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CHAPTER III

"THE TALE OF LANCELOT": PRELUDE TO ADULTERY

BY R. M. LUMIANSKY

The "Tale of Lancelot" is the shortest of the eight main divisions of Malory's book. It very clearly shows, however, a high degree of originality on Malory's part; and all the evidence points to the conclusion that this originality was motivated by Malory's conception of the function which this "Tale" would perform in Le Morte Darthur as a whole. As was demonstrated in the preceding chapter, a primary purpose of the "Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius" was to introduce Lancelot as the chief knight of the Round Table, with stress upon his, rather than Gawain's, military prowess. Most of the narrative progression in Tale III continues this demonstration of Lancelot's fighting ability; accordingly, we see his conquest of Belleus (259-60), his victory in the tournament for King Bagdemagus (262-63), his killing of Tarquyn (265-66), his conquest of Perys de Foreste Savage (270), his killing of the two giants (271), his rescue of Kay (273), his overcoming of Gawtere, Gylmere, and Raynolde (276), his defeat of the four knights of the Round Table (277-78), his saving the life of Melyot de Logrys (280), his escape from Phelot (284), and his overcoming Sir Pedyvere (285).

These exploits leave no doubt that Lancelot's courageous ac-
tivity in the war against Lucius truly foretold his coming distinction as a man at arms, and they fully establish Lancelot as the central hero of *Le Morte Darthur*. But the primary function which Malory—with his eye toward later developments in his book—assigned to Tale III is therein to offer the reader a view of the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship before the beginning of the adultery. A detailed examination of this view will be presented here after a brief look at the source relationship for Tale III.

Malory’s chief source here is the Agravain section of the Old French prose *Lancelot*.¹ His material up to the point at which Lancelot leaves King Bagdemagus is based upon successive episodes in this source; the narrative from that point through the liberation of Tintagel comes from a much later section of the *Lancelot*; and the remaining material, except for two episodes, is derived from two other sections of the *Lancelot*.² Of the two remaining episodes, the Phelot adventure has no known source, and the Melyot adventure parallels a section of the *Perlesvaus*. In preparing this “Tale,” Malory greatly reduced the bulk of his source materials. But, more importantly, we should note that he must have exerted considerable effort in the selection of such widely separated episodes to go into his “Tale.” Then he was able to weave these incidents into a tightly unified short narrative following the plot-line of Lancelot’s activities from the time he leaves Arthur’s court through his return. One important device he used to unify the various events within the “Tale” is represented by two of the five references therein to the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship.


At the beginning of the tale, Malory states that after their return from Rome Arthur and his knights held many "joustys and turnementes," in which various knights won honor; then he continues:

But in especiall hit was prevyd on sir Launcelot de Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes, and at no tyme was he ovrcom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntment. So this sir Launcelot encreased so mervaylously in worship and honoure; therefore he is the fyrste knyght that the Freynsh booke makyth mencion of aftir kynge Arthure com frome Rome. Wherefore quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladies dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her from the fyre thorow his noble chevalry. (250)

This introductory passage of nineteen lines does not match any section of Malory's source. It is obviously his device for connecting the "Tale of Lancelot" with the immediately preceding second large division of Le Morte Darthur, the "Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius." We have seen that in this "Tale" one of Malory's chief alterations of his source, the Middle English alliterative Morte Arthure, was to raise Lancelot from a knight who is mentioned casually but six times to the chief position among the knights of the Round Table. It is therefore readily understandable, after Lancelot's outstanding achievements in the second "Tale," for Malory, in the introductory passage for the third "Tale," to call Lancelot "the fyrste knyght." Vinaver strangely interprets this comment to mean that Lancelot was first in chronological mention; the context seems to make clear that Malory here means to point to Lance-


Works, 1398.
lot's having attained the first or pre-eminent place among
Arthur's knights. This reading is made certain by Malory's
next sentence: "Wherefore quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete
favour aboven all other knyghtis. . . ." Guenevere has this re-
gard for Lancelot because he is Arthur's outstanding knight, not
because he is chronologically the first mentioned.

Further, the implication is that Lancelot set out to prove
himself in the "straunge adventures" of the third "Tale" in or-
der to win the approval of Guenevere, whom he already loves.
Certainly, this desire for the Queen's approval seems present
when, in the course of his various adventures, he tells a number
of his conquered opponents to go to the court and "yelde you
unto quene Gwenyvere." Malory found in the prose Lancelot
the idea for this indication of the Lancelot-Guenevere rela-
tionship. In the French text Lancelot, after rescuing Kay, over-
comes four knights at the bridge—the incident from which
Malory develops Lancelot's fight with Gawtere, Gylmere, and
Raynolde (275-77); in the old French story, after conquering
the fourth knight, Lancelot says: "Dont te commanch ... que
tu le iour de pentecoste soies a la cort monseignor le roy artu et
illue te rendras a madame la royne de par keu le senescal et
cnteras ceste auenture par deuant tous ceuls de laiens" (V,
308). Malory has Lancelot apply this necessity of yielding to
Guenevere not only to the knights conquered at the bridge but
also to the three knights who attacked Kay (274). There is also
in the prose Lancelot the incident in which Lancelot forces the
knight who cuts off the damsel's head to report to the Queen
(V, 161-62, 167-68); from this incident, of course, Malory de-
veloped the Pedyvere episode (284-86). It would seem, then,
that Malory has used both the opening reference to the Lancelot-
Guenevere relationship and Lancelot's ordering a number of the
conquered knights to yield to the Queen at the concluding as-
sembley as a chief unifying device for his "Tale of Lancelot."
There are also in the tale three specific conversations, original with Malory, in which various characters refer to Lancelot's and Guenevere's interest in each other (257–58, 270–71, 281). The four queens inform Lancelot of their knowledge that he can love only Guenevere; he replies: "And as for my lady, dame Gwenyvere, were I at my lyberte as I was, I wolde prove hit on youres that she is the treueste lady unto hir lorde lyvnyge." We should note in passing that for this incident Malory so altered his source-passage as to have Morgan le Fay as the dominating character among the queens; this change fits with other appearances of Morgan in Malory's book (10, 429, 504–6, 557, 798). Later, the damsel who has led Lancelot to his successful adventures against Tarquyn and Perys tells Lancelot that she and many others regret the rumor that he loves Guenevere and can love no other lady; Lancelot puzzlingly replies that an adventurous knight such as he cannot be bothered with either a wife or paramours. Finally, in the Melyot episode, Hallewes the Sorceress tells Lancelot as he is leaving the Castel Perilous that she loves him, that she realizes no woman can have him alive except Guenevere, and that she (Hallewes) wishes to have his "body dede . . . dispyte of quene Gwenyvere." To this fearsome disclosure Lancelot simply replies: "Jesu preserve me frome youre subtyle crauftys!"

The total effect of these five indications of a relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere is, I think, easily grasped: Lancelot loves the Queen, and he orders the individuals he conquers to report to her in order to show her that he performs such feats for her sake; she, because of his knightly eminence, holds him "in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis," but she has as yet given him no indication that she will grant him her love;

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he therefore can maintain stoutly to the four queens that Guenevere is completely true to Arthur; he can feel justified in answering the damsel who led him to Tarquyn and Perys with the half-truth to the effect that he is more interested in adventures than in women; and he can refrain from meaningful comment about Guenevere to Hallewes.

Further, it is not particularly difficult to fit this total effect into Malory's handling of the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship throughout _Le Morte Darthur_. An intentional general pattern of progressive development for this adulterous relationship runs through the book as a whole, and this pattern should be regarded as a pivotal factor in the collapse of the Round Table. Before the "Tale of Lancelot," Arthur sees, loves, and decides to marry Guenevere; Merlin warns Arthur that Lancelot and Guenevere will love each other, but Arthur disregards this warning and weds her (39, 97-98). Also before the third "Tale," we have had one slight indication of Lancelot's love for Guenevere: he is "passynge wrothe" because Tristram is allowed to join Iseult in Cornwall instead of going to fight the Romans, whereas Lancelot must leave Guenevere and go to the wars with Arthur (195). But, after the "Tale of Lancelot," we have the development of the adulterous relationship and its catastrophic effects upon the characters involved and upon the whole society of the Round Table. Thus, within this large pattern, the function of the references in the third "Tale" to the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship is to show the two characters, in their own minds and in the minds of society at large, drawing more closely together in preparation for the adultery, which comes to be a matter of almost common knowledge by the time we reach the fifth "Tale," that of Tristram (425, 430). Further, coming developments in the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship are explicitly and importantly foreshadowed in the introductory passage for Tale III; "... and so he loved the quene agayne
above all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her from the fyre thorow his noble chevalry" (250). In the last two “Tales,” as final catastrophe approaches, Lancelot will save Guenevere on three occasions “from the fyre”: in the “Poisoned Apple,” in the “Knight of the Cart,” and in “Tale of the Death of Arthur.” That Malory had these three future instances in mind when he wrote the passage just quoted seems almost indisputable.

It is also noteworthy that in the “Tale of Lancelot” two of the five references to the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship are made by supernatural figures—Morgan le Fay and Hallewes—who thereby reinforce the effect of Merlin’s earlier prophecy to Arthur. Further, Malory’s careful attention to this problem is almost certainly to be observed in his alteration to Tintagel of the name for the castle held by the two giants whom Lancelot kills (272). This name and the mention of Ygraine and Uther carry the reader back to Arthur’s being conceived before the marriage of his father and mother (10), a situation which in the book as a whole—like that between Arthur and his sister Morgawse, from which Mordred was born (41)—has immensely important thematic connections with the adulterous relationship of Lancelot and Guenevere.

We have seen, then, that of the five references in the “Tale of Lancelot” to the relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere, four are original with Malory. These references help to unify the “Tale,” and they should be viewed as Malory’s intentional effort to fit the “Tale of Lancelot” into the progressive development of the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship which runs through Le Morte Darthur. Most important is the fact that Malory chose in the “Tale of Lancelot” to change the adultery between Lancelot and Guenevere, which he found clearly stated in the Old French prose Lancelot (V, 177–95), to a view of these two characters preceding the commencement of the adul-
terous relationship. Thus, Malory's presentation of Lancelot in Tale III is by no means characterized by the incoherence with which it has been charged.\textsuperscript{6}

Finally, we should note that in Tale III Malory alters his source in order to include Gaheris in place of Gareth. In one part of the prose \textit{Lancelot} used by Malory as source for a part of Tale III, Gaheriet (Gareth) appears; but Malory removes each of his appearances. Thus, in \textit{Le Morte Darthur}, Lancelot finds Gaheris "overthwarte" a horse driven by Tarquin; Lancelot kills Tarquin and releases Gaheris, who frees many of Tarquin's prisoners (265-68). But in the source Terrican's captive is Gaheriet, who later frees Terrican's prisoners (V, 205-8). The point here is that Malory replaces Gaheriet (Gareth) with Gaheris because Gareth is to be the central figure in Tale IV, and therefore at the time of Tale III has to be a youth at home rather than an adventurous knight.\textsuperscript{7} Here again we may observe an instance of Malory's meshing an aspect of a given "Tale" with considerations affecting his book as a whole.

\textsuperscript{6}Vinaver, \textit{Malory}, pp. 46-47.
\textsuperscript{7}W. L. Guerin, Jr., "The Functional Role of Gareth in Malory's \textit{Morte Darthur}," (Tulane University Master's thesis, 1953), pp. 97-98.