leads to self-advancement by making the Fair Unknown acceptable and often even superior to those already in power, this narrative motif undermines the traditional caste structure of medieval society, but denies its own subversive effect by invoking the near-mystical power of these values as part of the ideological realm of the "imaginary". Malory's *Morte Darthur* is thus typical of romance's enduring power to meet our aspirations through heroes whom, as Frye notes, enjoy a capacity of action superior to ourselves, and yet it has a particular relationship with the social aspirations of people like its author, members of the late-medieval English gentry, and this relationship has been overlooked by the traditional view of Malory as a retrospective and conservative spectator of his age. While there is

a profound conservatism in the way that Malory allies them with established practitioners of gentleness such as Lancelot and Tristram, and in Malory's fearful portrayal of unchecked self-advancement as chaotic and destructive, these keyword values are still memorably demonstrated by the lesser figures who play an unexpectedly prominent role in the *Morte Darthur*. It will be argued that by making courtesy and gentleness central to a relatively democratic understanding of chivalric virtue, according to which even humble knights and "fair unknowns" may prove themselves as gentlemen, Malory's text displays a high degree of sympathy with the social aspirations of the English gentry.

Malorian Keywords and Their Social Context

As the last chapter has argued, while the word "chivalry" may give one some conception of what Malory's *Morte Darthur* is about, chivalry as a word evades concise definition and has an institutional connotation which is actually inappropriate to the work's focus upon individual ethics. While it is most often used by critics to describe the spirit of Malory's work, it is a surprise to note that chivalry as a word does not figure prominently in his conceptual vocabulary, and seldom has the dramatic effect of Chaucer's invocation in the Tarquin passage of *Legend of Good Women* (1819-23). A survey of Tomomi Kato's invaluable concordance[2] reveals that chivalry, in all its variant spellings, occurs only fifteen

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[2] Tomomi Kato, ed., *A Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1974).

times in the entire *Morte Darthur*. In those tales which we might casually think of as being exemplars of chivalric romance, the frequency is low or non-existent; chivalry occurs only three times in *Tristram*, and not at all in Arthur and Books II and VII. The most occurrences in any one tale, six, are anglicisations of *chevaillierie* from the *Queste del Saint Graal*, in which the word has a crucial thematic importance. In the French work, earthly chivalry, representing the worldly pride and vainglory of the Round Table, is weighed against heavenly chivalry, the austere Christianity represented by Galahad, and is found wanting. The former is embodied in Lancelot's eagerness to help the black side in the symbolic tournament: "Than thought sir Launcelot for to helpe there the wayker party in incresyng of his shevalry" (931:25;xv.5). Here "shevalry" has the sense of renown or reputation, which Malory consistently expresses elsewhere as "worshyp", but which here represents the worldly compulsions that prevent Lancelot from fully attaining the Grail.

Of the fifteen occurrences, six share the *Middle English Dictionary*'s second definition of chivalry as the nobility, a class or estate, and four of this group use the formulaic phrase "floure of chevalry", which could be translated as "best among knighthood". Another five occurrences, couched in phrases such as "grete myght of chevalry" or "grete chevalry", partakes of *MED*'s fourth definition of prowess or skill at arms. The opening of *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot*, for example, invokes this meaning in telling of Lancelot's love for the queen: "and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry" (253:18-19;vi.1). The sense of chivalry we might expect to find

most frequently in Malory, that of *MED*'s fifth definition of an ethical code, occurs only four times in the whole of the *Morte Darthur*, and of the four instances only one occurrence is found outside of the Book VI. This one instance is found in the story of Alexander the Orphan, from Book V, when the widow Anglydes instructs her son to avenge his father, felonously killed by King Mark:

> "A, my fayre swete sonne, I charge the uppon my blyssynge
> and of the hyghe Order of Chevalry that thou takyste here
> this day, to take hede what I shall sey and charge the
> wythall".
>
> (636:24-27;x.34)

In her next breath Angfydes also charges Alysaundir by "the hyghe Order of Knyghthode" (637:4;x.35), a phrase Malory uses extensively throughout the *Morte*, whereas "Order of Shevalry" only occurs one other time (914:33;xiv.7). It is clear, then, that Malory did not habitually use the word chivalry, and that when he did it was usually to signify "knights" or "prowess". Use of the concordance thus offers the helpful caution that chivalry, a word replete with meaning for us, would not have had as significant a place in Malory's own lexicon. The modern critic or teacher who describes the ideals of Arthur's court or the conduct of a certain knight as chivalrous might thus be surprised to learn that Malory does not once use the adjectival form of chivalry, despite examples in his source material which were there for the borrowing.[3]

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[3] "Chivalrous" occurs often in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the source for Malory's Book II, usually with the sense of fierce or warlike:

"And there es sir Childrike a cheftayne holdyn,

In Malory the knightly virtues, values which we group together as "chivalric", are semantically diffused throughout a number of other terms – "knyghtly", "noble", "worthy", "good", "curteys" and "jantyl" – which I shall refer to below as "keywords". Admittedly the extensive use of such adjectives, often in the superlative form, and of the formulas which they frequently constitute ("noble knyght", "jantyl knyght", "worthyest knyghtes of the worlde", "the most noble king that made me knight") are a common feature of medieval romance, and it might be argued that they may contain no great significance apart from helping to create the exemplary and hyperbolic world which is characteristic of the genre. However, in my examination of their frequency and patterns of occurrence in the *Morte Darthur*, I have been led to agree with those scholars who have commented upon the thematic importance of such adverbial and adjectival layering. In her study of early English prose styles, Janel Mueller finds that while Malory's prose is given to pleonasm and to repetitive syntax through overwhelming use of the conjunction "and", it nevertheless "regularly conduces to rhythmical effects that evoke the formulaic character of life lived according to the chivalric code."[4] As an example of such "rhythmical effects" Mueller offers Ector's famous threnody for Lancelot, in which apparently conflicting phrases such as "curteyst knyght that ever bare shelde" and "sternest knyght that ever put spere in the reeste" are not, she argues, a confused and inconsistent pleonasm,

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[4] Janel Mueller, *The Native Tongue and the Word: Developments in English Prose Style, 1380-1580* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 121-23.

but rather an effective expression of the sometimes contradictory social and military codes of chivalry. Mark Lambert also cites this passage and its exclusive reliance upon superlatives -- "curtest", "truest" (used twice), "kyndest", "godelyest", "mekest", "jentyllest", "sternest" – which he describes as "evaluative modifiers", a collection of adjectives which come together to form "the solemn vocabulary of knightliness".[5] Such terms form a "qualitative vision" which narrator and characters share, a common understanding of identity which, like Ector's threnody, is profoundly moral and unambiguous and carries the weight of authorial approval:

> It is difficult to imagine a reading of *Le Morte Darthur* in which this passage would not be thematically central. Lancelot matters, finally, not because he is interesting in himself, or nice, or good, or complex, but because he is the *best* of earthly knights. And in Malory supremacy is fact, not opinion.[6]

Certainly Lancelot is the best of earthly knights, but it is worth noting that Malory's "evaluative modifiers" do not arise solely from martial abilities; Lancelot is remembered primarily for his individual disposition towards virtue, as expressed in the words "curtest", "truest", "kyndest", and "jentyllest".

These adjectives, therefore, represent the qualities which lie at the heart of knighthood in the work, a point which is worth making as Malory seldom

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[5] Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur*, 30-31. While he does not discuss it in similar detail, P.J.C. Field also speaks of Malory's "emphatic" style and his use of "moral and emotive" descriptions; *Romance and Chronicle*, 86.

[6] Mark Lambert, *Style and Vision*, 27-28.

describes knighthood elsewhere with the same degree of precision. Kato's *Concordance* reveals that the phrase "Order of Knyghthode", sometimes preceded by the adjective "hyghe", is used twenty-five times by Malory. Of these occurrences, just over one third (eight) have a clearly defined ethical sense, as in Lancelot's famous outburst upon learning of Perys' misdeeds (269:24;vi.10), or in the remark of Pelleas upon discovering Gawain sleeping with the lady whom he loves, and whom Gawain had promised to woo for him: "Though thys knyght be never so false, I woll never sle hym slepynge, for I woll never destroy the hyghe Ordir of Knyghthode" (170:23-25;iv.23). As in Lancelot's angry denunciation of Perys, there is the clear expectation that a true knight will never attack an opponent unawares and never (as Gawain has done) betray a friend, nor will he attack women. The remaining two-thirds of the invocations of the "Order of Knyghthode" occur when a character is dubbed a knight, as Lancelot dubs Gareth (299:32;vii.5), or in formulaic requests for a strange knight to reveal his identity. Percival, for example, requires Lancelot, who has assumed the title of "Le Shyvalere Mafete" for an offence to Guenevere, "uppon the hyghe Order of Knyghthode to telle me youre trewe name" (829:27-29;xii.8). These occurrences also convey a sense of the professional protocol appropriate to the institution of knighthood, but are conventional in nature and lack the ethical immediacy of the usages by Lancelot and Pelleas, cited above.

Malory employs the adverb "knyghtly" to further demonstrate his conception of the actions appropriate to knighthood, although he mostly confines its application to those actions which are militarily proper or praiseworthy. Of

the forty-one occurrences listed by Kato, thirty-one have a clearly martial sense, as in the account of Lancelot's attack on the party of knights attempting to trap him in Guenevere's bedchamber: "and myghtily and knyghtly he strode in amonge them" (11:68:18;xx.4).[7] Similarly, Gareth tells Lyonesse that he will defeat her unwelcome suitor, the Red Knight, and "wynne worshyp worshypfully othir die knyghtly in the felde" (321:6-8;vi.15). A similar adverbial phrase, "as a knight", has the same sense of martial approval.[8] Moving beyond those usages which might simply be translated as "bravely", we note a more limited application of the word to evoke what could be called the professional ethics of knighthood. A good example is found when Palomides praises Lancelot for acting "knyghtly and curteysly" when he did not seek revenge for Palomides' "unjantyll" action of killing his horse during a tournament (742:14-22;x.72). Only seven usages[9] have this sense of good professional conduct. They range from gentleness and mercy, such as Arthur showing a "knyghtly countenaunce" to the worried citizens of Metz when he graciously accepts their surrender (241:22-23;v.12), to mere table

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[7] In attempting to determine these categories, a process which is not entirely scientific, my method was to ask if "knyghtly" could be translated as "bravely" or, less satisfactorily, "properly", "as a knight should".

[8] Gareth, for example, defends himself without a shield against twenty men "as a knyght" (354:32;vii.32).

[9] This category was determined by the appropriateness of translating "knyghtly" as "mercifully" or "graciously".
  The remaining three occurrences are found in Book VI, (886:21; 886:26; 891;31), and form a third category with a unique spiritual sense, reflecting the French source's allegorical distinction between "knyghtly dedys in goddys workys" and "worldly workis".

manners, as in Gareth's demonstrating his nobility and maturity by eating his meat "full knyghtly" (354:2-3;vii.32). Clearly "knyghtly" actions are in all cases appropriate to the code of the "Ordre of Knyghthode", but Malory most often applied the adverb in relation to the knight's military function. While we see in the second, smaller category some indication of the knight as someone skilled in courtesy and graciousness, that aspect of the *Morte*'s ethos is generally evoked with other keywords.

The adjectives "worthy" and "worshipful", like the adverb "knyghtly", are also employed most frequently in a martial sense. Like its parent word "worshyp", it is determined by the strictly physical virtue of prowess, and reflects one's standing in the Round Table as a jousting fraternity. One acquires "worshyp", and is considered "worthy", by defeating worshipful opponents and, to borrow again from T.H. White's cricket analogy, by maintaining a high "battling" average. Palomides explains this system on the eve of the Lonezep tournament, when he declares that "the more men of worship that they be, the more worshyp shall we wynne", a sentiment which his companion Tristram approves of as being "full knyghtly spokyn" (732:9-14;x.68). Members of the Round Table are familiar with the technical skill of their fellows as cavalrymen, and can be quite clinical in their assessments of one another; when Palomides sees Mordred's shield he describes its bearer as "none of the worthy knyghtes" (589:4-5;x.13).[10] That "worshyp" is distinct from virtue is demonstrated by Dinadan, who tells Lancelot that "though

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[10] This is a purely professional evaluation, and has nothing to do with Mordred's role as a villain and usurper, which is in the narrative future.

I be nat of worship myself, I love all tho that bene of worship" (618:1-3;x.27). This comment may represent Dinadan's modest evaluation of his own fighting skills, but as we have seen, others know him as "a good knyght and a jantyll" (605:10-12;x.20) and respect his admiration of virtue in others. Malory does make some attempt to associate "worshyp" with virtue, for Dinadan tells the heinous Mark that as a "murtherar" he cannot hope to achieve worship (585:1-5;x.11),[11] but it remains primarily a martial quality.

A "good" knight in Malory can either be virtuous or skilful, depending upon the context. While this adjective is used extensively (Kato lists over nine hundred occurrences), it is subject to so many applications that a precise definition of the adjective is problematic. Dinadan's description of Mark as "none of the good knyghtes" (584:29-30;x.11) would seem to be a condemnation of the King's character, although the report of Tristram unhorsing "four good knyghtes of Orkeney" (734:1-3;x.68) appears to mean nothing but "four skilled jousters", an evaluation which serves to heighten the stature of Tristram's accomplishment. Some usages do have a clear ethical sense. During one tournament the King With the Hundred Knights orders his men away from Lancelot out of admiration for his "coragye and curtesye", remarking that "for evermore a good knyght woll favoure another, and lyke woll draw to lyke" (527:3-7;ix.31). Use of the adjective to describe capabilities predominates,

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[11] Malory also uses "worshyp" to mean reputation, a standing in the community that is not necessarily dependent upon virtue. When her son Uwain prevent's Morgan le Fay from murdering her sleeping husband, she pleads with him to "save my worship and discover me nat!" (149:26-28;iv.13).

(527:3-7;ix.31). Use of the adjective to describe capabilities predominates, however; if he practices his riding a knight may also be a "good horseman" (466:13-15;ix.4), or if a good fighter may be "a passyng good man off his hondis" (158:35;iv.17). Further semantic diffusion results from application of the word to inanimate objects, including horses, food and drink, and towns. The related adjective "goodly" and its superlative form are used to describe quality, in things (speech, harping, appearance) as often as in people, and generally lacks an ethical dimension.

The adjective "noble" is especially important in Malory, as it signifies social standing as well as quality. As with the word good", its applications are wide-ranging and variable. Felicity Riddy has noted that while this word was often used in Middle English simply to mean "choice" or "fine", in the *Morte Darthur* "the term is never wholly separated from ideas of social status".[12] even when applied to things as well as to people. Rome as head of Christian cities (and as Arthur's greatest prize) is thus "that noble cité" (246:18;v.12), and the courage in battle by which La Cote Male Tayle proves his maturity is hailed by his opponent, Plenoryus, as "youre noble dedys of armys" (473:26;ix.8). Like the adjective "good", "noble" may sometimes carry an ethical or moral sense, for when Plenoryus breaks of the fight and tells La Cote that "I shall shew to you kyndenes and jantilnes all that I may" (473:27-28), Malory approvingly calls him "thys noble knyght sir Plenoryus" (473:29). However, extensive use (Kato cites

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[12] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 62.

adverbial forms) results in the same pattern of semantic diffusion noticed in Malory's use of "good". The Red Knight of the *Gareth* who hangs men from trees is nevertheless "a noble knyght of proues" (320:18;vii.15), and the two low-born killers of King Harmaunce are similarly "noble knyghtes of their hondys", as are their followers (717:24-26;x.62). In these instances, when the narrator's approbation is clearly withheld, "noble" simply indicates physical ability. As with "good", an ethical dimension is not universally present in Malory's use of "noble" as an adjective.

The same may be said of the nominal form, "noblesse", in all of its variant spellings ("noblenes", "noblenesse", "nobles"). While this word does not occur with the same frequency as those discussed above (Kato lists eighteen instances counting all variant spellings) it is an important word. Medieval culture understood nobility as an inner quality originating in lineage but transcending the mere accident of a fortunate birth, investing aristocratic heroes (in literature at least) with an aura of authority and virtue. Such was Malory's understanding, although its vagueness may be seen in Lancelot's regretful words at Guenevere's tomb: "whan I remembre of hir beaulté and of hir noblesse, that was bothe wyth hyr kyng and wyth hyr ... truly myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body" (1256:29-32;xxi.11). "Noblesse" here might be translated as "goodness" or "worthiness", and while the precision of such a rendering may be doubtful, the definition of "noblesse" as "valour, noble conduct", offered by G.L. Brook in the

Glossary of Vinaver's edition, is clearly inadequate in this instance.[13] Brook's definition does however apply in most other instances, as Malory was evidently most comfortable thinking of "noblesse" as an expressly military virtue. Lancelot, for example, fights with two brothers at one tournament "and helde them hote, that all men wondred of the nobles of sir Launcelot" (349:19-23;vii.30), and at another contest Tristram admires the "nobles" of Lancelot's retinue, who "had levyr dye than to avoyde the fylde" (526:16-19;ix.31). In such instances the martial meaning of "noblesse" is apparent, although in other cases the precise virtue or combination of virtue; which it designates is ambiguous. When Bors reproaches Guenevere for driving Lancelot away from court after one of their quarrels, he praises her lover for the irreplaceable combination of "his noblenes and curtesy, ... hys beaulté and hys jantylnes" (808:9-12;xi.9). As the three other virtues ("curtesy", "beauté" and "jantylnes") are all social rather than military, courtly rather than epic, Malory's "noblesse" here seems to extend to the realms of the lover and to the courtier as well as to the soldier. We thus note the same semantic looseness or diffusion[14] exhibited in other Malorian keywords, although its ethical sense is stable, as the word is never once used in connection with villainous or "unknyghtly" figures. Nobility in the Morte Darthur, as Riddy observes, thus refers:

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[13] *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3:1732.

[14] On three occasions Malory also uses "noblesse" in a third sense, to mean "pomp and splendour" or simply "happiness". For example, after Urry and Lavain are admitted to the Round Table, he tells us that "the lyved in all that courte wyth grete nobeles and joy longe tymes" (1153:30;xix.13).

to the complex of virtues appropriate to the fighting man of high birth: honour, loyalty, and that fineness, both of feeling and conduct, which includes courtesy, magnanimity and open handedness.[15]

To summarise this brief survey of what I have described as "keywords", we have seen that Malory establishes the moral and ethical imperatives of chivalry by employing a range of vocabulary, the meanings and applications of which are subject to some variation. Riddy is correct, I believe, in thinking of these terms as articulating a "complex of values" rooted in one overarching conception of the aristocratic nature. In choosing to focus her study upon Malory's use of the word "noble", which exhibits the same semantic and ethical variability as the other keywords noted above, Riddy does however overlook words which are fundamental to the Morte's articulation of chivalric morality, namely "gentleness" "courtesy", and their adjectival forms. The two words are not always synonymous in medieval literature. In his book on the Gawain-poet, Jonathon Nicholls has suggested that "gentilesse" in Middle English "retains much of its original sense of defining status in the hierarchy (as in the technical sense of 'gentleman'," and thus differs from M.E. 'cortayse', "which is less dependent on notions of rank for its transferred usages".[16] Malory however made no great distinction between these words, and frequently employed all forms of them in the same breath, as

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[15] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 63.

[16] Jonathon Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 1895), 8.

the formulaic requests discussed above suggest.[17] As we noted earlier of the work's many tournaments, which are as often moral arenas as they are martial ones, it is the standard of "jantilnes" and courteous conduct which is opposed to "unknyghtly" conduct. Malory employs these terms with an impressive deliberation, and while they invariably appear in conjunction with his other keywords, they alone consistently combine an ethical and social sense.

As we have seen, the unpleasant Red Knight who hangs men from trees is also a "noble knyght", although Lyonesse, the object of his unrequited love, tells Gareth that her suitor is "nother of curtesy, bounté, nother jantylnesse" (318:24-26;vii.14). The quality of "jantylnesse" is therefore firmly linked to virtuous action. Palomides condemns his killing of Lancelot's horse as an "unjantyll" action, but when the great knight forgives him he praises Lancelot's "curtesy, proues, and jantylnes" (742:14-16;x.72). While "jantylnes" in this instance is found adjacent to the martial value of "proues", the two are not dependent upon one another. Dinadan, who disclaims "worship" and who is by no means a tournament hero, is nevertheless a "jantyll" knight. Presumably he has earned this reputation through his strong moral discernment and his hatred for "all that were destroyers of good knyghtes" (614:25-31;x.25). In all of these

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[17] Out of eighteen occurrences listed by Kato for the adjective "curtayse" (all spellings), the adjective "jantyl" occurs in the same phrase in six instances, and is either linked by the conjunction "and", or otherwise may be considered synonymous. The adverb "curteysely", which occurs four times in Malory, is linked to the adverb "jantly" on three occasions. The nominal form "curteysey" occurs twenty-eight times (in all spellings), and is linked to "jantylnes" in eight of those instances.

instances the adjective "jantyl" and its nominal form, "jantylnesse", stand for a moral ideal quite distinct from physical ability, and are never subject to the same semantic diffusion which leads to terms such as "good" and "noble" occasionally being employed in an ethically neutral sense. As a measure of this stability, never once in his narration does Malory apply the adjective to a knight whose actions are injurious or ethically suspect. Tristram, Lamerok, Lancelot and Dinadan are all called "jantyl" knights, while the Red Knight, Breunys Saunze Pité, and Mellyagaunce are not. While he occasionally employs it in a very vague manner, to report for example that "there was m..che slaughtir of jantyll knyghtes" in the battle with Mordred at Dover, Malory consistently confers the adjective upon characters whom, we sense, have earned his approbation.

In dialogue, "jantyl" most often occurs in formulaic requests, as in the damsel's request to Balin to return the troublesome sword: "Now jantyl and curtayse knyght, geff me the swerde agayne" (64:4-5:ii.2). Use of the word "jantyl" in such requests invokes the traditional chivalric obligations of mercy, courtesy, and service to others, and the addressee can only refuse to his shame and sometimes, as in Balin's case, to his peril. Gawain's mercy is invoked in this manner by a defeated opponent who beseeches him, "as he was a jantyll knyght to save hys lyff" (106:12-14:iii.7), and he refuses, with the horrendous result that he accidentally kills the man's lady, for which he must answer to Guenevere's inquest of ladies.[18] The unchristened Palomides also does not fully understand

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[18] 108:25-109:3;iii.8. It is after this quest, in which Gawain and Pellinor achieve such miserable results, that the Pentecost oath is instituted to restrain

the idea of "jantylnesse", and is the subject of several angry lectures on the subject, as when he betrays Tristram at Lonezep out of jealousy for La Beal Isoud:

> "A, sir, are ye such a knyght? Ye have be named wronge!
> For ye have ben called ever a jantyll knyght, and as this day
> ye have shewed me grete unjantylnes, for ye had allmoste
> brought me to my dethe."
>
> (755:1-4;x.77)

Malory's conception of "jantylnesse" was evidently similar to "cortayse", for as the above examples suggest, the two terms and their adjectival forms often appear together. After their violent and lengthy battle, Lamerok regretfully tells Tristram that "for your curtesy and jantylnes I shewed you unkyndnesse, and that now me repentyth" (444:11-12;viii.38). The likely importance of these words to Malory's contemporaries can probably not be overestimated, as their ethical importance was inextricably bound up in their social significance.

Those French romances discussed in the first chapter as romances of *cortoisie*, and especially those of Chrétien de Troyes, articulated the values of aristocratic society -- gracious and leisured living, hospitality, and polite social intercourse -- in a manner that was independent of the epic's concern with the political and military values of feudalism. It has often and correctly been noted that the earlier Middle English romances did not incline much towards the courtly sphere, preferring instead, as with *Havelok* and *Arthour and Merlin*, to recount the slaughtering of countless Saracens and treacherous vassals.

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the selfish tendencies of knight-errantry.

Furthermore, these romances often cast the hero as the protector of his realm and people, unlike the individualistic orientation of the romance of *cortoisie*, of which the alliterative *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the best and most famous insular example. Courtesy in *Sir Gawain* is synonymous with the graceful and hospitable aristocratic life, as practised by the occupants of Bertilak's castle, although there is a particularly worldly and potentially dangerous aspect to the somewhat shallow "spcchez of specialté" favoured there and at Camelot. As Tolkien and Gordon note in their edition,[19] "cortaysye" is among Gawain's five social virtues (the others are "fraunchyse", "fela3shyp", "clannes" and "pité", 651-55) which are incompatible with the other groups of five represented on his shield, the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin (642-47). Courtesy may be the quality which distinguishes Gawain as the gallant and polished member of Arthur's court, but in the deadly games which he must play with Bertilak's chatelaine, games which almost prove disastrous to Mary's knight, courtesy yields to a higher imperative:

> He cared for his cortaysye, lest crabayn he were,
> And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne,
> And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t.
> (1773-75)

For this reason modern readers, and especially those of the exegetical school, may well dismiss "cortaysyc" as a social convention which is at best superficial, and at worst a polite veneer for the concupiscent appetite, and such a negative portrayal may indeed have been the aim of the *Gawain*-poet. In most cases,

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[19] J.R.R. Tolkien & E.V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 96.

however, "cortaysye" does not have the associations with courtly love which characterise the Middle English word's French original.

W.O. Evans has argued that the "cortaysye" which interests the lady of Hautdesert is in fact an "aberration" from its usual meaning, particularly in chivalric contexts, "of conscious virtue or state of mind, that is, some reference to a spirit which moves one to please and help".[20] As Evans notes, such usage ranges widely in degree and profundity. The hero of *Sir Amadace* embodies the mundane end of this range in his gracious returning of greetings:

> His curtasé foryete he noghte,
> He saylut him anon ryghte.
> (ll. 431-32)[21]

In *Pearl*, however, the *Gawain*-poet employs "cortaysye" in a startling different sense, as it used by the Pearl maiden to signify the theological virtue of charity:

> "Of courtaysye, as says Saynt Poule,
> Al arn we membres of Jesu Kryst;"
> (ll. 457-58)[22]

Although differing in profundity, both usages have nothing to do with courtly love and illustrate the standard Middle English meaning of courtesy as a gracious and benign regard for others, of which divine charity, Christ's "courtaysye", is the

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[20] W.O. Evans, "'Cortaysye' in Middle English," *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1967): 145.

[21] Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Six Middle English Romances*.

[22] A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson, eds., *Pearl, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: J.M. Dent, 1962).

supreme embodiment. Malory restricts his use of the term to entirely secular contexts, although he too understands courtesy as a gracious and benign regard for others.

Malory's laconic knights are not given much to "spechez of specialté"; they do not as a rule flirt with ladies, but will readily fight for them. Courtesy in the *Morte Darthur* can sometimes, as in the example from *Amadace*, be mere politeness or social convention. When invited by Tristram to lodge with him Gareth hesitates, "and wolde nat of his curtesy have gone into his castell" (705:34-36;x.60), apparently out of reluctance to inconvenience his would-be host. This usage, which might be translated as "good manners", is rare in Malory. A more substantial meaning, and one in keeping with the ideals of chivalry, involves generosity and particularly a willingness to give service or assistance. Isode's servant Brangwayne thus thanks Lancelot "of hys curtesy and grete laboure" (538:24-26;ix.36) for rescuing her from the villainous sir Breunys. Such generosity can have considerable dimensions. During the siege of Joyous Guard, the first in the civil wars which destroy Logres, Lancelot prevents his kinsman Bors from killing Arthur, even though, as Bors protests, his death would end the war. Lancelot remounts the king, and the experience moves Arthur profoundly:

> So whan kynge Arthur was on horsebak he loked on sir Launcelot; than the teerys braste oute of hys yen, thynkyng of the grete curtesy that was in sir Launcelot more than in ony other man.
> (1192:28-31;xx.13)

It is characteristic of Malory that courtesy is most often displayed on the battlefield or in the tournament, and seldom in the castle hall. We may think

it strange or incompatible that a knight can have a reputation as "the moste curtayse knyght in hys fyghtyng" (534:15-18;ix.35). In fact, such statements pave the way for Ector's famous threnody, with its apparently self-contradictory praise of Lancelot as the "curtest knyght that ever bare shelde" and "the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde" (1259:12-16; xxi.13). "Curtesy" thus plays the same function as does "jantilnes", in that it restrains the knights' desire for individual worship, and (ideally) prevents contests which are generally playful in nature from becoming deadly serious.[23] As military virtues the two terms are virtually synonymous, as we see in this apology of Marhaus to Gawain for fighting him on unequitable terms:

> "Gramercy," seyde sir Marhaus, "of your jentylnesse! Ye
> teche me curtesy, for hit is nat commendable one knyght to
> be on horsebacke and the other on foote."
> (160:33-35;iv.18)

As with "jantyl", the adjectival form of "curtesy" is often found in formulaic requests which appeal to the knight's traditional obligations of service. Arthur manages to combine both words in his desperate request to Bors to act as the queen's legal champion (1052:25-29;xviii.5), and the encumbered damsel similarly asks Balin as a "jantyll and curtayse knyght" to return her troublesome sword (64:4-5;ii.2). In all such formal requests the addressee's knighthood is invoked

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[23] See above pp. 22-23. That this battle between Tristram and Lamerok can be settled by the invocation of "jantilnes" is perhaps owing to the ludic spirit of Book V, the *Tristram*. In the final book, when combat is in deadly earnest, Lancelot's chivalry seems decidedly inappropriate. This is the opinion of his ally Bagdemagus, who reproaches Lancelot for allowing Arthur and Gawain to lay waste to France unmolested: "Sir, youre curtesy woll shende us all, and youre curtesy hath waked all thys sorow" (1211:31-32;xx.19).

("Fayre curteyse knyght", "A jantill knight"), although the adjective appeals
simultaneously to the gentility which will move the addressee to undertake the
request, and competes with the institutional obligations of knighthood. After
the sexual deception which results in the conception of Galahad is discovered,
Elaine of Corbenic begs Lancelot to pardon her on the grounds that "ye ar
comyn of kynges bloode" (795:31-33;xi.3). Lyonet, Gareth's guide en route to her
besieged sister, reports to Lyonesse that Gareth has endured all of her
abusiveness and thus proven his gentility to her satisfaction:

> "Truly, madam," seyde Lynet unto hir sistir, "well may he be
> a kyngys son, for he hath many good tacchis: for he is
> curtyese and mylde, and the most sufferynge man that ever
> I mette withall."
>
> (330:4-7;vii.20)

The shift of emphasis in this passage is not without importance, as it seems to
indicate that the traditional obligations associated with chivalry are becoming at
least partially detached from the vocation and office of knighthood, and are
becoming dependent instead upon the hero's lineage, gentility, and inner worth.
As with the earlier English romances, the regrouping of these qualities around
the individual is also seen in Malory, and is the necessary precondition for the
coming of the Fair Unknown to Arthur's court.

Poor Knights and Fair Unknowns

The social and ethical value of "gentleness" and its synonymn, "courtesy",
is not only exemplified by the great knights such as Lancelot and Tristram, but

is also demonstrated by the lesser figures who play an unexpectedly prominent role in the *Morte Darthur*. Noting that such figures are generally revealed to be of noble birth, A.T. Byles once argued that Malory shared the medieval contempt for democracy, and compared him unfavourably to Sir Gilbert Hay, the Scots translator of Ramon Lull, who held that knighthood is held in common by the poorest knight and an emperor.[24] Malory was of course anything but a democrat, but Byles' comparison overstates the case, and overlooks additions to Malory's more well-known French sources which demonstrate the influence of the English romance tradition and its interest in upward mobility which recommended the genre to its gentry readers. For example, one of the more interesting alterations to the French material in Book I is a long passage occasioned by Arthur's return to court after a series of adventures under the tutelage of Merlin:

> So they com unto Carlion, wherof hys knyghtes were passynge glad. And whan they herde of hys adventures, they mervayled that he wolde jouparde his person so alone. But all men of worship seyde hit was myrry to be under such a chyfftayne that wolde putte hys person in adventure as other poure knyghtis ded.
> (54:15-20;i.25)

The linkage of the two phrases "men of worshyp" and the unusual "poure knyghtes" creates a distinctly egalitarian point of view here, for not only is Arthur admired as a leader acceptable to lesser men, men accustomed to the brunt of

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[24] A.T. Byles, "Medieval Courtesy Books and the Prose Romance of Chivalry" in *Chivalry*, ed. Edgar Prestage (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1928), 183-206.

fighting and risk-taking, but such men may also be included in the honorific "men of worshyp". It is a surprising passage, as we tend to think of the Round Table as a seamless aristocracy whose only gradations are ones of "proues" and degrees of virtue. In fact, Malory shows us that very real distinctions of power and privilege exist even in Camelot, as they did in his own society. Reflecting the English nobility's division between peerage and gentry, the men summoned to London to discuss Uther's succession include "lordes of the reame" and "gentilmen of armes" (12:21-23;i.5), and the supremacy of the former group is profoundly threatened by the election of Arthur through the test of the sword. Disdaining such magical arrangements of succession, the "barons" and "lordes" protest that "it was grete shame unto them all and the reame to be overgovernyd with a boye of no hyghe blood borne" (15:22-25;i.6). Of course, Arthur's lineage as a son of Uther allows him to draw the sword and justifies his claim, but Malory nevertheless chooses to portray his hero as the friend of "pore knyghtes" and as the enemy of an established and entrenched aristocratic order. The new regime imposes the sovereign's central authority upon the barons, who are the only ones to find this control oppressive. For the less powerful Arthur's regime brings a welcome social realignment; the new king's first action, in a passage original to Malory, is to redistribute lands unjustly seized, returning them "unto them that oughte hem" (16:25-30;i.7). Land, as Christine Carpenter has observed, was the currency of power among the English aristocracy, and given what we know of the endless and uphill struggles for land fought by gentry such as the Warwickshire Malory and the Pastons, Arthur's ability to cut through the

Gordian knot of lawsuits, influence, and local conflict suggests more than a hint of authorial wish-fulfilment.

Arthur's emergence from obscurity to become king of England follows the pattern of the *bel inconnu* motif, which Malory repeatedly drew upon. Invariably the hero's acceptance of the challenge produces shock and outrage, as among the barons who challenge Arthur's claim, or in Book IV with Lyonet, horrified to be given a "kychyn knave" as her champion. Given the rigid social distinctions which medieval estates theory attempted to maintain, the emergence of the Fair Unknown poses a profound threat to this imagined and idealised order. In almost all cases, the potential destabilisation to the caste system posed by his success is dispelled by the revelation that his prowess and bravery are the natural result of a hitherto unrevealed noble ancestry. Thus, Arthur's identity as Uther's son explains his unique ability to draw the sword, and Gareth's lineage, both as a son of the house of Orkenay and as Arthur's nephew, will assure his right to the adventure and to its rewards. In both cases, as is typical with the motif, the Fair Unknown's nobility is asserted *post factum*, crowning an established success, in a manner similar to the Pastons inventing a distinguished pedigree to buttress their claims to "lordship". The motif thus collaborates with the ideology of gentility while simultaneously corroding it. On the one hand, the aristocracy's power is the natural product of the almost mystical superiority of its bloodlines, and, on the other, the inability of those in power (the truculent barons and petty kings, the surly Kay) to recognise the Fair Unknown's merit and their comparative unworthiness to him, calls into doubt the validity of the existing

dispensation. In Malory's Book I this doubt is expressed powerfully by the "comyns" who support Arthur against the kings and "with clubbis and stavys ... slewe many knyghtes" (19:22-24;i.9), an image which would represent catastrophic social upheaval were the commons not fighting on behalf of Arthur.[25] A just and deserving order replaces an unjust one, but in the process of transition the fragility of order itself is exposed, if only briefly. Then as now, the true appeal of the *bel inconnu* motif was that it was charged with possibility.

In Malory this possibility is apparent from the start, for a mood of youthfulness and commencement animates *The Tale of King Arthur*, conveying the sense of a time when all things seem possible and the present is free of the burden of the past. Malory heightens this sense of a new beginning by starting his translation close to Arthur's conception, eliminating the French *Prose Merlin*'s long account of the birth of Merlin which precedes the story of Uther and Igrayne. While the period following the death of Uther is one of turmoil, it is also marked by fantastic happenings: the sword which will indicate Arthur as king appears in response to prayers that God "of His grete mercy shewe some myracle ... who shold be rightwys kynge of this reame" (12:18-21:i.5). A second sword is as mysteriously provided by the Lady of the Lake, in immediate response to his

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[25] Compare this with the scene from *Beuis of Hamtoun*, in which the hero is attacked by an evil steward and the people of London, described as a "route" and "fot-men mai & fale / Wiþ grete clobbes & wiþ smale!". In vanquishing the steward and his mob, Beuis contemptuously dismisses "file glotouns, / Þat wile misaie gode barouns!" (4323-4532); Eugen Kölbing, ed., *The Romance of Bevis of Hamtoun*, Early English Text Society e.s. nos. 46, 48, 64 (London: 1885, 1886, 1894).

need (52-54;i.25), echoing the occasion on which Arthur first drew the sword from the stone to provide Kay with a weapon (13-14;i.5). Although these supernatural occasions, as the expression of providential design, indicate his right to be king, Arthur's monarchical identity is often concealed by his youthfulness and impetuosity. The petty kings who dispute his right to rule call him a "berdless boye" (17:20-25;i.8) and in his battle with them Arthur fights with such ferocity and recklessness that he is "so blody that by hys shylde there myght no man know hym" (34:3-6;i.16). At the height of the battle Merlin, Arthur's military planner, must speak forcefully to prevent the king from squandering his carefully-engineered victory: "Hast thou nat done inow? Of three score thousande thys day hast thou leffte on lyve byt fyftene thousand!" (36:26-35;i.17).

In a later scene, in which his ingenuous manner recalls the heroes of *Sir Perceval of Galles* and *Lybeaus Deconnus*, Arthur is called a "foole" by Pellinor for desiring his hereditary right to pursue the Questing Beast, and is again called a "fole" by Merlin (43:26;i.20), who will subsequently reproach Arthur for wanting to fight Pellinor at an unfair advantage (53:24-32;i.25). These incidents combine to create a picture of Arthur quite different from the accomplished and experienced rulers of medieval literature represented by Chaucer's Duke Theseus and Froissart's Edward III, one much closer to the "sumquat childgered" sovereign imagined by the *Gawain*-poet. The image of Arthur in these early pages anticipates the king as knight-errant who, as we have seen, later rides out to see the beauty of Iseult for himself, and of whom Tristram says that "all knyghtes may lerne to be a knyght of hym" (745:28-31;x.73). It was this

willingness to distance himself from the static role of monarchical dignity which Malory seems to have found attractive in the young king.

The world imagined in the first pages of the *Morte Darthur* is one in which possibilities abound and barriers may be happily overcome, and Arthur's rise to power sets the tone for the success of others, and the "poure knyghtes" whom Arthur champions play a recurring role in the *Morte Darthur*. Balin, Tor, La Cote Male Tayle, and Gareth have numerous counterparts in medieval romance, and represent a type not unknown to Malory's French sources. In the *Prose Merlin*, for example, Balin encounters a knight, named Garnysshe in the *Morte*, "nés de cest pais et estrais de vavasours et de basse gent" [a native of this land, born to lesser folk of common rank], who by his "prouece" was rewarded with land by a duke.[26] However, Malory's willing acceptance of this belief that "proues and hardynes" could elevate a man from even humble origins most likely stems from the "gentleman heroes" prominent in Middle English romances. Malory's debt to the English romance tradition was considerable, and is only now receiving critical attention. Besides his well-known use of the stanzaic and alliterative poems describing the death of Arthur, there is the tale of Gareth in Book IV, for which P.J.C. Field has plausibly suggested a lost alliterative

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[26] Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich, eds., *Merlin: Roman en Prose du XIIIe Siècle*, 2 Vols., 1886 (New York: Johnson Reprint Company, 1965), 2:35. Malory translates this as "A poore mannes sonne, and by me proues and hardynes a deuke made me knyght" (87:4-6;ii.16).

source.[27] In addition to these primary sources, both known and presumed, the list of knights present for the healing of Urry suggests a wide familiarity with other romances, and at least three of those knights -- Cliges, Gauter and Degrevaunt (1149-50;xix.11) -- may well indicate knowledge of the English romances which bear those or similar names.[28] Malory may have known these works directly, or as Terrence McCarthy has written, indirectly, as one item among the memorised or partially-recollected libraries which medieval people carried "in their heads".[29] McCarthy reminds us that works known by memory complicate the traditional understanding of the "source" as a work present "at the author's elbow", and while their role in the shaping of the work may not be clear or apparent, he suggests that these indirect sources deserve consideration as part of Malory's "cultural background". I would venture further and suggest that as culture is never a monolithic structure but is rather participated in and understood at a number of social and political levels, that Malory's "cultural background", and in particular his understanding of the romance tradition, would

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[27] P.J.C. Field, "The Source of Malory's *Tale of Gareth*", 57-70. See also Terrence McCarthy, "Malory and the Alliterative Tradition" in *Studies in Malory*, ed. Spisak, 70 -74.

[28] Maldwyn Mills, ed., *Sir Gowther*, in *Six Middle English Romances*. W.H. French & C. B. Hale, eds., *Sir Cleges*, in *Middle English Metrical Romances*; in Book II Malory changes the name "Cayous" to "Clegis" (187:6;v.1). R.H. Wilson has also noted two names from Book I, Bawdewyn of Bretayne and Petipace of Wynchilsee, which are not found in the French source, the *Suite de Merlin*, but are instead native to English romances. See "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance," *University of Texas Studies in English* 29 (1950): 36.

[29] Terrence McCarthy, "Malory and the Alliterative Tradition," 64-67.

have been determined in part by the gentry's experience in late-medieval England, as discussed above.

Malory's version of the story of Balin, or the Knight with Two Swords, is essentially unaltered from its source, the French *Prose Merlin*. The incident follows an enduring convention of medieval romance, the test motif, designed in this case to find "a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson" (60-61;ii.1). In the French original, the knight who will finally relieve the encumbered damsel of her sword is a particularly humble member of Arthur's court, a newly released prisoner. In setting the scene, Malory carefully hints at Balin's worth, introducing him as "a good man named of his body",[30] while at the same time emphasising the shameful poverty which compels him to "put hymselff nat far in prees" as the knights attempt to draw the sword. The adjective "poor" occurs four times in this passage, and the adverb "poorly" -- "he was ... poorly arayde" -- occurs twice. Only when the assembled court fails does Balin advance, declaring that he is "fully assured" in his heart, although the damsel reacts sceptically to his shabby clothing. Balin's argument in his own defence is the most important of Malory's additions to his source, and wins him the right to try the sword:

> "A, fayre damesell ... worthynes and good tacchis and also good dedis is nat only in araymente, but manhode and worship ys hyd within a mannes person; and many a worshipfull knyght ys nat knowyn unto all peple. And therefore worship and hardynesse ys nat in araymente."
> (63:23-29;ii.2)

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[30] This is Malory's translation from the French, "il estoit riche de cuer et de hardement et de proueche".

Eugène Vinaver suggested that this passage was offered as a criticism of the orders of chivalry of the late Middle Ages, whose "distinguishing feature was the substitution of courtly apparel for the moral and practical aims of knightly behaviour".[31] Vinaver was certainly correct to note this passage as a significant departure from the source, but to read it as a criticism of the secular orders of chivalry is to look unnecessarily far afield from a pattern which Malory establishes in the work as a whole. Malory's description of Balin as "a good man named of his body" centres his worth in his individuality rather than in wealth or membership in the group, possibly suggesting the influence of English romances such as *Amadace* and *Launfal*, with their poor but dignified heroes.

Balin employs "worship" as an overarching concept, incorporating both ethics and morality ("worthynes and good tacchis") and martial accomplishments ("dedis" often being deeds of arms in Malory)[32] and his location of "worship" within "a mannes person" is not an invocation of the power of noble blood, for we hear nothing about Balin's lineage. Malory seems instead to place him with the unfortunate Garnysshe in the category of "poore mannes sonne" ennobled by "proues and hardynes". The function of the sword-test is somewhat uncertain, for while Balin's success identifies a present reality ("thys is a passynge good knyght and the beste that ever y founde") and also functions as a prophecy ("many mervayles shall he do"), his unwillingness to return the weapon, rather

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[31] *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3:1305.

[32] King Mark, for example, uses the word in reference to the "grettist bateyle" between Lancelot and Tristram, which Merlin prophesies (72:5-8;ii.8).

than being a further test of character, is in fact necessary to the "mervayles" which he shall perform with it. Thus, while the grateful damsel asks him to return the sword as a "jantyll and curteyse knyght", she describes his refusal as an unwise action but does not revoke his "jantyll and curteyse" status. Balin's "jantylnes", therefore, does not seem to be contingent upon the return of the sword. Despite his humble appearance Balin demonstrates an understanding of chivalric and aristocratic manners; he asks the damsel if he may attempt the test of the sword "of youre curteysy" (63:11), in contrast to the belligerent request of his French counterpart,[33] and later, when dying, will ask the lady of the castle "of her gentylnesse" (90:28-31;ii.18) to be buried with his brother. Unlike the traditional Fair Unknown such as Pereceval, who must learn the conventions of aristocratic culture as the narrative progresses, Balin's courtesy is only confirmed by the sword test, and compares favourably to the reaction of Arthur's court, for in a passage original to Malory we are told that "many knyghtes" had grete despite at him" (63:33-34;ii.2).

The court's envy presumably stems from the success of a poor knight in a challenge which has defeated them, and this reaction suggests the subversive potential of the Fair Unknown motif, as this unchivalric hostility inclines the reader against those currently in power, aligning our sympathies instead with the challenger. It is perhaps significant that Lancelot's later success in the healing

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[33] "Et il est *tous honteus*, si respont *par courouch*: 'Damoiselle, ne m"aiiés en despit pour ma povreté: je fui ja plus riches. Encore n'a il nul chiaens a qui ja plus riches'" (1:216). Emphasis mine.

of Sir Urry, again after the Round Table has failed, proves cause for celebration rather than bitterness, in that it reaffirms (rather than undermines) the cohesiveness of an established hierarchy of worth in which individuals are distributed according to the results of the quest for "worshyp", a system which Mervyn James has described as "competitive assertiveness". The emergence of Balin as an outsider and a new competitor is doubly challenging to the court. Not only does his success invalidate those identities sustained by the old hierarchy, but Balin's willingness to defy the sanctuary of Arthur's hall in killing the Lady of the Lake establishes the individual as a potentially dangerous force. Thus Arthur dispatches Launceor, an "orgulus" knight who "had grete despite at Balyne ... that ony sholde be accompted more hardy or more of prouesse", with orders to repay "the despite that he hath done unto me and my courte" (67:15-17:ii.4). Defeating Launceor confirms the prophecy of the sword and thus paradoxically constrains Balin's individuality by repositioning him within the court's hierarchy of "worshyp", a process of self-abnegation which Balin hopes to complete by making his peace with Arthur.

The story of Balin, therefore, shows that romances of the Fair Unknown type must by their very nature incline to the previously defined pole of *cortoisie*, as their focus is the establishment of the hero's identity as an individual. As in *Yvain* this identity is first established independently of the monarch's authority, and is developed in the pursuit of *aventure*. In the story of Balin this independence is not without risk, for his success occurs before the ideals of the Pentecostal oath give an ethical structure to the actions of Arthur's knights, and

before Galahad's retrieval of Balin's fratricidal sword suggests the spiritual redemption of earthly chivalry. In this rather benighted context, the physical worth or "worship ... hyd within a mannes person" proves vulnerable to the weaknesses of the body which contains it. Balin's "person" causes the death of the Lady of the Lake, kills Launceor (and indirectly his lover Columbe), gives the Dolorous Stroke at Pellam's castle, and will kill his own brother in a fated meeting. The quality which leads the damsel to recognise Balin as a "jantyll and curtayse knyght" is not yet sufficiently developed or understood to restrain the competitive desire for "worshyp", and it will not be until the battle between Lancelot and Tristram, as prophesied by Merlin, that a tragedy similar to the brothers' deaths will be averted through "gentilesse". As a Fair Unknown or "gentleman hero", then, Balin is a problematic role-model for the ambitious reader in that his success, while dramatic, is instabile, as his only means of "worshyp" is the dangerous and vulnerable body, physical force without any effective ethical restraint. In the next episode Malory would find a hero who embodies a more stable definition of "jantylnes".

In "The Tale of Balin" individual worth is located in the body, specifically in the "herte". The body of Malory's next Fair Unknown, Tor, also identifies him as extraordinary. Just as the damsel sees that Balin is "a lyckly man" (63:16-17;ii.2), so does Arthur recognise Tor as being "passyngly well vysaged and well made of hys yerys" (100:13-14;iii.3), despite his peasant clothing. The source of Tor's fair appearance is breeding, a fact made obvious when it is seen that the boy in no way resembles his supposed father, Ayres, nor is he like Ayres' thirteen

sons. This emphasis upon Tor's appearance differs considerably from the story of Balin, who is not physically exceptional, and who does not have a conspicuously noble lineage. Balin's self-advancement, while dramatic, is congruent with the brief autobiography of Garnysshe, a self-made "poore mannes sonne", and by comparison the spirit of the Tor story seems contradictory and conservative. A king's son, it seems to say, is shaped by his blood rather than by his upbringing, and his identity is inherited rather than inherent. In fact, Malory defeats our expectations by denying the almost mythic importance of noble birth which Tor's singular appearance implies, for in the quests which follow his knighting Tor proves himself to be "jantyll and curteyse", whereas his father, King Pellinor, and the royal nephew Gawain both fail conspicuously. The failure of these two great aristocrats in the moral arena of the quest undermines the nobility's right to rule by blood, and as in the tale of Balin the Fair Unknown's success has the disruptive effect of demonstrating the comparative ethical inferiority of the old order.

As with Balin story, Malory found the tale of Tor in the French Prose *Merlin*, and his translation follows the source closely. Two significant alterations occur early on, when the boy is brought to court by his adoptive father, a herdsman, to seek the gift promised by Arthur to each of his subjects on the occasion of his wedding to Guinevere. In the French original Arthur promises to fulfil the request "pour coi je soie possians de donner" [provided that I am able to grant it], while Malory's Arthur makes the more cautious condition, "so hit appayre nat my realme nor myne astate" (99:28-30; iii.3), as if sensing what

the request will be. In asking that his son be made knight Ayres challenges a fundamental assumption of medieval society, namely the right of the aristocracy to govern based upon their innate superiority to other classes. In Chrétien's *Perceval* the rustic's desire to be made a knight was a source of gentle amusement to his noble tutors. In Malory, however, the request is received gravely; as Arthur comments, "Hit ys a grete thynge thow askyst off me" (99:33). As if seeking to contain the subversive potential of Ayre's request, Malory altered his source further to show that the boy's desire is rooted in his own lineage, adding a passage in which Ayres explains that:

> ... thys desyre commyth of my son and nat off me. For I shall telle you, I have thirtene sonnes, and all they woll falle to what laboure I putt them and woll be ryght glad to do laboure; but thys chylde woll nat laboure for nothynge that my wyff and I may do, but allwey he woll be shotynge, or castynge dartes, and glad for to se batayles and to beholde knyghtes. And allwayes day and nyght he desyrith of me to be made knyght.
>
> (100:3-10)

By sufficiently distinguishing the boy's inclinations from that of his brothers, who like Chaucer's Plowman are content with a life of "swink", Malory appears to be preserving the mystique of nobility; despite Arthur's offer of largesse to celebrate his wedding, the king seems to realise that entry into the club cannot be open to anyone. To make the difference between Tor and his brothers even more dramatic, Malory invented a test whereby Arthur has Ayre's other sons brought in and placed alongside the would-be knight: "And all were shapyn muche lyke the poore man, but Torre was nat lyke hym nother in shappe ne in countenaunce, for he was muche more than ony of them" (100:17-20). As

observed, there is no mention of Tor's unique appearance in the original, nor is there any suggestion that it differs from the appearance of the common people.[34] Malory was thus preparing his readers for Merlin's announcement that Tor's biological father is in fact King Pellynor, who raped Ayres' wife when she was a "mayde" (100:33-101:17). We might therefore be pardoned for thinking that Malory's handling of the material seems to be highly conservative in its incorporation of details to support Merlin's contention that blood will win out; the wizard predicts that Tor "ought to be a good man for he ys com of good kynrede as ony on lyve, and of kynges bloode". However, the unfolding of the tale belies this apparent orthodoxy, for it will reveal that "kynrede" and "blode" alone do not make a gentleman.

Tor is knighted at Arthur's wedding feast, but he must be subsequently tested in a quest which will mark the coalescence of the Round Table and will include two other newcomers to the court, King Pellinor and Gawain. Under the terms of the quest as specified by Merlin (103:13-24;iii.5), the three set out on a curiously equal footing, negating the father's authority over the son and including Pellinor in what appears to be a *rite de passage* for the two young knights. Also negated are the benefits which one might expect to come from being Arthur's nephew. Whereas in *Gawain and the Green Knight* the hero could say to Arthur that "No bounté but your blod I in my bodé knowe" (l. 357), Malory's Gawain in this instance appears mean and spiteful in comparison to his

* *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3:1346.

uncle's generosity. Seeing Pellinor given a seat at the Round Table, Gawain reacts and plots with his brother Gaheris to kill the king to avenge their father, King Lot. The desire for vengeance is mixed with less noble motives, however, as Malory tells us that Gawain feels "grete envy" at the "worship" which Arthur shows to Pellynor (102:10-20;iii.4). Before this outburst occurs, Malory mentions that although Gawain was the first to request the honour, Tor is the first to be knighted at Arthur's wedding feast, an overlooking of precedence and familial status which seems to be an oblique rebuke of the royal nephew's murderous and unchivalric frame of mind. The presence of divisiveness and contention at the heart of the court again has the effect of diminishing the moral authority of its senior representatives, for in comparison to their failings -- the blood feud between Lot and Orkenay, the anger of Gawain and the implicit indictment of Pellynor as a rapist ("there mette with me a sterne knyght, and half be force he had my maydynhode" 101:13-14) – the simple desire of Tor to be a knight appears decidedly innocent, and our sympathies are readily attached to the newcomer. Looking ahead temporarily, it may not be a coincidence that Tor's name appears in the list of knights killed during the rescue of Guenevere by Lancelot (1177:24-30;xx.8). Gareth is also killed in that battle, another Fair Unknown who, like Tor, is also distanced from Gawain's violent and murderous temper. The death of these two knights seems an apt symbol for Camelot's loss of innocence. Of the three knights who set out on Merlin's quest for the lady, hart, and brachet, Tor is the only one to succeed, whereas Gawain and Pellinor fail disastrously. The reasons for this quest are not adequately explained, but its

nature soon becomes clear.

Writing of Chrétien's *Yvain*, Auerbach claimed that the road of the quest, with its atmosphere of fairy tale and uncertainty, lacks any clear significance.[35] The fork in the road which leads Yvain and Calogrenant before him to the fountain lacks any symbolic resonance or ethical meaning, unlike Langland's road to Truth, with its waystations clearly identified with such unambiguous labels as the Ten Commandments.[36] Malory's knights, however, traverse a landscape with a very clear ethical significance, even if it is not drawn with the deliberateness of allegory. The first, Gawain, is associated from the beginning with his "passynge trencheaunte" sword which he hopes to use on Pelllinor, and the sword comes to stand for his indiscriminate use of force. Gawain's quest begins promisingly when he first threatens violence to end the dispute of two brothers who have come to blows through "wylfulnes" and over a "a symple cause" (103:31-104:29;iii.6), and then uses violence to cross a river in pursuit of his quest, the hart. By overcoming the river's defender Gawain seems to have advanced significantly towards chivalric maturity, for his brother hails his victory as "a myghty stroke of a yonge knyght" (105:16-17). From this use of force, which seems appropriate to the circumstances, Gawain finds and defeats the hart's owner, who asks him to show mercy "as he was a jantyll knyght" (106:13-14;iii.7). This incident is the essence of Gawain's testing, for his hounds having

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[35] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 130-31.

[36] A.V.C. Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, 5.560-629.

taken the hart, and its owner vanquished, the issue at stake appears to be whether Gawain can display "jantyll" behaviour by tempering force with mercy. In refusing this request, and thus killing the knight's lady by "myssefortune", Gawain is universally condemned and must wear a grim emblem of his penitence, the lady's head, thus replacing the intended trophy of the hart's head as a sign of his "grete vylony" (108:5-24;iii.8). Gawain's failure in his test is thus explained by his wanting the mercy which a knight should show to others, and the same lack will cause the third, Pellinor, to fail in his quest for the knight with the lady. Unlike Gawain's adventure, the moment of true testing for Pellinor occurs at the outset, when he ignores the repeated cries for help of a damsel and a wounded knight, as "he was so egir in hys queste" (114:10-23;iii.12). While he later overcomes the lady's captors and pledges to keep her "as I am trew knyght" (116:20-21;iii.13), Pellinor has already failed and, like Gawain, his failure is also symbolised by a head, that of the damsel whom he ignored and which is all that remains of her and her knight, "etyn with lyons other with wylde bestis" (118:30-34:iii.14).

The failures of Gawain and Pellinor in these quests leads those at court to draw conclusions, for while both knights display skill at arms both lack mercy, and mercy is the paramount quality in the Pentecost Oath, which is inspired by these adventures. An important statement of Malory's thinking as a moralist, the oath is in part a professional code which gives Arthur's followers their identity as Round Table knights and upholders of what Malory calls the order of knighthood. Throughout this tale mercy is upheld as an integral part of the

knight's functional identity *as* a knight (Gawain is told, for example, that "a knyght withoute mercy ys dishonoured" 107:19), but it is also a quality which one is inclined to as an individual (Gawain is also told that it is "curteyse" to show mercy 108:34-35). This tripartite quest is also a test of the knight's inner identity, as we see most clearly with Tor, the only one to succeed in the eyes of his community. After a lengthy battle Tor defeats Abelleus, the guardian of the brachet, but his real test seems to come when a lady then arrives and asks him for an unnamed gift: "for kynge Arthurs love, gyff me a gyffte, I requyre the, jantill knight, as thou arte a jantillman" (112:16-18;iii.11). This request, upon being granted, is specified as the head of Abelleus, and as Tor regretfully explains to the distressed knight, must be granted "but I sholde be founde false of my promyse" (112:3-4). We may ask at this point what is being tested here, for with Gawain and Pellinor the ability to show mercy was the issue of the test, whereas in Tor's case mercy seems subordinated to what Chaucer's Franklin would call "trouthe". It might be argued that the moral distinction of Tor to his comrades thus appears uncertain, as the successful knight is as ruthless as the unsuccessful, and there is a further parallel with Gawain's quest in that Tor also takes a life in a quarrel over a hound. In fact, Malory is careful to keep our sympathies from Abelleus, who is described as "the falsyste knyght lyvynge, and a grete destroyer ... of good knyghtes" (112:35-36), and who has already refused mercy once (112:6-12). Like other Malorian villains such as Perys or Brewnys Sanz Pité, Abelleus has excluded himself from chivalric society, and is presumably beyond mercy. Tor's testing, therefore, hangs upon whether he will

respond to the damsel's request "as thou arte a jantillman"

While the language of this request is formulaic, and while it normally occurs in situations where it is hoped that the addressee will perform a knightly service,[37] it is also a somewhat surprising statement, for we are accustomed to thinking that the *Morte*'s ethical imperatives derive from knighthood, and the damsel seems instead to be simultaneously invoking another form of identity, albeit a related one. The term "gentleman" is not an especially common one in Malory, and is overwhelmed in frequency by comparison to the word "knight", the universal form of identity. It is sometimes used simply to indicate a group or rank, as in Arthur's summons to Camelot of "lordis, knyghtes and jantilmen of armys" (61:18;ii.1), and while there is a sense of hierarchy in the ordering of this phrase, on other occasions "knight" and "jantilmen" are used interchangeably. The term can also indicate someone of a distinguished lineage, for we are told in Book VI that Lancelot is descended in "the eyghth degré from oure Lorde Jesu Cryst, and thys sir Galahad ys the nyneth degré", and that therefore "they be the grettist jantillmen of the worlde" (865:12;xiii.7). Finally, in Books IV and V, where the values of "jantilness" and "curtesy" are of central importance, the term comes to stand for someone who is possessed of those qualities. This is true of Malory's narratorial aside on Tristram's invention of "the goodly tearmys that jantylmen have and use" (375:24-25;viii.3), and most strikingly, of Gareth's proud declaration to Lyonet that "I have done you jantyllmannys servyse, and

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[37] See for example the fiend's request to Bors (965:30-34;xvi.12), Arthur to Bors (1052:25-29;xviii.5) and Lancelot to Lavayne (1074:01-03;xviii.12).

peraventure bettir servyse yet woll I do or I departe frome you" (313:10-12;vii.11). As in the damsel's address to Tor, we sense that the identity of gentleman is at least partially supplanting the more traditional one of knight, in keeping with the definitions offered in later centuries by Defoe, Vaughn, and Harrison, which envision the gentleman as being possessed of a courteous and gentle disposition that will be well-disposed to service and courtesy. In Tor's case, however, the damsel's choice of words is not simply polite, for while he has been formally made a knight, the proof of Tor's identity as a "jantilman" seems to be contingent upon his response to her request; the test here thus has as much to do with status as with the young man's coming of age.

The testing of the knight-hero is more pronounced in Malory's Book IV than in any other part of the *Morte Darthur*. All of Gareth's experiences and adventures can be understood as a sustained period of testing, orchestrated by Kay who does not believe that the young man could be of noble birth, by Lyonet who seems to be aware of every obstacle that Gareth must overcome on the road to her sister's castle, by Persaunte who orders his daughter into Gareth's bed, and by Lyones who, already convinced of her champion's nobility, rather halfheartedly orders him to undertake further adventures "unto the tyme that thou be called one of the numbir of the worthy knyghtes" (327:7-11;vii.19). Most importantly, Gareth tests himself, so that he may demonstrate to the world that he is "a jantillman borne". As with Tor, then, the object of the testing is gentility rather than Gareth's bravery or prowess, which are seldom if ever in doubt, and as Beverly Kennedy has observed the arena for this testing is the castle rather

than the wood of *aventure*, reflecting an interest in courtly values which is atypical of *Morte* as a whole. I disagree with Kennedy, however, in the emphasis she places upon the mentor role which Lancelot plays to Gareth, a role which she claims is in accord with chivalric manuals such as the translation of Ramon Lull by Sir Gilbert Hay, who advises the squire to seek knighthood from a proven and virtuous knight who will be his "fader in knychthede".[38] Such advice may well explain Gareth's belief that "I am bettir spedde, for sertaynly the noble knyghte sir launcelot made me knyght" (316:18-20;v..13), and why knights such as Persaunte and Tristram are inclined to agree with this statement (350:5-24;vii.30). However, Gareth's desire to "stonde a proved knyght" (299:15-16;vii.5) has an immediacy which can not, I think, be fully explained by the cool and somewhat abstract ideal which Malory has already established in Lancelot.

Malory's portrayals of Lancelot in Book III and in Book IV differ significantly in emphasis, for Lancelot begins tne first tale as a mature figure with a well-established reputation, a sort of roving philanthropist in the tradition of Chretien's *Yvain*, rescuing dozens of damsels, imperilled wives and imprisoned knights. Book III has none of the aspects of an *enfance* romance; while Lancelot feels the need to prove himself "in straunge adventures" (253:20-21;vi.1), his lineage and reputation as "the floure of knyghtes" precede him throughout the tale. Service to others as an obligation of knighthood is the theme of this tale, and further distinguishes it from Book IV. After fighting for King Bagdemagus

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[38] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 131.

as a favour to his daughter he tells her that "Yf that ye have nede any tyme of my servyse, I pray you let me have knowlecche, and I shall nat fayle you, as I am trewe knyght" (264:3-5;vi.7), and later another damsel will call on him for aid "of your knyghthode" (279:15-16;vi.14). This request reveals the extent to which Lancelot here embodies the code which Malory calls "the Order of Knyghthode", and there is a certain anonymity in the crisp precision with which his hero uphol the Order. While not quite a type or abstract figure, like Chaucer's Knight, Lancelot here does not attain the individuality which marks his later appearances; he is a simply drawn, recognisably aristocratic figure who stands for "servyse" and is described as "noble", both in birth and in character.

Unlike Book III, the *Gareth* is a tale about self-advancement, the most fully developed of Malory's *bel inconnu* tales, and as the focus is on Gareth, Lancelot has only a minor part to play as an exemplar of chivalry. In Book IV Lancelot represents the values of "jantilness" and "courtesy", words which do not occur in the previous tale. These values lie at the heart of both Gareth's testing and his success, and they establish the connection between him and Lancelot which I believe Malory meant us to notice. Gareth's request to Arthur for a years' room and board strikes Kay as proof of the youth's servility, whereas we are told that Lancelot and his brother Gawain both befriend him:

> But as towchyng sir Gawayne, he had reson to proffer hym
> lodgyng, mete, and drynke, for that proffer com of his
> bloode, for he was nere kyn to hym than he wyste off; but
> that sir Launcelot ded was of his grete jantylnesse and
> curtesy.
> (295:31-35;vii.2)

Malory in this aside both calls attention to the blood tie between the brothers even while he diminishes its importance by suggesting that Lancelot's regard is ethically superior, "charity" being the approximate meaning of "jantylnesse and curtesy". The thinking here is very similar to the relationship between Tor and Pellinor, whereas we saw Malory both emphasises the near-magical properties of a "kinges bloode" and understates its importance by demonstrating that inheritance is no guarantee of ethical behaviour. In the *Gareth* Malory reiterates this point, particularly in a concluding remark which tells us that Gareth avoided Gawain because of his brother's temper and murderous disposition, "and that hated sir Gareth" (360:32-36;vii.35). I would therefore agree with Kennedy, who correctly notes that differing degrees of virtue have nothing to do with birth or breeding, as "Malory's great knights are as well-born as it is possible to be: the sons and nephews of kings" who "paradoxically ... may all be said to have been equal".[39] As a qualification, however, I would add that differing degrees of virtue among the nobility are essential to a Fair Unknown plot, as they open a gap in the social fabric through which the deserving upstart may rise, while justifying such an elevation on the grounds of the hero's extraordinary virtue.

Gareth's initial appearance, in noble dress and supported by two men, suggests a curious combination of heroic potential and infantile dependency. Malory describes his handsome face, large shoulders and fair hands,[40] but also

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[39] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 145.

[40] As Vinaver notes, the latter detail may be a corruption of a possible French source, or "may also be taken as a tribute to Gareth's moral character;

mentions that "he fared as he myght nat go nothir bere hymself but yf he lened uppon their shuldyrs" (293:27-33;vii.1). Gareth's inability to walk, and his request for a year's lodging, may be a survival of the tale's origin in folklore,[41] and is reminiscent of the *enfance* tradition of English romances such as *Havelok*, in which the hero's first conscious thought is the realisation that "Ich am nou no grom".[42] In a similar manner, consistent with the motif's atmosphere of potential and possibility, Gareth's first action hints at the maturity he shall soon prove: "Than this yonge muche man pullyd hym abak and easyly stretched streyghte upryght" (294:1-2), a foreshadowing which is in keeping with the *bel inconnu* pattern. Lancelot and Gawain share Arthur's suspicion that the young man is of noble birth, and only Kay is convinced otherwise:

> "That shall lytyll nede," seyde sir Kay, "to do suche coste
> uppon hym, for I undirtake he is a vylayne borne, and never
> woll make man, for and he had be com of jantyllmen. he
> wolde have axed horse and armour, but as he is, so he
> askyth."
>
> (294:35-295:3:vii.1)

The enmity of the steward or of some other household official towards the fair unknown is another hallmark of this narrative type, and Kay similarly refuses to recognise the obvious nobility of another Fair Unknown, La Cote Male Tayle,

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he is *fayre-handid*, and even 'largest-handid', for he is the most generous man that ever lived"; *Works of Malory*, 3.1431.

[41] See P.J.C. Field, "The Source of Malory's *Tale of Gareth*", 57-70.

[42] W.W. Skeat, ed., *Havelok*, ll. 785-92.

in a more abbreviated fair unknown romance from Malory's Book V.[43] However, as Felicity Riddy says of this passage, the rest of the court understands that "they inhabit a world in which the birth-beauty-courtesy nexus obtains: only a fool like Kay would propose that a 'vilayne' could be fair".[44]

Kay's inability to discern the obvious does however provide Gareth with the first of his tests, a year's reduction to servile status with the "kychen boyes", eating fare which, in Kay's unkind words, will leave him "as fatte at the twelve-monthe ende as a porke hog" (295:6-7). The latter is an especially ominous comment, as it threatens to obscure the appearance which is, as in all medieval romances of this type, indisputable proof of the hero's concealed identity. Gareth's noble ancestry may not be suppressed, however, and asserts itself, as did Tor's and Perceval's, in his desire to see "ony justyng of knyghtes" and in his excelling at athletic "mastryes" (296:2-7).[45] At year's end Gareth has offended no one, and in response to this abusive treatment "allwayes he was meke and mylde" (296:1-2), confirming what Riddy calls "the birth-beauty-courtesy nexus", or

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[43] It is Kay who "in mokkynge" gives the knight, Sir Brunor, his nickname of La Cote Male Tayle (459:11-13;ix.1). Lancelot reminds Kay of his misjudgment of Brunor in the *Gareth* (295:15-18;vii.2), which suggests that this tale was composed after Book V, in keeping with Gareth's appearances in the *Tristram* as a young and unproven knight.

[44] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 67.

[45] Compare Gareth's skill at stone-throwing with that of the youthful Havelok's:
He putte at þe first siþe,
Ouer alle þat þer wore,
Twel fote, and sumdel more.
(ll. 1007-62)

"nobility myth".

> The nobility myth is a myth of class: it rests on the assumption that high birth, beauty, knightly prowess, good manners and moral excellence go together. The servile antitype by means of which the nobleman defines himself is the *vilain*, [whose] ... role in the poem is necessarily static; the nobility myth ensures that he is denied access to the educative process of the plot, available only to those of gentle birth, whereby the hero will learn to bear witness in his conduct to the idealisms of the courtly world.[46]

This definition is consistent with our experience of the *Gareth* and similar texts, although we might well ask why, if the nobility myth is so strongly invested in the figure of Gareth that is obvious to all but the most obtuse, does he even attempt to conceal his identity? Gareth's patient acceptance of a year's abusive treatment indicates a test successfully passed, a signal that he is ready to take up Lyonet's quest, so that when a horse and armour of the "rychest wyse" are brought for him we are not surprised, even if the court is (297:24-29;vii.3). As a prince and Arthur's nephew, Gareth could have been given knighthood and the adventure of Castle Perilous without controversy, but instead he reveals his identity to three people, Lancelot, Persaunte, and Lyonet, although others are led by his prowess and courtesy to suspect a noble birth. The only explanation given for this deception is Gareth's declaration to Lyonet that "I ded hit for to preve my frendys" (313:8;vii.11). Kennedy suggests that this comment prepares us for his decision to favour Lancelot over his "vengeable" brother (360:32-

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[46] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 65.

36;xii.35),[47] but this choice is reported much later, in what amounts to an epilogue, and does not appear to be related to either knight's response to Gareth's period of disguise, for as we have seen both Gawain and Lancelot treat him kindly during his year as a servant. Of more relevance, I believe, is the concluding part of Gareth's explanation to Lyonet -- "and that shall be knowyn another day whether that I be a jantyllman borne or none" -- in which the syntax does not suggest that his gentle birth is dependent upon his choice of "frendys", but through the word "whether" does suggest that his identity as a "jantyllman" might be in some doubt.

The first half of the *Gareth* displays a curious tension as the extreme threat which Gareth poses as an armed and upstart menial is constantly tempered by reassuring hints that he could only be a nobleman. As Lyonet portrays him to others, Gareth "is but a kychyn knave that was fedde in kyng Arthurs kychyn for almys" (303:14-15;vii.7), and the double repetition of "kychyn" in this line effectively underscores the sheer impropriety of Gareth's entry into the world of chivalric honour in his servant's guise. Lyonet plays upon this sense of outrage in her exhortations to Gareth's challengers, reminding them of his "unhappy" destruction of other knights (303:18-24) and goading their sense of pride.

> "My lorde the Grene Knyght, why for shame stonde ye so longe fyghtynge with that kychyn knave? Alas! hit is shame that evir ye were made knyght to se sche a lad to macche you as the wede growyth over the corne."

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[47]. Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 130.

(305:37-306:2;vii.8)

Gareth's challengers are quick to react to such encouragement, "ashamed" not only to be bested by such an opponent but even, one suspects, to fight with him in the first place. The Black Knight is surprised "that ony man of worshyp woll have ado wyth hym" (303:25-26) and thinks "hit besemed never a kychyn knave to ryde with such a lady" (304:8-9), and after he is killed by Gareth his brother the Green Knight declares it "gret pyté that so noble a knyght as he was sholde so unhappyly be slayne, and namely of a knavis honde" (305:13-15;vii.8). The recurrence of words such as "unhappyly" and "mysfortune" indicate that it is unthinkable to the noble mind that a commoner could kill an aristocrat by design, as if Providence would not allow such a thing, and remind us of the force of the "nobility myth". Even so, Gareth's opponents are sufficiently pragmatic to make allowances, and in a rare touch of Malorian comedy the defeated Green Knight calls on Gareth as a "Fayre knyght" for mercy, declining to oblige the haughty Lyonet and be killed for the sake of class solidarity (306:9-25). His own defeat forces the Green Knight to reconsider events and find a place for Gareth in the hierarchy of prowess, telling Lyonet that "he is a full noble man, and I knowe no knyght that is able to macche hym" (307:18-19;vii.9).

Gareth's encounter with the Green Knight is typical of his encounters on the way to Castle Perilous; in each case he begins the battle as a disruptive and threatening figure, the embodiment of social chaos and rebellion, but in the wake of battle order is restored and his opponent is sufficiently convinced that Gareth "is com of full noble blood and of kynges lynage" to invite him to his table. The

table, with its elaborate protocols of seating and serving, was where the medieval caste system manifested itself most thoroughly, and it is on these occasions that Lyonet's attacks on Gareth are fiercest.

> "Fy, fy," than seyde she, "sir knyght, ye are uncurtayse to sette a kychyn page afcre me. Hym semeth bettir to styke a syne than to sytte afore a damesell of hyghe parage."
> (301:21-23;vii.5)

Lyonet is the last person to be convinced of Gareth's true nature. Her role is to a certain extent conventional, and has its equivalent in the damsel Maledysaunte of Book IV who chides La Cote Male Tayle because of his "evyll-shapen coote" (462:8;ix.2), although their motives are different. As the latter tells Lancelot, she rebukes the young knight "never for none hate that I hated hym, but ior grete love that I had to hym, for ever I supposed that he had bene to yonge and to tendur of ayge to take uppon hym thys aventure" (471:16-20;ix.7). Lyonet's interest is not so much in Gareth's self-preservation but in his status, for she is only concerned for his safety prior to his battle with Persaunte, "the moste lordlyest knyght".[48]

As Riddy notes, the plot of the *Gareth* is driven by its hero's needs, so that "the world accommodates itself to, and is defined by, the fair youth's wishes".[49] This observation also applies to the role of Lyonet. There is no good

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[48] In a wonderful display of Malorian pragmatism, Lyonet begs Gareth to avoid a needless fight with Persaunte, as she does not want her sister's champion damaged in transit: "Therefore I wolde ye were hens, that ye were nat brused nothir hurte with this stronge knyght" (312:10-19;vii.11).

[49] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 67.

reason for her to have withheld her sister's name from Arthur (296:26 - 297:3;vii.2), thus irritating the king and denying her the help of a proven knight, which was after all why Ironside started the business in the first place (325:1-9;vii.17). By this expedient Lyonet is thus transformed from messenger and guide into an examiner, challenging him to go on at each of the "perelus passages" which Gareth must negotiate *en route*, constantly probing his bravery and, more importantly, his courtesy. Her role in the narrative focuses upon Gareth to the point that her mission to Lyones is secondary, and in a work which has several climaxes -- the fight with Ironside, the Assumption Day tournament, Gareth's wedding -- perhaps the most important moment is Lyonet's confirmation of Gareth's true status.

> "A, Jesu mervayle have I," seyde the damesell, "what maner a man ye be, for hit may never be other but that ye be com of jantyll bloode, for so fowle and shamfully dud never woman revyle a knyght as I have done you, and cver curteysly ye have suffyrde me, and that com never but of jantyll bloode."
>
> (312:29-34;vii.11)

Lyonet here admits what everyone else has already realised, that an extraordinary combination of appearance, patience courtesy and ability can only be explained according to the "nobility myth", and she is able to report to her sister that her champion is indeed "noble" and "as lykly a man as ever ye saw ony" (317:16-17;vii.14). While this description is largely physical, Lyonet has remained unimpressed by Gareth's martial heroics; her criteria for gentility evidently hinge upon his forbearance of her "fowle" treatment, for in each of his encounters to date neither Gareth's courage nor his skill at arms have been in doubt. Proof

of gentility in the tale is seen in actions ranging from virtue to simple etiquette; Gareth's refusal to sleep with Persaunte's daughter is seen by his host as proof that he "is com of full noble bloode" (315:19-20;vii.12), while much later, at the castle of the Duke de la Rous, his table manners leads the inhabitants to remark that "they nevir sawe a goodlyer man nothir so well of etynge" (354:3-5;vii.32).

Good and courteous conduct is clearly the measure of nobility in the *Gareth*, although the tale is ambiguous in locating the source of such conduct. To most other characters, Gareth's success is proof of and commensurate with his lineage; by the time his mother arrives at court to confirm his noble birth, we are not surprised to learn that "ever sytthen he was growyn he was meryvaylously wytted, and ever he was feythfull and trew of his promyse" (340:14-16;vii.26). Aristocratic birth, however, is not a guarantee of noble conduct; like Pellinor and Gawain in the story of Tor, Kay, "an unjantyll knyght of the courte" (298:14;vii.4), seems to undermine the persuasiveness of the nobility myth's assertion that noble birth is the guarantor of good conduct. This is the paradox which Kennedy recognises in the *Gareth*, and which is a central feature of this sort of romance. It is a latent message which contradicts the ideological orthodoxy of the romance, a contradiction seen most clearly in Lyoness' comparison of Gareth to Ironside, in a speech which is laced with Malorian keywords:

> And sytthyn go thou to my sistir and grete her welle, and commaunde me unto that jantyll knyght, and pray hym to ete and drynke and make hym stronge, and say hym I thanke hym of his curtesy and goodnesse that he wolde take uppon hym suche labur for me that never did hym bounté

nother curtesy. Also pray hym that he be of good herte and
corrage hymself, for he shall mete with a full noble knyght,
but he is nother of curtesy, bounté, nother jantylnesse; for
he attendyth unto nothyng but to murther, and that is the
cause I can nat prayse hym nother love hym.
(318:17-26;vii.14)

Perhaps more clearly than at any other point in the *Morte* we see the peculiar

dynamic of social and ethical values which is the property of the *bel inconnu*

romance. To be a "full noble knyght" is not necessarily to be a courteous or

gentle one, and Ironside's practice of hanging knights from trees excludes him

from an aristocracy in which identity is largely based upon the mutual

approbation of its members. Ironside's actions effectively rupture the "nobility

myth", and while the ideological damage is repaired by a chivalric pretext ("all

that he dud was at a ladyes requeste" 325:22-25;vii.18), a gap has been created

into which the virtuous outsider can readily insert himself in a non-threatening

manner. The hanging of noble prisoners is particularly offensive to Gareth; he

describes it as a "vylans deth" (320:11-12;vii.15), a phrase of social as well as

moral opprobrium which serves to underlines Ironside's near-forfeiture of his

aristocratic identity. In resolving to end this "shamefull" practice, Gareth has

fully negotiated the Fair Unknown's transformation from a threatening and

disruptive force into an ideologically acceptable figure, the upholder of chivalric

practice and class solidarity among the aristocracy.

To what extent can Gareth be seen as an example of the "gentleman

hero"? As I have previously defined the term, the gentleman hero is a figure

whose social situation and aspirations betray some similarity to the position and

ambitions of the late-medieval English nobility, who usually experiences a significant improvement of fortune. Gareth's experience follows this general pattern, whereas many of Malory's knights, including Gareth's brothers, remain at Arthur's court or live the semi-ascetic life of quest and tournament, beginning and ending the narrative at the same elevated social level. Gareth's career more closely resembles those of English romance heroes such as Degrevant, Launfal, Amadace, who all make considerable material and social gains. At his wedding Gareth's former opponents come together as officers -- butler, sewer, carver -- at his wedding feast, ceremonial positions of the noble household which underscore his attainment of lordship and maturity. Admittedly Gareth is a prince and therefore of better ancestry than Malory's other Fair Unknowns, Balin and Tor, and therefore it may be argued that I have exaggerated the social significance of his rise. It is important to note, however, that Gareth's royal identity is obscured in two ways. First, his progress from kitchen boy to great magnate forms the outline of the narrative, and has great imaginative appeal, perhaps more so than any other English medieval romance of this type. Second, and more importantly, it is obscured by a curious combination of vocabulary and emphasis, for Gareth never once introduces himself to others as a king's son, and instead habitually thinks of himself as a gentleman, particularly in moments of agitation, as when he tells the Black Knight that "I am a jantyllman borne, and of more hyghe lynage than thou, and that woll I preve on thy body!" (304:10-12;vii.8). The term "jantillman" here simply means "of gentle or noble birth", but in other cases, as when Gareth tells Lyonet that "I have done you jantyllmannys

servyse" (313:10-12;vii.11), the unusual phrasing implies character as well as station, ethics as well as nobility. The phrase is a noteworthy variation on the more traditional idea of knightly service, but more importantly Gareth's thinking of himself primarily as a gentleman, a term that could be applied to a heterogenous group which included franklins, soldiers, parsons, lawyers and professionals as well as princes of the blood, diminishes the importance of Gareth's royal parentage. Gareth's success is due in part to the properties of blood, but it is also due to courtesy and gentleness, qualities which are not always granted to those of noble birth, as the examples of Kay and Ironside suggest. While the *Gareth*'s insistence upon lineage is highly conservative, its subversiveness, as with all romances of this type, lies in its message that there is always room at the apex for the deserving, and that courtesy and gentleness lead one to be taken for a "jantillman". Felicity Riddy suggests that the "educative process" of the *bel inconnu* romance is "available only to those of gentle birth", a comment which I would amend with the suggestion that a romance such as Gareth offers both hope and instruction to those who would be taken as gentle, even without the advantage of birth. The author of the *Book of Curtesye* warned his readers that "Who wil not lerne nedely he must be lewed",[50] and in like fashion the *Gareth* spells out those qualities necessary for self-advancement -- patience, dedication, courtliness and sexual restraint -- and paints success in dramatic terms. It is entirely consistent with the *Morte Darthur*'s presentation of

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[50] F.J. Furnivall, ed., *Caxton's Book of Courteyse*, 21.

Arthur's court as the goal of "poure", unknown, and would-be knights, where conduct is at least as important to identity as is birth.

Masters of "Jantylnes": The Gentlemen as Athlete and Sportsman

The characters of Book V, *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, seem to move, like the Questing Beast, in ambiguous wanderings which have no clear narrative function, and Malory breaks off, apparently exhausted, with "no rehersall of the thirde booke" (845:31;xii.14). For many years Book V has been regarded by critics as a failure, and its ethics have seemed as ill-defined as its narrative. The court of King Mark of Cornwall, the tale's focal point, is clearly inferior in Malory's estimation to the court of King Arthur,[51] although both courts are torn by adultery and jealousy and Arthur's own kinsmen, the sons of Lott and Margawse, share with Mark in the destruction of the Tale's central figures: Lamorak, Dinadan, and finally Tristram himself. The *Tristram* is a tale in which emotions run in strong and contradictory ways. Palomides is nearly driven insane by his unrequited love for La Beal Isode and by his envy of Tristram, to the point of treachery, but can also behave courageously, as he

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[51] This is at least the opinion of Lamerok, who says as much when Tristram reproaches him for diverting Morgan le Fay's enchanted horn to Cornwall instead of delivering it to Arthur's court, its intended target: "'Well,' seyde he, 'and hit were to do agayne, so wolde I do, for I had lever stryff and debate felle in kyng Markys courte rether than in kynge Arthurs courte, for the honour of bothe courtes be nat lyke'" (443:31-34;viii.38). There are plenty of other knights who share this opinion.

does at the Red City. Similarly, Galahalt (not to be confused with Lancelot's son Galahad), who at one point is described as a "noble prince" and a "passynge good man of armes" (653:3-4;x.40), plans to kill Lancelot out of envy for his jousting reputation (675:3-7;x.50). Maureen Fries attributes this moral confusion to Tristram himself, and suggests that he plays the role of "counter-hero" to Lancelot. Whereas Lancelot embodies the ideals of the Pentecost Oath in his wanderings, Fries argues that Tristram's example undermines these ideals, replacing them instead with "a system of brute force".[52] I would argue, on the contrary, that Book V is a successful and consistent articulation of Malory's ethic of "jantilnes", as demonstrated by Lancelot and more fully by Tristram.

Fries' claim that Tristram is an anti-hero attaches undue importance to his first appearance in Book V, which is a highly compressed rendering of Malory's French original.[53] As Malory begins to stamp his own identity on the material Tristram transforms from a rogue into a respectable country gentleman and the *de facto* husband of Isode, for Mark's legal claim to her is outweighed by his villainy in the minds of onlookers.[54] Tristram and Lancelot become firm friends,

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[52] Maureen Fries, "Malory's Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte Darthur*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 605-613, 606.

[53] All of Tristram's unsavoury actions occur in the book's first pages, including his deception of La Beal Isolde and her father as to the death of Marhalt (384:35-37; viii.8), and his forgetting his oath of love to Isode (392:11-12;viii.12) to take up with Segwarydes' wife, thus beginning the long rivalry with King Mark, who also loves this lady "passyngly welle" (393:15-19;viii.13).

[54] During the Lonezep tournament, Arthur compliments Tristram and Isode on their appearance together, remarking that "mesemyth ye ar well besett togydir" (757:14-17;x.78). This comment may mean more than simply "you are a

rated by their peers as the two best knights for strength, "bounté and of curtesy" (742:23-29;x.72), and Tristram is looked to by lesser knights such as Dinadan as a courteous and much admired knight. Malory's development of Tristram seems to have been influenced by the moralistic English Arthurian tradition, which rendered other French libertines such as Gawain into respectable soldiers, in keeping with Susan Crane's theory that "insular" romances are characterised above all by their ideological acceptability for English audiences. There was an custom, followed by the *Boke of St. Albans* and later writers, of crediting Tristram with considerable expertise in hunting and falconry, and the hero of the metrical romance *Sir Tristrem* is also qualified to criticise the king's minstrels. In a famous passage, Malory praises Tristram as the inventor of "the noble customys of jantylmen" (375:23-29; viii.3), and in a later, emotional moment, he declares that "of sir Trystram cam all the good termys of venery and of huntynge ... that all maner jantylmen hath cause to the worldes ends to prayse sir Trystram and to pray for his soule. AMEN SAYDE SIR THOMAS MALLEORRE" (682-83:54:x.52).[55]

Larry Benson has observed, in light of such passages, that Malory's

good looking couple", for *MED* shows that the phrase "bysett togydir" had matrimonial implications, as illustrated in an example from Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* 189: "She shal noght to any be sette withoutyn leue of my maumette." *OED* gives a similar example: "Organus thought his doughter shold wel be maryed, and wel beset upon hym" (Caxton, *Chron.Eng.* cxi).

[55] See Rachel Hands, ed., *English Hunting and Hawking in the Boke of St. Albans: A Facsimile Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), lx, and *Sir Tristrem*, ed. George P. McNeil (New York: 1966), ll. 293-97, 505-52. Cf. Arthur's speech to Tristram in the *Morte Darthur*, 571:27-32;x.6.

attachment to Tristram is stronger and more sympathetic than to any of his other characters,⁵⁶ a claim I prefer to arguments that Tristram is an anti-hero. Like many other readers of the *Morte Darthur*, Fries tends to judge its characters by how she thinks they should behave, rather than what Malory actually says about them. As we noted above (27-28), the battle between Tristram and Lamerok ends with Tristram's suggestion that they stop before both "sholde here be myscheved". Lamerok first offers to yield to Tristram because of "your renowne and your name", but his opponent declines the surrender, claiming that" I know youre profirs are more of your jantilnes than for ony feare or drede ye have of me". This reaction leads Fries to comment that Tristram's "might is right" approach to chivalry leads him to value "feare" more highly than courtesy,⁵⁷ which is difficult to understand, as Tristram admires the "jantilnes" that first prompted Lamerok to yield, and Lamerok then seems to decline Tristram's offered sword:

> "Nay," seyde sir Lamerok, "I woll do you jantylnes: I requyre
> you, lat us be sworne togydirs that never none of us shall
> aftir thys day have ado with other."
> (483:30-32;ix.11)

Both knights acknowledge the code of "jantilnes" as something which transcends their quest for "worshyp" through the defeat of the other, and it is the ability to do an act of "jantilnes", rather than simply skill at arms, and as we have seen, in Malory's thought makes a knight truly admirable. Malory's understanding of

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⁵⁶ Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, 109-11.

⁵⁷. Maureen Fries, "Malory's Tristram as Counter-Hero", 609.

Tristram was mediated by a tradition which made the character intelligible to a landed English audience. While Tristram begins as a fair unknown at the court of Cornwall, and proves himself, as Gareth did, through adventure, Tristram is throughout Book V a mature figure whose virtues are rooted in his identity as a gentleman.

What confuses some readers of Book V, I believe, is that its hero, unlike Lancelot in Book III, has no clear knightly function. He is depicted primarily as a noble athlete, and as he is never clearly associated with the structure of the Round Table, he appears to be an unconstrained force of appetite and ambition, unless we realise that the unwritten rules of tournament competition are centred upon the quality of "jantilnes". We first acquire a sense of these unwritten rules in an early part of Book V, in which Tristram and Lamerok find themselves on the Ile of Servage, the demesne of the tyrant Nabon, an enemy of King Arthur. Despite their past differences the knights join forces to defeat the tyrant, and enter a tournament called by Nabon. The word "play" occurs frequently in this episode, as in Nabon's invitation to Lamerok "to play his play with hym", and while the rules of the game are unstated, Nabon's killing of Lamerok's horse seems to define a standard of unchivalric conduct.[58] During the tournament at Surluse, Galahalt accidentally kills Palomides' horse and is immediately "ashamed of that stroke" (656:30-31;x.42), offering Palomides his own horse as

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[58] "And there aythir gate a speare, but this sir Nabone wolde nat encountir with sir Lameroke, but smote his horse in the forhede and so slew hym" (444:34-36;viii.39).

compensation. The Saracen acknowledges this offer as an act of "grete goodnes, for ever of a man of wership a knyght shall never have disworshyp" (657:1-2;x.42). Palomides' great envy of Tristram's "worshyp" and his love for Isode lends a schizophrenic aspect to this character, however, for at Lonezep he kills Lancelot's horse, an act which draws immediate and universal condemnation:

> Than was the cry huge and grete, how sir Palomydes the
> Saresyn hath smyttyn downe sir Launcelots horse. Ryght so
> there were many knyghtes wrothe wyth sir Palomydes
> bycause he had done that dede, and helde there ayenste hit,
> and seyde hyt was unknyghtly done in a turnemente to kylle
> an horse wylfully, othir ellys that hit had bene done in
> playne batayle lyff for lyff.
> (759:10-16;x.70)

Tristram also holds firm opinions of what is proper conduct in tournament fighting, as we learn when, at the Castle of Maidens, he sees Sir Persides unhorsed and "allmoste slayne, for mo than forty horsemen wente over hym". In an addition to the French, Malory describes Tristrams' outrage at the incident, for he thinks it "shame that sir Persides was so done to" (523:17-23;ix.30). Tristram's sense of justice and his knowledge of tournament etiquette qualify him for his ongoing role as tutor to the unstable Palomides, a role which culminates in his baptism of the Saracen knight. Lectures such as his rebuke of Palomides at Lonezep for deserting him in a fight are typical of Tristram:

> "A, sir, are ye such a knyght? Ye have be named wronge!
> For ye have ben called ever a jantyll knyght, and as this day
> ye have shewed me grete unjantylnes, for ye had allmoste
> brought me to my dethe."
> (755:1-7;x.77)

The quality of "jantilnes" allows certain knights to recognise such behaviour as unbecoming to a knight, and is apparent in the refusal of envy and a willingness to admire the skill and goodness of others. For example, despite his sardonic manner (considerably muted from the French original) and modesty, Dinadan is widely respected as a "jantyll, wyse, and a good knyght. And in aspeciall syr Trystram loved sir Dynadan passyngly well" (605:18-20;x.20). The same quality leads the better knights to respect each other's achievements as athletes, as we see when, at the end of the Castle of Maidens tournament, it is judged that Lancelot has won the competition, although he voices the opinion it is Tristram who should be declared winner. This selfless deed merely confirms the original opinion, much to Lancelot's displeasure.

> Than all the astatis and degrees, hyghe and lowe, seyde of
> sir Launcelot grete worship for the honoure that he ded to
> sir Trystram, and for the honour doyng by sir Launcelot he
> was at that tyme more praysed and renowmed than and he
> had overthrowyn fyve hondred knyghtes. An all the peple
> hole for hys jantilnes, firste the astatis, hyghe and lowe, and
> after the comynalté, at onys cryed, "Sir Launcelot hath won
> the gre, whosoever sayth nay!"
> (534:4-11;ix.35)

An ability to recognises the identity as well as the deeds of one's companions amidst the press of tournament fighting is important, for as Lancelot advises Arthur. "whan men bene hote in dedis of armys, oftyn hit ys seyne they hurte their frendis as well as their foys" (537:17-18;ix.36). Events at the Castle of Maidens prove this point, for Lancelot himself wounds Tristram "by malefortune" (531:33-34; ix.34), and Dinadan takes pains to avoid his friend Tristram amidst the melee, even after receiving a "buffette" from him (523:34-524:7;ix.30).

Discretion and "jantilnes" are necessary because of the strong emotions which the tournament has the potential to unleash. More than one medieval tournament ended with blood shed in earnest, and Malory's are no exception. Like Maureen Fries, Donald Hoffman identifies the *Tristram* as the point where chivalry in the *Morte* begins to decay, and he identifies the tournament as the "model" and "diagnosis" of the violence which destroys the Round Table.[59] While this observation notes the social tensions inherent in the tournament, it ignores both Malory's own awareness of those tensions and his suggestion that such violence is a moral rather than a social failure. After the competition at the Castle of Maidens the knight Sir Darras imprisons Tristram for his role in the death and injury of his sons there. At a later tournament, Gawain and his brothers have their "grete dedis of armys" eclipsed by Lamerok, who unhorses them all, and primarily for this reason they begin the plot which leads to Lamerok's murder (608:6-24:x.21). The hatred of the royal nephews for Lamerok is recognised by Lancelot, who warns Arthur to intervene. While the King promises to prevent this feud from continuing (613:13-25;x.24), his own impartiality seems suspect when he is incensed by the defeat of his nephews at the hands of Palomides, thinking it "a grete dispyte that suche a Saryson shall smyte downe my blood" (663:7-8;x.46).

As was the case in fifteenth-century England, formal justice in the *Morte* is unable to extricate itself from the ties of blood and affinity, and Arthur is

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[59] Donald L. Hoffman, "The Conflict From Within: The 'Timeliness' of Malory," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 7 (1983): 179-202.

ultimately unable to prevent the death of good knights such as Lamerok. Malory
however does not look to Arthur as a source of authority in this case, and
suggests instead that the curtailment of blood feuds is a matter of moral
initiative on the part of those concerned. Thus, although his kinsmen want
Tristram's life in return for their injuries Darras "wolde nat suffre that" (540:23-
27;ix.37), and eventually recognises that Tristram acted through "fors of
knyghthode", and not by "treson other trechory" (552:7-28;ix.40). Tristram
himself recognises the power of blood ties when he peacefully resolves a fight
with Lancelot's kinsman Balmoure, and the two swear never to fight each other
or their relations again, so that "for that jantyll batayle all the bloode of sir
Launcelott loved sir Trystrames for ever" (411:3-7;viii.23). Lancelot also acts to
suppress envy and the desire for vengeance within his own retinue, for after
learning that his kinsmen plan to kill Tristram to preserve their lord's reputation
he angrily rebukes them:

> "Wyte you well that and ony of you all be so hardy to wayte
> my lorde sir Trystram wyth ony hurte, shame, or vylany, as
> I am trew knyght, I shall sle the beste of you all myne owne
> hondis. Alas, fye for shame, sholde ye for his noble dedys
> awayte to sle hym! Jesu defende," seyde sir Launcelot, "that
> ever ony noble knyght as sir Trystram ys sholde be destroyed
> wyth treson."
>
> (785:6-12:x.88)

While an effective example of the theme of this book, by Books VII and
VIII the attractive characters of the *Tristram* -- Tristram, Lamerok, Dinadan,
Alexander -- are dead and the ties of kin and honour prove stronger than noble
sentiments and the mutual admiration of chivalric virtue, as Gawain, Arthur, and

Lancelot discover. While there are still gestures of "jantilness", such as Lancelot's decision to spare the defenceless Arthur (1192:20-33;xx.13), the spirit of these last books is truly elegiac and retrospective, the catastrophe irretrievable. For the achievement of these last two books Malory can deservedly be called a tragedian, but the ending of the *Morte Darthur* is foreign in spirit of Books I to V. These earlier books are almost unreservedly optimistic, and infused with the spirit of possibility and energy which of the *bel inconnu* romance. Balin and Tor, Gareth and Tristram, are not present for the tragic conclusion of the *Morte Darthur* for which Malory is best known, but they evidently captured Malory's imagination in turn as figures which embodied the aspirations and values of his class. Like other English romancers, Malory instinctually tempered the successes of these characters with the ideological safeguards of the nobility myth. Malory's social theory -- "For he that jantyll is woll drawe hym to jantyll tacchis and to folow the noble customys of jantylmen" (375:12-29;viii.3) – is heartfelt and striking in its simplicity and orthodoxy, yet it is a peculiar feature of the *Morte Darthur*, and perhaps of English society in this period, that this theory seems to encourage advancement rather than to restrict it.

Conclusion

There is a fanciful engraving by Doré, *Don Quixote in His Library*, in which the Don is depicted declaiming from a book of romance held in one hand, and waving a sword above his head with the other, while the shadows around him teem with the creations of his reading; damsels are being frightened by ogrish villains, while knights mounted on mice joust together.[1] It has more than once occurred to me that if one wanted an emblem for the "author function" which is Sir Thomas Malory, particularly for the Malory created by scholarship of the first half of this century, this picture would serve splendidly.

Few would claim that Malory was a writer in any way similar to Cervantes, or that he was even psychologically capable of parody, but the Malory of scholarship has more than a passing resemblance to Cervantes' hero, an old man lamenting the passing of an idealised age. This view doubtless has sentimental appeal, and depends in large part upon the assumption that Malory was reacting to the decline of chivalry and to what Huizinga called the "violent tenor" of late-medieval life. Unfortunately this view became increasingly incompatible with the violent tenor of the life of the principal authorial candidate. In the past thirty years, however, renewed interest in the relationship of literature to history and culture, what Richard Green calls the "social matrix" of texts, has thankfully led

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[1] Edmund Ollier, ed., *Cassel's Doré Gallery*, pl. 103.

Malory studies away from the "moral paradox" debate. The inspiration for the method of this thesis is owing in large part to the work of Benson, Kennedy, Merrill and Riddy, although I have ventured two broad objections to their attempts to understand Malory better within this social matrix. The first of these concerns the enduring assumption that Malory's work is essentially retrospective, that it views its age with alarm and regret, and therefore offers the ideals of chivalry as a basis for social and political reform. Merrill's theory, which reverses this position and sees the *Morte Darthur* as an analysis of a system that is no longer socially or morally coherent, is in my view also inaccurate. My second objection is to discussions of Malory's point of view as "aristocratic" a term which implies that the nobility of late-medieval England were a homogeneous group with a unified outlook on the nature and definition of their gentility.

The alternative to author-centred studies, as Foucault suggests, is that we look instead at the "modes of existence" of texts, considering their circulation, controlling influences, and most importantly the ways is which readers are shaped by texts, factors which are all included in Foucault's understanding of literature as a "discursive practice". In attempting to understand the "modes of existence" of the *Morte Darthur*, much of this project has been based upon the hypothesis that the discovery of a single individual who could be proven to have been the author, desirable as this prospect may be, may not necessarily advance our understanding of the work itself. Even Chaucer scholarship, with its enviable amount of knowledge concerning the life of its subject, is not in agreement as to the validity and usefulness of biographical criticism, while many

less well-documented medieval authors remain little more than cyphers. It has seemed to me that we can learn more from understanding the *Morte Darthur* as part of a larger dialogue, by listening to the voice speaking as narrator and through its characters to its readers, and by asking what possibilities it offers to those readers, or in Foucault's words, "What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects".[2] My study of the gentry has impressed me with the diversity and energy of romance's principal readership in this period, and has led me to see numerous connections between the *Morte* and other texts favoured by this class, in which the hero's self-advancement is central to the structure of the narrative and to the subject positions offered by it.

As I have argued, it has proved helpful to see these connections in terms of the gentry's relationship to a system of power and exclusion in which gentility served an ideological function as the justification of that privilege as the reward of virtue. This approach has seemed to me to be a useful amendment to the conventional view of Malory as the traditional spokesman of the established order, of institutions such as chivalry and feudalism, for as we have seen, the former is defined largely in terms of courtesy and gentleness, while the latter is almost non-existent as a force in his work. In defining Malory as a "gentry writer" I hope that I have not replaced one author function with another, or to have suggested that his text be read simply as concerning the situation of the fifteenth century gentry. In this respect I have been mindful of H.D.F. Kitto's

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[2] Michel Foucault, "What Is An Author", 160.

scorn for the historically minded critics who once suggested that the Danish
succession as discussed in *Hamlet* 1.2 could be understood in terms of English
constitutional law.

> If "statists" and other clever men in the audience could not,
> with Shakespeare, escape from contemporary London, but
> turned [the scene] into a meeting of the Privy Council and
> thereby found it obvious that Hamlet had been illegally, or
> by a trick, cheated of the succession, and that therefore he
> was smarting with indignation against the Usurper, and that
> it was for this reason that Claudius did not want Hamlet to
> leave Denmark, if the statists did this ... it was their own
> look out; Shakespeare was not asking them to do it.[3]

With Malory, however, the proximity of the gentry to power, and their exclusion
from its highest circles, has seemed useful in explaining the curious and
conflicting presence in the *Morte* of the young upstarts who make good, and the
strongly conservative strain which has always seemed characteristic of Malory.

The term "gentry writer" is to a certain extent unsatisfactory in that it
implies a unity among the gentry which belies the division between the *arrivistes*
and *novi homines* on the one hand and old and established families on the other.
Malory's tone strongly suggests affinity with the latter group, not only because
of his reference to his readers as "jantyllmen that bereth olde armes" (375:23-
24;viii.3), but through his fearful depictions of the chaos inherent in unrestricted
ambition and advancement. We see this fear in Malory's account of the days
following the death of Uther, when "stood the reame in grete jeopary long whyle,
for every lord that was myghty of men maade hym stronge, and many wende to

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[3] H.D.F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London: Methuen: 1956), 258-59.

have ben kyng" (12:11-13;i.5). Here the enemies of order are the rapacious barons, but elsewhere the threatening figures are villains in both sense of the word, including the archers and the surly carter who impede Lancelot's progress towards Mellyagaunt's castle (1125-26;xix.4), or the traitors supporting Morderd "that kynge Arthur had brought up of nought, and gyffyn them londis, that myght nat than say hym a good worde" (1229:3-5;xxi.1). With the latter group, whose disloyalty is underlined by their ingratitude to Arthur, there is the implicit suggestion that such is the result when unworthy men and commoners are elevated above their stations, and this suggestion is most clearly embodied in the killers of King Harmaunce, who Palomides avenges in Book V.

This brief tale reflects an enduring English fear of the king's vulnerability to the influence of bad councillors such as Piers Gaveston and Alice Perrers, and in this case that fear is heightened by the spectre of the rebellious commons, no doubt reminding readers of accounts of the Peasants' Revolt of the previous century, or, of Jack Cade's revolt of 1450. Malory exaggerates this sense of outrage and social disruption by comparing the late king to his murderers in terms drawn from estates theory: Harmaunce is remembered by his vassal Ebell for his "goodnes and jantyll demeanys", and for his enjoyment of "all justynge, huntyng and all maner of knyghtly gamys" (711:24-33;x.61). As with the description of Persaunte, who with his men loves to "juste and to tornay" (311:18-23;vii.11), or Malory's praise for Tristram for inventing the pursuits of gentlemen (375:12-29;viii.3), there is the clear suggestion, as Derek Brewer observes, that "Since the capacity to learn such skills is inherited, ... connectedness with

ancestors is demonstrated," with the result that "the class is set off against other inferior classes, and is morally noble by implication".[4] In contrast, Harmaunce's killers are commoners and foster-children, denied the near-magical properties of the king's "owne bloode", and are therefore naturally inclined to being "false" and "dysseyvable" (712:9-19:x.61). The lesson drawn by Ebell is couched in the language of proverbial wisdom, and is one of those frequent occasions in Malory where the gravity and certainty of a character's utterance suggests the full weight of authorial approval.

> "And as ever hit is an olde sawe. 'Gyeff a chorle rule and
> thereby he woll nat be suffysed', for whatsomever he be that
> is rewled by a vylayne borne, and the lorde of the soyle be
> a jantylman born, that same vylayne shall destroy all the
> jeauntylmen aboute hym."
>   (712:23-27:x.61)

The tone of this comment is absolute and uncompromising: the death of Harmaunce is a crime that cannot go unpunished, and the imperative to restore social order is very strong in this tale, a salutary reminder of the ultimate conservatism of Malory's sympathies. The fifteenth century was, as DuBoulay has aptly described it, an age of ambition, and it is highly unlikely that Malory would have viewed the social mobility of his day with favour. Rather than representing the self-made men of his day, it is far more likely that the impecunious and obscure knights who play a surprisingly prominent role in the

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[4] Derek Brewer, "Malory: The Traditional Writer and the Archaic Mind" in *Arthurian Literature I*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer), 103.

Morte Darthur mirror the plight of the older gentry families who were feeling pressure from below as well as from above. P.J.C. Field has noted that in 1445, when the Warwickshire Malory was an MP for his county, his actual income was about half of the stipulated qualification of £40:

> If he had said that he was qualified because he was a notable knight, who had followed his lord to the wars, came of an ancient family, and bore a coat of arms, there would still have been those who replied that according to the custom now made law he should never have been a knight at all. It is not surprising that the *Morte Darthur* shows more often than most romances an awareness of financial insecurity and its consequences ...[5]

Field's recognition that the *Morte* defines its world in terms of power and exclusion, even within the charmed circle of Arthurian chivalry, has not been stated enough in Malory studies. The image of Balin, who holds back at court because "he was poore and porly arayde", may well have an autobiographical basis, as Field suggests, but more important, though, is the mention that Balin "was fully assured to do as well as if hys grace happed hym as any knyght there was", for this very individualistic understanding of honour and identity as the expression of personal worth through good conduct is central to my term of "gentleman hero".

The Malorian heroes studied in this thesis may be considered literary cousins to the heroes of other Middle English romances discussed above, for the

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[5] P.J.C. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory MP", *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 47 (1974): 27-28.

reflects the ambivalent place of the gentry within the English nobility, while the success of these heroes is made ideologically intelligible as it is couched in terms of the nobility myth, a process very similar to the patents of arms which often set the seal of virtue and the mystique of heraldry upon a career of material success. In Malory the nobility myth is more coherent and more conservative than is often seen in romances such as *Percival of Galles* or *Lybeaus Desconus*, in which the revelation of the hero's gentility is as convincing as is the discovery that Gilbert and Sullivan's pirates "are no members of the common throng./ They are all noblemen who have done wrong". The success of Malory's "poure" heroes is consistently explained in terms of the active expression of their virtue, linking them with the mature exemplars of "jantylnes" and "corteyse" such as Tristram and Lancelot, in keeping with what Brewer calls the "connectedness" of the noble class. The public acclamation of Lancelot "for hys jantilness" after he declines the prize of a tournament in favour of Tristram (534:09;ix.35) is the same quality which Lancelot admires in the young Gareth, and which leads Lancelot to show the young man the same courtesy during the Assumption Day tournament (348:32-349:8;vii.29). Perhaps it is Lancelot, and not Gareth or Tristram, who dominate the imagination of the work as a whole, and certainly Ector's threnody seems to reveal that Malory himself was most drawn to this character, but as Lamerok says of Fair Unknowns, "evyn suche one was sir Launcelot whan he cam fyrst into this courte, and full fewe of us knewe from whens he cam" (459:31-33;ix.1).

The quality of "jantylnes" is therefore ultimately dependent on the great

The quality of "jantylnes" is therefore ultimately dependent on the great lords of the *Morte Darthur*, but is not exclusive to them, and therefore Malory's understanding of it resembles that of the courtesy books, which suggest that a gentleman can be born as well as made. The contradiction inherent in this understanding of gentility, or in the success of the fair unknown on the one hand and the fear and abhorrence of the "chorle" on the other, is the same contradiction which we see in the Pastons' disapproval of Margery's wedding to Richard Calle, whom her brothers, the descendants of husbandmen, regarded as a vulgar shopkeeper.

Certainly the explanation of gentility in the *Morte Darthur*, couched as it is in the imaginary of romance, is more attractive than the gentility evinced in the *Paston Letters*, which largely consists of spurious genealogies and muttered slurs against neighbours. For this reason the world of the Pastons has been considered too mundane and too violent to merit comparison to the world of romance, and doubtless the same could be said of the world of the Thomas Malory who wrote our text. In her essay on the Pastons' understanding of honour, Philippa Maddern writes that "Archetypal chivalry was clearly so remote from the experience of provincial gentlemen in the fifteenth century that its associations were all with the legendary past",[c] although as we have seen, chivalry for the gentry was not understood experientially so much as it was drawn upon as a body of secular ethics and philosophy which helped to define the aristocratic

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[c] "Honour Among the Pastons", *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988): 364.

identity. The 1460 letter of one Osbert Mundeford to John Paston I, in which he asks to be remembered to the children and especially to *mon petit homme d'armes,*[7] is thus a playful expression of this desire for identity which by the fifteenth century had become the most practical application of chivalry.

It would be intriguing to know what Malory would have thought of the Paston family. Until the late 1460's, when their acquisition of the Fastolf properties was beginning to seem overweening and possibly even disastrous, the Pastons were a family on the way up, whereas from his explicits and his sad address to readers of "olde armes" one gathers that Malory was on the way down, and that he might have included the Pastons amongst the *novi homines* who he felt were responsible for the erosion threatening older families such as his own. It is equally possible, however, that his grievance towards great lords, especially given the colourful history of the Warwickshire man, may well have mirrored those of the Pastons in their struggles to build a power base. One can well imagine Sir John II, who has more than once been suggested as a reader of the *Morte Darthur,* drawing inspiration from its upstart heroes in his own battles with the county establishment.

Barring further revelations concerning the exact readership and author of the Winchester manuscript and its antecedent, speculations such as these must remain speculation, but as we learn more about the place of the gentry in the late middle ages, and about the ideological function of romance and its

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[7] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 1:208.

obsolete evocation of a previous age, the *Morte Darthur* enjoyed a far greater immediacy in the lives of country gentlemen and their families than has previously been suspected.

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