

TRAGEDY IN MALORY'S MORTE D'ARTHUR

by

Roberta Engleman

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Approved by

James J. Winnett

Director

Examining Committee

Charles P. R. Tisdale

Donald G. Darnell

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Tragedy in Malory's Morte D'Arthur

I. The Beginnings

In tortuous, complex Latin, a British historian named Gildas (c. 540 A.D.)¹ told a singularly moving story about the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain. He spoke of the dispersed "Britons" in the tone of an exiled psalmist, describing how some of them were caught in the mountains and slaughtered, others became slaves, and others "went to lands across the sea with loud lamentation."² Gildas is generally given credit for being the first author to allude to King Arthur, because he speaks of "Ambrosius Aurelianus, a moderate man, who by chance alone of the Roman nation had survived the shock of so great a calamity."³ This man was a leader against the invaders. But Gildas was not concerned with glorifying battle chieftains. Instead he was composing a story of how the Britons suffered because of their sins.⁴ When he did this he touched on the themes which grew and developed side by side with the themes of glory in battle. It is quite appropriate that Arthurian literature should begin out of the destruction of a society, because that, and not tournaments, visions, and enchantresses, is the story it ultimately tells.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the development of the theme of destruction from the oldest stories, which are stories of simple usurpation, to Malory's Morte D'Arthur, which involves social corruption, personal instability, and

the ultimate failure of order.

After Gildas's gloomy chronicle the next writer of importance whose writings have come down to us is Nennius (c. 800), who designates Arthur by name and tells us that he slew 960 of the enemy single-handedly at the Battle of Badon Hill.⁵ But he tells us something else important about Arthur, describing a tomb and its occupant: "He was the son of Arthur the soldier, and he was the one who killed him in the same place and buried him."⁶ It is a little hard to tell from this translation of Nennius's "monkish Latin" just who killed whom, but it seems to mean that Arthur killed his son. This is the oldest reference to any sort of tragedy in the life of Arthur. The idea of father killing son is the cornerstone of the tragedy, then, and the other details are accumulated around it.

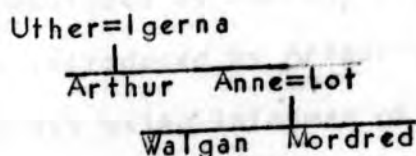
The rest of Arthur's family is also very important in understanding how the destruction of Arthur's society came about. The next most important member of the family after the son, and the next one we encounter, is "Walwen," who is of course Gawain. In the Gesta Regum Anglorum of William of Malmesbury (c. 1125), "Walwen" is "a nephew through his sister."⁷

The development of Arthurian legend was given a considerable boost by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who took it upon himself to embellish Arthurian legend, probably out of his own considerable imagination, and all under the guise of good honest history.⁸ In 1137 his Historia Regum Britanniae

was composed.⁹ This stage of the Arthurian tragedy is worth paying special attention to, for it represents a terminal prose development of the tragedy in the chronicles.

Arthur's tangled family relations are set down by Geoffrey in some detail. Aurelius Ambrosius (the same name that Nennius mentioned turned backward) is the king of Britain; Uther Pendragon is his brother.¹⁰ Uther gains the throne; he is of course the father of Arthur. Arthur has a sister, Anne.¹¹ Anne marries a man "of royal blood"¹² from the north, Lot, and there are two sons, Walgan (another manifestation of Gawain) and Mordred. Arthur marries Guanhumara (Guinevere) and sets out to conquer a kingdom for Lot to rule.¹³ He is successful, of course; in fact his whole rule is a series of victories and conquests. During the last of these victorious excursions Mordred marries Guinevere and usurps Arthur's throne. Arthur returns; both Arthur and Mordred are slain, and the order passes to a relative of Arthur's.¹⁴

The idea of son attempting to usurp father is absent in Geoffrey's version. Compared to what it will be in Malory's stories, Arthur's family tree as Geoffrey records it is relatively simple:



Even in a simplified version, the idea of internal trouble

as a cause of Arthur's fall is still there. However Geoffrey arrived at this version of the story, whether he gathered up a body of existing popular stories, as some scholars think,¹⁵ or whether he freely used his imagination, his version of Arthur's story (and the other kings of England) was the one which subsequent writers propagated. A French poet, Wace, and a Middle English poet, Layamon, handed down these stories making some changes and additions but basically preserving Geoffrey's story.

We are not as familiar with Geoffrey's version of the fall of Arthur because of the later French works which were Malory's antecedents, but in fact there is a quite good version of Geoffrey's story in the fourteenth century Alliterative Morte Arthure. Although scholars can trace the influence of the French romance in this poem, "both in its inclusions and omissions it is basically removed from the romance tradition represented by the French Mort Artus and the fourteenth century stanzaic Le Morte Arthur."¹⁶

In the Alliterative Morte Arthure we have a specific genre, the tragedy of fortune.¹⁷ This genre has the pattern of a state of success or happiness and a reversal into ruin or misery,¹⁸ symbolized by fortune's wheel. The tragic theme of the poem is introduced by Arthur's dream of Fortune rather than by his being informed of treachery, as Wace and Layamon preferred to do it.¹⁹ The tragedy here is well-developed and true to the medieval theory as it is set out in works like Lydgate's Fall of Princes,²⁰ and as such it

is reasonably clear and simple. Simplicity, however, is the last thing one finds in the stories which came down to Malory, that is, the stories of the French prose tradition. There, of course, the old theme of father against son has merged into the theme of uncle against nephew by introducing the idea of incest. These stories also involve adultery, blood feuds, and religion, so that ~~Malory's~~ Morte D'Arthur, derived from them, becomes vast and complex, nothing like the neat story of good fortune and reversal we saw in the Alliterative Morte Arthure. The reason for this complexity, however, can almost be said in a single word, and that is Lancelot.

11. The French Tradition

Lancelot, to put it simply, steals the show. He comes into Arthurian legend around 1172,²¹ dragging all the paraphernalia of the courtly romance with him. His creator, or if not his creator the first author we have who writes on the subject of Lancelot, is Chrétien de Troyes, a poet who lived at the court of his patroness, Countess Marie de Champagne,²² and wrote stories of courtly love to please her. Arthur's court was transformed in the process. It became something like this:

It was a vast court, where men and women lived in conformity with the rules of courtesy, ...where the weak and the innocent were protected by men who dedicated themselves to the cult of honor and to the quest of a spotless reputation. Honor and love combined to engage the attention of this society; these were its religion in a far more real sense than was that of the Church... Though the ideals of this court and those of Christianity are in accord at many points, yet courtly love and Christian morality are irreconcilable. This Arthurian material, as used by Chrétien, is fundamentally immoral....²³

This opposition of courtly love and Christian morality is the basic paradox in which Lancelot's unstable character is founded. It is such a powerful paradox that it can destroy the greatest knight on earth, and it makes such an enthralling story that one tends to watch Lancelot progress through his glories and agonies and forget about Arthur and Arthur's family entirely.

As Chrétien describes Lancelot, however, the tension

between love and morality does not affect him. To reach the level of sophistication that he does, Lancelot starts out as a singularly comical character (at least to modern taste.) He is incredibly moonstruck over Guinevere, to the point that he rides his horse into a river and nearly drowns while thinking about her. Whatever she bids he does, however pointless or downright silly it might be. At one point she pretends to be angry; he leaves in disgrace and is captured. She believes he is dead and goes into a decline; he hears she is dead and tries to commit suicide... And so it goes.

Subsequent stories outdo Chretien in this kind of thing. The next important Lancelot literature is the "Lanzelet," a Middle High German poem²⁴ in which our hero is reared by fairies in an enchanted kingdom with everything he could wish except benefit of his true identity. Eventually, however, he ventures forth and has the usual assortment of adventures, one of which is the rescue of "Ginovere," as in Chretien's story. The most remarkable thing about this Lancelot is his penchant for getting married over and over without being relieved of his former wives. He apparently accumulates four in this fashion.²⁵

Yet what Lancelot eventually becomes stands out starkly against this. His character is fully developed in an anonymous French prose trilogy of the early thirteenth century.²⁶ The three parts of the trilogy are the Lancelot du Lac, the Queste del Saint Graal, and the Mort Artu. They are unquestion-

ably dominated by the character of Lancelot, which needs some description because it is fascinating and, when translated into Malory's work as intact as it was, utterly distracting from the main business of the tragedy.

In these stories Lancelot is the greatest of all earthly knights, which makes him most glorious. He is also most prey to earthly temptations. He loved Guinevere, and that love was a threat to his salvation and a sin against his lord. Unlike the tragic hero of a play, Lancelot must live with the knowledge of his failing for many years. The means of emphasizing his sin is the Quest for the Grail. From the very outset of the search he knows that he must fail because of his love for Guinevere.

"Ah, Lancelot," says the damsel who serves as herald to the advent of the Grail Quest in the French work, "how hath your estate changed since yesternorn.... Ye shall not suppose from henceforth that ye are the best knight in the world."²⁷ Lancelot acknowledges that what she says is true, and later there is a poignant scene of his actually being in the presence of the Grail and unable to move.²⁸

His ultimate shame is being denounced by a holy man: "Lancelot, harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more naked and barren than the fig-tree, how wert thou so bold that thou durst enter into the place whereto the Holy Grail repaired? Get thee gone from here, for the place is polluted by thy presence."²⁹

And yet after all his chastening he returns to Guinevere,

is discovered in his illicit love, and subsequently brings the whole Arthurian society crashing down with him, or so it seems. A frequent belief is that the love of Lancelot and Guinevere is the central theme of Arthurian legend, "emphasized by countless episodes, and finally branded as the fatal cause that brings the reign of Arthur to a tragic end. Because of it arises the wars and series of disasters that culminate with the passing of Arthur and the shattering of the fellowship of the Round Table."³⁰

But there is more to it than that. As Vinaver points out, the Queste del Saint Graal and Mort Artu were stories about Lancelot, and they could not have been thought of at the time of their writing as part of an epic of Arthur.³¹ Malory put them into his Morte D'Arthur, certainly. But there are other stories from other sources as well, stories that are more integral to the tragedy of Arthur if we are to understand its causes.

III. The Orkney Faction

When Malory wrote his Morte D'Arthur, he scattered throughout it references to and stories about what T.H. White calls "the Orkney faction."³² These are the members of the family of Lot, the king of Orkney, and Arthur's sister, who goes by different names. There are four sons by this union: Gawain, Gareth, Gaheris, and Aggravaine. An important appendage to this family is Mordred, their half brother and the son of Arthur and his sister Morgause, as Malory calls her.

The development of this family's story is quite diffuse in origin, and snatches of it are scattered through several different works. Its origins were in Welsh literature, which accounts for the great variety of proper names a single character may possess. The Orkney family never received a coherent telling in the Latin chronicle tradition, except for Mordred. The family filtered into French literature in a most unorganized way. "Agravaïn," for example, shows up in Chretien's Le Conte del Graal.³³ Malory took some episodes of the Orkney story from the French prose Merlin.³⁴ The Orkneys also appear in a work called the Didot Perceval as "Mordres, the nephew of Arthur...and Gûlirres, his brother, and Garries and Gauvains."³⁵ Lamorak, a character tangentially but importantly connected with the Orkneys, is found for the first time in the French prose Tristan.³⁶

To attempt to trace the history of this family would be to enter a semantic maze. The important fact about the

Orkneys is that, in French literature, their story was tucked in among wildly improbable (and highly disorganized) tales about quests and visions. Malory seems to have picked up the pieces and sprinkled them into his work without about the same degree of organization. Appearances are somewhat deceptive; the stories are more artfully placed than they seem. But Malory's account of the Orkneys is fragmented indeed, and it needs a coherent beginning-to-end-telling before one can realize its importance.

The story of the troublesome Orkneys really begins with the begetting of Mordred, which is of course Arthur's fault— and then again not his fault. Certainly he knew it was seduction, but he was unaware of incest. ("But all thys tyme kyng Arthure knew nat Lottis wyff was his sister.")³⁷ Arthur further incriminated himself in an odd, inexplicable, Herod-like way by trying to destroy all the children born on May Day, and they were all destroyed indeed, all except Mordred. This action of Arthur's is totally unexplainable in the light of his subsequent conduct, and on second examination it sounds less like a Herod story and more like Oedipus.³⁸ The Oedipus motif is certainly tangled, however. The unknown act of incest associates Arthur with Oedipus, and Mordred's being saved by fate associates him with Oedipus too. Fate is at work here, especially in the instance of Mordred's being rescued, and the story begins to look like a tragedy. But the denouement is not a few episodes away, as in a Greek play, nor does the business of tragedy move forward

steadily. Instead it weaves in and out of an enormous, sprawling work and disguises itself in the process.

There are some attempts at recrimination on the part of the cuckolded King Lot rather soon, however, although Lot never actually mentions his disgrace as a cause for war. Slipped into the story of Balin and Balan is the story of how Lot, a compassionate figure much more attractive than Arthur, goes to fight against him and is killed. Again the motif of fate as a controlling agent is important:

"And well Merlion knew that one of the kynges [Arthur or Lot] sholde be dede that day; and lothe was Merlion that ony of them bothe sholde be slayne, but of the tweyne he had leyir kyng Lotte of Orkeney had be slayne than Arthure. (1,76)."

And so in a sense Lot is sacrificed so that Arthur may live. Arthur does not kill Lot personally. This is left up to King Pellinore (though what Pellinore is king of is never clear). The murder of Lot by Pellinore is the initial murder of the feud between the houses of Pellinore and Orkney, and it is a sore spot with the rambunctious clan for many years, until Gawain "slew kyng Pellynor with hys owne hondis (1, 78)." The pattern of vengeance is well established in the first book of the Morte D'Arthur, long before the distracting Lancelot appears.

Gawain and his brothers continue to act in a disturbingly uncivilized and primitive manner. When one remembers that they are the king's family and that the king has established

himself as a preserver of civilization and chivalry, symbolized by the Round Table, this is very disturbing indeed.

Gawain, as a matter of fact, puts a bit of discord into the very founding of the Round Table.³⁹ When the time came for investing the knights of the Table, a certain Sir Tor, who was an illegitimate son of King Pellinore, was knighted before Gawain. "And thereat had sir Gawayne grete envy and told Gaherys hys brothir, 'Yonder knyght ys putte to grete worship, which grevith me sore, for he slew oure fadir kynge Lotte. Therefore I woll sle hym...ll, 102)!" Gawain was dissuaded from this, but he went straight away from his knighting and killed a woman during the course of his first adventure. Not long afterwards he betrayed Sir Pelleas with Pelleas's lady Ettarde, and Pelleas was his enemy for life.

All these events happen before the prominence of Lancelot. When Lancelot reaches a position of honor and influence at the court, he has a problem at least as great as his illicit love for Guinevere, and that is how to get along with the Orkneys.

Lancelot, in the beginning, was certainly as good to the Orkneys as he could be. He rescued Gaheris from a marauding knight and did the same for Gawain in an almost identical incident. He was the friend and patron of the youngest member of the family, Gareth. Gareth, for some reason, was blessed with a better character than his brothers and kept away from them when he discovered what sort of men

they were. Gareth is given an entire book to himself, the only one of the family so emphasized, and at the end of his book we learn that Gareth could usually be found in Lancelot's company, "for evir aftir sir Gareth had aspyed sir Gawaynes conductions [character], he wythdrewe hymself from his brother sir Gawaynes felyship, for he was evir vengeable, and where he hated would be avenged with murther: and that hated sir Gareth (I, 360)."

One might expect that Gareth's preference for Lancelot over his own brothers would be enough to bring Lancelot into trouble with the elder Orkneys, but apparently Gareth was enough of a diplomat for this not to happen. It was inevitable that Lancelot, a model of chivalry, should run afoul of King Arthur's lawless relatives, however. At the end of "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney," we meet the reason for the clash. His name is Sir Lamorak, another son of King Pellinore, and therefore fair game for the Orkneys.

Most of the story of Lamorak, Lancelot, and the Orkneys is scattered (one is tempted to say "concealed") throughout the long Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones. Tristram was fond of Lamorak and rated him as a better knight than Gawain. Tristram says, "speaking of Gawain, 'I have felt sir Gaherys for the bettir knyght. And sir Lamorak, I call hym as good as any of them, except sir Lancelot (II, 557).'"

Needless to say Gawain was not fond of Lamorak. When

Lamorak bested him at a tournament, Gawain and his brothers "had grete despyte of him [Lamorak], and were wondirly wroth wyth him (II, 608)." Gawain at that occasion summed up all of his attitudes and the entire complicated feud as it appeared in his eyes.

"Fayre bretherne, here may ye se: whom that we hate king 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 Pellynor, 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 (II, 608)."

Unfortunately Lamorak was in love with their mother, but not for vengeance's sake. It simply seems that since Lancelot had his Guinevere and Tristram his Isolde, Lamorak, being the same sort of man, also had to love a queen illicitly. And he was just as unfortunate in his choice. For when he picked Morgause, the Orkneys, who understood nothing but vengeance, interpreted his action in their usual way.

The climax of all this bad feeling is of course the slaying of Morgause in Lamorak's bed by her son Gaheris. It is one of the most terrifying scenes in all of Malory, especially since it is placed immediately after the miraculous ~~knighthing~~ knighting of Sir Percival, which seems at that point in the story to be a symptom of spiritual renewal. This murder, misfiring as it did (the plot had been to kill Lamorak), is the epitome of "misdirected revenge,

filial treachery [and] the breakdown of coherence itself, with no appeal to any code above the elemental law of feud."⁴⁰

Lancelot becomes increasingly more involved in all this through his friendship with Tristram, Dinadan, and other knights of chivalric character. He was especially fond of Lamorak, and we are told "of all erthely men he loved hym best except sir Tristram (II, 660)." After the death of Morgause Lancelot feels compelled to tell Arthur that Lamorak was in danger from the Orkneys,⁴¹ and there are many instances in which the praise that Lamorak receives from Lancelot and his friends is a source of great irritation to them.

Lancelot's most openly partisan action is to invite Lamorak to go to Arthur's court with him, promising to see to it that Gawain and his brothers do him no harm. But Lamorak refused for king Arthur's sake. Not long after, he was killed by Gawain and all his brothers, "unto all good knyghts grete damage (II, 688)" and to the great damage of Arthur's society, irreparable damage, in fact.

The murder of Morgause may have been the most terrible crime the Orkneys committed in our eyes, but as far as Arthur's society was concerned, the killing of Lamorak himself was the last straw. After that everyone knew how reprehensible Gawain and his brothers were, nor did anyone keep still about it.

"Hit is shame," said Tristram to all of them, "that sir Gawayne and ye be commyn of so grete blood, that ye

four bretherne be so named as ye be: for ye be called the grettyst distroyers and murtherars of good knyghts that is now in the realme of Ingelonde. And as I have herde say..., amonge you slew a bettir knyght than any of you ever was, whych was called the noble knyght sir Lamorak de Galys (II, 69 (II, 691))."

Even Gareth, who is ironically to become the very last man whom Gawain seeks vengeance for, must say of his family, "Well I undirstonde the vengeance of my brethirne.... But as for me... I meddyll nat of their maters, and therefore there is none that lovyth me of them. And for cause that I undirstonde they be murtherars of good knyghts I left there company, and woulde God I had bene besyde sir Gawayne when that most noble knyght sir Lamorak was slayne! (II, 699)"

This is the state of Arthur's kingdom at the close of The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones. The next book is "The Tale of the Sankgreal," the quest for the Grail. Clearly this society is in need of some sort of moral redemption, but this quest, though certainly important, is largely a failure as a rehabilitating measure. Those who stand most in need of saving, not only Gawain but Lancelot as well, are not saved, and only Galahad and Percival, whose pre-eminence we were prepared for in the previous book, are completely successful. But it can hardly be said that either of these two needs any saving.

In fact, the murder of Dinadan occurs during this quest. Mordred and Aggravaine were the two brothers responsible for this, and it is as senseless as the murder

of Morgause, and infinitely more petty. Dinadan is a wonderfully human and sensible man, of whom Vinaver says, "He seems to have dropped by accident into the mad kingdom of Arthur where people never greet each other except by the point of a spear and never seem to look for anything they have a reasonable chance of finding".⁴² He is generally dismayed at Lancelot's zeal for fighting, and the only sense of humor Lancelot ever displays is coaxed out by Dinadan. His being murdered in the middle of a holy quest is a perversion of the aims of the Round Table and an indication that similar conduct is to come.

IV. The Fall of Arthur

There is, in Malory's works, a book intervening between "The Tale of the Sankgreal" and "The most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur saunz Guerdon." This is "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere." It opens with the story of the poisoned apples, which was an attempt to murder Gawain in revenge for Lamorak's death. The suspicion falls on Guinevere, and Lancelot is forced to defend her. In this story, the feud serves to bring together Lancelot and Guinevere, who had quarreled, and so, ironically, it is not only a danger to Arthurian society in itself but it also serves to strengthen the other danger, the adulterous love affair.

The rest of the book is devoted to stories of Lancelot and Guinevere's inability to refrain from adultery or even to be discreet about it, and its function, says Lumiansky,⁴³ is to build up suspense before the actual conflict. The last story, oddly enough, is "Le Chevalier du Chariot," which is Chretien's story and the first story that has come down to us on the subject of Lancelot. But Malory is no longer dealing with courtly romances. "And because I have lost the very matter of Le Chevalier du Chariot," Malory states in excusing himself, "I departe from the tale of sir Launcelot, and here I go unto the morte Arthur; and that caused sir Aggravayne (III, 1154)."

The story of the death of Arthur is a very long way

from Chretien, as Malory seemed to be well aware, in style, tone, and content, and it is also a very long way from the haphazard errantry at the beginning of Malory's own works. Vinaver says, "As we lose sight of the 'very matter' of romance, we step back into dark-stricken reality."⁴⁴

Part of this tone of realism is due to Malory's sources, in particular the thirteenth century French prose Mort Artu, the last part of the trilogy which includes the Lancelot and the Queste del Saint Graal. The Mort Artu is considered the best of the three by far in every respect. It displays a narrative skill which allows the plot to develop continuously with few digressions.⁴⁵ Neither supernaturalism nor the extravagant exploits of a single hero is dwelt on. The interest rests instead on the interaction of the characters and the grandeur of the action,⁴⁶ all of which Malory adopted, and adapted, with skill.

Malory had another source, an English source this time, a fourteenth century poem known as the stanzaic Morte Arthur. The poem is very much like the Mort Artu and probably is based on it, directly or indirectly. A good deal of scholarly effort has been expended in detailing exactly which passages in Malory come from the Mort Artu and which from the Morte Arthur. In general it might be said that Malory preferred the Middle English poem as a narrative guide and drew on the Mort Artu for emotional and psychological tone.⁴⁷ Malory makes his characters sympathetic wherever he can, whether there is authority for it in his sources or not,

and he de-emphasizes the military aspect of his story to emphasize the human values.⁴⁸ In short he has gone one step further than his sources in making the death of Arthur not the chronicle of a military rebellion, as it was centuries ago in the Historia Regum Britanniae, but a genuine tragedy.

The most surprising change which Malory makes from his sources concerns Gawain. He transforms a man whom he has previously portrayed as hot-tempered and vindictive into a truly sympathetic character, one who most nearly approaches the Aristotelian concept of a tragic hero.

The history of Gawain as a literary character is rather confused. His name has countless forms (Walwen, Walgan, Gwalchmei⁴⁹) and his character has almost as many facets. In Geoffrey he is an important warrior, Arthur's nephew,⁵⁰ slain at the time of Mordred's usurpation, but he has no literary character. The Alliterative Morte Arthure, following Geoffrey's version, presents him as Arthur's spokesman, although he is a man more at home breaking heads than talking. The Morte Arthure's picture of Gawain is Gawain the courageous hot-head. He is a man of intemperate rage ("Thare myghte no renke hym areste, his resone was passed!"⁵¹) but a man whose rage is spent in a just cause. This Gawain clearly belongs to the tradition of the "good" Gawain. Another outstanding example of the "good" Gawain is of course Gawain and the Green Knight.

The author of the stanzaic Morte Arthure has the "bad" Gawain in mind. The story of the Maid of Astolat who died

for the love of Lancelot is part of this poem. Gawain visits the maid and sees that she has Lancelot's shield. He spreads the tale that Lancelot and the maid are lovers, and when her funeral barge arrives at Camelot, the poem has this to say:

So that he [Gawain] knew welte at the laste,
That the mayde of Ascalote was she,
Which he som tyme had wowyd faste
his own leman for him to be.⁵²

This is a grim picture of Gawain. Rashness is not his only sin but gossiping and pettiness as well. The terrible vengeful Gawain found in The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones probably reflects a French source hostile to Gawain.

Malory had all these Gawains to work with: Gawain the fierce warrior with the bad temper (rather like our idea of Saint Peter), Gawain the covetous gossip, Gawain the clannish, spiteful feuder. He portrays all of them. Sometimes it seems that Gawain is inconsistent, but his apparent inconsistency does not detract from the quality of Malory's narrative. "Gawain's inconsistency," says one critic, "is the inconsistency of humanity, specifically the humanity who comprise Arthur's noble company...."⁵³ Be that as it may, one important fact is that, under Malory's treatment, the Gawain in The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones is the same Gawain as in "The Tale of the Sankgreal" and "The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon."

His conduct in the feud between Orkney and Pellimore's

family has already been described. The advent of the Grail Quest is perhaps tailor-made for the redemption of such men as Gawain and his brothers. Gawain's reaction to the appearance and disappearance of the Grail in the banquet hall is reminiscent of the impetuous Gawain. He is the first to vow that he will depart in search of the Grail, and all the knights follow him. He seems genuinely convinced that he can find it, but Arthur is more realistic.

"Sir Gawayne, Gawayne! Ye have sette me in grete sorrow, for I have grete doute that my trew felyshyp shall never mete here more agayne (II, 867)."

Nevertheless, the damage has been done, and Gawain rides out after the Grail. He is, of course, a miserable failure. He is lectured to by a hermit, told to repent, refuses, and rides away in a huff. And that is all the Grail adventure he ever has, repeated in one form or another. The gist of most of the hermits' harangues goes something like this: "Knyghtes of pore fayth and wicked beleve, thes three thynges fayled: charité, abstinaunce, and trouth (II, 948)."

And yet perhaps the quest has a chastening effect, at least a temporary one. Gawain in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" is not the tale spreader of the stanzaic Morte Arthur. In fact he behaves very correctly in the affair of the Maid of Astolat. In the story of the poisoned apples, seeing that he has just escaped being murdered, he does not even accuse Guinevere. The strongest

thing he says is "Madam, I drede me leste ye woll be shamed. (III, 1049)." Whether through his Grail experiences or simply because he is getting old, Gawain is mellowing. Malory is preparing his character for the all-but-admirable Gawain in the last book.

"The Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon" opens in the very heart of a family spat among the Orkneys. Mordred and Aggravaine propose to expose Lancelot and Guinevere; Gaheris, Gawain, and of course Gareth are opposed. Mordred and Aggravaine prevail, and after the mischief is done, Aggravaine and Gawain's two sons lie dead and Mordred is wounded by Lancelot. But Gawain is still conciliatory, more so than Arthur, who is determined to burn Guinevere.

"My lorde Arthure, I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty, but that ye wolde put hit in respite, thys jougemente of my lady the queen, for many causis. One is thys, thoughe hyt were so that sir Launcelot were founde in the queenys chambir, yet hit myght be so that he came thydir for none evyll (III, 1175)."

As for Aggravaine and his sons, "they are the causars of their owne dethe...(III, 1176)." Gawain has come a long way from his earlier clannishness, and for just a little while, he is the most noble figure in the entire dispute. But Gawain's glory does not last long. He soon relapses into the most violent and unreasoning desire for vengeance that he has ever displayed. The occasion for this is the death of Gareth and Gaheris, of course.

Even when Gawain understands, or is at least told, that Lancelot did not kill his brothers on purpose, he cannot be stopped. He continually drives Arthur to vengeance, and his most frequent words are "false recreayed knyght!"

Now Lancelot's conduct is the most exemplary in his reluctance to fight. Yet when Gawain presses him into a shouting match, they quickly get back to the old blight on Arthur's kingdom: the epic feud, and in particular the death of Lamorak. Sometimes Guinevere seems to be almost forgotten.

Gawain receives a mortal wound from Lancelot at the seige of Benwick and is nevertheless still calling the "traytoure knyght" to fight again, but by that time the only surviving member of the Orkneys, Mordred, has usurped Arthur's place. The first battle between Arthur and Mordred is fought at Dover. It is the scene of Gawain's death, and Malory is again careful to keep his character on a dignified plane. In the stanzaic version, for example, Gawain's death is almost ludicrous.

Hys woundis grenyd hym full sare.
One hytte hym vupon the old wounde
With a tronchon of an ore.⁵⁴

Poor Gawain, done to death by the expediency of rhyme. Malory, on the other hand, writes a moving scene of a man reaching self-illumination in an almost Aristotelian manner. Arthur finds him half dead, and he makes his final speech.

"Thorow my wyfulnes I was causer of myne owne dethe....

And thorow me and <my> pryde ye have all thys shame and disease, for had that noble knyght, sir Launcelot, ben with you, as he was and wolde have been thys unhappy warre had never been begun; for he, thorow his noble knyghthood and hys noble bloode, hylde all your cankyrde enemyes in subjeccion (III, 1230)."

Not only is this a speech remarkable for the dimension it gives to Gawain's character but also for its imagery. Gawain speaks of what has happened to Arthur as a disease and his enemies as "cankyrde" (malignant). This is the same imagery Shakespeare used to describe Hamlet's Denmark.

Does Gawain qualify as a tragic hero? Within the framework of the last two books, he certainly does. He is a "passyng hotte knyght of nature (III, 1049)," but he is able to restrain his nature until the death of Gareth, who embodied all that was good in the Orkneys. From then on the part of him which is primitive and violent⁵⁶ dominates until he has caused his death and Arthur's downfall, and not until then does he come to recognition of himself. One might disqualify Gawain by saying that in the earlier books he was a thoroughly violent and evil man, too bad to be a tragic hero. But in dealing with Malory's vast work, which covers Gawain's entire life, there is room for the emotions which Aristotle dictated to be roused and purged adhering to the stringent laws he set down for economy and neatness' sake in a play of a few episodes, one day, and one place. If one speaks of pity and terror, recognition

and reversal, then Gawain qualifies as a tragic hero more than Arthur and even more than Lancelot.

Lancelot presents a special problem. He is a tragic figure and a heroic figure as well, and this position has prompted many critics to say that he is clearly the tragic hero of the Morte D'Arthur. But this is to use the term loosely. The problem with calling Lancelot a tragic hero is that he possesses awareness of his sins all along and thus is in a position to take responsibility for them. One champion of Lancelot as a tragic hero says that although Lancelot is always conscious of the significance of his sins at a rational level, he does not reach the full emotional appreciation of what he has done until after Guinevere is dead.⁵⁶ This may be true. Tragedy, however, generally deals with rational discovery, because that is the level at which a man is responsible for his actions. To deal with Lancelot's "emotional appreciation" is to have a psychological drama.

Malory's account of Lancelot's Grail adventures are substantially like the French prose work already discussed. During one of his sermons to Lancelot, a hermit calls him "unstable." A great deal has been made of Lancelot's instability, first his inability to keep himself pure and later his inability to break away from Guinevere. The point is well made. Lancelot's story is a psychological story, and his struggles with himself are more interesting to us

than the eternal combat and errantry that overburden Malory's narrative.

At every point in his career, Lancelot's character is more attractive and simply more interesting than the Orkneys'. In The Book of Sir Tristram, where Gawain chiefly complains about his slights, Lancelot has his agonizing madness and affair with Elaine. His humility can be touching, as in the story of his healing Sir Urry when everyone else had failed. His dignity of character can be overwhelming. While Aggravaine and Mordred stand outside Guinevere's door clamoring "Traytoure knyght!" he, in serene contrast, comforts Guinevere, calling her "my speciall good lady, and I at all times your poure knyght...(III, 1166)." And when Gawain's turn to cry "Traytoure knyght!" comes, Lancelot is unfailingly conciliatory. He refuses to defend himself in personal combat against Arthur and even protects him. It is no wonder that such a character tends to overshadow everyone else.

But all this does not make Lancelot a tragic hero. In the last analysis his "tragedy" is the story of a man who has always had a keen perception of himself, strengths and weaknesses both, and yet is frustrated at every point to rise above them. To deny that he is the tragic hero of the Morte D'Arthur is not to deny his great importance and validity as a character. He is an epic hero rather than a tragic one. But Malory's work is so vast and complex that it has room for this character study in epic proportions,

room for the reversal-and-recognition pattern in Gawain's story, and still room for Arthur's story, which is the greatest problem of all.

If Lancelot is the epic hero of Malory's work and Gawain is the tragic hero, what sort of hero is Arthur? Again, as in the case of Gawain, Malory had conflicting traditions to work with. One is the battle-chieftain tradition which came down through the chronicles and found its way into the Alliterative Morte Arthure, which in turn found its way into Malory's "Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius." The other tradition is the French prose tradition where Arthur is totally subordinated to Lancelot. In reconciling Arthur the warrior and Arthur the cuckold, Malory comes out with a puzzle.

One rarely gets a clear picture of Arthur. In the early days he is dominated by Merlin; in between he is overshadowed by Lancelot, and finally he is dominated again, this time by Gawain. In the beginning the things he does on his own initiative are rarely wise. One is to marry Guinevere although Merlin in one of his bothersome prophecies warns him against it. The other is the begetting of Mordred.

His one imaginative act (whether wise or not) in the early years is the establishment of the Round Table and the enumeration of the principles that the knights are to live by: never to commit outrages or murder, to avoid treason,

~~to~~ to give mercy to anyone who asks, to defend assorted helpless women, and "that no man take no batayles in a wronge-full quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis (I, 120)." This is a sweeping statement of idealism. "Idealist" is perhaps the only term one can apply to Arthur with any certainty. His idealism is ^{so} all-pervasive that it is always in the reader's mind, always there to furnish a contrast to the violence and adultery of the individual members of the Table.

But it is also an unrealistic vision of goodness which better men than the Orkneys (Lancelot, for one) found hard to abide by. Arthur's setting up such high standards may not have aggravated the problems of his court, it may only have thrown them into relief. But as for the man who set up these standards and then gradually disappeared from the picture except for a few scattered minor episodes, one begins to suspect that there existed a vacuum in leadership.

Sometimes Arthur appears to be capricious. He had a curious habit of refusing to dine at Pentecost before he had seen a miracle, and once he went chasing off into "the Forest Perelous, that was in North Walis (II, 490)" after a seductive sorceress. The end of that adventure was that he had to be rescued by Sir Tristram. ~~an~~ When Arthur caught up with the sorceress he "smote of her hede." Gawain, although possibly with less provocation, had done the same thing once. It is an unpleasant reminder that Arthur and the Orkneys belong to the same family.

After that much has been said about Arthur, one is forced to admit that the single most important problem in interpreting his character is that we do not know enough about him. His knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the Lancelot-Guinevere affair is essential for an estimate of him as a tragic character.⁵⁷ Does he know and ignore, know and forgive, or simply not know? Lumiansky says, "Malory intends us to understand that Arthur, having learned of the earlier adultery through Lancelot's account of his experiences during the 'Grail,' decided to forgive the lovers."⁵⁸ This is a rather large assumption, especially since the following is Lancelot's supposed confession? "Than sir Launcelot told the adventures of the Sangreall that he had seen (111, 1036)." This is somewhat less than an explicit confession, hardly proof that Lancelot told Arthur about the contents of the hermits' warning. Nor is there any better evidence anywhere else that Arthur knew. The temptation to believe that he did is overwhelming, but it is also unsupportable. All we know is "the kynge had a demyng [suspicion] of hit, but he would nat here thereoff, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym... (111, 1165)."

If he did not know, he was tragically blind. If he did, he was a long way from the idealist who set up the rigorous standards of the Round Table. He would be, on the contrary, a realist who was willing to compromise his own personal honor for the sake of his society's stability, a man who saw that his utopia was sick and still hoped to work its

problems out. But Malory does not show us this man. He shows us Gawain's headlong madness and Lancelot's forbearing nobility clearly, but Arthur is obscured by them.

At one point, while Gawain is still willing to be conciliatory, Arthur insists that the queen be burned. Then, after the deaths of Gaheris and Gareth, he becomes conciliatory, but by this time Gawain is launched on his quest for vengeance, and Arthur has lost control. His final days and death are pessimistic in tone, and Malory does not allow him a fairy tale ending but insists that he be dead and buried in mortal fashion:

"Yet som men say in many p[art]ys of Inglonde that kynge Arthur ys nat dede, but h[ad] by the wyll of oure Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wyne the Holy Crosse. Yet I wold nat say that hit shall be so, but rather I wolde sey: here in thys worlde he chaunged hys lyff (III, 1242)."

Just before this, when Arthur says to Bedivere, "Comforte thyselff...and do as well as thou mayst, for in me ys no truste for to truste in, (III, 1240)" we are impressed with his sense of failure. There is no sense of illumination and regeneration as there was with Gawain. He is totally devoid of "comfort" for Bedivere, or catharsis for the reader, if you will, and that is the state he dies in.

V. Conclusions

Malory's work, the Morte D'Arthur, as Caxton called it, is the final gathering of the waters from a vast watershed. His immediate sources were predominantly French, but their sources in turn come from several languages and encompass several centuries. There are also several genres included: chronicles, narrative poems of all kinds, and prose romances. Malory drew on the romance and narrative poem genre. His work is not a tragedy or an epic as Aristotle defines these things. It may be considered epic as some critics use the term in that it deals with a national hero and a national theme, but this definition is not Aristotle's.⁶⁹

It fails to meet the terms of genuine Aristotelian tragedy too, though some of the elements are present. The characters have already been discussed in terms of their being tragic heroes. Since Arthur should be this hero and does not measure up, the story as a tragedy loses impact. Gawain comes closer than anyone to fit the pattern, and since he is the leader of the Orkney faction, his tragic status reminds one that the Orkneys, with their habitual hatred and drive for vengeance, are probably more to blame than anyone else for the catastrophe. But the work is not focused on Gawain either. If the focus is anywhere, it is on Lancelot, who is very much unlike a tragic hero.

This emphasis is of course inherent in Malory's French sources, where Arthur is a subordinate figure. But a tragic ending to Arthur's story is implicit in all forms of the

story from Geoffrey of Monmouth on down.⁶⁰ Malory's method was to unravel the tangle of the narrative line⁶¹ and to replace the emphasis on certain aspects of the story, among them the feuding of the Orkney family.⁶²

We do not know that Malory's aim in doing this was to write a tragedy or what his definition of tragedy was. "Malory most likely thought of tragedy, if ever he attempted a definition," says one critic, "in the usual medieval terms of the arbitrary spinning wheel of Dame Fortune, whose dictates caused even the most deserving heroes to be cast down by chance."⁶³

But this does not explain everything. Certainly the wheel of Fortune appears in the last book, but it is much reduced in importance from such works as the Alliterative Morte Arthure. There are also some "strongly articulated" elements of Fate in the first book. Again, Malory has omitted many of the references to fate from his sources, even though he has put emphasis on them by disentangling them from trivial circumstances.⁶⁴ But it is still hard to regard Malory's work as a tragedy of fate. Charles Moorman says,

I have attempted to define the tragedy of the fall of Arthur's court in Aristotelian terms, as a self-ordained tragedy precipitated by the hamartia of the court--by Lancelot's instability, Arthur's dogged blindness, the queen's lechery, Gawain's unreasoning temper. Although the Aristotelian dicta can help explain much of the Morte Darthur [sic], there is still much about the book it does not explain,

principally its conclusion. For it is the essence of Aristotelian tragedy that it end in a kind of moral victory in which the base emotions of pity and fear...are purged.⁶⁵

This does not happen. There is no comfort in Arthur, nor in anyone else, and Lancelot's story ultimately belongs to the next world. For the Morte D'Arthur to be proper tragedy its events should have been resolved in this world, at "The Day of Destiny."

Very little was resolved, spiritually or even practically. There is no Creon or Fortinbras to take charge, only one hesitant Horatio—Bedivere—trying to disobey his lord out of greed. Sir Lucan, Arthur's next-to-last companion, "saw and harkened by the moonelyght how that pylours and robbers were com into the field to pylle and to robbe many a full noble knyght of brochys and bees [bracelets] and many a good rynge and many a ryche jewell. And those that were nat dede all oute, there they slew them ~~And those that were nat dede all oute, there they slew the~~ for their harneys and their ryches (III, 1237-38)." This is a picture of utter anarchy. Nor does Lancelot come to restore order. His mind, as usual, is on Guinevere. In the previous book, among the long parade of knights who try to heal Sir Urry, we see "sir Cadors son of Cornwayle that was kynge after Arthurs dayes (III, 1149)," but just where Sir Cadors was during the final battle, or when he showed up afterwards, or what he did, we do not know. And we should know. In a good tragedy, when a man is spiritually healed his country should be healed as well. In the Morte

D'Arthur neither happens.

What happens instead is that the story turns its attention to the next world and attends to the penance and holy deaths of Lancelot and Guinevere. Clearly, in Malory's view Lancelot's business was not to restore order but to let the world go by and concentrate on his salvation. Ending his work in this way, Malory meant to emphasize its Christian aspects, even its didactic aspects, confirming Caxton's Preface:

"And for to passe the tyme thys book shal be plesaunte to rede in, but for to gyve fayth and byleve that al is trewe that is conteyned herin, ye be at your lyberté. But al is wryton for our doctryne, and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne, but t'exersyse and folowe vertu, by whych we may come and atteyne to good fame and renomé in thys lyf, and after thys shorte and transytorye lyf to come unto everlastyng blysse in heven (I, cxiv)."

Malory's Morte D'Arthur is the story of an earthbound society, however. It is the story of a king who should have kept order but did not, whether from visitation by an early sin, sheer capriciousness, or too much idealism. It is also the story of an entire family's inability to refrain from revenge and hate, and it is the story of one man's inability to refrain from loving what he should not.

It is the impulse of many readers to say that Lancelot and his great love affair pulled the kingdom down. But the

Orkney faction was present spreading corruption before Lancelot was ever heard of, and Arthur apparently did nothing to stop any of it. The Morte D'Arthur is a three-way tragedy. Lancelot, Arthur, and Gawain, Gawain more than any perhaps, all have a share in it.

Footnotes

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7. Ibid., 8.
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9. Ibid., 18.
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