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Malory and the Trope of Violent Grace: Seeking Spiritual Identity in *Morte Darthur*

“*I had levir to dye with honour than to lyve with shame*” –*Lancelot* (Malory 89)

“*Than whan they beheld the grete multitude of the people that they had slayne, they held themselves grete synners*” (Malory 568)

Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a seminal piece of literature from the fifteenth century, reveals much about both the martial tendencies and religious values of the writer's period. Within that chivalric code, characteristic violence is complicated by the expectations of devotion to God and the piety and love necessitated by a Christian worldview. While contradictory strands of the Chivalric Oath (i.e. forgiveness and goodness versus violence and war) may seem at odds and in need of “moral closure” (259), as Carol Kaske affirms in her essay “Malory's Critique of Violence,” a more mature reading emerges when readers see how religious allegiance and loyalty to arms work together and what such a relationship means for identity creation for knights and for the Round Table as a whole. Ultimately, Malory does seem to reach a conclusion about which part of the knightly code should have the upper hand, a conclusion which builds its support through events in the later part of *Le Morte* and culminates in the work's final tale. Though a black-and-white reading which pits violence and religion against one another oversimplifies the text, Malory certainly seems, in the sub-textual confrontation of those two forces, to expose his qualms over the prolific violence that accompanies ‘honorable’

knighthood and critically examines the flaws in a system simultaneously focused on “just” brutality and charitable love. Yet, in the “Tale of the Sankgreal,” as well as in the final tale of *Morte Darthur*, Malory’s text privileges the Christian strand of the knightly code and thereby demeans the requisite violence of the knightly system.

The systemic failure I will speak of must first be placed in context, and for *Morte Darthur* that begins with defining prose romance, a genre label that in this case plays a vital role in the reading of Malory’s work. Helen Cooper offers the most comprehensive and apt discussion of Malory’s form in her article “Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances,” and begins by noting simply but significantly that “prose romances differ from stanzaic ones not just in medium but in structure and content” as well, a truth confirmed by Arthurian verse written before and after Malory¹ (820). In choosing the prose style, Malory makes a statement about what he wants his narrative to convey, prose often carrying with it “associations with...and more direct claims to truth,” (820) and with such historical connotations, Malory is able to give credence to what seem to be his societal ideas. Cooper and many of her fellow medieval scholars assert how culture often drives literature, and literature in turn drives back. For Malory, I think this means creating a narrative where readers may see how medieval violence is a necessary yet destructive force in their world and what forces may be counted on to oppose cyclical war. Whether or not the writer uses the *Morte* as an impetus for religious and social change, he certainly “makes the parallel explicit” between “the civil war that makes the collapse of the Arthurian world [and] his own times” (Cooper 821). The prose connections to chronicle allow the easy passage of the reader through *Le Morte* as a history, even though the plot is as mythical and fantastic as any other version. Malory’s audience, therefore, would likely

¹ i.e., the Alliterative *Mort Arthure* and the 19th and 20th century poems *Idylls of the King* and “The Defence of Guenevere” by Alfred Tennyson and William Morris, respectively.

see the direct references to kingship, knighthood, and war as commentaries on their fifteenth century environment, and perhaps a deeper exploration of their shame/honor value system.

For Malory, the personal and social influence of shame and honor—as opposed to modern innocence and guilt of Western cultures—underscore every part of knightly life and deeply influence identity and reputation. Mark Lambert’s article about shame versus guilt provides crucial insight into the medieval mindset and especially into the motivations and perspectives of Malory’s knights, since “for Malory himself, not just his characters,...honor and shame are more real than innocence and guilt” (850). The realities of shame and honor weigh heavily upon knights, regardless of their guilt or innocence in particular situations, and the critical difference in the two frameworks is a question between internality and externality, respectively. Especially with the development of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, these distinctions become paramount in understanding why their affair, and the announcement of their affair, are two entirely separate entities, an idea revelatory of public versus private life in the fifteenth century and it *Le Morte*. Where guilt manifests itself within a man’s own soul and must be dealt with there, shame is a matter of the public and necessarily entails a group judgement, and because “social identity is one’s real identity,” reputation must be cultivated very carefully (Lambert 850). For much of the first half of the *Morte*, reputations are built and maintained by prowess and the accomplishment of ‘adventures;’ truly, to be ‘knightly’ meant simply to be skilled at battles and tournaments. This need to prove one’s value on the body of fellow knights, enemy or not, and to establish credibility and honor based on such violence, reigns in Malory’s tales up until the grail quest. Though the chivalric oath maintains several aspects of morality, spirituality, and warfare as the tenants of knighthood, violence

dominates identity creation until about halfway through the *Morte* where changes seem to take place within the tales.

Indeed, Malory consistently places knightly identity at the forefront of his narrative, outlining early on the markers and duties expected of a knight of prowess and repute. The brief list includes requirements of knights such as “never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure for evirmore,” and though formally listed here, these traits appear in practice—and more significantly neglected in practice—again and again throughout the *Morte* (77). The consistent reoccurrence and constant testing of the lifestyle detailed above attests to Malory’s awareness of the glorification of violence in the chivalric ‘ideal’ and his concerns with knights’ adherence to that ideal. As readers find out, however, Malory’s own narrative slowly proves that the oath only works in theory, not in practice. The footnote attached to Arthur’s pronouncement of the chivalric oath reveals its originality to Malory, the written oath found nowhere in the writer’s sources. Significantly, however, the note states that such oaths *are* similar to ones set up by real knightly orders in Malory’s world. These statements from Vinaver provide seminal evidence: not only does Malory take significant liberty with his source material, but his influences include his personal history and social experience. *Le Morte*, then, reflects literary, historical, and personal sources, illustrating Malory’s ability to craft a story and message particular to his life and period, but also giving the work traction in the canon.

For Malory’s historical sources, Christopher Gravett and John Keegan offer a fairly complete panoramic of the fifteenth century culture of violence, both practical and theoretical. Gravett’s “Tournament and Battle” shows us the framework surrounding tournaments and their

role in the 1400s in much of Europe, and from this a clearer understanding of Malory's use of the tournament can be achieved. While in the *Morte* tournaments and battles are written as serious and random encounters between errant knights, real "tournament perhaps reached its zenith as a colorful spectacle spiced with danger," a set of "memorable displays" often connected to an existing or upcoming war (785). Gravett continues, describing jousts as organized events with fantastic sets and excited audience members who were often expected to pay money to the king, yet another means for revenue to fund martial exploits. In war time or peace, jousts were a way to pretend battle, practice battle, or fund battle, further proof that the medieval ethos was first and foremost, a military one. John Keegan takes readers further into the battlefield in his article "Agincourt," identifying the violence of the English as "[no] arbitrary brutality," as soldiers stomped through the fields killing "those whom they found alive" (792). In 1415, the year of the battle of Agincourt, Malory would have been a mere ten years old, and though the boy certainly would not have participated, his childhood would have been colored by this war and the impending civil war between the houses of Lancaster and York. Malory's involvement in Parliament also placed him close to the political and military actions of England. Thus, Malory's life was deeply influenced by military violence and play violence alike, and his participation in the War of the Roses, a civil war at that, is what eventually landed the writer in prison to finish his enduring *Morte Darthur*.

War, however, was only one pillar of English society in the fifteenth century: religion, mostly in the form of Catholicism, was the other guidepost for English citizens in the medieval period, whether in practice or simply in speech. The intertwining of religion with violence would not have been even a second thought for a medieval knight since "lawful killing...was an act which religious precept specifically endorsed," not rejected (Keegan 793). Keegan goes on

to say that this truth only stands when the war in question is a just one, but the connection remains undeniable: war and religion were two sides of the medieval coin. Not unlike the idea of divine right of kings, God was likely used as incentive to fight more violently, or to enter into battle at all, charging forward with the security—whether false or not—of holy support. To confirm themselves in their righteousness, armies frequently if not always said mass before fighting, and these “religious preparations...must be counted among the most important factors affecting [the battle’s] mood” (Keegan793). Throughout the *Morte*, Malory has his knights take “Masse” nearly every morning, whether before a battle or not, and in this way he takes part in the realistic practices of knights and soldiers, at once establishing a way to distinguish good knights from not-so-good ones. In Malory’s narrative, the emphasis on prayer and religious rites grows throughout the “Tale of the Sankgreal” and beyond, starting out as merely a ritual and mounting to a necessary act to enter the presence and receive the healing of God. Considering the danger facing knights in both reality and fiction, the coexistence of violence and prayer seems not only reasonable but imperative.

In the *Morte*, these two overarching concepts, which to our modern minds seem quite at odds, blend together to create a united framework for Round Table knights. To return to the idea of knightly identity and its importance to Malory, we must discuss Balyn, the “Knyght with the Two Swerdis” (Malory 49). The capital letters and context in the sentence indicate this phrase as Balyn’s identifier; though we hear him called by his Christian name, the weapon-bent moniker occurs almost just as often and is representative of the priorities of Arthur’s knights. Though violence is implicit in Balyn’s very name, he and his brother are yet considered knights of “proues” and “worthynesse,” respected as good men of no particular cruelty or vengeance (49). Revered King Arthur is the one to commend Balyn and Balan for their goodness, and their desire

to please their king, in conjunction with all the knights' consistent loyalty to Arthur even in his failures, confirms Keegan's emphasis on "the personal bond between leader and follower" that makes united warfare possible (792). The bond Keegan speaks of, though, is reminiscent of a greater bond with which Malory is equally concerned: the bond between Jesus and his followers, significantly also called "soldiers" in second Timothy chapter two². The sacrifice experienced communally on the battlefield hearkens to the shared suffering Jesus requires of his adherents, and it is this sort of unity and bloodshed that connects the two superficially opposing strands of Malory's chivalric order. The similarities, however, seem to evaporate in the face of their mounting differences, differences highlighted by the ecclesiastical language and themes found in the story of the holy grail quest and later on with the profuse and heart-wrenching death occurring in the final tale of the *Morte*.

The intersection of war and religious devotion was for knights a simple and almost immutable reality, and with "Tale of the Sankgreal," Malory introduces a seemingly haphazard section of religious text that at once drives the momentum of the remaining narrative. At the heart of the *Morte* is the idea or expression of knightly identity: the central action and characterization happens with knights and knights alone. Where many of Malory's predecessors and followers accentuate Arthur, Guinevere, and Merlin, the fifteenth century prose writer localizes his narrative to knights and their internal and external struggles. However, until the start of the grail quest, Malory's focus tends toward the physical power of a knight in battle and tournament, but with the advent of the Sankgreal, the spirituality of knighthood comes to the foreground. In "The Tale of the Sankgreal," readers see the knights referred to as "Jesu Crystes knyghtes," a moniker that only some knights appear to live up to (552). The Christian aspect of

² 2 Timothy 2:3 (ESV)

a knight's life, as we see with Keegan's earlier comments, drives the tenor of a battle or war, and God is often complicit in the success or failure of a military venture. What Malory expresses with his version of the grail quest, though, is that piety and Christian living may have a far greater reach than just the battlefield. To that effect, the Round Table, the literal and symbolic sign for the community Arthur builds around himself, is an ever present and central image as readers journey through the tales of the *Morte*. The table signifies brotherhood and kinship, community through violence and a common oath, and at the beginning of the "Tale of the Sankgreal," that brotherhood is interrupted by and consequently defined by connection to Christ. The Siege Perilous—a place of utmost honor at the Round Table that eventually and significantly is occupied by Galahad—is proclaimed as a place that ought "to be fulfilled [by] Cryste" and Christ alone (497). Here is the first time that we see the real person of Christ intervening in the world of the knights, and with this space that is created for Jesus at the physical table of knighthood, space is also made for Christ within the hearts of the knights and in Malory's narrative.

To epitomize the dual nature of the religious and valiant knight, readers are introduced to Galahad, the man who will eventually achieve the Holy Grail, and with his arrival, Malory offers an amended standard for the true knight. As I mentioned, Galahad ends up occupying the Siege Perilous, and whilst the congregation of knights is amazed "that he durst sitte there and was so tendir of ayge," his placement at the table is only the first step in his holy journey (Malory 500). As with his occupation of the infamous seat, Galahad's heavenly nature does not go unnoticed by his fellow knights. Galahad's very birth is enrobed in supernaturality, not to mention the rest of his life, and because elements of magic often allude to God's omnipotence, Galahad's eventual accomplishment of the grail passes as providence, and that not incorrectly. The danger, though,

is citing providence as the sole catalyst for Galahad's glistening reputation and success with the grail adventure, since, as Malory reminds us again and again, the cup "may nat be encheved but by vertuous lvyng" (512). This advocacy for virtuous living appears again and again during the grail quest. At the center of knighthood is the desire for adventures, and the paramount adventure for knights is the achieval of the Holy Grail; thus, virtuous living is the means by which to gain the most sought after prize in knighthood, a significant idea when most adventures are achieved through violence.

Because of his virtuous living, a surprisingly simple and telling concept which Malory fleshes out through both positive and negative reinforcements of knights' actions, Galahad reaches the upper echelon of knighthood, a task that "none such [knyghtes] shall never attayne" (Malory 516). Hitherto, knights brandished their swords and thrust their spears to prove themselves, praying to God for success or uttering Christ's name in a rote act of religious ritual. In the Sankgreal section, though, simple ritual falls short, and a deeper expression of devotion to God must be realized, or at least pursued, if knights expect God's presence or favor. According to the religious teacher who preaches to other knights in search of the goblet, and likely to those knights' dismay, "Sir Galahad ys a mayde and synned never; and that ys the cause he shall enchyve where he goth" (Malory 516). Because Galahad prioritizes Christ over himself and over anyone else, because he places his faith in God and not primarily in his sword, and because he has kept himself pure, for these reasons he will successfully win the grail, and any other adventures he finds "where he goth." The scriptural exposition, Christ-like visions, and moral lessons found in the bewildering "Tale of the Sankgreal" reveal both the in-depth exploration of spirituality, a break from the consistent discussions of violence, and the ideological whiplash that ensues in the text and in the fifteenth century world of Malory. Where knights typically win

battles and build their reputations through their prowess, Malory's angelic Galahad offers an alternative.

Against the heavenly and noble Galahad is contrasted the quite earthly Lancelot, and with the addressing of Lance's sin, Malory is able to show the negative traits of most knights, the traits that cause them to sin and which ultimately engender the failure of the Round Table. In the ongoing sermon given by the good man in the Sankgreal tale, he implores knights to denounce their sin in favor of virtuous living, and his claim that "pryde ys hede of every synne" certainly affects the knightly community, whose livelihoods are dependent on their honor and reputation (512). For knights, pride and violence feed one another in a vicious cycle that Malory's text seems to finally acknowledge and away from which the medieval author seems to turn. A primary figure of Malory's work and Arthur's court, Lancelot struggles chiefly with pride as his reputation precedes him in Christian and heathen lands alike. Indeed, Jesus himself, in a vision that Lancelot has at a cross, must admonish the too self-centered knight that he "use[s] wronge warris with vayneglory for the pleasure of the worlde more than to please me" (Malory 534). Within this short statement, readers see not only the "vainglory" that is pride and reliance on the secular world for fulfillment, but also the idea of using violence "wrongly," an idea not previously addressed so directly. Though violence appears a necessary and integral part of medieval culture and politics, the uselessness of cyclic violence becomes apparent in Malory's text. As Maurice Keen points out in his work *Chivalry*, the "late middle ages were no less bellicose than were the tenth and eleventh centuries," (219) the age of the grueling and blood-spilling Crusades, and Malory's proximity to such violence—exacted so near to claims of true Christianity and piety—seems to generate doubt about the two worlds mingling. Lancelot, however, seems to be a bridge between medieval violence and a renewed understanding of

Christianity since he at once let warfare rule his mindset and yet has his sins forgiven, if only by Malory himself.

Despite Lancelot's "falling short of the glory of God,"³ Malory refuses to let the knight fall completely from grace, and instead uses the healing of Sir Urré to prove Lancelot's forgiveness, and by extension Malory seems to ask forgiveness for all of chivalry's requisite violence. *Le Morte* seems to favor Lancelot above all earthly knights, from the beginning of the text to the very close, and significantly, in spite of the knight's physical and spiritual sins of adultery and pride. Upon Sir Urré's hopeful arrival at Arthur's court, he rests his hopes on the knights that are supposedly the best in the realm, but Lancelot's success at healing the knight with the seven wounds, rather than feeding Lancelot's pride, causes him deep spiritual reflection. Lancelot insists against attempting to heal Urré, exclaiming that "never was I able in worthynes to do so hyghe a thyng," a statement that further connects him to his heavenly son Galahad who also humbly rejected personal praise (643). Within the words alone, readers get to see a rare statement of humility in a context where honor defines success, knighthood, and worthiness within the chivalric community. Again gesturing toward biblical themes, this meekness of spirit mimics a Christ-like attitude. Taking a step away from the diction, though, readers also get the sense that Lancelot has shifted his devotion from King Arthur to someone far more powerful: God, the King of Kings. This change in allegiance—proved further in Lancelot's lifestyle change at the end of the *Morte*—reflects the larger shift of the *Morte* in which "Malory locates chivalric communal morality within a Christian paradigm" (Holbrook 58). Though Sue Ellen Holbrook's article is centrally concerned with the Trinitarian aspect of Lancelot's prayer, the discussion about the interplay between Christianity and Chivalry is essential in further affirming

³ Romans 3:23 (ESV)

what seems to be an evolution from a violence-centered community to a God-centered one. Lancelot's prayer and subsequent healing of Urré elevate themes such as humility, prayer, and the "great virtue and grace of [God]," rather than the focus on violence, strength, and self which prevail in the first half of the *Morte* (643). As Malory's text nears the dissolution of Arthur's court, the more spiritual qualities that have begun to emerge in the diction, attitudes, and behaviors of the knights come to the forefront and are brought to their personal and spiritual, if not logical, ends. Lancelot and his emotional healing of Sir Urré become contextualized by the unmistakably spiritual focus towards which Malory appears to shift his characters and readers.

Malory affords Lancelot forgiveness despite his many sins, yet the author, in "The Tale of the Deth of Arthur," withholds forgiveness from Aggravayne and Mordred, the knights upon whom rest, at least for Malory, the fault for the disintegration of the Round Table. Scholars cite myriad characters and themes as the crippling factor of the Round Table's failure, but in Malory's *Morte* the distinction seems clear. Gawain advises Aggravayne to "stynte [his] stryfe," an echo of Malory's own plea for a stop to the vengeance and bloodshed permeating the community meant to be whole and idyllic, and Aggravain replies simply, "That woll I nat" (647). In Aggravain and Mordred's hypocritical and cruel attempt to spare Arthur's "honor," they engender the battle that ruins Arthur, Gawain, and the highly coveted and long-built Round Table. In the guise of doing the honorable thing, the evil brothers show that the "fusion of piety and prowess" that colors medieval life is neither simple, clear, nor perhaps even possible (Kaeuper 47). The Round Table crumbles under the pressure of violence and piety that each knight attempts to achieve in his own life, hinting at the idea that a knightly community may only be successful if its members can balance a healthy sense of "just" battle and the relationship

with God that must come first. Malory's content choices, additionally, are supported by minute yet crucial change in tone and dialogue.

Within Malory's intensely religious diction in the final tale of his *Morte Darthur* lies not only a shift in language and tone, but also what seems to be a final privileging of the Christian strand of the knightly code. More than six times within only the first ten pages of "The Tale of the Deth of Arthur," several characters desperately utter "Jesu mercy" (Malory 649), or some other such phrase pleading for God to defend them from shame or death, words that never once appear on the lips of Agravain or Mordred in the tale. With the volume of supplications to God, Jesus, or Heaven in the last tale alone, readers could infer that such language culminates in an actual prayer by Malory over the violence by which he was surrounded. Dorsey Armstrong, who writes of religion within *Morte Darthur*, reminds readers that "Christianity is an important and complicated aspect of the chivalric world of Sir Thomas Malory," an aspect which, although it oftentimes contradicts the martial side of the knightly code, is inseparable from the lives and attitudes of knights (107). Armstrong's article accomplishes two things: while further confirming the obvious connection between religious elements and chivalry in Malory, an integral notion for this Malorian study, Armstrong also states that the proximity and tension between the Christian and secular worldviews in the *Morte* prevents the two from being discussed with any clarity, whether for Malory himself or his readers (107). Reflected in the dizzying prose of the last several tales of the *Morte*, Christianity and violence are ever vying for dominance in Malory's text, unable to be resolved by the characters or the author. As Lancelot, though, comes to closer relationship with Christ, and the fate of the Round Table and its adherents is sealed, readers sense that devotion to God and biblical principles must gain preeminence over loyalty to violence, revenge, or self-aggrandizement.

Following the scriptural and moral exposition of “The Tale of the Sankgreal” and apart from the blame belonging to Aggravayne and Mordred, the interaction between Gawain and Lancelot in the *Morte*’s final tale seems to conclude, at least temporarily, the author’s feelings about the relationship between spirituality and violence. Gawain is not the villain who represents complete hatred nor is he the scape-goat for the utter destruction of Arthur’s court, but Malory uses him to show how vengeance and violence battle against the goodness we find in the final iteration of Lancelot’s character, probably the best way to express how violence plays an important role but can no longer remain the paramount concern for knights. Another way Malory illustrates this same concept is in the ideas of “the Olde Law” of the Jews and the “New Law” of medieval Christians, as the footnote points out (Malory 507-508). Assuming that by old and new Malory meant pre-crucifixion and post-crucifixion covenants between believers and God, the Old and New Testament dichotomy becomes one that Malory can use to comment on salvation reached by blood sacrifice and violent justice versus that reached by piety and relation to God through Jesus, approaches that cannot necessarily exist to the same degree simultaneously. These two types of covenant seem to be personified in the battling Lancelot and Gawain: Lancelot representative of the New covenant where prayer, humility, and forgiveness reign, and Gawain hearkening back to the eye-for-eye justice and revenge of the Old Testament law. Though Gawain resists his blood lust at first, Lancelot’s accidental slaying of Gareth sends Gawain into a fury from which he cannot retreat. Lancelot on the other hand, fulfilling his vows to Christ sincerely, if not perfectly, chooses to enter a religious life and “forsake the world” with Guinevere and many other knights following suit (Malory 692). A final snapshot of how violence and religious piety exist in constant hostility and chaos, Lancelot and Gawain provide the only end that Malory seems to be able to offer, that is, a tentative and unsure but at once

passionate suggestion that war and religion may not be as compatible as the society made them out to be. Perhaps as peace offering or means of confession, Malory has his once war-united knights remain connected only through their spiritual brotherhood. Raluca Radulescu sums this up well in her proclamation that “a good knight’s life should always end with pious service to God” and so shall this essay conclude with the idea that Godly devotion must needs win out over secular violence (82).

With *Morte Darthur*, Malory crafts a prose romance that reflects on, participates in, and reacts to the fifteenth century environment in which it was written, a dually violent and religious environment. Though war and religion are two of the primary pillars of medieval society, and perhaps of modern society as well, their irreconcilable differences certainly problematize both systems, and their mutual practice eventually reveals that one must overcome the other. Prayer and communion may influence the tenor or even outcome of war, but the piety and love of spiritual community stand at odds against combat-centric brotherhood. For confirmation that violence and religion are paradoxically yet wrongfully tied together, the modern reader need look no further than the current global strife against jihadists and other religious zealots who use violence as their gospel; such holy wars have their roots in the eleventh century and beyond with the Crusades and other battles with God claimed as the supporter of one or the other side. The war/religion dichotomy is complex and rife with contradictions, and it is these contradictions with which Malory and his text seem to struggle to offer a solution to. Nonetheless, these conflicts are also what give the fifteenth century writer traction and continued relevancy not just in his own period, but into the twenty-first century world.

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