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Chivalry in Malory: A Look at the Inconsistencies of
Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram in *Le Morte d'Arthur*

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Abstract

Chivalry and its counterpart, courtly love, are indispensable to Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century work on Arthurian legend, *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The three great examples of chivalry in this work are the knights Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram, each of whom has a book dedicated to his story. Within these knights' portrayals of chivalry, however, develop certain inconsistencies which seem out of place against their chivalrous backdrop. The purpose of this thesis is to propose that the reason for these contradictions of character and of chivalry is the close yet destructive relationship between chivalry and courtly love. What leads Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram to their individual failures in chivalry is their inability to reconcile their loyalty to their king and their knightly oath with their loyalty to their respective ladies. Whereas Gareth abandons courtly love for a more traditional form of chivalry, Tristram exhibits a perversion of courtly love that consequently produces a flawed chivalry. Lancelot's failure ultimately represents the impossibility of upholding both chivalry and courtly love as a unified code. As a whole, Malory's account of these knights' stories portrays the gradual yet inescapable downfall of chivalry when it is aligned with courtly love.

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Chivalry is dead—many people today make this statement because they observe a lack of manners and gentility in the actions and characters of those around them. Many a woman has made this observation because a man failed to hold the door for her or a man treated her in a rude manner; it is as if an assumption has been made that chivalry applies mainly to men and that it has to do with how they treat women. Where did these assumptions come from and what system codified these “rules” of chivalry? Most of our modern understanding of chivalry has come from historical research on the medieval period and through a legacy of literary representations of the era of knighthood.

Chivalric literature thrived during the late Middle Ages, and much of it told of King Arthur and his legendary knights of the Round Table. The most complete and best known version of this Arthurian legend was set down in the latter fifteenth century by Sir Thomas Malory, a knight of Warwickshire, and is known as *Le Morte d'Arthur*, or “The Death of Arthur.”

Malory’s work presents a portrait of chivalry in Arthur’s court: the knights are constantly questing in the name of chivalry, are loyal to their king in the name of chivalry, and honor and serve their ladies in the name of chivalry. Three knights in this work—Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram—have an entire book dedicated to them and to their story, which seems to show the importance of their lives and their depictions of chivalry. One might assume, then, that these knights lead exemplary lives that the other lesser knights of the Round Table should try to emulate; a cursory look, however, at the stories of these knights reveals a number of inconsistencies with what is typically

assumed to be “chivalry.” Gareth, for example, exhibits a perfect blend of battle prowess and humility as he defeats enemy knights and rescues a fair maiden; he then shatters his depiction of chivalry by attempting to sleep with his new-found love before their wedding night. Tristram does not have just one lady-love but many, and more than one at a time. Then, of course, there is the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere, who is not only another man’s wife but the wife of the king. It is no coincidence that these events all pertain to the relationships between the knights and their respective ladies. The “inconsistencies” in the characters of these knights grow out of their individual understandings and demonstrations of love—particularly what is known as courtly love—and their attempts to combine this love with their chivalric code.

Part I: An Introduction to Chivalry and Courtly Love

Before a comparison of chivalry among these three knights can be made, however, it is necessary to establish what chivalry is and what it meant to the knights of Malory’s day. Chivalry defined is “an exclusive code of ideas and behaviour” (Rudorff 104) that bound and was upheld by the order of knighthood. This societal order, established during the tenth century, was meant to serve as both the embodiment and protector of character ideals (Stroud 324). Knights were supposed to act in a “chivalrous” manner in every area of life, whether in love, war, sport, or religion. Over time, these different areas began to meld together—war and religion, for example, became one during the Crusades—and eventually, the course of chivalry began to follow two distinct strands: chivalry among knights and chivalry between a knight and his lady.

Chivalry among knights encompasses a vast array of knightly traditions, ranging from outer displays of banners and arms to inner manifestations of “knightly” qualities.

The tradition of heraldry originally came about to distinguish one knight from another on the battlefield or in tournaments. Knights wore specific colors or painted designs on their shields that would not only declare their identity when their faces were concealed beneath helmets but would also display pride in one's family heritage. Declarations of faith were also popular in heraldry, whether as simple as a red cross or as intricate as a painting of the Virgin Mary (Rudorff 104). Knights in literary tradition are often known by their armor or banners, such as the green-armored, green-skinned knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Edmund Spenser's Red Cross Knight, and the four brothers—the Red Knight, the Green Knight, the Black Knight, and the Blue Knight—that Gareth fights in Malory's own work.

Heraldry was one of the few elements of knighthood that did not wane with time: “Although the knightly code and ideology became definitively established—not to say fossilised—by the second half of the 13th century, the outward trappings and ceremonies of chivalry continued to evolve towards ever greater and more elaborate pageantry” (Rudorff 167). Knightly orders, such as the Order of the Garter, established in the fourteenth century, became more interested in this pageantry than in knightly virtue. Elias Ashmole, a seventeenth century historian on this particular order, claimed that the Order of the Garter was founded for the “advancement of Piety, Nobility and Vertue” (qtd. in Vinaver 57), but Vinaver suggests that “[t]he real object of the Order was to exhibit the brilliancy of Court festivals” (57). As if in support of this statement, Ashmole's own account illustrates tournaments in which these knights' colors were paraded in an aesthetically pleasing arrangement, even when the knights themselves were absent, “[l]est the honour of the Order might receive diminution from too small an

appearance at its public solemnities” (qtd. in Vinaver 58).

Despite these outward spectacles of cloth and color, a knight was first and foremost a warrior and had been trained as such since childhood (Rudorff 172). Battle prowess was the necessity that brought about the order of knighthood and remained the most important knightly quality, even when the order itself became degraded as the need for knights died out. Along with the skills of battle, came the chivalrous qualities of bravery, loyalty, and courtesy. Bravery, as chivalry dictates, was portrayed through one’s ferocity and tenacity on the field of battle. According to Rudorff, among “[t]o be brave on the battlefield, to die unflinchingly, sword in hand, to accomplish great feats of arms, and to be loyal to one’s leader” were among the “great virtues” of knighthood (106). Loyalty and bravery are intimately connected: bravery is inspired by loyalty to one’s king, yet it is through bravery that a knight shows ultimate loyalty. Loyalty to one’s lord, however, reached beyond the battlefield and applied to daily life. Knights were the arms and hands of a king, meaning that they performed his business in places where and at times when the king himself could not intervene. According to Kennedy, it was necessary that a king be “able to trust his knights as he would trust the ‘membres’ of his own body” (28). A king needed to be able to trust his knights to act in his stead. Here, the chivalrous role of a knight can be seen to expand from that of an elite soldier to that of an enforcer or a peacekeeper.

Courtesy, as a knightly quality, encompassed a number of different virtues. As knights became more and more the hands and feet of the king, the quality of justice became more and more important to chivalry: Ramon Llull, in his *Ars Brevis*, “described chivalry as ‘the disposition with which the knight helps the prince maintain justice’” (qtd.

in Kaeuper 107). A king's duty was to perform justice; therefore, a knight's duty was to emulate this justice. Indeed, justice became a requirement of knighthood, as was seen by Gilbert Hay, who observed in his fifteenth century work The Buke of Knychthede that "justice and knychthede acordis togeder" (779). With justice, came the tempering quality of mercy. Maintaining justice may have been the duty of a knight, but granting mercy was expected of him and was highly favored by the people (Rudorff 109). Malory's own work illustrates the prestige to be gained in showing mercy to one's opponent, such as when Gareth bestows mercy upon the Red Knight of the Red Lands, who has not only viciously fought him but had previously sworn to kill both Lancelot and Gawain. Outside of literature, this quality was especially important in the fighting of tournaments, where no one was meant to die and where there was a vast audience to observe the chivalrous actions of the mercy-giver: tournaments, in fact, were the practice grounds for a knight to show mercy to an opponent, and it was only through much practice within tournaments that mercy found its way onto the actual battlefield. The granting of mercy was also seen as a generous act, and since generosity and the ability "[t]o shower money and gifts upon one's friends, guests and allies increased one's prestige and raised one's knightly status" (108), the same favor was shown when a knight showered mercy upon an opponent. Ultimately, courtesy had a great deal to do with honor. In showing honor to other knights, even enemy knights, a knight brought honor upon himself. Over time, this courtesy "evolved [into] an exclusive code of honour" (109) that may have varied from castle to castle in its particulars but still retained the generic concepts of honor, mercy, and justice.

Each of these qualities of chivalry—whether under the heading of courtesy,

loyalty, or bravery—has been presented in terms of a knight’s human relations, whether the quality was exhibited to his fellow knights or to his lord; the Christian knight, however, had a master other than his human lord and was expected to perform chivalrous deeds in the name of this master—the Church. Time and again in medieval writing on chivalry, the order of knighthood has been associated with the defense of the Church. John of Salisbury, a twelfth century English scholar, wrote that the duty of knights was “[t]o defend the Church, to assail infidelity, to venerate the priesthood,” and only after these chief obligations were they “to protect the poor from injuries, to pacify the province, to pour out their blood for their brothers [as the formula of their oath instructs them], and, if need be, to lay down their lives” (qtd. in Rudorff 110). Such writings led to the mentality that God needed human defenders, which, in turn, led to the Crusades in defense of the Holy Land against the heathen. If, “[a]ccording to the Old French *Order*, ‘God and chivalry concord together’” (Schofield 100), such a campaign would fall under the banner of chivalry. It also cannot be denied that the Church’s emphasis on the virtues of chivalry provided a greater incentive for knights to follow them, since no chivalrous knight would go against God and the Church. According to Kennedy, the worth of a knight’s oath of loyalty to his lord depended “largely for its effectiveness upon the strength of the Christian ideology of knighthood” (28).

Though the Church’s interest in chivalry aided in maintaining the relationship between knight and king, it also created a new system of loyalty with knights who were loyal to the Church alone. Instead of pledging their loyalty to a lord who, it was understood, acted in the best interests of the Church, these knights pledged their loyalty directly to the Church. One of the most famous of these religious orders was developed

by Bernard de Clairvaux in the 1130s and was known as the Knights of the Temple, or the Templar Knights. These knights “lived in conditions of monastic discipline,” but instead of giving themselves solely to prayer or the copying of Scriptures, they gave themselves wholly to the art of war and “renounced everything of the outside world except the battlefield” (Rudorff 117). Other lesser-known but equally devout religious orders of knighthood include Hugh de Payens’ “Poor Knights,” whose main duty was to protect pilgrims journeying to and from the Holy Land, and the Hospitallers of St. Lazarus, an order specifically for knights who had contracted leprosy while fighting in the Holy Land (123).

With the advent of song and story into the knightly tradition, chivalry became highly idealistic. Knights of these tales had pledged loyalty to God and king and faced numerous temptations imposed to draw them away from this loyalty; those that succeeded in overcoming these temptations were depicted as symbols of perfection, having achieved the height of chivalry upon earth. Such intellectual victories are seen in the German literature of Gottfried von Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach, as well as in tales of the Holy Grail Quest (Barber 74, 94). If few knights, even within the realm of fiction, could live up to the lofty standards of this idealized chivalry, there was little hope of achievement for the mere mortal that lived in medieval Europe and fought for his lord. There was, however, a more fleshly side to chivalry, developing in the mid to late twelfth century, that served as a counterbalance to its unattainable, cerebral complement.

During the twelfth century, the presence of ladies began “to give tournaments a more refined, worldly air” (Rudorff 100). It was now common to hear minstrels sing in between jousts and to have knights carry favors—handkerchief, sleeve, etc.—of a

favorite lady. Also during this time, chivalric literature underwent a similar change, and knights of song and story began to have another object of loyalty; along with their loyalty to God and king, these knights began to have particular ladies to whom they also owed their loyalty. The most codified literary version of this knight-lady relationship was known as courtly love. It is difficult to determine whether the new interest in tournaments by ladies was the result of the literary climate of the day or whether the literature was influenced by the changing social practices, but what can be said for sure is that by the thirteenth century, “the presence of women” became “the supposed *raison d’être* for the knights’ chivalrous exploits” (Young 18). Rudorff captured this growing sentiment of knighthood in his statement that “[b]esides being able to hew his enemies apart, the knight had to sigh like a furnace (and, most important, to be seen to do it) for his lady love” (116).

French *troubadours* began the softening of literary chivalric tradition with their poems of “fair ladies and of the heart pangs of their knightly admirers” (Rudorff 152) and German *minnesingers* soon followed with their songs of “*minne* or ‘high’ or ‘exalted’ love” (152). Actual courtly love had its beginnings in the court of Marie de Champagne who commissioned writer Chrétien de Troyes to write stories in the tradition of the *troubadours’* poetry. The first result was *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, or *The Knight of the Cart*, the first tale of the romance between Lancelot and Guenevere (Burns 231). Around the same time that this work was being written, Andreas Capellanus, a French chaplain and writer also thought to have lived at the court of Marie de Champagne, composed a work entitled *De Amor*, or *The Art of Courtly Love*. Among other elements, this work sets down a definition and the specific tenets of courtly love. In summary,

courtly love was a secret love shared between a man and a woman who were not married to each other (although they could very well be married to someone else) and manifested itself in love letters, clandestine meetings, and tokens of affection. This love was usually not consummated since the very nature of the love was that of striving, and a love quickly gained was considered less valuable. Everything that a lover did, he or she did with the thought of the other in mind (Painter 117-19). Knights had now become the vassals of a particular lady, a position that brought with it a different set of customs, manners, and understandings that became assimilated into the chivalric tradition and “laid the foundation of courtly chivalry” (113-14).

With the advent of courtly love into chivalric tradition, the qualities of knighthood did not change—heraldry increased, and knights were still expected to exhibit bravery, loyalty, and courtesy and to protect the Church—but the reason for these acts of devotion changed. Whereas the former chivalry was performed for a lord, whether the king, the Church, or some other high-ranking official, this new chivalry was undertaken for the sake of a lady. Heraldry began to include ladies’ favors, such as Elaine’s and Guenevere’s sleeves that Lancelot wears in his helmet in Malory’s work, and it became more common for knights to bear shields portraying the Virgin Mary (Rudorff 104). Even the traditional knightly qualities of bravery, loyalty, and courtesy became the outworking of a love for one’s lady instead of one’s lord; such sentiment occurs numerous times in Malory’s work, in which, as Schofield observed, “true love is exalted as a noble inspiration to valour” (108).

These two sides of chivalry, however, did not come together as cleanly as one may think. One reason for this discrepancy was that while chivalry among knights for

the sake of a lord had existed for centuries in both literature and practice, courtly love was predominantly a literary phenomenon (Denomy 46). Though there were those of the nobility whose relationships adhered to the standards of courtly love, the spread of this idea was due more to literature than to practice. In an era where most of the men were either absent or had been lost fighting in the Crusades, literature favored a predominantly female audience. People like Marie de Champagne were enamored of the idea of courtly love and enjoyed to read stories about it, but courtly love as an actual practice was rare. Thus, a split formed in chivalry, dividing the codes that real knights actually followed from the more idealized chivalry of literature. This literary chivalry, which still retained all the characteristics of chivalry as it had been known for centuries but had now added the element of romantic love, is what is found in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, immortalized in the written word.

Malory's purpose in composing his vast work was to present an English "unified Arthuriad," that would collect all the tales told of King Arthur over the previous nine hundred odd years and present them in one great story (Moorman, "Courtly Love" 163). Such a composition would look back at tales from the initial form of chivalry, as well as stories from the new chivalry that included courtly love. Because Malory allowed himself such a vast scope of literature to pull from, he was able to watch the transition of chivalry and to see both the advantages and disadvantages that courtly love brought to chivalry. Whether Malory intended to set down a treatise on chivalry or simply to retell the story that he had such a passion for, his work captures the predicament that many aspiring knights faced in the attempt to combine chivalry and courtly love. Kennedy describes this quandary as follows: "Not many men could ever achieve this ideal of True

knighthood, because most would find it too difficult to resolve the conflicts which could arise between service to God and service to one's lady or between service to one's king and country and service to one's lady" (99).

It is due to such disadvantages that the chivalrous knights of Malory's work develop inconsistencies in their otherwise pristine characters. Knights of *Le Morte d'Arthur* face conflicting loyalties, confused ambitions, and problematic situations, all due to the conflict of traditional chivalry with courtly love. These inconsistencies are seen in the three knights who have their own books in *Le Morte d'Arthur*: Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram.

Part II: Chivalry in the Tales of the Three Knights

When Malory tells the story of these three knights his ordering is important and illustrates a timeline of the degradation of chivalry in Arthur's court. The first knight mentioned is Lancelot in "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake." Gareth is next with "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney," and Tristram follows with "The Fyrste and the Secunde Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones." After these two books and a book on the Grail quest, Lancelot has another book entitled "The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwenyvere." With the two halves of Lancelot's story as bookends, the tales of these three knights present the difficulty in reconciling the two sides that chivalry had developed—traditional chivalry and the new chivalry with courtly love—from its seemingly innocent and benign beginnings to its tragic end.

Lancelot's first tale shows the union of traditional chivalry with courtly love in its best light. The entire tale is the success story of Lancelot's combining his allegiance to Arthur and knightly virtues with his chaste loyalty to Guenevere. The tale begins by

expounding Lancelot's fame as the best knight at Arthur's court: "But in especiall hit [prouesse] was prevyde 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 ovircom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement" (Malory 151). Lancelot is also presented from the very beginning as being the favorite knight of the queen, and Malory makes no secret that he loves her in return: "Wherefore Quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the Quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff . . ." (152). With these two qualities combined, Lancelot is shown to be the epitome of chivalry, both as the ideal knight and the ideal courtly lover (Kennedy 98). The first event in this tale of Lancelot continues the theme of Lancelot's perfect combination of chivalry and courtly love. When he is taken prisoner by the four ladies of the Castell Charyot, one of them being the enchantress Morgan le Fay, the ladies all desire that he will choose one of them to be his wife. They know that he is "the noblest knight lyvyng" and that "there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is Quene Gwenyvere" (Malory 155)—both qualities of the combined chivalry—yet they would have him leave Guenevere for one of them or else remain in their prison. Lancelot passes this first test of loyalty by refusing them: "Yet had I lever dye in this preson with worshyp than to have one of you to my paramoure, magré myne hede" (155).

After this glorious setup of Lancelot, the tale regales his knightly qualities. In his humorous encounter with Sir Belleus, Lancelot grants him mercy and helps treat the wounds that Belleus has sustained through their duel: ". . . for this knight is a good man and a knight of adventures . . . and whan that I yelded me unto hym he laffte me goodly, and hath staunched my bloode" (Malory 157). At King Bagdemagus' tournament,

Lancelot displays his battle prowess by defeating all the knights he stands up against. Lancelot's fight to maintain justice within Arthur's realm is shown in his battle with the evil knight Terquyne, who is holding "three score and foure prisoners" (161). In return for the release of the prisoners, Lancelot must disclose his identity, even though he knows that Terquyne hates him more than any other knight. Despite the danger, Lancelot fearlessly announces himself to the evil knight: ". . . know that I am Sir Launcelot du Lake, Kynge Bannys son of Benwyke, and verry knight of the Table Rounde. And now I defyge the—and do thy beste!" (162). Lancelot's bravery in announcing himself to Terquyne is shown in the fact that Lancelot has killed Terquyne's brother; therefore, Terquyne "will not give up the blood feud and so Lancelot is forced to fight him to the death" (Kennedy 203).

After his defeat of Terquyne, Lancelot moves on to rid the realm of Sir Perys de Foreste Savage, a knight who "dystressis all ladyes and jantylwomen, and at the leste he robbyth them other lyeth by hem" (163). It is at this encounter in the Forest Savage that Lancelot is again reminded of his relationship with Guenevere, and once again, he must defend his purity in both love and chivalry. To the question of why he will not marry, Lancelot announces that to marry would mean to retire from the life of "armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures" (Malory 164), a life that would not only displease Lancelot but would also decrease his loyalty to his lord and therefore to chivalry. As to the allegation that his love for Guenevere is in any way unchivalrous or that she is his paramour, Lancelot explains why he will have no paramours: ". . . in prencipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advoutrers nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys . . ." (164). Lancelot's denial of

all but the purest love that a knight holds for his lady not only preserves his loyalty to Guenevere, but also his loyalty to the religious element of his knightly code. As Kennedy points out, “he has determined to remain perfectly chaste, ‘for drede of God’” (113).

After this transcendent moment, Lancelot moves on to display more knightly qualities. After slaying two giants and rescuing the women that they have been holding prisoner (Malory 165), Lancelot rescues Sir Kay from four knights who are unfairly pursuing and attacking him. Not only does Lancelot defeat four knights at once in his rescue of Sir Kay, but the next morning, he takes Kay’s armor and leaves Kay his own so that no one will bother Sir Kay anymore: “And bycause of his armoure and shyld I am sure I shall ryde in pease” (167). Because he is wearing Sir Kay’s armor, knights are more likely to attack him—as do Sir Gawtere, Sir Gylmere, and Sir Raynolde—believing him to be less than what he is. When Lancelot defeats these three knights, he sends them to Arthur’s court to present themselves to Guenevere; this is in part to pay honor to his lady, but also to bring glory to Sir Kay, since he tells them to go in Kay’s name, revealing his humility. When four of Arthur’s knights, including Sir Gawain, present a good-natured challenge to Lancelot, he defeats all four of them without revealing his identity (169-71). This sense of humility, according to Hay, falls under the umbrella of courtesy in chivalry: “. . . tharfore, thare sulde na knyght be hautayn, na feir, na prydefull, na presumptuous, bot ever with mekenes, and clemencé, and humilitee, be symple as a may . . .” (780).

Lancelot’s greatest challenge within this tale occurs when he comes across Sir Meliot de Logris, who has been wounded and whose wound has been enchanted so that it

may never heal. Lancelot must journey to the Chapel Perilous to obtain a “swerde and a bloody cloth” (Malory 171) that will break the enchantment. The Chapel Perilous tests Lancelot’s bravery, as well as his courtesy toward the wounded knight, as he must walk into the chapel among the “thirty grete knyghtes” (171) that stand guard in order to obtain the two objects. When he does so, the earth shakes and the knights tempt him to drop the sword; he does not and, upon leaving the chapel, learns from the “fayre lady” (172) that had he dropped it, he would never have seen Guenevere again. This reference to Guenevere moves the Chapel Perilous from a test of mere knightly courage toward a test of his loyalty to Guenevere.

If the fact that Lancelot held onto the sword throughout the earthquake serves as the first test of his loyalty to Guenevere, the second test occurs when the lady orders Lancelot to “kysse me but onys” (Malory 172), to which Lancelot refuses. Though Lancelot’s refusal to kiss the damsel may be interpreted as “radical” or “inflexible” (Kennedy 115)—since, as Benton claims, “kisses and embraces . . . were often a part of medieval greetings” (30)—his refusal illustrates his absolute devotion to Guenevere. Lancelot’s answer seems to have been validated in this case since the damsel clearly does not have a simple greeting kiss in mind, stating that whether he will or will not, she will at the least have his dead body for her own—“. . . and dayly I sholde have clypped the and kissed the, dispyte of Quene Gwentyvere” (Malory 172). In his prudent decision to abstain from kissing, Lancelot has preserved himself from any chance of being unfaithful to Guenevere.

In the process of having his loyalty to Guenevere tested, Lancelot’s Christian virtues are also tested, according to Kennedy, who asserts that “Malory transforms the

Chapel Perilous episode into a test of Lancelot's chastity as well as his piety" (115). His calling on divine help—"Jesu preserve me frome your subtyl crauftys" (Malory 172)—illustrates the religious element of his challenge. Thus, the Chapel Perilous has served as a test of Lancelot's preservation of chivalry, in the form of bravery and piety, and courtly love, in his loyalty to Guenevere. Lancelot's career reaches a high upon his miraculous healing of Meliot, and Lancelot prepares to return to Arthur's court, where he will be welcomed by those who have witnessed his peerless quest for justice, and where accounts will be told of his matchless chivalry (172-73).

Before reaching the court, however, Lancelot experiences one last adventure. A lady is being pursued by her husband, Sir Pedyvere, who is threatening to kill her for being unfaithful, even though the lady claims that she has done nothing wrong. Lancelot attempts to protect the lady, but the knight, through trickery, distracts Lancelot and cuts off the lady's head. Lancelot is horrified and fights the knight until the knight cries mercy, upon which Lancelot sends him to Guenevere to ask mercy of her (Malory 174-75). This episode seems out of place between the climax of Chapel Perilous and the glorious return to Arthur's court. It is almost foreshadowing in its portrayal of suspected adultery and the tragic end of the supposed adulteress. Lancelot even claims that the knight "haste shamed me for evir!" (175). Though Lancelot has emerged from his exploits as victoriously chivalrous, this event foreshadows the darkness that will soon intrude upon his perfect knighthood.

This first half of Lancelot's story serves two purposes. First, it establishes Lancelot as "the grettyste name of ony knight of the worlde" (Malory 176-77). His "noblesse de courage" or "greatness of spirit" (Kennedy 108) is clearly portrayed in his

exploits to bring honor to Arthur's court and justice to Arthur's realm. According to Lancelot, knights are bound by a code, a high calling, and he aligns his life in accordance with this code. Not only does he set this high calling as a goal to aspire to, but he actually achieves it and becomes the epitome of chivalry (Benson 91).

The second purpose of this tale of Lancelot is to set up his relationship with Guenevere. Lancelot's speech on the importance of a knight's remaining pure, as well as his denunciation of paramours, seems to solidify his innocence with regard to Guenevere. He loves her, but this, too, is in accordance with the new parameters of chivalry as they relate to courtly love. In loving Guenevere from a distance and in performing all his great deeds in her honor, Lancelot remains a truly chivalrous knight, loyal to his lord, his oath of knighthood, and his lady (Kennedy 112). So far, then, there is no inconsistency in Lancelot's combining of the old chivalry with the new. He seems to have reconciled them to each other in a way that is plausible to aspire to and proper to live by. This tale sets him up at the highest point that he can possibly reach. According to Benson, "[i]t defines his noble character, brings his relation to Guenevere to the center of the action, and shows in action the ideal of knighthood that had been abstractly stated in the oath required of Arthur's knights at the founding of the Round Table . . ." (90). Though Lancelot has reached the pinnacle of his chivalrous career, the accusations he receives regarding Guenevere illustrate the fine line that he walks in his observance of chivalry. If allegations are being placed against him now, while he is at the height of both chivalry and courtly love, he has no room for faltering and, therefore, no room for human failing. Since Lancelot is indeed human, this pedestal can only portend the downward movement that must follow such a lofty achievement.

Gareth represents this next step toward a breakdown in chivalry. His tale appears to be a highly successful, Cinderella story, in which the main character moves from being confined to the kitchen to marrying a princess; the very placement of Gareth's tale, however, "[c]oming as it does between the first, deceptively innocent signs of courtly love in Lancelot and the actual adultery of the 'Tale of Tristram'" (Moorman, *Book* 19), seems to suggest a degradation of courtly love and, subsequently, of chivalry. Something happens between the perfect blend of chivalry and courtly love in "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake" and the perversion of courtly love in "The Fyrste and the Secunde Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones," and a look at Gareth's treatment of chivalry and courtly love will shed light on this collapse.

When Gareth first arrives at Arthur's court, no one knows who he is or where he has come from, and since Gareth has no intention of revealing his identity, all anyone knows about him is that he is "the goodlyest yonge man and the fayreste that ever they all sawe" (Malory 178). His request of Arthur does nothing to help the court determine who he is: he asks that he may be given food and drink for one year and that after that year is up, he will be granted two other requests. He is what literature calls the "Fair Unknown"—the handsome young man that is only known by his nickname and must undergo a quest to find out who he is (Benson 102). Gareth's nickname—Beaumains, or "Fayre Handys" (179)—is given him by Sir Kay, who mocks his choice to dwell in the kitchen and decides that "he is a vylayne borne, and never wolle make man—for and he had be com of jantyllmen, he wolde have axed horse and armour . . ." (179). Gareth humbly takes no heed of Kay's scorn, however, and continues to live among the kitchen staff: "And so he endured all that twelvemonth and never displeased man nother chylde,

but allwayes he was meke and mylde” (179). Gareth also proves himself to be skilled in soldiery and attracts the attention of Lancelot and Gawain, Arthur’s best knights, who want to get to know him better; however, Gareth humbly declines their offers and remains under the authority of Sir Kay.

Gareth’s circumstances change when, after a year has passed, a damsel arrives, who is seeking help for her sister, who is being held captive by the Red Knight of the Red Lands. None of Arthur’s knights will take up this challenge until Gareth claims his second and third requests: to be given the quest of helping this lady and to be knighted by Lancelot after he has proved himself. The lady resents this arrangement—“Shall I have none but one that is your kychyn knave?” (Malory 181)—but Gareth is given the task nonetheless, and after defeating both Sir Kay and Lancelot in a joust, he finally reveals himself—though only to Lancelot—and Lancelot knights him (182). The fact that Gareth’s name is not even mentioned until after he has proved himself worthy to be a knight shows his humility. His identity reveals him not only to be Sir Gawain’s brother but also the son of King Lot and Queen Morgause of Orkney. He does not want to be knighted, however, because of his brother or because of his ancestry: he wants to achieve knighthood through his own merit. Gareth’s humility and desire “[t]o prove his worthiness of his name” is what, according to Benson, prompts him to “adopt a disguise” and serve in the kitchen of Arthur’s castle (102). Gareth has spent a year in preparation for this quest and will now devote himself totally to Lady Lyones and her rescue.

This newly bestowed knighthood of Gareth’s is not greeted with cheers and applause but rather with scorn and derision by the damsel Lyonet. Still peeved that Arthur has sent a knave who “stynkyst all of the kychyn” (Malory 182), Lyonet claims

that Gareth did not win against Kay and Lancelot fairly but by “myssehappe” (183). This pattern of Gareth’s great victories and Lyonet’s great scorn continues throughout the journey to Lady Lyones’ prison and accentuates Gareth’s qualities of patience and humility. When Gareth defeats two knights at a river crossing, Lyonet claims that “the fyrste knight his horse stumbled” and that “the laste knight, by myschappe thou camyste behynde hym, and by myssefortune thou slewyst hym” (184). Gareth comes back with the resolution that he will continue his endeavors to rescue Lyones, despite what Lyonet says: “. . . therefore I recke nat what ye sey, so that I may wynne your lady” (184). When Gareth faces the Black Knight, the Green Knight, and the Red Knight in succession, Lyonet even encourages his foes so that she may be rid of Gareth (185-90); yet Gareth perseveres and even grants mercy to the knights that yield to him—another example of his chivalry.

It is not until Gareth fearlessly decides to do battle with the Blue Knight that Lyonet has a change of heart and apologizes to Gareth for how appallingly she has treated him. His manner in relation to her has touched her and has convinced her that he must be of noble lineage after all: “. . . for so fowle and shamfully dud never woman revile a knight as I have done you, and ever curteysly ye have suffyrde me—and that com never but of jantyll bloode” (Malory 192). Gareth’s humility and long-suffering have not only proved his loyalty to his lady but have proved his excellence in chivalry and perfection of courtesy (Benson 103). His last example of courtesy before he reaches the Castel Perilous is while staying in the castle of the Blue Knight, whose name is Persaunte. Persaunte sends his beautiful daughter to Gareth’s bed to see whether or not he will show himself to be a courteous knight, and Gareth passes the tests of both

chivalry and loyalty to Lyones by sending the girl back to her father with a respectful kiss (Malory 193-94). Gareth has been proven “by courtly standards” to be “perfectly chaste, and therefore he is a ‘happy’ knight, as invincible as Lancelot” (Kennedy 140).

After this victory in courtesy, Gareth is ready to face the Castel Perilous to rescue his lady. It is interesting that the name “Castel Perilous” is so similar to Lancelot’s “Chapel Perilous.” Both knights win decisive victories at these “perilous” locations, and both knights win them in different ways and for different reasons. Kennedy observes that “the Chapel Perilous adventure could be achieved only by a knight perfect in faith and chastity; the Castel Perilous adventure may be achieved only by a knight perfect in courtesy” (127). Thus, a difference has already developed between the chivalries of Lancelot and Gareth that will grow as the two paths split off from each other.

Gareth’s battle with the Red Knight of the Red Lands displays more of his knightly qualities and his loyalty to Lyones. Upon reaching the errant knight’s domain, Gareth sees forty knights hanging from trees, and Lyonet tells him that these are all knights who have tried to rescue Lyones. Gareth is nearly daunted by the sight—“Now Jesu defende me . . . frome suche vylans deth and shendeshyp of harmys, for rathir than I sholde so be faryn withal I woll rather be slayne in playne batayle” (Malory 197)—but his decision to continue proves his bravery. His bravery is proven again in his sounding of the horn to call the Red Knight. Lyonet urges him to wait until after noon to blow the horn, since the Red Knight’s strength grows and wanes with the rising and setting of the sun. Gareth, however, desires a fair fight and sounds the horn immediately: “For and he were as good a knight as ever was ony, I shall never fayle hym in his moste might, for other I woll wyne worship worshipfully, othir dye knightly in the felde” (198). The

sight of Lyones also spurs Gareth to fight sooner rather than later for “she besemyth afarre the fayryst lady that ever I lokyd uppon . . . and for hir woll I fyght” (Malory 198). This adherence to the rules of chivalry, as illustrated by his decision to fight the Red Knight in his prime, and courtly love, as shown by his defiance of danger in the presence of his lady, is almost the death of Gareth, who is nearly overcome by the Red Knight. Lyonet has only to remind Gareth of his love for her sister, however, and Gareth recovers his strength, again in true fashion of Capellanus’ courtly love, which states that “[n]o man can do good deeds unless he is compelled by the persuasion of love” (qtd. in Painter 119).

Gareth’s devotion to courtly love is even shown in the mercy that he shows to the Red Knight. When Gareth demands to know why the Red Knight has so dishonorably killed and displayed all these knights of Arthur’s court, the Red Knight answers that his own lady’s brothers were killed by Lancelot and Gawain, so she made the Red Knight promise to do battle with approaching knights until the day that he is fortunate enough to fight these two knights (Malory 200-01). Instead of feeling anger at this animosity toward his brother and toward his role model, Gareth acquits the Red Knight for his loyalty to his lady: “But insomuche all that he dud was at a ladyes requeste, I blame hym the lesse . . .” (201). Gareth acknowledges that anything a knight does for his lady constitutes an act of chivalry, an acknowledgement that is supported by Denomy in his description of courtly love: “What is done, moreover, under Love’s compulsion cannot be sinful or immoral; rather it is virtuous and righteous as a necessary source of natural goodness and worth” (44).

With Gareth’s forgiveness toward his enemy and his rescue of Lyones, courtly love, as represented in this tale, is at its height. Gareth has proved himself worthy of

Lyones and is finally able to meet her, but it is this meeting at which courtly love ceases to hold sway over Gareth's actions. When Gareth attempts to approach the woman with whom he has fallen in love and for whom he has risked his life, she does not allow him, saying that he must "laboure in worship this twelvemonth" so that he may be "one of the numbir of the worthy knyghtes" (Malory 202). Such a response to Gareth's heroism may seem callous, but it is simply in accordance with the ritual of courtly love. According to Rudorff, it was in perfect accordance with courtly love for a lady to act aloof in the presence of her lover—to "reward his constancy by looking sweetly upon him and giving him a place in her heart" but to give no outward demonstration of her love and gratitude (Rudorff 155). Painter shares this view, stating that "[w]hile it is true that the knight was expected to serve his adored one, this service consisted merely of fidelity and continuous worship. In short troubadour love was not mutual" (114). Gareth, however, is crushed by this reception: "I have nat deserved hat ye sholde shew me this straungenesse" (202). He is disillusioned by this style of love that he has so ardently fought for and leaves, making "grete dole" (202).

This disillusionment is a turning point for Gareth: he must now decide whether to accept Lyones' coldness, thereby accepting courtly love, or he must abandon this type of love for one that he finds more gratifying. Lyones provides an opportunity for this decision by disguising herself as a princess in the castle of her brother, Sir Gryngamoure. Gareth is smitten by this new damsel and wishes that he had given his heart to her instead of the unfeeling Lyones: "Jesu, wolde that the lady of this Castell Perelus were so fayre as she is" (Malory 205). He begins to abandon courtly love for this "hote love" (206) that he now feels for this lady. Finally, the burning love is too great for Gareth, who

“wente unto the lady Dame Lyonesse and kyssed her many tymes” (206), after which Lyones reveals her true identity. Had this been a lesson in courtly love for Gareth, he would have been horrified to have been found so unfaithful, and Lyones would have chided him, much as Guenevere does Lancelot in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (Kibler 121). Instead, the two lovers are happier for the realization: “Than was Syr Gareth more gladder than he was tofore. And than they trouthe-plyght other to love and never to fayle whyle their lyff lastyth. And so they brente bothe in hoot love that they were accorded to abate their lustys secretly” (Malory 206). That Gareth and Lyones now plan to consummate their love for each other before marriage shows that courtly love has been abandoned for a more passionate, instantly gratifying love.

After this desertion of courtly love, the tale of Gareth reverts back to an earlier version of chivalry that revolves around glory in combat. Gareth arranges a tournament, to which he invites Arthur and all his knights. According to Benson, the last vestiges of courtly love can be seen in his strange decision to have Lyones’ hand in marriage be the prize for winning the tournament: “Gareth’s act is either foolish (why take a chance on losing her?) or prideful (his conviction that he will surely win); within romance, his act is inevitable, for he must conform to the pattern imposed by the convention and must show that he is worthy of the lady” (74-75). Despite the convention, Gareth does not need to show himself worthy: he has already won Lyones’ heart, so his convening of this ritualistic challenge is only meant to prove his own valor and battle prowess. Thus, Gareth has returned to the “Fair Unknown” story, in which he must prove himself and his heritage. The ring that Lyones gives him, though it seems like a trinket left over from courtly love, serves to protect his identity, as it changes the color of his armor and

heraldry. Gareth continues this hidden identity throughout the tournament and leaves when he is discovered; his discovery, however—along with his complete victory at the tournament, even over his brother Gawain—solidifies his identity, and he is no longer Beaumains or the “Fair Unknown” but Sir Gareth of Orkney (Benson 104-05). His encounter with the “Browne Knyght wythoute Pyté” (Malory 221) provides the first opportunity for Gareth to quest in his own name, proving that his quest for identity is over.

Gareth’s tale ends happily with his marriage to Lyones. Though this ending is satisfying and in no way wrong, courtly love is not triumphant in this tale. As Moorman observed, “Gareth is a ‘vertuous’ rather than a ‘courtly’ lover; he occasionally spends a sleepless night or goes without eating, but these actions seem dictated by a quite human passion . . . rather than by the elegant conventions of the code” (*Book* 21). Whereas Lancelot is able to balance chivalry and courtly love, Gareth cannot reconcile courtly love with his passions and his concept of chivalry and marries Lyones, thus choosing “a lower order of knighthood than that of Lancelot, who refuses both marriage and paramours. . . . Yet Gareth’s knighthood is admirable . . .” (Benson 107). Not even Lancelot disagrees with Gareth’s choice to settle down in marriage, but Lancelot’s fear that a “weddyd man . . . muste couche with hir [his wife] and leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures” (Malory 164) seems to come true for Gareth. In the celebratory joust after the marriage, “the Kynge wolde nat suffir Sir Gareth to juste, because of his new bryde—for, as the Freynsh boke seyth, that Dame Lyonesse desired of the Kynge that none that were wedded sholde juste at that feste” (226). As Lancelot feared, Gareth’s new position as husband hinders him from participating in traditional knightly

activities. In his abandonment of courtly love for wedded love, Gareth surrenders some of his traditional chivalry as well. This shows a peculiar amalgamation between traditional chivalry and courtly love. The two forms of chivalry, when combined, produce inconsistencies, but they have also been so adjoined at this point that a removal of one leads to a deficit in the other. This problematic relationship between chivalry and courtly love will continue to agitate, culminating in the story of Lancelot and Guenevere.

This brewing conflict continues with the story of Sir Tristram, which is by far the longest book of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, spanning nearly three hundred pages. Tristram's tale exhibits a perversion of courtly love in the portrayal of chivalry. Tristram begins his tale with a demonstration of mercy: his stepmother has tried to poison him and is about to burn at the stake for her crime, when "yonge Trystrams kneled byfore his fadir Kyng Melyodas and besought hym to gyff hym a done" (Malory 230). Tristram not only saves his stepmother from the flames but restores the relationship between her and his father: "But by the means of yonge Trystrams, he made the kyng and hir accorded . . ." (231). After this promising beginning, Tristram begins to develop himself as a knight in every area of chivalry, and he goes to France to learn both skill of arms and courtly manners: ". . . and so in harpyng and on instrumentys of muyke in his youthe he applied hym for to lerne. And aftir, as he growed in might and strength, he laboured in huntynge and in hawkyng—never jantylman more that ever we herde rede of" (231). His first chance to exhibit this learned chivalry occurs when his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, is being oppressed by Sir Marhalte, a knight from the court of King Angwysch of Ireland, who is demanding tribute. None of Mark's knights will fight this knight who has "bene assayede with many noble knyghtes" and has always "macched them" (Malory 235).

Tristram, however, shows the extent of his battle prowess and defeats this boasting knight, causing him to flee to his ships and to Ireland, where he dies of the wounds Tristram gave him (236).

In these first chivalrous encounters, Tristram proves himself to be what Kennedy calls a “Worshipful knight” (148). This type of knight usually displays an excellence in every area of chivalry, whether on the battlefield or in “certain courtly refinements and skills, such as the ability to carry on a conversation with a lady or to sing and dance” (164). Tristram shines in both areas, displaying his battle prowess during his seven-year study in France and his courtliness in what are typically considered “aristocratic pastimes” (Tucker 73), such as hunting and hawking. What sets the Worshipful knight apart from his peers, however, is that everything he engages in is done for the purpose of bringing worship to himself, and knighthood becomes “a means to an end rather than an end itself” (Kennedy 151). Tristram admits to Marhalte that his motive for fighting a knight so much more experienced is to bring glory to himself: “And sytthen I toke the order of knyghthode this day, I am ryght well pleased and to me moste worsyp that I may have ado wyth suche a knyght as thou arte” (Malory 235). When Sir Marhalte flees Tristram, Tristram reveals his desire for worship in his decrying of Marhalte: “A! sir knyght of the Rounde Table, why withdrawyst thou the? Thou doste thysel and thy kynne grete shame, for I am but a yonge knyght—or now I was never preved! And rather than I sholde withdraw me from the, I had rathir be hewyn in pyesemealys!” (236). Instead of pursuing Marhalte “with sword raised to kill,” Tristram “pursues him . . . with words to humiliate him” (Kennedy 155) because honor and worship are the most valuable prizes to be won in battle.

So far, Tristram has only exhibited a traditional form of chivalry in his quest to receive worship. His introduction to courtly love occurs when he must travel to Ireland to be healed of the wounds that Sir Marhalte gave him. Once there, he is treated by La Beale Isode, the niece of Marhalte, who does not know that Tristram killed her uncle, and the two begin to fall in love with each other. Tristram battles for Isode in a tournament—“ . . . my poure person shall I juparté there for youre sake . . . ” (Malory 238)—and defeats the veteran knight Sir Palomydes. Isode’s love for Tristram increases after this victory, showing that Isode, too, is concerned with honor and worship and places her affection in those who are admired: “Than had La Beale Isode grete suspeccion unto Tramtryste that he was som man of worshyp preved, and therewith she comforted herselfe and kyste more love unto hym, for well she demed that he was som man of worshyp” (239). When it is discovered that this “Tramtryste” is really Tristram, the enemy of Sir Marhalte, Tristram must flee the country, but before he leaves, he pledges his loyalty to Isode and the two exchange rings: “And I promyse you faythfully, I shall be all the dayes of my lyff your knyght” (243). The exchange of rings, and of gifts in general, is a convention typical of courtly romances, as Lyones illustrates by providing Gareth with a ring before Arthur’s tournament (Painter 135-36).

Though Tristram has pledged his love to Isode and has embarked upon a calling of courtly love, he still has a lesson to learn before he can pursue this love with Isode. This lesson provides a depiction of the first inconsistency that is seen in Tristram’s chivalry. Upon his return to Cornwall, Tristram immediately falls in love with another woman, and in typical courtly love fashion, this woman is the wife of another knight, Sir Segwarydes. The danger for Tristram is that King Mark also loves this woman and

wounds Tristram on his way to a secret visit with this lady. The first fault that Tristram must overcome is carelessness: not only has he made an enemy of the king, but “in hys ragynge” (Malory 244) with the lady, Tristram forgets about his wound, leaving blood all over the bed sheets. This carelessness leads to problems with Sir Segwarydes, who discovers the bloody sheets, and King Mark, who “loved never aftir Sir Trystramys” (245). The second lesson that Tristram must learn with regard to courtly love is responsibility. When Sir Segwarydes’ wife is later kidnapped, Tristram leaves the rescuing up to her husband, for which he is scorned by another woman who appeals to his desire for worship: “Than there was one lady that rebuked Sir Trystrams in the horrybelyst wyse, and called hym cowarde knight, that he wolde for shame of hys knyghthode to se a lady so shamefully takyn away fro his uncklys courte—but she mente that eythir of hem loved other with entyre herte” (246).

Tristram realizes that he is always responsible to his lady, whether she is married or not; by the time he learns this lesson, however, it is too late to save the relationship. When Tristram overtakes Sir Bleoberys, the knight who has kidnapped his lady, the knights place the lady in between them and allow her to choose with whom she will go. Much to Tristram’s shame, the lady chooses Bleoberys because “whan thou sawyste this knyght lede me away, thou madist no chere to rescow me” (249).

Having learned the proper way in which to be a courtly lover, Tristram is ready to keep his promise to Isode, though this duty is complicated by King Mark, who desires that Isode be his wife and even sends Tristram to Ireland to fetch her. Whatever hope the two lovers have of cooling their love for each other dies when they drink a love potion intended for Mark and Isode. With the drinking of the potion, Tristram solidifies his role

as Isode's knight, whether he may marry her or not: "But by that drynke was in their bodyes, they loved aythir other so well that never hir love departed, for well nother for woo. And thus hit happed fyrst, the love betwyxte Sir Trystrames and La Beale Isode, the whyche love never departed dayes of their lyff" (Malory 257). His first demonstration of this duty is in his defeat of Sir Brewnor, who threatens to either kill Isode or take her for himself (259). When Sir Palomydes reappears and takes Isode to be his wife, Tristram does not leave her rescue for another as he did with Sir Segwarydes' lady, but follows her himself and rescues her, proving that he has learned his lesson (263-65).

At this point Isode draws a conclusion about her romance that is developed throughout the rest of Malory's work. After Tristram defeats Sir Palomydes, she sends him to Arthur's court with a message for Guenevere: ". . . tell her that I sende her worde that there be within this londe but foure lovers, and that is Sir Launcelot and Dame Gwenyver, and Sir Trystrames and Quene Isode" (Malory 266). A parallel is now set up between the two romances, and some events that have occurred in the romance of Tristram and Isode will echo in the romance of Lancelot and Guenevere. This alignment also shows a contrast between Tristram and Lancelot, who, while having similar stories, are two very different people. With this declaration, the romance of Tristram and Isode also reaches a climax; however, there are over two hundred pages left in the tale of Tristram, suggesting that the romance is not the center of Tristram's story. Like his demonstration of tradition chivalry, Tristram's courtly love is subject to his quest for honor and worship, and therefore, he does not have "the makings of a 'true' lover" (Kennedy 167). When Isode is taken by Sir Palomydes, Tristram is not spurred to action

by the danger that his love is in, but rather by his own pride: “I am this day shamed!” (Malory 264). This cry reveals Tristram’s reasons for abiding by chivalry and foreshadows his eventual adjustment of chivalry to suit his own purposes. According to Kennedy, Tristram follows the tenets of traditional chivalry, “but within those limits he feels free to act prudently with regard to his personal well-being” (176).

The decline of Tristram and Isode’s relationship—and, consequently, the decline of courtly love—occurs when Tristram is wounded by a poisoned arrow and is healed by the skill of Isode le Blanche Mains. This new Isode, aside from being “goode and fayre,” is “of noble bloode and fame” (Malory 271) and is well-known and respected enough that La Beale Isode knows to send Tristram to her for healing. Such fame and worship is attractive to Tristram, who “had suche chere and ryches and all other pleasaunce, that he had allmoste forsakyn La Beale Isode” (271). Tristram eventually marries Isode le Blanche Mains, remembering his own lady only after the ceremony. In order to compensate for this betrayal, Tristram does not consummate his marriage: “. . . and other chere made he none but with clyppyng and kyssynge. As for fleyshely lustys, Sir Trystrames had never ado with hir . . .” (271). Tristram here exhibits a distorted view of courtly love. Whereas courtly love as set down by Capellanus never reached a sexual union but was entirely based upon thought, feelings, and subtle actions, Tristram’s view of courtly love is that he may remain true to his lady as long as he has no sexual relations with another woman. Thus, his “clyppyng and kyssynge” of Isode le Blanche Mains and even his marriage to her is, in his mind, excused by his abstaining from intercourse (Kennedy 171).

Lancelot, who so far has been the epitome of chivalry and courtly love, is

appalled by Tristram's actions:

Fye uppon hym, untrew knyght to his lady! That so noble a knyght as Sir Trystrames is sholde be founde to his fyrst lady and love untrew, that is the Quene of Cornwayle! . . . And lette hym wete that the love betwene hym and me is done for ever, and that I gyff hym warnyng: from this day forthe I woll be his mortall enemy. (Malory 272)

Tristram repents at the report of Lancelot's anger, but his remorse seems to stem more from his shame at having been chastised by such a respected knight, as opposed to any sorrow for his betrayal of Isode: "Than Sir Trystrames was ashamed and made grete mone that ever any knyghtes sholde defame hym for the sake of his lady" (272). This shame spurs Tristram redeem himself by attempting more worshipful deeds, questing, pleading with Lancelot to remain his "good frende" (285), and even rescuing King Arthur from the Forest Perilous.

In the middle of this atonement, a comparison is made between Lancelot and Tristram, placing them on the same level of knighthood: "For now I know ye [Lancelot] ar the floure of all knyghthode of the worlde, and ye and Sir Trystram departe hit even betwene you" (287). In light of Tristram's failure in and Lancelot's surpassing of courtly love, it seems incorrect that the two should be considered equal; Lancelot and Tristram, however, resemble each other in many ways. Both are famed knights and both are in love with their queen: the similarity between Tristram and Isode's relationship and Lancelot and Guenevere's relationship has already been mentioned by Isode herself (Kennedy 170). Even certain events in the lives of these knights parallel each other. For example, Tristram's carelessness in leaving his blood all over Sir Segwarydes' lady's bed

is mirrored by Lancelot later in his relationship with Guenevere. Even though Tristram seems to have fallen from an ideal, whereas Lancelot is still the embodiment of that ideal, the story of Tristram and Isode “all too obviously resemble[s that of] Lancelot and Guenevere” (Moorman, *Book* 23) and suggests the fall awaiting Lancelot. Though Lancelot’s love for Guenevere, at this point, seems to be completely pure and a perfect balance between loyalty to one’s lord and loyalty to one’s lady, Tristram’s actions mark a downside to courtly love and provide a clearer lens by which to view the Lancelot-Guenevere saga “in the sharp, unflattering light of the adultery of Tristan and Isode . . .” (76-77).

When Tristram is finally able to return to La Beale Isode, he discovers a letter from Isode to Sir Kayhydyus and mistakenly assumes that Isode has been unfaithful to him, calling her a “traytouras” (Malory 299). At this point that Tristram has clearly lost all concept of what courtly love is: while he is legitimized in marrying another woman—so long as he does not consummate the marriage—Isode is condemned for writing a letter to another knight “to comferte hym” (299). His distortion of this chivalrous love ends in his abandonment of chivalry altogether: he flees to the wilderness and pours out his sorrow to the playing of his harp, living naked among shepherds who “clypped hym with sherys and made hym lyke a foole” (301). Tristram is so altered by this failure in love that when he returns to Mark’s court, Isode does not even recognize him: “So whan the quene loked upon Sir Trystramys, she was nat remembird of hym . . .” (304). Tristram eventually recovers from this state, but his relationship with Isode is no longer the center of his tale. He now strives toward chivalry in its traditional sense—the chivalry of tournaments and battles—and abandons Mark’s court to be a knight of the Round Table.

According to Tucker, the fact that Tristram's "career culminates in the welcome he is given at Arthur's court" shows that he prefers knightly chivalry to knightly love, and that the importance of Tristram's welcome to court "is magnified by Malory" to illustrate the declining power of courtly love over Tristram (73-74).

The inconsistencies in Tristram's chivalry and his distorted concept of courtly love stem directly from his status as a "Worshipful knight," in that he adjusts his "expression of the basic feudal virtues—courage, prowess and loyalty—to accord with [his] ambition and [his] prudence" (Kennedy 175). Because Tristram's actions are undertaken in order to maximize his worship and minimize his shame, chivalry becomes a sort of contract: if one person does not hold up their end of the bargain, Tristram is not obligated to hold up his end. Tristram's relationship with King Mark is the best example of chivalry as a contract. Tristram exhibits his chivalrous loyalty to the king by bringing Isode to Cornwall even though he has fallen in love with her; he also maintains his chivalrous courtly love by restricting his interactions with Isode to clandestine conversations and quests in her honor. It is when Mark attempts to kill Tristram and later hides Isode away that Tristram feels a breach in this contract (Malory 266-70). The contract is described by Kennedy, who claims that "[i]f a king cannot trust his best knight to be loyal then there can be no good governance . . . if knights cannot trust their king to be loyal then good governance is likewise impossible" (165). It is only after Mark's betrayal that Tristram and Isode consummate their love for each other and openly demonstrate their affection (169).

If chivalry is merely a contract between a knight and his king or a knight and his lady, a knight's religious loyalties are completely forsaken. Much of what keeps

Lancelot true to chivalry is his fear of God, but Tristram seems to have no such fear and answers only to himself, as is exhibited by his blatant adultery and desire to quest for his own worship; unlike Lancelot, Tristram has no moral compass guiding his actions, and “[w]here there is no fear of shame, there is no need for chastity” (Kennedy 171).

Tristram’s depiction of chivalry and courtly love becomes a tool by which he can make a name for himself and can therefore be altered to fit his own purposes. Thus, the failure of chivalry in this tale is not a failure of chivalry but a failure of Tristram. As a result of this failure, all “courtly glamour” is stripped “from the Tristan-Isode legend by presenting the story of a young knight and a married queen whose sins are all of their own making” (Moorman, *Book 23*) and who have only themselves to blame for the consequences of their actions.

Up until this point, chivalry itself is not responsible for the infringements that occur in the exploits of Gareth and Tristram. Gareth simply abandons courtly love for a different form of love, and Tristram distorts courtly love until it is no longer recognizable. Lancelot has remained the champion of chivalry and courtly love, combining the two perfectly and completely; however, the alignment of his life with Tristram’s suggests that Lancelot’s chivalry will meet the same fate as Tristram’s. At the beginning of “The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwennyvere,” Lancelot has just returned from the Grail Quest and is at a spiritual high point in his knightly career. Upon rejoining Arthur’s court, however, Lancelot begins “to resorte unto Quene Gwenvivere agayne, and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the Queste” (Malory 588). The reason Lancelot has not attained perfection already is that he cares more for Guenevere than he does for any religious oath: “. . . had nat Sir Launcelot bene in his

prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the Quene as he was in semyng
 outwarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the Queste of the Sankgreall”
 (588). He is being pulled in two directions. Outwardly, he is pious and does everything
 for God’s glory, as when he heals Sir Meliot; inwardly, however, Lancelot thinks only of
 Guenevere and does everything for her sake. Thus, a chink already begins to form in
 Lancelot’s chivalry: in order to remain fully loyal to his lady, he has to forfeit some of his
 loyalty to God and the religious aspect of his oath of knighthood.

Realizing the problems that can arise from his proximity to Guenevere, Lancelot
 begins to avoid her and eventually leaves the court “for to eschew the sclawndir and
 noyse” (Malory 588). He must return, however, when Guenevere is wrongfully accused
 of poisoning a knight. In the trial by combat, no one will fight for her, and even Arthur
 wonders why Lancelot is not there: “And he were here he wolde nat grucche to do
 batayle for you” (592). Lancelot eventually does show up, and, after having won the day
 and rescued the queen, tries to reconcile his love for Guenevere and his loyalty to Arthur:

My lorde . . . wytte you well Y ought of right ever to be in youre quarell
 and in my ladyes the Quenys quarell to do batayle; for ye ar the man that
 gaff me the hygh order of knyghthode. And that day my lady, youre
 Quene, ded me worshyp . . . And therefore, my lorde Arthure, I promysed
 her at that day ever to be her knyght, in ryght othir in wronge. (597)

According to Lancelot, he loves Guenevere for Arthur’s sake: how better can he show his
 loyalty to his king than by fighting for and rescuing the king’s wife? Thus, Lancelot has
 temporarily resolved the problem of loyalty in chivalry that is brewing beneath his
 romance, and remains the truly chivalrous courtly lover.

If Lancelot's first great test of love was at the Chapel Perilous, his second is in his dealings with Elaine, the "Fayre Maydyn off Ascolot" (Malory 600). This second challenge is foreshadowed by a wiser Guenevere's actions: fearing a scandal—since Lancelot has remained behind while Arthur and the rest of his knights engage in a tournament—Guenevere sends him away to follow Arthur (599). This estrangement of Lancelot and Guenevere foreshadows the pinprick in courtly love that will occur as a result of Lancelot's fighting in this tournament. Desiring to battle in disguise, Lancelot wears Elaine's red sleeve in his helmet. This favor is sure to hide his identity since Lancelot has never done so much for any lady, even Guenevere: ". . . and if I graunte you that, ye may sey that I do more for youre love than ever Y ded for Lady or jantillwoman" (600). This idea of finding honor in anonymity hearkens back the "Fair Unknown" romance. According to Benson, a knight's "name is his renown, his *status*, and he must constantly prove his worthiness of his name and good fame" (102). In concealing his true identity, Lancelot, like Gareth, wishes to avoid biased treatment or attitudes. Though Lancelot's motives may be pure, his actions demonstrate a serious breach in courtly love, namely in wearing the favor of a lady other than his own. The gravity of this decision of Lancelot's is seen in the fact that Arthur and the other knights at the tournament refer to him as "that knyght that bare the rede slyve" (605). It is no coincidence, then, that Lancelot is seriously wounded in this tournament: it is quite possible that this wound is punishment for his failure to Guenevere.

For Lancelot's own part, it is clear that he has no love for Elaine, even as she nurses him back to health. Elaine knows this yet cannot cease in her love for Lancelot: "Yee truly . . . my love ys he—God wolde that I were hys love!" (Malory 607).

Guenevere, however, needs more convincing of Lancelot's indifference to Elaine. Even after Sir Bors defends his friend's actions and explains Lancelot's reasoning behind the bearing of the favor, Guenevere refuses to be pacified: "Fy on hym! . . . For I harde Sir Gawayne say before my lorde Arthure that hit were mervayle to telle the grete love that ys betwene the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat and hym" (608). Lancelot suspects this anger—" . . . for I am sure hit woll turne untyll angir" (609)—but it is still painful to hear of it from Sir Bors. It is then that Sir Bors offers a temptation to Lancelot, suggesting that he escape the queen's anger by turning his affection to Elaine: "Why sholde ye put her frome you? . . . for she ys a passing fayre damesell, and well besayne and well taught—and God wolde, fayre cousin . . . that ye cowde love her . . ." (611). Bors drops the subject, however, before Lancelot can make any response.

Elaine presents this temptation to Lancelot more forcefully. She first appeals to his mercy and courtesy, saying that she will die if she cannot have his love: ". . . have mercy uppon me, and suffir me nat to dye for youre love" (Malory 614). Having been denied in her first request that Lancelot be her husband, she next asks if he will be her paramour: ". . . for but yff ye woll wedde me, other to be my paramour at the leste, wyte you well, Sir Launcelot, my good dayes ar done" (614). Lancelot is immovable, however, in his love for Guenevere, and Elaine dies of a broken heart. Now Lancelot must appeal to Guenevere, who still has not forgiven him for the wearing of the favor: "And Sir Launcelot made all the meanys that he myght for to speke with the Quene, but hit wolde nat be" (615). It is not until Elaine's funeral barge floats to Camelot, and Guenevere realizes the price of Lancelot's loyalty to her that she forgives him and "[prays] hym of mercy for why that she had ben wrothe with hym causeles" (617-18). She also insists

that at all subsequent tournaments, Lancelot wear her own gold sleeve. That Lancelot is forgiven of his slight violation of courtly love is seen in his winning of the next tournament, while wearing the gold sleeve of Guenevere.

The section that follows this triumph of Lancelot's is a beautiful treatise Malory makes on love, relating it to the passion of the month of May. In the culmination of the section, Malory describes different types of love and yearns for a love that he laments has been forgotten:

But nowadays men can nat love seven nyght but they muste have all their desyres . . . And ryght so faryth the love nowadays, sone hote, sone colde: thys ys no stabylyté. But the old love was nat so; for men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them—and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes. (Malory 625).

With this passage, the story of courtly love within *Le Morte d'Arthur* faces a defining moment. The three main knights of this tale and their romances are represented within these lines. Gareth and Lyones cannot resist their passion and attempt to have their wedding night before the wedding, and when their first attempt fails, they cannot restrain themselves and try again to “have all their desyres.” Tristram is guilty of being “sone hote, sone colde” in his love for Isode. Having declared his loyalty to her, he turns his affection to Sir Segwarydes' lady; when King Mark marries Isode, however, he is inflamed with love for her again, but forgets her in the presence of Isode le Blanche Mains. The third type of love has described Lancelot and Guenevere up until this point in the tale: Lancelot has been true to Guenevere despite the distance between them and

the number of years that they have been apart. They have also allowed no “lycoures lustis” to come between them, proving their undying love for each other and Lancelot’s adherence to chivalry. This passage poses a question: what will “that lusty moneth of May” (624) hold for Lancelot and Guenevere? There are two answers: either Lancelot will reconcile his loyalties to God, king, and lady and will emerge victorious as the greatest knight of the Round Table, or he will fail, and chivalry will crumble from the inside out.

The crumbling begins when Mellyagaunce kidnaps Guenevere in order to have her for his wife. Lancelot, spurred by love and the code of chivalry, goes to “rescow that noble lady frome dishonour” (Malory 628). This goal is ironic, since his actions after the rescue bring more dishonor to Guenevere than her capture would have. On his way to Mellyagaunce’s castle, Lancelot’s horse is killed by the evil knight’s treachery, and in order to reach the castle quickly, Lancelot must ride in a cart. This cart ride is iconic in the career of Lancelot, who, in the French romances that introduce him to the Arthur legend, is known as *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*—the Knight of the Cart. To ride as Lancelot did, on the back of a cart with another driving, was the manner in which criminals rode to the gallows, as Guenevere’s lady-in-waiting points out: “. . . where rydes in that charyot a goodly armed knyght—and we suppose he rydyth unto hangynge” (630). For a knight to ride in such a dishonorable fashion was unthinkable: “I se well that ye were harde bested whan ye ryde in a charyote . . . and evyll likened, so for to liken the moste noble knyght of the worlde unto such a shamefull dethe” (630). For Lancelot, however, nothing is more dishonorable than to fail his lady, so he willingly degrades himself, regardless of the shame, in order to rescue Guenevere. At this point, Lancelot

has reached the height of courtly love in his romance.

After such an achievement, Lancelot seems to have won: courtly love and chivalry seem to have triumphed over the less honorable forms that have plagued the knightly tales of Malory's work. It seems out of place and almost unreal that Lancelot and Guenevere culminate this rescue in a midnight tryst, shattering all hope of a perfect union between chivalry and courtly love (Malory 633). Not even Lancelot can reconcile the inconsistencies of these two sides to chivalry. When Guenevere asks him not to hurt Mellyagaunce, who appears to have repented of his actions, Lancelot expresses loyalty to two people, his lord and his lady: “. . . there ys nother kynge, quene, ne knyght that beryth the lyffe, excepte my lorde Kynge Arthur and you, madame, that shulde lette me but I shulde make Sir Mellyagaunce harte full colde or ever I departed frome hense” (631). Lancelot has reconciled his two loyalties by abstaining from both marriage and the use of paramours: “. . . of thes two thynges ye muste pardon me” (614). His loyalty to Arthur forbids him from marrying Guenevere, and his loyalty to Guenevere forbids him from loving anyone else. However, having attained the height of courtly love, Lancelot realizes all the implications of courtly love: if merely loving another woman would betray him to Guenevere, loving Guenevere—even from a distance—betrays his loyalty to Arthur. Such a betrayal constitutes adultery, which betrays his religious loyalty to God and the Church, for according to Hay's *The Buke of Knychthede*, “lordis na knyghtis suld nocht brek the ath of mariage throw misordynat lechery, for that is a point that discordis with the poyntis of the ordre . . .” (779). This realization tears Lancelot apart from the inside out, and he rejects all loyalties to any person or code except Guenevere.

With this moment of total rejection of chivalry in all its forms, it becomes easier for Lancelot to distort chivalry, much in the way that Tristram does. When the treacherous Mellyagaunce traps Lancelot in a pit so that he may not fight to preserve Guenevere's honor, a maiden who brings him his food daily tempts him to lie with her, after which she will release him. Lancelot refuses until the maiden relents and prescribes that he has to "but onys kysse me" (Malory 636), just as the damsel said at the Chapel Perilous. Lancelot is not as strong anymore, however, and justifies himself in giving in to the maiden's demands: "As for to kysse you . . . I may do that and lese no worshyp—and wit you well, and I undirstood there were ony disworshyp for to kysse you, I wold nat do hit" (636). When Lancelot does fight Mellyagaunce, who loses the battle and pleads for mercy, the normally stalwart Lancelot wavers in his dealing of mercy and justice; he cannot make a decision on his own but must look to Guenevere, the sole object of his loyalty, for direction: "Than Sir Launcelot wyst nat what to do . . . So Sir Launcelot looked uppon the Quene, gyff he myght aspye by ony sygne or countenaunce what she wolde have done . . ." (637). Lancelot has become a broken knight.

Amid the tragic downfall of so great a knight, there is a brief moment of redemption before the love of Lancelot and Guenevere brings about the ruin of Camelot. It is found in the healing of Sir Urré, a knight who has an enchanted wound that will never heal, much like Sir Meliot of Lancelot's first book. Nearly all the knights of the Round Table try to heal this wound, but none is successful, and Arthur insists that Lancelot try his hand at the healing. Lancelot, knowing that he is an impure knight who has failed in the performance of chivalry, does not believe he can heal Urré but, at the insistence of Arthur, tries anyway: "For I shame sore with myselff that I shulde be thus

requyred; for never was I able in worthynes to do so hyghe a thyng” (Malory 643). Having failed in all manner of loyalty and honor, Lancelot, “saiynge secretly unto hymselff,” appeals to the divine and attempts at least to reestablish his loyalty to God: “. . . by the grete vertu and grace of The—but, Good Lorde, never of myself” (643). Lancelot’s plea is granted, and Sir Urré is healed; and Lancelot, convicted of his unworthiness, “wepte, as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn” (644).

Lancelot’s tale is not a hymn to the union of chivalry and courtly love but rather a tragedy of the collapse of the two codes: “The whole story of Lancelot and Guenevere is thus seen by Malory as a gradual debasement of what might have been ‘vertuose’ love into the adulterous relationship he observed in his sources” (Moorman, *Book 17*). This tragedy is seen in the following book, “The Deth of Arthur,” in Lancelot’s rejection of his redemption and his rebellion against Arthur. His rejection of chivalry is poignantly illustrated in his inadvertent killing of Gareth, who looked up to Lancelot as the greatest of knights and was knighted by him (25-26). The rejection is even more apparent in the sad fact that Gareth was not even armed, making Lancelot’s slaughter of him very dishonorable. Ultimately, Lancelot’s story represents a failure of chivalry, or rather of the combination of chivalry with courtly love. This failure is not the result of any particular fault in either chivalry or courtly love. According to Tucker, “love and chivalry are both presented sympathetically, and the reader has no feeling that the moral [of Lancelot’s story] is ready-made, or that he is told what to approve” (101). The failure, rather, is in the attempt to reconcile these two sides of chivalry together into one code to which all knights must adhere. As a result of this, the knight becomes “a tragic figure, pledged to a set of vows and standards which are impossible to maintain even in

the society that conceived them” (Moorman, *Book 72*).

Part III: Concluding Remarks

Thus, the fall of Arthur’s Camelot is not the result of any military or economic failure but rather of a chivalric failure: Arthur’s knights could not uphold the code that their society had established. *Le Morte d’Arthur* provides a portrait of the reasons for, the events leading up to, and the eventual ruin as a result of this failure of chivalry, and each knight’s story adds a chapter to the overarching tragedy of the Round Table. The individual stories of Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram illustrate, each in a different way, the problems of combining the chivalry of war and feudal servitude with the more romantic chivalry of courtly love.

Gareth’s tale demonstrates the problems that such a rigid code can have for young and lusty lovers who cannot be patient in their love but who “muste have all their desyres” (Malory 625). His failure in courtly love, however, can hardly constitute a failure of chivalry since he discards the convention of courtly love as soon as it ceases to live up to his expectations: “I have not deserved that ye sholde shew me this straungeness . . . I have deserved thanke; and well I am sure I have bought your love with parte of the beste bloode within my body” (202). Gareth willingly chooses to give up courtly love, and seems to be better off for it. His tale ends happily with his marriage to Lyones— “And thus Sir Gareth of Orkeney was a noble knyght, that wedded Dame Lyonesse of the Castell Parelus” (227)—and with honor bestowed upon him by various people for whose welfare he has fought or to whom he has shown mercy (225-26). Even Lancelot, the champion for chivalry and courtly love has no reproach for Gareth and, years later, still sings his praise:

Be my hede . . . he ys a noble knyght and a myghty man and well-brethed;
 and yf he were well assayed . . . I wolde deme he were good inow for ony
 knyght that beryth the lyff—and he ys jantill, curteyse and ryght
 bownteuous, meke and mylde, and in hym ys no maner of male engynne,
 but playne, faythfull and trew. (613-14)

Gareth has not adhered to courtly love long enough for it to become permanently affixed to his concept of chivalry; thus, its loss produces little negative effect on him, and he is still “a noble kynght” (613). If Gareth’s tale can be called a failure, it is not a failure of courtly love but rather his own failure to uphold this love. Gareth experiences his own problems with the application of courtly love and foregoes it for a more traditional form of chivalry that serves him as long as chivalry itself endures in Arthur’s court.

Tristram’s tale, as well, cannot represent a failure of chivalry since Tristram is forever adjusting chivalry and courtly love to best suit him, as he does in the instance of Lady Segwarydes’ kidnapping—“Fayre lady, hit is nat my part to have ado in such maters whyle her lorde and husbonde ys presente here . . .” (Malory 246)—and in his refusal to consummate his marriage with Isode le Blanche Mains—“So thys meanetyme than Sir Trystramys sente by a damesell a lettir unto Sir Launcelot, excusyng hym of the weddyng of Isode le Blaunche Maynes, and seyde in the lettir . . . he had never ado fleyschly with Isode le Blaunche Maynes” (285). The result of Tristram’s distorting of chivalry is a barely recognizable pseudo-chivalry that carries him from adventure to adventure, forever seeking praise and honor yet never reaching a pinnacle. Unlike Gareth’s tale, Tristram’s reaches no closure: it spans hundreds of pages and is, by far, the longest book in Malory’s account, yet it ends abruptly—practically in mid-sentence—

after an adventure with Sir Palomydes: “And than Sir Trystram returned unto Joyus Garde; and Sir Palomydes folowed aftir the Questynge Beste” (495). Even Tristram’s death, mentioned in “Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwentyvere,” is anticlimactic, its account buried in a catalogue of knights at one of Arthur’s feasts: “Also that traytoure kyng [Marke] slew the noble knyght Sir Trystram, as he sate harpyng afore hys lady, La Beale Isode” (641). As chivalry and courtly love begin to lose their forms under Tristram’s management, Tristram himself begins to lose substance and is reduced to an afterthought in the tale of another knight.

The real failure of chivalry and courtly love is seen in Lancelot’s fall; if Lancelot, who “passed all other knyghtes” (Malory 151), cannot uphold the standard that he has so diligently striven to keep, there is little hope for the other less-worthy knights of Arthur’s court. This extreme adherence produces two reasons why Lancelot’s failure reaches beyond the collapse of his own chivalry to affect his fellow knights—the height of the pedestal upon which his career has been placed and the magnitude of the fall in which he has found himself. Lancelot’s adultery is not merely an infringement upon his knightly oath but is an attack upon and a removal of loyalty from his liege lord, who also happens to be his king; thus, his indiscretion becomes an act of treason. As a result of the enormity of this offense, the entire body of knights suffers, as Gareth observes upon news of Lancelot and Guenevere’s betrayal of Arthur: “. . . now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled” (647). Not only have the knights lost their paradigm of chivalry and courtly love, but this loss creates divisions among them, which lead to the downfall of Camelot. The final collapse of chivalry is most clearly seen in Lancelot’s killing of Gareth in his rescue of Guenevere

from the execution pyre. Gareth, who has declared that he “shall never say evyll by that man that made me knyght” (647), is struck down “unarmed” (657) in the melee of Lancelot’s attack, chivalrously refusing to fight his fellow knight and courageously facing death at the hands of this same knight.

Malory’s accounts of Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram portray the parasitic relationship that courtly love plays upon chivalry. Courtly love, as a literary convention and as a practice within *Le Morte d’Arthur*, cannot exist without a traditional chivalric foundation; even before the term “courtly love” was coined, some scholars used the term “chivalrous love” to show this connection (Kay 84). The loyalty that a knight feels for his lady and the deeds of prowess that he fulfills for her find their worth in and trace their origins to the loyalty that a knight has and the deeds that he performs for his lord. Courtly love feeds off this chivalry, yet with fidelity’s having to be stretched between these two objects of devotion, courtly love destroys its very source of existence. At the same time, traditional chivalry and courtly love have been so entwined in Malory’s work—the term “chivalry” in Malory automatically implies the addition of courtly love—that courtly love cannot simply be removed without doing damage to chivalry itself. According to Moorman, it is in Malory’s poignant portrayal of this “paradoxical nature” that the “tragic effect” of courtly love upon the fate of Camelot is most clearly seen (*Book 15*). Malory exposes what the French romances that birthed courtly love so conveniently glossed over—that in its attempt to reconcile the conflicting requirements of the two codes, “chivalry provided the means of its own eventual destruction” (74).

Though the ultimate failure of chivalry does not occur until the end of the work, each knight’s story presents problems with the application of chivalry and courtly love

that build from the innocent beginnings of “The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake” to the tragic ending of “The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwenyvere.” This sequential progression of the decay of chivalry in *Le Morte d’Arthur* seems to indicate that Sir Thomas Malory, from the beginning of his writing, had laid out a plan to present the deterioration of chivalry as a result of courtly love. Some scholars, such as Moorman, have observed the timeline of chivalry within the work and believe that *Le Morte d’Arthur* exhibits “an attitude toward and treatment of courtly love by means of which Malory is able to foreshadow and suggest at every turn in his plot the tragic implications of his story” (*Book 27*). It is also possible, however, that Malory’s depiction of chivalry and courtly love sprang directly from his heart as he was retelling the legend of King Arthur and that the implied commentary grew out of the times in which he lived. Having completed his work in “the ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the Fourth” (Malory 698)—between March 1469 and March 1470—Malory wrote during the thick of the Wars of the Roses, a thirty-odd-year street brawl among the nobility of England, where courtly love was all but forgotten and chivalry seemed a thing of the past. Malory himself composed most of his work in prison, where he found himself for his own participation in the Wars of the Roses (Whitteridge 257). Such an environment would have provided an understandable background for the parts of *Le Morte d’Arthur* that exhibit an almost nostalgic yearning for a former era represented by Arthur’s Camelot—a yearning that would have grown in intensity as Malory observed the alignment of Arthur’s time with his own time and as both Malory’s and Camelot’s existences drew to a close.

Such longing and personal attachment draws the story of King Arthur into direct

comparison with the present time, whenever the “present” happens to be, and therefore suggests a connection between Camelot and whatever society in which the work is read. Part of the genius of Malory’s work—whether he planned it out from the beginning or whether it emanated extemporaneously from the passion within him—are the implications that *Le Morte d’Arthur* holds for its “present-day” readers of all eras. By the end of the work, chivalry has died and courtly love is forgotten: the vast story that has both subtly and clearly propounded the qualities of chivalry and courtly love has come to a disastrous end as a result of the incongruity between the two. With such a tragedy occurring in the ideal realm of Camelot, there is little hope for readers living in less-than-ideal circumstances, for whom chivalry is an unattainable principle. Despite this bleak prospect of chivalry, however, Malory’s composition ends in the hope of Arthur’s return as “*rexque futurus*,” or “king to be” (Malory 689)—the story does not record Arthur’s death but merely states that “here in thys worlde he changed hys lyff” (689)—and in the hope of a second chance for a chivalry untainted by contradictory and problematic conditions that arise from an affiliation with courtly love.

With such obvious connections between the failure of chivalry and the collapse of Camelot, the dysfunctional relationship between traditional chivalry and courtly love is a key theme in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. The characters of Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram exhibit inconsistencies because of the inconsistent nature of the standard they are expected to uphold. Whether in Gareth’s abandonment of courtly love in favor of traditional chivalry, in Tristram’s distortion of chivalry and courtly love, or in Lancelot’s strict adherence to the chivalric code and the tenets of courtly love, each tale displays the problems that arise from the amalgamation of the two sides to chivalry and proves the

incompatibility of these two systems in a single, unified chivalric code.

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