

**'One of the nobelyst knyghtes of the worlde, and most
perfitist man':¹ the role of Bors in Malory's *Morte
Darthur*.**

Laura O'Donnell

**Dissertation submitted for the 60-credit level 7 module
'Dissertation' for the degree of MA in English.**

University of Wales: Trinity Saint David

2011

¹ Malory, *Complete Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.617. This edition is used throughout unless otherwise stated; my references are to page numbers in this edition.

CONTENTS

Summary	1
A Note on Editions and Sources	2
Introduction	3
Chapter One: Bors as support to Lancelot	7
Chapter Two: Bors's spirituality and his role in the <i>Grail</i> quest	28
Chapter Three: Bors and women	51
Conclusion	62
Bibliography	66

Summary

The subject of this work is the role of the figure of Bors in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. It is concerned chiefly with the question of whether Bors is motivated mainly by his faith in God or by his loyalty to Lancelot, Malory's pre-eminent knight and the focus of his text. Bors is a minor character in the *Morte* until the later part of 'The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyonesse' where his role as support to Lancelot becomes prominent and where his spirituality and faith are first tested. During the quest for the Holy Grail, Bors is one of just three knights who succeed in the quest and travel to the Holy Land, and the only one of the three to return to England to give an account of these events.

It would appear that the significance of the figure of Bors has been under-rated by critics and I think that his roles both as a successful Grail knight and as Lancelot's closest companion are important for the development of Malory's text. Part of the appeal of Bors is that he is less obvious than many other characters - he does not have the charisma of Lancelot - and one has to look a little harder to gain insight into his function within the text. None of Malory's knights are huge conversationalists, but Bors does make some important speeches and observations, and his dialogues with Guinevere and Lancelot in particular do enable a deeper understanding of these key characters. Hopefully, this essay will persuade students of Malory that Bors is a remarkable character and worthwhile investigating both as a knight of the Round Table and as a Grail knight with a unique role in the *Morte*.

A Note on Editions and Sources

I have used two editions of Malory's text to undertake this work; Eugène Vinaver's 1971 edition and Helen Cooper's very accessible 1998 edition.² This has comprehensive explanatory notes and an excellent index of characters. Translations of Malory's sources that I utilized for comparison purposes and for a general understanding of the Arthurian legends were the 10-volume *Lancelot-Grail*,³ which is the modern translation of the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate, the English alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*,⁴ and Chrétien de Troyes's *Arthurian Romances*,⁵ parts of which were incorporated into the Vulgate texts. In the early part of the text, the influence of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* can clearly be seen, but the larger part of Malory's text has been taken from the French.

² Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, ed. and abridged by Helen Cooper, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed by Norris J. Lacy, 10 vols, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010).

⁴ *King Arthur's Death*, The Middle English *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (New York and Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1974).

⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991).

Introduction

The subject of this work is the role of the figure of Bors in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. More specifically, it is concerned with the question of whether Bors is motivated mainly by his faith in God or by his loyalty to Lancelot, Malory's pre-eminent knight and the focus of his text. Bors is a minor character in the *Morte* until the later part of 'The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyonesse' where his role as support to Lancelot becomes prominent and where his spirituality and faith are first tested. During the quest for the Holy Grail, Bors is one of just three knights who succeed in the quest and travel to the Holy Land, and the only one of the three to return to England to give an account of these events.

There is a great amount of interest in the Arthurian legend and Malory's work has been the subject of much comment from literary critics. The discovery of the Winchester manuscript in 1934 was hugely significant and this version is generally accepted by scholars of Malory as being closer to his original work than the Caxton version, which had been the only one available until 1934. Professor Eugène Vinaver's edition in 1947 has also been the subject of much debate, but Vinaver's

argument that Malory wrote eight separate books has mainly fallen out of favour amongst Malorian scholars. However, his edition is often regarded as the definitive text of the *Morte Darthur* and his 1971 student edition is the one I have used in this thesis.

Although Bors is mentioned fairly frequently by literary critics, there are very few articles where the central concern is Bors. R. M. Lumiansky's article, 'Malory's Steadfast Bors'⁶ and Victoria Weiss's response to Lumiansky's argument, 'Grail Knight or Boon Companion? The Inconsistent Sir Bors of Malory's *Morte Darthur*'⁷ are the only two works of literary criticism specifically about Bors that I was able to access. Although Lumiansky and Weiss offer opposing views on the character of Bors, there are relevant points to be gleaned from both articles. It would appear that the significance of the figure of Bors has been under-rated by critics and I think that his roles both as a successful Grail knight and as Lancelot's closest companion are important for the development of Malory's text. Part of the appeal of Bors is that he is less obvious than many other characters - he does not have the charisma of Lancelot - and one has to look a little harder to gain insight into his function within the text. He is a much more subtle and interesting character than

⁶ R. M. Lumiansky, 'Malory's Steadfast Bors', *Tulane Studies in English*, 8 (1958), 5-20.

⁷ Victoria L. Weiss, 'Grail Knight or Boon Companion? The Inconsistent Sir Bors of Malory's "Morte Darthur"', *Studies in Philology*, 94.4 (1997), 417-427, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174589>> [accessed 11/03/2011]

for example Tristram, who has a large section of text devoted to him but who does not really engage with the reader and whose narrative is not interwoven with that of other figures in the text in the same way as for example Gawain or Lancelot are. None of Malory's knights are huge conversationalists, but Bors does make some important speeches and observations, and his dialogues with Guinevere and Lancelot in particular do enable a deeper understanding of these key characters. Hopefully, this essay will persuade students of Malory that Bors is a remarkable character and worthwhile investigating both as a knight of the Round Table and as a Grail knight with a unique role in the *Morte*.

In order to explore the role of the figure of Bors within Malory's *Morte*, I examined various incidents within the text where Bors plays either a main or supporting role, and also examined the sources for these episodes so that a comparative study could be made. The main body of the dissertation is divided into three chapters: Bors as support to Lancelot; Bors's spirituality and his role in the Grail quest; and Bors and women. The last of these is perhaps the least vital in understanding the purpose of Bors, but it offers some insight into Bors's attitude to women, his chastity which enabled him to succeed in the Grail quest, and his rather strained relationship with Guinevere, who is a figure of some significance within the text. The first two chapters explore Bors's role as advisor and

counsellor to Lancelot, and Bors's spirituality. There are several lines to my argument, the first being to investigate if Bors is driven more by his loyalty to Lancelot than by his loyalty to God. The chief role of Bors in Malory's work is to succeed in the Grail quest, to return from the Holy Land and to report these events to the king and others. However, Malory is more interested in Bors's role as support to Lancelot, which reflects both Malory's general promotion of knightly virtues over spiritual ones and his continuing focus on Lancelot. I would conclude from examination of the text that Bors's loyalties are more inclined towards Lancelot than towards God, the exception being during the quest when the cousins do not meet and Bors is free to concentrate on spiritual matters. Also, by studying Bors's reactions to and conversations with women, I wish to demonstrate that Bors's vow of chastity may be a virtue, but it is a vow he finds easy to maintain; this may be why his Grail success seems less of a triumph than Lancelot's failure as this essential requirement for the role of Grail knight is so easily achieved. Lastly, I would suggest that the text shows that even though Bors is outspoken, sometimes to the point of rudeness, he is always reasonable and fair-minded and as such his opinions often reflect those of the reader.

Chapter One: Bors as support to Lancelot

Bors is one of only three knights who achieve the Grail quest, and the only one to return to bear witness to the extraordinary events surrounding this experience; therefore, the most important function of the figure of Bors in Malory's *Morte Darthur* may be assumed to be that of messenger. This vital role was not devised by Malory, although he is following his French sources, chiefly *La Queste del Saint Graal* (*The Quest for the Holy Grail*)⁸ by portraying Bors in this way; however, Malory does alter and develop Bors considerably in his text. Malory is often considered by critics to be less interested in spiritual battles than in earthly ones. By retaining the figure of Bors as the one knight who returns from the Holy Land, Malory is showing Bors to be a link between the spiritual world of the Grail, and the more familiar, and certainly more interesting as far as Malory was concerned, Round Table fellowship and all it entailed. It may be concluded that as Bors does return, he must therefore be worldlier than both Percival and Galahad, neither of whom return to the Arthurian court or the Arthurian world of earthly chivalry; in the case of Galahad, he was never really part of Arthurian society anyway. Galahad

⁸ *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, in *Lancelot-Grail*, VI, 171.

is taken, by his own request, from 'this wrecched worlde' (606) and Percival becomes a holy man until his own untimely death. Malory devotes little space to these episodes, perhaps another sign that his concerns are with getting Bors home to England as quickly as possible, so that he may be reunited with Lancelot, the central character of Malory's text, and so that the events leading to the civil war that dissolves Arthur's kingdom can begin.

However, in other sections of the *Morte*, Bors, who might be thought of as a fairly minor character, can be seen to play an important role in court society, and in particular as the chief support and confidant of his cousin Lancelot. Lumiansky refers to this role as 'the patient bearer of protective responsibility for Lancelot'.⁹ As Lancelot is Malory's most outstanding knight it seems reasonable to assume that he intended the figure of Bors to be regarded as intrinsic to his *Morte*, and not just for his Grail role. On close examination of the text, it can be seen that Bors is a character of great interest, and one who is present at many key events, particularly during the latter parts of Malory's work. As Bors is successful in the Grail quest and is endorsed by holy men, his spiritual superiority over Lancelot and almost all the other knights seems assured. However, an argument can be developed that despite his unique position as the knight who returns in triumph

⁹ Lumiansky, 5-20.

from the most important battle of all, the spiritual one, his main priority and motivating force is his loyalty to his kinsman, Lancelot. Malory may have followed his French source as far as Bors's chief *role* is concerned, but Malory's main *interest* in Bors is his supporting role to Lancelot, particularly in the final two books of the *Morte*. So although the figure of Bors has an important spiritual purpose, Malory's continued focus on Lancelot means that Bors's role as advisor and counsellor to his cousin becomes his most significant one. This illustrates that Malory did not simply reproduce his sources, but cleverly used them to produce his own work which also meant retaining the story of the Grail, albeit in a rather abbreviated form. As discussed later, the story of the Grail was an intrinsic part of Arthurian legend so could not easily be omitted, although this section of the *Morte* is quite different in tone and theme to any other.

As stated, Bors is Lancelot's cousin, the son of King Bors, brother to King Ban, who is Lancelot's father. The French *Lancelot*, which like *La Queste del Saint Graal* is part of the Vulgate Cycle, was utilised for much of Malory's work, and this text states that the cousins, along with Lionel, Bors's brother, were raised together.¹⁰ However, Malory omits the adventures surrounding the cousins' childhood and merely gives the reader a glimpse of Lancelot as a young man at the home of his

¹⁰ *Lancelot parts I & II*, in *Lancelot-Grail*, III, 3-90.

parents, and nothing at all of the young Bors; it seems that children are of little interest to Malory and he disregards much of his source material here. However, once Bors becomes a knight, he is one of the best, if not quite in the same league as Lancelot. In 'The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney', Persaunte clarifies for Gareth and the reader the hierarchal structure into which Bors falls, explaining that although Lancelot, Tristram and Lamorak are the three most well-regarded knights, ' "there be many other noble knyghtis, as sir Palomydes the Saresyn and sir Saphir, his brother, also sir Bleobrys and sir Blamour de Ganys, his brother; also sir Bors de Ganys, and sir Ector de Marys and sir Percivale de Galys" ' (193-4). This list not only underlines the importance of Bors in the ensuing narrative, but it also anticipates the ending of the *Morte*, when, with a few exceptions, the same named knights die as martyrs in the Holy Land after Lancelot's death.

But there is more to Bors than his fighting ability. D. S. Brewer states that Bors is 'brave, loyal, sensible, stolid',¹¹ but stolidity implies a lack of emotion or animation, and I do not think Bors can be accused of this; on the contrary, his very animated speeches to Guinevere and even his inclination to cry suggest a character that is more complex than is immediately obvious. The other qualities suggested by Brewer I would concur with, but would also add his extreme outspokenness, especially to

¹¹ Malory, *The Morte Darthur*, ed. by D.S. Brewer, York Medieval Texts (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), p.24.

the queen and his perhaps uneasy attitude towards women in general; his strength of will that enables him to resist temptation; his wisdom; and of course his chastity and humility before God which enable him to succeed where others have failed.

It does appear that Bors is rarely beaten in combat, and it is difficult to imagine that Lancelot would seek Bors's advice if he were in some way second-rate at feats of arms, as in this masculine, ordered society this would be the chief reason a fellow knight would be admired and respected. Most knights are remarked upon because of their fighting ability or perhaps the lack of it, but there are only a handful of knights who are portrayed as having any particular personality traits outside of this. Dynadan is 'a fine japer' (403), makes witty comments and is the only one of Malory's knights to have a marked sense of humour; yet he remains a minor character, his death only meriting a mention as Mordred and Agravain kill him during the Grail quest. Generally speaking, the families of Lancelot and of Gawain are portrayed as having more distinctive personalities. A possible reason for this might be because of the significant roles allotted to the members of these families and of the various family loyalties that become evident towards the end of the *Morte*. Gareth is given his own tale, one that emphasises his patience, forbearance and faithfulness to his lady, all qualities that are valued in Arthurian society.

Gareth does not play a large part after this however, so it seems likely that Malory

wanted to emphasise the importance of Gareth's death in the unravelling of the Round Table by showing the worth of this character and the reasons why he was loved and respected by all; he is described by Lancelot as 'passynge noble and trew, curteyse and jantill and well-condicionde' (696). Gawain is known to be hot-tempered, Agravain is 'opynne-mowthed' (611) and determined to cause trouble, and it is known that Mordred will be the cause of Arthur's downfall as Merlin has predicted it will be so; we read a certain slyness into his character.

Nevertheless, in the roll-call of knights who are present at the healing of Urry, very few stand out as individuals. This is perhaps to be expected, as the *Morte* is not a modern novel with an original plot and characterization, but rather a chronicle of events, episodic in nature. Victoria Weiss points to Ann Dobyns's suggestion that we should not look for consistency of character in Malory, and that characters behave the way they do because of context, not personality.¹² Many scholars of Malory have remarked that characterization is not really what the *Morte* is about; therefore, when a figure such as Bors is portrayed as demonstrating particular character traits, this is noteworthy. Terence McCarthy points out that Malory was not very interested in characterization, and suggests that he was more concerned with the public face of a particular figure, not his private thoughts, although

¹² Weiss, pp.425-426.

McCarthy also admits that he does offer hints regarding the characters of his figures, which we feel bound to explore.¹³ Although there are large stretches of the *Morte* during which Bors plays little part, when he does voice an opinion it is hard to ignore his advice; on a notable occasion when Lancelot does disregard it, chaos ensues.

His role as advisor or counsellor to Lancelot is particularly interesting, as other characters do not really appear to offer advice as often, or with such wisdom; an obvious exception to this is Gawain's advice at the start of book eight that is directed at his two brothers, Agravain and Mordred, who are determined to expose the love affair between Lancelot and Guenivere. Although P.J.C. Field suggests that Bors either 'does not know or want to know the truth about Lancelot's nocturnal visits to the queen',¹⁴ I think that Malory leaves us in no doubt that he does. Prior to the Poisoned Apple incident, Lancelot actually asks Bors to act as a go-between and to 'gete me the love of my lady queen Gwenyvere' (613), and although this could be interpreted as wishing to win the favour of his queen because of her position, the implication is that Bors is and probably always has been in the confidence of Lancelot. After Lancelot's madness following his second deception by Elaine, the mother of Galahad, Arthur questions Lancelot about the cause of this, a reference

¹³ Terence McCarthy, *An Introduction to Malory* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1991), p.112.

¹⁴ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales*, ed. P. J. C. Field, The London Medieval and Renaissance Series (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), p. 64.

to the notion of intense love causing a person to be mad. Lancelot's answer is typically non-committal, 'yf I ded ony foly I have that I sought' (506), but Malory informs us that Lancelot's kinsman, and this would obviously include Bors, knew for whom he went out of his mind, that person being the queen. However, by the start of the seventh book, it would appear the whole court is talking of nothing else, and not just Lancelot's kinsmen, but those who wish him ill. As Lancelot's closest ally, Bors would probably make it his business to know of Lancelot's movements in order to advise and warn Lancelot of impending trouble.

There are several instances of Bors in his role as Lancelot's counsellor or advisor that are worth examining. The first is concerning the Maid of Astolat episode, which is interesting as far as Bors is concerned for two reasons: Bors's conversation with *Guinevere*, and his advice to Lancelot regarding Elaine, the Maid of Astolat. Whilst at the injured Lancelot's bedside, an injury, incidentally, that Bors has accidentally caused, Bors claims he 'may nat nother dare nat counceyle you' (635) about Elaine's love for Lancelot and its possible reciprocation, although in fact he is doing just that, and it is the directness of his speech that gives it its impact. Of Elaine, Field suggests that 'In courage and generosity and all the chivalric virtues she is his equal, and both Bors and *Gawain* wish that he would return her love. That would solve every problem but *Guinevere's* - and *Guinevere's*

problem is something both knights want to know as little about as possible.¹⁵ I think it is correct to say that Bors considers Elaine an admirable potential wife for Lancelot; he spends some time at Lancelot's bedside and therefore can observe Elaine closely as she tends him. He is also almost certainly heartily sick of having to consider *Guinevere's* problems at all and perhaps cannot see why Lancelot should continue to prefer her over the devoted and straightforward Elaine. But larger issues are in force here.

Bors does not just want Lancelot to have a wife of his own instead of loving someone else's because he is his friend and wants him to enjoy married life. He is one of Arthur's most prominent knights, particularly since the *Grail* quest, but he is also close enough to Lancelot's situation to see it for what it is, a very dangerous one that could result in Lancelot and *Guinevere* being accused of treason. So Bors's encouraging of Lancelot, his endorsement of the qualities that would make Elaine a suitable wife, are not only designed to make Lancelot notice Elaine as a woman, but are an attempt to avert a disaster. Although Bors has supposedly had a narrow escape from having to fight as *Guinevere's* champion for a morally questionable cause, it is unlikely he really believed Lancelot would not appear to defend the queen himself; however, when he first sees Elaine, he has recently exchanged

¹⁵ Field, p. 60.

heated words with *Guinevere*, so it could safely be assumed that he would hope that Lancelot might eventually tire of her demands and peevish behaviour and turn to a woman with no agenda and very little power. Possibly, Bors is concerned about Lancelot's soul, particularly after the *Grail* quest, and is perhaps hoping that Lancelot will give up his sinful, adulterous relationship for one that is approved of by society but perhaps more importantly by God. However, I think the likelihood of Lancelot's adultery with the queen being discovered by those who bear them ill-will is the overriding factor behind Bors's encouragement and promotion of Elaine. Of course, Lancelot cannot love Elaine or stop loving *Guinevere*, so he does not heed Bors's advice on this occasion. In remaining faithful to the woman he loves, however problematic that love is, he is being true to the notion of unchanging love that was accepted and promoted by Arthurian society, whilst at the same time betraying the trust of his king. I do not agree with McCarthy,¹⁶ who suggests that the reader does not want Lancelot to return Elaine's love, but to remain faithful to the queen. Not only is *Guinevere* depicted as a highly irritating character by Malory in opposition to Elaine's quiet devotion, Bors is portrayed in such a way that what he would like, we would like also; his is the voice of reason.

¹⁶ McCarthy, p.115.

Another example of Bors's wise counsel just precedes the Poisoned Apple incident (613-21). Bors's advice to Lancelot here is sound. Lancelot is ready to leave England, but is dissuaded to by Bors, who suggests he stay at a nearby hermitage until the queen has had time to recover her temper. This advice seems reasonable, as Guinevere has only banned Lancelot from attending court, not from remaining in England, and Lancelot's plans to leave the country are perhaps hastily assembled and driven by resentment at his seemingly unfair treatment. However, Lancelot himself could have surely decided to reside nearby for a while until such time as he was required again, as he must have known he would be eventually. In this instance, I think Malory's implication is that Bors knows that Lancelot will be required to champion the queen before long, and would like ready access to Lancelot if the occasion demanded it. Bors's wisdom and foresight is shown to develop considerably during 'The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere', and as the evidence against the queen mounts up, Bors is portrayed as being constantly watchful on Lancelot's behalf. He is in direct opposition to Agravain, who is also watching Lancelot and the queen closely, but with a different end in mind. It is interesting to note that although Bors agrees to mediate between Lancelot and Guinevere after Lancelot leaves the court, there is no evidence in the text that he actually approaches the queen or requests an audience with her on Lancelot's behalf; the evidence is rather to the contrary, as Malory states that 'the quene outwarde made no maner of

sorow in shewyng to none of his bloode nor to none other, but...she toke grete thought' (613). Bors, as a Grail knight, may have moral reasons to resist acting the role of go-between for a pair of adulterous lovers. However, it is also likely that Bors is already resentful as regards Guinevere's treatment of Lancelot and does not want to ask a favour of a woman he is angry with. Immediately following this incident, Guinevere requests that Bors champion her, and his reaction to this is discussed in detail later.

The family link between Bors and Lancelot is obviously of great importance as the Round Table disintegrates and knights actually take sides against fellow knights, and it is in the final book of the *Morte* that Bors's loyalties are really put to the test. Again, Bors shows foresight in advising Lancelot to stay away from the queen's chamber when he suspects Mordred and Agravain of plotting to reveal the truth of Lancelot's and Guinevere's adultery. Bors does not just advise Lancelot at this point; he is insistent, and the repetitive nature of his speech emphasises how much Bors believes Lancelot is endangering himself, the queen, and all his kin: ' "ye shall nat go thys nyght be my counceyle" ... "I drede me ever of sir Aggravayne...I mystruste that the kynge ys oute thys nyght...I drede me sore of som treason" ' (675). Later, after Lancelot has killed Agravain and several others, he returns to find Bors and their followers armed and ready to fight if necessary, having experienced dreams

whereby they were warned of 'som grete stryff on honed' (678). The tremendous loyalty not just of Bors, but of Lancelot's kin and supporters, who are armed in preparation for conflict, is remarkable, Bors saying that 'we woll take the woo with you as we have takyn the weale' (679). Bors knew what would happen if Lancelot went to the queen, as the king's absence was unlikely to be a matter of chance, but he does not castigate Lancelot for disregarding his advice; this is never done. Bors might rebuke Guinevere for sending Lancelot away, but if Lancelot's actions result in conflict this is all part of being loyal to one's kin, providing all is done honourably. After the deaths of Agravain and several others in Guinevere's chamber, Bors once again offers his advice to Lancelot regarding the queen. As Bors's views regarding Guinevere are ambiguous at best, it might be thought that his advice to Lancelot at this critical moment would be to leave her to her fate, whatever that might be. But Bors is ever mindful of the ethos of the Round Table fellowship. Unlike the Poisoned Apple incident or even the Knight of the Cart episode (648-663) which was instigated by another, this time the blame for Guinevere's predicament must be placed on Lancelot's shoulders. Therefore, Bors argues, he should rescue her from execution; ' "Insomuch as ye were takyn with her, whether ye ded right other wronge, hit is now youre parte to holde with the quene" ' (680). Although they may not have been caught in the act of adultery, the result for Guinevere is the same. Her shame is now made public and Arthur can no longer deny in public what he has

known in private for a long time; therefore, honour must be satisfied. Bors and Lancelot both know this and are both agreed that it is Lancelot's duty now to support Guinevere, and Bors's duty, and that of their kinsmen, is to remain loyal to Lancelot. So Bors's advice is both wise and fair. His personal feelings towards the queen are irrelevant here and I think Bors's advice on this occasion is both a reflection of his strong belief in the chivalric code of conduct and his own fair-minded view of the situation.

From the moment Lancelot returns from Guinevere's chamber, it is clear that Bors has chosen to be loyal to Lancelot and not Arthur. Until now, there has been no conflict of interest, but when this does occur, Bors does not hesitate to support his cousin. This is to be expected, as this tribal loyalty was usual and necessary in times of conflict, although it could be argued that Arthurian society had become more sophisticated than this and that therefore the re-emergence of clan loyalty was somewhat regressive, and might be seen as a sign of a breakdown in society. For example, Gawain and the 'Orkney clan' are seen to behave in dishonourable fashion on several occasions, most notably in the 'traitorous' killing of Lamorak. One of the reasons Gareth is so well-regarded is that he does not participate in his kinsmen's ignoble acts, but remains loyal to the more advanced society of Arthur's court. It does appear slightly shocking however, that Bors is willing to kill Arthur

to 'make an ende of this warre' (691), as there is previous evidence of mutual respect between the two men, although this is not entirely Malory's invention as it follows the English *Morte Arthur* fairly closely,¹⁷ with the exception of Lancelot's threatening reply to Bors which is Malory's own slant on the episode. Weiss states that Bors's actions 'may be the product of natural frustration, but Bors's behaviour here, in contrast to Lancelot's, pushes our sense of him as the worthy Grail knight back into a distant past.'¹⁸ I think Weiss's point is partly correct, but possibly Malory wanted to demonstrate just how longsuffering and frustrated his favourite knight was, if even a Grail knight, known for his sensible judgement and high moral behaviour, is becoming tired of trying to fight whilst handicapped by Lancelot's restrictions. Malory is perhaps not being critical of Bors whose reaction might be regarded as normal - he is pushed to his limits - but is rather praising Lancelot for his patience and chivalric behaviour. Another way of viewing this episode is to consider the position Bors and his fellows are in as a result of Lancelot's adultery and the loyalty they have shown him. Bors, having agreed to take the good with the bad, has endured having to defend the queen publicly, possibly against his own judgement, and is now embroiled in a civil war; but despite this he is rebuked for his actions towards Arthur. However, it might also be said that by this stage of

¹⁷ *King Arthur's Death*, lines 2174-2205, pp. 60-1.

¹⁸ Weiss, p. 242.

the crisis all the usual rules of conduct have been abandoned, such is the unique nature of the conflict.

As well as being Lancelot's advisor, Bors is present at many key moments of Lancelot's life and because of his success in the *Grail* quest, also accompanies Lancelot's son Galahad to the Holy Land and is present at his death. There is nothing in the text that indicates that Bors or Percival were on intimate terms with Galahad in the way that Bors is with Lancelot. For a present-day reader, we might assume that as Bors has been with Galahad in a strange country where they experienced unique events, the two characters would have a close friendship and that each detail of this would be later reported to Lancelot. But there is no real indication of this, and Lancelot's own references to his son are of his great achievements, not of his personal worth or of their own relationship. As previously mentioned, Malory spends very little time describing the events that occurred in Sarras, dramatic though they are. It is interesting that even when Bors spends time with Galahad and Percival before they leave England, Bors still thinks of Lancelot, telling Galahad, 'if sir Launcelot, your fadir, were here, than were we well at ease, for than mesemed we fayled nothyng' (579). Galahad, however, dismisses this, as his chief concern is with religious matters, his father taking a definite second place. But Bors has met Galahad long before this episode, when he had

reason to stay at Corbenic Castle, saw the child in Elaine's arms and noticed that he was 'passynge lyke sir Launcelot' (482). This meeting with its resonance of a sighting of the Virgin and Child, immediately precedes Bors's night of adventures in the castle during which he is told he is not yet ready for the Grail quest. By placing Bors in Corbenic castle at this significant time, Malory is therefore predicting the vital role to be played by Bors during the Grail quest. Later, during the absence of Lancelot after he spends a second night with Elaine, Bors is a prominent figure in the search for him and leaves the court with Ector and Lionel, as 'they myght nat abyde no lenger for sorow' (489). Bors is even confided in by Elaine, who cries with him at the possible fate of Lancelot. After having berated Elaine, Bors's attitude towards her appears to soften, as he is saving his wrath for his later meeting with the queen. Elaine is also quick to deny any responsibility for Lancelot's behaviour and ensures Bors realises that Lancelot's madness is caused by Guinevere's harsh words; it is unlikely Bors does not understand this however, as the idea of true love causing madness was widely accepted. Both Bors and Elaine of course want to place the blame for Lancelot's absence on the queen, and Elaine's vow that she would die for Lancelot if necessary probably also raises her worth in Bors's eyes, as this is almost certainly how he feels himself concerning Lancelot. Like the later Elaine, Elaine the mother of Galahad is resourceful and brave, and absolutely devoted to Lancelot, as of course is Bors. However, unlike Elaine of Astolat, she has a specific

and vital role, that is, to be the mother of the most holy knight of all, and this role is recognised by Bors who understands the significance of Galahad's birth.

It can be seen, therefore, that Bors is usually present during important moments in Lancelot's life, but in the final few years of their lives, the cousins are virtually inseparable. Having received Gawain's letter and before they return from the siege of Benwick, Lancelot is encouraged, again by Bors, to take action if they mean to support Arthur before it is too late, neither man knowing that Arthur has already died. Lancelot's reaction to Gawain's letter is emotional, even verging on the self-pitying; Bors has scant regard for self-pity, even from Lancelot, and there is a certain impatient tone to his speech;

' "Now leve youre complayntes," seyde sir Bors, "and firste revenge you of the dethe of sir Gawayne, on whos soule Jesu have mercy! And hit woll be well done that ye se hys tumbe, and secondly that ye revenge my lorde Arthur and my lady quene Gwenyver."

" I thanke you," seyde sir Launcelot, "for ever ye woll my worship" '(718).

The situation has now changed completely; as Gawain has now died, Lancelot and Bors intend to return to fight alongside Arthur and against Mordred. As always, Bors sees clearly the altered circumstances and tells Lancelot exactly what he wants to hear, and this includes saving Guinevere from an enforced marriage to

Mordred. Again, Bors's personal feelings towards the queen are irrelevant and he encourages Lancelot to do the correct thing according to the values of Arthurian society.

Later, after Lancelot's final meeting with Guinevere, Bors and others of Lancelot's kinsmen choose to follow Lancelot and live in a hermitage, don religious clothing and pursue a life of abstinence and prayer. Although Malory uses both the French *Mort Artu (The Death of Arthur)*¹⁹ and the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur*²⁰ for the final section of his text, 'The Death of Arthur', it is the latter that he draws upon more closely as regards Lancelot's final years and the role played by Bors. The French text depicts Ector as Lancelot's companion until his own death, but Malory's choice of Bors is consistent with his development of the character elsewhere in his own text. Nevertheless, there is a certain amount of irony in Bors, a Grail knight, following Lancelot into a house of religion, as it might be expected that Bors would take the lead in this instance. However, the text implies that Bors chooses the holy life in order to be with Lancelot, rather than for religious reasons; 'whan sir Bors sawe sir Launcelot in that maner clothing, than he preyed the Byssshop that he myght be in the same sewte. And so there was an habyte put upon hym...' (722). However, after Lancelot's death, Bors and his fellows did as 'sir Launcelot

¹⁹ *The Death of Arthur*, in *Lancelot-Grail*, VII, pp.134-6.

²⁰ *King Arthur's Death*, ed., Benson, pp.106-11.

commanded them for to do or ever he passyd oute of thys world' (726); they put their affairs in order and travelled to the Holy Land, where they died as martyrs 'for Goddes sake' (726). So even in death, Lancelot's wishes are seen to be the driving force behind Bors's actions. Having therefore taken religious vows, worn the clothing of hermits and lived a life of austerity for over six years, Bors and his men did what must have been virtually unheard of and returned to a secular life, albeit one where the intention was to leave their homes and die in a religious war. It is worth noting that whilst in the Holy Land, Bors did not follow Percival and wear the clothing of a hermit, although this episode marked the highest point of Bors's spiritual achievement, as he wanted to return to England and to Lancelot, and once the religious life has been embarked upon, it cannot easily be undone. Therefore, although Bors achieved the Grail, the evidence could point to his earthly connections being of greater importance to him, and to Malory, than his spiritual ones. I would suggest also that although Bors does invariably follow Lancelot, even into a hermitage, he has at this point in the text nothing left to lose by doing this. Unlike the earlier situation when Bors returned to Arthur's court after years away on the quest and assured of a warm welcome, this time there is no court to return to, and a hostile outside world.

In many ways, Bors might be viewed as having many of Lancelot's virtues with fewer of his vices. Bors appears to find it easy to be chaste as there are few episodes that demonstrate otherwise, so although chastity is regarded as a virtue during the Grail quest, it is perhaps one that Bors does not struggle with a great deal, but more of this later. Bors's consistent loyalty to Lancelot may be Malory's chief concern, but as a literary figure with a history, Bors had another purpose to fulfil and that is to succeed in the Grail quest.

Chapter Two: Bors's spirituality and his role in the Grail quest.

In creating his *Morte*, Malory was working with pre-existing Arthurian material, and as the search for the Grail was well-known and popular, the story could not be simply omitted. This is confirmed by Larry D. Benson, who states that 'Malory had little choice; he had to include the story of the Grail quest, and he therefore had to deal with a work much different in tone and effect from the celebration of secular chivalry in the *Tristan*.'²¹ Malory lived in an era of Christianity, not secularism, but nevertheless most scholars of Malory agree that he was more interested in knightly pursuits than spiritual themes. It is widely believed that the search for the Grail was written by Cistercian monks, hence the origin of the importance of chastity for one's spiritual health. Bors is chaste and it is evident from the start of the Grail quest that he will achieve the Grail as he is endorsed by holy men and his purpose, as already stated, is to return and report to others. Although Malory followed his source, the French *La Queste del Saint Graal* fairly closely as far as events are concerned, he omitted much of the religious doctrine in this text. The emphasis in his own Grail story is on penance, with less weight being

²¹ Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Mass, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976) p.207.

given to Christian dogma, which would probably have reflected the sympathies of his time, or as Charles W. Whitworth puts it, 'Malory dispenses with pages of homiletics, but retains just enough for us to see he was not out to ride roughshod over the religious legend.'²² Although Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal' is filled with hermits and holy men who live as recluses and as such are removed from worldly concerns, religious thinking had evolved in the two centuries that had elapsed between the writing of the French text and Malory's own, and to choose the life of a recluse was no longer considered to be the only acceptable way to serve Christ. Felicity Riddy explains that during the fourteenth century, it had become usual for English mystics to positively promote the notion of an active life, which included good deeds, penance and fasting, often as a preliminary to a life of contemplation and separation from the wider world. Riddy points to medieval texts that support this idea, and explains that it was in line with the traditional teachings of the Church.²³

At the start of the quest, Arthur and his knights inhabit a successful society, although one in which flaws are clearly beginning to show, as demonstrated by, amongst other events, the murder of Lamorak. It is already a Christian society, but

²² Charles W. Whitworth, 'The Sacred and the Secular in Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal'', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 5, (1975) 19-29, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3507167>> [accessed 17/03/2010] p.20.

²³ Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory, Medieval and Renaissance Authors* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987) pp. 123-25.

the appearance of Galahad and the promise of the Grail change it, as predicted by the king when he laments for the inevitable loss of many of his knights. Galahad is perfect and alters the atmosphere within Arthur's court as soon as he enters it, but except for the events at Corbenic Castle, there is no evidence in the text prior to the start of the Grail quest that Bors will excel in spiritual matters. However, until the Grail quest, religion and spiritual affairs are very much secondary to the more worldly pursuits of chivalry and combat.

As previously stated, Bors's main role in the *Morte* is that of a messenger; he is chosen to return to England to inform Arthur and his court of the successful Grail quest and of the deaths of Galahad and Percival. The main spiritual function of Bors was constructed by Arthurian legend and continued by Malory, although his poignant reunion with Lancelot after the quest is Malory's own addition, and places Lancelot centre-stage once again. Bors, therefore, can be seen to function successfully in two cultures, that of Arthur's court and its emphasis on earthly honour, chivalry and combat, and that of the Grail quest and its final destination in Sarras. Once Bors has returned from the Holy Land, his own personal experience and spiritual journey are secondary to this role, but this is in keeping with the Round Table ethos that no single knight's individual experience is of more importance than that of the fellowship as a whole. But during the quest, the notions

of fellowship that support the Round Table no longer have the same significance; in fact, spiritual achievement is shown to be a personal matter between each individual and God, as represented by various holy men and hermits. Although Bors is sorely tempted to break his vows to God at certain moments during the quest, he has the ability to act independently of other Round Table knights and to remain focused on his spiritual objectives.

Bors appears to realise from the start of the quest that independent thought and travel may be the only way to achieve the Grail, and the only way he can distance himself from malign influence. The least worthy knights such as Gawain are seen to travel with others and the most spiritual knight of all, Galahad, shuns company, so therefore the worldly desire for fellowship is shown to be incompatible with spiritual achievement. This does contradict the Round Table notion of the fellowship being of greater importance than the individual, but is in keeping with Christian ideas of a personal relationship with God. Bors also appears to have a genuine desire to attain a new depth of spirituality and to accept willingly that the adventures encountered during the quest are usually tests of moral, not physical strength, in a way that many other knights cannot. However, his ability to accept physical hardship and his sheer tenacity are illustrated much later during the quest when he meets Galahad and Percival after a long period of time has passed. Bors

states; ' Hit ys more than a yere and a halff that I ne lay ten tymes where men dwelled, but in wylde forestis and in mownteaynes. But [God] was ever my comforte' (601). This lengthy sojourn alone in the wilderness, resonant of Christ's own ordeal, is a further test for Bors, one that is psychological as much as physical, and one that he accepts willingly, comforted by his faith.

Arthur's extreme reticence to allow his men to depart on the Grail quest is significant, and perhaps reflects how far removed the fellowship of the Round Table has become from the true meaning of Christianity and from the laws that were given by God to man, that ostensibly were still honoured in Arthur's court. It is interesting that Bors, unlike Gawain or even Lancelot, holds his peace during preparations for the departure of the knights. His modesty and willingness to defer to others during the last tournament demonstrates his ability to forgo chivalric honour when more important issues are at stake. He is also silent whilst others talk about the spiritual adventures they anticipate may lie ahead for them. I think this reticence from Bors, who is an outspoken man in many ways, reflects his knowledge of what is to come. He is quietly confident that what was predicted years before at Corbenic will now come to pass. Arthur orders a last jousting tournament before the knights' departure, and Malory does not say whether or not

Bors takes part in this; however *La Queste del Saint Graal*,²⁴ indicates that Bors and others were happy to act as squires for Galahad. This aspect of Bors's character, his modesty, clearly originated elsewhere, but Malory continued the portrayal of Bors in this way. He is not proud, and this is shown from the very start of Bors's personal quest.

Bors is portrayed as an active participant in the quest throughout 'The Tale of the Sankgreal'. When Lancelot is summoned by a damsel to follow her to the abbey where Galahad has spent his youth, Lancelot finds Bors and Lionel already there, returning to the court after their search for Lancelot. What is revealed to the reader here is perhaps designed to anticipate the key part that Bors will take in the quest, and that has been suggested by the earlier events at Corbenic Castle. He is an example of a sinner whose sins have been forgiven. When the quest is underway, it becomes clear that Bors's role is pre-ordained as explained by the first holy man he meets who knows Bors will succeed. Malory's text explains that 'thys good man founds hym in so mervales a lyffe and so stable that he felte he was never gretly correpte in fleysshly lustes...' (564). Therefore, Bors appears to be sanctioned by holy men and this is further emphasised when Bors and Lionel are prevented from fighting to the death by divine intervention. Bors's unwillingness to

²⁴ *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, in *Lancelot-Grail*, VI, 11-12.

fight Lionel could be seen as anticipating Lancelot's extreme reluctance to fight King Arthur later in the text. Bors appears positively to seek out those who can advise him on spiritual matters, even if their recommendations are arduous to follow, and he makes the sign of the cross if he cannot hear mass daily. He is also seen to pray at times of crisis, an example being when he is attempting to fend off his angry brother, so his spiritual credentials are noteworthy. Not only is Bors's spirituality recognised by holy men, but his modesty and humility are evident; from the start of the quest, he follows the advice of the 'religious man', wears the garments required of him 'in sygne of chastisement' (564) and agrees to consume only bread and water until the Grail is achieved. His readiness to follow the advice given to him by religious figures can be compared to Lancelot's; both appear in sharp contrast to Gawain, who is eager to begin the Grail quest, but refuses to undergo any act of penance when required to. However, Bors does speak of the 'erthly worship' (564) that can be gained by a successful Grail quest, so it seems reasonable to assume that Malory meant us to understand Bors to be a figure of great spiritual worth, but one who is nevertheless still motivated by a desire for honour in this world. It might be said that Bors is ambitious as regards both earthly and spiritual matters, but it is also possible to conclude that to a great extent, his wish for earthly honour is tied in with his wish to please and serve Lancelot.

Although Malory states that all the knights leave in search of the Grail, no details are given regarding the adventures of the vast majority after they leave the court. A minor character, Melias, is knighted by Galahad, Ector is mentioned only fleetingly and Gawain and Lionel kill Uwain and Collegreance respectively, thus ending any slim hope they may have had of seeing the Grail. So the experiences of just a few of Arthur's knights are afforded any detail; the three that are successful, including Bors, Lancelot, who is partially successful, and Gawain. The figure of Gawain played a prominent role in previous Arthurian legend in England and he is shown as an example of complete failure within the Grail quest. Arthur appears to hold his favourite nephew responsible for the departure of his knights and Gawain is portrayed as full of enthusiasm for the quest, although less keen when notions of religion and repentance replace those of combat and worldly glory. He complains of a lack of adventures, apparently unaware that he is looking for the wrong type of adventure, whereas Bors finds just what he is looking for. However, Gawain does have enough perspicacity to realise that the reason he has seen nothing of Bors or Lancelot is his own ungodly state;

' "Truly", seyde sir Ector, "I can nat hyre of [Lancelot], nother of sir Galahad, sir Percivale, and sir Bors."

"Lette hem be," seyde sir Gawayne, "for they four have no peerys...But

and thes four be mette togyders they woll be lothe that any man mete
with hem; for and they fayle of Sankgreall, hit ys in waste of all the
remanaunte to recover hit " ' (558).

It is interesting to note that despite Gawain's own lack of spiritual awareness he is able to describe succinctly the outcome of the Grail search for his more spiritual fellows. Lumiansky suggests that this passage is 'Malory's structural device to limit the remainder of the Quest to the events involving the four knights mentioned by Ector'.²⁵ I think it is also an opportunity for Malory to demonstrate that other knights are aware of the spiritual superiority of the named four, and this is further emphasised by the dream that Gawain later experiences. The interpretation of this dream makes clear that the remainder of the knights demonstrate a lack of humility and a surfeit of pride which leaves them unable to succeed in the quest, and crucially they are not chaste. Therefore, by this stage the position of Bors as successful Grail knight seems assured.

However, Bors's success on the Grail quest is not a matter of chance or of fate; his narrative is more complex and more suggestive than might at first seem. It might be said that Bors has earned his place as a Grail knight, as in the years between his adventures at Corbenic and the Grail quest, Bors has apparently become worthy of

²⁵ Lumiansky, p. 14.

the Grail. Time seems to have little bearing in the *Morte*, but as Galahad is a child in Elaine's arms during Bors's brief sojourn at Corbenic Castle, this episode must precede the Grail quest by many years, although Lumiansky points out that the castle represents a preliminary to the Grail quest, with the same standards required.²⁶ Bors has had just one slip from chastity when his son was conceived, and before his night at Corbenic he is warned away by King Pelles, who informs Bors that 'there com but feaw knyghtes here that goth away wyth ony worshyppe...here shall no knight wyne worship but yf he be of worship hymselff...' (482-3). This warning appears to be a challenge to Bors, as it could be considered cowardly to observe such a warning; knights usually take little heed if cautioned against headstrong actions. However, Bors is happy to accept one of Pelles's suggestions, and that is to be confessed: 'I woll be shryvyn wyth a good wyll' (483). Despite this, he does not entirely place his faith in God as he remains armed, ready to fight. During Bors's visit, he is subjected to a torturous night of fighting strange creatures, as well as being wounded by a mysterious spear. The visions he experiences in this most mysterious of castles, in which a leopard and dragon fight and the dragon's offspring kill it, are suggestive of the forthcoming civil war between Arthur's nephews and Lancelot's kin, and predict the fall of the Round Table fellowship. Of particular note, however, is the voice heard immediately after

²⁶ Lumiansky, pp. 11-12.

Bors is struck temporarily blind, that says ' "Go hens, thou Sir Bors, for as yet thou arte nat worthy for to be in thys place!" ' (485). In Malory's source, the *Lancelot*, a holy man tells Bors he is the purest and most worthy of Arthur's knights, but again he is warned that he is not holy enough yet.²⁷ The implication here is that Bors, although not yet worthy of the Grail, will become worthy in due course. So although Bors has offered his confession to a priest before this night and has emerged with some honour, there is the implication that Bors will be required to continue a life of chastity and 'good lyvyng' before he may see the Grail. Rather like Gawain in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,²⁸ Bors is also placing his faith in material objects rather than God, and this error of judgement is perhaps why, when he does become worthy, he later begins the Grail quest reliant on his faith to protect him. Or as Benson puts it, 'Bors is not deprived of his arms, because he begins as a penitent, trusting not in his armour but in his faith.'²⁹

Malory alters his sources regarding Bors's adventures at Corbenic, cutting some of the material from the French *Lancelot*, which portrays Bors making two separate visits to Corbenic after being accused of cowardice by a damsel³⁰. Bors is clearly

²⁷ *Lancelot, Parts V & VI, in Lancelot-Grail*, V, 302-307, 135.

²⁸ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. W.R.J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).

²⁹ Benson, p. 213.

³⁰ *Lancelot, Parts V & VI, in Lancelot-Grail*, V, 129-135, 302-308.

one of the knights that Malory intended to portray in a sympathetic light; therefore, this particular episode is omitted as Bors is never cowardly in Malory's *Morte*. In a similar way, Malory's portrayal of Lancelot omits any direct criticism for his love for the queen. As previously stated, the incident at Corbenic predates the Grail quest by some years, and perhaps Bors's blindness is indicative of his inability, as yet, to see moral truths. As this episode occurs at about the time Bors's son is conceived, his one slip from chastity is presumably hindering his spiritual health at this point. By the time he actually embarks on the Grail quest, his sin has been purged, as commented upon by the many holy men Bors meets during the quest. There is a marked contrast between adventures that occur in the 'Book of the Sangreal' and those that happen elsewhere in the text. As previously stated, those whilst on the Grail quest are purposeful, created to act as a moral testing ground for Arthur's knights, and involve making choices and resisting temptations.

The significance of chastity during the quest cannot be over emphasised. Of the three that achieve the Grail, only Bors is not a virgin and he has maintained a chaste life for many years. The importance of chastity throughout the quest is highlighted by Bors's dilemma when he is forced to make a moral choice between saving his brother and rescuing a maiden. Jill Mann refers to this as the claims of

virginity overriding the claims of blood,³¹ and it is only during the Grail quest that this is demonstrated to be so. Although knights save maidens elsewhere in the *Morte*, the moral dilemma posed by the situation Bors finds himself in is quite different, as loyalty to one's closest kinsmen, especially brothers, was immensely important and family loyalties, provided they did not involve dishonourable conduct such as the murder of Lamorak by Gawain, generally contributed to the stability of society. Bors makes the correct decision, although he endures a vision in which an apparently holy man castigates him for his actions and causes Bors to believe he finds Lionel's body. Later, the holy man is revealed as a false prophet, the first time this has happened in the quest, and Bors's prioritising of the maiden's chastity over his sinful brother's life is vindicated. Malory describes Bors as being severely tested when tempted by the 'fayryst lady that ever he saw' (570), but this is not just about sexual temptation, although it is clear he is tempted by her beauty, as there are other issues involved. Rather realistically for a man with little personal experience of women, Bors is described as being 'abaysshed' and 'ryght evyll at ease' (570) in the lady's company when she makes her desire for him known. By way of contrast, Lancelot never appears uncomfortable when refusing casual offers of sex from passing damsels as his loyalty to Guinevere never wavers. He is direct in his method, only being evasive when a damsel asks about his love for the queen.

³¹ Jill Mann, 'Malory and the Grail Legend', in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards, *Arthurian Studies XXXVII* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996) pp.203-220, (p. 216).

Bors of course is committed not to a woman, but to Christ and chastity, and his spurning of the lady, Bors believes, will put Lancelot and others at risk of death. This threat, spoken by a fiend disguised as a holy man, is the most dreadful one possible for Bors, but the various temptations offered by the lady and her household prove almost too much for a man starved of food, wine and company, and he temporarily forgets both Lionel and Lancelot. However, he refuses to save this woman or even his kinsmen from death if it means he will break his vow of chastity. Because of his resistance to the woman, her true nature, that of a fiend, is revealed to Bors.

This episode demonstrates the psychological conflicts experienced by Bors, and how Bors has begun to realise that this new world of holy figures, hermits and visions does not resemble the more straightforward, familiar world of knightly adventures and tournaments. Unlike Galahad, Bors and Percival can be deceived and tempted, demonstrating that they are not perfect and that therefore their resistance to temptation is more admirable. Benson points out that when Bors and Percival meet during the quest, 'they recount not the deeds they have done but rather "ayther told other of their temtacions" '.³² This is the equivalent, in the Grail world, of the commonplace activity of relating details of various deeds of

³² Benson, p.212.

arms and emphasises the almost parallel world now inhabited by Bors and his fellows.

What becomes noteworthy from the start of the quest is the company Bors keeps and chooses to avoid. Bors is alone when he meets the first holy man, and when not alone, he is seen to actively seek out Galahad and to shun those whose spiritual health may be in doubt, although of course he is willing to make an exception for Lancelot, whose welfare is seemingly always uppermost in his mind; Bors speaks of Lancelot and would clearly like to meet with him. But Bors and Lancelot do not meet during the Grail quest, leaving Bors free to concentrate on his own spiritual journey, and releasing him from 'protective responsibility' of Lancelot.³³ Having seen Galahad as a child and having prayed he would be as good a knight as his father, by the start of the quest Bors is aware of Galahad's special role and the significance of this for him, in that he will achieve the Grail with Galahad. As mentioned earlier, to be associated with Galahad is a great honour for Bors. An honourable or dishonourable act reflects on each member of the Round Table, and if the knight concerned is a kinsman, this is of particular relevance. So not only is Bors spiritual enough to be chosen to see the Grail in the company of Galahad, he is also the son of his beloved cousin. Conversely, after being warned of his brother's

³³ Lumiansky, p. 5.

ungodliness and having personal experience of his desire for revenge, disapproved of by both Christian law and the chivalric code, Bors leaves Lionel and the brothers do not meet again until Bors returns from the Holy Land.

By the time the Grail quest is underway, the spiritual progress made by Bors is evident, and this progress is confirmed by the appearance and subsequent death of Percival's sister. Her sacrifice gives her the status of a saint, and her presence on the mystical ship is heavy with symbolism. During the Grail quest, she meets only Percival, Bors and Galahad, although Lancelot later boards the ship that contains her body. She is a purposeful figure; her role is to guide Galahad and his fellows, to explain the story of Solomon's ship and the Sword with the Strange Girdles and also to clarify the links between Solomon, Christ and Galahad. Unlike the other holy figures that appear during the quest, she has no contact with the Grail failures; she is not responsible for explaining eschatological theories or demanding penance for sin from those who will not see the Grail. Most importantly, she is required to sacrifice herself honourably so that another might live, and the significance of this sacrifice is the value placed on her body and hair, the relics of a saint. The importance of her role is emphasised by the manner of her death and of her burial in the Holy Land, and Bors's part in this points to his own spirituality.

He has been in the company of a saint and has witnessed her death and burial, an honour conferred on very few.

It was after his first sighting of Galahad that Bors experienced the strange night at Corbenic Castle and was told he was not yet worthy to be there; but his chastity in the intervening years and his humility towards God means he is now able to achieve what others, even 'the best knight in the world' cannot. It is an indication of how far Bors has developed spiritually when he is given the sword that injured Joseph of Aramathea; 'than they gaff the swerde to sir Bors, for hit myght no bettir be sette, for he was so good a knight and a worthy man' (602). So, after having relied on the power of his faith in God, Bors is rewarded with a mystical sword that has been miraculously made whole by Galahad, and a sighting of the face of Christ. The Christ figure confirms the prophesy given earlier, that 'two of you shall dy in my servyse, and one of you shall com agayne and telle tydynges' (604). It is another sign of Bors's spirituality that he is permitted to be present at this extraordinary moment, and that he witnesses the healing of the Maimed King by Galahad. This vision of Christ and the ensuing events in the Holy Land are the pinnacle of Bors's spiritual achievement, but he is unique amongst his fellows in that he is destined to return to worldly concerns after being part of such mystical experiences.

Galahad's whole purpose is to achieve the Grail, and although Percival is a worldlier figure than Galahad and has been an active member of the Round Table fellowship, it would appear that his main purpose is to accompany Galahad to the Holy Land and to remain there, unable to return to court life and thus fulfilling his destiny.

Although a Round Table knight, once Percival has witnessed the death of Galahad, he chooses to devote his life entirely to Christ and becomes a hermit. Even before the quest, Percival's purity does set him apart from the his fellows as it has enabled him to experience a vision of the Grail after suffering injuries during a fight with Ector, as a result of which both knights were healed. Galahad, of course, is different from all other knights, and his single-mindedness and purity is beyond question. As Mary-Hynes Berry succinctly puts it: 'In the Sankgreal, Galahad is set in another dimension, apart from other men. Perceval and Bors are so overshadowed by the miracle in the Grail mysteries at Corbenic that we have no distinct impression of their participation.'³⁴ Galahad has never partaken in the usual chivalric adventures that were a normal way of life before he appeared at court and is presented as a figure of such perfection that his success is inevitable and predictable. However, since the beginning of the quest, it has been evident that Bors can perform equally well in both worlds; therefore, it could be concluded that

³⁴ Mary Hynes-Berry, 'Malory's Translation of Meaning: "The Tale of the Sankgreal"', *Studies in Philology*, 74.3 (1977), 243-257 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173938>> [accessed: 11/03/2011] p.252.

Bors is less spiritual than both *Galahad* and *Percival*. However, although Bors is not sexually pure as are *Galahad* and *Percival*, Christianity does teach repentance and forgiveness of sins. The hermit's interpretation of *Gawain's* dream states that although the white bull with the spot does represent Bors, he has lived a chaste life for so long that all his sins have been forgiven.

This does elevate Bors to a level of spiritual awareness that *Lancelot* cannot be a part of. I think that because *Lancelot* and Bors are friends and cousins, have fought alongside each other and have led fairly similar lives in many ways, it is difficult to resist comparing *Lancelot's* attempts at spiritual success with Bors's. To compare *Lancelot* with *Galahad* or even *Percival* does not have the same impact, as Benson suggests: '*Galahad* and *Percival* are purely celestial knights, so pure that they must die when the *Grail* quest is complete, for they cannot return to the world. Their success in *Malory's* tale can hardly diminish *Lancelot's* stature. Bors is another matter. He is an earthly knight, of *Lancelot's* own kin, and his one sin against perfect virginity was his affair with King *Brandegoris's* daughter, a parallel to *Lancelot's* one sin against his perfect love for *Guenivere*.'³⁵ However, despite Bors's success, on his return from the Holy Land, *Lancelot* once again becomes the main focus of *Malory's* text, his stature apparently undiminished. After Bors has

³⁵ Benson, p 221.

related the 'hyghe adventures of the Sankgreall such as had befalle hym' (607), he speaks privately to Lancelot and repeats Galahad's final message to Lancelot, 'to remembir of thys unsyker worlde, as ye behyght hym' (607). Lancelot's reply, 'now I truste to God hys prayer shall avayle me' (608) is sincerely spoken, although he does not, of course, keep this promise. Lancelot knows that he could have achieved even more than his cousin but for his love for Guinevere, and has no ill feeling towards Bors for his triumph. 'The Tale of the Sankgreall' closes with one of the most moving speeches in the whole text, but its purpose is to emphasise Lancelot's central role in the drama that is to follow, in which Bors, once again, merely plays a supporting part. I do not agree with Charles Moorman, who suggests that 'The purpose of this final passage is, of course, to end the Grail quest with a severely chastened Launcelot and not, as Vinaver has it, to make Launcelot the Grail hero.'³⁶ I do not think that Malory wanted Lancelot to appear chastened and it seems beyond all doubt that Lancelot is the hero of the *Morte*, albeit a flawed one, but equally Bors must be regarded as the hero of the Grail quest after his return to court. As suggested by Whitworth, Bors is 'the ordinary man' who achieves what Lancelot should have and that therefore it is fitting that Bors should assume more responsibility for Lancelot after the quest.³⁷

³⁶ Charles Moorman, 'Malory's treatment of the Sankgreall', *PMLA*, 71.3, (1956), 496-508, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/460716>> [accessed 11/03/2010], p.504.

³⁷ Whitworth, p. 26.

Despite the renewed emphasis on Lancelot, Bors should still be the most spiritual knight of all after the quest has finished and Galahad and Percival are dead. However, by the end of 'The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere', Lancelot heals Urry, whereas Bors is unable to do so (663-69). Why should this be so? The most obvious answer is that Malory wishes to re-affirm Lancelot's position as the most favoured knight in a dramatic way and at the same time list all of the Round Table knights before the 'slander and strife' of the following book when conflict becomes inevitable. Malory gives us a last reminder of the figures that comprise Arthur's court as a poignant note on which to end the seventh book. Had this event taken place shortly after the Grail quest Lancelot's ability to heal might seem less odd, as although he fell short of Bor's achievement, his spiritual progress was notable during the quest and his failure to achieve the Grail was, in part, a success. But Lancelot's involvement in some questionable episodes immediately prior to the Urry incident should lessen his ability to perform miracles whilst invoking the name of Christ. His refusal to grant mercy to Meliaguant (662) when it was requested not only contravened the chivalric code of conduct but was decidedly un-Christian in spirit, and his continuing adultery with the queen means he has failed to keep the promises he made during the quest. To maintain consistency, Bors should be the healer, not Lancelot, even taking into consideration Lancelot's previous ability to heal.

Of course, it would be erroneous to look for consistency in Malory's text, and it appears that Bors's status as a Grail knight is less relevant now that the usual court intrigue has replaced the spiritual world of the Grail. Bors is just one of a list of knights who cannot heal Urry and his close friendship with Lancelot is once again of more importance than any religious status he enjoyed earlier. Therefore, it could be concluded that Bors cannot heal Urry because the Grail quest has ended, Bors's achievements, although immense, are firmly in the past, and Bors has now returned to his usual role of supporting Lancelot. However, Bors has not transgressed as has Lancelot, and I think it is significant that Malory is careful to follow his source and omit any mention of Bors from the Knight of the Cart episode. If Bors had been present during this rather sordid incident, he would have been obliged to support Lancelot and thereby taint his own reputation. As stated earlier, Bors is a figure that Malory wants to present in a favourable light, so it was perhaps expedient to cause Bors to be absent during this incident, even though the result of this is that Bors cannot fulfil his obligations to his cousin. Weiss states that 'close scrutiny of Bors's behaviour throughout the *Morte* shows a knight who, however steadfast to religious values he may be in the Grail quest and however stable he may be in his devotion to Lancelot, cannot help but compromise one of these devotions in his

active pursuit of the other'.³⁸ I think that the Knight of the Cart incident is possibly the one instance, aside from during the Grail quest, where Bors's absence means he has prioritised his religion over his cousin.

After close examination of the *Morte*, I think it can be concluded that Malory's Bors, although pious and chaste, is motivated more by his devotion to his cousin Lancelot than by his wish to please God. During the Grail quest, Bors and Lancelot do not meet and I would suggest that this is highly significant. During this time, although Bors does think about Lancelot and muse on his whereabouts and welfare, his lack of real contact with Lancelot enables Bors to concentrate on godly matters, at which he excels. However, once the world of the quest is in the past, Bors's attention shifts once more to his beloved kinsman, which is in keeping with the overall change of theme in the text.

³⁸ Weiss, p.419.

Chapter Three: Bors and women

Bors achieves the Grail at least partly, perhaps mainly, because he is chaste, and chastity is seemingly not difficult for him. We are given to understand that Bors's son, Helian le Blanc, was conceived as a result of enchantment, and this experience may go some way to explaining Bors's differing attitudes towards Elaine of Corbenic and Elaine of Astolat. Although Bors is depicted as being attracted to a beautiful woman during the quest, there are no other instances of this happening, and it seems likely that this adventure happens only because Bors is seeking the Grail. It would seem that Bors allowed himself to act out of character on this occasion, as he does not usually seek the company of women at all, and is most at ease when in fellowship with other knights, but this could also apply to almost all of his fellows. Bors, it would seem, is chaste because he finds it comparatively easy to be so.

Bors is self-controlled; he is 'stable', as mentioned earlier. It is not difficult to imagine why Brandegoris's daughter had to resort to sorcery to get her man, although this is not original to Malory, taken as it is from the *Lancelot*.³⁹ It

³⁹ *Lancelot, parts V & VI, in Lancelot-Grail, V, 302.*

appears that following his own experience, Bors does not really approve of the means that Elaine used to lure Lancelot into her bed, and although Bors may feel that the end justified the means as Galahad resulted from this trickery, he is quick to blame both Guinevere and Elaine for Lancelot's madness, telling the latter, 'betwyxt you bothe ye have destroyed a good knyght' (488). As Galahad has already been born at this point, meaning that Elaine's purpose has been fulfilled, Bors has no reason to be lenient with her when she utilises her maid's powers for the second time. Nevertheless, as previously stated, I think Bors's attitude towards her does alter somewhat after her assertion that she would willingly die for Lancelot, and in her outspoken attitude to Guinevere, Bors may recognise a kindred spirit.

If Bors's attitude to Elaine of Corbenic is coloured by his own experience of enchantment by a woman, so are his positive views regarding Elaine of Astolat. As discussed earlier, Bors is keen for Lancelot to marry a suitable woman if this means he will give up Guinevere, as he can foresee a time when the adultery between the two will be exposed and conflict ensue. But I would suggest he also genuinely likes Elaine as she has no guile and nurses the injured Lancelot lovingly, 'wherefore sir Bors was gretly pleased with her' (635). Enchantment plays no part in her world, and as Helen Cooper puts it, women such as Elaine 'have nothing but love to offer in

a world where love is unlikely to be enough'.⁴⁰ She is a particularly sympathetic character, and Bors's positive reaction to Elaine is a reflection of the reader's own view.

After the defeat of Lucius, when attention is first drawn to Bors and Lancelot, Malory explains how Lancelot 'passed all other knyghtes' and that he 'loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff' (149). Lancelot has a history, and his love for the queen is an essential part of that history. Malory's source, the French *Lancelot*, gives a much more detailed account of the first few meetings between the two: 'The queen looked at him tenderly, and he looked at her, too, every time he could do so without being noticed'; 'At her touch, he started as if suddenly awakened'; 'He looked at her helplessly'.⁴¹ The implication in the *Lancelot* is that Lancelot's love is unrequited, at least at first. He is infatuated, or perhaps enchanted, by her. Malory accepts this almost as a fact; like the Quest for the Holy Grail, he cannot omit the love affair between the queen and Lancelot, but it is not his style to elaborate on the emotional detail. Malory's own attitude to the adulterous love of the couple is ambiguous and he accepts that his favourite knight is flawed, but he also views their love as a positive force whereby great 'worship' is bestowed upon Arthur's court. However, Malory's Bors appears to hold

⁴⁰ *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. by Helen Cooper, p. xix.

⁴¹ *Lancelot, parts I & II*, in *Lancelot-Grail*, III, 123-4.

Guinevere solely responsible for the destructive nature of the love between her and his cousin. Bors is pious, and as it was frequently perceived that the Church upheld anti-feminist views, the figure of Bors may be representative of the idea that women are the sinful agents of men's destruction. The Poisoned Apple incident could be perceived as being symbolic of this view. However, when Bors does reprimand the queen, which he does in quite an offensive manner, it is not the sin of her alliance with Lancelot that he objects to, but rather her erratic and unreasonable behaviour.

Bors is self-controlled enough to resist beautiful women, but he is almost invariably short-tempered when conversing with Guinevere. Two particular instances of Bors's loss of self-control whilst with the queen are especially relevant to an examination of his opinions of her, and also add to our knowledge of Guinevere's character.

After Lancelot's second encounter with Elaine of Corbenic, Elaine herself is quick to shift the blame for Lancelot's madness onto Guinevere, and to castigate her for being unfaithful to Arthur. Elaine's status has altered since the conception of Galahad, and she speaks self-assuredly to the queen; 'ye have done grete synne and youreselff grete dyshonoure, for ye have a lorde royall of youre owne'. Elaine then plays her trump card; 'by hym [Lancelot] I have borne a fayre sonne' (488).

Guinevere cannot hope to compete here and does not defend herself. Elaine has

given Lancelot a child, and it is left to *Guinevere* to salvage her pride and remember her position as queen; she dismisses *Elaine* from her court. It is possible to feel just a little sympathy for *Guinevere* as following this harsh reprimand from her guest, *Bors's* speech to her is even more ruthless;

' " Now, fye on youre wepyngel!" seyde sir Bors de Ganys. "For ye wepe never but whan there ys no boote. Alas!" seyde sir Bors, "that ever sir Launcelot or ony of hys blood ever saw you, for now have ye loste the beste knight of oure blood, and he that was all oure leder and oure succoure..." ' (489)

Bors obviously includes himself amongst those of *Lancelot's* blood whom he wishes had never met *Guinevere*. *Bors* has to endure the queen's foibles, as does *Lancelot*, but unlike *Lancelot*, *Bors* has nothing to compensate him for his tolerance, except *Lancelot's* confidence. His anger has clearly been brewing since he promised *Elaine* "I woll turne agayne unto quene *Gwenyver* and gyff her an hete' (488), but after the queen faints, it is 'tendir-herted' (572) *Bors* who lifts her up and revives her.

In a second instance, and following the *Poisoned Apple* incident, *Guinevere* is forced to ask *Bors* to be her champion in the absence of *Lancelot*, at her husband's insistence. Again, the queen has already been rebuked before she speaks to *Bors*, this time by *Arthur*, who apparently without irony asks her: 'What aylith you...that

ye can nat kepe sir Launcelot upon youre syde?... Now go youre way..and require sir Bors to do batayle for you for sir Launcelottis sake' (615). As the whole court is by now apparently aware of the liaison between the queen and Lancelot, it seems incredulous to the modern reader that Arthur himself is not also aware, or that he would suggest his wife's lover should rescue her. Medieval literature however, cannot be understood in this way and as yet there is no public exposure of the lovers; therefore, when Arthur refers to Lancelot, he is remarking on his qualities as a knight, not of any personal relationship he may have with Guinevere. Again, I think it is possible to feel some sympathy for this rather unsympathetic character; she is under sentence of death for a crime of which she is innocent, her husband has already castigated her because her lover is absent, and she is being forced to seek aid from the person whom she knows will reprimand her even more ruthlessly. Bors certainly does not treat the queen gently on this occasion: 'I mervayle how ye dare for shame to require me to do onythyng for you, insomuche ye have enchaced oute of your courte by whom we were borne and honoured' (616). Bors, I think, would like to make the queen squirm, and probably has no intention of refusing to agree to fight as her champion, as he is certain Lancelot will appear to relieve him of his duty. Weiss refers to this encounter between Bors and Guinevere as 'one of the nastiest verbal exchanges in all of the *Morte Darthur*'⁴² and it is hard to

⁴² Weiss, p. 423.

disagree with this assessment, although if *Guinevere* is upset by Bors's words, it does not prevent her from seeking his counsel later in the text. Also, Bors is clearly not alone in thinking it possible for the queen to have deliberately poisoned the apple that killed *Patrise*, although many doubt its target: 'they all had grete suspeccion unto the quene bycause she lete make that dyner' (614), and so his harsh words are perhaps understandable. Nevertheless, Bors, at Arthur's request, does agree to champion the queen, a decision that meets with much criticism from other Round Table knights, who claim that *Guinevere* is 'a destroyer of good knyghtes' (617). Bors's response to his detractors is interesting;

' "Fayre lordis...never yet in my dayes knew I never so harde sey that ever she was a destroyer of good knyghtes, but at all tymes...she was a maynteyner of good knythes; and ever she hath bene large and fre of hir goodis...and the moste bownteuous lady of hir gyffti[s]..." (617).

Bors has carefully chosen his words in this speech to his fellows. He is stating, with all honesty, that *Guinevere* is a very generous queen, and there are several instances within Malory's text which show that this is indeed so. In public, Bors continues to support *Guinevere*, regardless of what he may say to her in private. As a queen, her generosity and kindness to her husband's men cannot be faulted, and Bors is willing to promote *Guinevere*'s status as a queen, and to defend her as a

holder of that rank. His defence of her as regards the actual poisoning incident is less convincing. I would suggest that Bors clearly differentiates between Guinevere, the wife of his lord, and the irritating, demanding lover of his best friend. Despite his rather rude speech to Guinevere, he is acting honourably by defending her in public, as however erratic her behaviour is towards Lancelot, she is still his queen. Bors's public endorsement of Guinevere as a queen might be seen as a parallel to Lancelot's absolute loyalty to Arthur as his lord and king, whilst behaving treacherously towards him as the husband of the woman he loves.

It is worth noting that during both of these encounters between Guinevere and Bors and following his reprimands, the queen kneels before him in an act of supplication. This may be interesting as far as a character study of Guinevere is concerned, but I think it actually tells us more about Bors, as the queen appears to seek Bor's opinion and need his approval. He is a respected figure and well-regarded by both Guinevere and Arthur. The interactions between the two figures are worth a close examination. When Guinevere hears that Lancelot has worn Elaine of Ascolat's sleeve at a tournament, she actually sends for Bors, although it must seem a distinct possibility that he will rebuke her again. Bors has accidentally injured Lancelot, but Guinevere does not concern herself with this at all;

' " A, sir Bors! Have ye nat herde sey how falsely sir Launcelot hath

betrayed me?

"Alas, madame," seyde sir Bors, "I am aferde he hath betrayed hymself and us all."

"No forse," seyde the quene, "though he be distroyed, for he ys a false, traytoure knight."

"Madame" seyde sir Bors, "I pray you sey ye no more so, for wyte you well I may nat here no such langayge of hym" ' (632).

The conversation continues with Bors defending both the reasons behind Lancelot's wearing of Elaine's token and his prowess in the tournament, although he expresses regret that Elaine's unfamiliar sleeve caused Lancelot to go unrecognised. It appears that Bors is being deliberately obtuse when answering the queen with 'he hath betrayed hymself and us all'; he is referring to Lancelot's disguise that resulted in his injuries at Bors's own hand, but is fully aware that Guinevere is concerned only with the possibility that Lancelot has transferred his affections to Elaine. He addresses Guinevere as 'madam' several times during this short exchange and one can sense the growing anger in Bors as he desperately tries to remain polite to his queen, who has not asked a single question about the serious injuries her lover has suffered, the same person who has recently saved her life. It is hardly surprising that when Bors observes Lancelot being tended by Elaine, he

would like Lancelot to reward her devotion with marriage; the contrast between the two women could hardly be greater. *Guinevere* seems to be the only person to make Bors lose his temper, and she is also the only woman he has any regular contact with. This might lead to the assumption that Bors is misogynistic, but I think the text does not support this conclusion. Bors is chaste, he is pious, and I would suggest he has chosen chastity at least partly because he is rather uncomfortable with women rather than because he dislikes them. He is chivalrous towards them, he will champion their cause if requested to do so, but he does not need women in the way that *Gawain*, *Tristram* or *Lancelot* do, and his need for friendship and companionship is apparently met by his kinsmen and fellow Round Table knights. On the other hand, the Bors of the French *Mort Artu*, who is also extremely outspoken to *Guinevere*, gives a lengthy speech concerning the pitfalls suffered by men at the hands of the women they love following the Maiden of Escalot incident.⁴³ By comparison to this figure, Malory's Bors is a model of self-restraint.

If one compares Malory's handling of the love between *Lancelot* and *Guinevere* with that of his main source, the French *Lancelot*, it is clear that Malory is much less interested in love between men and women than the author of his source. P.E. Tucker even suggests that *Lancelot's* devotion to *Guinevere* was an aspect of

⁴³ *The Death of Arthur*, in *Lancelot-Grail*, VII, 38-9.

Lancelot that Malory did not like, and that when Lancelot is told by a damsel that as a knight he should also be a lover, Lancelot's quick repudiation of this idea reflects Malory's own view.⁴⁴ Bors's devotion to Lancelot is, of course, a positive force and strengthens the society in which they live, whereas the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is ultimately destructive. However, I would suggest that although Malory has little interest in the sentimental aspects of love as portrayed in the *Lancelot*, he does emphasise that Lancelot's faithful love for Guinevere brings honour to their society until the final days of the Round Table, despite its destructive nature. As Guinevere is depicted as a fairly unsympathetic character, Bors's attitude towards her could be perceived as showing Bors, once again, to be the voice of reason, as he regards her as a supportive queen, whilst regretting her personal relationship with his cousin.

⁴⁴ P.E. Tucker, 'The Place of the "Quest of the Holy Grail" in the *Morte Darthur*', *The Modern Language Review*, 48. 4 (1953), 391-397, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3718652>> [accessed 11/03/2011], pp.391-2.

Conclusion

In this study, my aim has been to highlight the figure of Bors and to examine his role within Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Bors is a pious figure, a Grail knight with a specific purpose, to bear witness at Arthur's court regarding the mysteries of the Holy Grail. He is also Lancelot's cousin, friend and confidant, and as Lancelot is the hero of the *Morte*, Bors himself is frequently present at significant episodes in the text. However, until the episode at Corbenic when Bors undergoes a night of torturous tests, he is still a fairly minor character; his role is developed considerably after this incident and his advice to Lancelot is usually wise and fair, although sometimes it passes unheeded. Bors is shown to be sagacious and well-regarded, not just by Lancelot but by key figures such as Guinevere and Arthur. Although Bors achieves the Grail and is both humble and chaste, Malory's focus on Lancelot means that Bors's relationship with his cousin becomes his most important role following the Grail quest.

From the start of the quest, Bors is willing to comply with the suggestions put forward by holy men and women in order to achieve his spiritual ambitions. Malory

contrasts Bors's humility and piety with the pride and ungodly acts of three named knights who are representative of the majority and who fail utterly in the search for the Grail. Bors and Lancelot do not meet during the quest, which leaves Bors free to concentrate on spiritual matters without the need to consider his cousin's wellbeing. Bors is severely tested whilst seeking the Grail, but he is depicted as exercising extreme self-control in rejecting the female fiend and by choosing a maiden's virginity over the life of his sinful brother, he reveals his understanding of the importance of virginity. After the fight with his brother, Bors parts from Lionel, demonstrating that he is aware of the need to associate only with those who can enhance his spiritual status. Bors travels alone much of the time whilst the quest lasts, perhaps pointing to the solitary nature of any spiritual journey, but is also linked with Galahad, Percival and Percival's sister, whose sacrifice and spirituality give her the status of a saint. Significantly, Bors does not take on the clothing of a religious man whilst in the Holy Land as does Percival, as he must fulfil an earlier prophecy and return to relate the events he has partaken in. He only does this after the fall of Arthur's court and at the behest of Lancelot.

Although Bors is depicted as wise, loyal and self-controlled, his self-control is less evident in his fairly frequent encounters with Guinevere. Malory's portrayal of Guinevere is unsympathetic at times, and she is shown to be erratic and irrational

towards her lover, Lancelot. Bors has little personal experience of women, and seems to blame the queen entirely for the enduring affair between her and his cousin. Interestingly, he seems less concerned with the sinful nature of their relationship than with the results of Guinevere's petty whims. However, after the Poisoned Apple incident, Bors publicly defends the queen despite receiving criticism for this and I would suggest that he differentiates between Guinevere, his lord's wife and Guinevere, his best friend's lover. Bors has a much more lenient attitude towards Elaine of Corbenic; he respects her vital role as the mother of Galahad and identifies with her devotion to Lancelot. Much later, when the liaison between Lancelot and the queen is becoming a topic for gossip, Bors endorses Elaine of Astolat as a suitable wife for his cousin as a way of avoiding disaster.

By examining Bors's attitude to women, it seems likely that chastity is a comparatively easy choice for him, giving him an advantage in the quest. He has clearly not led a dissolute life, even before the quest, as his one slip from chastity was as a result of enchantment. As the source for Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreall', the French *Quest for the Holy Grail*, was probably written by Cistercian monks, chastity was very important in order to achieve the Grail, and this is made quite clear at the start of the quest. However, this does not mean Bors cannot be tempted, although this does happen only within the context of the Grail quest,

when adventures are usually tests of spiritual worth and not those of worldly chivalry.

Whitworth states that Bors is 'ordinary' and in one sense this statement is correct, as Bors has none of the allure of Lancelot that makes him so appealing to both sexes. Nevertheless, I hope this work has shown that Bors is special for two particular reasons. Firstly, he is chosen to become a *Grail* knight, and we are aware of this after the mystical events at Corbenic when Galahad is a child, events that might be termed a turning-point for the figure of Bors. After the miracles in the Holy Land, Bors returns to the world of knightly chivalry, a feat attained by no other knight and which makes him a link between two worlds. Secondly, he is the closest and most respected confidant of the hero of the *Morte* and is present at many significant events in the life of Lancelot and his son. I would conclude by suggesting that although Bors may be regarded as a minor figure in the *Morte*, his dual role is highly significant for the development of the narrative, and Malory's subtle representation of Bors is worth a detailed examination in order to understand the impact of this character on the text as a whole.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. by D. D. R. Owen (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991)

Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, ed. by Norris J. Lacy, 10 vols (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2010)

Malory, *The Morte Darthur*, ed. by D.S. Brewer, York Medieval Texts (London: Edward Arnold, 1968)

Malory, Sir Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*, Winchester Manuscript, ed. by Helen Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Malory, Sir Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales*, ed. by P. J. C. Field, The London Medieval and Renaissance Series (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978)

Malory, *Works*, ed. by Eugene Vinaver, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1971)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. and trans, by W. R. J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974)

Secondary Sources

Atkinson, Stephen C. B., 'Malory's "Healing of Sir Urry": Lancelot, the Earthly Fellowship, and the World of the Grail', *Studies in Philology*, 78.4 (1981), 341-352, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174085>> [accessed 12/03/2010]

Arthuriana: Journal of Arthurian Studies, <<http://www.arthuriana.org>>

Benson, Larry D., *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Mass, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976)

The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend, eds. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes, ed. by Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert, *Arthurian Studies*, LXIII (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2005)

Hynes-Berry, Mary, 'Malory's Translation of Meaning: "The Tale of the Sankgreal"', *Studies in Philology*, 74.3 (1977), 243-257, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173938>> [accessed 11/03/2011]

Lumiansky, R. M., 'Malory's Steadfast Bors', *Tulane Studies in English*, 8, (1958), 5-20

Mann, Jill, 'Malory and the Grail Legend', in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards, *Arthurian Studies*, XXXVII (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996) pp. 203-220

McCarthy, Terence, *An Introduction to Malory* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1991)

Moorman, Charles, 'Malory's Treatment of the Sankgreal', *PMLA*, 71.3 (1956), 496-509, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/460716>> [accessed 11/03/2011]

Riddy, Felicity, *Sir Thomas Malory*, *Medieval and Renaissance Authors* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987)

Tucker, P. E., 'The Place of the "Quest of the Holy Grail" in the "Morte Darthur"', *Modern Language Review*, 48.4 (1953), 391-397, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3718652>> [accessed 11/03/2011]

Weiss, Victoria L., 'Grail Knight or Boon Companion? The Inconsistent Sir Bors of Malory's "Morte Darthur"', *Studies in Philology*, 94.4, (1997) 417-427, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174589>> [accessed 11/03/2011]

Whitworth, Charles W., 'The Sacred and the Secular in Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal'', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 5, (1975) 19-29, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3507167>> [accessed 17/03/2010]