

# *When Malory Met Arthur*



**Jack Fritscher, Ph.D.**

## Also by Jack Fritscher

### Fiction

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*Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley and  
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Drummer Magazine*, 2008

### Photography Book

- Jack Fritscher's American Men*, London, UK, 1995

# **Women and Magic in King Arthur's Camelot**

**A Textual Investigation of  
Religion and the Supernatural in  
Malory's *Morte Darthur***

**Jack Fritscher, Ph.D.**  
(John J. Fritscher, Ph.D.)



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## Preface

As literary artist, Sir Thomas Malory was nothing if not judiciously persevering. His virtue as *litterateur* far excelling his rapacious, now legendary, career provides fair enough credential of his own prime virtue of artistic stability. Confronted with reams of intransigent source material from books he had not always at hand, Malory successfully tread his way through the maze: he always kept his hand on some purposeful string that could lead him from adaptive beginning to creative end.

Malory's *Morte Darthur*, if one line of many might be pursued through the text, appears a novel of religious education. "Ever since Malory's time poets and critics have regarded the *Morte Darthur* as a means of moral and spiritual perfection."<sup>1</sup> While latterly, particularly with Eugene Vinaver, disagreement on this point has arisen, the statement can nevertheless be textually substantiated that the *Morte Darthur* is an educative novel, in the widest sense religious.

In the educative novel, the protagonist learns a lesson. Sophocles' Oedipus and Marlowe's Faustus are educated heroes in this sense. Protagonists in Malory similarly arrive at a certain knowledge of individual salvation, thus extending the Horatian *prodesse et delectare*; for in the *Morte* the protagonists learn their lessons while the reader is himself instructed by and through his delight in their learning.

Vinaver in 1929 believed that Malory was concerned by no reunion of the knightly and monastic ideals of service,

1 Eugene Vinaver, *Malory* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1929), p. 68; hereafter cited as Vinaver, *Malory*.

love, and sacrifice. What he advocated were the comfortable virtues of a righteous gentleman who “does after the good and leaves the evil,” but whose spiritual attainments are limited to social discipline and gentle manners.<sup>2</sup>

While Malory may indeed be writing a courtesy book as much the vogue as *The Courtier* or *The Governour*, he is writing more than the authors of the customary courtesy books. He writes a Christian gentleman’s guide. (For grace builds on nature.) He covers all the chivalric bases; yet does more. He is indirect social critic of his England, talking of “love nowadays”; yet he is more. William Caxton thought Malory didactic and moral,<sup>3</sup> yet begrudged him the vivid depictions of sin and bawdry, warning the readers of his edition to “Doo after the good and leve the evyl.” He recapitulates

...al is wryton for our doctryne, and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne, but t’exersyse and follow vertu by whyche we may come...unto everlastyng blysse in heven....<sup>4</sup>

Caxton thus gives the book great moral worth, all the more creditable a judgment for being contemporary with Malory’s own religious-psychological orientation, peculiar to its time. The medieval mind held to essentially a group-institutional identity. In contradistinction, the modern

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2 Vinaver, *Malory*, p. 69; H.O. Sommer claims great didactic influence of Malory on Elizabeth’s Englishmen in his *Le Morte Darthur by Syr Thomas Malory*, p. xix; hereafter cited as Sommer.

3 “I...enpnynte...that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the jentyll and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used...and how they that were vicious were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke...” William Caxton, “Preface to *Morte Darthur*, in Eugene Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xvii references to the Preface hereafter cited as Caxton.

Citations from Malory’s text will be taken throughout from this edition of Vinaver, *Malory: Works*. To ease the reader’s eye, page numbers will be parenthetically included immediately following the textual quotation.

4 Caxton, p. xvii-xviii.



mind has sought the identity of the individual existential. Malory, by peculiar happenstance, wrote within the precise band of historical transition. Thus Malory's protagonists receive education, and it is the education of the individual to personal salvation both by and out of the institution in which he discovers himself.

Hardly more than pedestrian in particular stylistic metaphor patterns, Malory nevertheless is product enough of his medieval age to partake of its comprehensiveness. He sees not only the literal meaning of life but also the general symbolic metaphor that underlies all for the genuine medievalist. Thus Jean Misrahi says, "One cardinal principle of the symbolic interpreters of medieval romance is that we modern readers have lost the key to the symbolic intellectual background of the medieval mind, so that we detect no symbolic meanings where medieval audiences grasped them immediately..."<sup>5</sup> Thus Malory's broadly metaphorical artistic sense (the form) couples with the "constant medieval sense of religion, of man in relation to God, to good, and to evil"<sup>6</sup> (the matter) to produce an organically functional work of moral edification and delightful reading.<sup>7</sup>

Vinaver seems overly simplistic in his literal reading of social discipline and gentle manners. Malory was no mere Dale Carnegie. The complicating fact is Vinaver is correct but goes not far enough. He minimizes the socio-moral tension involved between the gentlemanly seductions of *fin*

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5 Jean Misrahi, "Symbolism and Allegory in Arthurian Romance," *Romance Philology*, XVII (February 3, 1964), 557.

6 Wilfred L. Guerin. *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of the Morte Darthur*, ed. R.M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 269; hereafter cited as *Malory's Originality*.

7 *The Morte Darthur* "was evidently called forth by the author's anxiety regarding conditions in England in his own day, and was intended to be influential for good and not merely entertaining them." Willam H. Schofield, *Chivalry in English Literature: Chaucer, Malory, Spenser, and Shakespeare* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1912), p. 75.

*amour* and the hortative Christian respect for women ideally permeating Malory's contemporary Christian society. The point is that a society functioning on a basically metaphorical level sees social discipline and gentle manners as etiquette, indeed, and more than etiquette.

Religion, therefore, cannot be reduced to mean the life of the cloister as opposed to the life of the world. Malory's knights are

to go on being knights..., just as the soldiers who came to the Baptist were told to go on being soldiers. (Luke iii. 14) Malory in fact holds the same view as Langland and Gower and many other English medieval moralists. No man need leave the order to which he has been called.<sup>8</sup>

The literal life of the aristocracy will and must continue while on a deeper level this literal life is exemplum of a higher metaphorical truth negotiable in a society whose theology benevolently dominated the arts. Thus religion includes, complementary of its requirement for belief in a divine power, the ritual response of worship, the ethical response of socio-moral relationships, and oftentimes a well-defined philosophy. The interacting compatibility of these elements finds operational, but often paradoxical, expression in the Christian social counsel to be in the world but not of it. The "being in" is certainly literal; the "not being of it" implies a religious-moral transcendence of the literal which transcendence can best be expressed in art by metaphor.

In this way Malory, who at first seems a highly literal man, employs a highly pervasive religious metaphor. The medieval society was this-worldly; but behind this world, lay the other world and its eternal reward. Always unseen, this other world required and received confirmation of existence

<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewi, *Essays on Malory*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 1043; hereafter cited as *Essays on Malory*.

through artistic metaphor not only in literature, but in the sister arts. Malory created his Round Table society in an era that accepted “the historicity of original sin and the reality of the seven deadly sins.”<sup>9</sup> Though Alfred Lord Tennyson and Lytton Strachey may be excused for their Victorian distraction from the Malorian ethic, there is little pardon for Ascham, closer in time to Malory, for his very unmetaphorical antipathy against “open manslaughter and bold bawdry.” Ascham should have perceived in the broad Malorian metaphor that as much as was chivalry “the outward and temporal expression of inner and timeless values”<sup>10</sup> so also were chivalry’s attendant vices of murder and adultery obverse and temporal metaphors for the consequences of a much believed-in ruined Eden.

Malory, in short, uses the tangibles believable to his reading public as broad metaphor for the intangibles he values religiously, both in doctrine and works. All this Malory constructs to the end that Man Fallen lives in a state of paradox. From paradox grows the tension, the instability characteristic of fallen man. It is ultimately an adder (867) that causes the nervous drawing of the unstable sword that begins Adam-Arthur’s last battle and destroys, serpentine, the Eden of his Camelot.

Thus Malory can be construed as a metaphorical writer; he is not a religious writer of theological tracts; he is a writer whose metaphorical coin partakes of the peculiar psychological currency of his time. *The Old Man and the Sea* is not simply a sports story; so also is the *Morte Darthur* not simply a romance of knightly adventure. Malory seeks to portray his knights and ladies as persons with inner struggles<sup>11</sup> which

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9 Guerin, *Malory’s Originality*, p. 271.

10 P. E. Tucker, *Essays on Malory*, p. 103.

11 Charles Moorman, *The Book of King Arthur: The Unity of Malory’s Morte Arthur* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 88; Moorman here cites Guerin whose line of argument can be traced back to Vida Scudder.

make them grow to knowledge. His psychological empathy with his characters (and religious attitudes and values seem to be a matter of psychology) allows him a certain educative equation: "For Malory...there is no essential incompatibility between the values of Christianity and those of...secular Christian knighthood [and manners; the only failure is the]...failure to maintain normal Christian morality."<sup>12</sup>

And it is in this continual moral (that is, religious) concern that Malory enunciates for the evolving Christianity of his time. He maintains a narrative of courtly values, but makes them metaphorically transcendent so that ultimately the individuals can learn their own lessons of moral independence, leaving the failing court institution behind.

Than sir Bedwere cryed and seyde,

"A, my lorde Arthur, what shall becom of me, now ye go frome me and leve me here alone among myne enemyes?" (871)

To this cry of a minor character who sees the long warm security of his institution slipping from him, the departing Arthur counsels in his very last words the lesson of individual moral responsibility necessarily learned by each major protagonist who finds personal salvation the while the social institution of the Round Table founders to complete ruin:

"Comfort thyselff," seyde the kynge, "and do as well as thou mayste, for in me ys no truste for to truste in....Pray for my soule!" (871)

Thus pragmatic is Malory's English Christianity; and its pragmatism is quintessentially transitional. It is no longer the literally hortatory medieval tract; the indirect sophistication

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Hereafter this work of Moorman's will be cited as: Moorman, *Unity*.

12 D.S. Brewer, *Essays on Malory*, p. 58.

of metaphor marks it more modern in psychological tone and educative atmosphere. Arthur, the person in whom the institution has abided, draws down with him the last vestige of his institution, advocating to Sir Bedwere a personal survival more than physical; survival is to be moral in doing “as well as thou mayste.” In this sense Malory is no religious simplicitist whose fundamentalism consisted in simply chastening his sources’ bawdry and magic;<sup>13</sup> he is rather the integral artist penning life and more than life, literally and metaphorically opting for the individual’s personal moral responsibility above and beyond any institution of church, court, or family. Somehow, somewhere Malory had penetrated the lovely medieval fallacy of group salvation; his educative novel sees institutional unity to be necessarily exchanged for a salvific “isolation” of person. Institutions, to select an example, can help and ease any dying; but the individual, alone, makes the passage.

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13 Although the majority of Arthurian critics generally equate *supernatural* with *supranatural*, this paper, for precision’s sake, will make the following distinction: *supranatural* will be used for all instances of magic and the occult; *supernatural* will be reserved to matters of Christian Deity and traditionally accepted forms of Christian theology.



## *Ad Rem: A Brief Critical Digest*

To place the text, the prime consideration, in proper perspective, a brief summary of scholarly positions may help clarify a basic critical debate concerning Malory's secular or religious intent in constructing his prose work, *Morte Darthur*. The camps are basically two: the literal secularization in the texts of Vinaver versus the organic literary theology of Charles Moorman and Robert Lumiansky. The chain shot for both are the sources, but they aim to a difference of Malorian textual conclusion.

General agreement on the sources has been established by Vinaver's extensive investigation of fifteenth-century French Arthurian texts. His conclusion is that Malory's immediate French source has lost identification; he projects, however, that the prose cycle of the thirteenth century "had a *Merlin*, a *Suite de Merlin* or *Livre d'Artus*...a *Lancelot*..., possibly a *Gareth*, a *Tristan*, a *Queste del Saint Graal*, a *Mort Artu*....<sup>1</sup> At any event, Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Anglo Norman Wace had secured the Arthurian materials in early form; the lyrics of Chretien de Troyes injected the Aquitainian courtly love element; and the Cistercian writers detailed the Grail story into a barely digestible theological tract streaming a trail of thickset allegory.

These writers used the Arthurian material as a vehicle. Geoffrey, for instance, wanted to be remembered as authentic historian; the Cistercians had their theological disputations. It remained for Malory to make the Arthurian material more

1 E.K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 189.

than quasi-historic and apologetic material. It remained for Malory to make it literature and to ground the narrative dimensionally in a hearty metaphor.

Vinaver sees Malory very much a modern in sympathy and idiosyncrasy: "For the medieval courtly idealism he [Malory] attempts to substitute the philosophy of a practical and righteous fifteenth-century gentleman; and where the French romantic writers seek to set forth an ideal remote from reality he sees but a moral doctrine to be followed by all those who desire honor...in this world."<sup>2</sup> But once again Vinaver goes not far enough in allowing to Malory only a moral system that is this-worldly. As a result Vinaver finds Malory to have written an interesting secular pageant with no integrated religious, that is transcendent, motif. The Grail exists as no mystic symbol; Galahad's birth is no "act of redemption and purification," but is "an ordinary event in family life."<sup>3</sup> F. Whitehead agrees with Vinaver that to treat *Morte Darthur* "as though it were an improving religious work, as though it discussed courtly morality in the light of the doctrine of the Grail, or even as though it showed the world and its vain joys dissolving into nothingness...[is] to place emphasis where Malory has resolutely refused to put it."<sup>4</sup>

Moorman in contradistinction to Vinaver believes that Malory did indeed understand the French *Queste*. He agrees with Vinaver that Malory made extensive cuts. But unlike Vinaver, who oversimplifies that Malory's excisions from the *Queste* form in themselves a tidy theological treatise and that the passages were omitted because Malory had small concern for the religious implications of the *Queste*, Moorman maintains that Malory works always to cut away all unnecessary material be it religious or secular. The key

2 Vinaver, *Malory*, p. 109.

3 Vinaver, *Malory*, p. 83.

4 F. Whitehead, *Essays on Malory*, p. 112.



word is *unnecessary*. Thus in summarizing, especially his homiletic excisions, Malory “always preserves the core of the French books’ doctrinal statements, no matter how great his deletions.”<sup>5</sup> Malory is not therefore trying to secularize his sources, but only to make them tractable out of their vast intransigence. He uses or omits according to what is necessary or unnecessary for the overall plan of his Arthurian cycle: his constant pattern is to adapt and create material specific and thematically relevant to his narrative.

If Malory were a Vinaverian secularist one could hardly explain away the instances in which he adds to the religious content through supernatural additions. Twice, for instance, the voice commanding Galahad is depicted as supernatural in order to heighten both the spiritual authority of the command and Galahad’s own religious characterization. In the French source Galahad’s commands had been voiced by mere mortals. In addition, Lancelot’s highest test of religious faith and stature is in the episode, original with Malory, of the supernatural healing of the slain knight Urry.

Vinaver, however, may have called attention to an essential characteristic of Malory’s mind in stressing a secularizing tendency, but one must interpret this. Malory does not secularize so much the genuinely supernatural as he does the merely pietistic and homiletic. He does not so much reject religion as tone down any highly esoteric mysticism. There is a difference. The while he may have enjoyed “little of the theological subtlety of the French source...he by no means shared the [highly specified] pre-occupation of the French monastic author.”<sup>6</sup> The point is he condensed the theological debates while adding points of his own to the total effect that

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5 Charles Moorman, “Malory’s Treatment of the Sankgreal,” *PMLA*, LXXI (1956), 498; hereafter cited as Moorman, *PMLA*.

6 Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry: Studies in the Decline and Transformation of Chivalric Idealism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 53; hereafter cited as Feruuson.

the balanced critic must admit that Malory, recognizing the importance of the socio-moral religious code, had a genuine theological consciousness as far removed from secularism as genuine piety is from pietism. All this in a work not meant to be a two-penny catechism.

Therefore in his cultural tradition Malory necessarily saw human life as primarily an ethical problem of normal Christian morality. The Middle Ages more than modern times lived hyper-consciously at a point of Christian paradox. Malory resolved the resulting tension with a fine distinction; one must accept the “relative unattainability of the best without becoming dissatisfied with the good.”<sup>7</sup> This is the difference between his Galahad and his Lancelot, and it is the lesson both his characters and his fifteenth-century readers received. Perhaps it was his English practicality that enabled Malory to temper, beneath essentially the same narrative, the extremes of his sources into a balanced bedside book for the aristocratic reader.

Malory and his artist’s mind, conditioned by his time—one of transition from simple theological to psychological respect for man—effected in his art a statement of this very transition; for out of psychological respect for the reader, Malory made rather subliminal but quite pervasive the theology of his *Morte Darthur*. All this in a work meant to be literature.

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7 Ferguson, p. 54.

## When Malory Met Arthur

Just as the map is not the ground, so is critical furore once-removed from the reality of the text; and it is in the text, not in the critics, that Malory finds his sprawling immortality, although *sprawling* is relatively the wrong word for a man who reduced volumes of material to compact though lengthy digest. For Malory was an artist who worked steadily, albeit never shyly, in the spirit of those medieval carvers who so fondly sculpted the undersides of choir seats. Like them he knew constantly the whole cathedral was, simply, there, and that his artistic effect would be, ultimately, cumulative.

Thus while primarily interested in the Arthurian narrative, given the orientation of his times, Malory could not seriously work with such literal material without, at least in his artistic subconscious, being aware of the whole metaphorical response his plot and motifs were likely to elicit. In other words, Malory, writing a tale essentially about the destruction wrought by two warring families, participated, centuries before the explication, in the Jungian esthetic which maintains that certain recurrent, humanly experienced, themes or archetypes may evoke a response from the unconscious that cannot be otherwise evoked. The family in Malory is such an archetype.

The family or clan has been, from Eden on, the basic unit of society; when the family suffers a failure of stability, society suffers by implication. In Malory's social order which believed in the historicity of original sin it is, therefore, small wonder that the failure of Eden's first family should

be general paradigm: betrayal of husband by wife, murder of brother by brother. Thus Malory deals with two types of family: the literal families of Arthur, Orkeney, Pellinore, and Lancelot; and the socio-spiritual family, the analogous mystical body, the Round Table society. Thus in his plotting Malory demonstrates how the internecine strife of the private families spills over to destroy the social family of the Round Table in a spiritual Armageddon. Bors will finally have a dream revealing King Arthur Pendragon as destroyed *pater-familias*: he sees a dragon

and there semyd to hym that there were lettyrs off golde wrytyn in hys forhede, and sir Bors thought that the lettyrs made a sygnfyfacion of “kynge Arthur.” And ryght so there cam an orryble lybarde and an olde, and there they faught longe and ded grete batayle togydys. And at the laste the dragon spytte oute of hys mowthe as hit had bene an hundred dragons; and lyghtly all the small dragons slew the olde dragon and tore hym all to pecys. (590)

Arthur, born of Uther and Igraine, has three sisters: Elaine, Morgan la Fay, and Morgause, the latter his half-sister upon whom he begets Mordred and by whom his family is related to King Lott of Orkeney. When Morgan gives her lover Accolon Arthur’s magic scabbard, she creates a family antipathy that lasts until she comes in solemn state to carry Arthur to Avalon. The House of Orkeney, to which Arthur is related fraternally and incestuously, has as head King Lott, whose sons—besides the putative Mordred, whose incestuous conception Lott always resented—are Gawayne, Gaheris, Aggravayne, and Gareth. It is this family of Orkeney (so closely related to Arthur) that feuds with the family of King Pellinore, whose sons are Lamorak, Torre, Aglovale, and Perceval. The *Morte Darthur* as a whole exemplifies the blood

feud of these two families, demonstrating quite effectively that murder, and not adultery, in the economy of this society is the greatest sin.

The murder of Gareth by Lancelot, though accidental, provided Aggravayne and Mordred occasion for slanderous vengeance, motivated by perverse family loyalty, against the lover Lancelot and his paramour Gwenevere, Arthur's wife. Gawayne likewise overzealous with loyalty to his particular family brings utter ruin and destruction on the Edenic family of Camelot. Thus while the houses of Arthur, Orkeney, and Pellinore provide the tensions for the archetypal strife, Lancelot's pedigree needs establishment for additional reasons relative to the specifically religious dimensions of the tale.

Lancelot's family, intermixed so well with the political families, has apocryphal base used to literary end. It is Lancelot's son, Galahad, who pursues most completely the Grail quest in which all the political family engage. Galahad's advantage is that, back through Lancelot, King Ban, and Pelleus the Maimed King (whose cousin is Joseph of Arimathea), back through nine generations, he is in direct line of descent from Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> This justifies on an apocryphal as well as literary level Malory's rather explicit identification of Galahad as a Christ-figure. (651)

Arthur, as anointed king, is more than head of a political clan; he is perceptive priest-king, *pater-familias*, for whom the greatest moral good is the preservation of the spiritual family of the Round Table even at the expense of personal familial face. For the good of his kingdom Arthur is long able to overlook his wife's adultery;<sup>2</sup> when at last slander

1 "For sir Launcelot ys com but of the eyghth degré from oure Lorde Jesu Cryst, and thys sir Galahad ys th[e] nynt[h] degré from oure Lorde Jesu Cryst. Therefore I dare sey they be the grettist jantillmen of the worlde." (654) He then, of course, is also related to King Solomon. (712)

2 "...the kyng was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kyng had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here

of adultery and revenge of murder have nearly lost him his Eden of Camelot, he can yet publicly voice the wider social value: "I am sorryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes...was never [had before by] Crystyn Kyng." (833)

Arthur enuntiates thus paternally. He is priestly, or at least ministerial, in his fatherhood as a result of Merlin's interpretation of his right to the throne as part of divine destiny, as well as by the fact he "with creme is anoynted" (164) and his coronation oath in which he swears "unto his lordes and comyns for to be true kyng to stand with true justyce fro thens forth the dayes of this lyf." (11) Thus sanctioned with holy oil Arthur swears by God to preserve the entire social order<sup>3</sup> meeting around the family table, the vestigial altar of the spiritual body.

As Arthur provides kingly leadership in his role of *pater-familias*, Lancelot plays the favored scion of the moral family; yet his involvement with the Round Table society on nearly every score works to its destruction: not only is his anonymous stroke, killing Gareth, occasion for the day of destiny, but in him meet all the paradoxical strands of vice and virtue present in the Round Table of actuality. In short there are two Round Tables, the Round Table as it is and the Round Table as ideal projection: Lancelot is saint of the former, Galahad of the latter. Each fulfills the highest aspirations of his order. One is good, the other best. One can

thereof, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene...the kyng loved hym passyngly well" (820) and needed him and his kin to hold the Round Table together. As *pater-familias* he could not let personal insult cause public estrangement.

3 Vinaver claims that since in the French Arthur swore first allegiance to the Church, this is an instance of secularization; this is not so, however, if the culture is psychologically church-oriented and the sound doctrine is remembered that the people, clergy and laity, are themselves the Church. The theological implication is more than semantics. It is once again the Malorian emphasis on individuals rather than institutions.

follow the quest of beasts or the honorable quest of ladies; the other can follow the quest of the Grail. From both the higher and the lower order of honor, Arthur's great Oath elicited the highest ideals the while it stood as family binding at the yearly family reunion of Pentecost. When at last Lancelot forsakes honor to defend the guilty queen, he betrays the trust of the spiritual family and initiates its ruin by killing the "vertuose" lover Gareth thus occasioning a private family's blood vengeance that spills over to destroy the socio-spiritual family.<sup>4</sup>

Excluded from the most important clan, the spiritual family, are the pagans. The bigotry shown to Saracens appears in prejudicial comments never political or martial so much as religious. Palomydes, a prime character, is all too frequently introduced as "sir Palomydes that ys yett oncrystened." (385) Thus important a social sacrament is baptism to their aristocratic society. Nevertheless Palomydes intentionally remains familial outsider, though as he says, "my two brethirne ar truly crystynde." (568) He refuses baptism until he has completed "seven trewe bataylis for Jesus sake," (496) even though Malory reports *re* the unbaptized that all the court, at the beheading of the pagan Corsabryne, attested that

therewithall cam a stynke of his body, whan the soul departed, that there myght nobody abyde the sa-  
voure. So was the corpus had away and buried in a  
wood, bycause he was a pay[n]ym. (496)

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4 The enmity of Gawayne, which Lancelot raises here, is paralleled and foreshadowed in an earlier speech in which Gawayne, indicating his clan's vengeful premeditations, commits the clan to the Orkeney-Pellinore feud:

"Fayre bretherne, here may ye se: whom that we hate kynge Arthure lovyth, and whom that we love he hatyth. And wyte you well, my fayre bretherne, that this sir Lameroke woll nevyr love us, because we slew his fadir, kynge Pellynore, for we demed that he slew oure fadir, kynge Lotte of Orkenay; and for the deth of kynge Pellynor sir Lameroke ded us a shame to oure modir. Therefore I woll be revenged." (455)

Such sentiments being common, the honorable Palomydes cannot enter the spiritual family, that is, even become a knight of the Round Table until he is baptized. He is functionally acceptable to the spiritual family and continues in their company because he is both valued as a warrior and as a potential convert. He himself attests: "...into this londe I cam to be crystyned, and in my harte I am crystynde, and crystynde woll I be." (496)

Thus as an ideal the Round Table family is a socio-moral paradise; but as finite actuality, it has all the corruption inherent in Eden's orchards. Lechery and incest and murder are fostered and excused by the conflict of loyalties to the overlord, to the lady, and to God.<sup>5</sup> Particular considerations obscure universal moral truths. The ideal spiritual family aspires to balance and perfection; but its family members, its individuals have tasted more apple than the poisoned fruit of Gwenevere's banquet, and the serpentine gloss of courtly life has made the concrete institution seductively corrupt. Only by groping back to the pure religious principles behind the foundation of the institution can the individual members work their way to personal salvation, though their society be a lost cause not in principle but reality.

Palomydes' vow to avoid baptism until seven battles for Jesus' sake is typical of the numerous religious oaths and troth plightings scattered liberally throughout Malory's dialogue: the eleven rebel kings "swore nothyr for welle nothyr wo they should nat lye tyll they had destroyed Arthure" (19); Gawayne was "sworne uppon the four Evaungelystis that he sholde never be ayenste lady ne jantillwoman" (81); Nynyve made Merlin "to swere that he sholde never do none inchauntemente uppon her" (92); King Angwysshauce promised Arthur, "I make myne avow unto mylde Mary and unto Jesu Cryste" (138); Blamour and Bleoberys "made

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5 Vida D. Scudder, *Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory and Its Sources* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1921) p. 185; hereafter cited as Scudder.



their othis that they wolde never none of them two brethirne fyght wyth sir Trystrames, and sir Trystramys made them the same othe” (310); “Marke...kneled...and made hys othe upon the Cross of the swerde” (408); Gwenevere after the incident of the poisoned apple swears, “I made thys dyner... never for none evyll, so Allmyghty Jesu helpe me in my right, as I was never purposed to do such evyll dedes, and that I reporte me unto God.” (748) So many oaths,<sup>6</sup> a11 made with great currency, nearly always at some peak of crisis, bespeak a society living in a natural context of deep religious faith.

In consequence, Malory’s original addition to the Arthurian materials is the Oath administered by the priest-king each Pentecost as major renewal of family loyalty and stability. In its main points Arthur covers the two great family sins of murder and adultery and the two great stabilizing virtues of mercy and chastity; he

charged them never to do outrage nothir morthir and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy...uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [so-cour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of death. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. (91)

To this Oath every Pentecost Arthur (because he knew the vices that could destroy his society<sup>7</sup>) bound each of his knights, thus providing them with a restraining code

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6 Additional examples of oaths may be sampled: 123, 132, 153, 185, 191, 233, 341, 405, 445, 448, 457, 480, 496. (One of Vinaver’s chief failings, by the way, is his lack of index; one hopes the next printing would include such a helpful addition to textual study.)

7 E.K. Chambers, *English Association Tract Number 51*, p. 14 as found in G. C. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama* (Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 242.

designed to stabilize their impulses along moral lines ideal both for the individual person and the public family.<sup>8</sup> And even if Lumiansky should be correct in emphasizing the Oath is no great spiritual challenge, that it is rather “a code suitable for an ambitious, high-minded order just setting out toward...the whole of society,”<sup>9</sup> counter-emphasis can nevertheless be made in the simple theological doctrine—which no one of these scholars seems familiar with—that perfection of the natural order is necessary to spirituality, because, according to Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (1274), “Grace builds on nature.” In this is enough rationale for Arthur wanting his to be the best possible world; for the best possible, naturally, is the most *grace*-fully receptive.

Malory, the artist responsible for Arthur’s world, would have agreed with fellow British litterateur Samuel Johnson writing two hundred years later: “To be of no Church is dangerous. Religion, of which the rewards are distant and which is animated only by Faith and Hope, will glide by degrees out of the mind unless it be invigorated and reimpresed by external ordinances, by stated calls to worship, and the salutary influence of example.”<sup>10</sup> And at hand Malory had the medieval suffusion of religious ritual,<sup>11</sup> the directly and indirectly ecclesiastical ordonnance that chronicled not only attitudes of the era toward certain doctrines but also added the tonal warp and woof necessary to any complete tapestry of the age.

8 R. M. Lumiansky, *Malory’s Originality*, p. 39.

9 In much the same vein, but with less specification, is Vida Scudder, who states the theme of the early adventures in Book I “is the theme of the failure of the knights for lack of a restraining code, the imperative need for a standard through which the confused instincts of nascent chivalry may be focused and preserved. At the end of the book [III] this standard is to be established once and for all: the great Oath is to be sworn.” Scudder, p. 201.

10 Samuel Johnson, “The Life of Milton,” *Samuel Johnson: Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 447.

11 Ritual in the present continuing context means any formalized observance or procedure in any way connected with religion.

Most generally Malory's horology is ecclesiastically oriented *per diem* and *per annum*; daily, the characters tell time no more strictly than by reference to the hours of prime ("I shall telle you more to-morn be pryme of the day" [183]), none, and vespers or evensong.<sup>12</sup> Yearly, the time paces by ecclesiastical feasts: the feast receiving principal observance is Pentecost. It is in fact the climactic feast of Tristram's Book (617). While the feasts of Assumption (254), Michaelmas (270), Easter (790), and Candlemas (782) all receive a variety of mention, the feast of Christmas not only receives frequent mention (e.g. 175) but is the feast day on which Arthur first pulls the sword from the stone finally effecting the foundation of his British kingdom the following Pentecost. (11) It is horologically significant religiously, also, that the Armageddon on Salisbury Plain takes place on the feast of Trinity Sunday. (865)<sup>13</sup>

The characters continually frequent mass,<sup>14</sup> usually at the altars of pious hermits, themselves aristocratic in origin: "For in thos dayes hit was nat the gyse as ys nowadayes; for there were none ermytis in tho dayes but that they had bene men of worship and of preusse, and tho ermytes hylde grete householdis and refreysshed people that were in distresse." (766)<sup>15</sup> And rightly enough did the hermits require wealth; for their foundations were not merely isolated hovels in the forest but functioned as places of retreat (114) as well as convalescent hospitals for knights.<sup>16</sup> Quite often ecclesiastical foundations were built at the scene of a battle: "in the same

12 Selected examples from the first four Books: prime (102, 236); none (168, 229, 238); evensong (144, 220).

13 Selected examples of years 197, 212, 214, 258, 617, 774.

14 Confer 83, 85, 88; 103, before battle; 227, 232, 264, 266. This frequency is substantially representative of the entire text.

15 Religious women likewise are of more importance for their aristocratic state than for their present dedication. The moneyed Gwenevere becomes not simply a nun but an abbess. Less for her would have been impossible.

16 Confer 108, 133, 303, 318, 341, 403, 406, 570, 600, 766.

place thereas the batayle was done [the king]...made, a fayre abbay, and endowed hit with great lyvelode....” (96); Arthur “commaunded...to make a kyrke on that same cragge in the worshyppe of seynte Mychael” (148); and Lancelot as penance for killing Gareth vows:

“I shall firste begyn at Sandwyche..., bare-foote; and at every ten myles ende I shall found and gar make an house of religious, of what order that ye woll assaygne me, with an holé covente, to synge and rede day and nyght in especiall for sir Gareth sake and sir Gaherys. And thys shall I perfourme [from Sandwyche unto Carlyle; and every house shall have suffycyent lyvelode]....and there ys none of all thes religious places but they shall be perfourmed, furnysshed, and garnysshed with all thyngis as an holy place ought to be.” (846)

Such a vow indicates the importance attached to prayer for the deceased (though it does not soothe Gawayne) in a society having religious belief in an after-life: for Gawayne, at his own death, masses were sung all the day long, for “all the prystes and clarkes that might be gotyn in the cuntrye and in the town...sange Massis of Requiem [that]...dured fro the morne to nyght.” (875) Elaine of Astolat in her death letter says, “unto all ladyes I make my mone, yet for my soule ye pray and bury me at the leste, and offir ye my masse-peny.... And pray for my soule.” (781)

Elaine’s request is typical of the dying in Malory’s book: nearly all either make good Confession,<sup>17</sup> partake of Viaticum<sup>18</sup> and the Last Anointing,<sup>19</sup> or simply request prayers

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17 Bors confesses when in danger of death at Pelles’ castle (588); Gwenevere makes confession at the stake (831); Gawayne confesses (863).

18 King Harmaunce (528); Ector (603); Elaine (779); Gawayne (864).

19 Last rites for Balan and Balin (69); Lancelot (880).

and a Christian burial.<sup>20</sup> Such ending is typical of their living.<sup>21</sup> The sacraments in general are valued; all rejoice in rather much a moral victory when Palomydes who has had “many a day a good beleve in Jesu Cryste and hys mylde modir Mary” (620) finally consents to be both “confessed clene” (623) and washed with “the sacramente of baptyme” by “the surfrygan of Carlehylle.” (622) Confirmation likewise is of some importance: Lancelot’s baptismal name had been *Galahad*; his confirmation name, *Lancelot*, the important name by which he is known. (92) Coincidentally it is that Lancelot’s son is baptized *Galahad* at the same time the new mother, Elaine, is churchd. (586)

The sacraments were so integrated into the social structure that it was perfectly natural that Priamus—as Palomydes would be long after him—be christened and knighted at the same ceremony. “Than the kyng in haste crystynde him fayre...Priamus, as he was afore, and lyghtly lete dubbe hym a deuke with his hondys, and made him knyght of the Table Rounde.” (173) Thus united were sacrament and sacramental, the principal sacramental being the socio-religious institution of knighthood.<sup>22</sup> So serious was

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20 Lancelot and Columbe (a suicide) are given Christian burial by Mark (53); Tristram requests that if “I fle other yelde me as recreaunte, bydde myne eme bury me never in Crysten buryellys.” (284) He seems, therefore, to make value connection between natural valor and theological fortitude.

21 “A number of Malory’s additions strengthen the importance of religion in the lives of his characters. Some, such as requests for prayers or the reception of the last rites, may seem at first mere traditional devices, but Malory uses them sourcelessly.” Guerin, *Malory’s Originality*, p. 252.

22 The originally secular order of knighthood evolved more and more into a sacramental role, designatory of particular vocation, under the aegis of the Church who developed the ultimate religious ritual. The evolution was tripartite: 1. In the earliest and commonest, the king or noble simply dubbed the worthy recipient on the field of battle or in his own hall with little or no religious ceremony. 2. The intermediate stage found the knight consecrated by a layman in the vernacular after a night-long vigil, a purifying bath ritual, Mass, sword-dubbing, and sermon. 3. In the highest form of religious evolution the ceremony was purely clerical, the bishop reciting the *Benedictio Novi Militis*.

the religious connection that sir Beawmaynes refuses on the day of his knighthood all mundane fealty and gifts: "I woll no rewarde have. Sir, this day I was made knyght of noble sir Launcelot, and therefore I woll no reward have but God rewarde me." (219)

Correlative to knighthood as sacramental is the highly sacramental anointing of the king as supreme knight. In "The Noble Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius," Arthur says: "...for there sill never harlot have happe, by the helpe of our Lord, to kylle a crowned kynge that with creyme is anoynted." (164) Obversely, King Mark, begging for his life from Gaherys, uses his kingly consecration as ultimate plea:

"Save my lyff," seyde kynge Marke, "and I woll make amendys. And con sider that I am a kynge anoynted."

"Hit were the more shame," seyde sir Gaherys, "to save thy lyff! For thou arte a kynge anoynted with creyme and therefore thou sholdist holde with all men of worship. And therefore thou arte worthy to dye." (408)

Arthur and Mark thus appear at opposite poles: Arthur, attesting the sacramental character of his anointing feels closely protected "by the helpe of our Lord"; Mark, on the other hand, betrays his sacramentalized position by being less than he should. Gaherys rightly views Mark's attitude as sacrilege. Arthur's reward for fidelity to his British anointing is this: he becomes equated with the historical Charlemagne in gaining control of the great, religiously based power structure, the Holy Roman Empire. Upon Arthur's successful march down Italy to Rome, he is almost immediately besought by "all the senatoures...and...cynnyngst [a

This found use but rarely. Confer Coulton, *Medieval Panorama* (Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 243.

telling word!] cardynallis that dwelled in the courte [who]... prayde hym of pece...and besought hym as a soverayne moste governoure under God for to gyff them lycence...that they myght be assembled all, and than in the cité of Syon that is Rome called to crowne hym there kyndly, with crysemed hondys, with septure ...as an Emperoure sholde.” (175)

Thus Arthur, “crowned Emperoure by the Poopys hondis” (175) on Christmas Day in the capital city of Christendom, attains, as holy anointed king, objective verification that he is *pater-familias* of the spiritual state family, that he is veritable priest-king in a civilization where state power and church power were virtually contiguous. Plus sacramentally he is, as supreme knight, “the man of moste worship crystynde” (75), bound to the moral leadership of his public family.

The morality of this family Malory has stretched along a scale that is literary exemplification of one of Christianity’s basic paradoxes: besides bad and good, there is best. And the explanation of Malory’s scale cannot be accomplished by a simple definition of supererogation. It embraces an order more complicated and theologically tenuous; but because he is an artist, by definition a man who fashions, explicates, intangible realities into some kind of sensible phenomena, he dramatizes his moral hierarchy through narrative and characterization. The Quest of the Holy Grail must be for Malory’s morality the musical staff across whose five lines and four intermediate spaces are chorded the representative morals of Mark, Lancelot, and Galahad.

Mark in the beginning is unobjectionable, even admirable, morally, when the knights’ only quest is for a wild beast; but Malory proceeds to blacken Mark’s character with cowardice (408) and treachery (He kills his own brother, Alexander’s father.[472]) as the quest changes from vague pursuit of a rather nebulous beast<sup>23</sup> to the pursuit of the

23 “the questing beste that, had in shap lyke a serpentis hede and a body lyke

Holy Grail. Therefore, as need of genuine moral worthiness increases so by inverted proportion does Mark's sinfulness increase. The Grail in all probability symbolizes the Beatific Vision; thus Malory makes rather poignant indirect statement about sinfulness in his total non-involvement of Mark in the Grail quest. In this way Malory dismisses the lowest note on his moral musical staff. His narrative, after this dismissal, plays no chord since by definition a chord consists of a combination of at least three tones sounded in harmony: thus by casting Mark and his kind into the outer discordant darkness,<sup>24</sup> Malory is left satisfactorily with only two moral notes to play and brings into atonal harmony the paradoxical problem central to his interpretation of Christian religion: there are the good (Lancelot) and there are the best (Galahad) and sometimes being good is not enough.

Goodness, such as Lancelot's, might result simply from natural virtue, a lack of inclination to the majority of evils; being best, as is Galahad, results from a more positive commitment: not simply a disinterested shunning of the possible evil but rather the active pursuit of even further virtue. Perhaps Palomydes the pagan is much more admirable than Malory's literal characterization: if he feels unworthy of baptism till after seven battles with the Questing Beast, then perhaps what seems literal is really metaphorical as he, worthy pagan, stamps out in himself the seven deadly sins that hinder true religion's growth.

Malory, however, perhaps because of sheer volume never  
 a lybud, buttocked lyke a lyon and footed lyke an harte. And in hys body there was such a noyse as hit had bene twenty couple of hounds questynge." (358)  
 It is only with Palomydes, a pagan on personal quest toward baptism, that the Questing Beast emerges from the purely supranatural to a metaphorical religious dimension.

24 This does not mean evil and sin leave the story with the commission of the Grail Quest, but that the evil (while only the good and the best pursue the Grail) are relegated to treachery and sin contrapuntal to both the movement and lesson of the Grail venture. They are very much yet in the story. The bad-good-best scale is from C. S. Lewis.



gives indication of intending to deal with all of the Middle Age's popular Seven Deadly Sins. He is content to emphasize those two most destructive to the family stability metaphor he early established: Lechery, for its familial contribution, adultery; and Wrath, for its chief social sin, murder.<sup>25</sup> In Malory's moral economy, adultery and murder are the greatest evidence of the Seven; for more than the others, though every sin destroys more Eden's than its own, these two being less private sins have social repercussions in the context both of the literal and the spiritual families.

Stability in all areas is the greatest virtue in Malory's morality: it helps the good and the best to persevere. And there is no character so morally stable as Galahad, only against whose stolid purity can the nervous instability of familial lust and adultery be seen. King Mordrayne calls Galahad, "a clene virgyne above all knyghtes..., the floure of all good vertu...[in whom] the fyre of the Holy Goste ys takyn." (732) Thereupon Galahad calms, outside Mordrayne's castle, the boiling well

so that hit brente no more, and anone the hete departed away. And cause why that hit brente, hit was a sygne of lechory that was that tyme much used, but that hete myght nat abyde hys pure virginitie.  
(732)

This comment, a fine example of Malory's personal Horatian interjections slipping into the narrative, recalls that the "Arthurian world is undermined from the beginning by 'lechory' (Uther and Igraine, Arthur and Morgause) and that one of the contributing factors to the downfall of the court at 'that tyme' is the Lancelot and Gwenevere relationship..."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The other five sins have been termed variously: Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Gluttony, and Sloth. Confer Marlowe's *Faust*.

<sup>26</sup> Moorman, *PMLA*, 500, adds that "the passage takes on an importance and a relevance to the whole cycle which never existed in the French text...."

In his youth, Arthur, himself conceived in lechery that avoids adultery by merest technicality, sires Mordred on his half-sister Morgause. Thus incest is seedbed for the greatest of family complications, the private destroying the public, at Salisbury. This condemnable fact of incest gives cohesiveness to the narrative at the very center of its family metaphor. This kind of family unchastity is worse sin than adultery in Malory's mind: Arthur and the pure Galahad himself are conceived illegitimately, but this is not so reflected in their personal characters the way it is in the incestuously begotten Mordred who will cause general Armageddon. It is said to Arthur: "God ys displeasid with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a chylde that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realm." (35)

At first glance Malory was concerned with courtly love. To oversimplify, he was concerned only with the *matière* of courtly love the while he introduced a new moral *sens* which he introduced basically through the japing of Dinadan. (515) Courtly love, if truly Platonic, could lead the lover to virtue; but in practice courtly love more often led the lover to a choice "between Venus and Christ."<sup>27</sup> As a consequence it was vigorously condemned as immorally adulterous by the Church. Malory could have agreed no more.<sup>28</sup>

For instance he alters the story of Pelleas and Ettard from the French original. He has Ettard, who dies of love for him, deserted by Pelleas and gives Pelleas as a reward the hand of Nynyve. He ignores "the courtly conventions of the original, and [introduces]...a crude moral ending..."<sup>29</sup> By

Malory consistently makes the generalized textbook sins of the French into the actual sins of the Round Table, and so is able throughout to use this sort of religious material organically."

27 Moorman, *Unity*, p. 15.

28 Malory's main chivalric interest had been martial chivalry; courtly chivalry he generally found distasteful. Confer Sidney Painter. *French Chivalry* (Baltimore, 1940).

29 Tucker, *Essays on Malory*, p. 70.

experimenting with this early story, “Malory discovered that he might present Lancelot and Guinevere as lovers while at the same time condemning the relationship as unworthy of Lancelot’s knighthood [his role in the Round Table family], and this is the new *sens* which he wrote into the *matière* of the Lancelot story.”<sup>30</sup> Thus dismissed is courtly love, so that Lancelot and Gwenevere, by the time of Salisbury, themselves have reverted to personal conscience that functions according to the standard norms of the standard Christian ethic even as known today.

The Gareth-Lyones-Lyonet story in which Lyonet feels “hir sister dame Lyonesse...a little overhasty that she might nat abyde hir tyme of maryage” (247) confirms Malory’s preference for the standard Christian ethic. “If read in context, Gareth is clearly a commentary on *l’amour courtois* and is so placed as to contrast with the adulterous affairs of Lancelot and Tristram. The ‘Tale of Gareth’ works towards the proposition that the true end of love is marriage, not adultery...,”<sup>31</sup> and thus opts directly for family stability.

Tristram and Isode, themselves a departure from stylized courtly love (they both fall in love most purely—even without need of the love potion), provide muted prefiguration of and preparation for the Lancelot-Gwenevere affair; for it is already with Tristram and Isode that Malory begins stripping the glamorous *amour courtois* down to its outrageously adulterous shift. Even before Arthur’s marriage, Merlin warned him “that Gwennyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne...” (71) Yet Arthur proposed to her father King Lodegean of Camylerde (72), and the couple wed into a certain happiness, until Malory, in an original passage,<sup>32</sup> introduces Lancelot in direct confirma-

30 Tucker, *Essays on Malory*, p. 72.

31 Moorman, *Unity*, p. 21.

32 Moorman. *Unity*, p. 17.

tion of Merlin's prophecy, as the man who "loved the queene." (180) Merlin's phrase "nat holsom" directly implies moral judgment on the adultery that will result in family tragedy, private and public.

It is on Lancelot that Malory focuses the various tensions operative in the narrative: Lancelot is caught in the socio-moral paradox of *fin amor* and Christian respect for women. In the Quest particularly, Lancelot will try to reconcile the worldliness of chivalry with Christian standards and he will fail the reconciliation (because there is none); but he will learn at last enough humility to be contrite after his fashion: he will not even try to cure Urry so fearful is he of his pride in an area where 110 knights have failed; but finally in obedience to *pater-familias* Arthur, Lancelot prays and succeeds. His filial obedience overcomes his sinfulness at least temporarily. (814)

Before this, however, Lancelot promised Gwenevere "ever to be her knyght in ryght othir in wronge" (745) and he means more than martially for one cannot read Malory's superb little digression on May and Love (790) which opens "The Knight of the Cart" episode without thinking of 1) Lancelot and Gwenevere, 2) Lancelot and Elaine.

To the first point: Malory literally demands that "every man of worshyp florysh hys herte...firste unto God, an nexte unto the joy of...the lady." (791) Lancelot slowly slips from the cut-and-dried precision of this counsel with his accustomed instability as each successive fight for Gwenevere becomes less honorable. Two adventures illustrate the decline: Lancelot certainly honored God first by rescuing the innocent Gwenevere after the incident of the poisoned apple; his next rescue of her, however, was not so honorable as the lady was truly guilty of the adultery.<sup>33</sup> By saving

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33 This sentence of death for adultery, by the way, shows that neither Arthur nor his society was functioning on a level of well-you-know-courtly-love; their allegiance was to a moral code as specified by the established religious

her, thus giving false evidence of her innocence in a society which believed in proof by religious ordeal, Lancelot did service to his lady and disservice to his God, thus inverting the order Malory so carefully counseled. As if to comment on the round-robin of adultery and sinful defense, Malory immediately externalizes Lancelot's private guilt through the effect of the needless, heedless deaths of the innocent sirs Gareth and Gaherys. Each sin, once again, destroys more Eden's than its own.

To the second point, Lancelot and Elaine: here Lancelot's basic ambivalence, instability, is clearly demonstrated. Ready for involvement with Gwenevere in right or wrong, he has the following dialog with Elaine:

“Fayre knyght,” seyde she, “woll ye be my par-  
amour?”

“Jesu deffende me!” seyde sir Launcelot. “For  
than I rewarded youre fadir and youre brothir full  
evyll for their grete goodness.” (777)

This he can articulate (no matter what his true motives for not accepting a liaison with Elaine) in interesting social terms. He clearly sees the familial evil that must needs arise; for her specific family of father and brother he seems to have more respect than for Arthur, father-king of the Round Table. Malory in this citation makes no explicit reference to Lancelot's love for Gwenevere, yet the dialog coupled with the May and love sermon sets up a tense opposition within the story. At its heart is Lancelot: for he can choose chaste marriage to Malory's ideal woman Elaine or choose the liaison with Gwenevere.

It is all different for the *pater-familias*, the father-king Arthur. For him

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institution of the Church, albeit their penalty was of their own devising; Joan of Arc, for instance, was burned in 1431 when Malory was twenty-three years old.

the greatest good is the preservation of his empire and the correlative stability of the Round Table. To insure these ends he needs the sympathy and respect of his followers and the strong hands of Lancelot and his kin. At first [when he is only cuckold as private family man] he can retain these aids only by ignoring what he knows.<sup>34</sup>

Lancelot, however, is subject of the “prevy hate” (818) of Orkeney’s Aggravayne and Mordred. Although Malory never specifies the source of their hatred toward Lancelot, he does dramatize quite thoroughly their slanderous insinuations that ultimately make the liaison affecting a private family, a notorious affair of public state.

Sir Aggravayne seyde thus opynly, and nat in no councyle [that is, he was gossiping publicly about, a private matter], that many knyghtis myght here:

“I mervayle that we all be nat ashamed bothe to se and to know how sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene....hit ys shamefully suffird of us all that we shulde suffir so noble a kynge as kynge Arthur ys to be shamed.” (818)

Until this time Arthur had not been designated “shamed as king,” but only privately as husband. The Orkeney’s debate among themselves until finally Gawayne, Gaherys, and Gareth angrily disassociate themselves from their brothers Aggravayne and Mordred. These latter two, under the guise of family loyalty (to Arthur they say, “we be your syster sunnes” [819]), insinuate the privately cuckold husband into “a pubicly betrayed king by a most sophistical argument.” (819)<sup>35</sup> Such semantics force private cuckoldry into state

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34 Guerins, *Malory’s Originality*, p. 264.

35 King Mark, catching Tristram talking to La Beale Isode in a window, interprets this action calling dalliance with king’s wife state treason and

betrayal of king's person.

Caught in Gwenevere's room, Lancelot kills Aggravayne and wounds Mordred who, in his now provable denunciation, forces Arthur as official head of state to sentence Gwenevere to death for treason to the king's "person." As *pater-familias* of the greater family and the greater good, Arthur must acquiesce.

Lancelot must now act, himself crossing from private lover to public champion, this time in defense of a woman he knows to be guilty. If Malory has a tragic hero, it is probably Lancelot as he emerges here in moral dilemma; for out of the socio-moral tension in which Malory places Lancelot, the best of all earthly knights conceives a doubt,<sup>36</sup> a fear that his immoral championing of an affair of "courtly love" may not only kill some of his sworn brothers but may extend even to the larger social repercussions projected by all the others knowledgeable in the highly complex situation.<sup>37</sup> All are correct. Out of the adultery grows murder upon internecine murder until all, private family and public family, go down together on Salisbury Plain.

Eve gave Adam an apple, perhaps to win him from Lilith;<sup>38</sup> Cain killed his brother Abel; and it was an adder, like a serpent in Eden, that caused the drawing of the mistaken sword that began the frightful Armageddon of Salisbury. The biblical triangle, the biblical fratricide, the

Tristram "traytowre." (323)

36 This debate in Lancelot's mind is almost entirely Malory's invention. Tucker, *Essays on Malory*, p. 97.

37 For instance, Gawayne and Gareth suspect because of the machinations that "now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyship of the Round Table shall be disparbeled" (819); Arthur, seeing the rise of particular family allegiances in place of the one allegiance to the greater family of the Round Table predicts: "me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felysshyp of the Round Table ys broken for ever, for wyth hym woll many a noble knyght holde." (829)

38 Lilith according to medieval Jewish folklore was the first wife of Adam, before the creation of Eve.

biblical serpent, all in descending degrees perhaps exemplify the Jungian archetypes come darkling from the universal human subconscious into articulated metaphor. Such biblical tropes were commonly interpolated by phrase or incident into the authorized liturgy of the medieval church. Once so founded, the passages often worked their way into the dramatic narratives of the day. One need only recall Arthur's own familial violation, slaying of the innocents born (how ironically, that day of love) on Mayday, to be put in mind of that biblical King Herod, himself an all too real trope against innocents. (44)

Malory, however, tries to minimize Arthur's guilt in the innocents' murder by making Merlin scapegoat: "many putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthure." (44) This is understandable since in Malory's moral economy murder is the greatest sin, the ultimate social fester of the Seven Deadly Sins, and as such hardly appropriate to a *pater-familias*. As sociologists in modern times have documented, more people are murdered by close friends or members of their own family than by anonymous killers, so in Malory's time murder was too often an intra-inter family sin.

In intra-family relationships Arthur attempted murder of his nephew-son Mordred; the brothers, Balan and Balin, kill one another to become in their mutual fratricide major symbol of private family strife. (68) Balin provides main linkage to the rest of the narrative on familial religious grounds: for killing a lady he is morally judged by Merlin to be about to

"stryke a stroke moste dolerous that ever man stroke, excepte the stroke of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste. For thou shalt hurte the trewyst knyght and the man of moste worship that now lyvith; and thorow that stroke, three kyngdomys shall be brought into grete poverté, miseri and wrecchednesse twelve yere. And



the knyght shall nat be hole of that wound many yerys.” (54)

The explication of this prophecy is that Balin finally wounds King Pelles, dealing him the Dolerous Stroke through the thighs, bringing down the castle to symbolic destruction of a whole household. The weapon Balin uses is a spear he takes from “a table of clene golde with four pyllars of sylver that bare up the table. And [it is] upon the table [that stands] a mervaylous spere strangely wrought.” (64) The spear Malory identifies as the lance of Longinus (64) and so, correlatively, Pelles must remain the maimed king “and myght never he hole tylle that Galaad...heled hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. For in that place was parte of the bloode of our Lorde Jesu Cryste.” (64)

Thus because of Balin’s murder of a lady, three families of kingdoms are laid low; he and his brother become fratricides, and the Grail becomes ultimately object of a group quest for the public Round Table family whose pursuit is for the honorable worship that the accomplishment of the charitable act, curing the maimed king, can bring.

Inter-family murders find epitome in Gawayne who kills both Pellinore and Lamorak (who had been sleeping with Gawayne’s mother Morgause, who herself is for this reason beheaded by her son Gaherys [459]). So heinous are Gawayne’s murders judged by Gareth, his literal brother, that Gareth disowns Gawayne: “for he was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther and that hated sir Gareth.” (270) Thus is brother turned against brother over murder. Almost as if to objectify this, while excepting Gareth, Tristram judges the whole House of Orkeney as “the grettyste destroyers and murtherers of good knyghtes that is now in the realm of Ingelonde.” (520) And murder, Dynadan says, “is the grettyst shame that ony knyght may have, for nevir had knyght murtherer worshyp,

nother never shall have.” (435)

Gawayne’s murder of Lamorak “is one of the great turning points in the *Morte Darthur* in that it clearly divides the household of Orkeney and its supporters from those knights, friends of Lamorak mostly, who after his death look to Lancelot [whose allegiance is, of course, to Arthur] for leadership.”<sup>39</sup> Thus internecine, private murder has repercussions in the larger Round Table family. Murder like adultery in Malory’s established economy cannot remain a private matter for both are social sins contrary to the Pentecost Oath, the code to which the Round Table family swears each year.

Gawayne, in short, exemplifying the moral principle that virtue to excess is vice, because of his fierce family loyalty is willing (to avenge his private literal family [455]) to destroy the wider-knit family of Camelot; he says,

“I woll never forgyff the [Lancelot] my brothirs dethe, and in especiall the dethe of my brothir sir Gareth. And if myne uncle, kynge Arthur, wyll accorde with the, he shall loose my servys....” (847)

Arthur, *pater-familias*—not oblivious to the wider implications reacts as father-king—is deeply affected: he falls “syke for sorrow of sir Gawayne, that he was so sore hurte, and bycause of the warre betwyxte hym and sir Launcelot.” (857) Excessive private virtue concatenates to public vice.

Contrapuntally to the vices of murder and adultery Malory plays the virtues of mercy and chastity summed up in the last note to be played on the musical staff of his narrative of bad, good, and best: Galahad. Vinaver seems quite shortsighted estimating Galahad’s birth in Malory’s eyes as simply another ordinary event of family life;<sup>40</sup> for Malory

39 Moorman, *Unity*, p. 57.

40 Vinaver, *Malory*, p. 83. In addition one need only confer page 651 for the interpretation given Gawayne’s adventure, which is perhaps the main religious

states King Pelles knew well that Lancelot would beget on Elaine a child “by whom all the forayne cuntry shulde be brought oute of daunger; and by hym the Holy Grayle shulde be encheved.” (584) This knowledge of the maimed king that his grandson will achieve for him a mystical cure will hardly lead him to accept the birth as an ordinary event of family life.

Galahad, thus predestined to be the Grail knight, is the antithesis of adultery, the epitome of chastity: “For thou [Galahad] arte a clene virgyn above all knyghtes, as the floure of the lyly in whom virginité is signified.” (731) Far better than Gareth and Lyones’ last-minute purity, far better than Bors’ one lapse of chastity (684), Galahad is incarnate purity, himself ninth-generation descendant of Christ. He is Christ-figure as Elaine, his mother, is analog to the *fiat*-making Virgin Mary: “My lorde,” she says, “...I have obeyde me unto the prophesye...tolde me. And...to fullfyll this prophecie I have gyvyn...the grettyst ryches and the fayryst floure that ever I had, and that is my maydenhode...” (586)

Galahad is indeed moral object lesson, hardly a real personage in Malory’s narrative. His constant linkage with the divine—the descent from Christ, the identification with the Dove symbol of the Holy Spirit (731)—makes him transcend any real kind of physical membership with any group. As object example of ideal moral virtue, he is in the Arthurian world, but not of it. He is, simply, chastity.

His father is mercy. Lancelot is praised by Malory for his

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metaphor in the entire narrative:

“Also I may sey you that the Castell of Maydyns betokenyth the good soulys that were in preson before the Incarnacion of oure Lorde Jesus Cryste. And the seven knyghtes betokenyth the seven dedly synnes that regned that tyme in the worlde. And I may lyckyn the good knyght Galahad unto the Sonne of the Hyghe Fadir that lyght within a maydyn and bought all the soules oute of thralle: so ded sir Galahad delyver all the maydyns oute of the woofull castell.”

abstinence from murder.<sup>41</sup> In “The Siege of Benwick” Lancelot unhorses Gawayne who is so sorely wounded he cannot rise. Gawayne begs Lancelot to slay him, and Lancelot with every reason to kill Gawayne, refrains from Malory’s greatest sin, murdering of another family-sworn knight. (857)<sup>42</sup> If Lancelot has any particular virtue to offset his adultery, it is his quality of mercy called for so succinctly by the familial Pentecost Oath.

But because Galahad is a symbol more than a character, Malory concentrates on Lancelot; and of the two virtues exemplified by father and son, Malory alights upon neither virtue as higher than stability, what in usual moral argot is called perseverance: that virtue which maintains the others. Lancelot lacks stability in a way typical of the whole Round Table Society. He sees the good and tries to perform it,<sup>43</sup> yet he forgets the spiritual perfection he attained in the Quest (744) and reverts to his adulterous relation to the queen.<sup>44</sup> Stability could have maintained his new-found Quest-chastity. Stability to his Oath never to fight in a wrongfull cause could have preserved him from the ultimate murder of Gareth. Gawayne’s moral fluctuation, his instability of

41 Although, as Lancelot confesses, “never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake”; and the rest of his sins are enumerated on 655-656.

42 Killing another knight in the service of wider knighthood is forgivable as is illustrated in the Darras episode, resolved on 411, when Darras frees Tristram from prison even though Tristram has violated Darras’ private family by killing three of his sons. If only Gawayne had been so privately forgiving!

43 Early in the text Lancelot professed (the irony is on Malory’s part) to what his instability never allowed him to abide by: “to take my pleasure with peramours, that woll I refuse: in principall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advouters nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate...; for...they shall be overcom with...bettir men than their be herself; and so who that usyth peramours shall be unhappy, and all thynge unhappy that is aboute them.” (195) Lancelot here predicts in abstract that Galahad, the pure knight, must needs best him in the Grail Quest.

44 In the Quest, Lancelot promises not to see Gwenevere again; when he, however, reverts to his sin, he verifies the hermit’s statement that he is not stable. This is Malory’s own sourceless statement.

good, bad, good, bad, good is easily traceable throughout the text as further example of the private instability with social consequence. In summary statement: good people can have particular virtues particularly expressed; the best people persevere, stabilized, in their performance of virtue beyond the particular. Thus the Round Table society is good in all its particular and various virtues yet it lacks the constancy, the perseverance, the stability to make it best. And the lack of the best is fatal to the good: if not best, then bested.

Thus in Malory's educative morality, Maytime stability (791) in love is the prime virtue relevant to the Christian family; for his pervasive Christian norm is simply "love with stability and do what you will." This is the Jesus-lesson Malory teaches the reader; it is the lesson his characters, caught in a tragedy of unstable emotions, must understand to the end of their individual salvation. All the protagonists die holy deaths as they achieve some kind of personal stability—albeit they often enter the religious life, they never succumb to its institutionalization; the secondary characters die stably dedicated to fighting the infidels. This book, therefore, itself a transition from medieval to modern narrative pits against a medieval view of civilization a growing modern sense of religion. While the institutions of salvation are important, they are subordinate to and utilitarian for the salvation of individuals.

This is how Malory humanized the pietistic theological tracts of his sources: the latter existed as documents of the institution, strict allegories written to morally "beleaguer" the individual conscience.<sup>45</sup> Malory's innovation is that he dilutes the absolutism of the institutional religious tract.

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45 H. J. B. Gray, "The Mystical Doctrine of the *Queste del Saint Graal*," *Arthuriana*, I (1928), 52, tries to clarify the Gilson position: St Bernard of Clairvaux's influence on the *Queste*, he judges, to be both doctrinal and verbal. The *Queste*'s teaching on humility is of a highly stylized Cistercianism. Confer Etienne Gilson, "La Mystique de la Grâce dans la *Queste del Saint Graal*," *Romania*, LI (1925), 321-347.

Lancelot drags the world, a very personal world, into the calm of the depersonalized cloister. Lancelot, before this, at his healing of Urry—Malory's own supernatural interpolation—effects the cure not as a minister of highly stylized institutional apologetics, but as a result of his obedient filial faith; and thus he weeps, this man who is best in all the world, because at this point he sees the paradox that humanity, good as it is, in itself is not good enough. It lacks the dimension of the best. And the best cannot be demanded, cannot be taken by sheer force; for the best comes from that ultimate ennobling grace, that is, as is all grace, a gift of supernatural redemption.

A secular society can produce a man good as Lancelot; but a man such as Galahad descends on the world as a new incarnation, ideally best and totally, to the human expectation, supererogatory. Yet Malory could expect his audience to receive the extremely symbolic character of Galahad naturally into their literature as many other things were culturally accepted; for Christianity has always been wisely adaptable to (and perhaps with widest waters—*baptismi omnium rerum*—absorptive of) what had long existed most naturally in each converted pagan culture. Historically it has been typical of Christianity to absorb pagan legend and ritual and to make the transmutation satisfactory both to the endemic culture now converted and the Church's sense of correct doctrine.<sup>46</sup>

Malory reflects thin Christianizing absorption, but, of course, on a literary level. More often than not when he uses what can be termed the *pagan supranatural* or *magic*, it is as functional aid to his literary structure. In a kind of literary schizophrenia, Malory often will introduce papal (that is, religious institutional) intervention as a means of stopping

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<sup>46</sup> The Romans, accustomed to observing a feast of the sun at December's end, found that pagan holiday easily became Christmas holyday.

or furthering the plot,<sup>47</sup> but more often when caught in a blind alley or to change a certain emphasis he will employ the supranatural.<sup>48</sup> The so-called literary schizophrenia did not exist in Malory's mind; such diagnosis can only be of the twentieth century that has lost the sense of the medieval convention, the supranatural for purposes of atmosphere and motivation. "The genre recounts the doings and sayings of human beings moving on manifold errands in a world where miracles and marvels are commonplace."<sup>49</sup>

Malory, as litterateur, in his work of mild Christian didacticism found a light tonal sprinkling of the supranatural to be compatible. Yet catering to the tastes of his time, more sophisticated than the time and taste that birthed some of his sources, Malory rejected everywhere any overdose of the supranatural.<sup>50</sup> Just as what he left out of the French *Queste* (though he digested its *sens*) would form an elaborate theological treatise, so would the supranatural incidents voided from his Celtic and Welsh sources provide elaborate catalogue of magical occurrences. Malory constantly opted for a realistic background instead of the fairytale settings of his sources.

He was, therefore, not simply mythologist working in a land of supranatural faery. He was rather a narrative writer

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47 Some examples of papal interventions: 208; 842; Mark's counterfeit papal letters to Tristram, 502.

48 In a fight between Pellynore and Arthur, Arthur is being bested and is about to be killed. As Pellynore lifts his sword to strike off the king's head, Malory has "Merlin caste an inchauntemente on the knyght, that he felle to the erthe in a grete slepe. Than Merlion toke up kynge Arthure and rode forthe on the knyghtes horse." (40-41)

49 E. Snyder Ownby, "Merlin and Arthur," *Birmingham-Southern College Bulletin*, XXVI (January, 1933), 7; hereafter cited as Ownby.

50 "The Knight of the Cart" presents prime example where "Malory...ruthlessly cut...many adventures, among them the famous magic bed and sword bridge, which the French Lancelot must undergo....These courtly adventures belong in a world of their own and so have no place in Malory's planned book." Moorman, *Unity*, p. 79.

of convention whose story occasioned the use of any available symbols in an age that lived symbolism. The principle, connecting myth and Malory, is that the myth of one age becomes the symbol of the next. This is true of nothing more than the Grail.

Begun as apocryphal Christian myth, the Grail tradition—according to Professor Loomis—of Irish origin, traveled as did so much of the Celtic myth that came to Malory's hands, first to the courtly literature of France and then to Malory. The literary Grail legend is first met in the *Conte del Graal* of Chretien de Troyes (c. 1175) as

a jeweled platter. [Chretien] did not conceive of the Grail as a Christian object. [This] permits us to respect Chretien's intelligence. When later he speaks of the Grail as containing the Host, it is clearly an afterthought on his part or on that of his source. Likewise the identification by other authors of the Grail with the dish used by Christ at the Last Supper or with the Chalice containing His blood, the grafting of the apocryphal legend of Joseph of Arimathea—all these are what Matthew Arnold would call *Aberglaube*, no part of the original tradition.<sup>51</sup>

As myth works its way to Christian symbolism, such *Aberglaube* constantly appear. Malory arrives at the end of such transition to take full advantage of an already well developed Continental symbol,<sup>52</sup> for "the Holy Grail is not treated

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51 R. S. Loomis, "The Irish Origin of the Grail Legend," *Speculum*, VIII (1933), 417; and R. S. Loomis, "Bran and Other Figures," *MLR*, XXIV (1929), 416-436.

52 Loomis does not equate the mythical Horn of Bran with the Grail, even as prototype, but does say, "The Horn of Bran...affords the only satisfactory explanation...for the persistent association of the Grail (not the identification of the Grail) with the eucharistic wafer, since the Horn of Bran the Blessed would naturally be translated as 'li cors benoiz...,' i.e., the Corpus Christi." "Grail Problems," *Romanic Review*, XLV (February, 1954), 15.



in any Middle English romance outside of Malory.”<sup>53</sup> Thus provided with ready-made symbol, Malory had to tailor it to his family-religious purpose. The Round Table family is to find initial, though unstable, unity in its quest for the Grail. They pursue it for the *good* motives of worldly worship, for the honorable motives of a *good* Christian piety. It is only Galahad who seeks it for the *best*, for holiness’ sake.<sup>54</sup>

Malory thematically links Galahad as symbol to the major family problems by identification of the sword which Galahad pulls from the stone with the sword of Balin, the private-family fratricide. Galahad’s Grail is to cure the maimed king, himself head of a family, and redeem the Waste<sup>55</sup> Forest of family disaster. Malory makes functional the peculiar moral paradox that the good are done in by the best through the juxtaposition of the ideals of the Grail with the reality of the Round Table. It is Corbenic versus Camelot when King Pelles prophecises of the Grail: “Whan this thyng gothe abrode the Round Table shall be brokyn....” (584) The fault of the earthly and *good* questors is that they interpret their search in terms of worldly chivalry while like Galahad they ought rather to be concerned with the *best*, with celestial chivalry.

Lancelot is *li chevalier terrien*, the best of all the good knights, “never matched of erthely knyghtes” (882); but yet even he, despite Ector’s litany for the dead Lancelot (882), despite the ultimate odor of sanctity about his corpse, can only effect the curing of Urry and marvel why he can only

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53 A. C. Baugh, ed., *A Literary History of England* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), p. 192.

54 Bors is later to accomplish the quest, but only because he ultimately learns what Galahad as flat symbol has always known: the difference between the good-ness of piety and the best-ness of holiness.

55 The Waste Forest, invariably associated with Galahad, is an unmistakable symbol. The most waste in the present reading of Malory is that done by and to families, thus giving this interpretation of the symbol as family disaster a certain validity.

approach—not touch—the Grail and turn again, unstably, to his adulterous sin: all because he lacks the gift of grace to be *best* instead of *good*. In his failure, he is index to the fault and fall of the entire Round Table family.

Galahad as *li chevalier celestiel* is simply standard of the higher moral responsibility. Had the Round Table family had the grace they could have attained moral perfection. They would not have fallen prey to the King of the Hundred Knights, and Mark, and the multi-named villains<sup>56</sup> and evils summed up finally in Mordred had they had the grace. And this is the tragic question for Malory. Why hadn't they the grace; why is humanity too weak to correspond to what must be given. This is why Lancelot is tragic figure. Some flaw in his humanity kept him from corresponding to the grace the Quest proffered; *some part of his nature kept grace from building on his nature*. The wellwater that sank from Lancelot's reach lay in a "welle [that] betokenyeth the hyghe grace of God; for the more men desire hit to take hit, the more shall be their desire." (684) Once again Lancelot is a man in inexplicable Christian paradox.

His son, Galahad, however, attained grace; but then Galahad, for a reason, just as immeasurable as what makes the Catholic canon of saints seem so much better than the ordinary *good* Christian, was to his fellow knights no peer. Malory's theological question might very well be: why the paradox? why the *best*? but especially why should the merely good suffer the paradox of good not being good enough? Heaven for all perhaps: but the fact that even heaven will

<sup>56</sup> "The 'King of the Hundred Knights' is an epithet for the king of the dead....Death in the romances is the nameless one....My hypothesis is that in popular versions the usurper of Arthur's throne was identified with Death and hence was nameless. This would give a reason why in our literary versions the usurper has so many different names: Melvas, Modred, Meleaganz, etc...." The Oral tradition of the ancient Welsh had seen the last battle at Camlan as Armageddon or ultimate conflict of good and evil. "Arthur's opponent was regarded...as the personified...principle of evil or death." A. C. L. Brown, "Arthur's Loss," *Speculum*, XV (1940), 7 and 11.

not be a place of absolute equality galls. Galahad, for no explicable dessert, becomes in this life more than his father, and in the next will again be more; for he will be closer to the Beatific Vision whose major religious symbol in Malory is the Holy Grail. Perhaps it is once again, simply, the theological principle that grace builds on nature; and as Galahad's human nature was unflawed by instability (Malory's greatest vice) so much the more is the grace-ful reward accorded him. The moral nature that is good receives sufficient grace; the perfected moral nature receives superabundant grace.

But less intimately bound with religion than the apocryphal Grail myth and more to the core of the secularly supranatural in the *Morte Darthur* is Malory's systematic rationalization of Celtic and Welsh myth. He admits the genre of myth not only for the convenience of the aforementioned *dei ex machina*, not only for its inherent atmospheric tone, but as actual source for personages and things that ultimately in the narrative he greatly de-mythologizes.

Arthur in Malory's text, while he has an advent and childhood-to-kingship surrounded by the supranatural, still grows from less a supranatural background than any other character. The supranatural surrounding Arthur comes from Merlin, not from Arthur himself, about whom there seems more an historical than a supranatural myth.<sup>57</sup> His queen Gwenevere, likewise, whose name, however, does mean "white ghost"<sup>58</sup> seems born of associative myth, historical rather than supranatural. Malory gives little indication of having found any supranatural origin for this lady whom he treats most matter-of-factly. Her liaison with Lancelot Malory

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57 Professor Nitze, writing after vast and vastly respected research, states: "I believe that the evidence justifies the hypothesis that the Arthur legend began in the North in proximity to the Roman fortifications..., the ruins of which probably fostered the legend." W. A. Nitze, "Arthurian Names: Arthur," *PMLA*, LXIV (June, 1949), 596. Confer also: Kenneth Jackson, "Once Again King Arthur's Battles," *MP*, XLIII (1945), 44-57.

58 Sommer, p. xvi.

handles likewise as a matter of natural passion, although the scholar can trace the Lancelot-Gwenevere abduction stories back to a Welsh or Breton supranaturally oriented original.<sup>59</sup> Lancelot himself, though frequently involved in enchantment by Malory (e.g., 183) and though reared and often protected by the Lady of the Lake is not supranatural personally, but only seems so as he is so proficient in battle and wise in counsel being the best of all earthly knights. His pedigree like his son's comes not from the pagan supranatural but from Christian apocrypha.

Morgan la Fay, the Lady of the Lake, and Nynyve are three highly supranatural characters. Each identifies, for good or ill, with a single hero: Morgan with Arthur, the Lady with Lancelot, Nynyve with Merlin. The Lady protects the young knight; Nynyve beguiles her lover, does him in through his own magic (93, 98), and finally comes to some natural relationship by Malory's wedding her to the maimed king Pelles. Morgan, however, is Arthur's sister, basically a bawd<sup>60</sup> who "was put to scole in a nonnery, and there she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye." (5) "She is essentially the Fairy Queen of Arthurian legend."<sup>61</sup>

Nynyve "has practically no independent existence in romantic material outside of her relations to Merlin."<sup>62</sup> Since she is called "one of the damesels of the Lady of the Lake"

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59 Brown, 5 and 6.

60 Morgan, extramaritally, constantly through guile or not through guile, attempts to seduce almost any knight who comes by her portal: Lancelot, Hemyson (413), Accolon (98). She also tries to kill her husband but is stopped by her own son Uwayne: an example of another violated family. (106-109)

61 Lucy Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1903), p. 8; hereafter cited as Paton.

62 Paton, p. 204. In addition, once married to Pelles, Nynyve, who "ever ded grete goodnes unto kynge Arthure and to all hys knyghtes thorow her sorsery and enchauntements" (756) was called upon as seeress enough to confirm it was Madore not Gwenevere who poisoned the apple.

(91), it can perhaps be said of her by association, as it is said of her mistress, the Lady, by Miss Paton that the Celtic imagination placed their origin in the supranatural world “not only beyond the sea, but also beneath the sea.”<sup>63</sup> This watery palingenesis, myth to myth, seems relevant and functional in Malory principally in regard to the origin and end of Excalibur, and to the fact of Arthur’s final residence on a mysterious island.

Morgan’s earliest supranatural origins found her “invariably connected with the sea.”<sup>64</sup> But in Malory’s text her closest connection with water is her final trip to the island of Avalon: “thus was he [Arthur] lad away [to Avalon] in a ship wherein were three quenys; that one was kynge Arthure syster, quene Morgan le Fay...” (872) It probably surprised Arthur as much as the reader to find Morgan, so long inimical to her brother, finally tenderly reconciled. But her evolution from beneath the Celtic waves had run a much farther gamut. She was no longer the healing lover but in Malory became the healing sister. Malory undoubtedly found such a relationship tighter in meaning to the family metaphor, here previously so elaborated upon. As sister, who learned her magic in a convent (original with Malory) Morgan fits with greater thematic cohesiveness—than if she were purely unrelated fay—into Malory’s basic religious symbol of the family.<sup>65</sup>

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63 Paton, p. 167.

64 Paton, p. 9.

65 Malory, it is quite true, blackened Morgan’s character throughout the narrative “to fit her effectively into his overall thematic structure [of family strife and destruction]. Thus Malory has either removed or depressed considerably two of the most common traditions associated with Morgan [and the majority of other fays] during her long history: her ability to heal and to prophesy. True, there remain...two...vestiges of her healing tradition: [Alexander the Orphan and helping to transport the wounded Arthur to Avalon.] Nowhere...in the *Morte Darthur* is she permitted to prophesy, although in the *Suite du Merlin*, Malory’s immediate source, she writes an extended prophecy of the deaths of Arthur and Gawain.” Henry G. Morgan, Jr., *The Character of Morgan le Fay*

Merlin, however, popularly conceived as the epitome of the supranatural, is in reality an intermediate being, all the more surprising for being done away with so early in the narrative. Perhaps his humorous demise indicates something of Malory's attitude toward too much necromancy; but nevertheless Merlin, while in the Malorian narrative, is powerful intermediate being quintessentially indicative of Malory's peculiar mixture of the religious supernatural, the magical supranatural, and the naturally humane.

Neither devil, man, nor god, Merlin wears the masks of all three. He is equally capable of the miraculous feats of heroes and gods, or the undignified failings of devils and men. Empowered with extraordinary perceptions, he is also enfeebled, as in his lust for Nynyve, with weaknesses common to men.<sup>66</sup>

But Merlin is more than mere index to Malory's combination of real and mythical metaphysics. Merlin is case in point of a person used by Malory to his own ends. Malory has mutated the mighty enchanter Merlin who had evolved from a little-known Welsh bard; and the mutation is integral to Malory's family metaphor. Who is it who oversees Arthur's conception, who sees to his baptism and names him (6), who secures for Arthur his succession to the throne? (7) Merlin, of course; but it is not Merlin as pure supranatural enchanter. Malory in a prime stroke of genius has given the magician of his sources that special twist which fits him directly into the thematic structure of family and religion.

The dying Uther, struck speechless by his malady, is unable to indicate how his family line of succession should follow. The barons worry and seek counsel from Merlin who says:

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*in Arthurian Romance* (University of Southern Mississippi: unpublished M. A. thesis, 1963), p. 13 as found in Moorman, p. 84.

<sup>66</sup> Lumiansky, *Malory's Originality*, p. 33.

“There nys none other remedye...but God wil have his wille. But loke ye al barons be bifore kyng Uther to-morn, and *God and I* [italics added] shalle make hym to speke.” (6)

As Lumiansky so rightly says:

“This characterization of Merlin as the spokesman of God is a singular innovation in the Arthurian legend. It suggests a new pattern of causes, a new ground upon which the epic adventures are played, and it casts a new meaning on the reign...itself as a destiny ordained by God and established through Merlin.”<sup>67</sup>

Thus the supernatural magician of the sources has suddenly become, directly in Malory's hands, God's agent, a religious omniscient, a demi-priest. He oversees the founding of Uther's literal family through supernatural means, and he establishes Arthur's state family by combining a religious convocation called by a Merlin-counseled “Archebisshop of Caunterbury” (7) with the supernatural pulling of the sword from the stone. Demi-priest Merlin, reacting not at all like a supernatural magician, accepts the “comyns” cry “to have Arthur unto our kyng! We see that it is Goddes wille.” (7) Arthur, co-responding “took the swerd bitwene both his hands and offered it upon the aulter where the Archebisshop was....” (11) Immediately upon his coronation Arthur's subjugate kings rebel; Lott of Orkeney, his own brother-in-law, holding incest against Arthur (58), is leader of this immediate set-to of literal clan versus literal clan at the expense of the greater family. This close concomitance of Merlin-directed events in the first twelve pages of Malory's narrative can certainly not be meaningless to an artist who was accustomed

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67 Lumiansky, *Malory's Originality*, pp. 26-27.

to turning hundreds of source pages, only to omit them, in order to tighten the source incident at hand.<sup>68</sup>

While “the Merlin of the French book is a magician, a redeemed child of Satan whose only function is plainly to forecast the events of the future,”<sup>69</sup> Malory’s Merlin is expanded as above, but his talent for prophecy (e.g. warning Arthur about incest and Mordred, about the danger of marrying Gwenevere, about the fall of the Round Table [35]) is limited to a more tonally functional literary convention of foreshadowing. One feels it is not Merlin prophesying so much to display his powers as Malory making Merlin prophecy to help forge together unified links in a massive narrative, which, because of its varied origins, tends much too easily to matters tangential.

Thus it is with most of the so-called supernatural phenomena in Malory’s text. They are rationalized, utilized by Malory to help tighten and keep in motion what too often tends to be a much too loose and sluggish narrative. For instance, the frequent dreams of the protagonists (e.g. 680, Gawayne’s dream of the bulls) function much as does the prophetic linkage. After each dream a hermit usually appears to explain to the awakened dreamer the import of the dream. While in the sources the hermits’ dream exegesis was nearly always an excuse for some theological homily,<sup>70</sup> Malory settles most often for a digested theological nugget buried somewhere in a foreshadowing explanation tailored more to literary tautness.

The principal of the supranaturally based objects—the Grail being supernatural symbol of the Beatific Vision—is

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68 Lumiansky, *Malory’s Originality*, p. 15.

69 Moorman, *Unity*, pp. 69-70.

70 For an example, confer text 666: Perceval is told the lion of his dream “betokenyth the new law of Holy Chirche..., faith, good hope, belyeve and baptyme.... The serpent signifieth the olde law, and that serpente betokenyth a fynde.” His dream largely is a lesson to remain true to the baptismal vows.



the Round Table made by Merlin who made it round

in tokynyng of rowndness of the worlde, for men sholde by the Rounde Table undirstande the rowndness sygnyfyed by ryght. For all the worlde, crystenyd and hethyn, repayryth unto the Rounde Table, and whan they are chosyn to be of the felyshyp of the Round Table they thynke hemselff more blessed and more in worship than they had gotyn halff the world. (658-659)<sup>71</sup>

In this single textual quotation—given by one of the most trustworthy of the Ladies of Avalon, the Quene of the West Landis—seems sufficient Malorian evidence that the Round Table society was indeed a new religious family. As if to complement this position the Queen adds: “They have loste hir fadirs and hir modirs and all hir kynne, and hir wyves and hir chyl dren, for to be of...felyshyp...at the Table Rounde.” (659) This parallels much too closely to be ignored the biblical text concerning the founding of a new family: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife.” (Genesis 2: 24) Malory, in his day and age so well acquainted with the scriptures, would naturally cling trope-ically to such metaphorically expandable religious command to stable foundation.

As to other supranatural phenomena, the more magical they are the less important their linkage to religion in Malory: swords,<sup>72</sup> poisoned mantles (157), ladies with brachets (76),

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71 That Celtic fairies were accustomed to eat in a circle seems only remote rationale for the roundness of Arthur’s table since Malory states so explicitly why he draws, in his moral book, the table as round. Complementarily, the iconography of the Middle Ages traditionally pictured the table of the Last Supper as round.

72 That Excalibur is purely supranatural object from the land of faery seems the attestation of Paton. “Excalibur is always an other-world gift, whether Arthur draws it from an anvil of iron...or...from the land beneath the waves. His final casting of it into the lake...is a persistent tradition,...thoroughly in

magic scabbards (43, 59) that like Lyones' magic ring (257) prevent loss of blood, shape-shifting (111), invisibility (160), any number of enchantments (476) and love potions (367), witchcraft (48), strength that increases<sup>73</sup> till noon (856)—all these things are more the broadest local color of convention rather than the broadest local theology.

The magic drinking horn from which only faithful wives can drink (326), and certain other enchantments can be, however, more directly linked to Malory's religious *sens* of family: Morgan, that naughty sister, enchants Lancelot to kill her king and brother, Arthur (377); Lancelot begets Galahad on Elaine under an enchantment (585) just as Uther had sired Arthur upon Igraine, and Arthur had begotten Mordred on Morgause. Malory is perhaps questioning where objective morality lies. A very modern reading, more modern than was the transitional but seminal questioning of Malory, would claim that objective moral norms are set by God through religious institutions. Individuals, while they can be judged objectively, act subjectively—that is, they act once removed from the reality of the objective code. Perhaps it is this once-removal of personal subjectivity within the institutional objectivity that Malory is groping to dramatize through the use of enchantments, which like human passion, lessen the subjective culpability of the will. If Malory was indeed grappling with such theological intricacies, then as a writer with religious concerns he has been grossly unexamined.

Ships of Solomon (to whom is promised a female descendent, "the glorius Virgyne Mary" [712] who shall give great joy to mankind by mothering Jesus) are one of innumerable keeping with the story of its origin.

<sup>73</sup> Gawayne's magical increase of strength is perhaps some vestige of his origin from some pagan solar hero; the same might be said for the Rede Knyght of the Rede Laundis about whom Lyonet warns Gareth: Engage him not "tyll hit be hygh none, for now hit is aboute pryme and now encresyth his myght." (236)

tropes that, indeed, like wandering ships float into the Arthurian narrative. Spynnyls carved from trees of Eden (713) and Chapels Perelous (202) all provide fertile tonal material for Malory who in addition to his genuine religious values is not above employing a pseudo-religious gloss of popular *midrash* to delight his readers.

Therefore it can be said that Malory as artist functions on a basic principle of rationalizing the supranatural, of maneuvering the supranatural to his artistic and humanely didactic ends. An example in fine is Arthur's fight with Accolon. Malory does not stress the magic scabbard but rather the fact that a traitorous "son" fights with his kingly anointed "father." The supranatural retreats before the larger ends. Correlatively Malory can sourcelessly<sup>74</sup> add the super-natural, also to his larger didactic ends, by giving—as an instance—Lancelot his final visions of Gwenevere's death as well as his own.

To the readers of Malory's time—the age of faith—it was natural, even necessary, for the "other world" in both its strict supernatural and popular supranatural forms to intrude into the culturally expressive narratives. "To the Middle Ages the invisible world [in both its strictly theological (supernatural) and its popular (supranatural) sense] was as real as the visible one."<sup>75</sup> Malory indulged both tastes, giving his actors both kinds of superhuman aid. Yet one must conclude despite the vulgar distraction of often stupendous magic that on closer reading the quieter passages of the *Morte* emerge to Malory's credit—that his taste is not, after all is said and done, merely for the tonally colorful occult but more for the cultivated, truly religious sensibility.

The sense of religion predominates as each main

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<sup>74</sup> Guerin, *Malory's Originality*, p. 261, Moorman, *PMLA*, 500. Recall also the earlier judgment of this paper that for Palomydes the seven battles with the weird Questing Beast symbolize each man's battles with the Seven Deadly Sins.

<sup>75</sup> Ownby, 7.

character discovers himself at length. Galahad had always recognized his theological identity. Gwenevere, widowed, retired to Amysbury, and as “a nunne in whyght clothys and black,” took, with full personal responsibility, upon herself “grete penaunce.” (873) Pelles, cured, likewise becomes a religious. (736)

While Arthur always knew because of Merlin’s explanation what and who he was in private life and public metaphor, Lancelot continued through the narrative a student, a victim of the Christian moral paradox that the *best* is fatal to the *good*. Nearly always having *good* thirst, the wells of special *best* grace sink continually, inexplicably from him. So long is his period of adjustment that his vacillation within his problem establishes for him little more than a reputation for instability. It is only when Gwenevere renounces their adultery completely (876) that Lancelot achieves even *good attrition* (serving “God day and nyght with prayers and fastynges” [878]). It is only when Gwenevere dies and is buried alongside her husband that Lancelot finally achieves *best contrition*; for in the dual interment he sees the “rowndnesse,” the perfection of stabilized marital (family) relationship. Lancelot’s self-knowledge comes only by degrees, two steps forward to one unstable step back, throughout the narrative; but it comes, and in finding his moral identity he finds his salvation in his very humility.

To a hermit Lancelot justifies what appears to be groveling sorrow:

“I trust I do not dysplese God, for He knoweth myn entente: for my sorrow was not, nor is not, for ony rejoyssing of synne....For whan...I sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders...[then] I remembre me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were pereles that ever was lyvyng of Cristen people....” (880)

Lancelot's metanoia, his learning and turning, comes, but comes too late in the narrative for him to achieve fully Malory's Quest-symbol of the Grail. In this regard it is most clearly Bors who is best student. Though not as major a protagonist as was Lancelot, he converts from earthly chivalry to heavenly: that is, to the true service of God. And his occasion of conversion, his point of winning the grace needed to move from *good* to *best* was in his refusal to fight his *brother* Lionel. (702)<sup>76</sup> Being thus familiarly integrated into Malory's religious economy, the converted Bors becomes worthy to be the knight who sees the Grail ascend to heaven with Galahad (739), and to be the one to bury the spotless monk Perceval (740), and to take the news of the Quest's outcome to Camelot.

It is significant that Bors "chonged never hys seculer clothyng" (740) even while in the cloister with Perceval. This is perhaps Malorian statement and dramatization that the individual personality and responsibility must be maintained even within the religious institution. For it is true in a less explicitly symbolic way that all the families, literal and Round Table, go to group destruction while nearly every individual is saved. In this sense, and only in this sense, can Malory be said to have an anti-institutional bias: the institution exists for the individual who is to be educated by and out of the institution to personal, moral-religious responsibility. The institution is means to an end: a healthy insight for a man living at the end of a mono-institutional age fast evolving into an empirical humanistic era.

It is, finally, in the *Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus* passage that Malory most successfully combines religion and popular culture legends of the supranatural.<sup>77</sup> His position

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76 "God have mercy uppon me, though I defende my lyff ayenst my brothir. And so with that sir Bors lyffte up hys hande and wolde have smytten hys brothir." But a voice and flame from heaven answer his prayer, convince him to hold; he begs forgiveness of his brother and his brother of him.

77 Brown, 4.

grows from his sources, important here: Geoffrey of Monmouth, to be accepted as historian, mentioned a “geographical” Avalon but not the supranatural; Wace’s *Roman de Brut* claimed Arthur would “live again,” but Wace was skeptical enough Frenchman to be saying that the common people would never really believe that Arthur was dead.<sup>78</sup> Malory maintains the traditional vague departure of Arthur. Over a new tomb, Bedwere and the old Archbishop of Canterbury can only know “by demynge” (872), not by certainty, that Arthur is dead and buried, him being last seen alive.

Thus far goes Malory: “Of Arthur I fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene auctorysed, nothir more of the very sertaynté of hys deth harde I never rede, but thus was he lad away in a shyp wherein were three quenys...” (872) In this statement he seems to cater to the popular supranatural, but in next breath (875) he expresses, albeit in a somewhat vaguely poetic way, the religious and truly Christian hope in an after-life: “kyнге Arthur ys nat dede, but h[ad] by the wyll of oure Lorde Jesus into another place; ...he shall come agayne, and he shall wyinne the Holy Crosse.”

Skeptical though he is at an actual Arthurian return (“I woll nat say that hit shall be so” [873]), Malory instead stresses more and more the truly religious, the conversions to holiness, the best deaths and departings of his characters in a narrative that had begun in sin and the supranatural. The Once and Future King was *pater-familias*, protector of his children; and from somewhere, be it only in religious exemplum, a trope of attempt, he will answer again and again to Britain’s need for stabilizing family head, whose authority—as all authority—comes, as Malory had to know, not from some Welsh magician or Celtic fay, but from God.

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<sup>78</sup> Lumiansky in *Malory’s Originality* contends basically that the *Morte Darthur’s* general theme, structure, and characterization are exhibited by religion and the supranatural: this paper specifies this general statement.

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