

Chaucer and Malory have been seen as set being apart from the pervasive religious influences of the late middle ages. Malory is said to secularise his French sources, deliberately excising much of the supernatural from the story (Vinaver 123). Chaucer "writes remarkably little that can be recognized as ostensibly religious" (Shepherd 270). There is, however, a sense in which their major works, Le Morte D'Arthur and Troilus and Criseyde are informed by an understanding of the fallen nature of humanity which dooms human endeavour to failure and decay. From very early in both stories the reader knows that the worlds the characters inhabit are condemned to destruction. The individual characters are doomed by their sin which is manifest as some form of rebellion against God. While the usual suspects like lust are implicated, the pride involved in presuming to a reliance on human resources and feelings, is a prominent motif of man's separation from God's will.

The misfortunes which happen to Malory's protagonists and Troilus happen for reasons rather than chance. I will show how these catastrophes can be sheeted home to their failure in a religious sense by an examination of Balin, his sword and the subsequent need for a grail quest, the knights who fail in that quest, and finally how the tragedy of Troilus can be viewed in an analogous fashion.

There is something wrong with Balin. He is portrayed as the best knight of Arthur's company at the time and yet as a hero everything he touches turns to disaster. When he tries to help people they all get killed (II.17). Knights who ride with him get speared by an invisible knight (II.12-3). His story is a key one in that it introduces many of the motifs and motivations of the rest of the tales:

In many ways the Tale of Balin is a microcosm of the entire Le Morte Darthur, and the patterns of destruction outlined in the Balin are traceable throughout Malory's work, revealing a continuous concern with the themes of destructive action and behaviour that contribute to the dissolution of the Round Table. (Crenshaw 6470A)

Balin's crime is that he is not able to take on the mantle of an excellent earthly knight like Lancelot and his ham fisted forays into the areas of religion make Galahad necessary. He is given a sword with a reputation for killing the brother of the owner (II.5). The damsel presumably wants it back to do just that to her brother who had killed her lover (II.2). Balin refuses to yield the sword and indeed goes on to kill his own brother with it (II.18), the ultimate symbol of broken fellowship and echoing the sin of Cain, the first murder after the fall (Dean, J. 120). The clue to Balin's bane is in the pronouncement of the "old hoar gentleman" who said "Balin le Savage, thou passeth thy bounds to come this way, therefore turn again it will avail thee" (II.17). Balin's behaviour suggests he is just not up to the job of best knight, but chivalry demands he should take the adventure. It was mischievous in the extreme for poor Balin to be given the sword and the ladies involved are using an enchanted sword for treacherous purposes, but Balin can hardly refuse it. Lancelot, who is the right knight in so many of the ways that Balin is the wrong knight, knows it is not for him, "it longed not to hang by my side"(XIII.2), and Merlin blames the sword for Balin's death (II.19). Balin is not fit for the sword, the appellation "the Knight with the Two Swords" (II.8) is too much for Balin, and only fulfilled later in Galahad. The Bull "Unam Sanctam" was promulgated in 1302 by Pope Boniface VIII and its idea of the doctrine of the two swords was well known:

And we learn from the words of the Gospel that in this Church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. (Bettenson 115)

Of all the knights in the Morte only Galahad successfully combines the peak of spiritual and temporal success, and Balin is not even close. That we are meant to think of them in contrast is clear from the parallels in their careers. Galahad eventually inherits Balin's sword. Balin's damosel is unable to cure the lady of the castle, the lady in Galahad's company, Percival's sister, does (II.14).

The message seems to be that the chivalric code for all its glories will compel inadequate men into difficult situations and they will fail. Later events generalise this theme, such that even the greatest earthly knights are deficient. Although it seems at times to be no direct fault of his own, Balin serves as an archetype of this inadequacy and this will out in his manner. Lynch has noted his lack of understanding and discrimination (69) and I might add a lack of a sense of proportion. He enrages Arthur by beheading a woman under his protection (II.3) in unthinking vengeance and yet he is too squeamish to hurt a suicidal damosel by removing her sword before she kills herself (II.6). He is none too convincing in excusing himself to Merlin, "for she slew herself suddenly" (II.8). It is interesting that Merlin directly attributes the dolorous stroke to the death of that particular damosel, after all Balin had a hand in a few such unfortunate deaths. That a sin of omission is seen as a key problem for Balin suggests that it is often the things he does not do that dog his fortune, and will cause him to lay the land waste. Instead of meeting Garlon in combat and trusting to survive his opponent's invisibility, Balin kills him, a King's brother, at dinner. Garlon's "do that thou came for" (II.15) echoes Christ's appeal to Judas at the Last Supper "what you are going to do, do quickly." (John 13:27) Judas has just been taken over by Satan at this point and is already doomed. Balin lasts little longer. "I am the prize and yet I am not dead" (II.17). Garlon's murder precipitates the hew and cry in which the ultimate presumption of Balin occurs when he uses the spear which pierced our Lord as a weapon against a King. This audacity is a disgrace which lays waste the land until it is redeemed by Galahad in the grail quest. Balin plays Adam to Galahad's Christ.

The theme of presumption causing downfall is again associated with this sword as both Arthur and Gawain have reason to repent having contact with it (XIII.3). Gawain soon after dooms the round table with his vow to seek the Grail:

The Grail quest, though in the spirit of chivalry's view of itself, was from its hasty inception an impossible presumption for everyone except the Grail knights. (Moorman, *A Knyght There Was*. 106)

The quest cannot be a success for the whole company of knights just as the sword can only belong to one knight. It is a redemption achieved by the three pure knights and especially Galahad, and positively unhealthy for the confused remnant who don't get past wondering why they no longer meet adventures when they are trying to achieve a spiritual goal through earthly means (XVI.1). Malory "saw in the Grail a symbol not of man's failure, but of the ultimate failure of Arthur's would-be secular civilization" (Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*. 33). Having failed in the quest, the secular ideals of the knights are lost and the disintegration of the round table follows (Tristram 123). Balin's failure becomes the failure of the whole company as a society based on an ethic other than God's inevitably falls apart.

Galahad in Malory is the combination of the perfect earthly knight and the perfect spiritual knight. This combination is analogous to the fully man and fully God formula which allows Christ to become a sacrifice for man's sin. Galahad as perfect spiritual knight can, by achieving the sankgreal, which was always associated with the spear of Longinus, undo the wrong of Balin and restore fertility to the land. Galahad unlike his father is not hampered by the rules of courtly love, indeed even his conception was an offense to courtly love (Vinaver 125). Elaine becomes a Marian type, a virgin, impregnated under mysterious circumstances and even gets to deliver a mini Magnificat:

I have obeyed me unto the prophecy that my father told me.
And by his commandment to fulfil this prophecy I have
given the greatest riches and the fairest flower that ever I
had, and that is my maidenhood that I shall never have
again. (XI.3)

Galahad is connected to the world before the fall by his encounter with the spindles on Solomon's ship, which are ultimately derived from a branch of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (XVII.5). The garden of Eden is the ultimate account of a perfect world lost by disloyalty (Brewer 118) and the allusion to Eden prefigures the action after the achievement of the Grail. The spindles are icons for fallen womanhood, deriving from the tree associated with Eve's sin and more pointedly as part of the toil the fall imposed on women (Dean, J. 118). Galahad's chastity contrasts with the sinful lust of the majority of the knights who are depicted in Gawain's dream as the "rack of bulls ... proud and black" (XVI.1).

Decay and lust were seen as consequences of the fall:

The Catholic insistence that putrefaction is the God-given penalty of the Fall, and therefore the destiny of each sinful man, is recalled by the priest on Ash Wednesday, who mutters as he thumbs a smoky cross on each penitent's forehead: "Remember, man, dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return." ... The operations of lust and of death on the body are kinsmen in Christian symbolism. (Warner 98)

The Cistercian authors of Malory's French sources had no doubt that the cause of the fall of Arthur's world and earthly ideals was the sin of lust (Benson 206). The web of causes of the destruction of the round table draws includes the lust in the Lancelot-Guinevere relationship. Malory champions Lancelot and elevates him to an intermediate position in the Grail quest between Gawain, Hector and the rabble and Galahad, Percival and Bors (Hynes-Berry 267). Lancelot, however, cannot completely achieve the Grail, despite his penitence because he can neither forsake his lady for chastity, nor completely abandon the courtly code for the saintly one: "he is himself the personification of the secular chivalric way of life; to abandon it would be to abandon his own identity" (Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*. 37). As much as Malory changes the emphasis of the tale from his sources to lessen the completeness of Lancelot's

failure (Caron 30), the implication for the round table is clear. The best knight it could produce fails the quest and is left to face the world in the knowledge of his defeat and fated to participate in its destruction. The cringing penitent he becomes in the episode of Sir Urry is the Lancelot aware he is out of his depth and scared of failure (XIX.12). That he succeeds here is no more than a reminder of his failure in the Grail. Here Lancelot trusts God to achieve the miracle, just as he did not do in the Grail quest, and his tears at his success are a recognition that he can be successful as a knight pursuing adventures for God and not just as a secular champion of his lady (Atkinson 347; McCarthy 94). Malory also uses this tale to recapitulate the various strands of the story which will now bear their ugly fruit (Atkinson 344).

Lancelot the penitent sinner gets to heaven. Troilus, the Trojan lover who remains faithful to the end, has a less certain fate. Chaucer is working in an opposite frame to Malory, concerned with the private motivations of one couple in a fragment of a larger drama, as opposed to Malory's very public concerns and all encompassing reach. Troilus is also a pagan hero whose creator is working in a Christian milieu, which makes Christian ideas of sin problematic. Even so Troilus and Criseyde manages to involve itself with such religious controversies as predestination, free will, grace, sin and reward as well as possessing biblical parallels.

If Chaucer rarely writes overtly Christian material he certainly includes religious forms and figures in his poetry (Shepherd 289). In Troilus the garden of Eden is again a motif, with Pandarus as the Serpent. Robertson suggests that "all tragic protagonists in the Chaucerian sense follow in Adam's footsteps" (94). While Troilus is the fallen man, Adam, and Criseyde the unreliable Eve, it is Pandarus who leaps out as a very smooth and superficially attractive Satan. Criseyde calls him a "Fox" (III.1565) and Troilus, doubting he can help him says

"Thou kouldest nevere in love thiselven wisse / How devel maistow brynge me to blisse?" (I.622-3) Reading Pandarus in this mode recalls Screwtape:

If ... he is an emotional and gullible man, feed him on minor poets and fifth-rate novelists of the old school until you have made him believe that "Love" is both irresistible and intrinsically meritorious. This belief is not much help, I grant you, in producing casual unchastity; but it is an incomparable recipe for prolonged, "noble", romantic, tragic adulteries, ending, if all goes well, in murders and suicides. (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. 99)

Troilus gives his life to such a love but doesn't recognise "the dangers of ignoring the limitations to which human love is subject in this world" (Taylor, K. 17).

More than just dangerous it is an offense to God in that the perfection to which only spiritual love can aspire, is attempted with fickle human feelings. Troilus ties himself in knots over whether the relationship was predestined to fail. He begins with:

"For certeynly, this wot I wel," he seyde,
 "That foresight of divine purveyance
 Hath seyn alwey me to forgon Criseyde ..." (IV.960-2)

He then argues the proposition at length until he reaches the conclusion that removing the possibility of free choice due to God's foreknowledge has unexpected consequences:

"But now is this abusion, to seyn
 That fallynge of the thynges temporel
 Is cause of Goddes prescience eternal.
 Now trewely, that is a fals sentence,
 That thyng to come sholde cause his prescience."
 (IV.1060-4)

Troilus recognises the presumption that earthly events would dictate to God, to which his discourse is leading, and the passage ends not with the solution of a God acting outside of time as offered by Boethius (Shepherd 274), but with a cry for mercy to God who "woost of al thys the sothfastnesse" (IV.1080) Pandarus like a good devil distracts him from such momentary clarity (IV.1086-120).

Troilus does not regain such an insight until when out amongst the heavens he can see his world in perspective and reject blind lust and vanity (Wheeler 115). It is uncertain whether Troilus gets a reward for his life as his vantage point may be merely part of a journey rather than some celestial paradise (Conlee 36). Dante allows a similar Trojan, Ripheus, into paradise but Chaucer is less forthcoming as to Troilus' ultimate fate (Wheeler 110). Troilus' ascent forms part of the endings of Troilus which have provoked suggestions that these eighty-four lines contradict the thrust of the other four books and seventeen hundred odd lines of the poem (Gallagher 44). While it contains much else, if Troilus is seen in terms of the heroes' vanity displayed in his faith in merely human love and this leading to his destruction, then the exhortations to the "yonge, freshe folkes" (V.185) make perfect sense. The epilogue ends with an appeal to the mystery of the trinity, which is appropriate, as that paradox resists explanation as much as the fate of Troilus (Wheeler 120).

While Troilus remains true to his code of love and offends God, Criseyde offends the code of earthly love and escapes from "the unlawfulness of the secret love of Troilus and Criseyde" (Morgan 260). The logical extension of indicting Troilus for investing too much in the temporal is to see Criseyde as praiseworthy for allowing circumstances to teach her the folly of putting her love with Troilus above her life. Chaucer is noteworthy for his resistance to the traditional portrait of Criseyde as the archetypal unfaithful woman (Mieskowski 75). Criseyde for all her faults is given to mentioning God frequently, as opposed to Pandarus' use of the pagan pantheon (Morgan 267). The parliament which decides to exchange Criseyde for Antenor has been compared with the trial of Christ:

Both passages involve the convocation of an assembly for the purpose of deciding the fate of an innocent person, a public defense by a single important leader who maintains this innocence, a vigorous rejection of the leader's argument

by the assembly, and a unanimous demand for an exchange of an innocent person for a guilty prisoner. (Taylor, A. 51)

Criseyde's relative rehabilitation by Chaucer fits in well with a view of Troilus as being a moral work. Criseyde may be betraying Troilus but at least she doesn't need a cosmic vantage point to see which way the wind is blowing.

Although both Chaucer and Malory stand at the later part of the middle ages they are definitely pre-Renaissance and pre-humanist. To them the statement of Protagoras that "Man is the measure of all things" (Clark 57) still belongs with the cursed pagans as an impudent challenge to God and order. Both their works deal with societies based on an ethic outside the church, that of pagan Troy and of courtly love, and both writers are products enough of the religion of their era to blame the doom of their characters on the players' sin and by implication the fallen state of humanity generally.

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