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"Thus he rode sorowyng": Travel Narratives and the Ethics of Sexual Behavior in *Le Morte d'Arthur*

The Arthurian oeuvre traditionally maintains a plot structure that requires knights to depart from the Round Table, either as a response to a challenge or in quest of chivalric "aventure," followed by a return to Camelot. Within this narrative framework, there exists an intricately designed logic to descriptions of movement and travel. In particular, sex and travel appear inseparable. As Andrew Lynch notes, Malory often weaves aventure, "combat" and "sexuality" into one coherent narrative (Lynch 154). The sexual profile of the traveler often dictates the kind of narrative assigned to him. Travel narratives thus become code for bad versus good sexual behavior. This code of ethics applies not only to men but to women as well. The travel of male and female virgins differs from that of male and female sexual transgressors. While the former move about successfully coming upon quests, the latter often seem plagued with boredom and an inability to find adventure. Thus emerges a system of travel narrative in which movement often signals, or may sometimes be determined by, sexual behavior. Adventure, then, takes on ethical implications; chivalric success, as signaled through travel away from the castle on quests, can be manipulated by morality or immorality of sexual practice. Using the highly orchestrated system of movement and travel in romance as a basis, Malory imposes another kind of order on the design of his narratives: one that depends on the ethical undertones of sexual behavior. Sexual behavior, then, operates both as an ethical determiner of chivalry and as an agent of narrative design.

C.S. Lewis notes that although the wandering structure of romance seems "planless," it is rather precisely "planned." Indeed "interlacing" constitutes an organizing principle of romance (Vinaver 71). The realm of "aventure" in particular requires a multi-layered structure that mimics "alternating threads in a woven fabric" (Vinaver 76). Vinaver describes this "interweaving" as a "design" of "fantastic" dimensions (Vinaver 76). Even as the typical tales of knights' wandering in the forests often seem dependent on chance, quest and its wandering quality are in fact the organizing principles of romance (Vinaver 68). Vinaver notes that traveling through the forest enables the knight to confront a series of obstacles and reach a climactic victory which subsequently allows him to return home. The "quest," an outward symbol of chivalry, allows a kind of prescriptive travel narrative that differs from descriptions of movement in the court and defines chivalric travel. The successful knight must seek and find "aventure" and is subsequently obliged to follow a certain path of travel as prescribed by the structure of quest. Kim Hyonjin notes an inherent connection between property and love among Malorian knights. "Landed" knights, with the exception of Arthur, remain "aloof from the lure of marriage" and often have affairs or even commit adultery (Hyonjin 38). This assessment uncovers a social structure in which a knight's relationship with space and travel directly relates to his sexual profile. In many cases, sexual behavior either enables or prohibits certain kinds of adventure-seeking travel.

The Grail Quest is something of a forum for the sexual ethics of travel. The prerequisites for success in this mission include not only chivalry but also sexual purity. Sir Perceval and Galahad have the capacity to retrieve the grail precisely because they are "maydyns and clene withoute spotte" (562/2). Perceval and Galahad, along with Sir Bors

de Gaynes who "trespassed but onys in hys virginite" (562/3), come together to form a virginal fellowship. During his travels in quest of the "Sankgreall," Galahad comes upon a ship and upon entering it, he finds none other than Perceval and Bors, the very knights with whom he shares a virginal companionship (579). The three knights embark on a shared travel narrative, facilitated by their sexual purity. Sexual behavior, in this case virginity, here enables a narrative of travel and fellowship formation that is particularly familiar to romance.

Opposed to these tales of sexual purity, sexual transgression comes in the form of Lancelot, the greatest knight in the world. A "good man" tells Lancelot early on in his quest for the Holy Grail that he is unsuited for the mission because he "turned to the sinners, and that caused thy mysseaventure" (557/28). Lancelot's one sin has been his adulterous relationship with Guinevere. The use of the word "mysseaventure" rather than "misfortune" or "ill luck," its synonyms,[1] specifically draws attention to the role "aventure" plays in Lancelot's "sin": the "good man" vocalizes the causal relationship between Lancelot's "sin" and the questing travel narrative he must now abandon. Lancelot's moral failure in this instance is underscored by a narrative of distressed wandering: "Thus he rode sorowyng, and halff a day oute of dispayre, tyll that he cam into a depe valey" (556/24). He expresses his ultimate resignation upon finding an apple tree on top of a mountain: "And there he leffte hys helme and hys shylde, and put hys horse unto pasture. And than he leyde hym downe to slepe" (556/27). Unlike Galahad who "rode so faste that he cam that nyght to the castell of Carbonecke" (578/25), Lancelot strays, lamenting his ineptitude and happening upon no adventure. His inactivity and boredom carry potent ethical implications and denote his sexual misdemeanor.

[1] Middle English Compendium. http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec/ s.v. "mysseaventure"

Muriel Whitaker notes that it is precisely the "rapid motion" of the knight's quest that distinguishes his chivalric duties from the "leisurely pace" of life in the court (Whitaker 54). The romance's structure requires the knight to leave the castle, and only after he has obtained a certain distance can he be confronted by "hidden menaces," enabled precisely by the "limitless, uncultivated" nature of the space in which aventure normally proceeds (Whitaker 54). Yet Lancelot's travel narrative in this instance is much more like the lethargy of the court than the rapid progression of aventure. Confronted by his sexual sin, Lancelot is not permitted to inhabit the kind of rapidly moving narrative that enables chivalry; instead, he is, in essence, forced to remain at court.

In fact, Lancelot cannot even embark on a quest without being confronted by issues relating to his sexual behavior. In the Tale of Lancelot du Lake, Lancelot's search for adventure depends on a "damesel rydynge on a whyght palfray" (156/27) whose path he just happens to cross. He specifically asks her if she knows of any "aventures nere hande" (156/30). This traveling damsel leads him to adventures but, in the process of their travel together, scolds him for his sexual devotion to Guinevere, asserting that although he is "the curteyst knyght" in the world, she considers his refusal to "love som mayden other jantylwoman" (160/35) aside from Guinevere a form of transgression. This reminder of Lancelot's sexual misbehavior literally disrupts his adventure narrative. Led into adventure by a wandering damsel, he is subsequently forced to "depart" (161/12) from her and find a new adventure precisely at the moment when she brings his sexual iniquities to the forefront of the narrative. Malory reinforces that there can be no separation between sex and travel and asserts a narrative of troubled wandering and boredom as a result of sexual iniquity.

The notion that virginity enables "aventure" extends to female virgins in addition to males. Malory sews Perceval's sister, ever referred to as a "mayde," into the fabric of the Grail Quest. Her direct inclusion in the quest and travel of the virginal fellowship of Perceval, Galahad and Bors implies that her virginity enables her to take part in the adventure. Perceval's sister approaches Galahad, veritably as his female virginal counterpart, entreating him to follow her so that she may show him "the highest adventure that ever ony knyght saw" (578/40). Indeed, it is precisely this "jantillwoman" who enables the fellowship of the virginal knights, as Galahad tells Bors and Perceval: "Sertes, had not this jantillwoman bene, I had nat come hydir at thys tyme. For as for you two, I wente never to have founde you in thys straunge countreys" (579/30). This virgin, Perceval's sister, thus becomes an agent of the course of Galahad's adventure and travel and an enabler of the meeting of this fellowship of knights.

We later learn that the attainment of a particular enchanted sword requires a maiden's virginity: "And she must be a mayde all the dayes of hir lyff, both in wyll and in worke" (582/5). Perceval's sister becomes enmeshed in the fellowship of the virginal knights. It is as a "mayde," or virgin, and not specifically as a woman, that she can join this fellowship. Later, Perceval vocalizes the privileges accorded to a virgin: "…for a mayde, in what place she commythe, ys fre" (590/25). He speaks specifically about his sister, but the comment refers to male and female virgins alike. Sexual purity enables freedom of "commy[ng]." Virgins are accorded a certain freedom of travel; unlike the impure Lancelot, who is often forced into wandering or not allowed to seek adventure, Malory's sexually pure characters happen upon many adventures and are not restricted in their quest-seeking. Malory unifies these virginal characters via a shared ability to travel

and seek adventure freely. Lynch claims that "internal" space in Malory is "gendered feminine" while "public" space is "gendered masculine" (Lynch 147). Yet, at least in the Grail Quest, it is not gender but sexual behavior that determines characters' movement in space; indeed, even the virginal *male* knights Perceval and Bors are designated "maydyns." This characterization is not effeminizing but illuminates the transcendent power of virginity to determine fellowship formation and adventure seeking. Sexual practice, and not gender distinctions, acts as the organizing principle of the complex design of interlaced travel narratives.

The relationship between sexual behavior and travel narratives is also the organizing principle of the destruction of the Round Table. The demise can be traced back to the sexual transgressions of Lancelot and Guinevere. At the very end, Guinevere, now in a convent, remarks in regard to Lancelot: "Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobelest knyghtes of the worlde" (720/15). The word "disperse" strikingly appears and reappears throughout the last few tales. As Gawayne laments: "…now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled" (674/17). "Disparbeled" specifically signifies "to scatter abroad," "to separate into parts," or "to distribute from a main source."[2] The language implies that the tragedy of the downfall of the Round Table consists precisely of a travel narrative of dispersal. If chivalric adventure is exactly embodied by a narrative that enables travel, climactic victory and the return to the court, then a "dispersal" or "scattering" one-way journey away from the Round Table signifies the death of the narrative that enables chivalry. Once this narrative of non-return has been set in motion, all of the elements of the demise quickly fall into place, including Arthur's

[2] Middle English Compendium. http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec/ s.v. "disparbeled"

death, Guinevere seeking asylum in a convent and Lancelot becoming a priest. Malory's particular use of the word "disparbeled" to describe the tragedy of the fall of the Round Table asserts the essential nature of the physical unity of the fellowship of knights. Towards the end, the text takes on a new kind of travel narrative, one that inevitably foreshadows the ultimate doom of the Arthurian order. This ultimately fatal dispersal springs from the improper sexual relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. Once again, a transgression of the code of sexual ethics results in a distressed travel narrative.

The discovery of the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere carries with it a certain domestically situated, staid quality that counters chivalric battle. Lancelot is forced to confront a crowd of accusing knights without his armor, and it is implied that the exposure of his sexual misdeed and his impotence in battle are actually one and the same. At the moment of exposure, Lancelot is trapped inside the queen's chamber. Lancelot stalls, behind the door, his only option being to open it to a "russhynge" (677/16) in of knights. With the revelation of Lancelot and Guinevere's adulterous treason comes the negation of Lancelot's earlier claim of a constant ability to "ryde off and ascape" (612/5). Instead, Lancelot has no choice but to "unbarr the dore" (677/23) and let the knights inside. The subsequent battle scene erupts into the "chambir"(677/29) rather than taking place in a forest or other unspecified outdoor space. The narration of this struggle operates as a culmination of the trouble of sexual misdeed that has been lurking throughout the text. Lancelot is momentarily punished for his adultery during the Grail Quest, but he soon lapses once again. The present battle narrative in many ways echoes Lancelot's condition in the Grail Quest. He once again finds himself confined, unable to move, and able only to "hylde…opyn" the door "a

lytyll" with his "lyffte honde" (677/24). Just as Lancelot's traveling quest is confined in the Grail Quest, leaving him only the option of stopping to sleep under an apple tree, a similar, and more serious, confrontation of his adultery necessitates a similarly condemning travel narrative. Rather than escaping, as Lancelot earlier claims he has the freedom to do, or fighting in some open space, Lancelot is trapped, immobile and fighting in the somewhat humiliating venue of the queen's bedchamber. Perceval claims "fre" travel for his sister by virtue of her virginity. If virginity presupposes "fre" travel, Lancelot is bound to stay in the queen's bedchamber, unable to depart, precisely because he is anything but a virgin.

Muriel Whitaker develops a metaphor of chivalric travel as an "allemande left of a square dance" in which "movement in the forest is cyclical," the "perimeter" of the Round Table "where kings hold court and ladies wait for the knights' return" (Whitaker 67). Fashioning the structure of chivalric narratives as a "dance" seems a particularly apt choice. Malory's exposition of the social structure of the Round Table is in fact carefully devised. Masterfully crafted, the travel narratives in *Le Morte* as a unit constitute shorthand notation for a highly developed system of court behavior. The interplay of various travel narratives and their foundations in an ethical system of sexual practice does function as though choreographed. Confirming Vinaver's argument, Malory's Arthurian oeuvre, although employing interlaced narratives and variously pulled from French predecessors, advances a system of ethical travel that lends it unity, at least on the level of the narrative if not on the level of plot. Whitaker's description of the quest operating as the extended "perimeter" of the Round Table illuminates the nature of the devastation of the "disparbeled" Arthurian court. The breakdown of cyclical chivalric travel, in which

the knight departs and subsequently returns to court, signals the dispersal of the "perimeter" of the Round Table. Once Lancelot and Guinevere's sexual transgressions have been revealed, the perimeter of the Round Table, or the structure of quest, ceases to encompass the court. Knights depart from court entirely, rather than spanning the circumference of the Round Table. This dispersal, as Guinevere notes, proceeds from a sexual crime. Malory's cycle of Arthurian romances does not consist of fragmented strands of plot, haphazardly chosen from French sources. Rather, Malory's oeuvre is a monument to the painstakingly precise construction of romance in which interlaced threads of narrative are woven together in a highly devised manner. The sexual ethics of travel narratives not only constitute a guiding principle for the construction of the broader interlaced narrative but function as a testament to the thorough craft of the text.

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