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Redaction, Allegory, and Parable: Malory's *Sankgreal*

Nathan White

Much has been written on Malory's role as a redactor of the Grail legend contained in the Vulgate Cycle and other sources—and specifically on his penchant for removing many details which would seem to clarify the tales. As Mary Hynes-Berry asserts, "What Malory chose to delete or to preserve ... was more important than the words he added or altered" (243). Likewise, Jill Mann, in making a statement about Malory in general, notes that he often "[throws] out many of the explanations and clarifications which earlier writers had taken pains to provide" (*Taking* 72). It is undebatable that for Malory, less is often more; as Hynes-Berry points out, Malory's *Sankgreal* is only a third the length of its main source, the *Queste del Saint Graal* (243). And even when the cuts and changes seem minor, their effects are often dramatic—without changing the plot of the text, they change the sense of the text from one of stability, in which symbols are readily interpreted by the text itself (as in the *Queste*) to one of mystery and paradox, in which more interpretation must be supplied by the reader (as in the *Sankgreal*). And yet this change does not erase the allegorical nature of the tale; Malory may place the allegory in the background, but he does intend to remove it.

I have chosen to examine the bloodletting episode in Chapter VII of the *Sankgreal*, "Of Sir Galahad," as an example of this phenomenon, partially because here the differences between the *Queste* source and the *Sankgreal* are relatively few, and in part because the episode presents a particularly difficult problem of interpretation by omitting the moral

signposts found elsewhere in both texts. Malory translates the first part of the episode—in which the three pure knights (Galahad, Bors and Percival) do battle against the knights who seek to force Percival's sister to “fill [a] dish with the blood of her right arm” (384)—more or less faithfully. Few minor descriptions of the battle and the leprous woman are removed from the *Queste*, but these subtractions have very little impact on the overall sense of the text. A few subtle, but important, changes occur after Percival's sister submits to the bloodletting. First, there is a change in the source of the knights' instructions for their next adventure. In the *Queste*, it is Percival's sister who tells them to seek the Maimed King: “The Almighty wants it this way, and has asked me to inform you on his behalf” (76). In the *Sankgreal*, on the other hand, it is simply “a voice” that instructs the knights to depart (386). A second deletion occurs in the description of the anointing of the leprous woman with the blood of Percival's sister. The *Queste* here refers to Percival's sister as “the Holy Virgin” (76), while the *Sankgreal* notes only that the leprous woman is healed by the blood, with no mention of the saintly nature of the martyr (386).

But it is after the castle is destroyed in the storm that the omissions in the *Sankgreal* become most apparent. The *Queste* version indicates:

When they came to the castle keep, they found...dead knights were strewn here and there, as Our Lord had pounded and struck them down for the evil life they had led. The companions remarked that this must be heaven's revenge.

‘This would never have happened,’ they surmised, ‘if not to appease the wrath of the Creator.’

As they spoke, a voice said to them, ‘This is the revenge for the blood of the virtuous maidens that was spilled here as the earthly cure for a wicked sinner.’ *The two companions marveled at the Lord's vengeance, thinking how foolish it was to contravene his will, even to protect one's life* (77, emphasis added).

The *Sankgreal*, on the other hand, records only that the knights encounter “neither man nor woman that was not dead by the vengeance of Our Lord. So with that they heard a voice that said, ‘This vengeance is for blood-shedding of maidens’” (387). The moral of the *Queste* story—the injunction not to value one's life over the will of the Lord—is absent. A similar situation occurs when the knights discover the cemetery wherein

the previous victims of the bloodletting have been buried. The *Queste* records that the knights are moved to “[decry] the evil and vile custom that the castle inhabitants had maintained. The people of that land had endured it so long that many important family lines had been weakened or terminated by the death of these virgins” (77). Malory only notes that “there lay the bodies of all the good maidens which were martyred for the sick lady” (387). Once again, he withholds or at least minimizes the moral lesson; he tells us what happens but not what to take from it.

From these examples it should be clear that there is a common thread among those elements that Malory opts to change or delete: namely, the religious and moral nature. Eugene Vinaver notes that the *Queste* is “a dogmatic exposition of doctrine,” and for him, Malory’s redactions are an attempt to move the text out of the sphere of religious allegory: “For this kind of ‘interpretation’ Malory had little use” (lxxxix-xc). Vinaver’s scare quotes around “interpretation” are telling, for he highlights—perhaps unintentionally—the reason Malory would have pushed the doctrinal exposition of the *Queste* into the background. For Malory, it is better that the reader analyze and puzzle over the meaning of the text than have it explicitly given him or her. To be sure, he speaks frequently in moral terms, but his morality only hints at the inherent Christian allegory rather than stating it directly.

This is a subtle and somewhat unexpected move for a writer in Malory’s age to make, which might explain why Hynes-Berry asserts that Malory “probably did not even see the invitation to read allegorically” (244). As I have noted, Malory certainly sees allegory in a different light than does the *Queste* writer. Emmanuele Baumgartner defines the *Queste*’s intent as “writing in the *semblance* of the sacred text that would support reading according to the four levels of meaning, through which medieval theology read the Old and New Testaments” (112). The allegorical level is the second of these levels of meaning, this type of interpretation revealing how the narrative “illuminates human life under the pattern of Christ’s life” (Harris 5). It is inarguable that the *Queste* does this quite purposefully; the *Queste* writer points out the Lord’s hand in the events of the narrative as often as possible. But that is not to say, as Hynes-Berry does, that “[Malory] reproduces the plot—stripped of its discursive presentation; the allegorical level of the romance is subtracted” (244).

In fact, Malory preserves the allegorical signifiers from the *Queste* at least as often as he deletes them. Richard Barber notes that in the *Queste*, “Each scene is composed as a symbol, and the whole romance is infested by hermits, whose function is to explain both to the protagonists and the reader the spiritual import of the events that unfold before them”

(9). When these hermits show up in the *Sankgreal* they often serve a similar function—something spiritually significant occurs, and they expound the moral lesson related to the event. Early on in the *Queste*, Sir Gawain fights and kills the “seven brothers” who defended the Castle of the Maidens. He then meets a hermit who castigates him for his impiety and needless bloodshed. Gawain is told that he was commissioned as a knight “to serve our Creator, to defend Holy Church, and to return to God the treasure that he entrusted to [Gawain’s] protection: [his] soul,” and that he has instead “abandoned [his] Creator and led the most sullied and damnable life of any knight” (19). After chastising Gawain, the hermit explains the meaning of the previous events:

The Castle of the Maidens represents Hell, and the maidens represent the good souls wrongly held there before the passion of Christ. The seven knights represent the seven capital sins...Indeed, as soon as the soul leaves the body ... it goes first to hell where it is held captive, much like the maidens.

But when the Lord of heaven saw that His creation had gone awry, He sent His Son to earth to liberate the fair maidens: they are the good souls. Just as He sent His Son who had been with Him since before the world began, so too did He send Galahad as His chosen knight and servant to free the good maidens.
(19)

When Malory redacts this section he again cuts out many of the more explicitly religious passages and descriptions; in the *Sankgreal*, Gawain is chastised only for “[living] mischievously many winters” (328). It is likely that Malory means this phrase to imply that Gawain has abandoned his religious responsibilities, but it is significant that he does not state this directly. Likewise, where the *Queste* avers that the seven brothers “would have done penance ... for the evil custom they upheld ... and been reconciled by God” (19), the *Sankgreal* omits the reference to this unfulfilled repentance. However, the explanation of the episode’s allegorical import remains—Malory’s hermit still likens the maidens to “the good souls that were in prison before the Incarnation,” the knights to the seven deadly sins, and Galahad to “the son of the High Father” (328). If Malory’s aim is to strip the *Sankgreal* of allegorical significance then he is doing a pretty poor job of it here—especially since this episode retains the labeling of Galahad as a type of Christ.

This retention should be noted, since the link between Galahad and Christ seems to be severed by Malory's deletions at other points in the text. For example, Sandra Ihle points out that the *Queste* "establishes Galahad as a type of Christ" through the account of Percival's aunt about the Round Table's relation to the Table of the Last Supper and the Table of Joseph of Arimathea (112). Contrary to the *Queste*, the *Sankgreal* omits the references to the other tables and consequently "eliminates any suggestion that Galahad is to be compared to Christ" in this context (112). As we have seen, however, the fact that Malory deletes some allegorical signifiers does not mean that he deletes all of them; furthermore, much of the original allegorical content of the *Queste* can be inferred through the symbolic elements that he does preserve, such as the hagiography connected with Galahad and Percival's sister.

When critics such as Vinaver and Hynes-Berry claim that Malory deletes in order to clear away the allegorical significance of the Grail narrative, they are perhaps underestimating the power of the hagiographic context in which Malory writes: saints' lives were some of the most widespread books in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. "If a person owned only a few books, one of them would likely be about saints" (Kraemer 26). This means Malory's audience would have brought to their reading of his text an intimate understanding of hagiography. Alfred Kraemer notes that the *Sankgreal* follows many of the conventions of contemporary hagiography (and of the *Queste* for that matter), this parallelism directing the reader to a hagiographical and allegorical interpretation:

Malory appealed to his readers' religious sensibilities by presenting characters in a way that is directly related to their earlier or concurrent reading...[he] presents each character's lineage, chastity, and participation in miraculous events with direct allusions to the hagiographies...[his] contemporary readers would have seen his Grail story as a study of men, and a woman, whose adventures in pursuit of the Grail impart not only a chivalric morality, but *a morality applicable to all readers*. (65, emphasis added)

Kraemer sees in the *Sankgreal* a "framework [that] dramatizes the various levels of sainthood in a progression" (66): from Lancelot, the best of all sinful men; to Bors, tainted only once; to Percival, tempted but still valiant; to his sister, the virgin martyr; and finally to Galahad, the Christ figure. This designation of the *Sankgreal* as a re-imagining of a saint's life

lends support to the idea that Malory preserves much of the allegorical character of the *Queste*. After all, a contemporary reader of Malory would have been accustomed to reading hagiography for the purpose of finding Christ types and other allegorical symbols. And it is the idea of a universally applicable moral—one that can be shown through five examples, rather than just the one of a traditional saint's life—that concerns us here. If this is Malory's goal, as Kraemer suggests, then the sections of the *Queste* that he omits are those he has deemed unnecessary for the fulfillment of this goal, while those he has kept accomplish it in some way.

Furthermore, the language of Malory—and indeed, of narrative style in his period in general—is the language of judgment. Mark Lambert notes that “again and again in our romances, to describe is to evaluate” (29). A glance back to the bloodletting episode confirms this—the leprous woman is “full evil at ease” (386), and the intact cemetery is full of “fair tombs; and that place was fair, and so delectable that it seemed them there had been no tempest” (387). It is exactly this tension between the language of judgment and the seeming lack of authorial summation that makes the bloodletting episode so compelling. Because the Sankgreal is in some fashion a saint's life, we know that there must be a moral to every episode, and indeed, Malory implies that this event should be judged or evaluated. However, he does not offer a conclusion of his own, and instead it is the reader who must supply the moral through his or her own interpretation of the text. When Malory deletes material from the *Queste*, he does so, not to minimize the religious message of the story but rather to invite the reader to fill in that message. And Malory's contemporary readers would have been accustomed to doing just that.

I am aware that this assertion supposes that Malory has confidence enough in his readers to allow them to take interpretive liberties. Yet as frequent listeners and participants in the medieval exegesis of Christ's parables, Malory's audience would have been adequately prepared for an allegorical reading. As Stephen Wailes notes, “The stories that we call parables were understood by medieval readers to fall within a large body of likenesses or similitudes that communicated Christian truth when properly interpreted” (4). The episodes in the *Sankgreal* fall within this same scope—they are figurative and can communicate Christian truth; if they are not exactly parabolic, then they are at least similar enough to accommodate an exegetical style of interpretation. Wailes further notes that parables were preached to the congregation regularly: at least thirty different parables were included in the readings for Church feasts, and these readings were regularly accompanied by allegorical interpretations on the part of the preacher (6-7). Therefore, it is quite reasonable for Malory to expect his readers to be able to engage with the episodes in the *Sankgreal* on

a familiar, figurative level.

Applying this method of reading to the *Sankgreal* yields some striking results. To return to the bloodletting episode, let us note the difficulties it presents in terms of moral interpretation. We know, because the text has told us, that the custom of the castle—"blood-shedding of maidens"—is evil and the source of God's punishment, but this knowledge provokes more questions: for example, was Percival's sister wrong to submit to the bloodletting? And was Galahad wrong to consent to her request to cease fighting and "spare not for me" (385)? A rational interpretation might suggest this, but Malory's style of revelation—the knights act and are *then* told of the morality of their actions—"resists interpretation into a fully mimetic mode—that is, a mode in which ethical significance is intrinsic to the actions portrayed rather than symbolically expressed by them" (Mann, *Malory* 213). In other words, it is not so much that a good knight is pure because he acts virtuously, but rather that actions become virtuous on account of being committed by a good knight.

It is this principle we must understand if we are to unravel the bloodletting episode and wring from it the instruction it contains. The way to find the moral in Malory is to start with Galahad and work backwards, for if we have been paying attention to the way Malory has consistently labeled Galahad the purest of the knights, then we know that whatever he does must be not only the right action but the best possible action—indeed, because we have already seen Galahad compared to Christ, we know that his actions are perfect. This means that the initial battle (led by Galahad) is properly joined and also that the choice to assent to the request of Percival's sister to end the battle is the correct one. The first decision—the one to fight and defend Percival's sister—seems, then, to signify Christ's defense of His followers against those who would seek to force them to submit to the sinful ways of the world ("the custom of the castle"). The second decision is more difficult to interpret, but it may signify Christ's submission and obedience to the will of the Father. The moral, typical of hagiography, that a medieval reader would draw from such action might be something like: it is right to assent to the counsel of a virtuous woman, even if such counsel seems counterproductive. We might even replace "virtuous woman" with "the Blessed Virgin" or "the Mother Church."

And what of Percival's sister? Again, the associations provoked by Malory's description assure us of her righteousness—in fact, she parallels quite neatly the long tradition of virgin martyrs in hagiography. Her virginity is a prerequisite for her status as a martyr—the question the foreign knight asks to provoke the initial battle is, "Is she a maid?" (384).

Likewise, her prediction of her own resting place is a common trope in hagiography. Indeed, “by giving up her life for another she most nearly approaches the *imitatio Christi* of all the Grail seekers” (Kraemer 82). Her story would signify the way in which Christ, by delivering Himself into the hands of evil people, sacrificed Himself for all and ended the grief of the world. The moral of her story, once again characteristic of the saint’s life, is: it is right to sacrifice one’s own life to prevent grief, even if one must sacrifice it to evil people.

Ultimately, Malory’s motive for omitting what he does from the *Queste* may be based less on a desire to do thematic violence to the *Queste* and more on a simple desire to avoid redundancy. If he knows, for example, that his readers will immediately recognize Percival’s sister as a virgin martyr then he has no need to carry over the *Queste*’s appellation of “Holy Virgin.” Likewise, he can omit many of the links between Galahad and Christ because he is certain that the few remaining references will be found by his careful readers, and that they will be able to extrapolate them throughout the text. An allegorical reading of the *Sankgreal* is not impossible or even impractical—it simply requires more diligence from the reader than does a similar reading of the *Queste*. This is not to say that all of the allegorical symbols of the *Queste* remain intact, nor is it to say that there is not a dramatic change in the sense of the tale from the *Queste* to the *Sankgreal*; obviously, Malory has an artistic agenda apart from simply serving as a translator. But despite his many deletions he retains much of the deeper meaning of the *Queste*, and he is able to do this because of his understanding of how his work should be read. Malory does what any imaginative translator must do: he creates a new work and takes ownership of it while simultaneously leaving enough traces of the original to allow readers to recreate its sense for themselves.

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