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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Anthony K. Moses entitled "The Myth of the Morte D'Arthur." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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THE MYTH OF THE MORTE D'ARTHUR

A Dissertation

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Anthony K. Moses

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ABSTRACT

Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur is the most popular and influential of the various versions of the history of King Arthur, and has, especially in the twentieth century, inspired a large number of adaptations, retellings, and recastings in both the high and popular arts. One of the major reasons for the modern popularity of Malory's story of Arthur is that it is in fact myth. Myth here is defined as a story which, by the juxtaposition of archetypal figures and supernatural elements with a coherent narrative, allows the reader to recognize that the story has a universal import. This study thus traces the development not of the whole Arthurian legend, but of what became the specifically Malorian form of the myth of Arthur, from its beginnings as pseudohistory through its gradual accretions of archetype and motif until it reaches its most universal and potent form in Malory.

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CHAPTER I

ELEMENTS OF MYTH

Defining myth is a perilous business. Many people, however, apparently live for danger, with the result that seeking a definition of myth is not so much a matter of hacking one's way through unexplored territory as choosing which of several paths one wishes to take. All are trying to reach the same golden city; some go farther in that direction than others; no one has ever quite reached it. This should not be altogether unexpected, for no doubt the final secret of myth is locked way inside the mind; ultimately, there can be no satisfactory theory of myth until there is a satisfactory theory of the human mind (in other words, probably never). Myth is, at the last, not so much a literary or narrative genre as it is a function or perception of the mind. The attempt to find a universal pattern of myth, by which it can be invariably identified and explained, is therefore very likely a hopeless quest. In Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious, C. G. Jung, dealing with the idea that myths are derived from the primitive human's contemplation of the natural world, writes that

So far mythologists have always helped themselves out with solar, lunar, meteorological, vegetal, and other ideas of the kind. The fact that myths are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul is something they have absolutely refused to see until now. Primitive man is not much interested in objective explanations of the obvious, but he has an imperative

need--or rather, his unconscious psyche has an irresistible urge--to assimilate all outer sense experiences to inner, psychic events.¹

Susanne K. Langer echoes Jung when she writes, of a Polynesian moon-myth figure, Hina, that "Hina is not a symbol of the moon, but the moon is a symbol of Hina, Woman."² Her point is that mythmakers do not personify natural forces to explain nature, but use images from nature as symbols for human beings and their activities. While both Jung and Langer may be guilty of overstating their cases, they do perform the important service of reminding us that the genesis of myth should not be regarded merely as an attempt to explain natural phenomena--as if myth were only a primitive empirical science--but as a fundamental function of the human mind; indeed, for Langer, the symbolic function, which is at the root of myth, is the specifically human function that separates humans from animals.³ It would seem, then, that if the mythopoeic function is hidden away in its cerebral holy of holies, there is not much that one can say about it. But the matter is not quite that hopeless. When the mythopoeic function passes through any of the arts, it leaves behind certain traces which can be analyzed, in the same way that H. G. Wells' invisible villain could be followed by means of his footprints. In

¹C. G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 6-7.

²Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 3rd. ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 190.

³Langer, p. 32.

trying to formulate a theory of myth, we are trying to reconstruct, from his footprints, the appearance of the Invisible Man. But though this is never completely satisfactory, we can at least follow the prints to see where he is going.

Here it is necessary to make a distinction. When anthropologists and students of literature use the word myth, they do not always mean the same thing. The "literary" definition of myth is at once broader and narrower than the anthropologist's use of the term. Probably no student of ancient human culture would regard William Blake or George MacDonald or W. B. Yeats as writers of "myth" except insofar as they employed motifs from traditional mythology; even then, the anthropologist would find them of little use in his own studies. Those who study literature, however, frequently use the word "mythic" to describe the effects of these and other writers, as well as to describe the "genuine" myths which may have originated in prehistory. In this sense, the "literary" definition is broader. On the other hand, the literary critic frequently includes in his meaning of the word something of a subjective element--he intends to describe not only the formal content of the story, but the effect that the mythic tale has on the reader. The anthropologist might at this point find himself on rather unsteady, unempirical ground and be reluctant to take this effect of myth into account. Some stories which the anthropologist might unhesitatingly call myth might be rejected by the student of literature on the grounds that they are not "mythic" (in the "subjective" sense) at all. In this case, the literary sense

of the word is narrower. Throughout this study, I will be using myth in the literary rather than the anthropological sense; and a good--because general--place to begin a definition of myth in literature is C. S. Lewis' An Experiment in Criticism.

In the chapter "On Myth," Lewis lists six characteristics of myth as he understands the word. The first is that it is fundamentally "extra-literary"⁴--in the sense that "If some perfected art of mime or silent film or serial pictures could make it [that is, the myth] clear with no words at all, it would still affect us in the same way" (p. 41). A myth does not become more "mythic" because it is written by an especially good English stylist; in fact, since the myth is conceived by Lewis mainly as a certain shape of a story, a very ordinary and uninspired writer might be better in some ways than an exceptional writer whose art might get in the way of the myth--if communication of the myth were the main thing that a reader wanted. Lewis' second characteristic of myth is that it "depends hardly at all on such usual narrative attractions as suspense or surprise" (p. 43). It instead has a certain "inevitable" shape which can be contemplated and "which works upon us by its peculiar flavour or quality, rather as a smell or a chord does" (p. 43). Nor, he feels, is the narrative element of myth strictly necessary: the concept of Ragnarok is, for example, not a story; "The Hesperides, with their apple tree and dragon, are already a potent myth, without

⁴C. S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 43. Further page numbers references to this work are noted parenthetically within the text.

bringing in Herakles to steal the apples" (pp. 43-4). Third, the characters of a myth are not strongly dimensional people: "They are like shapes moving in another world. We feel indeed that the pattern of their movements has a profound relevance to our own life, but we do not imaginatively transport ourselves into theirs. The story of Orpheus makes us sad; but we are sorry for all men rather than vividly sympathetic with him, as we are, say, with Chaucer's Troilus" (p. 44). The fourth characteristic is that myth is fantastic, dealing with "impossibles and preternaturals" (p. 44). Fifth, although the effect of the story "may be sad or joyful . . . it is always grave. Comic myth (in my sense of myth) is impossible" (p. 44). Lewis' final quality of myth is, for the reader, the central quality of myth: "The experience is not only grave but awe-inspiring. We feel it to be numinous. It is as if something of great moment had been communicated to us. The recurrent efforts of the mind to grasp--we mean chiefly to conceptualize--this something, are seen in the persistent tendency of humanity to provide myths with allegorical explanations. And after all allegories have been tried, the myth itself continues to feel more important than they" (p. 44).

Lewis' definitions are not as idiosyncratic as they might sound at first reading. They have in fact been echoed by other writers. Lewis' mythic characters who move like shapes in another world and for which we feel general, not specific sympathy, are what is usually meant by the word archetype. That myth deals, in some sense, with supernatural events, is so generally taken for granted

that for some people the appearance of the preternatural itself is enough to classify the story as "myth." Hence Northrop Frye, though he does not go as far as this, does define myth as a type of story "in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that 'happen only in stories'; hence, a conventionalized or stylized narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or 'realism.'"⁵ The need for gravity or seriousness in myth is recognized by Susanne K. Langer, who distinguishes between "low fantasy" (which may be no more vicarious wish-fulfillment) and genuine myth which, for her, is not merely "grave" as opposed to "frivolous," but is essentially tragic.⁶ Mircea Eliade similarly observes that in cultures where myths are still alive, the people distinguish between "myths" (or "true stories") and fables (or "false stories") which deal with "profane content" or farce,⁷ though both contain elements which (in Frye's words) "happen only in stories." That the myth has a "profound relevance to our own life" is generally agreed upon, though what this means might be interpreted differently by different people. Bronislaw Malinowski, writing from an anthropological point of view, observes that "Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in

⁵Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 366.

⁶Langer, pp. 174-5.

⁷Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 8-9.

present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events."⁸ That is, myth relates the actions and characteristics of the physical (or phenomenal) world to a supernatural or religious (or noumenal) world. Jung would of course have no difficulty accepting this essential formula, though for him the noumenal world would not be an Olympian or strictly supernatural realm, but the collective unconscious with its pantheon of archetypes. And Langer writes that "The great step from fairytale to myth is taken when not only social forces--persons, customs, laws, traditions--but also cosmic forces surrounding mankind, are expressed in the story; when not only relationships of an individual to society, but of mankind to nature, are conceived through the spontaneous metaphor of poetic fantasy."⁹ Clearly, then, Lewis is telling us nothing strictly new or controversial; the only point at which I could disagree with him is in his assertion that myth need not have a narrative element. Certainly the "concept" of Ragnarok, if it means anything, means precisely a story about the last battle between the gods and the giants and the fall of Asgard. Apart from the narrative element involved, "Ragnarok" can have little meaning. The Garden of

⁸Bronislaw Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion (1948; rpt. New York: Anchor Books, 1954), p. 146.

⁹Langer, p. 180.

the Hesperides is a part of a myth (a part, indeed, of several myths), and I have certainly used the word "myth" to describe it before and no doubt will again. But for the purposes of this study it would be better to refer to it as an archetypal cluster, closer in some ways to the images on the Tarot cards than to myth in the strict sense of story. Archetypes are an integral part of myth and the mythopathic¹⁰ effect on the reader (how integral will be discussed later), but an archetype by itself is not a myth unless it carries with its connotations an at least implied story. Otherwise, Lewis has little if anything to say with which one can disagree.

But his approach to myth does contain what some might at first see as an insuperable objection to the practicality of the analysis of myth; I mean the subjective element. The potential dangers in such an approach should be obvious. Lewis himself realizes it when he says that "Since I define myths by their effect on us, it is plain that for me the same story may be a myth to one man and not to another."¹¹ If one means by "myth" merely the reactions that one has to a story regardless of whether anyone else has it or not, then there may be nothing to study; this is "reader-response" criticism with a vengeance, a morass of private impressions which might make a very good diary but a very poor study of literature. But if Jung and Langer are right, there is no way to discuss this particular mode of

¹⁰"Mythopathic" is an adjective which appears to have been coined by J. R. R. Tolkien to describe the emotional or intuitive response that the reader has to myth. I use the term in this sense throughout this study.

¹¹Lewis, p. 45.

symbolic thought without resorting, to some extent, to "personal interpretation," for the significant mythic function takes place not in the terms or forms themselves, but in the mind that apprehends them. What we call the "myth" is the "trigger" that sets off the mythopathic response in the reader. There is, then, simply no way to get around the fact that some myths may produce no mythopathic response for one reader and an overpowering one for another.

It would seem that one way out of this apparent impasse would be to approach myth from a solidly empirical point of view, to attempt to gather as many myths as possible so as to formulate, by induction, a specific narrative pattern clearly present in all myths-- I mean a program that appears to lie behind a study like Joseph Campbell's The Hero With A Thousand Faces, which claims to find the "one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story"¹² that lies behind all myth, and which Campbell calls the monomyth. In its "nuclear" form, the monomyth is as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.¹³

The chief objection to this narrative pattern is that it is almost too general to be of any use; it not only describes the pattern of myth but of western narrative in general. As for his longer form

¹²Joseph Campbell, The Hero With A Thousand Faces, 2nd. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 20.

¹³Campbell, p. 30. The passage is italicized in Campbell's text.

with its various optional accessories--such as the Refusal of the Call (to adventure), the Atonement with the Father, Refusal of the Return, the Magic Flight, and the like--all that one can say is that if they may or may not appear in the myth, then they may or may not be central qualities of the myth--and then, what has one said? One cannot deny that the myth-pattern that Campbell describes is certainly powerful as a story, and that various myths have used the motifs in highly effective ways, but I am doubtful that this is the pattern for myth, however useful it is for comparative mythic studies. One might say that, for example, the stories of Cupid and Psyche, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "Beauty and the Beast," and the ballad "King Henry" contain very similar plot motifs (a person is wedded to--or sleeps with--someone who is--or is imagined to be--a loathsome creature, but discovers that the mate becomes--or has in reality always been--beautiful). But while this describes the underlying plots of all four stories, it ignores the fact that the "surface structures" of the tales are different. It matters very much, to the reader, that the mates in question are, respectively, a god, an old woman, a beast, and a monumentally ugly ogre. Because the mates--and the specific situations--differ, the effect and the import of the stories differ from each other. A myth is not altogether like a sentence as understood in terms of transformational grammar, in which the surface structure may change while maintaining the same deep structure. In myth, the deep structure is in the mind interpreting the myth; a change in surface structure may change the deep structure profoundly.

The "monomyth" pattern--and other theories which attempt to explain myths by imposing ready-made universal structures upon them--appear chiefly to obscure the differences between myths.

Another possibility might be to ignore the specific meaning of the word "myth" as it has been defined here, and simply to use the term to describe the whole of a culture's fund of traditional stories involving the supernatural or religious, whether they produce the mythopathic effect or not. This would indeed remove the problem of understanding what produces the mythopathic response, in the same way that classifying amphibians, reptiles, and insects as "creeping things" clears up a number of problems of taxonomy; but it does little to further knowledge. And it ignores the very real fact that not only do some of the "traditional" myths seem more powerful and universal in their effects than other myths do, but that a number of "non-traditional" writers produce stories that have similar effects.

One might then be tempted to throw up one's hands and consign the whole problem to the psychologists. But this would be, if nothing else, the abdication of a responsibility and, worst of all, a rather frank admission that, once one has left the realm of linguistic and textual studies, the student of literature has little more to offer. It also ignores the very important fact that a story is more than the words that make it up, that a story does not exist in an empirical, objective vacuum, but only in relation to a mind reading it. Any study of literature which deals with the effect of a work on a reader--even the simple proclamation that one work is better than another--is as "subjective" as a discussion of the effect of the

myth on the reader, for there will always be readers who will disagree; anyone who has attempted to explain to students why Paradise Lost is worthy of their appreciation has noted that some are (sometimes resolutely) impervious to any explanation; this does not, however, mean that Milton cannot be discussed in terms of subjective reaction. If it did, we might find that we no longer had any right to make any sort of qualitative distinction between Melville's Moby Dick and Peter Benchley's Jaws.

But a discussion of myth is not quite so subjective and ambiguous as to be impracticable--only a little dangerous. We do know that when we respond to myth, it is not for the sake of cunningly-drawn characters, or adventure, or the beauty of the language, or suspense and puzzlement, or mere wonders. These things may accompany the myth, but they do not explain it; myth is more than the sum of these parts. What we find in myth is a significance that goes beyond the events described. We feel that the significance of the myth is in some way universal, that is has something important to say to us, but that this significance cannot be adequately expressed in simply propositional statements. If we are to try to understand how a myth "works," we might begin by attempting to account for those elements in some stories which produce this mythopathic effect.

The place to begin in a study of the effect of myth is with the archetype. We have Jung to thank for making this term popular, but we need not accept the whole of the psychological system which he proposes in order to use it. For Jung, the archetype is a

phenomenon from what he calls the collective unconscious and which is itself unknowable except insofar as the waking mind remembers its appearance in dreams or incorporates it into myths or fairy tales. The main drawback to Jung's theory is that it relies on rather doubtful genetics to explain the universality of the archetype; for Jung, these archetypes are biologically inherited from our archaic ancestors. But there is no need to search for a biological explanation if another, simpler explanation will serve. Northrop Frye, in dealing with a more literary concept of archetype, regards it as those repeated symbols in literature which help "to unify and integrate our literary experience."¹⁴ But one need not limit the appeal of the archetype to psychological or literary experience.

An archetypal image is, at its simplest level, a visual image of a thing or person regarded by the viewer or reader as a fundamental datum of human existence, uniting the viewer with what he perceives to be the common past experience of humankind. Such things as the sea, the sun, a horse, an old man, a woman, a mountain, or a forest are at least potentially archetypal in ways that a can-opener, a stop-sign, a stereo, or a typewriter are not. The more recent an object is, the less likely it will be seen as an archetype, because there is little chance of perceiving that it is universal or fundamental to the human experience. For example, a chariot might be seen as an archetype by our age because our cultural memory can recall no time or place that the chariot was invented; it is a given in our

¹⁴Frye, p. 99.

experience. We normally do not regard an automobile as archetypal because we cannot have the illusion that it has always been with us. We are aware that its presence sets us apart from past ages; it emphasizes the differences between our century and others (this does not mean that the automobile cannot be used as a symbol--as it is, for example, in Jean Cocteau's film Orpheus--but its significance as a symbol is artificial and assigned by the artist who uses it). Langer writes that "For some future generation, an aeroplane may be a more powerful symbol than a ship; its poetic possibilities are even more obvious."¹⁵ Perhaps; but if it ever does, it will be in an age which has long forgotten (or only dimly remembers) that there was ever an age without the plane. The use of a plane or (as in Cocteau) the automobile or the motorcycle in a telling of a myth would be an interesting conceit, clearly and deliberately employed because the artist realized that, in a context where it does not belong, it is automatically a striking (if not always attractive) image. It might even be a useful and interesting symbol. But it would not be an archetype. Any sort of contrivance which has appeared within conscious cultural memory disqualifies itself by its very newness; it is clearly an image which separates centuries and cultures rather than unifying them.

But to use the phrase "fact of human existence" suggests that an archetype is based solely on those things observed in the physical world; and this is not so. The "supernaturals" that inhabit myth and

¹⁵Langer, p. 288.

fairy tale are not (we usually hope) visible in normal life. But the tendency to invent them is universal; there is probably no culture that does not have its equivalents of these unearthly creatures. Such beings are potentially archetypal in the sense that they would be recognized anywhere as belonging to that class of supernatural beings who influence our lives in some way. Even our own century's addition to this menagerie, the "alien being," is, when he appears, usually either a monster or the technological equivalent of a fairy or god.

This is the meaning of archetype at its simplest level, then. The people or objects about which the myth is concerned must be universal or perceived to be universal, or the mythopathic reaction is brought up short by the anachronistic incongruity. The myth cannot be universal if the heart of the story is about things that we know well are not universal but merely the accidents of an age. But the universality of an image is not enough to guarantee its being an effective mythical archetype; there is also the matter of connotation. A cow is as universal a figure as (if not more universal than) a horse. A winged horse is a powerful image; a winged cow is another matter--in our culture, at any rate. We have been taught by history, legend, and literature to regard the horse as a "noble" beast, a friend to humanity, a creature of battle and romance; he (one invariably thinks of it as "he") is a companion of the gods in Greek myth, a steed for angels in the Apocalypse of St. John, the mount of kings in European history and literature. Our own immediate experiences with horses teach us to see them as beautiful and

graceful creatures, the quintessence of speed and power. They are "naturals" for archetypes. Cows, by comparison, are blocks of flesh that, for the moment at least, serve as a necessary link between grass and milk. They are rarely praised in literature. No one uses them in battle. Few occidental myths have anything to say about them. A cow is a perfect representation of the ordinary, the homely, the bucolic. A cow that suddenly mounts up with wings like an eagle is inappropriate and funny. But as soon as one realizes that the image is inappropriate or funny, the archetypal response stops dead, and the myth itself comes to a halt until the laughter is over. What we regard as appropriate for the horse--that such a noble beast should be given the wings of another noble creature, the eagle--strikes us as a piece of presumption in the cow, chiefly because the connotations that have gathered about the horse help us to forget that it, like the cow, is an herbivorous quadruped that would usually rather graze than fight and whose first instinct is to run away from danger rather than confront it, even if the danger is nothing more than a bit of paper that was not in the pasture the day before.

In brief, an archetypal image should contain connotations that are appropriate for the context that it appears in. If the context and the associations are inappropriate, then the image is drained of any archetypal power it might have had, and the result is frequently humor. If, however, the image is both universal in the sense already defined, and carries connotations appropriate to its function in the

story, then it has great potential as a significant image in the myth. It becomes at least capable of being more than its literal referent, of standing for not only itself but for all of its species as well as for any abstractions its connotations may suggest.

Obviously this at least partly accounts for the element of subjectivity in response to the myth, for one may feel the associations around the image only if one already knows what those associations are, and this means having read the "right" books or at least having been in some kind of imaginative touch with the archetype. If one does not know the legendary and historical connotations of the sword--if one knows little history, or has never read of the sword in the hand of Michael the archangel or flashing like a comet before the gates of Paradise--then there may be no reason why the reader should be surprised if the hand clothed in white samite rises from the lake bearing not Excalibur but a spoon or a submachine gun. When the hand from the lake gives Arthur the sword, it is not just providing him with a useful tool. It is conferring upon him a symbol of power that could be traced back through history, myth, and Scripture to the hand of the angel that guarded Eden. It is, in Frye's definition, a "complex variable"¹⁶ whose many connotations are waiting to be defined and augmented by not only the narrative context that it appears in, but by the associations in the reader's mind. It has ceased to be a mere image in the lowliest sense and has become an image with a nimbus.

¹⁶Frye, p. 102.

Two other attributes of myth--the supernatural and the plot--are closely related. In myth there are supernatural beings, objects, or deeds which affect the course of the story, or give it its significance or shape. Perseus, to kill Medusa, whose gaze turns men to stone, approaches her by looking at her reflection in his shield; from the Gorgon's blood, Pegasus arises. A woman plucks an apple from a tree and the world falls, Psyche lights a lamp to look at her sleeping god-lover, and is cast from his presence until she performs a series of impossible tasks. Odin, to gain wisdom, pays with one of his eyes. A man begets upon a woman a monster who, when he has killed his father, becomes a god.¹⁷ In each of these stories we are presented with a series of causally related events, but the supernatural causes are none that we can recognize from our own experience. These are obviously "fantastic" stories. This very element may alienate some readers, particularly the readers who demand "real stories about real life." If such a reader does not care for (or is imaginatively incapable of suspending disbelief in) the supernatural in fiction, then the story will obviously not be myth for him because he will never attend to it or, if he does, will regard it with a contempt that will not allow for any mythopathic reaction. At the other end of the scale is the person who is addicted to the fantastic in an unhealthy way, who is incapable of enjoying "real stories about real life" and whose appreciation of a story

¹⁷This, as C. S. Lewis describes it, is the central myth behind his early verse epic, Dymer (London: J. M. Dent, 1926).

increases in inverse proportion to how likely it is to happen. It may be that this sort of person is as incapable of responding to myth as myth because he is merely responding to it as a collection of wonders. His attention is trapped at the level of the literal image. Between these two extremes is the reader whose tastes are more catholic, who is capable of enjoying stories about both the "real" world and the wonder-world. It is this reader who will be most likely to respond to the power in the myths, at least partly because he has a foot in each world.

Myth, as Langer notes, is not unalloyed fantasy: there is something recognizable from the real world in every myth, whether these are familiar objects or familiar concerns.¹⁸ The props or the settings or characters will be recognizable on the level of the image; the basic human needs or concerns in myth are also familiar. Part of the mythworld, then, is a familiar world. On the other hand, there are the supernaturals, elements with which the reader has probably had little real-world contact. It is the presence of the supernaturals that may produce the mythopathic response in the reader but which, ironically, may also prevent the response from occurring. If the supernatural element is merely arbitrary--that is, if it does not affect the shape of the story but merely appears from time to time as "window-dressing"--then the reader can see that the story is really only a naturalistic story temporarily or needlessly festooned with

¹⁸Langer, p. 178.

marvels. He is then free to take either the story or the marvels as he pleases; neither is clearly dependent on the other. On the other hand, if the story is only a series of fantastic events, the reader is again unlikely to see the story as myth. If the world is too bizarre or too alien--if its humans or gods or monsters behave in absolutely incomprehensible ways or if the settings and events are so "supernatural" as to exclude any imaginative sympathy so that the tale proceeds with a completely alien and incomprehensible logic--then the story again will not be read as myth. Langer, writing about semantics, has said that terms have meaning only so far as they stand in relationship to other terms.¹⁹ The same can be said of the events and images in myth. If the elements--both natural--of myth do not stand in a clear relationship to one another, either because they are not connected in any necessary way (as with the case of the arbitrary supernatural elements) or because their connections are so unusual as to be all but invisible, then the "story" is no more a story than is a nightly dream or a child's rambling narrative.²⁰ And where there is no story, there is no myth.

When the supernatural and natural elements are combined in a myth in a "holistic" fashion, however--when they can be seen in a

¹⁹Langer, p. 55.

²⁰Langer makes a similar distinction between the incoherence of nightmare and "young children telling yarns" on one hand, and the demands of narrative coherence and significance on the other hand if the story is to be widely accepted (pp. 173-4).

sense causally related to each other--then the possibility of true myth begins to emerge. When a reader comes upon such a story, he must not only suspend disbelief in the way that he would to get over the momentary improbabilities and coincidences that might turn up in a more "realistic" story form (such as the detective or "romance" novel) but must enter into a different kind of belief altogether.²¹ While in the mythworld, he finds that he must let go of the presuppositions upon which he bases his daily life. The experience is a little like that which occurs when one encounters a Zen koan--the mind must separate itself from the usual habits of thought so that it can perceive new possibilities. The difference is that a koan is by its nature irrational--it is not a riddle to be solved but a verbal device designed to eliminate rational thought altogether. The myth has no such pretensions. It is still understandable at least on the level of story. But if the reader is to understand the myth--if he is to "resolve the tension" between the familiar and the supernatural elements of the myth--then he must think in a different way. He must search for other patterns to which he can compare the pattern of the myth. And these will be patterns not only in the external world or in the other stories that he has read,

²¹ Ernst Cassirer, in An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), writes that myth "defies and challenges our fundamental categories of thought" (p. 73), and adds that "the mythical world is, as it were, at a much more fluid and fluctuating stage than our theoretical world of things and properties, of substances and accidents" (p. 76).

but in his internal world as well. Lewis, writing on the effect of myth (in a different essay) supposes that when one reads myth, the world of the concrete (the world of the senses) and the world of the abstract (the world of the mind) coincide and we perceive them as one.²² This is very similar to Jung's remark that "archaic man" (as he calls those humans who are uncivilized or pre-civilized) does not think in abstract but concrete terms.²³ When the myth works, two normally separate mental functions coincide for the moment. The myth shows us two worlds--the natural and the supernatural--and "dares" us to make sense of them. In the process of "making sense," we find the meaning in the myth.

One final and important aspect of myth has to do with the way that the reader perceives the myth as having universal applications or as being in some way an index of reality. This is the place of what might loosely be called the "Divine." The most obvious representation of the Divine in a myth is the presence of a god or a being who serves, and therefore represents the will of, a god. When such a being gives advice, rewards, punishes, or significantly affects the progress of a story, the reader is clearly shown the values--the ultimate reality that influences and shapes human lives--of the world in the story, and if he finds these values congruent with his own,

²²C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in God in the Dock, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 65-6.

²³C. G. Jung, Modern Man In Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933), p. 144.

the story may become a myth for him. Conversely, if he finds the values repellent, he may see the myth as no more than a savage wonder-story unworthy of his sympathy. But even if the myth has no obvious godlike figure, its story may still derive its shape and narrative force from what the reader regards as a universal norm or taboo. For example, in the story "A man begets upon his sister a son who grows up to kill him,"²⁴ the effect of the story is derived from the feeling that it is simply a universal wrong for men to lie with their sisters or sons to kill their fathers. Consider the parallel story, "A woman, contrary to the rules of table etiquette, places the salad fork on the right rather than the left side of the plate, and during dinner is stabbed to death with that very fork." The effect is ironic, but not tragic or mythic, because in our culture it is not regarded as universally important which side of the plate the silverware is set on. The story of the son of incest strikes the reader as significant or important because it reinforces or is an example of what most readers will regard as a universal truth. It is true that no strictly supernatural person or event is present in the tale; but it is also true that without the noumenal value "Incest is an abomination" or "Patricide is evil," it is not even a story, but two unrelated events, as disconnected as the sequence "A man steps out of the barber's and is hit on the head with a falling safe."

²⁴The Arthur-Morgause-Mordred story in Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur.

Without the assumption of a Truth, a God, or at least an impersonal Justice, the story of the son of incest is equally a non sequitur. For the story to have meaning, even on a basic narrative level, the reader has to supply his own (in the etymological sense) evaluation.

It would be very convenient if, at this point, we could take the elements of myth discussed so far--the archetype, the supernatural, the Universal or Divine, and the self-contained story--and construct some sort of universal pattern into which they could be placed and which would therefore be a blueprint for all myths. But it should be clear that this cannot be done. To succumb to this temptation would be to produce something dangerously near Campbell's monomyth, and that way lies, if not madness, then at least uselessness. The ways in which the separate elements stand in relationship to each other change with each myth. We can point to stories that contain these elements, and discuss how the presence or absence of any of them affects the shape and meaning of each story, making it more or less mythic. But it is very probably impossible to go much farther beyond this, for this would mean going into the inaccessible regions of the mind itself, into the unknown country where symbol and structure are transformed into meaning. It would be better to say that the relationships of these elements to each other in the myth produce a kind of narrative matrix which generates or reveals certain sorts of patterns of relationship in the mind itself--which patterns are unobservable except insofar as the conscious mind is aware of them. And as Jung--or probably any other psychologist--would tell us, to

become conscious of the patterns is to transform them. It would seem that the study of myth has its own version of the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy in physics: the essential operation cannot be observed without to some extent altering it. But though the final secret of myth may continue to slip through our fingers, we can, by referring to the elements of myth discussed in this chapter, observe their relationships within particular stories and note how they are likely to generate the mythopathic effect in the reader.

But if a myth is to have any effect on the reader, it first must be seen as myth. The two following characteristics, while not themselves elements of myth proper, are conditions which are necessary if the reader is to perceive and therefore respond to the myth.

A myth, as has amply been indicated, is a story, a selection of events to form a self-contained narrative. That the plot should be visible--that the reader should know what the story is about--is a requirement for most stories, but especially for myth. Since the effect of a myth depends on our perception of the relationship of one event to the other, any elements that tend to obfuscate that relationship weaken the mythic effect. This means that a rambling story filled with digressions is not likely to be regarded as myth, if for no other reason than that the reader will become confused by the apparently arbitrary organization of events. If the story has no perceivable narrative structure, there will be no way to be certain which are the significant events, or whether the story is progressing or simply ambling along unconcernedly, unless the author takes pains

to point out which are the significant events. An author whose main concern is to tell a story clearly will be more likely to transmit a myth than an author whose greater artistic or thematic pretensions convolute or obscure the plot.

Tone is also very important. The writer, as well as the reader, must believe what he is writing--not, of course, in the sense of thinking that the story he writes has or had its literal referents in the external world, but at least treating his story as if he did. Few things, apart from incompetent plotting, are as likely to impede the mythic response as a writer who is careful to let his reader know that he does not take the story seriously, whose tone and approach are coy and, he thinks, "charming." This is why Charles Perrault's long and excessively cute "Sleeping Beauty" is inferior in mythic power to the simpler and more direct Grimm brothers' version of the same tale, "Briar Rose." Perrault's tone lets us know that he does not take the story seriously, and so we cannot. The Brothers Grimm, though they did not literally believe the story either, at least do not tell us so, but are content to record the bare outlines of the tale, with the result that whatever power it has is more clearly visible.

If it seems that I am saying that the best thing a mythic author can do is to keep out of the way as much as possible, it is probably because I am saying this. The temptation for an author who is too conscious of his art and too eager to display it is to "dress up" the myth in such a way that it becomes all but invisible; if he

is too conscious of his own dignity, he will be unable to give the story the simple belief that it needs to survive and may write with his tongue in his cheek. The best transmitter of a myth, once it has been "invented," may be a writer with a competent, clear style and a devotion to the story that is uncomplicated by self-consciousness or pretensions. He may be completely unaware that he is transmitting or inventing myth at all--his goals may be simply to tell a complete story clearly and well--but he will succeed where a greater artist may fail.

This chapter has so far attempted to account for the effects of myth in its literary form and to describe the type of narrative environment in which it may most readily be detected. It has had nothing to say, however, about the origins of myth, and for a very good reason. If, as has been suggested, myth is ultimately a mental function, a particular way of regarding the world, rooted in the fundamental nature of human consciousness, then it is obvious that any explanation as to how myths arise in the mind will have to be little more than speculation, for the roots of the mind are deeply buried. One cannot ask the creators of the classical myths how they came to invent them. Nor would it be very fruitful to ask a modern "mythic" poet or novelist how he came to write his myths, for probably few, if any, artists are conscious of the mechanics of the mind at the moment of creation. And any attempt to describe the process after the fact might read something like Poe's essay on how he came to write "The Raven"--which presents a far more orderly and deliberate process than is likely to occur in the creating mind.

But if we cannot account for the origins of myth, we can watch myth as it evolves, as various elements cohere and change to produce a mythic story. And there is probably no better example of a myth in the process of becoming than the story of King Arthur. Though many of the steps in Arthurian evolution are unavoidably lost to us--most notably the oral traditions about Arthur, as well as some literary works that, if they existed at all, survive only as titles mentioned in extant works--the popularity of the Arthurian story ensured that it would be continually retold and would therefore survive in a number of forms. We are therefore at liberty to observe the development of Arthur from a shadowy war-leader briefly mentioned in the annals, into a king with a splendid and highly detailed kingdom and history. But the history of the Arthurian legend is more than a matter of accumulation of details. It is, instead, a series of remarkable transformations in the nature of the story. With each major retelling and each major change in characters or narrative structure, with each introduction of a new theme or motif, not merely a new story, but a new kind of story emerges. The legend of Arthur gradually becomes more universal, more capable of meaning different things to different readers--in other words, more a myth. The culmination of this process is Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur. It is Malory's version of the story that, to borrow William Faulkner's words, has not only survived but prevailed, that has engendered a great many works in various art forms, in poetry, the popular novel, music, film, and even comic strips. The

generative power of the story is immense and apparently of great significance to our age. How the story of Arthur came to be such a myth--how the changes in its form and meaning resulted in the story that Malory told--is the burden of this study.

CHAPTER II

THE PERIOD OF MYTHIC GENERATION

Most histories of Arthurian literature--of which there are many--begin with the earliest, briefest mention of a battle (Mount Badon) or a name (Arthur) or a puzzling title (dux bellorum) and proceed clearly along a path of evolution or aggregation of detail, like tracing the progress of the first modest snowslide into a full-scale avalanche, until they end with Le Morte D'Arthur. This chapter makes no such comprehensive claim. Though I do indeed begin with Gildas and end two chapters hence with Malory, my chief concern is not with Arthurian legend as a whole but with a specific aspect of the stories: that is, their development as myth. Consequently, I can afford to be more selective in the details discussed and even in the works mentioned, for not everything that mentions Arthur's name can be said to have made a contribution to the developing myth of Arthur--or, more specifically, to the myth as it appears in Malory. For this purpose, only those works which can clearly be seen as precursors to Malory will be discussed.¹

¹About halfway through my first draft of this chapter, I re-read Charles Williams' unfinished Figure of Arthur, a "mystical" history of the Arthurian legend which has been published, with a commentary (by C. S. Lewis) on Williams' poetry, under the title Arthurian Torso (London: Oxford University Press, 1948). I discovered two points in his discussion which are similar to points I have made in the discussion of the same materials, specifically in reference to Geoffrey of Monmouth and to the effect that the Grail had on the story of Arthur. Concerning the Historia, Williams

Gildas' De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae (dated at around 540 A. D.)² is not strictly an Arthurian work, as Arthur's name is nowhere mentioned in it. But two names later associated with Arthur are: Ambrosius Aurelianus, under whose leadership the Britons withstood the Saxons, and Mount Badon, where one of the last great slaughters of the Saxons took place. Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson has pointed out, as many others have, that Gildas' omission of Arthur's name can be taken as evidence that there never was an Arthur at all,

writes, "Geoffrey had taken up a fable and so shaped and told it that it now had the potentiality of myth. Other and greater writers were to change it again into something more tremendous. But none of them should have written without, in the end, saying to their books, as the lord Galahad said to Bors of Lancelot: 'Salute me to my lord Geoffrey our father'" (p. 33). As for the Grail, Williams writes that it gave the Arthurian story "a union and a centre From this poetic point of view, the whole development of the myth is a kind of working out of a theme which is eventually discovered to be the Christian theme" (pp. 66-67). Williams' precis (on pp. 93-94) of his projected work is also, in a rather general way, similar to my own plan, though Williams seems to have been more concerned with the theological possibilities of the legend, especially as he employed them in his later Arthurian poem cycles. While I cannot recall being consciously influenced by Williams' work (the genesis of my own study was, in fact, an argument with a friend of mine one evening over the reasons for the appeal of the legend of Arthur), I cannot discount the possibility that Williams was concealed in my subconscious, waiting to come out. Psychologists will have to make what they can of this.

²Date supplied from Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson in "The Arthur of History," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 2. The relevant Arthurian excerpts from Gildas--as well as from other "Arthurian" chronicles--may most conveniently be found in E. K. Chambers' Arthur of Britain (1927; rpt. Cambridge: Speculum Historiale, 1964), in the appendix entitled "Records" (pp. 233-282). Selections from these texts, in modern English translation, have been compiled in Arthur, King of Britain, ed. Richard L. Brengle (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964).

or else that Gildas may have not bothered to mention him simply because he was already well-known enough to need no mention.³ For the purposes of this study, however, it matters very little whether Arthur was historical or not; in fact, except insofar as Arthur's "real" career influenced the development of the story (and Gildas may show us as much as we can hope to know of his real career), it does not matter at all. Gildas' chief contribution is to provide two names which turn up in successive retellings of the story of Arthur, as well as a historical context (Vortigern and the Saxons). But this is not a story of Arthur, merely a reflection of what was regarded as an historical reality which ensuing annalists and pseudo-historians were to embroider.

It is with Nennius and his Historia Brittonum (dated in the early ninth century)⁴ that the first outlines of a story begin to appear. Nennius tells us that Arthur, dux bellorum, fought against the Saxons, leading the kings of Britain in twelve battles, climaxing with Mount Badon, in which he himself slew nine hundred and sixty men.⁵ Twelve battles do not, of course, make a story, but they at least provide a progression of events. We also encounter the first

³Jackson, p. 3.

⁴Chambers, p. 238.

⁵"Duodecimum fuit bellum in Monte Badonis, in quo corruerunt in uno die nongenti sexaginta viri de uno impetu Arthur;" Chambers, p. 239. "The twelfth was the battle at Mount Badon, in which on one day nine hundred and sixty men fell to the ground during one onset of Arthur;" trans. Brengle, p. 6.

record of Arthurian wonders. At the battle of Castle Guinnion, Arthur carried on his shoulders the image of the Blessed Mary Ever-Virgin and made a great slaughter of the pagans through Jesus Christ and the Virgin.⁶ This particular motif comes to nothing in the later retellings of Arthur's story, but it does help to establish, early in the development of the story, a vague Christian ambience for the Arthurian world, an ambience that will come to full flower later in the French Prose Vulgate Cycle. It at least tells us that Arthur is a Christian here and that Heaven has some interest in him, though Nennius' observation may be nothing more than a conventional pietism. The statement that Arthur killed, in one day, nine hundred and sixty men at the battle of Mount Badon is a borderline wonder: while not absolutely impossible, it is not likely, and it pushes Arthur further out of the world of ordinary military heroism and into the world of the superman.

The two other Arthurian relics that Nennius mentions are indisputable wonders--that is, by no stretch of the imagination can they be regarded as within the natural order of things. One of these is the Carn Cabal, a cairn of which the top stone was said to hold a footprint of Arthur's dog, Cabal, impressed upon the stone in the hunting of Troynt the boar. The stone, however often it is carried away, returns to the cairn, apparently under its own power.⁷ The

⁶Chambers, p. 239.

⁷Chambers, pp. 239-40.

other is the wonder which Nennius claims to have verified himself: the famous elastic grave of Arthur's son Anir, whom Arthur himself slew. The grave, says Nennius, is never the same length as it was the last time one has visited it.⁸ Though certainly supernatural manifestations, neither detail alters the development of the myth or has any place in the later forms of the story. Both are rather miracles after the fact, in that they do not occur in or shape the story of Arthur's reign. But they do indicate that Arthur's name was popular enough so that stories of wonders gathered themselves around it and, perhaps as important, that he was popularly viewed as the sort of figure about whom wonders were likely to gather. If he is not here a mythic figure, he is at least beginning to be a marvelous one.

The Arthurian "works" (if one can so call these comparatively fleeting references) we have seen so far show us no shape to Arthur's life. But in the Annales Cambriae (c. 950)⁹ Arthur's life begins to be "shaped" in the sense that it is given an end. Like Nennius, the Annals mention the battle of Mount Badon (though they say that Arthur carried on his shoulders not an image of the Virgin but a Cross). But the more important entry (for our purposes), is the one which tells us that at the battle of Camlann, "Arthur and Medraut fell."¹⁰

⁸Chambers, p. 240.

⁹Date as supplied by Brengle, p. 7.

¹⁰Translated by Brengle. "Gueith Camlann in quo Arthur et Medraut corruerunt;" Chambers, p. 241.

As has been pointed out before, we do not know from this entry who Medraut was, whether he was Arthur's ally or enemy. The post-Malorian reader is tempted, of course, to see Medraut as the enemy and as Arthur's illegitimate son, for Medraut is the original figure from whom the later treacherous Mordred was developed. But the Annals are silent both as to the causes of death and whether the two men died at each others' hands, were killed by each others' armies, or died fighting on the same side. It is the seed of an important narrative but is, at the moment, no more than a seed.

William of Malmesbury, in the Gesta Regum Anglorum (c. 1125),¹¹ develops the story of Arthur's death a little further--or rather, records a popular development of the motif, though one has the impression that he did not care much for it. He had earlier proclaimed that the story of Arthur should be told as true history, not as "false myths" as the Bretons do.¹² And then he mentions that Arthur's tomb is nowhere to be found, with the result that "ancient dirges still fable his coming."¹³ (He does, however, mention that the tomb of Walwen--i.e., Gawain--who is Arthur's nephew is known.) One feels fairly certain that William did not believe, or did not want to believe, the story of Arthur's eventual return; and he says himself he

¹¹Chambers, p. 249.

¹²Brengle, p. 8; "fabulae," Chambers, p. 250.

¹³Translated by Brengle, p. 8; "Sed Arturis sepulcrum nusquam visitur, unde antiquas naeniarum adhuc eum venturum fabulatur," Chambers, p. 250.

did not invent it. But he did put in writing the story which (if Malory's "some men say" passage may be so interpreted) survived until the fifteenth century, and which, according to R. S. Loomis, was still current in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ From the written records up to the time of the Gesta, we can construct a skeletal storyline that, in William's time, ran like this: "Arthur, the great warleader of the Britons, successfully carried out many campaigns against the Saxon invaders until, at the battle of Camlann, he and his (ally or enemy) Medraut died; but Arthur will one day return." This is a tiny potential myth in itself, since it not only literally immortalizes a folk hero but opens the way for future speculation as to whether or not he really died and where he was coming back from. Its pattern also suggests a comparison with the Death, Resurrection, and Parousia (or second coming) of Christ and thereby steals a little numinous glory. It also includes us in the story since the return has not yet occurred and therefore (so far as the story is believed in our age) may occur in our lifetime. But it is only potentially a myth. It is, if nothing else, too vague even as a story. Though clearly a supernatural event, it is linked to no supernatural power or universal reality. We do not know whether Arthur was taken before he died, or died and will be resurrected; we do not even know what power is responsible for Arthur's eventual return. Nor do we

¹⁴Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 69-70.

know why Arthur has been singled out for this honor, unless it is that he is an invaluable war leader whose services may one day be required again. The story of Arthur at this point requires further elucidation if it is to evolve any further towards myth. This next step was taken by Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae.

Geoffrey in the Historia (the writing of which J. S. P. Tatlock limits to the 1130's¹⁵) claims as his source "a certain very ancient book written in the British language"¹⁶ which contains the history of Britain from Brutus to Caddwallader, and which he has undertaken to translate into plain Latin without an excess of rhetorical flourish. The book, given him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, has never been found and its existence is generally doubted (though Geoffrey Ashe attempts to identify this "ancient book" in a 1982 article in Speculum).¹⁷ Nennius is certainly one of his sources. Tatlock believes it is at least possible that the story of Uther's magical disguise and the begetting of Arthur may have been inspired by the myth in which Jupiter disguises himself as Amphityron and

¹⁵J. S. P. Tatlock, The Legendary History of Britain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), p. 437.

¹⁶Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 51. All quotations from Geoffrey will be drawn from this translation.

¹⁷Geoffrey Ashe, "'A Certain Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History," in Speculum, 56 (1981), pp. 301-323.

begets upon the mortal's wife the hero Hercules;¹⁸ but he regards it as likely that much of the Historia is from Geoffrey's imagination as it amplified the outlines of Arthur's career found in Nennius, with, perhaps, echoes from popular tradition.¹⁹ The result was, in Loomis' words, "one of the world's most brazen and successful frauds."²⁰ The Historia is certainly not history. But if Geoffrey does not succeed as an historian, he succeeds as a romancer and, most importantly, as the man who gave a definitive shape to the story of Arthur. Though the Historia is not exclusively about Arthur, it is for Geoffrey's story of the Arthurian kingdom that the work is best known. In order to write a convincing history of the famous king, Geoffrey had to cast it into a comprehensive birth-to-death narrative, organizing when he had the material to organize, inventing where he had none. This contribution cannot be overemphasized. For the first time, someone has attempted to present the whole life of Arthur as a self-contained story. It has been given a shape which will remain fairly constant throughout succeeding complete histories of Arthur, providing a framework on which to hang the new adventures that will be invented. But the sort of shape that the story has is quite as important as the fact that it is shaped at all. This is a story in which destiny or the will of God has become more evident.

¹⁸Tatlock, p. 317.

¹⁹Tatlock, p. 204.

²⁰Roger Sherman Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (1963; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970), p. 35.

One of the main figures in this new theme is Merlin who, Geoffrey says, "was also called Ambrosius."²¹ E. K. Chambers thinks that Merlin is "wholly a creation of Geoffrey's active brain" and rejects the idea that the wizard might have had a Celtic origin.²² Tatlock just as adamantly assumes that there was a pre-Geoffrey "Myrddin" tradition rather than that Geoffrey created a figure who immediately took root in Welsh literature and changed his name to Myrddin.²³ The question of Merlin's origins does not matter much to the present study. Whatever his origins Merlin appears in his particularly Galfridian form and connected to Arthur for the first time in Geoffrey. In an earlier incarnation--as the fatherless boy Ambrosius--he appeared in Nennius, though not in connection with the story of Arthur. In Nennius, the evil king Vortigern, acting on the advice of his wise men, attempts to build a city as a stronghold against the barbarians, but after each of three tries, the materials he has gathered disappear. The wise men tell him that the building will not stand unless he sprinkles the ground with the blood of a boy who has no father. Vortigern begins a search for such a boy, and finds him in Ambrose who, his mother declares, had no mortal father. The boy, when brought before Vortigern, challenges the wise men to tell what is hidden beneath the pavement where they stand. When they cannot, Ambrose tells them they will find a pool, and when

²¹ Geoffrey, History, p. 169.

²² Chambers, pp. 95-6.

²³ Tatlock, p. 177.

they dig, they indeed find a pool. Ambrose issues a series of challenges to the wise men to tell him what they will find next at each stage of the excavation, and each time the wise men must confess that they do not know. At least two serpents--a red one and a white one--are discovered in a tent. Ambrose explains that the pool signifies the world, the tent Vortigern's kingdom, the red serpent Vortigern, and the white serpent the oppressed of Britain; he goes on to prophesy that the British shall arise and drive away the Saxons. Ambrose reveals that he is the son of a Roman consul; Vortigern rewards the boy for his services by giving him a city.²⁴ The story that Geoffrey tells is similar in general outline, though here the boy is called Merlin, and the boy's mother tells more than that he never had a mortal father: the father was clearly a spirit of some sort, who used to come to her invisibly and lie with her, and so fathered Merlin. After being assured by one of his wise men that this is in fact possible, that certain semi-angelic beings called incubi may lie with women, Vortigern explains to Merlin why he was brought to him. Merlin declares that he can out-prophesy the wise men and proceeds to do so as in Nennius.²⁵ Whereas in Nennius, the prophecy merely tells of the rise of the Britons, in Geoffrey the prophecy more specifically concerns the sons of Constantine,

²⁴A translation of Nennius into English (by W. Gunn) may be found in Six Old English Chronicles, ed. J. A. Giles (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891). The "Ambrosius" tale is on pp. 401-404.

²⁵Geoffrey, History, pp. 166-9.

Uther and Aurelius Ambrosius, and their victory over Vortigern. Vortigern, in fear, shuts himself up in the tower that he built and is later burned in it by Aurelius' men, just as Merlin had predicted.²⁶ The boy prophet is thus from the first favorably connected with Arthur through his services to Aurelius and Uther, Arthur's father. And in the stories that follow, he serves as advisor and miracle worker to Ambrosius and Uther, his most famous pre-Arthurian feat being the moving of the Giant's Ring (Stonehenge) from Mount Killaurus in Ireland to Mount Ambrius in England. But the deed that links him intimately with Arthur's reign is his helping Uther to lie with Ygerne, wife of the Duke of Cornwall. That story bears--in fact demands--repeating.

After Aurelius is treacherously poisoned by the Saxon Eopa, Uther becomes king. At Eastertide, when Uther and his nobles have gathered in London, Gorlois the Duke of Cornwall and his wife Ygerna, a very beautiful woman, attend the court. When Uther sees her, he falls hopelessly in love so that he can think of nothing else and devotes all his attention to her. Gorlois, growing jealous, leaves the court with Ygerna and without Uther's permission. Uther is incensed when Gorlois refuses his order to return to court and the king leads an army to attack Cornwall. Gorlois leaves his wife in Tintagel, where he believes she will be safe, and remains in his castle at Dimilioc, refusing to attack because his army is smaller, and

²⁶ Geoffrey, History, pp. 186-8.

waiting for reinforcements from Ireland. Uther besieges Dimilioc, but after a week finds that he can think of nothing but Ygerna. He then sends for Merlin, who tells him, "By my drugs I know how to give you the precise appearance of Gorlois, so that you will resemble him in every respect. . . . In this way you will be able to go safely to Ygerna in his castle and be admitted."²⁷ Uther agrees to the plan, and he, Ulfen, and Merlin are all changed in appearance and proceed to Tintagel where they are admitted by Gorlois' men. The king lies with Ygerna, who conceives Arthur. Meanwhile, Gorlois has been killed in battle. Uther, after taking leave of Ygerna, returns later to Tintagel in his own form and weds her. In due time, Arthur is born.

It should be clear that what has been added to the story of Arthur is not merely a new anecdote or incident, but a whole new tone or theme to the Arthurian kingdom which serves to transform the nature of the story of Arthur. Whereas the previous Arthurian wonders had no causal relation to the history of Arthur, with the Merlin-assisted conception we now have a magical origin for the king to counterbalance the story of his possible return in popular tradition. We are also told that Arthur is, after his last battle, taken to a mysterious and probably marvelous island, Avalon. The context of Arthur's life has become encircled with a magic, an enchantment that subtly alters the way we look at the king. Though Geoffrey's

²⁷ Geoffrey, History, pp. 206-7.

Arthur himself is never a magical figure--though in fact he is very much like any other worldly king, however much more successful he may be--the very fact that he has been conceived through the aid of magic raises him above the level of the ordinary monarch. There is a suggestion in Geoffrey that Merlin's help in the begetting of Arthur is not merely a capricious act, done to please Uther. At an earlier part of the Historia, Ambrosius had summoned Merlin and had apparently asked him to entertain the court by prophesying the future. Merlin had replied, "'Mysteries of that sort cannot be revealed . . . except where there is the most urgent need for them. If I were to utter them as an entertainment, or where there was no need at all, then the spirit which controls me would forsake me in the moment of need."²⁸ Merlin's power is accompanied by a responsibility; he cannot use it just to please the king. While it is dangerous to impose too rigid a consistency upon a work that is largely pseudo-historical invention, if Merlin's "philosophy of power" is read in connection with the story of the begetting of Arthur, the reader cannot help reaching the conclusion that Merlin's disguising of Uther is one of those moments of "most urgent need." This, in connection with Merlin's prophecies of the "Boar of Cornwall" (that is, Arthur) who will bring relief from the invaders and whose end "will be shrouded in mystery,"²⁹ takes Arthur's life and reign out of the ordinary

²⁸Geoffrey, History, p. 196.

²⁹Geoffrey, History, p. 172.

world and places it into a more cosmic context. Arthur is no longer merely a successful war-leader, but a person whose reign is foretold in prophecy and whose conception is aided by a prophet. This suggests some higher power is interested in the king. The element of the Divine has begun to enter the story.

Those people who read the Historia in search of "Malorian" elements will recognize occasional familiar motifs but may be disappointed at not finding more. When Uther dies, Arthur does become king--but there is no emergence of Arthur from obscurity with Ector, no sword in either stone or lake. Arthur simply receives the kingship at age fifteen. Almost immediately, the battles for the crown begin. Modern readers may find their attention drifting while they plow through these accounts of Briton-Saxon politics and warfare; but one may suddenly take note of some familiar names at the Battle of Bath (Mount Badon): Arthur arrays himself for battle, and among the accoutrements are the shield painted with an image of the Virgin, and "his peerless sword, called Caliburn, which was forged in the Isle of Avalon."³⁰ Caliburn is, of course, the sword that came to be known as Excalibur, and Avalon is the place to which Arthur was carried at the end of his life. That these names--as well as those of the shield Pridwen and the lance Ron--are indications of a substratum of Celtic lore in Geoffrey is a point that has been much discussed. Robert Huntington Fletcher and J. S. P. Tatlock may be

³⁰Geoffrey, History, p. 217.

said to represent the two extremes in this controversy, the former feeling that such names so clearly represent Geoffrey's knowledge of Welsh mythology that the question is not worth argument,³¹ and the latter arguing that all that they clearly represent is Geoffrey's knowledge of the Welsh language.³² The significance of Avalon will be later discussed.

When Arthur has established himself as king, he begins to consolidate his kingdom, and more familiar names begin to appear. We meet Loth (or Lot) who, we are told, in the days of Aurelius had married Arthur's sister and had two sons, Gawain and Mordred; and Arthur himself weds Guinevere, who came from a Roman family and who was "the most beautiful woman in the entire island."³³ Arthur next conquers Ireland and Iceland and then returns home to twelve years of peace. During this time, the seeds of what would, in later romances, become the Round Table, are planted:

Arthur then began to increase his personal entourage by inviting very distinguished men from far-distant kingdoms to join it. In this way he developed such a code of courtliness in his household that he inspired peoples living far away to imitate him. The result was that even

³¹Robert Huntington Fletcher, The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles, 2nd ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1966), pp. 95-6. This is a reprint of the 1905 work by Fletcher with a bibliography (updated to 1965) and essay by Roger Sherman Loomis.

³²Tatlock, p. 78.

³³Geoffrey, History, p. 221.

the man of noblest birth, once he was roused to rivalry, thought nothing at all of himself unless he wore his arms and dressed in the same way as Arthur's knights.³⁴

Other kings, more afraid of Arthur than respectful of him, fortify themselves against him, and this, Geoffrey says, gives him the idea of conquering Europe. He makes short work of Norway and Denmark, and then goes to Gaul, where he defeats the tribune Frolo in single combat. After nine years of subduing Gaul, he returns to England in time for spring, to hold plenary court in the City of Legions, famous not only for its two churches but for its college of two hundred learned men, who, skilled in astronomy, are able to foretell any trouble for Arthur. There follows an attractive picture of the Arthurian court in its prime, and at peace. We are given scenes of procession, of feasting, of gaily-attired and noble men and women; we are shown Bedevere the Cup-bearer and Kay the seneschal; we are shown, as Geoffrey puts it, details that would make the book too long if he were to include them all. In the midst of this celebration come the twelve elderly men from Lucius the Roman Procurator, who demands that Arthur appear before him the following August in order to pay the penalty for not sending tribute to Rome. Arthur has no intention of paying tribute. His response is that he has worried about peacetime making his people too soft; now they will have a chance to show what they are made of. Arthur's people rally to him, and the Roman campaign begins. Of the Roman War little need

³⁴Geoffrey, History, p. 222.

be said here, except that Arthur wins it and no longer has to pay tribute to Rome and that, in the course of the campaign, Arthur fights and kills the monster of Mont-Saint-Michel, Gawain is distinguished in battle against Lucius himself (who is later killed, Geoffrey tells us, by an unknown hand), Bedevere is killed in battle, and Kay is mortally wounded and later dies. The really important contribution that Geoffrey makes to the myth is the story that frames the tale of the war.

Geoffrey says that as Arthur prepared to leave, he entrusted the kingdom and his queen to Mordred, his nephew. After the victory over the Romans, as Arthur is returning to Britain, he hears that Mordred, in his absence, has assumed the throne and has taken Guinevere as his mistress; Guinevere has evidently abandoned her marriage vows and accepted the situation. Further, Mordred has made an agreement with the Saxons, Scots, Picts, Irish, and "with anyone else whom he knew to be filled with hatred for his uncle."³⁵ In the first battle at Richborough, Gawain is killed. Mordred and his army go to Winchester; Guinevere, upon hearing the news, flees to the City of Legions and vows to become a nun. Arthur besieges Winchester; Mordred, suffering heavy losses, flees again to Camlam, where he waits for Arthur. There the last battle is fought, and Mordred is killed. Arthur, himself mortally wounded, is taken to Avalon for the healing of his wounds.

³⁵Geoffrey, History, p. 258.

What Geoffrey meant by the Isle of Avalon has been a subject of much discussion. Tatlock, proceeding with infinite caution, will say no more than that the Isle is "not recorded before Geoffrey" and that "It is not certain, but probable, that Geoffrey presents the place as marvelous."³⁶ Chambers, somewhat less cautious, presents some possible etymologies for Avalon³⁷ as well as some parallels in Celtic folklore that suggest that Avalon is "a Celtic designation of the Otherworld,"³⁸ and he cites Geoffrey's own later Vita Merlini³⁹ which mentions that Arthur was carried to the Fortunate Isle or the Isle of Apples to be healed by Morgan.⁴⁰ R. S. Loomis, in his article "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," considers several possibilities which include the Irish word ablach as a name for a fabulous elysian island, the proper name Avallach (mother of the Welsh goddess Modron, supposed to be the original of Morgan), and an analogous tradition recorded in the Irish saga The Cattle-Raid of Fraech in which a fairy woman takes her wounded kinsman away to be healed.⁴¹

³⁶Tatlock, p. 78.

³⁷The discussion of the etymology for Avalon is on pp. 219-220 of Chambers.

³⁸Chambers, p. 219.

³⁹A recent edition of the Vita is Life of Merlin (University of Wales Press, 1973), the Latin text edited and translated (with Latin and English text on facing pages) by Basil Clarke.

⁴⁰Chambers, p. 218.

⁴¹Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," ALMA, pp. 65-6.

One ultimately returns, a bit dizzy, to Tatlock's statement that the island is probably, though not definitely, marvelous for Geoffrey as the safest alternative; it is at least certain that by the time Geoffrey composed the Vita Merlini he did regard it as marvelous. We can with some certainty say that Geoffrey may have regarded Arthur, at the end of the Historia, still to be alive.

What does all this mean for the myth of Arthur? One need only look back at the entry in the Annales Cambriae--in which we are told merely that Arthur and Medraut fell--to see the transformation that Geoffrey has made in the story. Geoffrey tells us that Mordred, Arthur's nephew, rebelled against Arthur and took Guinevere as his lover. In this element of the story, two new major themes have entered into the Arthurian world: adultery and betrayal. There is also, more faintly, the first hint of incest. Mordred will remain throughout successive retellings of the Arthurian story the betrayer; Guinevere will, in Chrétien and in later versions, be an adulteress, though not with Mordred; and the incest theme, though still attached to Mordred, will shift so that he is more the victim of incest than its perpetrator. But all these themes are incipient in Geoffrey. We see, for the first time, that the kingdom and Arthur fell because of sin--an extremely important element in the later versions of the myth. Geoffrey has also solidified--by simply putting it in writing--the motif of Arthur's survival and (whether he was inventing it himself or merely passing on a tradition) his being conveyed to a probably magical isle. Though Geoffrey says nothing in the

Historia about Arthur's return (Tatlock thinks him too cautiously politic to do that),⁴² the hint at least is there.

If we are to sum up the elements in the Historia that contribute to the myth, they would be as follows. The first and most important thing is that Geoffrey has recorded a story which is, as Eugène Vinaver has called it, "the plot of the Arthurian romances,"⁴³ in that every comprehensive Arthurian history which followed had the structure of Geoffrey's story as its backbone. Other elements would be introduced into it, and there would be a little alteration and re-organization of its internal contents. But for the most part the story would remain in the shape that Geoffrey presented; and such a self-contained narrative shape is necessary if myth is to exist. But he also gives the story its first recorded tinges of the supernatural, William of Malmesbury notwithstanding. William's wonders stand outside of the Arthurian narrative proper; Geoffrey's enter it. There is Merlin--not a god, and not even very clearly the messenger or prophet of a god, but the son of a godlike being, whose powers appear to serve some larger purpose which includes Arthur. Merlin is a guiding force who appears to work for the purposes of some destiny, who helps Uther, through magic, to beget Arthur. There is also, at the end of the story, Arthur's own departure for the mysterious Isle of Avalon, the place where his sword

⁴²Tatlock, pp. 204-5.

⁴³Eugène Vinaver, Malory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 15.

Caliburn was forged, so that the King's life is encircled and (with Caliburn, very briefly) punctuated with wonder.

But while the myth may be said to have begun to take shape here, the Historia still falls short of myth. For one thing, the supernatural, though it begins and ends Arthur's life, is limited only to those points of the king's life; otherwise (unless one includes Caliburn, which, though from Avalon, seems to have been little more than an especially good sword) the supernatural has no effect and makes no appearances. Arthur's life does not seem to have been shaped by these events, only begun and ended by them. Merlin does not appear again after he helps Uther; the only other marginally supernatural character is the monster of Mont-Saint-Michel, who has no effect on Arthur's life. Though there are occasional wonders, they are only occasional--ornaments for the great man's life rather than any real part of it. If Arthur's life is shaped by anything, it is his own military might, which is heroic rather than mythic; it is a piece of good luck that Arthur happens to be a just man. And though the betrayal by Mordred and Guinevere's adultery bring the kingdom to its end, they are almost afterthoughts--they grow out of no previous action in the story and appear quite unexpectedly, connected with the story sequentially rather than causally. This is in fact the chief reason that the Historia fails as myth: Geoffrey gives us a sequence for the events of Arthur's life, but he provides only the most barely necessary causal links between episodes. He cannot be faulted for this. There is no clear evidence that he

intended to write myth. He was not even writing romance but (he said) history. Without Geoffrey's sequence of events, the Arthurian legend, if it had taken shape at all, would likely have taken a very different shape. But as long as the Arthurian story remained strictly faithful to Geoffrey's history, the myth could advance very little.

This is why less time is spent here in a discussion of Wace and Layamon than would ordinarily be devoted to them in a full history of Arthurian literature, for both the French and English poets are still writing essentially Geoffrey-shaped history. They both add details that were included in later histories of Arthur, but none of these details significantly affect the mythic aspects of the story. Wace's French Roman de Brut, a poem of around 15,000 verses completed in 1155, relies heavily on Geoffrey's Historia, incorporating material from other sources such as Nennius and William of Malmesbury.⁴⁴

Whether Celtic influence is behind what many regard as Wace's most important contribution to the Arthurian legend, the Round Table, is a matter of debate. Tatlock thinks there is no reason to assume any such influence, at least not directly.⁴⁵ Others, like Charles Foulon, at least concede the possibility of Celtic influence, if not directly then through the Bretons.⁴⁶ The Round Table, when it appears, is

⁴⁴Tatlock, p. 469.

⁴⁵Tatlock, p. 474.

⁴⁶Charles Foulon, "Wace," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 99-100.

created to keep the peace among Arthur's men:

Because of these noble lords about his hall, of whom
each knight pained himself to be the hardiest champion,
and none would count himself the least praiseworthy,
Arthur made the Round Table, so reputed of the Britons.
This Round Table was ordained of Arthur that when his
fair fellowship sat to meat their chairs should be high
alike, their service equal, and none before or after his
comrade.⁴⁷

The Round Table is one of those elements without which the modern reader could not imagine King Arthur. But however much a part of the legend it is, and however indispensable it may be to our idea of King Arthur, is it a part of the myth in the specific sense in which we have been using the word? In Wace, no; for the Round Table, once established, has no significant effect on the shape of the story. It is an addition, but only an addition. Structurally, the story proceeds as before. The other modification I wish to mention is Wace's treatment of Arthur's passing. As in Geoffrey, Arthur and Mordred are both mortally wounded, though not by each other, and Arthur is "borne to Avalon for the searching of his hurts."⁴⁸ Wace adds, as Geoffrey does not in the Historia, that Arthur "is yet in Avalon, awaited of the Britons; for as they say and deem he will

⁴⁷From a translation of Wace's Roman de Brut by Eugene Mason in Arthurian Chronicles (1912; rpt. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1971), p. 55. An edition of the Arthurian section of Wace's poem has been published under the title La Partie Arthurienne du Roman de Brut, eds. I. D. O. Arnold and M. M. Pelan (Paris: Bibliothèque Française et Romane, 1962).

⁴⁸Arthurian Chronicles, pp. 113-4.

return from whence he went and live again."⁴⁹ Wace is careful not to commit himself, demonstrating a "common sense," Foulon says, "recognized by nearly all scholars."⁵⁰ He does not say that Arthur will return, but only that his end, Merlin said, would be doubtful, and so it is, for though Arthur went to Avalon in the year 642, he has never come back. This is not strictly a new addition to the myth, for William of Malmesbury has said previously that Arthur's return was still expected by some. But this is the first time that a comprehensive history of Arthur has included both Arthur's departure to Avalon and the promise (or hint) of his return in the same text. Wace has invented nothing here, but has put the "whole" tradition of Arthur's end into a comprehensive history.

Layamon's Brut⁵¹ (composed late in the twelfth century), a poem of approximately 32,000 lines, and generally regarded as adapted from Wace's poem, does not significantly alter the story as presented by Geoffrey or Wace. Layamon's version of the Round Table is more fabulous--for though it may seat sixteen hundred, it is nevertheless portable--though no more directly connected with the shape of the story of Arthur than Wace's Round Table. When Arthur is born, elves

⁴⁹Arthurian Chronicles, p. 114.

⁵⁰Foulon, p. 98.

⁵¹The Brut has been edited for the EETS by G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, volume 1 having appeared in 1963 and volume 2 in 1971; in 1963, Brook published the Arthurian selections in Selections from Layamon's Brut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), with an introductory essay by C. S. Lewis. Probably the most widely-used translation into more or less modern English is that of Eugene Mason for Arthurian Chronicles.

take him and bless him (a motif that Loomis believes is derived from Celtic folklore).⁵² This connection with the elves may help us to understand why Arthur is taken to Avalon so that Argante the "elf-queen" may heal him; but between his birth and death, the elves apparently have little visible influence over his life. Merlin, as in the prior two histories of Arthur, disappears after he helps King Uther. Emily Anderson Scott, in her thesis "Historiography in Layamon's Brut: Merlin as Archetype,"⁵³ argues convincingly that Layamon's Merlin has many of the qualities associated with Jung's archetype of the wise old man. I cannot disagree with this. But Merlin by himself cannot make the story of Arthur a myth if his association with Arthur is limited to aiding in his conception and thereafter disappearing. Between the conception and birth of Arthur and his death and transportation to Avalon, though there may be occasional wonders (such as the elves and the portable Round Table), these are all theoretically "detachable" wonders that operate chiefly as ornament; they have not yet become so much a part of the story that Arthur's history could be called strictly a "wonder story." And while Layamon (like Wace) prepares us a little for Mordred's betrayal of Arthur and Guinevere's adultery by telling us that Mordred, though deemed a good man, was false, neither Mordred's nor

⁵²Roger Sherman Loomis, "Layamon's Brut," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 108.

⁵³Emily Anderson Scott, "Historiography in Layamon's Brut: Merlin as Archetype," M. A. Thesis. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1975.

Guinevere's falseness grows out of the story as told by either poet. The story of Arthur in Layamon, as it was in Wace and Geoffrey, is chiefly a collection of separate incidents which have not yet been given a shape other than a gradual rise to the military climax over Lucius and his forces and the dénouement involving the treachery of Mordred and the departure of Arthur for Avalon.

The first age of the development of the Arthurian myth was over. Within the limits set for it by Geoffrey's story, it could proceed no further unless some new elements entered the story. The person responsible for the second stage of development of the myth of Arthur was Chrétien de Troyes, whose Arthurian poems, though not themselves comprehensive Arthurian histories, nevertheless influenced the development of the next great Arthurian history, the French Prose Vulgate, by introducing into popular currency two themes: the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere and the Quest for the Grail. These two themes, as later developed by other writers, and combined with the narrative structure found in Geoffrey, would bring the story of Arthur nearer myth.

Chrétien's Le Chevalier de la Charette (or Lancelot), composed between 1177 and 1181,⁵⁴ introduces the love affair of Lancelot and Guinevere into the Arthurian saga, and in doing so introduces an Arthurian story that is well known even to those who know little

⁵⁴Jean Frappier, "Chrétien de Troyes," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 159.

else about King Arthur. But the Lancelot does not at all deal with the tragic possibilities that are familiar to the post-Malorian forms of Lancelot's story. In Chrétien the love affair remains undiscovered by Arthur and is the source not of the downfall of the kingdom but of Lancelot's prowess and is the cause of his adventures. Chrétien claims that the "matter" (the "source") was provided him by the Countess (Marie) of Champagne who requested him to write the romance. There has been some discussion about what this source might have been. Loomis believes that behind the story that Chrétien received (though the exact source is not extant) lies "a myth of the Persephone type"⁵⁵ which is contained in analogue in the Vita Gildae. The Vita, by Caradoc of Llancarfan, dated by Tatlock "before, perhaps years before, Geoffrey's Historia, but from probably years after 1088,"⁵⁶ tells of a Guinevere abducted by Melvas, king of the Summer Country, and restored to a wrathful Arthur by the Abbot and Gildas, who are given lands and a promise of Arthur's devotion and respect in return for their help.⁵⁷ Loomis believes that this story, or its original, is behind the famous Modena Archivolt representation of the rescue of Guinevere, and attempts to reconstruct the original form of the myth in his Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art.⁵⁸ Tatlock denies both

⁵⁵Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance, p. 49.

⁵⁶Tatlock, p. 188.

⁵⁷Summarized by Tatlock, p. 189.

⁵⁸Roger Sherman Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis, Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1938), pp. 34-5.

that the Gildas story is mythological and that the Modena Archivolt was necessarily originally Arthurian, preferring to think that the Arthurian names may have been added after the sculpture was executed.⁵⁹ All this is more or less by the way, since our concern here is more with the story as Chrétien handled it than with how any of his predecessors handled it; certainly Chrétien's Lancelot is the figure who most strongly influenced the development of the myth.

The story, in brief, is as follows. Meleagaunt of Gorre, after challenging a strangely listless Arthur and defeating Kay, takes Guinevere away with him to the land of Gorre, where she is held prisoner along with others from Arthur's kingdom. Gawain, who has watched this, lends his horse to an unnamed knight (this is, we later learn, Lancelot), who rides it until it is killed, and thereafter makes his way on foot until he meets a cart driven by a dwarf. The dwarf tells him that in exchange for news about the queen Lancelot must mount the cart. The knight hesitates for a couple of steps, for in those days it was considered a great shame to be seen riding in a cart, and then climbs in. Gawain follows him and, after a night spent in a perilous bed (which catches on fire after a flaming lance barely misses him), Lancelot sees the queen at a distance but cannot catch up with her. After several adventures, Lancelot at last comes to the land of Gorre, where he fights with Meleagaunt before the battle is stopped by Guinevere at the request of King Bademagu,

⁵⁹Tatlock, p. 213.

Meleagant's father. Guinevere is oddly cold to Lancelot, and only after some mutual confusion (the knight and the queen have heard rumors of each others' deaths) does Guinevere tell Lancelot that she refused to have anything to do with him because he had hesitated before climbing into the cart. That night, Lancelot bends the bars in Guinevere's window and climbs in to sleep with her. But he has cut his hand in bending the bars, and leaves the sheets of her bed bloody, which Meleagaunt discovers the next morning, and accuses Kay (who had been bleeding in the night) of sleeping with the queen. The fight between Lancelot and Meleagaunt for the queen's honor is halted by Bademagu again, and is not taken up until, after a further series of confusions and Lancelot's temporary imprisonment, Lancelot fights and kills Meleagaunt at Arthur's court.

This very brief summary can hardly convey the reasons for the popularity of this story: it is only the matière of the Lancelot. Chrétien's contributions come more in his handling of the story. The Lancelot is of course often regarded as Chrétien's first story to embody the ideal of courtly love in action: its author, C. S. Lewis has remarked, is the Chrétien who has translated Ovid's Art of Love,⁶⁰ and for whom (in this poem at least) courtly love is an imitation of religious worship.⁶¹ It has been suggested that Chrétien did not

⁶⁰C. S. Lewis, Allegory of Love (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 26.

⁶¹Lewis, Allegory, p. 29.

finish the poem--the last nearly thousand lines are attributed to Godefroy de Leigni--because he was "unenthusiastic" about the matter of the poem;⁶² and a certain element of deliberate excess, almost parody, has been detected by more than one critic in such scenes as Lancelot's ecstasy over finding strands of Guinevere's hair in a comb, or his purposely doing his worst at a tournament simply to please his lady, or his accepting Guinevere's chiding for his two-second delay in stepping into the cart and thereby shaming himself. The modern reader, for whom courtly love and its rituals are comparatively alien, might be excused for feeling that the driving force behind Lancelot's and Guinevere's involvement is not so much love as sadomasochism; Augustus J. App, in Lancelot in English Literature, writes that "from our modern viewpoint a more contemptible individual can hardly be imagined than this paragon of lovers Chrétien presents to us."⁶³ He may be right. But it was evidently what Marie de Champaign wanted; whether she liked what Chrétien gave her is another matter.

Chrétien's stylistic contribution to the story that he received was the use of the interior monologue, the literary device which lets us into the minds of the characters. Vinaver writes, in The

⁶²Jean Frappier, Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work, trans. Raymond J. Cormier (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 93. This is a translation of Frappier's 1968 edition of Chrétien de Troyes: L'Homme et l'oeuvre.

⁶³Augustus J. App, Lancelot in English Literature (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1929), p. 11.

Rise of Romance, that Chrétien was not the first to use this device, but that in his romances "the monologue often serves as the focus of the entire action of the story."⁶⁴ Some examples of this interior commentary are Lancelot's lengthy debate with himself when he meets six armed men ready to do him injury,⁶⁵ or his dissertation upon sorrow and his lament over the supposed death of Guinevere as he prepares to kill himself and join her.⁶⁶ This use of the interior monologue has been noted as the beginnings of psychological realism and the dramatization not only of human actions but of their motives as well, and the relationship of this inner life to the external actions of the plot; it is the forerunner of "modern" characterization, the first step in the direction that will lead to the literary delirium of Ulysses.

Neither of these elements, however--neither the religion of courtly love nor the interior monologue--can be said to be Chrétien's major contribution to the myth of Arthur. Although love between the sexes is a fit theme for myth, courtly love is not. If Chrétien's examples of courtly love behavior are meant seriously--that is, if Chrétien is seriously recommending them as models of

⁶⁴Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 25.

⁶⁵Chrétien de Troyes, Lancelot or The Knight of the Art (Le Chevalier de la Charette), edited and translated by William W. Kibler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), ll. 1097-1175. Kibler's edition has the French and English texts on facing pages.

⁶⁶Chrétien, Lancelot, ll. 4263-4283.

behavior or offering them up for our approval--then they are too extravagant to be believed, at least by the modern reader, and our disbelief, as one writer said in another context, cannot be suspended even by a system of weights and pulleys. On the other hand, if we pay Chrétien the compliment of assuming that he was writing with tongue in cheek, then we are reading something very close to satire, and myth cannot easily survive in an atmosphere of satire. Myth may be ironic--bitterly so--but never satirical; or, as Lewis noted, joyful, but never comical. If we smirk or congratulate ourselves on our cleverness at seeing through the story, we remove ourselves from it and are no longer participants in it but critics, and the myth is suffocated in an excess of frivolity. If Chrétien does not take his story seriously, why should we? If we cannot take it seriously, at least on a basic narrative level, how can we read it as myth? Nor is the interior monologue Chrétien's contribution to the myth. The more a character's motives are rationalized, the more he becomes an individual character and the less an archetype. It is true, as Vinaver has noted, that "Lancelot is by no means an individual character; he is the type of a perfect lover, who acts his conventional part with admirable precision."⁶⁷ He is not a Tristram Shandy or (thank God) a Leopold Bloom. But Chrétien's pauses to let us into Lancelot's head stop the progress of the story--the action is held up in a whirl of psychological analysis. If we cannot sympathize

⁶⁷Vinaver, Malory, p. 21.

with the character's motives--which may be the case with Lancelot in some of his more extreme seizures--then we are once again outside of the story, passing judgment, abstracted from its exemplary intent.

Chrétien's main contribution to the Arthurian myth was, then, his matière. Jean Frappier thinks it at least possible that "Lancelot had already become the queen's lover before Chrétien so depicted him,"⁶⁸ but even if this is so, it is Chrétien's Lancelot that survives as the first extant work in which the knight and the Queen are so linked. And this is one of those developments in literary tradition which, once made, cannot be easily unmade, just as Milton's connection of the war in heaven with the fall of man can now only with difficulty be "unimagined" even by the orthodox, though the Bible makes no such connection. Lancelot brought a serious moral theme--though lightly treated in Chrétien--into the heart of the Arthurian world. As long as the knights and their ladies were lesser luminaries, they and their affairs could exist apart from the central history of Arthur. But once the Queen becomes Lancelot's lover, the affair cannot be so easily dismissed. If this theme is to remain in the story of Arthur--and, with what has been called the perfect clarity of hindsight, we can see that it has--it will necessarily become potently tragic. The shape and moral import of the Arthurian story will have to change significantly to accommodate this new theme. An enormous chink has been opened in Arthur's armor; he has become a potential Maimed King himself.

⁶⁸Frappier, Chrétien de Troyes, p. 103.

Mention of the Maimed King leads us to the second of Chrétien's contributions to the Arthurian myth: the Grail. How much of the Conte du Graal (or Perceval)⁶⁹ was in the book that Chrétien claimed the Count gave him, and how much was his own invention, we cannot know, though there have been numerous attempts to identify the story behind Perceval as having its origins in Celtic (and other) myth and ritual, among the most famous being Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance. The ultimate origin of the Grail story is of little importance; it may be safest to assume, as L. T. Topsfield does, that Chrétien and his audience would have recognized both the Celtic and the Christian overtones of the Grail and the lance that bleeds, so that they "may be given a Celtic or Christian interpretation, or both, depending on the eye and the imagination of the beholder or listener. It does not matter what the Grail is, but what we, and Chrétien's audience in their turn, believe it to be."⁷⁰ Or, rather, what it became. For whatever the Grail's origins, it was to become, in the various attempts to complete and explain Perceval, clearly identified as a Christian relic.

Detached from the rest of its involvement, the relevant Grail-story in Perceval runs as follows. A rustic youth, Perceval, upon

⁶⁹An authoritative edition of the poem is William Roach's Le Roman de Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal, 2nd ed. (Paris: Textes Littéraires Français, 1959).

⁷⁰L. T. Topsfield, Chrétien de Troyes: A Study of the Arthurian Romances (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 212-3.

first seeing a troop of knights, breaks his mother's heart by leaving her and going to be made a knight at King Arthur's court. After being insulted by Kay, he rides out at adventure and after defeating a knight, takes his arms. Eventually, he comes to a kindly knight's castle, where he is instructed in the rudiments of chivalry and courteous behavior, among which is the admonition not to be too forward with questions. Leaving the knight, Perceval comes upon a wounded king fishing and is invited to stay at the king's castle. That evening in the castle, Perceval sees a mysterious procession in which a squire carries a white lance that drips blood, a damsel carries a brilliant graal, and another damsel carries a gem-encrusted silver platter. Perceval is curious, but because of the nobleman's instructions, he remains silent, and no explanation is offered to him. Later he learns that he should have asked the meaning of the procession:

"Perceval the wretched! Ah, unfortunate Perceval, how unlucky it was that you did not ask all those things! For you would have cured the maimed King, so that he would have recovered the use of his limbs and would have ruled his lands and great good would have come of it! But now you must know that much misery will come upon you and others. This has happened to you, understand, because of your sin against your mother; she has died of grief for you."⁷¹

⁷¹Chrétien de Troyes, Perceval, or the Story of the Grail, trans. Roger Sherman Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis (New York: Modern Library, 1957), p. 64. This translation contains only the "Perceval" portion of the romance, and has omitted the "Gawain" adventures. A complete modern English translation is Robert White Linker's The Story of the Grail, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952).

When Perceval has returned to Arthur's court, he is again reproached by a loathly maiden, who tells him that if he had spoken, the King would have been healed, but now "'Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, maidens, helpless, will remain orphans, and many knights will die. All these calamities will befall because of you!'"⁷² Perceval, remorseful, vows to go on the quest, and not to give it up for any suffering.

This is practically all that Chrétien has to tell us about the mystery of the Grail. The poem at this point departs on a series of Gawain-adventures which have nothing apparent to do with the Grail itself (though Vinaver notes that Gawain does meet with a prophecy about a flying lance which will lay waste to the land, and which later is incorporated into the wasteland theme in other writers).⁷³ In a short "Perceval" interlude between two of Gawain's adventures, Perceval meets a holy hermit who explains a bit more to him: that the Fisher King is the son of the King who is served with the Grail, and that the Grail provides the Grail King with one mass wafer: "'So sacred a thing is the Grail, and he himself is so spiritual, that he needs no more for his sustenance than the Mass wafer which comes in the Grail.'"⁷⁴ But this is hardly an "explanation" of the Grail mystery; rather, it sets up a slightly more complex set of

⁷²Loomis, Medieval Romances, pp. 85-6.

⁷³Vinaver, Rise of Romance, p. 57.

⁷⁴Loomis, Medieval Romances, pp. 85-6.

mysterious relationships that themselves need explaining. After another series of Gawain adventures, Chrétien leaves the poem unfinished--because, it is usually assumed, he died before he could complete it.

If, which is very difficult, a modern reader can force himself to forget Malory's Sankgreal, he can see easily that there are several mysteries in Chrétien's Perceval. We do not know why the maiming of the Fisher King should cause or coincide with the desolation of the land; nor why it is that Perceval's question would heal the King and restore the land; nor who the Fisher King's father is and how the mass wafer sustains him; nor even what the Grail is or how it comes to have a mass wafer. And yet all these things are vitally and mysteriously related to one another, and are in some way tied into the Divine or the Eternal in the Arthurian world. Further, all these wonders are connected with the character and the choices of a particular man, Perceval, by whose actions, in some inexplicable way, kingdoms stand to die or be reborn. Compare the wonders of Perceval with, for example, the wonders of Yvain: there the ogre, the magic fountain, the ring of invisibility, and the companionable lion all seem to be hardly more than props, pieces of narrative machinery unconnected (except in an accidental way) with Yvain's character or history. If they were left out or replaced with some more mundane plot machinery, his story would presumably go on much as it did, for his is very largely the story of human love. This

is, in Northrop Frye's definition, a pure romance.⁷⁵ But the wondrous elements in Perceval are inextricably connected with that young man's life. He leaves his mother because of his youthful callousness; he fails to ask the question because of his inexperience (and, we are told, because he abandoned his mother); he undertakes the Grail quest in penance. In Yvain and Lancelot, the wonders may help or hinder the hero at times, but they are all external to him. In Perceval, the very shape and natures of the wonders change because of the story's hero and what he decides to do. The wonders have become, in a word, moral and symbiotic with Perceval's life: they reflect the main character's loyalty to or betrayal of certain absolute standards. The Grail Quest then, even in its earliest extant form, is a quest of the spirit.

And this is a very important transformation in the Arthurian legend. We have had hints in earlier tales that the Eternal or Divine was somehow interested in Arthur's court. There is a hint of the transcendent in the accounts of Arthur's death, when he is taken to some demiparadisaal land where he can apparently live indefinitely. And there have been giants, sorcerors, elves, elastic graves, enchanted fossilized dog footprints and other wonders--the usual accoutrements of the legendary life of a great hero, the gold stars

⁷⁵Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 36: "Much of the hero's life is spent with animals, or at any rate the animals that are incurable romantics, such as horses, dogs, and falcons, and the typical setting of romance is the forest."

given for work well done. But in Chrétien's Perceval, these two sides--the Wondrous and the Eternal--come so close that one can practically hear the click as they touch. The Eternal gives value and transcendent meaning to the Wonders; the Wonders give form and substance to an abstract Eternal. Perceval raised the stakes of the Arthurian kingdom. It announced, clearly, that deed of arms and the panoply of war were no longer enough: the central questions become who are you? and why do you choose what you choose? The earlier stories deal with good and evil, but only in the standardized, conventional sense of Arthur's being a good Christian king and his enemies being evildoers. But Lancelot, Guinevere, and the Grail have made the questions of good and evil more complex and perilous. Beatification and tragedy become part of the story. The fate of the kingdom now depends not so much on military might or worldly splendor as on the simple questions of whether or not a man will lie with a woman, or whether a boy will become mature enough to accept his guilt and to repent--concerns (and this is supremely important to the question of myth) that millions of us face daily. If, as Langer suggests, myth deals with concerns common to humanity, then this sort of transformation was necessary to convert the story of Arthur into myth. One may entertain wish-fulfillment fantasies about a powerful and successful king, but one can have little identification with his story as long as his concerns are alien to our own experience. The Lancelot and Perceval change this by introducing two universal themes into the legend. The result is that the Arthurian story has now become

a story about persons and choices we identify with; and this means that it is now potentially a story about us.

Compared to this, the other blessings that Chrétien bestowed on the story of Arthur may seem insignificant, but they are still important. As is often noted, Chrétien was the first continental Arthurian romancer. So being, he began the "Europeanizing" of Arthur, the process of making the tales of Arthur more palatable to a non-British audience. He ignored the nationalism of the Arthurian legend as it appeared in Geoffrey, and which had been one of its great attractions in the first place. In Chrétien's hands, the battles and conquests for which Arthur was famous shrivel into insignificance; what begins to matter is that this kingdom is not famous for spears and imperialism, but for wonders and courtesy. Our reasons for admiring Arthur have begun to change; he is becoming more civilized and universal. Another change, and one not altogether welcome, is the reducing of Arthur's centrality in the tales. In Chrétien, he is often simply the puzzled and ineffective king into whose court these stories seem to blunder. His world is a world over which he presides rather than directly acts in. While this to a certain extent strengthens him as a symbolic archetypal figure, it also paves the way for the excesses one finds in the Vulgate Cycle, in which he becomes a secondary and inferior character compared to Lancelot.

The final thing that Chrétien did for the Arthurian story was to die--before finishing his Perceval. The unfinished Grail

story, as Topsfield has noted, tempted others to complete it.⁷⁶ In the several attempts to bring the poem to a conclusion, the writers Christianized the myth of the Grail, and produced a large corpus of material which would ultimately find its way into the next complete history of Arthur, the Vulgate Cycle. Because the Vulgate is centered largely around the Grail as a Christian symbol, it will be helpful to note the various stages of evolution through which the Grail mythos passed.

The explicit Christianizing of the Grail takes place in the "Continuations" of Chrétien's Perceval, which are found in eleven of the manuscripts of Chrétien's poem.⁷⁷ There are four continuations proper as well as two prologues, the Elucidation and the Bliocadran--both short works, and neither adding any Christian connotations to the Grail. Two of these continuations, those of Manessier and Gerbert, appear to have been composed after the Vulgate Queste del Sainte Graal⁷⁸ and so stand outside the Malorian pedigree. Consequently, this discussion will be limited to the first two Continuations.

⁷⁶Topsfield, p. 306.

⁷⁷Albert Wilder Thompson, "Additions to Chrétien's Perceval--Prologues and Continuations," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 206.

⁷⁸Thompson, p. 215.

The First Continuation, which exists in versions ranging from 9500 to 19,600 lines in length,⁷⁹ is dated at around 1200. Its author is called "Pseudo-Wauchier" because it and the second Continuation were once thought to have been written by Wauchier de Denain and to have been one work; Wauchier is not now regarded as the author of either continuation.⁸⁰ William Roach has said of the First Continuation that "Except for the one or two scenes in the Grail Castle, the First Continuation is merely a Gauvain romance which is in no significant way to be distinguished from the Hunbaut, the Vengeance Raguidel, Gawain and the Green Knight, or half a dozen others."⁸¹ In the first of these visits, Gawain sees, while sitting at the table, the bleeding lance, the Grail, and the silver platter that Perceval had previously seen; when he asks the meaning of these objects, he is told that he cannot learn their significance unless he is able to reunite the pieces of a broken sword that lies upon a dead knight. Gawain fails in the attempt and is told that because he cannot do this thing, he is not the best knight in the world and so may not learn the mystery of the lance or the Grail. In his second visit, Gawain again fails to join the pieces of a broken sword, but is told that he may now still ask concerning the mysteries of the bleeding

⁷⁹Thompson, p. 213.

⁸⁰Thompson, p. 207.

⁸¹From Roach's introduction to The Continuations of the Old French Perceval, Vol. I, The First Continuation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), xiii.

lance and the Grail. Gawain asks, and is told that the spear is that of Longinus, and will continue to bleed until the Last Judgment; he is then told that Joseph of Arimathea had used the Grail to catch the blood of the crucified Christ and, after suffering imprisonment and exile, had come with Nicodemus to England and had brought the Grail with him; the keeper of the Grail is a descendant of Joseph. Gawain falls asleep and, upon waking in the morning, discovers that he is far away from the Grail Castle. He vows to return to the castle and learn the mystery of the vessel, but the First Continuation ends without his fulfilling this vow.⁸²

The Second Continuation contains some 13,000 lines, and although it continues the Perceval story, it does not complete it.⁸³ Though Perceval is apparently more single-minded in his quest than Gawain, he nevertheless has various adventures before finally coming once again to the Grail Castle, where he again sees the procession and asks the Fisher King the meaning of the things he has seen. When he asks about the broken sword, the king tells him to try to join the broken pieces together, a task in which Perceval is only partly successful, for a small crack is still visible in the sword. The king laments that Perceval has not yet quite reached perfection, and

⁸²A summary of the First Continuation may be found on pp. xlvii-lxii of Roach's edition of the poem.

⁸³Thompson, p. 214.

the sword is taken away; and so Perceval's adventures in the Second Continuation end.⁸⁴

If, as Topsfield suggests, the audience of Chrétien's Perceval had the option of reading the Grail and the Lance as either Christian or Celtic, after the first two continuations that option became limited, since the First Continuation makes explicit the connection of the Lance and the Grail with Christianity. In the Continuations, the first steps have been taken toward the invention of a coherent mythology for the Grail and establishing its connection with Universal truth as perceived by the age in which these stories appeared.

The next step, that of establishing the Grail's connection with Arthurian history, was taken by Robert de Boron in his poem Joseph d'Arimathie, written sometime between the last decade of the twelfth century and the first of the thirteenth.⁸⁵ Though Robert claims a source for his poem, it is a claim, as J. D. Bruce points out, that a medieval writer commonly made to give authority to his own creations.⁸⁶ The only extant sources for Robert's work are non-Grail and non-Arthurian: such works as the Gesta Pilati from the

⁸⁴A summary of the events of this poem may be found on pp. xvii-xxxiv of William Roach's edition of The Continuations of The Old French Perceval, Vol. IV, The Second Continuation (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1971).

⁸⁵Pierre le Gentil, "The Work of Robert de Boron and the Didot Perceval," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 253.

⁸⁶J. D. Bruce, The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928), II, pp. 127-8.

apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus or the Vindicta Salvatoris⁸⁷--works which are more clearly in the province of the student of early Christianity than the student of Arthurian literature. Pierre le Gentil thinks that we need not completely rule out the idea that Robert had a source which contained the story of the Grail; it would, he argues, explain the internal inconsistencies and contradictions in the poem without impugning the artistry of Robert, which is more favorably represented in the sequel to Joseph, the Merlin.⁸⁸ But as the source has not survived, or else never existed in the first place, it is Robert who gets the credit.

Joseph d'Arimathie is the only complete poem of what Robert envisioned as a cycle of poems tracing the history of the Grail from the time of Christ up to the age of Arthur; but the Joseph ends without having conveyed either the Grail or its keepers to Britain. Robert announced at the end of the Joseph that he intended to get the Grail that far;⁸⁹ but rather than continuing to relate the history of the Grail consecutively, he announces that he will skip these parts of the story and will return to them later if he can find these stories in a book. He further announces that he will skip the fourth part of the story and proceed directly to the fifth, which is

⁸⁷Le Gentil, p. 254.

⁸⁸Le Gentil, p. 256.

⁸⁹Bruce, II, 129.

thought to be his Merlin, of which only about five hundred lines remain.⁹⁰

So far I have been speaking of the verse Joseph-Merlin; but in fact it was not the verse cycle that influenced future development of the Arthurian legend as much as did the prose redaction made later by an unknown author. As William Nitze notes in his introduction to his edition of Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal, in the early thirteenth century the age of verse romances had passed away, so that the prose version had the luck to be the source for future influence.⁹¹ Alexandre Micha, in his article "The Vulgate Merlin," writes that Robert's Merlin survives in complete form "only in two prose redactions. The more faithful of these is incorporated in the so-called Suite du Merlin or Huth Merlin; the other is incorporated in the Vulgate Cycle. . . ."⁹² Micha states that Robert's chief sources for the Merlin were Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia and Vita Merlini, that the changes and additions that he made in these sources were his own doing, and that he relied on no "intermediate" sources between Geoffrey and himself.⁹³

⁹⁰Le Gentil, p. 254.

⁹¹Introduction to Nitze's edition of Robert de Boron's Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal (Paris, 1927), xiv.

⁹²Alexandre Micha, "The Vulgate Merlin," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 319.

⁹³Micha, p. 321.

Briefly summarized, the Joseph story is as follows: After Joseph receives from Pilate the cup used at the Last Supper, he catches in it the last drops of blood that fall from the body of the crucified Christ. Persecuted by the Jews for his faith, Joseph is cast into prison where he is granted a vision of the resurrected Christ and is kept alive by the Grail given to him by his Lord. Joseph remains in prison a long while until the arrival of the Emperor Vespasian, who intends to avenge the death of Christ, and who releases Joseph from prison. Accompanied by his sister Enygeus and her husband Hebron (or Bron) as well as other Christians, Joseph departs from Judea and lives a long while in foreign lands. At one point, the whole company suffers starvation because of the lechery of a few, and the Holy Spirit, to remedy the situation, orders Joseph to set up the table of the Grail, upon which Joseph places the Grail and a fish which Bron has caught. At this table, where only those who are righteous and believe in the Trinity may sit, they will have their hearts' desire. One of the seats is reserved for Bron's as-yet-unborn son, but a Moyses (a sinner) sits there nevertheless, and the earth swallows him. God then proclaims that the seat shall remain vacant until Bron's grandson comes to fill it. As time passes, Bron and Enygeus have twelve sons, eleven of whom take wives; but the twelfth, Alain, is to be celibate and to lead his brothers to the West as they preach Christ. Alain (in another of the contradictions noted by M. le Gentil) will have a male heir who will afterwards become one of the keepers of the Grail about whom Christ prophesied to

Joseph, while a Petrus is to go to the vales of Avaron to await the advent of Alain's son. Bron is to take the chalice from Joseph, thus becoming the second of the Grail keepers; he will be called the Rich Fisher because he caught the fish which lay on the Grail Table, and also will go to the west to await his grandson. Alain, Petrus, and Bron (with the Grail) all depart on their journeys, leaving Joseph.⁹⁴

Robert's contribution to the story of Merlin appears to have been chiefly in the expanded account of Merlin's conception. In the Merlin, the devils, infuriated by the harrowing of hell and lamenting their loss, decide to engineer a counter-incarnation. After corrupting a wealthy man and two of his three daughters, a devil impregnates the third daughter, hoping to produce a child who is half human and half devil. However, when the daughter realizes what has happened, she goes to her confessor, who blesses her with the sign of the cross and who, upon the child's birth, baptizes him and christens him Merlin. The child, while supernatural, is thus not evil, and displays magical powers and a store of rather remarkable knowledge, among them the knowledge of the history of Joseph and the Grail, which he dictates to Blaise at the age of two. Much of the story that follows we are familiar with from Geoffrey of Monmouth: after the death of Constant, the king's son (here called Moine) is overthrown by Vortigern, who sides with the Saxon invaders; Vortigern,

⁹⁴ A more thorough summary may be found in M. le Gentil's article in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, pp. 251-2.

in attempting to build a tower, is told that it will be completed only if the mortar contains the blood of a child who had no father. Merlin is found and brought to Vortigern, and delivers the familiar prophecy of the red and white dragons. Later, Vortigern perishes in his own tower during an invasion by the Saxons under the command of Constant's sons. Constant's second son, Pandragon, reigns as king, during which time the Saxons are persuaded to leave Britain for a while. When they return, they slay Pandragon at Salisbury. Uter, Pandragon's brother, becomes king and takes the name Uter-pandragon. Following this is the story in which Merlin transports Stonehenge from Ireland to Salisbury. On Merlin's advice, Uter constructs the Round Table. There follows the story of Uter's infatuation with Ygerne, Merlin's magical transformation of Uter into the Duke's likeness, and the begetting of Arthur. Uter is killed in battle with the Saxons, and the young Arthur draws the sword from the anvil to become king.⁹⁵

As Thomas E. Kelly points out, Robert's plan in his cycle is clear: "to link the Arthurian world to the time of Christ and to the religion founded by Him."⁹⁶ What Robert evidently did was to create a "Christian mythology" into which the Arthurian romances could be "plugged," and in which they would take on a new significance.

⁹⁵Alexandre Micha's "The Vulgate Merlin" contains a more detailed summary on pp. 319-20.

⁹⁶Thomas E. Kelly, Le Haut Livre du Graal: Perlesvaus, A Structural Study (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1974), pp. 27-28.

The elements that were later absorbed into the Vulgate-Malory traditions are: the Joseph storyline, the religious significance of the Rich Fisher/Fisher King motif (represented by Bron), the Siege Perilous (the seat reserved for the son of Alain), the Grail table at which one receives one's heart's desire, and the motif of the sword in the anvil. But more important, the Grail, because of its new significance as a relic of the Last Supper and vessel of the blood of Christ, obviously cannot remain merely one adventure among many, but must become the chief adventure of Arthur's kingdom.

One attempt to conclude Robert's story of the Grail is the prose romance commonly called the Didot Perceval, named after the owners of one of the two manuscripts in which it is found.⁹⁷ William Roach, who in 1941 published his edition of the Modena and Paris manuscripts of the work, believes that Robert was himself the author of a verse Perceval of which the Didot Perceval is a corrupt and heavily-interpolated redaction; while acknowledging that "large sections of the work as it now stands have been taken with very little change from the Perceval of Chrétien and his continuator Wauchier,"⁹⁸ Roach assumes that the sections of the romance which cannot be ascribed to an extant or recognizable source faithfully reflect the original work of Robert, which had been so heavily altered because

⁹⁷Le Gentil, p. 257.

⁹⁸William Roach, "Introduction" in his edition of The Didot Perceval (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), p. 15.

the unknown redactor did not care for Robert's "dry, pietistic, prolix, and clumsy" style, and so included the more romantic Grail stories of Chrétien and "Wauchier" in place of Robert's original words.⁹⁹ Pierre le Gentil has argued, however, that once ten of the sixteen episodes of the work have been shown to be interpolated Chrétien and Wauchier material, little is left of the original Robert, if in fact Robert ever wrote a Perceval; le Gentil thinks it simpler to assume that the Didot Perceval is an attempt to complete the fragmentary Joseph-Merlin cycle by using suitable sections from the Chrétien Perceval and the Second Continuation and linking them together with invented episodes so as to tie them in to Robert's Joseph.¹⁰⁰

The Didot Perceval is composed of two sections: the Perceval proper and a Mort Artu derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth.¹⁰¹ In the Perceval proper, Alain le Gros sends his son Perceval to the famous court of King Arthur. Perceval leaves without his mother's knowledge and, upon coming to court, is made knight. After a tournament in which he unhorses, among others, Yvain and Lancelot, Perceval attempts to sit in the vacant thirteenth seat at the table of the twelve peers, a seat left empty to signify the place of Judas. As he does so, ignoring Arthur's warnings, the stone beneath him splits, the earth groans, and darkness spreads throughout the land. A voice tells the

⁹⁹Roach, Didot Perceval, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰Le Gentil, p. 260.

¹⁰¹Le Gentil, p. 257.

court that the Grail is now in Britain, and that Perceval's grandfather, Bron the Fisher King, is ill, and that neither he nor the stone will be made whole until one of the knights at the table comes to the house of the Fisher King and asks about the Grail. The Knights of the Round Table decide to undertake the quest, and Perceval swears he will not sleep two nights in the same place until he accomplishes it. After more than three years of adventures, Perceval is directed by two children from Paradise and by Merlin in the form of a shadow to the Grail castle. Riding on from these encounters, Perceval encounters his grandfather, the Fisher King, who asks him to stay the night at the castle. That night, during the meal, Perceval sees the Grail procession: a damsel carrying two silver platters, a boy bearing a bleeding lance, and another youth carrying the Grail which Christ gave to Joseph in prison. Though the King gives him every opportunity to do so, Perceval asks nothing about the Grail because his mother warned him against being too inquisitive--also, he is exhausted nearly to the point of collapse. The next morning, Perceval finds the castle deserted. Riding out, he meets a weeping woman who tells him that if he had asked concerning the Grail and whom it serves, all would have been well and Perceval would have had charge of the chalice. Perceval rides away to more adventures, during which time he meets his Hermit Uncle who hears his confession and imposes a penance on him. Later he meets Merlin, in the guise of a reaper, who again points the way to the Grail castle. This time during the procession, Perceval asks the

Grail question. The Fisher King is healed, the stone beneath the "Siege Perlous" is made whole, and all the enchantments in the world are ended. The Fisher King gives the Grail and the castle to Perceval, and dies three days later, leaving Perceval to become lord of the Grail castle.

In the Mort Artu section, Arthur and his knights, now that the enchantments have ended, seek adventure elsewhere. The story recounts the battle with Frolle of France and the Roman Expedition as told by Geoffrey. And, as in the Historia, Arthur is taken away to the isle of Avalon to be healed by his sister Morgan. Arthur, it is believed, will one day return to be king.¹⁰²

As Pierre le Gentil has remarked, the Didot Perceval "does round out . . . certain anticipations of the Joseph and the Merlin, and effects a synthesis of the romantic type of adventure found in Chrétien's poem and the ascetic and sacramental tendencies established by Robert."¹⁰³ Also interesting is the placing of the Mort Artu directly after the conclusion of the Grail Quest: it is because the wonders have ceased after the achieving of the Grail that Arthur and his knights depart for adventure in France. Arthur entrusts the care of his kingdom and his queen to Mordred, who later betrays him and wars against him. It is almost as if, now that the Quest is achieved, there is no further reason for the kingdom to exist. The

¹⁰²William Roach provides a summary of the Didot Perceval on pp. 18-32 of his edition of the work.

¹⁰³Le Gentil, p. 282.

Grail Quest, in the Didot Perceval, thus becomes the adventure that (indirectly) leads to the ultimate downfall of the Arthurian kingdom, a pattern that we find repeated in the Vulgate and which, as M. le Gentil remarks, might not have occurred in that work at all had not the Didot Perceval existed.¹⁰⁴

The French Prose Perlesvaus is another Grail romance based partly on the Joseph-Grail mythos of Robert de Boron. Dated later than 1191 (because of an internal reference to Guinevere's burial on the Isle of Avalon, an incident based on the supposed exhumation of the bodies of Arthur and his queen at Glastonbury in that year) and prior to the composition of the French Prose Vulgate,¹⁰⁵ the Perlesvaus might be considered another continuation of Chrétien's Perceval, for its author assumes that the reader is familiar with Chrétien's work. Perlesvaus begins where Perceval left off; in the first of the eleven branches of Perlesvaus, a maiden tells King Arthur that the curse on Britain is the result of the failure of a youth (Perceval) to ask "what was done with [the Grail] or who was served from it. And because he failed to ask these questions, all lands are rent by war; no knight meets another in a forest but he

¹⁰⁴Le Gentil, p. 282.

¹⁰⁵William Albert Nitze, "Perlesvaus," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 268.

attacks and kills him if he can" ¹⁰⁶ The Grail in Perlesvaus is, as it was in Robert de Boron, the chalice which Christ gave Joseph in prison; and, as in the Didot Perceval, Perceval is the son of Alain le Gros, and is successful, after a fashion, in the Quest. Perlesvaus also reminds us of Chrétien not only in that it purports to continue the action in Chrétien's poem, but in that it devotes a substantial amount of time to the detailing of Gawain's adventures, and in the fact that its Arthur, like Chrétien's, is curiously weak as a king. But here the resemblance to the previous romance ends. The Perlesvaus is more interesting for its divergences from past works and in the innovations it makes. For instance, though both Perceval and Gawain have had their adventures chronicled in Grail Quests, the Perlesvaus adds Lancelot to the list of Grail Knights. We learn that Arthur and Guinevere have a son, Loholt, whom Kay slays and whose head is brought to Arthur's court. Guinevere consequently dies of remorse and is buried in the Isle of Avalon, where Lancelot later comes to pay his respects. The Fisher King, in an interesting twist, dies before the completion of the Quest; as Nitze suggests, ¹⁰⁷ this may be the reason that, when Perceval defeats the King of Castle Mortal and gains possession of the Grail Castle, thus completing the Quest story, the Grail procession does not take place, and so the

¹⁰⁶ All quotations from the Perlesvaus are taken from The High Book of the Grail, an English translation by Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978), p. 167.

¹⁰⁷ Nitze, "Perlesvaus," p. 266.

redemptive question is never asked. Perceval does, however, at last become the lord of the Grail Castle. After other adventures following the end of the Grail Quest, Perceval sails away and is never seen again. A colophon in one of the manuscripts says that a later tale will be related which tells how Claudas defeated Lancelot and which will continue the story of Brien de Isles; but if it was written, it has not survived.

This is not intended to be a complete summary of the events and characters of the Perlesvaus--there are too many of both to be dealt with in so short a space--but simply an indication of some of the differences between Perlesvaus and the other Arthurian Grail stories. Many of these additions began and ended with the Perlesvaus; that is, they did not influence the Vulgate Cycle in any perceivable way. But some elements of Perlesvaus have parallels in the Vulgate. There is, for instance, the division of the Grail Knights into three basic "groups": Gawain, Lancelot, and Perceval. Both Gawain and Lancelot are unsuccessful in the Quest because (as a hermit explains to Perceval concerning their failure to enter a certain Turning Castle) "they are the finest knights in the world but for their lust."¹⁰⁸ Here, as in the French Queste, is the same division between the successful Grail Knight and the unsuccessful knights, between worldly prowess and the qualities needed to succeed in the Quest (though it should be mentioned that Gawain is apparently not the thick-headed

¹⁰⁸High Book of the Grail, p. 167.

oaf he is in the Queste; in the Perlesvaus he is occasionally successful in his adventures, as when he retrieves the sword that beheaded John the Baptist and, in the same adventure, converts the pagan king Gurgulan to Christianity). And Lancelot, in the Perlesvaus as in the Queste, fails in the adventure of the Grail because of his love for Guinevere, though in the Perlesvaus he is not at all penitent as he is in the Queste. In fact, in the Perlesvaus, though repeatedly urged to forsake his love for the Queen, Lancelot cheerfully confesses that he enjoys his sin too much and is sure that God is much too kind to hold it against him.¹⁰⁹ That Lancelot is present in the Quest in such a large way is in itself a rather large transformation in the myth, or what will become the myth. One gets the impression from Chrétien that Lancelot's love for Guinevere is one of those knightly peccadilloes which should, of course, be kept from general (and particularly royal) knowledge for the sake of sheer prudence, but which could have, at worst, consequences important only to those personally involved; in Chrétien, after all, the affair is linked to the events in the Lancelot. But once the affair becomes a part of a greater story, it is no longer simply an isolated event; it gains in tragic power. Its being connected to the Grail Quest increases the tragic implications of the adultery. And if the adultery does not blossom into full-blown tragedy in the Perlesvaus, it is because Guinevere dies before the adultery can be discovered.

¹⁰⁹ High Book of the Grail, pp. 110-111.

At this point of the development of the Arthurian legend--the immediate pre-Vulgate state--the components are one coherent history of Arthur (Geoffrey's Historia, and its reproduction in Wace and Layamon), a collection of individual tales of particular knights (represented by Chrétien's romances), and an attempted redaction-amplification-combination of one of these tales (Perceval, transformed into the Joseph-Merlin-Didot Perceval complex, as well as developed by the various continuations and the Perlesvaus). Also present is the "latent tragedy" of Lancelot and Guinevere, first presented in Chrétien as a conventional courtly love affair and brought a little nearer tragedy in the Perlesvaus, but as yet neither explicitly tragic nor the major part of the whole story of Arthur. Another "floating" element of the Arthurian story is a Lancelot-tradition represented by Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's Lanzelet, which will not be discussed in detail here because it made no contribution to the myth as it later appeared in Malory, though the tradition that lay behind the Lanzelet made its way into the Vulgate Cycle's narrative of Lancelot's youth.¹¹⁰

These are the raw materials of the myth of Arthur--at this stage of development, a rather disorderly and diverse collection of themes and motifs, frequently contradictory and crying out for order. There is a dangerous tendency, in tracing the development of a legend

¹¹⁰ Hendricus Sparnaay, "Hartmann von Aue and His Successors," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 438.

or myth--particularly a myth such as that of Arthur, which is already known to the modern reader in a fairly established form--of regarding the various stages in its evolution as mere stepping stones toward the finished product. Thomas Kelly, in his study of Perlesvaus, argues for the artistic autonomy of the work, writing that "one must avoid the danger of setting up the [Vulgate] Lancelot en prose as some sort of ideal construction, and thus judging the romances which precede it only insofar as they anticipate or deviate from this model."¹¹¹ That is, says Kelly, we ought to judge the romances as units in themselves rather than to regard them as nothing more than evolutionary links between the unadorned notation of the dux bellorum and the elaborate architecture of the Vulgate. And of course the authors of the Perlesvaus or the Didot Perceval did not think of themselves as merely creating motifs that would later be taken up and transformed by some more comprehensive work. But it is difficult to think of these pre-Vulgate works as strictly autonomous. Certainly their authors did not think so: they obviously thought of themselves as clarifiers, restorers, completers--people taking unfinished works and finishing them, or establishing contexts in which obscurities are explained. The whole history of the Joseph-Merlin-Didot Perceval cycle is an example of this tendency: each of the works in the series is an attempt to elucidate, clarify, extend, and otherwise fit itself into a tradition that it received but did not invent. One wonders, keeping this patchwork history of the Grail in

¹¹¹Kelly, Le Haut Livre, p. 28.

mind, how the word autonomous could be accurately applied to any of them. All of these authors or redactors see themselves as working toward some sort of complete narrative. These are not modern authors reworking an established tale; these are authors attempting to establish a tale precisely because there isn't one, because (most fortunate of literary accidents, though Chrétien could not be expected to agree) Chrétien died and left his romance unfinished.

But there was another force working toward the coherence of the Arthurian legend in the thirteenth century, a gradual change in European narrative tradition which Eugène Vinaver discusses in The Rise of Romance. This is the introduction of logical, causal links between various episodes of a story or the linking of previously separate tales into one longer continuous narrative. This may not sound much like a revolution in story-telling, or even a narrative convention as such, but more like an unavoidable part of the very nature of Story itself. But, Vinaver argues, this is a modern prejudice:

We look nowadays upon a narrative of events as a temporal sequence, each element of which moves towards the next as each moment of time moves towards the one that follows; and at the same time we see it as a rational sequence so arranged that each phase of it is related in a definable manner to whatever comes before or after. What is so difficult for us to understand is that a great masterpiece such as The Song of Roland should triumphantly discard the twin principles of rational and temporal motivation.¹¹²

¹¹²Vinaver, Rise of Romance, pp. 9-10. Further page number references will be noted parenthetically in the body of the chapter.

As examples, Vinaver provides, from the Chanson de Roland, Roland's almost simultaneous praise and denunciation of Ganelon, after the latter has recommended Roland as commander of the rearguard of the French Army, and Roland's death scene, which is given us in three versions. Discussing Roland's death scene, Vinaver points out that "These are not three different moments of time, but three independent descriptions of the same moment; and yet the details of each description are not intended . . . to coalesce into a single picture. Each description is a separate vision of the same event, so presented that the scene would lose much of its significance if all the passages referring to it were telescoped into one" (p. 9). What we call "normal" causal or logical sequence was not, therefore, a given in Roland. Vinaver argues that the European tradition of causal and logical links, which obviously includes the element of character motivation, grew out of the practice of annotating or explicating a received text: "the discovery of the meaning implicit in the matter, and the insertion of such thoughts . . . as might adorn or be read into the matter" (p. 16), related in principle and practice to biblical exegesis:

What a speaker trained in the use of Rhetoric felt naturally compelled to do was not simply to elucidate the matter but to adapt it to a given point of view. . . . Rhetoric could thus lead to a purposeful refashioning of traditional material, and the adaptor could become to all intents and purposes an original author, except that, unlike some authors, he would care above all for the way in which he told his stories and measure his achievement in terms of such new significance as he was able to confer upon an existing body of facts. (p. 22)

This was, Vinaver points out, Chrétien's approach when he adapted whatever unknown tales he had as raw material into the forms of his own romances: the elaboration or embroidering of a received tale with the learning and skill at his disposal. Chrétien adds to the motivation of characters by letting us look inside them through the conventions of the interior monologue, and emphasizes the "courtly" aspect of the story at the expense of the "mythological" matter, so that the coherence of the conte was less important to him than his skill at narrative embroidery (p. 41). Thus the attempts to defend Chrétien's apparent lapses and improbabilities in his stories are, Vinaver argues, unnecessary, since Chrétien would not have admitted to the sin with which he was charged. It is not until the next--that is, the thirteenth--century (says Vinaver) that a "mania" for fitting isolated elements into a coherent, connected narrative will appear: "The varied and incoherent poetic legacy of the twelfth century will fall into carefully thought-out narrative sequences, missing links will be found, and a vast architectural design will emerge. The Perceval story will become the story of Galahad, the hero of a rigidly coherent Queste del Saint Graal in which every detail of the action will have its explicitly stated motive and no episode will be allowed to remain outside a carefully thought-out scheme" (p. 51). Vinaver's example of this process of coalescence is, appropriately enough for the present study, the development of the Wasteland theme in Arthurian legend. Vinaver points out that the three elements (in Perceval) of the wounded king, the miraculous

weapon (or bleeding lance), and the Wasteland are not clearly causally connected in Chrétien, and that the further history of the Wasteland story is largely a continuing attempt to develop a framework in which the elements are causally connected, so that all the themes come closest to a coherent causal relationship in the Vulgate cycle and the Suite du Merlin (which includes the "Balain" episode adapted by Malory into "The Knight with Two Swords"). Though Vinaver is not concerned with the development of the Arthurian story as myth, it should be clear that his observations about the development of narrative technique are very important to my argument. As I remarked in the first chapter, for a myth to be myth, there must be an at least implied causal connection between the elements of a story; a disconnected series of events or archetypes is no more a myth than a throw of Tarot cards is a story. In attempting to connect the various elements of the Arthurian tradition into one story, the late twelfth and early thirteenth-century authors were establishing a framework that was at least congenial to myth. The most elaborate and comprehensive of these attempts to develop the Arthurian tradition into a coherent narrative is the French Vulgate Cycle, which is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

THE VULGATE CYCLE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MYTH

The French Prose Arthurian Cycle--or, as it is more commonly known, the Vulgate Cycle--is the modern title for five prose romances of the first half of the thirteenth century, these being L'Estoire del Graal, L'Estoire de Merlin, Le Livre del Lancelot du Lac, La Queste del Saint Graal, and La Mort le Roi Artu (or Mort Artu). The last three of these works--the Lancelot, the Queste, and the Mort--are sometimes called the Lancelot en prose or Prose Lancelot, to distinguish this original trilogy from the Estoire del Graal and the Merlin, which were composed after the original trilogy in order to explain the Grail and to provide an account of the rise of the Arthurian Kingdom.¹ The proposed date for the Vulgate Cycle is sometime in the second and third decades of the thirteenth century.² Though the Prose Lancelot claims a "Walter Map" as its author, this claim is almost universally rejected nowadays in favor of an anonymous architect-compiler who, Jean Frappier argues, was responsible for the general plan of the Lancelot en prose and its narrative unity, though he did not necessarily write the entire trilogy himself (Frappier thinks him responsible for at least the bulk of the

¹Jean Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 295.

²Frappier, p. 295.

Livre del Lancelot).³ It is also commonly noted nowadays that the Queste del Saint Graal has been doctrinally (and therefore, to a certain extent, artistically) influenced by the Cistercian order which was concerned with presenting an allegorical explication of the doctrine of Transubstantiation,⁴ though it is not known whether the author of the Queste was himself a monk. There are no internal claims of authorship in either the Estoire del Graal or the Merlin, though Frappier notes that "interpolaters attributed the work to Robert de Boron"⁵--as they might have done with some reason, since both the Estoire and Merlin are heavily indebted to Robert's Joseph-Merlin narratives. The only complete edition of the Vulgate is that prepared by H. Oskar Sommer and published by the Carnegie Institute in the first two decades of this century. The Queste has since been re-edited by Albert Pauphilet, whose edition, generally regarded as more authoritative than Sommer's, appeared in 1949. The most recent edition of the Mort Artu is Jean Frappier's La Mort le Roi Artu, the third edition of which was published in 1964.⁶

³Frappier, p. 316.

⁴For a brief discussion of this matter, see Albert Pauphilet's introduction to his edition of La Queste del Sainte Graal (Paris, 1949), pp. viii-x. Pauphilet provides a more detailed explication of the doctrines behind the Queste in Etudes sur la Queste del Saint Graal (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1921), in the chapter "Le Tableau de la Vie Chrétienne" (pp. 27-84).

⁵Frappier, p. 315.

⁶Jean Frappier, ed., La Mort le Roi Artu, 3rd ed. (Paris: Textes Littéraires Français, 1964).

The Vulgate is the climax of that coalescing tendency which Vinaver discusses in his Rise of Romance. One of its chief accomplishments is the arrangement of the various important and popular motifs and tales of the inherited Arthurian corpus into the first comprehensive history of Arthur since the Historia of Geoffrey of Monmouth. It achieves what Robert de Boron set out to do in his Joseph-Merlin cycle--that is, to fit the Grail Quest into the whole history of Arthur--and it gives a prominent place to Lancelot in the Arthurian Kingdom. But the Vulgate does not merely include these two narrative themes: it connects them. When it has done its work, the Vulgate has made the Lancelot and Grail stories almost symbiotic. The shape, and to some extent, meaning, of the Grail Quest is altered by the presence of Lancelot as one of the Quest Knights, just as Lancelot's life--and, correspondingly, the story of Arthur's kingdom--is transformed by the Grail Quest. The latent tragedy of the Lancelot-Guinevere affair in the Perlesvaus thus becomes fully potent, dragging Arthur into its orbit for the first time, and changing the significance and motivation of Mordred's treason at the end of the tale. If it had done nothing more than to connect, enhance, and ennoble the traditions it had received, the Vulgate would have done enough; but it also created. Some of the motifs that we regard as distinctively Arthurian first appear in the Vulgate: Arthur's begetting of Mordred on his half-sister, Lancelot's begetting of Galahad on the daughter of King Pellès, Galahad himself, the many numinous images and adventures of the Grail Quest, the Gawain-Lancelot

feud, the tragic consequences of the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere, and Arthur's final request that his sword Excalibur be tossed into a lake. } Many of these inventions were not made for their own sakes, but as necessary narrative connections--string to hold the whole mass together. And animating all of this is a new-found sense of great spiritual significance. If the Vulgate has a heart, a center from which radiates the life and organization of its whole series of romances, it is the Queste del Saint Graal, the great adventure towards which the Arthurian kingdom has been ascending and from which, as King Arthur correctly fears, it will never fully recover; as Merlin tells Uterpandragon in the Estoire de Merlin, even the Round Table itself is primarily the third table of the Grail. The choices open to the Arthurian community are now terribly clear: the achievement of the Beatific vision, or destruction. The result of this choice is that some few achieve this vision, but that all except two--Galahad and Perceval--suffer some form of destruction and loss.

The presence of the Queste, however, also universalizes the story of Arthur: because the Queste is a spiritual allegory, the story of Arthur becomes the story of all men, a type of life in the world. The Vulgate is trembling on the edge of true myth; why does it not completely cross over into myth may become clear as we proceed through its story. I should issue a disclaimer here that I do not intend to summarize every event in the Vulgate. While I do intend that the reader receive some sense of the narrative flow of the Vulgate, my chief interest here is to point out the significant

connections and innovations that the Vulgate makes--"significant" in the sense that they made their way into Malory and were transformed into myth.

This is why I give the Estoire del Graal shorter shrift here than some might think it deserves. For one reason, there is no corresponding history of the Grail in Malory except insofar as it appears in his Sankgreal romance, and even this is derived from the Queste rather than the Estoire del Graal. The Estoire itself, in fact, having been composed later than the Queste, is partially derived from that work, anticipating (and explaining the origins of) some of the wonders of the Queste. The Estoire begins by telling a story substantially similar to Robert de Boron's Joseph. But whereas Robert's Joseph ends before the Grail is brought to Britain, the Estoire traces the Grail's travels to its resting place in the castle Corbenic. Because it was composed after the Queste, the Estoire incorporated some of the Queste's material so as to provide the origins of some of the adventures that the Quest Knights will later encounter. This not unnaturally leads sometimes to a mere duplication of material, so that we are told twice--once in the Estoire and once in the Queste--the origin of Solomon's ship, the story of the Maimed King, and the cursing of the Foreign Land so that it becomes the Waste Land. The logic behind the composition of the Estoire is not difficult to imagine. The origins of the Grail and the Quest adventures are provided only in piecemeal form in the Queste. The Estoire is an attempt to tell these origin stories in

chronological order and to connect them with Robert's Joseph mythos. Thus the Estoire ends, as Robert intended his Joseph to end, with Joseph's son Josephe and grandson Alain in Britain with the Grail, as well as by telling us that Alain, established in Corbenic, had a son, Josue, whose successors all bore the surname "Rich Fisher."

The Estoire also supplies an appropriate Grail-pedigree for Lancelot's family, so that Lancelot's son Galahad can legitimately become the last keeper of the Grail. The result is a Joseph-Grail history that is consonant with the rest of the Vulgate Cycle.

One other result of the composition of the Estoire, however, was to turn the whole of the Vulgate into a Grail history. The original Lancelot trilogy had been, naturally enough, Lancelot-oriented, and this, as we shall see later, was itself an element that served to weaken the myth of Arthur. The Estoire weakened it further, by making everything that followed primarily the extended subsequent history of the Grail. For those whose chief interest is in the Grail, this is no doubt a salutary effect; for those interested mainly in Arthur, it is not. The Estoire impedes the Arthurian myth by making Arthur's story not a self-contained tale but a contingent one that is simply a part of another, longer self-contained story. Because of the Estoire, the history of Arthur in the Vulgate appears to have received its shape and destiny almost as a side-effect of the Grail's presence in Britain. If, as was noted in the first chapter, a myth must usually be seen as a self-contained story, then the Estoire, however much it satisfied the historiographical

instincts of its authors, reduced the effect of the Arthurian myth by making it less properly Arthurian.

Perhaps it was the passion for historiographical completeness that made the Vulgate compilers see that there was still rather a large narrative gap between the end of the Estoire and the beginning of the Lancelot, for the Arthurian kingdom is already fully established when Lancelot's story begins. The Estoire was not enough. The Lancelot needed yet another narrative preface. The result of this need was the Estoire du Merlin.

L'Estoire du Merlin is the first of the romances of the Vulgate to contain material with which most of us have become familiar because of Malory. The Vulgate Merlin is not, it is true, Malory's source--that honor belongs to the later Huth Merlin, or as it is sometimes called, the Suite du Merlin. But both the Vulgate and Huth Merlins tell similar stories, despite the Huth's addition of material not in the Vulgate. As was stated earlier, the Vulgate Merlin is in part a prose redaction of, or based upon a prose redaction of, Robert de Boron's Merlin up to the point of Arthur's coronation. Thereafter, the story of Merlin and Arthur--which continues up to the imprisonment of Merlin by Viviane and includes an abbreviated account of the birth of Lancelot, christened Galahad--is based partly on the Wace Brut, Chrétien, the Didot Perceval, and other parts of the Vulgate, as well as some non-Arthurian sources.⁷ The Vulgate Merlin

⁷Alexandre Micha, "The Vulgate Merlin," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 322-3.

was written, like the Estoire del Graal, as a sort of post facto introduction to the Lancelot en prose, as an attempt to set the Lancelot into a broader Arthurian perspective and to account for the world in which Lancelot finds himself.

The Vulgate Merlin opens, like Robert's poem, with the devils seeking to undo the Incarnation by fathering their own "incarnate" anti-messiah upon a mortal woman. When a suitable family is found, the devils, after causing the deaths of the husband, the wife, and the son, begin to tempt the three remaining sisters. Two are corrupted, but the third is advised to lock herself in a tower, cross herself before going to bed, and keep a light burning in the night. One night, after being berated by her sole surviving sister, she forgets these instructions, with the result that she is left unprotected and made pregnant by one of the fiends. When the child is born, he is christened Merlin. The christening removes the power of the fiends over his life, but allows him to retain the supernatural abilities of his sire. He meets Blaise, and amazes him with his obviously preternatural knowledge.

In the section that follows, we are given the political background to the founding of the Pendragon line, including the story of how Maines, one of the sons of King Constans, ascended to the throne and was betrayed by Vertiger, and of the escape of Uter and Pandragon, Constans' other two sons, into another land. A cruel and unpopular king, Vertiger defends himself against the threat of Constans' sons by attempting to build a strong tower. But the tower will not stand,

his wise men tell him, unless the mortar of its foundation is mixed with the blood of a fatherless boy. Merlin is accordingly brought to court where he reveals the clerks' plot against him and tells the king the real reason that the tower will not stand: two dragons, one red and one white, are fighting in a pool beneath the tower. When the pool is drained, the white dragon kills the red--a symbol, Merlin declares, of the death of Vertiger, which no tower can prevent. The sons of Constans come back to England and make war upon Vertiger, who dies when his tower is burned. Pandragon becomes king, and reigns victoriously until he is killed in battle, whereupon Uter takes the throne and assumes the name Uter Pandragon, continuing the war against the Sesnes (i.e., Saxons). Merlin comes to Uter and tells him the history of Joseph and the Grail and commands that a third Grail table--the Round Table--be established at Cardoel in Wales. Uter agrees to this. The Table contains a Siege Perilous, which must await the knight destined to sit in it. When a knight experimentally sits in the seat, he disappears, and Merlin repeats, to an audience no doubt ready to listen now, that the seat should remain vacant until the coming of the promised knight.

Then follows the familiar Uter-Igerne story in which Uter, magically disguised as Igerne's husband, enters the castle and fathers Arthur upon Igerne. When Arthur is born, he is taken by Merlin to be raised by Antor (Ector in Malory). After Uter dies, Merlin sets the sword in the stone. One day, some years afterward, when Antor, his son Kex, and the young Arthur meet with two hundred and fifty other knights to try to draw the sword from the stone, Kex

discovers that he has left his sword behind and sends Arthur to fetch it. Arthur instead draws the sword from the stone and brings it to Kex, who claims that he drew it out. Antor, who clearly knows his son well, does not believe him, and he, Kex, and Arthur return to the stone, where Arthur again draws out the sword and learns that he is not Antor's son after all, but the promised king.

After Arthur's coronation, the Merlin becomes largely a collection of battles--against the Sesnes, against the rebellious barons who will not have Arthur as their king, and ultimately against the Romans; yet, there is time out enough from battle for other things to happen. Arthur and Genievre (Guinevere) become acquainted when Arthur aids her father Leodegan against the Saxons. Later, Arthur and Guinevere marry, after a little difficulty with a second, false Guinevere. We are told that Mordred, ostensibly the son of King Lot, is actually the result of an incestuous union between Arthur and his sister when they did not know each other, and that Mordred will grow up to betray Arthur. Mordred's older brother Gawain comes to Arthur's court, his brothers tagging along, all desiring to be made knights, and all prove themselves in daring exploits (it is Gawain who, in the war against the Romans, cuts off the emperor's head). But it becomes clear that Aggravain is an unforgiving and violent sort (it is he who will later be drawn into the double-edged plot against Lancelot and Arthur). As the kingdom consolidates itself, and the purpose of Arthurian knighthood becomes clearer, the knights vow to Arthur that they will aid any damsel in distress and say that they wish

themselves to be Guinevere's knights; Arthur agrees to this, and makes his vow that he will never sit to meat until he has heard the tale of some adventure. Shortly thereafter, Arthur hears for the first time of the greatest adventure that his knights will ever embark on--the quest for the Grail, which only the best and bravest knight in the world may achieve. And, throughout the book which bears his name, Merlin comes and goes, aiding battles with magic, confounding and twitting friends and enemies alike with his shape-shifting, travelling about the world at unheard-of speeds (he makes the journey from Rome to Britain in twenty-four hours), and occasionally reporting in to Blaise, who is recording all that happens. But the most important thing that Merlin does apart from helping Arthur to become king is to fall in love with Viviane. The affair--if one can call it that--resurfaces throughout the book. Viviane wheedles more and more secrets out of Merlin, who clearly knows the outcome of this romance, but who has no power or desire to avoid his fate, despite Blaise's pleas that he come to his senses. Viviane at last asks him how she might magically imprison a man. Merlin tells her, and she imprisons him in a cave in the forest of Broceliande. Gawain is the last knight ever to hear his voice, which issues from the ground. Afterwards, Merlin passes from the knowledge of men, never to be heard from again. The last event that the book of Merlin records is that Ban of Benoyc, who has loyally aided Arthur, has fathered a son, christened Galahad, but who is called Lancelot. The stage is now fully set for the beginning of the Lancelot en prose.

Though there are many elements in the Merlin that are familiar to us from other Arthurian works, whether from Geoffrey or Malory, three of these elements are particularly important to the development of Arthurian myth, particularly as it is represented in Malory. No doubt the best known of these three is the motif of the sword in the stone, the story of a boy who comes from relative obscurity, performs a miraculous feat impossible for anyone else, and thereby learns his true identity and destiny. The reason for the universal appeal of this story should be obvious. Rooted in each human psyche is the idea of absolute personal singularity, of a uniqueness that the universe must in some way recognize. One of the ideas hardest to eradicate from the mind is the belief that a destiny awaits, a shape of time or history uniquely suited to the individual personality. When we are children, this sense of personal singularity manifests itself in daydreams of adult glory or, more unhealthily, in the half-serious belief that one is actually the son or daughter of the rich, the famous, or the powerful--a child unaccountably stolen away from its true parents and left with these boors who claim to be one's parents. Even on this admittedly low level, the story of the boy Arthur who is really the son of a king has an obviously powerful appeal. If this were the sole attraction of the story, it would be no more than a wish-fulfillment fantasy of the sort that Langer finds inferior to true myth. But this simple, common daydream of a boy who becomes king is transformed into myth by the presence of the sword in the stone. We are told that no one but the rightful king will be

able to draw out the sword. The magic involved here is related not to feats of strength but to a matter of essential identity. Compare these conditions for success with those of a fairy tale, in which (for example) a king grants his daughter to any man who is able to climb a glass hill or who can make the king's daughter laugh--or any tale in which the hero succeeds through strength, craft, or guile. In stories of this sort, the feats to be accomplished are unrelated to the essential identity of the hero. He succeeds not because of who he is but what he can do. Presumably, any other person with the same skills could have done the same things. But the motif of the sword in the stone is radically different. The sword is meant for only one person in all the world, and to draw the sword from the stone is to affirm this unique identity. Further, since the sword in the stone is a supernatural manifestation connected to the Merlin-Grail mythos, the person who draws the sword thus assumes his proper place in this larger and significant universe. We are no longer in the popular, almost democratic world of the fairy tale in which anyone can succeed if only he has courage and pluck and can keep his wits about him: we are instead in the hierarchical world of myth, in which one's life has its value mainly in relation to the larger universe or a supernatural reality. It is fitting that Arthur's career as it unfolds in the Vulgate should begin with such a demonstration of his uniqueness as a person and a king. It is a clear sign that here begins a new world, a new kind of king, a history whose import is universal.

The second important mythic element in the Merlin is the begetting of Mordred. We know from Geoffrey that Mordred is the traitorous nephew of King Arthur. But it is in the Vulgate that the potential for myth in this story is realized by the shocking expedient of making Arthur Mordred's father by incest. This is not strictly the Merlin's invention. The Vulgate Lancelot and Mort Artu, both written before the Merlin, tell us that Mordred is Arthur's son by Arthur's sister; the Merlin has merely taken this information and placed the begetting in chronological sequence. But because this element is introduced early in Arthur's career, it becomes a datum that will be with us throughout the story, a motif that will change the way we look at Mordred's betrayal of Arthur and attempted seduction of Guinevere. This is the "son of incest" story I mentioned in the first chapter: A man begets upon his sister a son who grows up to kill him. I noted then that the story derived much of its mythic power from the moral absolute, "Incest and patricide are abominations," that this story is meaningless even on a narrative level unless we assume a universal value against which it is played. An orthodox Freudian might argue that the story derives its mythic power not so much from a set of values as from a psychic tension between primal biological and emotional needs on one hand and the repressive power of the superego on the other. In other words, boys secretly desire to kill their fathers and to marry their mothers (which Mordred certainly seems to be trying to do symbolically with his father's wife); thus the power of the story comes from our

recognition of ourselves in this tale. But for the purposes of myth, it does not much matter which of these two interpretations we adopt. Either way, the mythic force of the story grows out of our seeing it as an exemplum of a universal truth, whether that truth is located in a greater Reality outside the natural world or in the fundamental drives of the human creature.

The "Merlin" story itself in the Merlin is also an important addition to the myth of Arthur. The kernel story of Merlin's conception and youth of course comes from Geoffrey. Malory makes no use of any part of this story, preferring to begin with Merlin's helping Uther into Tintagel. But he does preserve the story of Merlin's love for Viviane and her betrayal of him by imprisoning him, through his own arts, in a cave--a story first told in the Vulgate Merlin and repeated, with some embroidery, in the Huth Merlin (or Suite du Merlin), which was Malory's immediate source. The Merlin-Viviane story appears to have little actual effect on the essential shape of the Arthurian myth, though it is itself a powerful story, to which a parallel can be found in the tale of Samson and Delilah or even in the story of Solomon who, though the wisest man in the world, was led into idolatry by his wives. And one can hardly help but notice that the Merlin-Viviane story is generally similar to parts of the stories of Lancelot (the greatest knight in the world fails in the Quest and as a loyal knight to his king because of his love for the Queen) and Arthur (the great king fathers his own destruction because of his lust for his sister). However, I believe

it would be incorrect to assume, as Maureen Fries appears to do, that this theme of "fraudulent sexual relationships" is the primary mythic motif in what she calls the "Arthurian tragedy."⁸ For one thing, too much else is involved in the story of Arthur for it to be reduced to so simple a series of patterns. Further, "sexual fraud" is inadequate as a description of these motifs. It ignores the differences in the moral implications and the types of the sexual sins involved--Merlin's relinquishment of his wisdom for love, Lancelot's lifelong, crippling addiction, and Arthur's momentary lust are, despite the common sexual element, not the same sort of sins. The concentration on the sexual element also prevents us from seeing that the Merlin-Viviane story can have even wider implications--that, for example, Gawain commits the same sort of sin when his own natural greatness of heart and his love for Lancelot are overpowered by a more primitive blood-feud code of vengeance--or that we can remember times when our own wisdom has bowed to our passions or emotions, of whatever variety, with dire results.

However one sees the relationship of the Merlin-Viviane story to the overall myth of Arthur, at least as important to the myth is the mere fact of Merlin's presence in the early history of Arthur. In Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon, Merlin vanished from the story as soon as he had helped Uther to go to Igerne. In the Vulgate Merlin,

⁸Maureen Fries, "Tragic Patterns in Malory's Morte Darthur: Medieval Narrative as Literary Myth," in The Early Renaissance, ed. Aldo S. Bernardo, Vol. 5 (1978) of the ACTA series, p. 91.

the wizard remains as an advisor to the young king, the wise old man who guides youth into its proper place in the world. If one had to search for parallel stories, one could find them in the myth of Chiron's teaching Aesculapius, or in the story of the prophet Samuel's sponsorship of young king David. One need not search for examples in fiction or history, however--the Merlin-Arthur story is one repeated in every human life, with every child who recognizes that its father or mother or any elder knows far more about the mysterious world into which it has been born than it does. Merlin performs in the Vulgate's narrative a function that any reader of any culture would understand immediately. But because he is a magical figure, he is more than a counselor or substitute father figure: he is an archetypal father figure, a representative of a wisdom older than the world, and the only fitting advisor for a wonder-king such as Arthur.

These three elements--the sword in the stone, the begetting of Mordred, and the presence of Merlin--subtly transformed the myth of Arthur by universalizing the King, by making him more an archetypal figure. The Arthur of the Historia was in many ways too alien to receive our imaginative sympathy. Few of us are princes growing up in royal houses, or kings fighting to consolidate an empire. If the Arthur of the Historia is an archetypal figure, he is a limited, abstract one. But Arthur as he appears in the Merlin is a recognizable figure. He grows up, like most of us, in comparative obscurity, not seriously suspecting that he is a king's son. He has, like most

of us, a wise parental or guardian figure who advises him and who is (as most adults seem to be to young children) strange and unpredictable, operating according to an alien logic or greater wisdom. Further, he succeeds, as most of us would like to do, in affirming his uniqueness as a person and taking his special place in the framework of the universe. And, lest anything be lacking, he has a Sin, a Flaw with which he has to live and which to some extent defines and limits his life. As of the Merlin, Arthur is no longer an abstraction labelled "King" but a more universal figure, the Human Being. The very beginnings of his story serve to alert the reader to the fact that this is no mere fantasy nor simply the story of a particular king, but a story whose implications are broader, whose perimeters may expand to include the reader.

However, as much as the Vulgate Merlin augments the myth of Arthur, it also reduces its power, in much the same way as the Estoire del Graal did--that is, by making the history of Arthur a part of other histories. The "other histories" in this case are the stories of Merlin and the Pandragon clan. While these histories do define the historical and cosmic milieus which give rise to Arthur's kingdom, they also detract from the sense of a self-contained story that the Arthur narrative must have if it is to be read as myth. How Malory deals with this "problem" will be made clear in the next chapter.

It would not be wise to attempt a summary of the whole of the Livre de Lancelot del Lac. Nor, in fact, is there any real need

to do so. The Lancelot is a huge (three volumes in Sommers' edition) and rambling work--frequently rambling because repetitive--which treats of the story of the greatest knight of the Round Table from his birth and seclusion by the Damsel of the Lake through his first appearance at Arthur's court, his innumerable adventures, jousts, fits of madness (grief or drug-induced), and imprisonments, his love affair with Queen Guinevere, and his begetting of Galahad, up to the beginning of the adventures of the Holy Grail. The Lancelot is so constructed--if "constructed" is the right word--that from Lancelot's first adventure (swearing to avenge a wounded knight) the work runs breathlessly and without break through more than twelve hundred pages of episodes which involve not only Lancelot himself but most major--and a great many minor--figures of Arthur's court. The theme of the work, so far as it can be said to have one, is that Lancelot is the greatest knight in the world, which the romance seeks to prove by the inductive method: that is, by inventing situations in which Lancelot has the opportunity to show what he can do. Just as every situation is ultimately designed for Lancelot, so every character is ultimately drawn into his orbit, and exists chiefly in relation to him. Arthur himself comes off decidedly second or third best--he is denounced by a hermit as a wicked king who is faithless to Guinevere (on one occasion--the lady he loved was simply part of an elaborate plot to bring him into the power of his enemies), deceived by the ridiculous charges of the false Guinevere so that he sentences the real Guinevere to death (Lancelot

rescues her, of course), and generally incompetent when Lancelot is not around to help him out. His main unaided triumph is defeating King Frolle of Gaul in single combat--an episode adapted from Geoffrey's Historia. Likewise, most of the characters are defined by how much they love or hate Lancelot, or by how good they are in chivalric prowess as compared to Lancelot--never, it turns out, quite good enough. The modern reader might regard the Lancelot as a silly, shapeless book, and he might be right--with qualification. The Lancelot is shapeless in that there is no visible, all-encompassing plot structure which the individual episodes serve. There is at best something more than a plot drift, a gradual sliding of the episodes toward obviously key events which to a certain extent affect what comes next. But this does not mean that there is no artistry in the construction of the Lancelot, only that the artistry is more like that of a juggler who is able to keep four or five balls--or, in the case of the Lancelot, plot lines--going at the same time. It is a good and complex example of the literary device of entrelacement. And to carry the metaphor further, any attempt to discuss individual episodes of the Lancelot apart from their appearance in the interlace setting is a little like studying the juggler by simply examining the balls individually--you miss a great deal of the artistry. And in such a work in which many of the episodes will be regarded by a modern as silly, the artistry with which they are related and connected to one another is very important. Nevertheless, the importance of the Lancelot in this

study is how individual episodes within it contribute to the general movement of the plot in the whole of the Vulgate. Those are the episodes I intend to treat briefly here.

The Lancelot begins with the story of how treacherous King Claudas betrays King Ban of Benoyc and has him killed as he is going to Logres to meet King Arthur. The Damsel of the Lake rescues his son Galahad--otherwise known as Lancelot--and takes him to live with her, becoming his patroness. Lancelot is so young at the time that he knows neither his name nor his heritage. The Damsel brings him up in the way of true chivalry--that is, knights are supposed to be good, strong men who protect the weak and defend the Church. After his eighteenth birthday, she presents him with a white horse and an outfit of white and silver, telling him he will be knighted in Camelot at the feast of St. John. But in fact, Lancelot, through an oversight, does not have his sword ceremonially girded on him by Arthur, but by Guinevere, whom Lancelot loved from the moment he first saw her, and who has loved him from the same moment. Some three hundred pages will pass before this love is consummated--or, in fact, before Lancelot is officially seated as a Knight at the Round Table. Much of the first of Sommers' volumes of the Lancelot is concerned with the greatest knight in the world proving himself to the court and to everyone he meets. In the first volume he captures Dolorous Gard and renames it Joyous Gard, temporarily joins forces with Galehot (Galahaut in Malory) and persuades him to become an ally and friend of King Arthur, rescues Gawain and others from

prison, and even rescues Arthur himself after the deceitful Camille (with whom Arthur was in love) has imprisoned the King in La Roche. The other knights are kept fairly busy, also--usually on quests to find Lancelot, or getting themselves into predicaments from which Lancelot must rescue them. The first volume ends with Lancelot's being invested as a Round Table knight. The remaining two volumes contain episodes that are at times distressingly similar to those already mentioned: Lancelot has a propensity for being drugged and captured by damsels or for being thought dead by the court at Camelot, so that Arthur has to proclaim a quest to search for him, which provides the Lancelot-author with an excuse to follow the adventures of various other knights, interweaving them with the adventures of Lancelot who, likely as not, is in prison, or is mad, or is simply busy with his own affairs.

One very important recurring theme in the Lancelot is, of course, the love affair of Lancelot and Guinevere, which animates many of the events of the story. At no time in the Lancelot does Arthur suspect that the affair is going on, though various other people know, including a hermit in the second volume who tells Galehot that Lancelot will in fact fail in the Quest of the Holy Grail because of his love for Guinevere. And Arthur, though warned in a symbolic dream that he will be betrayed by those he most trusts and loves, does not suspect that the dream refers to Lancelot and Guinevere. Morgan also knows the secret, because she saw Lancelot, when he was once in her prison, painting the walls with a mural-record

of his chivalric life, including his love for the queen, and Morgan will make what capital of this she can in the Mort Artu. Various of Lancelot's kin and friends are in on the secret as well, and help him to arrange to meet her. Otherwise, however, the affair remains the big secret of the Lancelot and a potentially dangerous one. Guinevere at one point finds out that Lancelot's love for her will be the sin that keeps him from achieving the quest for the Grail, and is greatly sorrowful for his sake, but Lancelot is not particularly sorry, and tells her that all he has done as a knight has been motivated by his love for her. If this is so, then the driving force behind many of the adventures and accomplishments of the Round Table has been an act of deceit and betrayal--underneath all the glory and honor of the kingdom has been a bedrock of sin which will, a hermit tells Galehot, prevent Camelot's greatest knight from fulfilling not only the destiny of the kingdom, but his own destiny as well. For Lancelot, we have been told, is of the lineage of Joseph of Arimathea and a potential Grail Bearer. Now, because of his love for Guinevere, he will never be more than a potential Grail Bearer.

King Pellès, however, is desperate to have the curse lifted from the Waste Land, and needs more than a potential Grail bearer. This need leads to the second important contribution of the Lancelot to the myth of Arthur: the begetting of Galahad, which occurs in the third volume of the Lancelot. Lancelot, arriving at Corbenic, rescues a damsel from a tub of boiling water--a feat which Gawain had

been unable to accomplish when he had visited the Grail Castle in the previous volume (the whole adventure of the Grail Castle had, in fact, been opaque and unsatisfying for him). Lancelot is brought to King Pellès, who honors him. While they are in the hall, a dove carrying a golden censer flies into the room, a damsel appears, bearing the Holy Grail, and the tables are filled with all manner of good things to eat. In the conversation that follows, Pellès learns that, as he has suspected, Lancelot loves the Queen, and Pellès and Brisane, the maid of his daughter Helaine, put this information to their own use. Lancelot is drugged and made to think that Helaine is Guinevere, and he accordingly goes to bed with her. The next morning, after he has slept off the effects of the drug, Lancelot is enraged at the deception and threatens to kill Helaine, but at last shows her mercy and rides away from Corbenic, sick at heart. Of this union, Galahad is born.

Both these motifs--the love affair with Guinevere and the begetting of Galahad--are perhaps the two most important contributions that the Lancelot makes to the overall shape of the Arthurian myth, in that, once having happened, they predestine the outcome not only of the Quest but of the whole story of Arthur, which has, because of these motifs, become very largely a story of the effects of sin on individuals and society--has become, in fact, something of a tragedy. The adultery is not a conventional courtly affair occurring in a vacuum: it changes the destiny of a nation, and not only makes possible, but makes necessary, the begetting of Galahad, to

fill his father's place in the Quest. There are, throughout the Lancelot, reminders that the adultery will have grave consequences, as if the author does not want us to forget that this affair, amusing and romantic and adventurous as it may be at times, is, like all human actions, an act with consequences which are no less real simply because they are twenty years in the future.

There are other elements of the Lancelot which would bear mentioning in a more general study of the work--such as a prose version of Chrétien's Lancelot, Gawain's misadventure at Corbenic, a pair of medieval copper robots, and the like--but which I must reluctantly pass over here. The only other incident relevant to the myth of Arthur deals with Mordred's discovery of his true father: he encounters a priest who tells him that Arthur, not Lot, is his father. Mordred is unwilling to believe the priest and kills him in anger. This incident is little more than a minor waystation in the general progression of the Arthur-Mordred narrative. But it does tell us that Mordred at last knows who he is, and that the news does not please him. We are never actually told in the Mort Artu that Mordred betrays Arthur out of revenge. But, having read this story, neither can we forget that Mordred is a man prone to anger and vengeance for imagined wrongs. The incident keeps the Arthur-Mordred story in our minds, and in some sense prepares us for the denouement in the Mort Artu, when all the major narrative lines in the Vulgate converge in disaster.

The Queste del Saint Graal is the almost literal apotheosis of earthly chivalry, the elevation of a worldly military order to the level of divine warfare. In the Queste, the rules are changed: what would have been exemplary behavior in almost any other part of the Vulgate now becomes, if not mortal sin, at least a definite hindrance to the pursuit of the Quest. The salient points of the Queste are as follows. On Pentecost of the year 454 A. D., an old man robed in white appears in Arthur's hall, leading a red-armored young knight who has neither shield nor sword. This young man is Galahad, the son of Lancelot and the daughter of King Pelles. Galahad is led to the Siege Perilous, which now has a new inscription on it, proclaiming that it is destined to be his. Galahad draws, from a floating stone, a sword whose inscription proclaims that it is reserved for the best knight in the world. That evening, as the knights sit at meat, they hear a sound like a thunderclap, and see the whole castle illuminated by a sunbeam seven times brighter than the sun. The knights are struck dumb, and the Holy Grail, draped in white samite, appears and passes through the hall, providing each knight with what he prefers to eat, afterwards vanishing. Sir Gawain is the first knight to proclaim the Quest for the Grail. The other knights also swear that they will endeavor to sit at the Grail table. This greatly sorrows both King Arthur, who is certain that the Quest will sunder the Round Table, and Queen Guinevere, who is afraid that Lancelot will never return. After suitable preparations and farewells, the knights ride out, Arthur following part of the way before turning back. The Quest proper begins.

The Quest knights quickly divide into three main groups.

Gawain and Hector form one group to themselves: the spiritual boors who cannot think of the Quest except as an opportunity to increase worldly glory. Gawain's most frequent complaint is that he can find neither Galahad nor any satisfactory adventure on this quest. The monks he meets are only too willing to explain to him why his luck is bad: "You, Gawain, have abused your knighthood. For you have been henchman to the enemy, forsaking your Maker and living the worst and most dissolute life that ever a knight lived."⁹ But Gawain's usual response to these outbursts of character analysis is a polite request to be excused. He and Hector do occasionally see a vision or have an adventure, but the monks and hermits stationed throughout the Queste usually manage to bring the interpretations back to Gawain's need for repentance. Gawain's last act in the Queste is, fittingly, to be unhorsed by Galahad, while Hector, who at least comes as far as the Grail Castle, is turned away at its door and rides back to Logres, mortified.

The second "group" is composed of one person: Lancelot, the father of Galahad. Whereas it is Gawain's lot to be rebuked in the Queste, it is Lancelot's to be rebuked and to repent, and this is what makes Lancelot the closest thing to a tragic hero that one may find in the Queste. As far as we can tell, Lancelot's repentance

⁹The Quest of the Holy Grail, trans. P. M. Matarasso (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 79. Further quotations from the Queste are from this translation. Page references will be cited parenthetically within the text of the chapter.

is sincere, and his ultimate failure in the Quest is not due so much to an evil will as to a simple inability to break himself of even the most elemental chivalric habits, which interfere with his ability to enter a new world. Lancelot's repentance is motivated partly by the famous scene in which, in a paralytic wakefulness, he sees a wounded knight brought on a litter to a chapel. The wounded knight beholds the Holy Grail and is healed of his infirmity, marveling that Lancelot, who is apparently asleep, did not wake throughout the adventure. The squire explains that Lancelot is obviously "some knight who committed a grave sin, of which he was never shriven, and maybe so offended Our Lord thereby, that He would not have him witness this high adventure" (Quest, p. 84). The squire then relieves Lancelot of his sword, saddle, bridle and horse, and takes them to his own knight, whereupon they ride away. Afterwards, a voice calls Lancelot "harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more barren and bare than the fig tree" and orders him away from the chapel, "for the stench of thy presence fouls this place" (Quest, p. 85). Full of remorse, Lancelot comes to a hermit who hears Lancelot's confession that he has been Guinevere's lover. Lancelot is persuaded to repent and promises the hermit never again to sin with the queen or any other woman. And he keeps his promise--at least for the duration of the Quest. For Lancelot, the Grail Quest becomes a purgation and, at times, a series of humiliations as he is harangued by monks for his weak faith and his failures, for his continuing to think in terms of earthly chivalry--as in, for example,

the battle of the Black Knights and the White Knights, in which Lancelot joins the Black Knights (symbols of evil) because they need his help the most and offer him the better opportunity for chivalric glory. Still, despite setbacks, Lancelot continues to grow in faith and humility, until he is permitted to board Solomon's ship and to meet his son, Galahad. When, after some months, he disembarks and makes his way to the Grail Castle, he at last comes to a room in which a mass is being celebrated with the Holy Grail. Seeing that the aged priest is in some distress, Lancelot steps over the threshold of the door, and disobeys a command to stay out of the room. As punishment, he is struck into a catatonic state for twenty-four days, symbolizing the twenty-four years that he served the devil. After he wakes, he returns to Logres, having failed in the Quest on the very threshold of achieving it. The indiscretion with which he resumes his affair with Guinevere in the Mort Artu cannot help but seem the act of a despairing man who feels he has nothing left to lose.

The third group is the Grail Knights, distinguished from the Quest Knights because they--Perceval, Bors, and Galahad--actually achieve the Quest of the Grail, passing from wonder to wonder, from victory to victory. Perceval and Bors encounter temptations which repeatedly play off the expectations of conventional chivalric values. Thus Bors is offered the choice between rescuing a damsel or rescuing his brother Lionel. He chooses to aid the damsel, forsaking family ties and fraternal duty. When he later comes upon Lionel

again, Lionel is not unnaturally angry with Bors for leaving him, and threatens to kill him. Bors offers only passive resistance until Sir Calogrenant is killed in his defense. Only then does he reluctantly rise to fight Lionel, but he is kept from the distasteful duty by a ball of fire which parts them, and a voice which orders him away--an unusual and, from a purely chivalric point of view, a rather anticlimactic end to an adventure. As for Perceval, he cannot, perhaps, be blamed for swearing service to a lady who says she needs his help--at least, he cannot be blamed from a chivalric point of view. But when he crosses himself at his devotions and the pavilion is consumed by fire and the lady suddenly lost at sea, Perceval suspects that there was more to this adventure than met the courtly eye; a priest later explains to him that the lady was none other than the devil. Perceval and Bors may both be occasionally and briefly beguiled or deceived by the temptations they encounter, but they are never far from virtue, and they escape essentially unharmed and wiser for the experience--unlike Lancelot, who at best staggers from adventure to adventure, and unlike Galahad, who never seems in danger for a moment.

Galahad is perhaps the most interesting new development in the evolution of the Quest, springing, as he does, almost out of nowhere. Prior to Galahad, as we have seen, Perceval was the hero of the Grail Quest. In the Vulgate, however, Perceval, though still a Grail Knight, is but one of three knights successful in the Quest, and is subordinate to Galahad. Sister Mary Louis Morgan, in her

Galahad in English Literature, argues that Galahad was created as

Perceval's successor for, among other things, doctrinal reasons.

By the time of the composition of the Vulgate, the Grail had acquired certain clear Eucharistic connotations, which made Perceval the less-than-ideal Grail Hero:

Perceval's character did not accord with the ideal of perfect purity required of the hero of the Grail; he was a worldly knight whose virginity was not insisted upon. And at an age when the idea of celibacy was preached and praised in the Western Church there could be no married state for one whose quest was intimately associated with the priestly service of the Eucharist. Indeed, under the guise of the Grail, the Holy Eucharist became a symbol of and an incentive to the celibate ideal, and Galahad became its stainless champion.¹⁰

One might wonder why the Queste author did not simply make Perceval the model of celibacy--as he very nearly is in the Queste--and retain him as the central hero. One suspects, however, that celibacy was not enough, that the Queste author felt its supreme hero ought to be not only impervious to but free from temptation. And there was another important reason for the deposition of Perceval. Jessie Weston has suggested that the sheer popularity of Lancelot made it almost necessary for the Queste author to involve him in some important and triumphant way with the Quest. But, entangled as he had been--and would again be--with Guinevere, he could not himself be the Grail Hero. Therefore, enter Galahad, the son of Lancelot

¹⁰Mary Louis Morgan, Galahad in English Literature (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1932), p. 14.

and successful Grail Hero, "the product of direct literary invention, the son of Christian mysticism, and contemporary literary necessity. He came because in the fulness of time he had to come, and his coming closed for seven hundred years the creative activities of the Grail."¹¹ Weston states her case a bit apocalyptically, but it is probably true as far as it goes. As Morgan points out, Galahad has no real predecessors in literature; reason and evidence suggest that he is pure invention.

The result of this invention was one of the most mythically potent motifs in the Vulgate: Lancelot, the greatest knight of the world but for his sinful love for his queen, is drugged by the maid Brisane and seduced by King Pellles' daughter Helaine, who he thinks is Guinevere; the result of their union is Galahad, the almost literally perfect knight, who surpasses his father in spiritual and chivalric prowess. The apparent paradox--the rise of such perfection out of such sordidness--is what gives the myth its power. How Lancelot's sin can result in the perfection of Galahad is a mystery to the worldly mind, and certainly runs counter to our expectations that sin breeds disaster or misery. It implies a Reality operating beyond our understanding but descending into the world we know, suggesting causal relationships that require some explanation. It also suggests the doctrine of the fortunate fall, the felix culpa which results in the Incarnation, the sin which bore bliss. It

¹¹ The Legend of Sir Perceval, cited by Morgan, p. 15.

even suggests, in our own mythology, the ascent of the human species out of its protohuman ancestors in a sudden quantum leap. Galahad's very presence in the Arthurian saga is a judgment upon the world he is in while being, at the same time, the highest point it will ever reach; after his death, a kind of darkness settles upon the following Mort Artu. Things begin to go sour almost from the first. The ruin of Arthur's kingdom is doubly inevitable--not only because tradition demanded it, but because the highest product of the kingdom has been judged too good to remain in it. The ultimate collapse of Logres in the Mort Artu is like the autonomic twitchings of a body that does not realize that it is already dead.

This is Galahad in his function as a symbol. But as a character--as a personality--he leaves almost everything to be desired. It is impossible for me to find in the Queste the Galahad whom Sister Mary Louis Morgan describes: the Galahad who is as well defined a literary character as Hamlet.¹² The Queste-Galahad is little more than an ambulatory cipher who seems never to suffer any temptation or distress, who is as invariably destined to succeed as Gawain is to fail. He is not wholly impassive--he can, at times, be happy or sad--but he leads a charmed life with which few readers can sympathize. And on one occasion, he is ruthlessly experimental: he allows Baudemagus to be wounded in order to test a prophecy that no man but Galahad could bear a certain shield without coming to grief. This event unfortunately occurs early in the Queste, with

¹²Morgan, p. 5.

the result that it colors our thinking about Galahad for the remainder of the tale. But this is to criticize Galahad for failing to fulfill a function for which he was not designed. He is primarily an abstraction, a symbol, not a carefully-delineated character. As a character he does no worse than to suffer from the same malady as most "holy people" in fiction: he is simply a perfect man as imagined by an imperfect man.

The Grail Knights usually work alone in the Queste, their adventures alternating with those of Lancelot, Gawain, and Hector. Bors, Perceval, and Galahad are temporarily brought together on Solomon's ship (so called because it was built by Solomon), where they learn how Parlan became the Maimed King (he had attempted to unsheath a sword not destined for him and had been transfixd through the thigh by a flying lance) and how the Waste Land was laid waste (a King Varlan had used this same sword to kill a pursuing enemy, with the result that the land was ravaged), as well as the origin of the ship (it was made by Solomon from the wood of the green and white trees of Paradise). The Grail Knights are later separated from each other for a while--perhaps to give Galahad and Lancelot some time alone on Solomon's ship--but are later reunited with each other--as well as with Perceval's sister--for several adventures (during one of which Perceval's sister dies from being bled to heal an enchanted maiden) before they come to Corbenic, the Grail Castle. They behold the Grail Mass, which is, the Queste tells us in evasive language, celebrated by Christ Himself. Galahad heals the Maimed King by

anointing the wound with the blood which drips from the lance which wounded him. The Grail Companions then leave for Sarras on Solomon's ship, where the Grail has been miraculously transported along with the Maimed King's silver table. Arriving in Sarras, they are imprisoned for a year by its wicked king and are sustained, as Joseph was, by the Grail. At the end of the year, the king dies, and the companions are released from prison. Galahad serves as king of Sarras for a year, then dies, after which a hand appears and takes the Grail into Heaven. Perceval becomes a monk, and lives for a year and three days after Galahad's death. After Perceval's passing, Bors returns to Camelot to tell the story of the end of the Quest.

The Queste has much that would make it a powerful myth. It is filled with the stuff of dream and fantasy. The paraphernalia of the story--the angels, devils, enchanted ships, aged wise men, devil horses, intelligent lions, and illusory castles--appear to have erupted from the Jungian collective unconscious. But this is no mere archetypal delerium, for this preternatural raw material has been subjected to the discipline of story. It is the tale of an ancient wrong--the maiming of a king and the wasting of a land--set right by a quest for the chalice of a Deity, a quest achieved not through strength or skill, but through a condition of the soul. The Queste is thus not just a serial of wonders, but a causally-connected sequence of events operating from an internal logic that is not always obvious to the rational mind and which defies our

worldly expectations. And everything in the story is played very obviously against the Divine or Eternal. The noumenal world shapes the events of the Queste and the destiny of every character in it. The story may not be read on a merely literal level; the internal and external worlds are almost indistinguishable from one another, for what happens in one affects the other. In the Queste, one of Lewis's prescriptions for myth--that the abstract and concrete spheres of experience should be united--is fulfilled.

But the Queste's mythic potential is not limited to its own narrative confines. It is clearly an outgrowth of what came before it, and implicitly a judgment on and cause of what comes after. To appreciate the full mythic power of the motif of Galahad, we must view his success in the Queste in the light of the sin that begot him in the Lancelot. Galahad's father, Lancelot, also links the Queste to the rest of the Vulgate. It is because of Lancelot's sin with the Queen in the book that bears his name that Galahad is begotten and that Lancelot fails in the Quest. And it is perhaps because he fails in the Quest that he returns to his love for the Queen in the Mort Artu. In fact, the whole story of Arthur, because it passes through the Queste, is significantly and forever transformed. There cannot now be any merely human tragedy, any merely social disaster. Everything now stands in the clear, terrible light of the Grail. To understand how the Grail changed the shape and the significance of the Arthurian myth, one need only compare the Vulgate--or Malory--with Joshua Logan's film version of Camelot,

which has not only omitted the Grail entirely, but has stripped the story of Arthur of even the incidental wonders in Alan Jay Lerner's stage play, choosing to concentrate almost exclusively on the Lancelot-Guinevere story. The result is a pleasantly glossy and enjoyable soap opera rich with the sort of fashionable pathos that appeals to Broadway audiences. But it is no myth. All hints of the Divine are carefully omitted. The knife-edge of moral choice provided by the Queste is gone. There is little to suggest that the story has any relevance to anything beyond its immediate events. Camelot makes us think that it is rather a shame that such nice people should suffer so. The Vulgate, with the Grail Quest radiating its power throughout the story, is likely to leave the reader more fundamentally shaken at the end, when all has failed, when the kingdom is gone, when Arthur is dead and buried--shaken because he may suspect that this story might have something to do with himself.

So far I have qualified my statements about the Queste as myth, saying that the Queste has much that would make it a powerful myth, or that it has mythic potential. For the Queste, though it fulfills many of the requirements of myth as stated in the first chapter of this work, ultimately falls short of the genuine article.

The reason for the Queste's ultimate failure as myth may be found in the exegetical obsession which runs throughout the work. No sooner does an adventure or vision or dream end but that monks, holy hermits, and priests converge, like Job's comforters, to explain what it all means, and the explanation is always duller than the

vision. One example is a vision granted to Gawain and Hector:

As they were speaking thus of Sir Lancelot, they saw a hand an forearm draped in bright red samite entering through the door of the chapel. A bridle, plainly fashioned, hung down from it, while clasped in the fist was a big candle, burning brightly; this apparition passed in front of them and up the chancel where it vanished without their knowing what became of it. Thereupon they heard a voice say to them:

"Knights, weak in faith and erring in belief, these three things you have just looked on are wanting in you; and this is the reason why you cannot attain to the adventures of the Holy Grail" (Quest, p. 165).

This is a pleasing episode, both aesthetically and archetypally; it is a good example of those "clear visual images" which T. S. Eliot thought the highest gift that poetry had to offer,¹³ and each of the elements in the vision is at least potentially archetypal in that each object mentioned is as ancient as the cultural memory of the West; the numinous quality is achieved by separating all of these images from the normal contexts in which we expect them to appear, and placing them in a context (a chapel) in which we are conditioned to expect the Holy or at least the Significant to appear. Further, given the characters of Gawain and Hector and the traditional latent symbolic content of the objectives mentioned, it is not too difficult to work up an appropriate series of correspondences: the Candle is Light (knowledge, spiritual understanding), the Bridle is Restraint (of passions or improper actions), and the Hand might be Skill, Discretion, Delicacy, the ability to

¹³T. S. Eliot, in the excerpt from his study Dante, in Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975), p. 209.

"incarnate" understanding into right action--the link between the Abstract and the Concrete. The modern reader, if he wants explanation, prefers it direct and simple; what the Queste provides, however, is this:

"It is required [says the monk] that you should understand the meaning of the hand which passed before your eyes, holding a candle and a bridle, and the voice which told you that these three things were wanting in you. The hand spells charity, the vermilion samite represents the grace of the Holy Ghost, which burns in charity with a constant flame. And he that harbours charity is ardent and aglow with the love of Our Lord in Heaven, Jesus Christ. The bridle stands for abstinence; for even as by the bridle a man governs his horse and guides it where he would, so it is too with abstinence. It is so firmly fixed in the Christian's heart that he cannot stumble into mortal sin, nor follow his own volition unless it lie towards good works. The candle held in the hand denotes the truth of the Gospel: it is Jesus Christ, who restores the light of sight and sense to all who turn from sin and seek his path again. When therefore it so fell that charity and abstinence and truth appeared before you in the chapel, when Our Lord, that is to say, sought out His own abode within those walls, which he had not built to shelter arrant sinners polluted with every filth, but for the preaching of the truth, and when on entering He saw you there, He left the place your presence had defiled, and leaving, said to you, 'Knights weak in faith and erring in belief, these three things you have just looked on are wanting in you; and this is the reason why you cannot attain to the adventures of the Holy Grail.' I have now unfolded to you the meaning of your dreams and of the hand as well" (Quest, 173-4).

"Indeed," says Gawain, when the holy man has run out of equivalences, "you have explained the last so well that it is as clear as the day to me" (Quest, 174). And little good it does him; when the monk urges him to repent, Sir Gawain rides away with a wholly unconvincing promise to return and talk more about it at some more convenient season.

This is one of the briefer seizures of explication in the Queste. It is by no means uncommon for an interpretation or sermon or exhortation to extend for pages, blinding the reader in a glare of enlightenment.

It is poor scholarship to fault a work for failing to do what it never intended to do; the Queste was obviously intended to be just the work that it is, and the explications are clearly a part of its design. But we are discussing myth in this study and attempting to account for its absence as well as its presence in the Arthurian romances; and it is clear that the Queste falls short of being myth as defined in the first chapter for the following reasons.

First, if it does nothing else, the exegetical obsession brings the story to a halt for several hundred words, so that the sense of narrative continuity, so important to myth, is, if not killed outright, certainly crippled. As a result, the tale of the Queste moves spasmodically, jerkily, alternating short bursts of activity with periods of extended analysis. The reader is, for long periods of time, drawn out of the story and its events and into the critical mode of thought. The more often he is made aware he is reading a symbolic story, the less likely he is to regard the Queste as a story, and the less likely it is that he will be able to read it as myth.

Far more important, however, is the nature of the analysis itself. That some interpretation should be in this sort of tale is quite natural--and, given the opacity of some of the events, quite

necessary. But if the effect of the archetype depends on the investiture of personal association into the motif, then an excess of interpretation can kill any archetypal response. If one is constantly and forcibly recalled to the limited, defined, not-to-be-exceeded-or-mistaken meaning that the author intends the motif to have, any individual archetypal response is smothered in the cradle. Add to this the fact that the Eucharistic doctrine that lies behind the Queste is of little interest to anyone outside of the thirteenth-century Cistercians, and the Queste is revealed as a work whose events and motifs are kept from being universal by the double blow of an analysis that is both excessive and generally irrelevant to many readers.

The Mort Artu is clearly connected to the Queste: it begins with Bors' return to Camelot from the Quest, and his telling the court of the deaths of Perceval and Galahad. In all, thirty-two knights have died on the quest, more than half of whom have been despatched by Gawain. Lancelot, too, has returned, and in less than a month he has become involved with Guinevere again. But the affair has changed its quality--all the discretion which had kept their love secret is now gone. Lancelot and Guinevere are so open and unguarded that they come to the attention of Aggravain, Gawain's malicious brother. Aggravain hates Lancelot and welcomes any opportunity to do him harm, and he runs to tell King Arthur what he knows. Arthur does not believe that Lancelot could ever do such a thing; besides, he adds, with a liberality that is sure it will never be

put to the test, "if ever he did, he was compelled to by the force of love, which neither common-sense nor reason can resist."¹⁴ But the first seeds of suspicion are sown.

This theme of Arthur's suspicion is interwoven with two other major narrative themes in the first half of the Mort Artu. One of these is the "Poisoned Apple" story, in which Guinevere is falsely accused of deliberately giving a poisoned apple to Gaheris de Karaheu, brother to Mador de la Porte (the apple had been intended by a Sir Avarlan for Sir Gawain). The knights want justice, and Mador himself demands that Guinevere select a champion to fight for her and to prove her innocence. Ordinarily this would be no problem: Guinevere would simply set Lancelot on Mador. But Lancelot is currently unavailable, owing to the Queen's own jealousy and suspicion of the Maid of Escalot (Astalot in Malory). Some time earlier, while lodging at Escalot, Lancelot had grudgingly promised his host's daughter, who was in love with him, that he would wear her sleeve in a tournament. Gawain, whose understanding of relationships between the sexes is limited, immediately assumed that Lancelot was in love with the girl, and told the king so. This temporarily reassured Arthur that Lancelot did not love Guinevere. Unfortunately for Lancelot, the news had the same effect on Guinevere, who dismissed Lancelot from her presence. The girl later died of unrequited love and, according to her final request, was placed on a

¹⁴The Death of Arthur, trans. James Cable (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 26.

barge which floated downriver to Camelot where she--and a letter which cleared Lancelot--were discovered. Now Guinevere realizes her mistake and her danger at the same time: if she has no Lancelot, she has no champion who can defeat Mador. However, in the nick of time, Lancelot hears of the Queen's distress and rides to her aid. He fights and defeats Mador, who accepts Lancelot's offer of mercy. Lancelot and Guinevere, in their eagerness to make up, are as indiscreet as before, and it is not long before even Gawain cannot deny what is going on.

Arthur himself has never been completely free from his doubts. In one episode, in fact, he was given indisputable evidence that Aggravain had told the truth: he saw, in his sister Morgan's castle, Lancelot's own chronicles of his knightly adventures, including his love for Guinevere. Morgan later confirmed this story, telling Arthur plainly that Lancelot and the Queen were lovers. Forgetting his earlier words about the irresistible nature of love, Arthur now swears vengeance on both the lovers. Later, in a cooler mind, he tries to convince himself that what he fears cannot be true, but with little success.

One day, while Gawain and his brothers are discussing the affair and what to do about it, the King walks in among them, and they all grow silent. Arthur knows that they were talking about him and demands to know what they were saying. Gawain refuses to reveal anything to the king, who grows angry with him. Aggravain, however, has no such scruples, and tells the king everything. Arthur

is enraged, and commands that Aggravain attempt to catch Lancelot and Guinevere together. Aggravain is only too happy to obey. Lancelot becomes aware that the King is angry with him, and suspects that something is wrong. His suspicions are confirmed when Bors warns him against going to the Queen lest war break out on their account. Nevertheless, when Lancelot is summoned by Guinevere, he goes to her. They are in bed when Aggravain comes to take them. Lancelot, with no armor and only a sword, fights his way free of Aggravain and his men, and escapes, joined by Bors. Guinevere, however, is captured and is sentenced to be burned at the stake. Suspecting that Lancelot will attempt a rescue, Arthur posts a guard at the gates, among them Gaheriet, who at first refuses. Arthur, however, threatens him into submission.

As Arthur suspects, Lancelot does indeed ride to the rescue, slaying Aggravain and--inadvertently--Gaheriet. Lancelot and Guinevere escape to Joyous Garde. Gawain learns of his brothers' deaths at Lancelot's hands and vows revenge. Arthur and his knights can think of nothing but war against Lancelot, and Mordred urges them on. Arthur and his forces converge at Joyous Garde, refusing Lancelot's initial offer of peace. There follows a series of battles between Lancelot and Arthur, during which Lancelot behaves so chivalrously that Arthur praises him. In the midst of this siege, the Pope orders Guinevere to return to Arthur, and Arthur to accept her. Lancelot takes Guinevere to Arthur and lies, saying that if he had loved her, he would never have returned her. Arthur seems willing

to believe him and to make amends, but Gawain will have nothing but revenge, and Lancelot is therefore ordered to leave Logres and return to Benoyc.

Arthur would be content to leave matters where they are, but Gawain so fervently urges him to continue the war in France that Arthur at last gives in and prepares for war. Mordred offers to look after the Queen in Arthur's absence. Arthur's forces arrive at Benoyc, and there is further battle, including single combat in which Gawain is mortally wounded by Lancelot. Meanwhile, in Arthur's absence, Mordred's political ambition and love for the Queen are becoming obvious. He forges a letter in which a mortally-wounded Arthur turns both the kingdom and the Queen over to Mordred. All believe the ruse, but Guinevere, who knows the secret that Mordred is really Arthur's illegitimate son by his half sister, fortifies herself against him in the Tower of London, and sends for any reliable news of Arthur. When the King hears of Mordred's treachery, he returns with his army to Logres. In the final battle between father and son, Mordred is killed and Arthur is himself mortally wounded. Dying, he asks Sir Girflet to take the sword Excalibur and to throw it into a lake. When Girflet, after two failures, finally obeys, a hand emerges from the lake and catches Excalibur, brandishes it, and then draws it beneath the water. Girflet returns to find that Morgan, Arthur's sister, is carrying Arthur away on a barge. The next day, Girflet finds the tomb of Arthur and learns from a holy man that Morgan had brought Arthur there

the previous day. Lancelot and Guinevere, when they hear the news that Arthur is dead, betake themselves to (respectively) a monastery and a convent, where they later die. Bors, the last of the Grail Knights, when he hears of Arthur's death, ends his days as a hermit.

Much of this story is so familiar to the readers of the Morte D'Arthur that it might be difficult at first to appreciate the significant transformations which the Mort Artu made in the story of Arthur's downfall. The core of the Mort Artu--the betrayal of Arthur by the trusted Mordred--comes originally from Geoffrey of Monmouth, though this is a core that has been significantly changed. As I noted earlier, in the Historia, Mordred was simply the King's nephew, left in charge of the kingdom during Arthur's absence, during which time he took Arthur's queen and kingdom. In the Mort Artu, however, Mordred is Arthur's son by incest with his sister, and is thus a figure shadowed by a universal taboo, a man who simply should not be. He is a walking paradox, the son who is also the nephew, a result of one of the darker sins. The revulsion we feel toward incest makes us expect Mordred to be an agent of chaos, and he does not disappoint us. He now has a mythic "motive" for his betrayal and his own attempted symbolic incest with his father's wife: he is Mordred the evil son, the King's Shadow. Guinevere's part in the death of Arthur has also changed significantly. In the Historia, Guinevere and Mordred were lovers, partners in treachery to the King. In the Mort Artu, Guinevere's infidelity to Arthur still causes his downfall; her lover, however, is no longer Mordred but Lancelot. Nor

does she join with Mordred's plot to take Arthur's kingdom. She is now, like Arthur, a victim of Mordred's designs and seeks to escape them. The result of this change in Guinevere's character and actions was to make her a more universally sympathetic character, one with whom readers might be more willing to identify. She must, of course, still bear part of the blame for the downfall of Arthur, but in the Mort Artu she is not (as she is in the Historia) impelled by an apparently motiveless treachery, but compelled by her love for Lancelot, which makes her seem quite as much a victim of fate as Arthur is.

Guinevere's love for Lancelot also ensures that the causes for Arthur's absence from Britain in the Mort Artu will be quite different from those in the Historia. Geoffrey has Arthur on the continent for the purposes of what the Britons would regard as a just war. But in the Mort Artu, betrayal and vengeance set into motion a war not against unjust oppressors but against former friends and companions. In the Mort Artu, every human relationship that united the kingdom is sundered: Lancelot, Arthur, Guinevere, and Gawain are all in various ways set--at least temporarily--against one another; even the Round Table Knights are divided into the Arthur and Lancelot camps. The kingdom is thus assaulted not from without by a foreign enemy, but from within by the passions. I mentioned in the last chapter that the Lancelot-Guinevere and Grail themes introduced by Chrétien brought into the Arthurian story concerns that are common to humanity, shifting the import of the story from mere political

concerns to a universally recognizable interior world. The Mort Artu has made these concerns central to its story, with the result that it now strikes at what may be the deepest fears of every human being: the fears that friendship and love will fail, that the whole structure of one's life, which makes life possible or bearable, will collapse. The Mort Artu is almost the classic paranoid delusion embodied in a myth--"Every man's hand will be turned against me." There is probably no one who does not recognize these concerns, and therefore probably no one who cannot read the story of the downfall of Arthur without recognizing a pattern that, though it may not exist in the external worlds of many of its readers, exists internally, recognized as a terrible potential. The destiny of Arthur's kingdom is, in the Mort Artu more clearly than in any preceding version, a direct outgrowth of the life of the soul. The external actions mirror internal conflicts.

The most important things about these transformations, however, is that none of them are last-minute dramatic devices designed to ring down the curtain with a grand finale. In the Historia, the final disaster was precipitate--a sudden, startling treachery that, being unexpected, could not have been avoided. Neither Mordred nor Guinevere had played a very large part in Geoffrey's story until its denouement. We were told nothing of their characters and had no reason to expect that they would betray Arthur. But the Mort Artu is the culmination of choices made, sins sinned, lies told, and vows broken throughout the course of the Vulgate. Mordred was fathered

by Arthur in the Merlin, and he and Aggravain were shown throughout the Lancelot to be sometimes volatile, unforgiving men. Lancelot and Guinevere have been in love with each other since Lancelot's first appearance in court in Lancelot, and their love has shaped the major events of the story throughout the Vulgate, indirectly causing the begetting of Galahad, ensuring Lancelot's failure in the Quest, and bringing about the fall of the kingdom. Whereas the Historia was a catalogue of serially-related events, the Mort Artu, in completing the themes of incest, adultery, betrayal, and spiritual failure, makes the Vulgate Cycle cyclic. The sins all come home at last. The story has not been just ended: it has been completed.

The Vulgate Cycle, then, made the vital connections between the diverse elements it had received, sometimes implying connections simply by placing the elements side by side and letting us draw our own conclusions as to their relationships to each other. In incorporating the chiefly heroic history of Arthur with the spiritual themes of the Grail and the potential tragedy of the Lancelot-Guinevere story, it transformed all these elements into a coherent wonder-story, a pageant of archetypes that, by their relationships to one another and to a perceived set of universal values, can suggest to the reader parallels with his own life and provide him with forms through which he can interpret his own experiences. It has, in other words, made the sorts of connections that provide for the mythopathic reaction.

But though it is clear that the potential for a powerful myth is in the Vulgate, much of that myth remains only potential, obscured and gelded by several factors which I have mentioned in the course of this chapter, and which should be repeated here. One of these is the contingency of the Vulgate's story of Arthur--that is, Arthur's history is made a part of other histories--of the Grail, of Merlin, of Pandragon and Uther--and thus is not a self-contained story. The essential shape of the Arthurian myth, if one reads it in the whole of the Vulgate, is actually an extended sequel to the histories that preceded it. If Lewis is correct in his assertion that a myth has a certain sort of shape--and if that shape is hidden among the shapes of other stories--then the feeling of reading a self-contained narrative, which is vital to myth, is lost in the Vulgate.

One could make the same objection to the Lancelot which, though it contains three elements important to the myth--Lancelot's love for Guinevere, the begetting of Galahad, and Mordred's discovery of his true father--buries them in a tangle of adventures that do not advance the central mythic plot. The device of narrative interlace, though delightful in many respects, can be fatal to myth because the essential shape of the myth is given us in only a piecemeal fashion, with the result that we are less likely to see the myth as a self-contained story, but only as a series of narrative elements interspersed with, and therefore equal to, the other, non-mythic elements in the narrative. Further, since the Lancelot

naturally enough deals mainly with the exploits of Lancelot du Lac, Arthur must, by comparison, retire into the background to be successively cuckolded, deceived, and--indirectly--destroyed by the greatest of earthly knights. It is as if a retelling of the myth of Perseus had made Perseus a minor character. And it is partly because Arthur has had to become a kind of foil for Lancelot that, in the Mort Artu, the King is a comparatively weak figure--unstable, vengeful, vacillating, and at last despairing even of heavenly counsel (given to him in the form of Gawain who warns him in a dream, and in vain, to avoid battle with Mordred). As a result, the power of the myth is dissipated. Arthur, who began in the Merlin as a universal figure, becomes in the Mort Artu the sort of person with whom we find it difficult to identify, mainly because we can never be quite certain who he is going to be--benevolent monarch, jealous husband, forgiving friend, or despairing war-leader.

Another retarding element is the meticulous allegory of the Queste. This story of the Grail adventure does, it is true, contain a number of powerful archetypal images. But, as noted in the first chapter, much of the power of an archetype comes from the various associations that the image arouses in the mind of the reader--it is, in Frye's words, an associative cluster. And this is something that allegory, by its very nature as a form--however pleasant--of propaganda, can never be completely comfortable with. Allegory has overtly didactic designs upon its reader. It knows what it wants to say, and must be certain that the reader understands

what it wants to say, or it has failed in its purpose. Allegory must usually retain a strict one-to-one correspondence between the image and its abstract referent. It may employ figures that, in other contexts, would be more generally archetypal but which, in the context of allegory, must have their connotations sharpened and refined to a needle-point of meaning. An archetype is a "wilder" thing than an allegorical image, more likely to generate associations that would obfuscate or even invalidate the didactic intentions of the allegorist. Hence, the more sharply defined the meaning of the image, the more useful it is in allegory--but, also, the less likely it is to be viewed as an archetype. It should be clear that the Queste is allegory. It contains motifs and images which might well be mythic or archetypal, except that they are nearly all interpreted to within an inch of their lives, with the result that the archetypal response is deadened.

Finally, the Vulgate functions too much on the level of the particular. It is, for the purposes of myth, excessive in its detail. There is simply too much in it that does not carry forward the central story of the myth. This is useful and delightful in the detailed creation of a world, but it seduces the mind from the elements essential to the myth. Some of these details are fatal to our belief in the story. A good example is the insistence of the Mort Artu in providing the ages of some of its characters: Arthur is, we are told, ninety-two, Gawain seventy-six, and Guinevere fifty or more. Besides introducing a note of the absurd into the

proceedings of the Mort Artu (if nothing else, it makes the duels between Lancelot and Gawain unintentionally comic), it creates problems of chronology (was Arthur forty-two years old when Guinevere was born?). It would be better if we told no more than that the characters are young or old--best of all, not to have their ages told at all, so that we may supply them ourselves as we understand the text. To give too exact a set of figures is to draw the reader into an excessively literal world where inconsistencies and contradictions are more easily noticed, where one's suspension of disbelief is likely to become an immediate casualty.

The central problem with the Vulgate Cycle is that it is, more than Kipling's tales of Mowgli, a jungle book, full of meandering paths and undergrowth which hide the lie of its mythic land. If the potential Arthurian myth were to be "rescued" and further developed, it needed to have the centrality of Arthur once more affirmed; it needed much of the Lancelot pruned away; and it needed the allegorical tunnel vision of the Queste to be corrected so as to allow for a more universal archetypal response. It needed, in a word, Malory.

CHAPTER IV

THE MALORIAN TRANSFORMATIONS

How Sir Thomas Malory came to write his cycle of Arthurian romances, which we (thanks to Caxton) have come to know as Le Morte D'Arthur, is a literary mystery which will probably never be solved, if only because no one is completely certain which of the fifteenth-century Thomas Malorys was the man responsible for the work. Since G. L. Kittredge's day, the orthodox position has been that the Morte Malory was a man of Warwickshire--a man whose life might more properly have been a model for Sir Breunis Saunz Pitie than for any flower of chivalry. The Warwickshire Malory was immortalized in the legal records of the day as an alleged cattle thief, highwayman, burglar, rapist, and kidnaper.¹ William Mathews' The Ill-Framed Knight, however, argues from a linguistic analysis of the work that, in the words of the old joke, the author was not Sir Thomas Malory but another man of the same name.² The explicits in Vinaver's edition of the cycle do tell us that Malory, whichever one he was, was a prisoner at one time, and there is, in his Book of Sir Tristram, a poignant passage about the evils of sickness in

¹Malory's "criminal record" as well as other records pertaining to his life may most handily be found in the chapter "Materials for Malory's Biography" in Eugène Vinaver's Malory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 115-127, as well as in Albert C. Baugh's "Documenting Sir Thomas Malory," in Speculum, 8 (1933), 3-29.

²William Matthews, The Ill-Framed Knight (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

prison that, as Larry Benson points out, suggests that its author had a first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon.³ The only other times that Malory intrudes directly into the narrative of the Morte are his hearty "AMEN" in praise of Tristram's skill in venery, and his occasional laments about the lack of stability in either modern (i.e., fifteenth-century) love or political allegiance, as compared to the Arthurian era which, in the Sankgreal at least, he imagines as being a thousand years before his time. But however indirectly present he is in his romances, he is still rather insistently present in them. Though he relied almost entirely on previous Arthurian tales for his matter, by the time he had transformed the works, they were soundly Malorian tales. But more important, for the purposes of this study, he transformed the story he told into myth.

What exactly did Malory do right? In the previous two chapters, I have attempted to show how each of several major Arthurian works which stand in the line of Malorian descent made certain transformations in the story it received, edging the story gradually towards myth-hood, adding or deleting motifs or characters and shifting the narrative syntax, up to the comprehensive Arthurian history of the Vulgate. That Malory knew the Vulgate from at least the Merlin through the Mort Artu seems certain, but he at times (and for whatever reasons) used works other than the Vulgate in

³Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 110.

composing his own romances. Since the discovery (in 1934, by Walter Oakeshott)⁴ of the Winchester Manuscript of Malory's works, and Eugène Vinaver's publication of his edition of this manuscript under the controversial title Works,⁵ it has been generally regarded as given that what we have called the Morte D'Arthur is composed of eight tales which are, in some fashion, independent of each other, as well as being, in some fashion, interrelated. Their titles, as given in Vinaver's edition, are The Tale of King Arthur, The Tale of the Noble King Arthur That Was Emperor Himself Through Dignity of His Hands, The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake, The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney That Was Called Bewmaynes, The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones, The Tale of the Sankgreal, The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Quinevere, and The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon, more briefly referred to in this study as (respectively) Arthur, Arthur and Lucius, Launcelot, Gareth, Tristram, Sankgreal, Launcelot and Guinevere, and the Death. Most of these works are clearly adaptations of sources which are extant. As designated by Vinaver,⁶ these sources are as follows:

⁴Described by Oakeshott in his article "The Finding of the Manuscript," in Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 1-6.

⁵The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). Hereafter referred to as Works.

⁶From his Malory (Oxford, 1929), and the "Commentary" in Works.

<u>MALORY</u>	<u>SOURCE</u>
<u>Arthur</u>	<u>La Suite du Merlin</u> (or <u>Huth Merlin</u>)
<u>Arthur and Lucius</u>	<u>Alliterative Morte Arthur</u>
<u>Launcelot</u>	French Vulgate <u>Lancelot</u> (excerpts)
<u>Gareth</u>	No extant source
<u>Tristram</u>	French Prose <u>Tristan</u>
<u>Sankgreal</u>	French Vulgate: <u>Queste</u>
<u>Launcelot and Guinevere</u>	French Vulgate: <u>Lancelot</u> ("Knight of the Cart" (episode); <u>Mort Artu</u> ("Maid of Astolat" and "Poisoned Apple" episodes); sources not extant for "Tournament" and "Sir Urry" episodes
<u>Death</u>	French Vulgate: <u>Mort Artu</u> ; also English <u>Stanzaic Mort Arthur</u>

The only works in the Vulgate which appear to have had no part in the adaptation which Malory undertook are the Estoire del Graal and the Estoire de Merlin. Malory simply omitted the former, though the latter, as we shall see, may have had some influence on the development of his story. If I have not, in the previous chapter, discussed the Suite du Merlin, the Alliterative Morte Arthur, the Tristram, or the Stanzaic Mort Arthur, it is because I wish to discuss them here chiefly as Malory adapted them in his own cycle. ✓

These substitutions, as well as Malory's adaptations of the Vulgate works he did incorporate into his Arthurian history, are the chief

causes for his version's being more completely, whereas the Vulgate was only sporadically, myth.

It is at this point that the question of "unity," if it is to be discussed at all, should be gotten out of the way. The classical opposite poles of the question about whether Malory intended to write a whole book of King Arthur or only a series of disconnected romances are usually represented by R. M. Lumiansky, standing for the organic unity of Malory's work,⁷ and Eugène Vinaver, who argues for the narrative independence of each romance.⁸ At times, while reading the arguments of both sides, one is reminded of the moral of James Thurber's fable "The Bear Who Could Let It Alone": You may as well fall flat on your face as bend over too far backwards. Probably the most balanced look at the unity question is found in Derek Brewer's "the hoole book,"⁹ which clearly points out the links between the separate romances while avoiding the occasional excesses to be found in Malory's Originality. It seems very likely that Malory had, at least from time to time, the intentions of writing a "hoole book" of King Arthur; there does appear to be a method, however rough-hewn, behind his composition, though it does not appear

⁷The theory of unity in Malory's works is defended in Malory's Originality (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), a collection of critical essays by like-minded scholars, edited by Lumiansky.

⁸Vinaver presents his view of the unity question in "The Problem of Unity" in Works, I, xli-li.

⁹D. S. Brewer, "the hoole book" in Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 41-63.

to have been a thematic method but a more basically narrative one, less sophisticated and more (if the term is not too inappropriate) boylike. Malory was simply trying, in his way, to rescue King Arthur.

Or, to put it less dramatically, Malory was trying to return the Arthurian story to Arthur, from whom it had originally come. This was, I was very surprised to discover, the position of the "pre-Winchester" Vinaver who had written in his Malory that the knight-prisoner, finding his source devoid of consistent plot, set about to cut them down by stripping away "adventitious material"¹⁰ and thus causing his stories "to acquire a straightforwardness and an internal balance which it had never before attained."¹¹ This seems to me exactly right. Malory's approach suggests that, although he relied upon, he did not much care for, the Vulgate and Arthur's rôle in it. Vinaver has written that the Vulgate "generally centered upon Arthur,"¹² but in fact it appears to center, if upon anyone, then Lancelot. It is true that the Lancelot story in the Vulgate had added the powerful theme of adultery to the whole story of Arthur, but at the price of emphasizing Lancelot to the point that Arthur was shouldered from center stage, becoming at best Lancelot's patron, the person whose kingdom made Lancelot's adventures possible by giving him a playground. Much the same could be said of the Grail

¹⁰Vinaver, Malory, p. 93.

¹¹Vinaver, Malory, p. 94.

¹²Vinaver, Malory, p. 93.

mythos which, though it elevated the tone of the story and had transformed it into a tale of cosmic significance, smothered Arthur under the trappings of its mythology. The Vulgate is simply too "busy" a history for Arthur to stand out in it.

This may be why Malory eliminated the Estoire del Graal. It is of course possible to argue that he simply never had a copy to work from. But even if he had, he might have rejected it. For the Estoire is not, except in a peripheral sense, Arthurian. As I noted in the last chapter, the Estoire makes Arthur a part of its story, reducing him to a consequence of the Grail story, making him into a king into whose kingdom Lancelot and the Grail may conveniently come to play out their spiritual drama. Malory's solution to this problem may have been simply to detach the Estoire. Whatever the reason the Estoire is not there, the fact is that it is not there, and this--as well as the large omission he made in the Suite du Merlin--changed the meaning of the story that he told.

The reasons behind Malory's use of the Suite du Merlin might be very interesting to know, if we could know them; as it is, we can only be content to guess. It seems likely that he knew the Vulgate's Merlin but deliberately chose to use the Suite over it for his own purposes. The Suite du Merlin is also known as the Huth Merlin, a name derived from the owner of what was at one time the sole known manuscript of any version of the work.¹³ Fanni Bogdanow lists four

¹³Fanni Bogdanow, "The Suite du Merlin and the Post-Vulgate Roman du Graal," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A

versions currently known of the work: the Huth Manuscript; a fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman manuscript discovered by Eugène Vinaver in 1945 and now in the Cambridge University Library; a fragment of the work in a thirteenth-century manuscript in Siena, Italy; and a Spanish version called the Demanda del Sancte Grial.¹⁴ The Suite is believed to be a part of a now lost French prose Grail cycle (though the cycle is essentially preserved in the Spanish Demanda) to which Bogdanow gave the name Roman del Graal.¹⁵ Vinaver describes the Suite as a continuation or explication of the Vulgate: "it attempts above all to elucidate the earlier compositions and to give reasonable answers to the questions which will occur to any careful reader of the Vulgate Cycle."¹⁶ Among the examples which Vinaver mentions are Arthur's getting the sword from the hand that rises from the lake (a motif which explains--or at least balances--Arthur's throwing the sword into a lake at the conclusion of the Mort Artu)¹⁷ and a longer and (the Suite author hopes) more convincing account of the genesis of the love affair between Merlin and Nynve.¹⁸ It

Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 325.

¹⁴Bogdanow, p. 324.

¹⁵Bogdanow, p. 332. Bogdanow discusses this "lost" French Grail romance at length in her work The Romance of the Grail (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966).

¹⁶Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1270.

¹⁷Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1270.

¹⁸Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1272-3.

also contains a version of the story of Balin, or the knight with two swords (this section has been translated and published separately by David E. Campbell under the title The Tale of Balain),¹⁹ as well as, interwoven with the Gawain-Yvain adventures, a miniature "Gareth" (i.e., Gaheriet) story which Thomas Wright believes was the partial source for the later "Gareth" tale of Malory, and which will be discussed later in its proper place.

Vinaver describes Malory's process of adaptation as essentially an untangling of interlaced narrative lines: Malory "could not accept the view that a story, no matter how short or how long, had to be a part of an indefinitely extensible whole; to him any story was above all a well-circumscribed set of incidents."²⁰ The result is that we now have a series of "unlaced" self-contained tales. In "Merlin" we are told the by-now-familiar story of how Uther Pendragon begat Arthur upon Igrayne, how Arthur drew the sword out of the stone, the wars against the rebellious barons, the begetting of Mordred, and the sword from the lake. "Balin or the Knight with the Two Swords" is, in Malory, the beginning of the Grail adventures. In "Torre and Pellinor" we see that Arthur, despite Merlin's warnings, weds Guinevere and receives the Round Table from her father Lodgreaunce; also, as the title indicates, it is the tale of Torre,

¹⁹David E. Campbell, trans., The Tale of Balain from the Romance of the Grail (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972).

²⁰Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1275.

ostensibly the son of a poor man, but who is really the son of Pellinor. Among other events in "The War with the Five Kings," Merlin visits King Ban and Queen Elayne and sees the young Lancelot, and later is imprisoned by Nynyve. "Arthur and Accolon" treats of Morgan le Fay's treachery in stealing the sword Excalibur and its enchanted scabbard from Arthur, and Arthur's eventual retrieval of it in battle with Morgan's champion, Accolon. The last story in "The Tale of Arthur," "Gawain, Ywain and Marhalt," is a series of adventures involving these three knights, ending with the curious--and in Malory, unfulfilled--assertion that Pelleas was "one of the four that achieved the Sankgreal," as well as a "flash-forward" in which Tristram appears several books before he is born.

Disentangling the interlace was not the only change that Malory made in his source. One change which Thomas L. Wright mentions is what he regards as the strengthening of Merlin's prophetic and divine office, in such Malory-added scenes as the one in which Merlin clearly predicts that Arthur "shalle be long kynge of all Englonde,"²¹ and in the scene before the barons in which Merlin clearly allies himself with God. "This characterization of Merlin as the spokesman

²¹Thomas L. Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur': Beginnings and Foreshadowings," in *Malory's Originality*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 26. Wright is perhaps guilty of over-interpretation when he claims that Malory weakens the distinction between Merlin and God, particularly in the scene in which Merlin says "loke ye al barons be bifore kynge Uther to-morne, and God and I shall make hym to speke" (p. 26). Malory appears to suggest rather Merlin's "partnership" than his identification with God.

of God," says Wright, "is a singular innovation in the Arthurian legend: it suggests a new pattern of causes, a new ground upon which the epic adventures are played, and it cases a new meaning on the reign of Arthur Malory thus projects Arthur's reign itself as a destiny ordained by God and established through Merlin, an event distinct in its own promise--no longer, as in his source, mainly a preparation for the recovery of the Grail."²² Part of this observation should be qualified: Merlin has in fact had some sort of prophetic office ever since the Historia, and in the Vulgate Merlin he certainly appears to be an agent of God, however unorthodox his conception. There is nothing new in Malory as regards Merlin's function. But his person is certainly more mysterious, if for no other reason than that Malory omits the opening of the Suite which tells the story of the origin of Merlin. The wizard is never explained. He is simply an unaccountable fact of the world in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the Malory "Merlin." But because his origin is omitted in Malory, Merlin is more powerful as an archetypal figure. Exactly what he is is never made clear; as Edmund Reiss describes him, he is simply "the aged and ageless wise man, always at hand to help."²³ He is thus more universal than in the Vulgate, in which his power and wisdom are "explained" in terms

²²Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur,'" pp. 26-7.

²³Edmund Reiss, Sir Thomas Malory (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 36.

of his being a devil's child. In Malory he is more the wise parental figure as every child imagines his elders to be: he has always been there; he was never young; he knows--and can do--everything.

But Wright is correct in his assessment of the effect of divorcing the story of Arthur from the Joseph-Grail history. I have already observed that, by omitting the Estoire, Malory began to return the story to Arthur. Wright points out several changes which Malory made in the Suite which continue this process--as when, for example, Malory omits the Round Table's connection to the Grail adventures,²⁴ or when he discards the Bishop of Canterbury's references to Galahad.²⁵ It would seem that Malory wanted the story of Arthur to begin as its own, self-contained story rather than to grow out of a previous history of which it was but a part.

This does not mean, however, that Malory wanted nothing to do with the Grail, for he brings the Grail into this first Arthurian tale by way of the story of Balin. But because of Malory's omission of the Estoire and the changes which Wright mentions, the Grail story grows out of the Arthurian story rather than vice-versa. In the story, Balin, after being banished from Arthur's court for beheading the Lady of the Lake when she demands he return a stolen sword, wanders through adventures until at last he comes to the castle of King Pellam. When Gareth kills Garlon, the invisible

²⁴Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur,'" p. 37.

²⁵Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur,'" p. 39.

knight who has plagued him previously, Pellam, the invisible knight's brother, attacks Balin who, having lost his sword, flees into a forbidden room, takes up the spear that he finds there, and strikes the king:

And kynge Pellam lay so many yeres sore wounded, and myght never be hole tylle that Galaad the Hawte Prynce heled hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. For in that place was parte of the bloode of oure Lord Jesu Cryste, which Joseph off Aramathy brought into thys londe. And there hymself lay in that ryche bedde. And that was the spere whych Longeus smote oure Lorde with to the herte. And kynge Pellam was nyghe of Joseph his kynne, and that was the moste worshipfullist man on lyve in tho dayes, and grete pité hit was of hys hurte, for thorow that stroke hit turned to grete dole, tray and tene.²⁶

Wright points out that Malory added his passage, which has no counterpart in the Suite.²⁷ Vinaver, in commenting on the "Balin" story, has written that Malory intended to make this Dolorous Stroke a punishment for Balin's killing the Lady, and has thus made it "not related to the violation of the Grail mysteries" or "to anything that was to happen after the conclusion of the Balin story proper."²⁸ But if Malory added this passage himself, he can obviously not have intended to completely divorce Balin's story from the rest of the cycle; for Malory, at least part of the story of the Dolorous Stroke referred to events outside its own narrative boundaries. Wright

²⁶Works, I, 85. All quotations from the works of Malory will be taken from this edition and will henceforward be cited parenthetically, by volume and page numbers, in the body of the text.

²⁷Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur,'" p. 46.

²⁸Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1277.

mentions also that Malory has occasionally added to the Balin story references to Galahad and hints of the future Quest, as, for example, in his addition which has Marlin leave an empty scabbard on an island for Galahad to find (and, when Galahad comes to court, in the Sankgreal he is indeed wearing an empty scabbard--a detail not in Malory's source).²⁹ It is clear that whether or not Malory had any intentions, at the time that he composed the Tale of Arthur, of writing any more romances, he at least wanted his readers to understand that what happened in the tale had ramifications which extended beyond the limits of the tale and which are clearly unresolved within it.

One other major change is Malory's omission of the Vortigern-Pandragon-Uther history. In Malory's "Merlin" Uther has no real purpose apart from the begetting of Arthur and issuing assurances that Arthur is to be his heir. Whatever past history Uther has is, like the past histories of Merlin and the Grail, outside the concerns of the story Malory has to tell. The shape of the Arthurian story proper thus begins from the first to be more clearly defined, and the myth of Arthur begins to emerge as more distinct from its pseudohistorical backgrounds.³⁰

These are Malory's major changes and omissions. But what he preserves from the Suite is as important to the myth as any

²⁹Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur,'" p. 47.

³⁰Vinaver, Malory, p. 99.

alterations he made. There is, as in the Vulgate Merlin, the sword-in-the-stone story, the begetting of Mordred, and the story of Merlin's imprisonment by Nynyve, all of which are important in that they establish Arthur as a wonder-king and introduce motifs which will recur throughout the story. There are also two elements of the myth which Malory adapts from the Suite but have no parallels in the Vulgate Merlin. One of these is in "The War with the Five Kings," in which Merlin visits Lancelot's parents, prophesying that their young child will one day be the most famous knight in the world. Lancelot, who is to be one of the major figures in the myth throughout Malory, is thus introduced in the first tale of Arthur, so that by the end of the Tale of Arthur every motif that will shape the myth--Mordred, Guinevere (who, Merlin has prophesied, will be unfaithful to Arthur), Lancelot, and the Grail--is present. They only wait to have their relationships to one another developed.

The other of these "new" elements from the Suite is the hand from the lake. In "Merlin," Arthur, who had just broken his sword in battle with Pellinor, was promised by Merlin that he would have a new sword. The two of them rode on "tyll they com to a laake that was a fayre watir and brode. And in the myddis Arthure was ware of an arme clothed in whyght samyte, that held a fayre swerde in that honde" (I, 52). Following the advice of the Lady of the Lake, Arthur and Merlin get into a barge and row themselves out to the arm. "And whan they com to the swerde that the honde hylde, than kynge Arthure took hit up by the hondils and bare hit with hym, and the

arme and the honde wente undir the watir" (I, 53). This motif of the hand and the sword is not strictly the invention of the Suite, for it appeared first in the Mort Artu; there, however, it received the sword into the lake at the end of Arthur's career. In the Suite and in Malory, it bestows the sword upon Arthur as his career begins. And this is an important transformation. Because of this addition, the hand-from-the-lake motifs in The Tale of Arthur and The Death of Arthur now frame the King's life, encapsulating him within the boundaries of Miracle. The motif further suggests strongly that Arthur is in a real sense king by grace, for Excalibur, the symbol of his kingship, is apparently only loaned to him by some power which is never explained. Like Arthur, the sword seemingly arises from nowhere, and like him, it departs by water when his kingship is over, both drawn into mysterious realms. Excalibur may remain in the world only as long as Arthur is king; and there is the reciprocal suggestion that Arthur may be king only as long as Excalibur remains in the world. The relationship between the monarch and his weapon is only suggested, but it is there. The hand with the sword proclaims that we are in the presence of a tremendous mystery that is, paradoxically, all the more satisfying because it is never explained. We are left to establish our own interpretations and evaluations of what the reign of Arthur signifies.

All these changes helped to create a strictly Arthurian story from the material at hand. The Tale of Arthur is, as an origin story for the Arthurian kingdom, self-contained and has within it

the beginnings of the future narrative lines that will run throughout the rest of the cycle. And, though he doubtless did not intend it, in discarding the past histories of Uther, Malory has effectively taken the story of Arthur out of an historical framework and placed it in a suprahistorical, mythical time which the reader may, in his imagination, place at almost any time in the Middle Ages he cares to. It is, as Reiss remarks, "a world different from the present (different from that even in Malory's time)" ³¹ It has stopped being a "real" history--in even Geoffrey's elastic sense of the term--and become a more free-floating tale. For the first time, the whole history of Arthur begins as a self-contained tale, all of whose narrative lines commence with the very first words of the Tale of Arthur. The Tale of Arthur tells us that the cycle to follow is not about Lancelot or the Grail or the continued exploits of the descendants of the Pendragon clan. Though it may contain these elements, it is mainly a story about Arthur.

The Tale of Arthur and Lucius, which follows the Tale of Arthur, is based on the fourteenth-century English Alliterative Morte Arthure, which tells the story (derived ultimately from Geoffrey's Historia) of Lucius, ruler of Rome, his demand for "trewage" owed him by Arthur's father Uther, and Arthur's response to this demand in the form of a military expedition against Rome. In the Morte Arthure, the story ends as it does in Geoffrey: Arthur, while returning to

³¹Reiss, p. 36.

Britain, discovers that his trusted deputy Mordred has seized the land, crowned himself king, invited in the Saracens, Saxons, Picts, and Pagans, and has taken Guinevere (Gaynour in the alliterative poem) as his wife. Arthur and Mordred meet on the field of battle. Mordred is killed and Arthur is sorely wounded. He is taken to Glastonbury, to the Isle of Avalon, where, after a surgeon searches his wounds, Arthur dies "and spekes he no more."³² In Arthur and Lucius, however, Arthur, after his victory over Lucius, is crowned emperor and returns victoriously to Britain where Guinevere waits for him. There is, as yet, no Mordred in the story. Eugène Vinaver notes that, among other changes made, Malory generally reduces his source to about half its length and omits such elements as monologues, dialogues, descriptions of scenery, and some of the more gruesome details of battle.³³ Mary E. Dichmann notes also that Lancelot is made the "yong Sir Launcelot" in Arthur and Lucius³⁴ and is generally emphasized more than in the Morte Arthure, presumably (she believes) to provide some sort of chronological consistency in the Morte D'Arthur as a whole.³⁵ Larry D. Benson sees the purposes

³²The Alliterative Morte Arthure, ed. Valerie Krishna (New York: Burt Franklin and Co., 1976), l. 4327.

³³Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1370.

³⁴Mary E. Dichmann, "'The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius': The Rise of Lancelot," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 76.

³⁵See especially the discussion on pp. 76-79, concluding "Such care seems to suggest strongly that while writing the story of the Roman wars Malory was thinking of the position Lancelot would have in the coming portion of Le Morte Darthur" (p. 79).

of most of these emendations and condensations to be to make the story of the Roman War a tighter, more self-contained, "cleaner" tale.³⁶

Perhaps the desire for a "narrative compactness" is the reason that the Arthur and Lucius tale is among the first in the Morte D'Arthur to be heavily abridged in modern popular editions of Malory; in the two popular editions I have at hand, in fact, it is omitted altogether--in Alfred Pollard's "standard condensation" (the one called by C. S. Lewis the "household Malory"),³⁷ it is omitted without a word of apology or explanation. This has a fairly impressive precedent: Caxton himself, in preparing his Morte D'Arthur for publication, felt free substantially to reduce this particular noble tale, a fact not known until the discovery of Malory's complete version in the Winchester manuscript.³⁸ And one can, initially at least, sympathize with C. S. Lewis' lament that it was found at all: he prefers, he says, Caxton's version as the "more Malorian" of the two.³⁹ It is true that the Arthur and Lucius tale is alien in tone and spirit to much of the rest of Malory's cycle, largely because, as has often been observed, the Alliterative Morte Arthure is closer

³⁶Benson, p. 40.

³⁷C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose Morte," in Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 27.

³⁸Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 366.

³⁹Lewis, "The English Prose Morte," p. 26.

in spirit to Anglo-Saxon poems of battle than to the French romances which set the tone for Malory. Though the Arthur of the poem is more inclined to bloodthirstiness and vengeance than he is in Arthur and Lucius, he is still in the latter work a grimmer and bloodier king than he is in any other of the Malorian tales. There is certainly a greater concentration of war scenes (as opposed to the more usual jousts and incidents of single combat) than in any other single tale in the Morte D'Arthur. A modern reader is more likely to remember and appreciate individual details (such as the fact that Arthur has grey eyes) or certain incidents (such as Arthur's single combat with the giant of St. Michael's Mount and its amusing denouement)⁴⁰ than the whole sweep--or trudge--of the story. My initial plan in this chapter was to make as short a work of Arthur and Lucius as was possible, regarding it as a martial digression from the shape of the myth. Now, although it is still the tale I would most willingly dispense with, it does seem to have played what Malory at least would have regarded as an indispensable part of his whole history of Arthur.

Vinaver has written that we owe to Malory "the idea of separating the story of Arthur's Roman campaign [in the Morte Arthure] from the denouement which occupies more than a thousand lines of the

⁴⁰Sir Bedwere, after Arthur has made pilgrimage to the "saint," exclaims, "'if seyntis be suche that servys Jesu, I woll never seke for none, be the fayth of my body!'" We are told that "The kynge then lough at Bedwers wordis" (I, 204).

poem."⁴¹ Mary E. Dichmann thinks that this was done because Malory had later plans for Arthur and Mordred which would have been dashed if he had brought the Arthurian story to an end in Arthur and Lucius;⁴² Vinaver replies to this argument by saying that it was more likely that Malory was simply more concerned with presenting Arthur as a hero and conqueror than as a victim of the Wheel of Fortune.⁴³ But it seems more likely that Malory ended his tale of Arthur and Lucius when he did mainly because that was where the Vulgate Merlin ended its version of the story--with Arthur as successful conqueror in the Roman War and the end of his reign still many years away. It is true that Malory used the Suite du Merlin, not the Vulgate, as his source for his Tale of Arthur; Benson, however, in Malory's Morte Darthur, assumes that Malory knew the Vulgate Merlin, and cites as one bit of evidence the scene in Arthur and Lucius in which Arthur has to restrain his knights from killing the Roman ambassadors, which has its parallel in the Vulgate account of the Roman War (Mary Dichmann, however, regards this as having come from Wace).⁴⁴ Two additional pieces of evidence are

⁴¹Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1367.

⁴²Dichmann, p. 73.

⁴³Vinaver, "Commentary," in Works, 1367.

⁴⁴Benson, p. 255, n. 9. Benson adds further that "Malory knew the account of the Roman Wars in the Vulgate, and he could easily have adapted that to his purpose--perhaps more easily than the English poem, since in the Merlin, the Roman War occurs early in Arthur's career, long before his battle, and it ends in triumph rather than tragedy" (p. 42).

(1) the combined narrative structure of both the Tale of Arthur and The Tale of Arthur and Lucius which, though differing in details, has in common with the Vulgate the general movement from Arthur's origins to a series of domestic wars to the climactic battle with the Romans, and (2) the statement, at the beginning of Malory's Launcelot (immediately following Arthur and Lucius) that Lancelot "is the fyrste knyght with the Frey[n]sh booke makyth me[n]cion of aftir kynge Arthure com from Rome" (I, 253)--evidence that Malory was aware that in the Vulgate the adventures of Lancelot do in fact commence directly after the conclusion of the Roman War, something he could not have known unless he had knowledge of the Vulgate Merlin. I think it likely that Malory felt compelled to include his Arthur and Lucius because it completed a narrative pattern with which he was familiar in the Vulgate and which made perfect sense to him: it was only natural that Arthur, king of kings, should literally become king of kings by becoming emperor of what was at the time regarded as the whole civilized world. Nothing may come of the Roman War in the rest of Malory's cycle, but Arthur's being crowned emperor is a clear sign that this is not the mediocre ruler of a backwater kingdom, but the equal of the great mythic and historical conquerors. Arthur is now not just a king, but the King--the archetypal king.

Aside from this, Arthur and Lucius also has the odd effect of making Malory's cycle more centrally Arthurian: assured of its place and security in the world at large, the Arthurian kingdom can

now turn inwards, concentrating more on itself and its own development. The passage from the international conflict to the succeeding tales of Lancelot, Gareth, Tristram, and the Grail is like the turning of the contemplative from the mundane affairs of the world to that interior castle where the real and significant adventures are about to begin.

If the tales of Arthur and Arthur and Lucius correspond to the Vulgate Merlin, the tales that follow--of Lancelot, Gareth, and Tristram--correspond to the Vulgate Lancelot, in that they are the "middle" of the story, the tales which show us the kingdom in its daily operations, and which begin to develop the themes introduced in the Tale of Arthur. The Vulgate Lancelot, however, is a source only for the Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot, and even then Malory's Launcelot uses only separate incidents from different parts of the Vulgate Lancelot, pieced together by Malory so as to provide, in Vinaver's words, "a moderately continuous account of Lancelot's adventures and so avoid the typical 'cyclic' method of interweaving a variety of different themes."⁴⁵ There is not in Malory as there is in the Vulgate the lengthy and somewhat oppressive account of Lancelot's youth and his life with the Damsel of the Lake, nor are we told of Lancelot's first appearance at Arthur's court, if for no other reason than that Arthur and Lucius shows Lancelot as already at court (though this might by itself have been no objection since

⁴⁵Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1408.

Tristram appears in the Tale of Arthur and yet is apparently not born until the Book of Sir Tristram). Finally, and what may seem oddest to a modern reader, there is no "first encounter" with Guinevere as there is in the Vulgate, in which the two fall in love with each other at first sight. Malory dispenses with the origin of the love affair by simply stating that because Lancelot was the greatest of the knights, "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, and for her he dud many dedys of armys and saved her from the fyre thorow his noble chevalry" (I, 253). Lancelot's love for Guinevere plays only a small part in the Launcelot--Guinevere herself never appears--but, once having been introduced, the love theme is continually at the back of a reader's mind. When some character does bring it to the surface, as Morgan le Fay does when she tells Lancelot, "'we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is quene Gwenyvere'" (I, 257), Lancelot simply denies it: "'And as for my lady, dame Gwenyvere, were I at my lyberté as I was, I wolde prove hit on youres that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng'" (I, 258). Later on, when a damsel tells Lancelot that "'hit is noysed that ye love quene Gwenyvere'" (I, 270), Lancelot's reply, though evasive, is still a denial of the charge, especially when it is coupled with the paragraph following, which is Malory's addition:

"Fayre damesell," seyde sir Launcelot, "I may not warne peple to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem. . . . And as for to sey to take my pleasaunce with peramours, that woll

I refuse: in prencipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advouters nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werryys; for other they shall be overcom with a sympler knyght than they be hemself, other ellys they shall sle by unhappe and hir cursedness bettir men than they be hemself. And so who that usyth peramours shall be unhappy, and all thyng unhappy that is aboute them" (I, 270-1).

This has the ring of conviction, though one may wonder who is convinced here--Lancelot or Malory. One might suppose that this tale occurs early enough in Lancelot's career so that Guinevere is still the sort of fairly conventional "lady" who was as much a part of a knight's equipment as his sword or his horse, without there being any truly illicit love between them. But the fact that rumors are already in the air, along with the fact that both Tristram and Mordred are mentioned in the tale, indicate that this episode takes place sometime in Lancelot's later career, certainly late enough for the love between Lancelot and Guinevere to be more than mere courtly convention. If this is so, then Malory is presenting Lancelot as either a hypocrite or a man who truly believes the moral position he espouses but who is tragically trapped by his love into pronouncing his own condemnation--for he is certainly "unhappy" later. And then again, it may only be we who worship the chronological bogey; perhaps Malory is presenting Lancelot as a young knight who believes that his love for Guinevere is perfectly innocent, although, as sometimes happens in real life, others are already aware that it is not as innocent as Lancelot believes it is.

It may be appropriate, from the point of view of psychological verisimilitude, that Lancelot's love for Guinevere seems ambiguous and uncertain in this tale. Love at first sight, though an attractive dramatic device (particularly if the author wants to waste no time chronicling the development of a love affair), is usually not as convincing as a love that is seen to grow by degrees until neither lover can be certain when simple admiration turned into love. But this suggested contrast between Lancelot's words and deeds is important from the mythic point of view as well. There is from the first, in Malory's Launcelot, a tension between Lancelot's love and his fear of discovery--or at least an internal tension between his love and his conscience. This element of the love story is not immediately apparent in the Vulgate Lancelot, which seems to be having too much fun with the affair to think much about its moral import or consequences until the advent of the Queste. But in Malory, when Lancelot and Guinevere are introduced as lovers, they are already in their roles as the secret lovers who fear exposure, as if there has never been a time when they were not lovers. Malory no more needs to "explain" them than he needs to "explain" Merlin or Uther. They therefore become in Malory not a particular pair of lovers whose affair begin in a certain way, but simply the archetypal, eternal guilty lovers whose love has no origins in time.

Malory apparently felt just as free to eliminate the whole "pre-Arthurian" history of Lancelot as he did to dispense with the histories of Merlin, the Grail, and Uther, and for the same reasons:

all of these prior histories made Arthur merely contingent upon their existence or contained within a larger narrative. In the Vulgate, Arthur is only background to the Lancelot story and the shape of Arthur's whole story is subordinated to Lancelot's part in it. In Malory, however, Lancelot grows out of the Arthur-story and is, though an important part of it, always subordinate to it so that we are less likely to lose sight of the whole Arthurian myth. There is, besides, the fact that Malory's Lancelot is a much more universally sympathetic character than the Lancelot of the Vulgate, and precisely because Malory does not show us his history as the Vulgate presents it. The Vulgate author positively fawns upon Lancelot: the young knight is instinctively recognized as a king's son by total strangers; he is an immediate master at any sport or pastime he puts his hand to; the Damsel of the Lake worships him and leaves a wreath of roses on his pillow every morning; no one sits at table before Lancelot seats himself--if an author were trying to create an obnoxious and pampered character he could not do much more. In Malory, Lancelot is with his parents Ban and Elayne when we first see him, not with the doting Damsel of the Lake, and he wins his spurs the same way everyone else does, through feats of arms which prove his worth, not through some sort of charismatic nimbus which awes others into submission. Malory's Lancelot, like Shakespeare's mistress, treads upon the ground when he walks, and this enables us to have at least the illusion that Malory's Lancelot is more like us than is the Vulgate's Lancelot. We are able to forget that, as

a king's son and a knight, Lancelot belongs to a social and military caste that is alien to nearly every reader in the western world in our and Malory's times. For the sake of the myth, he must remain a knight, an archetypal warrior. But, stripped of the special favors and irresistible charisma he is burdened with in the Vulgate, he is transformed in Malory into a more universal figure, a basically good man with a tragic flaw, a type of the Old Adam, the Fallen Man. And like Man, he is already fallen when we meet him. Lancelot's rôle in the myth and the tensions that fuel the action of the myth are, early in Malory, being defined. The myth's shape is beginning to emerge.

The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney is probably Malory's most original single work--"probably" because the question of Malory's source for this tale is one which has never been fully resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Vinaver says that "Although its French source is entirely unknown it is safe to assume, despite some recent claims, that such a source existed and that it was built on the familiar pattern of the thirteenth-century prose novel: a knightly quest successfully brought to its conclusion by a young hero and followed by a brilliant tournament."⁴⁶ One of the recent claims to which Vinaver alludes is undoubtedly that of Wilfrid A. Guerin. Guerin believes that however many ideas Malory may have borrowed

⁴⁶Vinaver, "Commentary," in Works, III, 1427.

from various French sources, Gareth is mainly his own creation.⁴⁷

Larry Benson, in Malory's Morte Darthur, argues that "Malory did have a source for Gareth, and that was Ipomadon;" but that Ipomadon was a "source" only in the sense that it provided a narrative structure for the first part of Gareth.⁴⁸ Benson further provides an analysis of the main narrative motifs of Gareth for which he has found analogues in various other works (among them Lybeaus, Erec et Enide, the Estoire de Merlin, and "La Cote Mal Tayle," which Malory himself mentions in the first part of Gareth).⁴⁹ In a 1982 article in Speculum, Thomas L. Wright argued that Malory was inspired to write the Gareth by the "embedded" Gaheriet tale in the Suite du Merlin which has a narrative pattern fairly similar to that of Gareth.⁵⁰ The origin of the tale is less important for the purposes of the present study than is the story it has to tell and its place--if, in fact, any--in the myth of Arthur.

⁴⁷Wilfrid A. Guerin, "'The Tale of Gareth': The Chivalric Flowering," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 100.

⁴⁸Benson, p. 99.

⁴⁹Benson summarizes these in the form of a list on pp. 99-100.

⁵⁰Thomas L. Wright, "On the Genesis of Malory's Gareth," Speculum, 57 (1982), 569-582. In brief, Wright's argument is that the Suite du Merlin contains, interwoven into the stories of Gauvain, Yvain, and le Morholt, a Gaheriet narrative which, in general outline, though not in detail, resembles that of Gareth, in that both "share the same hero and the same theme of initiation as well as settings and certain turns of plot that seem obverse aspects of each other, as though a design were repeated by reversing it" (571). Added to this basic framework are details and motifs from various other romances of similar theme, with the result that Malory creates a "new" Gareth romance.

Gareth is an example of the "fair unknown" motif in which an unlikely candidate for knighthood or glory appears and demonstrates his worthiness to an audience which is initially inclined to dismiss him as worthless. This same motif turns up in other tales in Malory-- in "La Cote Male Tayle" and "Alexander le Orphelin." Even the young Arthur in Malory's "Merlin" is something of a "fair unknown." In Gareth this fair unknown is Gareth himself who has come to Arthur's court to ask him for three boons, the first of which is meat and drink for a year, at the end of which time he will name his other two requests. Kay, true to form, scorns the young man as a "vylayne borne," and, since the newcomer lacks a name, he provides him with one: Beawmaynes, or Fair Hands. Lancelot warns Kay against such mockery, reminding him that he had nicknamed Sir Brunor "La Cote Male Tayle" and had had reason to regret it later, as he might well with this case. Lancelot's warning is well-founded, for Beawmaynes is actually the brother of Gawain, who fails to recognize the little brother he has not seen in years. The story of Gareth as it develops is essentially a fulfillment of Lancelot's prophecy that Gareth may be more than he seems. A year later, a damsel, Lynet, comes to Arthur's court asking for help for her lady, whom she refuses to name. Arthur is inclined to dismiss her, but Beawmaynes steps forward and claims, as his remaining two favors, that he be made knight and given this adventure. Arthur, to the dismay of Lynet (who regards Beawmaynes as a mere kitchen knave), consents. There follows a series of encounters with knights of various hues,

all of whom Beawmaynes defeats. He cannot, however, impress Lynet, who attributes his successes to sheer luck and cannot but believe that a smelly kitchen knave will fail in the next encounter. Despite Lynet's doubts, Beawmaynes retains his composure and his courtesy, even when Lynet urges his opponents to murder him and get rid of him for her. At last, however, she confesses that she has treated him shamefully and that he is clearly a knight of high lineage. Afterwards, Beawmaynes fights and defeats the Red Knight, freeing Lyonesse (Lynet's sister), whom the Red Knight had held prisoner. Beawmaynes then falls in love with Lyonesse, who tells him that he may not have her love until he has proven himself in a year's worth of adventures. Understandably crushed, the knight rides away. But Lyonesse and her brother Gryngamour kidnap Beawmaynes' dwarf and force him to tell who Beawmaynes really is. The dwarf is taken to Gryngamour's castle where he confesses to Gareth's lineage. Gareth immediately afterwards appears and demands his dwarf back. Gryngamour assents and invites Gareth to stay. Lyonesse disguises herself and appears at the table, where Gareth, who does not recognize her, falls in love with her. Later she reveals herself to him, and the two make an assignation to meet that night. But they are prevented from going through with the tryst by a strange knight who pierces Gareth's thigh and who loses his head in payment for the wound. Lynet, apparently unconcerned, puts an ointment on the knight's head and fastens it back on, and he gets up and walks away. When the knight returns, Gareth chops his head into a hundred pieces,

but again Lynet appears and glues the head back together and the knight gets up and walks away. Gareth's wound, we are told, may not be healed except by enchantment because it was given by enchantment. Meanwhile, the defeated knights come to Arthur's court to surrender themselves. Morgawse also comes to court, to see how her son Gareth is getting along. Arthur and the court realize that Gareth must be none other than Beawmaynes, and Arthur sends knights in search of him. Gareth is found; a tournament is proclaimed; he is healed of his wound . . . and so on and on until Gareth wins renown at the tournament and openly reveals who he is, to Lancelot's delight. Gareth and Lyonesse are finally married and, lest anything be lacking, so are Lynet (justly called "the damesell Saveige") and Gareth's brother Gaheris.

As one may see, in summary form Gareth sounds frivolous and silly. It is certainly not meant to be taken very seriously. No one in the tale comes to permanent grief. Everyone lives happily ever after. Knights, like cartoon characters, are chopped into pieces and reassembled, none the worse for wear. It is difficult to see how Gareth plays any major part in the shaping of the Arthurian myth. But it does have its uses in helping us to look at the myth as it develops. Gareth may be seen as a sort of "control," a means of understanding what makes the myth of Arthur myth. In the first chapter, I quoted Langer as saying that one must distinguish between "mere" fantasy and wish-fulfillment tales on the one hand, and true myth on the other. Gareth clearly belongs to the former of these

two categories. Little that occurs in the tale can be made, except under hermeneutical duress, to refer to any wider, universal concerns outside of the tale. The very occasional wonders in Gareth are purely ornamental and incidental, suggesting no supernatural Reality which might transform the "fair unknown" motif into myth, as the sword in the stone did for Arthur. Other motifs which might have been made into myth--the disguised lover, the interrupted tryst, the death and resurrection of a knight--are prevented from becoming myth by the contexts in which they appear. These motifs are only individual episodes, not vitally connected with the rest of the story. We read Gareth for nothing but the adventures, for the sheer momentary excitement of incident. But, standing as it does outside the main shape of the myth, it serves to make us more aware of the myth simply by comparison.

But though Gareth as a whole stands outside the main shape of the myth, there is an interesting passage at the end of the tale which the reader might do well to remember when he comes at last to the Death of Arthur. We have already been told that Lancelot knighted Gareth. At the last of the tale, Malory writes that "there was no knyght that sir Gareth loved so well as he dud sir Launcelot; and ever for the moste party he wolde ever be in sir Launcelottis company" (I, 360). This has often been cited as an element that deepens the tragedy in the Death of Arthur when Lancelot, single-mindedly intent on rescuing Guinevere from death, accidentally kills Gareth, and thus brings about the feud that, even more than his

love for Guinevere, is the final (or at least immediate) cause of the fall of the Round Table. This element has also been used as proof that Malory intended to write a unified cycle of romances, since Malory's sources have nothing of this close friendship between Lancelot and Gareth; the friendship looks as if it were invented to heighten the pathos of Gareth's death. But that, as Kipling would say, is a story for another time. At the moment, the Arthurian kingdom is in what Benson calls the golden afternoon of chivalry, when all stories end happily and no one has a care in the world. Perhaps it would be better to say that Arthurian society is in its young adulthood, when the world is still fairly straightforward and values and ideals are still clear. If so, then the next book, of Sir Tristram, is the entry into a more complex and a darker world--not evil, necessarily, but a world where major permutations or mythic themes are beginning to appear.

The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones is the longest work in Malory's cycle--or, more precisely, it is the longest unit in Vinaver's Malory. It contains several romances or romance themes which reappear throughout as well as certain stories--such as "Alexander le Orphelin" and "La Cote Male Tayle"--which are self-contained. Its theme is the love of Sir Tristram of Lyones for La Beale Isoud, the lady whom he is sent to bring to King Mark, and who ultimately becomes both Mark's wife and Tristram's lover. The story--or recurring situation--in Tristram deals chiefly with Tristram's repeated trysts with Isoud in defiance of Mark, and Mark's enmity against Tristram

as well as his own general knavery and unwillingness to play the chivalric game; interwoven with this theme is that of Palomides, the unchristened Saracen knight who also loves La Beale Isoud and who has vowed never to be baptized until he has fought with Tristram. The Tristram-Isoud theme is never resolved with the Tristram; its eventual outcome--Tristram's death at Mark's hands--though contained in Malory's source, is merely reported later in Launcelot and Guinevere and The Death of Arthur; but in Tristram, Palomides does at last fight Tristram in a fairly friendly battle and consents to be baptized. These two story lines are not presented quite as clearly in Malory's books as they are in this brief summary; other knights and other adventures continually weave in and out of the narrative, so that the Book of Sir Tristram is, in reality, the book of nearly everybody else in the Arthurian kingdom.

Eugène Vinaver cites as Malory's source for Tristram a thirteenth century French Prose Tristan romance which set the Tristan story in the framework of the Arthurian cycle of the Vulgate, changing it so that it no longer emphasized the original love theme but instead concentrates on the chivalric adventures of the Round Table Knights.⁵¹ Vinaver describes the Prose Tristan as "essentially a long series of seemingly disjointed episodes centring [sic] upon the figure of a great knight who embodies all the traditional virtues of Arthur's fellowship."⁵² Malory changes his source chiefly by

⁵¹Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1443.

⁵²Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1443.

reducing it to one-sixth of its original length, pruning away the Prose Tristan's history of its hero's family from literally the year one (of the Christian era) and beginning with the story of Tristram's birth, omitting certain passages which express a courtly sentiment with which (Vinaver believes) Malory was not in sympathy so as to concentrate more on the martial aspect of chivalry,⁵³ and (most important perhaps in light of the present study) completely omitting the third and last book of the Tristan which contained not only the denouement of the Tristan story but which also told its own version of the Grail Quest with Tristan as the principal figure.⁵⁴ The reason behind Malory's omission of this third book is naturally a point of contention. Vinaver believes that Malory stopped when he did because he had reached "the natural denouement: Tristram and Isode are happily settled in Joyous Gard, Tristram earns universal recognition as Lancelot's equal, and Palomides, the unfortunate Saracen whose love for Isode darkens some of the pages of this 'joyous book,' is christened and reconciled to his fate."⁵⁵ Thomas C. Rumble, however, argues that "Malory's abandoning the well-known tragic climax of the tale requires a more reasonable explanation than his supposed naive predilection for a happy ending,"⁵⁶ among

⁵³Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1444-5.

⁵⁴Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1443-4.

⁵⁵Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1443.

⁵⁶Thomas C. Rumble, "'The Tale of Tristram': Development by Analogy," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 128.

those reasons being that Malory had plans already for a Grail Quest, based on the Vulgate, which would emphasize Lancelot, not Tristram, as a principal Quest Knight.⁵⁷ Just as important a question, however, is why Malory chose to include any version of the Tristan at all.

This is in fact a question which Vinaver himself asked once--or rather, a fact which he lamented, saying that it would have been better for English readers if Malory had never heard of the Prose Tristan.⁵⁸ It is a sentiment which many modern readers--particularly those obsessed with the question of unity⁵⁹--find easy to agree with. Tristram in the Malorian cycle is something of an anomaly, at least at first glance--a large, inconveniently-placed rock in the middle of a stream which appeared to be flowing quite well without it. Even Rumble, committed as he is to the idea of a thematically unified Malory, has to confess that "The 'Tristram' story is not wholly necessary to the high theme of the noble rise and tragic fall of the Round Table the French cyclic Arthuriad had done quite well without a Tristan. From a consideration of structure alone,

⁵⁷Rumble, "'The Tale of Tristram,'" p. 126-7.

⁵⁸Vinaver, Malory, p. 94.

⁵⁹Vinaver remarks that Tristram is "One of the major obstacles to any theory of unity" and is "the least relevant to any of the themes found in the earlier and later sections" (Works, I, xlvii-xlix). D. S. Brewer similarly comments, "If I were contending that there was a modern organic unity of design in Malory's work, the Tristram would in itself be enough to refute me" ("the hoole book," Essays on Malory, p. 56).

all that is needed to portray the establishment and disintegration of Arthur's noble realm is a Merlin, a Quest of the Holy Grail, and a Lancelot, with these romances centering, as they do in the French cyclic versions, around the figure of Arthur."⁶⁰ This is, of course, an oversimplification; aside from the fact that the Vulgate is centered more often about Lancelot than Arthur, one could point out that not even all of the Vulgate Lancelot is necessary, but only isolated, individual episodes in it, episodes which are in fact also contained in the Tristram. And of course, the Mort Artu is necessary to depict the complete downfall of the Table.

But what Rumble means is that the specific Tristram story is not necessary to the Arthurian narrative as a whole. Rumble does offer an explanation for its presence, however: he sees the Tristram-Isode affair as a sort of exemplary or cautionary tale about the dangers of adultery with the wives of royal personages. The argument is clever; it is even conceivable that it is true. But it does not carry much intuitive conviction with it. Donald G. Schueler,⁶¹ while rejecting the thesis that the Tristram story is a narrative counterpoint to the Lancelot-Guinevere intrigue, does argue that if we are to see its place in the whole narrative, we should look at Tristram as an analogue to Lancelot, comparing

⁶⁰Rumble, "The Tale of Tristram," pp. 144-5.

⁶¹Donald G. Schueler, "The Tristram Section of Malory's Morte Darthur," in Studies in Philology, 65, No. 1 (1968), 51-66.

Tristram's selfish independence and faithlessness in love to Lancelot's dedication to Arthur and his faithfulness in love; thus Malory omits the ending of the Tristram story (Tristram's death at Mark's hands) precisely because he does not want us to draw the parallel between the Lancelot-Guinevere affair and the corresponding "love theme" of Tristram and Isode. Again, though one can respond only on intuitive grounds, one can say that this doesn't seem to be what Malory is doing, or not consciously at any rate.

The explanation for the Tristram section in the Malorian corpus may be much simpler than either of these explanations, and may have been touched on by Benson when he wrote that Malory included the book because he liked it. The Tristram story itself, Benson believes, was of less interest to Malory than the whole book's picture of "the bright afternoon of Arthurian chivalry."⁶² In Tristram, there are lady loves, vendettas, battles, jousts, and disguised knights in superabundance--precisely the sorts of things that a fifteenth-century audience might like to hear about. If we find it hard to believe that an audience would sit still for this seemingly endless repetition of simple motifs, we only have to remember the many shoot-outs or saloon brawls we have sat through in the countless westerns we have seen. That we prefer less gentlemanly and more efficient methods of mayhem than are in Tristram is no objection to the book. The Tristram is supposed to be, in a word, fun, and if we do not read it as fun, than we are missing one of the reasons

⁶²Benson, p. 115.

it was written. Tristram contains some of the motifs, unrelated as they may be to the whole story, without which we could not imagine the story of Arthur. There is the delightfully improbable Questing Beast "that had in shap lyke a serpentis hede and a body lyke a lybud, buttokked lyke a lyon and footed lyke an harte. And in hys body there was such a noyse as hit had bene twenty couple of houndys questynge, and suche noyse that beste made wheresomever he wente" (II, 484). There is the surprisingly reasonable (read "modern") philosophy of Lamorek, who refuses to fight Lancelot over whether Morgause or Guinevere is the more beautiful woman because, as he says, every man thinks his lady the fairest. There is the hilarious Dinadan, who frankly thinks (or at least says) that Lancelot and Tristram are mad to ride into battle against odds of thirty to one, however conventionally chivalric it may be. He complains that after one season as Lancelot's companion he was too ill to get out of bed for three months. He cannot resist twitting Mark, and writes for him what Malory calls "the worste lay that ever harper songe with Harpe or with any other instrument" (II, 618). And there is, throughout the book, a surprisingly civilized attitude towards the whole chivalric game--which does at times actually seem like a game, in that while the best knights are capable of taking it quite seriously while in the midst of it, they are also able to abstract themselves from it in moments of real need. Tristram and Palomides may fight from time to time over Isode, but when one or the other is in real trouble (as when Palomides is harassed by Breunis Saunz

Pitie, or when Tristram is sick in prison), they drop their feud long enough to help each other out, and then part, cheerfully promising to beat each others' brains out later. Knights like Breunis or Mark, who through cowardice or brutality torment and kill other knights, are the exception rather than the rule. This is not to say that knighthood in Tristram is an easy-going cricket match; but along with the violence there is much mercy, much geniality, much bravery, and enough sanity to increase one's chances of survival. If one had to live in a chivalric universe, this would be the one to pick. If it seems primitive or brutal to us, we need only compare it to Beowulf, or The Battle of Maldon, or even the crime log in the daily paper.

Tristram is, then, obviously a delightful book, and we can be thankful that Malory included it in his cycle. It has much in the way of imagery, motif, incident, and character that we would be poorer without. But one could make the same claims for The Pickwick Papers or, more appropriately, Tristram Shandy, and yet we do not usually regard these works as mythic. What does Malory's rambling and dilatory Tristram contribute to the myth of Arthur?

The first thing to point out is that Tristram does not really impede the myth. The book does contain certain episodes which develop mythic motifs to which we have previously been introduced. Mordred was conceived in The Tale of Arthur; in Tristram he appears on the scene as a grown man--and an unpleasant one, given to occasional acts of treachery. Malory tells us that it is Mordred and (significantly) Aggravain who will "cowardly and felonsly" kill Sir

Dinadan after the Grail Quest; we are thus already being prepared for their perfidy in The Death of Arthur. In Tristram, Perceval, who will play a major part in the coming Quest, makes his first appearance at court. And the Lancelot-Guinevere affair begins to develop in ways that will later affect everyone. Arthur, through the instigation of his sister Morgan, has his first overt suspicions about the two lovers. And though he puts these suspicions aside, thinking that Morgan has lied to him in order to sow seeds of distrust, the first hint of the fatal rift between the King and Lancelot has appeared. And, most important, there is Lancelot's begetting of Galahad on Elayne, who he thinks is Guinevere--a story which is largely identical to the version presented in the Vulgate Lancelot. It is this story that, in Malory as in the Vulgate, turns the merely worldly story of adultery into myth by connecting it to the supernatural mythos and ethos of the Grail. In fact, if Tristram had contained only this last motif in the myth, it would have justified its existence in Malory's cycle.

One might object that Malory's Tristram is then not necessarily superior to the French Lancelot, since the latter work also contains some of the same developments of mythic motifs interspersed with a lot of narrative deadwood. But in reply, one need only to point out the differences in the kind of "deadwood" in the two works. In the previous chapter I pointed out that one of the biggest obstacles to myth in the Vulgate was Lancelot's apparent ubiquity. Nothing in the Vulgate Lancelot ever completely escapes his orbit;

rarely is anyone allowed to have a significant adventure which is not, even if only peripherally, related to him. The result is that he obscures our view of the Arthurian myth. The Vulgate Lancelot is not really a story about Arthur or even the Arthurian kingdom in general as much as it is about Lancelot in the Arthurian kingdom. Malory, by using the Tristram material instead of the Vulgate Lancelot, changed the focus in his own Arthurian cycle. Lancelot still frequently appears, to be sure--because he is one of the major figures of the myth, we cannot afford to have him disappear entirely. But he often stands on the sidelines and is, like the reader, a spectator of events that do not directly or even peripherally involve him. We see in the Tristram not a kingdom afflicted with Lancelot-mania, but a busy kingdom filled with a number of very interesting characters. Lancelot is no longer, as in the Vulgate, the absolute in the Arthurian world--if anything is "absolute," it is the Arthurian world itself. By including the Tristram, Malory has not so much changed the myth as he has simply directed our attention away from Lancelot and back to the larger world of Arthurian adventure from which Lancelot originally sprang. But this very redirection of attention saves us from the Lancelot-mania of the Vulgate and reminds us that the whole story is, after all, about Arthur and his kingdom.

The French Prose Vulgate plays a much larger part in the influencing of the contents of the last three books of Malory's cycle, but nowhere is Malory's story more obviously and faithfully related

to its source than in his Tale of the Sankgreal, which Vinaver has gone so far as to describe as "to all intents and purposes a translation of the French Queste del Saint Graal."⁶³ A comparison of the Queste and the Sankgreal may help one to understand why Vinaver called it the least original of Malory's works. In his other works discussed so far, Malory rearranged or omitted the incidents in his sources; but the Queste is the only source which is presented in Malory so much in its entirety that the reader passing from one to the other feels almost immediately at home. But the judgment that the Sankgreal is simply a translation of the Queste is rather excessive. While preserving faithfully the general outline and most of the incidents of his source, Malory has made the story of the Quest his own work. Vinaver's judgment is that Malory's tale is a "confused and almost pointless story, a beautiful parade of symbols and bright visions."⁶⁴ But Mary Hynes-Berry is closer to being correct when she writes that Malory "did not read the allegory but the story of the Quest for the Holy Grail"⁶⁵ leaving the reader to "intuit cause and effect or purpose" of what he reads rather than having the

⁶³Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1534.

⁶⁴Vinaver, Malory, p. 14.

⁶⁵"Malory's Transformation of Meaning: The Tale of the Sankgreall," in Studies in Philology, 74 (1976), 257. Hynes-Berry has made similar points in another article for Neophilologus, 60 (1976), entitled "Language and Meaning: Malory's Translation of the Grail Story." This paragraph has interwoven quotations from both articles.

meanings spelled out for him,⁶⁶ with the result that "the reader automatically invests the adjectives [as well as, one might add, the symbols] with his own universalized sense" of the meanings.⁶⁷ Or, to express the matter another way, Malory freed the symbols so that they could become archetypes. It seems unlikely that Malory consciously did this; rather, it was a side effect of his editorial and adaptive "policy" in altering the Queste for his own cycle.

One obvious change which Malory made in his source is in size: he has greatly reduced its bulk. One of the chief (and most welcome) reductions is in the various explications by the holy men who appear throughout the narrative. Malory rarely omits them entirely, but he does pare them to the bone of essential meaning, providing simple equivalences and reducing harangues to a minimum. In the previous chapter I recorded a holy man's interpretation of Gawain's and Hector's vision of the hand and the candle--a long-winded dissertation which nails down the meaning of the vision so thoroughly that it is unable to move. Here is Malory's version of the same passage:

"Now woll I telle you what betokenyth the hande with the candill and the brydyll: that ys to undirstonde the Holy Goste where charite ys ever; and the brydyll signifieth abstinens, for whan she ys brydeled in a Cristen mannes herte [s]he holdith hym so shorte that he fallith nat in dedly synne. And the candyll which shewith clernessee and lyght signyfieth the right way of Jesu Cryste.

⁶⁶Hynes-Berry, "Language and Meaning," 313.

⁶⁷Hynes-Berry, "Language and Meaning," 314.

"And whan "He" wente He seyde, "Knyghtes of pore fayth and of wycked beleve, thes three thynges fayled: charite, abstinaunce and trouth. Therefore ye may nat attayne thys adventure of the Sankgreall" (II, 947-8).

We can see that Malory's interpretation, though shorter than that of the Queste, omits no essential correspondences between image and meaning, and yet does not swamp the reader with an excess of interpretation and homiletics. Another example is Lancelot's dream of a crowned man attended by several knights. Lancelot, in the Queste, asks a holy man for the meaning of the dream, and the holy man responds with a long interpretation which includes the story of Joseph of Arimathea and the pagan king Evelach, concluding by telling Lancelot that Galahad is his son. The corresponding passage in the Sankgreall shortens this explication to four paragraphs, condensing the story of Evelake to its essentials.

Not only are the interpretations treated in this way; descriptions of action and setting are also greatly reduced so that, as Lambert notes, the result is "the reduced quantity of details" in Malory as compared to his source.⁶⁸ One example of this descriptive condensation is the scene in which Lancelot approaches Solomon's Ship. In the Queste the description is as follows:

When he was fully equipped and had belted on his sword, he looked towards the river's bank and saw a boat with neither sail nor oar; and he walked across to it and stepped inside. As soon as he entered the boat it

⁶⁸Mark Lambert, Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 85.

seemed to him that the air he breathed was sweet with every fragrance earth can offer, and that he was filled with all the choicest viands that had ever pleased man's palate. Then was his happiness increased an hundredfold, for now he had, as it seemed to him, all he could ever wish for in this life.⁶⁹

Malory's version is notably shorter:

And at the laste he cam by a stronde and founde a shippe withoute sayle other ore. And as sone as he was within the shippe, there he had the moste swettnes that ever he felte, and he was fulfylled with all thyng that he thought on other desyred (II, 1011).

Lancelot's essential actions are preserved, but the interpretation of his reactions is reduced. A similar example, cited by Lambert, is the scene in which Perceval defends a lion and afterwards sees a ship approaching. Lambert notes that the Queste provides details which Malory omits (such as a winged serpent) and that it takes more time describing the gradual approach of the ship to Perceval, whereas in Malory, the ship arrives almost as soon as it is sighted.⁷⁰

A third example is Malory's treatment of the lengthy "Tree of Life" story, which explains why the "spindles" of the bed on Solomon's ship are made of green and white wood (the spindles were made of the green and white trees that came from Eden) and how Solomon's ship was made. In the Queste, the narrative proper comes to a full halt while the author gives the reader this elaborate past history in "flashback" form; afterwards, Perceval finds a letter which tells

⁶⁹The Quest of the Holy Grail, trans. P. M. Matarasso (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 259. Further quotations from the Queste are from this translation and are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷⁰Lambert's discussion of this passage may be found on pp. 75-78 of his work.

the "Tree of Life" story again (Quest, pp. 222-235). In Malory, however, not only is this long history condensed, but Malory places the story in the mouth of a "damesell" who tells the story of two trees to both the reader and the Grail Knights simultaneously, so that there is no need for the cumbersome flashback device that the Queste author resorts to; afterwards, Perceval still finds the letter which tells the same story, but its function is more to substantiate the story just heard than to tell it to the knights for the first time (II, 990-994).

Malory's main principle of composition in the Sankgreal is, then, obviously to "reduce" his source into English. When an interpretation or incident may be pared to its essentials, he pares, and this means for him the elimination of what he regards as superfluous details which impede the progress of the tale. But this is not all that he does. Some of the details he omits do make a difference in the story, and he occasionally changes the details of his source as well. Some of these changes appear to make no substantial difference--as, for instance, when Malory changes what was, in his source, a meal set on tables into a picnic with "clothys coverde uppon the erthe, and may delycuios metis sette thereon" (II, 884), or when he alters the Queste's white frock to a "scarlet cote" (II, 956).

Some changes of detail may indicate some method. Malory frequently ages the figures in the religious visions: at least three times he changes the Queste's "a man" into an old man (though

in one case he reverses the process and turns an old man into a man dressed as a priest, age indeterminate). Other changes appear to put Galahad in a better light. In the Queste Galahad seems to encourage Baudemagus to take up the enchanted shield which he knows will be Baudemagus' downfall, simply because he wants to see whether the prophecy will come true; this aspect of the adventure is changed by Malory's omitting Galahad's encouragement so that he becomes more of an innocent bystander in the adventure that occurs afterwards. In the French Book, Galahad is given a horn which, when blown, will summon some knights, and then hands it, in what seems a lordly manner, to another knight so that he may blow it; in Malory he takes the horn and sounds it himself. And, when in the Queste Galahad and his companions have come aboard Solomon's ship and Bors comments that the only thing lacking is Lancelot's presence, Galahad's priggish reply is that it is impossible since it is obviously God's will that Lancelot not be there; this is softened in Malory so that Galahad says that it won't happen unless God wills it--turning his absolute certainty about God's preferences into a more humble deferment to His will.

Most of the changes mentioned are, however, comparatively minor, and do not significantly indicate any overall plan in Malory's adaptation of the Grail story, assuming he had one. The really important changes are those involving Lancelot and the general religious tone of the Grail Quest--important because, if the Quest is the mythic heart of the Arthurian story, then how we understand the Quest will affect how we understand the myth as a whole.

The starting point for debate on this subject--at least in this century--is, once again, Vinaver, whose statement that Malory did not care much for the religious element of the Grail Quest and that he sought to "protect" Lancelot from the sort of vilification that he undergoes in the Queste has been amply attacked and defended since the original publication of the Works. Vinaver's main evidence for the "desanctifying" of the Grail Quest is the numerous condensations and excisions made in many of the interpretations offered by the hermits.⁷¹ Vinaver argues that some specifically religious passages are made more secular, the spiritual motivations made earthly: "Ignoring the contrast between la chevailliere celestiale and la seculiere, Malory replaces the former by 'virtuous living,' and even uses the phrase 'knyghtly dedys and vertuous lyvyng' to describe the duties of a good Christian."⁷² A lady in distress pleads to Sir Bors to help her, not for God's sake as in the Queste, but for Arthur's in Malory; and Bors himself, in Malory, apparently thinks that one of the advantages of succeeding in the Quest will be the winning of "much erthly worship."⁷³ Vinaver sees in the

⁷¹"Arthur and his knights are not to be made a prey to theological argument, and Malory unhesitatingly deletes most of the theological 'explanations of adventures' which he finds in his source" (Vinaver, Malory, p. 79).

⁷²Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1535-6.

⁷³Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1535.

Sankgreal a general "substitution of the Arthurian for the Christian scale of values."⁷⁴ And there is certainly evidence for this point of view. The savage reductions of the eremetical explications indicate that doctrinal exegesis was certainly not the most important element in Malory's telling of the story. There are what appears to be other details that substantiate this point of view. The knight who comes to exact vengeance on Baudemagus (in the episode in which he carries off the shield intended for Galahad) is plainly said in the Queste to be sent by God; Malory leaves his origins more mysterious. In the Queste version of Lancelot's adventure at the mysterious chapel, Lancelot is further tormented with guilt when, in the morning, he hears the singing of the birds; but in Malory, the "small fowles" comfort him. In the Queste, Galahad buries King Mordrains in an abbey; in Malory, he is buried "in the erthe as a kynge oughte to be" (II, 1025). But one could point to details which might suggest that Malory is emphasizing or making more explicit the religious elements only hinted at in the Queste. In the Queste, the the Knights of the Round Table are merely perplexed by the manifestation of the Grail at the court; Malory says that they seemed to each other "fayrer than ever they were before" (II, 865). Whereas in the Queste, the evil lady tells Perceval "You were my liegeman once: before you swore fealty to your lord you first belonged to me" (Quest, p. 118), Malory has her plainly say that "ye were never but my

⁷⁴Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1536.

servaunte syn ye resseyved the omayge of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste" (II, 914). In several Queste passages, the author suggests in as roundabout a way as possible that a certain figure who appears to the Grail Knights is Christ; Malory plainly and clearly tells us that it was Jesus. In the Queste Grail Mass, the man who comes out of the vessel--a man who bears the signs of Christ's Passion--speaks of Christ in the third person; Malory has him say that "I ete the lambe on Estir Day" (II, 1030), clearly identifying the man as Christ himself. It is the Sankgreal, not the Queste, that supplies the famous scene in which Galahad asks his companions to tell his father, Lancelot, to beware of this unstable world. And (my favorite example) whereas the Queste has Gawain, after an exhortation to repent, simply tell the hermit no thank you, Malory has Gawain refuse on the grounds that knights need not do penance since they have a hard enough life as it is--a neatly compact vignette which tells us clearly that Gawain is such a blockhead that he cannot tell the difference between simple suffering and purgative suffering: both hurt, he feels, so where is the difference? But it also suggests that Malory saw the difference and thought it important. These additions and emendations would seem to indicate that Malory was not at all uninterested in the religious aspect of the quest--that in certain cases he emphasized it where the Queste only suggested it. The reductions of the hermits' exegesis can be taken as evidence of Malory's lack of interest in religious matters only if we take his reductions of details in the rest of his books as evidence that he was not very interested

in adventures either. I do not intend to argue that Malory necessarily had a specifically religious intent in writing the Sankgreal, only that there is evidence to suggest that his intentions were not necessarily hostile to religion, either. In other words, all we can say is that we cannot be sure what he "meant" to do with the religious element of the Queste. As far as we can judge them, Malory's intentions with regard to the Queste appear to be much the same as in his other sources: to tell the story they tell, but more directly, with as little extraneous material as possible. In the Queste this apparently meant cutting out large sections that were irrelevant to the plot, and in other places coming to the point more quickly and less ambiguously. Of course this means that at some times he seems to be uninterested in religion and at other times very interested. But both excisions and additions are made for the same purpose: to clarify the story.

The other half of Vinaver's assertion--that Malory set out to rescue Lancelot from the harsh treatment given him in the Queste--also depends on which passages one reads and how one reads them. P. E. Tucker, in 1953,⁷⁵ examined several passages which he felt, showed that Malory was trying to make a distinction between good chivalry and bad chivalry, a distinction which the Queste does not try to make, as it views all chivalry--except "celestial chivalry"--as, if not always downright evil, at least suspect. Thus, in

⁷⁵"The Place of the 'Quest of the Holy Grail' in the 'Morte Darthur,'" in Modern Language Review, 47 (1953), 391-397.

Lancelot's confession to the priest, Malory has the knight say that for Guinevere's sake "wolde I do batayle were hit ryght other wronge," and that "never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wyne worship and to cause me the bettir to be beloved, and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit."⁷⁶ Also, in his explication of Lancelot's adventures with the Black Knights and the White Knights, in which Lancelot joined the Black Knights--who represented evil--"for the increasing of his chivalry," the monk condemns Lancelot for "bobbaunce and pryde of the world."⁷⁷ The point, Tucker argues, is that Malory is making sure that if Lancelot is to be condemned, he is being condemned not for being a knight, but for not being as good a knight as he could have been, for taking the wrong sides in battles and for fighting not for the glory of God but for his own glory. Larry Benson also argues that Malory "removes much of the attack on Lancelot, thus considerably softening the effect of Lancelot's failure, and he adds many passages praising Lancelot, as if to assure his readers that Lancelot's failure in the spiritual quest does not diminish his knightly stature."⁷⁸ Among his examples is the episode at the beginning of the Sankgreal in which a damsel tells Lancelot that he is no longer the best knight in the world. Lancelot's reply is "As towchyng unto that, I know well I

⁷⁶Tucker, 392.

⁷⁷Tucker, 393.

⁷⁸Benson, p. 218.

was never none of the beste" (II, 863); but the damsel insists, "Yes, that were ye, and ar yet, of ony synfull man of the worlde." The Queste, of course, has neither Lancelot's apparently humble acquiescence to the damsel's pronouncement, nor her insistence that he was (and still is) the best knight of the world. Benson also believes that in the priest's later exhortation to Lancelot (on the occasion of his confession) to come no more into the queen's fellowship "as much as ye may forbear" (the Queste insisted that he never come into her presence--lustfully--ever again) is a softening of moral conditions for Lancelot's sake, so that his later failure to keep his vow is not quite such a failure--he is only doing the best he can.⁷⁹ And Charles Whitworth touches upon what has been regarded as one of Malory's most distinctive additions to the story of the Grail Quest--that Lancelot fails because he "is nat stable"--that is, he is not steadfast to his resolution concerning the queen. In Whitworth's view, this theme of instability is intended "to absorb much of the blame for his failure" and attempts "to mitigate the French book's harsh treatment of him. . . ."⁸⁰

But one might draw other conclusions from the same passages. If Malory takes pains to distinguish good chivalry from bad, and tells us that he fails in the Quest "not because he is a good knight

⁷⁹Benson, p. 220.

⁸⁰Charles Whitworth, "The Sacred and the Secular in Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal," in Yearbook of English Studies, 5 (1975), 19.

only in worldly terms but rather because he is not as good a knight as he should be,"⁸¹ then Malory condemns Lancelot more severely than the Queste does: the knight becomes personally responsible for his failure. The passage in which the damsel tells Lancelot that he is no longer the best knight in the world, along with the exchange that follows, might indeed be read, as Benson suggests, to show Lancelot as a humble knight, and to give the damsel a chance to emphasize his chivalric greatness; but my own first impression upon reading it was that Lancelot was politely and conventionally refusing a compliment that he felt he really deserved, and that the damsel, not one for playing games, emphasizes that yes, he was the greatest knight, in order to drive the point home past the defenses of conventional courtesy. If anything, it seems to emphasize Lancelot's sin and loss. The priest's exhortation to Lancelot to keep away from the queen as much as he can may indeed be a softening of moral absolutes for Lancelot's sake--or it may be read as a frank admission that Lancelot simply isn't advanced enough in his spirituality to go on to the more difficult level of complete celibacy--in other words, it is or could be a subtle rebuke. As for Lancelot's unstable nature lessening his guilt, to say that "instability" excuses one from sin is like saying that gluttony excuses one from overeating. And with regard to the repeated assertions that Lancelot is the best knight (of any sinful man) in the world, C. S. Lewis has accurately

⁸¹Hynes-Berry, "Malory's Transformation of Meaning," 245.

remarked that if one wants to show the failure of a system or a way of life, one does not do so by showing the failure of a second- or third-rate specimen, but of the greatest that that system has to offer.⁸² This back-and-forth tennis game of interpretations might go on indefinitely; one might point out that whereas in the Queste, when Lancelot approaches the lions in front of the Grail Castle, he draws his sword though they have made no move to attack him, Malory adumbrates this apparent cowardice by making the lions seem to attack him, thus giving Lancelot a plausible excuse for being on his guard; or one might point out that, in the Vulgate's Queste, Lancelot confesses to the priest that he has had an affair with Guinevere, whereas in Malory, Lancelot only confesses to having loved an anonymous "quene." It may be, as Mary Hynes-Berry has suggested, that he only wishes to save her reputation;⁸³ or it may be that he is afraid to make a full confession, which makes his subsequent repentance a bit more suspicious. The raw material for either interpretation is in the Sankgreal; one could, through a little judicious choice, argue fairly convincingly for either side (though one need not commit some of the excesses of interpretation present in Charles Moorman's contribution to Malory's Originality).⁸⁴ About

⁸²Lewis, "The English Prose Morte," p. 18.

⁸³Hynes-Berry, "Language and Meaning," p. 317.

⁸⁴Charles Moorman, "'The Tale of the Sankgreal': Human Frailty," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), pp. 194-204. Moorman is, on some occasions excessive in his attempt to demonstrate that Malory

all that one can safely say about Malory's treatment of chivalry in the Queste is that he does avoid the wholesale condemnation of it as represented in the Queste, and does make a distinction between good chivalry and bad, with the result that his Sankgreal is less an ethical about-face than the Queste is in comparison to the Vulgate.

It should by now be clear that Malory's Sankgreal is not merely a translation, but more a transformation. The matière is almost identical in both tales, but the meaning is different in each, because in Malory much of the sense resides not in the explications provided by the text but in the mind of the reader. I noted in the first chapter of this study that myth is a sort of "bilingual" story form--that is, it speaks to us with the vocabulary of dream but within the syntax of rationally-conceived story form so that, as C. S. Lewis has put it, it unites the abstract and concrete halves of the mind. The problem with the Queste, with regard to myth, was that it frustrated this sort of mythic "union" through excessive analysis of this dream and vision material. The result is that the "dream" and "analysis" elements of the Queste are kept compartmentalized; the fantastic elements are allowed no valid existence apart from the official interpretations that the French book insists on providing. We are never allowed to forget that we are reading a highly doctrinaire allegory which is more concerned with

had overtly religious designs in the Sankgreal and the cycle as a whole. Some of his points have been adequately contested in Whitworth's "The Sacred and Secular in Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal."

transmitting intellectual abstractions than with arousing more complex archetypal associations. But Malory either reduces or omits the explications of visions in his Sankgreal with the result that, as Lindsay Holichcek wrote, he lets the visions speak for themselves.⁸⁵ Or better, he lets them speak for us. While Malory must explain some of these rather opaque symbolic encounters, he does so as unobtrusively as possible. There are no extended interpretations that trap us, for long periods of time, in the analytical modes of thought. He provides only enough of the interpretative syntax to help us orient ourselves in the Quest's dream world, and then Malory the exegete vanishes into the background, leaving many of our own associations intact around the archetypes.

The ambiguity of Lancelot in the Sankgreal is another salutary transformation. The Queste may condemn him as a knight, but when the Sankgreal condemns him, it is as a man--as an individual and unstable human being. The focus of the Sankgreal thus becomes more personal, more familiar to the reader--more universal. Lancelot's problems as a knight are remote to us; his problems as a struggling human being are all too familiar. Malory had earlier made Lancelot into a more sympathetic character by omitting the story of his improbable and overprotective upbringing, which had made him seem a mere matinee-idol abstraction of the best knight in

⁸⁵Lindsay Eller Holichcek, "Malory's French Sources and English Books: Books VI, VII, and VIII and the Adaptation of Meaning," Diss. University of Wisconsin, 1974, p. 73.

the world. In Malory's Grail Quest, Lancelot makes the final transforming leap to become a universal figure. In the Sankgreal, his knighthood hardly matters save in so far as it predicates that he will have certain sorts of adventures that only a knight would have. The real focus is on the interior essence of the man. He still has knightly adventures and witnesses fantastic events, but he provides for us a port of entry into this dream world by giving us a point of universal reference--himself. He fails for the same reasons that every human being fails to live consistently according to whatever standards he gauges his life by: that is, he is not stable. We cannot help feeling sympathy for Malory's Lancelot--we see his face in the mirror every morning.

It would be going too far to assume I am arguing that the Sankgreal is a type of Rorschach test in which the reader may see anything or any value he likes. The Sankgreal, like the Queste, is a Christian work and is to a certain degree limited by its theology. But the Sankgreal is less limited, more generally Christian than the Queste. Perhaps only a thirteenth-century Cistercian could fully enjoy the Queste, but any reader raised in the Christian west can enter into the Sankgreal almost immediately. Its values are, if not accepted, at least recognized by such a reader, and its fantastic incidents and images, divested of meticulous interpretation, are capable of being seen as more universally archetypal. The structure and nature of the story obviously suggest that its meaning is related to some universal, noumenal Reality of which it is an expression,

but this meaning is rather broadly defined in the Sankgreal, with the result that a wider latitude of interpretation is open to the reader--as can be seen by the critical extremes of Vinaver (almost no religious significance in the Sankgreal) and Moorman (overwhelming religious significance in the Sankgreal) as well as in the various positions between them. The "deep structure" of myth in the Sankgreal is, then, clearly where it belongs--in the mind of the individual reader, where mythic deep structure always is at last.

Though less obvious than in the Sankgreal, the influence of the Vulgate is also evident in Malory's Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere; its influence, however, is less in the general structure of the whole tale than in the matter of three of its episodes. Two, "The Poisoned Apple" and "The Fair Maid of Astolat," have parallels in the Mort Artu; a third, "The Knight of the Cart," is adapted from an episode in the Vulgate Lancelot, which is itself an adaptation of Chr tien's Lancelot. The remaining two tales, "The Great Tournament" and "The Healing of Sir Urry," do not appear to have extant sources and may be Malory's invention though, as will later be noted, P. E. Tucker has pointed out a "seed" incident in the Vulgate which might have inspired Malory's "Urry."⁸⁶ There has been some argument about whether the Vulgate's influence on this book was direct or came through the fourteenth-century English

⁸⁶P. E. Tucker, "A Source of 'The Healing of Sir Urry' in the 'Morte Darthur'" in Modern Language Review, 50 (1955), 490-492, discussed below.

Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur,⁸⁷ a poem which was itself based on the Vulgate, but which made some alterations in the story, among the most notable being its unravelling the interlace of the "Apple," "Astolat," and "Death of Arthur" storylines and presenting them more as consecutive, self-contained tales.⁸⁸ Vinaver tends to discount the influence of the Stanzaic Morte, arguing that the verbal parallels between the poem and Malory are likely accidental, and preferring to regard Malory as the one responsible for disentangling the storylines for his own work. Others, such as R. H. Wilson, E. Talbot Donaldson, and R. M. Lumiansky, see significant influence from the Stanzaic Morte and insist that the poem be regarded as at least as likely a source as the Vulgate Mort Artu.⁸⁹

Launcelot and Guinevere seems at first an odd intermission from the coming disaster. In the Vulgate, as soon as the Queste ends, the narrative proceeds fairly directly to the resumption of the love affair between the Queen and Lancelot, and to Aggravain's suspicions, which prompt him to confront the King. Within the first

⁸⁷The edition used in this study is P. F. Hissiger's Le Morte Arthur: A Critical Edition (Mouton, 1975).

⁸⁸See Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1585-1591 for a discussion of this problem.

⁸⁹The relevant studies are R. H. Wilson's "Malory, the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, and the Mort Artu," in Modern Philology, 37 (1939), 125-138; E. Talbot Donaldson's "Malory and the Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur," in Studies in Philology, 47 (1950), 460-72, and R. M. Lumiansky's "'The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere': Suspense," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964). E. M. Bradstock notes further details that support Malory's probable use of the Stanzaic Morte in "The Source for Book XVIII of Malory's 'Morte Darthur,'" in Notes and Queries, NS 26 (1979), 105-7.

few pages of the Mort Artu, the downfall of the kingdom is already underway, its progress delayed only by the "Poisoned Apple" and "Escalot" (in Malory, "Astolat") tales. In Malory's book, though Lancelot and Guinevere do become lovers again, and though the court and the "opynne-mowthed" villain Aggravain speak of it, no one broaches the subject to Arthur. But this gives the love affair some time in which to regain its footing, and allows Malory to portray, as he has not done before, the nature of Lancelot's and Guinevere's love.

The first episode, "The Poisoned Apple," begins with Malory's notation that after the Quest for the Holy Grail, "sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste" (II, 1045), and that their love was "more hotter" (II, 1045) than it was before. C. S. Lewis reads this as "Launcelot's attempt to break off his intrigue with the Queen, and her ruthless recapture of him."⁹⁰ But this may be Lewis' own misogyny creeping into his reading; he has demonstrated elsewhere that he and Bors share much the same opinion of Guinevere.⁹¹ Malory seems to indicate that the affair was not quite as one-sided

⁹⁰"The 'Morte Darthur,'" in Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 109.

⁹¹In his essay "The English Prose Morte," in Essays on Malory, Lewis writes that Lancelot, at the first of the book, "almost begs the terrible woman to release him, pleading, 'I was but late in the quest' . . ." (p. 19).

as that, but that Lancelot was trying to camouflage the love affair, and it is this that causes the trouble with the Queen. Guinevere complains to Lancelot that "quarels and maters ye have nowadayes for ladyes, madyns and jantillwomen, [more] than ye were ever wonte to have beforehande" (II, 1046)--that is, she is jealous of his attention to other women. Lancelot's defense is logical--he reminds her that they are the subject of gossip and tells her that he hopes to throw their enemies off the scent by showing them that he is delighted to help any woman who seeks his aid--as well as subtly accusatory--"and if that I had nat my prevy thoughtis to returne to you[r]e love agayne as I do, I had sene as grete mysteryes as ever saw my sonne sir Galahad, Percivale, other sir Bors" (II, 1046). Guinevere's response is to burst into tears and send Lancelot away from court--after which she takes a leaf from his book by arranging a dinner for the knights "for to shew outwarde that she had as grete joy in all other knyghtes of the Rounde Table as she had in sir Launcelot" (II, 1048). No such motive is given in either the Mort Artu or the Stanzaic Morte, nothing to suggest that the dinner is anything other than the usual sort at which the Queen and the knights might sit. So it is more ironic than in Malory, Guinevere is, while sitting with the knights, falsely accused of poisoning Sir Mador's brother Sir Patryse with an apple which had been intended by Sir Pyonell for Gawain, and realizes with horror that the one man who can defend her against Sir Mador's demand for justice is the man she has just sent away from court. After a suitable period of

tension and remorse on the Queen's part, as well as some hard words from Sir Bors, Lancelot appears in time to fight for her and to relieve Sir Bors, who had reluctantly agreed to fight for her unless some more worthy knight came to assume the burden. Lancelot defeats Sir Mador and clears Guinevere of the charge. The lady Nynyve turns up to reveal who poisoned the apple, much as the detective unravels the mystery on the last page, and Lancelot and the Queen are reunited for a happy ending which lasts until the next tale, "The Fair Maid of Astolat." As the story begins, Arthur has ridden to a tournament, leaving both Lancelot and Guinevere behind. In the Mort Artu, Arthur arranges to leave the two lovers together in order to test Aggravain's accusation against them; in the Stanzaic Morte, the tournament is Guinevere's idea, ostensibly suggested to help Arthur to regain the glory that she declares he has lost in the eyes of the world.⁹² In Malory, neither of these motives is mentioned; Arthur instead asks Guinevere and Lancelot to accompany him, but both refuse, Guinevere on rather vague grounds, and Lancelot because, he says, he is not yet whole of the wound that he suffered from Sir Mador. Though King Arthur rides away angry, he appears to be upset mainly because he knows that without Lancelot they will be less successful at the tournament; so far, he suspects nothing. The court, however, suspects everything, and Guinevere, sensing this, tells Lancelot that he

⁹²"Syr, your honour bygynnys to falle/ That wount was wide in world to sprede . . ." (ll. 25-25).

should join Arthur in order to quell the rumors. Lancelot, after a parting shot--"'Hit ys of late come syn ye were woxen so wyse!'" (II, 1066)--departs for the tournament and stays secretly with Sir Barnarde of Astolat, for he plans to go in disguise and fight against his brother knights (Arthur, however, sees him, and is delighted that he is there, though he tells no one, preferring to drop cryptic hints to the other knights). While he is at Sir Barnarde's, Lancelot is alarmed to find Barnarde's daughter Elaine rather obviously falling in love with him. Elaine begs Lancelot to wear her red sleeve in battle, and Lancelot consents, partly because he feels he owes her something for all her care, and partly because he thinks the sleeve will be an excellent disguise, since it is widely known that he never wears tokens. At the tournament, Lancelot is wounded by Bors and rides away to a hermit, who takes care of him. Gawain, who has discovered Lancelot's identity, goes in search of him and happens upon Elaine, who imprudently tells Gawain that Lancelot is her love. Gawain, with at least equal imprudence, tells this to the court, and the news of course reaches Guinevere's ears. Guinevere is livid. When Elaine at last discovers that she may not have Lancelot's love, she dies of her love for him and is placed on a barge which floats down the Thames to Camelot, where Arthur and Guinevere find her--and the letter which indirectly tells the queen that Lancelot was never Elaine's lover. The Queen's response is, surprisingly, pity for the dead girl--"Couldn't you at least have shown her a little kindness?" she asks

Lancelot. Lancelot, who is perhaps justifiably fed up by this time, tells the Queen that he had done all he decently could do for her, and adds (one imagines their eyes meeting) "I love nat to be con-strayned by love, for love muste only aryse of the harte selff, and nat by constraynte" (II, 1097). (Lumiansky regards this as Lancelot's "indirect way of warning her that she must cease her unreasonable demands of him. . . .")⁹³ The Queen apologizes for her suspicions; Lancelot replies rather darkly, "Thys ys nat the firste tyme . . . that ye have ben displese with me causeles. But, madame, ever I muste suffir you, but what sorow that I endure ye take no forse" (II, 1098). This is hardly a sentimental reconciliation, a romantic fade-out with the music up, that we expect in a love story. These are the words of (to borrow Mary Stewart's description of Bedwyr) a man in the grip of a fatal addiction.⁹⁴

The tale which follows, "The Great Tournament," is Malory's invention though it was obviously suggested by other tournaments in the Vulgate. One of the episodes--in which a "hunteres" accidentally shoots Lancelot in the "buttok"--has a parallel in the Mort Artu (though there the archer is male) and, P. E. Tucker points out, in the Vulgate Lancelot as well (the archer there is female, but the wounded knight is not Lancelot).⁹⁵ But this is as close to a

⁹³Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere,'" p. 221.

⁹⁴Mary Stewart, The Last Enchantment (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1979), p. 369.

⁹⁵Tucker, "A Source for the Healing of Sir Urry," p. 491.

"source" for the whole tale as one is likely to find. The burden of the "Great Tournament" is, fittingly enough, a great tournament at which Lancelot, Gareth, and Lavane win the day, and is more notable for its details than for the shape of its story. When the tournament is announced, Guinevere demands of Lancelot that he not ride in disguise this time and that he wear her sleeve of gold, "presumably," Lumiansky suggests, "to erase the memory of Lancelot's having worn the Fair Maid's red sleeve" ⁹⁶ Lancelot agrees to her request and rides away with Sir Lavane, the brother of the Fair Maid. While staying at a hermitage, Lancelot, who is sitting beside a fountain because he likes to "se the well sprynge and burble" (III, 1104), is accidentally shot in the buttock by a lady archer. The lady tries to explain that "I wente I had done welle, but my hande swarved" (III, 1105). Lancelot is in no mood for explanations, and the lady wisely departs. To his chagrin, Lancelot discovers the arrow struck him directly where he meets the saddle. While the hermit tends to the wound, Lancelot laments that everything seems to happen to him, "for ever whan I wolde have faynyst worshyp there befallyth me ever som unhappy thyng" (III, 1106). He does, however, insist that only God Himself will keep him from the tournament. Later, Lancelot and Lavane ride to the tournament, dressed as Saracens, and watch the action from the sidelines before riding in "as hit had bene thunder" (III, 1109), and cheerfully

⁹⁶Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere,'" p. 223.

wreaking havoc. Bors has recognized Lancelot and warns his kinsmen and Gareth to keep away from him; Arthur has precisely the opposite plan and rides against Lancelot and Lavane with nine knights. Gareth, borrowing a Welsh knight's armor, goes to Lancelot's aid and distinguishes himself admirably on the field. Arthur is "wrothe out of mesure" for he sees that he and his knights are being defeated. Despite the disguise, Gawain identifies Lancelot by his style of jousting, and when Arthur asks Sir Gawain for advice, the knight replies that his advice is to quit now. Arthur sees the wisdom of this and decides to retire from the field. The King later blames Gareth for not fighting on his brother Gawain's side, but Gareth replies that Lancelot made him a knight and that he was greatly outnumbered and required his help. Arthur is impressed with the answer and declares that he will love Gareth all the better for it, for a knight's duty is always to help those who are in need, and he concludes with a paraphrase of the Golden Rule: "And allwayes a good man woll do ever to another man as he wolde be done to hymselff" (III, 1114). The tournament then breaks up into feasts, revels, games, and play, "And he that was curteyse, trew, and faythefull to hys frynde was that tyme cherysshed" (III, 1114).

There are two elements of "The Great Tournament" that are clearly related to the larger story of Arthur. One of these is Guinevere's insistence that Lancelot wear her token in battle. Nothing comes of this in the rest of the tale, but there is something at once imperious and pathetic in this demand that Lancelot do for her what he did for the Fair Maid, as if their love has come to such

a pass that it demands such material reassurances in order to survive. The other element is the valor of Sir Gareth, which is recognized and prized by Arthur. This deepens the pathos in the Death of Arthur where Lancelot finally kills the young knight who has aided him in the tournament. But most of the rest of the tale exists for no other purpose than enjoyment. Nothing ever comes of Lancelot's being shot in the rear, but it is a funny episode, compounded as it is with the huntress' lame explanation that her hand shook and Lancelot's complaint that nothing ever goes right for him. And there is for the reader some vicarious enjoyment of Lancelot's and Gareth's victories in battle. The tale ends with an almost riotous happiness; all, for the moment, is well.

"The Tale of the Knight of the Cart," which follows, could almost be taken as proof of Malory's anti-mythic tendencies, for any aspects of the supernatural which existed in its originals are gone. Vinaver assumes that Malory used not the Vulgate Lancelot, but another source derived from it and not extant, but it is quite as likely that Malory adapted the Vulgate tale himself.⁹⁷ This tale has as its distant ancestor Chrétien's poem in which Lancelot and the Queen are first introduced as lovers. In Chrétien, the land to which Guinevere has been abducted is clearly the land of death, or situated conveniently near to it, and Lancelot's rescue of her is a romantic variation on the harrowing of hell. A comparative mythologist could easily find analogues to Chrétien's story in the myths

⁹⁷ Vinaver, "'Commentary,'" in Works, III, 1592.

of Persephone, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Herakles' rescue of Alcestis, as well as in Christian tradition. But the latent mythic shape in the poem is shrouded by the interlace of adventures involving both Lancelot and Gawain before Lancelot ever reaches Melleagaunce's stronghold, as well as the multiplication of episodes afterwards involving Lancelot's being mistakenly captured and proclaimed dead, the tryst in Guinevere's bedroom, and the imprisonment of Lancelot. The Vulgate's version of this story loses its mythic potential at least partly because it has been, as Lindsay Holichuk explains, "integrated neatly into the Lancelot; those adventures left uncompleted in Chrétien are explained and placed within the framework of the whole prose Lancelot."⁹⁸ The "Charrette" tale in the Vulgate, from the appearance of Melleagaunce in Arthur's court to his death in battle with Lancelot, occupies some sixty-seven pages. By comparison, Malory's version is twenty-two pages long. It differs from the Vulgate chiefly by altering the opening of the tale and eliminating nearly all of Lancelot's adventures before he arrives at Melleagaunce's castle. Malory's version of the Cart tale is, as a story, less mythic than either Chrétien or the Vulgate; and yet, his version, in connection with the other tales in Launcelot and Guinevere, helps us to see the Arthurian story as myth through its transformation of the love theme.

Malory's tale opens with his famous passage on the month of May and the nature of true love, and includes the often-commented-

⁹⁸Holichuk, p. 151.

upon evaluation of Guinevere, "that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (III, 1120). The "trew lover" and her retinue of Queen's Knights, dressed in green, have ridden out Maying when they are surprised by Melleagaunce, who has long loved the Queen and has been waiting for this opportunity--that is, when Lancelot was absent--to abduct her. Though outnumbered, the knights fight valiantly until the Queen, fearing they will be killed, consents to go with Melleagaunce if he will also take the knights prisoner rather than kill them. Melleagaunce agrees to the conditions. The Queen, however, manages to send a "child" to Arthur's court to fetch Lancelot who, when he hears of the Queen's plight, rushes immediately to her rescue. Melleagaunce's men are waiting for him and shoot his horse with arrows so that Lancelot must continue on foot in his armor, leading a horse bristling with shafts. After a while, the weight of the armor and the encumbrance of his weapons become annoying, and he is happy to see a "charyot" (cart) on an errand of wood-fetching. Lancelot calls to the men driving the cart and asks for a lift. When the first carter refuses, telling him that the wood is for Melleagaunce and that Lancelot will not be allowed to see him, Lancelot strikes him dead with one blow. The other carter then decides to convey Lancelot to the castle. An hour and a half later, one of Guinevere's ladies-in-waiting spies Lancelot in the cart and remarks idly that she supposes he is some knight going to be hanged. When Guinevere recognizes the knight, she rebukes the lady for comparing him to a condemned knight. Melleagaunce,

meanwhile, hears that Lancelot has come, and he goes grovelling to the Queen, offering to let her go if she will keep Lancelot away from him. The Queen, who has no fear of Melleagaunce, seems amused by the situation, but agrees to protect him. And so when Lancelot comes before the castle and dramatically challenges the traitor knight to come forth, Guinevere (who no doubt is enjoying herself) appears saying, "Sir Launcelot, why be ye so amoved?" (III, 1128). Lancelot is taken aback, and replies that he thought that she was the one in trouble. Guinevere convinces him that all is well and that Melleagaunce is sorry for his for his deed. Lancelot replies that if she is happy, he is happy, but "and I had wyste that ye wolde have bene so lyghtly accorded with hym I wolde nat a made such haste unto you" (II, 1129). This banter continues a short while before Lancelot and the Queen agree to meet in her room that evening. When Lancelot comes to her window, he finds that iron bars are set in it, and he breaks them with his bare hands. But he also cuts his hand on one of the bars, so that as he lies with the Queen, he bloodies the sheets and pillows. The next morning, when Melleagaunce comes to the Queen's chamber (after Lancelot has left), he sees the bloodied bedclothes and, perceiving a chance to cover his own treason, immediately accuses Guinevere of sleeping with one of the wounded knights lying in her chamber. Lancelot appears and says, choosing his words carefully, "that thys nyght there lay none of thes ten knyghtes wounded with my lady, quene Gwenyver, and that woll I prove with myne hondys that ye say untrewly in that. Now,

what sey ye?" (III, 1133). Melleagaunce, given his previous behavior, seems suddenly brave and agrees to fight Lancelot. But Melleagaunce has no intention of fighting the knight, as becomes evident when the unsuspecting Lancelot falls through a trap door prepared by Melleagaunce and is held prisoner in a cave. When the day comes for the fight, Lancelot is nowhere to be seen, and a fire is being kindled for the burning of Guinevere. Sir Lavane offers to fight in Lancelot's place, and Arthur accepts the offer, unencouragingly telling him to do his best. But--as always happens--Lancelot arrives at the last possible moment, having been freed from his prison in return for a kiss bestowed upon the girl who was caring for him. The fight with Melleagaunce is brief, and Lancelot soon has him on the ground. Lancelot looks to the Queen, to see what her will is regarding Melleagaunce; "And anone the quene wagged hir hede uppon sir Launcelot, as ho seyth 'sle him'" (III, 1139). Lancelot tells Melleagaunce that he will fight him with one hand tied behind his back, and with his head and left side unprotected as well. Melleagaunce is delighted with the terms, but they do him no good, for a moment later his head is lying in two pieces on the ground. Malory's final comment in this episode is that "the kynge and the quene made more of sir Launcelot, and more was he cheryssed than ever he was aforehande" (III, 1140).

Malory's "Cart" take is a more exciting and straightforward adventure tale than its counterpart in the Vulgate. Malory concentrates on the essentials of the action, cutting out Lancelot's

adventures with the perilous bed, the sword bridge, his ecstasy over the sight of Guinevere's comb, and the like; instead, Lancelot proceeds directly from his hearing of the Queen's capture to Melleagaunce's castle. Nor is the reader exposed to the sort of courtly self-denigration found in Chrétien and the Vulgate. The Queen and her lover are, in Malory's tale, less the conventional, ritualized lovers than they are two live human beings; one cannot imagine Chrétien's love-struck hero complaining to Guinevere that he would not have hurried if he had known she would be so easily accorded with her abductor. Malory's Lancelot has no use for the conventions of courtly love as represented by Chrétien or the Vulgate; he is instead a man who has suffered some danger and the death of his horse in a valiant effort to rescue a lady who, it turns out, needs no rescuing, and he is understandably put out. As for Guinevere, if in the previous episodes she has been imperious and unstable, in the "Cart" she has her finest moments. When first ambushed by Melleagaunce, she does not shriek or swoon, but turns on him, scolding him as if he were a little boy. She is clear-headed enough to arrange for Lancelot to come and find her, and when Lancelot does finally appear, and Melleagaunce comes whimpering to her, she says (her arms probably crossed, her foot tapping impatiently), "What ayles you now?" (III, 1128). One almost has the impression that Guinevere has allowed herself to be captured for the fun of it, and is not for a moment afraid of Melleagaunce. Here more than in any other of Malory's tales, Guinevere is a grown woman, and a woman

worthy of being queen. One understands why Lancelot loves her.

In fact, the love affair in "The Knight of the Cart" is so satisfying and enjoyable a tale that the reader is lulled into forgetting that at its heart lies deceit. Lancelot and Guinevere escape discovery through a mere technicality, Lancelot's assertion that none of the injured knights in her room slept with her. This is true, but it is, like Melleagaunce's charge against the queen, an attempt to cover up a wrong, and therefore is morally, if not legally, a lie. And there is also that disturbing moment, in Lancelot's fight with Melleagaunce, when the Queen signs Lancelot to kill him. Her motives are not difficult to guess: Melleagaunce has come too near the truth to be allowed to live. It is as if the evil in the adultery will not be contained; in the first two episodes, it causes rifts between the lovers; in the "Cart," when they are again of one mind, it breaks out in the form of deceit and the moral equivalent of murder. Even Malory's final comment on the tale is oddly subdued, as if he feels that there is not much cause for rejoicing.

The "Cart" is the last episode in Launcelot and Guinevere that overtly treats of the love affair between the knight and the Queen, so it is appropriate that at this point we take note of what Malory has done to this theme, which is an intimate part of the whole myth of Arthur. In my discussion of Chrétien in Chapter II, I noted that the "courtly love" element in the poem is a major retardant to our accepting the Lancelot-Guinevere affair as myth, for the convention of courtly love as Chrétien portrayed it is too

extravagant to be taken seriously. It appears to require a degree of self-humiliation that strikes the reader as unhealthy or at least unrealistic, a code too artificial to be sustained in love except as it appears in the equally artificial world of story or in the less pleasant world of psychopathology. This makes Chrétien's Lancelot and Guinevere an interesting case study, but it is difficult for us to regard them as typical or archetypal lovers. This problem is less severe in the Vulgate Cycle, if only because there the love theme is interwoven with other events and concerns so that we get it in less concentrated a form than in Chrétien. But it is still there.

In Malory, however, the "courtly" element in the love between Lancelot and Guinevere has all but vanished altogether, save as it is represented by the bare motif of a knight in love with his lady. The love affair in Malory apparently operates according to no codes except the universally recognized codes of the heart. It is the sort of love that a reader may instinctively recognize as being real, a love strong and deliberate enough to permit quarrels and occasional rifts without driving one of the lovers into madness. Malory has drawn the love motif back into Langer's sphere of "common concerns." Because the love is no longer merely courtly, it is no longer the dated artifact of a particular age. Lancelot and Guinevere are no longer even as much a knight and a Queen as they are, more universally, a man and woman in love. They still maintain their archetypal roles as Warrior and Queen, but their psychology of love is no longer so artificial as to be too alien to our sympathies.

This transformation would by itself be enough for Malory to have accomplished in his treatment of the Lancelot-Guinevere love motif, in that it further universalized the figures of the knight and the Queen, making them more capable of initiating the mythopathic response in the reader. But Launcelot and Guinevere contains one final element that adds an inexplicable yet important quality to the myth, an element found in the final episode, "The Healing of Sir Urry."

"Urry" has in fact been seen by some as important to our understanding of the "theme" present in Launcelot and Guinevere. "Sir Urry" is usually regarded as Malory's invention, though P. E. Tucker has identified an episode in the Vulgate Lancelot (in which a wounded knight is told that he may be healed only by the best knight in the world, this being, of course, Lancelot) which may have inspired Malory to write the tale.⁹⁹ The story itself is simple. Urry, a knight of Hungary, is injured in a tournament in Spain, where he receives seven wounds. His mother, "a grete sorseras" (III, 1145), enchants her son to preserve his life, with the proviso that he may not be completely healed except by the best knight in the world. The mother and son travel for seven years before coming to Arthur's court, where they announce their plight. Arthur and one hundred and ten of his knights (forty, Malory tells us, are away at the moment) attempt to heal Sir Urry without success. At

⁹⁹Tucker, "'A Source for The Healing of Sir Urry.'"

last Lancelot appears, and the king charges him, very much against the knight's will, to attempt to heal Urry, assuring him that no one will accuse him of presumption. Lancelot consents and kneels beside the wounded knight,

And than he hylde up hys hondys and loked unto the este, saynge secretely unto hymselff, "Now, Blyssed Fadir and Son and Holy Goste, I beseche The of Thy mercy that my symple worshyp and honesté be saved, and Thou Blyssed Trynyté, Thou mayste yeff me power to hele thys syke knyght by the grete vertu and grace of The, but, Good Lorde, never of myselff" (III, 1152).

And Sir Urry is healed; "And ever sir Launcelote wepte, as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn!" (III, 1152). Arthur rejoices with his court, and proclaims a tournament for the healed Sir Urry, making him and Lavane knights of the Round Table. As happily as this tale ends, Malory cannot let it pass without telling us that Aggravain continually looked for an opportunity to shame Lancelot and Guinevere.

"Sir Urry" requires some explanation if for no other reason than that Lancelot, who failed in the Grail Quest, is still allowed to work a miracle; and, coming as it does at the end of a series of tales whose binding theme has been the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, it appears to be in some way significant to the reader's understanding of Lancelot's sin and the whole moral outlook of the cycle. Larry Benson thus sees Launcelot and Guinevere as "a kind of anti-Grail, a proof that just as the Grail reverses the code of chivalry so that the first shall be last, so the code of the Grail can be reversed, with the knight who was last becoming the first

by means of worldly love and prowess."¹⁰⁰ He sees the tale as a "proof-of-knighthood" story (a pattern he detects throughout most of the cycle) designed to allow Lancelot to demonstrate his worth again after his failure in the Grail Quest;¹⁰¹ the healing of Sir Urry is thus the final proof of Lancelot's stature. And when Lancelot weeps, Benson says, it is because he realizes that this, his greatest adventure, is also his last.¹⁰² Lumiansky also regards the healing of Urry as proof of Lancelot's being the greatest knight in the world, but points out that this is not really inconsistent with Malory's understanding of the term, since the adulterous Lancelot has once before miraculously rescued a damsel from a tub of boiling water.¹⁰³ Lumiansky understands the basic function of Launcelot and Guinevere to be to provide suspense, and his reading of the tale takes some liberties with the text. According to Lumiansky's understanding of the story, Arthur and the court already know all about the adultery since (Lumiansky explains) Lancelot had already told what had happened to him on the Quest--including, presumably, the reasons he failed in it--and this account was recorded in the "almeryes" for all to see. Consequently, we are to suppose that Arthur knew of the sin and had forgiven it, and placed "his hope

¹⁰⁰Benson, p. 231.

¹⁰¹Benson, p. 225.

¹⁰²Benson, p. 229.

¹⁰³Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Launcelot and Guenevere,'" p. 25.

for the future of his fellowship in Lancelot's promise to refrain from further adulterous relationship with the Queen."¹⁰⁴ Thus Launcelot and Guinevere is about whether or not Lancelot will be able to keep his promise to avoid the sin that can crack the Table. When Lancelot weeps, therefore, it is with relief that his unworthiness has not been betrayed to what Lumiansky regards as a very suspicious Arthur.¹⁰⁵ The problem with this interpretation, as Vinaver notes, is simply that the text will not bear such a construction.¹⁰⁶ There is, neither in the Sankgreal nor in Launcelot and Guinevere, any mention of the King's knowledge or forgiveness of the adultery, and any supposition to the contrary is based on a monumental reading between the lines. Besides, the question of "suspense" in the tale is itself not particularly appropriate. No one reading the story in the fifteenth century--or even in these post-Camelot days--would have wondered whether the two lovers would be reunited and the kingdom fall. One does not read the story of Arthur to find out what will happen next but to see it happen again and again. A story based only on suspense is a story that can be read only once. Benson may be closer to being right in his assumption that Malory wished to "re-ennoble" Lancelot following his failure in the Quest. But neither he nor Lumiansky is especially convincing.

¹⁰⁴Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Launcelot and Guenevere,'" p. 214.

¹⁰⁵Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Launcelot and Guenevere,'" p. 231.

¹⁰⁶Vinaver, "Commentary," in Works, 1591-2, n. 2.

It is in fact very likely that critics have tried too hard to fit the healing of Urry and the weeping Lancelot into a coherent thematic scheme presumably present in Malory's mind when he wrote the episode. "Urry" may after all be in Launcelot and Guinevere for no other reason than that it made a nicely climactic ending to the whole book. It is certainly a more triumphant and joyous ending than the muted celebration that concludes the "Cart." Nor need one make a mystery of the reason that Lancelot is able to heal Sir Urry. Neither Malory nor, for that matter, the Bible has ever said that only sinless men may work miracles. One should remember the miraculous feats of Samson (decidedly not a sinless man) or the reminder in the Epistle of James that "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months."¹⁰⁷ Lancelot was told only that his sins prevented him from achieving the specific adventure of the Grail, not that the grace of God was permanently off-limits to him. Finally, Lancelot's weeping need not be explained too cleverly--who, after all, would not weep at such a moment? Why should we search for complex "thematic" intentions in Malory's mind when the simpler explanations of narrative need or human psychology will serve?

What matters more is that the effect of the "Urry" in the context of Launcelot and Guinevere is intuitively, dramatically, and

¹⁰⁷James 5:17.

mythically right, giving the book the sort of shape and quality that makes for myth. The juxtaposition of the adultery story with a miracle worked by one of the adulterers is powerful, suggesting some sort of relationship between the two motifs that demands explanation, but which defies our attempts to explain it as seems obvious from the various attempts--and failures--by critics to explain it satisfactorily. It is also significant that Lancelot--the warrior, the man whose business is violence and death--performs as his greatest act a deed which is exactly the opposite of his job description: he heals a man. It is the utter reversal of our normal expectations--the figure of the sinful warrior who heals--that gives the story a power and suggestiveness that reminds the reader he is in a world where many of his presuppositions must be discarded.

One final effect of the "Urry" tale is the "deepening" of the tragic--or at least lamentable--nature of Lancelot's love for Guinevere. Just as a cardboard villain can be made more tragic by introducing a sympathetic trait into his character, or a comedy made more poignant by the introduction of a note of sorrow, so the sin of the adultery is heightened by its juxtaposition with a miracle. If the reader has ever, at the moment of being praised for some virtue, found that he remembered more clearly and painfully some past shame, he may understand the effect of the healing of Sir Urry in Launcelot and Guinevere. If we find it difficult to explain rationally the effect of the healing motif on the whole tale, it may be because the motif operates on us at a pre-logical level, on

the level of fundamental emotion. One does not need to advance or accept a critical theory in order to be affected by the tale. One only has to be human, just as Lancelot, after his long journey from his origin in Chrétien, has finally become human in Malory. The tension in his mind between his love for Guinevere and his conscience, apparent since the Tale of Launcelot, is brought to a climax at the end of Launcelot and Guinevere. And it is at this point, when the adultery is, by a sudden miracle, once again set in the clear light of the Divine, when we are ourselves powerfully and mysteriously moved by the story, that Malory begins to tell of the consequences of the adultery in The Death of Arthur.

I had mentioned earlier that there was still some argument over whether Malory had used the Stanzaic Morte Arthur in his Launcelot and Guinevere; but with the Death there is no doubt that the Morte Arthur was an important source along with the "Frennshe Book," in some cases replacing it altogether. There are other passages in the Death which have no parallels in either the Mort or the Morte. J. D. Bruce found it more convenient to postulate a "French modification of the Mort Artu" which would contain both the points of convergence and divergence between Malory and his sources, rather than to assume that Malory possessed the creativity necessary to invent these episodes.¹⁰⁸ Vinaver confesses he was once of this school, but has recanted, partly because of the "air of unreality

¹⁰⁸ Anglia, 23, 71, as cited by Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1615.

about the assumption of a French version containing just such details as are necessary to account for Malory's."¹⁰⁹ It is reasonable to assume that Malory simply invented the episodes which have no parallels in his sources. But Malory did more than invent episodes or speeches to patch together material from his sources. His use of the French Mort and Stanzaic Morte was much more free and loose than one would expect after having compared the Queste and the Sankgreal, so much so that it is still a matter of some argument as to which parts of the Death are derived from which source. In some cases, of course, the question is meaningless, since the Stanzaic Morte is, after all, derived from the French Mort, and there would naturally be correspondences between the two and Malory; but Wilfrid Guerin is probably very nearly correct in his view that "Malory used Le Morte Arthur as primary source for the 'Tale of the Death of Arthur,' and the French Mort Artu as a secondary source."¹¹⁰ A comparison of the three works will indeed reveal that most of the story of Mordred's betrayal, Guinevere's escape, the final battle between Arthur and Mordred, and Arthur's death are closer to the Stanzaic Morte than to the French Mort, sometimes even in such details as choice of words. And even in those Malorian passages which appear to be indebted to either source--such as the discovery of

¹⁰⁹Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1619.

¹¹⁰Wilfrid L. Guerin, "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 240.

Lancelot and Guinevere, which at first glance might seem to have been drawn from either the Mort or the Morte--there are details which point more strongly toward the Stanzaic Morte (e.g., in the Mort, Aggravain escapes death after Lancelot fights off the ambush party only to die later at Lancelot's hands when Lancelot comes to rescue Guinevere; in the Stanzaic Morte, Aggravain is killed on the evening he discovers the lovers together, as he is in Malory). But even within the long sections adapted from the Stanzaic Morte, Malory occasionally weaves a passage derived from or suggested by the French Mort, in order to have the best of both versions; thus, for example, in the Stanzaic Morte, Arthur finds Gawain dead in a boat after the first battle with Mordred's forces; in the Mort, Gawain dies in Dover Castle after the king's forces have landed, and there is a sorrowful farewell scene in which Gawain repents of his vengeance against Lancelot; Malory keeps the motif of Arthur's finding Gawain in a boat after the first battle with Mordred, but instead of preserving the rather cold and anticlimatic discovery of the dead Gawain, Malory interweaves part of the death scene from the Mort and invents the letter which Gawain writes to Lancelot. This might, in fact, be taken as a precis of Malory's whole principle of composition in the Death--an interweaving of motifs from both sources along with his own invention to produce a new version of the death of Arthur.

The general story of the Death of Arthur is similar to the Mort Artu in many ways. Malory begins the tale by showing us two "unhappy knyghtis," Aggravain and Mordred, complaining to their

brothers Gareth, Gaheris and Gawain, about the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere; in fact, Malory tells us, they are inspired by a "prevy hate" (III, 1161) towards the lovers more than by any sense of honor. When they announce their intentions to tell King Arthur about the affair, Gawain warns them sternly about the consequences of their actions. Finding that they pay him no heed, he leaves, followed soon by Gaheris and Gareth. Arthur happens upon the scene, and Aggravain and Mordred, under pretense of loyalty, eagerly disclose the affair to him. It is no news to Arthur, who has "had a demyng of hit" (III, 1163) for some time, but who has refused to take action against Lancelot because of the love he bears him. But now that the matter has been breached, he has little choice but to agree to Aggravain's plan: the King will ride out hunting overnight, to give the lovers a chance to be together so that Aggravain and Mordred may catch them. All goes according to plan: after Arthur leaves, Guinevere sends for Lancelot who, despite a warning from Bors, goes to her. Aggravain and Mordred, along with a band of knights, come to the queen's chamber and demand that the lovers surrender themselves. Lancelot fights his way to freedom, killing Aggravain in the process; Mordred, however, escapes. Guinevere is captured and sentenced to be burned, and Arthur, rightly suspecting that Lancelot will try to rescue her, stations a guard which includes an unwilling and unarmed Gareth. As expected, Lancelot does ride to Guinevere's rescue, "And in so thys russhynge and hurlynge, as sir Launcelot thrange here and there, hit mysfortuned hym to sle sir

Gaherys and sir Gareth, the noble knyght, for they were unarmed and unwares" (III, 1177). Lancelot takes Guinevere away to Joyous Gard. Gawain discovers the deaths of his brothers and demands vengeance against Lancelot. When the king has gathered his troops, they lay siege to Joyous Gard, and engage battle with a very unwilling Lancelot, who protests his and the Queen's innocence and who, even in battle, shows that he is unwilling to harm King Arthur. When the Pope hears of the battle and issues a bull demanding that Guinevere be returned to the King, Arthur is willing to receive her and to make amends with Lancelot, but Gawain refuses, claiming his right of blood-vengeance against Lancelot and forcing Arthur, against his will, to follow Lancelot into France to continue the war. Arthur appoints Mordred to take care of Logres and Guinevere in his absence, and then departs for Benwick. The King's forces lay siege to Lancelot's castle, taunting Lancelot for his supposed cowardice until he agrees to single combat with Gawain. In both of the fights that follow, Lancelot strikes Gawain such a blow on the head that Gawain cannot continue and must lie abed, gravely ill, for weeks afterwards. Meanwhile, in England, Mordred's treachery has become apparent: he has forged a letter which tells of Arthur's death, and has himself made king of England. He then tells Guinevere that he intends to make her his wife. Guinevere, horrified, is nevertheless able to convince Mordred that she agrees to his proposal, but later escapes to London and secures herself in its Tower. Mordred hears of this and gathers his men about the tower. Both the former lovers are now under siege.

When the news comes to Arthur of Mordred's perfidy, he immediately takes his men and departs for England. Upon landing, they engage Mordred's troops in a battle that routs the traitor's forces. Shortly after, Gawain, wounded yet a third time in the head, dies after he has written a letter to Lancelot, begging his forgiveness. Arthur and Mordred arrange for a final confrontation on the plains of Salisbury on the Monday following Trinity Sunday; but on the eve of the battle, Arthur has two dreams that dissuade him from going through with it. In the first, he dreams that he is sitting in a chair set atop a wheel that suddenly turns him "upsodown" into a pit of "serpentis and wormes and wylde bestis fowle and orryble" (III, 1233). In the second dream, Sir Gawain, attended by all the ladies he has aided during his earthly career, warns Arthur against proceeding with the battle, telling him that if he can sign a treaty with Mordred, Lancelot will arrive within a month to fight for Arthur and destroy Mordred and his forces. When Arthur wakes, he immediately makes arrangements for the month's treaty. Both sides meet for a parlay, each side warning its men against treachery and ordering them to fight at the first sign of a drawn sword. All goes well until an adder stings a knight on the foot and the knight draws his sword to kill it. When both sides see the glint of the sword, they rush to battle, with terrible slaughter on both sides. Arthur sees Mordred leaning on his sword among the dead and rushes upon him, killing him--but not before he can deal Arthur a mortal wound. As the King lies dying, he commands Bedivere to cast the

sword Excalibur into a lake. After two failures to obey him, Bedivere finally throws the sword into the lake. An arm rises to catch the sword and draws it beneath the water. When Bedivere returns to Arthur, he finds a barge with several queens, among them Morgan, the King's sister. The barge is to carry Arthur "into the vale of Avlylon to hele me of my grevous wounde" (III, 1240). Arthur departs. The next day, Bedivere finds what is believed to be Arthur's tomb at a chapel, and he begs the hermit to allow him to stay there with him. When Lancelot finally comes to England and hears of all that has happened, he seeks out Guinevere, who has taken herself to a nunnery, and who refuses to go with him to France. Lancelot, out of sorrow for his sins and love for her, becomes a monk and at last dies, as was prophesied in the Sankgreal, a right holy man.

A reader familiar with the story of Arthur's death as told in either of the two sources might wonder, after reading this summary, where Malory's changes lie, since the stories told in all three are quite similar. A student of the Mort Artu would immediately notice a few differing details--such as the letter of Gawain, or the fact that Lancelot and Guinevere meet again before the latter's death (in the Mort Artu, Lancelot does not hear that Guinevere has died until three days after her death), or that Arthur agrees to make a month's truce with Mordred (in the Mort he is so set on vengeance that he ignores Gawain's warning) or the motif of the adder (a detail which, like Arthur's treaty, comes from the Stanzaic Morte). But most of these are comparatively minor changes. In fact, Malory does

not significantly alter the events in his sources. Rather he changes the ways in which we view or interpret the events.

One of the changes in the story of Arthur's death must be seen in the light of the previous book, Launcelot and Guinevere. As has been noted, the Mort Artu interwove two tales, the "Apple" and "Escalot," with its "Death" theme, and the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, in adapting the Mort Artu, "disentangled" these three storylines, presenting them consecutively as self-contained stories. Malory, whether or not he was inspired by the stanzaic Morte, took this policy of narrative separation farther by detaching the "Apple-Astolat" themes from the Death altogether and adding three other episodes so as to create a separate Launcelot and Guinevere. The result of this change was not to weaken the relationship of the adultery theme to the "Death" theme, but actually to strengthen it. In the Vulgate, the interweaving of the three storylines means that we drift rather than progress into the story of Arthur's downfall, alternating between "Apple" and "Escalot" with occasional reference to Arthur's suspicions about the lovers. But in Malory, the Launcelot and Guinevere emphasizes the lovers' adultery so that by the time we begin the Death, we are much more aware of the affair as a real and dangerous fact in the Arthurian world. Because the affair is treated extensively and placed directly before the story of the downfall of Arthur, we see both the themes more clearly and distinctly, and will regard them as causally related, because they are more obviously successive. The story of Arthur has thus, in its final tales, become more "symphonic,"

its last two movements clearly developing themes important to the myth.

This is Malory's only major structural change in dealing with his source. Most of the rest of his alterations are concerned not with structure but with character. Malory does not really create any new scenes; rather, as Vinaver remarks, he transforms and elaborates an occasional narrative "hint" in his sources "by means of soliloquys, dialogues, or entire scenes suggested by it."¹¹¹ Malory may not drastically change what his characters do; rather, his chief contribution falls, in Vinaver's words, in the area of "reflection and analysis; it consists not in the building up of incident, but in the discovery and elaboration of motive"¹¹² But this is of course as important an effect as changing the characters' deeds-- is, in fact, almost exactly the same thing, for no two deeds are the same if each is done for a different reason, no matter how much they resemble each other externally. It is the motive for the deed that makes tragedy tragic; and it is tragedy that Malory approaches in his handling of The Death of Arthur.

We have seen that in his earlier books, Malory has shown us a divided Lancelot, a lover uneasy in his love, the knight who fails because he is not stable. Malory continues this development of Lancelot's character in the Death by allowing him to talk more at

¹¹¹ Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1619.

¹¹² Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1618.

length than in any previous book--explaining himself, doubting himself, saying his farewells. The cumulative effect is that of a more reflective and uncertain Lancelot than has appeared before in Malory's cycle--certainly less the single-minded heroic lover he appears to be in the Mort Artu.

The best example of Lancelot's new sense of self-doubt occurs in the scene in which he discusses with Bors his next course of action. He wants to rescue Guinevere, but he is not sure whether this is the right thing to do. He is afraid he may accidentally kill some of his friends in the attack (a well-founded fear, as it turns out), and he is not sure how he will keep Guinevere. Bors points out that Tristram had kept Isode in Joyous Gard, and that Lancelot might do the same with Guinevere, at least until the furor has died down and she may be returned safely to the king. But the very example of Tristram disturbs Lancelot, "'for,'" as he says, "'by sir Trystram I may have a warnynge'" (III, 1173): When Tristram returned Isode to Mark after having kept her in Joyous Gard, King Mark treacherously murdered him, and Lancelot is clearly afraid that the same may happen to him. It is a "warnynge" perhaps recalled some years too late, but it chills Lancelot. But Bors points out that the analogy is false, and so Lancelot and Bors plot, "for bettir othir for wars" (III, 1173), to try to rescue Guinevere if she is to be burned.

Malory also takes care to reduce Lancelot's culpability in the fall of the kingdom, by showing his attempts to forestall the

inevitable disaster. Some of these are adapted from his lengthy defenses at the sieges of Joyous Gard and Banoic in the Mort Artu. One such attempt, however, occurs earlier in Malory and in neither of his sources. While Aggravain and Mordred are hammering at the door of Guinevere's chamber, Lancelot cries out to them, "'Sires, leve youre noyse,'" and then adds,

"For I promyse you be my knyghthode, and ye woll departe and make no more noyse, I shall as to-morne appyere afore you all and before the kynge, and than lat hit be sene which of you all, othir ellis ye all, that woll deprave me of treson. And there shall I answeare you, as a knyght shulde, that hydir I cam to the quene for no maner of male engyne, and that woll I preve and make hit good uppon you wyth ny hondys" (III, 1168).

This is, of course, at least partly an attempt to cow them and to see to it that he has a chance to fight them fairly and win. But it is also an attempt to avoid the trouble that he has, in Lancelot and Guenevere, foreseen as a possible outcome of the affair (II, 1046). If Aggravain and company agree to his terms, the matter can be resolved in single combat, and the kingdom may survive. But the knights will not listen to him, nor will Lancelot yield himself to them, since he suspects that they will kill him. The speech therefore places the blame for what follows squarely on the shoulders of Aggravain and Mordred and lessens the burden on Lancelot.

This is also the purpose of the various speeches which Lancelot makes during the two sieges in the book: Lancelot is nobly offering ways out of the war, ways which Arthur would accept if Gawain were not there to urge him on. One such speech, derived from the Mort Artu, is Lancelot's offer to make a penitential journey

from Sandwich to Carlyle, in his shirt and barefoot, and every ten miles to found a religious house, praying all the while for the souls of Gareth and Gaheris. It is certainly a humiliating offer and ought to satisfy even Gawain, but it does not. And once again, the blame is lifted from Lancelot and placed onto someone else--this time, Sir Gawain. The result of all these speeches is to enable us to forget, for a little while at least, that Lancelot is lying when he repeatedly insists upon his and the Queen's innocence. But the speeches also help us to pity Lancelot more: he is, in Malory, a basically good man trying to avert the disaster he has caused, but who is trapped in the web of events.

The final major group of added speeches are those that Lancelot makes to Guinevere. Lancelot delivers three leave-taking speeches to the queen, all three designed to show us Lancelot as the faithful lover to his lady. In Guinevere's chamber, Lancelot promises her that she will be rescued by Bors should he fail to escape all the armed knights outside the door, and he asks her to pray for his soul if he should be slain (III, 1166). When Lancelot turns the Queen over to the king, he bids her again to pray for his soul, and tells her that if she ever requires his help, he will be there to help her (III, 1252). The final meeting occurs in the nunnery to which Guinevere has taken herself. Guinevere has finally found the strength to reject him altogether, even though he tells her that he would gladly take her into his own realm. But since she wishes to remain a nun, he will follow her example and become a monk. Guinevere

frankly doubts his intentions and suggests that he is not stable enough to maintain his vows. Lancelot assures her that he is quite sincere, and he does indeed become a hermit, largely for her sake--which is, as Benson remarks, "a curiously worldly way of renouncing the world."¹¹³ When Guinevere dies and is buried with Arthur, Lancelot lies "grovelyng" on their tomb and making great sorrow. Lancelot's last speech in Malory's cycle is in reply to a hermit who accuses him of behaving shamefully; he explains that his grief does not displease God, for it is not a rejoicing in sin but sorrow over all the grief he has caused his king and queen. He shortly thereafter dies, is carried to heaven by angels, and leaves behind, with his body, a sweet savor of sanctity. Lancelot has remained, throughout Malory's works, a knight whose greatest deeds have been inspired by Guinevere; even his life as a hermit and his death as a holy man are due to his love for his lady. As Vinaver has remarked, "it is as her lover that Malory wants him to die. . . ."¹¹⁴ He is a penitent lover, perhaps, but he is still her lover.

If Malory's Lancelot is not to be the villain of the piece, we must begin to look elsewhere for the figure responsible for the collapse of Logres. But Malory clearly will not allow Gawain to be this figure. His transformation of Gawain is one of his finest

¹¹³Benson, pp. 244-5.

¹¹⁴Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1627.

artistic and psychological successes in the whole cycle. It is Gawain's thankless task in the Death to provide much of the momentum that keeps the story moving inexorably towards disaster, for, as Lancelot correctly observes, left to himself, Arthur would soon have made peace with the lovers. But Gawain's grief over the death of Gareth and his desire for revenge trap Arthur into a course of action from which he cannot honorably escape; he must, for Gawain's sake and despite his own wishes, maintain war against Lancelot. A mediocre writer would have made Gawain a two-dimensional villain or berserker, cutting a wide swath of vengeance, thundering to the heavens for blood. And Malory, it must be admitted, does this--but he does much more. Malory's Gawain is hardly the tragic hero of the Death. But he is undoubtedly a tragic figure, and his scenes of grief and rage are extremely affecting. And Malory achieves this effect not by a melodramatic increase in the intensity of Gawain's grief but, paradoxically, by emphasizing his loyalty to and respect for Lancelot.

In the Mort Artu, Gawain's rage over Gaheriet's death is curiously unconvincing and empty, a mere convenience of narrative to ensure that a changeable Arthur keeps steadily on the course of war. In the Mort Artu scene where Arthur comes upon the arguing Gawain clan, there is little to suggest that Gawain is not as disaffected with Lancelot's treason as his brothers are, and though he refuses to tell Arthur what they were talking about, one feels that he does so merely because he does not want to get involved,

not because of any loyalty to Lancelot. In the Stanzaic Morte, he is even less involved, his motives more obscure: when the king appears, Gawain merely retires to his chamber without a word, his only comment being "Here now is made a comsemente/ That bethe not fynysshyd many a yere" (ll. 1726-7). But Malory's Gawain is hardly the uninvolved, dispassionate character he is in either source; from the beginning of the argument scene he is obviously involved in the discussion, clearly divorcing himself from the "counceyle" of Mordred and Aggravain, warning them that they had better leave the matter alone. When Aggravain declares that he will disclose the love affair to Arthur, Gawain reminds him of how many times Lancelot has saved the king and queen, "'and the beste of us all had bene full colde at the harte-roote had nat sir Launcelot bene bettir than we, and that hath he preved hymself full ofte'" (III, 1162). He has, Gawain further reminds him, saved them before as well, and as for himself, "'I woll never be ayenste sir Launcelot for one dayes dede, that was when he rescowed me frome kynge Carados of the Dolerous Towre and slew hym and saved my lyff'" (III, 1162). Later, after Lancelot has escaped and Guinevere is awaiting trial, Gawain begs Arthur to reconsider, offering possible interpretations for the lovers' having been together: "'peradventure she sente for hym for goodness and for none evyll, to rewarde hym for his good dedys that he had done to her in tymes past'" (III, 1175). He further insists that Guinevere "'ys to you both good and trew'" (III, 1175), and that Lancelot should be allowed to defend her honor. When Arthur reminds

him that Lancelot has just killed Aggravain and has nearly killed Mordred, and in the past slew two of Gawain's sons, Gawain defends Lancelot by saying that he had warned them not to fight Lancelot, and that though he is sorry they are dead, they have none but themselves to blame. Gawain remains faithful to Lancelot up to the last possible minute: when Lancelot has rescued Guinevere--and, unbeknownst to Gawain, inadvertently killed Gawain's unarmed brothers, Gareth and Gaheris--Gawain praises Lancelot for his deed: "'and to say the trouth he were nat of worshyp but if he had rescowed the queen, insomuch as she shulde have be brente for his sake. And as in that . . . he hath done but knyghtly, and as I wolde have done myselff and I had stonde in lyke case. But,'" he adds, in one of the most chilling of transitions in the cycle, "'where ar my brethrin?'" (III, 1184). They are, he learns, dead, and only after he has seen their bodies and heard the story one more time does he accept the fact that Lancelot killed them. Out of his grief comes the promise that leads to war, "'that frome thys day forewarde I shall never fayle sir Launcelot untyll that one of us have slayne that othir'" (III, 1186). Gawain's heart at last breaks. His respect for Lancelot has been so great that he has willing to forgive Lancelot's killing of Gawain's family, and now Gawain feels that Lancelot has betrayed him by slaying Gareth who not only was unarmed, but who loved Lancelot more than he loved his own brothers. Here, much more than in the Mort Artu or the Stanzaic Morte, we understand why Gawain prolongs the war against Lancelot. It is not merely a

matter of bloodguilt, the avenging of the murder of a family member. It is a more complex grief of the sort that accompanies the betrayal of a friendship. Malory has given Gawain dignity by giving him a motive not based on mindless vengeance, which is apparently his sole motive in the Mort Artu, but on what Dante called "love excessive," which is among the most lightly punished of sins in the Inferno. But Malory does not leave Gawain in this emotional hell. When Gawain lies dying, he commands that a letter be written to Lancelot, begging his forgiveness for prolonging the war and absolving him of any guilt for Gawain's death. The madness has passed, and the old Gawain re-emerges just in time to make his farewells before leaving the cycle. We cannot hate this Gawain; we can only pity him, and feel it fitting that, in Arthur's dream, Gawain should appear in the company of the redeemed.

By subtly altering the motives and characters of Lancelot and Gawain, Malory has humanized them, making them more accessible to the imaginative sympathies of his readers. Both are considerably less single-minded than their counterparts in the Vulgate. In Malory, they act not merely according to plot necessity but according to understandable human motives. Neither is, by strictly Aristotelian standards, a tragic hero, but both are, in a broader sense, tragic figures, men who too late realize the consequences of their choices and who, though penitent, are powerless to change these consequences. It is a welcome change from the Mort Artu, whose characters apparently act simply as the story demands, where tragedy is impossible because

neither Lancelot nor Gawain appears to think much about what he is doing. More clearly than in the Vulgate, we can see clearly the moral dimensions of the choices that Lancelot and Gawain make, and are reminded that they stand in relation to universal moral standards which, when violated, affect both the external and internal worlds.

But Malory's most significant--and most welcome--change is in reducing King Arthur's responsibility for the downfall of Logres. In the Mort Artu, Arthur is a moody, weak king, given to hysterical outbursts. When Arthur interrupts the Gawain clan in the middle of their argument over Lancelot and Guinevere, he shrilly demands that Gawain tell him what the argument was about. Gawain, perhaps disgusted by this outburst, coldly takes his leave, whereupon Arthur seizes a sword and threatens to kill Aggravain if he will not tell him what they were talking about. This more than Aggravain could have hoped for, since it allows him to kill his complaint and yet to seem to do so only under duress. When the king hears that his queen and his best knight are lovers, Arthur swears that if he does not take vengeance on the lovers, he will never wear his crown again, and he further commands Aggravain and Mordred to swear by their oaths as Round Table Knights to help him catch the traitors. Thus Arthur allies himself with the two most faithless men in his kingdom, and begins his headlong rush to destruction. The Stanzaic Morte presents the Arthur of this scene in a slightly better light. There is no ranting or threatening or waving of swords. Aggravain simply goes to Arthur and plainly tells him that Lancelot "liggys

by the quene,/ And so has done full many a yere" (ll. 1730-1). Arthur laments that such a noble man should ever be a traitor, and then adds, somewhat nervously, that Lancelot will be hard to take: "He is a man of suche apparayle/ Off hym I have full mychelle drede" (ll. 1748-9). Aggravain reassures the king by telling him that he has already thought of a plan.

Malory's treatment of this scene is far more satisfying. When Arthur appears in the chamber, Gawain tells his brothers to "stynte youre stryff," and, when they ignore Gawain, he leaves. Arthur then turns to Aggravain and asks, simply, "'what noyse they made'" (III, 1163). Aggravain needs no urging and is not given the dignity of being threatened: he blurts his accusation out eagerly as if (as he says) he "may kepe hit no lenger" (III, 1163). Arthur listens to Aggravain's recital of Lancelot's wrongs, which ends with the charge that Lancelot is a "traytoure to youre person" (III, 1163). Arthur does not at this point begin to make great dole or swear eternal vengeance, or tremble while he wonders how Lancelot may be safely captured. He merely observes, with admirable calm, "'Gyff hit be so . . . wyte you well, he ys none othir'" (III, 1163), and then delivers a veiled admonition to let the matter be by saying that Lancelot is a hardy knight, and that his accusers had better be able to prove their accusations--by, for example, catching Lancelot in the act--though they might well expect that Lancelot "'woll fyght with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I know no knyght that ys able to macch hym'" (III, 1163). Malory then explains that Arthur had

already had his suspicions about the affair, but "was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene," for "wyte you well the kynge loved him passyngly well" (III, 1163). While Aggravain proposes his plan, Arthur listens, consents, and then issues his final warning: "'Beware . . . for I warne you, ye shall fynde hym wyght'" (III, 1164). This is no weak and nervous king who screams for vengeance and sides blindly with his enemies against his friends. Malory's Arthur is self-possessed and stable, the calm center in this storm of accusation and betrayal. One feels that he does not trust Aggravain or Mordred, and while he cannot simply dismiss the charges, he does sufficiently warn Aggravain and Mordred about Lancelot so that most men would think at least twice before going ahead with their plans. The Arthurs of the Mort Artu and the Stanzaic Morte, upon learning of the adultery, think primarily of themselves and the dishonor done them. Malory's Arthur is the most atypical of cuckolds, a man who would prefer to let matters remain as they are than to risk war and the end of friendship for the sake of his own honor. His behavior after the failed arrest of Lancelot is still surprisingly selfless. In the Mort Artu, when Arthur learns of the failed attempt to capture Lancelot, he orders that his knights follow Lancelot and take him, and then says that since he cannot have Lancelot at the moment, he will take his vengeance on the Queen in a way that the world will never forget. In Malory, when Arthur hears of the abortive ambush, his first reaction is, astonishingly, admiration for Lancelot's fighting skill: "'Jesu mercy!' seyde the kynge, 'he ys

a mervaylous knyght of proues'" (III, 1174), and then adds, "'me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me And now hit ys fallen so . . . that I may nat with my worshyp but my quene muste suffir deth,' and [he] was sore amoved" (III, 1174). Malory even goes so far as to provide an explanation, not in either source, for the need to burn Guinevere: "the law was such in tho dayes that whatsomever they were, of what astate or degré, if they were founden gylty of treson there shuld be none other remedy but deth . . ." (III, 1174). The matter, Malory plainly tells us, is out of Arthur's hands, and even though Gawain pleads for Guinevere and begs that Lancelot be allowed to defend her, Arthur replies that this would not be justice, that Guinevere "shall have the law" (III, 1175).

Malory's ennobling of Arthur also removes the King's schizophrenia and emotional instability in the Mort Artu when, in the sieges of Joyous Gard and Banoic, he bursts into tears over Lancelot's nobility in battle and seems willing to forgive all. In the Mort Artu, there is no real preparation for this sort of behavior; its Arthur is an unstable king, moved to strong emotion by whatever is happening at the moment, however much it may contradict his feelings at other times. In Malory, Arthur is all of a piece: he has never really wanted to fight Lancelot; he wars against him only after he and Gawain discover that Lancelot has, apparently spitefully, slain the unarmed Gareth. This, for Arthur, is Lancelot's real sin, the murder of an unarmed brother knight who was a good friend. It is then that he cries "lat us shape a remedy for to

revenge their dethys" (III, 1185). But once he is convinced of Lancelot's innocence, he is ready to forgive. The tragedy is that Gawain is not, and Arthur is borne along to the doom that awaits him.

The good sense of Malory's Arthur remains to his end. The Arthur of the Mort Artu has lost whatever sense of proportion he may once have had; when Gawain appears in a dream to warn him not to fight with Mordred, Arthur refuses the advice, saying he would be thought a coward if he did not defend his own lands. Malory rejects the Mort Artu at this point in favor of the Stanzaic Morte, in which Gawain tells Arthur that if he can arrange for a month's peace, Lancelot will come to help him. Arthur agrees to try for a truce, and immediately sends Lucan and Bedivere to Mordred to arrange the terms. Whereas in the Mort Artu Arthur cannot see beyond his own immediate need for revenge and face-saving, Malory's Arthur is perfectly willing to make at least momentary concessions to an enemy if he can see that the eventual outcome is victory. It is his sensible and basically pacific nature, combined with the motif of the adder's sting (also from the Stanzaic Morte), that gives the battle of Salisbury Plain the real horror and sense of waste that are missing in the Mort Artu, whose last battle is merely a result of Arthur's rashness. In Malory the battle that brings Logres to its end is the result of a simple horrible accident, the medieval counterpart to a twenty-five-cent transistor malfunction that brings about World War III. It clearly suggests the serpent in Eden, the betrayal of

innocence. But it also exonerates Arthur from any blame in the destruction of his realm.

This rehabilitation of Arthur is one of the most important changes that Malory makes in his sources, for it helps to unify his story of Arthur and makes possible a tragic reading of the Death of Arthur. It was pointed out in the last chapter that the "weakening" of Arthur in the Vulgate was a major obstacle to our reading the story as myth. Arthur had begun in the Vulgate Merlin as a strong archetypal figure, the boy who miraculously becomes king and assumes his rightful place in the universe. We are thus prepared to see him as the central figure in the myth, a symbolic vehicle for our own aspirations and deepest psychological needs. But this is nearly the last time that we see Arthur in this role, for when Lancelot at last comes to court, Arthur steps aside and allows Lancelot to take center stage. And because Lancelot must be a sympathetic character, Arthur must become less sympathetic, and consequently turns into a dupe, a cuckold, and a bit of a dolt. By the time the Mort Artu begins, he is pettish and unstable--hardly evil, but hardly the sort of person we would have expected the young Arthur to have become. If he had remained noble, he would have been a tragic figure in the Mort. Even if he had become positively evil, the myth would have been powerful, suggesting the falls of both Satan and mankind from an original glory. But in the Vulgate Mort, he is simply neurotic, successively at the mercies of Lancelot, Gawain, Aggravain, and Mordred, tossed about by every shift in the emotional weather. Our

attention and sympathy are thus redirected to Lancelot, whose story the Vulgate has become. Arthur's end in the Vulgate is not tragic but pathetic. The King had entered his dotage; it was time that the kingdom should die.

Malory, on the other hand, has maintained Arthur's archetypal integrity throughout the cycle. As in the Vulgate, Arthur begins as the noble and triumphant young king, fighting to establish his just kingdom. In the "middle" of the cycle, when Arthur's stabilized kingdom begins to blossom, Malory avoids focussing our attention too exclusively on one knight by introducing a variety of knightly adventurers. This allows Arthur to remain the central archetype of the cycle, his at least implicit presence being the unifying factor in the diversity of adventures. Finally, in the Death, Malory shows us an Arthur who is not only still a noble king, but the noblest of all the principals, a stable, rational, just man who seeks peace and accord and who falls not through his own pride but through moral integrity and, at the last, through a simple, horrible accident--the serpent. If Arthur is morally guilty in the Death, it is of preferring to ignore the adultery, of being content to be only suspicious without trying to stop the affair before trouble can erupt. But if this is a sin, it is almost a humble one and more easily forgiven than the tearful rages that the Vulgate Arthur is subject to. Arthur thus remains a fully sympathetic figure throughout Malory's cycle; his centrality as archetype is reaffirmed, the story once more unified. And this change in Arthur's character

also changes our understanding of his end in the Death. Arthur's end is no longer the simple disaster that it was in Geoffrey's Historia, nor the pathetic, entropic collapse as in the Vulgate Mort Artu. Because Arthur maintains his integrity as a man and an archetype, because he is trapped by circumstance in a position where even the best choices lead only to disaster, he emerges for the first time in literary history as the genuinely tragic Arthur.

But perhaps I should qualify this last statement by saying that he emerges as the possibly tragic Arthur, for Malory's final transformation in the myth of Arthur remains to be discussed. It is in some ways among the most important of the transformations, as it will, depending upon how one interprets it, affect one's understanding of the whole story.

That Arthur's story is a tragedy seems obvious to some critics. Guerin, for instance, thinks that the main story in the Morte D'Arthur is a tragedy about the breakdown of a society due to a conflict between the godlike and the baser elements in each human being.¹¹⁵ Moorman sees the fall of Arthur as the result of his society's general unwillingness to exchange their "would-be ideal secular civilization" for a higher, heavenly calling.¹¹⁶ Maureen Fries finds the cycle of Arthur a tragedy based on the Christian

¹¹⁵Wilfrid L. Guerin, "The Tale of the Death of Arthur," p. 233.

¹¹⁶Charles Moorman, "'The Tale of the Sankgreal,'" pp. 186-7.

theme of original sin, with special attention given to sexual fraud.¹¹⁷ Vinaver regards the Death as a tragedy growing out of "the clash of human loyalties"¹¹⁸ and concludes that ultimately "There is no moral to be drawn from this [fall of the Arthurian world], no comfort for those who live to see the Day of Destiny, no 'trust to trust in' for those who are left to mourn the dead: nothing but the knowledge that so must end the noblest of human conflicts."¹¹⁹ T. H. White, in sketching out the plans for his own version of Arthur's story, wrote that "'The whole Arthurian story is a regular greek [sic] doom, comparable to that of the Orestes.'"¹²⁰ This is certainly a possible point of view and is, in many ways, congenial to the modern mind, which is curiously conditioned to accept disaster as the only fitting denouement to a "serious" story. But is it in fact the only possible view? Whether or not Malory's story is a tragedy depends on what happens to Arthur at the end of it. And what does Malory have to say about him?

The last indisputable knowledge we have of Arthur is that he is taken onto a barge by his sister Morgan, two other queens, and the dame Nynyve, and calls back to Bedivere that he "muste into the

¹¹⁷Maureen Fries, "Tragic Patterns in Malory's Morte Darthur: Medieval Narrative as Literary Myth," in The Early Renaissance, ed. Aldo S. Bernardo, vol. 5 (1978) of the ACTA series, p. 91.

¹¹⁸Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1621-2.

¹¹⁹Vinaver, "Commentary," Works, III, 1626.

¹²⁰Quoted by Sylvia Townsend Warner in her introduction to T. H. White's The Book of Merlyn (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. xi.

Vale of Avylyon to hele me of my grevous wounde" (III, 1240). The next day, Bedivere comes upon a chapel and a hermitage where he finds a new-made tomb. The hermit, when questioned, is not certain who is buried there; he tells Bedivere that "thys same nyght, at mydnyght, here cam a numbir of ladyes and brought here a dede corse and prayde me to entyre hum" (III, 1241). Bedivere immediately concludes that "[th]at was my lo[r]de kynge Arthur, whych lyethe here gravyn in thys chapell" (III, 1241). That the monk is uncertain, and that the identification of the grave as Arthur's is merely Bedivere's supposition, seem important to Malory, for he mentions both again in the famous passage which treats of the legend of Arthur's return:

Now more of the deth of kynge Arthur coude I never fynde, but that thes ladyes brought hym to hys grave, and such one was entyred there whych [the] ermyte bare wytnes that sometyme was Byssshop of Caunturbyry. But yet the ermyte knew nat in sertayne that he was veryly the body of [kyn]ge Arthur; for thys tale sir Bedwere, a knyght of the Table Ro[un]de, made hit to be wrytten.

Yet som men say in many p[art]ys of Inglonde that kynge Arthur ys nat dede, but h[ad] by the wyll of oure Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wyne the Holy Crosse. Yet I woll nat say that hit shall be so, but rather wolde I sey: here in thys worlde he chaunged hys lyff. And many men say that there ys wrytten oppon the tumber thys:

HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS
(III, 1242)

Larry Benson, commenting on this passage, writes that "Malory's most striking addition to the history of Arthur is the prophecy of Arthur's return. . . . There is nothing like this in any other

version of Arthur's death known to Malory. . . ." ¹²¹ This is a potentially misleading statement. Layamon's Brut (though Malory may not have known it) certainly contained the motif of Arthur's return, and William of Malmesbury long ago wrote that some men thought that Arthur would one day come back to Britain. Malory's "som men say" suggests that he was aware of and grafting onto his own history a surviving oral tradition that was for him a part of the story, however "unauthorised" by the French books it might have been. Malory's contribution is more in the validation of a long-held belief by incorporating it into an official history of Arthur. More interesting than the fact that he tells us about it, however, is what we are to make of it. Benson thinks that Malory intended to weaken the tragic impact of the Death of Arthur "by the suggestion that 'Arthur by the wyle of oure Lorde Jesu' has 'chaunged hys lyff.'" Malory's point is not that Arthur will not return ('I woll nat say that hit shall be so') but that his death is marked by divine approval for the good deeds of his life, which clearly outweigh his human defects." ¹²² But I am not sure that Malory has any such intentions, if for no other reason than that the text says clearly that it is Malory's preference (not oure Lorde Jesu's will) that Arthur "changed his lyff" (i.e., "died"). In fact, Malory's attitude towards Arthur's end and (possible) return is so ambiguous

¹²¹Benson, pp. 240-1.

¹²²Benson, pp. 240-1.

that it is probably impossible to come to any solid conclusions as to what he meant. Malory appears to provide a very prosaic end for his hero in the form of burial in a chapel graveyard, and yet he takes pains to point out that the hermit is not really sure who the dead man is, and tells us that the idea that it is Arthur was circulated by Bedivere. He scrupulously mentions that some believe that Arthur is alive and will one day return, and then says that he will not say that it is true--and then quotes the tombstone's veiled promise that Arthur will again be king. He seems determined to cover his tracks. Even the "I woll nat say" passage takes on an uneasy ambiguity the more one thinks of it: does he mean that he denies the story altogether and prefers to think of Arthur as dead, or that he will not commit himself and will only say that Arthur is dead as far as this world is concerned (which would be true, even if Arthur were away in some sub-heavenly paradise)? Mark Lambert thinks that Malory's caution adds to the mystery of his end.¹²³ It certainly adds to the ambiguity. Either understanding of Arthur's end seems valid; neither is wholly satisfying by itself, given the insistent presence of the other. What is the exegete to do?

It is not an unimportant question, for if Arthur is indeed to come again and win the Holy Cross, then there is no question of

¹²³Lambert, pp. 128-9. Lambert's own discussion of this passage makes some similar points; he writes that "one of the most effective ways to make the supernatural or the extraordinary convincing is to put it in the context of the ordinary. It is the cautious reasonableness of Malory's voice which makes us believe there may be something mysterious in Arthur's end" (p. 129).

Arthur's story being a tragedy. One might as well call the story of Christ a tragedy because its hero is killed--as one might have a right to do if the Crucifixion were not followed by the Resurrection and the promise of the Parousia (or "Second Coming"). But whether the bones of Arthur lie in the ground, or whether by the will of Christ he abides in the Vale of Avalon, Malory will not say. He just provides the facts.

But this is in a sense what Malory has been doing all along--not only in the Death but in the whole of his cycle. Malory seems less concerned with interpreting the significance of the stories than with telling clearly the story of Arthur that he saw in his sources. He deletes histories (of the Grail, of Merlin, and of Uther) that have no direct bearing on the specifically Arthurian story, and thereby focusses our attention on Arthur from the beginning. In the interests of narrative simplification, he disentangled the interlace of his sources, discarding many of the episodes and retaining others in the form of self-contained stories, with the result that the story of Arthur now appears to progress from adventure to adventure rather than to reel back and forth from installment to installment. And whether or not he intended the effect, the discarding of many of the Lancelot adventures in the Vulgate and the incorporation of the Tristram ensured that Lancelot, while remaining a major character in the story, would not become (as he had in the Vulgate) the main character in the story. In adapting the Queste, Malory condensed or omitted, for the sake of narrative simplicity, most

of the claustrophobically dogmatic interpretations of visions and dreams, consequently making his Sankgreal more generally Christian and more universally archetypal a work. And in his last two books, his separation of the "Apple-Astolat" tales from the Death and into their own book strengthened the adultery theme at the very point where strengthening was most needed--directly before the disaster that it causes.

We can see then that Malory's main transformations in the myth of Arthur lie not in the alteration of significant details or in the addition of new motifs as much as in simply clarifying and heightening what he has received from his sources. I must disagree with Maureen Fries who, in writing on the structure of the tragic myth in Malory, assumes that Malory's main contribution was the alteration of certain details that deepen the tragedy of the story, and the additions of the Gareth and Tristram to the cycle.¹²⁴ It seems that for Fries, the repetition of motifs is itself enough to make a story a myth (if this were so, the Vulgate Lancelot would be among the most mythic of medieval works); and most of the details she mentions do not significantly alter the shape of the story that Malory received. Nor will the Gareth by itself make the Vulgate's story more mythic. One only need imagine the Gareth appended to the Estoire de Merlin or the Suite du Merlin to see the problem. The rest of the Vulgate and its narrative tangle would remain;

¹²⁴Maureen Fries, "Tragic Pattern in Malory's Morte Darthur," 90.

Malory would still have his task of narrative simplification ahead of him. Fries thinks that the Tristram section's Tristram-Isode affair acts as a sort of mythic counterpoint of the Lancelot-Guinevere theme in Malory's cycle. But Malory himself seems to dissuade us from that point of view in the passage already mentioned in which Bors tells Lancelot that the two adulterous affairs cannot be compared with each other, as well as by the fact that Malory leaves the Tristram story unfinished, its conclusion only reported in Launcelot and Guinevere and the Death. Tristram strengthens the myth of Arthur not by adding another adultery motif to the story but by shifting our attention away from the Lancelot-mania of the Vulgate and showing us a world of adventures which are unified because they all take place in Arthur's kingdom. Fries' most valid assertion is that Malory changed very little of the story that he found in his sources.¹²⁵ In most cases he did not need to. Most of his task was to clearly reveal the mythic patterns latent in his sources, and to let them stand without comment.

And this puts Malory in rather a unique position. Alone among the comprehensive Arthurian historiographers, Malory appears to have had no axe to grind, no didactic purpose underlying his work. He was not trying to glorify England through falsified history (like Geoffrey of Monmouth) or to write an extended treatise on the failure of a merely earthly chivalry (like the Vulgate)--he

¹²⁵Fries, p. 90.

simply told the story of King Arthur. But because the story in the Vulgate was the kind of story that it was--because its motifs and its narrative were constructed so as to illustrate the working out of universal values in narrative form--Malory's version of the story cannot help but suggest "meanings" to the reader. Further, because Malory simplified and clarified the story, and omitted much of the analysis that simply tells the reader "what the story means," his version of Arthur's story is far more capable of affecting the reader as myth, of bypassing the merely analytical and moral consciousness and appealing to what Jung would call the archaic understanding--the realm of the mind in which abstract and concrete are perceived as one. If Milton is correct in his assertion that Spenser is a better teacher than Aquinas (because Spenser told stories about virtue whereas Aquinas wrote about it analytically), then Malory may be better than either for the mind that is willing to learn, for he proposes to teach nothing to anyone, and yet tells a story that by its very nature suggests a significance that we must ourselves make something of, because Malory makes nothing of it.

This does not mean that we must go quite as far as Lindsay Holichek does in her study of Malory's adaptation of the Vulgate. Holichek appears to assume that Malory was writing an intentionally "value-free" Arthurian cycle, that "Malory declines to condemn; his art finally asks his audience to embrace a forgiveness 'which

pierces so, that it assaults/ Mercy itself, and frees all fault."¹²⁶

In other words, we are to suppose that Malory was a modern ethical relativist who "believes that 'everybody has his reasons' . . . ;"¹²⁷ this is the "adaptation of meaning" which Holichek sees in Malory's handling of the sources. But Malory is at times not at all shy about passing judgment on or praising the characters in his story. He does not hesitate to lambast his countrymen (and, by implication, Arthur's countrymen) for their "new-fangled" ways in running after the newest, most fashionable leader, or for their fickleness in love. He is quite willing to stop his story to praise Tristram as gamesman par excellence or Guinevere as a true lover. But he does this infrequently, as if only occasionally does he see that the story he is telling might have an application beyond its immediate events. Malory hardly appears to be a free-thinker; as far as his ethical position may be determined--which is, admittedly, not far--he seems to be quite conventional in his morality. If he does not spend much time commenting on or condemning the action of his characters, perhaps it is because he assumes that his audience shares his moral conventions and does not need to have the obvious pointed out. This naturally makes possible Holichek's reading of Malory--compared to the Vulgate (especially its Queste), Malory seems more liberal, compassionate, and humane. But it also makes possible a much more

¹²⁶ Holichek, p. 247.

¹²⁷ Holichek, p. 56.

universal reading of Malory. We are quite free to invest our own values into the story and to see it as an exemplum of whatever universals we bring to the story--with the result that writers with rather different world views (e.g., T. H. White, Charles Williams, Thomas Berger, Mark Twain, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and John Steinbeck) have found Malory's Arthurian cycle to be a vehicle for their own philosophies.

We cannot, of course, assert that Malory intended this effect. Very likely he did not. While it is dangerous to make intuitive judgments about the personality of a man from whom one is separated by half a millenium and about whom one has no certain biographical information, Malory seems to me to have been, in a sense, too naive to have had any plans in mind for his epic other than the telling of a story. If so, we can be thankful for his naivete. If he had been (like Chrétien) more conscious of himself as an artist, or if he had been (like the Vulgate) committed to overt didacticism, he might have produced an intensely personal version of the Arthurian legend--and consequently buried Arthur more deeply than any Glastonbury tomb could have done. I remarked in the first chapter that the perfect "transmitter" of a myth, once it has been invented, might be a writer who unapologetically believed in the story he was writing, who was content to tell the story in an unadorned style and to let the tale speak for itself. It should be clear that Malory fits this description admirably. His goals appear to have been no higher than those of the child, the savage, the uneducated man, or

(if he can be made to admit it) the educated man who simply likes a good story told well. He might have intended to do no more than to entertain, but it is he, and not the more "serious" and high-minded Vulgate, who can justly claim to have made the story of Arthur myth.

CHAPTER V

REXQUE FUTURUS

After the publication of Malory's cycle by Caxton as Le Morte D'Arthur in 1485, there were, for nearly four centuries, no major reworkings of the Arthurian legend, not even excepting the great Faerie Queene; for, though Arthur and Merlin appear throughout the work, they are little more than names attached to characters whom Spenser is using for his own purposes. Little that they do or say has any relationship to Malory's comprehensive history (whether or not Spenser was generally influenced by Malory is another problem altogether, one which I do not intend to go into here). Not until the republication of the Morte D'Arthur in 1816 and Tennyson's "the Lady of Shalott" does Malory begin to re-enter the mainstream of English letters and to achieve a new popularity. Thereafter, Arthur-consciousness increases steadily throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until today the presence of King Arthur in any popular work of art is a guarantee of at least some financial success and, in some cases--as T. H. White--of literary immortality. It would be very interesting to know how this unusual death and re-appearance of Arthur came about--or why.

Unfortunately, this sort of investigation would require someone with far greater abilities in historial and sociological research than I possess. But one may guess. I believe that Malory's century may well have been the last century in which such a work

could have been written. For one thing, Malory's cycle is at least partly a celebration of chivalry, and, as Huizinga has made clear in his Waning of the Middle Ages,¹ chivalry was on its deathbed by the fifteenth century, as both a method of practical warfare and as a social force. It is true that Spenser's faerie heros and heroines are chivalric to the hilt; but it is also true that Spenser is looking backwards as he writes, that he is deliberately archaic; also, his chivalric world is conveniently located outside of the normal flow of history, in Faerie, where the footsoldier and the gun do not exist to confound the superseded warfare of the knight on horseback. Malory had the advantage of being able to write with some measure of belief in his subject; Spenser did not have that luxury. For him the armed knight was already beginning to be as romantic and, in some measure, as fantastic a figure as the other inhabitants of Gloriana's realm. Further, the social and philosophical pillars of Malory's world were toppling in England. The Reformation radically changed the religious world that Malory knew, begetting not only the Church of England but the various intensely nonconformist sects that plagued and drew members away from the new established church. There were new (or reborn) standards and genres of art which made Malory's naive tales of King Arthur seem a little shabby or juvenile, for this was a new age of self-consciousness and sophistication in art. There were new social and political

¹J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (1949; rpt. New York: Anchor Books, 1954).

theories that would have seemed to Malory as heretical as any of the religious innovations. And as the sixteenth century became the seventeenth, some of these political theories became reality in the form of Cromwell. A King was beheaded; later, a king was recalled. One can imagine Malory watching these events and wondering whether the world were going mad. It was at least becoming unsettled. No sooner had the world got used to the idea of a Reformation than the European intelligentsia decided it was time for an age of Reason, when not only Roman orthodoxy but any religious orthodoxy became suspect. There were more political theorists and, as consequences, new regimes in France and in the English colony in the new world. Western society had entered its adolescence and, like any adolescent, was growing and changing not only its body but its philosophies at a prodigious rate.

This is of course a caricature of what happened in the three centuries following Malory. But like any caricature, it does retain some semblance of what it attempts to portray. It is a picture of a world whose center, whose dominant philosophies, were fairly often in flux, of a cultural mind which had won some kind of independence from its past and was revelling in it, looking desperately for a new system to replace the old. It is the world in which "modern" became not just a chronological adjective but a term of praise. And it is a world in which something like modern historiography begins to be born--a world in which myth is not so much attended to as exposed or debunked. The more purely empirical the mind, the less use it

has for mystery and "mere" fantasy, in which Malory's tales abounded. This does not mean that Arthur was completely ignored. Purcell and Dryden collaborated on the "opera" King Arthur; Milton himself once expressed hopes of writing an Arthurian epic (and as much as I revere Milton, we may be thankful that he did not). But it is still true that no truly major Arthurian work was produced during this long period of time. It is possible that Arthur survived at the popular level, but if he did there is no real record of such a survival, certainly not in the world of the popular ballad, whose hero was more likely to be Robin Hood than King Arthur (as one student of the popular ballad pointed out to me some years ago). As far as the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were concerned, Sir Bedivere was right. Arthur was dead and buried.

Then, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Morte D'Arthur was exhumed and republished. In 1832, Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (roughly based on "The Fair Maid of Astolat" in Launcelot and Guenevere) appeared, followed in the ensuing decades by the poems that came to make up The Idylls of the King, Tennyson's own symbolic Arthurian cycle. Swinburne and Morris produced their own variations on Arthurian themes. The general output of Arthuriana increased so that almost yearly some new (though often popular and undistinguished) work of Arthurian fiction was produced. By 1889, Samuel Clemens thought that the Arthurian legend was at least popular enough to be vilified in his Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. But it is in the twentieth century that the

term "explosion" becomes appropriate for the appearance of Arthurian fiction. There are not only the works of the more or less major figures of modern letters--Laurence Binyon, John Masefield, Edwin Arlington Robinson, T. S. Eliot, John Erskine, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, T. H. White, John Steinbeck--which demonstrate knowledge of the Arthurian legend, but a swarm of minor authors who for whatever reason have turned to King Arthur--usually Malory's King Arthur--for inspiration. The past twenty or so years may be the most remarkable period, in that during this period King Arthur has become a subject of exploitation--that is, he has become a popular enough figure so that even the comparatively unartistic writer feels that he must have an "Arthur" book on the stands, no matter that he has either no imagination or the wrong sort of imagination for treating the legend. At least twenty popular books about Arthur have appeared in the past ten years, ranging in quality from H. Warner Munn's science-fiction exploitations to Mary Stewart's more skillful Merlin trilogy, along with the unavoidable imitations of Stewart and the more unusual and idiosyncratic treatments, such as Richard Monaco's "Parsifal" trilogy or Thomas Berger's Arthur Rex, the former rather obviously and the latter more subtly cynical in their approaches. Perhaps the most unusual--not to say bizarre--recent popular treatment of the Arthurian legend has been the limited series of comic books, Camelot 3000, which tells of the reappearance of King Arthur in the thirty-first century, and which claims on its title page that it is based on the stories of Sir Thomas Malory.

There are a number of possible explanations for the re-appearance of Arthur in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One might point to the medieval nostalgia of the nineteenth century which produced not only the Arthurian renaissance but Scott's pseudo-medieval romances and the pretty but unhistorical cult of the pre-Raphaelites, but this is ultimately as unsatisfactory as the old metaphysical assumption of a chain of infinitely regressing causes to explain the origin of the world--one has not explained the problem so much as pushed it conveniently out of the way. Similarly, one could explain the popularity of the story of Arthur in our century (and especially in the past decade) by pointing to the success of the musical play Camelot or to T. H. White's cycle, or to the mid-sixties popularity of the Lord of the Rings (a combination of various medieval mythic traditions), or (if one must) even the popularity of the Star Wars series (medieval romance outfitted with futuristic hardware). But these would be more to be explained themselves than explaining, for the works mentioned are either based on Arthurian materials or contain suspiciously Arthurian archetypes. The question is why such figures and stories should appeal at all to an age that is otherwise generally scornful of or ignorant about the past, an age that is otherwise aggressively modern.

Carl Gustav Jung has written repeatedly about the dangers of a culture without myths, and in particular of the dangers of our own culture when, as he says, "the stars have fallen from heaven and our highest symbols have paled," so that people seek now from

psychology what myth and religion once provided.² Mere materialism, he has written, is unsatisfactory; a life without symbol and myth is unthinkable and produces neuroses. Susanne K. Langer, writing in a similar vein, regards the making of symbols as the distinctive mark of humanity, and writes of the literalness with which humankind views what once were potent symbols for our ancestors;³ "This loss of old universal symbols," she writes, "endangers our safe unconscious orientation."⁴ Both Jung and Langer lament that for modern western culture, the world has no meaning or significance aside from the empirical facts that one can gather about it, and that to remain sane (or at least well-adjusted), western culture will have to either regain old or "invent" new mythic modes of thinking.

If Malory's Arthur has regained his popularity over the course of the last and present centuries, one might seek the causes in Jung's and Langer's diagnosis of the modern mind. What Malory's Arthur provides, in its small way, is what the current age needs. The Morte D'Arthur is a world of clear (if occasionally contradictory) ideals and well-defined roles in contrast to our world, in which both roles and ideas are in flux. If its appeal were only on this level, we might suspect that it is only a symptom of

²C. C. Jung, Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, 2nd ed. Trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 23.

³Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 279.

⁴Langer, pp. 287-8.

Miniver Cheevyism, an unhealthy nostalgia for an unreal and unexperienced past. But the sort of appeal that the Morte has for the modern mind might be seen in the way that some of the writers have treated it. For many, of course, it is merely fodder for "historical novels"--that is, love stories set against an improbably imagined cultural milieu. But for others, the appeal of the Morte was not only broader but deeper. Something in the Malory tales moved Tennyson to make his own *Arthuriad* a symbolic treatment of the life of the soul; Charles Williams' poem cycle is frankly Christian and mystical enough to delight the heart of any thirteenth-century Cistercian; T. H. White found in Malory the symbols and incidents he needed to write his own dissertation on the needs and failures of the human spirit and human culture; Mary Stewart acknowledges that even her Arthurian best-sellers may be read as allegory as well as romance; and John Steinbeck, in his uncompleted Acts of King Arthur, though he began with the simple plan of merely retelling Malory's tales in clear modern English, turned them, as he went along, into vehicles for his own truths, so that by the time he reached his own version of Malory's Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot, he was obviously writing more than twentieth-century culture than merely telling stories about King Arthur and his knights. As for the films, two extremes may suffice. John Boorman's "Excalibur" is as heavily (and sometimes simply ponderously) mythic a treatment of the Arthurian legend as one could find; it treats the story of Arthur (which Boorman made clear he derived from Malory) with a reverence

approaching the sort usually reserved for Hollywood epics about the Bible; and he apparently hit the right note for a great many people, for the film was quite popular. At the other end of the spectrum is the highly irreverent "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," a film that leaves no Arthurian motif unlampooned. This film would seem at first to be a clear argument against the modern world's taking the Arthurian cosmos seriously; and yet, as a student of sacrilege might observe, the humor of irreverence has no force where there is not a counter-balancing atmosphere of reverence and a popular knowledge of the story. If, for example, the story of Jesus has no meaning or import for the modern world, it is very unlikely that Monty Python would have ever produced it "Life of Brian," which carefully parallels and mocks the events of Jesus' life. No one, in this culture at least, has ever made a film satirizing the life and teachings of Lao Tse.

My point is that Malory's story of Arthur is clearly seen, by a great many people of our age, as a story with a significance with goes beyond the tale of its literal events, a story that demands retelling by various author and artists so that they may make explicit what they think they find in it, and--as should be evident from the various results--a story that has rather a different meaning for each person who reads it. While it can hardly substitute for a religion or a philosophy, it provides characters and a story that the modern world finds suggestive and important, a series of archetypes and tales that are repeatedly invested with

meaning. In its story of a king who is magically begotten, founds an ideal realm, and yet dies through the sins of his people and from simple mischance--and yet may come again, the people of our age have found a universally significant story whose shape suggests, with each twist it is given, a kaleidoscope of meanings. It is, in other words, read as a myth. No other story of Arthur has had such an effect on such a wide number of people, perhaps because no version other than Malory's has been capable of such a reading. At the last of T. H. White's Once and Future King, we are given a picture of a young Thomas Malory who says, wide-eyed with the innocence of a child, "I would do anything for King Arthur."⁵ In fact, he did everything for him.

⁵T. H. White, The Once and Future King (1958; rpt. New York: Berkley, 1966), p. 636.

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