

Rogue Knights: Characterization in Malory's "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake"

Stephen M. Hoyle
Waynesboro, Virginia

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Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* represents a genre of its own. On the one hand, it is a compendium of the Arthurian legend wherein the Matter of Britain, as produced by both British and French writers, is presented as a generally unified whole. On the other hand, the work is very much Malory's own creation. He weaves together the continental conquests of Arthur and the romantic adventures of his errant Knights of the Round Table, and his originality reveals itself in how he treats these recycled tales. He is not merely a mouthpiece for his long-deceased British and French Arthurian forebears; he offers his own voice and judgements on chivalry in his continuation of their tradition. In Malory's time, chivalry had not quite become obsolete; one might say it was needed and hungered for. Malory's life, and the composition of *Le Morte Darthur*, developed against the backdrop of increasing social upheaval and political instability in England, culminating in civil war.

The *Morte* is supposed to have been written in the middle of the Wars of the Roses; William Caxton published it less than a month before Richard III was killed at Bosworth Field. As Malory himself learned, these were dangerous times to choose allegiances, which likely accounts for why he appears to have had a habit of turncoating. He does not, then, present an explicit political commentary; considering he was a political prisoner while writing the *Morte*, it would have been unwise and even dangerous for him to do so during the tumultuous 1450s (Hardyment 344). This does not, however, keep him from catering to the social concerns surrounding him. Catherine Nall aptly points out that the *Morte* is best historicized "by situating it in its wider discursive context, relating it to the wider preoccupations, interests, and discursive strategies of both the period and Malory's likely readership" (21). It is not surprising, then, that Caxton spends much of his preface exhorting his readers to take lessons in conduct from the work:

For herein may be seen noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyté, frendlynesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murder, hate, virtue, and synne. Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renomnee. And for to passe the tyme thys book shal be plesaunte to rede in, but for to gyve fayth and byleve that al is trewe that is conteyned herin, ye be at your lyberté. But al is wryton for our doctrine, and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne, but t'exersyse and folowe vertu, by whyche we may come and atteyne to good fame and renommé in thys lyf, and after thys shorte and transytorye lyf to come unto everlastyng blysse in heven. (*Works* cxlvi)

Caxton's words nicely reflect the *Morte's* predominant concern with individual, rather than national, protocol. I hesitate, therefore, to join Felicity Riddy in calling the *Morte* a "post-imperial, or even post-colonial, text" (71). While Malory does recycle Arthur's continental exploits, these follow the tradition established by Geoffrey of Monmouth. As soon as Arthur has overcome Rome, the attention immediately turns from the king to his knights, beginning with Lancelot, and it is this personal focus that dominates the rest of the *Morte* and explains the failure of Arthur's chivalric society.

Malory's invention as a writer is born out of his interest in chivalry, which is, in turn, informed by his time and context. The referral to Malory as a mere "knyght prisoner" in the *Morte* masks the rich political career and reputation he enjoyed as a sheriff, a justice of the peace, and a member of Parliament (Hardyment 202). In a different century or even decade, Malory might have been spared his incarceration, or at least some of it. Unfortunately for him, his political career reached its apex in the middle of the fifteenth century, on the threshold of the Wars of the Roses. This crisis was a "vacuum of aristocratic values", wherein the "governing élites" turned their

attention from mutual enemies in the French and Scottish to fighting one another (Riddy 72). This high social tension seems to account for much (though not necessarily all) of his run-ins with the law. His charges leading up to his imprisonment ranged from cattle-rustling and rape to attempting to murder the duke of Buckingham (Vinaver 5). Considering the social context, it is difficult to judge the validity of these accusations – as C.S. Lewis aptly notes, how differently would we look upon Sir Tristram if his deeds were “presented to us by King Mark’s solicitors” (105). Malory witnessed firsthand and suffered as a result of petty rivalries among the aristocrats of England, the traditional defenders and exemplars, at least in the popular imagination, of chivalry. The *Morte* serves as a space wherein Malory can explore chivalry and the social and personal challenges that threaten the practice thereof among knights.

One of the best-known sections of the *Morte*, and one wherein Malory exercises significant originality, is “A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake.” While this tale is among the most popular for critics of Malory, little scholarly attention has been offered to the knights encountered by Sir Lancelot in this section. Each of these knights, after all, is given at most only a few pages before their part in the story comes to an end, whether by the sword or another mechanism of justice. This lack of attention is, nonetheless, regrettable. In the little time afforded them to perform in Malory’s romance, these knights exhibit conflicts and motives found throughout Malory’s work and the Arthurian legend as a whole. Vengeance, jealousy, love, and ambition fuel these knights just as they do the knights of the Round Table whom we consider with more esteem. As a result they are, with a few exceptions, able to at least be understood by the reader. Indeed, their motives may well have been thought of as justified by an audience living in Malory’s time, in which filial and dynastic bonds still held much sway over the fortunes of peoples and even countries.

This paper will focus specifically on those “roguish” knights encountered during the tale of Sir Lancelot. This particular section of the *Morte* merits such attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, as noted above, it immediately follows Arthur’s defeat of Emperor Lucius of Rome. The focus of the narrative shifts from the continental to the individual, as does the focus of knighthood itself. The band of knights fighting under the king’s banner has been replaced by the knight errant, adventuring in order to prove his mettle and gain worship. Secondly, Sir Lancelot has been intentionally modified by Malory to be more just and controlled in dealing with murderers and betrayers than the Lancelot of his French sources. As seen in his addition of the Pentecostal Oath, Malory is concerned with the uses and abuses of the power that comes with being a knight and vassal of Arthur. Simply killing a wrongdoer is not enough; doing so under the right circumstances and with the right etiquette is paramount when considering the honor of the justiciar in question. “The purpose of the quest,” argues Corinne Saunders, “is not to win the love of Guinevere, as it is for Chrétien’s Lancelot, but to uphold chivalry generally” (169). Much of this paper, therefore, will involve contrasting Malory’s rendition of Lancelot’s adventures with their presentation in his French source, the Prose *Lancelot*. Finally, the opponents encountered exhibit diverse behaviors and motivations, which determine how Lancelot overcomes them. There are times when Lancelot falls short and must redeem himself; by redeeming himself, though, he distinguishes himself from other knights in the romance. After all, the conflicts that now confront and threaten the stability of the Round Table are no longer external, as the native rebel kings and pagan warlords of the Continent have been subdued; rather, within Arthur’s own kingdom is internal strife, often wrought by blood feuds and the abuse of knightly power, both of which are clearly seen motivating the knights Lancelot faces.

I. Belleus

The first knight distinctly outside of the Round Table whom Lancelot encounters is Belleus. It is a significant encounter because Malory intentionally doctors the French source from which he is borrowing in order to present Lancelot as merciful, healing, and sensitive, especially with respect to women. Furthermore, like the encounters with Phelot and Pedivere discussed below, a wife is at the heart of the misunderstanding that precipitates the main conflict of the adventure. How Lancelot behaves toward Belleus is our first impression of him in his encounters with knights outside of the Round Table, and Malory's originality ensures that the impression is a favorable one.

In both texts, Lancelot comes upon a pavilion in a wood; seeing that it is empty, he undresses and falls asleep in the bed within. The pavilion's owner returns soon after, assumes it is his beloved who lies in the bed, undresses, and joins Lancelot under the covers and begins to kiss him. Despite the comic elements, the story takes a turn for the worst, especially in the French source, when the knights startle one another and begin to fight.

In the Prose *Lancelot*, the knight, having frightened Lancelot out of bed, is enraged. "“Scoundrel! You'll be sorry that you've shamed me and slept with my wife in my own tent!” Then he landed a blow to Lancelot's teeth, almost knocking them out of his mouth, and blood spurted all over his chin” (Lacy V:183-184). The knight, while certainly violent, is justified: he has discovered a stranger in his bed instead of his wife, and assumes a liaison between the two. Lancelot makes no attempt to explain himself; instead, he escalates their quarrel:

When Lancelot felt himself so ill used, he seized the knight by the throat and threw him over his back onto a rock in the middle of the tent. The knight was badly hurt when he fell. Lancelot stood up, went to where he had left his sword,

and drew it from its scabbard. The moon was shining so that one could see a little in the tent, and when the knight saw Lancelot coming with his sword drawn, he did not dare wait, but turned and fled naked toward the forest. But Lancelot was not about to let him go, so without stopping to dress he pursued him until he caught up with him and struck him a sword blow that split his head to the teeth, and the knight fell down dead. Lancelot then returned to the tent, lay down, and slept until morning. (V:184)

By the time Lancelot kills him, the knight is not only fleeing, but also naked and injured. Lancelot is inordinately brutal in dispatching him, especially considering he does so in response to a relatively trivial misunderstanding. As Albert Hartung aptly notes in his look at these sections, “Lancelot can be sufficiently brutal in Malory when the occasion justifies it. It is the lack of justification for what he does in the source that evidently bothered Malory” (257). Malory takes pains not only to provide that justification, but also to alter Lancelot’s response thereto. In other words, Lancelot’s response is more reasonable given the circumstances yet honorable given his restraint. It is worth looking closely at how Malory makes his change.

In Malory’s reinvention, Sir Belleus enters the tent thinking that his “lemman”, not his wife, awaits him in bed. When Lancelot feels “a rough berde kyssyng hym” he jumps out of bed, and the two knights draw their swords and come to blows. “And there by a lytyll slad sir Launcelot wounded hym sore nyghe unto the deth. And than he yelded hym to sir Launcelot, and so he graunted hym, so that he wolde telle hym why he com into the bed” (*Works* 260.1-4). Malory makes significant changes not only in having the knights fight fairly, both armed with swords, but also in having Lancelot grant Belleus the chance to explain himself rather than hastily kill him. Furthermore, Malory gives Lancelot a good reason for his alarm. Hartung argues that given the

comic implications of the “rough berde”, Lancelot “had every right to be upset” (257). While that may be true, it seems that Lancelot’s more urgent and understandable reason comes from his own mouth. When he learns that Belleus is the pavilion’s owner and that he expected to find his lady in that bed, only to be “lykly to dye of this wounde,” Lancelot confesses, “That me repentyth ... of youre hurte, but I was adrad of treson, for I was late begyled” (260.8-9). Lancelot here refers to his imprisonment by the Four Queens. He is aware that he has angered them by refusing to be their lover and by escaping their prison. He hides in the pavilion not only to sleep, but to find refuge. His fear of retribution is what drives him to nearly kill Belleus, who is guilty only of an innocent (if comic) mistake. A similar episode – that of three sorceresses – immediately precedes the parallel incident in the Prose *Lancelot*, yet the anonymous author does not bridge the two. Malory’s originality in this section is impressive not only in its recharacterization of Lancelot, but also in presenting the psychological impact of his encounter with the sorceresses.

Malory augments his reinvention of Belleus’ source character by giving his wife a presence in the story. Because Lancelot has acted impulsively out of fear, he is granted a chance to regain his honor by Belleus’ lady. This is interesting considering Lancelot has already made amends with Belleus by healing him. When the lady first appears and is distressed at the sight of a wounded Belleus, the latter says, “Pease, my lady and my love ... for this knyght is a good man and a knyght of adventures ... And whan that I yelded me unto hym he laffte me goodly, and hath staunched my bloode” (260.17-21). This is not enough for the lady, who, upon learning Lancelot’s name, makes a unique request:

But now wolde ye promyse me of youre curtesye, for the harmys that ye have done to me and to my lorde, sir Belleus, that whan ye com unto kyng Arthurs courte for to cause hym to be made knyght of the Rounde Table? For he is a

passing good man of armys and a myghty lorde of londys of many oute iles.

(260.28-33)

Kenneth Hodges points out that Belleus' wounds are not the only reason his lady gives for his being knighted; there are additionally his abilities as a fighter and his land holdings as a lord (26). We are introduced to an outsider to the Round Table – and, therefore, someone not as closely bound to Arthur's rule – who yet has geopolitical power. Thus, Lancelot is not only making amends with those whom he has injured, but is also doing a service for Arthur in making one small step towards stabilizing his kingdom. Belleus is a courteous knight, and we are given no indication that he abuses what power he has. Lancelot, then, is right in agreeing to do what he can to see that Belleus is knighted.

Malory's adventure involving Sir Belleus is a significant and telling reworking of the French source. It is not so much that Belleus himself is altered – how could we decide, considering the character in the Prose *Lancelot* is killed off almost immediately? – but rather his treatment by Lancelot reflects Malory's desire to present the best knight in the world as virtuous and level-headed. However, Lancelot does not find much trouble in being courteous, as Belleus is not wicked. It soon becomes clear that not all of the wandering knights are like Belleus, and not all of Lancelot's battles spring out of innocent mistakes. The tale of Lancelot steadily becomes darker, revealing just how abusive the characters lurking in Arthur's distant vassalage can be in exercising their power.

II. Tarquin

The first wicked knight Lancelot encounters in his tale is Sir Tarquin. Unlike Sir Belleus, who makes an understandable mistake and is, in the end, forgiven and redeemed, Sir Tarquin is an obvious villain. He is blatantly cruel towards his fellow knights, thereby violating the Pentecostal

Oath. This oath, being Malory's own creation based on pre-existing chivalric oaths, helps to define the villains in Lancelot's tale and throughout the *Morte*. It is outlined soon after Arthur's victory over his rebel enemies, early in the *Morte*:

Than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; 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. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtes sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and younge, and every yere so were the[y] sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste. (120.15-27)

Sir Tarquin breaks the first part of the oath – that is, he commits “outrage” (or cruelty) and murder. Having captured Sir Lionel and three other knights, Tarquin takes them to his castle. “Than he unarmed them and bete them with thornys all naked, and aftir put them in depe preson where were many mo knyghtes that made grete dole” (254.24-26). Later, Tarquin reveals that he has killed an additional one hundred knights, “and as many I have maymed all uttirly, that they myght never aftir helpe themselves, and many have dyed in preson” (266.31-33). Sir Tarquin has thus serially and intentionally deviated from the code to which he is bound as a knight.

The series of events in the Tarquin episode is generally faithful to the analogous adventure in the Prose *Lancelot*, wherein the wicked knight is named Tericam. The two differ in Lancelot's response to this knight's deeds. A telling example is found in the Vulgate. As in Malory, the deeds

of this evil knight are told to Lancelot by a damsel, seeking his aid against him. However, in the Vulgate version, Tericam's motives are revealed by the damsel immediately when Lancelot asks for news of his captured cousin, Sir Lionel:

“In this forest there dwells a knight, the tallest and most amazing you've ever seen, who holds him in his prison; he has many of King Arthur's knights in his prison there upon that hill. His name is Tericam of the Impenetrable Forest, and to my mind he's the cruelest knight in the world. He's the brother of Caradoc the Huge, lord of the Dolorous Tower, whom you killed to rescue Sir Gawain, so I've heard tell.”

“By God,” said Lancelot, “I didn't do a thing to his brother I wouldn't do to him as well, if I could find him!” (V:26)

As understandable as the Vulgate Lancelot's anger may be, it distinguishes him from Malory's Lancelot, much like the Belleus episode. This is further shown when Lancelot engages Tericam in combat, having discovered him taking a bound knight to his prison. The two fight a long and brutal duel until, exhausted, they sit and rest. Tericam offers a truce but asks for his attacker's identity, lest the latter be “someone with whom I could never arrange one” (V.29). Lancelot seems surprised, asking, “Is there someone in the world you hate so much you could never make peace with him.” Tericam reveals that person to be Lancelot of the Lake, “for he killed my brother Caradoc, lord of the Dolorous Tower, whom I loved more than any man in the world. So I tell you truly that I would give whatever I have in this world for him to be in your place, for then I think I could avenge this grief he has put in my heart.” Lancelot is unmoved, revealing himself as Caradoc's killer, and saying further, “I am the one who'll be the death of you without ransom, for

I hate nobody as much as you in all the world, and I'll prove it to you before I leave. En garde now, for you've been challenged." Another bloody fight ensues, and Lancelot corners Tericam at a moat:

His adversary did not realize where he was and retreated so far that he fell in; but he no longer had the strength to climb out, for he was so worn and weary and had lost so much blood that he knew he was on the brink of death. Lancelot seized him by the helmet and jerked it toward himself so savagely that he pulled it from his head and tossed it onto the path; then he struck him such a might blow to his skull that he split it to the teeth, and his enemy fell dead in the moat. (V:32)

At its end, the fight is hardly a fair one. Tericam's body, bloodied and weighed down by his armor, is mired in the mud of the moat. He is effectively defeated and neutralized as a threat, but the Vulgate Lancelot wastes no time in finishing the job in a manner so graphic that it hardly deserves to be called a *coup de grâce*.

Malory's Lancelot is far less temperamental. In the *Morte*, Lancelot's anger towards Tarquin's is not personal, but instead arises out of his outrage at the chivalric community being dishonored and harmed. When he encounters Tarquin leading a captured and bound Gaheris to his castle, Lancelot charges Tarquin to release him, saying, "thou doyste and haste done me grete despite, and shame unto the knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (265.26-27). Tarquin mocks the community of knights: "And thou be of [the] Rounde Table ... I de[fy] the and all thy felyshyp!" (265.29-30). The stakes are higher than a personal vendetta. Both the security and the reputation of the Round Table are threatened by Tarquin, who chooses to use his strength and property outside of Arthur's prescribed *modus operandi* and against his own knights in the hopes of wreaking vengeance against the very best of them.

A similar exchange is presented following the fight: Tarquin offers to “acorde” with Lancelot and free all of his prisoners, on the condition that it is not his brother’s killer with whom he speaks. Lancelot’s response is noticeably less charged than that found in the source text:

Now se I well ... that suche a man I might be, I might have pease; and suche a man I might[e be], that there sholde be mortall warre betwyxte us. And now, sir knyght, at thy requeste I woll that thou wete and know that I am sir Lancelot du Lake, kynge Bannes son of Benwyke, and verry knyght of the Table Rounde. And now I defyghe the, and do thy beste! (267.1-7)

Just as Tarquin defied Lancelot and his fellowship, Lancelot, in the name of that same fellowship, engages its ruthless molester, and the two fight. Malory’s telling of the fight is a condensed version of that in the Vulgate; however, he makes changes to the conclusion of the duel:

Thus they foughte styll two owres and more and never wolde have reste, and sir Tarquyne gaff sir Lancelot many woundys, that all the grounde thereas they faughte was all besparcled with bloode. Than at the laste sir Tarquyn wexed faynte and gaff somwhatt abakke, and bare his shyld low for wery. That aspyed sir Lancelot, and lepte uppon hym fersly and gate hym by the bavoure of hys helmette and plucked hym downe on his kneis, and anone he raced of his helme and smote his necke in sunder. (267.13-23)

The pace of this fight is faster and more urgent than that of the drawn-out Vulgate version. Here, Tarquin is putting up a strong fight against Lancelot, who sustains wounds and struggles to end the fight; he kills Tarquin by seizing a moment of vulnerability when he has lowered his defenses.

Tarquin is slain in the heat of battle; Tericam is pommelled to death, unarmed and half-drowned in a moat.

Lancelot's encounter with Tarquin is not on shared terms. This is no ritualistic jousting match, but rather a fight to the death, and Lancelot is justified in killing him due to his cruelty. Tarquin's character is made complex, though, by his desire to avenge his brother's death. The fallen knights encountered after Tarquin bring with them their own motivations, presenting new challenges as to how Lancelot is to handle their wrongdoings and bring them to justice.

III. Peris

Sir Peris de Forest Savage is encountered only briefly in Malory, being given significantly less attention than Sir Tarquin and no dialogue of his own. The nameless source character in the Vulgate is likewise given a brief narrative before meeting his end by Lancelot's hand. It would seem that the brevity in both versions is due to there being neither doubt nor ambiguity regarding his lawlessness. According to both Malory and the Vulgate, the knight is known to rape women passing by. On this point, at least, the sources agree. The major difference between the two – one that reflects more on Lancelot than it does on the wicked knight – is the manner in which the knight is brought to justice.

The first major difference between the two renditions of this tale is how Lancelot responds when he learns of the knight's villainous deeds. The Vulgate Lancelot, upon hearing that this knight "turns aside all those who pass in front of him so that he can conquer them", and that the damsel herself whom he is escorting was nearly raped by him, immediately tells the maiden to ride ahead so that he might catch the villain in the act (V:39). Malory's Lancelot hatches the same plan; however, before doing so, he denounces Sir Peris: "What? ... is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravyssher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of Knyghthode, and contrary unto his oth. Hit

is pyté that he lyvyth!” (269.22-25). This is one among several examples in the *Morte* of how Lancelot’s response to the wickedness of his fellow knights is not a purely emotional one; he consistently laments their failure to live up to the standards expected of them as outlined in the Pentecostal Oath.

If the Vulgate Lancelot can be seen as more emotional and even impulsive than Malory’s, how he dispatches the “ravyssher of women” illustrates this. In both texts, the damsel rides ahead and is attacked and thrown from her horse, and Lancelot immediately charges at the knight. The Prose *Lancelot* episode is as follows:

Frightened, the knight was about to flee, but was unable to when Lancelot came up and struck him so hard that neither shield nor hauberk could stop the point and shaft from piercing his body. He bore him backwards to the ground, and as Lancelot pulled out his spear the knight fainted in mortal anguish.

Lancelot dismounted, pulled the knight’s helmet from his head, and said he would kill him if he refused to acknowledge defeat. He was in such pain that he was unable to reply. And Lancelot, who had no mind to wait further, struck him a blow that knocked him to the ground dead. (V:40)

However much the end might appear to justify the means in this section, this image of Lancelot is almost unrecognizable from that which is seen in Malory. It is one thing for him to kill a knight on the run; it is another to kill him in cold blood out of impatience, depriving the knight of a chance to yield. The episode ends as abruptly as the knight’s life; no comment is offered on the knight or how he was neutralized, and Lancelot and the damsel move on to the next adventure.

Judging by his changes, Malory seems to have found Lancelot's actions distasteful. To kill a fleeing man out of annoyance and without a fair fight would be uncharacteristic of the great exemplar of Arthur's new chivalric code. Malory amends this by adding dialogue and altering the fight between Lancelot and Peris:

With that com sir Launcelot as faste as he might tyll he comm to the knyght,
sayng,

'A, false knyght and traytoure unto knyghthode, who dud lerne the to distresse
ladyes, demesels, and jantyllwomen!'

Whan the knyght sy sir Launcelot thus rebukynge hym he answered nat, but
drew his swerde and rode unto sir Launcelot. And sir Launcelot threw his spere
frome hym and drew his swerde, and strake hym suche a buffette on the helmette
that he claffe his hede and necke unto the throte.

'Now haste thou thy payment that longe thou haste deserved!'

'That is trouth,' seyde the damesell, 'for lyke as Terquyn wacched to dystresse
good knyghtes, so dud this knyght attende to destroy and dystresse ladyes,
damesels and jantyllwomen.' (269.32-270.12)

Lancelot directly denounces the knight as he did upon hearing of his crimes. Sir Peris does not flee, but instead draws his sword to fight. In glaring contrast to the Vulgate, Lancelot casts away his spear and draws his sword, allowing for a fair fight. After killing Peris in combat, Lancelot rebukes him once more before the maiden in his company ratifies his decision to kill him, comparing Peris' treachery to that of Tarquin.

So far, Malory's Lancelot has faced knights who are not among the established knights of the Round Table. Belleus, though a powerful landholder, is not a member. Tarquin and Peris, on the other hand, are "enemies genuinely outside the familiar court milieu" (Edwards 46); their brutish and unchecked actions, being in direct defiance of the Pentecostal Oath, preclude them from inclusion in Arthur's court of knights and demand their neutralization. Lancelot has proven more than able to handle himself in combat; the fallen knights he has yet to encounter, however, are tricksters, and these will test his abilities not so much as a fighter, but as a justiciar.

IV. Phelot

Inserted between the Peris de Forest Savage episode and that of Sir Phelot, there is another story of a healing, but one that is more complex than that of Sir Belleus. This adventure is worth examining, as it illustrates Lancelot's sensitivity towards women, which will be challenged in the Phelot episode. This adventure begins with Lancelot coming upon the body of Sir Gilbert the Bastard. The dead knight's widow calls her late husband "one of the beste knyghtys of the worlde, and he that hath slayne hym I know nat his name" (279.8-10). An appropriate expectation at this point would be for Lancelot to set out and hunt down the knight who has done this, and it seems like Lancelot may do so. However, he comes across the sister of the knight who killed Sir Gilbert. She reveals that her brother himself is wounded and appeals to Lancelot for assistance:

For this day he fought with sir Gylberte the Bastarde and slew hym in playne batayle, and there was my brother sore wounded. And there is a lady, a sorseres, that dwellyth in a castel here bysyde, and this day she tolde me my brothers woundys sholde never be hole tyll I coude fynde a knyght wolde go into the Chapel Perelus, and there he sholde fynde a swerde and a blody cloth that the woundid knyght was lapped in; and a pece of that cloth and that swerde sholde

hele my brother, with that his woundis were serched with the swerde and the cloth. (279.17-26)

Lancelot is, no doubt, on alert upon hearing of the involvement of a sorceress, given his recent run-in with the Four Queens. Furthermore, upon hearing that the wounded knight in question is Sir Meliot de Logres, Lancelot says, “That me repentys ... for he is a fellow of the Table Rounde, and to his helpe I woll do my power” (279.30-32). At this point, Sir Gilbert is set in the periphery, serving only as a means to the completion of this new and fantastical quest Lancelot undertakes. A number of questions are thus raised. Why did Lancelot not pursue vengeance for Sir Gilbert, or even ask if the widow needed assistance? (All he tells her at the end of their exchange is “Now God sende you bettir comforte” (279.11)) Does Lancelot refuse to seek vengeance because Sir Gilbert is revealed to have been born out of wedlock? And does Lancelot agree to help Sir Meliot only because he is a fellow knight of the Round Table? These are puzzling questions arising out of a short but rich episode. It illustrates, at the very least, that Lancelot is sensitive towards women in distress and that he is loyal to those who share in the fellowship of the Round Table. The episode of Sir Phelot will challenge Lancelot’s loyalties, as he will be encountered not only by a deceptive knight who is not (as far as we know) one of the Round Table, but also by a wife who is an accomplice in the knight’s treachery.

Sir Phelot, apparently an invention of Malory’s, is a trickster, and as such is able to threaten Lancelot’s honor as a knight. Like the Four Queens who attempt to seduce Lancelot, “the tricksters have no intention of acting honorably” (Nolan 179). Phelot lures Lancelot into a trap by having his wife request his help in retrieving her hawk. She explains, “for I kepte the hauke, and she slypped fro me. And yf my lorde my husbande wete hit, he is so hasty that he wyll sle me” (282.24-26). With Lancelot’s regard for women established, it is inconceivable for him to turn down this

urgent call for assistance. Furthermore, the lady reveals that her husband is “a knyght that longyth unto the Kyng of North Galys.” This is important to note, since, as Beverly Kennedy has noted, although we are never given an explicit reason for Phelot’s hatred for Lancelot as with Tarquin, “we may infer that Phelot is seeking vengeance for the humiliation which Lancelot so recently dealt his lord’s party in King Bagdemagus’ tournament” (122). Kennedy refers to an earlier adventure in the tale in which Lancelot is asked to come to the aid of King Bagdemagus in his tournament against the King of North Galys. “Humiliation” is a moderate word for Lancelot’s prowess:

Wyth that com in sir Launcelot, and he threste in with his spere in the thyckyst of the pres; and there he smote downe with one spere fyve knyghtes, and of four of them he brake their backys. And in that thrange he smote downe the Kyng of North Galys, and brake his thygh in that falle. (262.27-31)

If this is, indeed, Phelot’s reason for tricking Lancelot, it does not justify his treachery, even if he is acting out of feudal loyalty. When Lancelot, unarmed, climbs into the tree, retrieves the hawk, and returns it to the damsel, Sir Phelot appears, armed and ready to kill Lancelot once he steps onto the ground. “That were shame unto the,” Lancelot says to him, “thou an armed knyght to sle a nakyd man by treson” (283.14-15). Once again, we are reminded of the Pentecostal Oath in its stipulation to “fle treson.” Adding insult to injury, Sir Phelot denies Lancelot the chance to arm himself, knowing that allowing him to do so would mean his own doom.

However justified Lancelot may be in killing Sir Phelot, the manner in which he does so is questionable. After masterfully breaking a large branch from the tree and jumping down with his horse between him and his attacker, Lancelot strikes Sir Phelot on the head, “that downe he felle

in a sowghe to the grounde” (283.36). Phelot has been neutralized as a threat, and could easily have been bound up and taken to Camelot for judgement. Instead, Lancelot wastes no time:

So than sir Launcelot toke his swerde oute of his honde and strake his necke in two pecys.

“Alas!” than cryed that lady, “why haste thou slayne my husbonde?”

“I am nat causer,” seyde sir Launcelot, “but with falshede ye wolde have had me slayne with treson, and now hit is fallyn on you bothe.”

And than she sowned as though she wolde dey. (284.1-8)

Although Lancelot explains his reason for killing of Phelot, it is not quite as justified as in the cases of Sir Tarquin and Sir Peris, primarily because Phelot is unconscious when killed. It is interesting that in an adventure apparently of his own invention, Malory has Lancelot behave more impulsively than is usually seen in the *Morte*; such actions would seem more appropriate to the Vulgate Lancelot. While so far in the *Morte* Lancelot has neutralized knights who both deviated from the chivalric ideal and engaged him in deadly combat, here he has killed a knight in cold blood and, by saying “and now hit is fallyn on you bothe,” seems to be using a sort of “eye for an eye” argument. Lancelot’s handling of Sir Phelot is primitive, at best.

The attentive reader will note a similarity – and a foreboding one, at that – growing between Lancelot and another knight already encountered in the *Morte*. Sir Balin – an otherwise loyal knight with good intentions – demonstrates sudden anger and violence throughout his story, and his character is darkened by his repeated tendency to kill prematurely. He is first encountered as a prisoner, jailed for killing one of Arthur’s kinsmen (62.35); he kills the Lady of the Lake while she is in Arthur’s care (66.3); and he murders the unarmed villain Garlonde at a banquet (84.8).

Ralph Norris argues that these violent events are the inevitable results of Balin's *hamartia*; that is, his keeping the sword brought to Arthur's court by the Lady of the Lake's damsel, a sword only Balin can draw. Behind even that, it seems, lies stubbornness and a hot head that leads Balin to take justice into his own hands when encountering foes. Before returning to Lancelot specifically, it is worth comparing his killing of Sir Phelot with Balin's murder of the invisible knight Garlonde.

V. Garlonde

Garlonde is something of a precursor to Sir Phelot in that he aims to kill by means of deception, his means being his ability to become invisible. He is first encountered when Balin agrees to escort the knight Sir Harleus le Berbeus to Arthur. "And as they were evyn before Arthurs pavilion, there com one invisible and smote the knyght that wente with Balyn thorowoute the body with a spere" (80.9-11). Soon after, Garlonde likewise kills Perin de Mount Beliard after the latter agrees to help Balin bring the invisible knight to justice. Garlonde thus kills two men under Balin's protection. Nonetheless, Balin grows reckless in his pursuit of retribution for these two murders. He learns that finds Garlonde at a feast hosted by the latter's brother, King Pellam. Balin's desire for justice is understandable, but this desire devolves into vengeance, which compromises the legitimacy of his pursuit of Garlonde.

Balin gains his vengeance through what may be seen as deception of his own. When he is brought into King Pellam's castle, his hosts ask that he leave his sword behind. "That woll I nat," he says, "for hit ys the custom of my contrey a knyght allweyes to kepe hys wepyn with hym. Other ells ... I woll departe as I [c]am" (83.16-18). Because Balin knows Garlonde is within, this claim is dubious, and it seems that Balin, in his thirst for revenge, is willing to deceive those around him – even if it means disregarding the wishes of his hosts – in order to get to Garlonde. When he is permitted entry with his sword, Balin sees Garlonde and considers his options: "If I sle hym

here, I shall nat ascape. And if I leve hym now, peraventure I shall never mete with hym agayne at such a stevyn, and mucche harme he woll do and he lyve” (83.28-31). Balin is here too concerned with his own pursuit of vengeance. He does not appeal to a higher authority like Arthur for justice. He could, as others do in the *Morte*, charge Garlonde and send him to Arthur’s court for judgement. Instead, after Garlonde spots Balin and strikes him for staring at him, Balin not only cleaves his head in two, but furthermore mutilates his body using the lance with which Garlonde killed the two knights, saying, “With that truncheon thou slewyste a good knyght, and now hit stykith in thy body” (84.15-16). This reasoning is reminiscent of Lancelot’s words to Phelot’s wife. Both dialogues involve a degree of personal yet Hammurabic justice. Balin’s error, however much one might sympathize with his grievance against Garlonde, ends in the Dolorous Stroke and the ruin of King Pellam’s estate, resulting from his failure to appeal to a form of justice higher than that which he himself can execute.

Thinking back on Balin’s problematic tale, the reader is forced to critique Lancelot’s handling of Sir Phelot. He must redeem himself if he is to avoid falling into the extremes of deception and cruelty in the name of those whom he seeks to defend and avenge. Larry Benson argues that Lancelot’s actions are justified. Because Phelot is “dishonorable toward knights,” it is apt that he should be killed by a good and virtuous one (90). I am more inclined to agree with Janet Jesmok’s assessment: “He [Lancelot] does not give Phelot time to ask for mercy; he strikes as Phelot would have struck, unchivalrously seizing the moment. In this way, he *becomes* Phelot, assuming his violence and villainy as he kills without recourse” (84). Like Garlonde, Phelot is indeed deserving of death; however, the circumstances of his death are more questionable than honorable. Both villains are in a situation in which they could be brought to justice through an appeal to a higher authority; instead, the knights use their vulnerability to their advantage in

personally sentencing them. Balin does not get the opportunity to redeem himself. What redeems Lancelot is how he handles Pedivere.

VI. Pedivere

Malory's invention in the Phelot episode makes an interesting transition into his borrowed, though altered, Pedivere encounter. Although the source material in the Prose *Lancelot* is longer, Malory's changes make the episode far richer in its characterization of Lancelot, especially by placing it after his ethically-questionable handling of Phelot. What distinguishes Lancelot from Balin is the respect and sensitivity he shows towards women; we do not see Lancelot do something as egregious as beheading a lady in the presence of King Arthur. While this characteristic serves Lancelot well and earns him a good reputation among his peers, it tests him when he comes upon Pedivere and his wife.

The source story for the Pedivere is markedly more violent than its Malorian counterpart, so it is worth examining how it is adapted to the *Morte*. In the Prose *Lancelot*, the knight is encountered abusing his wife, who is wearing nothing but undergarments, "beating her and dragging her by her braids behind his horse and doing every kind of shameful and scandalous thing he could short of killing her" (V:317-318). Lancelot, as in Malory, is naturally compelled to rush to her defense, but his reasons for being so are different. In the *Morte*, Lancelot rebukes the knight, saying "Knyght, fye for shame, why wolte the sle this lady? Shame unto the and all knyghtes!" (284.22-23). Malory's Lancelot is invoking knighthood as a whole, and by extension their duty to protect those in distress. The Vulgate Lancelot, however, has a more personal response:

Lancelot, seeing this marvelously beautiful creature weeping tenderly and imploring help as loudly as she could, came to the knight and said, "Sir knight, have pity on this beautiful woman! If you do her any more harm than you already

have, everyone should reproach you for it, since she's so beautiful that no one could lay a hand on her without doing wrong. So I pray you to make your peace with her now." (V:318)

The old Lancelot is moved to engage the knight only, it seems, by virtue of the lady's beauty; Malory's Lancelot acts without consideration for the woman's appearance. The subjective, even arbitrary impetus for action in the Vulgate has been replaced by the dictates of the Pentecostal Oath, binding Lancelot to something more than mere looks.

The lady's actions, in addition to her appearance, are also portrayed differently between sources, which bear heavily on how Lancelot carries himself. Firstly, it is worth considering why Pedivere is trying to kill his wife. In both versions, the knight claims that he found his wife being unfaithful. In the Vulgate the lady has no chance to defend herself; however, the knight does later confirm in the presence of Arthur and the queen that he found a naked man in bed with his wife before killing him (V:341). In Malory, when Pedivere tells Lancelot that his wife has been unfaithful, the lady offers a defense:

Truly, he seyth wronge on me. And for bycause I love [and] cherysshe my cousyn jarmayne, he is jolowse betwyxte me and hym; and as I mutte answere to God there was never sene betwyxte us none suche thynges. But, sir ... as thou arte called the worshypfullyest knyght of the worlde, I requyre the of trewe knyghthode, kepe me and save me, for whatsomever he sey he woll sle me, for he is withoute mercy. (284.30-285.2)

The lady here appeals to Lancelot's duty as a knight. What attention was given to the lady's appearance in the Vulgate has been done away with and replaced by her own dialogue in which

she admonishes Lancelot, in the name of his knighthood – and, by extension, his oath as a knight – to defend her.

The altered manner of the lady's death provides a further dilemma for Malory's Lancelot. In the Vulgate, after Lancelot forbids him to harm his wife, the wicked knight beheads the lady and throws it to Lancelot to spite him. Lancelot draws his sword to kill the knight, who flees, prompting a horseback chase (V:318-320). Pedivere, on the other hand, is more devious: he agrees to stay his hand, saying to Lancelot, "in your syght I woll be ruled as ye woll have me" (285.4-5). Soon after, though, Pedivere tells Lancelot to look behind him, claiming "yondir com men of armys aftir [us] rydyng" (285.9). When Lancelot does so, Pedivere cuts off his wife's head.

This is when Lancelot's great challenge occurs. He rebukes Pedivere, dismounts, and draws his sword. Pedivere, however, does not flee: "therewithall he felle to the erthe and gryped sir Launcelot by the thyghes and cryed mercy" (285.16-18). Pedivere is not testing Lancelot's patience by fleeing, nor his skill (for he knows whom he faces) by fighting, but appeals to his pity. Lancelot has not yet encountered such a thing. He does not immediately kill Pedivere, as he did the unconscious Phelot. "Fye on the," he says, "thou shamefull knyght! Thou mayste have no mercy: therefore aryse and fyghte with me!" Pedivere does not bite: "I woll never aryse tylle ye graunte me mercy" (285.22-23). Usually, Lancelot's denunciation of a knight's behavior is soon followed by a duel, often ending in the knight's death. In this instance, Lancelot knows he would be in the wrong to kill Pedivere. The Pentecostal Oath, after all, leaves little room for his own interpretation: "gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure for evirmore." Lancelot wants to fight and kill Pedivere, but can do so only if Pedivere himself fights; otherwise, he would be killing not just an unarmed man, but one asking for his mercy. Lancelot is caught between the tenets of his code as a knight, and the

only movement he can gain is by entering fair combat with Pedivere. Even after offering to fight with nothing but a shirt on his back and a sword in his hands, Lancelot is refused. He cannot dispense justice in his own way, nor can he let Pedivere go. Therefore, he appeals to an alternate justiciar: “take this lady and the hede, and bere [it] uppon the; and here shalt thou swere uppon my swerde to bere hit allwayes uppon thy bak and never to reste tyll thou com to my lady, quene Gwennyver” (285.29-32). The referral of the wicked knight to the queen is present in both narratives; how it plays out for the knight himself, though, is significantly different.

The knight of the Vulgate is given a penance but no explicit redemption. Lancelot himself is the one to give the knight his orders. He tells him to go to Arthur and Guinevere and tell them of his crime. If spared, he is to seek forgiveness from the court of King Bagdemagu and that of the king of North Wales (V:323-324). The knight does as he is told, and Arthur and the queen, sparing him and thinking Lancelot’s judgement a fair one, send him on his way. Having been pardoned by King Bagdemagu and the court of North Wales, “He promptly had the woman’s body buried in a chapel tended by a hermit on the edge of a forest, then returned to his own land, traveling by day as swiftly as he could” (V:345). In this version, we cannot be sure of any change in the knight’s heart. The episode seems to be an announcement of Lancelot’s worthiness than anything else, and a nudge toward his romance with the queen. When he tells Arthur and the queen of the mission given him by Lancelot, Arthur praises Lancelot: “He’s clearly shown by this that he prefers ladies’ honor to shame, and may God never help me if he isn’t more deserving of ladies’ honor than any other knight.” If this were not explicit enough, Arthur soon after adds to the queen, “If you were some other lady and were jealous, may God never help me if I blamed you, for you could do much worse than to fall in love with him [Lancelot]” (V:344). This is just another adventure in which

Lancelot proves his sensibility towards women; it shows development on neither his nor on the wicked knight's part.

Malory, it seems, was unsatisfied with how this adventure ended. When Pedivere arrives at Arthur's court, the dialogue is significantly reduced; in fact, Arthur says not a word. Furthermore, it is Guinevere, not Lancelot, who gives Pedivere his penance: "make ye as good skyffte as ye can, ye shall bere this lady with you on horsebak unto the Pope of Rome, and of hym resseyve youre penaunce for your foule dedis. And ye shall nevir reste one nyght thereas ye do another, and ye go to ony bedde the dede body shall lye with you" (286.7-12). The penance is straightforward and unmitigated. The wife's body is not gutted and covered with herbs and ointments to ease the knight's senses as it is in the Vulgate; instead, the knight must bear the body as is and sleep beside it until he completes his long pilgrimage. Pedivere makes it to Rome, where the Pope himself has his wife buried before telling him to return to the queen. "And after thys knyght sir Pedyvere fell to grete goodnesse and was an holy man and an hermyte" (286.17-18). Malory adds another dimension to the plot. Rather than merely undergoing a penance, an outward recompense for the murder of his wife, the fallen knight is redeemed; he attains holiness, a holiness oddly reminiscent of that which Lancelot himself attains following the end of the Round Table.

The Pedivere episode is aptly placed in the *Morte* as the last of Lancelot's travails before his return to Camelot. Unlike the episodes preceding it, it illustrates the far-reaching consequences of Lancelot's mercy. The Vulgate version also depicts Lancelot as showing restraint, but this seems to serve his own image, specifically in the eyes of the queen, and little else; it is small wonder, then, that the Prose *Lancelot* is unconcerned with Pedivere's life following his obedience of the queen's penance. Malory, on the other hand, is interested in what Lancelot's restraint means not for his own reputation but for the fate of the knights he encounters. Just as Lancelot's

understanding and humility gave Sir Belleus the opportunity to join him as a member of the Round Table, they have also given Peverere the chance for not only social but also spiritual redemption.

VII. Return to Camelot

Malory significantly condenses the Vulgate narrative of Lancelot's return to Camelot. Although the conclusion of the tale is a scene of celebration and good cheer, it presents an ill omen of what is to come and a strange merging of the superficial emphasis on jousting and the very real threat of knights who use their strength and arms to take advantage of those who cannot defend themselves. Lancelot's fellow knights are impressed by and gladly congratulate his adventures and victories, including those whom he defeated while disguised as Sir Kay:

And whan Gawayne, sir Uwayne, sir Sagramoure, and sir Ector de Mares sye sir Launcelot in Kayes armour, than they wyste well that hit was he that smote hem downe all wyth one spere. Than there was lawghyng and smylyng amonge them, and ever now and now com all the knyghtes home that were presoners with sir Terquyn, and they all honoured sir Launcelot. (286.21-27)

This is a happy scene but also an oddly unsettling one. On the one hand, there are the knights of the Round Table who laugh off their embarrassment upon realizing that it was Lancelot, not Kay, who defeated them on horseback. On the other hand, there are the knights who have known real cruelty and injustice, those who were unhorsed, bound, stripped, beaten, and imprisoned by Sir Tarquin, and who watched many other knights die at his hands. Malory's juxtaposition of these two groups is a sad foreshadowing of what is to come in the court of Arthur: that interpersonal competition and feuds will take precedence over and even fuel the brutality endured by Tarquin's prisoners.

Moreover, that these knights honor Lancelot marks an important shift: it is the knights of the Round Table, no longer Arthur alone, who are expected to mete out justice, and as a result new popularities, loyalties, and conflicts will arise. For Lancelot, who has proven generally able to handle temper his emotions in battle, this is not expected to be an issue. However, the tale illustrates that for every Lancelot, there are ten other knights who use brute force and trickery to achieve selfish ends. Furthermore, it is Lancelot's greatness and strength as a knight and not so much his virtue that is extolled:

Whan sir Gaherys herde h[e]m speke, he sayde, "I sawe all the batayle from the begynnyng to the endyng," and there he tolde kynge Arthure all how hit was and how sir Terquyn was the strongest knyght that ever he saw excep[t]e sir Launcelot; and there were many knyghtes bare hym recorde, three score. Than sir Kay tolde the kynge how sir Launcelot rescowed hym whan he sholde have bene slayne, and how "he made the three knyghtes yelde hem to me and nat to hym". (And there they were all three and bare recorde). "And by Jesu," seyde sir Kay, "sir Launcelot toke my harneyse and leffte me his, and I rode in Goddys pece and no man wolde have ado with me." (286.28-287.3)

Strength, not honor, is emphasized here. Lancelot is the focus of a cult of prowess, despite the many instances we have seen in which he has behaved with great courtesy and restraint. No one at court realizes this so early, but Lancelot is already being put in a position in which he will be set against Arthur in both the fidelity of his wife and the loyalty of his knights. Likewise, the knights are already showing that they value one another's strength and worship above all. This, coupled with the importance of kin and vengeance, is what will make a rift between Gawain and Lancelot in the final book.

There are a couple of shining moments, though, in this ending: the appearance of the now-healed Sir Meliot de Logres and the knighting of Sir Belleus. Sir Belleus is the only knight mentioned in this last section (besides Tarquin) with whom Lancelot has fought with an aim to kill, not unhorse. He is also, by virtue of his mistake, his courtesy, and the appeal of his lady, the only one of such knights to survive, let alone to be welcomed at Arthur's court. This, along with the healing of Sir Meliot of Logres, is the greatest testament to Lancelot's virtue that is offered in this section. It is worth noting that these knights were both, at the time of their healing, connected to the Round Table in some way. Sir Belleus was to be a member at the request of his lady, while Sir Meliot was already a member. With the exception of Pederere, the other knights Lancelot encountered were killed and were not otherwise brought to justice.

Sir Thomas Malory's refashioning of the Arthurian romances offers new and complex questions regarding the right and just uses of knighthood. "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake" presents a variety of foes whom Lancelot must face, all with unique motivations. Although such enemies are an ideal means by which a knight such as Lancelot might prove his mettle and gain worship, they also raise the question of what it means to be a knight and how to use the power that comes with knighthood for good. Malory himself was certainly concerned with and made an attempt at illustrating an answer to that question, which is why he takes pains to alter the tales borrowed from the Vulgate in order to present knighthood in what he envisions as its best uses. In both the Prose *Lancelot* and Malory's tale, Lancelot encounters knights who abuse their power, whether out of vengeance or sheer brutality, in a way that demands an immediate response. The Lancelot of the French source does respond, but does so in a rash and even egocentric way, making his fights out to be deeply personal. By Malory's reckoning, it seems, Lancelot must be able to mete out justice with a controlled and just mind, lest he fall into the trap of hot-headedness as

exemplified by Sir Balin. Lancelot's character is made all the richer and more complex with this pressure. Furthermore, Malory's tale is a fitting prelude to the rest of the *Morte* as it demonstrates that Arthur's new kingdom is by no means internally stable or centralized. Outside of the Round Table, there is an entire loose vassalage of knights who lurk in the wilds, preying on those whom they either find vulnerable or expect retribution for a perceived wrong. Lancelot generally deals with these knights justly, although, as described above, there are instances in which he loses control and must redeem himself and his worship. In the end, he has killed three fallen knights, converted one to monasticism (if that conversion can be attributed to him and not to Guinevere), and healed two more. We are given plenty of evidence that Lancelot can handle fallen knights and save those who are or have the potential to be virtuous. The real conflict will emerge later in the *Morte*, when knights within the Round Table begin to abuse their power.

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