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COOPER (Shawn Phillip), « Guilt, shame, and truth in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* »

RÉSUMÉ – Lire Malory avec une compréhension moderne de ce qui constitue la "vérité" risque d'obscurcir l'usage changeant de la notion au quinzième siècle. La prise en compte de différents concepts divergents de "vérité" permet d'expliquer les actions du personnage de Lancelot en fonction de sa conception de son honneur personnel.

MOTS-CLÉS – Malory, Roi Arthur, matière de Bretagne, vérité, faits, justice, Lancelot, *Le Morte Darthur*, moyen anglais, Angleterre, histoire, droit

COOPER (Shawn Phillip), « Culpabilité, honte et vérité dans *Le Morte Darthur* de Malory »

ABSTRACT – Reading Malory with a modern understanding of what constitutes 'truth' risks obscuring the developing usage of the fifteenth-century. Attending to competing notions of 'truth' offers readings of Launcelot's character that are more consistent with his personal honour.

KEYWORDS – Malory, King Arthur, matter of Britain, truth, facts, justice, Launcelot, *Le Morte Darthur*, middle english, England, history, law

## GUILT, SHAME, AND TRUTH IN MALORY'S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

In the closing episodes of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, two of King Arthur's nephews, Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred, lay a plot to entrap the adulterous Sir Launcelot and Queen Gwenyvere *in flagrante delicto*. The two 'unhappy knyghtis' plan to lie in wait in the castle of Carlyle whilst the king goes on an over-night hunting excursion, certain that Launcelot will not accompany Arthur: after all, Launcelot would doubtless prefer instead a tryst with the queen, thereby providing Aggravayne and Mordred an opportunity to arrest him and 'preve hit that he is a traytoure'.<sup>1</sup> Their other brothers, Gawayne, Gareth, and Gaherys, are disgusted by the plan and refuse even to listen to it, with Gawayne exclaiming, 'Now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled.'<sup>2</sup> Gawayne's words will indeed prove prophetic, but Arthur reluctantly listens to Aggravayne's plan and replies with a two-fold warning. First, he reminds Aggravayne and Mordred of the standard of evidence that must be met if they are to succeed in their charges. Then, he reminds them of the danger that they will personally face both in the act of apprehension itself, and in the trial by combat that will follow if they emerge with no evidence:

I wolde be lothe to begyn suche a thyng but I myght have prevys of hit, for Sir Launcelot ys an hardy knyght, and all ye know that he ys the beste knyght amonge us all, and but if he be takyn with the dede he woll fyght with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I know no knyght that ys able to macch hym.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, edited by P. J. C. Field, Arthurian Studies 80, 2 vols (Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 2013), volume 1, pp. 870 & 872. This and all subsequent citations are to volume 1 alone.

2 Malory, p. 872.

3 *Ibid.*

In his warning, Arthur alludes to two previous circumstances in which Gwenyvere has been accused of treason: murder in the Poisoned Apple episode (in which she was innocent); and adultery, in the Knight of the Cart episode (in which she was guilty). In both cases, no ‘prevys’ (proofs; hard evidence) were offered to the court, and the charges were resolved in trial by combat with Launcelot serving victoriously as Gwenyvere’s champion, defeating Sir Mador de la Porte in the first case and slaying the pathetic Sir Mellyagaunte in the second. There are other reasons why these two episodes should give Aggravayne and Mordred pause: in the Poisoned Apple episode, Launcelot swore to Arthur ‘ever to be in youre quarell and in my ladyes the quenys quarell to do batayle’.<sup>4</sup> In the Knight of the Cart episode, Mellyagaunte’s pleas for mercy went unheeded, and Launcelot defeated him despite fighting whilst partially unarmoured and with one arm tied to his side. Moreover, after Launcelot’s victory, ‘the kynge and quene made more of Sir Launcelot, and more was he cherysshed than ever he was aforehande.’<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Aggravayne and Mordred may expect no mercy from the dauntless Sir Launcelot if they fail to produce the necessary hard evidence; and, their deaths in judicial combat will only further add to Launcelot’s prestige amongst the court and with the king and queen. Malory centres attention on Arthur’s feelings when he writes that ‘the kynge was full lothe that such a noyse should come uppon Sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kyng had a demyng of hit, but he wold not here thereoff, for Sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge lovede hym passyngly well’.<sup>6</sup>

Here and throughout this episode, Malory indicates that Aggravayne’s plan to publicly uncover Launcelot’s treason is, itself, treasonous because it is motivated by jealousy, not a desire for justice, and because it will catastrophically disrupt the realm – indeed, this is the reason for Gawayne’s aforementioned refusal to participate. Malory’s narration describes how ‘Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred had ever a prevy hate unto the quene, Dame Gwenyvere, and to Sir Launcelot; and dayly and nyghtly they ever wacched uppon Sir Launcelot.’<sup>7</sup> At the end of the Sir

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4 Malory, p. 802.

5 Malory, p. 860.

6 Malory, p. 872.

7 Malory, p. 870.

Urry episode, Malory notes that 'every nyght and day Sir Aggravayne, Sir Gawaynes brother, awayted Quene Gwenyvere and Sir Launcelot to put hem bothe to a rebuke and a shame.'<sup>8</sup> And, foreshadowing the death of Arthur, Malory declares, in his postscript to the Sir Urry episode, 'Here I go unto the Morte Arthur, and that caused Sir Aggravayne.'<sup>9</sup> Malory's narration leaves out any possibility of doubt in the assigning of blame for the fall of Camelot: Mordred and Aggravayne are clearly the parties responsible for the downfall of the kingdom.

In the event, neither Gawayne nor Arthur are able to prevail upon Aggravayne and Mordred. Arthur gives them a parting warning that Launcelot is a dangerous adversary; they, for their part, resolve to take a further twelve knights with them. Yet even the best-laid plans gang aft agley. Despite being warned of danger by Sir Bors, Launcelot visits the queen, secreting himself in her locked room; when the moment of arrest comes, the unarmoured Launcelot contrives to escape, re-armouring himself and killing all of his accusers (including two of Gawayne's sons, Sir Florens and Sir Lovell) excepting only Mordred, who is wounded in the melee.

The modern reader might well bracket the selfish motivations of the unhappy knights whilst pointing to Launcelot's treason with Gwenyvere as the cause of the kingdom's ruin. To do so is to reverse the understanding that it is Aggravayne and Mordred who provide the actual cause-in-fact of the disaster to come. Moreover, Launcelot's responsibility for the disaster that follows is downplayed by the narrative, even as he becomes the central character of the tale, surrounded by loyal friends who have cast their lot in with him rather than with King Arthur. Initially, following Launcelot's escape from Aggravayne and Mordred, Gawayne counsels Arthur to pursue a policy of mercy with Gwenyvere and rapprochement with Launcelot. After all, Launcelot might have been summoned to the queen's chamber for perfectly innocent reasons; and, in any case, Launcelot will 'make hit good uppon any knyght lyvyng that woll put uppon hym vylany or shame, and to lyke wyse he woll make good for my lady the quene.'<sup>10</sup> Gawayne has lost a brother and two sons in the fracas, so his counsel for peace

8 Malory, p. 868.

9 Malory, p. 869.

10 Malory, p. 883.

should be all the more persuasive.<sup>11</sup> Arthur, however, has committed himself unswervingly to the law (invented by Malory for the purpose of the story) which sees Gwenyvere charged with treason and ensures Launcelot's attempt to rescue her. C. David Benson argues that Arthur's sudden commitment to the letter of the law originates in his devotion to knightly honour, because the facially incriminating circumstances *are* the circumstances in whole: 'Arthur cannot accept that appearances may be deceiving because honour is all about appearance.'<sup>12</sup> In such a culture, the appearance of impropriety between Launcelot and Gwenyvere is indisputable evidence of impropriety between Launcelot and Gwenyvere. Likewise, Benson argues that Launcelot's next course of action is equally necessitated by honour, observing that 'Because Launcelot is responsible for the queen's predicament, he would be publicly shamed if he did not act.'<sup>13</sup>

In this, Benson seems to follow Mark Lambert's argument that Malory imagines a culture of honour and shame. But Benson goes further, averring that 'The three main heroes of the ending – Arthur, Lancelot, and Gawain – have no choice in what they do if they would remain honourable.'<sup>14</sup> Yet throughout the *Morte*, the nature of the relationship between Launcelot and Gwenyvere is an open secret in the court; even Arthur himself is aware of it. Should the argument for honour-driven necessity hold, then the relationship should have been challenged in law long before. That it was not – and that matters are only finally brought to a head by two indisputably villainous characters – suggests that more is at issue than Arthur simply accepting superficially incriminating circumstances as if they were hard evidence of actual guilt in law. After all, as Ryan Muckerheide has noted, 'Arthur routinely avoids (or tries to avoid) the application of the law when the outcome would

11 Gawayne had warned his brothers and sons about the fate that might befall them should they confront Launcelot in combat, even in grossly unfair numbers and circumstances, and so their defeat is neither unexpected nor unjust. Robert L. Kelly argues that Gawayne believes Launcelot acted in self-defence. See Robert L. Kelly, 'Malory and the Common Law: *Hasty judgement* in the "Tale of the Death of King Arthur"' in *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s., no. 22, Diversity (1995), 112.

12 C. David Benson, 'The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*', in *A Companion to Malory*, edited by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge, U. K.: D. S. Brewer, 1996), p. 231.

13 Benson, p. 231.

14 *Ibid.*

be detrimental to the larger fellowship.<sup>15</sup> Even beyond strictly legal considerations, there are many other places in the text the king shows himself capable of looking beyond appearances to consider long-term implications for the court and the polity, such as at the outset of the Grail quest: on the face of it, the most obviously and uncomplicatedly blest adventure, yet nevertheless the one which most threatens (and causes) serious damage to the stability of the Round Table.

Advocating for the potential innocence of Launcelot and Gwenvyvere, Gawayne does not rely purely upon appeals to the benefit of the doubt and to pragmatic concerns for the long-term stability of the court. Robert L. Kelly observes that there are legal considerations at issue, as well, writing that 'Of central importance is the issue of Arthur's judicial haste.'<sup>16</sup> He thus refers to Malory's explanation that 'the law was such in tho dayes whatsomevere they were, of what astate or degré, if they were founden gyilty of treson there shuld be none other remedy but deth, and othir the menour other the takynge wyth the dede shulde be causer of theire hasty jougement.'<sup>17</sup> In the passage immediately following this explanation, Gawayne seems to raise the matter when he addresses King Arthur, saying, 'I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty'.<sup>18</sup> Here, Malory appears to equivocate on *hasty*, but Kelly notes that, in Malory's explanation of the law, the stock phrase 'hasty jougement' means 'summary sentencing.'<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Kelly explains the two types of circumstance that lead to summary sentencing: 'menour' (i.e. *main-our*), meaning overwhelming circumstantial evidence of a deed; and 'the takynge wyth the dede', meaning to be caught in the commission of the criminal act.<sup>20</sup> But this is not to suggest that Arthur's judicial conduct is unproblematic, as Kelly observes when he notes that 'a king should not assume jurisdiction over anyone accused of lese-majesty against himself, a person accused of treason should not be condemned without a trial by her peers, and "haste" in judicial proceedings is not wise.'<sup>21</sup> Once these

15 Ryan Muckerheide, 'The English Law of Treason in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*' in *Arthuriana* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2010), p. 68.

16 Kelly, p. 112.

17 Malory, p. 882.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Kelly, p. 116.

20 Kelly, pp. 116–17.

21 Kelly, p. 119.

factors are added to Gawayne's analytical defence of Gwenyvere, Kelly rightly concludes that 'Malory's contemporaries are likely to have found Gawain's argument against the queen's sentence more compelling of moral assent than the narrator's recitation of the Arthurian law as the basis for her death sentence'.<sup>22</sup> In these ways, Malory creates the novelty of an Arthurian law in order to provide a just origin for Arthur's conduct – conduct which is necessary for the Arthurian narrative plot that has been taken from his sources – whilst at the same time he undercuts the potency of that explanation as a means of compelling his readers' sympathies. Hence Malory's audience might intellectually understand Arthur's conduct within the fictional context of Arthurian jurisprudence, but their emotional and moral allegiances will lie with Gwenyvere and Launcelot.

The queen is summarily sentenced to immolation, despite Gawayne's legal appeals to Arthur and his insistence that 'my lady your quene ys to you both good and trew'.<sup>23</sup> Launcelot duly arrives in order to rescue her, charging into the press of knights who surround the place of justice. There, inadvertently and without his knowledge, 'in thys russhynge and hurlynge, as Sir Launcelot thrange here and there, hit misfortuned hym to sle Sir Gaherys and Sir Gareth', both unarmed having been commanded by Arthur, against their will, to be present.<sup>24</sup> These events do not add to the stability of the realm. Gawayne's fears about the downfall of the Round Table seem to have been validated; but he is himself implicated as a cause of the catastrophe. So incensed is he at the death of his brothers that he swears to pursue Launcelot until one slays the other, thereby performing perhaps the most astonishing *volte-face* to be found in the entirety of the *Morte*. Arthur besieges Launcelot at Joyous Garde in France and the Round Table fractures into two warring factions. Eventually, the strife in Arthur's once-united court becomes so notorious that the Pope himself intercedes and gives instruction that Arthur should retake his wife and meet with Launcelot.

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22 Kelly, p. 122.

23 Malory, p. 883.

24 Malory, pp. 884–85.



## 'LYARS VE HAVE LYSTENED'

When Launcelot obediently returns with Gwenyvere as commanded, he delivers a momentous speech in his defence which, Malory narratively comments, he 'seyde full knyghtly':

'My moste redouted kynge, ye shall undirstonde, by the Popis commaundemente and youre I have brought to you my lady the quene, as ryght requyryth. And if there be ony knyght, of what degré that ever he be off, except your person, that woll sey or dare say but that she ys trew and clene to you, I here myselff, Sir Launcelot du Lake, woll make hit good upon hys body that she ys a trew lady unto you.

'But sir, lyars ye have lystened, and that hath caused grete debate betwyxte you and me. For tyme hath bene, my lord Arthur, that ye were gretely pleased with me whan I ded batayle for my lady youre quene; and full well ye know, my moste noble kynge, that she hathe be put to grete wronge of thys tyme. And sythyn hyt pleased you at many tymys that I shulde feyght for her, therefore mesemyth, my good lorde, I had more cause to rescow her from the fyer whan she sholde have ben brente for my sake.

'For they that tolde you tho talys were lyars, and so hit felle upon them: for by lyklyhode, had nat the myght of God bene with me, I myght never have endured with fourtene knyghts, and they armed and afore purposed, and I unarmed and nat purposed. For I was sente for unto my lady youre quyne, I wote nat for what cause, but I was not so sone within the chambir dore but anone Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred called me traytoure and false regrayed knyght.'

'Be my fayth, they called the ryght!' seyde Sir Gawayne.

'My lorde Sir Gawayne,' seyde Sir Launcelot, 'in their quarell they preved nat hemselff the beste, nother in the ryght.'<sup>25</sup>

Here, Gawayne, the former legal defender of Gwenyvere, has become Launcelot's most vocal accuser, and seems thereby to have become Gwenyvere's accuser as well. Yet the text can still be read ambiguously: Although Launcelot is speaking about Aggravayne and Mordred's shouted accusations of treacherous adultery, Gawayne's confirmation that Launcelot is a 'traytoure and false regrayed knyght' might not refer to adultery with the queen at all. Instead, Gawayne might be laying at Launcelot's feet hitherto hidden failings evidenced by the slaying of the unarmed

25 Malory, pp. 898–99.

Gaherys and Gareth – deaths which, unlike Launcelot's previous combat with Round Table knights, cannot be explained in terms of self-defence. And, it is unlikely that Gawayne's attitude has so totally changed simply because Launcelot prevented Arthur carrying out an execution to which Gawayne refused to be a party in any least way. Finally, there is the matter of Gawayne attesting to Gwenyvere's faithfulness: she has had no opportunity to see Launcelot in the interim, so either Gawayne was mistaken in defending her as 'both good and trew', or his dire estimation of Launcelot's character is due to something other than adultery.

Beverly Kennedy also believes that Gawayne 'has vowed to kill Lancelot, not because he believes him to be an adulterer, but because in rescuing the queen Lancelot killed his unarmed brothers, Gareth and Gaheris.'<sup>26</sup> Moreover, she posits that Launcelot and the Gwenyvere are not guilty of adultery except in the case of the Knight of the Cart episode, after which Launcelot truly repents and again earns divine grace as seen by his miraculous healing of Sir Urry.<sup>27</sup> She argues that 'Mordred and Agravaire are unable to offer Gawain any proof of adultery other than the private strolls which he has also observed,' and that, in narrating Launcelot's conduct in the queen's chamber on the night of the attempted entrapment, Malory's studied ambiguity is evidence of an author who desires 'to suggest Lancelot's innocence on this occasion' as a 'real possibility and, in his view, the more likely of the two.'<sup>28</sup>

However, even if the fictional court only possesses evidence of a quasi-circumstantial nature at this point in the text, the reality of Launcelot's adulterous involvement with the queen is essentially known to the reader. In the final episode before the attempted arrest of Launcelot, Malory is careful to avoid explicitly confirming any form of sexual liaison, writing that 'whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make no mencion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes'.<sup>29</sup> Thus the reader is deprived of indisputable narratorial evidence in this particular case. An adulterous inclination (although still somewhat ambiguous) is evident from the very beginning: a narratorial comment at the beginning of 'The Wedding of King Arthur' episode

26 Beverly Kennedy, 'Adultery in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*' in *Arthuriana* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1997), p. 84.

27 Kennedy, pp. 80–81.

28 Kennedy, pp. 77 & 80.

29 Malory, p. 874.

explains that 'Marlyon warned the king covertly that Gwennyvere was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir and sche hym agayne'.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, there are ambiguities; but the fact of adultery is established, natheless, because Malory is less cagey elsewhere in the *Morte*. Considering the possibility of adultery between Launcelot and Gwennyvere more generally, there are numerous details both to suggest and to confirm their guilt. In the final episode, Malory's narration comments that 'the kynge had a demyng of hit' (the adulterous relationship) – that is, Arthur had guessed at or suspected it.<sup>31</sup> And indeed, with regard to the episode of the Knight of the Cart, even Kennedy does not dispute the fact of adultery: when Launcelot breaks into Gwennyvere's bedchamber-prison, cutting his hand in the process, Malory reports that 'Sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurte honde, but toke hys pleasaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawnyng of the day; for wyt you well he slept nat'.<sup>32</sup> Lest the explicit confirmation thus given leave any lingering doubt as to whether there was adultery-in-fact, the state of the bedsheets – 'where she lay, and all the hede-sheete, pylow, and over-shyte was all bebled of the bloode of Sir Launcelot' – further indicates that the lovers were not resting in chaste stillness.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, after his departure, 'the quene lay longe in her bed in the mornynge'.<sup>34</sup>

Modern readers generally accept the fact of Launcelot and Gwennyvere's adultery with scarcely a second thought. Kennedy acknowledges as much, although she argues that it is because 'the judgment of twentieth-century readers has been deeply influenced by Freudian psychology as well as by Victorian puritanism'.<sup>35</sup> However, I suggest that modern readers are aware, as Malory was, of the story of Launcelot and Gwennyvere in the larger Arthurian mythos – a mythos which now includes modern adaptations that by and large concur with Malory's contemporary sources. In the French tradition, the sexual nature of Launcelot and Gwennyvere's relationship is presented almost as if unremarkable in any way – such liaisons are *de liaison* in the courtly *romans*. And, again, to

30 Malory, p. 76.

31 Malory, p. 872.

32 Malory, p. 852.

33 Malory, p. 853.

34 Malory, p. 852.

35 Kennedy, p. 78.

stress the point, Gwenyvere has *not* been true to Arthur. On at least one occasion, she *has* committed adultery with Launcelot; and this is why Launcelot's grand speech never explicitly makes the case for her innocence. Instead, he simply promises to fight, and beat, anyone who claims otherwise; to modern sensibilities, this is not a denial of fact! Therefore, confirmed in Launcelot's guilt, a reader of the *Morte* might well conclude that not only is Launcelot lying to his king (with whom he is meeting at the behest of the Pope), but that if he were to swear to it – as he says he will do should the need arise – he would be still further perjuring himself. Thus the problem arises: how to triangulate (1) the implicit and explicit claims of Launcelot's speech, (2) the fact of his impropriety with the queen, and (3) his other conduct both before, during, and after – conduct which is in all other respects irreproachably honourable and chivalric. In short, how can this bald-faced-lying Launcelot be the same one represented elsewhere in the *Morte*?

### SHAME VERSUS GUILT

Mark Lambert addresses Launcelot's apparent transformation from being Arthur's best knight to being a murderous and unrepentant liar by arguing that 'Lancelot is acting within a shame system rather than a guilt system,' in which the crucial distinction is not whether Launcelot is objectively *guilty* (in the modern sense), but whether he can be *shamed* by someone *proving* the charge through the means available for resolving disputes in the Arthurian court: trial by combat. Lambert writes that,

What matters for Lancelot here is not the fact of his guilt or innocence of the adultery and his personal awareness of that fact, but the public recognition of the charge, the public machinery for making the charge good, and the way the public accusation and public 'making good' affect his reputation and the queen's. [...] The important thing is not one's own knowledge of what one has done (the inner life is not very significant in Malory), but public recognition of one's actions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 178–79.

The essential point is that this understanding of reality is not confined solely to the literary world of the *Morte*: Lambert writes that 'It is Malory himself, not just his characters, for whom honor and shame are more real than innocence and guilt'.<sup>37</sup> Malory wrote this section of the *Morte* whilst held in prison – probably on the basis of limited or circumstantial evidence, for he was never charged or brought to trial.<sup>38</sup> As such, what matters for both Launcelot and for Malory is not what has actually *happened* objectively, but rather what can be *demonstrated* to be the case. Moreover, the evidence that Launcelot gives for his innocence has been customarily acceptable in Arthur's court: Launcelot fought for the queen's honour in the past, and his victory, acceded to by God, demonstrated her innocence. Consequently, the same standard of *prouesse* should be acceptable demonstration of his being in the right when he defeats his would-be-accusers in the final episode, especially considering the adverse odds (fourteen to one!) against which he fought.

Elsewhere in the *Morte*, this worldview seems to be confirmed when Launcelot, a knight who is secretly (or not so secretly) morally reprobate, nevertheless has the quality of his knighthood divinely confirmed. After a hundred and ten knights try and fail to heal Sir Urry of accursed wounds that only the best knight of the world might cure, Sir Launcelot demurs. Only when Arthur commands him, and the other knights beg him, does he make his own essay. At once, the wounds are healed, one by one, leaving Sir Urry whole and Launcelot weeping 'as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn'.<sup>39</sup> Kennedy believes that Launcelot's reluctance is a sign of his humility.<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, perhaps Launcelot at first demurred because he feared that this supernatural test, coming after the adultery in the Knight of the Cart episode, might unequivocally demonstrate that his moral turpitude meant he was not the best knight in the world. According to such a reading, Launcelot weeps because of the shame of his own self-knowledge, and not because he has come to understand the shattering, awesome of the depth of divine forgiveness that is extended even to the most reprobate and undeserving.

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37 Lambert, p. 179.

38 P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, Arthurian Studies 29 (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 131.

39 Malory, p. 868.

40 Kennedy, p. 80.

In the very next (and last) episode, Launcelot has his final liaison with Gwenyvere, and follows it with a vehement defence of himself and of the queen. Given his care-free, cavalier attitude, it seems incongruous to the point of absurdity to conclude that Launcelot was racked by secret guilt in the Sir Urry episode which immediately precedes these events. Rather, it seems that in conflict with Mellyagaunce and elsewhere, Launcelot is capable of *making* truth himself, through the exertion of his martial skill – his prowess. Launcelot heals Sir Urry, thereby *demonstrating* that he is the best knight in the world: he has made it so with his own hands. But, if we adopt Lambert’s vision of shame rather than guilt being the essential quality for Launcelot, we find that chivalric virtue may, by degrees, replace objective justice with force – that, at the very bottom, under the courtly speech and the valiant conduct, might *quite literally* makes right.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRUTH

Although understanding Launcelot’s speech in the light of Mark Lambert’s explanation of a shame system maps well with regard to *Launcelot*, applying his approach to the rest of *Le Morte Darthur*’s characters may seem at first to be less persuasive. Most obviously, there are numerous characters who must rely upon the prowess of others in order to establish truth. Amongst these are female characters such as Gwenyvere, although other female characters push back against this conclusion: the Fair Maid of Ascolat is able to create and establish truth with her own body and her tragic death. In addition, Gawayne’s rejoinder to Launcelot’s defence speech, ‘Be my fayth, they called the ryght!’, operates as a refutation of shame as the essential truth value, and by a knight who possesses almost as much prowess as Launcelot.

Instead of relying upon Lambert’s original argument as the terminus in reading Launcelot’s speech, it should be seen as an essential step in the development of an alternative: to understand Malory’s Arthurian court as depicting the contemporaneous, real-world, historical development of the definition of ‘truth’. Richard Firth Green, in *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, describes this development in exceptional

detail. Green describes the development of the Middle English word *troutbe*, and poses a question with obvious relevance to Launcelot's speech and as to the 'fact' of the adultery, as understood by modern readers:

Why should a word that earlier meant something like 'integrity' or 'dependability' have begun to take on its modern sense of 'conformity to fact' in the late fourteenth century, while at the same time its antonym, *treason*, was shifting its semantic focus from personal betrayal to a crime against the state?<sup>41</sup>

This etymological development was still under way during Malory's lifetime. We should understand the development of the word *troutbe* as having a bearing upon the way that fifteenth-century Englishmen understood truth (in the epistemological sense), in much the same way that the developing definitions of words and connotations in our own lifetimes have led to discursive, and indeed political, conflict.

An understanding of truth grounded in subjective qualities such as 'integrity' and 'dependability' will eventually be at odds with one grounded in an objective 'conformity to fact', and this is indeed the very conflict on display during Launcelot's speech, for Launcelot continually references both his dependability (describing some of the many times that he has served the king and queen), and his integrity (particularly referencing his loyalty to Arthur and subservience to the Church). But, in both this speech, and in an earlier speech with similar content, Gawayne continually interjects, interrupting Launcelot's description of himself as a True Knight with inconvenient facts such as the slaying of Gareth and Gaherys. Gawayne's fixation upon the reality of Launcelot's deeds is in contrast to Launcelot's subjective description of his own character.

Gawayne, then, seems to represent the developing definition of truth as 'conformity to fact'. But the text suggests that there are shortcomings to such a view. When Arthur goes abroad to besiege Launcelot at Joyous Garde, objective facts do at last bear out the truth of Launcelot's earlier, subjective claim that his accusers are liars ('But sir, lyars ye have lystened'), for it is at that time that Mordred forges documents proclaiming Arthur's death. Launcelot is thus proved right about his accusers, they *are* liars, and his nonlinear, more subjective model of truth is more readily capable of ascertaining that reality than is Gawayne's.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. xiv.

In a reading of the text which incorporates this etymological and epistemological development of ‘truth’, Launcelot’s speech does not hinge upon his desire to avoid ‘shame’. Instead, his integrity and prowess are the proofs of his defence of Gwenyvere and his claims about her unimpeachable conduct. Launcelot is not concerned with trying to avoid shame because, according to his understanding of truth, *he is right in a larger and more important sense*: and, he knows (in the present) that he is right because he is confident that he will not be beaten (in the future) in single combat. This may seem perplexing to modern readers, because it seems to invert the order of cause and effect, but – as with Mordred’s forgeries – Launcelot’s epistemology has advantages beyond a strictly linear, cause-and-effect understanding of what is true and false. As Kevin Grimm observed as in a paper given at the International Congress of Medieval Studies in 2021, Mordred is noble ‘only in the limited, purely martial sense of the word... Lacking in worship, Mordred seeks first only to disrupt the court, and later only to retain his political power.’<sup>42</sup> Launcelot apprehends this reality of Mordred’s character and reveals it in his speech, in which he asserts that he is willing to ‘make hit good uppon hys body’, as indeed he attempted to do on the night of his tryst with Gwenyvere, before Mordred ‘fled with all hys myght’.<sup>43</sup>

Launcelot is willing to draw in ‘facts’ to support his claims, insofar as those facts are revealing of the integrity of actors, which is the essential *truth*. For example, Launcelot observes that he must have had the ‘myght of God’ on his side in his battle against the conspirators; and, consequently, with God on his side, he must be *in the right*. And here, it may be useful to observe that Launcelot is careful never explicitly to deny that he has had an adulterous liaison: instead he observes that his accusers are liars (as indeed they are, more generally), and that he will defeat anyone who accuses the queen (as he has done in the past). Mere objective facts do not matter to Launcelot; they are simply what *happen* to be the case – almost coincidental and open to manipulation or obfuscation. God (and, by extent, righteousness) on the other hand, is decisive and superlative.

When established integrity and dependability are insufficient, appeal to God is indeed possible – via combat, before witnesses, in which one

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42 Kevin Grimm, ‘Malory Our Contemporary’, 56<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Medieval Studies, 10 May 2021.

43 Malory, p. 877.



knight is incontrovertibly defeated and equally incontrovertibly in the wrong. The text continually supports this reading: on the merits, it seems that Gawayne should defeat Launcelot in single combat during the Siege of Benwick. Launcelot has had an adulterous liaison with the queen; he has slain Gawayne's brothers, the innocent Gareth and Gaherys along with the accuser Aggravayne; he has lied about that liaison before the king and the rest of the court. But it is Launcelot who repeatedly defeats Gawayne in single combat, the narrative continually justifying Launcelot's position. Moreover, in terms of the larger plot structure, it is only acceptance of *Launcelot's* claims that would keep the kingdom together: Gawayne's desire for vengeance leads to the Siege of Benwick. Left behind as regent, Mordred usurps the throne, the Round Table fractures into still further warring factions, and Arthur is mortally wounded in battle against Mordred. Hence, Gawayne's insistence upon truth as 'conformity to fact' makes Launcelot's guilt – and so the destruction of the kingdom – inescapable. It is Launcelot's perspective that extends beyond the present, and offers the possibility of political salvation. I suggest that, in a larger sense, this is revealing of what I have elsewhere argued: that Malory's underlying sympathies are with a former order of things that, by the fifteenth century, had passed away: a world of militaristic, rather than courtly, chivalry; and, a broader and less legalistic understanding of what constituted truth.

The interpretations of Launcelot's speech covered here may (to varying degrees) seem almost to refute one another even as they each illuminate different aspects of the text. But, whether Launcelot's speech reveals the moral economy of a noble man driven to absolutest extremity, evidence of a chivalric culture of shame, or the developing semantic definition of truth, it is clear that his speech is a vital moment in the *Morte* for the thoughtful student of Malory, chivalry, and fifteenth-century history – and, indeed, for our own time as we, too, grapple with what constitutes the nature of 'truth'.

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