

Malory's Lancelot: "Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man"

by

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Malory's Lancelot: "Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man"

In the final pages of Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur, after King Arthur's death and the dissolution of the Round Table, Sir Lancelot and Guinevere meet for the last time. Their words to each other are so moving that "there was never so harde an herted man but wold have wepte to see the dolour that they made" (721.16-17).¹ Guinevere tells Lancelot: "for all the lo[v]e that ever was betwixt us . . . never se me no more in the visayge" (720.24-5). She wants him to be happy and encourages him to marry. Lancelot, however, cannot be happy unless he remains loyal to Guinevere even to his death. He tells her:

Now, my swete madame . . . wolde ye that I shuld turne
agayne unto my contrey and there to wedde a lady? Nay,
madame, wyte you well that shall I never do, for I
shall never be so false unto you of that I have
promysed. (720.34-37)

Lancelot becomes a hermit and, as Eugene Vinaver rightly states, he repents not because of the sins committed against God, as is written in his sources, but because of the sorrow he caused Guinevere and Arthur. "It is as her lover," states Vinaver, "that Malory wants him to die, so that the 'dolorous death and departing' of the noblest of Arthur's knights should appear as

the denouement of the noblest story of human love" (Works 773).

While the entire relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere can certainly be seen as the "noblest story of human love" in the history of the Middle English romances, the disturbing fact remains that their love is adulterous. Ironically, their adulterous love both inspires chivalric deeds and comes into conflict with chivalric ideals, ultimately causing the destruction of the Round Table. This noble love, in an adulterous relation, makes Malory's Morte an exception to the traditional Middle English treatment of love, where love inspires noble deeds and true love is usually chaste and ideally consummated in marriage.² This type of conjugal love can be seen in three representative Middle English romances, King Horn, Sir Orfeo, and Floris and Blancheflour, where love is of central importance. In these romances love prevails, but devotion to love serves in part with heroic deeds in order to establish the characters as heroes. More importantly, love in these romances does not come into conflict with the chivalric ideal. Rather, it inspires the heroes to perform chivalric deeds.

We know through the number of surviving manuscripts that King Horn (written c. 1250), Sir Orfeo (written in the early 1300's), and Floris and Blancheflour (c. 1250) were widely read and survive for over a century. King Horn and Sir Orfeo survive in three separate manuscripts, and Floris and Blancheflour in four (in one with King Horn and another with Sir Orfeo).³ Manuscripts containing King Horn originated in the West Midlands,⁴ and date to as late as the middle of the 15th century. Manuscript evidence also indicates that Sir Orfeo was read in

Warwickshire, London, and the Northeast Midlands,⁵ and one manuscript dates to as late as the 15th century. Floris and Blancheflour was also read in London, as well as Suffolk,⁶ and manuscript evidence indicates that Floris and Blancheflour was being read as late as the end of the 14th century.⁷ From this knowledge, we can assume with some accuracy that all three romances were read throughout most parts of England, and for well over a century; Sir Orfeo appears to have been read for close to two hundred years, as the Bodleian Library MS (Laud 108) indicates, and was being copied after Malory had completed the Morte Darthur. Scholars agree that any Middle English work represented by two or more manuscripts is likely to have been popular.⁸ We can therefore conclude that these Middle English romances were widely known and their attitude toward love accepted through a large part of England.

Because the treatment of love in each of these romances is somewhat similar, we can suppose that they represent a tradition. But this tradition does not end with these romances. The Erle of Tolous, which tells of an earl who falls in love with and eventually marries an emperor's wife after the emperor dies, treats love just as the other romances do. It was copied four times between c. 1430 and c. 1540.⁹ This indicates to us that the traditional love treatment existed from 1250 to the 16th century. As this is so, Malory's Morte Darthur clearly stands outside the tradition. He presents a hero who has an adulterous love affair and who, in the end, remains a noble knight despite his shortcomings. Among the Middle English romances this type of

love had heretofore occurred only in the stanzaic Morte Arthur, which was probably written a century before Malory's Morte and which he used as a source. The stanzaic Morte was written when English nationalism was beginning to take shape. This rise in nationalism generated the need to create vernacular versions of the story of King Arthur, who had become an accepted part of the true history of England (Mehl 6, Kennedy 409, Benson 24). The stanzaic Morte was an attempt to contribute to this history. Although it treats the love theme less sympathetically than Malory, the stanzaic Morte nevertheless treats the adulterous relation of Lancelot and Guinevere, which had before been avoided by its predecessors.

The source of the stanzaic Morte is the Old French La Mort le Roi Artu. In the Mort Artu, adultery is a central theme, and Lancelot's adultery is severely condemned. The stanzaic Morte is more sympathetic toward Lancelot than the Mort Artu, as is Malory, who also used the Mort Artu as a source. Although Malory and the stanzaic Morte differ greatly from the Mort Artu, particularly in their individual treatments of Lancelot, Malory nevertheless relies on the Mort Artu as an important source. It is largely through the Mort Artu that Malory realizes that he cannot write the entire story of King Arthur without treating the adultery. By examining the stanzaic Morte and the Mort Artu, we can see how Malory, in order to tell the Morte Darthur in a way acceptable to his audience, uses both sources to reconcile the Middle English tradition of noble, chaste love and the Old French tradition of adulterous love. Concurrently, through close observation of Books VII and VIII--with reference to Book VI--of

the Winchester Manuscript version of Malory's Morte Darthur, I will attempt to explain why Malory centers around Lancelot's love for Guinevere, and how the steadfast quality of his love for her ironically excuses him from his adultery and helps him to remain both "the noblest of Arthur's knights" and the "trewest lover, of a synful man, that ever loved woman" (725.21), while at the same time causing the dissolution of the Round Table.

A common misconception in the past has been to compare French romances to Middle English romances and conclude that Middle English romances suffer by comparison. This has resulted in a failure to recognize the two forms as individual and meritorious in their own right. A better understanding of the historical differences between the two can be seen by examining the major differences in literary conventions and audience. Scholars agree that French romances were written in the 12th century, and for an elite aristocratic audience. Jean Frappier notes that Chrétien de Troyes wrote many romances for the elite: Chrétien dedicated the Chevalier de la Charette to Marie de Champagne, daughter of Louis VII of France; and he dedicated the Conte du Graal to Phillippe of Alsace, Count of Flanders (Arthurian Lit 158). As the romances were written for an elite audience, they were filled with complex psychological and philosophical implications of the heroes' actions. In addition, they contained long explorations of states of consciousness which were mixed with fantastic adventures that, again, only the highly sophisticated French courtly audience would understand and appreciate.

In contrast, the 13th-century authors, in a different social and literary setting, wrote for an audience which went beyond the aristocratic few. According to P. R. Coss, the English nobility and the non-noble landholding class, or gentry, interacted socially and "enjoyed a broad common culture" (44). Coss argues that the gentry played an important role in the English society and it is partly because of the gentry that secular literature was distributed among classes other than just the nobility. This can be proved through Coss's extensive research on manuscript ownership. Through his research and the work of L. H. Loomis, whom he cites in his article, we know that the Auchinleck manuscript, which includes Sir Orfeo and Floris and Blancheflour, was read by members of the middle classes (40). Coss also argues the likelihood that another manuscript, the Harley 2253, which includes King Horn, originated among members of the gentry (63). We can conclude from Coss's evidence that Middle English romance readership extended beyond the nobility, as was not the case in France. Dieter Mehl further supports this theory in his research. He notes that, judging from the wide variety of works included in the manuscripts, the men who collected the romances also had interests in English history, saints' legends, and many types of religious instruction. From this Mehl rightly concludes that the romances catered to people of wide interests and from many walks of life, including the educated as well as the uneducated (13). The evidence given by Coss and Mehl in part explains why romances were written for a larger audience than the aristocrats: they were not the only ones reading them. Therefore, in order to meet the demands of such a large audience,

the result is a form in the Middle English romances which, as Ganim states, "borrows from many different genres in an attempt to establish its own authenticity and that moves towards a form less courtly and exclusive and more encyclopedic and inclusive" (18).

From these assessments we can conclude that the early Middle English romancers' attempts to illustrate and interpret courtly love and chivalry were uniquely directed to their own audience. Owing to this independent attitude, we can with some authority generalize and appreciate the style and structure of the early Middle English romances. These romances generally involve a complication which is followed in the end by a resolution. The complications usually embrace a loss, either of a kingdom, queen, or loved one, which causes the hero grief and necessitates a journey. The journey allows the audience to see the hero in action and the choices he makes when he acts. The hero typically responds well to his adversity, demonstrating his courtly virtues (such as loyalty, strength, valor and politeness) and in effect proving to the audience his worthiness as a hero. The actions which lead to his success provide models and rewarding lessons for the audience to follow in their own lives.

As Mary Hynes-Berry states, the English narrator characteristically focuses on the facts to show that the heroes "do what they say they will do, and do what must be done" ("Cohesion" 654), and the narrator's concern is, naturally, in action. Ganim states that theirs is a "thirst for adventure and

plot" (48). Consequently, there are fewer detailed descriptions and psychological implications than we find in the Old French romances and even in modern writings. Instead of analytical explanations and lengthy explorations of consciousness, the Middle English romances include a great deal of highly idiomatic dialogue, which adds direction to the action and the purpose of the romance. Ganim also accurately states that in the early romances there is limited treatment of political and philosophical issues and of the world, "and the relationship of the human and the ultimate offer[s] the audience a perspective that preclude[s] rather than encourage[s] serious questions" (46). By avoiding these rhetorical elaborations--A. V. C. Schmidt and Nicolas Jacobs refer to the process as "intensity through simplification" (23)--the narrator can focus on action and resolve of the action, skillfully meeting the demands of the 13th-century audience and effectively presenting the hero as worthy and chivalric.

The nature of the uncomplicated form in the early Middle English romances enables us to understand how love, although important, might appear to play a minor role. In contrast to Malory, where Lancelot's love is explored in depth and serves as a complication which greatly affects the entire Morte Darthur, there is very little discussion of love in the early romances, and the love inspires the heroes to successfully complete their journeys and resolve their complications. In truth, when compared to Malory, love in the early romances may seem a bit paltry. But close observation of three representative romances will show that love, although less passionate and detailed than

in Malory, nevertheless exists and plays a significant role in the early romances. In addition, we will be able to see how love in the early Middle English romances is usually chaste and ideally consummated in marriage.

As I stated earlier, the heroes in these Middle English romances experience conflicts which require each to take a journey. In King Horn, Horn is exiled at youth after his father's kingdom is conquered by the Saracens. His mission, then, is to regain his kingdom, and the journey he takes allows Horn to prove himself a hero. And throughout the romance, Horn sufficiently demonstrates his worthiness as a chivalric hero by regaining his kingdom and by proving his loyalty to Rymenhilde, with whom he falls in love and eventually marries. In the following discussion we will see that Horn's love for Rymenhilde inspires him to regain his kingdom and, even more importantly, that his love for her never comes in conflict with heroism.

Horn demonstrates his qualities as a hero early in the romance when he meets Rymenhilde of Westernesse, who immediately falls in love with him. Instead of hastily marrying her and revealing his noble birth, Horn keeps his nobility a secret and requests that Rymenhilde's father knight him. In this way he can prove himself to Rymenhilde by doing battles for her:

Mid spere I shall furst ride

And my knighthod proue,

Ar ich thee ginne to wowe. (ll. 548-50)

Horn would rather be knighted so that he can heroically prove his love and loyalty to Rymenhilde. Although he must fight to win

back his kingdom, Horn still pledges to do battle for his lady. He therefore makes both love and war part of an image of heroism and, as we will see, his love inspires him to be successful at war.

The ring which Rymenhilde gives Horn before he leaves for battle shows that his love for her inspires him to fight. Before three major battles, Horn remembers the ring: "He lokede on the ringe / And thoghte on Rymenhilde." He does this before he fights the Saracens (ll. 617-18), before he fights the giant Saracen who killed his father (ll. 881-82), and before he kills Fikenhilde (ll. 1495-96). The significance of the ring is enigmatic. A. C. Gibbs states that it has two possible meanings. It is either a "simple magic talisman [by which] certain powers inhere in the stones of the ring," or "it symbolizes the love-motif: if Horn looks upon it, he will be reminded of his mistress, and it is this memory which will give him strength" (31). Though the author does not give us a clear meaning, we get the clear impression that Horn's remembrance of the ring suggests his love for her, and this inspires him to win his battles.

Horn's protection of Rymenhilde after he is exiled from Westernesse shows that he feels a special obligation to her. Horn is exiled because Fikenhilde tells King Alymar lies against Horn. In keeping his previous vow to Rymenhilde, Horn pledges to return to her in seven years. Before leaving, however, he has his friend Athulf watch over Rymenhilde so that she will be cared for even in his absence. Instead of giving up on the idea of marrying Rymenhilde and perhaps finding someone else, Horn's love for Rymenhilde prompts him to offer her protection while he

journeys to win back her father's trust.

Horn further shows his loyalty to Rymenhilde by resisting the love of another woman. While in Ireland he fights and kills the giant who killed his father and, as a reward, King Thurston offers his daughter to Horn. Horn politely refuses the offer because he knows that he is committed to Rymenhilde. This refusal shows the extent of his love for her and once more demonstrates his character as a hero.

Horn's role as a loyal hero intensifies as he goes back to Westernesse to save Rymenhilde when he discovers that she is forced to be married to someone else. He feels that no one can marry her but him. He comes to her in disguise in order to test her loyalty to him.¹⁰ When she fails to understand his quizzing and puns, the disguised Horn tells her that Horn has died. Rymenhilde's swooning in answer must mean that she passes the test, for Horn reveals himself to her: "Ich am Horn of Westernesse. / In armes thu me kisse!" (ll. 1217-18). They kiss each other and Horn, like a true hero, pledges to avenge her: "Today I shall hem teche / And sore hem areche" (ll. 1229-30).

Horn successfully avenges Rymenhilde and, after revealing his true identity to King Aylmar, returns to his homeland to win back Suddene. This action echoes Malory's statement about "vertuose love,"--which I will discuss later--which states that a true knight's purpose is first to God and country and then to his lady. Although he is married to Rymenhilde, Horn realizes that he must complete his mission in order to be established as a true hero.

Horn goes back to his homeland and defeats the Saracens, thus achieving his final goal. He returns to his love only to discover that his traitorous friend Fikenhilde has abducted Rymenhilde. In a very hasty ending, Horn kills Fikenhilde and goes back to rule Suddene with his new wife. He has achieved his quest.

Although we never witness passionate love scenes between Horn and Rymenhilde, Horn's actions bespeak his love for her and his desire to remain loyal to her even in his absence. He successfully completes his journey, always inspired by his love for her. And yet, Horn's love for Rymenhilde never comes into conflict with his heroism. Horn's success as a fighter and his loyalty to Rymenhilde, therefore, whole-heartedly qualify him as a noble hero.

As in King Horn, Sir Orfeo also tells of a hero whose love is the motivation for his action. But, unlike Horn, Orfeo is already married and has a well-established kingdom. Conflict arises when his wife Herodis is abducted to the Fairy World.¹¹ Whereas Horn must fight to regain his kingdom, Orfeo willingly gives up his kingdom because his grief over losing Herodis is too much for him to bear. Through careful examination of Sir Orfeo, we will see that it is a romance which treats conjugal love, and that Orfeo's love for Herodis inspires his actions throughout his wanderings and search for Herodis.

Early in the romance Orfeo's emotional responses to Herodis' dilemma demonstrates his love for and loyalty to Herodis. When Herodis tells Orfeo that she will be abducted by the fairy knights, Orfeo is overcome by grief and passionately pledges that

he would rather die than lose her:

Oh we . . . allas, allas!

Lever me were to lete my lif

Than thus to lese the Quen, my wif! (ll. 152-54)

Despite his efforts to save her by forcefully taking on the fairy knights, Herodis is magically taken away. Her abduction arouses great pity from the court, and even greater pity from the king:

The King into his chaumber is go

And oft swooned opon the ston

And made swiche diol and swich mon

That heighe his lif was y-spent;

Ther was non amendement. (ll. 172-76)

Because of his loyalty to her, Orfeo is grieved by not being able to protect his wife, as he has so successfully done in the past.

When using force does not work, Orfeo's next move is to search for her. Just as Horn desires only Rymenhilde, Orfeo also loves only Herodis and refuses to seek another wife. This, and the fact that he willingly hands over his kingdom to his "heighe steward" (l. 181), proves his faithful devotion to her. He gives up everything he has because of his passionate grief over losing the only woman he has ever loved.

The narrator in the romance tells us that Orfeo suffers greatly as he wanders "ten yere and more" (l. 240) in the wilderness. His constant and seemingly hopeless meanderings confirms his love for Herodis. All of the love he feels for her culminates as he bursts into a passionate discourse when he finally finds her:

Allas . . . now me is wo!
Why nill deth now me slo!
Allas, wreche, that I no might
Die now after this sight!
Allas! too long last my lif,
When I no dar nought with my wif,
No hie to me, o word speke.

Allas, why nill min hert breke! (ll. 307-14)

His moving emotional response to seeing Herodis reveals that his devotion to Herodis has never faltered. It also reveals that Orfeo's love for her will inspire him to save her in any way possible.

Disguised as a minstrel, Orfeo finds his way into the palace and there he plays his harp for the Fairy King, who sits "full stille" (l. 419) while listening to the beautiful music. In response to Orfeo's playing the king offers to grant Orfeo any wish he desires. When Orfeo asks for Herodis, the king turns him down. Orfeo politely reminds the king of his promise:

"Oh sir," he said, "gentil King,
Yete were it a wele fouler thing
To here a lesing of thy mouthe!
So, sir, as ye said nouthe,
What I wold asky, have I shold,

And nedes thou most thy word hold." (ll. 439-44)

The Fairy King, pleased with Orfeo's answer, releases Herodis to him. Orfeo's use of music and his courtliness win Herodis back. Seth Lerer accurately notes that the above elements are those which a good king should have, and Orfeo's use of this courtly

"artistry" restores lost love (102). Orfeo further uses courtly artistry to regain entrance into his kingdom. Through his courtliness the still-disguised Orfeo discovers that his steward has remained a "trewe" man. Orfeo gets back his kingdom and reigns until his death.

We see again, as in King Horn, that love inspires the hero, Orfeo, to regain his wife and win back his kingdom. Throughout the romance, Orfeo constantly remains loyal to his wife, and never falters from his purpose to find her. His increasing loyalty to and search for her establishes him as a faithful hero.

As in Sir Orfeo, the hero's deep emotional love for his woman can also be seen in Floris and Blancheflour. Floris's childhood affection for Blancheflour blossoms into a steadfast love as they mature. Despite his parent's resistance to their marriage,¹² Floris's love for Blancheflour inspires him to perform noble deeds as he seeks to find her after she is sold into slavery.

At the beginning of the romance the narrator tells us that Floris and Blancheflour grow up loving each other and cannot bear being separated. Floris's love for Blancheflour continues to grow even after his father sends him away. While apart from Blancheflour, Floris grieves over the separation:

If eny man to him speke,
Love is on his hert steke.
Love is at his hert roote,
That no thing is so soote.
Galingale ne licoris

Is not so soote as hur love is,

Ne no thing ne non other. (ll. 115-121)

Because of their constant companionship in the past, as well as his love for Blancheflour, Floris feels that a part of him has been lost. Like Sir Orfeo, his only desire is to get her back.

Floris's pledge to find Blancheflour after she is sold into slavery by his parents not only indicates his love for her, but his loyalty to her. He vows never to rest until he finds her:

Ne shall I rest night ne day--

Night ne day ne no stounde--

Till I have my leman founde.

Hur to seken I woll wende,

Thaugh it were to the worldes end! (ll. 326-330)

Floris's truest test of loyalty to Blancheflour occurs when he finally finds her and they are discovered in bed together in the Emir's palace. When the Emir--who owns Blancheflour--learns of Floris' intrusion, he sentences them both to death. As they are about to be burned, Floris presents Blancheflour with the protective ring his mother has given him, which will keep her from being killed. In his final attempt to protect her, he is ready to sacrifice his own life so that she can live.

Just as Orfeo's courtliness wins him Herodis, Floris's and Blancheflour's love for each other, openly seen and heard by the Emir's court, causes the Emir to reverse his sentence and allow the children to live. In addition, the Emir knights Floris and marries him to Blancheflour.

The beauty of Floris and Blancheflour is that throughout the romance the young couple appear to be unconcerned with everything

but their love for each other. Floris' constant desire to remain loyal to and love only Blancheflour is rewarded in the end by marriage. Floris' devotion to her clearly establishes him as a true hero.

In summary, then, we see that in the three romances love inspires each hero to achieve his quest and to protect his lady from danger. In addition, their love causes the heroes to successfully complete their journeys: Horn regains his kingship, Orfeo reestablishes his kingdom, and Floris marries Blancheflour despite parental and political resistance. More importantly, their love is conjugal and does not conflict with the chivalric ideal. Each of the romances, therefore, follow the traditional Middle English love pattern.

We can understand why writing a romance where the hero is an adulterer was an exceedingly difficult task for Sir Thomas Malory. Prior to him, few Middle English romances existed which were not, as Beverly Kennedy describes, "monologues in inculcating the ideal of true love which could only be consummated in marriage" (412-13). The adulterous love experienced in Chrétien's Lancelot was the type of love which "ascetic theologians . . . condemned as the deadly sin of concupiscence" (Kennedy 410). Added to this was the still-existing law of England (1352) which stated that adultery with the wife of a king was high treason.¹³ Malory was therefore faced with how to present Lancelot's adultery and still maintain his hero's identity as the most noble knight in the world.

In addition to the adultery, Malory wanted to write a

romance uniquely directed to his audience. Critics agree that 15th-century England saw a rise in national identity and with that a great interest in national history and "authentification" (Benson 24). Because the story of King Arthur had become accepted as part of the true history of England, Malory's task was to accurately rewrite the Arthurian tales in the English vernacular which would reflect the chivalry of the time. This undertaking had been attempted prior to Malory in the stanzaic Morte Arthur, but the time was ripe for Malory to write a romance which would capture enough reality so that the 15th-century audience would recognize the actual details of chivalric life in their day.

At the time of Malory's writing, chivalry in the 15th-century romance was described as an aristocratic fact of life. Larry Benson gives substantial proof that during the 15th century noble gentlemen, for the first time in Western civilization, "actually jousted to gain honor and please the ladies, tried to be true lovers, went on quests, and attempted to realize in their own lives the ideals of romance chivalry" (138). He reports that in the generation before Malory, Richard II of England and Charles VI of France sponsored extravagant tournaments and chivalric ceremonials that had before existed mainly in the literary imagination. By the time of Malory's generation, the customs of chivalric life which had only existed in old romances had become widespread (142). Benson believes that this rise in chivalric ideals in Malory's time was due to the weakening of feudal ties and the rise of the middle class. Feudalism in Malory's England is often referred to as "bastard feudalism,"

which was a contractual, "monetary rather than strictly feudal (land-based) relation between a great lord and a lesser nobleman; the great lord would pay a fixed fee or offer political protection in return for feudal services" (Benson 143). Because 15th-century feudalism was more monetary than military, classes outside the nobility, such as the gentry, were able to become wealthy and powerful. The rise in the lower classes, argues Benson, caused the nobility of the time to insist upon an increased emphasis on the importance of noble blood, and an "enthusiastic cultivation of ceremonial forms of chivalry" (143). Therefore, Malory and his contemporaries wrote about the chivalry of their time, which included honor and integrity, courage and prowess, and love. Malory's idea of love was that of his time in that knights strove to win honor for the sake of their ladies, thus becoming virtuous through love (Benson 158). Benson points out historically that Edward III's knights, upon setting out for France, vowed to wear patches over their right eyes until they had struck a blow for their ladies' sake. Therefore, despite the fact that Malory's tales periodically appear to be overly heightened and idealized, the chivalry in the Morte nevertheless strongly resembles the actual chivalric life of his own day.

Since the 15th-century desire for realism in romances prevailed, Malory probably felt it necessary to respond to the tastes of his audience, especially in terms of love. "The Tale of Gareth" (Book IV), Malory's most original creation in the Morte Darthur, is proof that he was aware of the rules of love

ideally consummated in marriage. In the tale, Gareth falls in love with Lyonesse and, after she refuses him, tries to win her love by fighting and jousting with other knights. When he returns from his battles, he eventually marries Lyonesse, thus conforming to the pattern of conjugal love. In contrast to this, Lancelot's love for Guinevere is clearly adulterous, and because it is a part of the history of King Arthur it had to be included in Malory's Morte. Malory's sources, the French Mort Artu and, to a lesser extent, the stanzaic Morte Arthur, present Lancelot's love for Guinevere as shameful and ultimately charge that Lancelot's affair caused the break up of the Round Table. The Mort Artu focuses on Lancelot's uncompromising resistance to forsake his adulterous love for Guinevere. The French authors use Lancelot as a moral example to show their audience what happens to people who put their value in earthly things. As I shall demonstrate, Malory avoids having his hero shamed in this way by remarkably altering his sources and skillfully reinterpreting narrative events in order to lessen Lancelot's guilt. I will show how he diverts our attention from Lancelot's guilt by demonstrating that his loyalty in loving Guinevere strengthens his nobility. Malory builds on loyalty and stability as a part of chivalry, and in his stressing Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere, he creates in Lancelot a truly chivalric knight. His adulterous love, in turn, both inspires chivalric deeds and comes into conflict with chivalric ideals, thus setting Malory's treatment apart from the traditional treatment of love in the Middle English romances.

Even before Malory can begin to save Lancelot from the

public shame of adultery he must somehow alter his sources to excuse Lancelot's failure in the Grail quest in Book VI of the Winchester Manuscript version of the Morte Darthur. In the French Queste de Saint Graal, the intrusion of the Grail upon Arthur's kingdom, according to Vinaver, is regarded as a means of contrasting earthly and divine chivalry and condemning earthly chivalry (Works 758). According to Vinaver's assessments, with which I agree, the French Queste uses Lancelot as an example of earthly chivalry "humbled in the endeavor to make itself worthy of divine grace, and Lancelot's humiliation [is] as necessary a part of the story as [his son] Galahad's triumph" (Works 759) in the quest. The whole of the Queste embodies doctrinal expositions and allegories to show how those knights who follow "la chevallierie celestiale" succeed and those who follow "la seculiere" fail. Thus, the French Queste, in showing that Lancelot fails to achieve the grail because of his sinful affections for Guinevere, uses Lancelot's failure to humiliate him and disgrace the Round Table. Malory, however, softens the effect of his failure by leaving out much of the incriminating evidence against Lancelot, and by heaping praises upon Lancelot. Hynes-Berry notes that Malory leaves out much evidence of adultery in the Grail quest, and suggests that Lancelot's sin arises from weakness rather than evil instincts (Aspects 99). Lancelot admits to the hermit that his faults are doing many "dedis of armys" for the "quenys sake" (539.7-8) and not doing battle for "Goddys sake, but for to wyne worship and to cause me the bettir to be loved, and litill or nought I thanked never God

of hit" (539.9-11). When Lancelot asks for advice, the hermit counsels him to stay away from the queen: "Ye shall no more com in that quenys felyship as much as ye may forbere" (539.14-15). This is different from the French, which lacks the qualification, "as much as ye may forbere." The effect in the French version is that Lancelot does not keep his promise to the hermit because he sees her soon after his return from the quest. But, in Malory's version, as Larry Benson accurately notes, Lancelot does keep his vow. He tries to avoid the queen as much as possible, but his ultimate problem is that he cannot forebear her love, for love, as Malory later explains, is too powerful to suffer constraint (220). The hermit in Malory's Morte is presumably satisfied with Lancelot's answer for, later on in the quest, he tells Gawain that Lancelot will die "ryght an holy man" (563.23).

Another dramatic change in Malory is the nature of Lancelot's role as the repentant sinner in the quest. In the French version, Lancelot recognizes that he is not one of the "chosen" knights because of his sins. Malory's Lancelot, in contrast, feels blessed for going as far as he does in the Grail:

Now I thanke God . . . for Hys grete mercy of that I
have sene, for hit suffisith me. For, as I suppose, no
man in thys worlde have lyved bettir than I have done
to encheve that I have done. (598.13-15)

As Vinaver rightly states, Lancelot reflects more on his success than his failure in the quest: "He thanks God for what he has seen in his search for the Grail; and what he has seen 'suffices him': he returns from his adventures with a feeling of having once more accomplished a great task" (3: 1537).¹⁴ Malory's

insertions seemingly elevate Lancelot to the level of those who do achieve the Grail; he even spends more time focusing on Lancelot's accomplishments than the others.' In so doing he lessens the significance of the victories of Galahad, Bors and Perceval. In Malory's version, Galahad appears to be, in Hynes-Berry's words, an ideal of "someone operating in another dimension" (Aspects 101). The others are simply commended for their stability throughout the quest.¹⁵

Just as he tries to present Lancelot as a successful knight in the Grail quest, so Malory begins to reestablish Lancelot's worldly virtue in Lancelot and Guinevere (Book VII). In the opening lines Lancelot returns from the Grail quest ready to try to stay away from Guinevere:

And therefore, madam, I was but late in that queste,
and wyte you well, madam, hit may nat be yet lyghtly
forgotyn, and the hyghe servyse in whom I dud my
dyligente laboure. (611.39-41)

Because of his answer, Guinevere accuses him of being a "false, recrayed knyght and a comon lechourere" (612.19-20), and therefore faithless to her. This is quite an unfair accusation on Guinevere's part, because it is Lancelot's devotion to her that causes him to fail in the quest. But her jealousy and inability to restrain her passions cause Guinevere to exile Lancelot. Because of his neverending love for her, he sets out to prove himself worthy of her love. This is very much in contrast to Horn, Orfeo, and Floris because, unlike Lancelot, these heroes are not exiled by their ladies; their love is

already firmly established. Orfeo and Floris go on quests in order to regain lovers whom they have lost. Horn is not banished by Rymenhilde but by her father, because of Fikenhilde's lies. Before Horn leaves Westernesse, he pledges his love to Rymenhilde and promises to return to her in seven years. Although he loves her, Horn's love for Rymenhilde takes a back seat as he feels compelled to fulfill his duty to win back his kingdom. He does not feel that he must spend his exile proving his loyalty to Rymenhilde. Lancelot, however, feels that he must, if necessary, spend the rest of his life proving his loyalty and love to Guinevere. He does this through prowess in duels and by resisting the offers of ladies who fall in love with him.

Lancelot's first chance to prove his loyalty to Guinevere after the Grail quest occurs in the episode of Book VII that Vinaver has entitled "The Poisoned Apple," where Guinevere is falsely accused of poisoning a knight at a dinner she prepares for the Round Table. When Lancelot discovers that she is about to be burned at the stake, he returns to save her life. Even though she has previously banished him from her sight, Lancelot cannot refuse to save her life because of his love for her.

In the next episode in Book VII, "The Fair Maid of Astolat," Lancelot gets badly wounded in the tournament at Winchester. He is taken care of by Elayne, the fair maid of Astolat, who immediately falls in love with him. Because Lancelot does not return her love, Elayne eventually dies from a broken heart. Upon discovering Elayne's love for Lancelot, Guinevere asks him why he does not show more kindness toward her. Lancelot answers that he offered her money for nursing him, but he could not love

her, "'For madame,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'I love nat to be constrayned to love, for love muste only aryse of the harte selff, and not by none constraynte'" (641.36-38). These lines, not included in his sources, reflect the stability of Lancelot's love for Guinevere, which caused his failure in the quest, and shows how love is too powerful to suffer constraint. The outcome of Malory's challenge of softening the drama of Elayne's death is quite successful, especially since a rejected woman in romances ordinarily goes away and eventually disappears from the story. This can be seen in King Horn, where Horn is confronted with a chance to love another woman. He, like Sir Lancelot, cannot marry Reynilde because of his loyalty to Rymenhilde. Instead, Horn offers Reynilde to his best friend. Unlike Elayne, Reynilde does not reject the consolation. In the Morte, Elayne dies, therefore adding a complication to the plot. But Malory skillfully adds his own drama to the plot by suggesting that in remaining consistently loyal to Guinevere Lancelot must refuse Elayne, which Malory implies is the only thing that he can do. This, in effect, lessens the complication and reinforces Lancelot's decisions.

In addition to Lancelot's statements that love is too powerful to suffer constraint, Malory includes another key passage to express the importance of committed love, and to praise Lancelot's fidelity. In the beginning of the episode entitled "The Knight of the Cart," Malory addresses virtuous love to his readers:

But firste reserve the honoure to God, and secundely

thy quarell must com of thy lady. And such love I
calle vertuose love. (649.19-21)

Malory also stresses that "stabylyte," "trouth" and "faythefulness" are important components in "vertuose love," and this was the type of love practiced "in kynge Arthurs dayes" (649.29). Malory includes these statements to suggest to the readers that since Lancelot is a good, committed knight, who lived in the stable days of Arthur, he must also be a virtuous knight. In making these comments Malory deflects part of Lancelot's guilt by focusing on his stability. No narrative interventions such as these occur in the three early romances because there is no need to justify the behavior of their heroes. Malory, however, has to strive to reinforce Lancelot's virtue to an audience not accustomed to approving adulterous love.

Lancelot proves his fidelity once again in "The Knight of the Cart." When he discovers that Sir Mellyagaunte has abducted the Queen, Lancelot sets out to rescue her. He exclaims, "Allas . . . now am I ashamed for ever, onles that I may rescow that noble lady frome dishonour!" (653.1-2). Mark Lambert sees this statement and many others as more of a chivalric obligation than expressions of love. He argues that the above speech is one Lancelot might express to anyone (201). Lambert is justified in taking this as a noble act of conduct, but behind Lancelot's chivalric obligation lies his strong love for Guinevere, which we have seen and felt before, and his love proves that Lancelot's actions are more than obligatory. We can further witness his strong love for her when he confronts the old hag who tries to seduce him. If he promises to love her, she will set Lancelot

free. But Lancelot answers, "and if there were no mo women in all thys londe but ye, yet shall nat I have ado with you" (660.38-39). When the old hag decides to settle for a kiss, Lancelot remarks, "and I undirstood there were ony disworshyp for to kysse you, I would nat do hit" (661.5-6). Even though Lancelot realizes that the only way to save Guinevere may be to love the old lady, he cannot bring himself to yield to her wishes. He would rather die an honorable death than betray his commitment to Guinevere. Thus, by drawing the line as he does Lancelot shows both his devotion to chivalry and his loyalty to Guinevere.

"The Knight of the Cart" does not simply affirm Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere. While this is clearly one of Malory's purposes, he also uses it to show that, although Lancelot could not be a true "spiritual" knight in the Grail quest, God is nevertheless on Lancelot's side. At the end of "The Knight of the Cart," Mellyagaunt accuses Guinevere of sleeping with one of the ten knights of King Arthur, whom Mellyagaunt has taken prisoner. Guinevere swears that she has not slept with one of the ten, although she has indeed slept with Lancelot. Although she is not directly guilty of Mellyagaunt's charge, her claims are nevertheless deceptive. Lancelot also swears on Guinevere's behalf. Mellyagaunt, believing that Guinevere is guilty, rather tauntingly cautions Lancelot not to fight for her because, if Guinevere is truly guilty, God will justly punish Lancelot for, says Mellyagaunt, "God woll have a stroke in every battle" (659.6-7). Lancelot, believing that he is right to defend

Guinevere, responds:

As for that . . . God ys to be drad! But as to that I
say nay playnly, that thys nyght there lay none of thes
ten knyghtes wounded with my lady, quene Gwenyver, and
that woll I prove with myne hondys that ye say untrewly
in that. (659.8-11)

Lancelot takes a big leap of faith in believing that God will be on his side, especially after such an equivocal oath. Despite the equivocation, Lancelot wins the duel and, obeying Guinevere's wishes, he kills Mellyagaunt. Lancelot's victory clearly suggests that God affirms Lancelot's actions and that God is on his side.

Lancelot's victory over Mellyagaunt and his preceding successful quests prepare Lancelot for the final episode in Book VII, "The Healing of Sir Urry." Malory invents this story to emphasize that Lancelot passes the supreme test of knighthood in being being able to heal Sir Urry because of his loyalty to Guinevere, and because he has God's support. Lancelot's ability to heal Urry, when no other person in the land can, once again proves that God affirms Lancelot's oath to Mellyagaunt. His healing also indirectly suggests that God is ready and will always be ready to stand by Lancelot, in spite of his sin.

Lancelot's healing of Sir Urry ends Book VII of the Morte and with Book VIII we come to the breaking point at which the adultery is revealed to Arthur and the Round Table is destroyed. As I stated earlier, adultery in the Mort Artu is regarded as loathesome, and is the ultimate cause of the fall of the Round Table. In Book VIII of the Morte Darthur, however, Malory

lessens the effect of the adultery by juxtaposing Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere with King Arthur's seemingly uncaring attitude toward her. Malory also places many of Arthur's most noble knights, such as Gawain, on Lancelot's side, while at the same time presenting Aggravayne and Mordred as evil outcasts because of their traitorous deed. Malory's changes, in effect, invite different responses from the reader. Throughout Book VIII, Malory appears to follow the stanzaic Morte Arthur more closely than he follows the French. By comparing these two works and the Mort Artu, we can see that the stanzaic Morte, although not as completely sympathetic towards Lancelot as Malory, nevertheless presents the adultery less negatively than the French, therefore showing a progressive attitude change between the two versions.

When the adultery is made public, King Arthur appears to be more upset about the preservation of the fellowship than Guinevere's fate, for he states, "quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company" (685.31-32). King Arthur appears to be more interested in chivalric obligation to his knights; his flaw is that he does not feel as strongly devoted to Guinevere as he should. His affection for Guinevere is not at all similar to that of Sir Orfeo, who gives up his entire kingdom to save Herodis. He does not seem to fully exemplify Malory's definition of virtuous love. Malory's treatment of Arthur is similar to that of the stanzaic Morte, in which King Arthur seems to care even less about Guinevere. This negative treatment is probably why Malory uses the stanzaic Morte as a source. Upon learning the truth, Arthur

tells his men:

Certes, that were grete pitee;
So as man nadde never yet more
Of beautee ne of bountee,
Ne man in world was never yet ere
Of so mikel nobilitee.
Alas, full grete dole it were
In him sholde any tresoun be!
But sithe it is so, withouten fail,
Sir Agravain, so God thee rede,
What were now thy best counsel,
For to take him with the deed? (ll. 1737-47)

Arthur does not appear to be deeply upset that Lancelot has been false to him; he seems to marvel that a man of so much nobility could perform such a treasonous act. Arthur's response is clearly impersonal in that he responds to Lancelot's act rather than Lancelot himself. Without pausing to reflect that Lancelot may be innocent, Arthur very quickly calls for justice. He leaves out Guinevere altogether; she is not mentioned again until Lancelot rescues her from the stake. During the actual rescue scene, which occurs later on in the stanzaic Morte, Arthur is again more concerned that his knights have been slain than that Guinevere has departed.

In contrast to these versions, the Mort Artu describes Arthur as a grieved man, extremely sorrowed over having to sentence Guinevere:

Then King Arthur said no more and was so sorrowful that
all night long he would never drink or eat, nor did he

ever wish that the queen be brought before him. (81) As she is taken out to be burned at the stake, Arthur sees her, and "such great pity seized him that he could not look at her but ordered her to be taken from before him" (82). The king clearly regrets losing Guinevere. The Mort Artu version allows the audience to sympathize with Arthur, and feel less sympathy for Lancelot. Malory leaves out these lines and most lines in which Arthur appears to care for Guinevere so that the audience will feel more compassion for Lancelot, who operates out of a deeply felt mission to love his lady at any cost. Later on in Malory's Morte, Lancelot tells King Arthur that his accusers must have been liars because, "had nat the myght of God bene with me, I myght never endured with fourtene knyghtes" (694.35-36). R. T. Davies accurately states that the "ultimate implication of this is that God is on the side of the truly chivalrous though they are sinful" (Patterns 161). Therefore, we see Malory diverting our attention from Lancelot's adultery by presenting him as a man who loyally defends the love of his lady.

Malory also tries to defend Lancelot's love and lessen the effect of the adultery by suggesting in the tale that even Arthur's most trustworthy knights do not feel that Lancelot's affair with Guinevere is an injury to the king. Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred only decide to make public Lancelot's adultery because they have "ever a prevy hate unto the quene, dame Gwenyver, and to sir Launcelot" (673.11-12). Gawain, in realizing "what woll falle of hit" (673.30), reminds Aggravayne and Mordred of Lancelot's loyal duties to both the king and

queen, as well as the knights:

ye muste remembir how oftyntymes sir Launcelot hath
rescowed the kynge and the quene . . . he rescowed me
frome kynge Carados of the Dolerous Towre and slew hym
and saved my lyff. Also, brother, sir Aggravayne and
sir Mordred, in lyke wise sir Launcelot rescowed you
both and three score and two frome sir Tarquyne. And
therefore, brothir, methynkis suche noble dedis and
kyndnes shulde be remembirde. (673.36-8; 674.1-5)

Gawain suggests, as the mouthpiece for the knights and Malory, that Lancelot has been so loyal to the court that his adultery is not a justifiable reason to commit him, or the Round Table, to a destructive end. Because Aggravayne and Mordred still decide to accuse Lancelot, Malory makes the audience feel a strong sense of hatred for them; they appear to believe that Lancelot's adultery supercedes his good deeds, but it is merely a ploy for them to take revenge on Lancelot.

In the Mort Artu, Aggravayne and Mordred are not regarded as evil because King Arthur, enraged, forces the truth out of them with threats:

"When you refuse to tell me," said the king, "either you will kill me or I will kill you."

He ran to a sword lying on a bed, drew it from its scabbard, advanced on Agravain and shouted that without fail he would kill him if he did not tell what he was so desirous of hearing. He raised the sword to strike him in the middle of the head. (74)

Aggravayne reveals the truth for safety's sake. Instead of

Gawain's prefacing comments in defense of Lancelot found in Malory,¹⁶ the Mort Artu pictures a king overcome by the desire to confirm his suspicions as to whether or not his wife and his loyal knight could actually commit such a crime behind his back.¹⁷ This description of King Arthur does not allow the audience to feel the sympathy for Lancelot that Malory creates. In the stanzaic Morte, we again feel no sympathy for Aggravayne who, when asked, does not hesitate to tell everything he knows:

Agravain told all bydene

To the king with simple cheer,

How Launcelot ligges by the queen,

And so has done full many a yere,

And that wot all the court bydene

And iche day it see and here. (ll. 1728-1733)

Malory uses this version because it, of course, reveals Aggravayne as the true traitor he is. The audience feels disgust for him because he would rather bring ruin to the court than keep the peace by remaining silent.

Because Malory places all of the knights on Lancelot's side, we can more fully appreciate and even feel compassion for Lancelot as he spends the rest of his life striving to save Guinevere from death. When their adultery is first made public, Lancelot reminds the queen of his loyalty to her: "and as I never fayled you in ryght nor in wronge sytthyn the firste day kynge Arthur made me knyght, that ye woll pray for my soule if that I be slayne" (676.35-37). This again echoes the thought that God is on the side of the truly chivalrous knight. If

Lancelot can remain loyal to his queen, his fidelity will gain him his reward. And, like King Horn, who remains forever loyal to Herodis, Lancelot promises to remain loyal to Guinevere: "for have ye no doute, whyle I am a man lyvyng I shall rescow you" (678.23-24).

Lancelot's vow to remain loyal to Queen Guinevere becomes more complicated as he now puts himself into a possible position of disloyalty to the king. Again Malory alleviates this disloyalty to the king through Lancelot's attitude toward Arthur during the battle scenes which follow Lancelot's rescuing Guinevere from the stake. Lancelot is distressed that he and Arthur are put into opposition to each other. But because of his loyalty to Arthur, Lancelot refuses to fight him. He tells Sir Bors during battle to spare the king: "Uppon payne of thy hede, that thou touch hym no more! For I woll never se that moste noble kynge that made me knyght nother slayne nor shamed" (691.16-18). Lancelot vows always to avoid having to fight Arthur for as long as he can:

For I woll allwayes fle that noble kynge that made me
knyght; and whan I may no farther, I muste nedis
deffende me. And that woll be more worship for me and
us all tha[n] to compare with that noble kynge whom we
have all served. (702.19-22)

These words are Malory's attempt to redeem Lancelot for opposing his king. Lancelot is trapped by his loyalty to Guinevere, as well as by his sense of personal honor, and he must see both through to the end. If Arthur refuses to understand Lancelot's plight, then Lancelot, however dismayed, must fight Arthur. The

best way for Lancelot not to fight Arthur is to avoid him, which is what he does.

Malory description of Lancelot's loyalty to King Arthur in order to increase audience sympathy is quite different from King Horn where, as I have previously stated, the hero's virtue speaks for itself. In the romance, there is also a conflict between Horn and King Aylmar. But this conflict is a result of Fikenhilde's lies against Horn. In response to his banishment, Horn simply leaves Westernesse to fulfill his duty to win back Suddene, with the intent of returning to Rymenhilde in seven years. The author of King Horn does not get involved in building emotional conflicts between Horn and Aylmar because, since we know that Horn is innocent, it is not necessary to dwell on his hurt. Also, the 13th-century audience is more interested in how Horn is going to solve the problem of his banishment from Westernesse. Lancelot, however, clearly opposes his king and the only way he can be redeemed for his actions is to express his dissatisfaction at having to possibly fight Arthur.

When Mordred turns traitor and decides to fight against King Arthur and abduct Guinevere, Lancelot and Arthur are eventually reunited in common cause; however, the destruction of the Round Table has unfortunately gone too far for their reunion to prevent its outcome. Arthur dies at Mordred's hands before Lancelot can rescue him. Lancelot's loyalty to Arthur causes him to be greatly distressed by Arthur's death. In the end, Lancelot remains loyal to Arthur, which again inspires the audience's sympathy.

The Mort Artu ends with Lancelot seeking revenge on Mordred for Arthur. After he and his brothers kill Mordred and his family, Lancelot lives out the rest of his life as a hermit:

I will tell you, . . . you have been my companions in worldly delights; now I will join you company in this spot and in this life, and never again will I move from here as long as I live. If you do not accept me here, I will become a hermit elsewhere. (170)

There is no parting scene between Lancelot and Guinevere; he merely hears that Guinevere dies and he mourns her death. Lancelot dies after many years of religious service. Malory does not follow this version because it makes the whole affair between Lancelot and Guinevere seem anticlimactic. Instead, he uses the stanzaic Morte as his source and further alters its narrative to make Lancelot's loyalty to Guinevere complete.

In both versions, Lancelot and Guinevere meet one last time. Guinevere admits to Lancelot that she is at fault for the death of Arthur. This is much like Blancheflour, who equally shares the blame for her and Floris's dilemma. As her penance she decides to become a nun at Alymsburye. She beseeches him never to see her again and to take a wife "and lyff with [hir wyth] joy and blys" (720.31). But Lancelot cannot marry anyone. As Davies suggests, he remains faithful to Guinevere as if committed to a marriage (Patterns 162). He decides instead to become a hermit. He tells Guinevere: "I ensure you faythfully, I wyl ever take me to penaunce and praye whyle my lyf lasteth, yf that I may fynde ony heremyte, other graye or whyte, that wyl receyve me" (721.10-12).

In the stanzaic Morte, much like the Mort Artu, Lancelot

dies as a result of his devotion to religious duty. In Malory, however, Lancelot dies because of the sorrow he caused Guinevere and Lancelot:

Whan I remembre me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were pereles that ever was lyvyng of Cristen people, wyt you wel . . . this remembred, of their kyndenes and myn unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself. (723.27-31)

Out of grief he "never after ete[s] but lytel mete" (723.32) during the remainder of his life. He dies faithful to King Arthur and Guinevere. And his stability in loving Guinevere redeems him from his adultery and his failure in not being stable in the Grail quest.

Because of Malory's devotion to Lancelot, he creates a difficult task of presenting Lancelot as a true hero despite his faults. I believe that this devotion to Lancelot in part causes Malory to stand apart from the Middle English tradition of love. His success in accomplishing his task and still creating a romance which overall promotes English nationalism and reflects 15th-century chivalric ideals bespeaks his skills as an artist. Malory never promotes adultery, nor does he imply that it is morally satisfactory. Instead, he presents the adultery in such a fashion that the English audience, accustomed to the conjugal love found in King Horn, Sir Orfeo, and Floris and Blancheflour and presumably not likely to look with sympathy on an adulterous relation, can come to share Malory's sympathies toward Lancelot

without having to condone adultery. Although Lancelot's love is adulterous, Malory skillfully and radically alters the purpose of the Mort Artu and revises the moral vision in order to present Lancelot as a noble, loyal, and chivalric knight who remains the "trewest lover, of a synful man, that ever loved woman" (725.21).

Notes

¹ My source for Malory's Morte Darthur is Malory: Works, ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971). For King Horn, Sir Orfeo, and Floris and Blancheflour, I am using Middle English Verse Romances, ed. Donald B. Sands (NY: Holt, 1966). For the stanzaic Morte Arthur, I am using King Arthur's Death, ed. Larry D. Benson (Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1974). For the French La Mort le Roi Artu, I am using From Camelot to Joyous Guard, ed. Norris J. Lacy, trans. J. Neale Carman (Lawrence: U of KS P, 1974).

² The closest a romance comes to adultery is in The Erle of Tolous. Although an earl falls in love with an emperor's wife, she rejects his love until after her husband dies. Despite this complication, the Erle nevertheless follows the typical Middle English love tradition.

³ According to Gisela Guddat-Figge's Catalogues of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances, the manuscripts and their dates of origination are as follows:

King Horn: University Library MS Gg.IV.27.2 (about 1300)
B.L. MS Harley 2253 (ca. 1330-40)
Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 108 (Part 1, late 13c or early 14c; Part 2, as Part 1, plus 15c additions)

Sir Orfeo: National Library of Scotland MS Adv.19.2.1
[known as the Auchinleck MS] (1330-40)
B.L. MS Harley 3810, Part I (second half of 15c)
Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 (late 15c)

Floris and Blancheflour:
University Library MS Gg.IV.27.2 (about 1300)
National Library of Scotland MS Adv.19.2.1
[known as the Auchinleck MS] (1330-40)
B.L. MS Cotton Vitellius D.III (about 1275)
B.L. MS Egerton 2862 (end of 14c)

Notes

⁴ Bodleian Lib. MS Laud Misc. 108 and Harley 2253.

⁵ Harley 3810, Auchinleck MS, and Ashmole 61, respectfully.

⁶ Auchinleck MS and Egerton 2862, respectfully.

⁷ Two other manuscripts which include Floris and Blanche-flour, the University Lib. MS Gg.IV.27.2 (which also includes King Horn), and the B.L. MS Cotton Vitellius D.III, are dated at 1300 and 1275, respectfully, but the provenance of these manuscripts is not known.

⁸ See Donald B. Sands, 279. He notes that Floris and Blanche-flour's survival in four manuscripts may be an indication of worth and appeal.

⁹ The earliest manuscript that includes The Erle of Tolous is the Cathedral Library MS 91 ("Thornton MS") which was copied somewhere between 1430 and 1440. The latest manuscript that includes the Erle is the Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 45. Although Guddat-Figge catalogues its production at the first half of the 16th century, recent scholarship by Friedrich Hulsmann (Note and Queries 32 (1985): 11-12) suggests a production date between 1530 and 1540.

¹⁰ John Ganim is one of the few critics who makes special note of Horn's use of puns, his testing of other characters, and his "uncanny" return. Calling it "artistic complexity," Ganim notes that nothing of this type exists in other Middle English romances.

¹¹ Critics agree that Sir Orfeo derives from the Orpheus and Eurydice story in Ovid's Metamorphosis, Book X (see Sands, 185).

Notes

For an account on how the Orfeo author departs from his classical sources, see Ramsey, 151-52.

¹² Lee Ramsey states that in many Medieval romances, great conflicts exist between children and parents. The mother and the father "tend to greater extremes of good and evil than the other characters, as if the parents were abstractions rather than real people (107). Margaret Gist dedicates one chapter to the marriages of convenience in Love and War in the Middle English Romances. She writes that many times marriages were arranged by the parents (and feudal landowners), much to the dismay of the children.

¹³ Quoted from Kennedy, n. 4, p. 410.

¹⁴ This quote is from Vinaver's earlier three-volume, 1967 edition of the Morte. This quote is not in his one-volume, 1971 edition.

¹⁵ Benson notes that the three who achieve the quest "trust not in earthly armor nor in the code it symbolizes. Instead, they follow St. Paul's advice to take up the sword of the spirit and the shield of faith" (214).

¹⁶ In the Mort Artu, Gawain rebukes King Arthur for wanting to know information on a subject which will cause him and the Round Table great unhappiness and destruction. He does not, however, defend Lancelot in front of Aggravayne and Mordred (73).

¹⁷ In the Mort Artu, prior to the Aggravayne-Arthur encounter, Arthur's sister Morgan tells him that Lancelot and Guinevere are having an affair. Still, he chooses not to believe the truth (40-44).

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Malory's Lancelot: "Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man"

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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ABSTRACT

In Malory's Morte Darthur, Lancelot's constant love for and loyalty to Guinevere makes Lancelot, in the end, the noblest knight in King Arthur's court. But despite this, the disturbing fact remains that their love is adulterous. Ironically, their adulterous love both inspires chivalric deeds and comes into conflict with chivalric ideals, ultimately causing the destruction of the Round Table. This noble love, in an adulterous relation, makes Malory's Morte an exception to the traditional Middle English treatment of love, where love inspires noble deeds and true love is usually chaste and ideally consummated in marriage.

In the report, I show how Malory's Morte Darthur stands outside the traditional Middle English treatment of love by carefully examining three representative romances, King Horn, Sir Orfeo, and Floris and Blancheflour. I show through manuscript evidence that they are indeed representative romances in which conjugal love can be seen, and in which love does not come into conflict with the chivalric ideal.

In addition, I examine key passages in the Old French La Mort le Roi Artu and the English stanzaic Morte Arthur, which treat the adultery theme and which Malory used as sources. By examining the sources, I show how Malory, in order to tell the Morte Darthur in a way acceptable to his audiences, uses both sources to reconcile the Middle English tradition of noble, chaste love and the Old French tradition of adulterous love.

Finally, through close observation of Books VII and VIII--

with reference to Book VI--of the Winchester Manuscript version of Malory's Morte, I attempt to explain why Malory centers around Lancelot's love for Guinevere, and how the steadfast quality of his love for her ironically excuses him from his adultery and helps him to remain the noblest of King Arthur's knights, while at the same time causing the dissolution of the Round Table.