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THE MORAL PROBLEM IN MALORY

THE PROBLEM OF MALORY'S ETHICS in the *Morte Darthur* presents contradictions which are insoluble by the laws of any rigid code. There indeed lies the secret of Malory's greatest power. On the surface, if one accepts the authority of Caxton's preface, the intention is clearly ethical. Caxton's purpose in printing the book, he says, was . . . "to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the jentyl and vertuuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes, by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vycious were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke". Yet one notices that even here Caxton makes reservations. The work he is introducing is not invariably one of high and noble conduct. It is only "somme knyghtes" that are virtuous. Later in the same paragraph one finds further evidence of Caxton's ambivalence when he notes both good and evil in the *Morte Darthur*. "For herein may be seen noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyte, frendlynesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne". Out of this mélange Caxton extracts a moral: "Doo after the good and leve the evyl". In spite of contradictions, the moral alternatives and conflicts which Caxton recognizes account for Malory's most moving passages, and reveal the power that characterizes great literature in its functional reconciliation of opposites.

The present high regard for Malory, fortified by Eugène Vinaver's magisterial edition of the Winchester manuscript, and by distinguished re-workings of material from the *Morte Darthur* by E. A. Robinson, T. H. White and others, represents a swing of the pendulum away from narrow moral disapproval of Malory by two earlier writers. It is a truism of Arthurian criticism to point to Tennyson's attempt to make the *Idylls of the King* in effect a moral tract. He was disturbed by the immorality of his source, and in his "Lines to the Queen" he refers loftily to "Malleor's book one/ Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time/ That hover'd between war and wantonness".

The Elizabethan Roger Ascham also had a low opinion of Malory. In *The Schoolmaster*, after attacking Italian books translated into English, he comes to the *Morte Arthure* (as he calls it), "The whole pleasure of which booke standeth in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye". . . . "This is good stuffe", he goes on to say, "for wise men to laughe at, or honest men to take pleasure at What toyes, the dayly readyng of such a booke, may worke in the will of a young ientleman, or a yong mayde, that liveth welthelie and iddlelie, wise men can judge, and honest men do pitie". It is obvious that neither Ascham nor Tennyson saw Malory and saw him whole. At present he is judged much less severely.

Immediately, however, it must be admitted that Ascham was right about the prevalence of open manslaughter and bold bawdry, especially the former. One need hardly remind any reader of Malory of the countless combats waged by the knights of Arthur's court, both among themselves and against their enemies. Arthur and his followers were subject to almost constant attack. In the early sections of the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's right to kingship is disputed by rebellious petty kings; later he goes to war against the Emperor Lucius of Rome. Finally the reign comes to a tragic end in the wars against Launcelot and Mordred. Between these times there are constant single combats, and one reads over and over again of roving malcontents who are sworn enemies of Arthur's knights. Such a one was Sir Terquyn, who had been fighting and imprisoning members of the Round Table for years, and who was finally overthrown by Launcelot. As T. H. White has said, Terquyn had been operating a sort of concentration camp. There are others also: the Red Knight of the Red Laundes, Sir Galardone, and especially Sir Breuse sans Pite, described by Malory as "the mooste mescheyvoust knyght lyvyng", who constantly rampages through the countryside. Nor is the mischief confined to men. Women are also a great trial: the wicked phantasms who try to ensnare Percival and Launcelot on the Grail Quest, the enchantress Annowre, Morgause of Orkney, and, most powerful and persistent of all, Arthur's half-sister, Morgan le Fay. Nor should we overlook those peevish and tiresome females, the damsels Maledisant and Linet, who made life miserable for La Cote Male Tale and Gareth. One remembers also Launcelot's encounter with the lady archer, who mistakes him for a hart while he is resting in a wood and pierces his buttock with an arrow. He upbraids her furiously for daring to poach on man's private preserve of hunting. "Lady or damesell", he says, "whatsomever ye be, in an evyll tyme bare ye this bowe. The devyll made you a shoter". Small wonder, in view of their objectionable activities,

that women generally have a hard time in the *Morte Darthur*. The knights seem to take savage satisfaction in swapping off ladies' heads, as witness the dark and terrible tale of Balin and Balan, and the story of Sir Pedivere, who plays a small (but grisly) part in Launcelot's adventures in Book VI and whose decapitation of his wife caused Launcelot such distress. Then, too, there is the strange tale of Tristram's visit to the Castle Pleure, where he assists at the most macabre of beauty contests, at the end of which he strikes off the head of Sir Breunor's wife. At this point Malory makes one of the most magnificently ironic understatements in all literature. After the grisly decapitation Breunor turns to Tristram and says, "Well, knyght, . . . now hast thou done me a grate dispyte". In the context of these examples of violence, it was natural for a person of restricted view, like Roger Ascham, to see the *Morte Darthur* in terms of lawlessness and brutality.

In all probability this violence is a reflection of the tumultuous fifteenth century in England, and possibly Malory's own part in it.¹ Whatever its source, it is an absolutely integral element in the *Morte Darthur*. Under these turbulent conditions the moral pattern begins to emerge, in a picture of epic, internecine warfare quite characteristic of the Middle Ages. Huizinga has said of this tempestuous time: "So violent and motley was life, that it bore the mixed smell of blood and roses. The men of that time always oscillated between the fear of hell and the most naive joy, between cruelty and tenderness, between harsh asceticism and insane attachment to the delights of this world, between hatred and goodness, always running to extremes".²

Yet in spite of its violence I doubt if any scholar today would seriously argue against the basic morality of the *Morte Darthur*. Caxton's colophon refers to it in a happy phrase as a "noble and joyous" book, as indeed it is. Interwoven in the texture of brutality are the threads of medieval aristocratic ideals: martial prowess, courtly love, and religious dedication. All three of these elements are honoured by Malory, martial prowess particularly, the other two clearly enough to constitute, with the first, an unmistakable moral pattern. Though it was often ignored by rapacious, glory-seeking knights, the Round Table oath was the pattern for Arthur's ideal order. Arthur charged his knights "never to do outrage nothir morthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis".

Arthur supplements this code in his speech to Gareth in Book XVIII: "For ever hit ys, seyde kynge Arthure, a worshypfull knyghtes dede to helpe and succoure another worshypfull knyght when he seeth hym in daungere. For ever a worshypfull man wolle be lothe to se a worshypfull man shamed, and he that ys of no worshyp and medelyth with cowardise never shall he shew jantilnes nor no maner of goodnes where he seeth a man in daungere, for than wolle a cowarde never shew mercy. And allwayes a good man wolle do ever to another man as he wolde be done to hymselff". Here the knight's obligation is expressed in a paraphrase of the Golden Rule. This attitude is quite characteristic of Malory's prudential morality. The mysteries, the sacramental elements of the legend of the Holy Grail as described by Robert de Boron and as they appear in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, do not appeal to Malory. Except for the graphic account of Launcelot's ordeal at Corbenic, the Grail is played down. This is in keeping with Malory's tendency to make the *Morte Darthur* more "natural" and less supernatural than his French sources. Yet though mystical elements are subordinated, the quest for the Grail is an absolutely essential part of Malory's design, particularly because it is a moral challenge to Arthur's knights, and reveals the tragic inadequacy of most of them.

Malory is also less exacting in regard to the obligations of the knight under the code of courtly love. This is to say that the pattern is modified rather than discarded. The code still obtains in certain ways: Pelleas is the devoted—and somewhat stupid—slave of Ettard, and Launcelot keeps his adulterous devotion to Guinevere strong through years of varying fortunes. One can agree with C. S. Lewis when he says that Malory is "perfectly serious about the nobility of Launcelot and of courtly love—the 'old love' so much more faithful and patient than 'love nowadays'; and he is equally serious about the yet higher law which cuts across the courtly world in the Grail books."³ Though he shaped the legend in his own way, sometimes departing from the rigid courtly and religious concepts in the French sources, Malory was their successor, and could ill afford to disregard Launcelot's high place in the Middle Ages as a knight of surpassing merit. In this he followed the spirit of the Vulgate *Lancelot*, which Ferdinand Lot described as . . . "le meilleur propagateur de la conception qui faisait de la chevalerie un idéal de noblesse morale, fort éloigné de la réalité dans la société brutale du moyen âge".⁴ Yet even in the *Lancelot* one observes some shifting in the attitude toward love, as Frappier has pointed out in Chapter 22 of *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*. At first, love of women, even including adultery and deception, was a noble

end. Gradually, however, adultery comes to be regarded as sin, and the cause of disaster. Thus the way had been prepared for Malory, and for Launcelot's poignant statement to Guinevere that he would have forsaken the vanities of the world had not their love been.

The ambivalence of the "Frenssh booke" becomes even more pronounced in Malory. In many ways Launcelot is a courtly lover; for years he is Guinevere's own man, faithful in the face of alluring temptations. Even so, he does not go to extremes he sometimes reaches in the Vulgate *Lancelot*, in which on one occasion Guinevere's voice causes him to lose consciousness; again, he almost falls from his horse at the sight of his beloved. Malory's hero is far more worldly-wise; in fact on one notable occasion he rejects both marriage and love of paramours. A damsel with whom he is riding chides him for his attitude toward love and marriage, to which he replies "Fayre damesell . . . I may not warne peple to speke of me what hit pleseth hem. But for to be a weddwd man, I thinke hit not, for than I muste couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures. And as for to sey to take my pleasaunce with peramours, that woll I refuse: in principall for drede of God, for knyghts that bene adventures sholde not be advouters nothir lecherous".

The more we read in Malory the more we become convinced that Launcelot is not a conventionalized picture of a noble knight in the stereotyped postures of a courtly lover, or a surpassing man-at-arms, or a quester for the Grail, but rather a complex and very appealing person, a man of driving energy and spirit, capable of great achievements and great mistakes, at times inconsistent and unpredictable, yet one to whom we give our trust and affection. In spite of sinful lapses, Launcelot's moral sense is never submerged, even though his love of the Queen spells the doom of Arthur's kingdom. He is a person of great sensibility and emotional depth, yet one also with a pragmatic sense of issues and consequences.

In fact Malory stresses the realities of decision and action more than the French sources. In spite of the fairy-tale atmosphere which Andrew Lang found so appealing in the *Morte Darthur*, Malory very often has a shrewd eye cocked for the homely, the real, the commonsensical. One recalls the story of Pelleas and Ettard, and how the love-lorn knight, through the help of the Lady of the Lake, was freed of his dismal infatuation for the lady who despised him. "And now suche grace God hath sente me that I hate hir as much as I have loved hir", said Pelleas. "'Thanke me therefore', seyde the Lady of the Lake", who is obviously in no mood to let any pious nonsense

rob her of her moment of glory. The French source makes no mention of such a remark. As further evidence of Malory's hard-headedness one also notes his statement (for which there is no earlier authority) that Guinevere spent twenty thousand pounds in the search for Launcelot after his attack of madness.

Malory's understanding of the way in which good and evil, truth and error, are often intermingled to cause conflicting, inconsistent human actions is his resolution of the difficulties posed by ethical paradoxes. Whether he knew it or not he was following the optimistic view of man's nature as revealed in the Aristotelian relationship of opposites in human character. As Alfred Adler has persuasively shown, Aristotle maintains that "Something 'good' in the character of a man may be discerned next to something 'bad', yet this juxtaposition does not seem to detract from whatever is found to be 'good' ".⁵ This concept is the very stuff of tragedy. The tragic hero, a flawed individual of noble qualities, awakens our keenest compassion, and we bind him to ourselves with hoops of steel. It is the very fact of Launcelot's variability—yet fundamental unity—that makes him so appealing. He is flexible and adaptable; though often intuitive in his responses, he is also a man of hard common sense. He embodies all the requirements of the medieval knight: martial prowess, courtly love, and religious devotion; yet he is not slavishly or even consistently confined. Always on the move, spiritually as well as physically, he has a great advantage over Guinevere, who in Malory is much more passive and receptive than she need be. Launcelot emerges as the real individual of the pair, constantly battling with problems without and within, often groping clumsily toward questionable solutions, but at any rate always striving. A man of generous instincts and stout heart, he wins his greatest victories not in battle but in the realm of the spirit. The account of Launcelot's ordeal at the castle of Corbenic is the most moving incident of the Grail narrative in the *Morte Darthur*. His desperate desire to come into the very presence of the holy mysteries, the breath "entromedled with fyre" which lays him low, his twenty-four-day swoon—all these put us in close touch with a truly striving and suffering man. Though this is a moment of spiritual failure it is no less a moment of great moral heroism.

Even though Launcelot never achieved the Grail he continued to move in the spiritual realm, finding unexpected success in a less mystical achievement. His miraculous curing of the Hungarian knight Sir Urry is a revelation of his spiritual power now turned to the problem of bodily healing. Loath to take on the test, he weeps as though he were a beaten child when Urry recovers. C. S. Lewis says that he weeps in sorrow for having failed in the Grail

quest and somehow also in the healing of the stricken knight.⁶ Yet I believe it is more in keeping with Launcelot's spiritual progress, especially after his failure at Corbenic, to hold with Vinaver that his are tears of "joy and gratitude".⁷ A spiritual disaster is behind him; a spiritual triumph has just been won.

So it goes with Launcelot: hard-won redemption of past failures right to the very end. After the disastrous war against Arthur and Gawain and his relinquishment of the Queen, after the death of Arthur, comes the spiritual close. Launcelot enters the monastic life and abjures the world. In this he approaches the ideal and the accomplishment of his son Galahad, who, just before his death sent word for his father "to remembir of this unsyker world". He remembers it so poignantly that he rejects it in favour of the cloister, where at last he achieves a holy serenity. Just before Launcelot dies the Bishop foretells his apotheosis, for he saw "mo angellis than ever I saw men in one day . . . heve up syr Launcelot unto heven". He dies literally in the odour of sanctity: "So when Syr Bors and his felowes came to his bedde they founde hym stark dede; and he lay as he had smyled, and the swetest savour aboute hym that ever they felte". Sir Ector pronounces his noble eulogy and the catharsis is complete.

The ethical problem is also resolved. The extremes of violence and nobility tend to lose their angularity as we come close to the experience of persons who suffer and learn. Malory's recognition of the co-existence of good and evil in the noble man and of the ways in which the clash of opposites can be reconciled constitutes his great moral achievement in the *Morte Darthur*. In comparison with this, all other ethical statements—the Round Table oath and declarations of high knightly obligation—important though they are, seem the common coin of didacticism. Not so with Launcelot's long ordeal. Here the inconsistencies are transformed and refined to create a picture of admirable manhood; indeed they are the essential instruments of Launcelot's redemption. The lion in his path at Corbenic and Sir Urry had already witnessed a proof of his power. From this time on, though misfortune rides upon his back, he goes from strength to strength through the sweet uses of adversity.

NOTES

1. In *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 10. Until recently it was assumed that the turbulence of the *Morte Darthur* was a product of Malory's lawlessness, which led to his imprisonment for a number of years. In 1966, however, William Matthews in *The Ill-Framed Knight* (University of California Press) argued that the author was not Sir Thomas

Malory of Warwickshire but a Yorkshireman of the same name who may have been imprisoned in France. Whichever Malory it was, however, the moral difficulty remains.

2. *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday [Anchor Books], n. d.), p. 27.
3. Review of E. K. Chambers, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and some Collected Studies*, in *Medium Aevum*, III, 1934; as quoted in E. Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory", in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 547, n. 6.
4. *Etude sur le Lancelot en Prose* (Paris, H. Champion, 1918), p. 102.
5. "Problems of Aesthetic versus Historical Criticism in *La Mort le Roi Artu*", *PMLA*, LXV (1950), p. 935.
6. *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford, Clarendon Press), p. 20.
7. "On Art and Nature: A Letter to C. S. Lewis", in *Essays on Malory*, p. 38.

A FORMER DREAM

John Newlove

I have come to the lonely place,
 where life has been decided; parked
 in a former dream, I act the part
 my youth derided: half-success
 in a limited circle.

My belly swells
 with meals set before it every day,
 and praise from friends and those I know
 softens my eyes. The circle seems closed.
 If I could break it, I would think
 myself to be more than the man I am,
 and almost part of what I could have been.