Friendship and Kinship in *Le Morte Darthur*: The Cases with Balyn and Gareth

MAIKO KOMIYA

King Arthur's men-at-arms are renowned as the Knights of the Round Table, and in his *Le Morte Darthur* Thomas Malory depicts how these 150 fellows are united by the same ideal. All the knights articulate the common oath at the feast of Pentecost every year (120.15-27), which makes each member a "sworne brother" (945.4). There is a close connection between knighthood and brother-like affection, and according to a hermit "the shevalry hath ben at all tymes so hyghe by the *fraternité* which was there [at the Round Table] that she [chivalry] myght nat be overcom" (946.10-11; emphasis added). Still, throughout the story, Malory subtly underlines the unbridgeable gap between two kinds of brothers at King Arthur's court: innate ones and sworn ones. The Round Table is established to form the most brilliant chivalric community beyond blood (906. 15-26); at the end of the whole book, however, the fellowship of the Round Table crumbles due to Launcelot's murder of his sworn brothers. In this paper, I will turn to the tales of Balyn and Gareth to analyse the fundamental conflict between lifelong friendship and genuine kinship at the Round Table.

Interestingly, both the French Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* and *Le Morte Darthur* compare pedigree to a chair. During the quest for the Holy Grail, Ector de Marys has a strange dream: he and his brother Launcelot get out of the same chair and set out on a journey (*The Vulgate Version* VI: 107. 16-19; *Lancelot-Grail* IV: 48; Malory 942. 20-24). Nacien the Hermit
explains the meaning of the vision thus: “Soth hit ys that sir Launcelot and ye com downe of one chayre; the chayer betokenyth maystership and lordeship which ye too cam downe fro” (Malory 947. 4-7). The seat signifies patrimony, inherited from one’s ancestors.

Moreover, in *Le Morte Darthur*, the bond of the Round Table, like kinship, lasts until death. While the French Post-Vulgate tells us how some Knights of the Round Table are afraid to lose their seats, Malory intimates that there is lifelong fellowship by avoiding any mention of forfeit. In *Le Morte Darthur*, the members of the Round Table change only when knights are killed. Even after Launcelot and his companions cause a riot in order to take Gwenyver to his castle Joyous Gard, Malory makes no mention of the fact that they thereby forfeit their seats. In short, the membership of the Round Table changes only when some of the knights are killed in Malory.

Still, the difference between friendship and kinship is crucial, as a statement made by Arthur’s nephew reveals. When Gaheris challenges him, Uwayne answers as follows:

‘Sir, ye do nat youre parte; for, [sir,] the firste tyme that ever ye were made knyght of the Rounde Table ye sware that ye shuld nat have ado with none of youre felyship wyttyngly. And, pardé, sir Gaherys, ye know me well inow by my shylde, and so do I know you by youre shylde. And thaughe ye wolde breke youre othe, I woll nat breke myne. For there ys nat one here nother ye that shall thynk I am aferde of you, but that I durst ryght well have ado with you. And yet we be syster sonnys!” (546. 26-34; emphasis added)

Uwayne successfully avoids fighting against his cousin and fellow knight
of the Round Table. This persuasion, however, makes a reader wonder which bond appeals to Gaheris more profoundly: is it innate kinship, or acquired companionship at King Arthur's court?

To take further investigation, I would like to pick up the tales of Balyn and Gareth. The former ends tragically, and the latter ends happily; but both of them represent a knight's endeavour for chivalric success among natural and sworn brothers.

"Balin le Sauvage or the Knight with Two Swords" ("Balin le Sauvage" hereafter) is the second part of the "Tale of King Arthur" in Vinaver's edition, preceding immediately Arthur's wedding to Gwenyver and foundation of the Round Table fellowship. One day, a damsel with a strange sword visits Camelot: by her account, only a good, loyal knight can draw the sword out of its sheath. Many knights give it a try, only to fail. When she is about to leave the court, a Northumbrian knight called Balyn offers her help and achieves the adventure. The maiden asks Balyn to return the sword, but he refuses. She then makes an ominous prophecy:

'Well,' seyde the damesell, 'ye ar nat wyse to kepe the swerde fro me, for ye shall sle with that swerde the beste frende that ye have and the man that ye moste love in the worlde, and that swerde shall be youre destruccion.' (64. 8-11; emphasis added)

Regardless of her warning, Balyn keeps the sword. He refuses to hear Arthur's request to stay at the court, too. No sooner is Balyn about to set out for a quest than the Lady of the Lake, to whom Arthur owes Excaliber, visits the king. As a reward for granting this celebrated sword she asks for the head either of Balyn or the damsel—she even says that both heads will be fine—because Balyn killed her brother and the maiden brought about her father's death. Hearing the Lady of the Lake's request, the Northumbrian
knight beheads her in fury and is banished from the court.

Balyn's misfortune is connected with such sudden, unexpected deaths. After the murder of the Lady of the Lake, an Irish knight named Launceor pursues the Northumbrian knight to avenge her and is also slain by Balyn. Launceor's lover Columbe in despair kills herself. To win back his lord's favour, Balyn decides to defeat Arthur's mortal enemy, King Royens; and with the help of his brother, Balan, he successfully conquers Royens and other rebellious kings. Arthur's consequent request, however, causes another chain of tragedy: seeing a knight lamenting piteously, the king orders Balyn to fetch him. The knight, Sir Harleus le Berbeus, is killed by an invisible knight called Garlon while under Balyn's protection. To avenge his death, Balyn departs with Harleus's damsels. Another knight joins their quest but soon is also murdered by Garlon. Balyn pursues Garlon to the court of Garlon's brother, King Pellam, where he stabs the treacherous knight to death and makes an enemy of King Pellam. Trying to defend himself, Balyn takes up the sacred spear (it once pierced Jesus Christ's body and is kept as a relic) and consequently wounds King Pellam mortally. Though unintentionally, this "Dolerous Stroke" destroys three countries and slays many people, including Harleus's damsels. After this misery, Balyn indirectly lets a knight named Garnysh kill his false lady and her lover, which consequentially leads to Garnysh's own suicide.

Ultimately, Balyn's tale ends tragically with unwitting fratricide. By chance, Balyn visits a castle whose custom requires every male passer-by to joust against the guardian knight. Balyn accepts the challenge and confronts the champion of the castle, bearing an unfamiliar shield which a knight lends him. The unknown opponent is in fact Balan, but because of the exchange of the shield Balan cannot recognise his own brother. It is when both of them are mortally wounded that the brothers realise with whom they are fighting.
In his critical work, Andrew Lynch examines the adventures of Balyn as follows: because Balyn is not of noble family (unlike Launcelot and Tristram, for example), his actions are not interpreted favourably. Although Balyn achieves the adventure of an enchanted sword just as well as Arthur and Galahad, his poor lineage and ignoble name do not allow him to receive great renown. In other words, Balyn's birth and name decide his fame and destiny. Balyn cannot be the hero of the romance; he remains merely a predecessor of the glory of Launcelot, Tristram and Galahad (23-25).

Certainly, in the section of "Balin le Sauvage" Malory puts emphasis on the hero's penury. In the French Suite du roman de Merlin (Suite du Merlin hereafter) Balin loses his wealth by disinheritance—he even boasts of his former wealth: "ne m'aiés en despit pour ma povreté: je fui ja plus riches" ("don't despise me for my poverty; I was richer once"; 96: 16-17; Lancelot-Grail IV: 186). Malory, on the other hand, merely informs us that Balyn is a poor knight of low family. While in the French source the hero's change in life is underlined, Malory does not tell of Balyn's prosperity in his homeland. The omission of Balyn's economic change highlights his innately and persistently humble origin. Instead of a rider on Fortune's Wheel as he is in the Suite du Merlin, Malory's Balyn is always poor. His economic plight is frequently repeated ("there was a poore knyght"; 62. 33; "But for he was poore and poorly arayde"; 63. 5; "thys poure knyght"; 63. 16; "hys poure araymente"; 63. 17), and the phrase "by good meanys of the barownes he was delyverde oute of preson" (62. 37-63. 1) implies that Balyn belongs to a social group lower than the influential barons. Malory's Balyn was poor even before imprisonment, and his economic status is consistently bad throughout his life.

Throughout the tale, the Northumbrian knight suffers from unjust treatment in Arthur's realm, Logrys. When Arthur begs Balyn to stay at the court, the king says that "I was mysseinfourmed ayenste you: but I
wente ye had nat bene such a knyght as ye ar of worship and prouesse" (64. 27-28; emphasis added). Arthur tells Balyn that he has misunderstood him due to bad rumour, perhaps given by some courtier. Besides, Balyn's success in drawing the enchanted sword attracts scorn at King Arthur's court: "many knyghtes had grete despite at hym" (63. 33-34); "the moste party of the knyghtes of the Rounde Table seyde that Balyne dud nat this adventure all only by myght but by wycche crauffte" (65. 6-9). Balyn's marginality as well as impecuniousness blights his chivalric career. He is banished from King Arthur's court for his murder of the Lady of the Lake, even though Arthur himself does not hesitate to slay evil women. After Launceor's lady, Columbe, commits suicide, Merlin foretells that Balyn will cause the Dolerous Stroke to compensate for her death (72. 25-32).

Unlike the cases with the Knights of the Round Table, Balyn's chivalric achievements deeply humiliate the hero. Due to his difference from other knights, D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. dares to call Balyn an "antiknight" (95-98), but Elizabeth Pochoda's analysis would seem more precise: although Balyn is loyal to Arthur, he is not so to his chivalric community (63-64). Balyn is not a member of the Round Table, so he does not commit himself to the ideal of the Pentecostal Oath. While the Knights of the Round Table "prove" their chivalric qualities and enhance their honour by way of tournaments and articulation, Balyn's adventure lacks such occasion. Because the fellowship of the Round Table is not established at that moment, Balyn has no opportunity to display his chivalry by visual demonstration or by verbal account.

Instead of quasi-combats, outright violence continually takes place in the section of "Balin le Sauvage." Our hero is morbidly reliant on weapons to demonstrate his knightly quality: Balyn refuses to return the cursed sword to the damsel, regardless of her request and warning, as if to prove his superiority by possessing it. At King Pellam's court, even when
his sword is broken, Balyn will not try to parley or retreat but continues to fight, eventually taking up the sacred spear and wielding the Dolerous Stroke: “And whan Balyne was wepynles he ran into a chambir for to seke a wepyn [and so] fro chambir to chambir, and no wepyn coude he fynde” (84. 30-85. 1). In addition, during his adventures Balyn kills or mortally wounds all of his opponents except for King Royens.

Compared with his brutal power, Balyn’s speech is meaningfully pathetic. As Jill Mann points out, there is the permanent gap between Balyn’s intention and his behaviour (80-81); Balyn makes an awkward defence against people’s accusation, emphasising his good will. While Robert Kelly interprets Balyn as a benevolent but arrogant knight (95), Balyn’s poor skill in persuasion reveals his inability at speech rather than character flaw. Despite his good will, Balyn’s acts bring misfortune; and however he tries, Balyn’s excuses are of no avail.

In sum, Balyn fails to advance his career, not because of his poor chivalric competence but due to his poor manner of demonstration. Without the Pentecostal Oath, the definition of knightly ideal, Balyn’ excessively aggressive deeds allow ambiguous interpretation. Watching Balyn and Balan fiercely fighting against their opponents, people have contrasting opinions—they think that the brothers are “sente frome hevyn as angels other devilles frome helle” (76. 2-3). This example indicates Balyn’s lack of control over his reputation. If there is no ethos of chivalry, Balyn’s actions may be regarded as homicidal.

In addition to his poor ability to “prove himself,” the absence of a spiritual bond is another fatal trait of Balyn. Without the communal oath, Balyn cannot acquire friendships in Logrys. Knights at King Arthur’s court do not believe in Balyn’s qualities as shown in his deeds, nor will they listen to Balyn’s pathetic excuses. Even though in appearance Balyn belongs to Arthur’s court, no knight expresses sympathy for his exile—
Balyn is excluded from chivalric society in Camelot.

For a long time, scholars have discussed Balyn's struggle for social adjustment considering his two swords. Robert Merrill concludes that Balyn's two swords symbolise the dualism of “I” (subjective; innate; individual) and “me” (objective; social; collective), i.e., the gulf between social and private self (140-41). Kenneth Hodges also points out that the sinister sword is “a sword of social division” (22), and the curse prevents Balyn from obeying Arthur's law represented by Excaliber (47-48). In other words, Balyn's tale tells us about a knight's attempt to adapt himself to King Arthur's chivalric community.

As well as his two swords, Balyn's relationship with his natural brother and other knights at King Arthur's court shows two exclusive options. Balyn is a knight of Northumberland, but he seeks to cement spiritual bonds in a foreign country rather than blood ties in his native land. The hero's choice between his kinsman and non-relatives plays a crucial role in “Balin le Sauvage.”

Significantly, Malory changes Balyn's criminal record. While the Suite du Merlin narrates how the hero is banished from two countries, Malory's Balyn does not commit murder in his native land. To introduce this unfortunate knight into the story, the narrator indicates that Balyn had been imprisoned for more than six months “for sleyng of a knyght which was cosyne unto kynge Arthure” (62. 35-36). In the Suite du Merlin it is the king of Northumberland who is the kin of the victim, and thence has punished Balin; in Le Morte Darthur Balyn is said to have killed one of Arthur's kinsmen. Malory blots out Balyn's misdeed in his native land and turns our hero into the killer of the king of Logrys's relative and a prisoner in Logrys.

Nevertheless, apart from his homeland, Balyn seeks to establish his name. Even after his release, Balyn remains at Camelot—where his name
as a poor knight and his crime are well known, where Arthur's men treat him as inferior. Even though the barons contribute to Balyn's liberation from prison (62. 37-63. 1), this only underlines class difference between the poor knight and aristocratic ones. When the damsel visits the court, Balyn stands alone from the crowd, which comprises "The moste parte of all the barownes of the Rounde Table that were there at that tyme" (62. 24-25). Notably, no knight speaks to Balyn during the adventure of the ominous sword.

In place of Balyn's fellow knights at Camelot, his brother Balan represents an ideal companion. Soon after Balyn is banished from King Arthur's court, Balan makes his first appearance—as if Balan covers Balyn's social deficiencies. The brothers enjoy their reunion heartily: "whan they were mette they put of hyr helmys and kyssed togydirs and wepte for joy and pité" (70. 4-5). Balan tells Balyn that he is going to visit King Arthur's court across the border at the news of his brother's deliverance. Hearing how Balyn fell into disgrace with Arthur, Balan consoles his brother with kind words and promises to help him ("I woll ryde with you and put my body in adventure with you, as a brothir ought to do"); 70. 28-30). Thus, Balyn's isolation from King Arthur's court contrasts with Balan's innate affection for him. Arthur's knights are envious of Balyn's achievements, but Balan loves his natural brother sincerely. Malory deliberately gives Balan an allegorical role in the story, representing natural fraternity.

Balan and Balyn do not stay in Logrys together, as if to indicate incompatibility between the spiritual fraternity and physical kinship at King Arthur's court. The brothers cooperate to defeat the rebellious kings' army; after the victory, however, Balyn returns to King Arthur, while Balan immediately leaves the court. Balyn's choice to stay in Logrys, not to go back to Northumberland, may thus imply his desire to escape from his
natal identity, gain his name, and construct fellowship with other knights. While in the French text Balin cannot return to his homeland because of his own misdeeds, Malory's Balyn does not have any particular reason to avoid Northumberland. He can leave Logrys if he wishes; nevertheless, even after Balan's departure, Balyn remains at King Arthur's court. He is eager to enhance his chivalric fame among Arthur's men-at-arms rather than cherish his native land and natural brother.

Ironically, the difference between Balyn's "friend" and "brother" disappears in a fatal way. When the Northumbrian knight obtains the cursed sword, the maiden foretells to him: "ye shall sle with that swerde the beste frende that ye have and the man that ye moste love in the worlde, and that swerde shall be youre destruccion" (64. 9-11; emphasis added). According to Middle English Dictionary, the word "frend" indicates "a kinsman" and "an enemy" as well as an intimate; and these definitions apply to Balan's role at the end of Balyn's adventures. Shortly before their conquest over King Royens, Balan swore that he would share the adventure with Balyn "as a brothir ought to do" (70. 29-30); at a castle beyond the border, however, the brothers unwittingly fight as a challenger and the champion. When Balyn asks for his name, the younger brother answers: "My name is ... Balan, broder unto the good knyght Balyn" (90. 1-2). This utterance reveals that Balan is both "the beste frende" (64. 9-10) whom Balyn kills with the cursed sword and the agent of Balyn's "destruccion" (64. 11) in the maiden's prophecy. For Balyn, who fails to cultivate friendship among strangers in a foreign country, his natural brother Balan is the only man who deserves to be called "frende." When Balyn by ill fortune slays his "beste frende" Balan, the younger brother makes a counterattack and likewise causes Balyn's death.

Balyn, who lacks companionship at King Arthur's court, is yoked to his kin even after death. Granting Balan's last wish—"We came bothe
oute of one <w>ombe, that is to say one moder bely, and so shalle we lye bothe in one pytte" (90. 26-28)—the lady of the castle buries their bodies in the same tomb. Then the book adds as follows: “and the lady lette make a mensyon of Balan how he was ther slayne by his broders handes, but she kneue not Balyns name” (91. 5-7; emphasis added). Balyn, whose name as a poor knight excites prejudice among Arthur’s knights, has to meet his doom as an anonymous knight, known only as Balan’s brother.16 In the end, even though it costs him his life, Balyn cannot sever his relationship with Balan.

Thus, Balyn’s adventure ends without solving the tangled thread joining lineage and fraternity. Balyn’s humble origin hinders his chance to gain acceptance at King Arthur’s court. His blood brother Balan, when recognised as Balyn’s “beste frende,” causes their deaths. The brothers’ corpses are confined together, and Launcelot will wield the enchanted sword to his best friend and sworn brother, Gawain (91. 21-25).

The fourth book of Le Morte Darthur in Vinaver’s edition, “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney That Was Called Bewmaynes” (“Tale of Gareth” hereafter), also negotiates questions of kinship and friendship. While Balyn’s story is told in a pessimistic tone, Gareth’s quest ends happily with the marriage of the hero. Still, these sections share the same framework—each of them narrates a knight’s attempt to create a spiritual bond instead of innate relationship.

Malory’s “Tale of Gareth” begins with a youth’s arrival at King Arthur’s court on the feast of Pentecost. He does not tell his own name but asks the king to feed him for a year. Kay the Seneschal scornfully calls him Bewmaynes (“beautiful hands”), but Gawain and Launcelot treat the unknown boy with kindness. After one year has passed, a damsel (after the sequence of adventures we find her name is Lyonet) visits the court and asks for help from the king: her sister’s castle is being besieged by an
evil knight called Ironsyde, also known as the Red Knight of the Red Land. In spite of her objections, Bewmaynes takes the adventure as a boon. He successfully beats back Kay, who has chased him from the court, and, revealing his true name and lineage ("My name is Garethe, and brothir unto sir Gawayne of fadir syde and modir syde"; 299. 27-28), is knighted by Launcelot. Even though Lyonet insults him by calling him a kitchen knave, Bewmaynes answers with courtesy. After defeating two rogue knights, Bewmaynes kills the Black Knight, Sir Perarde, and takes his armour. Bewmaynes then subdues Perarde's three brothers one after another, which gains Lyonet's admiration. He also vanquishes the Red Knight of the Red Land and sends him to King Arthur's court.

Because Lyonet's sister Lyones will not allow Bewmaynes to enter her castle until he has pursued fame for one year, the young knight's quest continues. Although Lyones gives the cold shoulder to Bewmaynes, she is inwardly so eager to know his true name and lineage that she asks her brother Gryngamour to kidnap Bewmaynes's dwarf. When she is satisfied with the knight's parentage, Bewmaynes visits the castle to get back his servant. Lyones appears as an unknown lady, and Bewmaynes falls in love with her. After her identity is revealed to Bewmaynes, the lovers make a tryst. Lyonet's intervention prevents them from consummating this relationship, however: she thinks Bewmaynes and Lyones should not have carnal intercourse until marriage. When the lovers try to spend a night together, through Lyonet's enchantment a stout knight appears. Bewmaynes has to fight against the opponent that his future sister-in-law has sent.

Meanwhile, at King Arthur's court, the kitchen boy's identity is revealed by his mother Queen Morgawse; to draw Gareth's attention, a tournament is going to be held on the holiday of Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The young knight joins it in disguise and achieves great deeds of
arms, but by accident his true name and lineage are made public—"This is
sir Gareth, kynge Lotys son of Orkeney!" (351. 20). The hero quits the
field, but on his way he happens to joust against an unknown knight.
Before either of them gets injured, Lyonet stops the combat; it turns out
that Gareth unwittingly fights against his brother Gawayn. Then, the tale
concludes with Gareth's wedding with his beloved lady, Dame Lyones, at
King Arthur's court—and his brothers, Gaheris and Aggravayne, take
Lyonet and her niece Lawrell as wives.

Overall, Malory's Gareth clearly contrasts with Balyn. At King
Arthur's court, the former suffers from his humble origin whereas the
latter dares to hide his noble lineage as King Lot's son, Gawayn's younger
brother and King Arthur's nephew. The Northumbrian knight kills many
opponents, including his own brother Balan, but Gareth/Bewmaynes's
combats usually end with reconciliation (most of his enemies offer him
homage, and Lyonet stops Gareth and Gawayn from fighting).

These differences, however, do not mean that the "Tale of
Gareth" is merely the reverse of Balyn's story. Rather, Gareth's story displays the
irreconcilable opposition between the corporeal and the spiritual bond
more subtly than in Balyn's case. After revealing his nobility and its
consequential high competence, Gareth avoids his brothers and develops a
friendship with Launcelot; yet their amity tragically ends with unintended
death of Gareth.

Whereas Balyn's poor name is a burden on the bearer, Gareth/
Bewmaynes intentionally hides his noble origin "to preve my [his] frendys,
and that shall be knowyn another day whether that I [Gareth] be a
jantyllman borne or none" (313. 8-10). Gareth definitely believes that his
good quality comes from his noble lineage. Being insulted about his birth
by the Black Knight, Gareth snaps back: "Thow lyest! . . . I am a jantyllman
borne, and of more hyghe lynage than thou, and that woll I preve on thy
body!” (304. 10-12). This cry reveals Gareth's pride on his status. As a knight-errant in disguise, Gareth intends to prove his quality: he does not doubt that those who have good eyes can see the youth's genuine lineage through his knightly achievement. Contrary to Balyn, who strives to use his skill-at-arms to compensate for his low birth, Gareth’s motivation is based on the keen connection between quality and bloodline: despite appearances, those who accomplish great deeds come from a decent family. As James Simpson points out, “Gareth manifests what he already is. For this reason (again despite appearances) there are no chances, or aventures, in this story, since Gareth’s progress is genetically determined” (134-35). In sum, Bewmaynes’s disguise is designed as a test, to see if people can penetrate its surface to witness his quality.

The interrelationship between lineage and ability is widely accepted in the “Tale of Gareth.” After several combats, Lyonet wonders why the supposedly low-born Bewmaynes vanquishes great knights: “Sir ... I mervayle what thou art and of what kyn thou arte com; for boldely thou spekyst and boldely thou haste done, that have I sene” (312. 10-12). In other words, Bewmaynes’s words and deeds are considered too noble for a kitchen boy. If a knight achieves great deeds of arms, he must be of noble family. If he looks of humble origin, he should disguise himself.

Still, this relationship between nature on the one hand and nurture on the other is undermined by Gareth's own brothers. After gaining a seat at the Round Table, Gareth prefers Launcelot to Gawayn because the latter is very cruel:

Lorde, the grete chere that sir Launcelot made of sir Gareth and he of hym! For there was no knyght that sir Gareth loved so well as he dud sir Launcelot; and ever for the moste party he wolde ever be in sir Launcelottis company.
For evir aftir sir Gareth had aspyed sir Gawaynes conductions, he wythdrewe hymself fro his brother sir Gawaynes felyshyp, for he was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther: and that hated sir Gareth. (360. 28-36)

To Gareth’s disappointment, his blood brothers often commit sins which are not appropriate to their high parentage. Aggravayne and Gaheris kill a knight just because he praises Launcelot more than Gawayn (690. 30-691. 23). Gawayn, Aggravayne, Gaheris and Mordrede even treacherously kill Lamerok, their companion of the Round Table, a son of King Pellynor (as Pellynor has slain their father on the battlefield) and also their mother’s lover (699. 17-27; 716. 2-15). These misdeeds committed by his own siblings displease Gareth—“bretherne as they be myne” (699. 30-31)—and further encourage him to prefer spiritual attachment to Launcelot rather than to his blood clan.

In Malory’s “Tale of Gareth” Gareth’s kinsmen serve as a foil to his sworn brothers. Felicity Riddy asserts that “By expressing the myth of class in terms of romance Malory has avoided the tensions which the idea of nobility must have held for his contemporaries” (69), but Malory’s alteration in Gareth’s kinship actually poses a more insoluble dilemma of “fraternity.” While in its possible sources the hero is usually identified as Gawayn’s son (Wilson 3), the “Tale of Gareth” narrates the adventures of Gawayn’s brother; besides, it appears that Malory adds the hero’s friendship with Launcelot, which is apart from its original (Field 63). Changing Gareth from Gawayn’s son to his brother and Launcelot’s favourite, Malory makes a distinct contrast between Gareth’s innate and spiritual brotherhood.

In this context we can interpret Gareth’s quest as the desire to eschew innate brotherhood and to form spiritual relationships—finding
new sworn brothers instead of natural ones. To accomplish this, Gareth demands that his new friends abandon kinship as well. At the beginning of his adventures, before challenging the other three brothers, Gareth kills Perarde the Black Knight. Seeing a knight wearing Perarde’s black armour, Pertolyp the Green Knight and Perymones the Red Knight mistake Gareth for their sibling; they ask in wonder, “Is that my brothir the Blak Knyght that ye [Lyonet] have brought with you?” (305. 9-10); “Brothir, what do ye here in this marchis?” (309. 9). From the Black Knight Gareth takes not only life and appearance; the young hero symbolically usurps Perarde’s fraternal relationship as well. After Gareth’s victory, the three brothers (Pertolyp, Perymones and Parsaunte of Inde) do him homage, forgiving Gareth for murdering their brother Perarde (306. 1-25; 310. 1-5; 314. 16-25). Even though Gareth has killed one of their siblings, the brothers pledge their loyalty to the young knight. Thus, Gareth makes use of the death of the Black Knight as a trial of friendship, determining whether each knight can relinquish his grudge and become an ally of his brother’s murderer. For the three knights the reconciliation with Bewmaynes is a touchstone to building up a spiritual bond beyond clan.

Gareth’s victory over Ironsyde also involves the symbolic replacement of brothers. The Red Knight of the Red Land increases his might until noon (320. 36-321. 3; 325. 9-11), which is analogous to Gawayn’s miraculous power (161. 5-7; 1216. 31-34). Gareth defeats the knight who possesses a similar attribute to that of his eldest brother; then, as a condition of reconciliation, he demands that Ironsyde relinquish his grudge against Gawayn and Launcelot, Gareth’s natural and sworn brothers (325. 30-33). Ironsyde accepts Gareth’s order, and with other knights whom Gareth has conquered during his journey, Ironsyde pledges eternal fidelity to Gareth (362. 4-7). Whereas Gareth is disappointed at Gawayn’s vengeful character, Ironsyde makes peace with his former foes and becomes another member
of the Round Table (362. 34-36). As if to substitute Ironsyde for Gawain, Gareth gains a new sworn brother who is comparable to his blood brother in strength but superior in tolerance.

The “Tale of Gareth” appears to end happily, yet it displays a troubling contradiction in lineage. As Hyonjin Kim concludes, in Le Morte Darthur Launcelot’s retainers are united in spiritual bonds and loyal to their lord; meanwhile, Gawain’s clan is exclusive and under lax control (94-95). Gareth follows the former model and establishes fraternity with the knights he has overcome instead of that for his own four brothers. Still, as for the superiority of friendship over kinship, its basis is blemished in the following lines. When both Gawain and Launcelot display kindness to an unknown kitchen boy, the narrator casually insists that Gawain’s deed merely comes from their blood relationship:

> And than sir Launcelot aftir mete bade hym [Gareth] com to his chambir, and there he sholde have mete and drynke inowe, and so ded sir Gawayne . . . . But as towchryngh sir Gawayne, he had reson to proffer hym lodgyng, mete, and drynke, for that proffer com of his bloode, for he was nere kyn to hym than he wyste off; but that sir Launcelot ded was of his grete jantynnesse and curtesy. (295. 27-35)

Despite the basic actions being the same, Launcelot’s attitude toward Gareth is considered a gesture of nobility while Gawain’s is seen as unveracious and hardly worth of respect. Though the elder brother does not recognise Gareth/Bewmaynes’s true identity, Gawain’s persistence in support of his own kinsman is emphasised. Here lies a paradox: Gawain is not allowed to show Gareth brotherly affection because he is in fact Gareth’s brother.
Actual blood connection turns to be a hard obstacle to overcome in the creation of a fraternal community: such a conundrum repeatedly arises in *Le Morte Darthur*. Shortly after the war against the five kings, when Arthur chooses new members of the Round Table, Pellinor recommends his son Tor for the post with the following reason:

‘but for because he is my son I may nat prayse hym, but ellys and he were nat my son I durste say that of his age there is nat in this londe a better knyght than he is, nother ofbettir condycions, and loth to do ony wronge and loth to take ony wronge.’ (131. 21-25; emphasis added)

Also, after addressing Gareth as his own kinsman, Gawain tells of his admiration for Gareth thus:

‘Alas! my fayre brother,’ seyde sir Gawayne, ‘I ought of ryght to worship you, and ye were nat my brother, for ye have worshipte kynge Arthure and all his courte, for ye have sente mo worshipfull knyghtes this twelve-monthe than fyve the beste of the Rounde Table hath done excepte sir Launcelot.’ (357. 23-28; emphasis added)

Kinship makes Pellinor’s and Gawain’s praise dubious; paradoxically, however objectively they try to assess Tor and Gareth, their appreciation can be reduced to favouritism through lineage.

Gareth gives friendship priority over kinship, underestimating Gawain’s affection because of their blood ties. The youth believes that he should not stick to his relatives but form an alliance with noble knights beyond blood. When he sees Launcelot fighting against too many opponents
at a great tournament, Gareth leaves his brothers' side and assists Launcelot. Gareth feels deep obligation toward Launcelot, who has bestowed a knighthood on him (1110. 32-34). Thanks to knighthood Gareth can join the Round Table; thanks to the membership of the Round Table he can enjoy a friendly relationship with his fellow knights. Launcelot is the man who allowed Gareth to form a new bond apart from his kinsmen, so that Gareth does not hesitate to make enemies of his brothers in order to save Launcelot's honour—while "no man shall make hym be ayenste sir Launcelot, bycause he made hym knyght" (1113. 4-6). Although Arthur at first chides Gareth for changing sides, after his account the king praises his nephew: men of honour help each other, while cowards cannot take mercy (1114. 16-28). Arthur attributes Gareth's adoration for good knights to Gareth's own nobility and encourages spiritual fraternity.

It is ironical that Gawayn's utterance cited above—Gareth cannot fight against Launcelot—comes true in the worst way. Trying to rescue the queen from the stake, Launcelot unwittingly slays his sworn brothers of the Round Table, including Gareth:

And so in thys russhyngge and hurlynge, as sir Launcelot thrange here and there, hit mysfortuned hym to sle sir Gaherys and sir Gareth, the noble knyght, for they were unarmed and unwares. As the Freynshe booke sayth, sir Launcelot smote sir Gaherys and sir Gareth uppon the brayne-pannes, wherethorow that they were slayne in the felde. Howbehit in very trouth sir Launcelot saw them [nat]. And so were they founde dede amonde the thyckyste of the prees. (1177. 31-1178. 5)

Despite the narrator's description, the French Vulgate does not tell Lancelot's murder of both brothers. It is Bors who slays Guerrehet (The
Vulgate Version VI: 281. 7-11; Lancelot-Grail IV: 123); also, before Lancelot accidentally kills Gaheriet, Hector of the Fens attacks him and knock off his helm (The Vulgate Version VI: 281. 14-31; Lancelot-Grail IV: 123). In the French romance Lancelot is more excused for his sworn brothers’ death. Malory, on the other hand, underlines Launcelot’s fault: Launcelot by himself attacks and kills Gareth, who is his friend and not armed.

Whereas the “Tale of Gareth” ends happily with the marriage of the hero, in the final book of Le Morte Darthur a tragic reversal takes place. Gareth, who by many feats of arms gained his beloved lady, is murdered by the man he loves most. Aggravayne and Gaheris, who performed the nuptials with Gareth, are also slain. Pertolyp the Green Knight and Perymones the Red Knight, who swore fidelity to Gareth, are found dead with Gareth’s corpse (1177. 23-34). Launcelot—who defeated most knights at the tournament of Gareth’s wedding—has killed many knights, including Aggravayne, Gaheris and Gareth: Gareth’s best friend, his sworn brother Launcelot, turns out Gareth’s slayer. Being informed about his brothers’ death, Gawayn abandons his oath of spiritual fraternity and promises revenge on Launcelot. Gareth’s dead body symbolises the end of the Round Table fellowship.

In point of their kinship and friendship, Balyn and Gareth show a sharp divergence. The poor knight Balyn cannot make friends with other knights at King Arthur’s court: people belittle his deeds, without accepting his reasons. While his blood brother Balan devotes fraternal affection to Balyn, Balyn seeks to forge spiritual bonds with other knights in Logrys. Balyn’s quest ends tragically with fratricide, and, as if to prove a predominant influence of blood, the brothers’ bodies are buried together. On the other hand, the prince of Orkney Gareth visits King Arthur’s court as a youth of obscure origin. His adventures as “Bewmaynes” enable him to build an amicable relationship with other knights: instead of innate
brothers Gareth cherishes sworn ones, following the ideal of the Round Table.

Still, friendship cannot resolve the fundamental paradox: though it unites the fellow knights by spiritual bonds, it cannot connect true siblings such as Gawain and Gareth by means of brotherly affection. A deep chasm of kinship and friendship has gaped in Arthur's chivalric community, and the death of Gareth will completely shatter the ideal fellowship of the Round Table.

Notes
1 This paper is based on my presentation at the 26th annual conference of the West Branch of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies on 12 June 2010.
2 All the quotations from Malory are from Vinaver's edition, with reference to the page and line number. Also, to mention each character's name in *Le Morte Darthur*, I follow the “Index of Proper Names” in the same edition.
3 As for the citations from the French Vulgate Cycle, I refer to Sommer's edition (with the page and line number) and English translation (with the page number). For convenience's sake, I spell all proper names in the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles according to the “Index of Proper Names” in the latter edition.
4 Malory briefly mentions the significance of the chair as above, while the French Vulgate adds a detailed explanation. The description, however, differs among manuscripts. Some say that “la chaiere” (“the chair”) indicates the honour and reverence the brothers received at the Round Table, but another replaces the phrase “la chaiere” with “la signorie” (“the lordship”). For detail, see *The Vulgate Version VI*: 113, n. 5.
5 For example, in the Post-Vulgate, Bors says he may have lost his seat at the Round Table during his long quest for Lancelot (*Lancelot-Grail V*: 94); being asked to kill Gaheriet, Perceval is afraid of being so deprived (*Lancelot-Grail V*: 103). When Tristan finds that he has injured a companion of the Round Table,
Tristan thinks he may lose his position at the Round Table (Lancelot-Grail V: 141). Also, when Arthur knows that Gawain has killed Eric, the king says Gawain should be excluded from the fellowship of the Round Table (Lancelot-Grail V: 213).

6 For example, in order to replace eight slain knights, Arthur asks Pellynor who should take the seats at the Round Table (130. 27-30); the replacement of knights is also mentioned after the death of two members (179. 31-34). Though Uwayne is banished from the court because of his mother's treason, Arthur does not deprive him of his seat at the Round Table (158. 5-13).

7 The French Vulgate Mort Artu, on the other hand, clearly tells us that Arthur replaces Lancelot and his men with other knights (The Vulgate Version VI: 293. 7-294. 8; Lancelot-Grail IV: 126-27).

8 When citing the Post-Vulgate Merlin, I use Gilles Roussineau's edition of the Suite du Merlin with reference to the section and line number; but, due to the poor condition of manuscripts, this edition abruptly ends after Morholt's departure.

9 In the Suite du Merlin, Arthur makes an excuse that because there are so many knights in his court the king does not know who to cherish (97: 7-9; Lancelot-Grail IV: 187). There is no mention to any slander on Balin in the French source.

10 Malory mentions the Round Table in the section of “Balin le Sauvage.” This description is chronologically contradictory, for Gwenyver brings the Round Table as her dowry just after the death of Balyn and Balan (98. 7-9).

11 Arthur chides Balyn for the murder of a sorceress; but later the king makes a maiden who brings an enchanted cloak die (157. 20-158. 2). He also cuts the head off a witch, Aunowre, by his own hands (491. 27-30). Arthur clearly will not hesitate to kill a woman if she does evil; nevertheless, the king does not hear Balyn's excuse—that the Lady of the Lake is a murderer—at all.

12 The story tells us that Balyn's sword is broken when he fights against King Pellam. Still, “the Knight with Two Swords” should have worn another sword (Vinaver 1315). Clearly, Balyn's search for a new weapon at King Pellam's court indicates the hero's wild obsession with aggression.

13 As for the murder of the Lady of the Lake, Balyn insists that she is an evil
sorceress who has killed his mother (66. 10-14). Balyn tells a dwarf that he slew Launcelor for self-defence and that Columbe killed herself against Balyn’s will (71. 6-10); Balyn also tells Merlin that he was not able to stop her suicide because she acted too suddenly (72. 23-24). When Garnysh condemns Balyn for showing his lover’s infidelity, Balyn answers he just intends to release Garnysh from vain love, for Garnysh’s lady does not deserve his love (87. 31-34). Balyn’s excuses are, however, rarely accepted. Arthur does not forgive the violence in his presence and banishes Balyn from the court (66. 15-19). The dwarf does not trust Balyn’s account and warns Balyn that Launcelor’s kinsmen will meditate revenge (71. 11-15). Merlin bluntly makes a prophecy about the Dolerous Stroke as a punishment for the death of Columbe (72. 25-32). After killing his false lady and her lover, Garnysh would not listen to Balyn and commits suicide (87. 35-38).

14 Malory in his paratactic style usually narrates actions without causal explanation; therefore, in Le Morte Darthur characters offer reason behind their deeds from their own limited viewpoint (McCarthy 15; Wheeler 111-12). The knights’ words of self-vindication are generally accepted except for Balyn (in the first book) and Launcelot (in the final book). Hodges finds several similarities between Launcelot and Balyn (93), and we might add their poor excuses to the list.

15 Still, it is not surprising that no one accepts Balyn’s excuse, for during the Middle Ages intention and motivation are generally not taken into legal account (Green 118-19). Balyn is guilty of his deeds regardless of his good will.

16 It is Merlin who orders that Balyn’s name should be written on the tombstone (91. 8-11).

17 Molly Martin points out the crucial function of vision in Le Morte Darthur: the exchange of glances between a knight and his lady inspires mutual affection and approves his masculinity. Martin picks up Gareth’s tale as a paragon because at the battlefield he beholds his lady, who is watching him fight (34-39). Although this paper does not argue about the visual display further, to see is as vital as to be seen.

18 As Jane Bliss mentions (114-15), Lyones shares a similar notion to that of Gareth/Bewmaynes. She meets the hero pretending to be an unknown lady: “I
love hym byfore all othyr knyghtes lyvynge, and full fayne I wolde speke with hym. But in no wyse I wolde nat that he wyste what I were but as I were anothir strange lady" (330. 31-34). Even though Gareth cannot recognise her and says to himself “Jesu, wolde that the lady of this Castell Perelus were so fayre as she is!” (331. 19-20), Lyones looks satisfied with the fact that he again falls in love with her. Gareth should be fascinated by her, Lyones believes, even in disguise.

Likewise, seeing Bewmaynes’s chivalric achievement, people utter words of amazement: “whatsoever he makyth hymself he shall preve at the ende that he is com of full noble blood and of kynges lynage” (307. 21-23); “what maner a man ye be, for hit may never be other but that ye be com of jantyll bloode” (312. 29-31); “whatsoever he be he is com of full noble bloode” (315. 19-20); “we mervayle muche of what bloode he is com, for he is a noble knyght” (326. 20-21); “well may he be a kyngys son, for he hath many good tacchis” (330. 4-5); “I mervayle what knyght he is and of what lynage he is com” (336. 22-23); “What is his name? . . . and of what bloode is he com?” (350. 14-15). These discourses demonstrate the belief that good lineage is essential for a knight’s good quality.

The brothers effect a reconciliation with Gareth saying as follows:

‘Alas!’ seyde the Grene Knyght, ‘suffir me nat to dye for a fayre worde spekyng. Fayre knyght,’ seyde the Grene Knyght, ‘save my lyfe and I woll forgyff the the deth of my brothir, and for ever to becom thy man, and thirty knyghtes that hold of me for ever shall do you servyse.’ (306. 21-25; emphasis added)

‘Mercy, noble knyght, slo me nat, and I shall yelde me to the wyth fyffly knyghtes with me that be at my commaundemente, and forgyff the all the dispyte that thou haste done to me, and the deth of my brothir the Blak Knyght, and the wynnyng of my brothir the Grene Knyght.’ (310. 1-5; emphasis added)
'Gramercy,' seyde sir Persaunte, 'for now I wote well hit was ye that slew my brother, the Blak Knyght, at the Blak Thorne. He was a full noble knyght! His name was sir Perarde. Also, I am sure that ye ar he that wan myne other brother, the Grene Knyght: his name is sir Pertholope. Also ye wan my brother the Rede Knyght, sir Perymones. And now, sir, ye have wonne me. This shall I do for to please you: ye shall have homage and feawte of me and of an hondred knyghtes to be allwayes at your commaundemente, to go and ryde where ye woll commaunde us.' (314. 16-25; emphasis added)

21 It is rather difficult to judge which knight is Malory's Gareth, the second youngest of the five brothers. Some scholars support Gaheriet theory (Field 66); however, Post-Vulgate Merlin tells how Gaheriet kills his mother (Lancelot-Grail V: 53), which is Gaheris's misdeed in Le Morte Darthur (612. 9-11). Besides, in Malory's possible sources, the description of these brothers are confusing (The Vulgate Version IV: 359. 5-13; Lancelot-Grail III: 108). In Post-Vulgate Merlin "Gaharies" is the second eldest (Suite du Merlin 1: 10 ; Lancelot-Grail IV: 167).

22 Aggravayne has been killed when he with thirteen knights attempts to entrap Launcelot and Gwenyver (1168. 17-20).

Works Cited

I. Primary Sources


II. Secondary Sources


Studies XXXIX.

Mann, Jill. “‘Taking the Adventure’: Malory and the Suite du Merlin.” Brewer 71-91.


