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**L'héritage de Chrétien de Troyes**

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## « As the French Book Seyeth »

Malory's Morte Darthur and Acts of Reading

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## « As the French Book Seyeth » : Malory's *Morte Darthur* and Acts of Reading

Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (Winchester MS, circa 1469 ; Caxton's printing, 1485) is a late medieval English Arthuriad that persistently defers to the authenticity and authority of its French ancestors. In fact, Malory revels in such deference: no fewer than ninety-eight times he refers to «books» that he purportedly translates. Often he refers only to «the book», but when – thirty-nine times – he specifies the language or source of the book, it is, with only one exception, «the French book»<sup>1</sup>. Though he plunders at least a few English works for his stories, the sole time he mentions any English book, on the last pages of his work, he impugns its authority in relation to its better, a legitimate French source<sup>2</sup>. From the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth (who himself claims merely to translate his ancient British text), a show of deference to prior texts typifies Arthurian literature in all languages. This is especially intense and French-focused in Malory. When we read the *Morte Darthur*, then, we are acutely aware of its author's habits as a reader of vernacular literature. Malory's frequent reminders about his sources create a visible layer of discourse within his fiction with his literary predecessors and his readers. Others have plowed Malory's textual field in relation to his sources ; such work helps us understand his method, since his explicit pointers about reading help us read the *Morte Darthur*, though one might be warier than some of reading Malory's sources as if their mere reproduction constitutes Malory's teleological goal. Malory reading – and ways of reading Malory – are the subjects of this essay.

Like the fourteenth-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* with whose readerly strategies I here compare him, Malory directs our attention to his pose as a translator of authoritative texts and to the claim that he writes merely «as the French book seyeth». Malory's self-presentation as translator and reader reflect, I suggest, a variety of reading audiences for whom he wrote. Even when he translates episodes from his sources literally, Malory reconfigures the pattern of those episodes to suit his firm design. This essay briefly considers this complex aspect of Malory's narrative design, in order to see how his generic compendium provides not only the concise biography of King Arthur and his chivalric Round Table but also a typology for romance in an English mode.

Malory's deferential stance towards his sources was once taken at face value and he was often dismissed as a journeyman – translator. His seemingly transparent claim of authorial absence blinded those who assumed (sometimes following the

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<sup>1</sup> A *Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, éd. T. Kato, Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1974, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, éd. E. Vinaver, rev. P. Field, 3d éd., 3 vols., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 1260. Malory mentions a conflict between his French and English sources is about whether Arthur died or will return. Interestingly, Malory truncates the mention of his «books» to two instances in his *Tale of Sir Gareth*.

lead of his great twentieth-century editor, Eugène Vinaver) that the «knyght presoner» Malory was a defective translator. In the mid-twentieth century, Vinaver achieved a monumental scholarly feat in the commentary to his edition of the Malory manuscript when he amplified H.O. Sommer's earlier delineation of Malory's sources<sup>3</sup>. Scholars have followed this intertextual path ever since, pouncing with curiosity upon Malory's borrowings, from small quotations to chunks of structure, that might illuminate authorial strategies and textual aesthetics, and cultural contexts. Thanks in large measure to Vinaver, we know that Malory frequently misleads us when he refers to «the French book» as his source. What effect do such references have? Should we assume, as do some, that there are yet-unidentified sources for such specific passages? Should we assume instead, as do others, that Malory was highlighting his authorial role by planting false clues and using (how British!) understatement? In this regard, are Malory's translations defective or devious? Contemporary scholars now read Malory *with* and *against* his known French and English sources. With the insights of contemporary literary theory we now interrogate the idea of «translation» and the project of the «author» in his late medieval *Arthuriad*<sup>4</sup>.

Writers who quote inherited materials invite readers to enter intertextual conversations about, among other matters, the authority-claims of the past in the present. Late medieval culture brooded about authority as anxiously as does postmodernity. Chaucer, for whom the authority of the textual past is a persistent problematic, provides a magisterial example. Chaucer insists that he is a mere «rehercer» of past texts that possess genuine authority, but knowledgeable readers know that Chaucer invents and subverts past authorities almost as frequently as he invokes them. By this means, Chaucer draws attention to the making of his stories, to his processes of reading and reassembling the already-written. Chaucer thus tantalizes his readers with multiple perspectives on authority in narratives that are imbricated in anxiety: his poems draw upon an authoritative past while raising thorny questions about the relevance of the past to life or poetry in the present. In the *Retraction* traditionally attached to the *Parson's Tale* that knits up his *Canterbury Tales*, for example, Chaucer asserts – not for the first but for the final time – that «all that is written is written for our doctrine», thus affirming the happy possibility of learning from any and all reading and writing<sup>5</sup>. Since Chaucer embeds this quotation from Romans 15.4 into a retraction of, and apology for, anything he wrote that might lead readers astray, in what ways can readers learn from «all that is written»? Under such conditions, why is a retraction necessary? In this endgame Chaucer plays with topoi of repression and indecisiveness: his work probes the moral status of writing, the meaning of authority, and the clarity of doctrine. Here Chaucer appropriates scripture, that most authoritative source, to elaborate issues of how, what, and whether we can learn from what we read. Acts of reading, then, are

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<sup>3</sup> *Estoire de Merlin: The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, éd. H. Sommer, 8 vols., Washington, D.C., Carnegie Institute, 1908 – 16.

<sup>4</sup> For a powerful contemporary reading of Malory in relation to his sources, see C. Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition*, New York, Palgrave, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. éd. L. Benson, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 328.

pronounced issues in Chaucer, whose poetry delights in delineations of the poet as a « dawsed » (dazed) and incessant reader. Probably most often cited is the moment in Book 3 of *Troilus and Criseyde* where the lovers are abed, and the speaker suspends us in mid-titillation when he says,

But sooth is, though I kan nat tellen al,  
As kan min auctour, of his excellence,  
Yet have I seyde, and God toform, and shal  
In every thyng, al holly his sentence ;  
And if that ich, at Loves reverence,  
Have any word in eched for the beste,  
Doth therwithal right as yourselfen leste.<sup>6</sup>

In the next stanza, the poet shifts his guise when he urges readers to correct his work, to « encesse or maken dymynucion / Of my langage »<sup>7</sup>. The translator has done his best to reproduce the « sentence » of his source ; if readers find him inept in translating his tale, then we are urged to make changes to suit ourselves. We readers are to match the excellence of his « auctour » by changing Chaucer's words. Here we observe Chaucer in one of his favorite literary claims – his text (says he) is not original, but a mere translation of Lollius's work ; he writes only to repeat that ancient work in a modern idiom. The poet poses as a man inexperienced in love who begs correction from his more practiced readers who know love's art. His inadequacies, then, are great, and he finds himself in need of accomplished readers to act as accomplices. Yet Lollius's book is an invented pre-text for which scholars search in vain. Thus Chaucer's statement here is another seduction in the famous bedroom scene. This time it is the reader who is flattered into the responsible role of textual co-maker. Without the reader the text supposedly wavers without necessary stability.

Malory, too, is an omnivorous reader, but he displays himself differently as author. He largely erases the subjectivity of a first-person voice (so characteristic of Chaucer) from his fiction. We observe his reading obliquely. Like Chaucer, he claims only the role of translator, writing only « as the book seyeth ». Malory presents his whole work as an act of reading and his contributions as a matter of selection more than invention – he puts new English words to the language of his originals and proses the poetry of some antecedents. In large measure, he effects the imaginary notion that there is a grand pre-existing French original, a Book of King Arthur into which he delves, rather than a host of disparate texts from which he shapes his story<sup>8</sup>. His writing is a reading of the vernacular Arthurian corpus, a metaliterary dialogue with his literary past.

Some writers, especially those in periods that valorize originality (or sue for plagiarism) disguise or deny literary indebtedness. Others proclaim their dependence

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<sup>6</sup> Chaucer, *ibid.*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1324-30.

<sup>7</sup> Chaucer, *ibid.*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1335-36.

<sup>8</sup> Though he claims to « turn » frequently from one episode to another, Malory occludes the form of his source-texts. With the exception of tales he claims not to find at hand, he agglomerates his book.

upon their predecessors, seeking to enhance the reputation of their own work by celebrating it as part of a tradition of literary achievement. Malory strikes neither of these poses. Some writers characterize reading as an act of exclusive authority in which the writer guides readers to follow behind his grand ship in a little skiff (in Dante's metaphor from *Paradiso* 2, 1 – 15) so that they might move safely in the writer's intellectual wake and deduce a proper interpretation of the text. Dante's *Commedia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* exemplify such narratives. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton claims to « explain » the ways of both God and man rightly in his reading of Genesis ; in the *Commedia*, Dante postulates a right reading of history and salvation. These epics subsume the past, including all its literary modes of expression, into themselves<sup>9</sup>. Their narrative shifts demand intellectual and emotional assent from readers. In the *Commedia*, each physical step Dante the pilgrim takes – from his descent into Hell to his climb through Purgatory until he reaches the summit of Paradise – requires explicit mental, moral, and emotional change towards the good : the pilgrim must assent in order to move forward and ascend finally to the Emperium. Each reader of the poem is invited to join Dante in the athletic process that produces rightful understanding. In this sense, such texts are complete and closed imaginative acts.

Epic is not the only literary form that attracts writers who act as authoritative readers. The thirteenth-century *Queste del Saint Graal* is an Arthurian text that makes similar claims in terms of right reading. Its landscape is littered with holy men prepared to provide befuddled Arthurian knights with rightful interpretations of their adventures. Knights engaged in the Grail Quest will succeed or fail according to the conformity of their actions to allegorical readings proffered by the text. Here, as with Dante, the text is internally and externally authoritative – characters within and readers of that fiction are subject to the exclusive authority claimed by the writer, who is « right reader » of Christian texts and experience. Yet the *Queste* is an exception to the usual secular and provisional pattern of medieval chivalric Arthurian romances.

Arthurian stories provided the most malleable subject matter of medieval literature and constitute a capacious dictionary of medieval culture ; in each individual Arthurian text, we find characters, motifs, structures that are both familiar and refashioned to suit local, contemporary sensibilities. Malory knows Arthurian stories best through the French *Vulgate* and the later English *Morte*, both alliterative and stanzaic<sup>10</sup>. These he transmits in the fashionable format of his own day, the encyclopedic cyclic condensation<sup>11</sup>. Malory claims to be working within an established tradition when he reminds readers that he has prior texts, silent subtexts. Yet if he is a disciple of Arthurian stories, he is also their judge, since his own narrative freezes one version of the Arthurian tradition.

Readers easily suppress awareness of Malory as a reader. Chaucer draws readers' attention to his protean « I » as he provides miscues to source-texts ; this technique adds vertical layers of complexity and perplexity to his poems. Though

<sup>9</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski makes this important point about epic in *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> For a full bibliography of Malory's sources, consult Vinaver, *ibid.*, and Batt, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard, 1976, ch. 1.

his readings are idiosyncratic, his shifting «I» claims only to be a compiler, dependent upon past «auctores», speaking only «as my book seyeth». Malory distances himself from even that small admission of subjectivity because he does not claim that even the «bookes» to which he turns are his: they are «the books» not «my books»<sup>12</sup>. Unlike Chaucer, he does not speak from the position of the first-person singular; with only three notable exceptions, Malory refers to himself as part of a collective of readers in the first-person plural<sup>13</sup>. He consistently uses «we» in the frequent remark: «now turne we» to another source or another story «as the booke seyeth». Readers convinced by this tactic of «the old bookes» speaking view Malory as a mere reporter. His authority derives from accurate rendering of his sources. Furthermore, if «we» turn from one story to another with him, acts of reading become collective, not distinctive; audience and author are on the same experiential plane. If he and I— «we»— are together observing the turning of the story, then our collective *Arthuriad* is assured to be an authentic report. It gathers the heft of history.

There is none of Chaucer's arch rhetoric or narrative hesitancy in Malory. He treats his translations as fixed, not flexible: unlike Chaucer, he does not often suggest that he has increased or curtailed the books he pre-reads for us. Yet Malory's literary past is as malleable as was Chaucer's and in this regard Malory is one of Chaucer's intellectual and cultural heirs. «As the book seyeth» is equally slippery for both writers. More often than not, when they refer us to the book that says—the one they are claiming to read rightly—they are inventing or modifying that text.

At least since 1485, the time of his first editor and printer Caxton, readers have noted that Malory maintains his focus on the episode grounded upon action. As I have argued elsewhere, Malory projects romance as paratactic in its causal structure as well as its grammatical details<sup>14</sup>. Caxton keenly observed this. Over and over in his edition, Caxton breaks the narrative into episodic units with chapter titles that tell us how rather than why something happened. Something happens, and then something else happens, and it is through the act of reading that we readers define (or refuse to define) cause and effect.

Malory alters minute segments from his sources both by suppression and addition; he frequently alters the whole shape of his inherited texts by an impasto technique of slicing and embedding them into different segments. Though we now possess no exact copy of any of Malory's sources, we have sufficient copies of his source-texts to track his typical method. Both in small moments and in large segments, he changes and restructures his sources. His overall method is not merely

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<sup>12</sup> This may also be a literal statement: Chaucer may well have owned at least some of the books he used and Malory may not.

<sup>13</sup> The three independent uses of the first-person singular pronoun occur in Vinaver, *ibid.*, p. 1119-20; p. 1154; and p. 1242. All such usages occur very late in the complete work. The first is the virtuous love passage; the second a comment on Malory's loss of the Knight of the Cart episode; and the third the commentary on King Arthur's passing from this life.

<sup>14</sup> B. Wheeler, «Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The Case of Sir Gawain's Reputation,» *Arthurian Literature*, XII, éd. J. Carley and F. Riddy, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993, p. 109-32.

compression of his diffuse sources, because he adds just as he frequently omits. With some of his sources, he takes a diffuse story and produces from it a progressively linear narrative. With others, such as the alliterative *Morte*, he complicates a tragic trajectory by sundering its parts. In each case, his reading of prior texts is aggressive. His work, then, is not a simple compilation of inherited texts reduced into English; it is rather an active re-making of those texts. He gives new sense to old matter. In this, Malory reveals a certain consistency of method from the very opening pages of his *Morte Darthur*. His telling of the Arthurian story, with its priority on action and eschewing of his sources' comments on intention, pulls events – adventure-by-adventure – to the surface. Malory is far more reticent than even his most discreet sources to ascribe motive to his characters. Because he culls and pares explanations of events found in his sources, he produces a work suggestive but not definitive about matters of intention and causality. Malory tells his readers who acted, what happened, how it happened, often where it happened, sometimes when it happened, and almost never why it happened.

To know why events occurred is a deep human desire. In the epic or the traditional novel, writers typically satisfy this desire at least partially through the vehicle of some central controlling consciousness that asserts or suggests the narrative's meanings; selected characters within the fiction sometimes assume this function. Even in the absence of controlling voices that assert a relation between cause and effect within a fiction, hierarchies of causation (destiny, choice, accident) can sometimes be gleaned by analyzing the pattern or sequence of the narrative. But chivalric romance, whether individual or cyclic in structure, is a literary form that subverts the very concept of logical necessity. From its inception in Chrétien's later twelfth-century poems, Arthurian romance stood largely in philosophic opposition to theories of logical causation<sup>15</sup>. In logical discourse, we expect both progression and comprehension: narrative unfolds according to discernible principles of cause-and-effect as it moves hypotactically from point A to point B to conclude at point C. Romance moves from point A to point B but typically suppresses point C. Romance writers avoid explicit rationales that might satisfactorily explain cause and effect. The episodic sequences of romance sometimes appear self-contained, self-referential; sometimes episodes are open-ended, interpenetrating or overlapping other episodes to suggest covert causal patterns.

Critics most commonly use analogies or metaphors to describe these structures in romance. Romance structure is frequently compared to tapestry, with its warp and woof sides, and its episodes are called interwoven or interlaced. Some see the structure of episodes as merely sequential, « like beads on a string ». C. S. Lewis preferred a musical analogy; he described romance as « polyphonic », part of the Gothic elaboration of multiple simultaneous voices. Others prefer the term « dreamlike » to describe the seeming irrationality of romance structures. In lieu of structural analysis, some describe romance in terms of its characteristic motifs: knights and ladies, quests and adventures, magic and magicians. Still others approach romance thematically, like Patricia Parker, whose now-classic definition

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<sup>15</sup> Romance, of course, finds its philosophic roots in the northern French schools that were cavorting in the play of dialectic and logical methodology at the same time that Chrétien was writing.

holds that romance is « a form which simultaneously projects the end it seeks and defers or wanders from a goal which would mean among other things the end of the quest itself »<sup>16</sup>. These critical analogies share a perception of romance's complex structure, and Parker's definition describes its formal tensions well.

Yet it is also useful to approach medieval romance by reference to its grounding in rhetorical techniques, the most dominant of which is its common choice of paratactic structure. Parataxis is the most basic syntactical choice ; at the level of the sentence, units are coordinated rather than subordinated. In the later Middle Ages in England, as P. J. C. Field demonstrates, it was the dominant syntax of chronicle writings<sup>17</sup>. Hypotactic sentence-structure is traditionally thought to be more sophisticated ; the subordination of one unit to another within the grammatical structure requires the writer to define a causal relation between the units and thereby allows the reader to grasp this relation by noticing the comparative importance allocated to each element of the sentence. Malory ordinarily eschews the hypotactic method ; his syntax is marked by his proclivity to coordinate his sentences. « And » is the predominant word in Malory's *Morte*, accounting for more than 6% of the total text<sup>18</sup>. In contrast, the different forms of « because » account for only .00511 of the text. More significantly for my analysis, Malory depends upon parataxis for his structure as well as grammar ; he plucks episodes from his source-texts and sets them side-by-side without explicit subordination of one to the other. As a consequence, these structures allow readers access to « what » and « how » but not necessarily « why ». What we notice in Malory, then, is that « this happened and that happened » rather than « this happened because that happened ».

On this account, Malory annoys some readers and has been judged wanting by others<sup>19</sup>. Even his current editor P.J.C. Field once argued that his paratactic style « is a very limited one, unsuitable for reflecting the movement of a sophisticated mind, for organising complicated material, or for delivering ironic judgements, and it is doomed to extinction by the proliferation of the printed word »<sup>20</sup>. Malory and his French sources share, I think, a paratactic linking structure, but Malory often pushed his sources one step further by rendering hypotactic sentences from his French texts into paratactic English sentences. For Malory, parataxis is an ideal vehicle for liberating fiction from closed readings : the *impasto* technique permits readers to make (or evade) judgments that the writer has eschewed. It is not necessarily less sophisticated or potentially less ironic than any hypotactic style or structure – and as the postmodern novel witnesses, in the long *durée* paratactic structure was only temporarily extinguished by the advent of print culture. In Malory's case, parataxis

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979.

<sup>17</sup> P. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style*, London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1971, p. 31-35.

<sup>18</sup> See Concordance, Word Frequency List, p. 1610.

<sup>19</sup> Recently, Ad Putter argued that Malory's « limitations are exposed in passages that demand a more complex calibration of events or propositions », « Late romance: Malory and the Tale of Balin, » *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, éd. D. Johnson and E. Treharne, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 340.

<sup>20</sup> Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, *ibid.*, p. 35.



allows distinctive philosophic and aesthetic attitudes to interpenetrate. When the structure is dilatory, the writer self-erasing, and no narrative voice has overarching authority, then the choice of and to meaning is found in the act of reading.

Romance, as I have previously argued, is a genre that uses parataxis as its normal structural as well as thematic principle. Medieval grammatical theory here interacts with rhetorical theory, for the commonplaces of *amplificatio* or *dilatatio* (*dilatatio*) that permeate romance style also serve to reinforce paratactic structure. Whether or not the grammar is paratactic, the structure is. What is often writ small in the fabric of romance (from Chrétien to Malory) is writ large in its narrative structure. One consequence of this paratactic mode is that no episode in a medieval romance is granted necessary preeminence over another – and no incident can be ignored as insignificant. Each incident or episode is thus narrated on the same plane; segments as tight as tragedy or as complex as comedy are given equality in these discourses. With the exception of texts like the *Queste del Saint Graal*, no narrative presence provides a comprehensive, reliable guide to meaning in romance texts. Typically, the presence of a narrator within romance confounds and confuses rather than clarifies. The very marks of intervening authorial presence in romance texts are ambiguity, tangled logic, and limited comprehension.

Between Chrétien de Troyes's earliest Arthurian romances in the twelfth century and Malory's elegy to that tradition in the late fifteenth century, romance became progressively more diffuse. The French prose cycles from which Malory drew so much of his story are dense with incident, punctuated by internal analyses. As an acute reader of romance, Malory discerned its fundamental paratactic structure. In his own production, he deploys this definitive paratactic romance structure. He thickens the layers of incident but avoids conclusive analysis. He imposes this form even upon source-texts from other literary genres, such as the alliterative *Morte*. Malory's chosen role, then, as a reshaper of the romance tradition, is to forge a discourse that is both traditional and trendy. If parataxis, that common syntactical feature of both chronicle and romance in Malory's England, is «already in his time a little old-fashioned»<sup>21</sup> it is nonetheless both as style and as structure an ideal vehicle for a writer who is chronicling the whole Arthurian past. One might further temper the allegation of old-fashionedness by considering Larry Benson's argument that the overall structure of the *Morte Darthur* is acutely fashionable, responding to the late fifteenth-century habit of condensing encyclopedic narratives into one-volume prose histories<sup>22</sup>.

Malory specifies the audience of his work as «jantylnen and jantylwomen». A scale of values is therefore signaled in the work in relation to social class, moral values, and even educational expectations. Other (non-gentle) readers of this *Morte Darthur* witness the work as a dialogue between Malory and his defined audience. Some readers in Malory's generation might have read or heard his source-texts and thus be aware of his literary antecedents. For this audience, characters enter the text heavy with their literary past. When Malory moves to biographical romance to focus on his hero Sir Lancelot, for instance, he says

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur*, p. 4.

Soone aftir that Kynge Arthure was come from Rome into Ingelonde, than all the knyghtys of the Rounde Table resorted unto the Kynge, and made many joustys and turnementes. And som there were, that were but knyghtes, encreased in armys and worship that passed all other of her felowys in prouesses and noble dedys – and that was well proved on many. But in especiall hit was prevyd un Sir Launcelot de Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes .... So thus Sir Launcelot encreased so meryvaylously in worship and honoure: therefore he is the fyrste knight that the Freynsh booke makyth mencion of aftire Kynge Arthure come frome Rome. Wherefore Queen Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other kynghtis, and so he loved the Queene agayne aboved all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys, and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chivalry.

Readers of Malory's French source-texts, not reasonably, see in this passage a full admission of Sir Lancelot's passion for the queen. They have the past at their disposal as they read into the present. However, readers who learn of Sir Lancelot only through Malory – or who act as « independent » readers – find only an idealized friendship between the great champion and the queen. Moreover, an amplified, learned audience might (like those who urged Caxton to print this *Arthuriad*) above all see a political goal in Malory's desire to elevate his charismatic English king to his true imperial stature and to sustain his grandeur while distilling the long French tradition of Arthurian productions. For these readers, Malory's claim that he is speaking « as the French booke seyeth » is deft and provocative, subsuming as it does French into English history. But yet other readers – a new class of English readers not schooled in French texts – is lured (then or now) by Malory's implicit consolation that he says nothing newfangled. He has only done our reading for us. Schooled readers know that Malory did something quite different: he bounded a definitive history of the Arthurian realm (and thus earlier England) that he forged from the strands of the French *Vulgate* and his wholesale pillaging of the romance and Brut traditions. Malory's readers might be led to view the Arthurian moment as a pinnacle of English achievement, but only schooled readers know that Malory built his history from the shards of fading French fascination with chivalry.

But if this is a form of history, what might Malory's « jantylnen and janytlwomen » expect from his *Arthuriad*? As chronicle it provides stories of past actions; as *historia*, however, should it not subdue *nugae* in favor of moral lessons from the past? Fifteenth-century English readers expected history to situate morals from the past by divining positive and negative models of those who came before. Malory refuses to fill this role of overt moralizer. Readers who desire history to explain the past almost inevitably create hierarchies of interpretive importance among the myriad stories of Malory's huge compendium. They desire history to tell not just the story, but also the truth. Such histories forge stories according to an organizing worldview that shows not only what changed but why it changed: readers thus understand whom to praise, whom to blame, whom to hold in mind. When writers provide moral pointers, they clarify rules for behavior so that readers might emulate the good and avoid the bad. History reveals the true and transcendent.

Malory, however, mixes the modes of history, epic, chronicle, and romance. Story is piled on story without any guidance as to their relative importance.

Characters occasionally ascribe meaning to incidents, but their views are all partial, limited; the result is a multiplication of potential causalities with none affirmed and none denied. In this paratactic narrative, no single voice dominates and the only unqualified truths are (quite literally) those etched into stone. Yet this is hardly to say that Malory's work is value-free. The *Morte Darthur* is replete with key resonant values that jog emotive responses; there is frequent repetition of value-laden terms, prime among them « noble », « good », « best », and « fellowship ». Readers become emotionally attached to the text through these repetitions, but the terms float free from a defining logical position: they evoke powerful response without providing much more than a reassuring attitude.

From its opening lines, the *Morte Darthur* is a thicket of experience. Readers are confused, anxious for some intervening authority – Malory, Merlin, or King Arthur – to interpret the myriad experiences, to define a right reading. Perhaps on the next page? One reads in part to alleviate such anxiety, hoping that, at the very least, the accumulations of the story will provide clarity. But they don't. As readers, then, we are trained through reading Malory's whole text to at least one conclusion: we are trained to be suspicious of right readings. Like Chaucer, Malory leaves options of meaning to his audience. And readers relentlessly make those choices – by preferring one character to another, for example, the reader reveals a partiality for one pattern of significance over another. One can argue, as various scholars have, for Malory the historian who shows the relentless working of destiny, or for a Malory the moralist who details the failures of society due to morally flawed leaders, or a Malory the cynic for whom all, in the end, is due to sheer hap, the chance appearance of a viper on the battlefield. Each of these visions is true to the text; each is true to the individual reader's unique vision of history – and each is partial. History as indeterminacy, as Malory gives it to us, finally suggests to us that (for good or ill) we make our own meanings according to our own drives and needs. This is a vision of history so complex that all interpretation becomes reductive.

One can profitably revisit Vinaver's assertion that Malory wrote not one book but eight separate tales. Scholars now shuffle the ending and starting points of different segments according to their personal predilections or sense of editorial history, but few have considered Malory's wide range of romance types. He begins with the corporate romance. This huge thicket of pre- and youthful-Arthurian stories culminate in the founding of the Round Table that attends Arthur's marriage, a celebration muted and heightened by Merlin's instruction to the court that adventures must be pursued. Those early adventures conclude with the seeming logic of the uniquely Arthurian Pentecostal Oath. After the narrative moves to that seeming conclusive sense that justice and mercy can be interwoven, Malory re-complicates his narrative, undermining premises (even about the Oath) that propelled previous assent. Like many politicians dealing with complex cultural forces, the young Arthur finds refuge in war: Malory moves from interlaced romance to a joyful epic mode in telling his version of the story of Arthur's (notably pre-Charlemagne) ascendancy as Holy Roman Emperor, ruler of western Christendom. From this moment, the central segments of the text are Malory's many biographical romances of Sir Lancelot, Sir Gareth, Sir Tristram and their cohorts, similar in structure to Chrétien's Yvain and Erec et Enide. The narrative broadens again into the thicket of cyclic romance style in the latter segments of Tristram's

tale – « Arthurland-at-large » as Vida Scudder said – then it once more reverts to clarifying focus on religious romance in the quest for the Holy Grail. The subsequent sentimental romance of Sir Lancelot and his ladies stands in stark structural counterpoint to the Grail narrative, but together they propel the story's final explosive study of romance-tragedy and its culminating set of elegies. Malory thus moves through all available types of chivalric romance, yoking them together as a singular act of reading the French books for his multiple English audiences.

Caxton, Malory's first known reader, found the *Morte* both irresistible and troublesome. In the preface to his 1485 edition of Malory, he reveals his own anxieties about the text. On the one hand, King Arthur, as a national hero and one of the Nine Worthies, deserves to be remembered by his countrymen, but only if, in fact, he existed. Caxton's defense is cunning: on the one hand, he was « requyred » by certain « noble jentylmen » to print this history; on the other hand, Caxton knows that many think King Arthur's stories are « but fayned and fables ». The printer, concerned about historicity, cites traditional proofs in favor of the existence of an historical Arthur. In the face of such evidence, Caxton alleges that he « coude not wel denye but that there was suche a noble kyng named Arthur »<sup>23</sup>. This statement stops somewhat short of positive assertion, just as his subsequent advice to his readers falls short of clarity about the moral status of the text:

For herein may be seen noble chyualrye, curtosye, humanyte, frendlynesse, hardynesse, loue, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne. Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renomnee.<sup>24</sup>

For Malory's readers follow the good and avoid the evil as Caxton recommends, they must be able to differentiate all that is good from that which is wicked in Malory's work. Prior to his moral injunction to « [d]oo after the good and leve the evyl », Caxton's oscillating list suggests that moral clarity is sometimes problematic – and down to the detail of his chapter rubrics, he sustains Malory's indeterminacy. In this, Caxton replicates Malory's fundamental method of letting the whole experience of the whole story speak for itself in spite of his preface. Caxton thus foists onto readers both the requirement of moral discernment and the responsibility for rightful reading. All readers of Caxton's Malory then, are enjoined to perform acts of understanding that Caxton never took upon himself. Nor did Malory, who makes no such demands when he presented his text as a humble homecoming for his hero, « as the French book seyeth ».

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<sup>23</sup> Vinaver, *ibid.*, p. cxiv.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. cxlvi.