Dreams and Discovery——Reader's Quest in Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal*

Wendy Williams

Little is known about the life and character of Sir Thomas Malory but that he was a knight and allegedly a rogue. He is said to have spent much of his life breaking the law; he certainly spent years in prison. It was during his last imprisonment, in the second half of the fifteenth century, that he completed his version of the legend of King Arthur, *Le Morte Darthur*. In creating the eight books that comprise the *Morte,* Malory drew from several thirteenth-century works including French romances and English poems.

In creating most of the individual tales, Malory reworked long, interlaced sources with intricate plots. He reshaped those sources, adding, deleting, and changing material, carefully crafting and significantly altering his sources to form an original piece of literature which is today regarded as a masterpiece.

In this paper, I focus on Malory's source changes and the role of the reader in his text. I examine only the book, *The Tale of the Sankgreal Briefly Drawn out of French which is a Tale Chronicled for one of the Truest and one of the Holiest that is in this World.* I do not claim to accomplish a complete *Morte Darthur* source study——to do so would require analysis of all of Malory's books. I do, however, intend to look at how Malory's source changes affect the reader by selecting a sample of his work.

Most critics of the *Sankgreal* focus on Malory's alteration of the French source. Eugène Vinaver jump-starts the literary debate with several claims. He first asserts that it is a close translation of the French source, calling it "the least original of [Malory's] works" (Malory 1534). Larry Benson addresses Vinaver's claim, stating that Malory "drastically alters [the source's] thematic meaning" (210), and Mary Hynes-Berry insists that Malory's different perspective causes him instinctively to create an original work (106).

Vinaver also claims that the *Sankgreal* lacks unity with the rest of the books (*Malory* 70). Benson and Moorman disagree, saying that the book carries the same thematic organization as the other tales, lending itself to the larger narrative structure (Benson 210, 222; Moorman 155-56). Finally, Vinaver maintains that Malory attempts to secularize the grail theme by omitting religious passages (*Malory* 78-79). The majority of grail critics including, Sandra Ihle, Dhira Mahoney, Margaret Bradstock, and John Plummer, attack this popular issue, giving their own view of why Malory reduces his tale.

Only a handful of critics suggest a reader-response approach to the tale. Plummer touches briefly on the idea, stating that "Malory points to a gulf between two planes, one occupied by his readers and Arthur' s knights, and the other by the Grail" (108). Stephen Atkinson takes the idea further in his article on the education of Malory's reader. He suggests that Malory trains his readers in the *Sankgreal* to approach the final sections of his work more perceptively. He says that "in confronting the Grail material, we are urged to participate, forced to test our perception and judgment in company with the knights themselves" (90-91). I agree with Atkinson's education theory and plan also to take a reader-response approach to *The Tale of the Sankgreal*.

Stanley Fish, a reader-response expert, comments on the validity of

this approach in his article, "Interpreting the Variorum." He presents a case for the reader-response analysis, criticizing formalist approaches. Fish argues that questions raised by a text "are not meant to be solved but to be experienced, and that consequently any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail" (312). He asks us to not ask what a specific word in a text means, but to ask, "what does the fact that the meaning of [that word] has always been an issue mean?" (313).

Fish then unravels his own case stating his opposition to such editorial practices (like his essay) which assume that a particular sense or meaning can be made of a text. In doing so, he creates an awareness of the necessity of "the making and revising of assumptions" (319). The text does not wait for a meaning to be discovered; but rather, it constitutes meaning "and [is] continually in the act of reconstituting itself" (319). I believe Fish's "undoing the case for reader-response analysis" (319) creatively justifies it. It is in this regeneration of meaning, and in the evolution of meaning over time, that we accrue knowledge and develop new ways to look at texts as well as ourselves.

Readers of Malory cannot help but notice the drastic change in tone and subject matter as they move into the Grail story from the foregoing *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*. We are immediately thrown into a spiritual tale where prayer, confession, and penance replace jousting, feasting, and merry-making. Spiritual concerns replace earthly ones. Adventure takes on an entirely different meaning. As the *Sankgreal* dawns we enter a new world—— a mystical world of dream, vision, and interpretation.

Throughout the book, each character is forced to face his own spiritual struggles, making the Grail quest a spiritual journey. Dreams, visions, and supernatural events mark each character's quest,

reflecting the individual's conflict. Hermits and priests translate the visions and events, relating answers that help the characters work through their conflict.

At the risk of sounding like a statistician, I would like to give some numbers and percentages in order to see what Malory does with these interpretive passages. The translated French source contains 1255 lines of interpretation which Malory condenses to 365 lines——omitting approximately two-thirds. There are thirteen interpretive passages both in the French and in Malory. In seven of these, Malory specifically changes the lines concluding the interpretation. He omits the character's declaration of understanding.

In this paper, I focus primarily on these seven interpretive passages. In the French source, *The Quest of the Holy Grail,* the excerpts are lengthy. One can assume that the longer and more detailed the explanations, the more the character has a chance of understanding. And this seems to be true; in the French text, each character confirms that the holy person's words enable him to grasp the meaning. As Malory converts the French, however, he shortens the interpretations and omits verbal acknowledgments, leading characters and readers to discover truth on their own.

We see this early both in the *Quest* and in the *Sankgreal.* A newly knighted Melyas de Lyle accompanies Galahad on the quest of the Holy Grail. En route, they come to a fork in the road. Melyas, wishing to "preve [his] strength" (Malory 883. 33), departs from Galahad. He quickly falls into sin, stealing a gold crown, and Galahad must save him from his angry opponent.

A monk later tells Melyas the meaning of his misadventure, moralizing on the sins of pride and covetousness. In the French, the monk expounds for some time, beginning, "for everything you have told me

has a meaning which I will interpret to you...." "Listeners" (probably Melyas and Galahad) answer 58 lines later "that they find the meaning admirable and much to be marvelled at" (*Quest* 70-71). That night, "much talk passed ...between the two knights and their host about the adventures of the Holy Grail" (71). Finally, Galahad takes up his arms and commends Melyas to God. We the readers depart with Galahad to continue the quest. We leave Melyas behind, confident that he will recover from his physical and spiritual wounds.

In the *Sankgreal,* Malory's monk gives a brief nine-line explanation of Melyas' adventure. He explains, "pryde ys hede of every synn:that caused thys knyght to departe frome sir Galahad. And where thou toke the crowne of golde thou ded syn in covetyse and in theffte. All this was no knyghtly dedys ..." (886. 22-26). Then, without further discussion, Galahad departs. The reader is left wondering if Melyas realizes his folly. We can only conjecture as to whether or not he will take heed in the future.

Later in the *Quest* and in *The Sankgreal,* we follow the travels of sir Percival de Galis.Percival intensely pursues Galahad to pay him homage. Unable to keep up without a horse, Percival borrows one from a strange woman. He then dashes off, taking no heed of himself (*Quest* 112; Malory 911. 34)The horse, which we later learn to be a fiend, takes him on a ride to hell, and Percival barely escapes by making a sign of the cross on his forehead (*Quest* 113; Malory 912. 6).

> In the French, the author relates that Percival was: all careless in his joy of whom he was addressing. He believed it was a woman that he spoke to, yet he erred, for it was none other than the enemy, agog to trick him and bring him to that pass where he should lose his soul eternally.(112)

Malory omits these words. The reader must wait until after Percival is safe to find out the horse's real identity. Percival must also find out for himself that he has been tricked by the enemy:"Than sir Percivale perceyved hit was a fynde, the whych wolde have broughte hym unto perdicion" (Malory 912. 9-11).

After this event, Percival winds up on an island, where he prays until morning. Then he encounters a serpent and a lion in battle. He helps the lion kill the serpent, thinking the lion the more natural beast of the two. That night, he dreams of a young lady on a lion and an old lady on a serpent, the latter of which rebukes him for aiding the lion in battle (*Quest* 114-19; Malory 913-14). Finally, Percival asks a mysterious priest to explain his dream.

In the French source, the priest assures him, "I will give you clear and certain proof of what it signifies" (121). He then takes 89 lines to explain how the young lady signifies the New Law, the lion Christ, the elder lady the Old Law, and the serpent the Deceiver. Percival treasures the priest's words, saying as the priest is about to leave, "Good Sir, why would you go so soon? I take such pleasure in your commerce that, as for me, I should never seek to part myself from you. For the love of God, bide here a little longer if you can" (123). The priest promises to explain the events clearly, and the knight depends on him for understanding. Percival states, "For what you have already said to me will make me, I am sure, a better man for all my life to come" (123). The priest replies, "Look to it that you be not unfurnished against the coming of your adversary; for if he finds you undefended it will go ill with you, and that right fast" (124). When the priest leaves, Percival clambers up a rock to visit the lion he had kept company with the previous day. With this symbolic act, we feel confident that Percival will follow the law of the lion.

By contrast, Malory's priest explains Percival's dream in only 18 lines, with no easy promise of clear and certain proof (Malory 915). The shorter interpretation conveys the same basic information. However, its omission of lengthy description leaves more work for Percival in deciphering the truth for himself. Percival never says to the priest, "I understand my dream because of your words."Even though Percival goes back to the lion, we are not assured that he will follow him. Malory's ambiguity leaves an open-endedness to the narrative.

Later, at mid-day, Percival's final challenge arrives by ship. She appears to be richly clad and of boundless beauty. She tells him that she has come from the Waste Forest where she had "witnessed the strangest adventure imaginable that overtook the Good Knight [Galahad]" (*Quest* 125). The woman then tempts the knight with sacred information about the Good Knight.

Interestingly, the temptation varies from the French source to Malory. In the source, the woman agrees merely to tell Percival what she knows of Galahad. In exchange, he must "do [her] bidding" when she calls upon him (*Quest* 125). Malory makes the temptation much greater. In exchange for Percival's doing her will when she summons, she agrees to "brynge [him] unto that knyght" (Malory 916. 19-20). Percival agrees to "fullfylle [her] desyre" (916. 21-22). We soon discover what her desire is. The knight is lured into her bed but resists temptation when he sees "hys swerde ly on the erthe naked, where in the pomell was a rede crosse and the sygne of the crucifixe therin" (Malory 918. 29-31).

Seeking repentance, he catches up to the priest he had seen before and begs him, "in God's name, ...tell me what I must do, for I never stood in such desperate need of advice as I do now" (*Quest* 131). The priest, in the French source, stresses Percival's dependence on him,

stating, "I will make all plain to you. Do you but listen" (131). Sixty-six lines later, Percival avows,

> "Upon my faith, from the moment of your arrival it has been as though I had never been wounded, for since I set eyes on you I have felt no pain or discomfort, nor do I now while I listen to you; instead, your words and looks impart such balm to soul and body, that I must believe you are no mortal man but a spiritual being." (*Quest* 133)

He recognizes the priest as "the Living Bread that comes down from heaven"—— that is, as Christ (133).

In Malory's work, the priest explains to Percival the significance of overcoming temptation in a brief 10 lines without the desperate plea for help and without the lengthy, spoon-fed description. Then the priest simply ends, "Now, sir Percivale, beware and take this for an insample" (551.15-16). Without verbal acknowledgment, sir Percival "toke hys armys and entirde into the shippe, and so he departed from thens" (920. 12). In Malory's work, Percival (and the reader) are left to decide if the priest is Christ or just any wise old priest. Malory invites the reader to join the quest of spiritual self-discovery. We, like Percival, must determine the truth from scant clues.

We see the same pattern in the spiritual journey of Launcelot du Lake when a hermit interprets his dream of the seven kings. The exposition on lineage reveals Galahad as his son. In the French source, the hermit explains the dream in such detail that it is no wonder that Launcelot is "greatly amazed by what [the hermit says] about the Good Knight's being [his] son" (*Quest* 154). We are not surprised that he clearly understands and is "greatly comforted by what [the hermit says]" (154).

Then "Lancelot and the worthy man [talk] long together" (155). The next morning, the holy man implores him to "hold to his new-found path," and Launcelot assures him that he will (155). We, like Launcelot, feel certain he will walk straight on his new spiritual trail.

Malory condenses this interpretation to 28 lines (as opposed to the 127 lines in the French). Launcelot's response is not one of comfort and understanding but rather of hope for spiritual improvement."Well, mesemyth that good knyght shold pray for me unto the Hyghe Fadir, that I falle nat to synne agayne" (930. 29-31). His desire for betterment draws us into his spiritual journey. We feel his struggle with sin and hope for a successful union with the Father. We may even relate personally to his spiritual yearning, quietly wishing for a Galahad to pray for us, too. Malory leaves us with no sense of certainty, only one of hope.

Unfortunately that hope shatters the very next day when Lancelot rides upon a great tournament. His sinful misjudgment causes him to choose the wrong side. He tries to gain glory by helping the weaker party of black knights, but falls weak and gets captured. Distraught and confused, Launcelot begs a holy woman to explain the events.In the French, the lady explains that "whatever you saw was but as it were a figuration of Jesus Christ" (*Quest* 158). She interprets the meaning of the black knights, who were earthly and sinful, and the white knights, who were heavenly and pure. She moralizes for 60 lines and makes plain to Launcelot his sinful pride. He then admits, "Madam, both you and those holy men with whom I have talked have filled my ears with so much wisdom that if I fall into mortal sin I shall be worthier of blame than any sinner living" (*Quest* 160). With this comment, we once again feel confident that he is on the corrected path. We either forget or forgive the immediate lapse into sin after his last assuring statement.

Malory's recluse uncovers the same meaning of the tournament to Launcelot in 36 fewer lines, explaining that neither "pryde" nor "vayneglory of the world" is "worth a peare" (934. 11-12). Rather than praising the lady for her words, in *The Sankgreal,* Launcelot sits silently through the woman's chastisement. His silence and failure to acknowledge the woman's speech indicate a stage of internal struggle. We sense his personal strife, and experience with him independent discovery. Contrary to the French source, Malory does not allow Lancelot or us simple and easy answers.

Atkinson points out that Launcelot does not succeed in the Grail world in spite of his great earnestness. He suggests that Launcelot is the character that is most like the readers."His frequent setbacks have little effect on the effort he brings to the quest; and that effort largely mirrors our own" (104). He points out that Launcelot describes in a "sort of speech otherwise reserved for hermits and priests" his own spiritual condition (104):

> 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 better in every place, and never was I discomfite in no quarell, wer hit ryght were hit wrong. And now I take uppon 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.(Malory 896. 1-9)

It is in his effort to "se and undirstonde," that "Lancelot and the reader are united" (Atkinson 105). Atkinson states in an endnote that Malory changes his source significantly in this passage. In the French, Laun-

celot's speech amounts to "vague self-reproaches," and in Malory, the emphasis of speech is altered to express Launcelot's "intellectual initiative of the same sort Malory requires of the reader" (214). We sympathize with Launcelot who experiences the greatest struggles and setbacks. At the same time, we relate to the unfortunate realism that life's struggles will continue to exist; we are not Galahads.

I will now detour from our discussion of the 7 interpretive passages in which Malory alters the character's response to an interpretation. In 6 of the 13 total translation passages, Malory shortens the hermits' explanations, keeping the character's similar response.In four of these passages, both the character in the source and in Malory acknowledge that the hermit's words enabled him to understand. In the remaining two passages, neither the character in the French text nor in Malory's text respond at all to the interpretation. I will examine one translation passage in which Malory significantly does *not* alter the source's ending—— that is, the character's acknowledgment of understanding.

After we leave the tale of sir Launcelot, we turn to the travels of sir Gawain. Gawain rides with Ector de Maris to an ancient chapel where they fall asleep and dream of "mervaylous adventures" (Malory 942. 1-2). When they awake they ask a hermit named Nacien to relate the meaning of their strange dreams. Nacien first explains Gawain's dream of a hayrack in a meadow. The rack represents the Round Table, and the meadow signifies humility and patience. He says that although 150 bulls eat at the rack, they are not in the meadow because the bulls are "proude and black sauff only three" (Malory 946. 15-16). Nacien then translates Hector's dream of his and Launcelot's coming "downe of one chayre [which] betokenyth maystership and lordeship" (947. 4-6). He tells Hector that Launcelot has "leffte hys pryde and takyn to humilitē" (947. 11). Finally the holy man translates a vision

they both saw of a hand carrying a candle and bridle. The hand, he explains, represents charity; the bridle signifies abstinence; and the candle is the light that shows a clear path to Jesus Christ (*Quest* 173-74; Malory 947-48).

In the French source, after Nacien interprets Gawain's dream, Gawain acknowledges his understanding. He states, "I rest content with that. And it is right I should; for you have given me such certitude in place of my confusion that the true meaning of my dream is quite apparent to me" (*Quest* 171). After the hand-bridle interpretation, Gawain again claims to understand clearly, stating, "Indeed, you have explained the last so well that it is as clear as the day to me." (174). We can assume that with two verbal acknowledgments, Gawain does in fact see the meaning and therefore see his own pride and sinfulness. However, we grow suspicious with his statement, " Pray tell us now why it is we no longer meet with as many adventures as we used to do" (174), and our suspicions are confirmed when he refuses to repent of his sinful pride. When the holy man shows concern for his salvation, Gawain responds with disinterest, "Sir, had I the leisure to talk to you I would do so gladly. But you see my companion making off down the hill, and I must needs go too" (175).

We encounter a similar empty acknowledgment of understanding in *The Sankgreal.* Although Gawain only claims to understand his translations once in Malory (as opposed to the two acknowledgments in the French), the effect is the same. After Nacien explains the hand-bridal vision, Gawain retorts, "Sertes, full sothly have ye seyde, that I see hit opynly. Now I pray you telle me why we mette nat with so many adventures as we were wonte to do?" (Malory 948. 11-13). Again, Gawain says the holy man's words have enabled him to see the clear meaning, but if he did understand the meaning, he would not be asking

why they lack adventures. He would be in repentance. He has the opportunity to repent and rejects it, rejecting God. We see Gawain's blatant rebellion against God in his understanding of the truth and decision to not follow it. He vainly tries to find the Holy Grail which the hermit clearly tells him he will "nat attayne" (Malory 948. 9).

In the second half of the *Quest* and of *The Sankgreal,* we follow the journeys of Bors and Galahad. For some reason unknown to me, there are only two interpretive passages as opposed to the 11 found in the first half. Perhaps there is less need for interpretation because the second half focuses largely on Galahad; since he is without sin, there is little need for teaching through interpretation. At any rate, both of the interpretive passages change slightly but significantly from source to Malory.

In the first, a priest translates three strange events that sir Bors·de Ganys encountered on his journey. The priest first explains the significance of the "grete birde uppon that olde [dry] tre [that] ...bledde so faste that he dyed amonge hys birdys [who] toke lyff by the bloode" (Malory 956. 6-13). He then relates the importance of choosing to do battle for the lady who represented the "newe law of oure Lord Jesu Cryst" (967. 18-19). Finally, he explains the choice that Bors had to make between saving his brother's life and the honor of an unknown maiden (967-68). Unlike Launcelot, who needs constant help in his spiritual journey, Bors gets one summary interpretation and learns that he followed Christ in every decision.

In this example, Malory continues the pattern of condensed translation. Where the source gives 130 lines of explanation, Malory gives only 42. The ending of the interpretation changes from source to Malory as well. In the French, the abbot concludes, "Now I have told you the meaning of the adventures that have fallen to your lot in the

Quest of the Holy Grail" (*Quest* 199). Bors replies, "That, Sir, ...is very true. You have explained them so admirably that I shall be a better man for the telling all my days" (199). Malory, as usual, omits these definitive statements, creating mystery and intrigue for his readers. We march on toward the end of the journey, with a true sense of the quest—— a sense of hard searching for spiritual truth.

As we draw to the close of the *Quest* and of *The Sankgreal,* we encounter one final interpretation. Nearing the Holy Grail, Galahad, Percival and Bors see a fantastic sight as they enter the Waste Forest. They see a hart, that is, a male deer, "take human shape and become a man, and lions translated into divers beasts" (*Quest* 244). When they see a priest, they recount what they've seen and beg him to tell them the meaning of it.

It is at this point that the dialogue takes an interesting twist in the French book. Whereas the characters typically say, "Your words have great meaning, and now I understand because of them," now the priest retorts, "Welcome, Sirs, indeed!Your words are proof to me that you are of that band of godly men, of true and faithful knights, who shall see the Quest of the Holy Grail through to its ending" (*Quest* 244). The acknowledgment reversal suggests that the men are growing closer to the priest's godliness as they near the Grail. Also, the priest's knight-like recognition of "proof" suggests an unusual earthly searching. Priests and knights alike must discover their own spiritual mysteries.

Still in the French source, the priest then explains the vision in a briefer-than-usual 26 lines. The narrator concludes the interpretation for the characters by stating, "These words made the companions weep for joy and render thanks to Our Lord for allowing them to see His truth unveiled" (*Quest* 245).

Malory slightly alters the priest's initial response to the men. After

they recount the vision to him, he states, "A, lordys, ...ye be wellcom, for now wote I well ye beth the good knyghtes whych shall brynge the Sankgreall to an ende" (Malory 999. 24-26). Malory keeps the same basic response as the French text, omitting only, "Your words are proof to me" (Quest 244).The priest still does not recognize truth from other men's words; he probably gets all of his knowledge directly from God. He is not lowered to the knights' earthy level, as he is in the French source. In the source, both holy men and knights are geared toward self-discovery, and in *The Sankgreal,* the priest remains elevated, with God-like omniscience. Malory does not need to bring the priest closer to earthiness in order to bring knights and priests on a similar godly plane. The knights have worked on their own and continue to work on their own to achieve godliness. Each step they take toward the Grail marks a hard-earned movement in the direction of their Savior.

As Galahad, Percival and Bors near their destination, they require less explanation. Both in the source and in Malory, the priest gives brief interpretations (26 lines in the French and 16 in Malory). The knights need less direction from holy men because they are nearly to the source of all understanding. Malory concludes the interpretation with the statement, "And than they joyed much" (1000. 9). Malory still omits that it was the "words" that caused them to be joyful. Yet we for once feel confident of what causes their joy. They are approaching the rim of the Holy Grail; they feel it, and they understand it. The quest for the Holy Grail is coming to a close. The quest for spiritual discovery, however, continues.

We emerge from the Grail book as "active, questioning, concerned readers" (Atkinson 103). Malory shortens the interpretive passages and omits acknowledgments, insisting that both characters and readers make their own discoveries, knowing that a quest can only bear fruit if

one learns for oneself. Malory leaves many unanswered questions for his reader to ponder. We can therefore take the reader-response approach throughout the *Works* and try to uncover truth—— truth for the characters and truth for ourselves.

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