

Was Justice Served?

In popular legend, the knights of King Arthur's Round Table are chivalrous knights traveling the land, rescuing maidens, and bringing justice and order. Similarly in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the knights are bound by a chivalric code and are knights-errant who wander the land encountering adventure. Often during their travels, the knights in *Le Morte D'Arthur* come across unusual, sometimes cruel, customs, which the knights then challenge and overturn. Although it appears Arthur's knights, by obeying the oath they swore at the Round Table, are succeeding in bringing justice and order to these places with cruel customs, in reality, the knights deal with the customs in a way that pertains to their individual self and do not consider a larger view of societal justice. In fact, the only way justice is enforced is through acts of God

Shortly after the founding of the Knights of the Round Table, King Arthur established that the fellowship of knights would abide by a common code, which governs their behavior. This code becomes a law of sorts. The knights swore among other things, "never to do outrageousness nor murder, and always to flee treason... Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world's goods" (100-101). As well as swearing not to murder or act treacherously, the knights also swore not to fight for the "wrongful" side of a quarrel, which implies that the knights should take battles on the rightful side of a quarrel. In other words, they should fight for justice. When Sir Beaumain comes across a castle in which the Red Knight of the Red Launds is unjustly slaying people, he remarks, "it is marvel that he endureth so long that none of the noble knights of my lord Arthur's have not dealt with him" (235). According to Beaumain, it is the duty of the knights of the Round Table to deliver just punishment to knights who are performing crimes such as slaying people.

Indeed, the knights appear to fulfill their oath of upholding justice by fordoing customs that transgress the oath of the Round Table they swore. The customs of Sir Nabon's isle and the siege of the Red Knight of the Red Launds, for example, are considered "ill" (346) and "shameful" (235) because they involve killing and treason. Ultimately, knights of the Round Table end these evil customs. Knights who came upon Sir Nabon's castle are "either slain or villainously wounded, or pass as a poor prisoner" (464). While it is not uncommon for knights to be killed when fighting, usually they have a chance to plead mercy, but there is no evidence that Sir Nabon endorses this practice. In fact, Sir Nabon had a particular hatred for King Arthur's knights, and "there came never knight of King Arthur's but he destroyed him" (341). Such language suggests that Nabon was purposely aiming to kill the knights of the Round Table. Consequently, both Sir Tristram and Sir Lamorak fight with Sir Nabon, and Sir Tristram eventually kills Nabon, ending the custom. "Those ill customs... are fordone, for Sir Tristram slew your lord, Sir Nabon, and his son," Sir Lamorak tells a hermit, and "then was the hermit glad, and all his brethen, for ...there was never such a tyrant among Christian men" (346). In some sense, Sir Tristram acts as a savior to the people of Sir Nabon by fordoing the evil custom and freeing them from a tyrant.

However, because knights sometimes do not appropriately punish the instigators of these wicked customs, the knights only ensure the custom is ended, not that justice has been achieved. In another similar episode to Sir Nabon's, the Red Knight of the Red Launds, whom Beaumain encounters, also "put [knights] to this shameful death without mercy and pity" (235) in order "to do all the villainy unto King Arthur's knights" (240). The two places' customs are almost identical: knights, specifically Arthur's knights, are being killed without mercy. Yet, in contrast to the punishment and justice delivered to Sir Nabon, the Red Knight of the Red Launds

punishment is to go to King Arthur's court and ask for forgiveness. Initially, Beaumain's instinct was to punish the Red Knight severely for his crimes, he "bethought him upon the knights that [the Red Knight] had made to be hanged shamefully" (240). However, the lords of the land beg him not to kill the Red knight and "by his death ye shall have none advantage" (241). Beaumain seems to take the fact, that he would not gain an advantage or worship over the killing of this knight, into consideration, because he replies right after, "I am full loath to slay this knight...insomuch all that he did was at a lady's request I blame him the less" (241). What Beaumain declares to the lords differs drastically from what he had just been thinking. While Beaumain did also learn that the Red Knight had been influenced by his ladylove, his decision to lighten the punishment seems suspicious. Even if the Red Knight killed all these knights at a lady's request, he did also kill these knights. In addition, we do not know what Beaumain actually thinks of this reduced punishment because Malory lets us see what first "bethought" Beaumain but with respect to the final punishment, we only know what Beaumain says aloud. The change of mind directly after the lords plea and warn that he will not gain worship from such a deed suggests that Beaumain also had a ulterior, selfish motive to lessening the Red Knight's punishment—he did not want to lessen his worship. Thus, although the knights succeed in undoing the evil customs, the knights do not necessarily deliver justice because of their personal reasons.

Furthermore, the knights often follow their own agendas and sometimes do not even ensure the end of evil customs. During one of his adventures, Percivale comes across a castle in which a lady chains up knights who refused to be her paramour. Sir Percivale frees the knight, but tells the uncourteous lady, "Forsooth this is a shameful custom of a lady, and if I had not a greater matter in my hand I should fordo your evil customs" (629). The greater matter at hand is

finding Sir Lancelot who has gone missing and Percivale puts this personal quest ahead of stopping this uncourteous lady. While finding Lancelot is an important quest, Percivale does not take the short time to ensure the lady will not continue with her cruel practice, which he acknowledges as “shameful” and “evil.” In addition, Sir Persides, whom Percivale rescued from the uncourteous lady, is not on such a quest and could have dealt with the lady. Ultimately, the lady escapes any form of judgment or punishment and is free to imprison another knight because Percivale has something better to do than bringing justice.

As a result, because Arthur’s knights do not succeed at bringing about justice, they cannot be the ultimate law of the land; in fact, there is a higher law that of God, whose judgment is very different from those of the knights. Sometimes God directs knights to perform his acts of justice on his behalf. God tells Sir Galahad to “Go thou now, thou adventurous knight, to the Castle of Maidens, and there do thou away the wicked customs” (677). Galahad follows his orders and successfully “[delivers] all the maidens out of the woful castle” (681). Unlike Beaumain, Percivale, and many of the other knights of the Round Table, he puts the words of God above his personal desires, such as gaining worship. As a result, he is seen as a savior, comparable to Christ because he delivers the maidens, and divine justice is achieved through God’s instructions. When justice is still not achieved, sometimes God intervenes directly. When Sir Galahad, Sir Percivale, Sir Bors, and Percivale’s sister encounter a castle whose tradition is that “what maid passeth hereby shall give this dish full of blood” in order to heal the lady of the castle, they end up bringing an end to the custom by having Percivale’s sister’s blood cure the lady (761). But this castle’s custom is especially troubling because the ceremony with which the castle bleeds the maidens, “there came out a ten or twelve knights armed...with them came gentlewomen which held a dish of silver” (761) recalls that of the Sangreal, “so came in a

damosel passing fair and young, and she bare a vessel of gold betwixt her hands” (610). Both involve a ceremonious procession as well as a dish or vessel of some kind. However, this castle’s custom makes a perverted imitation of the holy tradition. The Sangreal is supposed to be the host, or the body and blood of Christ. This castle’s silver dish also carries blood; however, it is the blood of maidens unwillingly slain (except in the case of Percivale’s sister) and sacrificed in order to heal the lady of the castle. In contrast to Christ who willingly gave himself to save mankind, these maidens were slain; previously, when Sir Balin and a damosel had encountered this same castle, the men “would have slain her” (the damosel) had it not been for Sir Balin (67). As a result, even though the blood that Percivale’s sister gives does end up healing the lady similar to how the Sangreal miraculously heals people, this healing is tainted by the deaths of the many maidens who died before. In a very disturbing scene, Galahad and Percivale stumble upon a graveyard “therein might they see a three score fair tombs...there lay the bodies of all the good maidens which were martyred for the sick lady’s sake” (764). The word choice “martyred” draws attention to the parallel between the castle’s custom and the Sangreal (and Christ’s sacrifice); however, the position of the word martyr in the same sentence as three score tombs emphasizes the evilness of this custom for which sixty maidens have died.

Yet, despite the fact that this castle performs such an heinous act, of slaying maidens, using their blood, and perverting one of the seven sacraments, Galahad, Percivale, and Bors do not hold the occupants of the castle accountable. After Percivale’s sister heals the lady, the three knights seem to forget that moments ago the castle had been trying to kill the damosel and are satisfied with simply ending the custom. In a similar scene, Balin “made [his damosel] to bleed by her good will, but her blood helped not the lady. And so he and she rested there all night, and had there right good cheer, and on the morn they passed on their ways” (68). Balin and his

damosel even happily spend the night there despite the men of the castle and tried to slay the damosel! The knights seem not to care about the previous maidens this castle has killed, and in Balin's case, future maidens this castle will kill. Instead, God is the one who ultimately brings justice; the occupants of the castle are tried and punished "by the vengeance of Our Lord...[whose] vengeance is for blood-shedding of maidens" (764). God calls down "a sudden tempest and a thunder, lightning, and rain" upon the castle to punish and kill the occupants (this imagery recalls the story in the Bible of Noah's ark) (763).

Because the knights of the Round Table do not succeed at bringing order and justice to the land, the chivalric code and conduct actually falls apart. In the case of Beaumain and Percivale, their actions to benefit themselves prevent perpetrators of the crimes to be appropriately punished. In some ways, the knightly code itself has become a custom that is unjust and sometimes cruel, and as Percivale dreamed, "the new law of holy church" is coming to replace the old customs and old law (700). Fittingly, near the end of the book, acts of God (even more broadly, the Quest of the Sangreal) overwhelm the adventures that the knights of the Round Table usually go on. Even God plays a more active role near the end when the law of the church is coming to replace everything. The coming of the God seems to suggest that from the very beginning of its founding, the fellowship of the round table was already a part of the past, and doomed to fail.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.460 Medieval Literature: Legends of Arthur
Fall 2013

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.