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~~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