

**Causality in *La Mort le Roi Artu*:
Free Will, Accident, and Moral Failure**

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*The thirteenth-century French *La Mort le Roi Artu* indicates forthrightly how the Arthurian world comes to an end, but the text leaves less clear what motivates the disaster. Many critics attribute the cause to an external force, God or the goddess Fortune, that obliges Arthur and others to pursue their own destruction. A few offer greater insight into the nature of causality in the romance. They see the characters as exercising some degree of free will or even complete liberty. But these critics err in alienating the notion of free choice from moral concerns. In their reading, the heroes suffer not from moral failures but from intellectual or psychological deficiencies. However, to thirteenth-century minds free will would be a moral question. Indeed, the author encourages us to think in such terms by framing his romance as a sequel to *La Queste del Saint Graal*, a story of moral choices. The focus on choice in *Mort Artu* is much more subtle, consequent with the absence of supernatural manipulations so present in the previous romance. The author implies the kingdom collapses because of the moral weakness of its inhabitants who cannot satisfy the imperatives established for them in the *Queste*.*

*The title and first folios of the thirteenth-century French *La Mort le Roi Artu* make no secret of what will follow. The romance recounts the collapse of the Arthurian realm, but the author makes less clear what produces that calamity.*

Most critics understand Arthur and his knights more as objects acted upon than as agents of destiny. Jean Frappier and Norris J. Lacy, for example, see Fortune as a willful power that carries the narrative's heroes on a downward spiral. Alexandre Micha attributes the catastrophe to God's anger and "le déterminisme des

passions” [the determinism of passions].¹ The most recent contributor on this subject, Roger Pensom, sees the kingdom as torn asunder by a pre-Christian divinity acting as a “principe justicier” [justice dispensing principle].² Karen Pratt, who interprets the romance as a tragedy, finds that the author strikes a “careful balance between fate and free will.”³ Nonetheless, in her reading, the characters do not assume moral liberty until the *Mort Artu*’s “epilogue,” so her explanation for the cause of the disaster itself differs little from Frappier’s and Lacy’s.⁴ Donald MacRae makes a similarly attenuated claim for liberty. He characterizes Arthur and Gawain as exercising a “measure of free choice” and concedes “the importance of fate in the *Mort Artu*.”⁵ David Hult, in the introduction to his recent edition and translation of the romance, recognizes all of the protagonists as exercising complete freedom of choice.⁶ According to both MacRae and Hult, the damage arises from cognitive or psychological dysfunction, not from moral weakness.⁷ Hult even implies that Lancelot’s and Guenevere’s adulterous love plays no role in the kingdom’s

1 Micha, *Essais*, 205. The translation from modern French into English is mine, as are all other such translations in this essay.

2 Pensom, “Les Avatars,” 27.

3 Pratt, “*La Mort le Roi Artu* as Tragedy,” 107.

4 Pratt, “*La Mort le Roi Artu* as Tragedy,” 86 and 108.

5 MacRae, “Appearances and Reality,” 266-67. MacRae never indicates clearly how free choice and fate interact. Laurent, “Le problème de la liberté dans le *Lancelot-Graal*,” suggests that although the characters exercise free will through most of the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle, they lose that freedom in the *Mort Artu*, 22-23 and 61.

6 Hult, “Esquisses,” 39.

7 MacRae, “Appearances and Reality,” on the one hand, characterizes Arthur’s reluctance to accept reality as an inability to choose well, and this weakness leads to disaster, 267. On the other hand, MacRae says of that same reluctance “The King is prepared to close his eyes to the truth . . . as long as he can postpone the inevitable,” 272, suggesting that Arthur chooses well in denying the truth of Lancelot’s behavior. Hult, “Esquisses,” 39-73. Lyons, “*La Mort le Roi Artu*: an Interpretation,” rejects any notion of “decay and decline among great Arthurian figures;” she assigns blame for the end of Arthur’s kingdom to bad luck and bad timing without assuming that “misfortune” results from anything other than random chance, 147. Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law*, would seem to agree more with MacRae and Hult than with Lacy and Frappier, when he asserts that Lancelot’s championing of Guenevere against Mador’s accusation “implies a world in which human and divine wills function independently of each other, a world from which the gods have withdrawn, leaving humans responsible for the consequences of their deeds,” 28. Like MacRae and Hult, Bloch shows little interest in the moral significance of free choice. His interest lies instead in the political implications of the kingdom’s turmoil: “rooted far deeper than personal foible or folly . . . the death of Arthur and the destruction of the Round Table . . . look like the failure of feudal organization to deal with the problems of a new, more centrally-oriented era,” 14. Because I address Bloch’s arguments in “Judicial Duels and Moral Inadequacy in *La Mort le Roi Artu*,” I will not devote them attention here.

trouble.⁸ MacRae's approach failed to persuade Pratt, Lacy, or Pensom, and Hult's much more recent effort seems unlikely to convince those skeptical that such freedom exists in the kingdom of Logres for two reasons: first, because Hult examines the nature of causality only in the final third of the narrative; and second, because he does not offer a clear idea of what free will represents. In that respect, Hult is not alone.

Among nearly all who have considered the matter of causation in the *Mort Artu*, there is misunderstanding about the meaning of free will. To begin with, severing it from the notion of moral responsibility, as MacRae and Hult do, would make little sense to the thirteenth-century author and his readership for whom free will would be nothing if not a moral question. Indeed, MacRae's and Hult's gesture is all the more wrongheaded given that the *Mort Artu*'s author casts his story as a sequel to *La Queste del Saint Graal*, a romance that focuses on the moral choices of its protagonists and rejects any notion of fortuity. A careful reading suggests the final installment in the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle follows a similar, if much subtler, course in which supernatural interventions give way to a natural order. In this way, the author suggests the kingdom disintegrates because the survivors of the quest fail to live up to the high moral standards set for them in the previous romance. The best among them win eternal life but their worldly society cannot endure.

Before considering the moral choices in the *Queste*, and what those choices imply for the *Mort Artu*, let us first clarify the meaning of free will. It is essential not to confuse agency, the individual's exercise of choice, with the ability to realize ambitions.⁹ The inability to achieve a desired end does not imply that one cannot choose a course of action. Unforeseen circumstances may thwart the realization of a project, and that obstruction does not by itself suggest manipulation by a supernatural force. If all individuals exercise the same freedom, then the will of some must inevitably interfere with the will of others. Aristotle refers to such contingency as a form of *causa per accidens*, and establishes, in the words of Howard Patch,

8 Hult, "Esquisses," 72.

9 MacRae, "Appearances and Reality," 275.

that “chance is necessary to make room for free-will.”¹⁰ That Aristotle makes this case in his *Nicomachean Ethics* indicates that even in the pre-Christian period free will represents a moral concern.

With Augustine, who follows Aristotle on the necessity of accident, freedom of choice becomes not just a moral concern for this world but one of consequence for the next. Early in his theological career, Augustine asserted in *On the Free Choice of the Will* (ca. 387-395) that heaven as reward for the virtuous and hell as punishment for the sinner made no sense if believers were not free to choose between good and evil (2.1.3.7).¹¹ Later, in countering Pelagius, who preached an extreme form of free will for which man alone was responsible, Augustine insisted on the preeminent role in salvation of God’s grace, the gift that gives rise to virtue. To some his insistence seemed to leave no room for free will. Animated by this misunderstanding, Augustine wrote several treatises explaining the cooperation of grace and free will, e.g. *On Grace and Free Choice* (ca. 426-427), *On Reprimand and Grace* (ca. 426-427), and *On the Gift of Perseverance* (ca. 428-429).

Several centuries before the period of the romance’s composition, some elements within the Church used Augustine’s anti-pelagian writings in an effort to deny or minimize the role of human agency in salvation.¹² But after the ninth century this current of thought lost currency that it did not regain until the reformation of

10 Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna*, 16.

11 See *On the Free Choice of the Will*, *On Grace and Free Choice*, 32.

12 Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency*, “In the end what carried the day was a pastoral theology that was fundamentally grounded in Augustinianism, but an Augustinianism that had evolved in its encounter with the monastic theology of Cassian and with the realities of the wider Western Church. . . . The pastoral solution employed . . . and officially accepted by the Western Church confirmed the connection between human action, as prepared, empowered, and assisted by grace, and human destiny. Predestination had proved to be unpreachable,” 239. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, explains “with Semi-Pelagianism and Semi-Augustinianism alike, and after them with most Catholic theologians, it [the motive] was both moral and ecclesiastical, to preserve human freedom and responsibility and yet to restrain human pride and insure man’s absolute dependence on the church. The ecclesiastical interest to be sure was in a sense religious--the church was a divine institution and to make men dependent on it was supposedly to make them dependent on God,” 142.

the sixteenth century.¹³ For the period of interest to us, the Church maintained much the same the position Augustine elaborates in *On Grace and Free Choice*.¹⁴ Such is the position Saint Anselm of Canterbury offers in *On Freedom of Choice* (ca. 1085) and that Peter Lombard echoes in *The Sentences* (ca. 1155), a scholastic manual forming “the basis of all further theological elaboration in the West until the end of the Middle Ages,” according to historian R.W. Southern.¹⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, promoter of the Cistercian order whose monks offer guidance to the knights in the *Queste*, wrote his own treatise *Concerning Grace and Free Will* (ca. 1127-1128), the inspiration for which came to him when he was accused of so “strongly commending the work of grace” that he “lay himself open to the charge of unduly minimizing the function of free will.”¹⁶

Albert Pauphilet, who highlights the *prudhomes* of the *Queste* as representatives of the Cistercian order, characterizes the penultimate romance in the Cycle as “l’histoire des âmes à la recher-

13 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, “the National Synod of France held at Toucy, near Toul, in October, 860, . . . ended the controversy” because “the medieval church needed the doctrine of free will . . . as a basis for maintaining the moral responsibility, the guilt and merit of man. . . . [A] revival of strict Augustinianism . . . took place on a grand scale in the sixteenth century,” 536-37. See also McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, 132, 134.

14 Augustine’s *Enchiridion* (ca. 421-422) served this end; see, for example, J.F. Shaw’s translation, *The Enchiridion*, chapters 30, 31, 32, 100, and 101. However, Augustine himself did not see his doctrine of predestination as incompatible with free will and sought to reconcile them in *On Grace and Free Choice* (ca. 426-427), see, for example, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, *On Grace and Free Choice*, 141-42, 146.

15 See Anselm, *Freedom of Choice*, in particular, chapters 9, 11, and 13. See Lombard, *The Sentences Book 2*, distinction V, ch. 2, distinction VII, ch. 2, distinction XXIV, ch. 1, 3; distinction XXV, ch. 2-4, 7-8; distinction XXVI, ch. 1-2, 7, 11; distinction XXVII, ch. 1-3, 6; distinction XXVIII, ch. 4. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, 145. Ghellinck, *Le mouvement théologique du XIIe siècle*, notes of Peter Lombard that “Le concile de Latran de 1215 . . . assure définitivement son triomphe dans l’enseignement de la chrétienté et inscrit le nom du *Magister* à une place d’honneur dans un des premiers canons dogmatiques du concile. L’enseignement trinitaire de Pierre Lombard fut solennellement reconnu orthodoxe,” [The Lateran Council of 1215 . . . definitively assures his triumph in the teaching of Christendom and inscribes the name of the *Magister* in a place of honor in one of the first dogmatic canons of the Council. The Trinitarian teaching of Peter Lombard was solemnly recognized as orthodox], 162.

16 Williams, introduction to his translation of *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, v-vi.

che de Dieu” [the story of souls in search of God].¹⁷ Others scholars, such as Micha, reject Pauphilet’s assertion that “on n’y trouve rien qui ressemble à la predestination” [one finds nothing here that resembles predestination].¹⁸ Frappier characterizes the pious narrative as “le roman de la grâce” [the romance of grace], thereby assigning all agency to the Almighty.¹⁹ In Hult’s estimation, “un déterminisme absolu régit tous les personnages, toutes les actions (aventures), tous les destins” [an absolute determinism governs all characters, all actions (adventures), all destinies].²⁰ Similarly, Lacy sees a “divine plan” at work in the adventures of the questers.²¹

Such doubts about Pauphilet’s claim of complete personal liberty are not without foundation. The *Queste* lacks the quality that Aristotle and Augustine deem necessary for a world in which free will operates.²² Although the narrator and characters alike speak of *mescheance* [accident or misfortune], in every case, it indicates the unpleasant consequences resulting from sinful behavior rather than a fortuitous occurrence (9, 30, 42, 44, 61, 104, 107, 110, 123, 184, 212, 258) [6:8, 21, 28, 29, 40, 65, 67, 69, 77, 114, 131, 157].²³ Nevertheless, only one of the knights follows what amounts to a pre-determined path. Galahad neither sins nor feels the temptation to do so. When he slays evil knights, the narrator tells us that witnesses are so impressed with his energy and prowess that they see him as other than human (48, 230, 238) [6:32, 142, 146]. In effect, the narrative presents him as so virtuous that he appears not to be a

17 Pauphilet, *Études*, 26.

18 Pauphilet, *Études*, 31, and Micha, *Essais*, 195.

19 Frappier, *Étude*, 244.

20 Hult, “Esquisses,” 29.

21 Lacy, “The Sense of an Ending,” 119.

22 The reference to Aristotle and Augustine is from Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna*, 12.

23 References to the *Queste* are from *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet. Translations are by E. Jane Burns from the *Lancelot-Grail*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, indicated in brackets by volume and page.

quester so much as a model for others who seek the grail. A monk even compares his arrival “a la venue Jhesucrist, de semblance ne mie de hautece” (38) [to the coming of Jesus Christ, in form if not in significance, 6:26].

To these lesser mortals who confront difficult moral choices, the author devotes much more attention. The only successful quester with a sin in his past, Bors, joins Gahalad and Perceval only after five years of wandering on his own, improving his understanding of what the quest represents (265) [6:162]. Even the second purest of the questers, Perceval, faces moral temptations. Early on, he finds himself overwhelmed by an attack from twenty knights, and “li Bons Chevaliers” [the good knight] comes to his rescue. But as soon as the danger has passed, Galahad departs without saying a word despite Perceval’s efforts to retain him (87-88) [6:56]. Whereas Perceval may not immediately grasp the meaning of the rescuer’s limited intervention, the reader understands the message--the quest is an individual endeavor on which each participant must make his own way, choosing between sin and virtue. On the other end of virtue’s spectrum, iniquitous and nameless knights meet an untimely end; others, such as the covetous Meliant and the proud Bademagu are wounded and quickly fall by the wayside.²⁴ Gawain, a man of good will but one who never understands the quest as anything other than the search for a treasured object, disappears from the narrative before its conclusion. A repentant Lancelot ends up at the grail castle in Corbenyc, but tainted by his adultery with the queen, finds himself excluded from the remainder of the quest and the journey the successful knights undertake to Sarras (272) [6:166]. In short, although adventure and white-robed monks set the scene for moral choices in the *Queste*, the questers—aside from the exemplar Gahalad—face choices fraught with consequence. The supernatural suppresses fortuity, nonetheless the questing knights experience freedom of choice.

24 Bademagu’s name reappears only when Lancelot discovers his tomb. The inscription indicates that Gawain has killed Bademagu, but the killing does not figure in the narrative (261) [6:160].

The action of the *Mort Artu* begins as the survivors return to Arthur's court. The results of the quest create a somber tone, because those who might bask in the triumph of the undertaking, the worthiest of knights, Gahalad and Perceval, have passed into another world. It falls on Bors, who shared in their glory, to communicate the sad tidings: "en furent tuit moult dolent a court" (1) [all those at court were grief stricken at the news, 7:3].²⁵ Gawain, representing those who failed in the quest, recounts his numerous disgraces, including the killing of eighteen other questers "non pas pour ce que ge fusse mieudres chevaliers que nus autres, mes la mescheance se torna plus vers moi que vers nul de mes compaignons. Et si sachiez bien que ce n'a pas esté par ma chevalerie, mes par mon pechié" (2) [not because I was a better knight than any other, but because misfortune afflicted me more than any of my companions. And you may be assured that it was not a feat of prowess, but rather the consequence of my sin, 7:4].

Given that Gawain recalls here events from the quest, *mescheance* preserves the meaning it had in the previous romance. As Pensom correctly points out, "il désigne évidemment un malheur survenu en conséquence d'une faute morale précédente." [it evidently designates a misfortune arising as a consequence of a previous moral error] (12). Based on this one instance, Pensom assumes the meaning of the word will remain unchanged in the narrative that follows because "il n'est sûrement pas fortuit que le conte saute directement de la pénitence de l'orgueilleux Gauvain jusqu'à la recrudescence de la passion coupable de Lancelot et Guenièvre" [it is surely no accident that the story jumps directly from the penitence of the proud Gawain to the recrudescence of the guilty passion of

25 References to the *Mort Artu* are from Jean Frappier's edition, *La Mort le Roi Artu*, indicated by page. I reference Frappier's edition rather than Hult's, *La Mort du roi Arthur*, based on the assumption that the reader will more likely have access to the former than the latter. In the introduction to his edition, Hult indicates that the divisions of the narrative Frappier introduces into his edition are somewhat arbitrary, 116-27. However, the wording of the two versions is remarkably similar, particularly for the passages quoted in this essay. All translations are by Norris J. Lacy from the *Lancelot-Grail*, indicated in brackets by volume and page.

Lancelot and Guenevere] (13), as if the connection between sin and the harm it brings to the sinner were to remain unchanged from one romance to the other.²⁶

This assertion fails to take account of an important indication of rupture with the past. Before mentioning Lancelot's deviation from his vow of chastity taken during the quest, the narrator reveals that "les aventures del roiaume de Logres estoient . . . menees a fin" (3) [the adventures of the kingdom of Logres had been brought to a close, 7:4]. This absence comes as no surprise to readers of the *Queste*, for there it is made clear that the grail itself produces adventure and once the holy vessel leaves the kingdom, adventure will cease. Without a doubt, the absence indicates that the immanent God has receded from the narrative landscape.²⁷

One might assume, as Pensom and other critics do, that another directing force fills the vacuum. Lacy, for example, sees a world in which "Arthur and those around him no longer have even the illusion of control. Deprived of adventure, they are also deprived

26 Griffin, *The Object and the Cause*, like Pensom, attributes the same meaning to *mescheance* that the term has in the *Queste*: "*mescheance* and *pechié* are the same thing." As she sees it, the romance's notion of predestination is "illusory" because the narrative was composed retrospectively in that the romance begins by telling how it will end, 45. Lacy, "The Sense of an Ending," offers a different understanding of the Old French term: "*mescheance*, the word that characterizes Gawain's killing of eighteen knights, might indicate nothing more than poor luck, but in this text the word (like its translation as 'misfortune') must be seen as a reference to fate or Fortune," 117-18.

27 Although critics see signs of divine intervention in this narrative--see Frappier, *Étude*, 233, 235, 252--and some of the characters expect divine participation in judicial duels, the narrator never explicitly evokes an immanent God during the events between the end of the grail quest and the end of Camelot. During Gawain's duel with Lancelot, we learn that Arthur's nephew benefits from a divine gift that affords him greater strength as he fights at noon. But the narrator tells us that this gift was bestowed upon Gawain at his birth because he was baptized by a hermit "de si seinte vie que Nostre Sires fesoit tote jor por lui miracles" (198) [who lived such a pure life that for his sake our Lord performed miracles every day, 7:102]. In other words, the miracle recalls a virtuous past, and more the hermit's than Gawain's. At the battle of Salisbury Plain, Arthur thrusts his lance through Mordred's body, and "l'estoire dit que après l'estorde del glaive passa par mi la plaie uns rais de soleil" (245) [the story says when the lance was withdrawn, a ray of sunlight shone through the wound, 7:126]. In the *Lancelot Proper*, a white-robed monk destines a prophetic letter to Mordred that says of this wonder "ceste merueille mosterra Diex seulement en toi" (5:223) [God will produce this miracle in you alone, 5:286]. The *Mort Artu*'s narrator, on the other hand, abstains from such forthrightness. He attributes the claim to a lesser authority: "cil del país distrent que ce avoit esté sygnes de corrouz de Nostre Seigneur" (245) [the people of that country say that it was a sign of Our Lord's wrath, 7:126].

of the will to resist their destiny, represented by the turning of the Wheel.”²⁸ However, the Wheel of Fortune metaphor does not appear until the narrative is four-fifths complete. If the author wished to suggest that some force manipulates events, presumably he would do so earlier. At this point in the narrative, all we can be sure of is that the supernatural that focused attention on moral choices in the *Queste* no longer holds sway. Perhaps the lack of adventure simply points to a more natural world, one including true contingency. To know whether or not some extrinsic force, such as Fortune, or in Pensom’s words “une autre intelligence” [another intelligence] supplants the supernatural and suppresses whatever agency the characters enjoyed previously, one must pay close attention to the events that follow soon after the Gawain’s public confession. What do we find in the way of accidents or what appear to be accidents, and what does the context suggest as the meaning of *mescheance* when the word arises?

Pensom characterizes Lancelot’s wound at the Winchester tournament as the first sign of the ineluctable physical punishment that follows from sin. But nothing in the narrative identifies the injury as a *mescheance*. Nevertheless, one might read the wounding as an accident in that Bors does not understand that he thrusts his lance into his cousin’s side. Then again, Bors purposely attacks the Red Knight who happens to be Lancelot, so the blow is certainly not inadvertent. Indeed, tournaments require violent encounters among knights, and injury represents a logical outgrowth of such meetings.²⁹ In the *Queste*, when a spiritually inspired knight strikes a sinner, such as Galahad unhorsing Gawain, the result suggests a moral reproach or warning for the lesser knight (196) [6:122]. Although in that romance Bors represents one of the inspired, here he reverts to the role he plays in the *Lancelot Proper*, that of a facilitator for Lancelot’s and Guenevere’s clandestine affaire. Moreover, the context in which Bors wounds Lancelot underscores their distance from the quest and its focus on celestial chivalry.

28 Lacy, “The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure,” 91.

29 The romance never associates the word *mescheance* with a wound inflicted in a tournament or in battle.

The *Queste* features no tournaments. The event at Winchester is a mundane substitute that Arthur turns to in order to fill the void left by the disappearance of adventure. That Lancelot wins first place in the tournament—“enporta d’ambedeus parz le pris del tor-noiement” (17) [it was the opinion on both sides that he was the best knight in the tournament, 7:12]—establishing himself once again as the finest knight—also seems designed to highlight more Camelot’s impoverished moral landscape than any sin in particular. Although his adultery features prominently in the narrative as a whole, here the author downplays his connection to the queen. She does not attend the tournament, and Lancelot gives her absence little thought. But his victory, like all other martial triumphs in this romance, implies his moral superiority over others and, by extension, the kingdom’s moral deficit. Pensom believes Lancelot’s wound evokes his sin because his encounter with Bors parallels an incident much later in the romance—“la blessure infligée involontairement par un ami” [the wound involuntarily inflicted by a friend]—where Lancelot kills Gaheriet without recognizing him.³⁰ Lancelot inflicts that lethal blow in order to liberate his adulterous partner, the queen, from the execution pyre. Consequently, there is a connection between sin and bloodshed. However, the parallel extends no further, because the punishment falls in this case on an innocent party. Lancelot’s slaying of Gaheriet does not connect sinful behavior, *mescheance*, and bodily harm to the sinner. That pattern, so evident in the *Queste*, does not apply here.

When Lancelot and his companions depart from the tournament at Winchester, they leave behind “un de leur escuiers mort, que uns chevaliers avoit ocis par mesaventure d’un glaive” (18) [one of their squires, accidentally killed by a knight’s lance, 7:12]. Participants in mock combat assume the risk of fatal injury, but those assisting them from the side lines do not. The death is both accidental and unexpected, and although such losses may have occurred in real tournaments, it is curious that the author sees fit to mention this detail. The possessive adjective “leur” [their] links the squire to

30 Pensom, “Les Avatars,” 13.

Lancelot, the adulterer, yet the author weakens this link by indicating earlier that this squire is from the household of the knight from Escalot who accompanies Lancelot. When the tournament begins, Lancelot asks his own squire to stay away from Winchester so that his presence will not jeopardize his master's disguised participation (13) [7:10]. Furthermore, the squire is not the only incidental casualty in the aftermath of the tournament. When Gawain and Gaheriet pursue the Red Knight to learn his identity, they come across a dead knight, one with no connection to the events at Winchester. Those carrying him reveal that he was killed by a "uns pors sauvages que il avoit acueilli a l'entree de cele forest" (20) [a wild boar that he encountered at the edge of the forest, 7:13]. No more blame attaches to this nameless victim than to the dead squire.³¹ In fact, of this second death, Gaheriet remarks "c'est granz domages; car il a bien persone d'ome qui poïst estre bons chevaliers" (20) [this is most unfortunate, for he looks like a man who could have been an excellent knight, 7:13]. Perhaps most revealing about the notion of causality the narrative creates is that neither of these deaths affects the course of subsequent events. Both are mere details, gratuitous ones at that, unless the author means for us to understand the casualties as bad luck and nothing more.

On the other hand, Lancelot's wound has consequences. His recovery delays his return to court, allowing Guenevere to believe falsely that he has been unfaithful to her. Jealousy leads her to rebuff him on his return, he leaves Camelot, and his absence later puts

31 Pensom, "Les Avatars," does not comment on the meaning of the squire's death but he reads the knight's wound as evoking Lancelot's sin with the queen, claiming that "le texte fait appel à la conscience subliminale du lecteur/auditeur" (14) [the text appeals to the subliminal consciousness of the reader/listener]. As Pensom points out, there are similarities between Lancelot and the dead man; both are wounded knights. However, the nameless knight dies from his wounds, whereas Lancelot does not, so the parallel is less than perfect. In addition, his association of the wild boar with "concupiscence" requires reference to several other texts, most of which postdate our romance, and the suggestion that the nameless knight was wounded by the boar in the genital area--associating the injury with sexuality--requires quotation of two other poems, Bérout's *Tristan* and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, where such a wound appears. Nothing in the *Mort Artu* hints at where the knight was mortally wounded, so it seems unlikely that the romancer wanted to draw the reader's thoughts, however subliminal, to the groin area, 15-17.

her in mortal danger. Here we have part of what Lacy terms a destructive “interlocking sequence of events, held together in a chain of causes and effects” that he compares to “falling dominoes, each one toppling the next, until Camelot itself is ultimately destroyed.”³² However, causes followed by effects do not by themselves suggest, as Lacy implies, a lack of agency for the characters involved in the sequence, particularly not when the narrative presents certain causes and effects as falling outside of the chain. For example, while Lancelot convalesces, he learns of a tournament at Taneburgh that Guenevere will attend. Fearing he cannot meet her there, Lancelot becomes agitated, and his wound reopens. He determines that he will nonetheless make his way to the tournament, claiming that otherwise: “morrie de duel” (44) [I’ll die of grief, 7:26]. The wise man who acts as his physician manages to dissuade Lancelot from his rash project only by refusing to accompany his patient. Lancelot could not survive the journey, therefore blame for his death would fall on his caretaker. As a means of delaying Lancelot’s reunion with Guenevere and allowing her jealousy to fester, the new bleeding and the argument it provokes are superfluous. The original wound already serves that narrative function. The episode involving Lancelot’s interrupted recovery seems designed instead to show that he can make a reasoned decision and control his impulses.

A scene that soon follows the reopening of Lancelot’s wound represents another instance where the author underscores contingency. Avarlan hands a poisoned fruit to Guenevere, assuming that she will pass it on to Gawain, the target of the assassin’s animus. But Guenevere offers the fruit instead to Gaheris who succumbs to the poison. The malevolent character and his scheme has so little to do with the “chain of causes and effects” that Frappier disparages it as “un épisode secondaire et pauvrement agencé” [a secondary episode and poorly constructed] that the author employs without concern for “l’invraisemblance du procédé” [the verisimilitude of the conceit].³³

32 Lacy, “The Sense of an Ending,” 118. Pratt, “*La Mort le Roi Artu* as Tragedy,” subscribes to a notion similar to Lacy’s interlocking causes, 97.

33 Frappier, *Étude*, 196-97.

Despite his position on free will in the romance, Hult offers a judgment of the episode similar to Frappier's. He describes Avarlan's crime as a clumsy pretext "pour relancer l'intrigue" [to relaunch the plot], a manifestation of what he terms "le destin romanesque" [romanesque destiny]—the force exerted on the author by his audience's knowledge of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and Wace's *Roman de Brut*.³⁴ According to Hult, the weight of that knowledge obliges the author to show Arthur's kingdom following the same disastrous arc.³⁵

However, this episode has no antecedent in Geoffrey's or Wace's work and is superfluous as plot catalyst. At this juncture, Arthur has just returned from Morgan's castle where she has shown him the illustrations Lancelot drew there of his love affair with the queen. Though not persuaded of the queen's infidelity, the king nevertheless suspects her, and she is vulnerable because of Lancelot's absence. Without Avarlan's gesture, the ingredients for a new confrontation requiring Guenevere's rescue are already present. If one sees Avarlan's attempt on Gawain's life as a means of relaunching the plot or as another piece in a line of falling dominoes, the episode proves troublesome. But if the author wishes instead to present a disorderly world filled with chance occurrences, the sudden appearance of a scheme with no connection to previous events makes more sense. That Avarlan fails to achieve his desired aim serves as an illustration of how easily one may mistake a world where contingency operates with a more orchestrated universe. When, for example, Lacy writes that the "romance insistently underlines the fact that not only Arthur, but other characters as well, are incapable of guiding the course of events" or that what happens "is beyond the control of individuals involved," he is entirely right. As indicated earlier, the error lies in the assumption that the inability to control events reveals a narrative where the "emphasis is . . . on the irreversible forces shaping events."³⁶ In passing the fruit to Guenevere, Avarlan

34 Hult, "Esquisses," 34.

35 Hult, "Esquisses," 31-32. MacRae, "Appearances and Reality," makes the same claim of intertextual influence as Hult without using the term "romanesque destiny," 276.

36 Lacy, "The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure," 89.

asserts his will, but Guenevere's expression of her own will thwarts his design. For Avarlan, Guenevere's choice represents an accident, a contingency that he did not anticipate and cannot overcome. His failure to kill Gawain does not suggest that a supernatural force deprived him of the ability to choose a course of action. The free will of some must on occasion frustrate the desires of others.

In this context, it is important to note the language used in the aftermath of the poisoning. When King Arthur enters the room where the death occurred, "*dit que ci a trop grant mescheance et que trop grant vilennie a fete la reïne, se ele a ce fet de son gré*" (76-77) [he said that this was a great misfortune and that the queen had committed a very great crime if she had done it intentionally, 7:42].³⁷ Arthur's "ci" is so vague that one cannot be certain what it refers to. The "mescheance" may describe the predicament Guenevere finds herself in because she has precipitated Gaheris's death rather than to the grief experienced by those who love Gaheris. Although the reader knows that the queen has not acted with malicious intent in passing along the poisoned fruit, perhaps the blame she suffers alludes to another transgression of which the reader knows her to be guilty. In that sense, "mescheance" may represent suffering she has brought upon herself. The narrator, speaking from the queen's point of view, offers a similarly ambiguous thought: "*La reïne ne set que dire, tant est esbahie durement de ceste mescheance*" (77) [The queen did not know what to say, so dumbfounded was she at this misfortune, 7:42].³⁸ However, subsequent expressions of regret that include "mescheance" clearly indicate mourning for the deceased: "*li rois . . . se seigne plus de mil foiz de la merueille que il a del chevalier qui est morz par tel mescheance*" (77) [the king . . . made the sign of the cross a thousand times in his distress about the knight who had died through such misfortune, 7:42]; and "*la reïne . . . commence a fere trop grant duel . . . quant par tel mescheance a ocis un*

37 Here I have altered Lacy's translation. No doubt, sensing the lack of moral connection between offering the fruit and the consequences of eating it, he renders "mescheance" as "tragedy."

38 Here again, I substitute "misfortune" for "tragedy."

si preudome" (77) [the queen . . . began to lament loudly . . . since she had accidentally killed such a noble man, 7:42].³⁹ Nothing in the narrative hints at opprobrium attaching to Gaheris. The author presents him as an innocent bystander who suffers through no fault of his own, so here we find yet another instance in this romance where "mescheance" means an unfortunate chance occurrence rather than retribution for sinful behavior.

From this accident, the narrative immediately turns attention again to Lancelot. His wound finally healed and distressed by Guenevere's rebuff on his return to court, he seeks to isolate himself. When Bors voices concern about the risks of traveling alone, Lancelot insists he has nothing to fear, claiming that God "ne soufferra pas par sa grace que il me meschiee en leu ou ge soie" (74) [by his grace . . . won't allow any harm to come to me wherever I go, 7:41]. Soon after he expresses this belief, a hunter's arrow penetrates his left thigh. Pensom reads this wound, like the first Lancelot suffers at Taneburgh, "comme le châtiment de son péché adultère" [as the punishment for his adulterous sin]. According to Pensom, the location of this second wound reinforces the rapport between misfortune and sin, given that the thigh represents a "métonymie (synecdoche) des parties sexuelles" [metonymy (synecdoche) for the sexual organs].⁴⁰ Pensom likens this metaphorical connection between leg wound and sin to that of the Fisher King in Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*. However, in that romance the reader learns of the connection through an explicit announcement. Perceval's cousin tells him that had he not remained silent when he saw the grail procession, the king's infirmity would have been cured. He said nothing because of his previous sin: "por le pechié, ce saches tu, / de ta mere t'est avenu, / qu'ele est morte de duel de toi." [It befell you, understand, / because you sinned against your mother, / who died of grief on your account] (3559-61).⁴¹

39 Lacy renders "par tel mescheance" as "so tragically," for the sake of continuity and clarity, I alter his translation.

40 Pensom, "Les Avatars," 19.

41 Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li Contes del Graal), or Perceval*.

No such pronouncement figures in the *Mort Artu*. The Maimed King in the *Queste* would seem to constitute a better analogy. There one realizes the connection between the king's wound and the sinful nature of earthly chivalry when Galahad heals the sovereign's legs by anointing them with blood from the holy lance (271-72) [6:166]. At this point in the narrative, the three successful questers journey together, united in their understanding of celestial chivalry. Thus, it is precisely the healing of the wound that underscores the metaphorical association between sin and bodily imperfection. If the author of the *Mort Artu* wished to associate the arrow through Lancelot's thigh with his adultery, it is curious that the wound heals before Lancelot's liaison with the queen ends. The transient nature of the wound, in this case and in that of Lancelot's tournament injury, casts doubt on the symbolic meaning Pensom attributes to it.

After parting ways with Bors, Lancelot "gisoit chascune nuit chiés un hermite a cui il s'estoit fez confés aucune foiz" (78) [spent each night with a hermit who had once heard his confession, 7:43]. One may take this subordinate clause as a reference to the monk who hears Lancelot's confession in the *Queste* and who persuades the knight to abjure his adulterous relationship with the queen (66-67) [6:42-43]. The context, a suffering knight in need of a hermit's council, seems designed as an allusion to that romance. It is the only such meeting before Lancelot retires to a hermitage at the end of the *Mort Artu*. But even without the allusion to the previous romance, that Lancelot confesses to this hermit indicates the latter is aware of the hero's sins, yet the *prudhome* offers no reproach for the sinner. He merely advises Lancelot to abstain from the next tournament because "n'i feriez vos riens qui vos tornast a enneur" (81) [you could not win honor there, 7:44]. As Alfred Adler puts it, the "spiritual advisor does not explain his illness as a sign from Heaven, but as a *droite mescheance*, an unfortunate incident . . . a reality in

its own right, no *figura*.”⁴² Given how we see the word *mescheance* employed shortly before in the narrative, where Gaheris is poisoned, Adler’s translation of the old French term seems entirely appropriate. If one is inclined to read Lancelot’s wounds as a sign of some retributive power at work, two accidents involving the same hero in fairly quick succession may seem one coincidence too many.

However, the juxtaposition of the two episodes has a purpose other than to suggest free choice as an illusion. In the first instance, when the wound he receives at the tournament reopens, Lancelot behaves prudently following the physician’s advice and avoids doing himself further harm. In the second, where Bors warns his cousin of the dangers of traveling alone, Lancelot acts impulsively and pays the price. The contrast of the two decisions underscores the link between choice and consequence. In this instance, the consequence of the stray arrow is not far reaching. Lancelot convalesces with the hermit and misses yet another tournament, but he still arrives in time to defend Guenevere against Mador’s accusation that she killed his brother treacherously. After Lancelot’s triumph in the duel, the queen’s jealousy abates and so does her husband’s suspicion of her. For the moment at least, the dominoes stop falling. The chain of causes and effects is interrupted.

Restarting the destructive cascade requires the intervention of Agravain who once again urges Arthur to spy on Lancelot. Even Lacy acknowledges the deliberateness of this gesture, writing “Agravain’s action is one of the few . . . in the romance that are the result of choice.” Nevertheless, Lacy quickly attenuates this acknowledgement by suggesting that Agravain’s behavior may not count as a freely-made decision: “if indeed his jealousy of and hatred for Lancelot really left him any choice in the matter.”⁴³ This is a common approach for those who see the *Mort Artu* as a model of determinism. Faced with a lack of evidence of an outside force act-

42 Adler, “Problems of Aesthetic versus Historical Criticism,” 940. Frappier, *Étude*, reads both of Lancelot’s wounds as “un avertissement céleste” [a celestial warning], 233.

43 Lacy, “The Sense of Ending,” 118.

ing on the characters, one searches for proxies to fill the void. As Lacy puts it, “the text leaves no doubt that inclination, passion . . . as well as notions of duty . . . and family honor, have deprived the characters of the normal ranges of behaviors and have determined that they must act precisely as they do.”⁴⁴

Madeleine Blaess makes a similar assertion: “the figures” are “driven by character, environment, heredity, upbringing,” as does Artie Zuurdeeg: “they [the characters] are not . . . fully independent creations. Their behavior is prescribed by the codes of chivalry, courtly love, and family honor.”⁴⁵ No doubt, the characters in this romance find themselves constrained by their values and influenced by their environment. If they were not, they would hardly seem human, but constraint and influence fall far short of the absolute control these critics suggest.

44 Lacy, “The Sense of Ending,” 119. I elide “accident” from this list to avoid confusion because Lacy believes there are in fact no accidents in the romance. As he explains later, “In reality, what appear to be narrative accidents in this text are of course an illusion created in large part by the inability of characters to determine the direction of events. Apparently unmotivated occurrences—accidents—are a specialized expression of the force of fate or Fortune, whose turning wheel links events so as to propel the text toward its predictably catastrophic ending,” 121. The notion that all behavior is determined for the characters leads Lacy to make the odd claim that the narrator must fabricate dramatic tension: “The characters in this romance, though unable to act other than as they do, are nonetheless capable of fervor, and the narrator maintains the appearance, the fiction, of decisive action. Although readers know that Lancelot cannot fail to return to rescue Guinevere when she is condemned to death, his doing so is presented as a matter of bold resolve,” 122. At this point in the narrative, Lancelot has no infirmities and faces no obstacles to rescuing the queen, other than the armed knights who anticipate his arrival, so one cannot say that the author meant create any suspense surrounding the queen’s liberation. It is the unintended consequences of the rescue—the killing of Gaheriet and Guerrehet—that give the episode emotional resonance.

45 Blaess, “Predestination,” 18; and Zuurdeeg, *Narrative Techniques*, 4. See also Pensom, “Rapports du symbole,” who asserts: “Le thème central du roman est la limitation du libre-arbitre imposée par les passions et par la nature même de l’existence physique. En effet, l’attitude de l’auteur envers le libre-arbitre sent l’averroïsme, quoiqu’il ne témoigne aucune envie d’en exposer la théorie de manière systématique ainsi qu’avait fait l’auteur de la *Queste del Saint Graal* de ses doctrines cisterciennes. Le développement de chacun des personnages principaux se termine par la reconnaissance de la limitation de sa liberté,” 404 [The central theme of the romance is the limitation imposed on free will by passions and by the very nature of physical existence. Indeed, the attitude of the author toward free will hints of averroism, although he betrays no desire to expose the theory in a systematic way as the author of the *Queste del Saint Graal* had done with his Cistercian doctrines. The development of each of the principal characters ends with the acknowledgement of his liberty’s limitation].

The only affirmative indications of a manipulative force, prior to the appearance of Lady Fortune fourth-fifths of the way through the narrative, come not from the narrator but from the mouths of characters. Bors, Gawain, and Arthur imprecate the goddess when faced with sorrow or contretemps. Although Lacy stops short of suggesting we take these invocations of Fortune as authoritative, he points to their frequency as meaningful.⁴⁶ Whereas there are several in the *Mort Artu*, “the enormously longer *Lancelot Proper* mentions the word only a few times, and it never occurs in the *Queste del Saint Graal*.”⁴⁷ But the numerical discrepancy does not validate the characters’ assignment of responsibility. The simpler explanation is that the heroes in the *Lancelot Proper* meet with less grief than their older selves in the *Mort Artu*, and in the *Queste*, the interpreters of adventure, the white-robed monks refuse to allow the questing knights to assign blame for their misfortune to any source other than their own unrighteousness. As Hult puts it, the blame that characters assign to Fortune represents a “symptôme d’un trait fondamentalement humain--la tendance à se traiter de victime, et par là à ne pas accepter sa propre responsabilité,” [symptom of a fundamentally humain trait--the tendency to think of themselves as victims, and thereby not accept their own responsibility].⁴⁸

The love between Lancelot and Guenevere may represent something of an exceptional case in the characters’ exercise of agency. Their mutual affection certainly represents a force that contributes to the destruction of the Arthurian world, and perhaps we are to understand this passion as one that they cannot control, as Lacy and Micha claim. Almost as soon as Gawain finishes revealing his failures during the Grail quest at the beginning of the romance, the narrator announces Lancelot’s abandonment of chastity: “il ne demora pas un mois après que il fu autresi espris et alumez come il

46 Zuurdeeg, *Narrative Techniques*, on the other hand, accepts the characters’ assertions as authoritative, 27.

47 Lacy, “The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure,” 89-90.

48 Hult, “Esquisses,” 51.

avoit onques esté plus nul jor, si qu'il rencheï el pechié de la reïne autresi comme il avoit fet autrefoiz" (3) [not a month passed before he was as enamored and inflamed as he had ever been before, so that he again lapsed into sin with the queen just as he had done formerly, 7:4]. But when Lacy asserts that there is no "indication even that the lovers actually make a decision" to resume their adulterous relationship after the quest has finished and that "discretion is simply not a behavior that is available to them," he makes too much of the narrator's failure to reveal the lovers' thoughts at that juncture.⁴⁹ The romance distinguishes between the emotion the lovers feel and acts arising from that sentiment. Although Lancelot and Guenevere conduct themselves less prudently than before, at this early stage in the narrative, among the members of Arthur's court only Agravain becomes aware of their assignations because he spies on Lancelot and "se prenoit garde de ses erremens que nus des autres" (3) [watched his comings and goings more attentively than any of the others, 7:4]. Arthur's other nephews are so unaware of Lancelot's surreptitious activities that when Arthur later shares Agravain's accusation with Gawain, the latter responds: "ge sent Lancelot si sauf de ceste chose que il n'a el monde si bon chevalier, se il l'en apeloit, que ge n'en entrasse en champ encontre lui por Lancelot deffendre" (30) [I consider Lancelot so guiltless in this matter that I would take the field to defend him against any knight, no matter how good, who might accuse him, 7:18]. To all appearances this offer to serve as a champion for Lancelot is sincere, and all the more credible given that Gawain later indicates that he would not defend his own mother in single combat if doing so would bring him dishonor (101) [7:54].

Even after Lancelot successfully defends the queen against Mador's accusation of treachery and we learn that Lancelot and Guenevere "se demenerent si folement que li pluseur de leanz le sorent veraïement" (107) [conducted themselves so indiscreetly that many people there knew the truth beyond any doubt, 7:57], the narrative also indicates nothing the lovers do in front of Arthur arouses

49 Lacy, "The Sense of Ending," 119.

his suspicion. The intervention of third parties, Agravain and Morgan, is required to bring the infidelity to the king's attention. On the morning Agravain catches the couple together in the queen's bedroom, the narrator tells us beforehand that Lancelot "se porpense comment il porra aler plus couvertement, si que nus ne le sache" [considered how he could join her so discreetly that no one would know]. When he asks Bors how he might achieve this end, his cousin tells him where he can find "la plus coie voie et la plus estrainge de gent" (114) [the quietest and most deserted path, 7:61]. The precaution proves insufficient, because the trap is already set, but that failure does not annul the will to avoid detection. Evidently, Lancelot can act with a degree of discretion. He can exercise restraint as his absence from the tournament at Taneburgh demonstrates. Most important of all, after the Pope intervenes to end the war following Guenevere's rescue from the execution pyre, Lancelot returns the queen to Arthur and leaves Logres with no intention of returning. His love for her endures but he chooses not to realize his desire.

Although following this turning point, the frequency of accident or *mescheance* diminishes, one major contingency remains.⁵⁰ Arthur must fight the Romans, a battle no doubt inspired by events in *The History of the Kings of Britain* and *Roman de Brut*, as Hult suggests. In the narrative presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, Arthur crosses the channel in order to fight the emperor who responds to the king's recent conquests of territory claimed by Rome. The battle is thus a foreseeable consequence of Arthur's behavior. In the *Mort Artu*, by contrast, Arthur comes to Gaul to fight Lancelot. The conflict with Rome arises without connection to other events in the romance, and the fight would seem to have far reaching consequences given that its ravages deny Arthur the benefit of his nephew's prowess in the struggle against Mordred.⁵¹ The narrator lets us know that despite the head wound he suffers in his duel

50 The word *mescheance* appears only twice in the second half of the romance (142) [7:75] and (227) [7:117].

51 Rome seeks to avenge a defeat Arthur inflicts on them years before, near the end of the *Lancelot Proper*. See *Lancelot: roman en prose*, volume 6:105, or *Lancelot-Grail*, 5:397.

with Lancelot, Gawain still has another productive battle left in him “s’il ne fust einsi preudom li Romain n’eüssent pas esté veincu, por gent qui encontre eus fust” (210) [if he had not been so valiant, the Romans could not have been beaten by the army opposing them, 7:109]. But otherwise, the narrative becomes, in Lacy’s words, “increasingly linear,” as cause and effect follow each other in a clear sequence.⁵² However, this linearity by itself tells us nothing about the source of causation. The narrowing of options does not indicate a loss of free will for Arthur and Gawain.

Indeed, all of the prophetic voices in the final third of the romance manifest themselves in scenes where the narrative suggests not that Arthur and Gawain face a predetermined future but that they must choose between alternatives. As MacRae points out, a very old woman who knows of Gawain’s humiliation “chiés le Riche Roi Pescheor” (169) [at the castle of the rich Fisher King, 7:88] attempts to dissuade the king and his nephew from their project, telling them that besieging the city will bring them shame and disgrace.⁵³ The two proceed with their project, but their stubbornness in the near term does not indicate an inability to choose because, after two months of fruitless effort, Arthur in fact heeds the woman’s admonition. He insists that Gawain find an alternative for “nos i porrons plus perdre que gaaignier” (182) [we have more to lose than to gain here, 7:94]. Though indecisive, Arthur evidently can exercise choice.

As an alternative to the siege, Gawain decides to fight Lancelot in single combat. The young man whom Gawain asks to present his challenge predicts that the duel will lead to nothing but shame and death (182-83) [7:95]. Gawain claims that he must follow through with his plan, but his own words end up calling that necessity into question. At first, he claims to be confident of victory because he fights with God on his side (183) [7:95], then moments later confesses to another motivation: “pour a aise estre en aucune maniere,

52 Lacy, “The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure,” 87.

53 MacRae, “Appearances and Reality,” 274.

ou morz ou vis, ai je empris ceste bataille” (187) [I have undertaken this battle so as to be somehow at peace, either dead or alive, 7:97].⁵⁴ To avoid fighting his former companion in arms, Lancelot offers to become Gawain’s vassal and spend ten years in exile as a penitent, but Gawain categorically refuses the gesture of reconciliation. If the author wished readers to attribute Gawain’s insistence on fighting Lancelot to codes, upbringing, or values, it seems unlikely he would underscore the astonished reactions of Gawain’s contemporaries to his refusal. Arthur begs him to accept: “Biaus niés, por Dieu, fetes ce que Lancelos vos requiert; car certes il vos offre toutes les resons que chevaliers puisse offrir a autre por ocision de lingnage; certes si preudom comme il est ne dist onques mes ce qu’il vos a dit” (191) [Dear nephew, in God’s name, do what Lancelot is asking; he’s certainly making all the amends that one knight can make to another for killing a kinsman; surely no man as noble as he is ever made such an offer, 7:99]; and Yvain reproaches Gawain for rejecting the offer: “Onques mais voir tex merveilles ne feïstes” (193) [Surely, you’ve never done anything so astonishing, 7:100]. Moreover, when Gawain feels death approaching, he reproaches himself for rebuffing Lancelot’s generosity: “ge li peüsse crier merci de ce que li ai esté si villains” (212) [I could ask his forgiveness for my cruel treatment of him, 7:110].

In Arthur’s dreams, the figure of his deceased nephew offers a more consistent message, calling for prudence much like the old woman and the young man outside of Gaunes. The narrative thus attributes greater authority to the late Gawain’s voice. First, he urges his uncle not to do battle with Mordred, a course of action Arthur rejects out of hand as dishonorable. But after momentarily disappearing, Gawain returns, beseeching his uncle to call on Lancelot for help, “car ce sachiez veraïement, se vos l’avez en vostre compaignie,

54 MacRae, “Appearances and Reality,” attributes Gawain’s animus to “mistaken observations” and assumes that Gawain’s “quest for his own death” is “subconscious,” 273. But Gawain’s words suggest a conscious effort of self-destruction. Without the accusation that Lancelot killed his brother treacherously, Gawain cannot oblige a judicial duel that could end his grief. For the distinction between simple and treacherous homicide, see Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law*, 36.

que ja Mordrés n'avra encontre vos duree" (225-26) [for you can be sure if you have him in your company, Mordred will never be able to hold out against you, 7:116]. According to Frappier: "la loi de l'honneur interdit à Artus de commettre une telle lâcheté, et même de faire appel à Lancelot" [the law of honor forbids Arthur from committing such an act of cowardice, and even to call upon Lancelot].⁵⁵ Although avoiding battle with Mordred would evidently bring Arthur dishonor, nothing in the narrative--not even Arthur own words--suggest that it would be cowardly to ask for Lancelot's help. Arthur refuses the suggestion instead out of fear that Lancelot would not comply "car il li a tant forfet qu'il ne quide mie qu'il venist a son mandement" (226) [because he had so wronged him that he did not think he would come if sent for, 7:116].⁵⁶ However, the reader knows this fear to be unfounded because Lancelot has already indicated his desire to regain Arthur's company. When he offers to go into exile in order to avoid fighting with Gawain, Lancelot asks that he be allowed to return to Camelot if he survives his banishment—a proposition Arthur then willingly accepts. The king experiences a change of heart but one consequent to a change in circumstance. No doubt, we are to understand that, without Gawain's company, Arthur cannot abide a reunion of Lancelot and Guenevere. He makes an anguished choice for reasons he hesitates to acknowledge. Though he indeed rebuffs his late nephew's counsel, no "law" obliges him to do so.

In Arthur's next dream, he finally encounters Lady Fortune. Lacy frames this vision as one would expect: "On the Wheel of Fortune, Arthur is beginning his descent . . . a reversal of the Wheel's movement is inconceivable."⁵⁷ Similarly, Frappier points to the downward turn of the wheel as indicating that Arthur "doit compren-

55 Frappier, *Étude*, 281.

56 Here I modify Lacy's translation. He substitutes the "il" at the beginning of the sentence with "Lancelot." However, after the pope imposes a truce on Arthur and Lancelot, Gawain, not Arthur, renews the hostilities. The king's passivity in this renewal suggests that he is again uncertain whether Lancelot has wronged him.

57 Lacy, "The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure," 92-93. See also, Lacy, "The Sense of Ending," 119.

dre que l'écroulement de sa puissance est conforme à une loi universelle" [must understand that the collapse of his power conforms to a universal law], because even the most powerful undergo an inevitable decline.⁵⁸ In other words, whatever measure of choice may have been available previously, none can now remain for the king. Alternatively, Hult proposes that we understand Arthur's dreams as the product of his anxiety on the eve of battle with Mordred rather than as a sign of an inevitable future sent to the king by a God or goddess. In his visions, Arthur contemplates:

les deux possibilités d'action qui se présentent à lui: la révision de sa stratégie, qui consiste en l'appel au secours de Lancelot; ou la continuation sur le chemin du désastre. Gauvain, en voix de la liberté d'action, articule la première option, mais la maîtresse même du destin . . . révisé cette option en lui montrant de manière concrète que cette possibilité n'en est pas une.⁵⁹

[the two possibilities of action that present themselves to him: the rethinking of his strategy that consists of the appeal for Lancelot's help, or of continuing on the path to disaster. Gawain, as the voice of liberty of action, articulates the first option, but the very mistress of destiny . . . revises that option by showing him in a concrete manner that this possibility is not one at all].

Hult's contention about the source of Arthur's visions makes perfect sense. It is doubtful that an author who has thus far avoided supernatural interventions would introduce one so late in his narrative.

One may, nonetheless, take exception to Hult's interpretation of the dreams' contents because it is far from clear that the visions of Gawain and Lady Fortune represent different voices. On the contrary, both figures seem to present the same message of choice. Although in general the wheel evokes an unavoidable downward trajectory as good luck turns to bad, in this particular manifestation, the author hints at something other than the wheel's traditional course. Lady Fortune whisks Arthur from the earth and "illuec l'asseoit seur une

58 Frappier, *Étude*, 281.

59 Hult, "Esquisses," 51.

roe. En cele roe avoit sieges dont li un montoient et li autre avaloient; li rois regardoit en quel leu de la roe il estoit assis et voit que ses sieges estoit li plus hanz” (226) [there she set him upon the wheel. The wheel had seats, some of which rose and others sank. The king saw that his seat was in the highest position, 7:117]. The description tells us that the wheel moves but not necessarily that it does so when Arthur sits on it. Eliding the mechanical turn, Lady Fortune drops Arthur in the highest spot. She then tells him: “tel sont li orgueil terrien qu’il n’i a nul si haut assiz qu’il le coviegne cheoir de la poesté del monde” (227). [such are the effects of earthly pride that no one is so highly placed that he can avoid falling from earthly power, 7:117]. If this warning were followed by the descent of Arthur’s seat on the wheel, it would seem a premonition of doom indicating that as an aging monarch he must unavoidably lose his grip on power, so Gawain’s counsel can avail him nothing. But instead Lady Fortune “le prenoit et le trebuschoit a terre si felenessemnt que au cheoir estoit avis au roi Artu qu’il estoit touz debrisie” (227) [took him and dashed him to earth so cruelly that it seemed to King Arthur that he was crushed, 7:117]. The lady removes him from the wheel as brusquely as she placed him on it, a violent gesture suggesting a pointed reproach, an indictment of something other than the sum total of Arthur’s achievements.

Perhaps in this instance “li orgueil terrien” [earthly pride] represents Arthur’s refusal to heed Gawain’s advice. Fortune intimates that his unwillingness to call on Lancelot for help will bring his downfall. The archbishop’s words, which Hult omits, certainly support this reading. When Arthur asks the prelate to interpret these visions for him, the wise man essentially repeats the late Gawain’s warning “Ha! sire, por sauveté de vostre ame et de vostre cors et del reigne, tornez arriers a Douvre, et toute vostre gent, et mandez a Lancelot qu’il vos viengne secorre . . . Car se vos assemblez a Mordret” (227) [Oh, sir, for the salvation of your soul and body and kingdom, turn back to Dover with all your army, and ask Lancelot to come to your aid . . . For if you attack Mordred, 7:117] disaster will result.

Later, Arthur and the archbishop come across Merlin's inscription predicting the battle of Salisbury Plain and Arthur's death. That the prediction is etched in stone contributes to the impression that, as Lacy puts it, the end is "pre-ordained."⁶⁰ Even Hult ascribes to this idea, and not simply as a function of "romanesque destiny."⁶¹ However, we cannot assume that the author has such an aim—a desire for the reader to understand Merlin's knowledge of the future as ordaining the foreseen event.⁶²

Christian thought had long held that God's foreknowledge of an outcome does not impose the result on those involved in the event. Such is the position Augustine maintains, for example, in *On Free Choice of the Will* (3.4.9.39). Boethius presents a more a limpid explanation of the question while separating the notion of foreknowledge from the divine.⁶³ In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Philosophy asks her interlocutor: "why then do you imagine that things are necessary which are illuminated by this divine light, since even men do not impose necessity on the things they see? Does your vision impose any necessity on the things which you see present before you?" (book 5, prose 6).⁶⁴ In the romance, the archbishop's reading of the inscription conforms to this understanding of pre-science. Once again, the king asks for an interpretation, a request

60 Lacy, "The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure," 94.

61 Hult, "Esquisses," refers to the "caractère inexorable du destin, dicté . . . par les signes et prophéties inscrits dans le texte" "[inexorable character of destiny, dictated . . . by the signs and prophecies inscribed in the text], 39.

62 The character in the romance *Merlin* performs a different function. Composed after the *Queste* and the *Mort Artu*, the *Merlin* serves as preface to those romances in the *Vulgate Cycle* but presents an unorthodox notion of causality. As Sunderland, *Old French Narrative Cycles*, explains of the eponymous hero in the *Merlin*: "his job is to make sure that things happen as they are supposed to. The future is thus for Merlin both absolutely predetermined and contingent at the same time. Paradoxically, he has to ensure that events *do* occur precisely as they inevitably *will* occur," 77.

63 Lombard, *The Sentences Book 1*, attributes to Origen (ca. 185-232) the understanding of God's foreknowledge not impinging on free will, citing the theologian's *On the Epistle to the Romans*, 214-15. Matthews, *Augustine*, while designating Saint Augustine as the pre-eminent authority on the subject, indicates that Boethius "seems to have been the first philosopher to mark this modal distinction clearly," that between an event occurring because God's foreknowledge requires it to occur and God's foreknowledge conforming to an occurrence. Matthews also indicates that Saint Anselm "makes completely clear that he understands the Boethian distinction" in *De Concordia*, 102-03.

64 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 91.

that in itself suggests the prediction is not as straightforward as it might appear. Whereas the prelate says: “vos i morroiz ou vos se-roiz navrez a mort; autrement n’en poez partir” [you will die or be mortally wounded there; you cannot escape that], he prefaces this certainty with a condition “se vos assemblez a Mordret” (228) [if you attack Mordred, 7:118]. In other words, Arthur has a choice. Provided that he calls on Lancelot for help, he may survive. If, and only if, the king fails to exercise the discretion available to him is he sure to perish at Salisbury Plain.⁶⁵

Evidently, given the narrative’s end, the characters in this romance chose poorly, and those poor choices represent a degree of moral failure on the part of the decision makers. Yet the binary nature of the decisions—attack Mordred with Lancelot’s help or without—hardly signals that Arthur and the knights of the Round Table fall among the reprobate, such as Eugène Vinaver, Micha, and others suggest.⁶⁶ They see the destruction of the Arthurian world as

65 Lacy, “The *Mort Artu* and Cyclical Closure,” himself asserts that “portents” and “dreams . . . are themselves entirely reliable and unambiguous in the *Mort Artu*,” 93. Yet at the same time, he does not accept the choices these prophetic voices offer as meaningful. In fact, he does not acknowledge their presence in the text. For example, despite the archbishop’s role in interpreting Arthur’s dreams and the inscription, Lacy claims that “in the *Mort Artu*, pronouncements that anticipate the future do not require interpretation,” 94.

66 Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, 89; Micha, *Essais*, 205. Adolf, “The Concept of Original Sin,” 21-29, attributes the end of the kingdom to Arthur’s incestuous union with his half-sister. Dubost, “Les dénouements dans *La Mort le Roi Artu*,” 85-111, writes in reference to Arthur’s accidental killing of Lucan: “n’est-ce pas une manière de signifier qu’en ce moment ultime le Ciel reste sourd et que la Providence se détourne du roi?” [isn’t this a manner of signifying that at this final moment Heaven turns a deaf ear and that Providence abandons the king?], 99. Zuurdeeg, *Narrative Techniques*, sees the climatic battle as evidence that “God has washed His hands of the fellowship of the Round Table,” 75. MacRae, “Appearances and Reality,” in the single instance where he sees a moral cast to the King Arthur’s predicament, interprets the message from the visions involving Gawain and Fortune thus: “overcome foolish, earthly pride and salvation will be guaranteed” and the reaction to it as “But Arthur does not,” 276. Failure to call on Lancelot will lead to ruin for the kingdom, but nothing in the romance hints that Arthur will be denied salvation for losing a battle. Sunderland, *Old French Narrative Cycles*, finds the cause at an earlier stage than other scholars: “God’s servant . . . Galahad causes the destruction of the Arthurian world by rejecting all its moral coordinates and ripping to pieces the ideals that sustain it. The *Queste* thus reveals the holy will is not the highest good . . . but a mask for evil,” 76. Black, “Violence in *La Queste del Saint Graal* and *La Mort le roi Artu* (Yale 229),” adopts a nuanced position on the question of divine retribution. Whereas she sees an “apocalyptic tone” in the romance, it “is tempered by an accompanying elegiac sense of regret for the loss of so many noble men and women” such that “the reader cannot take satisfaction from the destruction,” 162.

an indication that divine wrath or abandonment tears the kingdom asunder. But in this romance cycle, suboptimal choices do not lead inexorably to eternal hell fire.

Here again, a turn to the preceding romance proves instructive. Before the Grail leaves Logres, Josephus explains to the successful questers that the inhabitants of the kingdom “se sont torné a peor vie et a seculier, ja soit ore ce qu’il aient adés esté repeu de la grace de cest saint Vessel. Et por ce qu’il li ont si malement guerredonné les desvest ge de l’anor que je lor avoie fete” (271) [have turned to a dismal, worldly life, despite having once been nourished by the grace of this Holy Vessel. Because they have so poorly repaid the favor, I divest them of the honor I confirmed upon them, 6:165-66]. One could mistake this revocation of privilege with punishment, if not for a scene that precedes it. There Galahad and Perceval return to the castle where the previous day Perceval’s sister was exsanguinated in order to cure the leprous woman. The knights find all of the inhabitants struck dead by divine fury because an innocent was sacrificed for the benefit of an irredeemably wicked soul. The characters on which the *Mort Artu* focuses our attention turn to the “worldly life,” though not to the exclusion of all virtue. For instance, the successful quester, Bors returns in this romance to the role he plays in the *Lancelot Proper*, an intermediary between his cousin and the queen. Beloved by the common people for her generosity, Guenevere resists leaving Lancelot’s company when the Pope requires that Arthur welcome her back into his household. Before the battle of Salisbury Plain, she attempts to join a religious order but as an expedient rather than out of conviction. Lancelot displays great virtue in championing the queen during the first duel despite doubts about her innocence, in refusing to harm Arthur in battle, and in offering to exile himself rather than fight Gawain. Nonetheless, he finds himself in all of these situations because of his adulterous passion. These heroes are more human than Galahad, and thus fallible. As a result, they end up fighting each other, exposing themselves to the one moral analogue of the leprous woman in the *Mort Artu*, Mordred.

Because Hult overestimates the coercive weight of the supernatural in the *Queste*, he rejects any moral connection between that romance and the *Mort Artu*. In his words, “le sens moral de la *Queste* n’a vraiment aucune pertinence pour une interprétation de la *Mort Artu*” [the moral sense of the *Queste* has not the slightest relevance for an interpretation of the *Mort Artu*].⁶⁷ Frappier, however, takes a more measured approach in seeking to distinguish the religious complexion of this romance from that of its predecessor. He remarks on the rarity with which the characters confess their sins, how none takes communion, how secular clergy supplant the regular, and how this latter group, the *Mort Artu*’s bishops and archbishops “se contentent d’exercer le culte sans prétendre jouer le rôle de chefs spirituels” [content themselves with performing services without assuming the role of spiritual leaders].⁶⁸ Moreover, Frappier notes that the romance’s author “ne fait nulle part la moindre allusion au culte de la Vierge; il ne la nomme jamais; ce silence surprenant, mais absolu, suffirait à prouver qu’il ne s’inquiète pas de se conformer à la religion de *La Queste*” [no where makes the slightest allusion to the cult of the Virgin; he never names her; this surprising and absolute silence would suffice to prove that he does not concern himself with conforming to the religion of the *Queste*].⁶⁹ In a sense, Frappier makes a valid assertion. The cast of characters and their religious fervor differ from those of the previous romance.

But that difference should come as no surprise when one takes account of the *Mort Artu*’s narrative purpose. The author tells the story of the Arthurian world’s destruction. To populate that story with same white-robed monks urging righteous behavior, a pious Bors, and a penitent Lancelot would produce a confusing moral picture, one antithetical to the spirit that animates the *Queste*. The rarities and the silence to which Frappier refers suggest an author eager

67 Hult, “Esquisses,” 60.

68 Frappier, *Étude*, 222.

69 Frappier, *Étude*, 223.

to harmonize the spirit of his romance with that of a much different narrative. The worldliness the romancer puts on display in the *Mort Artu* testifies to the moral drift of the characters rather than to his own secular leanings.

If this harmony of spirit escapes notice through much of the romance, as the *Mort Artu* reaches its very end, the author's desire to frame his work as the sequel to the *Queste* again becomes apparent. Lancelot becomes a hermit, joining his cousin Blioberis and the archbishop of Canterbury, both "vestuz de robes blanches" (258) [dressed in white robes, 7:134]. Four years later when Lancelot, the priest, passes away, the archbishop dreams of angels escorting the hero's soul to heaven. The vision assures the reader that the former sinner finds salvation, an outcome no critic attributes to forces beyond Lancelot's control.⁷⁰ One might argue, as Pratt does, that what occurs subsequent to the demise of the Arthurian world need not cohere to what brings about that end. She asserts that free will operates only in the aftermath of the final battle.⁷¹ However, the narrative suggests that, before Camelot has drawn its last breath, Lancelot's closest companions also find heavenly peace. On the eve of battle with Mordred, Arthur dreams that the poor have "conquestee la meson Dieu" (225) [won the house of God, 7:116] for his nephew. Of Guenevere we learn that "onques haute dame plus bele fin n'ot ne plus bele repentance . . . qu'ele ne fist" (254) [never had a lady met a finer death or repented more nobly . . . than had she, 7:131]. A holy man assures Girflet that Arthur does indeed lie in the tomb that bears his name in the Black Chapel, a resting place on sanctified ground (251) [7:129].

70 According to Frappier, *Étude*, even before the hermitage episode, Lancelot "se dégage de la fatalité" [extricates himself from fatality] (267), whereas other characters lack that capacity "Mordret, Gauvain, Artus doivent rester, eux, sur la route de la fatalité" [Mordred, Gawain, Arthur must remain on the path toward fatality] (275).

71 See note 4.

These reassurances prove troubling for a number of scholarly interpretations of the romance, most of all for the notion of God smiting the kingdom in anger.⁷² Although Pratt accepts that Lancelot, Guenevere, and Gawain win their final repose, she refuses to recognize the suggestion of Arthur's salvation as it would undermine her reading of the king as a tragic hero.⁷³ Hult acknowledges all of these references to the afterlife, but seeks to diminish their importance citing the oblique manner in which the text delivers them: "on peut bien se demander pourquoi le narrateur ne voulait pas prendre à son propre compte ces événements surnaturels" [one may wonder why the narrator did not want to assume responsibility for these supernatural events]?⁷⁴ The query is wrongheaded, particularly given Hult's recognition that the author eschews supernatural interventions elsewhere in his narrative. There is no reason at this moment for the author to abandon the lighter touch he gives to moral questions than the author of the *Queste*. To Hult's thinking, for the characters in the *Mort Artu* to have free choice requires there be no divine element in the narrative, not even an understood presence: "le narrateur fait tout ce qu'il peut pour ne pas affirmer une force du destin extérieure et supérieure aux volontés et aux décisions des hommes" [the narrator does all that he can in order not to affirm a force of destiny exterior and superior to the wills and decisions of men].⁷⁵ Whereas the narrator manifestly avoids indicating any divine manipulation of behavior, the words "superior to" extend Hult's claim well beyond that measure. In essence, Hult would have us believe the thirteenth-century author, like Pelagius, sees grace as irrelevant to salvation.

72 Micha, *Essais*, acknowledges this gesture on the author's part despite his contention about divine anger, 205. Laurent, "Le problème de la liberté," comes to a similar conclusion: "il est implicitement souligné que ce sont les héros qui ont trahi la confiance; Dieu va donc les abandonner, comme déçu dans ses espérances" [it is implicitly underscored that it is the heroes who have broken faith; God will therefore abandon them, as if disappointed in his expectations], 22-23. Pensom, "Les Avatars de la justice divine," acknowledges that the romance's coda does not fit with his interpretation of the text, 25.

73 Pratt, "*La Mort le Roi Artu* as Tragedy," 108.

74 Hult, "Esquisses," 55.

75 Hult, "Esquisses," 58.

On the other hand, Frappier, who assumes Arthur and Gawain lack free choice, attributes their happy ends to grace alone.⁷⁶ However, we know that neither Hult's nor Frappier's understanding of grace conforms to Church doctrine in thirteenth-century Western Europe. Augustine's insistence that grace and free choice work together became dogma, a position the later writings of Saint Anselm, Peter Lombard, and Bernard of Clairvaux make plain. If our thirteenth-century author wished to evoke a universe in which mortals were not responsible for their behavior, it seems unlikely that he would draw attention, however indirectly, to the question of salvation. If he wished to suggest that grace serves no prevenient function, it is doubtful he would encourage readers to think of the *Queste*—where grace figures so prominently—at the beginning and at the end of his own romance. Intimations of heavenly peace certainly have no precedent in the earlier versions of the kingdom's collapse, those Hult characterizes as imposing a “romanesque destiny” on the *Mort Artu*. Both Geoffrey and Wace tell of Gawain's death and burial, but without indicating where his body lies or offering any other hint of his soul's destination. Their narratives preclude the question of salvation for Arthur by suggesting that, despite his mortal wound, he may return to rule Britain once more. Given the allusions to the *Queste* at the end of the *Mort Artu* and the suggestions of eternal life for the heroes, it stands to reason that the author wished to underscore an orthodox notion of free will and grace in the fictional world he vivifies. We know for certain that he presents us with a more disorderly world than the one we find in the *Queste* where holy men and adventure oblige questing knights to opt between vice and virtue. There the supernatural controls the journey in a way that leaves no room for accident that might distract from the moral decisions the questers contemplate.

76 Frappier, *Étude*, 247-52.

In the *Mort Artu*, by contrast, the survivors of the quest lack such guidance, and *mescheance* assumes the meaning of accident. From early on the narrative emphasizes hazard with the deaths of non-combatants at Winchester. Lancelot's injuries also underscore fortuity and the other element essential to free will—choice. When Lancelot's first wound reopens, he listens to reason and recovers, whereas when he refuses to heed his cousin's advice, he pays a price for his rashness. One may characterize these events as "a chain of causes and effects," but they evoke a world where choice brings consequence rather than one where human will amounts to an illusion. Adulterous love, plays a destructive role in this romance, yet that passion hardly deprives Lancelot of all restraint. He controls his impulses in front of the king and attempts to avoid detection from other eyes. Moreover, to keep the peace, Lancelot and Guenevere accept a physical separation. After this act of self-denial, attention turns to Arthur and Gawain who assert that circumstances compel them to act as they do, but more authoritative voices contest these claims. Even Arthur's dream featuring Lady Fortune becomes, in the archbishop's interpretation, a warning of danger rather than a prediction of the inevitable. This concentration on choices and *mescheance* conjures a realm where characters have a say in determining their own fate. In the romance's final folios, the author presents assurances that the souls of his heroes find paradise, personal codas not manifest in the previous iterations of Arthur's disastrous end. Salvation for these representatives of the kingdom of Logres, despite their shortcomings, intimates not only that they enjoy God's grace but also that they merit their final repose. Such a conclusion makes perfect sense in a romance that casts itself as a sequel to the *Queste*, a narrative function that Lancelot's retreat from the world reinforces. The author wishes us to see the Arthurian world as collapsing from within rather than being crushed from without by God's wrath or by another supernatural force. He would have us understand that this society suffers not from wickedness or irrationality but from the slow decay of moral weakness.

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King Arthur fighting the Saxons.

From The Rochefoucauld Grail, 14th Century