

**The Naked Truth,  
or Why in *Le Morte Darthur* La Beale Isode  
May Be Naked but Queen Gwenvivere May Not**

*Anat Koplowitz-Breier*

The fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur*<sup>1</sup> composed by Sir Thomas Malory, is perhaps the most influential Arthurian text written in English. Malory wrote his romance in prose at the end of the fifteenth-century (c. 1470) basing it on several works in English and French. Since the only facts we know about Malory<sup>2</sup> is his name, his being a knight and his being in prison, at least part of the time while writing the *Morte*, we can only assume what sources he used. His work includes the story of King Arthur and the Round table from the birth of Arthur until his death and the collapse of the Round Table. It brings in, for the first time in English, the love story of Lancelot and Gwenvivere and combines within the work the Story of Trystram and La Beale Isode.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *The Morte* are from: Thomas Malory, *Works*, Eugène Vinaver, ed., 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the identity of Sir Thomas Malory see P.J.C. Field book *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (1993; Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999).

The two love triangles dominate the plot:<sup>3</sup> the first is the love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Gwenyvere, and Lancelot; the second is the one between King Mark, La Beale Isode, and Trystram. The two triangles share many common points:<sup>4</sup> in both cases the wife's lover is also the husband's knight and vassal, and both relationships entail not only adultery but also treason. Throughout the *Morte* we have the impression that the two triangles are intended to reflect one another in order to emphasize the differences between them.<sup>5</sup> Many of Malory's critics who analyzed the love triangles focused on the characters of Lancelot and Trystram.<sup>6</sup> Others focused on Lancelot and Gwenyvere's love, treating the love story of Trystram and Isode as an example of adultery included in the text for purposes of comparison.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> There were not many English versions to the Arthurian romances, and in the few that did exist love was not the main issue. Malory is the first English writer who added the love story of Lancelot and Gwenyvere to his romance. Terence McCarthy writes in his article "Old Worlds, New Worlds: King Arthur in England," in: *The Social and Literary Context of Malory's Morte Darthur*, D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., ed., (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 5–23: "It is true that the tradition of the English chronicle reinforced the fondness of English romance writers for the heroic exploits of Arthurian knights, it is also true that the tastes of the public they were writing for – at most the provincial minor nobility – were more for action and adventure than for aristocratic refinements such as amorous intrigue and psychological enquiry." (p. 14). Malory is also the first in Arthurian literature to weave together the story of Trystram and La Beale Isode with the story of King Arthur, Gwenyvere and Lancelot.

<sup>4</sup> The love triangles as shown in the work seem to be in the basic form of the *Fin'amors*: the king-husband, the queen-wife, and the knight-lover. A full discussion of the courtly model of love is found in Georges Duby's article: "The Courtly Model," in: *A History of Women – Silence of the Middle Ages*, Christine Klapisch-Zuber, ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 250–266.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion of the parallels between the couples see: Maureen Fries, "Malory's Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte Darthur*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 76 (1975), pp. 605–613.

<sup>6</sup> For example: Maureen Fries, "Indiscreet Objects of Desire: Malory's 'Tristram' and the necessity of Deceit," in: *Studies in Malory*, James W. Spisak, ed., (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications Western Michigan University, 1985), pp. 87–108; Danielle Morgan MacBain, "The Tristramization of Malory's Lancelot," *English Studies*, 74/1 (1993), pp. 57–65; Corinne J. Saunders, "Malory's 'Book of Huntynge': the Tristram section of the 'Mort Darthur,'" *Medium Aevum*, 62/2 (1993), pp. 270–284.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Beverly Kennedy, "Malory's Lancelot: 'Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man,'" *Viator*, 12 (1981), pp. 409–456; E. Kay Harris, "Evidence against Lancelot and Guinevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Treason by Imagination," *Exemplaria*, 7/1 (1995), pp. 179–208; Thomas A. Prendergast, "The

present paper emphasizes a different angle of these two love triangles: Malory's attitude towards it, or more precisely, his attitude towards the presence or absence of physical contact between the lovers in these triangles. The questions concern Malory's moral attitude as part of fifteenth-century morality.<sup>8</sup>

Corinne J. Saunders points out that two different atmospheres are evoked for the love affairs of Trystram and La Beale Isode and of Lancelot and Gwenyvere: "one carefree and delightful, the other portentous and tragic".<sup>9</sup> The question is why the change in atmosphere and attitude, why does Malory have a double standard when these love triangles are considered.

According to many critics Malory was facing a moral dilemma with respect to the love affair between Lancelot and Gwenyvere:<sup>10</sup> on the one hand, he claimed Lancelot to be the most virtuous knight in the Arthurian realm, and on the other he relates – for the first time in the English language – the complete adulterous love story of Lancelot and Gwenyvere, which in its essence contradicts Lancelot's position as a virtuous knight. Beverly Kennedy claims that according to English law adultery with the king's wife was considered high treason: "No matter how great his prowess as a knight nor how passionate and loyal his love for Guinevere, he was still a traitor to his God and – what would have been more shocking, perhaps, to an English gentleman – he was a traitor to his king".<sup>11</sup>

Invisible Spouse: Henry VI, Arthur, and the Fifteenth-Century Subject," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32/2 (2002), pp. 305-26.

<sup>8</sup> An article about 15th century attitudes toward sexuality is Ruth Mazo Karras's "Two Models, Two Standards – Moral Teaching and Sexual Mores," in: *Bodies and Disciplines – Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace, eds., (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 123–138.

<sup>9</sup> Corinne J. Saunders, "Malory's 'Book of Huntyng': the Tristram section of the 'Mort Darthur,'" *Medium Aevum*, 62/2 (1993), pp. 270–284; the quotation derives from page 279.

<sup>10</sup> For example: Kevin T. Grimm, "Love and Loyalty in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Avalon to Camelot*, 2/2 (1986), pp. 24–27; Betsy Taylor, "Malory's Lancelot and Guinevere *abed togydirs*," in: *Words and Wordsmiths: A Volume for H.L. Rogers*, Geraldine Barnes, John Gunn, et al. (eds.), (Sydney: Dept. of English University of Sydney, 1989); D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., "Malory, the *Mort[els]*, and the Confrontation in Guinevere's Chamber," in: *Sir Thomas Malory – Views and Re-views*, D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., (ed.), (New York: Ams Press, 1992), pp. 78–90; Beverly Kennedy, "Adultery in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*," *Arthuriana*, 7/4 (1997), pp. 61–91.

<sup>11</sup> Beverly Kennedy, "Malory's Lancelot: 'Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man,'" *Viator*, 12 (1981), pp. 409–456; the quotation derives from page 410.

In the case of Trystram and La Beale Isode, the moral problem seems not to exist, although Trystram is King Mark's knight just as Lancelot is King Arthur's, and although Trystram and Lancelot are both considered to be the best knights "that ever was or ever shall be, and the trewyst lovers" (p. 45). Although by law Trystram's adulterous relationship with La Beale Isode represents high treason, Malory and his critics do not consider this part of the story morally problematic. Some of the critics try to explain it by the difference between the two kings: because King Arthur is a just and righteous king, Lancelot and Gwennyvere's affair is immoral, but because King Mark is a treacherous king, Trystram and La Beale Isode's affair is justified.<sup>12</sup> It is true that the two kings are dissimilar, but this cannot account for Malory's different attitude toward the two relationships.

I intend to provide a new explanation to Malory's different attitudes toward the two love stories, and show that his approach is especially challenging when it comes to sexual contact within the relationships. When considering Lancelot and Gwennyvere, Malory is as vague as possible, but when considering Trystram and La Beale Isode, he seems quite comfortable with the sexual aspect of the relationship. In view of the prevailing attitude in fifteenth-century England toward sexual relations with the monarch's wife, Malory's treatment of Trystram and La Beale Isode poses a moral problem.<sup>13</sup> This difference in attitude may be explained by the dissimilarity in the way in which the two stories begin: Queen Gwennyvere is already King Arthur's wife when the relationship with Lancelot begins; Trystram and La Beale Isode fall in love before La Beale Isode becomes King Mark's wife. The first parting scene between Trystram and La Beale Isode may be interpreted as an agreement between them, or even, as explained later, a clandestine marriage ceremony.

In his article about clandestine marriages in fourteenth-century England, Michael M. Sheehan claims that although canon law did not approve of

<sup>12</sup> In her article "Malory's Lancelot: 'Trewest Lover, Of A Synful Man'" Beverly Kennedy (see note 7) writes: "Tristram and Isode may be able to justify their adultery by secular standards of honor and loyalty because Mark is a traitor and a coward, but Lancelot and Guinevere could never justify such a betrayal of the noble and honorable king Arthur" (p. 422).

<sup>13</sup> As is mentioned in Thomas A. Prendergast, "The Invisible Spouse: Henry VI, Arthur, and the Fifteenth-Century Subject." See note 2.

clandestine marriage, the phenomenon was quite common.<sup>14</sup> P.J.P. Goldberg, who has treated the subject of women in fifteenth-century England, mentions two well-known cases of women who were married in clandestine marriages.<sup>15</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly and John Maguire have shown that Chaucer chose to depict his Troilus and Criseyde as married in a clandestine ceremony.<sup>16</sup> Clandestine marriage was used in England as a literary device to explain a dubious relationship. This article shows that Malory uses clandestine marriage to enlighten the moral problem of the story of Trystram and Isode. But because he cannot use this device in the Gwenyvere–Lancelot relationship, he uses a different approach to make their love story more morally acceptable.

### *Gwenyvere and Lancelot*

When the idea of a marriage between King Arthur and Gwenyvere is first brought up in *Morte*, Merlin the magician warns King Arthur:

For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym  
agayne... (p. 59).

Later, when Lancelot is mentioned for the first time at court, it is only natural for Malory to claim him as the bravest knight of the Roman war (that is, after the King). For this reason, the Queen favors him above all others:

Wherefore quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all  
other knyghtis, and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other  
ladyes dayes of his lyff... (p. 149).

<sup>14</sup> Michael M. Sheehan, "The Formation of Stability of Marriage in Fourteenth-Century England: Evidence of an Ely Register," *Medieval Studies*, 33 (1971), pp. 228–263.

<sup>15</sup> P.J.P. Goldberg, "Women," In *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes – Perceptions of society in late medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 112–131.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Clandestine Marriage and Chaucer's 'Troilus,'" *Viator*, 4 (1973), pp. 435–457; John Maguire, "The Clandestine Marriage of Troilus and Criseyde," *The Chaucer Review*, 8/4 (1974), pp. 262–278.

At first it seems natural that the queen should favor the bravest knight of her husband. But soon rumors begin to spread about the nature of their relationship. For example, when the damsel whom Lancelot has saved from Sir Perys de Foreste Savage claims that Queen Gwenyvere had Lancelot bewitched so that he would love her exclusively, she uses the phrase "But hit is noysed" which means "it is known" (p.160). Another example stressing the fact that Lancelot and Gwenyvere's love affair is common knowledge can be found in the words of Hellawes the Sorceress. After confessing that she herself has loved Lancelot for seven years, she actually considers killing him in order to enjoy his dead body after embalment<sup>17</sup> because she knows that "there may no woman have thy love but quene Gwenyvere" (p. 168).

But the most convincing statement about the nature of the relationship known to exist between Gwenyvere and Lancelot can be found in the words of La Beale Isode while conversing with Palomides:

...and there recommaunde me unto Quene Gwenyvere and tell her that I sende her worde that there be within this londe but four lovers, and that is Sir Launcelot and Dame Gwenyver, and Sir Trystrames and Quene Isode (p. 267).

When La Beale Isode parallels the relationship between Lancelot and Gwenyvere with that of Trystram and herself, only one conclusion can be drawn – that they were known to be lovers.

Queen Gwenyvere complains to Lancelot that their enemies would interpret his remaining at court with her and forgoing the Winchester Tournaments (which he did because of his injuries) as proof of adulterous behavior:

So how Sir Launcelot holdith hym ever behynde the kyng, and so the quene doth also, for that they wolde have their plesure togydirs.(p. 622).

<sup>17</sup> For information about various sexual experiences such as those suggested by this necrophilic statement in the *Morte*, see Donald L. Hoffman's article: "The Ogre and the Virgin: Varieties of Sexual Experience in Malory's MORTE DARTHUR," *Arthurian Interpretations*, 50 (1986), pp. 19–25.

But what is the “plesure togydirs” that the Queen refers to? Does she mean physical pleasure, implying a sexual relationship? And does the text in general refer to the relationship between Gwenyvere and Lancelot as physical or only as emotional? Malory always avoids discussing this matter openly.

There are only two occasions in the *Morte* where we can suspect a physical relationship. The first is in Mellyagaunte’s house, where it is quite clear that Lancelot was in Queen Gwenyvere’s bed:<sup>18</sup>

So, to passe uppon thys tale, sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurte honde, but toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawninge of the day; for wyte you well he slept nat, but wached (p. 657).

Even in this passage Malory tries not to commit himself.<sup>19</sup> The episode begins with the famous “May passage,”<sup>20</sup> in which Malory claims that love in King Arthur’s time often meant chastity, that men and women could love without lust. He also comments:

<sup>18</sup> An interesting reading of Mellyagaunte’s discovering the bloodied sheets is in Paul Strohm’s article “Mellyagant’s Primal Scene”, in: *Sir Thomas Malory LE MORTE DARTHUR or The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of The Rounde Table*, Stephen H.A. Shepherd (ed.), (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) pp. 894–905.

<sup>19</sup> We can compare Malory’s words in this passage with those describing a parallel situation in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot – Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. Chrétien is not very explicit either but more so than Malory: “Now Lancelot had his every wish: the queen willingly sought his company and affection, as he held her in his arms and she held him in hers. Her love-play seemed so gentle and good to him, both her kisses and caresses, that in truth the two of them felt joy and wonder the equal of which has never been heard or known.” [The quotation is taken from: Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, Trans. William W. Kibler, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 264–265]. From the words “kisses,” “caresses,” “equal joy and wonder,” and from Chrétien’s statement about pleasures not to be talked about we can assume that he refers to a sexual relationship. In Malory’s version we cannot be sure he refers to sexual contact because of his restraint.

<sup>20</sup> Many articles have been written on the “May passage,” in particular about the different between “true love” and “virtuous love.” For example: R.T. Davies, “Malory’s ‘Vertuose Love,’” *Studies in Philology*, 53 (1956), pp. 459–469; Betsy Taylor, “Malory’s Lancelot and Guinevere *abed togydirs*” (see note 7); Peter Waldron, “‘Vertuose Love’ and Adulterous Lovers: Coming to Terms with Malory,” in: *Sir Thomas Malory – Views and Re-views*, D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., (ed.), (New York: Ams Press, 1992), pp. 54–62.

But nowadayes men can nat love sevensnyght but they muste have all their desyres. That love may nat endure by reson, for where they bethe sone accorded and hasty, heete sone keelyth. And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stablyté. But the olde love was nat so. For men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in kynge Arthurs dayes (p. 649).

In this introduction, Malory attempts to persuade us that Lancelot and Gwennyvere's shared night in Mellyyagaunte's house fell short of sexual content.<sup>21</sup> Malory's ambiguity regarding a physical connection between Lancelot and Gwennyvere is even more apparent when he describes the scene that took place the night they were caught,<sup>22</sup> when Lancelot decided to visit the Queen in her chamber: "he wolde go that nyght and speke wyth the quene" (p. 675). Malory remarks:

For, as the Freynshhe booke seyth, the Quene and Sir Launcelot were togydirs. And whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make no mancion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadays (p. 676).

Stressing his belief that love was different in those days, Malory tries to mitigate the unfavorable impression we might have formed about the fact that the couple was in bed together.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Even Beverly Kennedy, who in her article "Malory's Lancelot: 'Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man'" shows that Lancelot and Gwennyvere relations were chaste for a long period in the *Morte*, claims that in this incident Malory had to follow his sources regarding this one adulterous act between the lovers. She emphasizes that Malory makes the situation unplanned: "it resulted from a sudden, mutual, and uncontrollable burst of passion" (p. 438), which made it more excusable. I do not agree with this interpretation and I think that the addition of the May passage was intended to change the reader's presumption of an existing sexual contact.

<sup>22</sup> An interesting analysis of this situation can be found in an article by D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. "Malory, the *Mort[e]s*, and the Confrontation in Guinevere's Chamber." See note 10.

<sup>23</sup> Two important facts must be added here: (1) When Lancelot goes to the Queen's chamber to speak with her, he does not keep it a secret, and tells Sir Bor openly about it. If he were planning an adulterous act, he would have been more secretive. (2) Unlike in some of his sources (the French



The concept of an asexual dyad is reinforced by Lancelot's oath before King Arthur, after being caught in Gwenyvere's chamber. Lancelot, renowned in the *Morte* as one of the most reliable and truthful knights, swears that the Queen has been faithful to the king. This situation is even more ambiguous as far as the real essence of the Lancelot–Gwenyvere relationship is concerned. If Lancelot dares to swear that Gwenyvere has not been unfaithful to her king and husband, perhaps Malory is right. Love was indeed different in those days, and a known lovers' liaison could well have been innocent of sex.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that Malory claims in the May passage that Lancelot and Gwenyvere's love was true love may add to this point of asexual relations. According to Beverly Kennedy, in Middle English literature true love should be consummated only in marriage, and when lovers were not free to marry their only solution was a chaste love. She quotes John Lydgate's poem *The Temple of Glas*, in which he treats in a theoretical way the delicate subject of true lovers who cannot wed. She writes: "No matter how abstract the level of discourse, Lydgate's argument is clear: true lovers may be united in heart even if they are not able to consummate a lawful marriage, provided that they remain faithful and chaste."<sup>25</sup>

It seems therefore that when claiming that Lancelot and Gwenyvere were true lovers, Malory implies that their love was chaste according the literary views of his time.

Of special interest is a clear account in the text of Gwenyvere's sojourn at Joyous Garde, Lancelot's castle, after he has saved her from death by fire. The restrained conduct portrayed here is in direct contrast to that of La Beale Isode and Trystram at Joyous Garde, who according to hints in the text enjoyed each other in every possible way (p. 416). Another fact to consider is that having charged Gwenyvere with helping Lancelot kill the attacking knights in her room, King Arthur accuses her not of adultery but of treason, making no

*Mort le roi Artu*), Malory's Lancelot is not naked when caught in the queen's chamber. These two details stress the fact that no sexual act has taken place when the couple was caught.

<sup>24</sup> About linking Lancelot's oath with the idea of love being different in the days of King Arthur, see Michael Senior, 'The Phaedra Complex Amour Courtois in Malory's 'Morte Darthur,' *Folklore*, 82 (1971), pp. 36–59.

<sup>25</sup> See note 7 for the bibliographical data; the quotation derives from page 414.

mention of any crime (or sin)<sup>26</sup> concerning Lancelot's presence there in the first place.

In sum, on both occasions when the story suggests Gwenyvere and Lancelot's relationship to be more than platonic, Malory is deliberately vague about the possibility of a sexual liaison, stressing instead the innocent nature of love in King Arthur's days. This is emphasized even more by Lancelot's oath in support of the queen's chastity and faithfulness.

### *La Beale Isode and Trystram*

The relationship between La Beale Isode and Trystram begins when he reaches the shores of Ireland seeking a cure for his injuries. La Beale Isode successfully treats these. The story continues as follows:

And therefore Sir Tramtryste kyste grete love to La Beale Isode, for she was at that tyme the fayrest lady and maydyn of the worlde. And there Tramtryste lerned hir to harpe and she began to have grete fantasy unto hym (p. 238–239).

Contradicting early twelfth century versions of the Trystram–Isode romance, here the relationship is described as having begun well before King Mark has had any opportunity to hear about Isode. As opposed to *Tristan en Prose*,<sup>27</sup> where only Tristan falls in love with Isolde at this stage<sup>28</sup>, their love in

<sup>26</sup> In his article "Malory and the common Law: Hasty judgment in the 'Tale of the Death of King Arthur,'" *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 22 (1995), pp. 111–141, Robert L. Kelly claims that since the twelfth century in West European countries adultery was a sin to be judged under canon law and not under state law, so that Arthur could not have put Gwenyvere on trial for adultery but only for treason. It is remarkable that adultery is not mentioned anywhere in the text as a sin.

<sup>27</sup> Probably Malory's source for the story. For a more detailed discussion, see Dhira B. Mahoney's article "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram': Source and Setting Reconsidered," in: *Tristan and Isolde – A Casebook*, John Tasker Grimbert, ed., (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995), pp. 222–253.

<sup>28</sup> Tristan falls in love with Isolde in *Tristan en Prose* more because of his jealousy of the Saracen Palamède than for of any other reason. Maureen Fries, in her article "Indiscreet Objects of Desire:

Malory's *Morte* is mutual. Even after La Beale Isode learns from her mother the true identity of Trystram as the knight who killed her uncle, it is said that she feared for him because of her love:<sup>29</sup>

Whan Isode herde her sey so she was passynge sore abaysshed, for passynge well she loved Tramtryste and full well she knew the crewelnesse of hir modir the quene (p. 242).

When later Trystram is about to leave Ireland, he swears an oath of life-long fidelity to La Beale Isode; she in her turn promises not to marry without his consent for seven years, and rings<sup>30</sup> are exchanged between them before his departure.

On Trystram's second visit to Ireland, it is generally believed that he has come to marry La Beale Isode. The text clearly states her love for him:

But the joy that La Beale Isode made of Sir Trystrames there myght no tunge telle, for of all men erthely she loved hym moste (p. 257).

Malory's 'Tristram' and the Necessity of Deceit," writes: "Palamède enters the *Tristan en Prose* as a temporary mediator for Tristan's desire for Isolt upon his first visit to Ireland; Tristan's belief that the Saracen already has the princess's heart arouses his own desire for her" (p. 95).

<sup>29</sup> The fact that Malory emphasizes Isode's love for Trystram after she acknowledges him as her uncle's murderer suggests that Malory diverges here from previous versions of the story. In Gottfried von Strassburg's version, for example, Isode's reaction to this acknowledgment is pure hatred, as she herself exclaims when boarding the ship with him: "...because I hate you! 'But why, dear lady?' he asked. 'You killed my uncle!'" [Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan with the 'Tristan' of Thomas*, Trans. A.T. Hatto, Rev. Ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1967) p. 193]. Isode's reaction in Malory's *Morte Darthur* is in direct contrast to that of Isode in Gottfried's *Tristan*.

<sup>30</sup> The fact that the lovers do exchange rings is very important. The entire departure scene resembles some sort of pact between them (to be discussed later). I don't agree with the implication of Dhira B. Mahoney's essay entitled "'Ar ye a knyght and ar ye no lover?' The Chivalry Topos in Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram*," in: *Conjectures: Medieval Studies in Honor of Douglas Kelly*, Keith Busby and Norris J. Lacy, eds., (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 311-324. Mahoney states that the treaty between the lovers serves merely as a fidelity agreement and has no sexual implications. I believe the agreement is more than that because a love affair between Trystram and Isode is mentioned several times in the text.

However, Trystram informs King Angwyshe that his mission is to request La Beale Isode's hand in marriage on behalf of King Mark. Angwyshe's surprise is very apparent:

'Alas!' seyde the kynge, 'I had lever than all the londe that I have that ye wolde have wedded hir yourself' (p. 257).

But again Trystram assures him that he has come on behalf of his lord and uncle, so King Angwyshe grants him freedom of choice to do as he pleases: he may marry Isode himself or he may arrange her marriage to King Mark.

Similarly to the best-known twelfth century versions of the legend, Malory also adds a magical love potion to the plot.<sup>31</sup> But unlike earlier versions, the love potion of the *Morte* neither inflames passion without substance nor bases it upon hatred (as in several early versions), but imbues an existing love with a lifetime connection:<sup>32</sup>

But by that drynke was in their bodyes they loved aythir other so well that never hir love departed, for well nother for woo. And thus hit happed fyrst, the love beywyxte sir Trysrames and La Beale Isode, the whyche love never departed dayes of their lyff (p. 258).

Their love affair, by then widely known in Ireland, was rendered eternal by the magical love potion.<sup>33</sup> I suggest that the potion was made to ensure the

<sup>31</sup> A discussion of the different versions concerning the importance of the magical love potion and its duration can be found in D. de Rougemont's book *Love in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> I do not agree with Maureen Fries interpretation that the love potion is less important in the *Morte* than in the earlier versions. "The Impotent Potion: On the Minimalization of the Love Theme in the *Tristan en Prose* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Quondam et Futurus*, 1/3 (1991), pp. 75–81. I think the potion has a different effect, as I will show later.

<sup>33</sup> The love potion in Malory is not powerful enough to control their love completely, as it is in earlier versions. Roberta Anne Davidson, in her Ph.D. dissertation *Three Ladies of Arroy: Sign and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory's Arthuriad* (Princeton University, 1987), pp. 213–214, discusses the fact that the characters in Malory's text draw no distinction between love of magical origin (the potion) and ordinary love. On several occasions, the four lovers compare their love affairs, considering both situations (Tristan and Isode's: a magical love; and Gwenyvere and Lancelot's: a non-magical one) to be the same. She also mentions that although Trystram drank the love potion he eventually

success of the forthcoming marriage between La Beale Isode and King Mark despite the existing liaison between the bride-to-be and Trystram. Isode's mother, aware of the love between her daughter and Trystram, might have made the potion in the first place to sway Isode's affections toward her future husband, King Mark.

If the nature of the contact between Gwenyvere and Lancelot is ambiguous, it is clear from the text that Trystram and Isode's relationship was carnal. In Malory's version it is not certain that it was Trystram who deflowered Isode (as is in older versions in which Brangewayne is sent to substitute for Isode on her wedding night). Nevertheless, there is no question that later their relationship is sexual.

Than Sir Trystremes used dayly and nyghtly to go to Quene Isode  
evir whan he myght, and ever Sir Andret, his cosyn, wacched hym  
nyght by nyght for to take hym with La Beale Isode (p. 270).

When Sir Andret catches the pair, Trystram is found naked in Isode's bed. Additional proof is rendered by the incident in which Isode is unable to drink from Morgan le Fay's magical horn, thereby demonstrating unfaithfulness.

Thus, the main difference between the lovers' relationships in the two love triangles is in Malory's attitude toward their sexual behavior. Malory is circumspect about Gwenyvere and Lancelot, but quite frank about the relationship between Trystram and Isode. Why does Malory try to portray one triangle as almost platonic and the other as undoubtedly sexual?

### *How the Affairs Began*

The affair between Lancelot and Gwenyvere begins after the Roman war, when Gwenyvere is already King Arthur's wife. In contrast, the *Morte's* version shows the liaison between Trystram and Isode beginning just after the

married Isode le Blanche Mayne, which almost made him forget La Beale Isode. Davidson concludes that magic can direct the lovers' emotions but cannot control their will.

wounded Trystram reaches Ireland in search of a cure for his injuries. The fact that the couple became lovers before the wedding of Isode and King Mark is important and changes the situation between them.

In the departure scene between the recovered Trystram and Isode, before Trystram's return to King Mark's court, we learn that some sort of pact has been made between Trystram and Isode. After making sure that Isode knows he is Trystram de Lyones, he swears fidelity to her: "I shall be all the dayes of my lyff your knyght" (p. 243). In return Isode promises him:

I shall nat be maryed this seven yerys but by your assente, and  
whom that ye woll I shall be maryed to hym and he woll have me, if  
ye woll consente thereto (p. 243–244).

These words reveal an arrangement between the couple, but its exact nature is unclear. We suspect that it refers to a marital arrangement to be carried out in the future.<sup>34</sup> According to the precepts of canon law this exchange constitutes an agreement to marry,<sup>35</sup> but because the agreement must be confirmed at a future date, it is not consent *per verba de presenti* (in words said in present tense) but *per verba de futuro* (in words said in future tense).

A decree of Pope Alexander III, known as *Veniens ad nos*,<sup>36</sup> declared that there were two ways for a couple to legitimize their marriage: by a voluntary

<sup>34</sup> We must bear in mind that no formal procedure was followed when expressing consent to marry. This is clear in documents concerning various fourteenth century cases of clandestine marriage in England, as shown by Michael M. Sheehan's article "The Formation of Marriage in Fourteenth-Century England: Evidence of an Ely Register"; see note 14.

<sup>35</sup> This is according to the consensual theory regarding the criteria for a valid marriage. As Michael M. Sheehan writes in his article "The Formation of Marriage," "In the long run the most important development was the adoption of the consensual theory of marriage by Alexander III and Innocent III and the exploitation of its consequences in the following decades. Not only was the consent of the spouses necessary for valid marriage, but in time it became evident that the consent of no other person was required" (p. 229); see note 14.

<sup>36</sup> James A. Brundage, in his article "Implied Consent to Intercourse" in: *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, Angeliki E. Laiou, ed., (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993). pp. 245–256, writes about the connection between consent to marriage and consent to intercourse. He claims that "Pope Alexander's decision in *Veniens ad nos* became the ruling authority in Western marriage law throughout the rest of the Middle Ages until the close of the Council of Trent in 1563." (p. 248).

decision to marry immediately (*per verba de presenti*) and by a decision to marry at some future date (*per verba de futuro*). The difference between them is that *per verba de futuro* the marriage became valid only after consummation.<sup>37</sup>

Even if we consider the verbal part of the farewell scene not as totally convincing, since the exact words that Trystram and La Beale Isode uses are not the customary, its most important element is the non-verbal act of exchanging rings. The exchange of vows followed by an exchange of rings implies far more than simple courtesy and indicates a private marriage ceremony.<sup>38</sup> The exchange of rings in itself signifies marriage,<sup>39</sup> so that no verbal confirmation is necessary. Referring to the question of the ring, Hostiensis's<sup>40</sup> comments in his *Summa aurea 4: De matrimonies – Qualiter contrahatur* (Lyons 1586) that the act of exchanging rings establishes a marriage contract even without verbal confirmation, a contract to be fulfilled in the future. He compares the act of giving a ring to giving an advance in any commercial activity: as the advance implies the commercial contract to be sealed, so the giving of the ring implies that the marriage contract is sealed. Although, according to Hostiensis the exchanging of rings between Trystram and Isode was enough to conclude their

<sup>37</sup> James A. Brundage, in his book *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) writes: "*Veniens ad nos* ruled that a valid marriage might be contracted either by the free and voluntary exchange of present consent between persons of legal age who were free to marry each other, or by the free and voluntary exchange of future consent between two parties legally able to marry one another, if that consent was ratified by subsequent sexual intercourse" (p. 334). I discuss this point according to Malory later.

<sup>38</sup> An interesting article considering a private marriage ceremony in the fifteenth century is Erwin Panofsky's "Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini* Portrait," *The Burlington Magazine*, 64 (1934), pp. 117–127.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Macfarlane, in his book *Marriage and Love in England – Modes of Reproduction, 1300-1840*, (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1986), claims that "Marriage litigation confirms how important was this practice in sealing a bond. Sometimes the whole decision as to whether an engagement had taken place or not would hinge on whether the suitors had exchanged silver rings, whistles, handkerchiefs and other small 'tokens of love,'" pp. 300-301.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in: Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Clandestine Marriage and Chaucer's 'Troilus,'" p. 449.

marriage,<sup>41</sup> according to Pope Alexander III, marriage that takes place by consent *per verba de futuro* must also be consummated.<sup>42</sup>

In Malory's version, the account of what happens on board ship after the lovers drink the love potion is vague. The potion is said to ensure the everlasting love of the couple, but we can only surmise what really happens next on the ship between them:

And thus hit happed fyrst, the love beywyxte Sir Trysrames and La Beale Isode, the whyche love never departed dayes of their lyff (p. 258).

A first-time event has taken place ("And thus hit happed fyrst"), which Malory describes as an expression of the love between them ("the love beywyxte sir Trysrames and La Beale Isode"). We already know that the couple had been in love since their first meeting, therefore we must assume that Malory refers to the first sexual act taking place between them, something that is openly stated in most early versions of the story.<sup>43</sup> Thus the marriage of Trystram and La Beale Isode, consummated after drinking the love potion, must be deemed valid, in which case La Beale Isode could not have legally married King Mark. Furthermore, according to the canon law in those days,<sup>44</sup> the already existing marriage between Trystram and La Beale Isode legitimized their sexual relationship.

<sup>41</sup> According to James A. Brundage, in his book *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe in the 14–16th centuries*: "Some authorities held that the gift of a ring by a man to a woman created a presumption that they were married," (p. 502).

<sup>42</sup> Irvn M. Resnick, in his article "Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary," *Church History*, 69/2 (2000), pp. 350–371, discusses the problems of the theory of Consent and the Consummation theory in the context of the marriage of Mary and Joseph.

<sup>43</sup> I do not agree with Beverly Kennedy's interpretation of the events that took place on board the ship. In her article "Adultery in Malory's *The Morte*," she writes: "In Malory's version, drinking the potion does not cause Tristram and Isode to engage in sexual intercourse on board ship; its only effect is to strengthen their love for one another..." (p. 68). However, she does not interpret the words "And thus hit happed fyrst."

<sup>44</sup> In Malory's time, Canon Law in England was not as clear as it is today, as we may see in Michael M. Sheehan's article "The Formation of Marriage" (see not 14). Today the Canon Law is much more precise, as we can see in Ladislav Örsy's book *Marriage in Canon Law* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1986).



In sum, Trystram and La Beale Isode's love affair in Malory's *Morte* begins after their first meeting and culminates in a private marriage ceremony that includes an exchange of rings. After drinking the love potion on board the ship, consummation presumably took place, validating the marriage agreement, as stressed in much earlier versions of the text.

Trystram and La Beale Isode are therefore already married when the subsequent wedding of King Mark and Isode takes place. But the earlier clandestine marriage invalidates the subsequent marriage of King Mark and La Beale Isode. Therefore, the relationship between Trystram and La Beale Isode is not adulterous, which explains Malory's frank attitude about their relationship.<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, it seems that Malory's ambiguity concerning the possibility of any sexual contact between Lancelot and Gwenyvere is the consequence of the fact that Gwenyvere is a married woman when their love affair begins. Malory's vagueness is understandable. As he could not ignore his well known sources, and considering the clearly adulterous situation between Lancelot and Gwenyvere, Malory blurs any traces of sexuality and suggests a more platonic relationship to minimize the moral problem.

However, in the case of Trystram and La Beale Isode, Malory uses a different approach in order to legitimize the story, which in the older versions had definite sexual aspects. Malory took advantage of the fact that in fifteenth-century England clandestine marriages were known to occur and changed the beginning of the story, adding the departure scene as a private marriage ceremony, thereby nullifying the marriage between La Beale Isode and King Mark. Therefore, when the love triangle begins, Trystram and La Beale Isode are already married and their sexual status is legitimate. To deal with the moral problems involving both love triangles he inherited from his sources, Malory uses two different approaches: in the Lancelot-Gwenyvere relationship he minimizes the sexual aspect, presenting their contact as a platonic one; in the Trystram-La Beale Isode relationship he legitimizes their sexual contact by

<sup>45</sup> Dhira B. Mahoney, in her article "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram': Source and Setting Reconsidered," writes about the end of the tale: "Far from exploiting it as a moral omen, he seems to have forgotten it altogether by the end of the Tale, representing his lovers living in comfortable domesticity in Joyous Garde"(p. 238).

adding a clandestine marriage that nullifies the love-triangle altogether, which is why in *Le Morte Darthur* La Beale Isode may be naked but Queen Gwenyvere may not.<sup>46</sup>

Anat Koplowitz-Breier

Instructor, Ph.D

Department of Comparative Literature, Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

email: koplowa@mail.biu.ac.il

<sup>46</sup> The phrase “may be naked” should be seen only as a metaphor, since the text, while not specifically referring to La Beale Isode as naked, does reveal that Trystram is unclothed when they are caught in La Beale Isode’s bed.