

Becoming Redeemed: Lancelot's Journey of Faith in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* continues to be one of the most influential works of Arthurian legend since its original publication in 1485. In his text, Malory combines many sources, such as *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *The Vulgate Cycle*, with original stories to create a narrative detailing the lives of knights in King Arthur's court. Stylistically, Malory's narrative is structurally similar to the Bible, implying a religious theme underlying the surface story. His central figure is Lancelot, a man in an adulterous relationship with Queen Guenevere, but despite this relationship, Lancelot attempts to seek God throughout the book. Malory's narrative distances itself from traditional Christian practice which relied heavily on the church, allowing Lancelot to seek redemption on his own—a personal relationship between man and God. By focusing on Lancelot, Malory provides a compelling example of the Christian journey from sinner to redeemed man, in effect turning Lancelot's story into a representation of a new faith, one that can be defined by personal failure and triumph with all events leading to reconciliation with God.

To make his narrative of faith recognizable and relevant to Christianity, Malory chose to write his book so it can be explicitly compared to the Bible in both style and content. In similar fashion to the Bible, Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is made up of many separate books, each with their own story that connect thematically to each other to form the overall narrative. Malory's work "is, like [the Bible], a narrative of faith" that revolves around central themes and constantly returns to them throughout the book (Grimm 16). These themes and ideals—chivalry, courtly love, the Pentecostal Oath—are not only important to the central storyline, but are also important to the development of Malory's characters. In this way, his characters, including Lancelot, are much like the heroes of the Old Testament in the Bible who adhere to the Mosaic Law in order to

become godly men. Although all men will fail in pursuit of perfection such as Lancelot, who struggles with adultery, or Noah, a drunk, these men still have favor with God by adhering to the laws set before them. The failings of these men do not discount their ability to be figures of faith. Instead, they provide an example of the human struggle to remain god-like in a fallen world. Both the stylistic and content-related similarities between *Le Morte D'Arthur* and the Bible allow for Malory's work to be read as a faith-based narrative. The writing style allows Lancelot to read as a knight of Arthur's court, as well as a Biblical man of faith, similar to Abraham or Noah of the Old Testament.

Lancelot, as Malory's central figure, is an alternative to the traditional characterization of a Christian man promoted by the Catholic Church. Historically, he wrote during a time of widespread animosity towards the Church. Around this time, "there was a strong desire among many of the faithful for reform [of the church]" (Hart 251). His narrative, completed in 1469 or 1470, contains little mention of the church as an institution. Malory used his narrative to respond to the corrupt Catholic Church, by providing a new Christian experience through Lancelot. Malory's Christian journey distinguishes itself by focusing on the journey of a single man who wrestles with faith on his own, in a more secular setting, rather than finding redemption and acceptance in God through Catholic practice. *Le Morte D'Arthur* becomes "his personal faith ... unique, idiosyncratic ... and rarely expressed in a direct way" (Grimm 17). His writing, while a commentary on his time, allowed him to redefine the Christian lifestyle as it relates to him. Lancelot becomes the prime example of this new lifestyle, a life without need of the church to come to God for redemption.

Throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur* Lancelot attempts to uphold Christian values, but is brought down by his affair with Guenevere, highlighting his human character. Although Lancelot

“passed all other knyghtes[,] ... he [was] ovircom ... yf hit were by treson other inchauntement[,]” and since the cause of his faults are known, Lancelot becomes sympathetic and relatable (Malory 151). Malory’s hero is caught in a treasonous relationship with Guenevere, his king’s wife, so by extension, Lancelot is betraying the kingdom he strives to protect. The hero of the Bible, on the other hand, is Jesus Christ, a holy and perfect man-god. If Malory’s focus was on perfection, he would have chosen King Arthur, a man described as god-like, though stagnant in his character development. Even sleeping with Morgause, Arthur’s well-known sin, is pardoned because he “knew nat that Kynge Lottis wyff was his sister” (Malory 30). Instead of the blameless Arthur, Malory relies on Lancelot, a knowingly sinful man, to become the hero. Lancelot can be compared to Noah or Abraham, men who are said to have “obtained good testimony through faith ... that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (*The Scofield Study Bible*, Heb. 11.39-40). The men of faith in the Bible were all flawed in some capacity and not meant to be celebrated for their perfection, but for their ability to overcome great sin and shame, and in turn bring glory and honor to God, rather than themselves. Through his sin, Lancelot continues to seek God and build his faith through the Grail Quest, the Healing of Sir Urry, and adherence to the knightly code. By modeling Lancelot after these Biblical characters, Malory promotes the idea that it is possible to overcome great sin in order to be redeemed, and that Lancelot’s position as the central character is important to Malory’s model of the Christian faith.

To accurately use Lancelot as his “man of faith,” Malory must mirror the human struggle of internal sin and outward perception. In spite of his fatal flaw, Lancelot is expected to uphold the ideals of the Pentecostal Oath, a set of guidelines for knights original to Malory’s text. For Lancelot, in light of his relationship with Guenevere, the oath is troubling because the second

guideline is “allwayes to fle treson” (Malory 77). Malory’s design of a treasonous relationship creates a parallel between the Arthur’s kingdom and the kingdom of God. Lancelot’s failing as a knight—treason—matches his failing as a Christian—adultery—allowing Malory to compare the knightly code with the Law of God. In both cases, Lancelot attempts to hide failure from his king, earthly or spiritual. Malory creates tension to demonstrate the existence of sin in a character typically considered exemplary. Arthur, his earthly king, is oblivious to Lancelot’s adulterous relationship for most of the narrative, and so Arthur continues to rely on Lancelot’s ability as a knight. At the same time, Lancelot struggles with sin, as all humans do, and seeks God anyways, hoping that his “good” character, defined by his dedication to Arthur and the court, as well as attempting to live a moral life, will be enough for him to be a Christian man. Malory’s representation of Lancelot’s struggle through the Pentecostal Oath allows for Malory to illustrate the effects of living with two personalities, one of greatness and one of sin and shame.

Since Lancelot has deep internal conflict, Malory uses the Grail Quest to develop Lancelot’s need for God and redemption, while proving that striving toward God does not lead absolutely to perfection. While on the Quest, “the hermits as well as Galahad, teach him to pray, and when Lancelot puts their advice into practice he is rewarded with his vision of the Grail” (Moore 4). Lancelot’s journey into truly seeking God is marked by this moment. He was not able to retrieve the Grail, because, according to Malory, “had nat Sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the Quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the Queste” (588). In this explanation, Malory returns to Lancelot’s love for Guenevere as the factor keeping him from becoming the knight that retrieves the Grail. Even though he learns to pray and is rewarded with a vision of the Grail, Lancelot did not let go of his sin and so he fails. Following the quest, he is no longer considered the greatest

knight. His title instead bestowed on his son, Galahad. Lancelot's failings as a Grail knight are not incidental, instead coinciding with the failings of Malory and humanity as a whole. Galahad, Christ-like in his perfection, is an unattainable standard, representing the outcome of perfect pursuit of God. Lancelot becomes the "normal" man in this scenario, the greatest worldly knight, no longer perfect as he was once perceived to be, instead full of fault.

Though his hero is flawed, Malory writes Lancelot as forgivable and exemplary in order to make him a compelling example of the Christian walk for his audience. In the first of his famous May passages, Malory comments on the love of Arthur's time and his time. He says in love the pair should "firste reserve the honoure to God ... and such love I calle vertuose love" (Malory 624-625). He specifies that a couple should honor God in their relationship, showing it is important to be a man or woman of God. Later, he describes Queen Guenevere as a "trew lover" (Malory 625). For many reasons, Guenevere should not be a model for love, namely because of her adulterous relationship with Lancelot. The seventh of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament is the instruction to not commit adultery (*The Scofield Study Bible*, Exo. 20.14). As such, Malory's definition of Guenevere as a "trew" lover also affects Lancelot, since they are romantically involved. If Guenevere embodies "trew" love, then Lancelot does as well. Though committing a sin, Lancelot continues to prove himself as a good person by being a "trew" lover to Guenevere. Malory makes the distinction that being a "good" man and a man of God are not the same. Like any human, Lancelot is fighting a fatal sin, however, he is still considered a good person. As a representation of the Christian journey, Lancelot's life is transparent, allowing him to appeal to the sympathy of the reader, as well as become a meaningful look into the difference between "good" and redeemed.

Lancelot's most public test of faith, the healing of Sir Urry, is a pivotal moment in his journey to God. Urry, a wounded man, can only be healed by the best knight in the world (Malory 639). Many knights, even King Arthur, try to heal Sir Urry, but are unable to close his wounds. Later, Lancelot arrives and is commanded by Arthur to attempt a healing. Lancelot is nervous about this, possibly because of his affair with Guenevere, and says "I wolde nat take upon me to towche that wounded knyght" (Malory 643). Through Lancelot's anxiety, Malory reveals weakness and humanity in Lancelot's character. In an instance where Lancelot would, most likely, earn honor and praise for his good deed, he rejects this act because of his own shortcomings, fearing that his peers and king would find out about the affair in the event he was unable to heal Sir Urry. This can be likened to a specific Christian journey of failure, and the shame resulting from that failure, as seen in the Genesis account when "Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of God" following the consumption of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (*The Scofield Study Bible*, Gen. 3.8). Lancelot does not physically hide. However, by rejecting the task at hand, he tries to keep his sin hidden from his peers, and by extension, God.

Malory highlights Lancelot's anxiety at the healing to explain the conflict between earthly goodness and spiritual redemption. Though he would like to avoid the healing, Lancelot, a good earthly knight, is obedient to his king. In order to achieve success, he begins his healing with a prayer asking God for "power to hele thys syke knyght by the grete vertu and grace of The- but, Good Lorde, never of myselff" (Malory 643). By asking God for help, Lancelot recognizes his past sin, especially his failings with Guenevere, and turns to God for honor and glory. In this momentary revelation, earthly honor becomes meaningless. He finally accepts there is no way for him to achieve the perfection of Christ anymore. God grants Lancelot the

miraculous ability to heal Sir Urry, and after Lancelot heals him he “wepte, as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn” (Malory 644). This moment is interesting, especially given Malory’s religious implications. Lancelot does not weep out of sadness, but because of the mercy he received from his God. He is not punished for his sins. Instead, he heals Sir Urry and is congratulated by Arthur’s court even though he “knows he deserves no such praise ... earthly chivalry is no longer sufficient” (Moore 13). In this scene, the glory is God’s, and Lancelot understands that he has been saved from humiliation and guilt by his omnipotent God. To his peers, nothing about this event is out of the ordinary as Lancelot has always been the greatest knight that ever lived, excluding his son. However, Lancelot knows God allowed him to accomplish this task because he should have failed. Malory’s appeal to strong emotion in this scene, a disjunction from most of Malory’s writing, signifies a possible personal connection to this moment. As a Christian example, Lancelot’s realization of his faults and his turn to God for assistance is logical and expected. However, Malory does not use Lancelot as a clichéd Christian example. His characterization of Lancelot, a man plagued by an unforgivable sin but continually turning to God, is complicated. The healing of Sir Urry forced Lancelot to rely on God for ability and in turn, becomes the moment that changes Lancelot’s view of his need for God. His realization that he wants to end his back-and-forth lifestyle proves Malory’s view that constant struggle with God is normal.

Lancelot wrestles with extreme guilt due to his past, allowing Malory to illustrate that the life of a man seeking redemption is not simple. Following the destruction of Arthur’s kingdom, Lancelot becomes a hermit and devotes the rest of his life to seeking God. During this time, Lancelot is seen “groveling on the tombe of Kyng Arthur and Quene Guenever” (Malory 695). Though his “groveling” may seem dramatic, Lancelot is grieving his sin and the loss of people

he truly cared about, humbling himself before God to do so. Lancelot's time as a hermit and church official can be seen as a "great conversion [narrative] best known through the genre of the saint's life" (Cherewatuk 70). Malory's hero is pushing through a period of repentance, which increases his reliance on God. He accepted his failings and has become serious about mending his relationship with God. Lancelot achieves the redemption he sought by understanding the need of a Christian man to seek God for himself, rather than at the suggestion or teaching of someone else, as on the Grail Quest. The imagery of the groveling allows Malory to depict the human struggle with sin and the consequent lamentation for those sins, symbolizing the difficulty of repentance on the Christian journey.

In the scene following Lancelot's death, Malory solidifies his choice of Lancelot as a hero and effectively portrays him as a redeemed man of God. After Lancelot's death, Sir Ector eulogizes Lancelot and calls him "a synful man" and "the godelyest persone that ever cam emonge prees of knyghtes" (Malory 697). This description may seem contradictory, but in fact, it is not. Malory's Lancelot is definitely sinful, however, according to Christian doctrine, all men are sinful (*The Scofield Study Bible*, Rom 3.23). Malory's choice of words in this moment highlight the transformation of Lancelot over the course of his text. Lancelot overcomes his treasonous relationship with Guenevere to become a Christian man. Through Lancelot's example, Malory implies that every person, no matter their background or wrongdoing, can look to God for redemption and in the end be considered "good" both internally and externally. Malory's choice of Lancelot as a hero, instead of Arthur or Galahad, is not so striking in light of this narrative of reconciliation with God. Malory's Arthur never needed redemption; his sins were not by his own choice. Arthur was always a god-like figure, even his death can be read as

the death of God, forcing Lancelot to reevaluate his past decisions and finally turn to his God at the destruction of the only institution he knew: the Round Table.

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is on the surface a story of an almost perfect king's kingdom falling into destruction. However, Malory continually highlights the life of Lancelot, an adulterer, who is often considered the greatest knight who ever lived. Though Lancelot's actions throughout the narrative appear contradictory, he is a mirror of human nature. Reading of *Le Morte D'Arthur* as a Christian journey allows for study of Malory's motives in writing the narrative. As an example of Christianity, Lancelot's journey is personal, not structured by church ritual. The creation of a redeemed hero allows Malory to justify his past sins and become a redeemed hero himself. As such, Lancelot's story is a deviation from Christian normalcy, emphasizing the change in religious thinking at the time. Malory's hero, though flawed, becomes a true hero both to himself and the reader, because in the end, Lancelot is known as both a great knight and truly godly man, the title Lancelot relentlessly pursued throughout Malory's text.

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