

Le Morte D'Arthur: Analysis

I chose to create a storyboard of a proposed preview episode in a TV series based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. To bring the themes of the novel into a modern day perspective, I chose to compare King Arthur's round table to a fictional college blackjack team based upon the real MIT blackjack team. Similar to Arthur's round table, the club in my show depends on the cooperation of all of its members to function. Their quest for fame and fortune in Las Vegas is a modern allegory of the many quests of the knights in Malory's work. Book 7 would be an ideal adaptation of Malory's novel into a TV show. At first glance it reads like a classic television drama; a striking male lead, a beautiful girl, and the trials and tribulations of trying to achieve success. The details of Gareth's adventures and his subsequent role in the Sangreal quest however, suggest that Malory uses Gareth's story symbolically to take his readers down a path towards acceptance of the truth of the Sangreal, and away from our own arrogant opinions.

Gareth's story would transition well into a modern day television drama because his book most closely follows a traditional "ugly duckling" storyline with a "happily ever after" ending. Malory appears to give Gareth one of the most complete and clean endings of all the knight's stories. At the end of book/episode 7, Gareth is claimed to be, "a noble knight, and a well-ruled, and fair-languaged" (277). He has "wedded Dame Lionesse of the Castle Perilous" and been recognized for all of his feats of arms at King Arthur's court (276). The reader is led to believe Malory has given us an example of the ideal knight of the Round Table due to the earthy rewards Gareth receives. I would leave my television viewers with a similar feeling of satisfaction at the end of episode 7 of *Le*

Morte, that a gold standard had been set which they could rely on to interpret other characters in the show.

As a reader, or TV watcher, we are left with a feeling of satisfaction at the end of book/episode 7 when the knight gets the girl, the recognition, and the respect he deserves for his righteous feats of arms. Much later in the novel, Malory turns this feeling “up-so-down” when Gareth is not one of the knights that achieve the Sangreal. In fact his only appearance in the Sangreal quest is when Galahad hears, “that Gawaine, Gareth, and Uwayne, had slain the seven brethren” (680). We are left wondering why Gareth, our perfect knight of the Round Table, is busy fighting against the symbols of the 7 deadly sins instead of achieving the Sangreal.

When examined in more detail, Gareth’s validity as an ideal knight is undermined by complications in his story. Gareth’s marriage to Lioness seemed to validate his knightly order, but before they are married, “they burnt both in love, that they were accorded to abate their lusts secretly” (248). Gareth’s lust, one of the seven deadly sins, seems to undermine his supposed dedication to marriage. Similarly, his modesty through his decision to remain in disguise results in him fighting his own brother. Only through Linet’s interference when “there she cried on high, Sir Gawain, Sir Gawain, leave they fighting with thy brother Sir Gareth,” do the two brothers manage to stop fighting each other to the death (271). This encounter undermines the validity of Gareth’s worship, since he almost wins honor by fighting his kinsman, a key rule he breaks of knighthood. Gareth also aligns himself with Lancelot in his book. Malory says, “Lord! The great cheer that Sir Lancelot made of Sir Gareth and he of him, for there was never no knight that Sir Gareth loved so well as he did Sir Lancelot; and ever for the most part he would

be in Sir Lancelot's company" (274). Gareth chooses loyalty to Lancelot over his vengeful brother Gawaine, but Lancelot has moral flaws of his own that make him a less than ideal knight to serve and pledge his loyalty.

When Gareth doesn't achieve the Sangreal, we are forced to reexamine his shortcomings in book 7. Malory has lulled us into a false feeling of authority over the moral character of a knight. We feel as though the ends justified the means in Gareth's story. The Sangreal, the symbol of God's ultimate authority, however, determines who deserves to be marked as the ideal knight. This is our first enlightenment over the truth of the Sangreal, similar to Lancelot's first enlightenment over the error of his ways during his Sangreal quest. Lancelot admits that, "for her sake would I do battle were it right or wrong; and never did I battle all only for God's sake...and little or nought I thanked God of it" (687). The reader recognizes that Gareth was lustful during his adventures and thought little of God. As readers, or television show watchers, we allowed ourselves to be swept up with book/episode 7's feelings of "happily ever after." We distracted ourselves with Gareth's earthly rewards just as Lancelot distracted himself with his love of Guinevere. After the Sangreal quest, Malory's message of God's authority becomes apparent. We shyly admit that we must have been wrong about Gareth being the ideal knight, as he doesn't achieve the Sangreal.

None of us can be the judge of an ideal knight; the Sangreal or some higher being will determine that for us. This idea is reiterated to us through Gareth's demise, even if we don't recognize it at first. "For as the French book saith, Sir Lancelot smote Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris upon the brain-pans, wherethrough they were slain in the field" (880). Gareth placed his trust in Lancelot without regarding God. In the end it is his

downfall. As readers we feel betrayed by Malory and are left feeling like Gareth was martyred for being an honest knight. This murder seems to come out of nowhere for the reader because we again place our trust in our own judgment of Gareth's character over the ultimate judgment of the Sangreal. In a way we, like Lancelot, "forgot the promise and the perfection that he made in the quest" (785).

At the end of the novel Lancelot says that, "I remember me how by my default, mine orgule and my pride, that they were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living of Christian people" (934). Through King Arthur and Guenever's deaths Lancelot is able to recognize the Christian truths that the Sangreal represents. By not truly repenting after the Sangreal quest, Lancelot's actions end up destroying Camelot and the two people he loved most. Similarly we as readers may not recognize that Gareth's choices throughout the book will result in his death. Gareth not achieving the Sangreal is our first reminder that our opinions of Gareth's character will not stand next to God's word. Through Gareth's actual death, Malory is giving us the opportunity to put aside our pride and recognize the Sangreal's truth above our own opinions.

A common first impression of book 7 in *Le Morte D'Arthur* is that Malory presents Gareth as a youthful knight that embodies all of the ideals of the Round Table and lives "happily ever after." I felt like it was important to acknowledge this through my storyboard of a television drama of Gareth's adventures. Gareth's story seemed highly idealized compared to the other knights around him, specifically Lancelot in book 6 and Tristram afterwards. I believe that Malory uses Gareth as a symbol of the reader's journey towards accepting the truth of the Sangreal, however, Christian redemption does not make good television. On Television, sex and violence sells. Perhaps even Malory

understood that in writing Book 7. Lancelot's double repentance mirrors our own struggle towards accepting that Gareth is not as perfect as the ending of book 7 makes him appear. We are distracted by the earthly rewards Gareth gains, which make it easier to ignore the clear judgment the Sangreal passes on him. Only when we acknowledge that the betrayal we feel over Gareth's death is actually our own hubris, and that Gareth deserves to be judged by the Sangreal standard, can we start to progress towards true enlightenment and follow in the path of Lancelot.

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