The Tale of Sir Gareth in Malory

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The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney is an interesting one for several reasons. While major French sources have been found for Malory's other romances, Gareth's sources remain a mystery. Some crtitcs believe that Gareth must be based upon an earlier romance. Others think that Gareth is the most original and inventive of Malory's works. There is solid evidence to support both opinions. The issue raises another problem. Because the major source, if any, of Gareth is unknown, it is impossible to evaluate Gareth on the basis of the source. If the critic is to understand Gareth and its role in the collected works of Malory, he must, at least in part, be willing to regard Gareth on the basis of its own merits.

It is clear that Gareth is, to some extent, based upon earlier romances. But there are two sides to the question. Did Malory borrow many details from several romances and form them into a coherent story? Or did he condense and adapt an already exixtent "romance of Gaheret," as Vinaver calls it?[1] The main proponents of the former view are Wilfred L. Guerin and Larry D. Benson. Both Guerin and Benson believe that Gareth is drawn from many sources and that Malory did not merely condense and adapt, but created the most original of his works. Both support their ideas with convincing, if speculative, arguments.

According to Guerin, the role of Gareth in Malory's works [illegible] the idea that he drew details from many

is admirable. This leads Guerin to conclude that Malory used his sources, which were inconsistent, and created a specific and consistent character, Gareth, who would play an important role in the future events of Malory's works. Thus, Gareth as he stands is original in Malory. One could, however, as easily say that Malory's Gareth is consistent because he used a major French source, now lost, which was also consistent.

Benson, too, believes that Malory drew basic ideas from many romances, including Chretien de Troyes' Erec et Enide as well as Ipomadon, Desconus Lybeaus, and others. Like Guerin, Benson believes that Gareth is not mere adaptation, but an invention which allowed Malory to choose a multitude of sources rather than merely to adapt and to reshape one or two. Benson sees Gareth as an example of a "Fair Unknown" romance. In such romances, a man who either does not know his name or who does not wish to reveal it is called upon by a damsel to rescue his lady. In the process, he is also called upon to prove his worthiness of knighthood to the court, his family, his lady, and himself. Included in his adventures is a series of battles with knights who are related to one another, as well as a battle with a knight who is usually related to the knight besieging the lady. He also eventually fights his own brother without knowing who he is, but then recognizes him. In the end, after he has proved himself and become known, he marries the lady whom he has rescued and his brother marries the damsel who led the Fair Unknown. These "stock conventions of romance" are found in whole or in part in many romances, some of which are believed to be among Gareth's sources.[2] For example, though Gareth does not appear in Ipomadon, it can still be seen easily that Ipomadon is

a possible source of Gareth, for Benson demonstrates many parallels between the two.[3] The theme of an anonymous but attractive young man is evidently common in romance. Malory even draws attention to this in Gareth when Lancelot warns Kay that once gave a good knight who was a Fair Unknown the mocking nickname La Cote Male Tayle. These parallels lead to the idea that Malory used the stock conventions to create an original romance.

According to Benson, even the obvious similarities between Gareth and earlier Fair Unknown romances contribute to the notion that it is an original work. For example, the section of Gareth from the beginning to Gareth's battle with the Red Knight of the Red Lands is a typical Fair Unknown section, yet even the similarities do not "fit in comfortably" with prior Fair Unknown romances, for Gareth shows the influence of other works, such as Tristan.[4] Again, this leads to the possibility that Malory created rather than adapted. This is one view of the book that critics have taken.

On the other hand, Vinaver thinks that there must have been a romance of Gaheret which was part of a romance cycle, and which has since been lost. He cites the similarities between Gareth and the Gaheret of the Prose Lancelot. Both are fair and modest. And both have similar adventures. Yet it is equally obvious that Malory did not draw his entire story from the Prose Lancelot. Rather, Vinaver believes that Gareth was derived from a part of the Prose Tristan.

Vinaver offers several reasons for this belief. One is the fact that characters who are not Arthurian and who appear in the Prose Tristan appear only in Malory's works in his Trystram and Gareth. If Malory were using a section of the Prose Tristan, it

is logical that Tristan characters would appear in Gareth If he were not, however, there is no reason for Tristan characters such as Lamerok, Dinadan, and Trystram to appear exclusively in Gareth as well as in Trystram, but not in the other works. This is strong evidence that Gareth, like Trystram, was taken from the Prose Tristan.

To further support this, Vinaver also points to the character of Gawain in the Prose Lancelot and in the Prose Tristan. In Lancelot, Gawain is a noble, good knight; in other words, Gawain is regarded favorably. In Tristan, however, Gawain is regarded unfavorably, and is even equated to some extent with Breuz Sans Pitie, who is alway notoriously evil. In several of Malory's works, his Gawain resembles the Lancelot conception. However, in Gareth and Trystram, Gawain shows his other side; he kills two good knights and is full of treachery. This perhaps indicates that Malory was adhering closely to the French sources. When drawing from Lancelot, the Mort Artu, or the Merlin, Malory kept their conception of Gawain as basically good. When, in the case of Gareth and Trystram, Malory drew from Tristan, he conveyed Tristan's image of a more treacherous Gawain. Malory did not create a new Gawain from both types of sources; there is no reason to believe that he created Gareth, but drew Gareth and his story from a lost branch of Tristan.

Loomis offers an argument which tries to support a similar theory. If one can suppose that there were a number of sources from which Malory drew, why is it not possible to suppose that all these sources were based upon an earlier romance? As support, Loomis shows how Gareth's nickname, Beaumains, may have been a

corruption of a Welsh name. Gauvains' adventures, which appear in many works, including Chretien's Conte del Graal, parallel many of Beaumains' adventures. But the parallels are not so close that one can say that the Conte del Graal is the source. For Loomis, it is far more plausible that Malory's Beaumains and Chretien's Gauvains are based upon a "common source."[5] The problem is that it is highly improbable that the Welsh name would have become Beaumains, and that this is how a Welsh tale gave birth to French romances.

Each critic offers convincing evidence to support his idea, but the fact remains that each argument is mainly conjecture. It is impossible to know whether Gareth is an adaptation, as is the case with Malory's other works, or if Malory created the framework for a new tale about a character who would play such an important role in the Arthurian story. In either case, Gareth is an interesting story in itself and as a part of the story of the flowering of chivalry and the downfall of Arthur and his realm.

In a general sense, Gareth can be divided into four parts. First, Gareth comes to court anonymously, where he serves as a kitchen knave and where he is mocked by the court wit, Kay, who calls him Bewmaynes. Second, he leaves the court on a quest to rescue a lady, meanwhile encountering many knights and challenges. Third, he battles at a tournament which Arthur and his court attend, and continues to prove himself in spite of his anonymity. He even [illegible] his oldest brother anonymously. Finally, after having

adventures. Thus, Gareth is obviously modelled upon the idea of a Fair Unknown romance.

The first part of the story is perhaps the most cohesive, and there are several themes which contribute to this. The first is the damsel whom Gareth follows and who, knowing him only as the kitchen knave Bewmaynes, attributes his victories to misfortune rather than to prowess. After each adventure, she is always there to belittle him. Her ultimate realization that Gareth is no ordinary kitchen knave is one of the most important moments of the story. She and Lancelot are among the first to realize that Gareth is not what he appears to be to Kay, and both admit this when Gareth has fought to prove himself.

The battles which Gareth fights are another theme tying the section together. First, Gareth encounters several knights about whom we know little. He defeats six knights escorting a bound

Gareth should stay away for such a long period of time. Immediately after his departure, she devises the means to discover the name of the anonymous knight; she steals his dwarf and pries the name from him. Gareth then discovers her and the dwarf at her brother's castle. Now that Lyones knows Gareth's name, it will be possible for them to be together. Gareth has both deeds and name behind him now.

There is another anticlimax. The attempts of Gareth and Lyones to fulfill their love are interrupted by a mysterious knight with great recuperative powers who is sent by the damsel sister. This is a sort of romantic interlude between Gareth's first string of battles and the next major section. It is important because Gareth once and for all achieves the lady and, having done that, is successfully prevented from committing a terrible mistake. For, as Malory directly points out later in speaking of the old and new ways of loving, it is better to exercise self-control and love forever than to allow hot love to burn itself out in seven days by immediately gratifying it. In relation to Gareth, he must abstain until he has achieved all his goals. Only then can he achieve the final goal--marriage.

The next section is linked to the first by the brothers with armor of different colors whom Gareth has defeated, who come to King Arthur at Gareth's request. As part of the link, Arthur's sister reveals Bewmaynes' identity as her youngest son Gareth, thus ruining his needed anonymity. Gareth re-creates this by returning to his original state; when the tournament is held so that Arthur can discover Gareth, Gareth naturally appears, not as himself, but as the least of knights. The disguise is further en-

hanced by the ring which changes the color of his armor. And, because Lancelot will not steal the day, Gareth wins the tournament. It is as though Gareth's story begins once more. He starts as an anonymous knight and defeats the proven knights of Arthur's court. Color continues to play an important role.

In the third section, the problems with Gareth's anonymity continue when, robbed of his ring by the dwarf, his identity is once again revealed and Gareth must quickly take the ring back to hide his true self. Leaving the tournament, Gareth faces yet one more set of adventures; he defeats the Duke de la Rouse and Sir Bendalyne and sixteen knights, frees the widows of another knight's castle, and finally, still anonymously, fights his brother Gawain until they are stopped by the damsel who once and for all reveals Gareth's identity. Again, Gareth starts the section anonymously, proves himself in battle against his brother, his most important foe, and is finally revealed. Thus, this, pattern reveals itself for the third time in the tale.

The idea of each section and, indeed, of the entire tale, is that Gareth, though he is the son of a king and a queen, is not content to be accepted merely because he is entitled to be by birth. Arthur makes the mistake of assuming that Gareth, like some Fair Unknowns, does not know his own name. But it is important to realize that Gareth does know and three times assumes humble disguises to hide it simply because he wishes to prove that he is not only the son of a king and queen, but that he deserves to be such. In the first series of battles, he proves himself to his lady and to her sister. In the tournament, he proves himself to Arthur and the court. In the last series, culminating in the fight

with Gawain, he proves himself to his family. This final battle with Gawain, who is acknowledged as one of the greatest knights in the world, comes to a draw; now Gareth has shown by works that he too must be included among those great knights.

The last scene is Gareth's reward for his works. At his marriage, which is celebrated on a grand scale, the knights he has defeated come to King Arthur with increasingly large retinues: the Green Knight with thirty knights, the Red Knight with sixty knights, and so on until the Red Knight of the Red Lands, Sir Ironside, an

rives with three hundred knights, and the ladies whom Gareth has freed arrive with their gentlewomen. And to increase the festivities, Arthur sees that Gaheris marries Lyonet and Agravain marries dame Laurel. The end of the tale is the picture of flowering chivalry, stability, marital bliss, and a unified court, marred only by the disappearances of Trystram and Lamerok.

Thus, Gareth having as a kitchen knave, has faced a series

and the brother knights of different colors, and the definite sense of a clear beginning and a clear ending. Another important reason is the character of Gareth himself. Malory tells us a great deal about Gareth beyond merely describing his actions. First, Malory often refers to Gareth's youth; in fact, Gareth is so young that he cannot replace Gawain in the hierarchy of knights. Later, in The Book of Sir Trystram, he has himself been replaced by the older, experienced Palomydes.[6] In every way, Gareth begins his career as an underdog of sorts; not only is he lowly, but he is young as well. Gareth is also courteous. Though the damsel provokes him beyond the normal limits of human endurance, he demonstrates tremendous self-restraint. Not only does he not ruin his mission by blurting out the truth in order to keep her quiet, but he never even reveals the slightest sign of annoyance or anger to her. Instead, he later admits that he used her words to make him fight harder. His only revenge seems to be taken when he defeats the Green and Red Knights, for he puts the damsel in the rather ironic position of having to beg for the lives of full noble knights from a kitchen knave. But even this is not as cruel as it seems, for Gareth knows that he is not a knave, and is not really putting the damsel in a debased position, and he hopes that he will soon be able to show her this. In everything, Gareth is always courteous. Gareth is also a fair man, for though Kay's nickname may be referring to his physical appearance, Malory probably uses the nickname to refer to his "fair-handed" nature.[7] When possible, Gareth spares the life of his opponent. He even gives Sir Ironside the opportunity to explain his evil practice of hanging defeated knights and, upon hearing that this is done for the sake of a lady, Gareth generously

grants him mercy. Gareth, above all, is moral, especially when compared to his brothers. Gawain chooses lovers; Gareth chooses marriage. When he does try to transgress, he is prevented by outside forces until he learns his lesson. Gareth is so morally superior to Gawain that, by the end of the tale, he shuns his brother, for Gawain is "evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther: and that hated sir Gareth."[8] The separation appears even more strongly in a later work; while Gawain, Agravain, Gaheris, and Mordred plot against Lamerok, Gareth remains free from any taint of the crime. The Gareth character which Malory has drawn is not only admirable, but sympathetic as well. What makes Gareth a great story is the skillful combination of theme and narrative with a worthy, appropriate protagonist.

Like most of Malory's works, Gareth is a complete narrative in and of itself. Yet, again like the other stories, it has a [illegible]

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looking at the entirety of the works. From The Tale of King Arthur to The Tale of Sir Gareth, Malory paints the beginning of the

section, that is, the rise, the flowering, and the fall, comprises roughly one third of the entirety. This also explains the extreme length of Trystram and the use of characters within it; Lancelot, Trystram, Lamerok, and Palomydes, the four greatest knights of the world, and the knights and characters associated with them (Isode, Mark, Elaine, Dinadan, and so forth) contribute to keeping the narrative together. So, though Trystram seems excessively long and tedious, its length and structure do serve a purpose; they balance the other two sections. More importantly to this discussion, Benson, with this structure in mind, proposes that Gareth is a counterpoint to The Tale of the Sankgreal; Gareth is a counterpoint to Galahad.[12]

First, there are certain parallels within the stories themselves. Gareth arrives at court at Pentecost; his damsel guide arrives a year later on Whitsunday. The damsel who leads Lancelot to Galahad arrives at the court at the vigil of Pentecost; Galahad himself, preceded by many wonders, arrives at Pentecost. Each is the strange adventure which Arthur must see before sitting to meat. Both are anonymous by choice, and both are very young. The main difference between the two at this point is that Galahad has been knighted before his arrival by Lancelot; Gareth will be knighted after his departure by Lancelot.

Each sets out upon a quest. The quests, of course, are very different. Gareth sets out to rescue a lady and to prove his worthiness of knighthood along the way; Galahad sets out to find the Sankgreal and to prove that he is worthy of it. It is necessary for Gareth to fight, defeat, and sometimes kill other knights; it is equally necessary that Galahad not kill anyone rashly, un-

like knights like Gawain. In the process of Gareth's quest, he kills two knights who guard a bridge; he brings to an end the Red Knight's and the Duke de la Rouse's evil customs; and he liberates thirty widows. In the process of the quest of the Holy Grail, the adventures of England are brought to an end. Thus, in both quests, there is a very strong sense of completion, of important adventures being brought to their logical conclusions. The difference is that Galahad is known by the time he sets out upon his quest; Gareth is not.

In both quests, the hero is ultimately successful. Gareth wins worship and the woman; Galahad achieves the Grail. Gareth marries; Galahad dies. Each event is the natural result of the particular quest. This points out the most important difference between the two stories. Gareth is a secular hero; his goals are earthly things. Galahad is, of course, a religious hero; his goal is heavenly. In his own sphere, each is admirable.

If one accepts Benson's view, then Gareth has a completely logical place in Malory's works. Gareth the character serves a function as well, for he reappears several times in the other works. As portrayed in Trystram, Gareth continues to be a good knight; in fact, he is called a better knight than his brothers. At one tournament, in The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, he defeats thirty knights, but rides off with another great knight, Palomydes, before collecting his prize, again demonstrating his modesty. Throughout, it is important to note that Gareth, unlike many good knights, has few, if any, enemies. Lancelot and Trystram have enemies because they are the greatest knights and because of

them. Lamerok is slain because he is Pellinore's son and he once crossed the vengeful Orkney family. Palomydes incurs Trystram's dislike when he professes his love for Isode and his hatred for her lover, Trystram. Yet Gareth is loved and admired by all, and is praised by everyone for refusing to murder good knights such as Lamerok, a practice in which his brothers seem to delight. Even in the hottest dispute, the war between Arthur's kin and Lancelot's kin over Guinevere, Gareth manages to remain fairly neutral, neither siding with his king and uncle, and his brothers, nor with the man who knighted him and whom he loves best in the world, Lancelot. Gareth remains one of the few completely admirable characters in Malory. Ironically, it is Gareth's goodness and very neutrality which causes his premature death and, in one sense, the ultimate downfall of Arthur.

Because he does not choose sides, Gareth, for Arthur's sake,

final destruction. The personality of Gareth and the fate of Arthur and his kingdom are clearly related.

Thus, the character of Gareth plays an important role in two of Malory's works. In the first, The Tale of Sir Gareth, Malory describes the blossoming of Arthurian chivalry and provides Gareth as a courteous, fair, brave, knightly, and modest ideal. The tone of Gareth is youthful and optimistic, for it is the story of a young man who proves himself to the world and who is appropriately rewarded for his goodness. The end of the story is hopeful, showing Arthur's court at its peak. Only the disappearance of Trystram and Lamerok hints vaguely that not all is perfect.

By the end of The Tale of the Sankgreal and the beginning of the Morte Darthur, the rivalries that were beginning to develop in Trystram have surfaced and Gareth, one of the most innocent and benign of the great knights, is caught in the middle between loyalty to his family and their unreasonable jealousies, and loyalty to the man who knighted him and to whom he owes his duty. He makes the only choice that a man like him in his position can make. If Gareth was a youthful story of hope for Arthur's court, then

the Morte Darthur is the story of that court destroyed by fatalistic

romance about a youthful ideal who must come to a tragic end in the same way that Arthur's brilliant commencement ends in death? Is Gareth an original romance intended to mirror Arthur's reign? Whether Gareth is an adaptation or an invention, it is clear that not only is the tale itself well-conceived, but that its contributions of theme and character are invaluable to Malory's works as a whole.

N O T E S

[1]Sir Thomas Malory, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 1432.

[2]Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.98.

[3]Ibid., p. 99-100.

[4]Ibid., p. 93.

[5]Roger Sherman Loomis, Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory: A Study of the Book and Its Sources (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1921), p. 65.

[6]Benson, p. 104.

[7]Malory, p. 1431.

[8]Ibid., p. 360.

[9]Benson, p. 34-35.

[10]Ibid., p. 35.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

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