



Is there a core moral code to all Arthurian narrative?

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The many narratives that span the Arthurian tradition contain an overwhelming variety of messages on how the human moral code should be determined. As the tradition developed from early British quasi-historical roots into the later French romance tradition, the focus of the stories changed and the values contained within them changed accordingly. The narratives became less dominated by simple rivalries, bloodshed and warfare; characters and motivations became more developed and relationships and personal loyalties came under closer scrutiny. The variance within the tradition is so great that George Kane asserts: ‘the many contradictions inherent in the accumulated material of the Arthur legend confuse the issues so completely that no moral point of view could be consistently maintained with regard to it’.¹ Consequently this essay will focus primarily on two texts from the Arthurian romance tradition. It will consider the late 12th century French writings of Chrétien de Troyes, in particular the tales of *The Knight of the Cart* and *Erec and Enide*, and the 14th Century English composition the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Based on the concerns of these texts, the role of morality in relation to dictating human action will be examined, with a particular focus on how it figures in certain aspects of life – love, justice, and political governance. Essentially the essay will argue that rather than adhering to the tenets of one moral code, the morality of this tradition is characterised by testing, competition and conflict between different systems of moral value.

Romantic love is a primary concern in both texts, and in both we can see a clear contention between love and other value systems. The knightly code of conduct which prizes public virtue enters into direct competition with the laws of love, and characters are forced to choose between doing what is right in terms of the chivalric code, and what is right according to the rules of courtly love. Romantic love appears as an overriding and all-consuming passion, within which the typical norms of moral behaviour must be subordinated to the whims of the beloved. The knight Maboagrain, imprisoned in a garden by his lady, vocalises this in Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide* - ‘He is no lover who does not unhesitatingly do whatever pleases his lady, unstintingly and neglecting nothing, if ever he can in any way’.² The clearest example of this conflict between love and public virtue occurs in *The Knight of the Cart*, where Lancelot voluntarily subjects himself to humiliation and public vilification by riding in a cart intended for criminals. Despite the social consequences he would incur from riding in this cart, Lancelot hesitates ‘but two steps’ before climbing in in order to find out the whereabouts of the Queen.³ The narrator details the conflict within his heart here, and clearly presents love as the overriding motivation determining his action – ‘Reason... told him to beware of getting in... but Love, who held sway within his heart, urged and commanded him to climb into the cart at once... since Love ruled his action, the disgrace did not matter’. In a society governed by the chivalric code, where the closest things to a universal moral

¹ George F. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, (London: Methuen, 1951), p.69.

² Chrétien de Troyes, ‘Erec and Enide’, in *Arthurian Romances*, (Penguin Classics ed.), (London: Penguin, 2004), p.111.

³ Chrétien de Troyes, ‘The Knight of the Cart’, *Arthurian Romances*, p.211.

system are the rules of knightly conduct, Lancelot's willingness to mount the cart demonstrates a lack of regard for the norms of public behaviour and a lack of concern for his own righteous reputation.

In *Erec and Enide*, we also see love interfering with the knight's obligations towards chivalric behaviour. Erec's overindulgence in married life causes him to lay down his arms, lose his reputation as a noble knight, and be labelled 'recreant'.⁴ Like Lancelot, he sacrifices his public virtue and is 'blame[d]' and held 'up to ridicule' by everyone in the land. He is forced to prove himself again as a righteous knight by pursuing 'adventure'. We see moral conflict extended in the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere in general. By embarking upon a love affair with his king's wife, Lancelot is transgressing several different codes of morality – of friendship, of national citizenship, of feudal loyalty, and from a religious point of view, the sacred bonds of matrimony. Chrétien's own point of view on this topic is difficult to discern; the 'subject matter and meaning' were given him by his patroness, and his failure to complete the story has led some critics to speculate that he had a moral objection to this portrayal of infidelity.⁵ Certainly in his other stories, Chrétien elevates matrimony and focuses on love within marriage. However in *The Knight of the Cart*, he does not overtly present Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship as morally wrong. He actually gives their union a holy aura – 'Lancelot bowed low before the bedchamber, as if he were before an altar' – arguably generating implicit narrative approval. It is therefore impossible to be conclusive about his own moral stance as a writer.⁶

In the stanzaic *Morte*, we see the moral consequences of Lancelot's betrayal weighed by the other knights. Gawain argues that although Lancelot's actions could be considered treason, it is better not to expose them. He, and the kingdom, owe Lancelot loyalty – 'King and court had oft been slain/ Nadde he been better than we mo'.⁷ Furthermore his betrayal, and his moral wrongdoing, seem to be lessened by the great deeds he has done in the past, and his righteous reputation – the fact that he is 'hardy knight and thro' - seems to stand in his favour. Indeed, upon discovering the accusation, Arthur himself laments that they could be levelled at a man 'Of so mikel nobilitee' – 'Alas, full grete dole it were/ In him sholde any tresoun be!'⁸ Here the chivalric code seems to play into a man's moral reputation; the more noble the knight, the more unbelievable any accusations of wrongdoing. For a lover in these texts, the prevailing moral code of society is challenged and often abandoned – what is right in the eyes of society is not always what is right in the eyes of love.

If love stands for some characters as a system of morality independent of others, their loyalty to these principles is often explicitly tested. Lancelot endures many tests to prove his love for the queen, and suffers countless hardships on her account. In *The Knight of the Cart*, the Queen sends a messenger to Lancelot during a fight telling him that she 'bid[s] him "do his worst"'.⁹ She makes this request in order to confirm his identity and for him to demonstrate his fealty to her – however she then lets him fight the rest of the battle according to her demand, exposing Lancelot to 'shame, disgrace and dishonour'. Erec performs a similar test upon Enide in their story; after treating her callously for most of their journey together, he finally relents, saying, 'My sweet love, I have tested you in every way... now I love you more than ever I did, and I am once more certain and convinced that you love me completely'.¹⁰

⁴ 'Erec and Enide', p.68.

⁵ 'The Knight of the Cart', p.207.

⁶ 'The Knight of the Cart', p.265.

⁷ Larry D. Benson (ed.), 'Stanzaic Morte Arthur', in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994) l.1698.

⁸ SMA, l.1742.

⁹ 'The Knight of the Cart', p.276.

¹⁰ 'Erec and Enide', p.97.

Lancelot and Enide's allegiance to the principles of courtly love proves their virtue – despite hardship, they have remained loyal to their lovers. This demonstrates an underlying moral assumption in the texts – that doing good always means taking the hardest path. Chrétien asserts that 'it is the truth... that evil can be more easily done than good'.¹¹ Both texts advocate striving for what is right and equate enduring hardship with moral virtue – Lancelot takes the hardest bridge to Gorre in *The Knight of the Cart*, yet is still the one to rescue the queen. King Bademagu is certain that 'the knight who had crossed the bridge is far better than any other'.¹² Again, knightly strength, devotion and determination translate to morality, but it is a morality that is continuously tested.

Inevitably in a tradition where the main characters are public figures, individual morality is rarely just an issue for the individual – it always reflects back on the notion of kingship and government. Frequently the moral choices of individuals affect the society of the Round Table, and the nation. This pattern is reflected in the form of the stanzaic *Morte*, which can be divided broadly into two parts. The first section tells of individual moral choices affecting the lives of individuals – mainly personal dilemmas restricted to the small circle of the court. The second section revolves around choices and actions which directly affect the governance of the realm – larger conflicts which result in war and the disintegration of the kingdom. Within the stanzaic *Morte's* narrative of causation, this form demonstrates the implications and spiralling consequences of individual moral choices.¹³

In the stanzaic *Morte*, we sometimes see conflict enacted between individual morality and morality at the level of kingship – acting in the way that is best for the kingdom. Returning to Gawain's speculation on Lancelot's 'tresoun', another consideration that he states is that if the court were to turn against Lancelot, many people would actually turn against the court and fight on his side – 'And sithen, and him need bestood/ Many a land wolde with him hold'.¹⁴ This is a prosaic political concern weighing in to what is essentially a moral argument. Gawain is aware of the wider bloodshed that would be caused by the revelation. Later, the Pope's letter brought to Arthur by a bishop advises him to agree to make peace with Lancelot and forgive the Queen in order to 'hold Yngland in rest and pees'.¹⁵ He is advised to overlook his own moral injury for the good of the kingdom. There is also a discontinuity between Mordred's moral status and his status as king. Although Arthur is of unquestionably higher moral standing in the text, it transpires that the English people prefer the kingdom under Mordred's rule. They maintain that "'Arthur loved nought but warring/ and such thing as himself sought'.¹⁶ Here we see a distinction between the moral requirements on an individual, and on a ruler.

Both texts feature characters who are torn between competing loyalties, or between two moral stances. Many of these conflicts are given an extra dimension because they are in some way political. In the stanzaic *Morte*, Gawain sides with Lancelot over King Arthur when he discourages Agravain from revealing the Queen's infidelity – 'And sithen might I never sayn/ The love that has been between us two;/ Lancelot shall I never betrayn./ Behind his back to be his fo'.¹⁷ Here the bonds of friendship are privileged over his allegiance to the King. Later in the poem, however, Gawain sides with Arthur and swears a deathly oath promising revenge upon Lancelot for the murder of his brothers. Here the ties of friendship are superseded by familial loyalty. With the character of Gawain, this text demonstrates the

¹¹ 'The Knight of the Cart', p.246.

¹² 'The Knight of the Cart', p.246.

¹³ Richard A. Wertime, 'The Theme and Structure of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*', *PMLA*, Vol.87, No.5 (Oct 1972), p.1075.

¹⁴ *SMA*, I.1706.

¹⁵ *SMA*, I.2261.

¹⁶ *SMA*, I.2975.

¹⁷ *SMA*, I. 1700.

way in which different systems of moral value can compete within an individual, and political allegiances can be disrupted by personal ones.

We see a similar conflict of loyalties in *The Knight of the Cart*, when Lancelot is caught between two positive codes of conduct. He is engaged in a fight when a girl appears and asks him to kill the knight he is fighting and reward her with his head. The knightly code of conduct dictates that a knight must afford mercy to those who ask for it; yet Lancelot has given his word to the lady that he will strive to give her what she wants. Beheading the knight is presented as ‘a good and charitable act’, yet allowing him to survive would represent ‘pity and kindness’.¹⁸ Lancelot’s moral dilemma is elucidated explicitly in dramatic terms with the personification of the competing values – ‘Compassion and Generosity hold him doubly imprisoned, with each in turn spurring him on and causing him anguish’. Chrétien uses free indirect discourse to explore in depth the conflicts within the character’s motivations, with narratorial reflection that takes us inside the mind of the character – ‘But since the knight has begged for mercy, should he not have it?’ Such a personal insight into the mechanics of moral decision making is not seen in the stanzaic *Morte*, where morality can be deciphered only at the level of plot and actions. In Chrétien’s texts, Lancelot’s character in particular, oppressed as he is by different loyalties and desires, provides a ‘touchstone’ for ‘identifying and evaluating appropriate behaviour in a society where multiple systems of value make claims on individual’s choices and actions’.¹⁹ The narration through which we see him allows for this transparency in evaluating moral choices.

In both texts these characters who face competing loyalties remind us that in Arthurian society as in ours, there is not always a straightforward moral choice between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; often it is simply a choice between two competing ‘rights’. In both texts we also see that sometimes truth and justice themselves are not incontrovertible. In some cases the moral specifics are hazy, and fighting and violence become the moral adjudicators. The truth itself is tested and proved by victory in battle. In a sense, the moral rules are unfixed and are written by military victory. In the stanzaic *Morte*, Lancelot avails himself to fight for Guinevere’s honour twice; once in response to an accusation of murder and once to an accusation of infidelity. In the first instance, the Queen is morally acquitted by the public upon Lancelot’s victory, despite fairly strong proof against her. Even Sir Mador willingly accepts the moral implications inscribed by Lancelot’s success, and forgives the Queen – ‘My brothers deeth forgiven be/ To the queen for thy sake’.²⁰ The true culprit of the murder is not found until after Lancelot’s victory has been celebrated and the Queen vindicated. Forgiveness and civil peace is engendered by a show of incomparable might from such a noble warrior. In the second instance, the moral grounding for Lancelot’s challenge is far more dubious. He returns Queen Guinevere to Arthur’s company in a gesture of reconciliation, but determinedly asserts that she is guiltless of the crime of which she has been accused – ‘If any man says she is not clene,/ I proffer me therefore to fight’.²¹ Whether the Queen is actually ‘clene’ in a moral sense is questionable; regardless of whether his assertion is logically true or morally defensible, Lancelot seeks to prove it as incontrovertible fact through a victory of might.

In *The Knight of the Cart* is the kernel of the same situation; Lancelot settles a similar dispute over the Queen’s constancy by fighting for her honour on Kay’s behalf. Although he knows that she is not unimpeachable – she has in fact been disloyal to the King – he still fights to prove her innocence. The specifics of the situation allow him to fight with a clear conscience – the accusation has actually been levelled against Sir Kay, and Lancelot embarks on the

¹⁸ ‘The Knight of the Cart’, p.242.

¹⁹ Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert, *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2005), p.153.

²⁰ *SMA*, I.1620.

²¹ *SMA*, I.2386.

battle strictly ‘to prove that Kay never so much as conceived of such a deed’.²² By winning the battle, though, he also acquits the Queen of any wrongdoing.

In the societies in which these texts are based, this is how moral conflicts are often settled. In the absence of any universally accepted system of morality or law, physical might emerges as the deciding force in situations of moral contention. Victory in battle translates to moral right; the villains never triumph over the heroes. This pattern supports the idea that history, and narrative, is usually written by the victors. It makes us start to question the stories themselves – what if the outcomes of the battles had been different? What if, for example in the stanzaic *Morte*, Lancelot hadn’t managed to fight his way out of Guinevere’s bedchamber? Had he been captured and convicted, his moral stance would be completely compromised and we would have a very different final idea of his character. What if, actually, King Arthur had been killed in the battle against Lancelot rather than the battle against Mordred? Would we have a new conception of Lancelot as the villain? Or a different conception of Arthur himself? We accept the moral judgements that stem from military victory as essential to the progress and message of the story, but through this we accept a rather arbitrary determination of morality.

In the episode in *The Knight of the Cart* where Lancelot fights Meleagaunt on Kay’s behalf, Lancelot invokes a force of moral justice beyond the human – ‘If it please God, may he show his righteousness by taking vengeance on whichever of us has lied’.²³ Here we see a sense of the existence of a higher power, and an awareness that moral choices are not the only determining force in events; some things are outside human control. Without attempting to conflate what is here clearly a religious conception of power with fate, in the stanzaic *Morte* we also gain a strong sense of events branching outside of human control. Within the ‘harsh, consequential logic’ around which the narrative of the stanzaic *Morte* is structured there are two categories of causal forces spurring on narrative development.²⁴ These include moral choices made by characters – ‘momentous decisions’ and ‘calculated design’ – but also the forces of consequence and fate – ‘inconsequential choices’ and ‘sheer accident’.²⁵ In Arthur’s first dream before his battle with Mordred, the poet summons the enduring medieval motif of the wheel of fortune. Arthur dreams he is sitting at the top of the wheel, regally dressed, when it begins to turn and tip him into the dark water below filled with dragons – ‘The wheel over-turned there with-all/ And everich by a limm him caught’.²⁶ The movement of the wheel represents the capricious intervention of Fortune into human destiny; the way in which human beings are always subject to the indiscriminate whims of Fortune. One of the most tragic events of the poem – Arthur’s death – is occasioned by exactly such an unpredictable external force. As Mordred’s and Arthur’s forces gather to arrange a truce the incidental arrival of a snake causes a knight to draw his sword.²⁷ Consequently the chances of a peaceful truce are scuppered, and battle ensues. This complete accident that triggers disastrous events serves as another narrative reminder of the powerlessness of human beings in the face of Fortune.

Chrétien’s stories are far more self-contained than the sprawling, escalating narrative of the stanzaic *Morte*. Nevertheless they feature similar ‘inconsequential choices’, misunderstandings and incidental meetings that dictate the plot. The misunderstanding surrounding the Queen’s infidelity allows Kay to be accused, due to his wounds and the blood on the Queen’s sheets, and for Lancelot to entirely escape suspicion. Both texts

²² ‘The Knight of the Cart’, p.268.

²³ ‘The Knight of the Cart’, p.268.

²⁴ Wertime, p.1080.

²⁵ Sheron E. Knopp, ‘Artistic Design in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*’, *ELH*, Vol.45, No.4, (Winter, 1978), p.580.

²⁶ *SMA*, I.3186.

²⁷ *SMA*, I.3341.

complicate the idea of human morality by suggesting forces that are outside human control. It is highlighted that moral choices are not the only determining force and can sometimes be futile in the face of accidental external events.

Within these texts, we see that moral values are constantly challenged, tested, and pitted against one another. Loyalty and strength are rewarded and are equated with moral virtue, but neither of these qualities operate only within one value system, and therefore a single moral code can never be determined. Loyalty to a lover, loyalty to a lord, loyalty to friends and family or to the principles of right and wrong are different moral forces that act upon the individual and that have to be evaluated and prioritised differently in each case. Even within the single code of chivalric conduct, 'competing values may arise'.²⁸ For Lancelot in *The Knight of the Cart*, love is the overriding motivation; for Gawain in the stanzaic *Morte*, it is family loyalty; and for Arthur, the demands of kingship and righteous action. In consequence, the texts demonstrate 'the contradictions of human experience' and the characters exhibit 'guidelines for making decisions'.

This lack of ethical unity or conclusiveness within either text is perhaps because the authors did not set out to create morally instructive works. The stories in both are entertaining precisely because of the unpredictable action and poignant conflicts of loyalty. Critics have advanced that Chrétien was in fact 'ideologically uncommitted';²⁹ he was merely 'playing with ideas and making his characters act out a variety of themes'.³⁰ Similarly Sheron Knopp claims that the stanzaic poet 'wisely avoids the temptation to isolate and evaluate causes, weigh responsibility, or assign blame'.³¹ In these texts, the Arthurian tradition, and the literary canon as a whole, writers usually use the moral content of a work as 'raw material', worked up into a form where the morality is no longer relevant, but is superseded by artistic value. 'Great literature must', as Posner writes, make us understand and empathise with different moral perspectives and through this make us 'somehow... suspend moral judgements'.³²

²⁸ Lacy and Grimbart, p.153 and p.154.

²⁹ E. Vinaver, 'From Epic to Romance', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 46, no.2, (1964), pp.489-502.

³⁰ Fanni Bogdanow, 'The Love Theme in Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la Charrette*', *The Modern Language Review*, Vol.67, No.1, (Jan 1972), p.50.

³¹ Knopp. P.581.

³² Richard A. Posner, 'Against Ethical Criticism', *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol.21, No.1, (April 1997), p.3.

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