"The tale of Sir Tristam": its role in Malory's "Le morte Darthur"

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"THE TALE OF SIR TRISTRAM"--ITS ROLE IN
MALORY'S LE MORTE DARTHUR

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Barbara Crump
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, April 1978

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE KINGS AND THEIR COURTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. ISOUD AND GUENEVERE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. TRISTRAM AND LANCELOT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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ABSTRACT

In his late medieval retelling of the Arthurian legends, Sir Thomas Malory purposefully included "The Tale of Sir Tristram" to provide a literary counterpoint to the tale of Camelot.

In particular, Malory created each of the characters in the Mark/Isoud/Tristram love triangle to serve as a foil to his or her parallel character in the Arthur/Guenevere/Lancelot triangle. Mark is systematically blackened, making him a complete antithesis to the noble King Arthur. Isoud, portrayed as a more noble heroine than in the earlier romances, is made more appealing not only to justify the conflict between Mark and Tristram for her love, but also to enable her to function as a foil to the less appealing, albeit romanticized, Queen Guenevere. Tristram's divided loyalties and inner conflicts as he tries to decide to whom he owes loyalty serve to mirror the equally agonizing dilemma tormenting Lancelot, while at the same time emphasizing the weaknesses inherent in the chivalric code.

Therefore, it becomes apparent that Malory included "The Tale of Sir Tristram" in his work to provide a principal contrast to the Arthurian love story. Although there is still critical discussion as to the wisdom of Malory's inclusion of the Tristram section within Le Morte Darthur, nevertheless "The Tale of Sir Tristram," when viewed in conjunction with the central love story, aids the reader in seeing the Arthur-saga in a clearer perspective.
"THE TALE OF SIR TRISTRAM"--ITS ROLE IN MALORY'S LE MORTE DARThUR
INTRODUCTION

Sir Thomas Malory's decision to include "The Tale of Sir Tristram" in *Le Morte Darthur* creates a major obstacle for critics who view Malory's great work as having a coherent unity. By including the story of Tristram with the story of Arthur, Malory has introduced materials which had never before been linked closely with the Arthurian legend and which have no direct bearing on the rise and fall of the fellowship of the Round Table. One must consider, then, what purpose, if any, "The Tale of Sir Tristram" was intended to serve in relation to the larger work.

Thomas C. Rumble, the author of the Tristram chapter in Robert Lumiansky's book *Malory's Originality*, provides the most extensive justification for Malory's inclusion of "The Tale of Sir Tristram."¹ For Rumble the chief importance of the Tristram section lies in the fact that this section contains certain crucial events in the feud between Gawain and Lamorak. In one sense Rumble's point is well taken: the Gawain-Lamorak feud is vital to the final outcome of the Arthur story. But the inclusion of this material within the Tristram section is not in itself sufficient justification for the existence of the entire Tristram section: there is no apparent reason why Malory felt it necessary to position the Gawain-Lamorak material within the Tristram section.
rather than elsewhere in the Morte. In a way, then, Rumble's discussion is beside the point, for the fundamental question still remains: why did Malory include the material relating to Tristram, Isoud, and Mark in Le Morte Darthur?

Rumble does, however, touch in passing on a more pertinent justification when he suggests that Malory uses "The Tale of Sir Tristram" in order to magnify the virtues of Camelot when compared with the turmoil and unrest plaguing Cornwall, thereby serving to intensify the pathos created when Arthur's "ideal" society of peers ultimately collapses. But Rumble is content to leave this important observation unexplored and unsubstantiated. I intend, therefore, to explore the ways in which Malory uses the Tristram section of the Morte as a principal contrast and literary counterpoint to the tale of Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot. I wish to demonstrate that through his use of parallel themes, motifs, and episodes, Malory unites the "Tristram" with the rest of the Morte and in so doing he creates for his readers a "correlative of, not a sequel to, the story of Arthur's fellowship."² Of particular importance are the love triangles of Arthur/Guenevere/Lancelot and Mark/Isoud/Tristram; therefore, this study will focus on the various parallels which Malory so carefully draws for his readers between the kings and their courts, the ladies, and the knights.
CHAPTER I
THE KINGS AND THEIR COURTS

At the end of Book III, when all of his knights have returned to Camelot, King Arthur sets forth the chivalric code by which the Round Table — the very life-blood of his kingdom — shall be governed:

. . . never to do outrageousity nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, dames, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world's goods.

The code is lofty in its idealism and sentiment; as the knights of the Round Table strive to uphold it, the kingdom of Camelot comes to represent the pinnacle of earthly power and glory:

Also Merlin made the Round Table in tokening of roundness of the world, for by the Round Table is the world signified by right, for all the world, Christian and heathen, repair unto the Round Table; and when they are chosen to be of the fellowship of the Round Table they think them more blessed and more in worship than if they had gotten half the world; . . . (XIV.ii).

Unfortunately, there are inherent contradictions and weaknesses in Arthur's chivalric code, for it ignores human frailties and failings. For example, although a knight was expected never to betray his country or his liege lord, and he was expected always to serve ladies in time of need, there is no provision for establishing the knight's priorities if these ideals should conflict. Arthur's subjects strive to
live by these high standards of behavior, and as a result Camelot becomes a model for the ideal society; yet the inability of Arthur's knights to live up to these standards ultimately results in the collapse of the Round Table.

In contrast with Camelot, the court of Cornwall is known for its ineffectual government and its cowardly knights. Perhaps Sir Kay best expresses this view: "Fie on you false knight, said Sir Kay, for ye of Cornwall are not worth" (IX.xxxviii). This judgment of Cornwall's knights reappears often in the Morte. Thus Camelot is viewed as the potentially ideal society while Cornwall is viewed with disfavor. In Book VIII, Malory presents an incident which links the two kingdoms and clearly reveals the manner in which each is regarded. In this incident Morgan le Fay sends a horn of adultery to Arthur's court. The horn is intended to reveal Guenevere as an adulteress and Arthur as a cuckold. Lamorak confiscates the horn, diverts it to King Mark's court, and is chided by Tristram for doing so. Lamorak replies that he would rather disgrace Mark's court than Arthur's, "for the honour of both courts be not alike" (VIII.xxxviii).

The reputation of each of these kingdoms is closely bound to the reputation of its monarch. Just as there is a huge chasm between the way the courts of Camelot and Cornwall are viewed, so also is there a significant difference between Mark and Arthur as monarch and as men. In the early French versions of "The Tale of Sir Tristram," King Mark is portrayed as a kind and generous ruler who becomes the hapless victim of the tragic but unconquerable love shared by Tristram
and Isoud. In these versions Mark's situation is closely akin to the situation facing Arthur as the victim of Lancelot and Guenevere's love. But Malory chooses to alter the "Tristram" dramatically. In order to justify the love of Tristram and Isoud, while at the same time maintaining Tristram's integrity as a knight, Malory maneuvers character and episodes in the "Tristram" in order to achieve a "systematic blackening of Mark's character."\(^4\)

When the story begins, Mark is overjoyed to meet his nephew, whom he sees as the potential savior of Cornwall:

> O Jesu, said King Mark, ye are welcome fair nephew to me. Then in all the haste the king let horse Sir Tristram, and armed him in the best manner that might be had or gotten for gold or silver (VIII.v).

As soon as Tristram begins to win glory for his deeds and prowess, however, Mark's baser instincts begin to surface. Early in "The Tale of Sir Tristram" King Mark develops a strong animosity toward his nephew, becoming jealous of Tristram's reputation not only as a knight, but also as a lover. Foreshadowing the love they will share for Isoud, both Tristram and Mark fall in love with Sir Segwarides' wife. Rather than fighting openly and honestly for the lady, Mark resorts to treachery. When he is informed of a clandestine meeting between Tristram and the lady, Mark plans to ambush and kill his rival. Both Tristram and Mark are wounded in the battle, but Tristram remains unaware of the fact that his attacker is his uncle. Although Sir Segwarides and his wife are untimately reconciled, a pattern of rivalry has been established between Mark and Tristram, and Mark's
feeling of enmity toward Tristram has become more deeply rooted:

... as long as King Mark lived he loved never Sir Tristram after that; though there was fair speech, love there was none (VIII.xiv).

Mark's jealousy of Tristram as a lover is best seen in Mark's attempts to separate Tristram and Isoud. Even before King Mark sends Tristram to Ireland to secure La Beale Isoud for his queen, Tristram and Isoud have already fallen in love. Tristram, however, is unswervingly loyal to his king and selflessly goes to fetch Isoud for Mark. But Mark's motives for feigning love for Isoud become instantly suspect: although he has never seen Isoud, he desires her all the more because Tristram loves her, and he realizes that his marriage to Isoud would be another obstacle for Tristram to overcome. More important, however, is Mark's plan to have Tristram murdered while on his journey to Ireland:

Then when this was done King Mark cast always in his heart how he might destroy Sir Tristram. And then he imagined in himself to send Sir Tristram into Ireland for La Beale Isoud. For Sir Tristram had so praised her beauty and her goodness that King Mark said that he would wed her, whereupon he prayed Sir Tristram to take his way into Ireland for him on message. And all this was done to the intent to slay Sir Tristram. Notwithstanding, Sir Tristram would not refuse the message for no danger nor peril that might fall, for the pleasure of his uncle, (VIII.xix).

Through these actions, Mark relinquishes all his rights, as king or uncle, to demand loyalty from Tristram.

It is important for the reader of "The Tale of Sir Tristram" to realize that Mark's enmity is not directed solely
toward Tristram. Since Mark is human, and as such falls prey to the very human emotions of jealousy and envy, his actions, although unjustified, are perhaps understandable. Therefore, Malory includes further instances of Mark's cruelty and treachery directed toward people other than Tristram. One particularly striking example of such behavior occurs about halfway through "The Tale of Sir Tristram" in the story of "Alisander le Orphelin." In this story Mark's brother, Boudwin, slays forty thousand Saracens, saves Cornwall, and returns home to accolades and worship. Mark is jealous of Boudwin's glory as well as the love shared by Boudwin and Tristram. Therefore, "for his goodness and for his good deeds this gentle Prince Boudwin was slain" (X.xxxii). Not contented with one murder, Mark also sends knights to slay Boudwin's infant son, Alisander. As a direct result of these acts of treachery Mark's best knights desert him, leaving Cornwall unprotected and vulnerable to both internal and external dangers. Such an episode "shows very well that tyranny and peace are indeed mutually exclusive." Mark's consistently vengeful acts also serve to nullify any claims he has to the sacred authority of kingship. Consequently, he is forced to relinquish his rights to unquestioned and arbitrary rule when his own knights imprison him and free Tristram (X.li).

By making King Mark prey to the human emotions of jealousy and hatred, feelings which motivate his behavior throughout the Tristram section, Malory achieves a degree of psychological realism in his depiction of King Mark:
In Malory . . . Mark's treachery grows out of the internal incidents and conflicts of the story itself: he is not from the very beginning the cruel and scheming antagonist that he later becomes.6

The jealousy he feels toward Tristram is understandable, but his underhanded methods of dealing with his rivals establish Mark as an out-and-out villain.

Only once does Malory bring his two kings face to face in Le Morte Darthur. King Arthur calls a joust in "The Tale of Sir Tristram," and King Mark along with several of his court comes to Camelot. Arthur summons Mark to him and asks Mark to be accorded with Tristram:

Sir, I pray you give me a gift that I shall ask you. Sir, said King Mark, I will give you whatsoever ye desire an it be in my power. Sir, gramercy, said Arthur. This I will ask you, that ye will be good lord unto Sir Tristram, for he is a man of great honour; and that ye will take him with you into Cornwall, and let him see his friends, and there cherish him for my sake. Sir, said King Mark, I promise you by the faith of my body, and by the faith that I owe to God and to you, I shall worship him for your sake in all that I can or may. Sir, said Arthur, and I will forgive you all the evil will that ever I ought you, an so be that you swear that upon a book before me. With a good will, said King Mark; and so he there swear upon a book afore him and all his knights, and therewith King Mark and Sir Tristram took either other by the hands hard knit together. But for all this King Mark thought falsely, as it proved after, for he put Tristram in prison, and cowardly would have slain him (X.xxii).

Rather than serving as an example by which to live, Mark is portrayed as the epitome of falsehood and treachery. While reinforcing Mark's treachery, this confrontation reveals Arthur to be a kind, noble, and beneficent monarch. Arthur also appears to be naively idealistic by believing that Mark
will live up to his promises. The code of honor, which means nothing to Mark, means everything to Arthur.

When Arthur established his Round Table, and anchored it firmly in the chivalric code, he did so to initiate a pattern of behavior for his subjects. As a wise monarch, Arthur knew that in order to protect his kingdom from external threats he must first establish an internal order to bind its citizens together. Arthur's code, therefore, is designed to hold in check the potentially destructive elements within the society:

... the highly ordered rituals of chivalry disguise a passion for anarchy, fratricide, and revenge. Surely much of the appeal of the story of Arthur lies in the paradoxes it temporarily holds in check: the highly ordered ritualistic society of peers devoted to a charismatic leader and the anarchy, fratricide, and cuckolding of the king.7

Before Arthur established this code, Malory had introduced two episodes in which Arthur's own frailty was revealed. The first occurs after the battle of the eleven kings, when Arthur meets and "set [sic] his love greatly upon" Dame Lionors (I.xvii), by whom he has a son named Borre. This episode, a prologue or foreshadowing episode to Arthur's later loves, is roughly analogous to the early love of Mark for Sir Segwarides' wife. In the second episode Arthur has an affair with Morgawse (I.xix), who is already married to King Lot. Although Arthur knows that she is married, he does not know that Morgawse is his half-sister. As a result of this liaison, Morgawse becomes pregnant with Mordred. Merlin warns Arthur of God's displeasure, and tells Arthur that Mordred will destroy him and his realm. In a
fashion reminiscent of the Biblical story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2:16), Arthur orders that all the male children of noble blood born on May-day are to be killed. But as a result of a storm Mordred is saved (I.xix-xxvii), and much later on Merlin's prophecy will be fulfilled. Arthur's attempt to kill Mordred, which parallels Mark's attempt to kill the infant Alisander, is the most unsettling example of Arthur's human failings in the entire Le Morte Darthur. His later weaknesses simply result from the conflict Arthur feels in his love for his wife and his love for his friend.

After he establishes the chivalric code and swears with the knights of the Round Table to abide by it, Arthur seems to have reached his full maturity, and he also has come to realize the responsibility he has to his kingdom. Unlike Mark, Arthur steadfastly carries out these duties to the best of his ability, submerging personal feelings whenever necessary. Rather than engage in a personal vendetta against Lancelot and Guenevere as King Mark would have done, Arthur chooses to pretend that he is unaware that their love exists. After Agravaine and Mordred disclose the love of Lancelot and Guenevere to Arthur, he is forced, because of his position, to allow his knights to try to trap the lovers (XX.i-iii). When the lovers have been caught in a compromising situation, Arthur responds not with anger but with wisdom and strength. Abiding by the laws of his kingdom, he sits in judgment of his wife and condemns her to death.

The inherent nobility of Arthur and his court makes the
destruction of his kingdom all the more poignant. A tone of high tragedy prevails as the code fails because humans inevitably fail, and Arthur's world subsequently collapses around him. The pathos of its destruction is perhaps best expressed by Arthur himself:

... wit you well my heart was never so heavy as it is now, and much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company. And now I dare say, said King Arthur, there was never Christian king held such a fellowship together. ... and ever among these complaints the king wept and swooned (XX.ix).

By paralleling the tragedy of Arthur's court with the lesser tragedy of Cornwall and its king, Malory has succeeded in making this tragedy all the more poignant.
Malory's heriones play important roles in the tragedies of both Camelot and Cornwall. Although Malory's women are not as fully developed as his heroes, both Isoud and Guenevere play pivotal roles in establishing the Mark/Isoud/Tristram triangle as a literary counterpoint to the Arthur/Guenevere/Lancelot triangle. Each of them, for example, seems destined to fall in love with her knight. Before Arthur has married Guenevere, Merlin attempts to dissuade him, pointing out that "Guenevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife," and that "Lancelot should love her and she him again" (III.i). But Arthur is determined to wed her, and his inability to heed Merlin's advice sets in motion events which contribute a great deal to the final tragedy of Camelot.

Isoud falls in love with Tristram initially when she is nursing him back to health, and she claims that she will marry no one unless Tristram approves (VII.xii). But after Tristram is sent to fetch Isoud to be Mark's queen, destiny intervenes for these lovers, too, here in the form of a love potion:

But by that their drink was in their bodies, they loved each other so well that never their love departed for weal neither for woe (VIII.xiv).

Although Malory tries to play down the importance of the love potion -- especially when one compares his version with
earlier versions of the story -- nevertheless it provides the means by which the lovers' fate is determined and they can no longer prevent themselves from giving in to their mutual love.

Just as both women appear to be led into tragic love affairs by forces beyond their control, their station in life makes them both victims of a political system which encourages the idea of the marriage of convenience. Although such arranged marriages were most common among the upper classes of medieval England, Malory does not seem to approve of marriages of convenience. Such marriages, contracted for the sake of expediency rather than out of true love, forced true and passionate lovers to engage in either abstinence or adultery. Malory prefers to celebrate a romantic ideal in which the partners should share a deep love for each other, and a love that is sanctified by marriage. The most perfect example of such conjugal love in *Le Morte Darthur* is the marriage of Gareth of Orkney to Dame Lionessse. When asked by Arthur if "he would have that lady as paramour, or to have her to wife," Gareth replies that he loves Lionesse better than any other lady, and then he affirms his love for her in front of the king:

... an I have not you and wield not you as my wife, there shall never lady nor gentlewoman rejoice me (VII.xxxiv).

In contrast with the ideal marriage of Lionesse and Gareth, the marriages of Guenevere to Arthur and Isoud to Mark are lacking in the mutual passion shared by loving hearts. Although Guenevere is fond of Arthur, Lancelot is
the real love of her life; and even Arthur, in a passage quoted earlier, admits that Guenevere means less to him than his knights (XX.ix). Isoud marries Mark only because she must do so, and she soon comes to despise him. Soon after she and Mark are married, Mark allows Palomides the Saracen to walk out of his court with Isoud, since she had previously agreed to grant Palomides a boon if he would rescue her maid. Rather than fight for Isoud, Mark thinks only of himself: he is afraid that he will be shamed in the eyes of others for letting his wife go without fighting Palomides. Consequently, Mark is not thinking of Isoud's welfare when he sends for Tristram to rescue the queen; he is only thinking of saving face (VIII.xxx). Continued instances of Mark's cowardice and weakness justify Isoud's eventual decision to leave him and live in Joyous Gard with Tristram (X.lii).

Although the basic circumstances leading to their marriages may be similar, Malory makes it quite clear that his two heroines differ greatly in their attitudes and behavior. Malory takes great care to portray Isoud as a much more attractive heroine than the Isoud of the earlier romances. In the French version of the tale, Tristram and Isoud consummate their love before Isoud is wedded to King Mark. Since she is no longer a virgin, Isoud forces her maid Bragwain to sleep with King Mark on their wedding night, thereby tricking the king into believing that Isoud is still pure. Later Isoud becomes fearful of betrayal by Bragwain, so she hires assassins to kill Bragwain.
Malory intentionally deletes the bridal night substitution so that as far as his reader knows, Isoud is pure as she approaches her bridal chamber. Although an attempt is made on Bragwain's life in *Le Morte Darthur*, the plan in this instance is conceived by two ladies of King Mark's court who are jealous of her position and her close relationship with the new queen (VIII.xxiv). They fail in their plan because Palomides the Saracen, who hopes to win Isoud's love for himself, reveals their plan to the queen. Isoud agrees to grant him a boon if he brings Bragwain back safely to court, and Palomides subsequently foils the plot and returns Bragwain to her mistress unharmed.

Not only has Malory changed this story by leaving out the bridal night substitution, but he has also painted a portrait of Isoud as a gentle and loving woman. Here Malory exhibits a significant degree of originality not only in his alteration of the facts of the story and its outcome, but more importantly in his alteration of the character of Isoud. By making Isoud a more appealing heroine, Malory provides more substantial motivation for the conflict between Tristram and Mark for Isoud's love, as well as maintaining sympathy for the lovers. For this design to be successful, Malory's Isoud must be, and is, a psychologically believable heroine.

Malory's Guenevere, on the other hand, is a somewhat puzzling figure. Rather than being the romantic, idealized heroine that she often is in later Arthurian literature, Malory's Guenevere is portrayed as a nagging, dominating,
jealous, and possessive woman. In the early books of *Le Morte Darthur* Guenevere remains an undeveloped character; when Arthur is riding off to battle the five kings, she meekly agrees to go along with him (IV.ii), and when Sir Kay slays two of the five kings, she speaks only praise of him (IV.iii). Indeed, Guenevere has so very little spirit or personality that one wonders why either Arthur or Lancelot could become so enamoured of her unless for her great beauty and mild temperament. Guenevere, however, seems to have captivated Lancelot. In spite of his intentions to relinquish his love for Guenevere, Lancelot falls back into his old patterns of love when he returns to Camelot after the Grail quest. He tries to be discreet, however, for he realizes that Agravaine and Mordred are watching them, and he tells Guenevere:

> the boldness of you and me will bring us to great shame and slander; and that were me loath to see you dishonoured. And that is the cause that I take upon me more for to do for damosels and maidens than ever I did to-fore, . . . (XVII.i).

Guenevere, now a changed woman, refuses to accept Lancelot's sensible explanation, and rails at him for his imagined infidelity:

> Launcelot, now I well understand that thou art a false recreant knight and a common lecher, and lovest and holdest other ladies, and by me thou hast disdain and scorn. For wit thou well, she said, now I understand thy falsehood, and therefore shall I never love thee no more. And never be thou so hardy to come into my sight; and right here I discharge thee this court, that thou never come within it; . . . (XVIII.ii).

Although she claims that she will never love him again,
Guenevere flies into a jealous rage when Sir Lancelot wears the sleeve of another woman as a disguise (XVIII.xv). Guenevere's selfish inability to end her affair with Lancelot ultimately sets the course for the break between Lancelot and Arthur, and the final destruction of Camelot.

One of Guenevere's most destructive tantrums occurs earlier in the Morte when she hears Lancelot talking in the next bedroom, and discovers him sleeping with Elaine. Although Lancelot has been enchanted and actually thinks he is with the queen, the enraged Guenevere chides him for his infidelity and orders him to leave her sight forever. Lancelot, in a state of confusion and disbelief, jumps from a castle window and wanders the forest in madness for two years (XI.viii-ix).

A somewhat parallel episode is found in "The Tale of Sir Tristram" when Tristram is also driven mad, though his madness does not result from any overt action by Isoud. Tristram accidentally finds a letter from Isoud to Sir Kehydius, which was written in the hope of discouraging Kehydius' unrequited love for her while trying to ease the pain of his love. Tristram, however, erroneously believes that Isoud has had an affair with Kehydius. Before Isoud has a chance to explain the situation to him, Tristram leaves the court and wanders in the forest for months, bereft of his senses (IX.xvii-xviii).

Although Guenevere and Isoud differ in personality, both queens are "victims" of political marriages, and both fall in love with one of their husband's subjects. Their
role as desirable lovers makes them principals in the tragedies of the two courts. Malory consistently idealizes the character of Isoud as he is blackening Mark's character, and by doing so he justifies the love between Tristram and Isoud. Malory's blackening of Guenevere's character is somewhat harder to understand than his softening of Isoud. He ascribes to Guenevere many of the vices typically associated with the anti-feminist view of medieval woman: she is nagging, domineering, jealous, and possessive. Because Guenevere evolves into such an unattractive heroine, Lancelot's devotion to her becomes more difficult to understand; however, Malory's portrait of Guenevere as an indifferent wife and queen is used to make the reader more sympathetic with Malory's unfortunate King Arthur.
CHAPTER III
TRISTRAM AND LANCELOT

Sir Tristram functions throughout *Le Morte Darthur* as a foil to Sir Lancelot, who is portrayed in the *Morte* as Arthur's greatest knight of earthly prowess. Because Tristram is the greatest knight of Cornwall and the one knight in the *Morte* who comes the closest to equaling Lancelot in physical prowess, Malory frequently compares the two. In Book X, for example, Merlin foretells a battle that is to take place at the burial site of a knight named Sir Lanceor and his lady Colombe:

> And at that time Merlin prophesied that in that same place should fight two the best knights that ever were in Arthur's days, and the best lovers (X.v).

The knights who battle here are Tristram and Lancelot. From this point in *Le Morte Darthur* until Tristram's tragic death in Book XIX, the lives of Tristram and Lancelot follow remarkably similar patterns. Both are men of renown and prowess; both are slaves to passion and are devoted to their already-married mistresses; and both owe fealty to the husbands of these mistresses.

There are also several specific episodes which provide important parallels between the lives of Tristram and Lancelot. As noted earlier, for example, each knight is driven mad by the actions of his mistress. There are also parallel episodes in which each knight becomes romantically involved with two women who bear the same name. For Tristram these women are La Beale Isoud, whom he genuinely
loves, and Isoud la Blanche Mains, with whom he becomes enamoured and actually marries (VIII.xxxv). Malory uses this same literary convention in a slightly different way when Lancelot becomes involved with the two Elaines: King Pelles' daughter Elaine by whom he has Galahad (XI.ii), and Elaine le Blank, otherwise known as the Fair Maid of Astolat, who dies as a result of unrequited love (XVIII.ix). Such similarities may be rather superficial, but by associating the two tales in the reader's mind, they help Malory to link "The Tale of Sir Tristram" more closely with the rest of the Morte.

A far more important parallel between Tristram and Lancelot in Le Morte Darthur involves the similar conflicts in loyalties which develop for each of them. Although the chivalric code, as discussed before, is lofty in its idealism, the code is plagued by inherent contradictions. It states that a knight should always serve his liege lord and his lady; unfortunately, the code fails to establish priorities when the two come in conflict, as they inevitably do. This choice between lady and liege lord becomes the principal dilemma facing both Tristram and Lancelot.

By arbitrary standards, Tristram owes overwhelming fealty to King Mark: in addition to knighting him, Mark is Tristram's uncle and his king. Tristram's overpowering sense of duty toward Mark drives Tristram to fetch La Beale Isoud for Mark in spite of the fact that he is already in love with her. Tristram's inherent nobility of character enables him to suppress his own desires, and to consider them
secondary to those of his king. Therefore he is unswervingly loyal to King Mark, and selflessly goes to fetch Isoud for his uncle.

When he arrives in Ireland, Tristram saves King Anguish from Sir Blamore de Ganis, and is granted a boon. Tristram asks the boon not for himself, but for King Mark:

... this is all that I will desire, that ye will give me La Beale Isoud, your daughter, not for myself, but for mine uncle, King Mark, that shall have her to wife, for so have I promised him. Alas, said the king, I had liefer than all the land that I have ye would wed her yourself. Sir, an I did then I were shamed for ever in this world, and false of my promise (VII. xxiv).

Tristram's willingness to make such a sacrifice for his lord makes him a sympathetic, albeit naive, character -- particularly in light of the reader's foreknowledge of Mark's treacherous character and motives. Although through his actions Mark relinquishes any right to expect fealty from Tristram, nevertheless Tristram insists on maintaining his integrity as a knight and fulfills this distasteful mission. It is only after Mark repeatedly attempts to assassinate Tristram, and finally imprisons him, that Tristram rebels against his king and leaves Cornwall, taking Isoud to live with him in Joyous Gard. Because Mark has proven unworthy of receiving Tristram's loyalty, Tristram is released from his bond of fealty and is free to devote himself to the services of Isoud. Thus, the conflict between lady and liege lord is resolved for Tristram, and his choice is relatively simple: he chooses to leave Cornwall with his worthy lover rather than stay and serve a traitorous
and undeserving king.

Tristram's agonizing over such a superficially easy choice brings into sharper focus the agony experienced by Lancelot in his similar situation. When Lancelot is forced to choose between the attractive Queen Guenevere and the noble King Arthur, his choice is far more difficult and serious, for Lancelot considers Arthur and Guenevere equally worthy of his devotion and affection. Much later, for example, after Arthur and Guenevere are dead, Lancelot reflects on their nobility:

For when I remember of her beauty, and of her noblesse, that was both with her king and with her, so when I saw his corpse and her corpse so lie together, truly mine heart would not serve to sustain my careful body. Also when I remember me how by my default, mine orgule and my pride, that they were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living of Christian people, wit you well, said Sir Launcelot, this remembered, of their kindness and mine unkindness, sank so to mine heart, that I might not sustain myself (XXI.xi).

Because he wishes to devote himself both to Arthur and to Guenevere, Lancelot refrains from choosing between them; and instead of leaving Camelot and the problem behind him, Lancelot lingers because he does not want to leave their noble company. Lancelot's continued refusal to decide between king and lover, and his frustrating attempts to serve both, are inextricably tied to the destruction of Arthur's kingdom.

The conflict in loyalties is intensified by the belief that a knight must "always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death" (III.xv). Because a knight is always expected to serve his lady, regardless of
whether or not she is married, Tristram cannot desert La Beale Isoud and Lancelot cannot desert Guenevere, for the chivalric code requires the good knight to be a good lover. Perhaps there is a certain nobility inherent in such love. For although Tristram becomes temporarily enamoured of Isoud la Blanche Mains, when he remembers his first love, La Beale Isoud, he refuses to consummate his marriage. As a proponent of romantic idealism Tristram considers marriage of secondary importance to true love. He feels that his duty is greater to the first Isoud whom he loves - although she seems to be unattainable - than to the second Isoud.

Lancelot finds himself in a somewhat similar situation with the Fair Maid of Astolat, Elaine le Blank, who asks him either to marry her or to be her paramour. Because he wishes to be faithful to Guenevere and does not wish to disgrace Elaine, Lancelot refuses her request, but he offers to repay her for her kindness to him with gifts of money and land. Elaine, unable to accept Lancelot's terms, dies of a broken heart (XVIII.xix).

Both Lancelot and Tristram, then, refuse to be unfaithful to their mistresses while at the same time they cuckold their kings. Nevertheless, because their justifications for cuckolding Mark and Arthur are quite different, Malory must treat these two love affairs quite differently. In the case of Tristram and Isoud, Malory feels free to describe explicitly the sexual relationship that exists between them.

Malory's treatment of the adulterous love of Tristram and Isoud, although explicit, is not nearly as moralistic
as the treatment it receives in other legends. As early as the twelfth century, for example, Chretien de Troyes had condemned the adulterous love of Tristram and Isoud and had warned his lovers against such behavior. In an episode in Cliges which closely parallels the Tristram story, Fenice the maiden bemoans her frustrated love for Cliges, yet swears that she will never be like Tristram and Isoud who bring shame upon themselves and their kingdom:

> for he who has won my heart is the nephew of him whom I must take. And although he may find joy in me, yet is my joy forever lost, and no respite is possible. I would rather be torn limb from limb than that men should speak of us as they speak of the loves of Iseut and Tristan, of whom so many unseemly stories are told. . . . I could never bring myself to lead the life that Iseut led. Such love as hers was far too base; for her body belonged to two, whereas her heart was possessed by one. . . . Never will my body be portioned out between two shareholders.10

But Malory's attitude toward the love of Tristram and Isoud is ameliorated, first by the character of Mark, and second by Malory's tacit approval of the natural affection shared by Tristram and Isoud, in spite of the fact that he portrays their relationship as explicitly adulterous.

Tristram and Isoud are taken in adultery when Sir Andred, along with twelve other knights, sets a trap to capture Tristram in Isoud's bed:

> . . . and at midnight he set upon Sir Tristram secretly and suddenly, and there Sir Tristram was taken naked abed with La Beale Isoud, and then he was bound hand and foot, and so was he kept until day (VIII.xxxiv).

This event also provides a specific literary counterpoint to the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere. For just as
Andred plots against Tristram and Isoud, Agravaine and Mordred plot against Lancelot and Guenevere. Along with twelve knights of the Round Table, Mordred and Agravaine trap Lancelot in the queen's chambers (XX.iii).

Malory, however, has trouble dealing with the sexual details of the love of Lancelot and Guenevere. Even though he was not troubled, apparently, by presenting Tristram and Isoud naked in bed, Malory here only says:

And whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list not hereof make no mention, for love that time was not as is now-a-days (XX.iii).

Although it is easy to assume that their relationship is adulterous, Malory hesitates to present explicit sexual scenes between Lancelot and Guenevere. In fact, his entire treatment of the physical aspects of their love is described only in ambiguous and general terms. For example, even on the night when Lancelot breaks the bars on Guenevere's window so that he can be with her, Malory's statement that Lancelot "took his pleaseunce" (XIX.vi) -- a phrase that usually implies sexual intercourse -- is as explicit as he ever becomes. In light of his statement that "love that time was not as is now-a-days," the reader is left to judge Lancelot's guilt or innocence for himself.

On numerous occasions Lancelot vehemently denies having an adulterous relationship with Guenevere, and he defends the queen's virtue to the very end of Le Morte Darthur:

. . . my lady, Queen Guenever, is a true lady unto your person as any is living unto her lord, and that will I make good with my hands. Howbeit it hath liked her good grace to have me in chierte, and to cherish me more than any
other knight (XX.xi).

And again:

... she is a true lady unto you; but liars ye have listened, and that hath caused debate betwixt you and me... for by likelihood had not the might of God been with me, I might never have endured fourteen knights, and they armed and afore purposed, and I unarmed and not purposed (XX.xv).

Although the circumstantial evidence against Lancelot and Guenevere is overwhelming, Lancelot may be speaking the truth. If he and Guenevere have not actually consummated their love, then Lancelot does not consider himself guilty. Indeed, their abstinence may well explain Guenevere's fury at Lancelot's undoubted bedding of Elaine. Lancelot's passion for Guenevere, nevertheless, is real: if he is not guilty of adultery in a literal sense, he is at least "guilty" of being passionately in love with another man's wife, and therefore his "sin" is the sin of lust.

The possibility that Lancelot is innocent of adultery may be borne out by the episode in which he heals Sir Urre. Urre, tormented by wounds unhealed after seven years, can never be healed "until the best knight of the world had searched his wounds" (XIX.x). After Arthur and all the other knights of the Round Table have tried, unsuccessfully, to heal Sir Urre, upon Arthur's insistence Lancelot searches Urre's wounds and miraculously heals him. By allowing Lancelot to perform this miracle, Malory seems to be suggesting that Lancelot is the "best knight of the world" in more than just physical prowess.

In any event, Malory is reluctant to condemn Lancelot
for his disloyalty to Arthur. Throughout the Morte, Lancelot's intentions remain noble, and he does try, however futilely, to fight his love for Guenevere. Just as Malory can describe Queen Guenevere as "a true lover, and therefore she had a good end" (XVIII.xxv), so also he can describe Lancelot as "the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman" (XXI.xiii), and thus a hero who merits a noble death, and one approaching canonization.

In contrast to Lancelot's death, Tristram's death is much less noble. Instead of carrying the Tristram legend to its traditional conclusion, Malory abruptly drops the story after Tristram and Isoud are settled in Lancelot's castle; his tragic death is only briefly mentioned in Book XIX:

Also that traitor king slew the noble knight Sir Tristram, as he sat harping afore his lady La Beale Isoud, with a trenchant glaive, for whose death was much bewailing of every knight that ever were in Arthur's days; (XIX.xi).

This abrupt termination of "The Tale of Sir Tristram" has been the subject of much concern among critics of Le Morte Darthur. The most sophisticated, and perhaps the most attractive explanation for Malory's final treatment of the "Tristram" is reflected in Elizabeth Pochoda's theory about the larger narrative structure of the Morte. Dividing the Morte into three distinctive parts, Pochoda sees the earlier tales of Merlin and Arthur as representative of the flowering of the kingdom. The middle tales of Tristram, Gareth, and Lancelot present a picture of Camelot at the peak of its earthly glory; the Grail quest shows Camelot at the peak of
spiritual perfection. The final books of the Morte portray the crumbling of institutions and ideals, resulting in the final and inevitable collapse of the Round Table.

"The Tale of Sir Tristram," then, falls directly in the middle of the tales of grandeur and glory. According to Pochoda, for Malory to bring the hero Tristram to a clearly tragic end at this point in the narrative would destroy the illusion that he has worked so hard to create:

The reason why Malory leaves out the tragic end of the French tale of Sir Tristram, and leaves Sir Tristram in cheerful domesticity, is surely because these central tales of Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram, and a number of minor characters, are all devoted to the glory and success of the knights of the Round Table.

Consequently, Pochoda believes that Malory purposely postpones any mention of the tragedy of Tristram's death until the final books of Le Morte Darthur. As Arthur's kingdom is being undermined by treachery and deceit, Tristram's murder can more appropriately be introduced. Mark's treachery and cowardice as he attacks Tristram from behind is merely symptomatic of the decay consuming Camelot. Tristram's death, then, is far from the noble death which Lancelot merits in Le Morte Darthur.

The comparisons that Malory draws between his two knights are substantial enough to allow the character of Sir Tristram to function as a foil for Sir Lancelot throughout Le Morte Darthur. Both are guilty of cuckolding their king, although the circumstances of each affair are quite different. Both are considered to be the best knights and truest lovers in Arthur's realm. Above all, both are men
of honor who strive to uphold a code imbued with idealism, but doomed to failure because of its inherent contradictions and weaknesses.
Sir Thomas Malory's decision to include "The Tale of Sir Tristram" in his retelling of the Arthurian legends has proved to be as controversial as it is innovative. "Because of its great length and seemingly haphazard array of adventures," the Tristram section has been commonly regarded as the weakest part of the entire Morte. But in spite of its considerable length, "The Tale of Sir Tristram" is important to the narrative because the turmoil and strife in Cornwall serves as a correlative to the flowering, chaos, and ultimate collapse of Arthur's realm.

Malory carefully paints his picture of Cornwall by systematically altering character and plot. This deliberate alteration of the legend of Tristram permits Malory to draw more detailed parallels between the kingdoms of Cornwall and Camelot. The characters in each love triangle are played off, one against another, to magnify the pathos of their respective situations.

Thus, Malory succeeds in creating a "tragic emulsion" throughout Le Morte Darthur. By using "The Tale of Sir Tristram" as a literary counterpoint to the tale of Lancelot and Guenevere, Malory shows how the potentially ideal society is destroyed when the fulfillment of individual desires becomes of paramount importance to the peers. Thus, "The Tale of Sir Tristram" has a definite place in Le Morte Darthur because it reinforces, through comparison and contrast, the potential greatness of the ideal society, and intensifies the
pathos as those ideals crumble along with the very foundation of the Arthurian society.
NOTES


2 Donald G. Schueler, "The Tristram Section of Malory's MORTE DARTHUR," Studies in Philology, 65 (1968), 53.

3 Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table (London, Macmillan and Co., ltd., 1920), III, xv. All subsequent references to the text of Le Morte Darthur are to this edition, and will be referred to by book and chapter number only.

4 Rumble, p. 136.


6 Rumble, p. 132.

7 Pochoda, p. 114.

8 Rumble, p. 141-42.


11 Pochoda, p. 97.


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