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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

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 Westernessee 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 upon 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 "authentication" (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,"