

## ABSTRACT

“I Se and Undirstonde”:  
Vision, Reason, and Tragedy in Late Middle English Literature

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When modern readers encounter sensory experiences in medieval literature, we often assume that they look, sound, smell, taste, and feel as they do today. However, while the physiological experience may be similar across centuries, the cultural interpretation of these sensory experiences has shifted dramatically. This is particularly true of vision in the Middle Ages, which people viewed as both a powerful, God-given gift, and as a dangerously exposed entrance to the soul. In this study, I examine the abundant instances of sight (which is often linked to an individual's ability to reason) in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. I argue that in each case, Chaucer and Malory use vision as an important means of character development, and that how characters use, abuse, or neglect their senses indicates whether their narrative will end happily or tragically.

“I Se and Undirstonde”:  
Vision, Reason, and Tragedy in Late Middle English Literature

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

Controlling “þy wyttus fyue”: Sensory Management in Late Medieval England

Near the end of his late-fourteenth-century *Instructions for Parish Priests*, John Mirk advises confessors to interrogate their parishioners on their use of their five senses or “wyttus fyue”:

Hast þow spende þy wyttus fyue  
To goddus worschype? Telle me blyue.  
Þese ben þey as I þe telle,  
Towche & tast & eke þy smelle,  
Þy herynge also and þy syȝt  
Here þey be fyue on ryȝt.  
[How have you used your five senses for the glory of God? Tell me quickly and willingly. That is to say, touch, taste, and also smell, your hearing and your sight—these are the five I mean.] (lines 1417-22)<sup>1</sup>

Mirk categorizes sensory infractions as “synnes venyal,” lesser sins that do not wholly separate the sinner from God and which do not result in eternal damnation. They are certainly not the grave sins Mirk covers earlier like disobeying the Ten Commandments or committing one of the Seven Deadly Sins; however, left unchecked, venial sins can lead to these more serious violations.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

Chaucer's Parson from the *Canterbury Tales* warns against this in the "Parson's Tale":

"[I]f a man charge hymself with manye swiche venial synnes, certes, but if so be that he somtyme descharge hym of hem by shrifte, they mowe ful lightly amenuse in hym al the love that he hath to Jhesu Crist; and in this wise skippeth venial into deedly synne." [If people fill themselves with many such venial sins, certainly, unless they purge themselves of the sins from time to time through confession and penance, they may very quickly diminish in their love toward Jesus Christ; and in this way venial sin hastens to deadly sin.] (X, 355-61)<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, the Parson urges his own parishioners and the Canterbury pilgrims, "[L]at us nat be negligent to deschargen us of venial synnes" [Let us not be negligent to purge ourselves of venial sins] (X, 365-66). Later in his sermon, the Parson will remind his audience—as does Mirk—that people commit these sins in many ways: "in herte, in dede, by thy fyve wittes, that been sighte, herynge, smellynge, tastynge or savouryng, and feelynge" [in heart, in deed, by your five senses, which are sight, hearing, smelling, tasting or savoring, and feeling] (X, 955-58).

In their concern for properly managing the senses, Mirk and Chaucer's Parson take part in a common discourse of medieval pastoral literature abounding in references to the senses and exercising control over them. For

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<sup>2</sup> References to Chaucer are from the *Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Larry D. Benson. Citations from the *Canterbury Tales* include fragment and line numbers. Citations from *Boece* include book, prosa/metrum, and line numbers.

clergy and laypeople alike, the senses offered many and varied opportunities for spiritual formation, but these opportunities were not always positively formative. As Matthew Milner observes, the process of human sensing could not always be trusted: “if governed properly, it benefited, instilling virtue; if not, it harmed and ingrained vice” (53).<sup>3</sup> As a result, those concerned for their souls should exercise constant vigilance against dangerous sensory experiences like lasciviously gazing at an attractive member of the opposite sex or indulging one’s sense of taste by gluttonous overeating. At the same time, people should expose themselves to beneficial sensory experiences like the scent of incense or the sound of pious chanting available at daily mass.

This dissertation explores the role of just one of the five senses—vision—as it appears in later medieval tragedies by Geoffrey Chaucer and Sir Thomas Malory. In their *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Le Morte Darthur*, significant moments of sight abound: Troilus and Criseyde cast their eyebeams at one another and determine that their earthly lover is the one “True Good” or “Suffisaunce.” Balin’s senses are defied as he attempts to track and fight an invisible knight. Arthur’s knights depart on a quest to see—not touch—the Holy Grail. Many characters in the *Morte Darthur* experience the typical romance motif of love at

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<sup>3</sup> See also Richard Newhauser, “Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages,” *A Cultural History of the Sense*, volume 2, ed. Richard Newhauser, p. 22.

first sight, but curiously Launcelot and Guinevere—the central lovers—do not. I argue that in each case, Chaucer and Malory use vision as an important means of character development, and that characters' use, abuse, or neglect of their senses indicates whether their story will end happily or tragically. Because medieval people would have viewed the senses—especially vision—as simultaneously powerful, God-given gifts, and dangerously exposed entrances to the soul, characters' interactions with vision have the potential to empower or imperil the soul.<sup>4</sup>

### *Vision*

In considering vision as it appears in late-medieval tragedies, one must bear in mind that the sense of sight does not mean the same thing to a modern reader as it would have for Chaucer or Malory or their early audiences in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Today, most children learn the basic operations of the eye in elementary school, perhaps—as was my experience—when a science teacher dissects the eyeball of a cow for a roomful of breathless second graders. The process is simple enough: light from the sun or a lightbulb reflects from an object and travels—at the speed of light—to the eye. The eye's

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<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to argue here that Chaucer and Malory intentionally or overtly construct moral tales to accompany treatises like Mirk's which advise proper management of the senses; however, both authors inhabit a world in which clergy provided warnings and advice concerning sensory management. It makes sense that a concern for the senses, especially vision, would appear in their works.

cornea and lens focus that reflected light onto the light-sensitive retina in the back of the eye. The retina connects to the brain via the optical nerve, and the brain processes the information into a useable image.

While the average second grader may understand the basic mechanics of this process, this optical theory is relatively new in the history of thinking about the senses. René Descartes proved the viability of this theory in the seventeenth century, but before that, optical theories varied widely and had far-reaching implications for people's daily lives. In order to more fully appreciate the sense of sight when it appears in texts like *Troilus and Criseyde* or the *Morte Darthur*, we must contextualize and historicize vision. Without careful contextualization, readers may assume that sensory experiences have never changed, which, as Robert Nelson observes, makes the past a "mirror of the present" (2).

Mark M. Smith describes this risk as a problem of "production" and "consumption" (846). People today still have the same physiological sensory apparatus—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, etc.—as our medieval counterparts, and we can *produce* similar sensory experiences that they would have. For example, medieval enthusiasts can use medieval recipes to reconstruct the sight, smell, and taste of a medieval feast; or we can dress in replica armor and brandish replica weaponry to produce the sounds and tactile experiences that might have accompanied a medieval battle. However, the way that modern people *consume*

those sensory experiences is vastly different. To illustrate his point, Smith provides the example of a modern person accidentally injured in an American Civil War reenactment: “Not only has the meaning of pain changed—[the] comparative references for his pain are radically different to those of the similarly injured 1863 soldier—but our expectation for successful recovery and our ability to end or dull the pain is much greater than that available to the poor soul in 1863” (846). In short, the challenge for historians and literary critics is to discern the meaning that contemporary readers would have attached to their sensory experiences. In the words of David Howes, “the history of the senses...is interpretive: it makes sense of the past through the analysis of sensory practices and ideologies” (400).<sup>5</sup> Thus, I begin this dissertation with the understanding that when Chaucer or Malory deliberately incorporate the sense of sight in their work, they do not simply refer to the physical act of seeing. Rather, they draw on an entire web of meanings that the sense of sight can evoke.

For a late-medieval audience, vision would have been the most powerful, and thus the most potentially dangerous, of the five senses. For this reason, when

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<sup>5</sup> See also Annette Kern-Stahler and Kathrin Scheuchzer: “The ways we use our senses are informed by social values and shaped by culture” (2), and Robert Nelson: “[E]very viewer belongs to a society and subscribes in varying degrees to the bodily conventions and practices of that society. In this sense visuality is similar to sexuality. Both pertain to natural and universal human acts, but both are also learned, socially controlled, and organized, and therefore domesticated. Like art, religion, or common sense, visuality is what Geertz terms a ‘cultural system,’ and thus capable of analysis locally and with whatever degree of ‘thick description’ the evidence permits” (9).

the senses are listed in medieval texts, sight usually comes first. A notable exception may be the passage from *Instructions from Parish Priests* quoted above; however, while Mirk lists it last for the sake of his rhyming couplets, he prioritizes it when he expounds. “*De visu*” is the first of the five senses that priests are to explore with their confessants:

Hast þow i-seyn any thyng  
Þat tyses þe to synnyng?  
Be-þenke þe, sone, welle I pray  
For mony þyngus þat falle may.  
[Have you seen anything that enticed you to sin? Think hard, I pray, for many things can do so.] (1423-26)

Following this interrogation, priests are instructed to address hearing, smell, taste, and touch. This is the traditional hierarchy of the senses, in use since Aristotle. Most medieval theologians and preachers use this hierarchy, although they rationalize vision’s primacy for varying reasons. For example, Isidor of Seville points out that people can see farther than they can hear, smell, taste, or touch. Augustine further explains that vision is the most objective sense, since two or more people can see the same thing and confirm the same shape, color, and size of an object.<sup>6</sup> For John Wycliffe, a contemporary of Chaucer’s, sight is the most powerful sense not only because it works over wide distances, but also

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Isidor of Seville’s and Augustine’s hierarchy of the senses, see Robert Jutte, *The History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*, trans. James Lynn. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005, pg. 65.

because the eye is the sensory organ located highest on the human anatomy and because the physical functioning of the eye is far more complex than the other sense organs.<sup>7</sup> The reasons may be varied, but most medieval thinkers regarded vision as the most powerful and most in need of regulation.

If vision was considered the most powerful of the senses, it makes sense that it was also the most studied. Thus, a second important piece of historicizing the senses in late medieval England is the heated debate among medieval philosophers regarding the operation of the human eye. The intricate working of the eye mentioned by Wycliffe was by no means a settled matter for natural philosophers or theologians. In the centuries leading up to Chaucer and Malory's literary careers, the scholarly consensus shifted dramatically as new information from the east threatened to displace long-held theories about sight.

Before and into the eleventh century, most natural philosophers hypothesized that the human eye emitted visual rays (variously described as a "beam," "stream," or even "very fine threads") to gather visual information and then return to the eye.<sup>8</sup> Medieval philosophers inherited this theory, commonly termed *extramission* due to the projection of visual rays away from the eye, from

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<sup>7</sup> See Sean Otto, "The Perils of the Flesh: John Wyclif's Preaching on the Five Bodily Senses" (166).

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed description of the medieval optical debate, see David Lindberg, *Theories of Vision* (87-116).

the works of Plato (see figure 1). Augustine employs a version of this theory in *De Trinitate* when he writes that people see “by the rays which shine through [the eyes] and touch whatever we see” (9.3.3).<sup>9</sup> Margaret Miles notes that this model for seeing “implies effort and selectivity on the part of the viewer” since the rays must be willed and directed by the person who wishes to see (127). She also observes that extramission insists that when a person sees something, “viewer and object are momentarily united” (127). Because the eye emits the ray, which in turn touches the object, extramission implies a kind of physical contact that simply is not present in our modern understanding of sight.

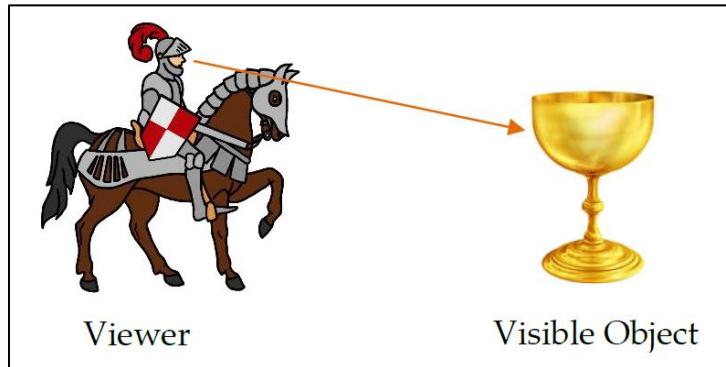


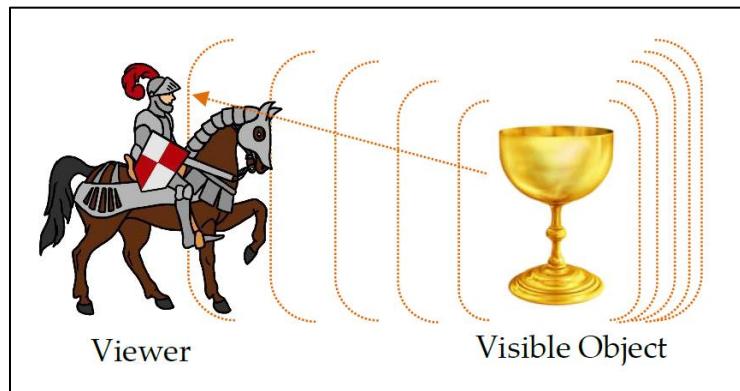
Figure 1: Extramission

The hypothesis threatening this theory argued that the relationship between viewer and viewed should be reversed. This theory, called *intromission*, stated that all objects in the material world emit a substance called “species” that strikes the eye (see figure 2). Philosophers debated the exact nature of this

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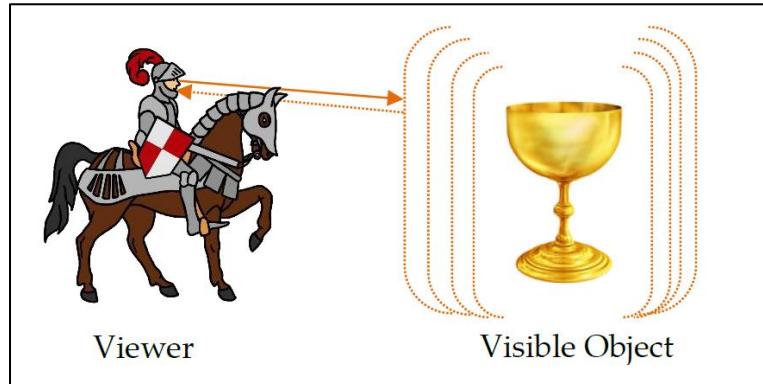
<sup>9</sup> Citations for *De Trinitate* include book, chapter, and section number.

substance, which was neither gaseous, liquid, nor solid, but still undoubtedly present; however, most proponents of intromission agreed that it traveled to the eye on its own power. Thus, the viewer no longer controlled what he/she saw, but rather was at the mercy of surrounding objects, which constantly produced species for the viewer to receive if their eyes were open.



*Figure 2: Intromission*

The debate over extramission and intromission culminated in the 1260's with three works by Roger Bacon. In these texts, Bacon synthesized the two theories (see figure 3). He suggested that all objects emit species which travel outward, but that these species could not travel all the way to the human eye without assistance from an "ennobling" ray that the eye produced (qtd. in Lindberg 115). Bacon's compromise and various forms of intromission would dominate discussions of optics through the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth.



*Figure 3: Bacon's Compromise*

In short, the three models of sight outlined above—extramission, intromission and Bacon’s compromise—entail vast discrepancies from our modern optical theories. Even the most basic mechanics involving rays and species vary wildly from today’s idea of vision. However, aside from the seemingly foreign optical mechanics, these models of vision are accompanied by at least two significant implications that are key to understanding what medieval authors mean when they write about sight.

The first implication is that all three models state or imply a kind of physical interaction with the visible object. The contact is particularly clear in the case of the “fine threads” metaphor, used in a letter written by painter Leon Battista Alberti in 1436.<sup>10</sup> Alberti writes that these “extremely fine threads, [are]

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<sup>10</sup> As can be seen from the date of Alberti’s letter, the emergence of intromission did not signal the entire dismissal of extramission. While intromissive theories are much more common after the thirteenth century and extramissive theories were a small minority, the scholarly debate continued well beyond the fifteenth century. In fact, one recent (2002) psychological study finds

connected as straight as they can be in a single extremity as in a bundle and accepted in the same place and at the same moment inside the eye, where the sense of sight resides" (26). As Nelson remarks concerning Alberti's theory, "[t]his is the language of contact," an intimate, physical connection between the viewer and the viewed (6). Regarding medieval optics more broadly, Matthew Milner, too, describes seeing as a "quasi-tactile" experience (15). Jill Stevenson further notes that the shift from extramission to intromission did not curtail this sense of contact: "despite their differences, both extramission and intromission present seeing as a moment of physical contact between object and viewer" (21). Thus, for medieval writers like Chaucer and Malory, vision is not a safe, distant encounter with an object, but rather a potentially dangerous and immediate experience akin to the sense of touch.

While both extramission and intromission imply a tactile visual experience, a second implication involves the inherent difference between the two theories. Whereas extramission allotted a kind of agency to the viewer since the eye actively projected visual rays, intromission reassigned agency to the visual object. In the words of Molly Martin, "The gazer becomes an object of the image" (6). The idea that the eye was the passive, perhaps even vulnerable,

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that some twenty-first century college students believe in various extramissive models for vision (Winer 419).

recipient of species instead of the active seeker of visual data gained popularity in the thirteenth century and became the standard theory through the fourteenth and fifteenth century. It is no wonder that we find clergy like Mirk admonishing parishioners to manage their senses carefully. A rashly opened eye might mean the intrusion of sensory data that could jeopardize the soul.

If our goal is to properly historicize the senses for the audiences of Chaucer and Malory, we should keep in mind that for most people, theories of optics were too esoteric for easy comprehension and application to daily life. However, at least some part of the tactile nature of sight and the passive role of the gazer crept into the popular consciousness. Laypeople might have encountered these ideas in their confessions, as we have seen in Mirk's *Instructions to Parish Priests*. They certainly would have encountered visual concepts in the sacrament of Holy Communion, which was a visual rather than tactile or gustatory experience.<sup>11</sup> Suzannah Biernoff also argues that sermons from university-educated clergy would have conveyed at least the fundamentals of visual concerns to the masses (6). As Milner observes, "Late-medieval sensory culture...constantly articulated the need for [sensory] control and governance" (53).<sup>12</sup> Milner points to several medieval conduct manuals for anchorites and

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<sup>11</sup> For an extended analysis of the Eucharist's visual aspects, see chapter four.

<sup>12</sup> See also Richard Newhauser (9).

laypeople that describe the senses, including vision, as “gates” or as a series of locks on a large river flowing between the outside world and the human soul. These gates and locks required strategic opening and closing in order to welcome virtue and prevent vice from entering the soul (56).

In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, a lay audience would have found this kind of a description of the human soul in the “Tale of Melibee.” Early in the story, readers learn that while Melibee is absent one day, three of his enemies break into his house and beat his wife, Prudence, and his daughter, Sophie. Sophie sustains five mortal wounds in her eyes, hands, ears, nose, and mouth (VII, 971-72).<sup>13</sup> Prudence later explains the significance of Sophie’s wounds:

Thou hast doon synne agayn oure Lord Crist, for certes, the three enemys of mankynde—that is to seyn, the flessh, the feend, and the world—thou hast suffred hem entre in to thyn herte wilfully by the wyndowes of thy body and hast nat defended thyself suffisantly agayns hire assautes and hire temptaciouns, so that they han wounded they soule in fyve places; this is to seyn, the deedly synnes that been entred into thyn herte by thy fyve wittes.  
[You have sinned against our Lord Christ for certainly, the three enemies of humankind—the flesh, the fiend, and the world—you have willingly allowed them to enter your heart by the windows of your body, and you have not defended yourself sufficiently against their assaults and temptations, so that they have wounded your soul (the allegorized Sophie) in five places. That is to say, the

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<sup>13</sup> Sharon Hiltze Romino observes in the explanatory notes for the “Tale of Melibee” in the *Riverside Chaucer* that “feet” in line 972 is an erroneous substitution for “eyes.” Helen Cooper elaborates that the French “piez” (feet) is also a variant translation of the Latin “oculis” (eyes), and she speculates that the connection may be due to “the moralists’ widespread recognition of the tendency of the feet, as of the eyes, to wander off in a diversion of the soul from spiritual concerns” (*Oxford Guides* 317).

deadly sins have entered your heart through your five senses.] (VII, 1419-23)

Here, the Dame Prudence offers readers the practical advice to guard the “wyndowes of the body” from the dangers of the world, particularly those consumed by the same “fyve wittes” that concerned Mirk and Chaucer’s Parson.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, even if the medieval laity did not engage with the scholarly discourse on such esoterica as species or the direction of visual rays, they still had a basic understanding of the senses—especially vision—as the entrance to the soul, an entrance that must be opened toward positive sensory data, and guarded from sensory data that might cause their condemnation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> While many modern readers (students and scholars alike) find the “Tale of Melibee” rather boring, Helen Cooper notes that it was the second most common of the *Canterbury Tales* for independent copying (*Oxford Guides to Chaucer* 317). Medieval people did not just read this tale; they found its lessons worthy of reproducing for continued independent study.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to devotional and conduct literature, another text that suggests sight as a tactile experience and an aperture to one’s soul is the anonymous Renaissance play *Arden of Faversham* (1592). In the play, one character suggests a murder plot involving a poisoned painting. When the intended victim simply looks at the painting, he “[s]hall, with the beams that issue from his sight, / Suck venom to his breast and slay himself” (1.1.232-233). The painting plot is ultimately abandoned, for one of the conspirators fears that, “[c]oming into the chamber where it hangs, [she or her partner in crime] may die” by accident (1.1.238). Visual poisoning is simultaneously effective and too dangerous for use, and neither the characters nor the play’s intended audience is meant to underestimate such a plan. The lines also suggest that in the popular mind, both extramissive sight (seen here with the “beams”) and intromissive sight are available models for the mechanics of vision through the Renaissance.

## *Reason*

In the broader understanding of medieval epistemology, sensory data represents only the first step toward understanding. Michael Camille rightly observes that this is another way in which medieval vision was very different from our modern concept: “the image is not the reflection of some external view of the world but the beginning and foundation of a process of thought” (206). Aristotelian philosophy had held for centuries that “there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses,” but this implies that something happens to the sensory data after it is received by the eye in order for intellect to be gained (qtd. in Newhauser 12). Richard Newhauser defines the missing link as “an interpretive process” that requires “human effort in virtue aided by grace” (12-13). In other words, people must actively apply reason to sensory data in order to act in accordance with established morals, whether Christian or social.

Nancy Ciccone points out that a common feature of medieval fiction is the application of practical reason, which seeks to answer the fundamental human questions of “What shall I do?” or “What ought to be done?” (43).<sup>16</sup> Ciccone situates characters’ internal debates concerning the “right” action amid emerging

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<sup>16</sup> Ciccone’s argument specifically treats medieval romance, but still applies to the texts that I ultimately define as tragedies. Both *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Morte Darthur* exhibit many features of medieval romance, and scholars are often divided on the generic classifications of both texts.

philosophical and theological discussions of ethics and confession, and she argues that in these monologues, characters “calculate” and “demonstrate...doing the right thing” (43). However, in order to demonstrate correct behavior, characters must have data to calculate. Characters gain this information in many ways, but one of the most important is by gathering sensory data, including visual data. Because of this connection between vision and reason, it is important to consider what happens after characters in medieval literature are described as “seeing,” regardless of what model of vision the characters use.

### *Tragedy*

In this project, I argue that how characters interact with vision and reason determines their narrative fate. When characters use visual information and reason correctly, they are usually rewarded; when they rationalize visual information incorrectly, or simply refuse to apply reason to the available visual information, their stories end tragically. However, just as the senses must be contextualized in order for modern readers to better understand them, we must also approach the genre of tragedy as Chaucer and Malory would have.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Monk’s Tale” in the Canterbury Tales contains one of the standard definitions of tragedy for Middle English literature. The Monk reports in his “Prologue”:

Tragedie is to seyn a certyn storie,  
As olde booke maketh memorie,  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

[“Tragedy” is as much as saying “a certain story”—as old books remind us—“Of a person who stood in great prosperity, and falls from a high standing into misery and ends wretchedly.”] (VII, 1973-77)

In addition to a fall from prosperity and a wretched end, the Monk says just a little later that usually Fortune is to blame for this fall because occasionally, she will “list to flee” (VII.1995). Most Chaucerian genre critics, like Henry Ansgar Kelly, note that Chaucer found this definition in his translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, where he learned that “the clamor of tragedies bewails the unexpected overthrow of happy kingdoms” and that “[Tragedy is] a poem beginning in prosperity and ending in adversity” (171). Rebecca Bushnell concisely summarizes the three themes that medieval tragedies almost always contain: “the fall from a prosperous or ‘high’ condition to a wretched or low one; the role of ‘Fortune’ in causing that fall; and the idea that the tragedies only happen to ‘mighty men’—kings, conquerors, and those of ‘great nobility’” (“The Classical and Medieval Roots” 293).

By this contextualized definition of a fall from prosperity to a wretched end caused by Fortune, both Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and Malory’s *Morte Darthur* appear to most readers to be tragedies. The main characters in each story

initially experience a rise in fortune to an unprecedented degree of happiness and prosperity, only to suffer a reversal of their fortune, which leads to their demise, or at least to their misery. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, tragedy strikes when Criseyde must leave Troy, and both she and Troilus are heartbroken. By the end of the story, the woeful Criseyde has been persuaded to take another lover, and Troilus is killed in a battle with the Greeks. For the *Morte Darthur*, tragedy means the end of the Round Table fellowship and the wretched, or at least sorrowful deaths of the once-noble main characters, Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot. In both stories, we see characters who once “stood in greet prosperitee” and have fallen into “myserie” and, for the most part, death.

Certainly Bushnell’s list describes most medieval tragedies, including the two I propose to examine in this project; however, I would add a final important feature of tragedy: its didactic nature. According to the Monk, tragedies are told so that people may “Be war” that they might suffer the same fate; thus, they should not blindly trust Fortune, even when she seems most generous (VII.1998). Elsewhere, Bushnell writes that tragedy more generally (not necessarily limited to medieval tragedy) “can shape experience and history into meaning, and the shock of significance may have the power to transform us. The distinction between tragedy and the merely horrific accident or catastrophe lies in our expectation that knowledge might emerge out of the chaos of human suffering”

("Introduction" 1). By discerning the causes of characters' discomfort, audiences can change their behavior to avoid similar individual fates or change their community to avoid similar collective fates. As I will argue, one of the causes of the characters' miserable ends is their misapplication of vision and the reasoning processes that follow.

### *Chapter Summaries*

I begin my study of the relationship between vision, reason, and tragedy with an examination of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as informed by his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. In many ways, this chapter serves as a foundation for the chapters that follow because *Boece* proves that Chaucer had access to a philosophy of vision. The philosophy of vision found in *Boece* defines seeing as an important first step toward gaining knowledge and discerning the difference between earthly, temporal pleasures and true, eternal goods. Following an exploration of vision, reason, and their purposes as they appear in *Boece*, I show how Chaucer dramatizes these principles in *Troilus and Criseyde*. I focus especially on the lines of sight between Troilus and Criseyde as they experience "love at first sight" and develop their relationship. Criseyde in particular reasons her way through falling in love, and readers can see her progress through the mental faculties of sense, imagination, reason, and intellect as they appear in *Boece*. At the climax of the narrative, when Troilus and

Criseyde consummate their love, Criseyde demonstrates her faulty reasoning, though, when she labels Troilus “my suffisaunce,” the term that Chaucer uses repeatedly in *Boece* to indicate a good that is true and eternal. With Troilus and Criseyde’s misuse of vision and reason, then, it comes as no surprise that their love is doomed to fail and that their narrative is doomed to become a tragedy.

If *Troilus and Criseyde* stands as a tragic cautionary tale of what happens when vision and reason are applied incorrectly, Malory’s “Tale of Balyn le Sauvage,” which I examine in the second chapter, demonstrates what happens when a character eschews reason altogether. In this brief tragedy near the beginning of the *Morte Darthur*, the protagonist Balin proclaims several times that he will “take the adventure that God shall ordain,” often even when his senses show him that calculated action would be better than leaving his decisions to chance. During one of Balin’s central adventures, he encounters the embodiment of his commitment to adventure and chance: an invisible knight named Garlon. I argue that this invisible opponent is a fitting adversary for Balin, who refuses to reason, thus making sensory data irrelevant. While Balin eventually does track down and kill Garlon, he is ultimately punished for his blind commitment to chance. Following the disaster of the Dolorous Stroke (a direct result of his encounters with Garlon), Balin wanders until he finds, challenges, and fights a knight who turns out to be his brother. In the battle, the

brothers slay one another, tragically recognizing each other in their final moments. I argue that the story cautions against a blind commitment to adventure.

The first two chapters demonstrate ways that late-medieval literary characters can interact incorrectly with vision and reason, which ultimately leads them to tragedy. However, in my third chapter, I explore a visual practice that—if understood and performed correctly—will prevent tragedy: gazing at the elevated Host during mass. According to both medieval optical theories and Eucharistic theology, simply looking at the elevated Host could secure all manner of benefits such as preventing blindness and averting sudden death. It was also understood as a sufficient form of consuming the Eucharistic elements. In this chapter I explore the theological and scientific contexts for Malory's "Sankgreal" and its source, the French *La Queste del Saint Graal*. Then I trace the parallels between the Eucharist and the Holy Grail, which the knights vow only to see more openly than it appears in Arthur's court (Malory 674). While not every knight completes the quest, a select few are able to navigate the spiritual riddles of the Grail Quest and achieve a more complete sight and understanding of the Grail and thus of the Eucharist.

The fourth chapter strays somewhat from the established pattern of examining the ways that individual characters interact with vision and reason in

their respective narratives. Instead, I explore visual motifs in the *Morte Darthur* that readers usually expect in the genre of romance. Perhaps the best known of these motifs is love at first sight, but I also examine moments when the hero is inspired by the sight of his beloved during battle, and the longing glances or gazes that are traditional symptoms of lovesickness. Malory certainly makes frequent use of these genre conventions, but interestingly, he reserves them for peripheral narratives like the “Tale of Sir Gareth” or the “Tale of Sir Alisaunder le Orphelin.” For the overarching plot involving the Launcelot-Guinevere affair that ultimately dooms the Round Table, visual romance motifs are conspicuous only in their absence. I argue that the dearth of these visual motifs, which *are* present in Malory’s source material, signals the reader to expect a genre other than romance for the primary plot of the *Morte*. Instead of a tale of adventure and love, readers should prepare for tragedy.

### *Conclusion*

Nelson observes that when modern readers project modern ideas of sight into the medieval era, they may “flatten, obscure, and even destroy delicate vestiges of prior practices” (2). In the realm of literature, modern readers run the risk of ignoring the way that these “delicate vestiges” may influence our understanding of literary works. *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Morte Darthur* each offer readers a high concentration of visual encounters and visual motifs, and in

each instance, these encounters mean different things to their respective authors and audiences. In each case, then, modern readers must take care not only to reconstruct not the visual encounters that the characters experience, but also to understand the more complex web of meanings that Chaucer and Malory evoke when they incorporate sight in their works. In the chapters that follow, I examine some of the philosophical, religious, and literary contexts that would have been available to Chaucer and Malory. In each case, vision emerges as a dangerous window to the soul, but each character demonstrates different medieval hazards and the need for reason to guide the use of sight.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Eye Beams and Boethian Sufficiency in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

I begin my study of vision, reason, and tragedy with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which there are at least forty-eight references to the human eye. Furthermore, there are thirty-nine occasions of a character "looking," and at least one hundred and eighteen uses of the verb "see" (NeCastro). These and other instances of sight-driven language have piqued scholarly interest for decades. For example, Norman Klassen points out that perhaps all these allusions to vision should be expected, since "[t]he eye survives in medieval thought as one of the strongest bastions of symbolic thought, adaptable to several different parallel readings" ("Optical Allusions" 141). However, others observe that Chaucer's use of sight is much more frequent than that of his literary predecessors and contemporaries. For example, Carolyn Collette notes that in some of the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly "The Franklin's Tale," Chaucer's insertion of sight imagery is "his own creation" as it does not appear in the sources or analogues (396). More relevant to this discussion of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Elizabeth Dobbs remarks that "[i]n general, characters in the *Troilus* do more seeing or looking, desire more often to see, and use more references to eyes

to express themselves than do their counterparts in *Il Filostrato*" (408). Readers can expect, then, that the abundant references to eyes, sight, and seeing perform a function in *Troilus and Criseyde* that they do not necessarily perform in Chaucer's sources. Further, when read in the context of medieval optics and other visual references in Chaucer's corpus, they may indicate Chaucer's own individual stance on sight.

Most scholars attempt to explain Chaucer's insertion of sight imagery in the context of the medieval academic debate surrounding the study of optics. As Miriam Moore points out, several scenes of *Troilus and Criseyde* involving the sense of sight are depicted with "greater attention to medicine and optics than [in *Il Filostrato*]" (153). As I described in the introduction to this study, the point of liveliest debate in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries concerned the then-recent theory of intromission, which posited that the human eye is continually struck by *species*: miniature images which emanate from all objects found in the natural world. This theory challenged the long-held theory of extramission, which stated that the eye sees by casting its own ray or beam that strikes the object. Collette remarks that "discussions of how sight occurs physically during this period almost always turn on acceptance or rejection of the theory of intromission" (403). We know that Chaucer was at least slightly informed on this debate as he mentions "Alocen" and other optical philosophers in "The Squire's

Tale," a work generally agreed to be original to Chaucer (V, 232).<sup>1</sup> The philosopher "Alocen"—or more accurately Abū 'Alī al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham, often referred to as Alhazen—introduced the theory of intromission, and most scholars recognize him as one of the most important contributors to the field of medieval optics.<sup>2</sup> However, as Klassen points out, we see both models of sight employed in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and it is difficult to "formulate precise statements about Chaucer's own philosophical stance; we cannot know his opinion on the existence of *species*" ("Optical Allusions" 138). In sum, judging by his fiction alone, it is difficult to say what exactly Chaucer thought about vision, and just as difficult to decide what all these references to eyes, looking, and seeing might signify in *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from Chaucer's works refer to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. Citations from *The Canterbury Tales* are formatted to provide fragment number and line number.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Alhazen's contributions to the study of optics, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of the availability of esoteric optical theories for common audiences, see Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Thomas E. Hill, "She, This in Blak": *Vision, Truth, and Will in Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Irma Taavitsainen, "Science," *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford, 2000), 378-396. Biernoff examines several medieval sermons and speculates that university-educated clergy would have conveyed at least the basics of elite learning to the masses. She also concludes, based on the abundance of vision-inspired metaphors and images in many different kinds of texts, that "vision was a rich and contested discursive terrain in the later Middle Ages." Hill argues that "[al]though the intellectual excitement and inventiveness that characterized developments in the English arts and theology faculties before the 1350's waned in the years following, late fourteenth-century England seems to have been a place where the topics of the schools found new relevance in the world at large." Taavitsainen provides a short survey of the kinds of natural sciences Chaucer would have encountered in his reading and shows how

If the debate over extramission and intromission cannot fully explain the ubiquity of visual imagery in *Troilus and Criseyde*, we must consider a fuller contextualization of the senses as they appear in Chaucer's other work. One Chaucerian text that has yet to be mined for information on sight is his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. In Chaucer's *Boece*, readers find an abundance of sight imagery similar to that of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and even some indication of what contemporary ideas of sight Chaucer was familiar with. Given the main purpose of *Boece*—convincing both the character Boethius and the real-life reader that lasting satisfaction can be found only through disciplining the mind to contemplate things eternal rather than earthly or ephemeral—it is unsurprising that the instances of sight in *Boece* are most often connected with the reasoning process. In this chapter I will explore how sight is described in *Boece* and how it connects to the use of sight in *Troilus and Criseyde*. I will ultimately argue two points: 1) that Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* fictionalizes the Boethian model of processing knowledge, which begins with sight, and 2) that Troilus and Criseyde experience tragedy because they fail to see and understand that object of their earthly love cannot be the True Good.

Along the way, Pandarus contributes to Troilus and Criseyde's fall from

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these scientific tracts influence the way that Chaucer interacts with topics of medicine, astrology, and alchemy in his fiction.

Fortune's wheel by misdirecting the physical act of seeing for both characters and interfering with their independent reasoning. In the narrative's conclusion, the two lovers fall to a wretched end due to improper seeing and reasoning, echoing Lady Philosophy's warning in *Boece*.

#### *Vision and Reason in Boece*

Chaucer's rendering of how sight works in *Boece* is not original to him as he follows his Boethian sources closely. As I will show, he does not add, redact, or modify any comments on vision or reason. However, the understanding of sight that Chaucer achieves is important because it binds sight and reason in the context of a discussion on free will. In the final book of *Boece*, Boethius wonders whether humans can truly possess free will if God knows all things past, present, and future. Lady Philosophy assures him that—despite the paradox—humans are free to act as they choose, even if God already knows what they will choose: “thanne is ther fredom of arbitrie, that duelleth hool and unwemmed to mortal men” [therefore, there is freedom of choice, which remains whole and unspotted for mortals] (V.pr.6.288-90).<sup>4</sup> Despite this allowance of free will, though, Lady Philosophy warns that God continuously judges human action, and Boethius and

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<sup>4</sup> Citations from *Boece* are formatted to provide book number, prosa or metrum number, and line number. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Middle English, Latin, and Old French are my own.

others should demonstrate great “prowesse and vertu” [prowess and virtue] in using their senses and reason to pursue behavior that God will reward (V.pr.6.305-306). Bearing in mind this imperative, I now turn to vision and reason as they appear in *Boece*.

According to the model we find in *Boece*, sight for Chaucer is an extramissive process and does not imply the immediate knowledge implied by the modern phrase “I see.” Rather, sight represents only the first step toward eventual knowledge. Lady Philosophy explains that “lookyng” functions by “castynge of his bemys” [casting one’s eye-beams], and she quickly moves on (V.pr.4.145-46). The functioning of sight itself is not as important as the fact that sight and the other senses are the lowest of four “strengthis” or “faculties” that the human soul can perform. The higher faculties include “ymaginatioun,” “resoun,” and “intelligence” [imagination, reason, and intelligence]; and when all four faculties have been applied to understanding a thing in the natural world, the viewer achieves knowledge (V.pr.4.140-165). Chaucer’s translation carefully observes that the “heyeste strengthe to comprehenden thinges embraseth and contienith the lowere strengthe; but the lower strengthe ne ariseth nat in no manere to the heyere strengthe” [the highest faculty of comprehension encompasses and contains the lower strengths, but the lower strength cannot ever attain to the higher strengths] (V.pr.4.168-72). In other words, sight, while

an important first step toward knowledge, cannot provide understanding in itself. Rather, it indicates the beginning of what I will refer to as the “cognitive process” that leads a person from raw sensory data to fully processed intelligence.

In this section of *Boece*, Chaucer is very faithful to his source material, choosing to align vision with reason rather than quibbling over the exact mechanics of sight. Scholars have long debated what versions of *The Consolation of Philosophy* Chaucer used as a base for his Middle English translation, and most now believe that Chaucer’s source manuscripts are lost. However, Tim William Machan points to two manuscripts, one in Latin by an unknown scribe and one in Old French perhaps translated by Jean de Meun, as the most similar to those that were Chaucer’s sources. Machan also observes that “as medieval translations go, the *Boece* is particularly dexterous” in that Chaucer often combines the two sources, sometimes using syntax from one source and vocabulary from the other (13). As it turns out, Chaucer could have gotten his information about sight from either the Latin or the Old French manuscript, as both contain this section on sight as a link in the reasoning process.

In the Latin text, Lady Philosophy tells Boethius: “Ille enim a longinco manens totum simul iactis radiis intuetur” [For a person sees the whole object by throwing his rays while remaining at a distance] (Machan 206, translation mine).

In the paragraph that follows, she informs Boethius that there are four faculties that assist humans in understanding: “sensus,” “ymaginacio,” “racio,” and “intelligencie oculus” [the senses, imagination, reason, and the eye of intelligence] (206). As in Chaucer’s translation, the Latin Lady Philosophy makes sure to point out that “nam superior comprehendendi vis amplectitur inferiorem, inferior vero ad superiorem nullo modo consurgit” [the higher powers of understanding embrace the lower, but the lower by no means attain to the higher] (206). Here readers find an extramissive model of sight with its projected rays and the hierarchy of faculties just as in *Boece*. These two important features arrive unchanged in Chaucer’s translation.

The Old French translation by Jean de Meun, *Li Livres de Confort*, contains nearly a word-for-word translation of the Latin above. According to Jean, people see “par ses rais la gitéz...sens soy mouvoir” [by the throwing of their rays...without moving themselves]; and once again there are four faculties involved in the knowing process: “sens,” “ymaginacion,” “raison,” and “l’œil de l’intelligence” [the senses, imagination, reason, and the eye of intelligence] (Machan 207, translation mine). The Old French Lady Philosophy also remarks—like her Latin counterpart—that “la plus haute force de comprendre les chosez embrace et contient la plus basse, mais la plus basse ne se lieve pas en nulle maniere jusques a la plus haute” [the highest power of understanding things

embraces and contains the lower, but the lower in no way rises to the higher] (207). Chaucer apparently found no fault with these descriptions of sight since he reproduces them in Middle English, as appears above. He converts both the Latin and the French into a description of sight that focuses not on the debate between extramission or intromission, but rather on the importance of sight as a building block, indeed the cornerstone, for reason and knowledge.

Within the larger context of *Boece*, reason is important because it distinguishes the human soul from the animal soul. Later in the same section of Book V, Lady Philosophy reminds Boethius that “man is a resonable two-foted beest” (V.pr.4.196-97), and in the following section she explains that sense and imagination are given to animals, but access to “resoun is al oonly to the lynage of mankynde” (V.pr.5.34-35). These reminders of humans’ greater cognitive abilities echo an earlier part of the conversation in *Boece*, in which Lady Philosophy accuses Boethius of forgetting what he is. He responds: ‘Axestow me nat...whethir that I [woot wel that I] be a resonable mortel beste? I woot wel, and I confesse wel that I am it’ [Are you asking me if I know that I am a reasoning mortal beast? I know it well and I confess that I am one.] (I.pr.6.59-64). Lady Philosophy counters that he *has* forgotten what he is, and later in Book II she corrects him by changing one important feature of his definition: man is not mortal, but rather a “devyne beest be meryte of his resoun” [a divine beast by

merit of his reason] (II.pr.5.128-29). She emphasizes shortly after that humans are “semable to God by yowr resonable thought” [comparable to God in your ability to reason] (II.pr.5.134-35). Throughout *Boece*, reason is the single most important faculty that mankind possesses. Without it, humans are no better than animals; therefore people must exercise their reason consciously and carefully.

In addition to distinguishing human from beast, we also learn in Book III that reason is the only way for people to determine “Truth” or the “True Good.” Lady Philosophy sings:

Whoso that seketh sooth by a deep thought, and coveyteth not to be disseyvid by no mysweyes, lat hym rollen and trenden withynne hymself the lyght of his ynwarde sighte; and let hym gaderyn ayein, enclynynge into a compas, the long moevynges of his thoughtes; and let hym techeyn his corage that he hath enclosid and hid in his tresors al that he compassest or secheth fro withoute. And thanne thilke thing that the blake cloude of error whilom hadde ycovered schal lighte more clerly than Phebus hymself ne schyneth.

[Whoever seeks the truth and desires not to be misled, let him/her scan the light of his inward sight back and forth within himself; and let him gather and align the many movings of his thoughts; and let him tell his heart that he/she has considered all that he has sensed with his outward senses. And than the very thing that the black cloud of error had been hiding shall shine as brightly the Phoebus himself.] (III.m.11.1-12).

This section anticipates Lady Philosophy’s description of the cognitive process later in Book V, and while she is not yet explicit about each mental faculty used to produce knowledge, she does hint at them (admittedly not in their usual hierarchical order). Here in Book III, she begins with imagination, the “lyght of

[the soul's] ynwarde sight." Next she describes reason, "the long moevynges of his thoughtes." The physical senses, which "compasseth or secheth fro withoute," follow reason. And finally, intelligence takes over and the "blake cloude of errour" gives way to true knowledge of a "thing."

While Lady Philosophy does not here emphasize the importance of physical vision in the process of gaining knowledge, she chooses to end Book III with the "fable" of Orpheus, who looks back to his wife as they emerge from "the termes of the nyght...[or] the laste boundes of helle" [the boundaries of night, the last borders of hell] (III.m.12.57). In her version of the story, Orpheus' act of looking back triggers the immediate loss of Eurydice and Orpheus's own death. Lady Philosophy deems this fate appropriate: Orpheus' looking back is evil since he has cast his eyes on an earthly good rather than an eternal one. Lady Philosophy ends the Book by saying that this fable should concern anyone who seeks the "sovereyn day" or "sovereyn good" (III.m.12.62-63). This "sovereyn good"—called variously "blissfullnesse" or "suffisaunce" throughout Book III—is only available to those who do not "ficche [their] eien into the put of helle, that is to seyn...erthly thinges" [fix their eyes on the pit of hell, i.e. earthly things] (III.m.12.64-66).<sup>5</sup> The "eien" mentioned here are meant in both a literal and

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<sup>5</sup> Megan Murton observes that Chaucer chose to follow his French source in this section, which emphasizes the association between the "put of hille" and "erthly thinges." Assuming

metaphorical sense: people should not dwell on either the physical sight or the imagined reflection of an earthly good—in the case of Orpheus, an earthly love.

Thus, by the time we finish *Boece*, we have learned quite a lot about sight. When read as a whole—as Chaucer must have—*Boece* teaches that sight is the first of four faculties that allow humans to reason. We also learn that reasoning is what separates humans from animals. Finally, we learn that the purpose of reasoning is to determine the true good and that we should avert our outer and inner eyes from sights that will lead us toward earthly goods rather than the “sovereyn” good. Importantly, the fullest description of sight and of its role in the reasoning process occurs near the end of *Boece*, where readers receive clear instructions to use their mental faculties to think and act well because God’s vision “seeth and demeth” [sees and judges] all things (V.pr.6.309-10). If humans are allowed free will, they must also act with discernment. In its location near the end of the treatise, the description of vision provides practical advice for effective reasoning: thinking well begins with seeing well, and leads to acting in accordance with the True Good. Equipped with this understanding of sight, reason, and the True Good, let us return to *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which the title

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Chaucer had access to both a French and a Latin MS, he evidently desired to underscore the dangers of relying on earthly goods for happiness (Murton 310).

characters move through most of the stages of gaining knowledge described here, but suffer a fate very similar to that of Orpheus.<sup>6</sup>

### *Boethian Vision and Reason in Troilus and Criseyde*

In the text of *Troilus and Criseyde*, sight, the first step in the process of gaining knowledge, is important early on. Troilus ambles through the temple with his young comrades, “lokynge” on various ladies, until “His eye percede, and so depe it wente, / Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente” [His eye pierced deeply (through the crowd), until it struck Criseyde, and there it stopped] (I, 269, 272-73).<sup>7</sup> Here Troilus exhibits a typical instance of sight that echoes the Boethian model described above. He casts a beam that “pierces” the crowd and lands on Criseyde. The audience is already prepared for the vision Troilus sees, alerted to Criseyde’s beauty by the narrator who calls her “makeles” [matchless/spotless/mate-less] and judges her more beautiful than a star under a black cloud in her widow’s garments (I, 172, 175-76). Troilus adds to this

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<sup>6</sup> Murton further observes that most of the scholarship concerning *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Boece* has used *Boece* as a “standard by which Troilus should be judged,” and she urges scholars to reconsider their evaluation of Troilus’ behavior, as *Boece* and its classical source text are much more complicated in terms of imagery and final messages than has been previously thought (295). While this is certainly true for the point she makes regarding the tension between philosophy and religion in *Boece*, the treatment of vision and reason in *Boece* is more straight forward, and therefore more easily used as a standard by which to judge Troilus’ sensory activities.

<sup>7</sup> Citations from *Troilus and Criseyde* are formatted to include book and line numbers.

description, thinking that there was never anyone “*lasse mannyssh in semynge*” [less mannish in appearance] and further that her movements are those of someone with “honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse” [honor, estate, and womanly nobility] (I, 284, 287). Regardless of the dubious nature of his compliments, in these stanzas Troilus views Criseyde and thus completes the first physical step toward knowledge—and, in theory, toward determining the True Good.

The next step toward knowledge described in *Boece* is “*yimaginacioun*,” and Troilus enters this phase almost immediately. Upon his return to the palace, he continues to mock his friends for their love, but then he retreats to his bedroom and sits at the foot of his bed to re-visualize Criseyde:

[He] thought ay on hire so, withouten lette,  
That, as he sat and wook, his spirit mette  
That he hire saugh a-temple, and al the wise  
Right of hire look, and gan it newe avise.  
Thus gan he make a mirour of his mynde  
In which he saugh al holly hire figure.  
[He thought only upon her, without interruption, so that as he sat there awake, his spirit dreamed that he saw her in her full appearance in the temple, and he considered it anew. Thus did he make a mirror of his mind in which he saw her whole figure.] (I, 361-66)

In *Boece*, Lady Philosophy explains that “*yimaginacioun comprehendith oonly the figure withoute the matere*,” and this is exactly what we see here (*Boece* V.pr.4.157-59). In these lines, Troilus uses the faculty of imagination to

reconstruct the image of Criseyde—as clearly as an image in a mirror—even though she is not physically present.

Just as Troilus quickly makes his way through the first two faculties of knowing, so does Criseyde. We can infer that when Troilus makes his way past Criseyde's window for the first time, it is probably not the first time that she has seen him. As the second son of King Priam, brother to Hector, and a mighty warrior in his own right, Troilus is a public figure. In fact, she tells Pandarus that she already knows that Troilus performs

In armes day by day so worthily,  
And bereth hym here at hom so gently  
To everi wight, that alle pris hath he  
Of hem that me were levest preyed be.  
[deeds of arms worthily every day, and bears himself home so humbly towards every person, that he is respected by all those I would wish him to be praised by.] (II, 186-89)

However, after Pandarus delivers the news that this same Troilus suffers lovesickness for Criseyde, she has the opportunity to see him in a different light. Knowing only that Troilus may die if she does not allow him to love her, Criseyde looks down to see Troilus returning from a skirmish. As with Troilus' first physical sight of Criseyde, the narrator offers a description of Troilus' physical appearance. His knightliness makes him seem like "Mars, that god is of bataille," and it is "an heven" to look upon him (II, 630, 637). His appearance also proves his valor and bravery, as his helm is "tohewen" [hewn] in twenty places

and his shield is “todasshed” [beaten] with swords, maces, and arrows (II, 638, 640). To complete the picture of the perfect suitor, he outwardly displays his humility by blushing “a litel reed for shame” when the Trojan townspeople cheer for him (645). Sarah Stanbury argues that Criseyde’s gaze here is “in part constructed by the gaze of a crowd that even seems masculinized by its exteriorized positioning, outdoors, jostling in the world while she looks out from a feminized interior space” (237). However, while Criseyde’s *gaze* might be a public action, her *reaction* is intensely personal and very much an interior response. Following these twenty-three lines of lavish praise for Troilus, “Criseyda [*sic*] gan al his chere aspien, / And leet it so softe in hire herte synke, / That to hirself she seyde, ‘Who yaf me drynk?’” [Criseyde did look at his whole manner, and she let it sink so softly into her heart that that she asked herself “Who gave me drink”?] (649-51). “Aspien” here functions as the narrative marker for sight, and the result has nothing to do with the crowd but everything to do with the foundation of Criseyde’s cognitive processing. She has gathered the sensory data required to determine the correct course of action regarding Pandarus and Troilus’ request for pity.

Echoing Troilus’ pattern of sight and then imagination, Criseyde also retreats to a private place to recreate an image of Troilus in her mind’s eye. She goes to her closet, where,

[She] gan to caste and rollen up and down  
Withinne hire thought his excellent prowesse,  
And his estate, and also his renown,  
His wit, his shap, and ek his gentilesse;  
But moost hir favour was, for his distresse  
Was al for hire, and thoughte it was a routhe  
To sleep swich oon, if that he mente trouthe.  
[She began to mull over in her thoughts Troilus' excellent estate, renown, wit, figure, and nobility; but the best part for her was that he was distressed on account of her. She thought it would be a pity to slay such a one, if he meant to be honorable toward her.] (Book II, 659-665)

We see in these lines that Criseyde's mind has begun the processing of knowledge. In fact, the phrase "caste and rollen up and down / Withinne hire thought" bears striking resemblance to the description of imagination in *Boece* that we saw earlier: "rollen and trenden withynne hymself the lyght of his ynwarde sighte" (*Boece* III.m.11.3-4). Criseyde's internalized image of Troilus disposes her toward pity for Troilus' plight. From the dashing spectacle presented outside her window, Criseyde has an impression of his "prowesse," "estate," "renown," "wit," "shap," and "gentilesse"; however, Troilus' most appealing attribute is that he is in "distresse," indeed, he will die if he is not allowed to love her. This last part—Troilus' "distresse"—represents Criseyde's own addition to her imagined picture of Troilus. In a later scene, Troilus will actually look distressed because he knows she will be watching, but in this first appearance, he does not know that he is seen by Criseyde. It is only in her

imagination, then, that she sees a full picture of Troilus as both hardy warrior and distressed lover.

Thus far, both Troilus and Criseyde have employed their first two mental faculties and have gained the physical and internal image of their prospective lovers. They have both cast eye beams in the other's direction and have retained an image in their mind's eye. According to *Boece*, the next highest faculty is "resoun," which is described as gathering and "enclynynge into a compas the longe moevynges of [one's] thoughtes." A little later in *Boece*, a more scientific description states that "resoun surmountith yimaginacioun and comprehendith by an universel lokynge the comune spece<sup>8</sup> that is in the singuler peces" [reason rises over imagination and understands the commonality of all the singular pieces by looking over them all] (V.pr.4.159-62). In both of these descriptions the function of reason is to make sense of the various fragments of sensory and imaginative information contained in the viewer's mind, and *Troilus and Criseyde* is nothing if not the recording of the "longe moevynges" of its characters' thoughts as they attempt to organize and generalize their thoughts and emotions.

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<sup>8</sup> The presence of the word "spece" ("specie") here does not necessarily indicate a theory of intromissive sight. In addition to the esoteric definition of minute images radiating from natural objects, the *MED* offers the more conventional definition of "A class of individuals or things."

Criseyde's application of reason looks exactly as we might expect. In Book II, after Pandarus has left and Criseyde has seen Troilus both in the flesh and in her imagination, she holds a lengthy internal debate about the merits and dangers of accepting Troilus' love. Following her mental reconstruction of Troilus' appearance and suffering, she sits down to consider what she should do since her uncle insists on Troilus' suit:

And, Lord! So she gan in hire thought argue  
In this matere of which I have yow told,  
And what to doone best were, and what eschue,  
That plited she ful ofte in many fold.  
Now was hire herte warm, now was it cold;  
And what she thoughte somwhat shal I write...  
[And, Lord! Thus she did consider this subject that I have told you about in her thoughts: what was best to do, and what to avoid—she folded and unfolded these ideas many times. Now her heart was warm, and now cold; I will tell you a part of what she thought.] (II, 694-699)

In the several stanzas that follow, Criseyde employs her reason to sort through the evidence available to her—the Boethian “singuler peces”—in order to determine whether she will allow Troilus’ love. And there are many “peces” to consider, including:

- 1) Troilus’ status as her “kynges sone,” which may jeopardize her precarious standing in Troy if she refuses him (II, 708);
- 2) the fact that it is not expressly “forbede” by any laws to be in love, especially not love in moderation (II, 716);
- 3) Troilus’ reputation as a modest man, who will not “make avaunt” that he has conquered her, thus keeping her reputation intact (II, 727);
- 4) the fact that no woman can control who loves her;

- 5) the wonder that it is herself, the humble Criseyde, that this “worthieste” man has chosen (II, 739);
- 6) her own current status as “naught religious” (i.e. not a nun) and therefore an available lady (II, 759).

All these “peces” incline Criseyde to accept Troilus’ love, but then she must also consider the disadvantages of being courted and possibly falling in love. In her widowhood, she is currently “free,” whereas love would make her “put in jupartie / My sikernes, and thrallen libertee” [jeopardize my security and take liberty hostage] (II, 772-73). She also worries about “How ofte tyme hath it yknownen be / The tresoun that to wommen hath ben do!” [It is well known how oftentimes treason has been done to women] (II, 792-93): she may be betrayed by Troilus, or by any number of the “wikked tongue[s]” that spread ugly gossip about any amorous couple (II, 804). So many conflicting “peces” of information make her feel “Now hoot, now cold,” and she goes to find the company of her friends. In the garden, she finds her niece Antigone singing a love song that prompts her to consider her situation even further. As the narrator tells us before this passage, Criseyde’s is not a “sodeyn” [sudden] love (II, 667); rather, she studies it from every angle as she attempts to arrange all the “peces” to gain a “universel lokynge” on the situation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Some scholars, notably Talbot Donaldson, have pointed out that the narrator’s defense of Criseyde in moments like these serves only to point out how quickly she falls in love. However, the long passage preceding this defense shows Criseyde carefully reflecting on the myriad consequences that her decision might entail. In my reading of the narrator’s defense, there is no naïveté or irony, but rather a full endorsement of Criseyde’s cognitive powers. For

If Criseyde provides readers with a textbook use of reason, Troilus is just the opposite. In fact, Troilus seems to refuse using reason at all, and must be prompted by Pandarus to take action in order to alleviate his love sickness.<sup>10</sup>

After Troilus sees Criseyde at the temple and reconstructs her image in the mirror of his mind, he does not have a conversation with himself in the way that Criseyde does. Instead, the imagery used in the following section is filled with emotion: “the fyr of love... / Ne him forbar in no degree” [the fire of love...did not spare him in any way] (I, 436-37), and that he loses his color “sexti tyme a day” [sixty times a day] (I, 441). He seeks to relieve the pain of his love by being near Criseyde and being able to see her, but “the ner he was, the more he brende” [the nearer he was to her, the more he burned in love] (I, 448).

Furthermore, instead of using his reason to make sense of the situation, he returns to imagination and terrifies himself with various images: Criseyde loving another man and taking no heed of Troilus’ suffering (I, 498-504), himself as a fool who “whilom japedest at loves peyne” [used to jest at the pain of love] (I,

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Donaldson’s reading, see Talbot Donaldson, “Criseyde and Her Narrator,” *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1970), 65-83.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Ciccone notes that most scholars attribute to Troilus a great “affinity with academic modes of discourse” and therefore a tendency toward reason and logic. This may be true of later sections, especially in Book IV as he attempts to decide if his tragic fate was predestined or not; however, in this early section where he is trying to make sense of his potential relationship with Crisedye, his thought patterns are certainly not orderly, and do not tend toward reason. See Nancy Ciccone, “Saving Chaucer’s Troilus ‘With Desir and Reson Twight,’” *Neophilologus* 86 (2002): 642.

508), and himself as “fordon as snow in fire” [doomed as snow in the fire] (I, 525). These images do not reflect the sensory data that Troilus has gathered; instead, they represent new, hypothetical situations that exist only in his mind. Boethius’ Lady Philosophy would chastise Troilus for lingering so long on these imaginary torments, just as she scolds Boethius at the beginning of *Boece* for wallowing in his imagined misery. While Criseyde makes good use of her faculties of imagination and reason, setting all her thoughts in order, Troilus stalls in the second faculty, bemired in his imagination.

The final faculty that readers should expect Troilus and Criseyde use as they process their relationship with each other is the “eighe [eye] of intelligence.” In *Boece*’s Book V, this faculty is described as that which

surmountith the envyrounynge of the universite, and loketh over  
that bi pure subtilte of thought thilke same symple forme...that is  
perdurablyle in the devyne thought. [rises above the individual  
pieces arranged by reasoning in order to discern the ideal (simple  
form), which resides eternally in the divine mind.] (V.pr.4.163-66)

Earlier in *Boece*, this process was described as having “enclosid and hid in [the soul’s] tresors al that he compasseth or secheth fro withoute” [embedded in the soul’s treasure stores (i.e. memory) all that the soul has understood (through reason) or sought from the external world (by means of the senses)] (III.m.11.7-9). In other words, a person who has attained the final faculty of “intelligence” has aligned all the “peces” sorted through in the reasoning stage, and the “peces”

have been stored away in the soul. At this point a person is prepared to deliver a conclusion about what he/she has seen, imagined, and reasoned through. This faculty is the most important step in the process because it signals the highest form of understanding and ideally should lead people toward the “sovereyn good.”

Perhaps because of her clearer reasoning process, Criseyde is the first of the two lovers to assert her final conclusion. In the climactic scene at Pandarus’ house on the conveniently rainy night in Book III, Troilus orders her to “yeldeth you, for other bote is non!” [yield, for there is no other remedy!] (III, 1208). Criseyde responds, “Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, / Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere!” [If I had not yielded before now, my dear sweetheart, I would not now be here!] (III, 1210-11). Despite Pandarus’ dogged determination to orchestrate the evening, Criseyde’s language suggests that she retains the ability to reason and decide for herself: she would not be in this precarious situation if she hadn’t already yielded to Troilus’ requests. This decision to yield also suggests that Criseyde’s reason and “eighe of intelligence” have brought her here, not simply a plotting uncle. After a long process of carefully considering the advantages and disadvantages of accepting Troilus’ love, she has approved it, and allowed herself to be “trapped” by Pandarus’ ruse.

On one level, Criseyde's independent reasoning and decision to take a lover may seem a triumph: unlike Troilus, whose cognitive process stalls in the imagination, Criseyde has sorted through her thoughts and arrived at a conclusion on which she can act. However, Criseyde does not simply decide to yield. She also mistakenly finds sufficiency in an earthly good. In *Boece*, the primary reason that humans have the capacity to reason is so that they may recognize the difference between ephemeral, earthly goods and the eternal, "sovereyn" good. As readers learned in the Boethian example of Orpheus and Eurydice, earthly lovers fall into the category of earthly pleasures, and dedication to an earthly love equates to fixing one's eyes on the pit of hell. At the climactic moment in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde has employed her reason and intelligence incorrectly, for she assures Troilus that he is her "hertes list, / [her] ground of ese, and al myn herte deere" [heart's desire, her resting place, and her own dear heart] (III, 1303-1304). She further proclaims: "And at o word, withouten repentaunce, / Welcome my knyght, my pees, my suffisaunce" [And in short, without repentance, welcome, my knight, my peace, my sufficiency] (III, 1308-09; emphasis mine). Here, immediately preceding the most earthly of acts, Criseyde labels an earthly love her True Good.

Chaucer's decision to end Criseyde's speech with the word *suffisaunce* is particularly interesting as it appears only a handful of times in both *Boece* and

*Troilus and Criseyde*. In *Boece*, *suffisaunce* and its variant *suffisance* are used exclusively in Book III, when Lady Philosophy explains the nature of the “soverayn good.” According to Lady Philosophy, “the soverayn good... conteneth in hymself alle maner goodes; to the whiche goode if ther fayled any thyng, it myghte nat ben sovereyn good” [the True Good contains in itself all the kinds of goods; if a good lacks any good component, it cannot be the True Good] (III.pr.2.12-15). Because the True Good contains every kind of good, it cannot be attained by earthly means, which will always lack some facet of true happiness. As Boethius recites to Lady Philosophy, “I se wel now that suffisaunce may nat comen by rychesse, ne power by remes, ne reverence by dignites, ne gentilesse by glorie, *ne joie be delices*” [I see well now that sufficiency cannot be achieved through wealth, nor can true power come through governing, nor can respect come from honors and awards, nor can nobility be gained by glory, *nor can true joy be derived from bodily pleasures*] (III.pr.9.6-9, emphasis mine). Rather, by the end of Book III, Lady Philosophy has taught him that “God hymself is sovereyn good, and that God is the ful blisfulnesse” [God himself is the True Good and True Happiness] (III.p.12.166-67). Throughout Book III, Chaucer and his sources treat the terms “sovereyn good,” “ful blisfulnesse,” and “suffisaunce” interchangeably, all designating a complete

contentment and enduring satisfaction that cannot be found in earthly goods like wealth, power, respect, or the bodily pleasures available to lovers.

In addition to its importance as a term for the True Good, *suffisaunce* is also an interesting word for both *Boece* and for *Troilus and Criseyde* because it would have been a new word in the English language. The *Middle English Dictionary* lists Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as the first instance of the word in the last decades of fourteenth century, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists only one other instance of the word before Chaucer, circa 1380.<sup>11</sup> Considering the difficulty of determining a composition date for *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, it is even possible that Chaucer introduced the word to the English language himself when he strove to translate the Latin *sufficienciam* or the Old French *suffisance*.<sup>12</sup> Given its relative newness to the English language and its association with the Boethian True Good, *suffisaunce* bears a heavy linguistic weight, and Criseyde's use of it to describe Troilus represents a grave error. Troilus, no matter how hardy, mighty, gentle, or distressed in love, cannot be the True Good, just as Eurydice cannot be Orpheus' True Good.

Criseyde makes this error twice more in the remainder of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The second time she uses the word, she affirms to Troilus at her leave-

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<sup>11</sup> See *MED* "suffisaunce (n.)," sense 1; and *OED* "sufficience, n.", sense 1.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Machan, *Sources of the Boece*, 110-111.

taking from Troy that he is her “owene hertes sothfast suffisaunce” [her own heart’s true sufficiency] (IV, 1640). The addition of and alliteration with “sothfast” makes her pronouncement emphatic: Troilus is *truthfully and without doubt* the only thing she requires for continued happiness. Unfortunately, the addition of “sothfast” also emphasizes Criseyde’s confidence in the transitory rather than the eternal. Criseyde’s third and final use of *suffisaunce* appears in Book V when her ten-day deadline for returning to Troy has expired. She regrets her refusal to run away with Troilus, and after lamenting her current situation, she resolves to return to Troy: “Felicite clepe I my suffissaunce / For which, withouten any wordes mo, / To Troie I wole, as for conclusioun” [I call happiness my sufficiency, for which, without any more delay, I will return to Troy] (V, 763-65). The focus of Criseyde’s *suffisaunce* seems to blur a little here, as she proclaims happiness to be enough. Troy, and presumably Troilus, is the location of this happiness; so Criseyde still has not correctly identified the True Good. By the end of the narrative, Criseyde transfers her love to the Greek Diomede—another earthly love—and presumably never discovers *suffisaunce*.

Unlike Criseyde, Troilus never uses the word *suffisaunce* to describe his earthly lover or anything else. Readers may expect this of a character who does not progress into an active reasoning stage and therefore cannot arrive at a single-term conclusion the way that Criseyde does. This could explain why

Troilus' expresses his sorrow for Criseyde's absence with obsessive gazing and imagining. Even before he speaks to Criseyde about the news that she is to be traded for Antenor, Troilus proclaims his eyes to be worthless if Criseyde cannot be seen:

"O woful eyen two, syn youre disport  
was al to sen Criseydes eyen brighte,  
What shal ye don but, for my discomfort,  
Stonden for naught, and wepen out youre sighte,  
Syn she is queynt that wont was yow to lighte?  
In vayn for this forth have ich eyen tweye  
Ifourmed, syn youre vertu is awey."  
[Oh, woeful eyes, since your pleasure was only to see Criseyde's bright eyes, what shall you do now but stand for nothing and weep out your sight since the woman who was your light is now quenched? It is worthless for me to have these two eyes since your virtue is gone.] (IV, 309-15)

Although Troilus does see Criseyde again after this outburst, it is only for a short time. Then Criseyde's departure makes her unavailable to the sight of those in Troy, and Troilus replaces Criseyde's physical image with an imagined one. After regarding her abandoned house, he revisits places he used to go with Criseyde and replays scenes from happier times:

Fro thennesforth he rideth up and down,  
And every thyng com hym to remembraunce  
As he rood forby places of the town  
In which he whilom hadde al his plesaunce  
"Lo, yonder saugh ich last my lady daunce;  
And in that temple, with hire eyen cleere,  
Me kaughte first my righte lady dere."  
[From thence he rode up and down, and everything came back to his memory as he rode past places in the town where once he had

all his bliss. “Lo, over there I last saw my lady dance, and in that temple I had the first glimpse of my own true love and her bright eyes.”] (V, 561-67).

For several stanzas, Troilus moves from place to place, reconstructing happy occasions in his imagination, and once again, Troilus’ cognitive process halts in the faculty of imagination. He does not attempt to make a plan, and he cannot even respond well to Pandarus as a voice of reason. Given his obsession with seeing the places where he used to see Criseyde, we might safely infer that Troilus also considers Criseyde his *suffisaunce*, although at a more subconscious level than hers.

#### *“Nece, ysee!”: Pandarus’ Visual and Rational Interference*

If Troilus and Criseyde arrive at incorrect notions of the True Good and mistakenly conclude that they can be each other’s *suffisaunce*, they are not entirely to blame. Pandarus plays a substantial role in both characters’ cognitive processes as he steers them toward one another. As Troilus’ go-between, Pandarus especially contributes to Criseyde’s understanding and acceptance of Troilus. The vague motives for his actions leave critics divided on Pandarus’ morality. Some, like Jane Chance, accuse him of essentially seducing Criseyde and assisting Troilus with her rape, despite Pandarus being her “older, presumably wiser” guide as well as uncle (123). Cory James Rushton goes further and argues that Chaucer means to make readers “feel complicit in the actions of

Pandarus" in order to show that courtly love is "an illusion, a dangerous social conceit at best" (148, 160). Other critics, like Gretchen Mieszkowski, observe more benignly that Pandarus represents a hybrid go-between figure, drawn from two different traditions of classical and medieval stories. She shows how Pandarus functions as both an enabler of idealized love (as in courtly romances) and as a wily trap-setter (as in fabliaux and other comic tales). Regardless of critics' final judgements of Pandarus' character, though, it is important to recognize that the way he contributes to the narrative's tragedy is by directing Criseyde's eyes toward Troilus and supplying information that colors her imagination and reason.

From the beginning of Pandarus' efforts as romantic go-between, he carefully appraises and navigates Criseyde's cognitive process. Even on the brink of telling her that Troilus may die from lovesickness because of her, he takes a moment to evaluate her intelligence; ultimately he decides on a straightforward delivery of the news, "For tendre wittes wenен al be wyle / Theras thei kan nought pleynly understande; / Forthi hire wite to serven wol I fonde" [For simple minds believe that all they cannot immediately understand is trickery; therefore, I will try to adjust my speech to her level of intelligence] (II, 271-73). According to Pandarus, Criseyde is incapable of complex thought, although—as

I have shown—she certainly demonstrates these abilities in the scenes that follow.

Criseyde's supposed simplicity makes her a target for Pandarus' deception, and he begins by scattering praise of Troilus throughout their conversation. He primes her imagination with images of Troilus as "Ector the secounde" [Hector the second, i.e. the very image of his famous older brother] in whom "alle vertu list habounde, / As alle trouthe and alle gentilesse, / Wisdom, honour, fredom, and worthiness" [all virtues abound, such as honesty, gentility, wisdom, honor, generosity, and worthiness] (II, 158-61). He further paints Troilus as a fierce fighter: "Now here, now ther, he hunted hem so faste, / Ther nas but Grekes blood—and Troilus" [He was everywhere at once, he hunted them to fast; there was nothing but Greeks' blood and Troilus] (II, 197-98). When Criseyde asks how Pandarus came to learn of Troilus' love, Pandarus again constructs an image of an athletic Troilus, who practices his spear throwing before taking a nap and pleading to the God of Love in his sleep (II 505-39).

While these first images of Troilus as a noble fighter may be accurate, Chaucer's readers know Pandarus has invented this last image. Accuracy troubles him less than providing a favorable image of Troilus for Criseyde's imagination. By the time he leaves Criseyde's house, Pandarus has shaped—or perhaps corrupted—Criseyde's mental image of Troilus into the ideal suitor, so that when Troilus

happens to ride by her window, she can be properly impressed by his material image.<sup>13</sup>

If Pandarus begins by appealing to Criseyde's imagination, he does not neglect her physical sight either. In the second phase of his wooing on Troilus' behalf, he personally guides her eyes toward love by colluding with Troilus to set a visual trap. After delivering Troilus' first love letter and ensuring that she reads it, he innocently asks "Nece, who hath arayed thus / The yonder hous, that stant aforyeyn us?" [Niece, who has decorated that house across the street?] (II, 1187-88). Pandarus' question has the intended effect: Criseyde comes to the window and positions herself to be seen by Troilus. When Troilus repeats his ride past Criseyde's window, Pandarus directs her eyes in his direction: "Nece, ysee who comth here ride! / O fle naught in (he seeth us, I suppose) / Lest he may thynken that ye hym eschuwe" [Niece, look who comes riding through here! O, do not flee inside (I think he sees us), lest he think you dislike him] (II, 1253-55). Criseyde dutifully stands her ground in the window, following her uncle's directions to "ysee" her suitor. In turn, Troilus "up his look debonairly...caste" [humbly cast up his gaze], so that the two lovers make mutual, visual contact for

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<sup>13</sup> I mean this remark without irony. Troilus passes Criseyde's window twice in Book II: the first time he remains unaware of her presence, and Criseyde simply sees him and favorably compares the actual sight to the image built by Pandarus. The two men plot the second encounter to ensure that Troilus and Criseyde see each other.

the first time (II, 1259). While the event discomfits both Troilus and Criseyde, the narrator assures the reader that the moment is effective in advancing Pandarus' plans:

To telle in short, hire liked al in-fere,  
His person, his aray, his look, his chere,  
His goodly manere, and his gentilesse  
...  
She hath now caught a thorn  
She shal nat pulle it out this nexte wyke.  
[In short, it pleased her altogether: his person, his dress, his look, his face, his good manners and his gentility. ... She has now been pricked by a thorn (love) that she will not be able to remove.] (1266-1273)

By this point in the narrative, Pandarus has manipulated the first two stages of Criseyde's cognitive process: her physical eyesight and her imagination. He continues to craft these kinds of encounters by setting up meetings for Troilus and Criseyde at Deiphebus' house and his own. Less in need of explication are his contributions to her reason, which are frequent and long-winded, and apparently successful (despite Criseyde's proclamation of agency). By Book III, Pandarus' strategic guidance of Criseyde's eyes, imagination, and reason lead her to accept Troilus as her lover and to further pronounce him her *suffisaunce*.

While critics often express dismay at Pandarus' manipulation of Criseyde, the most troubling feature of his behavior from a Boethian standpoint is his awareness of the ephemeral nature of worldly goods. Following the

consummation scene in Book III, Pandarus congratulates Troilus on his conquest but warns him to beware a reversal of fortune:

For of fortunes sharpe adversitee  
The worste kynde of infortune is this,  
A man to han ben in prosperitee,  
And it remembren whan it passed is.  
Th'art wis ynough; forthi do nat amys:  
Be naught to raken, theigh thou sitte warme,  
For if thou be, certeyn it wol the harm.  
[For the worst kind of fortune's adversity is this, that a man has been in prosperity and then remembers it when it is past. You are smart enough, therefore do not err: be not too rash, though you are now comfortable, for if you are too rash, it will certainly come to harm.] (III, 1625-31)

At first, Pandarus' advice seems logical: Troilus should take care not to boast about his new love for Criseyde, or the affair may fail. However, Pandarus continues by acknowledging that this affair is a "worldly joie," which "halt nought but by a wir" [holds by a wire/thread] (III, 1636). Here, Pandarus shows his awareness that Troilus and Criseyde's love is an earthly good, not an eternal, True Good. As a friend of Troilus and the uncle/protector of Criseyde, Pandarus should help them to recognize and strive toward more lasting goods. Instead, as I have shown, he purposely directs their eyes, imagination, and reason toward each other, which Lady Philosophy would equate to fixing their eyes on the "pit of hell."

### *"Double Sorwe": Boethian Tragedy in Troilus and Criseyde*

Chaucer tells us that Troilus and Criseyde's affair does last a significant amount of time—three full years in fact; however, just as Pandarus warns Troilus in Book III, it is not permanent. The sorrowful ending should come as no surprise to readers, since the opening lines of the entire work tell us to prepare to hear about "The double sorwe of Troilus" whose narrative arc will bring him "Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie" [The double sorrow of Troilus...From woe to happiness and back to woe] (I, 1-4). This woe does not only affect Troilus, however; Criseyde also experiences a tragic end. Klassen observes that Chaucer would have been working with two definitions of the word *tragedy*. One was available from Chaucer's reading of *Boece*: "a work that embodies the attitude of having forgotten providence and bewailing changing Fortune" ("Tragedy and Romance" 163). Klassen notes that a second definition from the medieval commentary tradition allows for an "attitude of artistic detachment and perhaps [readers can] even learn from it" (163). Both lovers exhibit these features—immense sorrow due to a shift in Fortune and a didactic element—in the final books of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

When Criseyde first hears the gossip that the Trojan officials have determined to trade her for Antenor, she instantly recognizes the full scope of the suffering in store for her, and her behavior immediately displays both features of

tragedy. She collapses into bed with the intent of never arising, and alternately tears at her “sonnyssh” [sunny] hair and wrings her “fyngeres longe and smale” [fingers long and slender] (IV, 736-37). In her woe, she begs God to send her death since she cannot imagine living without Troilus:

To what fyn sholde I lyve and sorwen thus?  
How sholde a fissh withouten water dure?  
What is Criseyde worth, from Troilus?  
How sholde a plaunte or lyves creature  
Lyve withouten his kynde noriture?  
For which ful ofte a by-word here I seye  
That “rooteles moot grene soone deye.”  
[To what end must I live and sorrow in this way? How can a fish endure without water? What is Criseyde worth, parted from Troilus? How can a plant or a live creature live without its proper nourishment? As the proverb says, “rootless green things die quickly.”] (IV, 764-70)

Here Criseyde makes the very mistake that Boethius makes in *Boece*: she has forgotten what she is. She compares herself to fish, plants, and live creatures, but neglects the fact that as a human, she possesses a higher level of reasoning. As such, she should recall that her source of nourishment is not “rooted” in the earthly things that sustain plants and animals, but rather in God and his providence.

When Pandarus arrives with word from Troilus, he finds a disheveled and distraught Criseyde, who proclaims “Endeth than love in wo? Ye, or men lieth, / And alle worldly blisse, as thynketh me” [Must love end in woe? Yes, or men lie, and all worldly joy, I believe.] (IV, 834-35). These lines suggest that Criseyde has

perhaps become more aware of herself as a rational creature whose sustenance must come from eternal rather than earthly joys. She goes on to tell Pandarus that her plight can serve as an example for those who do not believe this truism:

And whoso troweth nat that it so be,  
Lat hym upon me, woful wrecche, ysee  
That myself hate and ay my burthe acorse,  
Felyng alwey fro wikke I go to worse.  
[Whoever doesn't believe this, let him/her look upon me and see  
this woeful wretch that hates herself and curses her birth. I feel like  
I pass from bad to worse.] (IV, 837-40)

Criseyde herself feels that she can be an example to others who mistakenly locate their source of joy in worldly pleasures, and if she had been allowed to continue in this vein, she may have even found some lasting peace by the end of the story. However, unlike Boethius whose guide is Lady Philosophy herself, Criseyde is led by the scheming Pandarus, who seeks to encourage Criseyde in her earthly love for Troilus. When the lovers and Pandarus strive to cling to worldly goods, Criseyde ends her story in nearly as much woe as Troilus. Even as she transfers her love to the Grecian Diomede, the narrator assures readers that "ther made nevere womman moore wo / Than she, whan that she falsed Troilus" [A woman never made more woe than Criseyde when she betrayed Troilus] (V, 1052-53). She mourns not just the loss of Troilus, but also her tarnished reputation, which Lady Philosophy would define as yet another earthly good.

As I have shown above, when Troilus' fortune reverses and Criseyde is given to the Greeks, his misery equals that of Criseyde. Also like Criseyde, his despair originates from the same cause: he has forgotten (if he ever knew) what he is, and incorrectly defines the source of his *suffisaunce*. As he writes to Criseyde after she misses her ten-day deadline,

[T]o youre trouthe ay I me recomande,  
With hele swich that, but ye yeven me  
The same hele, I shal non hele have.  
In yow lith, whan yow liste that it so be,  
The day in which me clothen shal my grave;  
In yow my lif, in yow myght for to save  
Me fro disese of alle peynes smerte.  
[I recommend myself to your fidelity; unless you give me health/happiness, I have none. In you lies the power, whenever you wish, to determine the day when my grave shall be closed upon me. In you lies the power to save my life and save me from the discomfort of all sorrow's harms.] (V, 1414-20)

Because Troilus identifies Criseyde as the source of all his happiness, his anguish increases as her absence lengthens. Finally he spots the brooch he gave Criseyde on the coat of Diomede and learns that she has transferred her love to another. Completely despairing, he tells Pandarus he will seek his "owen deth in armes" [own death in battle], which he finds at the hands of Achilles (V, 1718).

While Troilus' death may seem to signal the end of both misery and consciousness, Chaucer allows him to see his error, and readers are given an opportunity to learn from the lovers' mistakes. In the concluding stanzas, Troilus dies, his spirit ascends to the eighth sphere, and once more,

Ther he was slain his lokynge down he caste  
And in hymself he lough right at the wo  
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,  
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so  
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,  
And sholden our herte on heven caste.

[He cast his eyes down to the place where he was slain, and he laughed to himself at the woe of the people who wept so hard for his death, and he condemned the actions of those who pursue blind lust for earthly pleasures that cannot last, who should instead cast our hearts up to heaven.] (V, 1820-25)<sup>14</sup>

Here Troilus undertakes a miniature version of the Boethian cognitive process.

He casts his beams, sees the people weeping for his death, internalizes the image, and laughs at it. He realizes that he should have spent less time thinking about earthly love, and more time thinking about the eternal. However, at this point, it is too late. He can recognize his error, but Achilles has already slain him, and there is no more time to use his reason on earth.

However, hope remains for the audience of Chaucer's "litel bok," just as hope remains for the ailing Boethius while he lives in prison (V, 1786). Therefore, after a series of exclamations and apostrophes, the narrator provides a final warning:

Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,  
And of your herte up casteth the visage  
To thilke God that after his ymage

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<sup>14</sup> For an examination of similar moment in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, see Steven Kruger, "Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *The Chaucer Review* 28.2 (1993): 123. In *House of Fame*, when the dreamer finds himself on an empty plain, he requests Christ's assistance and looks heavenward: "And with devucion / Myn eyen to the hevene I caste" (494-95).

You made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,  
This world that passeth soone as floures faire.  
[Come home from worldly vanity, and cast up your heart's face to  
that same God who made you in his image. And remember that  
this life is like a fair; the world changes just as fast as fair flowers  
wilt.] (V, 1835-41)

This parting advice provides a model for Boethian thinking influenced by late-medieval Christianity. Chaucer encourages young lovers to cast up the “visage of the herte,” in other words, their mind’s eye, and consider not just “the eternal,” but specifically God and Christ. Unlike Fortune, Christ suffered on the cross on behalf of humanity and “nyl falsen no wight” [will not betray any person] (V, 1845). Choosing to avert one’s eyes from those things encouraged by “blynde lust” and instead casting one’s physical and internal eyes upon God is the only way to gain *suffisaunce* and salvation.

### *Conclusion*

C. David Benson writes that “the tragic vision of *Troilus and Criseyde* demonstrates the limitations of human effort and reason” (137). This is certainly the case if we take into consideration the understanding of *The Consolation of Philosophy* that Chaucer gained from translating *Boece*. According to Lady Philosophy in *Boece*, people who dwell on images—either physical or imagined—of earthly pleasures are no better than animals and may be punished. Therefore, humans have a responsibility to discipline their physical senses and their

reasoning powers to consider things eternal, which will strengthen their relationship with God. In this way, humans distinguish themselves from animals and fully realize the divine nature of their souls.

This is what happens in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer's use of the familiar medieval eye-beam allows his audience not only to see what Troilus and Criseyde look at, but also to alert readers to the beginning of the characters' cognitive process. Unfortunately for the title characters, the objects on which they cast their looking most often—one another—are not synonymous with the Boethian True Good. In the faulty reasoning processes that follow, their misdirected physical gaze leads them to label each other their *suffisaunce*, and they set in motion the machinery leading to their respective tragedies.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Invisible Aventure in Malory’s “Balyn le Sauvage”<sup>1</sup>

In his recent book *Invisible: The Dangerous Allure of the Unseen*, Philip Ball writes that “magical invisibility in fiction should never function simply as a convenient power that advances the narrative” (6). He writes that invisibility contains too much symbolic and allegorical potential to serve only as a means to propel characters from one scene to the next, and he argues that invisibility must reveal to readers something important about the narrative’s characters or themes. Yet in one of the earliest sections of *Le Morte Darthur*, Sir Thomas Malory provides readers with a brief series of episodes featuring an invisible knight who seems to function only as Ball’s “convenient power.”

In two separate attacks, this invisible knight—later identified as Garlon—kills two men whom the knight Balin has sworn to protect.<sup>2</sup> Balin eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have yet to reach a consensus on the spelling of both Balin’s name and the term *aventure*. For the name of the protagonist, criticism is evenly split between the modernized *Balin* and Malory’s frequent spelling of *Balyn*. The same divide exists for the modernized *adventure* and the more archaic, more French *aventure*. For the sake of consistency and reading ease, I have elected to use the modernized *Balin*, but I retain the more archaic *aventure* to remind the reader that Malory’s use of the word requires a more complex meaning than simply an exciting experience. When the words appear in direct quotations from either the *Morte Darthur* or secondary scholarship, I retain the source’s original spelling.

<sup>2</sup> Garlon’s name, like *Balin* and *adventure*, appears with varied spellings both in the *Morte Darthur* and in scholarship. I will use *Garlon*, unless it appears differently in a direct quotation

tracks Garlon to the castle of King Pellam, where Malory reveals that Garlon has a “blacke face” when visible and that he has a reputation as one who “destroyeth many good knyghtes, for he goth invisible” (66.33-35).<sup>3</sup> Balin rashly attacks and kills Garlon, only to be attacked in turn by Garlon’s brother, King Pellam. The episode ends with Balin fatally striking Pellam with the legendary spear of the Roman centurion Longinus, who used the spear to pierce Christ’s body on the cross. Balin’s so-called Dolorous Stroke represents an emotional high point in the narrative, as the castle collapses, nearly all its inhabitants die, and three surrounding kingdoms are laid waste.

In contrast to this battle with King Pellam and the later battle with his brother Balan, Balin’s interactions with Garlon are straightforward events, given little narrative space or explanation; on the surface it appears that the frequently invisible Garlon is simply a “convenient power” that drives Balin’s story from exposition to climax. However, as I have shown in the previous chapters, sight and its proper management was a topic of great concern in medieval literature, both pastoral and secular. For authors and readers who were regularly reminded

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(e.g. *Garlone*, *Garlond*, *Garlonde*).

<sup>3</sup> References to the *Morte Darthur* come from P. J. C. Field’s edition (D.S. Brewer, 2013) and include page and line numbers.

to beware the dangers of sight, an invisible antagonist must have presented a particularly frightening encounter, and Garlon's role merits closer inspection.

Perhaps because Garlon's appearances (or non-appearances) take up so little space in the overall narrative, there is very little scholarship dedicated solely to his role in the *Morte Darthur*. There is also very little scholarship that specifically examines the greater significance of invisibility as it appears in medieval English romances. When scholars do comment on invisibility—often as continental authors employ it in German or French romances—they typically comment only in passing or simply dismiss it as a power used by villains or tricksters. As Michael Haldane succinctly observes, it is a “short road from invisibility to crime... [as it] facilitates and encourages criminal actions” (272). Surely Garlon's actions mark him as a criminal and villain, but for a society concerned with the sense of sight, Garlon's invisibility must suggest something else about his character.

Scholars of medieval romance more broadly warn readers that magic—including invisibility—in such texts is rarely a simple escape from the everyday. For example, Michelle Sweeney argues that magic is one of the “authorial tools” that medieval writers of romance use in order to construct “morally ambiguous situations which encouraged analysis by the audience” (13). In a similar argument, Corinne Saunders writes that magic in medieval romance “revels in

imagined possibilities, but reflects broader cultural ideas and attitudes, often of very material kinds" (3). She adds that in the *Morte Darthur*, readers can see such "ambivalent and enduring cultural attitudes to magic as well as romance conventions of the supernatural" (235). In other words, Garlon's role, though brief, should not be dismissed as simply a plot device or convention of romance. If magic gives authors and audiences an opportunity to investigate human morals and motivations, magical invisibility and other characters' reactions to it deserve our attention.

Thus, in this chapter, I will examine the use of sight in "The Tale of Balyn le Sauvage," especially as it applies to Balin's interactions with the invisible Garlon. While *Troilus and Criseyde* is characterized by misguided looking and flawed reasoning, as I showed in the previous chapter, this early section of the *Morte Darthur* is characterized by an inability to see, both literally and metaphorically. In his interactions with Garlon, Balin suffers a distinct disadvantage in not being able to see his adversary; however, this inability to see is emblematic of Balin's greater, self-imposed blindness: Balin seemingly rejects reason outright, preferring to leave events to chance, fortune, fate, hap, destiny, or "aventure" as he says multiple times. Balin's resignation to chance and destiny signals his refusal to see and reason, which leads to tragedy, just as incorrect viewing and reasoning leads Troilus and Criseyde to such miserable ends. I

begin this chapter by showing how Balin's commitment to aventure also implies a rejection of sight and reason. Then I examine how Malory adapts his source material to make the invisible Garlon both embody and defy the very concept of aventure. I follow this section by showing how Balin's commitment to aventure and simultaneous refusal to see and reason leads him to commit increasingly rash and violent acts with increasingly destructive consequences, culminating in the accidental mutual fratricide of Balin and Balan. Ultimately, I argue two points: 1) that in this early section of the *Morte Darthur*, Malory suggests that aventure is a flawed system for gauging moral character as well as God's plan, and 2) that an individual's refusal to see and reason inevitably leads to tragedy.

#### *Aventure and the Rejection of Vision and Reason*

The words *aventure*, *adventure*, or *peraventure* occur twenty times in the short space of the tale of "Balyn le Sauvage," a concentration that marks it as an important theme for the self-contained narrative.<sup>4</sup> The frequency of *aventure* in the tale is perhaps unsurprising, since Balin leads what modern readers would call an "adventurous" life. Very little of his narrative takes place in the relatively sedentary setting of Arthur's court, and he spends most of his time attempting to capture rebel kings, tracking an invisible knight, causing chaos at other kings'

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<sup>4</sup> "Balyn le Sauvage," as Field calls it, occupies only twelve folios in the Winchester MS: 22r—34r.

castles, or otherwise seeking opportunities to gain worship. However, readers should bear in mind that the word *aventure* and its variants in Malory's late Middle English signifies more than simply a series of exciting occurrences. The *Middle English Dictionary (MED)* provides several definitions ranging from "Fate, fortune, chance" to "Danger, jeopardy, risk" to "a marvelous thing" ("Aventure"). In each of these definitions, *aventure* suggests a type of event with an often unknown cause and an unpredictable result.

Because *aventure* encompasses essentially any chance event, it is a good way for Malory's knights to express boldness and valor as they voluntarily put themselves in potentially dangerous situations and exercise their martial or mental abilities. We see an example of this early in the *Morte Darthur* when the recently crowned Arthur returns to Carlion having procured Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake and having fought (and nearly dying in) two battles with King Pelinor. The encounters with the Lady of the Lake and King Pelinor are typical of Malory's concept of *aventure* since their causes and outcomes are uncertain, and Arthur proves his kingly courage by facing both *aventures* without flinching. On Arthur's return, he recounts his *aventures*, and his men approve his actions:

"And whan they herde of hys adventures, they mervayled that he wolde joupardé his person so alone; but all men of worship seyde hit was myrry to be under such a chyfftayne that wolde putte hys person in adventure as other poure

knyghtis ded" (45.9-12). Arthur's men equate aventure and chance when they connect "adventures" and "joupardé." By participating in these chance events, Arthur "hazards" his body in both senses of the word: he puts himself in danger, and he gambles on an unpredictable outcome. Moreover, Arthur's men approve of Arthur's eager engagement with aventure; as non-royal knights, they often face hazardous situations, and they appreciate a leader who will do the same.

In an influential 1982 essay ("Knightly Combat"), Jill Mann observes Malory's frequent references to aventure and argues that repeated terms like this one should not be dismissed as a result of a simplistic style:

"The (deliberate, as I believe) narrowness and simplicity of [Malory's] vocabulary directs our attention, by insistent repetition, to the key words and concepts of his narrative. ... These words are not, for Malory, a decorative clothing for his subject; rather, they form the skeletal structure of his work." (334)

Mann lists aventure as one of the concepts that Malory explores most often, and she argues that the main function of aventure in the *Morte* is "the discovery of self" (334). In Mann's reading, knights engage in combat or in the "multifarious tests and ordeals" of the narrative to prove their inner worth: by putting their bodies in aventure, they reveal qualities hidden within themselves, and as a result they can discern what they are made of, both physically and morally (339). In Mann's reading of aventure, vision is an essential component; the ordeals in which knights engage make invisible traits like strength or mercy outwardly

visible in the knights' actions. We might even express Mann's idea as a mathematical equation:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{a knight's body} \\ + \text{an unpredictable event (e.g. a joust or other marvel)} \\ \hline \text{a visible outcome that reveals invisible qualities} \end{array}$$

Many scholars have responded to Mann's call for this new thematic keywords style of reading and interpreting the *Morte Darthur*, and several have also commented on the ubiquity of aventure, especially in "Balyn le Sauvage." For example, Elizabeth Sklar further points out that most successful chance events "enhance the personal worth of an individual" (38). Not only does aventure prove what a knight is worth to himself; it also proves his worth to those around him. Here, too, vision plays a role: the visible outcome of a chance event illuminates qualities that spectators can see and appreciate. While Mann and Sklar both argue that Malory uses aventure to prove his knights' prowess or worthiness, Beverly Kennedy argues that how characters interact with aventure indicates how much control the character believes they have to determine their own fates. In her study, Kennedy points out different meanings of the word *aventure* and interprets instances of the word in the first two sections of the *Morte Darthur*:

In the story of how Arthur became king, all the uses of *aventure* have meanings... [such as] "danger," "risk," "enterprise," and "exploit"—thus focusing the reader's attention on human agency,

human power and daring. In the story of Balin, by contrast, almost all the uses of adventure [*sic*] have meanings... [such as] "marvel," "chance," "fate," and "destiny"—thus focusing the reader's attention on supernatural or divine agency and, as a result, on human powerlessness. (46)

In this second option without human agency, an individual's optical and rational efforts in a chance event lose much of their meaning. If an event cannot be managed through human means, it is less important to gather sensory data and to act appropriately before and during the event. Further, the visual evidence produced by the adventure signifies little since it cannot be controlled or used in future chance events.

As Kennedy observes, Balin often expresses his belief that he could not have changed the outcome of a chance event. He stubbornly acts as though his decisions and actions have no bearing on his destiny, and it is this feeling of powerlessness and concomitant refusal to make rational decisions that leads Balin into a kind of figurative blindness. Naomi Schor notes that the metaphorical link between an inability to see and an inability to reason has existed for a long time. She quotes Pierre Fontanier's *Les Figures de Discours* concerning the potent metaphor:

Blindness must have at first referred only to the deprivation of the sense of sight; but he who does not clearly distinguish ideas and their relationships; he whose reason is disturbed, obscured, does he not slightly resemble the blind man who does not perceive physical

objects? The word blindness came naturally to hand to also express this deprivation of moral sight. (qtd. in Schor 77)

While Schor's study considers eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, Edward Wheatley finds that similar language concerning the "impairment" of one's sight and the "impairment" of one's reason was common in the Middle Ages: "In medieval Europe, blindness was both fact and figurative language" (64). As both Schor and Wheatley imply, the "blindness" associated with the neglect or willing rejection of reason rarely works in one's favor. The inability to see and reason indicates a defect or an incompleteness that always hinders the physically or metaphorically blind. And indeed, Malory demonstrates through Balin and Garlon that the blindness resulting from a total commitment to aventure can lead just as easily to destruction as glory.

"Balyn le Sauvage" opens with an aventure typical for Balin, who believes in a divinely ordained destiny. In this first aventure, a mysterious damsels arrives at Arthur's court encumbered by a sword that can only be drawn by a knight who is "a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson" (48.2-3). Already, vision is essential to this chance event. When a knight succeeds in this aventure, the visual outcome of removing the sword will prove the knight's good character. At the beginning of the story, Balin desperately needs this visual proof, as he has only recently

been released from prison for supposedly killing Arthur's cousin. Balin proves his innocence—or at least his lack of “velony other trechory”—to Arthur and the court by being able to draw the sword. Arthur admits that he may have been “mysseinfourmed ayenste” him, and he apparently pardons Balin on the basis of the visual proof offered by the aventure (50.18-19).

In the exchange following this aventure, Balin makes his first declaration concerning aventure and disregards vital sensory information that may prevent future tragedy. The damsel requests that Balin return the sword, for it portends great personal harm if Balin keeps it:

‘[Y]e ar not wyse to kepe the swerd fro me, for ye shall sle with that swerd the beste frende that ye have and the man that ye moste love in the worlde, and that swerde shall be youre destruccion...for an ye woll nat leve that swerde hit shall be youre destruccion and that ys grete pité.’ (50.1-4)

Despite the repetition of these very clear consequences (“youre destruccion”), Balin responds, “I shall take the aventure...that God woll ordayne for me” (50.5-6). In his first decision since escaping Arthur’s dungeon, Balin privileges divine ordination over human causation. He also announces his resignation to God’s fore-ordinating: he will “take” the aventure, not resist it by attempting to do otherwise. In saying so, Balin denies—at a very early stage in his narrative—that his actions have consequences. All will go as God commands; Balin is simply along for the ride. As a result, he need not use his senses (in this case his hearing

for the damsel's aural warning) to gather information or use his reason to make informed decisions.

Balin's belief in and resignation to God's plan nearly gains the status of family motto shortly after this first adventure. On leaving Arthur's castle with the sword damsel's sword and his own, Balin is pursued by the Irish knight Launceor, who wishes to revenge the Lady of the Lake's death. In the joust that follows, Balin kills Launceor, and Launceor's lady takes her fallen lover's sword and proclaims, "A, Balyne! too bodyes thou haste slayne in one herte, and too hertes in one body, and too soules thou hast lost" (54.26-28). Balin weakly attempts to take the sword from her, but she quickly sets the pommel to the ground, and "rove hirself thorowoute the body" (54.35). As Balin prepares to leave, his brother Balan arrives, and while they both grieve the lovers' deaths, the two brothers also accept the lovers' deaths as inevitable turns of fate, directed by God. Balan comforts his brother with the same words Balin had so boldly proclaimed in Arthur's court, saying, "[Y]e must take the adventure that God woll ordayne you" (55.22-23). As Kennedy observes about these words of consolation, "[Balan] does not suggest that Balin might have behaved differently in any respect; on the contrary, he assumes that everything that has happened is God's will and thus there is nothing Balin could have done to prevent it, even if he had wanted to" (45). Balin, apparently accepting Balan's observation on

aventure as truth, does not respond. Instead, he changes the subject and outlines his plan to regain Arthur's favor by attacking and capturing the rebel King Royns.

In these two episodes—the freeing of the sword damsel and the heart-rending deaths of Launceor and Columbe—Balin and his brother rely on aventure to reveal God's plan, a plan they feel they cannot influence. As Mann and Sklar imply, aventure is not evil or wrong in itself, as aventures often prove the physical or moral prowess of a knight; however, as other critics observe, a complete reliance on aventure—such as the reliance shown by Balin and Balan—becomes problematic. One of the greatest difficulties with using aventure to discover one's self or God's plan is the potential for misinterpreting the visual evidence resulting from the chance event. Janet Jesmok points out that the meaning of aventures is particularly difficult to find in "Balyn le Sauvage" given the story's "unclear mores and morals" ("Alas!" 25). Jesmok chooses for her example the sword damsel. As we have already seen, the aventure of the sword damsel supposedly provides visual evidence for Balin's character as a "passyng  
good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory  
and withoute treson." However, as Jesmok rightly observes, Arthur's trusted magical advisers both denounce the sword damsel as false, possibly negating the results of the aventure and casting doubt on Balin's character ("Alas!" 26). The

reader, too, has come to trust Merlin especially, since each of his predictions in the first section of the *Morte Darthur* have come true and his counsel seems to promote stability and goodwill in Arthur's new kingdom. In spite of Merlin and the Lady of the Lake's scorn for the sword damsel, though, the narrative proves her warning true: keeping the sword will indeed lead Balin and his brother to their demise. In this one brief episode, Malory leads the reader through a series of conflicting interpretations of the aventure of the sword. While all characters and the reader work with the same visual information (Balin's ability to draw the sword) each individual may read the event differently. The reader is left wondering which interpreter—Merlin, the Lady of the Lake, the sword damsel, or the narrator—to trust and perhaps questioning whether God's plan is knowable at all.

Just as non-combat aventures like that of the sword damsel yield problematic interpretations of God's plan, aventures which do include trials of arms may also provide dubious results. Several times in the *Morte*, characters like Meliagaunce declare that "God woll have a stroke in every batayle," and it would seem that the inhabitants of Malory's Logres believe combat to be a dependable test of innocence, guilt, and prowess (854.16-17).<sup>5</sup> However, the

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<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, in the episode concerning the judicial combat between Meliagaunce and Lancelot, it is difficult to determine who the "right" party is. Meliagaunce accuses Guinevere of sleeping with one of the knights who were sleeping outside her chamber, and Launcelot (who

knight in the right does not always win. One example of this occurs in the “Book of Sir Tristram” when Sir Amaunt accuses King Mark of treason. In their battle before Arthur and his court, Malory tells readers that “by mysadventure Kynge Mark smote Sir Amaunt thorow the body; and yet was Sir Amaunte in the ryghtuous quarell” (468.9-11). Malory’s use of “mysadventure” suggests that, sometimes, aventures do not unfold as even God had planned: human treachery can somehow deflect at least a small portion of one’s destiny. Arthur’s court is troubled by this “mysadventure,” with Arthur and the other knights “wrothe oute of mesure,” and the ladies crying aloud “A, swete Jesu that knowyste all hydde thynges! Why sufferyst Thou so false a traytoure to venqueyshe and sle a trewe knight that faught in a ryghteous quarell?” (468.28-30). The maidens are never answered, although trial by combat continues to be used several more times throughout the *Morte*, rarely to good effect. In fact, Jacqueline Stuhmiller points out that trial by combat in the *Morte Darthur* provides an accurate, just verdict in less than half of all such trials (434). If trial by combat cannot be trusted to determine one’s innocence or guilt, perhaps aventures that include individual battles should not be trusted to provide an accurate evaluation of a knight’s physical or moral prowess either.

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actually slept with her) claims she is innocent of this charge. Technically speaking, Meliagaunce is incorrect, although his accusation is much nearer the truth than Launcelot’s guilty defense.

These few episodes show that aventure is not a reliable way to discern characters' inner worth or God's plan in the *Morte Darthur*, whether those adventures are violent or non-violent encounters. Laura Bedwell remarks that an underlying reason for the slipperiness of aventure is that "[s]uch a trial involves no investigation of facts; it is strictly based on the belief that might makes right" (13). In many cases, an "investigation of facts" could mean simply using one's senses in intentional ways—in other words, using one's eyes or ears to gather sensory data that might influence one's actions. This is certainly true of Balin's early exploits. For instance, after Balin has killed Launceor and failed to prevent Columbe's suicide, Merlin tells Balin, "Thou haste done thyself grete hurte bycause that thou saved nat thys lady that slew herself, for thou myghtyst have saved hir and thou haddist wolde" (57.14-16). In contrast to Balan's comforting explanation of Columbe's death as an aventure ordained by God, Merlin tells Balin that he did in fact have the power to save Columbe and that her death is indeed his responsibility. Whereas Balan pardons Balin for not making a better decision and excuses him from future decision-making altogether, Merlin condemns him for reading the situation incorrectly and taking no action. If Balin had investigated the facts, he might have made a more informed decision. Even a cursory examination with his own eyes would have shown him that Columbe was in distress and armed, and therefore likely to do harm to herself or others. A

further examination would have provided the information that his armor would protect him from the sword if she decided to strike him. A moment's reasoning would have allowed him to organize this data and realize his religious or moral responsibility to prevent a suicide. Instead, Balin believes that he has no power to sway God's plan, and his fatalism results in Columbe's unnecessary death.

In these introductory episodes—and in those yet to occur in the tale of "Balyn"—Balin functions in a kind of self-imposed blindness. As we have seen, he refuses to use his own senses and his own reasoning powers to prevent destruction, even when given clear auditory warnings (in the case of the sword damsel) or when visual evidence would afford him the opportunity to make an informed decision (as in the case of Columbe's suicide). Already Balin's rash, uninformed actions have resulted in destruction, and his continued neglect of sensory data and reason will cause continued and amplified devastation for the rest of his narrative. Following this section of self-imposed, metaphorical blindness, Balin succeeds in capturing King Roynes, but then dives once again into blindness, this time a kind of literal, physical blindness since the adversary he confronts is the frequently invisible Garlon.

*Invisibility as the Embodiment and Defiance of Aventure*

In his translation and adaptation of his French source, *La Suite du Merlin*, Malory maintains only the barest structural components of Garlon. He redacts or transforms many—if not most—of the character details provided by the *Suite*, including the mechanics of Garlon’s invisibility, the colors associated with Garlon, and Garlon’s role in King Pellam’s household. As I will show, Malory’s adaptation of his source material transforms Garlon from a nuanced, nearly supernatural opponent into a simple, human villain who embodies Malory’s idea of aventure with his mysterious appearances and disappearances, inexplicable motives, and cryptic significance. But if Garlon embodies Malory’s idea of aventure, he also defies the entire concept. As we have seen, visual evidence is an essential component for revealing individuals’ inner qualities or God’s plan, and when there is no visual evidence (e.g. when a participant in a chance event is invisible), characters and readers gain no knowledge of these things.

Furthermore, even in this section, when Balin experiences the highest concentration of unpredictable events (after all, an invisible knight represents the most random opponent a knight can face), Malory suggests that his characters maintain most of their agency. Balin may feel that God’s plan is unknowable and unavoidable. However, the narrative shows that while aventure may appear chaotic or random, and the visual evidence of chance events may require

assistance from a more experienced guide in order to interpret correctly, it is not controlled solely by the divine or by the supernatural. Instead, aventure is an earthly phenomenon that earthly knights need to engage actively, both physically and cognitively.

The first time we hear of Malory's Garlon is about two-thirds of the way through "Balyn Le Sauvage." A weeping Sir Meliot refuses to tell his story to King Arthur, and Arthur orders Balin to retrieve Meliot for further questioning. Balin catches up to Meliot, who reluctantly agrees to return on the condition that Balin protect him. Balin, whose prowess has been proven to the reader in several battles and the capture of King Roynes, swears "by the faith of my body" that Meliot will be safe (64.1). However, even the best of knights cannot prepare for an attack from an invisible assailant: "And as they were evyn before Arthurs pavilion, there com one invisible and smote the knyght that went with Balyn thorowoute the body with a spere" (64.4-6). In Meliot's dying breath, he provides Balin with some helpful information: "'Alas!' seyde the knyght, 'I am slayne undir youre conduyte with a knyght called Garlon'" (64.7-8). He instructs Balin to take his horse and assume responsibility for his quest, avenging his death if Balin has the chance. A second surprise attack occurs later that day when an unnamed "knyght that had bene an-hontynge" joins Balin, only to be slain by "thys traytoure knyght that rydith invisible" (64.21, 34-35).

In these two attacks, Malory alters only one detail from the source material regarding Balin's first encounter with Garlon, which is to clarify that Garlon is, in fact, an invisible knight. In contrast, Malory's French source shrouds the attacks in mystery, leading both characters and readers to suspect supernatural intervention. In the *Suite*'s first attack on Sir Meliot, Arthur witnesses the ambush and is troubled: "[je] ne vi onques si grant merveille comme ceste est, car je le vi ferir et si ne vi mie chelui qui le feri" ["I never saw anything so strange as this is. For I saw him stricken and didn't see the one who struck him"] (Roussineau 132, translation Asher 204).<sup>6</sup> The mystery assailant strikes again as Balin and the hunting knight ride through a cemetery, and Balin again cannot locate the murderer:

Il regarde tout entour lui et ne voit reins de mere nee qui li peust avoir douné cel cop. Et quant il vit bien que il ne savra mie ore qui a che fait, il en est trop dolans. [He looked all around and saw no one born of woman who could have given him this blow. When he saw that he would not then know who had done this, he was sorrowful.] (Roussineau 142, translation Asher 206)

The heightened sense of mystery surrounding these random attacks by an invisible assailant leads Balin so suspect some kind of supernatural, perhaps demonic, activity. He tells a hermit:

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<sup>6</sup> French quotations are taken from *La Suite du Merlin* edited by Gilles Roussineau (Librairie Droz, 1996). Unless otherwise marked, modern English translations are taken from Martha Asher's translation found in *The Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Garland, 1995).

“[M]e fust grans assouagemens se je peusse chelui veoir qui si soudainnement les occhist, mais che ne puet estre, che me samble, car il est aussi comme *fantosme*. Et che est la chose dont j’ai gringnour duel.” “[I]t would be a great comfort to me if I could see the one who killed them suddenly, but that cannot be, it seems to me, for he is like a *phantom*. This is the thing for which I feel the greatest sorrow.”] (Roussineau 142-43, translation Asher 207, emphasis mine)

In contrast to this confused and sorrowful Balin in the French source, Malory’s Balin and Malory’s readers know immediately—thanks to Meliot—that an invisible but earthly knight kills Balin’s companions, not a supernatural phantom. Malory’s text prefers to focus readers’ attention on the relative normalcy of Garlon: he is a human knight with a human body that just happens to be invisible. While Malory’s changes remove the supernatural horror from Garlon, he maintains a good portion of his earthly terror. Garlon’s attacks are frightening in their suddenness and unsettling from a neurological standpoint. As Hildegard Elisabeth Keller remarks about literary knights who engage in battle against invisible enemies, “whoever fights physically against an opponent depends in general on sensory perception and, more specifically, on the coherence of different modes of perception” (219). She describes moments of conflicting sensory information as “aporia of perception” and speculates that moments like this are potentially some of the most frightening for knights who

depend on sensory information in battle (253).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps for Malory, a soldier and fighter himself, the sensory disconnect between seeing the effects of the attacks but no cause for these effects inspires enough fear on its own. The result of Malory's earliest modification to Garlon is to solidify him as an earthly opponent. He is still frightening, but ultimately an adversary with a human body, one that a likewise earthly knight, like Balin, can hope to subdue.

Malory's next major change concerning Garlon involves the practical mechanics of Garlon's invisibility; this change affirms that while Garlon is earthly, he continues to be a daunting antagonist. In the French *Suite*, Balin receives an explanation of how Garlon becomes invisible when a knight in King Pellam's crowded hall points out Garlon:

“Veés le la, ... le plus mervilleus chevalier dou siecle. ... Qu'il est armés, nus ne le puet veoir tant come il se veult celer” [See him there,...the most marvelous knight of the century... When he is armed, no one can see him save those he wants to see him]  
(Roussineau 157, translation mine).<sup>8</sup>

According to this knight, it is Garlon's armor—“when he is armed”—that provides him with invisibility. Similar to Harry Potter's invisibility cloak,

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<sup>7</sup> Keller's work specifically examines the French romance *Yvain* in which the hero Yvain uses invisibility to escape and defeat several enemy knights. She concentrates on these enemy knights who remain visible through the encounter, and their reactions to the invisible Yvain, which parallel Balin's experiences with Garlon.

<sup>8</sup> At this point of the narrative, Asher's translation deviates slightly from the Old French presented in Roussineau's edition. I am grateful to my colleague Laura Clark for her translation assistance. Any translation errors remain my own.

Garlon's armor functions as a wearable talisman that confers a special ability, in this case invisibility. On the other hand, Malory's translation omits all details about Garlon's means of acquiring invisibility. Malory's informant knight tells Balin: "[Y]ondir he goth...he ys the mervailyste knight that ys now lyvynge. And he destroyeth many good knyghtes, for he goth invisible" (66.33-35). True to his source, Malory includes the knight's judgement of Garlon as "marvelous," but in his description of Garlon's invisibility, readers learn nothing about the operation of Garlon's powers. Instead of owning a magical talisman, Garlon simply *goes* invisible.

Certainly this is a simpler option for Malory as a translator: he need not spend extra time describing the means of Garlon's invisibility since the important part is that he *can be* invisible. However, in addition to simplicity of narrative, Malory's Garlon also regains a portion of the mystery that Malory removed from him earlier and he becomes more difficult to capture. The *Suite*'s Garlon depends upon his armor for invisibility, which means that if a knight like Balin can catch him without his armor, the armor could be destroyed and Garlon would no longer be invisible. It may also mean that if an avenging knight can predict when Garlon will remove his armor, he should be able to predict when Garlon will be vulnerable. Malory's version of Garlon resists these kinds of schemes. With no knowledge of how the invisibility works, Malory's Balin must simply hope to be

in the right place at the right time to catch Garlon when he is visible. While Balin and readers know that Garlon is not a supernatural phantom, his visibility or invisibility remains unpredictable. Thus, while Garlon is a human opponent who can be subdued, chance governs whether a knight tracking him will even be able to locate him.

Just as Malory changes his source material for Garlon's powers of invisibility, he also changes the description for Garlon's color from red to black, which aligns him with other examples of aventure in the *Morte Darthur* which require the interpretation of colors. The *Suite du Merlin* reads: "Veés le la, cel grant, cel rous chevalier a cele sore chavелеure" ["You see him there, that big one, that red knight with such auburn hair"] (Roussineau 157, translation mine). In this description, Garlon is a large, strong knight who can be identified by his red complexion or red apparel and his auburn hair. Malory could have easily chosen the Middle English *red* for the Old French *rous*; however, he rejects the color entirely, and provides his readers with something else: "yondir he goth, the knyght with the blacke face" (66.33).<sup>9</sup> In this description, Garlon loses his

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<sup>9</sup> Momentarily, I will examine a few parallels between Malory's Garlon and another famous invisible figure in British literature: the Invisible Man from H.G. Wells' *Invisible Man*. Here I wish only to note the interesting coincidence that both characters are described with the color black. Malory provides this "blacke face" for Garlon, and in one of the earliest descriptions of the Invisible Man, Wells describes him as "staring more blackly and more blankly than ever with those unreasonable large glass blue eyes of his" (33).

distinctive size and acquires a new color as Malory changes the invisible knight's hue from red to black.

Despite the seemingly arbitrary nature of this color change, Malory has actually made a fairly artistic alteration. The *MED* provides an array of definitions and connotations for the colors red and black, but they are quite distinct. Furthermore, the color black provides more numerous and potentially symbolic meanings. *Red* as it applies to humans usually signifies a state of health—a rosy complexion (1c[a])—or an emotional disturbance such as embarrassment or anger (5a). Thus, when an English reader like Malory reads the French source calling Garlon “rous,” Garlon is either dressed in red clothing, or his face indicates that he is healthy or angry. In any of these cases, Garlon portrays typical actions of typical knights, like the Red Knight of the Persaunt bretheren or the Red Knight of the Red Lands in the “Tale of Sir Gareth.”

However, when Malory chooses “blacke,” he evokes a completely different set of meanings. Among the different definitions that the *MED* provides for *black*, the most obvious is “Of a black color” (1a).<sup>10</sup> If Malory literally means

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<sup>10</sup> For the vast majority of instances of “black” in the *Morte Darthur*, the color is simply meant as an indication of physical color; however, the *MED* entry for “black” does offer “fierce, terrible, wicked” as it might apply to a human (3b). There is only one irrefutable use of this definition of the word in the *Morte Darthur*: Percival’s demon horse in the Grail Quest that is “inly black” [black within, i.e. a tainted soul] (705.12). For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in the implications of Garlon potentially having a dark complexion, and I follow Molly Martin’s assumption that Garlon is dark skinned, which she calls a “vexing racialization of this already troubling figure” (51). However, “fierce, terrible, wicked” is also an apt description for

that Garlon's face is of a black color, Garlon is the only person with black skin in the entire *Morte*.<sup>11</sup> Several times Malory describes black horses, armor, or shields, but the word is rarely applied to a human, and then never to that person's skin. Sometimes the color is an important distinguishing feature, as in the "Tale of Sir Gareth," in which readers distinguish the Persaunt brethren by their different colored accoutrements. For instance, the "Black Knight" owns a black banner, black spear, black shield and black horse as opposed to his brothers who own green, red, or indigo versions of the same items. Despite these black trappings, though, the black knight is not described as having black skin.

Occasionally, the physical color of people or objects in the *Morte Darthur* suggests something about their inner state, much as aventure allows for visual representations of inner qualities. Readers find this phenomenon most frequently in the "Quest of the Sankgrael" when colors—especially white and black—are used to denote spiritual achievements or failings in certain knights, and each

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the man who seems to hold a grudge against humanity in general. Garlon does not seem to have a system or motives for his attacks on Meliot or the hunting knight, and his behavior in King Pellam's hall further demonstrates his angry and violent disposition.

<sup>11</sup> Palomydes the Saracen knight perhaps represents another character with a skin tone other than white; however, while Malory makes him exotic with occasional strange signes and tokenings, he never describes Palomydes' physical features. Palomydes' complexion does not merit remark, so it may very well be white. Malory), he is clearly not inscribed with any visible, physical difference. As Donald L. Hoffman writes of Palomydes, "Skin color is never mentioned, nor is any other feature that to a medieval or modern audience would mark him as Middle Eastern or North African or anything else different from the English and Cornish knights in whose midst he operates" (49).

time Malory employs black, it signifies sin, evil, or corruption. For example, while Lancelot quests for the Grail, he encounters a tournament in which five hundred knights fight in a melee. Half of these knights ride “black horsys [with] trappoures black,” and the other half have “whyght horsis and trappers” (719.28-30). Lancelot waits to see which side will most need his help so that he may gain the most worship, and he soon joins the knights with black horses and trappings. Despite having recruited Lancelot, the black team loses, and Lancelot bemoans his loss: “And now I am shamed, and am sure that I am more synfuller than ever I was” (720.28-29). He gains a fuller understanding of the event from a holy recluse who tells him that the dark trappings of the black team represent “synnes whereof they be nat confessed,” and that Lancelot joined this side “for bobbaunce and pryde of the world” (721.20-25). This pride and his unconfessed sin of loving Guinevere prevents Lancelot from fully achieving the Grail Quest, and the sign of these sins is the color black.

Another example of a physically black exterior indicating a metaphorically black interior occurs when Gawayne has a vision of one hundred and fifty bulls, all of which are black, save three. Nacien the hermit interprets this vision: “And by the bullys ys to undirstonde the felyshyp of the Rounde Table, whych for theire synne and theire wyckednesse bene blacke; blackenes ys as much to sey withoute good vertues or workes” (727.34-728.1). Here, black

indicates that the majority of the Round Table knights are internally flawed, and the color helps Gawayne to visualize the sin of his fellow knights.

If Garlon's complexion is literally, physically black, it is tempting to argue that his "blacke face" signifies an evil nature, especially when his other actions in the *Morte* involve random murders of seemingly innocent knights.<sup>12</sup> His features and behaviors might even seem to indicate that he is a kind of fairytale villain whose motives the audience need not know; he is simply the "bad guy" of the story.<sup>13</sup> Indeed Janet Jesmok comments that the brothers King Pellam and Garlon occupy opposite ends of the good-and-evil spectrum: "Interestingly, [Garlon] is bad brother to good brother King Pellam, the Grail king...an unexpected pairing of evil with the holy king inextricably tied to the most sacred Christian artifacts. ... The good and the bad, the light and the dark, reside together" (Jesmok, "The Double Life" 88). A red knight is simply a red knight, but a knight with a "blacke face" may indicate an equally black soul.

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that the idea of physical blackness to indicate inner evil was a commonplace in medieval British visual arts. Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk traces this tradition back to early Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in which "evil" characters in illuminations are colored black to signify the state of their damned souls. She points out that the association of blackness and sinfulness is a common theme for both the bible and early theologians, citing Origen, Manilius, and Gregory the Great as church fathers who perpetuate the connection (66-67).

<sup>13</sup> For more on the fairytale nature of "The Tale of Sir Gareth" and the rest of the *Morte Darthur*, see D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., "The Rhetoric of the Folk Fairy Tale in *The Tale of Sir Gareth*."

However, while Garlon and his brother certainly serve as foils for each other, elsewhere in the *Morte*, the color black does not necessarily entail evil. For example, the Black Knight in the “Tale of Sir Gareth” is not evil (although unlucky for his accidental drowning). His brothers—who willingly join Arthur’s Round Table and prove to be good knights—mourn his death, and there is no indication that Gareth has overcome an evil opponent in defeating him.

Likewise, in the vision of the hundred and fifty bulls cited above, the three white bulls symbolize the three pure knights who will eventually achieve the Grail. However, the remaining hundred and forty-seven black bulls are not necessarily actively evil. As we have seen, Nacien tells Gawayne that “blackenes ys as much to sey withoute good vertues or works.” For Nacien, blackness indicates an absence of good rather than a presence of evil. The same could easily be said for Garlon with his black face. Certainly his behavior in the *Morte* lacks “good vertues or works” and certainly killing random knights would count as a breach of the fifth commandment.<sup>14</sup> However, readers should be wary of taking Garlon’s coloring at face value. Like the other moments of aventure in the *Morte*, and especially as we have seen in “Balyn le Sauvage,” appearances can be deceiving.

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<sup>14</sup> Gawayne himself falls into the category of the black bulls: among other atrocities, he accidentally beheads a damsel on his first quest at Arthur’s wedding, beds Ettarde even as he claims to be helping Pelleas win her love, and assists in the murder of King Pelinor. Yet his death is treated as a sad occasion, and God allows him to return with a warning for Arthur that he should not fight in the last battle. Black in these instances does not necessarily mean “irredeemable.”

Garlon's face, if it in fact symbolizes anything, perhaps signifies a lack of virtue.

If Garlon's face is indeed literally black in color, he invites interpretation like other color-bearing adventures in the *Morte Darthur*.

Thus far, I have shown that Malory's transformation of Garlon serves to make him an earthly opponent whose potentially dark coloring may indicate that even when he is visible, his appearance requires careful interpretation, much like many of the symbolic adventures of the Grail Quest. A final change that Malory makes to Garlon is to strip him of redeeming human qualities, especially his defense of hospitality, making him more of a chaotic force rather than a nuanced human being. In the French source, as in Malory's adaptation, Garlon is the younger brother of King Pellam—the keeper of the Holy Grail—and Garlon's role in the household is to serve food and drink to Pellam and his guests. However, the French source emphasizes Garlon's role in Pellam's court by actually showing “Gallans le Rous, qui aloit servant par les tables” [Garlon the Red, who went among the tables serving] (Roussineau 158, translation Asher 211). Not only does Garlon serve food, though; he also defends his brother's hospitality by ensuring that guests partake in the feast appropriately. Meanwhile, Balin—who has recently learned the identity of Garlon and has found someone in Pellam's court to point out the frequently invisible knight—has spent the entire evening considering his current dilemma: should he accost

Garlon immediately since he is visible, or would it be shameful to attack Garlon since he is unarmed? Balin's meditation persists through the whole feast and finally draws the attention of Garlon:

Si dura chis pensers tant que tuit li mes furent venu seur la table, si s'en peust bien a celui point lever ensi comme il s'i estoit assis, qu'il n'i avoit ne beut ne mengiet. De ceste chose se fu moult bien gardé Gallans li Rous . . . bien ot veu que chis n'i ot beau ne mengié, si le tient a moult grant vieuauté, car il cuida bien qu chil le laissast par despit.

[And this state lasted until all the courses had come to the table, and at that point he could have got up as he had sat down, without having drunk or eaten. Garlon the Red . . . took good note of this and saw that this man had neither drunk nor eaten, and he thought it very rude of him, for he thought he left his food out of disdain.]  
(Roussineau 158, translation Asher 211)

Siegfried Christoph observes that in Arthurian romance (both English and continental), hospitality is an important expression of a nobleman's wealth and beneficence, which leads them to "jealously guard their roles within this fundamental social institution" (45). It is no wonder, then, that Garlon confronts Balin: Balin's behavior is not only rude, but diminishes Pellam's social standing—and Garlon's by association.

When Balin does not immediately respond, Garlon slaps him, an action that may be typical for Garlon's behavior, and perhaps unnecessarily violent. However, the *Suite* again situates his behavior within the context of violated hospitality. Garlon commands:

“Drechiés vostre teste, sire chevaliers, et mengiés aussi comme li autre, que li seneschaus le vous mande! Et dehait ait qui vous aprist a seoir a table de preudoume quant vous n'i faites que penser!”  
[“Raise your head, sir knight, and eat like the others what the seneschal sends you! Ill health to him who taught you to sit at a nobleman’s table and do nothing but think!”] (Roussineau 158, translation Asher 211)

Garlon’s slap resolves Balin’s dilemma, and it prompts Balin to draw his sword and attack the currently visible Garlon. However, the *Suite* presents Garlon as at least partially justified in his violence toward Balin. The exchange in Pellam’s court is the first time that readers have actually seen Garlon for themselves, and the *Suite* portrays him as a defender of the universally recognized virtue of hospitality. Although the reader knows that Garlon is responsible for the invisible attacks, this is the first time Garlon is actually visible, and in defending his brother’s hospitality, he is an almost honorable figure.

In contrast, Malory nearly eliminates references to Garlon’s defense of hospitality, making Garlon’s motives and behaviors more mysterious and chaotic. In the *Morte Darthur*, Malory condenses the altercation to a few lines: “And therewith thys Garlon aspyed that Balyn vysaged hym, so he com and slapped hym on the face with the backe of hys honde and seyde, ‘Knyght, why beholdist thou me so? For shame, ete thy mete and do that thou com for’” (67.5-8). Malory maintains the barest vestige of the hospitality issue by having Garlon instruct Balin to eat his food, but Balin’s supposed infraction has more to do with

his rude staring—“Balyn avised hym longe”—rather than his neglect of his host’s food. Malory’s framing of the encounter aligns Garlon’s behavior in Pellam’s hall with his previous attacks: with seemingly no motivation, he arrives from nowhere and slaps Balin on the face. Readers do not know what drives Garlon, and Malory makes him more of a force than a human being.

In each of his changes to his French source, Malory systematically constructs Garlon to be more of a chaotic force than anything else. As we have seen, he removes the supernatural elements that lead the *Suite*’s Balin to believe he has encountered some kind of phantom or ghost. However, in his refusal to explain the functioning of Garlon’s invisibility, Malory leaves enough of Garlon’s mysterious elements to maintain his random, chaotic nature. He also removes Garlon’s humanizing elements, like his defense of hospitality, so that Malory’s Garlon is neither fully supernatural nor fully human. Instead, Malory’s Garlon is an earthly embodiment of chance—of aventure. He can arrive from nowhere to strike down a knight, but he is not a phantom or a demon. His actions and motivations are mysterious, and his “blacke face” invites interpretation in much the same manner as other aventures involving the colors black and white. Considering Balin’s commitment to chance and aventure and metaphorical blindness, Garlon the invisible knight is a fitting foe.

While Garlon may be the embodiment or personification of Malory's aventure, he also defies the entire concept, further suggesting that trusting aventure to reveal one's self or God's plan is problematic. According to the definition I have been using, aventure is a chance event with an unforeseeable outcome that allows a knight both a chance to express his courage and an opportunity to gain self-knowledge. This self-knowledge usually results from the visual outcome of the chance event; however, when a component of the aventure obscures itself from view—such as an invisible knight—the opportunity to gain knowledge is thwarted. Tarryn Handcock explores a similar idea expressed in H. G. Wells' late-Victorian novel *The Invisible Man*. Handcock writes that while "the visualized body enabl[es] social connectedness...the unseen body...is a malignant presence that poses critical and moral problems" (40-41). Much like Mann's analysis of knights' bodies in aventure, Handcock argues that bodies, and especially skin, perform essential communicative work: "[they] function as important visual signifiers of age, ancestry, health, mood, cultural identity, experience, and aspirations" (46). When two people meet (whether in fiction or in real life), they can immediately gain this important information about the other person/character, and visible bodies facilitate this communication.

However, when one of the parties is invisible, as with the Invisible Man or with Garlon, their bodies cannot be "read." This leads Handcock to state that

"invisible skin is not neutral, but is a statement of rebellion against the reason and morals of society" (45). In the case of Wells' *Invisible Man*, society could potentially pardon the Invisible Man since he is at least partially a victim: unable to reproduce his experiments or create an antidote for his invisibility, he is forced to remain invisible, even when he realizes that being visible would allow him to rejoin human discourse. By contrast, Garlon can decide when to "go" invisible and when to appear. His active choice to become invisible represents a willful rejection of "social connectedness" and a further frustration of the aventure system.<sup>15</sup> Earlier I described aventure as a mathematical equation where a knight's body combined with an unpredictable event produces a visible outcome that reveals invisible qualities. However, if one half of the unpredictable event is invisible (e.g. an encounter with an invisible villain) and yields no visible result (because the invisible knight has escaped without a trace), no knowledge is gained. A revision of Mann's system might look like this for an encounter with an invisible opponent:

a knight's body  
+ an unpredictable event against an invisible opponent

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a mostly invisible outcome that reveals nothing

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<sup>15</sup> In a brief discussion of Garlon, Molly Martin describes Garlon's behavior as a "rejection of the norms of Arthurian knighthood, norms that require visibility in order to build and maintain...status. ... Invisibility here proves decidedly disruptive and destructive" (51).

In fact, in cases like this, one's existing self-knowledge may be diminished or distorted by such an encounter.

Balin's early encounters with the invisible Garlon function in just this fashion: in the aftermath of the adventure, the people Balin has sworn to protect mysteriously die, and Balin cannot learn anything about his assailant or his own ability to defeat him. We have also seen, though, that Balin functions in a kind of metaphorical blindness. It is likely that even if he *could* see Garlon, he probably would not waste time to gather the sensory information and interpret the results.

When Balin does kill Garlon in Pellam's hall, this is exactly what happens.

Following Garlon's death, events occur in a rush, and Balin does not stop to look or think: Pellam swings a "grymme wepyn" at Balin and breaks one of Balin's swords; Balin rushes "fro chambir to chambir" in search of another weapon with Pellam following him closely; Balin enters a sumptuous room with a convenient spear on the wall; Balin grabs the spear, turns, and strikes Pellam "passyngly sore with that spere" (67.27-68.05). The shock from this "dolorouse stroke" destroys the castle, kills Pellam, and stuns Balin for three days, but while this moment is dramatic, it does not signal the end of Balin's story, at least in part because Balin has not learned anything in this encounter with Garlon and Pellam (68.8-9). In his haste to kill Garlon and escape the enraged Pellam, Balin does not stop to examine the visual signs available to him either before or after killing

Garlon; instead, he continues in ignorance and returns to a metaphorical blindness for the remainder of the tale.

### *Aventure and Tragedy*

As Balin's story moves past the section containing Garlon and Pellam and toward the tale's conclusion, Balin continues to abdicate responsibility for his actions in order to "take the adventure." However, in this closing section of the tale, readers can also see the final effects of Balin's blindly adventurous behavior as the story ends with the double deaths of Balin and Balan. Most scholars agree that this ending marks the text as something other than pure romance, and most categorize it as a tragedy considering the downward spiral that Balin experiences following the Dolorous Stroke. Ralph Norris notes that the tale's conclusion strikes readers as especially tragic because of the changes Malory makes to the *Suite*. He points out that in the *Suite*, Balin is the direct cause of the problems that Galahad will correct during the Grail Quest; therefore, it is necessary for Balin to fail so that Galahad can succeed. However, since Malory chooses a different source text for the Grail section of the *Morte Darthur*, he must transform Balin into a stand-alone character, not simply a precursor for Galahad. Norris argues that

[f]or Malory, Balin is more than an anti-Galahad. For Malory, Balin is, rather, the central figure in a tragedy that mirrors the larger

tragedy of the fall of Camelot, and the effect of Malory's changes is to give Balin the dignity and the pathos of a tragic hero, something that he lacks in the *Suite*. ("Tragedy of Balin" 55)

Other scholars have observed the tragic nature of the "Balyn" section, and they offer a variety of interpretations of the tragedy, many of them arguing, like Kevin Whetter, that "Balyn's adventures serve as a microcosm for the *Morte Darthur* as a whole" ("On Misunderstanding" 155). For example, Deborah Ellis examines the contagious nature of treason in the Balin section of the *Morte Darthur* and argues that "treason in this story is in fact an intensified, compressed version of the treason that will destroy Arthur's kingdom, and this implicit identification between the smaller and larger tragedies is one of the underlying reasons why we respond so strongly to 'Balin'" (Ellis 67). Elizabeth Pochoda similarly argues that Balin's narrative allows Malory to "figure forth in small the crucial governmental problem of *Le Morte Darthur*, and, indeed, of fifteenth-century political thought in general" (Pochoda 64-65).

While these scholars argue that the tragedy in "Balyn le Sauvage" represents a miniature version of the tragedy of the *Morte Darthur* as a whole, other scholars have remarked on the tale's cautionary, didactic nature. For example, D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., argues that Malory "questions the pre-eminence of the armed male" ("Malory's Anti-Knights" 109). As Hanks rightly observes, throughout the *Morte* and especially in the Balin section, "[t]he person bearing

arms might, indeed, be on the side of right—but, like Balin, he might nonetheless slay his/her brother” (“Malory’s Anti-Knights” 110). Malory is perhaps correct to question the role of the armed male, and even more correct to worry about the dangers of an armed male like Balin who acts without gathering sensory information and processing that data with his reason. As I will demonstrate in this final section, despite their good intentions, both Balin and Balan come to miserable ends because they continue to “take the adventure” instead of actively interpreting the visual signs around them.

After leaving Pellam’s destroyed castle, Balin wanders through several countries until he reaches the site of his last battle, where he once more proclaims his commitment to chance and aventure. Even when a damsels warns him that the borrowed shield he carries will be his undoing, “for by your shield ye shold have ben knownen,” Balin responds by saying, “Me repenteth...that ever I cam within this country; but I maye not torne ageyne for shame, and what aventure shall falle to me, be it lyf or dethe, *I wille take the adventure that shalle come to me*” (71.22-25, emphasis mine). At this final juncture in the narrative, as Kennedy points out, Balin does offer another reason for his dogged pursuit of aventure: it would be shameful for him to turn back at this point (45). However, Balin’s conclusion that he will again “take the adventure” confirms that he still believes he has little control over his own destiny and must passively follow the course that God has

ordained for him, even if the aventure leads to his demise. Additionally, Balin's fatalism blinds him to other options: he cannot fathom an alternative action like procuring a different shield or asking the damsel for advice. The only options that he sees are turning back in disgrace, or continuing on the path before him.

In the passage following the damsel's warning, Balin and Balan accidentally kill each other in battle, and the language Malory uses to describe the tragedy again evokes ideas of chance and vision—particularly obscured vision. Just as the damsel warned, Balan does not recognize Balin, although he does study him: "Whan this knigte in the reed beheld Balyn, hym thought it shold be his broder Balen by cause of his two swerdys, but by cause he knewe not his sheld he demed it was not he" (71.29-32). In this moment, Balin has produced a kind of invisibility of his own. His identity is hidden from his opponent, and as is the custom in the *Morte Darthur*, the only way to prove one's true identity is to take the aventure and discover knowledge of self and other in the unpredictable event of combat. As a direct result of the contradictory visual signs that Balan receives, Malory writes that the two knights immediately "aventryd theyr speres" (71.33). Just as in the episodes with Garlon, incomplete vision both leads to aventure. The juxtaposition of the two ideas suggests once again that, for Malory, aventure is closely linked to obscured vision.

The brothers' battle also follows the pattern of Balin's encounter with the invisible Garlon, as incomplete vision and aventure are followed swiftly by death and destruction. However, even when this final aventure proves fatal for the brothers and they reveal their identities to one another, they refuse to take responsibility for their actions. Despite being the only two people involved in the fight, they feel that they had no control, as their dying words show. Balan says that it is "thorough *mishap* [he] myght not knowe" his brother, despite his repeated admission that he "aspyed wel [Balin's] two swerdys" (72.35-73.1, emphasis mine). Balin in turn places blame squarely on the "*unhappy* knight in the castel, for he caused me to leve myn owne shelde to our bothes destruction" (73.3-5, emphasis mine). Balan further distances himself from the fight by explaining that he was only here to challenge Balin because "it *happed* me to slee a knight that kepte this island" (73.8-9, emphasis mine). Neither knight feels accountable for slaying his brother, despite the fact that they are each the direct cause of the other's death. Instead, chance or "hap" is to blame.

By alternating between references to obscured vision and to aventure, Malory demonstrates yet another flaw in the system that uses aventure to reveal God's plan and personal identity: by leaving one's choices up to chance, one may easily choose the wrong battle. This leaves open the possibility for tragic outcomes, like killing one's brother. And indeed, both Balin and Balan suffer a

fall from relative prosperity due to their abdication of sight and reason. Like Troilus, Balin has experienced a full turning of Fortune's wheel, although the upward arc of his journey does not rise as high as Troilus'. In the early part of the story, Balin's station improves as Arthur releases him from prison and later expresses gratitude for Balin's capture of King Roynes. While Balin never achieves the station of Arthur's champion that Launcelot later does, his situation by the middle of his narrative is significantly better than when it began.

Following the episodes with Garlon, Balin once again travels down Fortune's wheel. After receiving their mortal wounds, the two brothers request to be buried together in a scene of great pathos: "We came bothe oute of one wombe, that is to say one moders bely, and so shalle we lye bothe in one pytte" (73.15-16).

The lady of the tower who forced the battle grants them their wish, all the time "wepyng" (73.18). Balin's tragic fall from prosperity to the destruction of his only living relative inspires pity from all onlookers.

Even if the two knights die without realizing the cause of their tragedy, their deaths have not been in vain, and the episode cultivates a didactic element to help readers avoid a similar fate. Malory goes to great lengths to ensure that their wretched end is witnessed by a large number of people, and together the lady of the castle and Merlin memorialize their deaths by inscribing their names on their stone tomb, a warning for passersby. Balin emphasizes that their tomb

should state that they were “two bretheren [who] slewe eche other,” and the entire company of gentlewomen “wepte for pyté” (73.25-28). While the brothers may have died without realizing their blindness due to reliance on aventure, Malory’s construction of the tale urges his readers to avoid the same mistakes.

### *Conclusion*

Perhaps in the end, Balin’s appellation “Le Sauvage” can best explain the nature of his tragedy. According to the MED, *savage* (and its variants *sauvage* and *saveage*) used as an appellation for a person may indicate that the person is “wild, barbarous, uncivilized” or “bold, valiant; also, cruel” (1a, 2a). However, as Norris observes, “[Balin] is … often exceedingly noble and genuinely upset when his good intentions lead to disastrous outcomes” (“The Tragedy of Balin” 54). While Balin is bold and often valiant, he is certainly not intentionally cruel.<sup>16</sup> In fact, as Balin tells the unfortunate Sir Garnish, “I dyd none other but as I wold ye dyd to me” (70.16-17). While following the Golden Rule has not worked out for Balin in this story, he is not a vulgar villain. Instead, Balin’s flaw seems to follow the

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<sup>16</sup> Other characters in the *Morte Darthur* who have earned this epithet are perhaps more deserving of the name “Savage” with the connotations of wildness or cruelty. For example, near the end of “The Tale of Sir Gareth,” Lyonet is referred to as the “Damesell Savyage.” Throughout the tale, readers have seen her rebuking Gareth (whom she mistakes for a kitchen boy), using magic to construct a knight that stabs Gareth in the thigh, and mysteriously arriving to staunch the wounds of Gareth and Gawayne after they have unknowingly battled each other. Likewise, characters like Sagramore and Dodinas—both with the epithets of “Savage”—seem to serve no function in the *Morte Darthur* except as instigators of fights.

MED's third definition for *savage*: "Reckless, rash, foolish" (3a).<sup>17</sup> As I have shown, Balin's decisions are rarely—if ever— informed by his senses or his reason. Rather, his commitment to "taking the adventure" means that he refuses to think for himself since he believes it is pointless to avoid one's destiny; this lends his actions a hasty quality that leaves readers wondering why he does not heed warnings from Merlin, various damsels, and/or even the sign on a cross by the road that says "It is not for no knyght alone to ryde toward this castel [the castle where Balan awaits their final battle]" (70.25). Malory's decision to call Balin by his name and to include the epithet "Le Sauvage" five times is especially significant since the *Suite* calls him "Balaain le Sauvage" initially, and then "li Chevaliers a .II. Espees" or simply ".II. Espees" ["the Knight with Two Swords" or "Two Swords"] for the rest of the story (e.g. Roussineau 158). Rather than focus on distinguishing physical features like Balin's two swords, Malory prefers to remind readers of Balin's rash decision-making habits. This is especially true at important moments as when Balin introduces himself as "Balyne le Saveage"

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<sup>17</sup> In this, I disagree with Norris. Norris writes that Balin's fatal action is pulling the sword at the beginning and refusing to return it to the damsel when she requests it: "Just as the tragic hero in both Classical tragedy and tragedy found in romance must make a tragic choice that is dictated by his *harmartia*, so does Balin: he keeps the sword that only he can draw. At this moment in Malory's story, Balin's fate is sealed and all of the tragic events that occur afterwards are now, but only now, inevitable" (Norris 57-58). I argue that Balin's *harmartia* is not a single action, but rather a character flaw that encourages him to make several poorly informed decisions.

to Garnish after striking the Dolorous Stroke, or when Merlin writes the epithet on Balin's tomb after his battle with his brother (69.20).

Thus, it is fitting that this character—committed so strongly to “taking the adventure” that he abandons caution and reason—experiences a metaphorical blindness in the early and final stages of his tale. In the middle of this framing device, Malory constructs a fitting opponent to match these themes: unlike in the *Suite*, Malory’s version of the invisible Garlon both embodies and defies aventure, and Balin experiences a physical blindness to echo his earlier self-imposed metaphorical blindness. Malory then concludes the tale with another kind of blindness, this time a simple lack of recognition between brothers who could under most circumstances be expected to recognize each other.

Throughout the narrative, Malory shows that the opposites of invisibility and aventure are vision and reason. When characters are unable to see (as when they cannot see Garlon), or are simply unaware that they should be looking (as in the battle with Balan), characters cannot or will not use reason. In the final battle between the brothers Malory stresses that there *are* in fact visual signs that can be read in order to make better decisions. In the end, Malory suggests that no one—not even “a passyng good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson”—can trust chance, hap, or aventure to reveal self-knowledge or God’s plan. Thus, he counsels characters and readers

alike to use both their senses and their reason to make informed decisions and act accordingly.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Seeing Is Believing and Achieving in Malory's "Sankgreal"

In the past two chapters, I have shown how literary characters can misuse or neglect their vision and reason. Troilus and Criseyde look at each other and mislabel their earthly lover as their "suffisaunce"; Balin fatalistically believes in a divine, unalterable plan that leads him to ignore important sensory data and act without careful reasoning. In both *Troilus and Criseyde* and "Balyn le Sauvage," these errant visual practices lead to tragedy. However, in Malory's version of the quest for the Holy Grail, "The Sankgreal," readers finally encounter a character who uses his sense of sight correctly: Galahad. Unlike the narratives of Troilus, Criseyde, and Balin, Galahad's story does *not* end in misery or destruction, although Malory's prose style does leave Galahad's achievement in the Grail Quest slightly ambiguous.

In his by-now-classic introduction to the *Morte Darthur*, Derek Brewer describes Malory's prose as having "the style of a gentleman," sounding "both colloquial and ceremonious" and displaying a "vigour" that helps to unite the work as a whole (12-13). Brewer observes that Malory's direct style excuses him from explaining ideas in "abstract, analytic terms" and frees him from "either

social or scholarly anxieties" (12-13). This style is in full effect at the climax of the Grail Quest, when Galahad finally achieves a full vision of the Grail. An unknown man (later revealed as Joseph, the son of Joseph of Arimathea) celebrates a mass and then beckons Galahad away from his companions:

"Com forthe the servaunte of Jesu Cryste, and thou shalt se that thou hast much desired to se." And than [Galahad] began to tremble ryght harde whan the dedly fleyshe began to behold the spirituall thynges. Than he hylde up his hondis towarde hevyn and seyde, "Lord, I thanke The, for now I se that that hath be my desire many a day." (787.10-16)<sup>1</sup>

Certainly this passage is "vigorous." Void of setting description and character psychology, the fullest accomplishment of the Grail Quest occurs in the space of just six lines. The passage also balances the colloquial ("ryght harde") and the ceremonial ("Lord, I thanke The"), and it lacks "abstract, analytic terms." Galahad simply sees the Grail, trembles, and thanks God for granting him his desire.

Other critics have observed that this style allows Malory to develop a sense of marvel and mystery, even if it does not lend itself to explaining exactly why or how his characters do the things that they do. In the more recent words of P. J. C. Field, Malory creates a "vivid factual-seeming narrative, but one that

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<sup>1</sup> References to *Le Morte Darthur* come from P. J. C. Field's edition (D.S. Brewer, 2013) and include page and line numbers.

tends to leave causes and relationships obscure" ("Malory and the Grail" 144).<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the passage above represents a marvel, but it also leaves the reader, particularly the modern reader, with many unanswered questions. Obviously something important has happened, but why does Galahad experience a visceral physical reaction to the point where he trembles? Is the cause spiritual, psychological, emotional, or even physiological? For that matter, why do the other knights who see the Grail not experience a similar reaction? Does it signify that their achievement is somehow less complete than Galahad's? Furthermore, why has the goal of the entire quest been only to 'se' [see] the Grail? Both Joseph's son and Galahad—as well as Gawayne at the start of the quest—define the goal of the quest to be a sight of the Grail, but would it not be a more complete physical and spiritual experience to touch, hold, or consume the contents of the Grail? Malory's enigmatic, bare-bones prose refuses to answer.

To pursue these questions of sight and the achieving of the Grail, I suggest that we examine what Malory, as a "gentleman," may have thought about seeing a more familiar symbol for Christ's body and blood: the Eucharistic elements visible in the celebration of every holy mass. Richard Barber notes that Grail romances are saturated with references to the mass and with allegorical

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<sup>2</sup> For further observations on Malory's mysterious style, see Jill Mann "Malory and the Grail Legend" (209), James Wade (35), and Bonnie Wheeler (109-112).

interpretations of the Eucharist, and Malory is no exception (138-40). Certainly Malory was not a university-educated theologian, and readers cannot expect him to provide an “abstract, analytic” explanation of the metaphysical effects associated with the Eucharist. As Gary Macy observes, for most laypeople of the late Middle Ages “transubstantiation must have been something like quantum physics for non-scientists today... an amazing thing we trust a scientist can explain” (“Theology” 378). However, we *can* expect Malory to translate and transform his sources in ways that make sense to him as a late-medieval Christian in his version of the Grail Quest.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will suggest that just as Malory may have the prose style of a “gentleman,” he could also be expected to have the religious background and spiritual reflexes of a late medieval gentleman. It stands to reason, then, that we should examine what the Grail as a representation of Holy Communion

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<sup>3</sup> I realize, of course, that a completely accurate reconstruction of Malory’s exact position on transubstantiation, the Eucharist, or even religion in general will be impossible. As Kevin Grimm has written, “[Malory’s] personal faith is just that, personal (unique, idiosyncratic), and rarely expressed in a direct way, so that critics have been unable to agree on what precisely that something is” (17). Similarly, Catherine Batt observes that “there are problems with extrapolating a theological position for Malory by reconstructing his religious environment, especially as historians of fifteenth-century gentry piety do not agree on mapping its parameters” (133). However, as D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., and Janet Jesmok point out, “religious observances such as tithes, baptisms, marriages, and death rites would have been central to [Malory’s] daily life” and the ceremony of knighting that Malory would have undergone would have included oaths to protect the church (3). Hanks and Jesmok argue that “*Le Morte Darthur* affirms that Malory’s idea of chivalry was imbued with Christianity both conventional and literary” (3). I will assume for this chapter that Malory would have been familiar with the ubiquitous sacrament of Holy Communion, which would have been performed in mass on a daily basis, with additional opportunities to experience it at events like weddings and funerals.

would have meant to Malory as a late-medieval Christian. My examination will first consider the intersection of two debates that attracted much scholarly attention from the twelfth century all the way into the sixteenth century: the dispute on the operation of vision, and the separate but related debate on metaphysical properties of the elements of Holy Communion. Then I will examine how Malory's work reflects this cultural, religious, and scientific context. Ultimately, I will argue that a justification for Galahad's trembling lies at the intersection of late medieval Eucharistic theology and late medieval optics: while Eucharistic theology clarifies the visual nature of the Grail Quest, medieval optics helps to explain the varying degrees of success that Malory's Grail knights achieve. Furthermore, I contend that Galahad's disciplined use of his senses—particularly his vision—allows him to avoid a tragic end, despite his death at the end of the story.

#### *Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology and Optical Science*

My exploration of religion in the “Sankgreal” takes part in a long tradition of scholars examining Malory’s possible religious beliefs in his translation of the Grail Quest. Early in the scholarly conversation, we see turmoil over whether or not the “Sankgreal” and its source material represents an earnest exploration of Christianity and a critique of earthly chivalry, or whether it represents an appropriation of religion for the glorification of that same earthly chivalry. For

example, Eugène Vinaver doubts whether Malory could “fully appreciate the religious doctrine” of his French source material for his “Sankgreal” and he claims that Malory “relentlessly cut out the theological comments” from his French source, the *Queste del Saint Graal* (Malory 78). The effect of these changes, Vinaver argues, is to make the Grail Quest a simple “ornament” of Arthur’s secular kingdom rather than the intended critique of earthly chivalry presented in the *Queste* (84).<sup>4</sup> Soon after, Albert Pauphilet provided a counter to Vinaver’s claims by arguing that the French *Queste* features a theology aligned with Cistercian mysticism, a mysticism that Malory would have translated into the *Morte Darthur* (*Etudes* 53-84). However, Jean Frappier in turn disputed Pauphilet’s conclusions and argued that ascetic Cistercians would not have been so frivolous as to spend time writing vernacular romances, even if written for theological ends. Instead, Frappier argues (rather cynically) that the French *Queste* represents a self-congratulatory religious quest for those of higher social classes; in his interpretation of the Grail Quest, Frappier sees noble knights who enjoy a “messianic chivalry, predestined, worthy of approaching, almost without

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<sup>4</sup> Vinaver restates these beliefs in the commentaries included with his edition of the *Morte Darthur*, claiming that Malory’s Grail Quest is “primarily concerned with ‘erthy worship,’ not with any higher purpose” and that Malory’s narrative goal is to “secularize the Grail theme as much as the story will allow” (*Works* 3:1535).

intermediaries, the mysteries of the faith and of achieving knowledge of the divine" (Frappier 170).<sup>5</sup>

More recent scholarship on religion in the Grail Quest has sided with C.S. Lewis, who writes—responding to Vinaver—that while Malory may remove some mystical material from the *Queste* and focus more on ethics and morality, readers must not mistake “ethical” as the opposite of “religious.” According to Lewis, “[T]he ethical claim and ethical response, when prompted by a vision, purged by confession and penance, supported and corrected at every turn by voices, miracles, and spiritual counsels, is precisely the religious as it most commonly appears in secular vocations” (17). In other words, Malory, a secular man writing for a secular audience, expresses religion differently than an author from a religious order might have done. Lewis considers it a matter of belonging to a certain “Order”: in the traditional Nobility, Clergy, and Peasant division of medieval society, Malory belongs to the lower nobility. This does not indicate Malory’s refusal of or lack of interest in religion, but rather that it is not his primary occupation (17).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Translations of both Pauphilet and Frappier and a thorough summary of their disagreement can be found in Jill Mann’s “Malory and the Grail Legend.”

<sup>6</sup> For more on the medieval orders of society, or “estates” as they are called more recently, see Jill Mann’s *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: the Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*.

Other scholars have transformed Lewis' discussion into various terms. For instance, in regard to the requirement of virginity as a pre-requisite to achieving the Grail, Norris Lacy writes that "Malory..., doubtless perceiving the problem with such exclusivity, appears to leave slightly more open the possibility that others who, though less than absolutely perfect, live pious and virtuous lives ... may have some legitimate hope of salvation" (8). Field also senses that Malory "seems to have felt uncomfortable with its [the *Queste's*] thoroughgoing condemnation of secular life" ("Malory and the Grail" 109). Field describes Malory's editorial process as "humaniz[ing]" the Grail Quest, pruning the sermonizing of hermits while maintaining the focus on holiness ("Malory and the Grail" 109). Despite the reduction of the source material, though, as Charles Moorman points out, Malory does not prune away the central religious tenets; rather, "he always preserves the core of the French book's doctrinal statements, no matter how great his deletions" (187). Fiona Tolhurst provides a concise summary of all these views under the label "secularized salvation" (132), which she later calls Malory's "practical brand of Christianity" (149). She describes Malory's narrative goals as two-fold: "'[The Sankgreal]' reflects both his strong interest in earthly life and his concern that knights of the world achieve salvation" (132). The end goal of the Grail Quest might be spiritual salvation and a place in heaven, but Malory's knights must earn that salvation here on earth.

Importantly, as a part of Malory's "humanizing" of the Grail Quest, he clarifies and solidifies the earthly existence of the Grail itself.<sup>7</sup> As Frederick Locke remarks, Malory's source material leaves the physical nature of the Grail in question: "[A]t the end of the *Queste* we cannot define the Grail with any greater precision than when we first saw it or when we continued to see it in the development of the narrative" (95). However, Moorman observes that Malory "frequently transforms the hazy symbols of the French *Queste* into tangible, concrete parts of a real quest" (190). Moreover, he argues that one of Malory's most important transformations is the Grail itself from a beatific vision to a physical object each time it appears in the narrative (190).<sup>8</sup> Field, too, notes that Malory makes the Grail a physical object every time it appears in the *Morte*, not just in the "Sankgreal" section: even in the earliest appearances of the Grail, "[i]t has a physical existence as a gold dish that can be carried by one young woman, who needs to use both hands to carry it" ("Malory and the Grail" 148).<sup>9</sup> If Malory's knights are to seek spiritual salvation on earth, they require an earthly objective. Malory's clarification and solidification of the Grail provides this

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<sup>7</sup> For a synopsis of the development of the Grail from mystery object to Malory's Eucharistic vessel, see Mann "Malory and the Grail Legend" (203-206).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on the Grail as beatific vision, see Richard O'Gorman (212-213).

<sup>9</sup> See also Sandra Ness Ihle: "[Malory] consistently narrows and concretizes references [to the Graill] into something simple which we can know fully" (32).

spiritual quest with an achievable, physical goal: a physical viewing of the concrete artifact of the Grail. Moorman stresses that Malory's solidification of the Grail into a single physical object does not lessen its mystical qualities in the least. Instead, he argues, the clarification of the Grail as Eucharistic vessel "insists on the fact of the transubstantiation," one of the greatest mysteries in the life of a Christian (190-91). If, then, Malory is a worldly knight translating the French *Queste* into a more secularized, but no less religious quest for his knights, and if one of his few transformations is that he clarifies that the Grail is a vessel used in Holy Communion, let us consider what the Eucharist would have meant for him as an average, worldly, Christian knight in the late fifteenth century.

In Malory's late Middle Ages, the Eucharist was the "chief sacrament" of the Christian faith (Lahey 499). It was celebrated at every mass, and while it may have been a daily occurrence, Miri Rubin points out that the sacrament makes some of the most "audacious" claims of any faith tradition: "that God and humans could meet and unite, mix and merge, that a disc of baked wheaten dough could embody the saving body of Christ, that the lives of men and women, of cities and nations, could be encompassed, redeemed, transformed or forsaken through it" (*Corpus Christi* 1). Yet, as Rubin observes elsewhere, the components of this ritual—bread and wine and the actions of preparing and

serving food—are also mundane and would have helped make “the most unfamiliar and unlikely familiar and truthful” (“Popular Attitudes” 465).

The central miracle of the Eucharistic ritual, both in the Middle Ages and today, is transubstantiation. As the priest recites the words of institution, “*Hoc est enim corpus meus*,” the bread on the altar miraculously and mysteriously transforms into the real body of Jesus Christ while retaining the physical attributes of bread. Such a strange occurrence must be accounted for, and indeed, Gary Macy writes that “[a]lmost every major theologian from [the eleventh to the thirteenth century] discussed the Eucharist somewhere in his opus” (373). The scholarly conversation continued into the fifteenth century as Stephen Lahey observes: “[N]o schoolman, however fatigued he may have become with the subtleties of his analysis, overlooked the significance of examining the Eucharist” (499). In addition to the obvious difficulty of the bread maintaining its appearance, smell, and taste, scholars attempted to explain every facet of the miracle. They debated the exact moment of the transubstantiation as well as the nature of the matter that composed the bread both before, during, and after the transubstantiation. They worried whether Christ’s body could be injured when the bread was broken and chewed, and they disputed the efficacy of non-

Christians or even animals consuming consecrated bread and wine.<sup>10</sup> While no detail was too trivial for investigation when it concerned the Eucharist, Macy argues that church officials probably did not expect the average layperson to understand the minutia of Eucharistic theology ("Theology" 378). Instead, it was enough for the average Christian like Malory to know and believe that Christ was truly present in the bread and wine.

While the metaphysical nature of transubstantiation was beyond the grasp of the average or even of the moderately educated layperson, the moment of transubstantiation—the *sacring*—and the elevation of the bread that followed was still considered the high point of each mass (Duffy 96).<sup>11</sup> Eamon Duffy writes that most of the laity would not have participated in the majority of the service, which was spoken or sung in Latin and not intelligible for those unfamiliar with the language. Instead, the clergy encouraged most congregants to stand or sit quietly for the duration of the mass, silently reciting their *Paternosters* and *Aves* (117). The one moment of cooperation between priest and congregants was at the

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<sup>10</sup> For details on the theology of transubstantiation, see Lahey (504-532), Macy ("Theology" 370-378), Rubin (*Corpus Christi* 14-83), and Bynum (85-96).

<sup>11</sup> As Catherine Batt noted in 2002, scholars are conflicted about the role of the gentry (like Malory) in daily mass. Batt's remarks challenge those of Duffy in the first edition of *Stripping of the Altars*. However, since 2002, the trend in scholarship is to note the active participation in mass by the gentry. Although their mass experience may have included more private masses and more reading rather than reciting during mass, the gentry certainly participated in rituals like gazing at the elevated host. See, for example, Peter Clark (23-35). Duffy himself defends gentry piety in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Stripping of the Altars* (122).

elevation of the host. A clerk rang the sacring bell to alert congregants that the elevation was about to occur, and the laity was expected to kneel and raise their hands in devotion while gazing on the raised bread which was infused with the holy presence (Duffy 117-18). Duffy further notes that the moment of elevation often became a theatrical event in daily worship, especially in larger churches with greater financial resources. Black screens were sometimes raised at the moment of elevation to highlight the whiteness of the bread, and special candles donated by parish members were often lit to provide more light for the climactic moment (96). There is even evidence of a mechanical device in one church that caused images of angels to descend toward the altar for the sacring and elevation (96).<sup>12</sup>

Theatrical gimmicks aside, it is important to note here that the sight of the elevated host represented the layperson's full reception of Holy Communion at each mass. The single exception to this rule was the high mass at Easter when freshly-confessed congregants would actually consume a small portion of the consecrated bread.<sup>13</sup> This annual participation in the Eucharist was prescribed in

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<sup>12</sup> Gary Macy has labeled the late-medieval mass—especially the parts concerning the Eucharist—an “extravagant pantomime of priestly power” (“Medieval Inheritance” 15). As may be expected, the theatricality and sensuality of the elevation was one of the concerns of protestant reformers.

<sup>13</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, bread was the only Eucharistic element that the congregation would consume. Since Christ's body and blood were thought to be equally diffused in both the bread and wine, it was only necessary to consume the bread. For more on this

the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, and Miri Rubin observes that limiting access to the Eucharist allowed the pope and clergy to “shor[e] up” their role as mediator between God and humankind (Rubin, *Corpus Christi* 12). Caroline Walker Bynum notes that in addition to solidifying the power of the clergy, both laypeople and clergy alike felt “increased reluctance” about actually consuming the elements since “it placed God objectively in their mouth, [and would] damn them if any element of their spiritual intention or preparation was flawed” (87). Instead, the moment of elevation provided an opportunity for what Edward Foley calls “ocular communion” (108) and Macy labels “spiritual reception” (*Treasures from the Storeroom* 180).

While simply seeing the host may seem a poor substitute for touching and consuming the Eucharistic bread, both literary and non-literary sources from the late Middle Ages provide evidence that gazing on the elevated host was a valued ritual and considered just as effective as consuming the elements. For example, in the anonymous ballad “Robin Hood and the Monk” dated approximately 1450—a mere twenty years prior to Malory’s completion of the *Morte Darthur*—Robin complains to Little John that living in the forest as an outlaw comes with just one disadvantage: “That I may not no solem day / To mas nor matins goo” (lines 23-

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concomitance, see Rubin (*Corpus Christi* 70-71). In Malory’s time, violent revolts took place in parts of Europe over the withheld chalice; for more on Ultraquism, see Lahey (535-39).

24). Robin feels this disadvantage more distinctly as the story begins on “Whitson” (Pentecost) and thus an important feast day, but he particularly complains that “Hit is a fourtnet and more.../Syn I my Savyour see” (25-26). His inability to attend mass and witness the elevation of the host drives him from the forest into the more dangerous gated city of Nottingham, where the eponymous Monk and Sheriff of Nottingham conspire to capture and imprison Robin. While Little John and the Merry Men predictably save Robin for a happy ending, it is interesting to note that Robin jeopardizes his freedom and quite possibly his life in the name of simply seeing his savior in the form of the Eucharistic bread.

Non-literary sources like John Mirk’s *Festial*—an early-fifteenth century collection of sermons for use on feast days that was widely disseminated and read in English churches—offer some explanation for why characters like Robin Hood would willingly endanger themselves for a glimpse of the Host. In his Corpus Christi sermon, Mirk states that faithful congregants receive seven “gifts” by attending Mass and gazing on the host:

That day hym schal wonte no bodily fode; idul speche þat day is forȝeuuen him; his idul lyȝt opes ben forȝeten; he schal not þat day lese his siȝth; he schal not þat day dey no sodeyn deth; and as longe as þe masse lesteth he schal not wax old; and his angele telleth ech paas þat he goþ to þe chirch in gret worschip to hym.  
[That day he shall not need/shall not lack any bodily food; his idle speech that day will be forgiven; his inadvertent and minor cursing will be forgiven; he shall not lose his sight that day; he shall not die a sudden death that day; for the duration of the mass he will not

age; and his guardian angel will direct each step that he takes toward the church.] (169-70)<sup>14</sup>

While avoiding hunger and punishment for swearing “idul lyȝt opes” are nice benefits, Duffy notes congregants likely valued the escape from sudden death above all other gifts received from gazing on the host (120). A sudden death implies that the individual did not have the opportunity to receive his/her last rites, which included a final communion in which the individual physically consumed consecrated bread. For a soldier like Malory or knights like those of the Round Table, who may have daily encountered life-threatening situations, avoidance of sudden death would have been a highly relevant benefit to attending mass and seeing the host. With benefits such as these, it is perhaps no small wonder that, as Bynum relates,

[b]y the thirteenth century, we find stories of people attending mass only for the moment of elevation, racing from church to church to see as many consecrations as possible, and shouting at the priest to hold the host up higher. An account even survives of guild members bringing charges against a priest for assigning them places in church from which they could not see the elevated host. (87)

In some churches that were large enough to facilitate multiple masses simultaneously, there are also reports of congregants abandoning a mass in one

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<sup>14</sup> Duffy notes that this list of benefits from gazing at the host is standard in many late-medieval texts. In addition to the wide-spread use of *Festial*, parish priests could have encountered this list in several other manuals for pastoral care (100).

part of the church to arrive in time for the elevation at another mass in another part of the church. Duffy records the complaint of one such abandoned celebrant in the early fifteenth century: at the chiming of a sacring bell elsewhere in the church, “myche peple turned awei fersli, and with greet noyse runnen frowards me” [many people suddenly (“fiercely”) turned away, and with a great noise they ran away from me] (William Thorpe qtd. in Duffy 98). Clearly, the late-medieval laity valued their opportunity to “eat by seeing” (Bynum 87). This ritual gazing not only reduced the anxiety of potentially damning oneself by putting God’s body in one’s mouth; it provided spiritual and physical gifts worth racing for.<sup>15</sup>

If we consider medieval attitudes on optics and the act of seeing, the use of “ocular” or “spiritual” reception gains another level of intimacy with God and only deepens the significance of ritual gazing at the Host. As I showed in the introduction to this study, between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries the scholarly consensus on optics shifted dramatically as new information from the

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<sup>15</sup> While it is not the main focus of this chapter, it is worth noting that the blind or visually impaired were not able to participate in this form of spiritual reception due to their inability to see the elevated host. Edward Wheatley writes that this exclusion “made them marginal to an observance that was central to both personal affective piety and Christian community-building” (15-16).

east threatened to displace long-held theories about sight.<sup>16</sup> For centuries, the commonly held theory of extramission stated that the human eye emitted an optical beam to gather visual information and then return to the eye. As we saw in the introduction, this theory implies a kind of agency for the viewer, since he/she can decide where to look and accordingly cast their eyes toward the object they wish to see.

The hypothesis threatening to displace extramission essentially reversed the relationship between viewer and visual object. According to this new theory, called intromission, all objects in the material world emit a substance called “species” that strikes the eye. While the exact nature of this substance was a topic of debate, most proponents of intromission agreed that it traveled to the eye on its own power. In this visual model, the viewer loses the power to intentionally direct his/her eyebeams and is instead at the mercy of surrounding objects, which constantly bombard the viewer with potentially dangerous visual information. In the 1260’s, Roger Bacon attempted to synthesize the two theories of extramission and intromission. According to his model, all objects do emit species which move outward, but these species were weak and required the assistance of the eye’s “ennobling ray” to travel all the way to the viewer.

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<sup>16</sup> In the paragraphs that follow, I briefly summarize common medieval theories of vision and focus on aspects of these theories that may pertain to our understanding of the Eucharist and Malory’s “Sankgreal.” For a fuller description, see Chapter One (4-15).

Bacon's compromise and various forms of intromission held currency through the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth.

Although Bacon's synthesis of sight models occurred in the later thirteenth century, it is important to note that the emergence of intromissive sight corresponds with the period of time including the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which prescribed a single, annual consumption of the Eucharist. These same decades coincide with the composition of the *Queste del Saint Graal* (c. 1215-1235), Malory's source for the Grail Quest.<sup>17</sup> Between the years of 1230 and 1235, Robert Grosseteste (whose works would later be a major influence on Bacon's work) defended the idea of extramissive sight against the growing number of natural philosophers who "assert that vision is produced by intromission" (qtd. in Lindberg 100). Grosseteste ultimately rejects the ideas of these natural philosophers, who only study the functionality of the "natural" or physical parts of the eye, while "mathematicians and physicists" study the aspects of optics that are "above nature": the nearly spiritual activities that the eye performs (qtd. in Lindberg 100-101). However, Grosseteste's need to defend extramission indicates

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<sup>17</sup> The exact date of the *Queste* is unknown. These are the dates offered by Dhira Mahoney ("Introduction" 101). Alison Stones observes that even before the Fourth Lateran, there is evidence of widespread liturgical and devotional practices applied to the miracle of transubstantiation and the elevation of the host (302). The *Queste* emerges from a scholarly ferment that was actively considering both optical mechanics and the proper interaction between people and the consecrated host.

that for the years leading up to the Fourth Lateran and the composition of the *Quête*, medieval scholars were rethinking the way vision worked and the implications that each theory would hold for daily life.

Although the specific mechanics of these visual models were likely too esoteric for the masses, at least two implications of these theories would have affected churchgoers in the late medieval period. The first is an implied physical interaction with the visible object.<sup>18</sup> The language that medieval natural philosophers use to describe vision suggests an intimate, physical connection between the viewer and the viewed; either the visual beam extends from the eye to the object, or the object's species reach out to strike the viewer's eyes. Thus, when medieval laypeople performed ritual gazing during the elevation of the host, they were not just experiencing a moment of sight with heightened awareness: seeing the host would have meant experiencing a nearly tactile encounter with the divine.

A second implication of these theories that may have affected the mindset of the late-medieval laity is the growing influence of intromission, with its reversal of subject-object agency. While the earlier extramission allotted visual power and choice to the viewer, the later intromission reassigned power to the object. This in turn makes the viewer the passive, vulnerable recipient of species.

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<sup>18</sup> See above, pg. 11.

It is important to bear in mind, then, that when we imagine the average late-medieval Christian—or even a gentleman like Malory—contemplating the elevated host, the kneeling churchgoer is not an active gazer. Rather, because intromission effectively reversed the direction of sight, the transubstantiated host was the active party in the subject-object relationship, as it emitted divine species toward the passive viewer. Given the effects that gazing at the host were thought to produce, the species radiating from it must have been powerful indeed.

In sum, for a laity severely limited in opportunities to eat and drink the Eucharistic elements, simply looking at the elements, particularly the bread, was considered an adequate reception. The act of seeing the host provided a moment of direct, nearly physical communion with God, and thus could provide spiritual and physical healing and protection. Additionally, this quasi-tactile encounter with the divine placed communicants in the passive, submissive role in their relationship with God for two reasons: not only because God was their creator and savior, but also because intromissive theories of sight posited that the visual object (i.e. the host) was the active producer of species that was only received by the passive gazer. In short, emerging optical theory simply reinforced traditional theology. Now let us turn to Malory's "Sankgreal" and see how the intersection of late-medieval Eucharistic theology and optical theories helps us to understand

both the visual nature of the Grail Quest and the varying degrees of “achievement” that the Round Table knights attain.

### *Seeing Malory’s Grail*

For a reader attuned to the features and practices of the medieval Eucharist, it is clear from the opening that Malory’s “Sankgreal” employs the Grail as a symbolic form of the Eucharist, especially as a visual ritualistic encounter with the divine. Ralph Norris remarks that Malory follows his source material for his Grail Quest with “greater fidelity than that of any other of the eight tales” (114). However, as Malory begins his tale, he makes a few key changes. He takes care to emphasize parts of his French source that deal with vision, and reduces or eliminates sections that deviate from visual Eucharistic imagery. For example, in the French *Queste* when the Grail appears in Arthur’s court, much narrative space is given to the food produced by the Grail. Each knight receives the food that he most desires, and the knights’ dinner conversation revolves around the miraculous food. Even Arthur thanks God that He would “volt repaistre” [nourish] the court in this way (Pauphilet 16, translation Burns 7).<sup>19</sup> When

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<sup>19</sup> French quotations are taken from *La Queste del Saint Graal* edited by Albert Pauphilet (Paris: Librairie Ancienne, 1949). Unless otherwise marked, modern English translations are taken from Jane Burns’ translation found in *The Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Garland, 1995).

Gawayne and the rest of the knights swear to seek the Grail, seeing the Grail is still a primary part of the quest, but they also desire to taste:

Quant cil de la Table Reonde oïrent ceste parole, si se leverent tuit de lor sieges et firent tout autretel veu com messieres Gauvains avoit fet, et distrent qu'il ne fineroient ja mes d'errer devant qu'il seroient asis a la haute table our si douce viande estoit toz jors aprestee come cele qu'il avoient iluec eue.

[When the knights of the Round Table heard (Gawayne's proclamation), they rose to their feet and reiterated Gawayne's vow. They said they would search until they could sit at the special table where food as sweet as they had eaten that day was served regularly.] (Pauphilet 16, Burns 8).

It is unsurprising that Gawayne and the other knights seek another taste of the Grail's repast; in both the *Queste* and the "Sankgreal," the Grail has just provided the knights with a magnificent feast, described in terms similar to the "sweetness" that the medieval laity often used to describe the taste of their Easter communion (Rubin, "Popular Attitudes" 459). Certainly, they cannot be faulted for their desire to repeat the experience.

Given that Malory also includes a feast of "what metys and drynkes [the knights] thought on," readers may expect the knights of the *Morte Darthur* to seek another taste of the food they just ate (674.15). However, in Malory's adaptation, he cuts nearly all of the French *Queste*'s references to the miraculous food and focuses his attention on the visual aspects of the feast and the quest. Malory spends significantly less time describing the meal the knights receive from the Grail, and he limits Arthur's comments to the "good grace" that "Oure

Lorde Jesu Cryste...hath shewed us thys day" (674.9-12). When Gawayne outlines the goals of the quest, he specifically seeks a better *view* of it:

But one thyng begyled us, that we myght nat *se* the Holy Grayle: hit was so preciously coverde. Wherefore I woll make here a vow that tomorne, withoute longer abydynge, I shall laboure in the Queste of the Sankgreall—and that I shall holde me oute a twelvemonth and a day or more if nede be—and never shall I returne unto the courte agayne tylle I have *sene* hit more opynly than hit hath bene *shewed* here. (674.15-21, emphasis mine)

Malory has translated this passage nearly word-for-word from his source. However, in the *Queste*, this passage is followed by reiterations from the other knights, who also desire not only to see, but also to taste the Grail's food once again. Malory, on the other hand, eliminates the references to food and simply states that "they arose up the moste party and made such avowes as Sir Gawayne hadde made" (674.24-26). Without the specific vows concerning the food, the reader assumes that these knights, like Gawayne, seek only to see the Grail more "opynly."

Certainly Malory's choices to reduce the references to taste may be attributed to narrative economy and simplicity; this section of the *Queste* also includes a reference to King Mordrains that Malory eliminates since the character is unnecessary to the plot at this moment. However, Malory's choices result in a much more vision-oriented quest that may even mirror the transition of the Eucharistic sacrament between the early thirteenth and the late fifteenth century.

Mary Hynes-Berry has described Malory's editorial practices as "instinctive" rather than "calculated," and the changes that Malory makes in this section may reflect his experience of the Eucharist in daily mass (106). The writer of the *Queste* in the 1230's may have had some memory of a time before the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 which prescribed once-annual communion, and the food provided by the Grail may have been emblematic of the food consumed in Holy Communion. However, by Malory's fifteenth century, visual reception of the Eucharist had been standard practice for at least two hundred years. The physical consumption of the bread and wine would have been a rare event for Malory himself, with the more frequent version of the sacrament being a clear sight of the bread at the elevation of the host.

If the knights' goal is to strive to see the Grail in the same way that a medieval Christian would strive to see the host at mass, we should also bear in mind that for Malory, the sight of the Grail will involve an intromissive variety of sight that gives agency to the gazed-upon object. Molly Martin has already described the Grail as having a certain amount of agency concerning its visibility: "The knights aim to see the grail; the grail looks for inner religiosity" (147). The Grail possesses the power to provide sight, not only because it is a divine object, but also because contemporary optical theories grant power to the visible object rather than to the viewer. Thus, the Grail can independently decide how much of

itself to reveal in any situation, and even selectively grant the power to see. Indeed, it does just this before the “Sankgreal” section when Ector (Launcelot’s brother) and Perceval nearly kill each other in a battle. The Grail miraculously arrives to heal their wounds, and while Ector cannot see the holy vessel, Perceval—a “perfyte mayden”—glimpses a “glemerynge of the vessell and of the mayden that bare hit” (643.8-9). Keeping in mind Malory’s visual focus for the Grail Quest and the independent, discerning nature of the Grail itself, let us now examine the degrees of success that the questing knights achieve.

Although Gawayne volunteers his participation first, his quest for a more open viewing of the Grail ultimately fails. After wandering on the Grail Quest for a long time, he meets Ector and reports that he has found “none adventure” (723.10). Gawayne and Ector travel together for several days until a mysterious vision of a hand holding a candle and bridle leads them to a chapel where “anone com downe a voice” that calls them “Knyghtes full of evyll faith and of poore beleve” (725.8-9). The voice also promises that they “may nat com to the aventures of the Sankgreall” (725.9-10). The hermit Nacien explicates the vision and voice for Gawayne and Ector as a sign that they lack “charité, abstinaunce, and trouthe”; for good measure, he also labels Gawayne an “untrew knight and a grete murtherar” (729.19-28). He advises Gawayne to confess his sin and “be counceyled,” but Gawayne replies that he has no time: “Sir...and I had leyser I

wolde speke with you, but my fellow Sir Ector ys gone and abith me yonder bynethe the hylle" (730.15-19).

Corey Olsen observes that Gawayne's impatience for worldly adventure and rejection of confession in the *Queste* and the *Morte Darthur* cause him to develop a "spiritual aridity" that ultimately excludes him from the Grail Quest (4). In this episode, we see just that. If, as Martin claims, the Grail looks for "inner religiosity," Gawayne is doomed to fail. The earlier parts of the *Morte Darthur* already showcase several of Gawayne's questionable deeds (refusing mercy to another knight and inadvertently killing a lady on his first quest, taking Pelleas' place in wooing Ettard, joining his brothers in the murder of Lamorak, etc.). Furthermore, the earlier parts of his Grail Quest feature other reprehensible deeds such as the accidental killing of his cousin Uwayne in his impatience for worldly adventure and the chance to increase his worship. On top of these offenses, he casually declines the opportunity to confess and do penance for his transgressions. It is no wonder that the voice from heaven—presumably God on behalf of the Grail—says that Gawayne will have no adventures. Far from achieving a more open sight of the Grail, Gawayne cannot even really participate in the quest.

Unlike Gawayne, Launcelot has two encounters with the Grail, the second time achieving some measure of success. His first encounter is disastrous, but it

does give us some idea of the physical appearance of the Grail itself and how it operates. Launcelot, frustrated in an attempt to enter a chapel where he suspects the Grail currently resides, lies down to sleep at the foot of a stone cross. In the middle of the night, a “syke knyght” arrives and laments, “A, sweete Lorde! Whan shall thys sorow leve me, and whan shall the holy vessel com by me wherethorow I shall be heled?” (693.21-25). Launcelot, half-sleeping and half-conscious, sees the Grail arrive, and hears the sick knight entreat the Grail for health: “Fayre swete Lorde which ys here within the holy vessel, take hede unto me, that I may be hole of thys malody!” (693.33-35).

The episode of the sick knight bears remarkable resemblance to an instance of a pilgrim visiting a relic to seek healing; and indeed, Macy points out that the *Queste*'s thirteenth century saw a rise in treating the host as a relic (“Theology” 393). While it had been common practice for centuries to keep some consecrated bread stored in churches to take to the sick or dying, the scarcity of contact with the Eucharist in the thirteenth century caused more people to venerate this reserved host (393). Macy adds that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there were literally hundreds of stories of miracle hosts that “might bleed onto the altar cloth, or turn into bloody flesh” (394). Such miracle hosts would be reserved in a special container—often with transparent glass—and the churches where they were kept would become pilgrimage destinations. The

vessel in which consecrated bread was stored (whether it was regarded as miraculous or whether it was simply awaiting the next mass) was, and still is, called a *ciborium* (pl. *ciboria*). Ciboria could be small enough to fit in a priest's pocket when he ministered to the sick or dying, or as tall as two feet. The largest and most ornate would have held the consecrated bread for occasions like the Corpus Christi processions; others would remain in designated areas of a church so that local residents of the parish or visiting pilgrims might pray to the host (Hourihane 87).

Alison Stones, in her study of the Grail as it appears in manuscript illuminations, notes that the Grail is portrayed as a ciborium in several of the *Queste* manuscripts, including the scene at the stone cross while Launcelot sleeps (323). While we cannot know if Malory's source manuscript included an illustration of the Grail as ciborium, the number of manuscripts with such depictions suggest that this was a common way of thinking about the Grail. When the sick knight in the "Sankgreal" prays and kisses the Grail and his malady disappears, Malory and the writer of the *Queste* are participating in a tradition of miracle host stories. As the sick knight points out, the Grail contains the actual body of their "Fayre swete Lorde."

The sick knight sees the Grail and receives the healing he requested. Indeed, he feels so well that he steals Launcelot's horse, helmet, and sword—an

underhanded action for someone who can see and kiss the Grail, in my opinion. However, Launcelot cannot fully awake and rise to see the Grail himself. The squire of the sick knight speculates that Launcelot's inability to rise stems from "som dedly synne whereof he was never confessed" (694). Thus begins a long segment of "Sankreal" in which Malory examines the faults of his favorite knight and his attempts to find forgiveness through confession and penance. As Karen Cherewatuk observes, "Malory's version of the grail quest foregrounds the sacrament of confession as preparation for the Eucharist, which is literally embodied in the Sankgreal" (68). This is unsurprising given the requirement that all Christians must confess their sins to a priest before their yearly communion on Easter, which was also prescribed by the Fourth Lateran.

Launcelot consults two hermits regarding his inability to see the Grail. The first identifies the root of Launcelot's problem as the "deadly synne" in which Launcelot was living while in the presence of the Grail (696.1). For this reason, Launcelot was unable to "se hyt with [his] worldely yen" [see it with his worldly eyes] (696.2-3, translation mine). The hermit encourages Launcelot to confess, and "hyde none olde synne from me," and for the first time Launcelot confesses that he has "loved a queen unmesurably and oute of mesure longe" (696.13-19). In a later part of the "Sankreal," a second hermit assigns Launcelot penance for his sin:

"I require you take thys hayre [hair shirt] that was thys holy mannes and put hit nexte thy skynne, and hit shal prevayle the gretly.... Also, sir, I charge you that ye ete no fleysshe as longe as ye be in the queste of Sankgreall [*sic*], nother ye shall drynke no wyne, and that ye hyre masse dayly and ye may do hit." (716.16-22)

If Launcelot can do these things and renounce his love of Guinevere, the hermit assures him that he will have better success in the Grail Quest: "[Y]et shall ye se hit more opynly than ever ye dud, and that shall ye undirstonde in shorte tyme" (716.30-32). Launcelot's willingness to confess and perform penance distinguishes him from Gawayne, whose reluctance to engage in the spiritual elements of the quest ensures that he fails.

Launcelot succeeds in performing his penance so that his second encounter with the Grail represents a qualified achievement of the quest. While he does not have the fullest achievement of the Grail (which is reserved for Galahad alone), he does attain the fuller, more open vision that Gawayne set as the goal of the quest; and as Tolhurst has observed, Malory's editorial decisions throughout the "Sankreal" section "collapse the distance" between Galahad and Launcelot's achievements, suggesting that Launcelot's achievement of the Grail is fairly complete (132). When Launcelot arrives at the room in the Castle Corbenic where the Grail resides, he witnesses the Grail on its silver table, where "a good man clothed as a pryste" seems to perform a mass (774.3). At the sacring of the mass, Launcelot sees above the priest "thre men, whereof the too [two] put

the yongyste by lyknes betwene the prystes hondis; and so he lyfft hym up ryght hyghe, and hit semed to shew so to the peple" (774.5-8). Field remarks that this scene is a "symbolic representation of a number of dogmas central to Catholic Christianity: the Trinity, the Incarnation and transubstantiation" ("Malory and the Grail" 151).<sup>20</sup> I would add that the scene also includes the most visual part of the mass: the sacring and elevation of the host, which in both the *Morte Darthur* and the *Queste* the priest shows to the "peple," even though Launcelot appears to be the only person in the room. The priest struggles with the symbolic spiritual weight of the transubstantiation, and Launcelot disobeys a direct order from God by entering the room to assist the priest.

For attempting to approach the Grail, God sends a "breeth...entromedled with fyre, which smote hym so sore in the vysayge hym thought hit brente hys vysayge" (774.16-18). Launcelot faints and remains unconscious for twenty-four days, but his reaction upon awakening and that of his Corbenic caretakers suggest that Launcelot's experience represents at least a partial achievement of the quest. When Launcelot regains consciousness, he asks why his guardians have awakened him. He then exclaims, "A, Jesu Cryste, who might be so blyssed that myght se opynly Thy grete mervayles of secretnesse there where no synner

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jill Mann who writes that here Malory "renders visible the transformation of bread and wine into body and blood, a transformation which is normally accessible to Christians only on the plane of belief" ("Malory and the Grail Legend" 206-07).

may be?" (775.8-9). Launcelot's exclamation clarifies the goal of the quest and suggests that he considers himself successful in his personal quest. The stated goal of the quest, as proclaimed by Gawayne, is to see the Grail more clearly, for when it appeared at Camelot, it was "preciously covered"; however, when Launcelot sees the Grail in the chapel at Corbenic, a cloth of "red samyte" still covers the vessel (773.35). Nonetheless, Launcelot exclaims about his ability to "se opynly" the wonders of the Eucharist and the hidden nature of God, which places him among the successful Grail Quest knights. Apparently, the goal was never simply to see the Grail as a physical object—although the spiritually arid Gawayne may have had this in mind when he made his vow. Instead, the goal of the quest is to see and understand the theological importance of the bread/body stored within the Grail.

When the Corbenites ask him to describe his vision, Launcelot acknowledges his inability to describe it, but he asserts that "had nat my synne bene beforetyme...I had sene muche more" (775.12-13). The castle residents reinforce Launcelot's success by proclaiming—with great certainty, it seems—that the "queste of the Sankgreall ys encheved now ryght in you, and never shall ye se of the Sankgreall more than ye have sene" (775.29-31). While Launcelot and his caretakers admit that he has not achieved the fullest vision of the Grail, Launcelot does seem content with his vision. He allows that he might have had

more success if he had been less sinful, but his exclamation portrays him as thankful for God's great mercy rather than regretful that he has failed. The castle inhabitants, too, seem satisfied with the simple fact that Launcelot has seen and understood a small part of God's mysteries.

In this section, Malory has deviated only slightly from his French source, but one editorial decision merits attention. When the residents of Corbenic deem Launcelot's quest complete, Malory stops, effectively marking the end of Launcelot's quest, with which Launcelot seems satisfied, despite the fact that he might have seen and understood more of the mysteries. However, the French *Quest* contains another line: "Or nos ameint Diex cax qui plus en doivent veoir" [May God send us others who are destined to see more] (Pauphilet 259, Burns 81). While the castle inhabitants have deemed Launcelot's personal quest complete, they recognize at least some part of the quest remains: others can surely achieve it better. The fact that they beg God to send them someone else suggests disappointment with Launcelot and his inability to finish the task. By cutting this line, Malory does not allow the Corbenites to diminish his hero's achievement. For Malory, it is enough that a sinful man—perhaps not unlike himself—is able to achieve even a small understanding of God's great love, an astounding accomplishment in its own right. The fact that Launcelot's vision simulates a mass suggests that this is a salvation that other sinful people can

achieve by attending mass and seeing their savior in the consecrated and elevated host.

If Launcelot's partial but satisfactory achievement of the Grail Quest represents a mass, it makes sense that Galahad's first achievement of the quest represents the Last Supper, the event that every mass commemorates with Holy Communion. At the same Castle of Corbenic, Galahad and eleven other knights see the Grail, again on its silver table. Four angels and Joseph of Arimathea descend from heaven, and Joseph conducts a mass. Similar to Launcelot's encounter, the climax of this vision represents the climax of a mass:

And than [Joseph] made semblaunte as though he wolde have gone to the sakeryng of the masse, and than he toke an obley which was made in lykness of brede. And at the lyftynge up there cam a vigoure [figure] in lykness of a chylde, and the vysayge was as rede and as bright os ony fyre, and smote hymselff into the brede, that all they saw hit that the brede was fourmed of a fleyshely man. And than he put hit into the holy vessell agayne, and than he ded that longed to a preste to do to a masse." (782.34-783.6)

In this passage, the knights experience an elevated elevation of the host, complete with a visual representation of the miracle of transubstantiation: the bread of the Eucharist is literally and visibly filled with the presence of Christ, here represented as the infant Jesus.

This part of the Grail Knights' experience, with its representation of a mass and visualization of the miracle of transubstantiation, bears striking resemblance to Launcelot's achievement. The part that follows, however, makes

the Grail Knights' achievement greater than that of Launcelot. When Joseph completes the mass and departs, a man with "all the sygnes of the Passion of Jesu Cryste bledyng all opynly" emerges from the cup (783.14-15). This man informs the knights: "I woll no lenger cover me frome you, but ye shall se now a parte of my secretes and of my hydde thynges. Now holdith and resseyvith the high mete which ye have so much desired" (783.19-20). Instead of a priest, who would have represented God's mediator for humankind, the Grail Knights are instructed by Christ himself.

Two features of Christ's speech to the knights are noteworthy in the context of medieval optical theory and Eucharist theology. First, as readers would expect for an intromissive model of sight, Christ maintains his agency, despite being the object of the knights' gaze. Although this moment marks the end of the quest for eleven of the twelve Grail Knights, Christ informs them that they will now see only "*a parte* of my secretes and my hydde thynges," not a full vision (emphasis mine). Just as when the appearance of the bread continues to mask the presence of Christ in a regular mass, Christ at Corbenic continues to mask at least some of his true nature. A second feature worthy of note is that Jesus himself tells the knights that the reception of his body and blood is an ocular process. The knights are told simply to behold and receive—"holdith and

resseyvith.”<sup>21</sup> The knights do also consume a small piece of the bread, which they describe as “so sweete that hit was mervaylous to telle,” but Christ explicitly states that seeing him (or the host in a normal mass setting) equates to receiving him (783.23-24).

These achievements of the Grail by Launcelot and by the fellowship of Grail Knights represent two points on a continuum of understanding God’s mysteries. For most late-medieval laypeople, like Launcelot, their exposure to God was limited to what could be seen in mass. The twelve Grail Knights achieve a deeper understanding through the instruction of Christ himself in a reconstruction of the Last Supper. If the narrative trajectory continues, then, the final achievement of the Grail by Galahad alone represents a full, unmediated exposure to the entirety of God’s mysteries. A year after Galahad, Bors, and Perceval bring the Grail and its accoutrements to Sarras, the knights once again witness a mass at the silver table of the Grail, this time performed by a man who turns out to be Joseph, the son of Joseph of Arimathea. Unlike the other masses on the Grail Quest, though, Joseph does not complete this mass. Instead, when he

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<sup>21</sup> The verb “holdith” could also mean to literally hold with one’s hands; the *Middle English Dictionary* does offer “to hold with the hand, grasp” as a primary definition for “holder” (“holder” 1a). However, instructions to take the bread, hold it in one’s hand, and bring it to one’s mouth would be inconsistent with standard mass practices. In both medieval and modern distributions of the host, the priest puts the bread directly into the communicant’s mouth; in this way, priests reduced the chances that the sacred body might be dropped or otherwise treated with disrespect. Christ in this scene almost certainly means that the knights should simply to “regard” or “consider” (“holder” 27b, 27c).

arrives at the moment of the sacring, he stops and beckons Galahad to join him so that, as I reported at the opening of this chapter, he can “se that thou hast much desired to se” (787.11-12). Galahad approaches, and when confronted with the full vision of God’s mysteries, he begins to “tremble ryght harde whan the dedly fleysh began to beholde the spirituall thynges” (787.13-14).

In this scene, we once again see the agency of the visible object and its ability to choose how much of itself to reveal to certain individuals. Only Galahad sees the full mysteries of God, despite the fact that Bors and Perceval also stand in the room with the Grail. We also see the power of sight in the medieval imagination, especially a sight of the consecrated host. Galahad does in fact touch and taste the bread—Joseph offers him full communion—but it *follows* his vision of the “spiritual thynges.” The sight alone produces his violent physical reaction; he need not actually touch or taste it. As Christ told the knights in the previous Grail encounter, it is enough to “behold and receive.”

After his encounter with God’s mysteries, Galahad prays once more: “Now, my blyssed lorde, I wold nat lyve in this wrecched world no lenger, if hit myght please The, Lorde” (787.16-18). After Galahad speaks briefly with Joseph, Bors, and Perceval, God grants his wish, and the remaining knights see “a grete multitude of angels bare hit [his soul] up to hevyn” (788.3). For Galahad, the final sight and consumption of consecrated bread from the Grail acts as his housel, the

last communion given to those who are dying. As Rubin observes regarding the Grail and housel, “The Grail was the romantic idealized extension of the host—one was to see/receive it, and then to die, like Galahad” (*Corpus Christi* 141). For Galahad, who has achieved a full sight and unveiled vision of God’s mysteries, nothing remains but to join his Savior.

#### *The “Trewyst” and “Holyest” Tale: The Absence of Tragedy in the “Sankgreal”*

In the previous chapters, I have included a final section examining two late-medieval markers of tragedy: a downward spiral from prosperity to misery near the end of the narrative and a cautionary lesson that readers should take away from the text. However, the ending of the “Sankgreal” resists these two features, despite the demise of half the Round Table knights and the death of the tale’s ostensible hero, Galahad. As I will show, the absence of tragedy in this tale is due mostly to its hero’s proper engagement with visual practices concerning the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup>

Although Galahad makes the Grail Quest look easy as he prepares his soul to receive his savior and directs his eyes to the proper images, there are ways for ocular communion to go tragically wrong. For instance, one fifteenth

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<sup>22</sup> Most critics, including Fiona Tolhurst cited above, agree that Malory elevates the role of Launcelot in the “Sankgreal” portion of the *Morte Darthur*. He may even rival Galahad for the position of protagonist; however, Galahad probably retains the role of “hero” for the tale. His arrival at Camelot signals the beginning of the quest, his achievement of the Grail vision is the most complete of any of the knights’, and his death at Sarras effectively concludes the text.

century chronicle reports that a man who robbed a church went to mass a few days later and “at the levacyon of the mass, he myght not see that blessed sacrament of the auter” (qtd. in Duffy 101). Concerned by this selective blindness, the guilty man attends another mass immediately, but while he can see the bread as it lies on the alter, “when the pryste hylde uppe that holy sacrament at the tyme of levacyon he myght se nothyng of that blesyd body” (qtd. Duffy 101). Only after a thorough confession to a priest does he regain the ability to see the host at the elevation. A similar miracle is reported by Robert Mannyng in *Handlyng Synne*, although in this story, the guilty party is a monk who doubts the real presence of Christ in the communion elements. During the elevation, the monk sees a vision of a child being stabbed by an angel, and when he is offered the bread, he is horrified to discover that the bread has been replaced by bloody morsels of flesh (Horstman 201-02). The narrative goal for both of these stories—and in others like them throughout the medieval period—is to show readers what *not* to do. By avoiding behaviors such as theft or doubt, readers can properly engage in the ritual gazing in daily mass, and receive the spiritual benefits that the elevated host provides.

The difference between the characters in these cautionary exempla and Galahad in the “Sankgreal” lies in these characters’ spiritual preparation. Whereas the thief and the monk above had committed sins and required

confession to see the host properly, Galahad spends the entirety of the Grail Quest making correct decisions as he prepares himself for his encounter with the Grail. In the words of Dorsey Armstrong, “[Galahad] leaps into the text fully formed as the perfect Christian knight and succeeds in the Grail Quest with little struggle” (123). Armstrong points out that Galahad’s flawless execution of Christian virtues represents just as much of a threat to the Round Table as pagan Saracens, and even modern critics seem uncomfortable with his perfection. Indeed many have labeled him “aggressively virginal” or “perfectly boring” (Armstrong 117).<sup>23</sup> Despite these labels, though, Galahad is undeniably the best prepared knight for the quest, and because of this preparation, he achieves the fullest vision of the Eucharist through the Grail—a major accomplishment that essentially ends the quest.

Because of Galahad’s preparation and successful visual encounter with the Grail, his death does not represent a fall from prosperity that we would expect from a tragedy. Bors and Perceval do grieve the loss of their friend: “So whan Sir Percivale and Sir Bors saw Sir Galahad dede they made as much sorow as ever ded men”; however, the loss of Galahad occurs in such a holy manner that they do not “falle in dispayre” (788.9-11). Indeed it would be difficult to mourn for a companion whose soul has been borne to heaven by a “grete

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<sup>23</sup> See also Schichtman (13) and Mahoney (50).

multitude of angels...evyn in the sight of hys too felowis" (788.3-4). Furthermore, Galahad's soul is accompanied by a mysterious "hande" that bears the Grail and spear to heaven (788.5). Far from failure, this moment with singing angels and mysterious signs represents a major triumph as Galahad is granted his final wish. Thanks to his proper spiritual preparation and visual practices, Galahad's soul experiences both a physical and metaphorical rise—not on fortune's wheel, but to heaven.

Because Galahad's final moments are not misery and death (like those of Troilus, Criseyde, or Balin), the "Sankgreal" also lacks the cautionary moral of a tragedy. While the text's conclusion does imply a moral lesson to prepare one's heart for the reception of God, it does not do so by showing only what happens when readers fail to do so. There are indeed examples of how to fail on the quest (e.g. Gawayne), but there are also positive examples in Launcelot, who works hard to achieve a small understanding of the Grail's secrets, and Galahad, who succeeds outright: readers should emulate Galahad's behavior, not shun it.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, I would like to return to the questions asked at the beginning of this chapter: Why does Galahad tremble at the sight of the Grail in Sarras? For that matter, why do the other knights who see the Grail not experience a similar reaction? Does it signify that their "achievement" is somehow less valuable than

Galahad's? Furthermore, why is the goal of the entire quest only to "se" the Grail? While Malory's gentlemanly prose refuses to answer, I have shown that the scientific and theological contexts of the *Morte Darthur* and *Queste del Saint Graal* clarify many of the intricacies of Malory's Grail Quest.

As I have shown, the sacrament of Holy Communion was an exceptionally visual experience for churchgoers in Malory's day, particularly at the elevation of the host. For the centuries between the Fourth Lateran and the Reformation, the sight of the raised host represented the laity's only interaction with the elements except at major holidays like Easter. Popular devotional practices suggest that medieval lay people—perhaps like Malory himself—considered sight to be a perfectly adequate substitute for actually consuming the elements of Holy Communion: behaviors like running from church to church to witness additional elevations or drilling holes through vision-obstructing rood screens confirm the importance of simply seeing the host (Duffy 97). If, as Hynes-Berry says, Malory's editorial practices are "instinctive" rather than "calculated," it would make sense that he would instinctively portray the goal of the quest to be vision-driven because a sight and understanding of the Eucharistic elements would be his most frequent interaction with the sacrament.

Furthermore, medieval optical theories confirm that vision is in itself a kind of physical contact. As Suzannah Biernoff writes, for medieval thinkers,

visual perception allowed for a mingling of viewer and visual object: “when we perceive something, that thing in a very real way becomes *part* of us: the essence of the thing is drawn forth from the object...and impregnates the receptive matter of our sense organs and mind” (100, emphasis original). In fact, in the *Queste*’s version of the events concerning Launcelot at the stone cross, the sick knight does not simply “look” at the Grail; he “la toche a ses euz” [touched it with his eyes] (Pauphilet 59, Burns 21). Modern readers can perhaps better understand the appeal of simply seeing the Grail if we keep in mind that medieval models of sight collapse the distance between subject and object and allow for a more intimate experience than our modern understanding of sight.

Finally, modern readers would do well to remember that according to contemporary intromissive models of sight, the contact between viewer and visible object is a contact governed by the object instead of the viewer. When the visual object is also a divine object like the Holy Grail, it makes sense that it can independently decide how much of itself to reveal to viewers based on what Martin calls their “inner religiosity.” Thus, the spiritually arid Gawayne makes no progress on the Grail Quest, and Launcelot can make a partial achievement after confession and penance. When the spiritually pure Galahad encounters the Grail, he does not control the quality of the vision any more than Gawayne or Launcelot does, but he is better prepared for the mysteries of the Eucharist. Thus,

in the moment when Galahad sees the host in the form of the Grail in Sarras, he actually makes full, raw, physical contact with the divine, inducing an understandable amount of trembling. This does make his achievement more complete than that of his father's, but it does not dismiss Launcelot's own achievement. After all, the average Christian (medieval or modern) cannot hope to be as perfect as Galahad; instead, Malory sets up Launcelot's achievement to be more successful than that in the source material. For Malory, an earthly knight seeking salvation in this world—and for his readers doing likewise—attending mass and seeing the host raised at the elevation might be the most that they can hope for, but that in itself is a wondrous achievement.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Malory's Missing Moments: Visual Romance Motifs in the *Morte Darthur*

In the previous chapters, I have examined sight in three different contexts: as it appears in philosophical treatises like the *Consolation of Philosophy*, as it relates to invisibility and aventure, and as an important element in late-medieval Eucharistic theology. In each of these cases, vision functions as a physical action performed by a character that indicates the beginning of a cognitive process: when a character “casts his/her eyes,” the reader can interpret the character’s vision as a nearly tactile encounter with the visual object and as a step toward a greater understanding of that object. This chapter represents a departure from this kind of intentional, mechanical seeing and explores a fourth context for vision in late-medieval literature: as a genre convention of courtly romance.

For example, midway through the “Book of Sir Tristram” in *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory takes a short detour to relate the history of “Alexander the Orphan,” a nephew of King Mark. Despite Alexander’s rocky childhood and early days as a knight—Mark unjustly murders Alexander’s father, and Morgan le Fay captures Alexander after his first tournament—he eventually finds true

love with “Alys La Beall Pylgryme” [Alice the Beautiful Pilgrim] (511.26).<sup>1</sup> Their first exchange exhibits one of the most explicit iterations of one of the most recognizable romance genre conventions—Love at First Sight:

Whan La Beale Alys sawe hym juste so well, she thought  
hym a passing goodly knight on horseback. And than she lepe oute  
of hir pavylyon and toke Sir Alysaundir by the brydyll, and thus  
she seyde: ‘Fayre knight, I requyre the of thy knyghthode, shew me  
thy vysayge!’

‘That dare I well,’ seyde Sir Alysaundir, ‘shew my vysayge.’  
And than he put of his helme, and whan she sawe his vysage she  
seyde, ‘A swete fadir Jesu! The I muste love, and never othir.’  
(512.7-14)

If Alexander finds Alys’ proclamation of exclusive and undying love to be abrupt or hyperbolic, he does not comment on it. Instead, when Alys “unwympel[s]” her face, he responds in kind: “A, Lorde Jesu! Here have I founde my love and my lady! And therefore, fayre lady, I promise you to be youre knight, and none other that beryth the lyff” (512.16-19). For both Alexander—who has not even learned the name of his chosen lady yet—and Alys, a single sight suffices to engender love that will apparently last a lifetime.

This unmistakable instance of love at first sight has invited many scholarly comments regarding Malory’s ideas about love and genre. Donald Hoffman calls this exchange “a delicious antidote to the ritual of courtly love” as

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<sup>1</sup> References to *Le Morte Darthur* come from P. J. C. Field’s edition (D.S. Brewer, 2013) and include page and line numbers.

it “contradicts proprieties” usually observed by lovers in medieval romance (“Malory’s Cinderella Knights” 153). Hoffman appreciates that, unlike characters in other romances who thrill at stolen glances and implied-but-rarely-stated affections, the young and uninitiated Alys and Alexander simply look each other in the face and declare their love. Approaching the tale from another angle, Amy Kaufman notes the subversion of gender roles throughout the episode: unlike most romances, this one features a male knight who is both captured and rescued by female characters. Kaufman observes that Alys takes part in this gender subversion by demanding a sight of Alexander and proclaiming her love before Alexander does. Moreover, she writes that focusing on the women of the narrative provides a new way to rate the success of the title character in a romance: “reading with an eye toward valuable and effective relationships between women, and for moments of female power and subjectivity, can make the tale itself less ‘disappointing’” (141). Helen Cooper, too, observes the reversal of gender roles in the episode, but attributes them to Malory’s Englishness. She points out that while French romances more frequently assign female characters passive roles, English romances are more likely to place females on a more even rhetorical footing with their corresponding male characters. With Alys and Alexander, Cooper sees the “insular traditions of the active heroine who instigates a mutual love” (“Malory’s Language of Love” 304). All three of these

scholars note changes that Malory has made to his source material; all three also agree that the episode belongs to the genre of romance, and that Alys and Alexander's love at first sight is a typical convention of romance, even if Malory subverts the motif.

The tale of "Alexander the Orphan" is certainly not the only appearance of love at first sight in the *Morte Darthur*. We also see a version of it in nearly every pair of the work's important lovers. Uther sees Igraine and is struck by her beauty (admittedly this is more a case of *lust* at first sight). Gareth sees Lyoness and burns with passion for her. Tristram sees Isolde and "kyste grete love" on her due to her beauty (302.10). Arthur himself takes one look at Guinevere and loves her for life: "And there [Camylarde] had Arthure the firste sight of Gwenyvere, the kyngis doughter of the londe of Camylarde, and ever aftir he loved hir" (32.11-12). If Malory is aware enough of the convention to adapt it to suit his different characters or even to ridicule it gently as Hoffman suggests, he must use it consciously and intentionally. And yet, the convention is conspicuous in its absence for his most important pair of lovers, Launcelot<sup>2</sup> and Guinevere.

In this chapter, I explore why Malory has dispensed with the cornerstone convention of love at first sight for his favorite knight and his lady. The absence

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will use Malory's spelling of "Launcelot" (with "au") when discussing Malory's Launcelot; I will use the spelling "Lancelot" (no "u") to indicate the French text or character.

is even more striking considering that Malory's French source for much of Launcelot's adventures lingers luxuriously over Launcelot and Guinevere's moment of first sight. Given the reputation of the French *Lancelot* as a salacious narrative with its romantic dalliances, one wonders why Malory would skip the "exciting parts" and keep only the drier adventures of Launcelot. In this chapter, I will first examine the convention of love at first sight and two other visual romance motifs—sight as both a cause for and symptom of lovesickness and the sight of the beloved in battle—in romances leading up to Malory's time. Then I will consider Malory's treatment of these visual romance motifs for his lovers other than Launcelot and Guinevere. Finally, I will compare key moments of sight in the French *Lancelot* to Malory's construction of his central lovers' relationship. Ultimately, I will argue two points: 1) that Malory's excision of love at first sight for Launcelot and Guinevere is part of his program of clearing the reputation of his favorite knight, and 2) that the presence or absence of sight-oriented motifs such as love at first sight helps us to determine the genre of the *Morte Darthur* as a whole. If these kinds of conventions are important to Malory's understanding of romance, their absence early in the text signals readers that the text *will not be* a romance. Instead, Malory's attempt to clear Launcelot's name ironically and paradoxically refocuses the readers' attention on the forbidden, adulterous nature of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship. With these subtle

adjustments to visual romance motifs, Malory prepares his reader for tragedy—even when his favorite lovers first meet.

### *Visual Motifs in Courtly Romance*

Of course, scholars have yet to agree on the exact genre of the *Morte Darthur*, so my examination of vision as genre convention necessarily takes part in the attempt to categorize Malory's text. The attempt is complicated, because, as Larry D. Benson points out, Malory has created a "cycle of his own invention," in which Malory draws from many sources to "shape this cycle in accord with his own ideas of coherence and proportion" (28-29). Since many of Malory's sources were not originally designed to cooperate, they may conflict or even contradict one another. At times this conflict may threaten the continuity of plot or characterization, and at other times it may juxtapose episodes originally composed in different genres or modes.

As a result of the cyclic nature of the *Morte Darthur*, the text at least partially meets the definitions of several genres. Due to the length and subject matter representing the story of a full nation (Arthur's Britain), the *Morte* meets many of the qualifications of epic.<sup>3</sup> However, some of those same features—

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the genre of epic in relation to the *Morte Darthur*, see Kevin Whetter's *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (51-60).

especially in the early episodes relating the solidification of Arthur's kingdom and conquest of Rome—could also mark the narrative as a historical chronicle that reports the early history of Britain. Others find that the *Morte* is a medley of genres; for example P. J. C. Field calls it “romance material [in] chronological form” (*Romance and Chronicle* 37). In the end, most scholars agree, though, that a majority of the episodes within the cycle represent the genre of romance.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, defining *romance* with any certainty or precision is a task nearly as slippery as selecting a single genre for the *Morte Darthur*. As Raluca L. Radulescu and Corey James Rushton write, the study of the Middle English romance—whether courtly or popular—is “notoriously tricky business” (1). Because the term *romance* covers such a wide variety of texts with varying lengths, forms (verse/prose), character types, and themes, Susan Crane remarks that “insofar as observations about the generic nature of medieval romance can be made, they must be fluid and contingent” (10). As a result, many critics hesitate to prescribe definite rules for the genre; instead, most take a descriptive approach for identifying markers of the romance. For example, Melissa Furrow advocates a “radial categories” approach (51-53). In her study, she examines particularly popular romances of the Middle Ages and determines the essential

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<sup>4</sup> For examples, see: Larry Benson “Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*” (123), and Sandra Ness Ihle “Generic Shift in Malory” (225).

features of these central romances; then she traces those central features as they occur in stories that contain fewer of them. Similarly, Helen Cooper assures readers that romances are recognizable by sharing a “family resemblance” (*English Romance* 8). She argues that even if a text is missing a few of the standard motifs, it can still be part of the romance genre family, as long as it balances the romance conventions with those of other genres (9-10). Out of a range of romance motifs that Cooper describes in her book, an author need only employ a few for their work to be read and understood as a romance.

Although it is more common for critics to take a *descriptive* approach to defining romance, some have attempted a *prescriptive* approach, and when they do, the most common element for the genre is love as a driving force. For instance, the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature* describes romance as “a particular kind of story. . . concerned with courtly knights who, motivated by love or by religious fervor, went in search of adventure” (Ruud 547). In another definition, Kevin Whetter confidently states that there are four fundamental elements that a narrative must employ to be labeled as a romance: “[W]hatever other features may commonly occur, the essential and defining features of English romance are the combination and interaction of love and ladies and adventure, culminating in a happy ending” (7). Whetter’s insistence on a happy ending distinguishes him from most romance scholars, who allow that romances do not always end

happily; however, most definitions do agree on the other three features of love, ladies and adventure. Cooper, too, lists adventure and love as two foundational elements of the genre, although she lists many more, such as the protagonist's discovery of his/her identity and the testing of secular ideals (*English Romance* 7-15). For the purposes of this chapter, I will assume, like Derek Pearsall, that "[a]bove all, the hero [in romance as opposed to the earlier genre of epic] now thinks and feels as well as acts; there is an inner consciousness to be explored. He is in love" (22).

In the genre of courtly romance, this all-important theme of love is usually expressed in predictable ways. Carol Fewster writes that romance is a "highly formulaic and stylized" genre, often conveying complicated ideas in small, familiar units or motifs (v).<sup>5</sup> This kind of stylized love often begins with a dramatic first sight of the beloved, as in the episode of Alexander and Alys in the *Morte Darthur* quoted above. In fact, John Stevens finds this convention important enough to include in his list of quintessential romance motifs: "the mysterious challenge or call; the *first sight of the beloved*; the lonely journey through a hostile land; the fight" (16, emphasis mine). If love at first sight is the most common, and perhaps the most significant, visual romance motif, it is

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<sup>5</sup> See also P. J. C. Field: "The English prose romance has cultivated an artificial and decorated expression" (*Romance and Chronicle* 37).

certainly not the only sight-driven convention. Ludger Lieb, examining a wider scope of romances from both England and the continent, includes vision as an important outward indication of love even after the lovers' initial visual contact. He writes that the most common symptoms of developing love and lovesickness include: "Loving words and *glances*, the trembling heart, blushing, and being unable to speak" (89, emphasis mine). A final visual motif that I will consider in this chapter is the inspiring sight of the beloved in battle: often, all it takes for an underdog knight to win a fight is a glimpse of his lady waving or weeping in her tower. In short, if a romance deals with characters falling in love—as the genre so often does—some of the most important indications of that love will be visual motifs. Let us now consider what these motifs might signify in the contexts of both literary history and medieval optics.

The motif of love at first sight is one of the oldest and most frequent in all of literature, and certainly in the genre of medieval romance. Cooper observes that the convention appears in its "fully developed" form even at the earliest stage in the development of the genre with an occurrence in the French *Le Roman d'Eneas* (c. 1160) (*English Romance* 231). In this narrative, the heroine Lavine sees Eneas (Aeneas) from her tower window and promptly falls in love, much like Alys in "Alexander the Orphan":

[V]it Eneas qui fu dessouz,  
fforment l'esgarde seur touz.

Moult li sambla et bel et gent,  
bien a oy comfaitemment  
le loent tuit par la cite  
et de prouesce et de biauté;  
bien le nota en son coraige.  
La ou elle fu en estaige  
amors l'a de son dart ferue.

[She saw Eneas, who was below. She gazed intently at him above all. He seemed most handsome and noble to her. She had heard well how everyone praised him throughout the city both for his prowess and his beauty, and she took good note in her heart. There where she was standing in her chamber, Love struck her with his dart.] (Petit lines 8111-19, Yunck pg. 215)<sup>6</sup>

For Lavine, one sight of Eneas produces a love so powerful that she has no choice but to love: “Or est cheoite en las d’Amor, / ou veulle ou non, amer l’estuet” [Now she has fallen into the snare of love: whether she wishes it or not, she must love] (Petit 8122-23, Yunck 215). Here in the earliest stages of medieval romance, the convention is recognizable even for a modern reader.

If love at first sight has been an available motif for romance writers since the earliest days of the genre, it makes sense that it is also one of the most frequent. Cooper notes that the motif often functions within a set of equally familiar motifs to portray the early stages of love, especially for female characters:

The heroine’s falling in love follows a regular pattern. She sets eyes on the man she is to love and is smitten with desire for him,

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<sup>6</sup> Old French quotations are taken from *Le Roman d’Eneas*, ed. Aimé Petit (Le Livre de Poch, 1997). Modern English translations are taken from *Eneas: A Twelfth-Century French Romance*, ed. John Yunck (Columbia UP, 1974).

typically by the arrow of the God of Love piercing through her eye to her heart. She is overwhelmed by the strangeness and paradoxical nature of the feelings that ensue, and engages in a long monologue with herself, usually as she lies in her bed, while she tries to come to terms with what has happened to her. She then devises means to let the man know of her desire. It is a clustering of memes [motifs that can shift over time to acquire new meaning] that is thoroughly familiar. (*English Romance* 229-30)

As Cooper's remark suggests, the motif of love at first sight is ubiquitous in medieval romance, and even makes its way into contemporary treatises on love. Indeed, Andreas Capellanus begins his famous commentary with some comments on vision. The first words of *The Art of Courtly Love* (1186-88 AD) state bluntly that "Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from *the sight of* and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex" (28, emphasis mine). At the end of the opening section titled "What Love Is," he again stresses that love—that great inborn suffering—comes from "seeing and meditating" (29). For Andreas, vision is so essential to love that he even proclaims that an inability to see "is a bar to love because a blind man cannot see anything upon which his mind can reflect immoderately" (33). The fact that Andreas begins his work with vision and allots so much space to it suggests that the connection between love and vision was already so common that it would be a logical place to start a treatise on love as it appears in literature and perhaps in real life.

As the courtly romance began to flourish in France around the same time as Andreas' *Art of Courtly Love*, the dramatic first sight of the beloved continued

to be an important feature. Readers can see this trait in the archetypical *Roman de la Rose*, which employs vision several times in the opening chapters. One of the guests in Mirth's garden is the God of Love, who is attended only by a youth named "Douz regarz" ["Sweet Looks"], implying that glances between lovers are one of the primary ways that love functions (Strubel line 886, Dahlberg pg. 43).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when the narrator gazes into the Fountain of Narcissus, he sees two crystals; according to C. S. Lewis these crystals represent the eyes of the beloved (*Allegory of Love* 117, 125, 129). Finally, when the narrator stands before the entralling rosebushes, the God of Love shoots him with five arrows, the first two of which explicitly enter his body through his eyes:

Il a tantost pris une flesche;  
Et quant la corde fu en coche  
Il entesa jusqu'a l'oreille  
L'arc qui estoit forz a merveille  
Et trait a moi par tel devise  
Que parmi l'ueil m'a ou cuer mise  
La saiete par grant redor.

[He took an arrow and, when the string was in the nock, drew the bow—a wondrously strong one—up to his ear and shot at me in such a way that with great force he sent the point through the eye and into my heart.] (Strubel 1686-92, Dahlberg 54)

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<sup>7</sup> Old French quotations are taken from *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel (Le Livre Poche, 1992). Modern English translations are taken from *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton UP, 1995).

The narrator recognizes these first two arrows as “Biautez” and “Simplesce” [“Beauty” and “Simplicity”], and while he can remove the shafts of the arrows, he cannot extract the points, which have lodged in his heart (de Lorris lines 1713, 1734).<sup>8</sup> In the world of the *Roman*, the initial sight of the beloved (here the rosebud in its youthful beauty and simplicity) causes a permanent alteration in the lover’s heart.

Considering the immense popularity of the *Roman* in both France and England, it is unsurprising to find its influence in romances as they developed in both locations.<sup>9</sup> For example, I have already examined Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which Troilus feels “thorugh-shoten and thorugh-darted” [thoroughly pierced] by Criseyde’s look (I.325, translation mine).<sup>10</sup> The convention also appears in his “Knight’s Tale” when Palamon and Arcite glimpse Emily from their tower prison. Palamon is the first to “cast his eye upon Emelya” and feel “stongen...unto the herte” [stung to the heart] (I.1077-78). He explains to his cousin, “I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye / Into myn herte”

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<sup>8</sup> The wounding from the other three arrows follows the same pattern of lodging in the narrator’s heart, but they do not explicitly enter through his eyes. As “Courtesy,” “Company,” and “Fair Seeming” represent less visual facets of love, Cupid may shoot them more directly from his bow to the narrator’s heart.

<sup>9</sup> See Dahlberg (1).

<sup>10</sup> References to Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd edition*. Citations for *Troilus and Criseyde* include book and line number(s). Citations for the *Canterbury Tales* include fragment and line number(s).

[I was hurt right now through my eye into my heart] (I.1096-97). Arcite joins him at the window and suffers a similar fate:

...Arcite gan espye  
Wher as this lady romed to and fro,  
And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,  
That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,  
Arcite is hurt as much as he, or moore.  
[Arcite did spy where the lady was roaming about, and with that sight her beauty hurt him so, so that if Palamon was badly wounded, Arcite is hurt just as much or more.] (I.1112-16)

The resemblance to the pattern established in the *Roman de la Rose* is unmistakable, and while the *Roman* is not the direct source for either *Troilus and Criseyde* or the “Knight’s Tale,” the three pieces take their motifs from the same pool of expected romance genre conventions.

While Chaucer’s male protagonists suffer from love at first sight, the motif also affects female characters (as noted by Cooper above) in romances such as *Ipomedon*, in which no fewer than three ladies fall in love with the title hero by simply looking at him. It also occurs in *Huon* in which Huon’s daughter Clariette sees Florence and thinks to herself,

“[T]his Yonge man whome I neuer saw before / maketh me to thynke that I neuer thought before / so that it maketh my blode and all my membres to trymble.”  
[“This young man whom I never saw before makes me think things that I never thought before so that my blood and limbs tremble.] (Lee 628.20-23).

In these and other romances, the motif of love at first sight of his/her beloved is familiar and available to the collective memory and consciousness of the medieval audience. Cooper writes of characters and motifs such as these that “they were as familiar as Cinderella is now, and by similar means: through oral retellings, through illustrations, by simply being around in the culture” (1).

By merely “being around in the culture,” visual romance motifs flourished through the Renaissance and have survived even to the present day. Cooper writes that many medieval romance motifs experienced “remarkable metamorphoses” in the Elizabethan era (*English Romance* 3). Visual motifs like love at first sight seem to have remained much as they were, although they did gain some irony as Renaissance writers overplayed the genre convention. For example, in Christopher Marlowe’s poem *Hero and Leander*, the title characters experience love at first sight much like Troilus and Criseyde. Leander encounters Hero at an altar in the woods,

sacrificing turtles' blood,  
Vail'd to the ground, veiling her eyelids close;  
And modestly they opened as she rose.  
Thence flew Love's arrow with the golden head;  
And thus Leander was enamoured. (1.158-62)

Leander’s gaze in turn enflames Hero, and the speaker asks, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “Whoever lov’d, that lov’d not at first sight?” (176) Shakespeare makes use this line as an overly dramatic “proverb” used by the willful and ignorant

shepherdess Phebe in *As You Like It*, and revisits the idea in many of his plays (3.5.1735). For instance, in *Love's Labour's Lost* Berowne, declares in a humorously analytical meditation on love that “love [is] first learned in a lady's eyes” and that love provides special powers to the lover's vision: “It adds a precious seeing to the eye; / A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind” (4.3.331-38). Importantly, though, even as these renaissance poets gently mock the motif, they continue to employ it as an effective plot device.<sup>11</sup>

If love at first sight is a standard convention of romance throughout the medieval period, it must perform an essential function for the narrative. After all, as John Stevens observes, genre conventions are not simply arbitrary rules for storytelling: “[Conventions] are not invented for their own sake and do not maintain their life on those terms. They come into being because they are needed. They are needed, primarily, for explanation; they are needed to order experience, to impose meaning on life” (30). What kind of human experience, then, might

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<sup>11</sup> Even in the twenty-first century, literature and visual media employ the motif of love at first sight, often as a cliché or parody. For example, in Walt Disney's recent children's film *Frozen*, Anna dreams of the moment when she will “suddenly see him standing there, / A beautiful stranger, tall and fair” (*Frozen*). Anna feels confident that this initial moment of visual contact will inevitably lead them to “laugh and talk all evening, / Which is totally bizarre.” As she breaks into the song's refrain, Anna wanders through the castle's art gallery, positioning herself before paintings of lovers. For each of the six paintings, her placement allows the men in the paintings to gaze lovingly at her. The tone of the song is light and slightly ironic as it gently parodies the conventions of courtly romance, but ultimately, it proves that even for today's audiences—even for naïve audience members like children—the motif of love at first sight is alive and well. In fact, in a 2003 study of the most popular Disney animated feature films, 78% of the romantic relationships portrayed began with a moment of love at first sight (Tanner et al 364).

this motif seek to explain, and how does our modern understanding of the motif change when we consider medieval ideas about optics?

Modern psychology may at least partially explain the phenomenon of love at first sight. Psychologist James Grant-Jacob points out that many independent studies have determined that humans have evolved to intuitively select a suitable sexual partner in less than a one-half of a second (1). These selections are based on many subconscious factors, including a physical similarity to oneself or one's parents, perceived intelligence or trustworthiness, and general disposition (happy, healthy, etc.). This leads Grant-Jacob to argue that the "ability to perceive another individual's personality ... can allow us to be attracted to someone before we have even spoken to them" (1). He goes on to write that the "positive initial impact can become replaced with familiarity and predictability of the partner, which can lead to a potentially long-term attraction" (1). He speculates that this psychological process produces the real-life phenomenon of love at first sight.

In the realm of visual art, cinema theorists may also help to explain the effectiveness of visual romance motifs. For example, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey describes the gaze as an active, masculine force which acts upon the passive, female visual object. She writes that both characters within a film and the film's audience derive a subconscious erotic

pleasure from this gaze: "looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (8).<sup>12</sup> E. Ann Kaplan refines Mulvey's theory and suggests that the gaze is not itself male, but that viewers put themselves in a masculine role, holding power over the visual object. According to Kaplan, though, even the feminine object of the gaze experiences pleasure in this role: "[Females'] positioning as 'to-be-looked-at,' as object of the gaze, has through [their] positioning come to be sexually pleasurable" (314). Both Mulvey and Kaplan argue that this "scopophilia" (the pleasure of looking at another person or being looked at) is instinctive for all people; this may explain the intensity of the reactions that characters in medieval romance experience in love at first sight.

If modern psychology and film theory can help to explain the emotions that accompany love at first sight, modern readers of medieval romance must bear in mind that the concept of vision has changed dramatically since the medieval period. In *Vision and Gender in Malory's Morte Darthur*, Molly Martin examines the implications of an intromissive model of sight for the construction of gender in the *Morte* (see fig. 2 on pg. 10 above for the illustration of intromission). She argues that

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<sup>12</sup> Mulvey derives her idea of visual pleasure from the "scopophilia" (the pleasure of looking and being looked at) discussed in Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Kaplan, too, works with these psychoanalytic concepts.

[i]ntromissive theories of vision destabilize and blur gendered notions of active and passive in visual exchanges... [Intromissive] sight disempowers the gazing man; he relinquishes the masculine subjecthood often associated with the male viewer in contemporary gaze theory. (7)

Martin largely limits her study to intromissive models of sight, but she does note vision's "potent multi-directionality": in the visual exchange, the role of gazer (whether male or female) might be one of power or of vulnerability (9).

As I have shown previously, the introduction of intromission did not curtail the broad acceptance of extramission. Depending on which visual model a medieval reader subscribed to, he or she might imagine moments of love at first sight as assigning power to either the male or the female—or perhaps even to both. As we saw with Troilus' first sight of Criseyde, Troilus' eye first "pierces" through the crowd at the temple, a typically active, extramissive variety of sight.

However, when Troilus' gaze finds Criseyde, her image assumes the active role and Troilus feels "thorough-shoten and thorough-darted" as he becomes the passive recipient of her image. Even so, in each instance of love at first sight, the roles of viewer and object would imply a form of visual (and perhaps painful) pleasure as described by Mulvey and Kaplan.

Modern readers would also do well to recall that both extramissive and intromissive models of sight imply a tactile encounter, which Mulvey and Kaplan do not account for. Martin does note that in medieval models of sight

there is a “collapse of space between the subject and the object” and “a fusion of eye and object,” but then focuses the majority of her study on the multi-directionality of vision, not necessarily its tactile nature (7). It is worth noting, though, because this “fusion of eye and object” could heighten the erotic potential of the gaze for medieval authors and audiences. Mulvey and Kaplan argue that there is sexual pleasure in looking and being looked at even when the viewer understands the visual object to be beyond his/her reach; how much more pleasure might be available if the viewer and visual object imagine sight as a tactile experience as well? Given the multi-directionality and physical contact implied by medieval concepts of vision, visual romance motifs like love at first sight are potentially some of the most erotic narrative units a medieval author could employ.

In sum, the concept of love at first sight was a ubiquitous, long-lived motif that readers would have accepted and expected as a marker of romance. Moreover, even if later authors began to mock the idea of love at first sight, the motif has always derived its power from its accurate depiction of falling in love. As Cooper observes,

Love at first sight, irresistible, absolute, and lifelong, is the typical way of falling in love throughout all romantic literature: not because it is conventional, but because the convention itself reflects real experience—it is still a great deal more common in actuality than a cynical modern age likes to believe. (*English Romance* 231)

Furthermore, if we consider visual romance motifs in the context of medieval optical theories, they gain enormous narrative potential, whether as an expression of power in a romantic relationship or as an erotic encounter akin to touch. With this in mind, let us now turn to the minor lovers from Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

#### *Visual Motifs for Malory's Peripheral Lovers*

As noted earlier, Malory makes frequent use of visual romance motifs. In fact, he writes a scene of love at first sight for nearly every pair of his lovers. The notable exceptions to this rule are Launcelot and Guinevere, to whom I will return momentarily. Since Malory treats love at first sight as a cornerstone motif of the romance genre, it must have some meaning for him as a translator / editor / author; however, the full meaning of Malory's moments of love at first sight and other sight-oriented motifs is complicated by the fact that the motif rarely appears in the same form twice. Because Malory collects several Arthurian narratives into a single cycle, there is not just one moment of love at first sight for a single, central pair of lovers. Rather, he provides readers with a network of such moments involving several pairs of lovers—and some lovers more than once. Collectively, these moments show that Malory finds the motif not only central to the romance genre but also as a useful narrative tool to foreshadow the narrative trajectory of each relationship.

Malory sets the standard for visual love conventions in “The Tale of Sir Gareth,” which actually includes three forms of love expressed by sight: love at first sight, the inspirational sight of the beloved during battle, and sight as a symptom of lovesickness. When Gareth first sees his future wife Lyoness, he experiences an intense moment of love at first sight. His eyes follow Lyonet’s pointing finger to Lyoness’ window and he remarks: “[S]he besemyth afarre the fayrst lady that ever I lokyd upon, and truly she shall be my lady and for hir woll I fyght” (250.8-11). Two features of this moment of visual contact merit attention: first, this is apparently a long moment, as Malory describes Gareth as “ever he loked up to the window,” suggesting that even after the moment of first sight, Gareth repeatedly turns his gaze back to Lyoness (250.12). Moreover, the moment apparently lingers as his opponent, the Red Knight of the Red Lands, must call Gareth’s attention back to the fight at hand: “Sir knight, leve thy beholdyng and loke on me, I counsayle the[e]” (250.15-16). Second, the sight of Lyoness has a physical impact on Gareth as he continues to gaze up to the window with “glad countenaunce” (250.12). Prior to arriving at the castle, Gareth passes the bodies of forty hanged knights, the sight of which causes Gareth to “[abate] his countenaunce” (248.24). However, one look at Lyoness—albeit a prolonged one—reverses his despair and inspires him for the fight ahead.

The effects of this initial visual contact between the lovers sustain Gareth beyond their first moment, especially during battle. When Gareth and the Red Knight have fought from morning to evensong, they pause to catch their breath. Gareth returns his gaze to Lyoness' window, and despite the long fight, "his herte waxed light and joly" (252.11-12). Refreshed by the sight of his beloved, he calls for the battle to continue. Gareth's affections are apparently returned, for when the battle begins to go badly for him, the sight of Gareth's peril distresses Lyoness. Lyonet cries to Gareth, "'Alas! my lady my sister beholdyth the, and she shrekis and wepys so that hit makyth myne herte hevy'" (252.23-25). Just as the lovely sight of Lyoness inspires Gareth to fight harder, the sight of him in danger torments Lyoness. The report of this sight alone inspires Gareth to redouble his efforts and soon defeat the Red Knight.<sup>13</sup>

Gareth's victory frees Lyoness' castle and lands from the Red Knight; and despite Lyoness' pranks of sending Gareth away for a year, stealing his dwarf, and pretending to be another woman, the two lovers do meet face to face. Once again, Malory employs a sight-driven convention of romance: gazing as a symptom of lovesickness. When Lyoness disguises herself as another woman

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<sup>13</sup> In this moment, Malory does not have Gareth look for himself to confirm the sight of Lyoness' anguish. It is possible that Gareth, currently pinned to the ground by the Red Knight, physically cannot turn to look. However, it might be possible that the sight of a lady's distress is not encouraging the way that her beauty and smiles are. It is beyond the scope of this chapter, but there may be a correlation between a lady's composure and the effectiveness of her inspiration for her knight.

and presents herself to Gareth, he is overwhelmed by her beauty and charm. During the evening's entertainment, his gaze wanders to her many times: "and evermore Sir Gareth beheld that lady. And the more he loked on hir the more he loved hir, and so he brenned in love that he passed hymself farre in his reson" (259.15-18). Andreas Capellanus likely had moments like this in mind when he wrote that love is caused by "the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex" (28). Gareth's excessive gazing and meditating on the disguised Lyoness causes two other conventional lovesickness symptoms: at supper that night, "[he] myght nat ete" and "he wanst nat where he was" (259.19-20). Lyoness' brother sees "All thes lokys," and he encourages her to reveal her identity (259.21).

It is interesting to note that modern science actually validates this genre convention, just as it does for love at first sight. Grant-Jacob calls this reciprocated looking a "copulatory gaze" (1). He writes that when one person finds another attractive, that person will desire to gaze into their potential lover's eyes "in order to express the strength of [his/her] feelings" (2). This gaze alerts the potential lover to the first person's positive appraisal as attractive; then the receiver of the gaze may return that gaze to convey his/her own interest. This returned gaze reinforces the original person's attraction, and "as both individuals gaze into each other's eyes, they perhaps realize that they are both

attracted to each other, and so an immediate unspoken emotional union is potentially formed" (2). If we consider the added eroticism of sight as a tactile experience, it is no wonder that Gareth and Lyoness burn with a "hoote love" from their loving gazes (260.27). After pledging each other eternal love, the young lovers are unable to withstand the emotions engendered by their copulatory gazes, and they arrange a nocturnal tryst that Lyonet must disrupt to preserve the honor of both Gareth and her sister. Eventually, after several more adventures, Gareth and Lyoness are married.

Here in the "Tale of Sir Gareth," often considered to be Malory at his most original, Malory is also at his most conventional.<sup>14</sup> In constructing Gareth's adventures, Malory borrows heavily from the "Fair Unknown" story type, and Malory conveys meaning by producing variations on familiar stock characters

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph Norris argues for a lost major source for the "Tale of Sir Gareth," which might diminish Malory's creativity and originality for this section of the *Morte Darthur* (82-84). Norris contradicts earlier scholars, who argue that the "Tale of Sir Gareth" represents Malory's collection and assembly of various romance motifs from many sources (see, for example, Wilfred Guerin's "'The Tale of Sir Gareth': The Chivalric Flowering"). However, Norris allows that even with a major source accounting for some of the narrative oddities (e.g. Gareth's disability when he arrives at court which Malory never mentions again), the "Tale" is definitely a composite, with smaller episodes from other romances woven into the main plot. Even this represents a form of originality for Malory as editor, determining which episodes belong in which part of the story. Given this originality and the current lack of a major source, I will assume for this chapter that Malory is indeed being original in the "Tale of Sir Gareth"—certainly more original than in some of his other "Tales" (e.g. the "Sankgreal") which strictly follow a single source. His prolific use of visual genre conventions in the piece described as his most original further suggests that Malory values such motifs for their narrative power.

and recognizable narrative units.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to love, Malory fills his narrative with visual conventions: the lengthy and intensely emotional moment of love at first sight, the inspirational sight of the beloved during battle, and the lingering gaze that kindles passion for those suffering from lovesickness. Malory apparently finds these visual conventions useful for communicating characters' emotions and psychology and building empathy with his audience. After all, these conventions reflect feelings that Malory would expect his audience to have experienced: the rush of falling in love and having one's feelings returned by the object of one's affections.

A final important feature of the visual conventions in the "Tale of Sir Gareth" is that in each case, the visual gesture is reciprocated by both Gareth and Lyoness. This reciprocity signals to readers that the love portrayed by Gareth and Lyoness is appropriate and potentially long-lasting. Thus, readers can expect that this story will end happily. When he first sees her in the window, she also sees him and acknowledges him by raising her hands. When he sees her during the battle and feels powerful emotion, she also sees him and experiences a similarly powerful emotion. When they meet face to face, they "ha[ve] goodly

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<sup>15</sup> For more on this motif, see D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., "The Rhetoric of the Folk Fairy Tale in *The Tale of Sir Gareth*."

langage and lovely countenaunce togyder” (259.11-12).<sup>16</sup> Even if that “lovely countenaunce” leads to something resembling lust, Malory always balances their gazes at each other, so that the characters feel coordinating emotions toward one another. Gareth and Lyoness are also both single, attractive, young, lusty, and noble: they are perfectly compatible for marriage. It makes sense, then, that Malory deploys his visual conventions the way that he does. By using reciprocating sight motifs, Malory prepares readers to expect a happy ending for Gareth and Lyoness.

Gareth and Lyoness may represent the purest form of love at first sight and other visual motifs for the *Morte Darthur*, but we can see variations on the convention for many of Malory’s other lovers. An earlier version involves Arthur himself, who experiences two such moments in close succession. In the episodes following the defeat of the eleven kings who oppose Arthur’s ascension to the English crown, the young Arthur encounters two women: Lyonors (the daughter of an earl) and Guinevere. Both encounters follow the visual romance conventions: Arthur sees the fair lady, casts his love on her, then takes action on

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<sup>16</sup> Helen Cooper observes that “there are a few pairs of lovers [in the *Morte Darthur*] who love both deeply and mutually, and for those Malory reserves a distinctive syntax and style that sets them apart from the other characters and encounters in his work” (“Malory’s Language of Love” 297). I would add to this thought that an important expression of Malory’s distinct style for lovers who love deeply and mutually is to incorporate genre conventions that allow the lovers this reciprocity. Malory’s distinct style for writing about love occurs at the sentence level (syntax) and at the narrative unit level—i.e. both sentences and recognizable romance motifs.

his feelings. And both episodes contribute to Malory's characterization of Arthur as king of England.

When Arthur meets Lyonors, he notes that she is a "passyng fayre damesell" (31.25-26). Following this first sight, Arthur "sette hys love gretely on hir, and so ded she upon hym, and so the kynge had ado with hir and gate on hir a chylde" (31.27-29). It is important to note here that as in the "Tale of Sir Gareth," Arthur and Lyonors' actions are reciprocal. Arthur does not simply see Lyonors and ravish her; rather, his love (or lust) is returned by Lyonors, and the union results in the birth of a son who will grow up to be a "good knyght and of the Table Rounde" (31.30). While modern readers may feel uneasy about Arthur "having ado" with a woman to whom he is not married, this encounter performs an important function for Malory: it shows that on a pragmatic, physical level, Arthur has the potential to be a good king. Malory has already arranged the narrative so that the sword in the stone and Uther's dying words legitimize Arthur's succession, and Arthur's war against the eleven kings proves his ability to lead a military campaign. The encounter with Lyonors shows that Arthur is a king with sexual as well as martial prowess. The fact that this first dalliance produces a son proves that Arthur can fulfill his duty as king to engender an heir.

Just one paragraph later (according to Field's edition), Arthur meets Guinevere in an exaggerated moment of love at first sight: "And there [at Camylarde] had Arthure the first syght of Gwenyvere, the kyngis doughter of the londe of Camylarde, and ever afftir he loved hir. And aftir, they were wedded as hit tellith in the booke" (32.11-13). In the previous episode with Lyonors, the romance motif of love at first sight portrayed Arthur as a vigorous lover who could supply the requisite heir. In this encounter, Malory reduces the convention to its most basic form—actually using the words “first syght”—to emphasize Arthur as a courtly king-lover in a romance. In this section of the *Morte Darthur*, readers also see Arthur questing and battling alone, of which his knights heartily approve (45.9-12). It makes sense for a romantically questing king to also have a conventionally romantic episode of love at first sight. In this early section, Malory works to establish the reputation of Arthur and the Round Table that will continue through the rest of the *Morte Darthur*. By including the two moments of love at first sight with Lyonors and Guinevere, Malory shows that Arthur is both a pragmatic and a romantic king—truly legendary material.

It is interesting to note, however, that while Arthur experiences love at first sight when he sees Guinevere, Malory is silent regarding Guinevere's reaction to seeing Arthur for the first time. Unlike the episodes involving Alexander/Alice, Gareth/Lyoness, or even Arthur's earlier encounter with

Lyonors, Arthur's chosen lady does not gaze at him in return—or at least Malory does not report it. This lack of reciprocation resurfaces later in the *Morte*, when Arthur refers to another of the visual romance conventions a little later in the *Morte*, this time the inspiring sight of the beloved in battle. As he prepares to campaign against five kings who have entered England to burn and pillage, Arthur insists on bringing Guinevere with him to the battle: "Madame, make you redy, for ye shall go with me, for I may nat longe mysse you. Ye shall cause me to be the more hardy, what adventure so befalle me; yette woll I nat wyte my lady to be in no joupardye" (101.14-17). Like Gareth in later episodes, Arthur expects to be inspired by the sight of his beloved as he fights his enemies, and it is clear from his small speech that the newly-wed Arthur loves his queen.

This should be another opportunity for Guinevere to express some kind of affection for her new husband, but she does not take it. Guinevere's response displays no personal affection for Arthur; rather, she responds only as his queen: "'Sir...I am at youre commaundemente, and shall be redy at all tymes'" (101.18-19). While this may be a dutiful answer for a queen to give, it does not return Arthur's affection or expectation of visual support for the coming battle. In both of these instances of visual romance conventions—love at first sight and the sight of the beloved in battle—the connection between Arthur and Guinevere is a one-way street. Arthur loves his queen, but she expresses no affection in return.

Instead, Malory's use of romance conventions leaves room for her personal affections to lie elsewhere, and in this way he foreshadows Guinevere's eventual adultery. Certainly these actions—or lack of actions—do not on their own guarantee that Guinevere will stray from Arthur's bed and contribute to the fall of Arthur's kingdom. However, for readers familiar with romance motifs, Guinevere's lack of engagement with them should signal a problem at the root of her relationship with her husband.

Elaine of Ascolot provides a final, succinct case study for the conventions of vision in romance and the tragic consequences of an unreciprocated love. In the episode, Launcelot secretly arrives at a tournament and is unrecognized by his host Sir Barnarde of Ascolot. No one else in Barnarde's household recognizes Launcelot, but Barnarde's daughter is smitten. Once again, Malory employs the visual conventions of romance to indicate a character's internal emotion:

So thys olde barowne had a doughtir that was called that tyme the Fayre Maydyn off Ascolot, and ever she behylde Sir Launcelot wondirfully. And, as the booke sayth, she keste such a love unto Sir Launcelot that she cowde never withdraw hir loove, wherefore she dyed; and her name was Elayne le Blanke. So thus as she cam to and fro, she was so hote in love that she besought Sir Launcelot to were upon hym at the justis a tokyn of hers. (806.16-20)

In this short passage, Malory sketches the sad plot for the entire episode before it really even begins, and at the center of Elaine's tragedy is the fact that "ever she behylde Sir Launcelot wonderfully." The sight of Launcelot causes her to fall in

love, and the fact that her gaze is repeated ("ever") and filled with awe ("wondirfully") causes her lovesickness in much the same style as with Gareth and Lyoness. The crucial difference between the two relationships is that Launcelot does not return her affections, and the result is the death of a character rather than a happy marriage.

In summary, Malory knows and consciously selects genre conventions from his source material to form the *Morte Darthur*. When writing about love, he particularly values of the convention of love at first sight, as well as other visual conventions like the inspirational sight of the beloved in battle and the excessive gaze that leads to lovesickness. Furthermore, he manipulates these conventions to signal the intensity of a romantic relationship, as well as to predict its success or failure. For those characters who return each other's gazes and affections (like Gareth and Lyoness or Alexander and Alys), the initial sight of their lovers suggests an intensity and longevity of passion that assures readers of a happy ending. On the other hand, for characters whose gazes and affections are not returned (like Arthur or Elaine of Ascolot), the initial visual encounter feels incomplete and foreshadows a tragic ending. With this pattern in mind, I now turn to Malory's primary lovers of the *Morte Darthur*: Launcelot and Guinevere.

### *The Scandalous French: Malory's Source and Audience Expectations*

Malory takes most of the early part of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship ("The Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake") from the French Vulgate *Lancelot*, a text that had earned a notoriously salacious reputation even by Malory's day. Ralph Norris writes that "it is generally thought that Malory probably knew the whole of the *Lancelot* and deliberately picked the parts that he wished to include" (*Malory's Library* 72). Norris goes on to observe that Malory leaves out many moments of heightened emotion between Launcelot and Guinevere: "Although he accepted Lancelot and Guenevere's adultery as a part of the story, Malory apparently took little pleasure in it" (72). As I have already shown, Malory is a conscious crafter of stories through genre conventions; and if his intention was to design a passionate love affair for his central lovers, he would have found ample material in the *Lancelot*. However, as I will discuss in this section, Malory shies away from the eroticism of his French source in favor of less intimate adventures for the early parts of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship.

The notorious reputation for the French *Lancelot* stems from a short passage in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In the second circle of hell, reserved for sins relating to lust, Dante and Virgil encounter the adulterous lovers Francesca and Paolo. The lovers find themselves trapped in an eternal whirlwind, which reflects

their sweeping passions while they were alive. Francesca reports that her own adultery and subsequent damnation was caused by her reading of the *Lancelot* with Paolo:

“Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto  
Di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse;  
Soli eravamo e sanza alcun sospetto.  
Per più fiate le occhi ci sospinse  
Quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;  
Ma solo un punto fu quell che ci vines.  
Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
Esser basciato da cotanto amante,  
Questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,  
La bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.  
Galeotto fu ‘l libro e chi lo scrisse:  
Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.”

[One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot, how love constrained him; we were alone, suspecting nothing. Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the color from our faces, but one moment alone it was that overcame us. When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, this one [Paolo], who never shall be parted from me, kissed my mouth all trembling. A Gallehault was the book and he who wrote it; that day we read no farther in it.] (*Inferno* V.127-38)

Reading books together as a means of flirtation is probably effective in general, given the close proximity that two people would require to see the text simultaneously; however, Francesca singles out the *Lancelot* as a book lasciviously indulging sexual fantasies. As such, it tempts her lover and herself to similar acts.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A smaller reference to the *Lancelot* in Chaucer’s “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” perhaps explains the effect that the book has on Francesca. The narrator of the tale asserts that his story of courtly

The actuality of Lancelot and Guinevere's first kiss in the French *Lancelot* is perhaps less exhilarating than Francesca suggests. The meeting of the two soon-to-be lovers is arranged by Sir Galehaut, who continues to lurk in the background for the entire scene. Guinevere delays the kiss, first examining Lancelot by asking him to recount his adventures and to tell her for whom he performed all these feats. With the intent of testing his true feelings, she argues that he must love someone else, and Lancelot nearly faints. Galehaut comes forward to assist his friend, and it is Galehaut who recommends that Guinevere "Donc lo baissiez devant moi par comancement d'amors veraie" [give him a kiss, in my presence, to mark the beginning of a true love] (Kennedy 348.13-14, Rosenburg 146).<sup>18</sup> Guinevere approves the idea, and after some businesslike negotiation over the conditions of the kiss, she efficiently kisses Lancelot, who is too overcome to kiss her:

Lors se traient tuit troi ansanble et font sanblant de conseillier. Et la reine voit que li chevaliers n'an ose plus faire, si lo prant ele par lo menton, si lo baise devant Galehot assez longuement.

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barnyard animals is "also trewe, I undertake, / As is the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That wommen holde in ful greet reverence" [as true as the book of Lancelot that women hold in such regard] humorously implying that neither text warrants serious consideration (VII.3211-13). Chaucer's dismissal of the text suggests, as Francesca does, that this "book" indulges fictional female fantasies.

<sup>18</sup> French quotations are taken from *Lancelot do Lac: The Non-Cyclic Old French Romance*, edited by Elspeth Kennedy (Clarendon Press, 1980). Unless otherwise marked, modern English translations are taken from Samuel Rosenburg's translation found in *The Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Garland, 1995).

[Then all three withdrew together, as if they were conferring. Seeing that the knight dared do no more, the queen took him by the chin and gave him a prolonged kiss in front of Galehaut] (Kennedy 348.27-29, Rosenburg 146).

Precious little about this kiss is the titillating tryst that modern readers may expect, especially if they are acquainted with Francesca's description of it in the *Divine Comedy*. In fact, most of the emotion conveyed in the moment relies on the fact that readers have followed Lancelot through several adventures that he performs in the name of the queen; readers have also witnessed the trance that Lancelot experiences whenever he is near the queen. The kiss represents the culmination of Lancelot's efforts to be worthy of the queen's love.

The delayed gratification of this kiss provides a satisfying experience for readers with a long investment in the story, but it is not as immediately thrilling as the moment when the two lovers first see one another. When Lancelot first arrives at Arthur's court, he does not expect to find love. For that matter, neither does Guinevere, although she hears a report of Lancelot's handsome features before he enters the hall and she looks forward to meeting him: "[E]le s'an mervoille mout et trop li tarde que ele lo voie" [The queen marveled greatly at it all and was impatient to see the boy] (Kennedy 156.39-40, Rosenburg 64). When they stand face to face in Arthur's hall, Guinevere "regarde lo valet mout durement, et il li, totes les foiz qu'il puet vers li ses iquiz mener covertement" [looked at him tenderly, and he looked at her, too, every time he could do so

without being noticed] (Kennedy 157.23-24, Rosenburg 65). Lancelot deems her “la dame des dames et la fontaine de biauté” [the sovereign of all women and the very font of beauty], and when she reaches out to take his hand and ask where he is from, he “tressaut toz autresin com s’il s’esveillast” [started as if suddenly awakened] (Kennedy 157.28-38, Rosenburg 65).<sup>19</sup> Flustered, Lancelot cannot answer any of the queen’s questions; and she suspects, “mais ele n’osse pas cuidier que ce soit por li” [but dares not think, that it is because of her] (Kennedy, 158.4-5, Rosenburg 65).<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps even more than their later kiss, this moment of first sight exemplifies erotic fantasy. Lancelot, the eighteen-year-old youth, arrives at the hall of the famous King Arthur, only to have his gaze returned by the beautiful, sexually experienced, married, older woman who also holds one of the most powerful offices in the kingdom. The intensity of the moment is repeated when he takes leave of Guinevere the next day to embark on his first quest. This time, Lancelot is prepared for the sight of her, and engages with the romance convention of sight as a symptom of developing love or lovesickness:

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<sup>19</sup> It is interesting, but perhaps not vital to my argument, that here the visual object (Guinevere) physically reaches out to touch the viewer (Lancelot), just as intromissive theories of vision suggest.

<sup>20</sup> Helen Cooper observes that French romances infrequently portray an reciprocation of gesture and speech (“Malory’s Language of Love” 304). Thus it is not surprising that Guinevere’s reaction is less passionate. The narrative focus is on Lancelot’s point of view.

Et quant li vallez la vit, il ne la mesquenut pas. Il s'agenoille devant li, si la regarde mout debonairement tant com il ose. Et qant vergoigne lo sorvaint, si fiche vers terre ses iauz, toz esbahiz.  
[Seeing the queen, he did not hesitate but knelt before her and warmly gazed on her as long as he dared. But then embarrassment overcame him, and he suddenly lowered his eyes.] (Kennedy 164.27-29, Rosenburg 67)

Alternating between longing and embarrassment, hope and despair, these passages invite readers to experience Lancelot's pain and joy as he falls in love.

Moreover, the intensity of these visual encounters underscores the power of visual romance motifs: the entirety of Lancelot's desire—whether hopeful or despairing—is expressed by his eyes in these scenes. Andrew Taylor suggests that erotic literature such as this “hover[s] on the edge of what can be socially acknowledged,” which increases the sexual tension both for characters and for readers (283). For Lancelot, the tension is doubled, if not tripled: not only is he unprepared for and embarrassed by his first feelings of love for a lady, the lady is totally unavailable. She is already married—to no less a personage than the king. Lancelot's desire, overwhelming though it is, cannot be acknowledged, and the repression of this desire creates a tension released only when Guinevere finally kisses him at Galehaut's request. In other words, the much-delayed kiss that may lure readers like Francesca and Paolo into adultery depends on visual romance motifs for its erotic power.

### *Malory's Missing Moments*

Even though Malory's source text includes these dramatic moments of visual pain and pleasure, and even though most lovers in the *Morte Darthur* receive a variation of love at first sight, Malory's central lovers do not experience the motif themselves. This is partially because Launcelot is first introduced in Arthur's Roman Wars, which take place on the European continent while Guinevere stays safely at home in England. However, another, more important cause seems to be Malory's discomfort with Launcelot and Guinevere's adultery that Norris notes above. Further, as Karen Cherewatuk observes, "Malory's tendency to protect Launcelot from the accusation of wrongdoing is well established" among Malorian scholars (68). Malory goes to great lengths to diminish the sins of his favorite knight; he often omits dialogue, behaviors, or entire scenes that remind readers about the forbidden nature of Launcelot's desire for Guinevere. One of these missing moments is the typical scene of love at first sight. I have already shown the erotic potential of this motif, so it is perhaps unsurprising that Malory chooses to exclude such a scene. However, as Norris observes, Malory also acknowledges that their adultery is an essential component in the fall of the Round Table. Thus, the love interest *must* be introduced at some point. As I will argue in this section, though, Malory's method of skipping love at first sight has a paradoxical effect: while he attempts

to save the reputation of his favorite knight by cutting the visual encounter, he instead highlights the forbidden nature of his love for Guinevere.

In his efforts to protect Launcelot, Malory's introduction of his central lovers' relationship occurs only indirectly. As Launcelot sets out on his first solo quest, he encounters a damsel who asks him why he is "wifeless," and she reports rumors of his relationship with Guinevere:

"But hit is noysed that ye love Quene Gwenyvere, and that she hath ordeyned by enchaunteamente that ye shall never love none other but hir, nother none other damesell ne lady shall rejoice you, wherefore there be many in this londe of hyghe astate and lowe that make grete sorowe." (206.4-7)

Launcelot neatly evades the implied question of whether he *is* in fact in a relationship with the queen by stating that he cannot control what other people think or say: "Fayre damesell...I may nat warne peple to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem" (206.8-9). Then he launches into a lengthy explanation of why he does not take a wife or mistress:

But for to be a weddyd man, I thynke hit nat, for than I muste couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures. And as for to sey to take my pleasaunce with paramours, that woll I refuse: in prencipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that ben adventures shold nat be advoutrers [adulterers] nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys...And so who that usyth paramours shall be unhappy, and all thyngs unhappy that is about them. (206.9-19)

The evasion and short sermon about wives and lovers apparently distracts the damsel, who does not repeat her question, and they part ways.

By skipping Launcelot's arrival at Camelot and introduction to Guinevere, Malory avoids a typical moment of love at first sight and the erotic baggage implied by the motif. As I have shown, visual romance motifs are powerful narrative units that reflect the real-life experience of falling in love, with all its emotion. This is exactly what happens in Malory's source material: the moment of Lancelot and Guinevere's love at first sight conveys as much or more desire as their eventual first kiss. By avoiding the moment when Launcelot and Guinevere first see each other, Malory avoids acknowledging Launcelot's forbidden love for the queen. Instead, he can allow his favorite knight to fend off the nasty rumors of their supposed affair. If Malory did not relish the idea of Launcelot and Guinevere's adultery, it makes sense for him to delay it as long as possible.

On the surface, this may seem to be a smart narrative move for an author concerned with cleaning up the image of his favorite knight. However, while skipping love at first sight and replacing it with rumors may seem a safe move, Malory is mistaken. Even if Launcelot denies the rumors, Malory's audience would already be familiar enough with the Arthurian cycle to know that the rumors are almost certainly true. Although though Cooper encourages readers to imagine a fifteenth-century England where the French romances are not widely read ("The Lancelot-Grail Cycle" 151-52), Elizabeth Archibald argues otherwise.

After compiling and examining many allusions to Lancelot in English texts, she concludes that

[b]y the late fourteenth century, Chaucer and Gower clearly expected readers of their English texts to appreciate both direct and oblique references to the love story, and there were also numerous allusions to Lancelot alone as a great knight. Evidently he had some degree of name recognition with Middle English readers, even if he was not always admired. (213)

Similarly, Furrow argues that late medieval audiences would have been conditioned to expect Guinevere's infidelity. She points out that in the many medieval romances featuring Guinevere, "most things about her are unstable, and may change from story to story: the forms of her name, the traits of her character, the partners in her adultery. What remain stable are the two facts of her marriage to Arthur, the greatest of kings, and her sexual transgression" (85).

In short, English audiences would have expected Launcelot to hold a position as both Arthur's best knight *and* as Guinevere's lover. When the damsel mentions the "noyse" surrounding the queen and Launcelot, Malory's audiences would have believed the rumors: in this case, the fact that anyone suspects an affair indicates that the affair exists.

Because of the tale's reputation, Launcelot's chaste response to the damsel further incriminates him and foreshadows the conclusion of the *Mort*. According to Launcelot, the fate of knights who take lovers out of wedlock is that they will not be "happy" or "fortunate" in fighting, or anything else that they do ("all

thyngē unhappy that is around them"). Although he does not use the word, Launcelot implies that knights who take lovers end in tragedy: a dramatic decline in prosperity brought about by "hap" or fortune. Ironically, instead of excusing his "paragon of chivalry" from his sins, Malory exposes them and foreshadows what the punishment for those sins will be (Jesmok, "The Double Life" 81).

Malory's strategy here in the early "Tale of Launcelot" has an interesting effect on the genre of the *Morte Darthur* as a whole. Malory certainly attempts to compose the "Tale of Sir Launcelot" as a romance: it follows a single young knight as he proves his prowess on various adventures. It also has Whetter's requisite happy ending as Launcelot and his defeated opponents arrive at Camelot to present themselves to the queen. However, the essential requirement of love presents a problem. Whereas lovers like Arthur and Gareth can openly acknowledge their love for their ladies and perform unlimited feats of valor for them, Launcelot is trapped. As Corey Olsen writes, "It is, in a sense, only the circumstances that render their love sinful at all, the tragedy that Guinevere happens to be the wife of Launcelot's king" (41). Unfortunately for Malory, when he attempts to clear Launcelot's reputation by excising his moment of love at first sight, he replaces it with a conversation that focuses on Launcelot's very flaw. At this stage of the *Morte Darthur*, Launcelot could be rejoicing in the early stages of

his relationship with Guinevere, and Malory could be highlighting the romance elements of the story. However, the rumors that Malory so casually integrates will be read as true by his audience, and the effect is to emphasize the same forbidden nature of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship that he avoided by eliminating their love at first sight.

### *Conclusion*

Laura Mulvey claims that "it is only in the film form" that the gaze reaches its full potential (17). She writes that "shifting the emphasis of the look" portrayed by strategic camera angles and editing "builds the way" that characters (especially female characters) are understood by the audience as a pleasurable visual object. As I have shown, however, these same moves can and do exist in the realm of literature. When Alexander and Alys first meet in "Alexander the Orphan," we find a "cinematic" gaze centuries before the invention of film. When Malory's other pairs of lovers first meet, he carefully crafts their gazes so that audiences recognize the degree of passion that the characters experience; further, Malory can design these moments of love at first sight to foreshadow the relationship's future success or failure. The French *Lancelot* employs all these powers of the gaze: in its careful placement of visual romance motifs like love at first sight and the longing gazes of lovesickness, Malory's source even generates a sexual tension great enough to be

memorialized in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. While the power of these visual romance motifs is impressive, though, they also condemn characters who should not commit adultery. In shaping the romantic relationship for his favorite knight, then, it makes sense that Malory would avoid such genre conventions. Paradoxically, though, Malory's avoidance of visual romance motifs means that he must introduce the affair by other means. By reporting on rumors that Launcelot and Guinevere are having an affair, Malory alerts his readers to the very sins he wished to spare Launcelot, and he lays the foundation for later tragedy.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion: “I Se and Undirstonde”

As I conclude, I would like to consider two episodes from Malory’s *Morte Darthur* that inspired the title of this study. The first episode appears in “Sir Tristram de Lyones: The First Book.”<sup>1</sup> When the newly knighted Sir Trystrams goes to fight against the Irish Sir Marhalt to settle a tributary disagreement between Cornwall and Ireland, the stakes are high and it is his first battle as a knight. To prepare for this battle, the Cornish King Mark—Trystrams’ uncle—provides him with a good horse and arms him with the best armor that “myght be gotyn for golde othir sylver” (297.13). The ship that ferries him to the battle carries everything that he might need, “bothe for his body and for his horse [so] that he lacked nothyng” (297.23-24). Despite these preparations, though, Trystrams is young and untested, while his opponent is a battled-hardened veteran of many fights. All of Cornwall knows that the odds are not in Trystrams’ favor; he will almost certainly die in this endeavor. However, Trystrams comports himself with confidence, and the idea of such a youth

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<sup>1</sup> P. J. C. Field’s edition modernizes the spelling of “Tristram” in the section title. Throughout this chapter, however, I will use Malory’s spelling of “Trystrams.”

sacrificing himself for the sake of their country brings the Cornish people to tears:

And whan Kynge Mark and his barownes of Cornwayle *behelde*  
how yonge Sir Trystrams departed with such a caryage [bearing] to  
feyght for the ryght of Cornwayle, there was nother man nother  
woman of worship but they wepte to *se and undirstonde* so yonge a  
knyght to jouparté hymself for theire ryght. (297.24-28, emphasis  
mine)

The spectacle of the youthful, innocent Trystrams, willingly giving his life for his uncle's country, represents Trystrams' first public appearance in Cornwall. It sparks the goodwill that the country's inhabitants will show him throughout the two "Books" comprising the Trystrams narrative; it also contributes to the outrage that readers feel when Mark later betrays Trystrams and sends him into exile.

The second episode is one I have partially explored earlier in this study (see chapter four above). When Launcelot finds himself half-asleep at the foot of the stone cross and unable to see the Grail when it appears to the sick knight, he believes he may have been dreaming. However, a voice from heaven confirms that he will have no luck on the Grail Quest. The voice (presumably God on behalf of the Grail) declares that Launcelot is harder than stone, more bitter than wood, and "more naked and barer than ys the lyeff of the fygge-tre" [the leaf of the fig-tree] (694.30-32). These words cause Launcelot great pain, but they also

inspire him to do something he has never done in the *Morte* before: he admits his sin.

My synne and my wyckednes hath brought me unto grete dishonoure. For whan I sought worldly adventures for worldely desyres I ever encheved them and had the bettir in every place, and never was I discomfite in no quarell, were hit ryght were hit wronge. And now I take upon me the adventures to seke of holy thynges, now I *se and undirstonde* that myne olde synne hyndryth me and shamyth me, that I had no power to stirre nother speke whan the Holy Bloode appered before me. (695.7-14)

Launcelot's self-confession of his sin inspires him to seek out the nearest hermit and formally confess his sins. It is the beginning of the spiritual journey that will lead him to see and achieve the Grail at least partially.

Admittedly, these two episodes have little in common. They take place in different locations and at different times.<sup>2</sup> They involve different characters and themes. One portrays youthful innocence while the other portrays the sins of experience. However, they are also linked by characters who "se and undirstonde." In both episodes, Malory links vision and reason, and while these two episodes are the most explicit about the link, there are many other occasions in the *Morte Darthur* when characters "see and know" or "see and learn" or "see and feel." Each time, sight—the physical process of collecting visual sensory

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of time is rather fluid in the *Morte Darthur* as Malory often backtracks to provide a backstory for new characters as he introduces them. I assume here that since Trystrams and Launcelot are a similar age in the middle of the "Book of Sir Trystram," the two episodes I describe must happen with at least 5-10 years between the episodes.

data—is the first step toward the acquisition of knowledge and a greater understanding of a concept, whether it be the recognition of self-sacrifice, one's sins, or anything else.

The fact that these two episodes have so little in common yet employ the phrase “se and undirstonde” suggests that the phrase may take on different meanings in different contexts. This is what I have shown in this study: different situations require different kinds of seeing, and the knowledge gained from these visual encounters changes with the viewer and his/her context. In the words of Robert Nelson, “every viewer belongs to a society and subscribes in varying degrees to the bodily conventions and practices of that society. In this sense visuality is similar to sexuality. Both pertain to natural and universal human acts, but both are also learned, socially controlled, and organized” (9). When considering sight as it occurs in medieval literature, it is essential to consider the “bodily conventions and practices” that may have informed authors’ ideas about vision. The challenge is to reconstruct what kind of social rules governed those ideas.

We know from pastoral literature like Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests* and Chaucer’s “Parson’s Tale” and “Tale of Melibee” that people in late-medieval England were aware of the power and perils of vision. The effects of these texts would have been far reaching indeed, as Mirk’s *Instructions* was

widely distributed in England, and each priest would advise their parishioners to manage their senses with great care. Moreover, while Chaucer's "Parson's Tale" and "Milibee" are rarely read today, they were some of the most popular and most independently copied texts of all the *Canterbury Tales*, which itself enjoyed a high degree of popularity. Because these texts implied the existence of right and wrong ways to use vision, it is unsurprising that ideas about proper visual practices seeped into ideas about medieval genres. This is especially true of tragedy, which shares a didactic element with these pastoral texts. Thus, when characters in literary texts use their sight and reason responsibly, they come to a good end, as Galahad does on the Grail Quest. When they use their sight and reason incorrectly—and as I have shown, there are many ways to do so—their narratives are doomed to end tragically.

If medieval people were aware of the hazards of vision, we also need to understand *how* they were aware of it. As sensory historian Mark M. Smith writes, scholars should not seek to reproduce medieval sensory experiences (e.g. Civil War reenactments or Renaissance Faires); rather, we should strive to understand the "consumption" of those sensory experiences (846). Part of that understanding is recognizing the implications of the medieval scientific debate surrounding the mechanics of optics. New ideas from the East changed the way that both scholars and less-educated people thought about power and agency:

whereas extramission had assigned power to the viewer, intromission reassigned power to the visual object. While these ideas were widely circulated, there is no way to be certain that every medieval person—or even a majority—heard about and accepted the new concept of intromission. Thus, real-life and fictional viewers in late-medieval England may display elements of either—or both—varieties of sight. Either way, all medieval ideas about sight implied a kind of tactile encounter with the visual object that heightens the visual experience regardless of the context: Galahad may tremble when he sees the Grail because he makes contact with the divine, but Launcelot may tremble when he sees Guinevere for much less wholesome reasons.

Added to this overarching scientific context, we must consider the specific social contexts in which our literary characters participate. As Nelson observes, visual practices are socially “learned, … controlled, and organized,” and certain contexts require different kinds of seeing. In chapter four I examined one rigidly regulated context for sight. The (sometimes theatrical) elevation of the host required a ritualized gazing that sufficed as the communicants’ full consumption of the communion elements, and this practice was instilled and “socially controlled” for people’s entire lives. Other contexts call for different kinds of seeing, though. In Chaucer’s *Boece* sight should be disciplined so that a person can consider the True Good, or “suffisaunce.” In *Troilus and Criseyde*, readers find

that the title characters do *not* properly restrain their vision or their reason, and in the end they suffer for their mislabeling of “suffisaunce.” For characters in any text to fulfill their duty of using vision correctly, they must determine what kind of vision a context calls for.

In short, the gaze is not limited to the construction of gender or repressive desire as Mulvey and other modern gaze theorists imply. I showed in chapter five that visual romance motifs employing vision illuminate our understanding of Launcelot and Guinevere’s love and the genre of the *Morte Darthur*. Certainly gender and desire are facets of one kind of visual practice, but it is not the only kind of visual practice. Instead, readers can and should investigate instances when characters use their eyes to gaze, pierce, cast their looking, espy, stare, regard, see, or otherwise use their eyes. In that investigation, readers must keep in mind that these characters’ visual experiences are not the safely distant encounters that modern readers assume. Instead, medieval models of vision collapse the distance between viewer and visual object, and—depending on one’s acceptance of extramission or intromission—may allot agency to the visual object instead of the viewer.

Ultimately, this study has shown that the sense of sight emerges as a powerful narrative tool for medieval authors because they can use it to show how characters gather sensory data and interpret the world around them. They

can describe characters' cognitive processes and show how they arrive at correct or incorrect understandings of the world, as in *Troilus and Criseyde*. They can show how a chivalric society depends on visual evidence for social order and what happens when invisible characters overturn the rules, as in "Balyn Le Sauvage." They can congratulate proper interactions with visual rituals, as in Launcelot and Galahad's adventures in the "Sankgreal." And they can convey or suppress desire by employing or redacting visual motifs, as in "The Tale of Launcelot du Lac." In each case, medieval authors like Chaucer and Malory can use vision to foreshadow whether characters will achieve a happy ending or experience a dramatic fall from prosperity, simply by showing how their characters "se and undirstonde."

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