

Malory and his launcelot: returning to god



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In the years between Geoffrey of Monmouth's (1136) *History of the Kings of Britain*, which featured tales of a young warrior who would become ruler of an empire, and the prison-inked *Le Morte Darthur* of Sir Thomas Malory, the religious landscape of Europe began to shift from thoroughly Christian to a mixture of traditional beliefs and newfound spiritualism. In detailed study on the religion of the period, Tanner (2009) highlights a declining population due to the Black Death, the spread of the Ottoman Empire into Europe, and general disillusionment with the church following the Western Schism as reasons for waning support for the church. Due to the rise of other religious beliefs during its composition and passages selected from the work, some critics have argued Malory's (1485) *Morte* is a secularized telling of Arthurian lore rather than being influenced by Christianity. Even the seminal Holy Grail section, *The Noble Tale of the Sankgreall*, has been argued as a simplified telling of the divine chalice that eschews the overly Christian elements in favor of a secularized account. Eugene Vinaver (1947) argues Malory's Grail section is the least original of the author's work. Writing of the translation from the source material, the French Vulgate Cycle *La Queste de Saint Graal*, Vinaver says:

His attitude [toward the source] may be described without much risk of oversimplification as that of a man to whom the quest of the Grail was primarily an Arthurian adventure and who regarded the intrusion of the Grail upon Arthur's kingdom not as a means of contrasting earthly and divine chivalry and condemning the former, but as an opportunity offered to the knights of the Round Table to achieve still greater glory in this world. (1)

This argument claims Malory's work is secular in nature rather than inspired by Christian themes. The claim is flawed on its face as this research will prove. Vinaver's argument is refuted by Charles Moorman in his 1956 essay "Malory's Treatment of the Sankgreall." In a detailed response to Vinaver, Moorman argues the Grail story must be viewed in context of the Morte as a whole. Furthermore, rather than seeking glory as Vinaver posits, Moorman argues Malory's Grail adventure is symbolic of man's fall from God's grace - "presenting the failure of the Grail knights as one of the major causes of the downfall of the Round Table" (497). However, Moorman's opinion is somewhat narrow in scope. Not only is Malory's work brimming with Christian influence, it can be argued the entire work was inspired by the author's desire to return to God. The Sankgreall is a Christian story, not a secular one, and functions as a message about the importance of true redemption. Even though another knight in the tale - Galahad - achieves ultimate greatness, the story belongs to Launcelot, who also serves as the metaphorical vessel by which Malory begins his own redemption following a life of ill deeds.

In the closing lines of *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory makes a plea to his reader to pray for his soul. Specifically, the scribe writes:

I praye you all, jentylnen and jentylwymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and his knyghtes from the begynnyng to the endynge, praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce; and whan I am deed, I praye you all praye for my soule. For this book was ended the ninth yere of the regyne of Kyng Edward the Fourth, by Syr Thomas Maleore, knyght, as

Jesu helpe hym, for hys grete might, as he is the servaunt of Jesu both day and nyght. Amen. (698)

Malory, the wordsmith most associated with Arthurian tradition, was a troubled man who spent significant time in prison. The very work for which he is famous, *Morte*, was composed while incarcerated for a series of violent crimes. Most notable among these crimes was the rape of a woman by the name of Joan Smith. In her essay "Malory and Rape," Catherine Batt (1997) outlines that legal documents of the day reveal Malory of Newbold Revel engaged in these wanton acts in the year 1450. On May 23rd of that year and then again on August 6th, Malory invaded the home of Hugh Smith in Leicester where he "feloniously raped and carnally lay by" the man's wife and then stole goods from the family. He was subsequently pursued by local authorities, arrested, and made to serve a not unsubstantial term in the mire of an English prison for his obscenities. However, behind those cold walls, Malory achieved greatness. His Arthurian prose retold legends, added new wrinkles, and produced a coherent, concise, canon for the King of Camelot and his Knights of the Roundtable. But as a lowly criminal, one charged with the heinous crime of rape, how is it appropriate for such a man to write of morals, God, and appropriate decorum and behavior? His stories are not of despair but of salvation. Malory's writing, while brimming with violence, murder, deception, and betrayal, is at its core a story of men seeking redemption, cautionary tales of the tragedies brought about by sin, and a guide for how humans should treat one another.

It is firmly my contention that if not for Malory's crimes and subsequent punishment, the author would have never produced the *Morte*, and Arthurian

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lore would not have its current lofty perch in the annals of British literature. It is important to realize because of the very nature of his writings and the overt moral plea he makes in the work, that Malory was heavily influenced by Christian doctrine and ideology. Furthermore, his closing lines in the *Morte* - "praye for me ...that God sende me good deliverance" - as well as his promise that he had become a servant of Jesus Christ in the day and the night was a profession of faith, perhaps a faith he gained while in prison and pondering his own wicked deeds. Malory's writing and final plea indicate a man who achieved greatness, lost his way from God, and was committed to being restored. The story of the lost soul who finds God is a narrative of several characters in the *Morte* most noticeably Launcelot, who is an exemplary knight of the order but strays from God. And, like Malory himself, the knight finds God by his narrative conclusion.

While we know little of Malory's days in prison, his writing indicates a devout man who placed heavy emphasis on church attendance and knowing God on an intimate and personal level. Though a criminal, Malory was fascinated with church and the act of communing with God. McCarthy (1991) argues that Malory ranks his knights in a simple and singular way with piety serving as the measuring stick. This argument is bolstered by David Eugene Clark (2015) in his essay "Constructing Spiritual Hierarchy through Mass Attendance in *Morte Darthur*." In the *Morte*, Malory parallels the weakness and strength of all mankind to those of Arthur and his knights. Clark issues a tier ranking to the Grail knights which places Gawain at the base and Perceval and Galahad as the most exemplary. This ranking establishes the belief that Malory attributed closeness to God as being vital to the soul.

Malory's own journey to return to God begins with his Grail knights, who are the best of us yet still falter. None of these knights are of low moral standing, however. The base ranking of Gawain is simply a delineation to separate the noblest knights from those with more corrupted souls. Clark points out Malory's tying of mass attendance to the piety of Arthur's knights. The more frequent the mass attendance, the closer the knight's place is to God (136). However, simply attending mass is not enough to exalt a knight. He must also be as free of sin and lead as clean a life as possible. Gawain only attends mass during "communal" times when everyone else is going (128). The higher tier knights spend a greater amount of time in mass, making it part of their daily rituals. What separates Launcelot, a tier 3 knight, from the upper echelon of Galahad and Perceval (tier 4) is not his lack of mass attendance but rather how he strays from God after being granted a glimpse of the Grail. After Launcelot's moment of clarity with the Grail, he pledges his soul to God but then returns to Camelot and is once again a slave to sins of the flesh. He continues his affair with Guinevere, slaughters an innocent in Gareth, and is the catalyst for the demise of Arthur's kingdom. Launcelot is symbolic of every person who finds himself close to God only to waver when time or inconvenience prove greater than the call for piety. It is ironic that despite the violence in which these men engage, they are still considered noble and even godly because of their church attendance. They put king (and queen in Launcelot's case) above or at the very least next to God, and they violate God's commandment not to kill with impunity. While they are seen as the utmost of righteous by laypeople, Malory's writing indicates God sees them for what they are - broken men. Clark writes that both Launcelot and Bors are guilty of grievous, even "deadly sin," but to move closer to

God they confess their crimes as well as repent, serve penance and prove themselves through “ clean living” (144). The task proves too great in the long term, and Launcelot’s faltering proves to be the detriment of all involved.

This idea of the fall from grace of the soldier could be a testimony Malory writes of himself. From Batt’s research as well as from the work of others, we know that Malory was a soldier and someone of reverence as he was elected to parliament. He was also a political activist in the most aggressive sense of the term as he engaged in raids to weaken and raise the ire of the Duke of Buckingham. The rape crimes as well as countless other wicked acts were carried out in a seemingly more brazen manner before his incarceration. The more criminal acts in which he engaged, the greater their severity became. But as he sat in prison, his stories created an idyllic world where good triumphed over evil until petty squabbles grew into major grievances. Cracks appeared in the foundations of the chivalrous oath the king established, and man’s sin proved too great for the kingdom to bear. Whether these writings were politically motivated or Malory’s statements on the sad state of his own life remain unclear. Writing during the era of the War of Roses, Malory’s stories have parallels to the real world in which he lived. However, his constant use of chivalric notions in the writing indicates he was influenced not only by Christian teachings but also by his own desire to make amends for his violation of the chivalric code he created. While Malory could have been simply telling a tale, the dedication, care, and detailed and intricate expression he gave to each page indicates a man attempting to impart a message. The character of Launcelot, with his failings and triumphs,

indicates an author living vicariously through his creation. Malory's final plea in the book, for readers to pray for his soul, also indicates a man seeking forgiveness and his own redemption.

At this juncture, it is important to return to the notion of chivalry and Malory's own violation of the code. The Pentecostal Oath first appeared in the *Morte* and has not been found in any earlier incarnations of Arthurian lore. At its core, the oath is what Arthur believes to be the key virtues of a knight. By taking the oath, a knight becomes a member of the Round Table and is granted riches and lands. One of the chief tenets of the code regards the treatment of women. As it pertains to Malory's crimes, there is one section of the oath to consider: "...and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour], strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe..." (77). The author failed to live up to this portion of his own code (and it can be argued that any author's words, especially codes of conduct, are their own beliefs). While Malory violated his own oath, we still must contend the *Morte* is a testament of repentance and a plea to follow the Christian virtues therein. The prose clearly illustrates a man with an overt message of hope and a plea for readers to follow the virtues therein. If Malory remained a callous criminal, what purpose would it serve to write messages of hope unless he was seeking forgiveness for his crimes and had perhaps already discovered God? What has a cold criminal to gain by writing messages of love, piety, and crafting tales that are cautionary in nature and illustrate the suffering from sin? Malory was inspired, asked for the light of the Christian God, and according to his own words, found that light. However, despite these revelations, some have

argued Malory's work was not inspired by a Christian influence. Among the detractors is Alastair Minnis (2006), who argued just because the "Sankgreall" tale deals exclusively with the Holy Grail, the entire *Morte* should not be deemed a Christian work (34). He says the work contains Christian elements but only in limited form, likening the work to being many individual keys for many separate beliefs rather than a skeleton key that opens the entirety of the work to Christianity. The challenge then, as Hodges (2007) explains, is to know which keys to use when they appear and how audiences are "invited to respond to what they find when the locks are opened." Secularization aside as well as any arguments for or against Christian influence, the narrative of Launcelot and his path toward the Grail are keys to unlock Malory's own hidden plea for redemption.

Before an argument can be made that Launcelot was a representation of Malory himself, we must examine the literary character as well as the author's influences in the knight's shaping. From a variety of sources across Europe, Malory pieced together an official Arthurian "canon." Some of the canon, including much of Launcelot's story, was tweaked for his own purposes, and others, such as the tale of Perceval, were altered considerably. The *Sankgreall* was inspired by the French text *La Queste de Saint Graal*. However, Malory trimmed the work to nearly one third of its original length. In his removal, the imprisoned author excised lengthy dogmatic dialogue. Mary Hynes Berry (2001) says the cuts create new perceptions of the Grail story and writes, "While we can never be sure of precisely what Malory did or did not understand, his deletions unquestionably follow a clear and consistent pattern" (244). That pattern is

to focus extensively on Launcelot. There are other knights – Bors, Perceval, Galahad – but it is Launcelot who is at the center of the plot. Specifically, the story focuses on one man’s desire to repent and please God while struggling with his own nature and the desires of the flesh. Malory’s hero is deeply flawed, yet not unsalvageable. In the end, before the story’s final act, Malory reaches his symbolic conclusion as he writes of Launcelot’s partial success in seeing the Grail, being denied the full glory because of his sin, and then promising to rededicate his life to God. The thematic lesson of the story is to constantly work to better one self. Launcelot is the best Earth has to offer. He is contrasted with Galahad, who Malory uses as the epitome of what all should strive to be. Galahad is the ideal. Launcelot is the reality. This father/son dynamic is also intriguing and will be discussed later in the work.

Returning to Malory’s excisions, he essentially trims the fat of the French text by excluding sermons and lengthy spiritual sections that, as Berry explains, “develop significance but do not advance the plot” (246). This dogma drags down the text and while Berry and other Arthurian experts believe the cuts are made to keenly focus the message of hope and a return to God, some critics argue Malory’s Grail story secularizes the material. This is a return to the Vinaver argument laid out previously. Snyder (1974) disagrees with Vinaver and contends Malory’s Grail story is a larger statement on society and a man’s place in it as he struggles to go with God rather than go with greed of the flesh. Snyder realizes the Morte must be viewed as a whole and that the reader must understand the reason why the cuts were made.

As a complement to Snyder's points, Moorman contends the failure of the Grail knights is not only the catalyst for the downfall of the Roundtable but also Malory's metaphor for man's failure in finding God. Moorman: " He pares away from the hermits' comments the purely religious commentary which is alien to his purpose, yet he is always careful to keep, usually in summation, the religious core of the argument presented" (498). He agrees with the thesis of this essay and that Vinaver's secularization statement is flawed. Had it been Malory's desire to secularize the Grail, he could have very easily completely excluded the words of the hermits. Their inclusion, in fact, continues to slow down the narrative. If Malory had only been interested in continuing his tradition of detailed description of war and battle (the soldier in him) it would have been easier to go from one perilous adventure to the next on the Grail path rather than stop for life lessons from those who are passed on the trail. This was evidently not Malory's wish. He had no intention of making the work about blood and violence. Malory's Grail tale is an effort to illustrate a man's repentance from his sin and a desire to find God once more.

Continuing this line of thought, Riddy (1987) says Malory's trimming of the source text was a " reaction against the too explicit . . . literary mode" (113-114). He continues noting the tone of the French text was " too didactic and Malory's rejection was simply to trim the fat no matter if it was religious or secular." Kennedy (1985) posits Malory's treatment of the Grail story " reflects fifteenth century writers' attempts to reconcile religion with their own experience of life" (286). And considering Malory's life experiences and his station in life as he wrote the Morte, it is quite easy to argue Launcelot

was Malory himself on the page. The writing adage “ write what you know” was true in the Middle Ages as it is true today. Launcelot was Malory and Malory was Launcelot.

Launcelot’s fall is foreshadowed in the very beginning of the Grail story as he kindly rejects his king’s order to pull the sword from the stone: “ Sir, hit ys nat my swerde. Also, I have no hardiness to sette my honed thereto, for hit longith nat to hange be my syde” (498). While this act may seem small, it is a betrayal of one of the key decrees of Arthur’s Pentecost Oath. It is a parallel between Christian knighthood and its failings to the failings in our lives. Throughout the story, Launcelot meets hermits and damsels as well as other knights and is always deemed the “ best of any synfull man.” He is the best in a sinful world and can achieve no more. When comparing Malory as a person to his creation in Launcelot, it is important to remember Malory does not condone Launcelot’s failings or sins. He paints a grim picture about what Launcelot (who is a stand in for Malory as well as humanity) brings about to those he loves simply because of his vanity, hubris, and pride. He outlines the common problem in men throughout time. Repenting and undertaking penance are not enough if you do not continue along the righteous path. The essential flaw in Launcelot is his instability. It is not his past sins that cost him but the continued failure to direct himself exclusively toward God. Like all humans, it is not about good and evil. There are far too many shades of gray. It is about the path toward God.

Malory, writing of Launcelot in the weeks before entering Corbenic Castle, describes a man who is in constant prayer: “ And the wynde arose and drove Sir Launcelot more than a moneth thorow the se, where he slected lititll, but <https://assignbuster.com/malory-and-his-launcelot-returning-to-god/>

prayed to God that he might see some tydynges of the Sankgreall" (575). He arrives at the castle, sees a guard of lions, and returns to his vessel to arm himself. Then a voice: "...wherefore trustist thou more on thy harneyese than in thy Maker? For He might more avayle the than thyne amour in what servyse that thou arte sette in" (576). Launcelot obeys the voice, walks freely into the castle. After a period of searching, he finds his way to a barred door that opens and Launcelot is granted a glimpse of the Grail. Awestruck and wanting to move closer, the voice tells him not to enter for he is not worthy to go further. The critical mistake comes when he sees a figure appear to be in distress. Disobeying the voice, he rationalizes, "Fayre Fadir, Jesu Cryste, ne take hit for no synne if I helpe the good man which hath grete nede of help" (577). Launcelot is thrown from the room and found the next morning by the people. He slumbers in a coma for 24 days.

The door is shut; the way is shut, simply because Launcelot does not put his trust in God. The knight herein is cast back because he once again ignores advice and commands in pursuit of knightly chivalry. Rather than ignoring the warning and trying to aid the ill figure, Launcelot should have placed faith in God that the deity would protect those who have faith in Him. In other instances in the story, Launcelot has not taken to heart the words of hermits. These hermits arguably serve as messengers of God who deliver key information that can be followed or ignored. Ignoring the advice, however, has consequences. There are also numerous tempters and temptresses along the path to the Grail that all knights encounter. Chief among them would be the devil posing as a beautiful woman who tempts Perceval. A religious gesture (the sign of the Cross) saves the knight. So it is

not all Launcelot's fault, for how is a man to know who is friend and who is foe? In the instance of being on the Grail's literal doorstep, Launcelot's ignoring the warnings results in the knight's failure to realize God will help those who have faith. Perhaps if Launcelot had not been so rash and had faith, just as Daniel survived the lions' den, the knight's story may have had a different ending. But even Launcelot had been granted more than a glimpse, he continues to fail his requirements of the Christian knighthood upon his return to Camelot.

If Launcelot is a stand-in for Malory in this instance, what can be said of Galahad? As Galahad's illegitimate son, an argument could be made to the parallel of the virgin birth of Christ in so much as he enters the world in unusual circumstances, was then raised by someone other than his father, and is the only soul who can achieve what others cannot. We know Malory had at least one son, but it is not possible to know if the father/son dynamic of Launcelot and Galahad is a result of Malory's own desire for his son to have a better life than he or if Galahad is only symbolic of Christ as an example of what humanity should strive to be. In any event, it is easy to see Launcelot's failings as greater than what they are because of the success of Galahad. However, the argument must be made that Launcelot is even more of a success as a knight because of Galahad's achievements. The father wants more for the child, which is a statement that rings true throughout time no matter creed or color. In the closing pages of the story, Malory writes of Galahad's success in the Grail quest and his rule over the land of Sarras. Galahad is approached by a descent of Joseph of Aramathy, who was trusted

to protect the Grail, and takes the knight into Heaven. Before he goes, Galahad has a final word for his friends Percival and Bors:

And whan he had seyde thes wordis [Sir Galahad] went to Sir Percivale and kissed hym and commended hym to God; and so he wente to Sir Bors and kyssed hym and commended hym to God, and seyde, “ My fayre lorde, salew me unto my lorde Sir Launcelot, my fadir, and so sone as ye se hym, bydde hym remembir of this worlde unstable.” (586)

In his final moments, his mission accomplished, he tells his friends to pass along a message to Launcelot, his father. The message is not one of love, necessarily, but one of encouragement. Remember the unstable world. Remember the perils of the world and the ease of sin. His message is one meant to give hope and encouragement to a father who is struggling to continue being a decent man in an indecent world. Along that line of thought, the message could be one of love although it is a didactic love. The roles of father and son are almost reversed in this instance which is the purpose of the Galahad character. The message is the same as that spoken by Christ. In this portrayal Galahad is speaking to Launcelot, Malory, and the reader.

Launcelot and his son are very different souls. The son is set apart from other men and we are only aware of his near perfect nature. But in his nature, he displays few human emotions. Malory seems to have intentionally written the character in a way that emphasizes the humanity of Launcelot. Doing so, tells the reader that we can all be Launcelot and that the only thing that keeps partial success from blooming to complete victory is

ourselves. Berry writes: " The meaning and the effect of Launcelot's partial success depend on our clear recognition of the fact that his achievement is limited. Galahad provides the counterpoint. He embodies the ideal" (253). So as Galahad succeeds and shows us all what can be achieved, Launcelot ends his journey. He promises to follow the advice of those he has encountered on the journey and reform his life of sin (the pride, adultery, and betrayal) and begin living in servitude to God. Launcelot remarks: " Now I thanke God for Hys grete mercy of that I hae sene, for hit suffisith me. For, as I suppose, no man in thys worlde have lyved bettir than I have done to enchyeve that I have done" (578). These lines illustrate Launcelot does have a new understanding of what he should do, the life he should lead, the sins he should never commit again. However, the hearts of men remain easily corrupted and Launcelot's pride and vanity show through upon his return to Camelot and his reunion with Arthur and Guinevere. The scene at the castle is grim as Malory describes the Round Table he returns to as having more than half of its knights " slayne and destroyed." Malory's foreshadowing of the brief reunion with the king and his best knight establishes the final act and final downfall of the kingdom known as Camelot.

While Launcelot is Malory's vessel for the story of redemption, it is not fair to pick exclusively on the knight. Moorman reminds that Launcelot's failure lies in the inherit flaw of the entire system. Malory's Camelot, and Galahad's role in it, is representative of Jesus Christ (the overt Christianity and redemption angle are like sledgehammers) and his role for believers. Galahad is a stand-alone character, sent from Above to accomplish the single goal of the Grail quest. Arthur's knights could not accomplish the goal. It took someone far

more powerful just as according to Christian doctrine Jesus Christ died for the sins of all humanity. Sent from God, Galahad reveals the inadequacies of Arthur's court and the mystical and secular world in which they live. In the modern vernacular, Galahad is the clarion call to "get right with God." This leaves Launcelot in a tragic light as Moorman writes: "Malory would thus seem to use Launcelot as a tragic hero, as the man whose greatest strength, his devotion to the chivalric code, is at the same time his greatest weakness and downfall" (501). In other words, the system itself is flawed as it calls for a pledge to Arthur rather than God.

As has been established, Malory's favorite knight is undoubtedly Launcelot. To that end, considering Malory's predicament at the time of Launcelot's writing it is arguable that Malory used the knight as a stand-in for himself. Malory's plea to the reader in the closing lines of the Morte call for prayers for his soul, that he had found God, and was a warrior for Jesus in the day and night. It is only after Launcelot has lost everything, his king, his kin, his beloved, his kingdom that he finds ultimate redemption and forgoes worldly desires and knightly things. He takes up the role of a hermit, a man of God, and devotes himself to that service. In a final encounter with Guinevere, he laments his failure to live up to what he promised God upon awakening from his coma. He now begs the queen for a final kiss to which she refuses. Broken-hearted, surrounded by the irreparable pieces of his shattered life, Launcelot retires to a mass with the Bishop of Canterbury which afterwards he falls to his knees and asks the bishop to "shryve hym and assoyle" him. "Than the Bysshop sayd, 'I wyll gladly,' and there he put an haybte upon Syr

Launcelot. And there he servyd God day and nyght with prayers and fastynges" (693).

The entire Morte, specifically the Grail section, indicates Malory had great desire to be absolved and serve God just as Launcelot did. Jailed, a life thrown away because of the sins of the flesh, Malory died in prison. Perhaps Sir Thomas Malory only desired one final chance. If granted, perhaps he would follow in the footsteps of Launcelot and serve only God. We will never know. All that any of us can say is that his greatest and favorite character did those things. The adage "write what you know" applies. And Malory knew Launcelot; he knew mistakes; and according to his final words, he knew God. Perhaps he found peace in his final days. Perhaps the tale of Launcelot and his pursuit of the Grail, subsequent failing, and ultimate renewal allowed Malory peace and calm in a life that had, by all accounts, been a whirlwind of criminality, deception, violence, and master story-telling.

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