

The Medieval Period, Day Twenty-One

Back to the Arthurian

Deadline Discussion

- We have one other graded essay due for this course—currently it is due on December 5.
- If we move the deadline to the last day of class (December 12), you will have more time to learn from the feedback on this essay.
- If we move the deadline to the last day of class, you will have an assignment due right at the end of term, a busy time.

Who Was Thomas Malory?

Sir Thomas Malory, of Warwickshire, was born c. 1410. He was elected to parliament for Warwickshire in 1445, but according to later accusations, he was living by violence in the 1450s—among other alleged crimes, he ambushed the Duke of Buckingham and tried to murder him, stole livestock and extorted money, and was accused of rape on two occasions. Pardoned by King Edward IV in 1462, he served the earl of Warwick in the so-called Wars of the Roses.

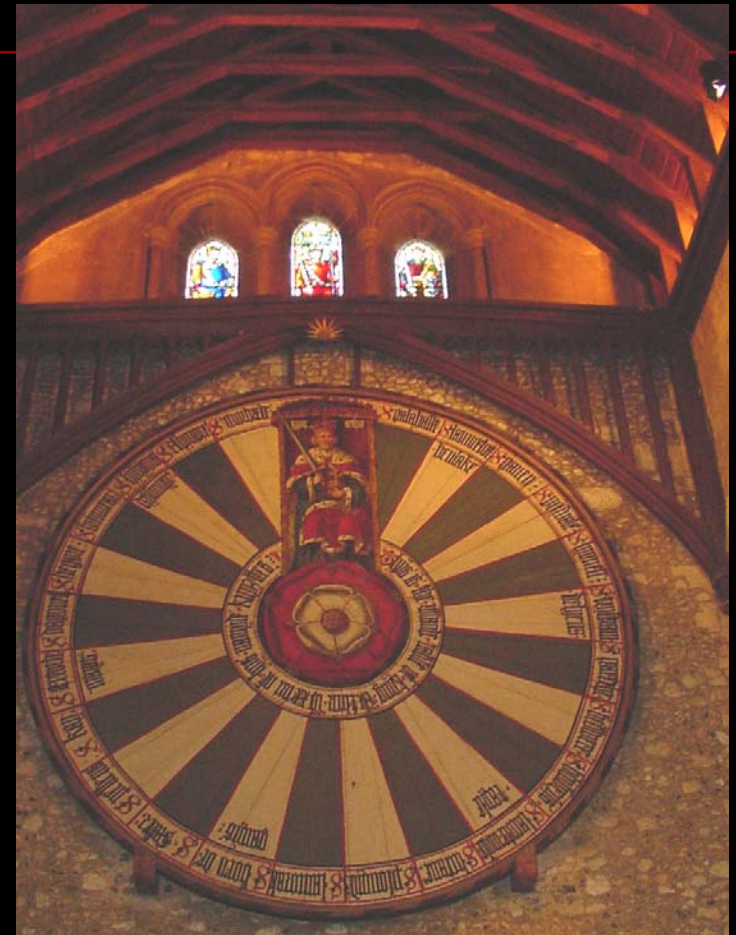
These dynastic wars pitted the house of York (white rose), supported by Warwick, against the house of Lancaster (red rose), with the incumbent king, Henry VI, who struggled from bouts of insanity, deposed in 1461 and Edward IV seizing the throne. Henry came back in 1471 but was murdered that same year.

Malory was captured and imprisoned, probably after Warwick switched sides to the Lancastrian side (bringing Henry's return). He is thought to have spent the last years of his life in Newgate Jail in London, translating Arthurian stories out of French; he died in 1471. "This was drawyn by a knyght presoner, Sir Thomas Malleorre, that God send him good recover Amen & etc." (112)

Malory's main source was the early 13th c. 'Vulgate' prose version, which contained three cycles: stories about *Merlin*, *Tristan*, and *Lancelot* (the last of which included the tale of the holy grail and the death of Arthur). But Malory also appeared to use English texts on the same subject (like the alliterative and stanzaic *Morte Arthur* poems), especially in his last books.

The Winchester MS, c. 1471-83

- In 1485, William Caxton, the first printer in England, printed Malory's work as a book in 21 chapters, giving the whole thing the rather misleading title of the last part (a grammatically incorrect French phrase meaning *The death of Arthur*). Caxton claimed in a preface that it was the entire story of the truly historical Arthur (reprinted on pages 814-818 of your edition).
- In 1934, a librarian interested in inspecting old practices of book binding discovered, at Winchester College, a medieval manuscript of Malory's translations that had been used by Caxton in creating the printed text—revealing how Caxton re-shaped the translation. The MS is divided into 8 books, each with a different title and to a certain extent free standing.



Round Table in the Great Hall at Winchester Castle

Check out the Tudor Rose...

Why is Middle English Prose so hard to read?

■ Parataxis vs. Syntaxis

Almost all of the story is related in coordinated rather than subordinated phrases. The conjunctions that are used tend to be ones like “and” and “but” rather than “because” or “therefore.” There is a linear rather than a cause-effect drive to the narrative.

■ Repetition and Stock Phrases, Alliteration

Hmm, where have we encountered these features before...

■ Collective, rather than individualized voices

There is much slippage between narration and dialogue and the manner of speaking is consistently the same--you can't distinguish characters or the narrator by the way they talk. Sometimes, characters are even represented as speaking in unison!

(See Terence McCarthy's article in your edition)

Complaints!

■ Mark Twain

“these archaics are a little TOO simple; the vocabulary is too limited, and so, by consequence, descriptions suffer in the matter of variety; they run too much to level Saharas of fact, and not enough to picturesque detail; this throws about them a certain air of the monotonous; in fact the fights are all alike”

Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, 1889

■ John Steinbeck

“Present day people can read unlimited baseball scores in which the narration isn't very great and fifteenth-century people could listen to innumerable single combats with little variation...”

“I have removed all of Merlin's prophecies...Malory never could lead to a climax, he gave it away three times before he got to it...”

“Arthur is a dope.”

Letter to editors of his Malory translation, 1959

Uther and Arthur— not *exactly* the Disney story



■ **LUST AND BETRAYAL**

“Kyng Uther sent for this duk, charyng hym to brynge his wyf with hym...the kyng lyked and loved this lady wel, and...desyred to have lyen by her” (3.5-6, 9-11)

■ **RAPE**

“she mervailed who that myghte be that laye with her in lyknes of her lord. So she mourned pryvely” (5.26-7)

■ **ADULTERY AND INCEST**

“and thydir com unto hym kyng Lottis wyff of Orkeney...the kyng caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her...And she was syster on the modirs syde Ingrayne unto Arthure” (29.45-6, 30.1-7)

■ **MASS INFANTICIDE**

“Than kyng Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes... And all were put in a shyppe to the se; and some were four wekis olde and som lesse...the shyppe drove unto a castelle, and was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party” (39.20-1, 26-9)

Like Heorot, like Camelot: Doomed Kingdoms?

“thus was the dreame of Arthure: Him thought there was com into hys
londe gryffens and serpentis, and hym thought that they brente and
slowghe all the people in the lande” (28.11-13)

“ye have done a thyng late that God ys displesed with you, for ye
have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a chile that
shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme” (32.5-7)

“thou goste to thy deth-ward—and God be nat thy frend (35.16-7)

“he shall telle you the name of your owne son begotyn of youre syster,
that shall be the destruccion of all thys realme” (34.10-12)

Fame and Shame

What is the definition of a “clene knight”—and who at the round table fits it? (41.17)

What is a “shamefulle deth” and what is “a worshipfull dethe”? (32.14-5)

What is the role of the literary in the chivalric court?

“he dude wryte all the batayles that every worthy knyght ded of *Arthurs* courte” (27.29-30)

Women in *Le Morte Darthur*

- Arthur's wife, Guenivere

“Merlion warned the kynge covertly that Gwentyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff” (*Torre and Pellinor*)

- Arthur's sister, Morgawse

“kyng Lottis wyff...she was sente thider to aspye the coure to kynge Arthure” (29.45-6)

- Arthur's other sister, Morgan le Fay

“And she wolde have had Arthure hir brother slayne” (52.19-20)

- Other women, including the lady of the lake

“The falsist damesell that lyveth” (44.35-6) “by inchauntement and by sorcery she hath bene the destroyer of many good knyghtes” (43.39-41)

Magic & Mystery

- “Morgan le Fey was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye” (5.44, 6.1-2)
- “Merlion caste an inchauntmente” (36.39)

Or just told a long tale? P. 5

- “ ‘Because of the dethe of that lady thou shalt stryke a stroke moste dolerous that ever man stroke, except the stroke of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste. For thou shalt hurt the trewyst knyght and the man of moste worship that now lyvith; and thorow that stroke three kyngdomys shall be broughte into grete poverte, miseri and wrecchednesse twelve yere’ ” (48.11-17)

Imperialism and Civil War in the 15th century

■ Glory of conquest

“Arthur...dyd merveillous dedes of armes, that many of the kynges had grete joye of his dedes” (*Merlin*), “brenne and destroy all the contrey before them there they sholde ryde” (*Merlin*)

■ English-ing Arthur

Caxton’s Preface, “remembered emonge us Englysshemen tofore al other Crysten kynges” (815)

Look at the chronology of the 15th c., Wars of the Roses, brother against brother, betrayal, imperial desires...

Next Class: the Grail!



- Read Malory's version and compare it with his sources on the story of the grail (as presented at the back of your edition).

What is the importance of this part of the legend?

Why do you think it has been so long remembered (and so productive of other works)?