The Thematic Unity of Lacelot of the Laik

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The Thematic Unity of *Lancelot of the Laik*

Of *Lancelot of the Laik*, George Kane says:

The style quite destroys the power of the associations of this familiar material [i.e., Chaucerian imitation]; the preamble... illustrates one of its mannerisms. The alternative, when the story compels the author to leave rhetoric for narrative, is a prosiness as profuse as his grand manner. A language swinging from one to the other of these extremes, with occasional excursions into the aureate style, conventional laments, talking birds, the god of love, quotations from Ovid, all between them prevent the adventure of the willing imagination which this old and famous story might so easily have afforded.¹

Kane's comments constitute the most extensive stylistic critique yet written on *Lancelot of the Laik*, and they are typical of the myopic criticism to which the poem has been subjected.² Those elements which have usually been designated as "Chaucerian" (i.e., the descriptions of nature and the aureate language) in fact derive from the *Wallace* of Blind Harry and the earlier works of Dunbar and Douglas³ while the actual Chaucerian elements (the concern with the significance of dreams and the question of *free* will versus foreordination) have been totally ignored. The thematic unity of the work which is so obvious as to become almost tedious after a time, has similarly gone unnoticed. Kane's characterization of the plot of *Lancelot of the Laik* as an "old and famous story" is especially ill-chosen, since the wars between Arthur and Galiot are treated nowhere else in English.⁴ Indeed, *Lancelot of the Laik* is the


All references to the text will be to this edition, hereafter cited as *Lancelot*.

⁴Miss Gray says: *Lancelot of the Laik* "is the only version in our language which treats of the first section of the [Old French] *Lancelot* of which Malory seems to have had no knowledge, he ignores it so completely." *Lancelot*, xiii.
only English or Scottish romance in which Lancelot is the title character, and in only one other romance, the stanzaic Morti Arthur, is the career of Lancelot treated at any length.

Lancelot of the Laik (ca. 1480-1500) is a very loose and expanded paraphrase of the French prose romance of Lancelot du Lac. The major additions which the Scottish author has made to his source are: 1) the prologue (lines 1-354), 2) the Amytans episode (lines 1274-2143). The author "proposes to begin the story at the point where Lancelot has been made prisoner by the lady of Melyholt, and to take as his subject the wars between Arthur and Galot, and the distinction which Lancelot won in them; and afterwards to tell how Lancelot made peace between these two kings, and was consequently rewarded by Venus. . . ." The only extant MS (KK. 15 in the Cambridge University Library) is deficient at both the beginning and end; the narrative breaks off at line 3484 and whether the author ever finished the poem is conjectural. The fragment which has survived is, however, sufficient to show that the author, despite some very serious stylistic shortcomings, was capable of implanting in his work thematic unity lacking in the original.

The poem begins with a description of the author's persona who is suffering from a wound inflicted by "The derdful suerd of lowis hot dissire" (29). While ruminating in his garden, the lover is visited by a messenger, in the form of a bird, from the god of love who advises him to make for his lady a tale "of love, ore armys, or of sum othir thing" (147); it is ironic that this line, which is often cited by critics to show the incompetence of the poet, is probably the most important line in the entire poem since it introduces the major theme of love and arms which, from this point on, becomes pervasive. For the remainder of the poem, the author will be concerned with the relationship between love and arms and how the one can result from the other. After some deliberation, the lover fixes on the story of Lancelot because it is a tale "That boith of love and armys can content" (200).

After a conventional display of modesty, the lover-narrator launches into what must be the most sustained passage of occupatio in the English language. For eighty-four lines (215-298), he lists those elements of the Lancelot story which he will not relate (e. g., Lancelot's birth, breeding,

The version of Lancelot du Lac to which the Scottish poem is closest is that contained in The Vulgate Version of The Arthurian Romances, ed. H. O. Sommer (7 vols., Washington, D. C., 1910), III-V. Cf. Lancelot, xiv-xvii.


E. g., Ackerman, p. 489.

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the injustices done to him, and his relationship to the Lady of the Lake.
After telling us that the story will take the traditional "wo to wele" form, the narrator ends the Prologue.

Book I (there are two complete books and a fragment of a third) begins with a description of nature, probably modelled on similar descriptions in Blind Harry's Wallace. We are told that Arthur postpones his journey from Carlisle to Camelot until he finds out the meaning of two dreams which he has had. Guenevere reproaches Arthur for his belief in dreams in much the same language that Perceoloe uses to Chaunticleer and that Pandarus uses to Troilus; she says:

To dremys, sir, shuld no man have Respek,
For the ben thingis weyn, of non affek.
(581-82)

Arthur's clerks tell him that the dreams are a warning to him. He must forego all "erdly honore" (498) and prepare himself for the traitorous acts of whom he most trusts, "marget of ther will" (500); he will find no help but in the "watrye lyone" (519), the "liche" [without medicine] (520), and the "flour" (521). The statement that Arthur's most trusted friends will betray him "marget of ther will" coupled with the prophetic dreams raises the question of the validity of man's free will, a commonplace in medieval literature, but especially pervasive in Chaucer. This question is raised in varying contexts throughout Lancelot of the Laik; on its answer hinges the moral responsibility for the betrayal of Arthur by Guenevere and Lancelot.

An aged messenger from Galioet arrives and informs Arthur that Galioet demands tribute; if Arthur refuses to pay, Galioet will ravage his lands. When Arthur refuses, the messenger, alluding to the inevitability of the war between Arthur and Galioet, says: "Non may recist the thing the wiche mone bee" (565). Arthur replies that if Galioet wins his kingdom, "Al the world shal see/that It shal be marget myne entent" (585-86). The implicit question is whether Arthur's "entent" is of any consequence.

Lancelot's first appearance (687 ff.) is marked by a change in tone which in turn is indicated by a metrical change. The decasyllabic couplets give way to four-five-line stanzas (rhyming aabba) in which Lancelot laments his imprisonment by Melyhalt (698-717) which he blames on:


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Lancelot further laments his absence from Guenevere and his inability to perform knightly deeds (718-724). It is in the areas of love and arms then that Lancelot's imprisonment weighs most heavily upon him.\footnote{It should be noted that the lover's choice of a story for his lady is an apt one, for both he and Lancelot are unrequited lovers.}

In the meantime Galiot has invaded Arthur's kingdom, and a battle is already in progress. Our author, like most Northern writers, excels in his battle descriptions, but unlike his contemporaries he disdains the use of heavy alliteration. Gawain's statement "Deth or defence, non other thing we wot" (804) is illustrative of the simple unadorned heroism which Northern poetry, at its best, can occasionally capture.\footnote{Cf. Wallace's statement, "I am bot ake, and for gud caus I ga" (VIII, 59).}

Similarly, there is a sense of perspective shown in the battle descriptions which is all too rare in medieval literature. After praising Gawain's feats of arms, the narrator brings us back to the harsh realities of the situation (Arthur is badly outnumbered):

\begin{verbatim}
But what awalith al his [i.e., Gawain's] besynes,
So strong and so insufferable vas the press?
\end{verbatim}

Later in the poem the valor displayed by individual knights is again commended but, of the battle as a whole, the narrator says:

\begin{verbatim}
S hit ay for one ther ennemyes wor thre;
Long mycht thei nocht endur in such dugree.
\end{verbatim}

Lancelot has heard of the battle and asks Melyhalt to release him. She replies that she will free him only if he promises to return that night. He so promises unless something happens "magre myne entent" (959). Melyhalt gives Lancelot a red horse, red shield, and red spear (991). On his way to the battle he sees Guenevere in a parapet overlooking the field (1005 ff.). He laments his love-sickness and unworthiness, but his love for Guenevere inspires him to forego cowardice and perform valiant deeds of arms (1018 ff.) for her sake. What Lancelot cannot know is that courage will inspire love not in Guenevere but in Melyhalt; Guenevere, who comes off rather badly in this poem as elsewhere, is moved only to the extent that she hopes the Red Knight...
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will be saved "fro deth or wykit adventure" (1131), a sentiment applicable to any of Arthur's knights.

The love and arms motif is here reinforced by the imagery as Lancelot is described first as "the red knycht, byrnyng in loves fyre" (1090) and then "Lyk to a lyone" (1095). But despite Lancelot's heroism, the numerical superiority of Galio's forces wins the day. Arthur is fear-stricken that his clerks' prophecies will come to pass, but he is given a year's respite by Galio who brutally, but accurately, sums up Arthur's situation:

. . . . no worschip to ws wre
In conquerynge hyme, nor of his loode,
He haist no streth, he may ws not withstande.
Wharfor, me think, It best is to delay,
And resput hyme for a tuelmoneth day,
Whill that he may assemble al his mycht;
Than is more worschip aenim hyme to ficht.
(1157-65)

Lancelot, having returned to Melyhalt's castle, falls asleep in his bloody armor. Melyhalt immediately falls in love with him, but her cousin reminds her that Lancelot may love another. In the light of the later career of Lancelot and its relationship to Arthur's prophetic dreams, the cousin's words are heavy with irony:

His [i.e., Lancelot's] hart hyme sal not suffir
to love two,
For noble hart wil have no dowbliness.
(1255-56)

Book II begins with the now to be expected nature description (1274 ff.), but there is an excellent contrast drawn between "The cloudy nycht, wnder whois obscure/ The rest and quiet of every creatur/ Lyth sauf" (1274-76) and "Arthur . . . to whome that rest is nocht./ But al the nycht supprisit is with thocht" (1280-81). There follows an episode of 949 lines (1294-2143) in which a wise man, Amynas, arrives at Arthur's court and proceeds to tell him in what ways he has displeased God and how he may yet attain salvation. All critics, with the exception of Vogel, have seen this episode as intrusive, irrelevant, formless, and dull; Vogel sees this section as important only because, he says, it helps to date the poem.\(^\text{11}\) What has been overlooked in previous critical evaluations is the thematic relevance which this episode has to both the remainder of the poem and the Arthurian legend as a whole. The reconciliation of the two conceptions of Arthur (the

\(^{11}\) Vogel, p. 13.
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dux bellorum and the medieval Christian king) is never complete in
classical romance, which generally emphasizes one conception to the
virtual exclusion of the other. That such a reconciliation should be
attempted in Lancelot of the Laik is suggestive of the sophistication
of its author; that the attempt is unsuccessful is less the fault of
the author than of his material, for certain elements of the Arthurian legend
simply cannot be reconciled to the teachings of the Medieval Church.

Amytans, in what is perhaps an allusion to the dance of the seven
deadly sins, tells Arthur that he is "far myswent/ Of wykiness upon
the vrechir dans" (1319-20) and adds that God will smite him down
from his high estate unless he reforms (1325 ff.). Since Arthur was
not begotten in "spousag" (1335), his kingship is not based on hereditary
right but is a privilege granted by God. Here the first point of
conflict between the Arthurian legend and orthodox Christianity is met
and effectively disposed of.

Amytans accuses Arthur of breaking God's laws, of administering
justice unwise, and of being concerned only with "this fals world"
(1337), i.e., only with conquest and the acquisition of new territory.
The second point of conflict is less effectively handled; Arthur simply
admits his guilt and asks, "How [sal I] mend, and ek her eftir leif[?]
(1391). We cannot blame the author for refusing to defend the indefensible, but some justification from Arthur of his past exploits
would seem an artistic, if not a logical, necessity.

The third point of conflict is handled with consummate skill. Arthur
goes to confess his sins (1433 ff.); when he returns, Amytans asks him
whether he has confessed his unjust treatment of King Ban and his
wife, nor to mention their son who is, of course, Lancelot (1445-50).
Apparently it never occurred to Arthur that his disinheriting of Lancelot
was a sin, for "the king in his entent/ Assets was, and furthwith is he
went/ Agane, and to his confessour declarith" (1450-52).

Amytans tells Arthur that some of his people have failed him
"magre ther entent" (1498), but that most have deserted him because
of past injustices (1502). The offer of a year's truce has been sent by
God in order to give Arthur a chance to repent (1589-95); the implication
is very strong that Galior "wol he, nol he" is an instrument of
divine providence.

The next three hundred lines are taken up with advice of the kind
which Polonius gives to Laertes as Amytans emphasizes the virtues of

For Chaucer, "the olde daunce," referred to by both Pandarus and the
Wife of Bath, refers to love and courtship.
moderation. Amytans lectures Arthur on court flattery and tells him that a king is susceptible to flattery only if he is ignorant, vicious, or foolish (1919 ff.). In answer to Arthur's plea (2003-2010), Amytans explains the significance of the "waitir lyon," the "lech that is withouten medysyme" and the "flour" (2007-09). The "lyon" is God the Father; the "waitir" represents the impurity of the clerks who, because of past sins, were unable to see the Deity in all His magnificence (2015-2052). The "lech withouten medysyme" is Jesus Christ (2054-84), and the "flour" is the Virgin Mary (2085-2116). If Arthur will place his trust in these three he will reign "In honore and in worship" (2128). Arthur promises to do all that Amytans has said (2129-42), and the wise man leaves (2143).

With the departure of Amytans, Arthur remembers the forthcoming battle and instructs Gawain to find the Red Knight who fought so bravely in the previous engagement (2160 ff.). As Gawain and his knights ride forth, the scene changes to Melyhalt's castle. Lancelot again asks to be released so that he may fight against Galor. Melyhalt promises to ransom Lancelot if he will answer one of three questions: 1) Whom do you love? (2373-74), 2) What is your name? (2375; cf. 962-63 and 2265-66), 3) Do you expect to repeat your former exploits when you fought as the Red Knight? (2376-80). Lancelot refuses to answer either of the first two questions but says that he expects to exceed his exploits as the Red Knight (2401-03). Melyhalt, who had hoped that Lancelot would tell her the name of his beloved, asks him to remain with her until the day of the battle (2411-12). He agrees (2417) and asks her to prepare black arms for him (2424). In this section love and arms are the most important elements; the parallel between Lancelot and Melyhalt, who are both unrequited lovers, should not go unnoticed.

Just before the close of Book II, the narrator returns to Arthur (2440) who, we are told, "kepit the lore of maister amytans/ In ryghtwysness . . . (2444-45), And thus the sher he dryweth to the ende" (2468).

Book III opens with the inevitable nature description (2469-85) whose function here, as elsewhere, is to indicate the passage of time by means of seasonal and astrological references. Gawain and his knights, who have been unable to find the Red Knight, resolve to return to Arthur (2505-18). We learn that Galor has doubled his host, and

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that some of his men fight "for wynyng," others "for luf" (2548). The battle (2577 ff.) is skillfully described with many realistic touches:

\[\ldots\text{many one felith deithis wound,}\]
\[\text{And wndir hors lyth sobing one the ground.}\]

(2655-56)

Darkness ends the battle "magre of thar [i. e., the combatants'] desyre" (2709).

When Lancelot hears of the grievous wounds suffered by Gawain, he laments his imprisonment (2747 ff.) and apostrophizes himself and his grief to Melyhalt (2757-70). After Melyhalt promises to free Lancelot on the third day of the battle (2771-80), she rides to the court and finds that Gawain is not so badly wounded as was first thought (2783-2802).

On the third day of the battle, Lancelot, clad in sable arms, rides out from Melyhalt’s castle, but, as earlier, stops to stare at Guenevere, who is again watching the proceedings from a parapet (2813-14). The battle begins, but Lancelot remains motionless. Guenevere is advised to commend herself to the unknown knight; she refuses, but says that her gentlewomen may commend themselves to him if they wish (2847-2915). A squire bearing arms, and a lady, symbolic representations of arms and love respectively, urge Lancelot "for love of them [i. e., all the ladies but Guenevere] this day/ In armys sum manhed to assay" (2933-34).

Lancelot is disturbed by Guenevere’s aloofness but rides forth despite his annoyance. After demonstrating his prowess by slaying several of Galior’s knights, Lancelot retires from the field and resumes his vigil of the parapet. Gawain, who can tolerate Guenevere’s insolence no longer, upbraids her sharply:

\[\text{For well it outh o prince or o king}\]
\[\text{Til honore and til cheriss in al thing}\]
\[\text{O worthi man, that is in knychted prewitt.}^4\]

(2993-95)

\[\text{Not with the Rich nor mychry antery,}\]
\[\text{Bot with the purc [i. e., poor] worthi man also,}\]
\[\text{With them thou sit, with them yow ryd and go.}\]

(1694-96)

Guenevere finally relents, and Lancelot, who still has not revealed his identity, promises to be her knight (3039 ff.). Many knights follow Lancelot into battle, “Sum for love, sum honor to purchess” (3089),

\(^4\text{Gawain’s statement of the doctrine of “gentliesse” echoes the words of Amytans to Arthur:}\)

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and he rides forward "Thinking to do his ladice love to have/ Or than his deth before hir to resave" (3169-70). Lancelot forces many knights to flee, one of whom report to Galio that a Black Knight surpasses the feats which the Red Knight had performed (3327-38); the truth of the answer which Lancelot had given to Melybalt is thus effectively demonstrated. After seeing the heroism of the Black Knight at first hand, Galio promises that he himself will see to it that the Black Knight is not set upon treacherously. This sets the stage for the reconciliation between Arthur and Galio that Lancelot effects in the French version.

Lancelot rallies Arthur's forces, and, in a bit of unintentional irony, comments on his own anonymity:

What that ye ar I know not yhour estat,
Bot of [yhour] manhed and worship, well I war... (3443-44)

The narrative breaks off at line 3484 in the midst of the battle description.

Lancelot of the Laik is the work of a man who thinks more clearly than he writes. On the conceptual level the poem is challenging and original; as poetry it is almost, but not quite, as bad as the critics would have us believe. Lancelot represents an attempt to come to grips with the Arthurian legend in the context of Christian orthodoxy. In this attempt the author uses elements (arms and love) which have relevance both to Arthurian material and to the symbolism of the Medieval Church. In Amyrants' interpretation of Arthur's dreams, the "lyon" and the "fleur" represent the theological equivalents of the conceptions of arms and love depicted in other parts of the poem. Specific points of conflict between the Arthurian legend and Church teachings are met and disposed of, some more effectively than others. The author is well versed in his subject and is perspicacious enough to realize that the important role which prophecy plays in the Arthurian legend calls into question the existence of man's free will. Lancelot of the Laik is totally devoid of the supernatural material which is pervasive in Arthurian literature as a whole; the author is primarily interested not in spells but in ideas, not in the details of the story but in its significance. The "theme" of Lancelot of the Laik, symbolically presented in terms of arms and love, is that the Arthurian material, or at least that portion of it concerning the early career of Lancelot, is compatible with orthodox Christianity, a concept which later writers, like Spenser, would have readily understood.

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