The image of the greatest knight in the world weeping like a beaten schoolboy at the conclusion of Malory’s *Tale of Sir Urry*, is among the most startling in literature. In response, my first impulse has always been to admire the emotional range of Malory’s characters. It is a mark of his greatness (and Malory’s) that Sir Lancelot can cry in public. It also stands out like an exclamation mark, in a work where characters often must conceal their emotions or project the opposite of what they feel. But why does he cry?
This passage is central for the understanding of Malory. A single reader can interpret it in multiple ways. Here are a few suggestions, presented in brief.

First of all, scholarly readers today may well see Lancelot’s as a manifestation of the affective piety of the later Middle Ages. Here Lancelot meets Margery Kempe. His tears in “The Healing of Sir Urry” look forward to his even more doleful bereavement after Guinevere’s death at the end of the Morte Darthur. Lancelot is one of few characters in Malory who engages in this affective style of religious expression.

This reading may offer us the perfect Hegelian solution. The past is seen as alien, but also tidy, self-contained, dead and done with. (Here the chronological snobbery is liable to creep in.) We are not like that. Contrariwise, Thomas Dixon in Weeping Britannia (Oxford: OUP, 2015) sees Margery Kempe and her contemporaries at the forefront of a long lachrymose tradition in British emotional expression, so he would argue the reverse. Any viewer of late medieval religious art knows that the potential to provoke emotional responses on sight continues unabated for as long as the work exists.

But there is more, because Malory’s description of Lancelot weeping like a child that had been beaten is also a literary allusion.
Alert readers, then and now, can make the connection with another familiar character who also wept in this way at a climactic point in his history: Chaucer’s humiliated clerk Absolon of the “Miller’s Tale” after his close encounter with Alisoun at the window.

This link can be dismissed as a coincidence, a cliché, or a literary in-joke. But if we “trust Malory” as Larry D. Benson used to advise his students to “trust Chaucer,” there is more to be seen.

This nod to Chaucer can be read as an astute psychological observation. It works in two ways: on Malory’s part, it shows his recognition that whatever the emotion that triggers it, whether it be shame, relief, horror or gratitude, the affective response is the same. The overwhelming physiological reaction leads us to burst into tears.\(^1\)

This allusion also bears witness, on the part of Malory and Chaucer before him, to the stinging memory of having been beaten as a child, whether

\(^1\) For a readable overview of psychological thinking on this, written for the non-specialist reader see Jay Efran and Mitchell Greene, “Why we Cry: The Fascinating Psychology of Emotional Release”

http://www.alternet.org/story/155447/why_we_cry%3A_the_fascinating_psychology_of_emotional_release.
at home or in school, that was shared by most members of their audiences, and continues down to the present. (Here I make a little mention of my aunt Betty, who snatched the ruler from the rabbi as he was about to crack her over the knuckles for talking in class, and broke it. That was around 1930.)

The long-term health impacts of childhood adversity have been well documented in particular by Esme Fuller-Thomson of the University of Toronto. Under stress we flash back. We fracture along the same fault lines.

Malory’s depiction of Lancelot is not only an allusion. It is an affirmation of the acute psychological observation, the sharp clinical eye characteristic of Malory and Chaucer before him.

And it is more. It is a long-term train of thought, and it is a vision.

As a train of thought it links two characters not usually considered together, but who are in fact, in certain ways the same person, the lover confronting his beloved, divine or human. In Malory he is Lancelot kneeling in prayer before being granted the ability to heal Sir Urry, or Lancelot before Guinevere’s tower window. In Chaucer he is Absolon at the carpenter’s infamous shot-window begging Alisoun for a kiss. Following the thread further into the past, he is also the lover of the *Roman de la Rose* attacking the tower where his beloved rose is imprisoned. He is Chrétien’s Lancelot in *Le*

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Chevalier de la Charette. Still closer to the beginning of the chain, he is the lover of the Song of Songs who sees his beloved as a walled garden, and wonders (as do her male relatives) what other architectural features she may possess. This is a meditation on the nature of divine and human love, human physical integrity and individuality, and on the possibility of togetherness, passed down the centuries from hand to hand, or mind to mind. It should be recognized as a thread.³

As a vision, the conclusion of the “Healing of Sir Urry” draws our attention to the moment when the Round Table as a whole devotes itself to the enterprise of healing as opposed to wounding, and Lancelot, as its head, is given the kingly power of the healing touch.⁴ This event affords us, alongside Lancelot himself, a momentary glimpse of the miraculous powers a transformed chivalry could offer the world. It suggests that in the sight of God, chivalry itself is still a child. All this comes together in that moment when Lancelot weeps.

³ The Lancelot-Absolon link through this quotation was also noted and astutely discussed by Catherine Batt in Malory’s Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition. The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave, 2002), though she takes it in a different direction than I do.⁴ See Marc Bloch, The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France (Originally published as Les Rois Thaumaturges, 1924; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, the foundational project in historical anthropology that was Bloch’s doctoral dissertation. Tolkien’s Aragorn asserts his true kingship through healing throughout The Lord of the Rings, drawing on this idea.
Jennifer Goodman Wollock

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Works Cited:


