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# The Art Of Magical Narrative

*An exploration of Malory's 'The Tale of King Arthur' and 'The Book of Launcelot and Guinevere' in the light of Wilson's theory of magical narrative*



'For Madame,' seyde Sir Launcelot, 'I love nat to be constrained to love, for love must aryse of :he harte self, and nat by none constraynte.' (641:36-38)

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Picture: Rhead, Louis, & George Wooliscroft. *Elaine with Lancelot's Shield*.  
The Camelot Project: <http://rodent.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/images/rheadel.htm>.

## Dedication

As is customary in longer dissertations, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the University of Cape Town for allowing me the privilege of completing my degree, my daughters Lis and Kate, and my son Andrew, for nagging, persuading and at times cajoling me to keep going when everything in life seemed to conspire to prevent me from doing just that; my father for teaching me from very small the interest to be had in digging at the roots of things; Jackie for teaching me the meaning of the word 'perseverance'; Angela and Morgan for love, friendship and an unceasing flow of interest and debate; and last but not least, Roger Lass – my mentor – thank you for having faith in me so many years ago: you gave me faith in myself.

Janine Clatworthy  
Leigh on Sea, England  
May 2001

All references to Malory's text refer to Vinaver's second edition of *Malory: Complete Works (1977)* and appear in round brackets adjacent to the quotation, citing page number and then line number.

## **Abstract**

*The Art of Magical Narrative: An exploration of Malory's 'The Tale of King Arthur' and 'The Book of Launcelot and Guinevere' in the light of Wilson's theory of magical narrative.*

By Janine Clatworthy

What is a magical narrative? How can the inconsistencies and strange repetitions in the plots of Malory's Arthurian cycle be explained? What are their purposes and why are they essential to the plot? In this dissertation, I have attempted to answer these questions by applying Anne Wilson's theory of magic in narrative (*The Magical Quest*, A. Wilson, 1988, Manchester UP, Manchester) to a selection of tales from the beginning of Malory's Arthurian cycle (*The Tale of King Arthur*) and from the latter half (*The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*).

Each sub-tale has been examined to sift out its magical elements: the repetitions, incantations and unexpressed desires of the hero. The latter are revealed in a set of identifiable *moves*, which unbeknown to hero and author propel the plot to sometimes surprising conclusions. Each sub-tale has been carefully analysed in the text, and its own chart of the 'moves' and identified desire mapped in the *Appendix*.

The movement within Malory towards a more modern approach to plot and character in the later tales, leads to an analysis of the appropriateness of the theory in later tales where features that Wilson precluded from magical narrative, such as comedy, tragedy and the beginnings of characterisation intrude.

This dissertation makes a contribution to the field of Arthurian studies in that it is the first to examine Malory's tales in the light of Wilson's groundbreaking theory.

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## 1. Introduction

Much has been written on virtually every aspect of the *Morte Darthur*, and simply listing all the publications, books and journals available on the subject would in itself create an enormous encyclopaedia. However, in every generation there is someone who teaches us to look at familiar objects, ideas and texts in a completely new way. One such person was, and is, Anne D. Wilson. Her article *The Critic and the Use of Magic in Narrative* which appeared in 'The Yearbook of English Studies' (1992: Volume 22, Ed. Andrew Gurr: 81-94) offers a radically new way of exploring texts, particularly the genres of folk tales and romance. Wilson had been searching for a way of explaining 'irrational systems of thought in some narratives' (ibid:81) for some time and admits that at first, when she began to test her hypothesis, she had to 'forget all (she) knew already and rely exclusively on the texts for (her) information.'(ibid).

She identifies certain tales as 'magical texts' not because they contain spells, wizardry or supernatural events, which they may well do, but because the plot contains certain inexplicable elements which can only be understood if one interprets the plot as directed by a single character in order to fulfil his/her desires or expiate his/her guilt. The plot is literally the creation of the hero,<sup>1</sup> who is in turn 'the participant identifying with the narrative.' (ibid). The narrative therefore has similarities with dreamscapes in which the dreamer is both a participant in the dream, the creator of the dream and the subject of the dream's plot and action; the subliminal forces operating in the dream to effect a catharsis paralleling the rituals or moves of the magical narrative.

There is the provision in the narrative for an investment of power on the part of those who choose to take the opportunity and the narrative can bring about desires (in the mind of course) and dispel anxiety. (Wilson:82)

Wilson describes magical narrative as being the 'most organised structure there is' (ibid). Far from being the chaotic assemblage of characters and idiosyncratic

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the term 'hero' to describe both male and female heroes

happenings that such plots might at first appear, riddled with incongruities and strange repetitions and rituals, magical narratives contain a sequence of rituals or moves. Repetition becomes an integral part of the plot, with pledges and vows being repeated, numbers of rings, knights, dwarves and even sequences of actions being repeated until the hero is purged or satisfied and his objective realised.

Wilson's definition of magic is: 'a power created in the mind in order to bring about desires or dispel fear and guilt at a deep level of need' (Wilson:82)<sup>2</sup>. She argues that this interpretation allows for the assimilation of certain incongruities or anomalies in the plots of certain well-known texts: she cites *Apollonius of Tyre*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Ywain* as examples.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson's theory proposes that magical narratives have three defining characteristics: each plot expresses a single point of view; it is the creation of the hero and it contains highly organised repetitions. She proposes that certain structural elements such as comedy and tragedy are unused in magical narratives as the plot has a 'restricted range'. The essential lack of distance between the audience and the story creates a plot with little use for comedy or tragedy, as 'magic enables every step forward' (ibid: 85) and the purpose of the plot is to bring about the 'desires of the hero' (ibid: 84).

Wilson argues that the critics have always explored Malory's writings by 'interpretation', which would lead us to the tradition of comparative textual analysis. She proposes an alternate route in order to understand the function of the texts by looking closely at the narrative itself to discover the internal motivation for the presence of such elements. She argues that magical narratives are 'unique' and cannot be fully understood without attempting to identify and understand the rituals at work within them. Interestingly, and unwittingly, Fritscher supports Wilson as he discusses the audience shift that has occurred since the

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<sup>2</sup> All references are to Wilson's article in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol.22,1992,Ed. A.Gurr

<sup>3</sup> A discussion of these texts lies outside the scope of this dissertation, but interested readers may read Wilson's article for further analysis of the anomalies within these texts.

*Morte Darthur* was written. Living in a society with differing perceptions of God and which does not wholly follow Biblical doctrine and church teachings, we are excluded from not only the 'insider knowledge' of the courtly tradition that would have been commonplace to Malory's readers, but are no longer intimately acquainted - as were the mediaeval readers - with the beliefs, expectations, perceptions and rituals of the Christian Church. What would thus have been a transparent series of stages within the tales to contemporary readers are, to us, unseen and in need of reconstruction by careful scholarly workmanship.

As Wilson's theory is relatively new and has not been applied to Malory as yet, I decided to follow Einstein's advice and assess the validity of the theory by testing it against sections of the *Morte Darthur*. As he observed: 'Knowledge cannot spring from experience alone but only from comparison of the inventions of the intellect and observed fact.' (Seelig et al 1954: 265-266).

Unlike the 'educative novel... where the protagonist learns a lesson' (Fritscher 1972:1), in Wilson's theory, the heroes of Malory's tales control the action which in turn fulfils their desires. Other characters, such as Guinevere, whose role is to protect Launcelot from assault by his unwitting relatives by reminding him to inform them when he is fighting incognito, absorb moral and practical lessons which are never internalised by the principal character.

The heroes, similarly, never learn the 'spiritual lessons' Fritscher proposes (ibid); in contrast, Launcelot returns from the Quest for the Holy Grail and within a short space of time forgets his pledge to never see Guinevere again, but loves her 'more hotely' than before.

Wilson's analysis of some deeper objective in the tales is not at odds with mediaeval thought as magical narrative would have been perceived as containing the 'general symbolic metaphor that underlies the literal meaning of life' (loc cit).



Fritscher in his exploration of religion in his PhD thesis, *Sex and Magic in King Arthur's Camelot*, arrives at the portals of Wilson's insights, declaring:

Malory, writing a tale essentially about the destruction of two warring families, participated, centuries before the explication, in the Jungian aesthetic which maintains that certain recurrent, humanly experienced, themes or archetypes may evoke a response from the unconscious that cannot be otherwise evoked.

[Fritscher 1967:4]

In this dissertation I shall be exploring to what extent Wilson's theory can be applied to two of Malory's tales: *The Tale of King Arthur*, comprising the six sub-tales of: *Merlin, Balin or the Knight with the Two Swords, Torre and Pellinor, the War with Five Kings, Arthur and Accolon* and *Gawain, Ywain and Marhalt*; and *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* comprising the five tales of: *The Poisoned Apple, The Fair Maid of Astolat, The Great Tournament, The Knight of the Cart* and *The Healing of Sir Urry*.

I shall be examining the tales and sub-tales in the light of the three defining characteristics and shall be looking particularly at the extent to which Wilson's insistence on the irrelevance and, therefore, absence of comedy and tragedy is accurate. For each tale I shall try to erect a set of moves and attempt to assess to what extent the narrative has been controlled by the hero.

One final consideration: in a collection of tales such as the *Morte Darthur*, one must assess whether to attempt to apply the theory to the whole collection and try and identify one 'über-hero' or to use Malory's existing divisions (eight) or Caxton's further divisions and try to identify individual heroes in each tale or sub-tale. In an exploration of the *Complete Works* there does not seem to be a single hero but, rather, a collection of greater and lesser heroes, with greater heroes featuring in more than one tale or sub-tale. It is for this reason that I have followed the divisions set up by Caxton.

## 2. The Tale of King Arthur

### 2.1 Merlin

Wilson argues that imitative magic is to 'bring about desire' and in *Merlin*, the first sub-tale in *The Tale of King Arthur*, it is Uther's passionate desire to 'lyen' with Igrayne, wife of the Duke of Cornwall, which the magical plot initially contrives to engineer. The fulfilment of this physical desire is, however, subsumed by Arthur's desire to justify his right, spiritually, legally and physically to his throne and to establish his status as Uther's legitimate heir.

It is ironic that the Head of the Round Table and epitome of knightly virtue is the illegitimately conceived son of his father's lustful and adulterous desire for another man's wife. Magical narrative addresses guilt and morality only in so far as these emotions and precepts impact on the movement of the plot. Uther has broken three codes: the first, of hospitality - by attempting to have sex with a guest's wife; the second, of fealty - as he is the Duke's liege-lord and owes him protection in return for service; and finally as a brother knight - by deceiving Igrayne. Although knights were well known for loving other men's wives - the relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere being of note - Igrayne had refused Uther and therefore could only be courted and not 'won'. Uther had no intention of not achieving his goal of a sexual relationship with her and so besieged her husband's castle in order to abduct her. Although Uther's intentions and actions would be condemned by any knight of his future son's Round Table, the fact that this is a magical narrative is confirmed by the fact that they never are.

Uther, while recognising that Igrayne is a 'fair lady and a passynge wyse' (3:5-6), ignores her rejection of him and besieges her husband's castle of Terrabil. Igrayne had been placed in the Castle at Tintagel in order to protect her. The obvious division of the spousal bond by placing the male in one impregnable place and the female in another leaves a magical solution as the only route to Arthur's conception. In the tradition of Norse and Greco-Roman legends, the solution lay in the physical transformation of the would-be lover. Igrayne has been

separated from her husband and can now be seduced by the transformed Uther. The plot has ensured that Igrayne remains innocent of both the intention and the act of adultery. She becomes a non-consensual participant in the act that both 'cures' Uther's 'sickness and engineers the conception of his son. Uther's desire is already known to Merlin and it is he that facilitates the transformation. There is, however, a price to be paid:

...yf kynge Uther wille wel rewarde me and be sworne unto me to fulfille my desire, that shall be his honour and profite more than myn, for I shalle cause hym to have all his desyre. (4:11-14)

Uther is unsurprised by Arthur's conception and Igrayne seems to have felt indifferent to her unwitting seduction by Uther in the guise of her husband; both characters fulfilling little more than their role as Arthur's progenitors. Uther dies shortly afterwards and because of his pledge, Igrayne has no knowledge of Arthur's whereabouts. Uther lives only long enough to indicate that Arthur was to be his heir, and Igrayne's survival is only assured so that she can have a 'walk on part' later, when she provides the corroborating evidence of Arthur's miraculous conception. In a magical narrative there is no requirement of change, growth or development: characters have fulfilled their function once the 'hero' has completed the move in which they are involved.

Wilson's analysis of magical narrative is that there is a 'narrative (which) is the creation of the hero' (1992: 83) and it is his or her desire that controls the 'single viewpoint' of the plot. Although the section is entitled *Merlin* and the desires of Uther are the focus of the first part, the controlling presence is in fact Arthur - whose tale parts I-VI comprise. Merlin's section deals almost exclusively with the justification for and provenance of Arthur's right to the throne; his magical origins - fathered when his mother's legal husband could not have sired him and having his natural father transformed into a 'seeming' Duke of Cornwall - neutralizes all opposition. Anyone who saw the 'Duke' that night would never know whether it was the Duke or Uther transformed. Harris (1999:6) argues that in Malory's time adultery was not considered real unless it was seen and talked about. And yet it was legally possible to commit treachery by 'imagination', literally thinking ill

towards the King. Igrayne's adultery and Arthur's parentage, therefore, only become real once imagined in the minds of Arthur and the Court and spoken out by Merlin and Igrayne. Uther's sexual 'move' cures him of the double 'sickness' of passion and of the lack of an heir.

Without benefit of accurate watches or clocks the exact time of the Duke's death and Arthur's conception could not be proved. The corroboration of Igrayne and Arthur's foster family closes the circle of suspicion. Of course, Brasias never knew that Arthur was Uther's son, and Igrayne certainly would have had her own reasons for confirming that she was not guilty of adultery.

The raising of princely sons by other members of the nobility was customary in Malory's time (cf *The Paston Letters*), and having lived through the Wars of the Roses, English readers would recognise the need to protect the heir to the throne from danger, especially from ambitious relatives, who might try to seize power after the death of Uther. As an infant, Arthur's life would have been in great 'jeopardy' (7:14) and so his 'fostering' appears justified.

Uther's sudden lustful desire for Igrayne is, thus, another essential move embedded in ritual which will in time fulfil Arthur's desire to retain and secure his right to the throne. It is this theme which is at the heart of Malory's entire work and which is, perhaps, the sole motivation for all of the moves and all of the magic. For unless Arthur is the true King of England, his actions and the chivalrous deeds performed by his true knights become questionable too. Arthur's role is unalterable, like a tragic hero's. His marriage to Guinevere is also pre-ordained; its inevitability foreshadowed by the creation of the very table which would form the physical representation of the knights' circle of honour and prestige. Merlin had created it and given it to her father before her birth; Guinevere's father in turn offers it to the newly weds as his gift, returning to England the symbol which would fulfil its purpose of establishing Arthur at the head: the *pater familias*, of the knights of the Round Table. The complexity of the table's 'moves' again reveals the single-minded purposefulness of the plot in magical narrative.

In order to justify his role as King, Arthur needed a legitimate provenance and as little more than a young squire, had to establish that he was King by 'divine selection'. His lack of knowledge about the stone, and everyone's acceptance of it as the 'quest' which would identify the next king, is yet another move towards this goal. Other characters fail to ask questions about the genesis or validity of the stone that would retard or derail the completion of the magic ritual. It is this illogically of plot, which Wilson argues is a defining feature of magical narratives.

Arthur draws the sword from the stone four times, at three of the four great festivals of the church: at Christmas, at Candlemas, at Easter and again at Pentecost, thus balancing his father's oath by the 'four evangelists' to fulfil Merlin's desire. Three of the four festivals would have been times of great festivities with large numbers of the population gathered to celebrate the mass. It is possible that Malory simply adds the festivals to provide colour, or to signal that six months has passed; but in such religious times it is more likely that Arthur was to be perceived as a Christian King, with God's favour upon him at these four key points in the religious calendar.

In offering the sword to his foster brother, Arthur is unwittingly revealing to the reader and the other characters in the plot that he is not desirous of kingship, but that his natural right to be king - his fate - was inescapable. It is the plot which engineers his role as King and not Arthur's own desire and volition. His step-father points this fact out to his step-brother who, unlike most mediaeval kingly candidates, quietly acquiesces.

Having obtained the Kingship by divine right through drawing the sword from the stone, and having thus proven his legal right as heir to Uther, Arthur demonstrates his prowess as a knight by engaging in battles and by going off on 'adventures' like other knights. What makes this tale interesting in relation to Wilson's model is that while it fulfils her basic parameters for a magical narrative, it does contain snatches of humour, an element that she identifies as 'irrelevant to the magical plot' (Wilson: 84). One example should suffice: when the messenger of King Royns of Wales demands Arthur's beard as 'trewage' Arthur humorously returns

to an earlier insult he had received in which he was described as a 'berdless boye' (36: 37) and answers that he is 'full yonge to make a purphile'<sup>4</sup> (36:39-40).

Wilson identifies repetition (1992: 83) as another defining feature of a 'magical narrative'. The key repetitions in *Merlin* are - as they are in a number of the tales - the loss and discovery of swords, the exchange of gifts and shape changing.

When a king makes a man a knight he expects a gift in return and, at certain feasts, requests for gifts could be made of the king. Merlin exacts Uther's promise for all his 'desyre' in exchange for fulfilling Uther's desire for sex with Igrayne. As with Arthur's later promise to the Lady of the Lake, made in exchange for a sword, the giver need not express their demand at the time of the agreed exchange but may demand whatever they wish at a later date, as Uther and Arthur both agreed to the fulfil the demand when made. These incomplete exchanges usually burden the giver with an enormous gift later - as when Merlin requires Uther's only son, Arthur, in payment for the 'shape changing'. However, they are always in the best interest of the 'hero' in the long run and are essential 'moves' to propel the hero towards his/her desire and as such they are accepted without question by all characters.

*Merlin* is a magical tale in that all problems and issues are resolved 'magically': Uther sleeps with Igrayne through shape-changing magic yet she is prepared to marry him and bear no grudge when he reveals how he misled her. Arthur in turn is made king - not because he is Uther's son - which is revealed later - but because he draws the magical sword from the stone. In a time when blacksmith's were still combining iron and steel in order to create weapons of strength and sharpness, this act is one of natural improbability, but one whose supernatural probability and significance is accepted by all the characters in the Tale.

Later Arthur is spared combat with Sir Pellynor as Merlin causes Sir Pellynor to fall asleep at the fountain, and then to pass by without seeing them on the road. In a magical narrative characters see and hear only what the heroes need them to

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<sup>4</sup> a fur trimming for a garment

hear and see to fulfil the moves of the plot. A rather more complex example of this is the survival of the four-week old Mordred in spite of Merlin's and Arthur's attempt to destroy him. He is shipwrecked against a castle and lives to wreak vengeance on his father and herald the prophesied destruction of Camelot. How does Mordred's survival fulfil any of the heroes' desires? Although Mordred's survival is against the odds, it is not exactly supernatural. What makes this event interesting is that it occurs relatively early in the cycle, well before the point at which critics might imagine Malory to have shifted his narrative style from magical to a more modern conception of plot and dénouement. Mordred is Arthur's nemesis and his survival is almost 'anti-magical narrative' in that his survival will effect no positive moves in which Arthur's desires are met, but will ensure that all the magical narrative has effected will be brought down.

Wilson argues that even death, though not tragic death, can be a purgative that expiates the guilt of the hero. The warring families, adulterous Knights and proud King are all destroyed and the Round Table broken. All the 'sin' is absolved by their destruction. The male and female heroes that peopled the Arthurian legends could not simply disappear; the heroes' ends had to be the expiation of their earthly sins: Launcelot of his sexual sin and treachery against his liege-lord; Guinevere of her adultery and betrayal of her husband and King, and Arthur of his pride in his collection of the 'best knights in the world' which prevented him from heeding any warnings, or avoiding any pitfalls. At the end of the cycle, the heroes turn to God and the sword returns to the lake.

Although Wilson argues that death can be redemptive in magical narrative, that analysis leaves us with an unresolved problem in relation to the *Morte Darthur*. If we assume that the plot is magical and follows the pattern of moves indicated by Wilson, then who is driving the plot when all the heroes are dead at the end? If we acknowledge that the plot is romantic, as long as the heroes are the lovers their desires and that of the magical narrative will concur; if the plot is tragic – and Wilson considers tragedy to be at odds with magical narrative – who propels the plot forward when the heroes are purged of their sin and are dead? I think that

this is an important question and reveals that although the *Morte Darthur* can be usefully analysed in relation to this theory, both Malory as compositor/writer and the troubadours themselves held their narratives as encyclical and finite. The heroes within their magical plots 'fret their hour upon the stage and then are heard no more.' The characters, like their readers, have a life span and death, and their ends - which at times fulfil aspects of the magical plot by removing rivals or expiating sin - ultimately close the *Morte*, as everyone who has internally controlled the plot dies. If there are parallels with the Bible in various allusions in the tales, then perhaps there is no coincidence that the *Morte* opens with *Genesis* – Arthur's birth – and ends with Armageddon. It is Malory's skilful use of magical narrative together with greater character development, pathos and tragedy that creates the atmosphere of 'otherworldliness' and a willingness to suspend disbelief in the modern reader that signals his initiation of the modern novel.

In the *Tales*, much is made of how things and people 'appear': Merlin *appears* as a twelve year old boy and then again as an old man to Arthur at the fountain, Uther *appears* in the likeness of the Duke of Cornwall to Igrayne, Arthur *appears* to be an inconsequential squire and the sword given by the Lady of the Lake *appears* more wonderful than the scabbard to Arthur. The hero controls not only what characters can and can't see, but also how they perceive and interpret what they see. This god-like omnipotence has a loki-like ability to disappear as Launcelot discovers when he is seen near Guinevere's bed chamber before their flight. Perhaps only by Malory removing this power can the heroes of his tale be destroyed; their position as controllers of the plot effectively preventing any such eventuality.

Another area of magic explored by Malory is shape changing which seems to be Merlin's forte. He utilizes it in order to achieve the initial object of the plot: Arthur's conception, survival and enthronement. At times his purpose is opaque, as it is when he appears disguised at Arthur's feast and requests a 'gyffte'. His early detection by the rest of the court prevents him from expressing what gift it was that he required.



In this Tale we are told of the two 'errors' which ultimately lead to Arthur's death; neither of which he could foresee as he had no foreknowledge of the sin he was committing. The first is the act of incest with Morgan his half sister and the conception of Mordred, his nemesis, whose purpose from birth seems to have been to destroy all that his father had built. Arthur's second error was his selection of the sword rather than the scabbard, a selection which reveals his interest in the practical use of the weapon, the male pursuits of war and battle, rather than the courtly wearing of fine craftsmanship. It reveals both his warrior-like nature but also his inability to understand the magical realm – with all its inherent dangers- that appeared to surround such weapons. In both cases Merlin – his magician and advisor - fails to advise Arthur before he makes his choice and only afterwards reveals the dire consequences of his mis-selection: God's displeasure with Arthur (29:35) and the power of the scabbard to prevent death by haemorrhaging. These moves may seem *unfair* and at odds with the fulfilment of the hero's desires, but in a world of pre-ordainment, events are fated and inevitable, including Arthur's death or transportation to Avalon. This 'quirkiness' or oppositional flow to the major thrust of the magical narrative perhaps reflect the mediaeval belief in fate and of the inability of the individual to control his or her own life. Regardless of status and magical powers, sin was inevitable whether consciously or unconsciously performed and the out workings of sin would lead to death and judgement; hence the attitude of so many of the knights who respond in the tales by simply 'accepting the aventure that Godde has given (them)'.

Wilson's article does not preclude allusion, but presumes that it is irrelevant in a magical narrative where stereotypical characters have no growth. While this is correct in the most part, Malory does occasionally use biblical allusion to create an element of three dimensional shadow to what are otherwise often flat characters. Who could not fail to note the parallels in the tale of Uther's desire for Igrayne with the great old testament king, David, and his overwhelming desire for Bathsheba? In both accounts, the deaths of the desired women's husbands is in a battle of the Kings' making and both were innocent victims of their king's

desires. Both were also content to marry their deceiving lovers and both bore sons that were to be 'golden age' rulers. Of course Malory does not explore the morality of Uther's passion, nor does he ascribe to him David's understanding and devastation at the consequence of his sin; but perhaps the analogy is less to do with the 'wages of sin' and the reality of the proximity of lust and power, and its consequent glow of a violent but still magical kingly past.

A further example of religious allusion might be seen in the occasions when Arthur draws the sword from the stone which followed the seasons of the church from Christmas to Pentecost and in his unsuccessful attempts - like Herod - to destroy his inchoate nemesis.

Wilson describes magical narrative as comprising a series of moves: in *Merlin* there are four: the fulfilment of Uther's desire and the conception and fostering of Arthur forms the first. Arthur's ascension to Kingship through the drawing of the sword from the stone and his physical battles for his throne are the forces which propel the second move forward. The conception of the son who will destroy him is really an aside in this tale but one which forms part of the greater tale of Arthur's own life. What the revelation of his legal right to the throne and the unravelling of the 'proof' of his birth initiates, Arthur's receipt of his sword, Excalibur, from the Lady of the Lake completes, as Arthur acquires public, courtly, legal, spiritual and magical confirmation of his right to Kingship.

Mediaeval writers enjoyed repetition and Malory was no exception: the plot has four 'moves', the sword is drawn from the stone four times and there are four women in Arthur's life, two sexual and two maternal: his mother, his adoptive mother, his sister and the mother of Borre. Two of the women are known and their relationship to Arthur is clear to him from the outset, but two - his birth mother and his half-sister are not. Both hidden relationships are dangerous for Arthur because the secret of his birth suggests that he may be illegitimate or worse of 'lowe blood'. It is because of this ignorance that he enters into a sexual relationship with his half-sister unaware of their blood-tie and defiles the natural order of relationships. In so doing he incurs God's displeasure and is cursed by

the conception of his second son and enemy, Mordred, from the relationship: the two mothers and two sexual partners balancing openness and deception in equal measure. The repetition of *four* reflects the invocation to the 'four evangelistes' by Uther when pledging to fulfil Merlin's desire.

## 2.2 Balin or The Knight with the Two Swords

In an examination of *The Tale of King Arthur*, one must assess to what extent each of the parts - such as *Balin or The Knight with the Two Swords* - are individual tales which stand alone with their own heroic character around whom the plot turns and to what extent they are the workings out of issues in relation to Arthur. The plot of *Balin* seems to be three-fold: to explore the dangerous nature of women and their capacity for betrayal, to present the complete tale of *The Knight with the Two Swords*, and to create a context in which elements of the later stories have their foundation.

The women who betray knights are Morgan le Fay, the lady in waiting from Lady Lyle of Avilion and the Lady of the Lake. Morgan le Fay betrays Arthur's trust by giving Arthur's magical scabbard that prevents death by bleeding to her lover Accolon and returning a worthless copy to Arthur. The consequences of Arthur's trustful - if rather unwise - decision are left to be revealed later in the cycle. Balyn's betrayal is effected by a young 'damoiselle' ostensibly sent by 'Lady Lyle of Avilion' who arrives with a testing game: a sword that can only be drawn by the purest knight. None of the knights are able to fulfil the challenge except Balyn. Later it is revealed that the sword was created by magical means to entrap Balyn in order to get him to kill her brother. Her treachery is compounded by the curse she places on the blade: that he who owns and uses the sword will 'slay the beste freinde' (39:44) he has with it. And finally the Lady of the Lake, who requires either Balyn's head or the 'damoiselle's' for their parts in the death of two of her relatives as the belated 'gyffte' owed to her for Excalibur.

The women in the tales are, therefore, perceived as one of two types: the good, and dutiful or the magical and unpredictable. The 'good women' are those who

are not performers of magic: such as *the Fair Maid of Astolat*, Elaine or Launceor's lady who kills herself. The magical and unpredictable ones are women such as the Lady of the Lake, Nenyve and Morgan le Fay. If we examine their stories we see that The Lady of the Lake was good in that she gave Arthur a sword and a scabbard that would protect his life but yet had been involved in having Balyn's mother unjustly declared a witch and burnt. Her beneficence could not then be relied upon! Similarly, Balyn's death at the hand of his brother is the fulfilment of the Damoiselle's curse, and the place - an enchanted island - does seem to suggest a parallel that expunges any guilt engendered by involvement with the death of the Lady of the Lake. The role of the women is, therefore, to ensure that although the heroes will have their desires, the plot will not be as predictable as a simple route from A to B. This unpredictability also ensures the reader's inability to rightly predict the outcome of the tale from the outset, thus introducing - even if superficially - an element of suspense and perhaps even of empathy with a character, as the reader identifies with a character whose life is thwarted by 'unseen' and magical forces as a mediaeval man or woman's might seem to be by his or her lord's or by the powers of nature or of providence itself.

Balyn does seem to be the controlling character of his tale in that no remorse is anticipated or shown for the killing of The Lady of the Lake. Similarly the disjunction between his meek and humble manner before he commences the game and his evident greed and hubris which is exposed when he decides to keep the sword is never explained. Information about his involvement in further deaths - other than for the one for which he was initially incarcerated - is not presented in any way which condemns him. The sword is thus eventually proven to have been designed to entrap him and his claim to innocence and virtuosity fallacious, yet it is these qualities that remain uppermost in the presentation of *Balyn* to the characters in the tale and to the reader. The logicalities of the tale supporting Wilson's analysis that the presence of such matters are acceptable in magical narrative as their resolution may not be relevant to the successful completion of the hero's moves.

Balyn's tale ensures that the reader knows about several characters and incidents that appear in later tales such as the woman needing a dish of maiden's blood. We are even told that more will be revealed about her recovery in the 'Sankgreall'. We are also told about the clearly significant tombs with golden writing (three), which predict the battle between Sir Gawain and King Pellynor, and between Tristram and Launcelot. The golden writing appears on tombs that Merlin has created and on those he has not and so cannot be seen as magic directed by Merlin, but as elements of the 'moves' which may or may not be completed in the sub tale. Finally, golden writing appears on Balyn's sword and scabbard, which still possesses its potent curse, and which is left on the island to be found by Launcelot. The moves concerning this sword are at this point incomplete, but later it will fulfil Merlin's magical incantation that it should be handled only by 'the best man in the world', and it will be with this sword that Sir Launcelot will kill his best friend, Gawain.

The sword's future seems to share certain characteristics with the sword Arthur removed from the stone to become King. Only this sword, inscribed around the pommel with golden writing, set in a stone that hovers over the water is separated from land by a bridge over which only certain men could pass because of their virtue. The magical other-worldliness of the setting reveals the incomplete move in which the sword is involved. Although its role in this particular tale is complete, its role in the overarching story of the formation and disintegration of the Round Table is not. All the elements conspire to create a sense of waiting: a timeless pause until a greater hero is born to complete the final adventure. The quest that its discoverer, Galahad, will fulfil is the greatest of the *Morte Darthur* and is possible in spiritual terms only because of Arthur's earthly achievement: the drawing together of the best knights in the world, with Galahad's father, being the best of them all.

Balyn's story itself seems to be a sequence of moves, which take him towards, away and then return him to Arthur's good graces. He does appear to be the 'hero' in that events are seen through his eyes and all acts of violence (such as

the beheading of the Lady of the Lake) are revealed to be justified. The only deaths he feels guilty for are the unnecessary death of Launceor's lover, whom he could not save from self-murder on her lover's sword, and the death in combat of his brother, Balan. He is guilty of breaking his knightly code by not managing to save the lady, and the familial code by killing someone of his own blood. The 'moves' that propel Balyn towards his death are: firstly, his winning and possession of the Lady of Avilion's sword; secondly Merlin's prediction of Balyn's early death and the arrival and beheading of the Lady of the Lake; thirdly his capture and delivery of Arthur's enemy King Royles of North Wales and finally his quest for Garlon which leads to his death in combat. Balyn's sin and guilt is expunged and the sword is placed in readiness for a more important hero in the tales: Galahad.

As Balyn dies in this the second story in King Arthur's Tale, he was, perhaps, never intended to be seen as the hero of his own story. Wilson's theory has a place for heroes' deaths expunging past guilt and effecting changed circumstances for the 'survivors' and this analysis would certainly match the facts and the 'moves' of this particular story. On a secondary note, the tale may well have been created to simply provide a vehicle for the establishment of various elements, such as the sword, which recur more significantly in later tales.

### 2.3 Torre and Pellinor

Malory's *Tale of Arthur*, for all its repetitious use of chivalric terminology and endless use of identical phrases to describe knightly combats, contains a complex structure in which an over-arching plot - such as Arthur's ascent to the throne, his forming of a knightly company, marriage to Guinevere and establishing of the knights of the Round Table - forms the shell within which a series of shorter plots or 'episodes' are worked out, and elements from future tales (such as Launcelot's love for Guinevere) are introduced. This is a structure not dissimilar from the model used by current playwrights of TV soap operas: a short plot that is worked out in a single episode but with threads that continue several longer running subplots which may form the fully blown main plots of subsequent episodes.

Allowing for this type of 'multi-plot' structure, how then does this analysis fit together with Wilson's identification of a central 'hero' who controls and dominates the plot? Arthur is not present or only briefly present in some of the sub-tales and if he were to be taken as the 'hero' in all situations, the analysis would be limited to his desire to establish a knightly team and would preclude analysis of plots which have obvious 'moves' directed by other 'heroes'.

If we examine the third sub-tale in the *Tale of King Arthur* in isolation, and follow Wilson's model, Torre could be identified as the 'hero' of the piece and his acceptance as an equal knight of the Round Table as his quest. However, that analysis does leave Arthur's marriage and the sub-quest of Sir Gawain as 'loose ends'. One must also consider the place of the sub-tale within Arthur's Tale. One possible solution is that each sub-tale has its own micro-hero who dominates the plot so long as his goals are not in opposition to the over-arching hero: Arthur.

The moves of the sub-tales are to provide us with insight into the lives and characters of the knights that Arthur collected to form the Round Table. This analysis is supported by the opening of sub-tale III, where Arthur chooses Guinevere as his Queen, a woman Merlin explicitly reveals is not 'holsom for hym to take to wyff' (59:36-37). The characters do not find it dissonant that Merlin is prepared to warn the King against a woman he had foreseen Arthur marrying – hence the complex and cyclical gift of the table from Merlin to Guinevere's father and from him to Arthur and his daughter. This type of inconsistency typifies, according to Wilson, the magical narrative structure where characters ignore all threads that do not converge to move the plot in the direction of the fulfilment of the hero's desires.

The marriage of Arthur and Guinevere results in Uther's table being restored to England as a bridal gift from Arthur's father-in-law. This 'move' ensures the seeds of the disastrous end to Arthur's rule are sown. He is told before his marriage that Launcelot and Guinevere will be lovers, but he ignores this information as if unheard, just as he ignores the inherent dangers of the arrival of a table in which the 'Sege Perelous' is identified (the seat where only one man - he who has most

worship - can sit), with its clearly divisive and envy-inducing effect on the ambitious and envious natures of King Lott's sons. Although the *Morte Darthur* reveals Arthur's awareness of the natures of Lott's sons, true to magical narrative format, he ignores the consequences of both table and warning as both are essential to the plot's moves: to bring about his glory and his destruction.

The themes of love and allegiance are interwoven with betrayal and jealousy from the first and form part of the tale of Arthur's entire kingship. The marriage, when seen from Torre as hero's perspective, is simply a vehicle to provide a context for him to obtain his knighthood.

If we allow that Sir Torre is the 'hero' of the plot, what then is his 'desire' to which the moves of the plot must conspire? His early years spent as the apparent son of a churl have not fitted him in wealth, position or status for the role of a knight, and as the Round Table knights are the 'best knights in all the world' he would seem uniquely *unfitted*. However, Malory evinced a clear belief in 'nature over nurture' and as with Arthur, royal blood always showed itself in the character of its possessors. Torre did not like nor participate in the farm work that his thirteen brothers accepted as their lot in life; but spent his time practising knightly skills, presumably as best as one could without armour, charger or training! His stepfather's request is, therefore, the first move in obtaining Torre's desire of being accepted and recognised as a true Knight of the Round Table.

Arthur's curiosity about Torre's origins leads Merlin to reveal his true paternity and establish Torre's right to knighthood through his father. The arrival of the hart, brachette, and knights followed by the abduction of a woman creates the context for the second move: Torre's quest for acceptance and recognition as a Knight. This issue of Torre's paternity makes an interesting foil to Arthur's own recent discovery and assumption of his lineage through Uther. Torre's plot does not contain a fantastical or magical conception for him, and at no point does Torre claim to be his father's legitimate son. This contrasts with Arthur for whom it is vital that he be seen to have been born in wedlock and the legitimate son of his father. The plot though magical is prosaic in that it creates magical events only to



propel the hero's desires to fruition: Torre did not have to rise to take the throne his father had left vacant and so his father's acknowledgement of him was suffice for the plot and the knight.

What then is the purpose of the episodes in the quest relating to Gawain and Pellinor? They could be ignored as 'detours', sub-sub-plots in which the actions of characters unrelated to the hero are explored. Alternately, if Wilson's theory is accurate they must have some purpose in the movement towards or the achievement of the hero's objective. How then do Gawain's and Pellinor's quests relate to Torre's desire? Gawain's actions are perhaps to reveal the contrast between the unmerciful and hence unknightly actions of the acknowledged son of a king as juxtaposed to the would-be merciful actions of the son of a king raised as a churl. Yet another example of things - and people - not being as they first appear in magical narratives, and supporting the general argument of innate rather than acquired nobility. Characters are thus cast in a particular character role before the tale commences and are not transformed by their experiences as this would be antithetical to the purpose of magical narrative.

The purpose of the tale of Pellinor's quest is to reveal his prowess with the sword - he slices a man's head in two with a single stroke, his courtesy to women and his single-minded focus on his quest to the detriment of anyone (such as the grieving woman, later eaten by lions) left behind. He is thus demonstrated to be a 'worthy' father for Torre in knightly valour and manliness but is revealed to be a careless one, not even recognising the children that he has fathered. It is left to Merlin to identify his second child of mischance from the remains of her head returned by Pellinor after the quest, and to pronounce his doom because of his neglect.

All three return to the court having fulfilled their quests, but it is Torre alone who returns without censure for some aspect of his conduct, and the final move - the retelling of the tales - places him at the Round Table with honour, his churlish past expunged.

The moves are few; perhaps because Torre's objective is simple and he does not engage the magical forces of opposition, as do those characters more central to the overarching plot. What makes this sub-tale interesting is that, yet again, the plot contains humorous scenes and situations, which Wilson insisted were irrelevant to magical plots because of the lack of distance between the hero and the audience. Torre's step-father's request of a 'gyffte' from Arthur on the occasion of his marriage when he had proclaimed that he would 'gyff ony man the gyffte that he wold ask ... excepte hit were onresonable' (61:12-13) is almost bathos. It was as unimaginable to the people of Malory's time as it would be to ours to have an uneducated farm labourer petitioning for his son to be given a knighthood. There are very few references to laughter in the tales but one can imagine that if there were no laughter it was only because the court was so astonished at his request.

Wilson further argues that comedy is irrelevant to magical narrative as it serves no purpose to the hero in his series of ritual moves that propel him or her towards the achievement of his desire or expiation of his or her sin. But, in Malory, characters that are readily identifiable as heroes according to Wilson's model, most definitely are the butt of buffoonery and experience situations that are often ridiculous, silly if not downright funny. Malory seems to enjoy presenting his key heroes, such as Launcelot, the most perfect knight in the world, in ridiculous situations; such as when in full armour his horse is shot and he must walk, or when he arrives to rescue Guinevere in a cart like a man riding to his execution, or perhaps most ignominious when Launcelot is shot in the 'thicke' of the buttocks by a passing female hunter!

The heroes perception of themselves and the readers' perception of the characters is not damaged by these farcical episodes. Laughter in Malory, is yet another ritual that the hero must endure: the ritual of pride being humbled (Launcelot) or the pride of the court in their own smug position being revealed as a sham (Torre's revelation of his relationship to Pelleas). Perhaps Wilson is wrong and that humour is a 'move' in Malory: one in which the qualities of the hero are

thrown into relief by the inappropriateness of the 'joke' and a situation – like any other knightly challenge – which they must overcome. One idiosyncrasy in Malory, is that the heroes are never offended and there is no indication that they feel ashamed of the ridiculous position in which they find themselves. The reader may infer that they are embarrassed but rage is the only emotive response permitted to the hero. To be a truly good knight, the venial sin of Pride must be rooted out and humbleness embraced, perhaps humour enables the better acquisition of this virtue!

As Wilson suggests, the characters do remain flat: although transformed in the eyes of the court from churl to knight, and knight to hero, Torre does not alter in himself; neither does Arthur avoid a marriage damned from the outset; nor, as we discover later, does Gawain change from being unmerciful to being merciful. All magical characters are predictable and act in accordance with their original intentions, neither ageing nor developing in any way.

The central incongruity appears to be that characters - and readers - are informed as to the fate of all key characters and yet none are able to alter their choices or control their actions. There is the feeling that they are living out their doom and although warned of danger - as was Arthur - they ride on to meet the adventure that God has pre-arranged for them. The 'moves' and incidents in the plot simply confirm this plan as we can see in the re-appearance of the magical writing motif when the twenty-eight names of the existing knights who have assumed their places appear etched in gold, by magic, on the Round Table. In magical narrative, agentless writing can also have predictive qualities as we saw in the previous sub-tale where it revealed the 'Sege Perelous', a seat at which only one as yet unnamed man could sit, and at which death would be the reward of inopportune knights. The knights do not respond to these aspects of magical narrative with religious prayer or with any allusion to God; He may well be the object of their final searches – as we see with Guinevere and Launcelot after the collapse of the Table and their conversions – but He is not to be perceived as the unseen hand driving the narrative. Unlike the mystery plays and the perceptions of other

Mediaeval secular writings, in magical narrative it is the desire of the character for 'lof', for honour and worship which acts as the impetus, not the writer's to reveal the dangers of damnation (as in the mystery plays), nor, within the plot, God's to reveal the error of the characters' ways and to promote salvation.

As the tale progresses, a dwarf makes an appearance and, as Sir Torre has killed his master, the 'recaunt knyght', he asks to accompany him. In mediaeval writing, particularly in those of courtly romance and knightly valour, magical plots contain certain supernatural elements and some more prosaic: white deer, golden rings, and swords are familiar to the readers but may possess hidden powers. In this tale we meet another of these elements: the servant dwarf. While familiar from court and from street entertainment, in magical narrative dwarves often appear to possess foreknowledge or magical abilities as in Chaucer's *The Boke of the Duchesse* or in Malory's Tale of Sir Gareth where the dwarf knows the nature of the quest and where Sir Torre must go to fulfil it. His appearance is not an irrelevant curiosity, then, but the impetus which ensures that Sir Torre fulfils his quest and achieves the object of his desire: acceptance as a Knight of the Round Table.

#### 2.4 The War with Five Kings

This brief tale has two simple purposes: to establish Gawain, Kay and Torre as Knights of the Round Table in their heroic defeat of five further kingly enemies of Arthur; and to dispose of Merlin. The accession of the five knights fulfils Arthur's desire of developing his court as a seat of the finest knights in the world as well as drawing more land and people under his control, but how is the loss of Merlin to Nenyve's enchantment a move towards Arthur's goal? It would seem at first assessment a severe loss to Arthur to have his mentor and advisor and prophet lost in one fell swoop; but if we assume that Merlin's demise performs a 'move' in Arthur's plot, we have to consider the object of Arthur's ultimate desire. He has already legally achieved kingship by discovering his father was king and by his prowess as a knight and leader and so his desire for power has been met. He has married the object of his romantic desire, Guinevere, and this too is presented as

magically orchestrated and inevitable, in the return of the table to England confirming the formation of Arthur's circle of knights as the sword in the stone had magically confirmed his role as future king. If we deem his desire to have been complete control over England - a nation of many kings - then he may well have also desired complete control over his actions. Although Arthur ignores Merlin's warnings about Guinevere – as a character in a magical narrative he appears deaf to them – Merlin's removal from court isolates Arthur from magical insight and guidance. This could be seen negatively in that he is now exposed to the 'adventures' of the plot without his mentor, or could be seen as the fulfilment of a further 'move' to place Arthur as unquestioned head of the court and hence of the table. In order to achieve this objective, the plot could not tolerate someone more revered or who might be seen to dominate or manipulate him at the court. If this were simply a 'normal' plot, Arthur would then have arranged a murder as in *Macbeth* or a disappearance as in *Richard III*. In a magical plot, the plot itself ensures that the desires of the 'hero' are met or his anxiety dispelled, not by his conscious action but in that all elements of the plot conspire to effect his desire or dispel his anxiety. Merlin is thus removed - like the eight dead knights in the battle with the five Kings - in order to *clear the decks*, as it were, for the next 'move': to raise Arthur to his position of Pater Familias.

## 2.5 Arthur and Accolon

This is a particularly interesting story as it fulfils the prophecy that Merlin had made earlier, that 'the serde and the scawberde scholde be stolyn by a woman frome hym (Arthur) that he moste trusted.' (76:17-18) The plot revolves around the machinations of Morgan le Fay, her hatred of Arthur, her secret love of Accolon and her deadly intentions towards her husband and her brother. Wilson points out that a key characteristic of magical narrative is that their plots are often governed by irrational systems of thought, and Morgan's hatred of Arthur seems to be of this type: of her it is said 'she hatyth (Arthur) moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode.' (88:10-11).

Perhaps her hatred is not so illogical if one considers carefully Arthur's description of his relationship to her:

'God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kin affir' (18:31-34).

In what way has he given her more honour? Apart from asking her to guard his life-preserving scabbard, Morgan has not appeared in any of the stories and so this, then, is the first of Arthur's great betrayals - the other being of course Lancelot and Guinevere's. His earlier relationship with Morgan is not developed in Malory and, as he had had one incestuous relationship, it is perhaps quite feasible that his and Morgan's relationship had been *unnaturally* close.

The moves in this sub-tale are thus directed by Arthur's need to have Morgan's treachery exposed and to expiate Arthur's guilt for allowing her to have so much power over him. It is one of Arthur's recurrent characteristics that while a good judge of male qualities he is unable to identify dangerous women - even when expressly warned against them, as he was with Guinevere.

The sub-tale opens with the pursuit of the white hart; a motif which recurs throughout the Arthurian legends and other writings of the chivalric tradition as in Chaucer's *The Boke of the Duchesse*. Magical adventures take place in forests and in Malory this is the second time a white hart's appearance precedes a quest/adventure. The sender of the first hart is not known but, in this sub-tale, the originator is Morgan le Fay. The plot draws the three men: Uryence (Morgan's husband), Accolon (her secret lover) and Arthur (her brother/Lord) away from the rest of the hunt until they are isolated.

The *brachette*<sup>5</sup> has already caught the white hart and Arthur dispatches it. The men are then drawn to a beautiful boat, with silken sails and twelve willing maidens, which they board. They eat and fall asleep only to awake and find themselves magically translated to other places. Arthur and his co-hunters seem

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<sup>5</sup> small dog or terrier

relatively unsurprised at the occurrence - their reaction typical in a magical plot where such events are accepted as natural. This is the first move: to isolate Arthur from his supporters and to place him in jeopardy.

Uryence appears to have been whisked home to safety whereas Arthur and Accolon are endangered by their displacement. Arthur chooses combat rather than a slow death by starvation for himself and in order to save the twenty remaining knights. Accolon also chooses action and is apparently motivated by a desire to aid the injured Damas. Yet faithful Accolon who prayed for his Lord and for Uryence's safety, as soon as he realises what danger they are in, reveals he has already formed a plot with Morgan to murder Arthur and assume the title of king. His decision is revealed by Morgan's dwarf's delivery of Excalibur. What is illogical is why he would pray for the safety of one he had pledged to murder? Wilson says that such illogicalities are part and parcel of magical narrative as, like dreams, characters are not constrained to be consistent, nor dreamscapes logical. It is the fulfilling of the dreamer/hero's desire or expiation of guilt that is the entire objective of the tale. Accolon's terrible quandary is the result of betraying his liege-lord by literally *sleeping with his enemy*.

The second move occurs when Arthur's death seems assured as Accolon wields Arthur's own sword, which he belatedly recognises as Excalibur. Nenyve, Merlin's nemesis appears and for love of Arthur causes Accolon to drop Excalibur. This is a direct and interesting intervention on the part of the plot in a situation where the fulfilment of the over-arching hero's desire, if not his very life, is at risk. Given this respite, Arthur grabs the sword and the battle is decided in his favour. How Nenyve knows of Morgan's involvement is purely magic, as Morgan's plan was secret even from Accolon. In a magical narrative it would appear that practitioners of actual magic have knowledge of most if not all other magical acts. So although Arthur's whereabouts were unknown and he was wearing borrowed armour and not carrying his own shield - hence Accolon's failure to recognise him - Nenyve knows immediately where to find him and to 'see through' any superficial disguise. It would suggest that those with magical powers are either overt facilitators of or

antagonists to the desires enshrined in the magical narrative. Like Gods they are able to descend and interfere in the mortal world of the magical narrative.

Accolon's change of heart provides insight into the effect of magic on characters in the plot. We are not told whether Morgan feared, in the light of his prayer, that Accolon might prove unreliable as her tool, or whether his love for her was another 'inchauntement' which had created his 'fals lustis' (88), as Arthur described them, which she feared might fail when pitted against Arthur. Whatever the cause, after Nenyve's intervention, Arthur recognises Accolon and realises that he is not his enemy, but is simply the agent of his sister, Morgan's, enmity. Although Accolon has been translated from good to evil and then through Arthur's forgiveness and his death to a state of grace again, the magical narrative presents both Accolon and Arthur as untouched by the taint of Morgan's treachery. Accolon has expiated his sin with his life, but is presented as her unwitting tool. The plot seems to suggest that only those who are knowingly treacherous are guilty of that sin.

The third move in the tale is Arthur's forgiveness of Accolon, culminating in Accolon's death and Arthur's punishment of Morgan: his revelation of his repossession of his sword and scabbard and his despatch to her of her dead lover's corpse. Morgan is prevented from murdering her husband by her maid and son but she wreaks her revenge on Arthur by escaping the court, stealing the scabbard and when cornered throwing it into the lake, thus destroying Arthur's one opportunity of avoiding death by haemorrhaging, and obtaining almost knightly immortality.

One of the significant aspects of a magical plot is the inability of its characters to recognise and act upon significant information. Although Arthur is warned on several occasions by Merlin to preserve and protect the scabbard yet he gives it to his sister - a known enchantress. Until all the moves are completed Arthur cannot achieve his doom and it is this sense of complete predestination which echoes Renaissance Christian thought in the tales. However, the lack of insight displayed by the characters and their inability to absorb and act upon significant



warnings are elements typical of purely magical narrative and which ignore all the introspective devices of prayer and meditation propounded at the time and still observed today.

The sub-tale closes with Morgan sending Arthur a message full of portent and menace and creates the final 'move, and her exposure as traitor-sister and deadly enemy is complete. Arthur's deep guilt about his suspicions of her is assuaged by the revelation of her deadly enmity.

I feare hym nat whyle I can make me and myne in lykeness of  
stonys, and lette hym wete I can do much more than I see my  
tyme. (93:7-9)

The purpose of this plot is thus to expiate Arthur's guilt at allowing Morgan too much power over him and his deep-seated suspicions (unmentioned) of her. By killing her lover, and recovering his sword he has regained his manhood. He has also dealt her a serious blow but as her final message demonstrates she is not cowed and her menacing presence lingers until the end of the entire cycle when she is transformed into one of the Queens who carry Arthur's dying body across the lake.

It is possible that another interpretation of the sub-tale could be made. Wilson identifies the hero as the one 'controlling the plot' (Wilson: 86) and it is apparent that Morgan is the one originating the complex situation in which Arthur and Accolon find themselves. Her objective could also be to expiate her guilt about her relationship with Arthur or to fulfil her own desire for the throne. However, in Wilson's analysis the hero/dreamer's plots are always to fulfil their unexpressed desire and although Morgan comes close to success, she is thwarted by the actions of another enchantress, Nenyve. It is the failure of Morgan's scheme that makes me propose that Arthur is in fact the controller of the plot, with Morgan's schemes operating to create a context in which Arthur is permitted to fulfil his desire of exposing his sister and sanctioning her banishment from Camelot.

Wilson's analysis is aimed at describing tales of romance and folk tales and is perhaps stretched to accommodate plots that are as complex as Malory's where the resolution of the dreamer/hero's desires only being achieved in the outworking of the complex warp and weft of multiple plots and sub-plots. If one applies this stricture to the tale of Arthur and Accolon, one can see immediately that the magical narrative of the sub tale – though peopled with other characters – fulfils only Arthur as overarching hero's desires.

The sub-tale demonstrates many of the facets of magical narrative that Wilson has identified as typical in her theory: rituals, repetition and predictable language and events. The series of rituals that lead to the fight - the hunt, the ship with silken sails, the translation to other places when asleep by magic, the pledges made to fight to the death, the false sword and false sister, and the true sword and true 'sister' (Nenyve), and the last messages. The narrative also employs repetitive phraseology to describe fight scenes, where each 'gaff many grete strokes' (85:38), and 'buffette'(s) that they were 'wrothe oute of measure' (85:10); swords always 'braste' and men always 'falle to the erthe': the language of the fight is as clichéd and as predictable as a 1950s Western. Fritscher damns Malory's style as 'hardly more than pedestrian (in his) use of stylistic metaphor'. (1967:1) whereas Wilson recognises the repetitive nature of language usage in magical narratives., viewing it as 'incantation': the ritual use of language for magical purposes and hence an essential part of the rituals of the 'moves'.

## 2.6 Gawain, Yvain and Marhalt

This last book or sub-tale in the *Tale of King Arthur* opens with an irate Arthur arriving back at his court bent on revenge on his sister, Morgan le Fay; but it is she who pre-empts his plans with a diabolical plot of her own: she sends him a gift, a coat which when worn will burn the wearer to death. As with all magical gifts is *seems* like a good thing and Arthur is gulled by her offer of 'amends'. He is only spared a certain death by the appearance and advice of Nenyve, Merlin's acolyte and. Her second intervention advances her to the role of Arthur's protector from enchantresses, a position being one of ironic transposition as it was she who

buried Merlin 'quyck'. It is worth noting here that Arthur and other heroes in the cycle are frequently put in the most jeopardy by the women they love or serve, and it was Merlin's regard for Nenyve which ensures that his feared for doom is fulfilled.

The moves in magical narrative often incorporate a 'tit-for-tat', mirror image situation, as we see in this tale when Morgan's handmaiden is forced to wear the deathly coat she has brought from Morgan le Fay and must perish in the place of Arthur. Arthur is 'wondirly wrothe' (94:8) and yet in relation to his sister's attempt to have him killed with a diabolic coat and take his throne, the expulsion of Uwayne for allegedly being part of his mother's conspiracy seems a rather slight retributive injustice. Gawain, ignoring his bond of allegiance to Arthur - his uncle - leaves because of the banishment of his cousin. The illogically of that choice has less to do with the structure of magical narrative and more to do with the presentation of Gawain as the hot-headed trouble maker both at and away from court. Fritscher would argue that this move reveals the schism in Arthur's family: his court and loyal nephews and step-family in opposition to his headstrong and treacherous nephews, sister-lover and nephew-son - the family of King Lott.

It is essential to the moves that Gawain leaves the court with Uwayne in order for his merits as a knight to be measured against those of his cousin, and later against Sir Marhault whom they encounter early in their adventure. Although Arthur does not have an active role in the rest of the narrative, both Marhault and Uwayne send their defeated knights to him as an act of allegiance and return at the end of a twelve month with their damsels and the stories to the King. Gawain sent no vanquished knights nor returned with his damsel, as he had broken a series of 'trouths' and she had left him as a 'recryaunte' knight.

In Wilson's analysis Arthur does not fulfil a key parameter - that of the *obvious* controller of the plot - and so should not be designated the hero of this sub-tale; and yet not one of the knights, nor either of the enchantresses, Nenyve and Morgan le Fay, is responsible for all the events. Who then is the controller? I would posit that it is still Arthur as the visible defeat of Morgan, even if only with

the magical help of Nenyve to balance the supernatural power of Morgan, enhances his position as King and victor, desires which we have already identified as part of the overarching plot of the tales. The Quest that the three knights of the title undertake, while offering them challenges, is effectively to sift and expose knightly qualities that should be retained for the Round Table and to reveal another aspect of Gawain's un-knightliness. The only beneficiary of such an investigation, apart from the reader, is Arthur in his aim to collect the best knights in the world at the Round Table to enhance his power and worship.

The quest began, as is *de rigeur* for chivalric tales and Malory in particular, in a forest. This repetitious use of setting is identified by Wilson as a defining feature of magical narrative as the characters are principally figures in rituals. In this sub-tale Uwayne enters the ritual of the purgative quest: one that will free him from the slur of treasonous association with his mother. The other knights accompany him as his companions. This would be a convenient and tidy analogy that would follow simple moves of: banishment, quest encountered, quest undertaken nobly and a return to forgiveness and honour: all moves which Uwayne does undertake. However, the larger part of the remaining narrative is absorbed in Gawain's troth-breaking, licentiousness, betrayal and failure to love 'all good ladyes and jantyllwomen...as a knyght ought to do' (97:1-2).

If the first move is the banishment of Uwayne then the second move is the encounter with the three women at the well. Each woman is half the age of the next (sixty, thirty and fifteen) with their status being reflected in their headdresses of gold garland, gold circlet and circlet of flowers respectively. Two women wear circlets, which may symbolise their sexuality - the flowers possibly symbolising maidenhood or youth, with the gold circlet representing knowledgeable womanhood and the third woman wearing a gold garland which might suggest that she is no longer young and sexually active but rather wears a garland of golden experiences.

Women in *The Morte Darthur* are either good or unpredictable enchantresses, therefore the knights must choose and choose wisely. Uwayne considers well and

selects the eldest, to balance his lack of experience; Marhault chooses the one closest to his age and leaves - according to Gawain - the 'levyest' to him: the knights' choices reflecting their characters and dispositions. The knights' selection of a woman leaves them committed to the journeys and adventures that have been prearranged by that woman. As this is a magical narrative, none of the characters are the least bit surprised to discover the three women alone nor to encounter three knights riding through the forest; likewise, the origins of the women are not revealed nor enquired after and there is consensus amongst all characters that the women will supply the obstacles necessary for a knightly adventure. It is this quality of sub-conscious acceptance of the bizarre and other-worldly, as well as a fatalistic acceptance of being on an adventure arranged by some other force - God as the knights say - that makes the Malory tales clearly part of Wilson's group of magical narrative tales. The ages of the women are also part of the ritual, each one is double the age of the next., and the Knight's selection of a damsel is also part of a test, as we have seen repeatedly (and which heroes never learn in magical narrative) is that what *appears* best might not prove to be the wisest choice in the long run.

The third move is the separation of the three knights and just as they have been brought together by adventure so too must they be divided. They pledge a troth to follow the women, and their different roads, and to return in a twelvemonth'. (97:42).

Gawain is rapidly abandoned by his damsel as he did not intervene when Sir Pelleas was led away and so he has broken his pledge to ride with her throughout the adventure. As the youngest, he thought he had drawn the best, but she leaves him at the first opportunity to ride off with another knight. Her early departure allows the next move in the plot, as with a young maiden riding behind him, Gawain would not have been able to seduce Ettarde!

Gawain pledges a second troth to the dolorous knight, Sir Pelleas, to turn Ettarde's hatred to love. He also pledges to return within a day and a night to reveal to Pelleas what he has achieved. He pledges a third troth to Ettarde that he

has killed Sir Pelleas and on that basis she 'granted hym to fulfille all his desyre' (102:30). Gawain has, of course not kept any of his promises and has betrayed both friend and lover. He is a troth-breaker, possibly the worst sin a knight could commit and he must expect to be punished by God in mediaeval thinking and within a magical narrative by the turnings of the plot itself.

In this story there is a repetitious use of the number three: three damsels, three knights, and three highways. Gawain pledges three further troths and breaks all three. Ettarde has three pavilions, and Pelleas visits Gawain and Ettarde's pavilion three times while they sleep. On the third visit he leaves his sword across their throats and Gawain's troth-breaking is exposed. The number three has powerful magical significance and forms almost an incantation that runs through the plot to create the magic of the rituals that enable the hero to obtain his desire. The number is associated with Christian power – the Trinity – and is thus a power for good, but it is also associated with witchcraft and evil and with the casting of spells as with the three witches in *Macbeth*.

The tales are all set within an ecclesiastical calendar with jousts and admission to the King's table being frequent around the feast of Pentecost, but Candlemass, Christmas and Whitsuntide are all mentioned but it is possible that the numbers in the tale are also related to biblical numerology. The knights' journey to find adventure lasts seven days and seven is the number of perfection in the Cabala; there are twelve maidens in the tower as there were twelve disciples and twelve is thus the perfect number for a company. It could also be that as the twelve maidens were witches, according to Pelleas, the number twelve was chosen from the Cymrhodhion, as the Brythonic Celts count in groups of twelve. The use of three could reflect the triumvirate nature of the godhead, or of the power of a unite group as in Ecclesiastes 8:4 where a 'triple-stranded cord is not easily broken.' Whatever the intent of the author, the use of the same numbers repeatedly provides the suggestion of the invocation of a spell: a magical refrain that echoes throughout the tales.

It is only Nenyve's intervention, her second in the sub-tale, which prevents Pelleas' death from love. Her third is to invert their feelings so that Pelleas hates Ettarde and Ettarde loves Pelleas. Ettarde then dies of heartbreak and Pelleas marries Nenyve. Gawain simply rides off into the forest in search of further adventure. What then is the object of this move? In the over-arching plot, Gawain's true nature as an unworthy knight is revealed as is his unfitness for his place at the Round Table. Nenyve's action neutralises his actions in the sub-tale and saves the good knight, Sir Pelleas, for his seat at the Round Table and his later role in the Quest for the Holy Grail.

Wilson argues that magical narrative ends when what the hero or heroine desires is brought about (Wilson: 86). This tale does not quite fulfil that parameter as it ends when the twelvemonth of the quest is over, which appears to coincide with the term of Uwayne's banishment as he returns to court with Gawain and Marhault, and the retelling of their tales to the assembled company. Perhaps if the true onus of the plot is the search for suitable candidates for seats at the Round Table then the plot is fulfilled when Marhault and Pelleas are nominated to two vacant seats.

### **3. The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere**

#### **3.1 The Poisoned Apple**

*The Tale of the Poisoned Apple* opens with the court's joy at the safe return of Sir Launcelot and Sir Bors from the quest for the Holy Grail. The spiritual nature of their quest and their almost 'other worldliness' is alluded to by Malory: 'as the Booke of the Sankgreall makith mencion' (611:3). Sir Bors and Sir Launcelot are the only ones who have returned from the Quest; Percival and Galahad having been perfect and therefore able to continue on the journey to the end, i.e. death itself. Launcelot expressly tells us that it was his earthly love for Guinevere which prevented him from achieving in the Quest what Galahad, as a virgin knight, could.

Unusually in a magical narrative, Launcelot as hero appears to have absorbed something from his experience and decides to forego the sinful pleasures of Guinevere's bed and on his return holds himself aloof. Again – unlike the characters of magical narrative who tend to hold to fixed ideas – he relents and eventually 'began to resorte unto quene Guinevere agayn' (611:10-11).

As this is the first in the later tales we will be examining in this 'Book of Launcelot and Guinevere' it is worth commenting on Malory's creation of a more *rounded* hero; Launcelot's inability to maintain his position of 'splendid isolation' being more in keeping with a naturalistic character than the static and predictable heroes of his magical narrative thus far.

Launcelot's resumption of his role as Guinevere's true knight was not only acceptable, but also expected within the code of chivalry and the romance genre. Knights were expected to conduct amours with ladies and to do battle with other knights for the honour of themselves and to defend their ladies. However, Launcelot had made a 'promyse' to abstain from Guinevere's bed and although imperfect in comparison with his son Sir Galahad who had never known a woman, was still the 'perfectest man in the world'.

This promise predates the tale and ensures that Launcelot remains an earthly man: imperfect and in sin, good but not 'best'; and later, when he fails to keep his oath, forms the first of the 'moves'. Whether Guinevere and Launcelot were adulterers is left to the reader to construe, but having made the oath, he becomes an oath-breaker when he allows his recent spiritual elevation to pale and pall and to allow her attraction for him to reassert itself. Launcelot is the 'hero' according to Wilson's pattern for magical narratives: it is *his* story and, although Sir Gawain, the knights, King Arthur and Queen Guinevere all play their parts, it is the cycle that takes us from the 'oath', through his experience of oath breaker and defamed knight, to his restoration as the knight who is still the 'perfectest in the world' and the rightful defender of the Queen, that fulfils the moves.



Launcelot is the object of the tale's 'single point of view' (Wilson: 82) and the plot is 'magic created in the mind in order to bring about desires and dispel (his) fear and guilt' (Wilson: 811). When he quested for the Holy Grail, he was never openly condemned for 'sinning': his love for the Queen being seen as the accepted part of his manly life as a knight. His single-mindedness, in that: 'he was sette upon her inwardly' (611:13) is used only to reveal that he was a faithful and true knight. His return to court does, however, prompt a re-ignition of their physical love and 'They loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde' (611:14). The surreptitious nature of their relationship is demonstrated by their arranging trysts in which they 'had many prevy draughts togydir' (611:17). It is perhaps worth considering that as the genre of courtly romance presumably turned a 'blind eye' to adulterous liaisons as part of the knightly ideal – a knight must have his lady after all – that Launcelot and Guinevere's love was acceptable. Inherent in the tales is an antipathy to treachery and to any danger that will result in discord in the court and I would posit it is this danger that results in the magical narrative operating towards the destruction of a relationship between two characters who have operated as heroes in the *Morte Darthur's* sub-tales.

Their relationship provides fodder for one of Launcelot's enemies: Aggravayne. And his discovery of their relationship places Launcelot in immediate jeopardy. At no time is Arthur's honour or the safety of the realm, or Launcelot's allegiance to Arthur raised or questioned. The matter of his wife and chief knight's adultery is simply a matter of ensuring that it did not become publicly known. Aggravayne is dismissed by the narrator as simply a troublemaker 'for he was ever opynne-mouthed' (611:19). It is this risk of exposure that precipitates the second move: Launcelot's departure from court because of Guinevere's failure to understand her danger should their relationship become known. He cautions her that while he could ride off she 'must abyde all that woll be seyde unto you'. His advice is ignored, and he is deliberately misunderstood, because of Guinevere's 'wyllfull foly' (612:6). She banishes him as a 'common lecher' and Launcelot leaves with Sir Bor's comforting words that the queen had often quarrelled with him but that she was often the 'first that repented hit'. (612:43-44). Although Launcelot had

presented himself to court as something of a 'gay Lothario' he had felt assured – wrongly – that she would understand his ploy and would concur with the wisdom of his concealment of his monomania for her. His departure leaves her protected from potential slander and dishonour should anyone discover the true nature of their actual relationship, but removes him from his place as her protector at court. Guinevere fails to see her danger until after she is arraigned for poisoning Sir Patryse at a dinner. Sir Mador appeals Arthur for the case to be taken to 'the utterance' and none of the knights of the court will defend her. Ironically and illogically her husband, Arthur, may not act as her champion as he is the 'judge'. Without a champion to prove by winning a fight with Sir Mador, she is judged guilty by default and sentenced to be burnt.

Although Merlin forewarned Arthur before his marriage of the love that would exist between Launcelot and Guinevere, he seems to have 'forgotten' that prophecy and demonstrates a complete lack of knowledge about her situation. It is even more bizarre when Arthur testily upbraids her for not keeping Launcelot beside her:

'What aylith you..that ye can nat kepe Sir Launcelot upon youre syde? For wyte you well...who that hath Sir Launcelot upon his party hath the moste man of worshyp in thys worlde upon hys syde. (615:35-38)...'he wolde nat grucche to do batayl for you' (615:21).

The magical plot's complete concern with facilitating the desire of the hero means that other characters such as Arthur are blind and unable to act appropriately in the scene. His passivity towards her situation - she is about to be burnt - seems unchivalrous, and the plot's failure to indicate his anxiety reveals the strangely dream-like and obsessive nature of magical plots. Husbands are not required to feel or act like husbands unless the needs of the hero of the plot require them to do so and no other character's needs are deemed to be sufficiently relevant to the narrative to be acted upon.

Sir Bors refuses her request at first as he was at the dinner, too. The plot turns as she kneels and begs forgiveness for her treatment of Launcelot who always

supported her in her 'ryghte and in (her) wronge' (616:6). Arthur's arrival persuades Bors, for 'the love ye owghe Sir Launcelot' (616:21), to defend her until a better knight presents himself. Bors goes to Launcelot who is overjoyed: 'A, Jesu...thys ys com happely as I wolde have hit' (616:36), as it provides him with his opportunity to save the Queen and restore himself in her good graces. Guinevere's desperation precipitates the third move: Launcelot's return to her favour and to his position as 'the perfectest knight' and most suitable champion for the Queen. Meanwhile, Arthur instructs Guinevere to ask Sir Bors for help.

Bors returns to court and twice repeats his commitment to defend Guinevere, 'until a better knight appears'. Launcelot arrives incognito and Launcelot defeats Mador and makes him withdraw his appeal of treason. However, Launcelot is injured in the affray. He removes his helmet to reveal his true identity, having had to assume a neutral persona until his honour with the queen was restored, and reveals to all his duty to Guinevere as she had saved him from embarrassment on the day of his knighthood: a rather trite reason for such loyalty and passion. His allegiance was to Arthur for giving him his knighthood, but his allegiance to Guinevere is revealed as a personal - if not sexual - one. He had promised to be her knight 'in rhyght othir wronge' (620:30). Guinevere's tears and repentance for her 'unkyndenesse' close the move and their prior relationship is resumed.

Nenyve reveals the true plot to kill Gawain, whose role seems to be one of invariable troublemaker - whether as agent or as victim! – and the tale ends with Guinevere and Launcelot's honour restored. It seems ironic that the magical narrative should operate both productively and counter-productively in the same tale: it operates productively to fulfil Launcelot's desire to be reconciled with Guinevere, but counter productively in that by forcing him to return and resume his physical relationship with her, the over-arching plot and hero – Arthur and the success of the Round Table – are placed in jeopardy.

It is perhaps this inherent counter-current that reveals Malory's shift from following or encoding the traditions of an earlier phase of narrative – magical narrative – into something more modern, in which the plot does not fulfil all of the hero's or

reader's desires, and in which consequence, tragedy and humour will play an increasing part.

### 3.2 The Fair Maid of Astolat

One of the regular patterns within the Arthurian Cycle is Malory's use of church feasts as a measure of time passing. The tale of The Fair Maid of Astolat is set at Lady Day and Launcelot is still recovering from the wound he suffered in the previous tale defending Guinevere's honour. Guinevere is also 'syke and might nat ryde' (621:37) and becomes apprehensive about comment on their both remaining at home when everyone else had gone off to the joust. Her attitude is so different from that expressed in the previous tale that Launcelot comments humorously: 'Hit ys late com syn ye were woxen so wyse!' Malory's use of realistic and humorous idiom reveals his shift from the prescriptive and iterative phraseology of magical narrative which dominated the earlier tales towards a more modern and realistic presentation of character.

Launcelot's reaction is, as in the previous tale, always to do what best pleases her; so he leaves to take 'the aventure that God wyll gyff me.' (666:27-28). Guinevere's anxiety to conceal their relationship precipitates the first move: the separation of the lovers. As in the previous tale, while there is the danger of discovery in their being together, there is always greater physical danger to one or the other in being apart. Only when their relationship is finally exposed in the *Morte Darthur*, does their being together precipitate their deaths. Even after the destruction of the round Table, Launcelot and Guinevere only die when their relationship has been sundered irrevocably.

Launcelot's decision to conceal his identity by borrowing the shield from his host's injured and recently knighted son means that he can pass unknown at the joust: a 'new' knight being unknown to those at Arthur's court. This is of course illogical as Arthur would have had to make the boy a knight and the court would have heard and seen the proceedings. Illogicalities are an accepted part of magical narrative as all elements of the plot are subsumed in the hero's desire and in its fulfilment,

however as Malory has begun to introduce some rounding of character, and as we move towards the tragic dénouement of the lovers' destruction, it does seem rather unmotivated for Launcelot to want to fight against Arthur and his family and friends. No reason is offered - not even a reference to his anger at their treatment of Guinevere in the previous tale or of his being wounded by a fellow knight of the Round Table in her defence. Miraculously he finds the shield of an unknown knight available at the place he is lodging; all conspires to fulfil his objective. In the earlier stories this type of serial improbabilities would not be questioned as the tales feature improbability as one of their defining characteristics, but in the later tales it appears as if the narrative lacks motive and as if the writer has failed to supply us with some mechanism in order to place Launcelot in the lists. As the style of narrative shifts from the purely magical to a more realistic vein, the acceptance by the reader of an implicit magical motivation slips and the writer is required to supply cause and motive for his character's actions. In this instance Malory provides us with nothing and we are left to conjecture Launcelot's motive and the purpose of this 'move'.

Interestingly the daughter of the house's request that Launcelot carry her sleeve into the jousts ensures that his identity would be efficiently concealed as he had never carried a woman's favour before and therefore everyone who knew him would be duped. His uncharacteristic acceptance of her offer is inexplicable and cannot be analysed as part of magical narrative: his exposure as an opponent of his Kings and his deliberate irritation of his love would in no way fulfil any desire on his part. If there are any 'moves' at work here, it could only be those which are operating to reveal his relationship with Guinevere and to create division in the court and lead to the destruction of the fellowship. As this is not the desire of any of the heroes, and particularly not of Arthur, the over-arching hero, it has to be identified as the shift of the modern narrative and Malory's interest in developing dramatic tension in what is the penultimate 'book' of the tales.

Aside from this initial inconsistency and despite the fact that not all of Malory's plots have an obvious hero with an obvious desire that is fulfilled by the plot; *The*

*Fair Maid of Astolat* is a tale in which Launcelot demonstrates the perfect nature of his love for Guinevere and in which her passions and jealousies are revealed to be unfounded. She knows that but for his love for her he would have completed the Quest of the Holy Grail. He is therefore not the perfect knight in the spiritual sense of 'sinless', but the 'perfectest knight in all the erthe'. He is true and unlike Gawain, never dallies with women's affections, doesn't seduce them and is in all things Guinevere's true knight. The moves have a second objective, which is to bring Guinevere to humble repentance for mistreating Launcelot. He is therefore the obvious 'hero', in the sense of the one for whom the plot engineers the fulfilment of his desires, in this tale.

The third move is to expose Launcelot to temptation or at least introduce the cause of Guinevere's jealousy. Launcelot is never tempted, but makes a grievous mistake: to wear her colours, for 'Never dud (he) erste so much for no damesell.'(623:43). The consequences of coming so close and experiencing even this amount of Launcelot's favour is 'hote love' and as Malory tells us at this point, Elaine will die of love. Magical narratives do not concern themselves with tragedy, Wilson argues, as the purpose of the plot is to bring about the hero's desires. Tragedy serves no purpose in effecting this goal and so is not a tool used in this type of narrative structure. Wilson's theory proves to be true in this case, as although Launcelot is ultimately reproved by Guinevere, for not showing her some 'jantlylesse', no one seems to be traumatised by Elaine's death. Her deathbed letter and styx-like journey down the Thames seem a fitting end to her unreturned love.

The fourth move occurs after Launcelot has roundly beaten all concerned, with more clashing like boars and other repetitive descriptions of knightly combat as when he 'hurled into the thyckest prees of them alle' (626:40), after he withdraws from the battle injured severely by Sir Bors. Launcelot watched the fight from a wood and returns to the same. Woods and forests are sites that occur repeatedly in tales of knights and courtly love as scenes of magic and adventure. Launcelot's adventure seems about to take a turn for the worse as, after demanding that

Lavayne pull out the truncheon of the lance, he loses blood, 'nyghe a pynte at onys' (627:34). His wounds are indirectly caused by his love for Guinevere as had she not insisted that he seek 'worship' and put her at risk he would still have been recuperating from his earlier wound.

Concealment is a repetitive element in this tale: the concealment of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship, and his concealment of his identity from Elaine and her family, from his own fellow knights and thirdly from the hermit who would heal him. The plot seems to work backwards from this point as the Hermit recognises him from an old wound on his cheek, and the shield that concealed his identity is replaced by one which reveals who he is to Gawain and Elaine.

The plot also contains two 'mistakes', both instigated by Elaine: the first is Lancelot's wearing of Elaine's colours and the second is her showing Gawain, Launcelot's own shield. The wearing of one and the hiding of the other were meant, by Launcelot, to conceal his identity whereas to Elaine, and to the watching Guinevere, the display of a women's colours was an overt declaration of his love. The confusion wrought by his wearing a love token as a disguise rebounds on Launcelot and it is the discovery of his hidden male symbol, his shield, which leads to his unmasking and ultimate return to Guinevere's favour. The sleeve and the shield do seem to be contrapuntal symbols of gender, as women wore beautiful sleeves to attract men, and men wore beautiful shields to repel other men; both clothes and shields being a statement of the gender, identity and status of the wearer. Launcelot, indirectly, exchanges his shield for Elaine's sleeve and ignores the potent symbolism of wearing her colours at jousts. This move of 'exchange' and deception precipitates him into great physical danger.

The two mistakes are balanced by the exchange of two kisses: the one given by Launcelot to the fainting Elaine and the second given by Elaine to the fainting Launcelot after his third wound. Both kisses appear to be 'medicinal', but whereas Elaine's is motivated by passion, Launcelot's simply creates a sense of obligation in him resulting in his offer of a dowry, as he will not accept her proposal of

marriage. Launcelot's offer of a £1000 seems crass in relation to Elaine's offer of love, but was a practical response to an impossible situation. It was undoubtedly a vast sum of money in those days guaranteeing her, her pick of any man she would have for a husband. This gesture on Launcelot's part does provide the glimmer of a round character, one that feels pity for someone who experiences 'unrequited love'. That he is not more tormented, nor experiences profound guilt when she dies returns us to his 'dreamer' role in the narrative and as her death does not in anyway fulfil his desire – other than to release him from a sense of obligation to her – leaves her passing as a minor irrelevancy in a magical narrative.

Elaine like Arthur did not accept that Guinevere was Launcelot's only love and he, hers. This is Launcelot's opportunity to choose a 'good' woman', marry and avoid his part in the final destruction of Camelot. But his choice was fixed on Guinevere, and recorded by Merlin, long before he and Elaine ever met.

Guinevere recognises immediately the significance of the sleeve and is justifiably - in chivalric terms - furious. Ironically, once Elaine reveals her knowledge of his name, he recognises the consequences of discovery and remarks, 'alas!...that repentith me that my name ys knowyn, for I am sure hit wyll turne untyll angir'. (633:31-32) Although he may be speaking about his fellow knights, it is most unlikely as the strategy of fighting for the other side, seems to be a common one as Launcelot, Tristram and Galahad all do at one time or another in the cycle. His fear was for Guinevere's reaction, and her 'grete angur' was as he had predicted.

The next move is Launcelot's sending of Lavayen to seek Sir Bors and obtain forgiveness from all for concealing his identity and fighting his kin. Sir Bors arrives with news of Guinevere's anger and sadly informs Launcelot that he had already guessed his reasoning and told her, but to no avail. He tries to encourage Launcelot to see Elaine as an alternative, but recognises that this is unlikely as 'she is nat the first that hath loste hir payne upon you, and that ys the more pyté.' (635:15-16).



Launcelot has three wounds in this tale. The first is in the thigh, and he has this wound at the outset (from a friend in defence of Guinevere), the second, in the side, is from Sir Bors (a friend and at a joust which he attended to please Guinevere) and the third is caused by his desire to return to a joust at which he knew she would be. Malory uses repetitions in series of threes frequently and it is only after the third incident has occurred that the rituals can be resolved and the desire achieved. Three seems to form both a barrier and an incantation, both recognisable elements of magic and ritual. Although Guinevere is identified as the indirect cause of Launcelot's wounds, at the end of the 'over-arching' tale, he is able - by separation - to cleanse himself of the great sin of his sexual desire for her.

Launcelot's return to court pleases everyone except his three greatest enemies: Aggravayne, Mordred and Gawain and his greatest love: Guinevere, who held herself aloof from the general welcome. The arrival of Elaine's corpse provides the impetus for the next move: Guinevere's realisation that Launcelot is innocent of any wrongdoing and has (again) chosen her and done right even when rejected by her. He cannot choose another or stop loving her for:

I love nat to be constrayned to love, for love muste only aryse of  
the harte selff and nat by none constraynte... for where he (love)  
is bonden he lowsith hymself. (641: 40-41)

Magical narratives ensure that only the hero's needs are addressed and so Arthur's complete ignorance of what is passing so passionately before his eyes continues. Launcelot's words could be applied to himself in that he could not love Elaine even if he had wanted to, as only if it rose up in his heart spontaneously could he have loved her. Or, they could refer to Guinevere's relationship with Arthur, in that although we are told in *The Tale of Arthur* that he loved her, we have not yet been told what her feelings were towards her husband. Malory's French sources record her initial passion for her husband, but in Malory's own version her passion and her spleen seem to rotate on Launcelot's axis.

The moves reach their goal when Launcelot is able to reprove Guinevere for her injustice to him:

Thys is nat the firste tyme... that ye have ben displese with me causeles. But Madam, ever I muste suffir you, but what sorrow that I endure ye take no forse. (642: 8-11)

It is interesting that once reconciliation has been achieved Guinevere always recognises his faithful demeanour and commitment to her. Her lively and passionate nature is much more than a foil to Launcelot's 'hero' role, and her uncertainty, jealousy, haughty dismissal, refusal to hear reason from his family and friends and fury to find that he has given a first - the wearing of a woman's colours - to another, defines a much more robust character than Wilson's theory would predict. Guinevere does seem to 'learn' from past tales in that the ending of one carries over to the next and she instructs Launcelot not to go disguised without telling his family, and in future to wear her colours to over-ride his decision to wear - if temporarily - the colours of another. Launcelot is the 'dreamer' in that he ignores all consequences (enraging Arthur at the jousts or Guinevere with the 'rede sleeve') and the situation resolves in his favour, with harmony restored and all worship given him by the court.

### 3.3 The Great Tournament

The links between each of the first three tales in *Launcelot and Guinevere* do suggest a little character growth, as Guinevere recognises that fighting while disguised has dangerous consequences for Launcelot. Her jealousy is barely sublimated, as she demands that he wear her 'slyeve of golde' and ironically reveals that he is wearing her colours. As her knight and champion, it would have been acceptable for him to wear a woman's colours, even a married woman's. Malory insists that things were different in those days, but one wonders to what extent readers were to have believed that when, in the previous tale, Launcelot goes to such lengths to prove that Elaine is 'a clene mayden for me, bothe for dede and wylle' (639:9). The passionate nature of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship leads them both repeatedly into danger, as we see in *The Knight of*

*the Cart*, and ultimately to their deaths. The knightly ideal, insisted on serving and loving ladies; hence Gawain's questions to Pelleas regarding the accusations of the twelve damsels that he was no knight if he did not love ladies and do them service, 'as a knyghte oughte to do' (97:1-2).

That these relationships overspilled into passionate affairs is undoubted and recorded in tales such as *Tristram and Iseult*. The tension in the relationship between Launcelot and Arthur and Guinevere is that of the endless pull between their roles as King and Queen; sovereign and subject; champion knight and his lady, husband and wife, lover and paramour: a classic *ménage à trois*.

The tale opens with Launcelot still recovering from the previous tale's wounds. Having achieved general respect and a reconciliation with Guinevere, the aim of this tale appears to be to present the noble and perfect knight, Launcelot, in as farcical a light as possible, as a mediaeval Diana shoots an arrow into his buttocks! Yet even in such circumstances he cannot be kept from the fight and he goes to the joust: unable to 'sytte in no sadyll' (644:11). If Launcelot is the hero what is the purpose of presenting him in such a demeaning light? Even wounded in the posterior he is able to defeat fifty of Arthur's knights and perhaps the tale provides little more than an opportunity to reconcile with Guinevere and to wear her colours at the joust.

If, as Wilson posits, the tales are little more than dream scenes in which all events are seen through the eyes of the dreamer, then we have to identify the Diana figure as in some sense reflecting Launcelot's fear of women. Like Guinevere, she injures him - where it hurts him most: - his pride. Again, like Guinevere, the wound is inflicted unintentionally, but it is painful and embarrassing for Launcelot. The site of his injury, and the details about the length of the wound - 'six inchys depe and inlyke longe' (648:12-3) - when no other wound is measured in the book, suggests that the injury may well prove to be a significant move. Does it signify indirectly a punishment for his sexual relationship with Guinevere? It seems too ludicrous to be yet another demonstration of his courage when he decides to joust on, pain or no pain.

Again Launcelot enters the lists against Arthur - this time identified by his kin by the Queen's colours on his helmet. He unseats his arch-enemies: Mordred, Aggravayne and Gawain joined by thirty other Knights of the Round Table. Arthur also recognises Launcelot and is angered by his fight against his knights. Launcelot is only able to continue with the help of Gareth who is counselled by Bors to go disguised. This concealment provides the second move, as Gareth borrows a shield - which mirrors Launcelot's deception in the previous tale - and comes unrecognised by Launcelot to his aid.

There is an interesting inconsistency in this tale, as on page 645, in lines 36-37, Arthur is 'wrotthe when he saw Sir Launcelot do such dedis', yet on page 647 he appears surprised by the information that it is Launcelot, Gareth and Lavayne - identified by Gawain - who are their combatants. And the irony is taken further, when the deceiver and plotter Gawain comments: 'but I drede me ever of gyle' (647:19). 'By my hede' expostulated Arthur 'neveaw, I belyeve you.' (647:26-27). Arthur only knew for certain that Gawain had been right when he sees the three knights unarmed. Arthur is magnanimous and gives Launcelot the prize and they go to the feast together and all are reconciled.

At the feast, and opening himself to general ribaldry, Launcelot reveals the nature and site of his wound, and that he was shot by a woman. No comment is passed on this piece of astonishing information by the Knights of the Round Table, which provides firm support for Wilson's analysis of magical narrative, as only the hero controls which information is significant and which not: Launcelot's indignity having no motive in the moves other than to show the humbleness of his character. In contrast, the final thrust of the tale is about knighthood, in particular about Gareth's closer allegiance to Launcelot because he had made him a knight and because 'I shamed to se so many good knyghtes ayenste hym alone'; Arthur, his anger forgotten, responds to this chivalric display with a paean to knightly virtue:

'For ever hyt ys,' seyde Arthure, 'a worshypfull knyghtes dede to help and succoure another worshypfull knyghte whan he seeth

hym in dangere. For ever a worshypfull man woll be loth to see a worshypfull man shamed, and he ys of no worshyp and medelyth with coardise never sall he shew jantilnes nor no maner of goodnes where he seeth a man in daungere, for than wol a cowarde never shew mercy. And allwayes a good man wol do ever to another man as he wolde be done to hymselff. (648:24-31)

### 3.4 The Knight of the Cart

This tale is couched in terms and place in the manner of a tale of courtly love: it is May time, with sap and sexuality rising in both plant and man:

Every lusty harte begynnyth to blossom and to burgoyne. For, lyke trees and erbyes burgenyth and florysshyth in May, in lyke wyse every lusty harte that ys ony maner of lovir spryngith, burgenth, buddyth anf floryssheyth in lusty dedis. (648:38-41)

Malory's paeen to spring and love is not eulogising sexual love - or so he says - but if he:

Firste reserve the onoure to God, and secundely thy quarrell muste com of thy lady. And such love I calle vertuouse love. (649:19-21)

However, Malory pragmatically sighs that today things are different:

Nowadays men can nat love sevennyght but they must have all their desyres... sone hote sone colde. (649:24-25)

In Arthur's day things were different, Malory would have us believe, and 'men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and then was love trouthe and faythefulnes.' (649:26:28). The consequence of being such a good lover was that like Guinevere you made a 'good ende'. (649:35).

All this preamble about love, lovers and the pristine state of love in Arthurian times, seems riddled with irony: within this book we have just met Sir Gawain and his rapid affair with Ettarde in which they resorted to a shared bed within 24 hours of their first meeting. And in this tale itself, we see the proof of Guinevere and Launcelot's 'hote' passion as he forces the barred window to be able to enter her room, and leaves tell-tale signs of blood on her pillows. Perhaps Malory's

intention was to both present the predictable world of courtly romance - the season, the forest, the young lovers and the thwarted admirer - in order to mock the inherent conflict which appear within a world given over to romance and passion, but which precludes sex.

As the tale occurs in the book of *Launcelot and Guinevere* and, as they are the two whose passion for one another is predicted in the very first part of *The Tale of King Arthur*, Guinevere's enjoyment of the season without her lover or her husband seems a little unromantic. Arthur's whereabouts are pinpointed by her prior arrangement to meet him 'by ten of the clok' (650:12) but Launcelot's absence scarcely rates a mention.

The first move therefore places Guinevere in the wood, scene of magical happenings and starting point of all Malorean adventures with her own knights, who, because of the day, are unprotected by armour and carrying only swords. Launcelot is notably absent and so lays the Queen open to attack from Sir Mellygaunce, a knight willing to 'joupere (his) worshyp to dishonoure' (651:16-17) in order to possess her. She resists his suit: 'levir (would I) kut myne owne throte in twayne rather than thou sholde dishonour me!' (651:9-10).

The second move occurs when Guinevere agrees to go with him in order to save her knights: 'and suffere hem no more to be hurte' (652:38-9). However, she insists on their accompanying her, possibly in order to protect her honour. Mellygaunce's passion for the Queen was quite acceptable, as even would her abduction be in other circumstances, but Guinevere is both Arthur's Queen and Launcelot's Lady and therefore untouchable in knightly terms without incurring disworship. Guinevere has made the only choice a lady could make in the circumstances in risking her virtue for the lives of her knights.

The knights are terribly wounded but Mellygaunce's mind is still filled with fear of Launcelot. That the plot does not reveal the cause or the nature of Launcelot's absence, nor how Mellygaunce should know that he would not be accompanying the Queen a-maying is unquestioned by the characters in the tale. He simply is

absent, as acceptably so as his undoubted and imminently expected reappearance will be. Which begs the question: where then is Launcelot? In a modern narrative such a question would require an answer, but in magical narratives illogicalities and inexplicable happenings are to be embraced as the norm, and although late in the Arthurian cycle, in this aspect at least, Malory retains his right to no justification.

The third move is the summoning of Launcelot to Guinevere and the knights' aid by the sending of a ring and a message guaranteed to bring any knight or lover to her aid. 'Pray hym as he lovythe me that he woll see me and rescow me, if ever he woll have joy of me' (652:16-17). The messenger, a child 'swyftely horsed of a grete avauntage' (652:14), seems cupid-like in his carrying of an urgent message between two lovers and, although drawing Launcelot into battle, does bring the errant lover back to his beloved's side. Launcelot's failure as a lover brings shame on him for had been at her side Mellygaunce would not have dared approach. He vows: 'Alas... now I am shamed for ever, onles that I may rescow that noble lady frome dishonour!'

In this tale, we see the 'perfectest knight' pitted against someone for whom the knightly code of conduct is meaningless: Mellygaunce orders that Launcelot's horse be killed but his men were not to fight him: 'for he ys overharde to overcom' (652:35). His intentions are not, then, honourable: he doesn't intend to fight Launcelot with the winner thus gaining the right to be the Lady's champion, but to simply abduct and imprison her.

The third move precipitates Launcelot and his horse into swimming across the Thames to Lambeth only to meet Mellygaunce's archers who shoot Launcelot's horse. He is astonished and threatens them, but armed as a knight he cannot surmount the numerous hedges and ditches behind which the archers are ensconced. He mourns the broken nature of knighthood when one knight can treat another knight in such a fashion but comforts himself with an 'oldeseyde saw' which turns out to be a piece of dramatic irony: 'A good man ys never in daungere but whan he ys in the daungere of a cowhard.' (653:39-40). As in the

previous tale, Launcelot is reduced to a comic figure clumsily lumbering along on foot in full armour: a weighty business indeed.

The fourth move sees Launcelot further shamed: not only is he reduced to walking but is refused a ride in a peasant's cart by the carter who seems oblivious to Launcelot's importance and the physical and social weight of his knightly armour. Only when Launcelot kills one carter with a blow does the other carter agree to help him. Launcelot's shame and dishonour mount as he draws ever closer to Mellygaunce's castle. His final ignominy is to be the subject of Guinevere's own ladies' mockery, as they presume he is on his way to be hung - a most unlikely end for a knight even in Malory's day. Launcelot's glory is masked and they fail to recognise him.

The Fifth move sees the beginnings of his return to worship: Guinevere immediately recognises him by his 'shylde and mourns for his poor horse who trod 'hys guttis and hys paunche undir hys feete'. A rather grisly detail but perhaps necessary to justify the desperate straits Launcelot had come to, to ride in a cart. She upbraids her ladies:

'Forsothr hit was fowle-mowthed,' said the quene, 'and evyll lykened, so for the moste noble knyghte of the worlde unto suche a shamefull dethe. A! Jesu deffende hym and kepe hym.. from all myschevous ende!' (654:36-39)

As Guinevere is filled with hope at the arrival of Launcelot, Mellygaunce turns to despair and runs to the Queen to for mercy. He pledges that all shall be put in her hands as she would wish it and she agrees for 'the lesse noyse the more ys my worshyp' (655:22). Launcelot, meanwhile awaits downstairs for battle with the abductor: 'thou traytour knyght com forth!' The Queen's response that all is well, dumbfounds Launcelot. As a knight he cannot oppose a lady's wishes but he has been shamed by Mellygaunce in his pursuit of redressing what he perceived to be, and was, a slight on Guinevere's honour. With a strong sense of personal injustice he wryly quips: 'and I ad wyste that ye wolde have bene so lyghtly accorded wyth hym I wolde nat a made such haste unto you.' (655:41-43). She



takes it as a slur on her virtue and angrily responds that she 'accorded wyth hym for no favour nor love that I had unto hym, but of every shamefull oyse of wysedom to lay adoune.' (656:1-3). His commitment to her is pledged by his statement that only Arthur as King and herself, as his lady, could have persuaded him to let Mellygaunce live for what he had done.

This prevention of knightly justice appears at first to bring Guinevere honour but, as the price has been dishonour for Launcelot, the later consequences will be dire for her. The other knights would also have had revenge but they 'kepte the pees' (652:23) because of the Queen.

As his name suggests, Mellygaunce's castle is a place of bad (*mal*) decisions and dishonour. Guinevere's decision to lodge there the night leads into the next move in which Launcelot, in order to fulfil a promise to the Queen, arranges to meet her at her window that night. Lavayne begs to go with him as he too fears Mellygaunce's 'treason', but Launcelot the lover cannot allow this and ignoring what proves to have been wise advice goes to Guinevere. She is unsatisfied with their visit through the window and says that she would prefer him to come inside to her:

'Wolde ye so, madam, seyde sir Launcelot, wyth youre harte that I were with you?'  
 'Ye truly,' seyde the quene.  
 'Than shall I prove my myght, ' seyed sir Launcelot, 'for youre love.' (657:22-25)

And with brute strength he pulls the iron bars out of the stonemasonry. And although Malory said that things were different in King Arthur's day, Launcelot:

...wente to bedded with the quene and toke no force of his hurte honde, but toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng untyl hit was the dawning of the day. (657:33-35)

Launcelot and Guinevere are sexually reconciled, which ends the danger of her being unprotected – at least temporarily – but places them both in the greater danger of sexual sin and the discovery of their 'treachery'.

The sixth move is the revelation of the bloodstained pillow which Mellygaunce presumes is stained with the blood of one of Guinevere's injured knights, while the broken bars go unnoticed by him. Mellygaunce again acts in an unknighly fashion, drawing the bedclothes of a lady - an action that Launcelot said that even Arthur, her husband, would not have done. Mellygaunce's intention was to conceal his act of treason in Guinevere's much more heinous crime. Launcelot challenges Mellygaunce to prove the Queen's innocence and Mellygaunce threatens Launcelot with the old saw: 'God woll have a stroke in every batayle' (659:6-7). Launcelot agrees that God is to be 'drad' but in this case he can avow with certainty that 'none of these ten knyghtes wounded with my lady' and not fear God's blow in battle. This is a bit of sophistry on his part, as Launcelot knows that he need have no fear on the knights' behalf as *he* is the guilty party, and no accusation has been made against him. He would therefore be defending the virtue of the unjustly accused Queen and her knights: a nice legal point indeed.

The seventh move is Mellygaunce's duping of Launcelot and his incarceration in the castle's cellars when the court thought he had - as was his wont - simply ridden off in search of some other adventure. Launcelot's temptation is again female: a jailer offers to exchange his physical freedom if he agrees to 'lay(ne) by her'. But he refuses even if it means he cannot champion the Queen, for he knows that one of his relatives will stand in for him, and Jesus will protect him from 'the worlde's shame now' and as for the 'distresse', it, like adventure, is seen to come from God and must be endured.

Having passed the final test of his knightly commitment to his lady, the female jailer frees him for a kiss. Waxing pedant: Launcelot reveals that were it 'disworshyp' even to kiss her then he would not do that either. He kisses her, dons armour and rescues Guinevere in the nick of time as she is about to be brought to the 'fyre and brent' (661:18). Launcelot defeats Mellygaunce who asks for clemency. However, Guinevere who earlier had preached 'pees', indicates that she wants him dead and so Launcelot offers to fight him with one hand behind his back. Mellygaunce agrees but Launcelot still kills him. The difficulty of being a

lady's knight and yet subject to the laws of chivalry creates a constant struggle between the knight's own flesh and soul, between his anger and his desire to be honourable; and between wanting to perform the deeds required of him by his Lady, and yet without losing his honour as a Knight.

The tale, humorous moments included, commences as a traditional lover's tale but is in fact an exploration of the adversity or adventure that Knights believed was pre-ordained by God to test them. Launcelot is placed in positions of ignominy by enemies and Lady-love alike and submits himself to her will when he might have chosen otherwise. He chooses virtue whenever he is confronted with any sin other than sexual desire for Guinevere. Malory's tale sanctions Launcelot's love and service to Guinevere, but there are always dire consequences when he resorts to her chamber.

What is interesting about this particular tale in the light of Wilson's theory is that while it possesses the 'restricted range' and is concerned with fulfilment of the hero's (Launcelot's) desires to be tested and recognised as the 'noblest knyght', it does permit Guinevere a central role. Not only is she indirectly the cause of the adventure, again, but also actively directs some of the action. Furthermore in direct contradiction of Wilson's identification of comedy and tragedy as 'irrelevant' to the fulfilment of the hero's desires, Launcelot's arrival by cart and insistence on the wounded knights' innocence is ironic and amusing.

It is also the only tale that is not set according to the ecclesiastical clock, of Easter, Pentecost, Christmas and Candlemas as it is set in a Julian month: May. It also follows the courtly love traditions most closely in its opening scene in the wood, which in turn forms the link with adventure that Malory and writers of his time associated with magic and knightly adventure.

### 3.5 The Healing of Sir Urry

This tale further explores Launcelot's character as 'the beste knyghte in the worlde' (663:34). The first move is the arrival of Sir Urry of Hungary at the court and his mother's challenge that he can only be healed by 'the beste knyghte in

the worlde' (663:34). She reveals that many have tried but been unsuccessful, but Arthur leading the way for the rest of the court lays hands on Urry, perhaps sharing the mediaeval belief that the hands of the King might bring healing, as Edward the Confessor's were believed to have done. In this case Arthur is unsuccessful and only when Launcelot - with many modest protestations and prayer for protection and healing - explores the wound is Sir Urry healed. This second move is a true miracle and as well as restoring Urry to health inflames Aggravayne to jealousy. The danger that Launcelot's place as 'noblest knyght' and true lover of the Queen has placed the lovers in is revealed by Aggravayne's constant watch to put them both 'to a rebuke and a shame.' (669:20-21). Sir Urry's healing is a true magical narrative, not simply because of Urry's magical healing but because the entire tale conspires to present Launcelot as a Christian knight. Apart from his mortal enemy Aggravayne, no one takes offence that it is he who by the fulfilment of the deed is able to take upon himself the title of the 'noblest knight in the world'. His humbleness as the implement of God's mercy is revealed by the fact that he 'wepte, as he had bene a chylde that had bene betyn!' (668:35-36), and his modesty by his desire to help Urry but 'For I shame sore that I shulde be thus requyred, for never was I able in worthynes to do so hyghe a thyng.' (668:17-18).

This tale is almost a sub-tale and forms one of the greater moves which will take Launcelot to his death as 'clene' knight, purged of his ungodly lust for Guinevere though never his tender love.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this mini-dissertation, I have attempted to explore a selection of tales from Malory's *Morte Darthur* in the light of Wilson's theory about what constitutes a magical narrative. An exhaustive examination of *all* the tales is beyond the scope of a dissertation of this size. I have therefore focused upon the sub-tales that comprise *King Arthur's Tale* at the beginning of the cycle and *The Book of Launcelot and Guinevere* from the latter half. I selected tales from these two groups to see whether Wilson's theory is as applicable to the different styles of

the earlier and later tales. Both *King Arthur's Tale* and *The Book of Launcelot and Guinevere* present Arthur, Launcelot and Guinevere as the three key characters. If, as Wilson argues, there is a 'central hero who controls the plot', then these tales should reflect such a hero. Interestingly the 'heroes' named in the title of each 'book' are not necessarily the heroes of the individual component sub-tales, just as Arthur is not the 'hero' of all the sub-tales in Malory's cycle.

Although I have not examined all of the tales in the *Complete Works* in the light of Wilson's theory, there is sufficient evidence in *King Arthur's Tale* and *The Book of Launcelot and Guinevere* to draw conclusions about its predictive and analytic power. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated that:

1. Malory's narrative does lend itself to the identification of a hero who controls the plot.
2. Malory's narrative reflects definite moves in which the hero achieves his or her desire through a sequence of rituals.
3. Malory uses language repetitively, both in phraseology, and in an iterative use of vows, pledges, oaths and declarations of intent.
4. Malory uses repetitive sequences of behaviour, choice or action as part of the rituals of the moves.
5. Malory does include 'incongruities' that are only explicable when one applies Wilson's theory.

While agreeing that Wilson's theory can be applied to effectively reveal insights unmapped by other theories, the theory and the *tales* are not a complete 'fit'; this is increasingly so in the later tales.

Wilson argues that comedy, tragedy and allusion are irrelevant in magical narratives as they would not be instrumental in effecting the desires or expiating the guilt of the hero. While this may be true in general, Wilson herself appears to have ignored the humorous qualities in one of the works she analysed (Wilson 1988:55-63): *Sir Gawayne and The Green Knight*. In *The Knight and the Cart*, we see Malory's light touch of the ridiculous as a knight's pride is pricked and he is humbled by circumstance. Who can deny the tragic qualities inherent in the

relationships of Arthur, Launcelot and Guinevere? Each is fatally drawn to each other by complex bonds of loyalty, treachery, fealty, friendship and lust; doomed to act out roles and emotions predestined before their births. Characters are not, then, as flat or undynamic as characters in magical narratives are supposed to be.

And finally allusion, Malory constantly seeks to provide his authorship with a patina of authority by alluding to two works: as the 'Frensshe booke maketh no mencyon' (7:28) or as the 'Booke Sankgreall makith mencion' (611:3). But, as neither work is allusory in the sense that they deepen our understanding of plot and character by references to outside works – the tales still 'fit' Wilson's theory in which allusion is discounted.

One aspect of the *Morte Darthur* that is unusual is the occasional allusion to non-mythological places: Carlisle and Tintagel seem to have acquired an allure of glamour from being associated with Camelot, but Lambeth, Winchester and the Thames seem rudely prosaic in a courtly romance! The world of courtly romance takes place in forests and castles; characters are knights, ladies, squires, hermits and dwarves; and, exotic places – real and imagined – are visited and magical vessels and transpositions undertaken. This particular incongruity of place is not explicable within the frame of Wilson's theory and needs reflection on the general context and time of writing to explain its presence. It is an intrusive aspect of reality and as such heralds the birth of the modern novel.

There are three principal areas where the *tales* and Wilson's theory diverge: the presence of humour, the use of tragedy in the plot and the development of rounding of characters. Initially the characters are 'flat' and their speeches stilted (cf the speeches between Uther and Igrayne on page 1) and their battle cries repetitive. Malory's description of the fights where everyone fights like a 'boar' and wins the prize or falls over his pommel easily fit the model of 'repetition' and 'incantation' within a magical narrative. But later in the *Book of Launcelot and Guinevere*, Launcelot's character has developed a touching roundness: we see his enthusiasm when invited by Guinevere to share her bed, 'wolde ye so,

madam... with youre harte that I were with you?' When she replies in the affirmative he rips the steel bars from the castle window in order to 'prove my might.. for youre love' (657:22&25). The speech is both idiomatic and 'real', suggesting both his passion and his male ego!

Malory also allows the reader some respite from all the heroism and presents Launcelot, constantly acclaimed as the 'best knight in all the world', as the butt of the tale's humour. We see him being shot in the buttock with an arrow, riding on a peasant's cart with his horse's 'guttis' being trampled underfoot and feeling peeved when Guinevere prevents him from wreaking vengeance on Mellygaunce. Guinevere herself moves from the stylised courtly lover a-maying with her courtiers to the woman who would rather die and allow Launcelot to escape than save herself.

The characters in the later part of the *tales* are more than simple characters in a dreamscape achieving single, unified desires, or expiating guilt. Though perhaps 'flat' to modern eyes and allowed little to no growth throughout the cycle, there are touches of realism, of jealousy, of passion, of quirkiness to the characters which do give them more than a frieze-like reality. Perhaps it is because the Arthurian cycle has more than one character controlling the action: at times it appears to be Arthur, sometimes Launcelot, and in yet others it is extremely difficult to identify a single controlling personality as several objectives and several 'heroes' seem to be working out their desires simultaneously.

Wilson considers that tragedy has no place in magical narrative, as it serves no purpose in a tale where the object of the plot is to fulfil the hero's desire. However, the inevitability of the moves, and the consequence of the moves for the hero, do seem to invest the hero with a somewhat tragic status. When we look at Launcelot the hero, he is doomed - as is Guinevere - even before they meet. Merlin warns the infatuated Arthur of the predestined love between his best knight and his wife-to-be but Arthur is oblivious to all except the 'aventure' that inescapably lies before him.

Arthur, too, is locked into the consequences of a deadly relationship: his incestuous relationship with his sister Morgan le Fay out of which his nemesis Mordred, his nephew-son is born. The fact is that Arthur, Guinevere and Launcelot are *all* guilty of sexual sin and it is *this* sin which ultimately causes the destruction of Camelot and their own isolation and death, and for Launcelot and Guinevere the rejection of which permits their spiritual or redemption. Sinlessness was not aspired to, only the rejection of this particular mortal sin as Guinevere believed that 'sinful as ever [she] was are saints in heaven.' (523)

The characters are fatally flawed and this too invests them with tragic status; the inevitability of their doomed relationships seeming more in accord with Greek tragedy than with tales of courtly romance. If one follows this idea, and accepts the foreknowledge Merlin had to have had in order to make a table for Guinevere's father, knowing that in twenty or thirty years it would return to Arthur as King of England, when he marries Guinevere – even though she is fated to love Launcelot – creates some idea of the 'control' extant in the narrative. This control can be broken down into definable 'moves' within the tales, but still does not escape the sense that the three key characters' lives are in the hands of the gods, and their destruction inevitable and therefore tragic. This tragic quality engenders dramatic tension – a quality without which no modern work of literature could exist, and thus forms the 'over-arching plot' which unifies the sub-tales into a progressive story-line.

What can be said of the *tales* is that the creation of 'character' seems to move closer, if marginally, to the modern concept in the later tales, whereas the earlier tales seem truer to their epic-romance genesis. Perhaps, as Malory brought together tales from a cornucopia of romances, the selection he forged for the *Morte Darthur* contained the weight of the character's past actions and quests, and with the complexity of their interrelationships remorselessly bearing down, inevitably generated a creative tension that Malory's contemporaries working within their exclusively episodic plots failed to experience.



The conflicting desires of the three principal characters are negated and none of their desires ultimately fulfilled. This combination of emerging tragedy and shadowing of rounded characterisation parallels a decline in the applicability of Wilson's theory. Wilson, herself, recognised that her theory of magical narrative was an inappropriate model for modern literature and confined its application to literature up to the mid point of the Middle Ages. Likewise, she anticipated that she 'would not expect relevant texts to be found more than occasionally outside the genres of romance and folktale' (1992:84). Wilson's theory is therefore remarkable, not in its failure to explain all aspects of the *Complete Works*, but the extent to which it *does* explain the power of the plot to fulfil the hero's unspoken desires; its iterative magic and its 'essential lack of distance between audience and story' (1992:84).

Perhaps the least literary but most romantic argument for Malory's tale being a magical narrative is its enduring ability to capture the reader and hold us spellbound, caught up in another world where things - as Malory said - 'are not as they are now'. A world where romantic love is unquenchable, where death is not a terrifying void, life seems eternally purposeful and all adventures end with the hero winning his prize. The moves of the magical narrative absorb us and we become united with the heroes in their quest for their desires. Translated from our prosaic 21<sup>st</sup> Century world, we are caught up in a dreamscape created by the art of the magical narrative.

Jan Clatworthy  
Essex  
18 May 2001

<p><b>Word count 22 764</b> (excluding <i>Dedication</i>, <i>Table of Contents</i>, <i>List of Sources</i>, and <i>Appendix</i>)</p>
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## List of Sources

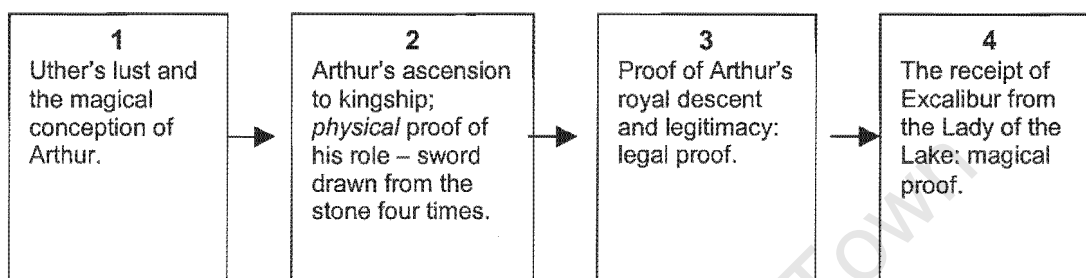
- Fritscher, J.J. *Sex and Magic in King Arthur's Camelot*, published PhD thesis (e-text), 1967, Loyola University Library, Chicago (j\_fritscher@earthlink.net)
- Harris, E.K. *Evidence against Launcelot and Guinevere in Malory's Morte Darthur: Treason by Imagination*, e-text, 1999, University of South Mississippi
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- Carly Seelig et al (Eds) *Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein based on Mein Weltbild*, 1954, London
- Vinaver, E. (ed) *Malory: Complete Works*, 1977, OUP, Oxford
- Wilson, A.D. *The Magical Quest*, 1988, Manchester University Press, Manchester,
- Wilson, A. D. The Critic and the Use of Magical narrative (pp81-94) in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 22, 1992, ed. Andrew Gurr

## Appendix

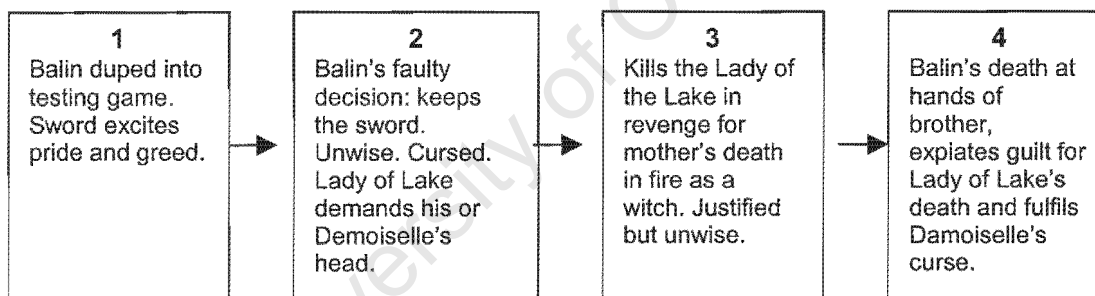
These are simple charts showing the heroes' desires (in italics next to the title of the tale) and the 'moves' that I have identified in the specific sub-tale according to the parameters set out in Wilson's theory of magical narrative.

### 1. The Tale of King Arthur

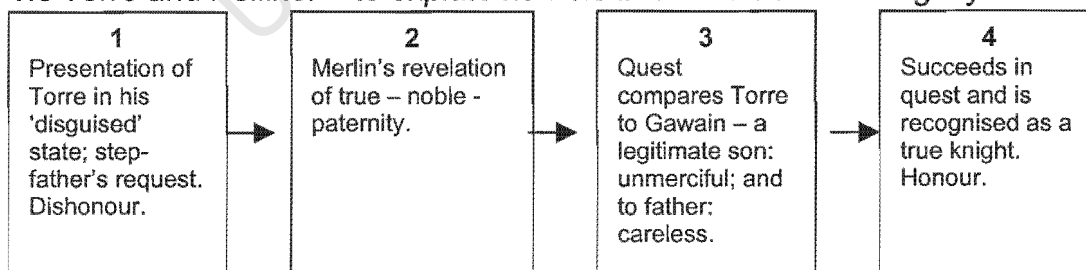
#### 1.1 Merlin~ *to become king and justify right to kingship*



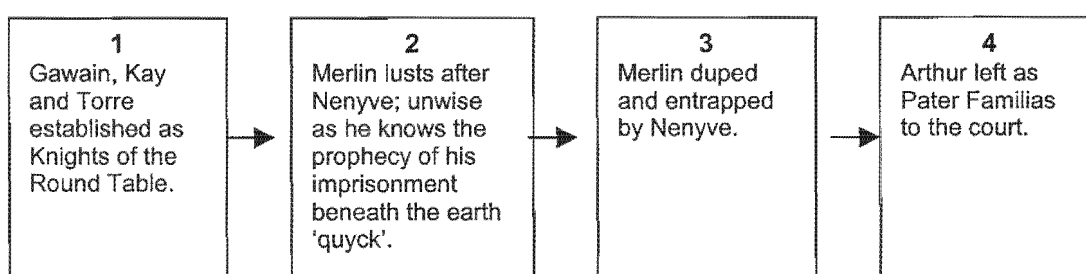
#### 1.2 Balin~ *to expiate guilt at unwise action and murder of Lady of the Lake of the Lake*



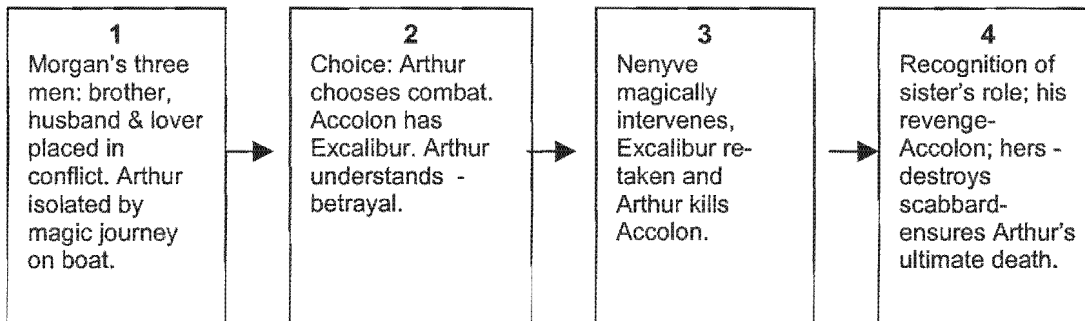
#### 1.3 Torre and Pellinor ~ *to expiate humble birth and achieve knightly status*



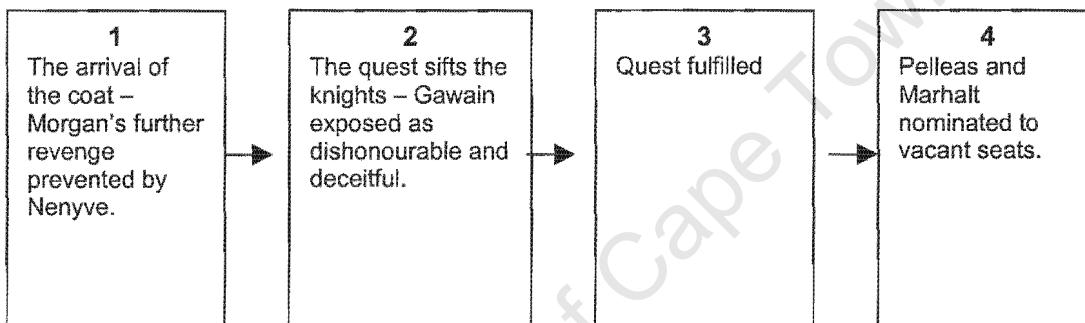
#### 1.4 War with Five Kings~ *to establish Arthur as Pater Familias*



### 1.5 Arthur and Accolon ~ to kill sister's lover and to reveal her true nature as his enemy

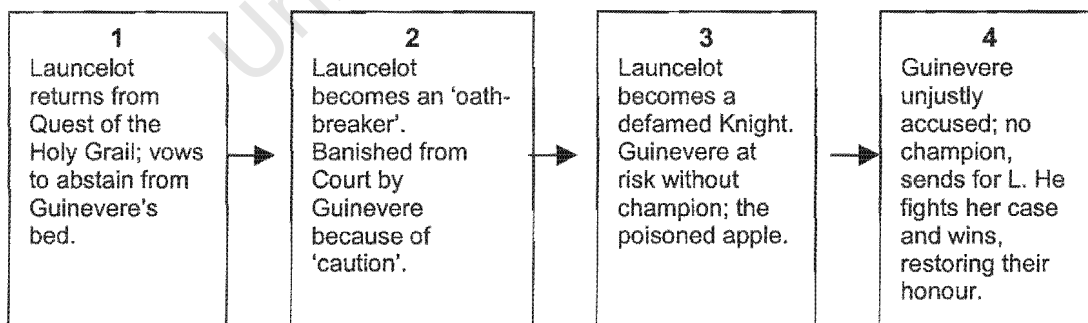


### 1.6 Gawain, Ywain and Marhalt ~ to expose unknighthly qualities?

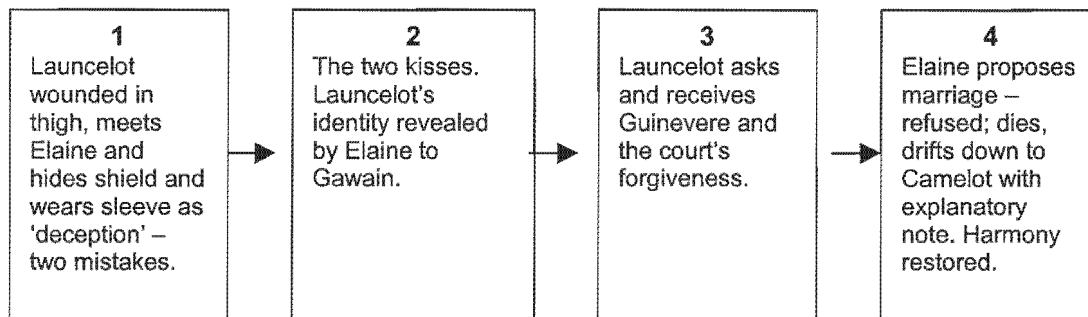


## 2. The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere

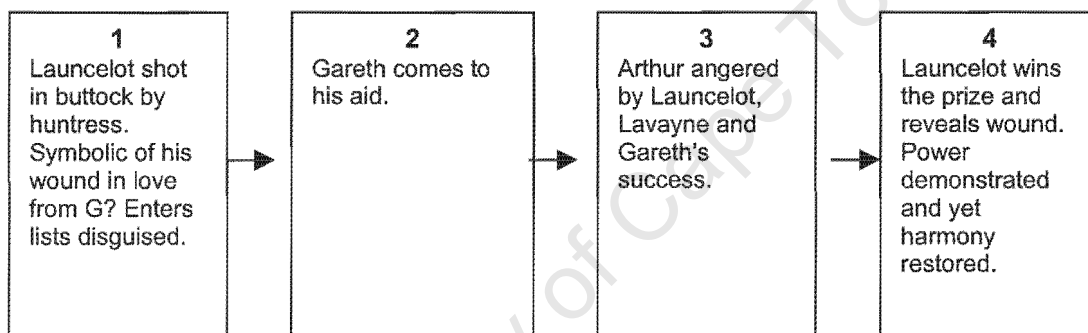
### 2.1 The Poisoned Apple ~ to expiate Launcelot's guilt for resorting to Guinevere's bed



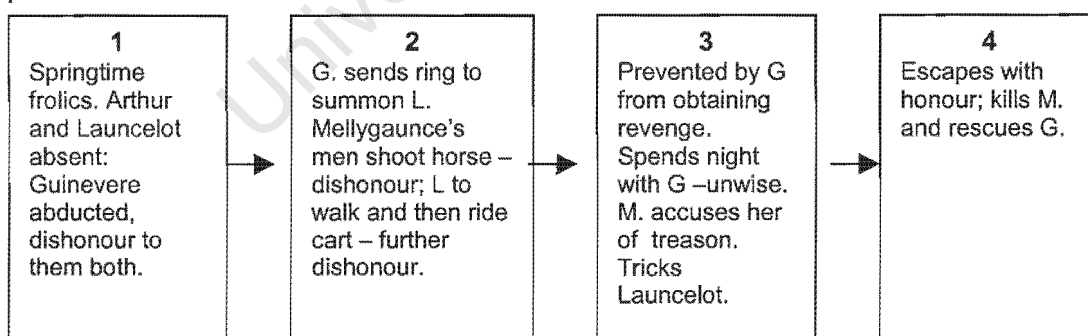
**2.2 The Fair Maid of Astolat ~ to fight against Arthur (lover's husband) without being 'disloyal'; to punish Guinevere, his obstacle to achieving the Holy Grail without losing her love**



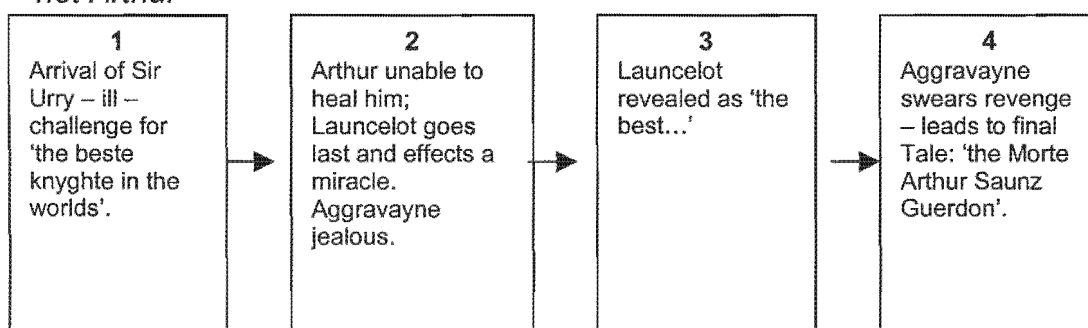
**2.3 The Great Tournament ~ to demonstrate again his exceptional prowess at the expense of Arthur – Launcelot the 'better' knight?**



**2.4 The Knight of the Cart ~ to prove Guinevere's need for Launcelot as her protector?**



**2.5 The Healing of Sir Urry ~ to demonstrate that Launcelot has the power to heal – not Arthur**



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Dear Sue Buchanan + David Shalkwyk

Here is the corrected thesis (x2) — pray God it is the last! I was not able to maintain the original pagination — much as I and Brian would have desired it — xxx computers (or the inept person (me!) on the keyboard).

Thank you for your help.

J Clabbe