Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* was completed some time in 1469-70. It is the classic English-language version of an Arthurian legend – still a “history” to some – that stretches back into Celtic antiquity (Higham 2002). The surviving early forms of Malory’s text are themselves historical landmarks: Caxton’s edition of 1485 is probably the best-known early printed book in English; the *Morte’s* single surviving manuscript, rediscovered by a Winchester schoolteacher in 1934, is also famous.

Malory himself stresses the historicity and antiquity of his narrative in many references that locate it in a previous England, under the “most nobelyst kynge of the worlde” (*Works*, 459). In medieval times, Arthur was a historical figure, celebrated as the “British Worthy” in a list of nine Jews, pagans and Christians that included Joshua, David, Hector, Alexander and Charlemagne. Geoffreys of Monmouth’s twelfth-century prose Latin *Historial Regum Britanniae*, “History of the Kings of Britain”, was still taken as true, and was the ultimate source of Malory’s story of Arthur’s Roman wars. Malory also sometimes refers to his French romance sources, from the Merlin, Lancelot-Grail and Tristan traditions, as “authorised” documents based on accounts from people closely involved: Merlin dictates early events to
Bloyse (37-8); Arthur has all the Grail knights’ testimonies made into great chronicles by clerks (1036); Bedivere survives to have Arthur’s ending written down (1242). “Romance provides history with … the protocol for recording deeds and for making them into books” (Crofts 2006: 39).

The *Morte* was actually a latecomer in the medieval Arthurian tradition, built on the work of many predecessors, but later retellings have given it the status of a foundation text for English readers, a venerable beginning. It is now one of a very few fifteenth-century English narratives still much read. As a result, it has tended to become decontextualised, either ahistorically viewed in isolation from its own times, or else simplistically taken as direct evidence of their socio-political problems. It has also often been misleadingly treated as a moral fable of sin and punishment, in compliance with the cultural work imposed on the story in the Victorian age. The *Morte*’s heroes are fallible men and women – Lancelot himself is an “erthly synfull man” (934) – but Malory remains convinced of their goodness. This is not to say that modern readers cannot see blind-spots and contradictions in his evaluation of their actions, but we will not find him condemning Arthur, Lancelot or Guenevere for wrongdoing, or treating the downfall of Camelot as their just deserts. Malory’s God expresses the same generous attitude: he punishes Arthur’s incest through the final “day of destiny” with Mordred, yet sends Sir Gawain from heaven to warn Arthur to postpone the battle, “for pyté of you and many mo other *good men* there shall be slayne” (1234, my emphasis). Divine punishment implies no personal shame or loss of good will. The prevalence of sin and need for repentance and mercy were commonplaces in later medieval religious culture. When a character like Lancelot accuses himself of sinfulness, he is doing what he should in a confessional or penitential context: “his self-condemnation issues from and is sanctioned by the world he inhabits” (Riddy 1996: 121).
The Identity of Thomas Malory

During the Victorian and Edwardian age, the medieval past was gradually installed as the basis of British heritage. Arthurianism, with the *Morte* as its main medieval reference point, was central in the process of inventing a new version of the historical origins and cultural inheritance of the present. At the same time, the success of the medieval revival depended on bringing Arthur up to date: Tennyson saw him as “a modern gentleman” (Tennyson 1969: 597). He acknowledged Malory’s prestige, but wanted to detach an ideal Arthur and ideal chivalry from the problematic medium and era in which Malory had presented them – “Touched by the adulterous finger of a time / That hovered between war and wantonness,/ And crowning and dethronements” (Tennyson 1969: 1756). Tennyson made the Arthur of *Idylls of the King* “modern” in Victorian terms, a spokesman for contemporary bourgeois attitudes, in ways that have later made him seem very old-fashioned. *Idylls of the King* became a dominant influence on how most English-language readers from about 1850-1950, longer in some cases, imagined all Arthurian literature, and made it harder for them to think of *Le Morte Darthur* positively as a fifteenth-century text, a work of its own distinctive era. In literary history the fifteenth century was usually understood as a barren, decadent time between Chaucer and the emergence of Wyatt, Surrey and the Elizabethans. Malory was typecast as a nostalgic idealist, “a practical and righteous fifteenth-century gentleman, who wished to bring back a decadent England to the virtues of ‘manhode, courteyse and gentynnesse’.” (Chambers 1945: 195). Such judgements credited the *Morte* with a simple distaste for its own times and an equally simple idealisation of a past world.
It has largely been left to more recent scholarship to research and reimagine the relationship of *Le Morte Darthur* to its own historical period. An important issue in that process was to find the identity of the writer, Sir Thomas Malory. Evidence in the manuscript reveals him as a “knight-prisoner” who completed his book “between 3 March 1469 and 4 March 1970” (Field 1993: 1). The only known Thomas Malory who was a knight-prisoner at the time is a member of a gentry family from Newbold Revell in Warwickshire, probably born around 1416, who had become a knight by 1441. The life-records of the same Thomas Malory show him dealing in land, taking up lawsuits, electing people to parliament, and becoming a member of parliament himself for Warwickshire in 1445, and possibly for boroughs in Wiltshire in 1449 and Dorset in 1450. All that is typical of an active member of the gentry, but Malory’s extensive record of criminal charges, dating from 1443 and skyrocketing in 1450, is unusual, and a shock to readers of the *Morte*. Very serious allegations are recorded against him: robbery, malicious damage, assault, gaol-breaking, extortion, rape, ambush and attempted murder (Field 1996).

Malory was never actually tried, and spent substantial periods free on pardon or on bail. But he had been in prison for the best part of eight years before being freed when the Yorkists came to power in 1460. Trouble resurfaced later, and he is now known to have been in Newgate in April 1469. Imprisonment in Newgate rather than in the Tower of London suggests criminal charges, not the detention of a political prisoner, though if Malory had not had political enemies, or had had more friends in power, criminal proceedings against him would not have been so active. He died in March 1471, quite likely in Newgate. His burial in the nearby church of the Greyfriars may be because it was a fashionable London church, or because gentlemen convicts who died in the prison were often buried there (Sutton 2000).
The *Morte* translates and adapts numerous French and English Arthurian sources. It has puzzled some scholars how a prisoner could gain access to them. Possibly Malory had one or more friends or patrons – there is no evidence for this – who brought him books in gaol, or he may have received favours from its keeper. Conditions in Newgate were not pleasant – it was a gaol for serious offenders – but it is possible that with the assistance of family, friends and money, and with the favour of the keeper, his life there was bearable and reasonably social. Perhaps he arranged to buy or hire books from the nearby booksellers (Sutton 2000). It is possible that he wrote with an eye to the commercial book market. The Winchester manuscript may be a copy produced for sale; Caxton soon enough came across Malory’s work and saw its commercial potential. It has also been conjectured that Malory was trying to restore his moral reputation by writing a notably idealistic work (Wallace 2006). These motives need not be incompatible. What is certain is that to complete *Le Morte Darthur* under such conditions he was a remarkably energetic and resourceful man, whom even Newgate could not daunt as long as he was well: “For all the whyle a presoner may have hys helth of body, he may endure undir the mercy of God, and in hope of good delyveraunce” (540).

**Malory and Politics**

A feature of Malory’s career is an apparent habit of changing sides, or of finding them change around him. He seems to have been favoured by the Duke of Buckingham, who owned the Wiltshire borough where a Thomas Malory was elected in 1449, yet he was charged with leading a gang to ambush and kill Buckingham early in 1450. The Yorkists pardoned Malory in 1462, and he fought for them in 1462-63 at some locations the *Morte* mentions in Arthur’s
war against Lancelot, but some time after 1464 Malory was imprisoned again and Edward IV specifically excluded him from general pardons made in 1468 and 1470. Perhaps Malory was caught up in the later falling-out between King Edward and his former supporter the Earl of Warwick. It is not possible to work out from the remaining records just what happened, but at any rate he was now perceived as an enemy, not an ally, by those he had previously served. Given the *Morte’s* emphasis on reward for loyal service, Malory’s own apparent situation does not match the ideals of his narrative, but may resemble some developments that occur towards its ending, when Lancelot and the knights loyal to him suddenly find themselves turned against Arthur, and former friends and comrades fight against each other. He could have empathised with Lancelot’s anguish at loss of “worship” (standing/ good reputation) when Arthur banishes him from England: “And that ys to me grete hevynes, for ever I feare aftir my dayes that men shall cronycle uppon me that I was fleamed [banished] oute of this land” (1203).

Shortly before Camelot breaks up into hostile factions, Malory highlights Arthur’s praise for Gareth who has changed sides in a tournament to help Lancelot: “methought hit was my worshyp to helpe hym. For I saw hym do so move dedis of armys, and so many noble knyghtes ayeynste hym” (1114). Gareth does not place winning the tournament for Arthur’s side above everything else, and feels able to balance loyalty to a friend in trouble with his overall duty to the king, in a way that Arthur himself appreciates. Malory concludes: “he that was curteyse, trew, and faythefull to hys frynde was that tyme cherysshed’ (1114, my emphasis). The episode sets out an understanding of knightly service as principled yet flexible, with an emotional bent, and motivated by personal assessments of situations as they emerge, not by sheer utility to one’s own faction. As long as a knight is motivated by good will, without unworthy ulterior motives, his actions can be seen as “worshipful”. Towards the
end of *Le Morte Darthur*, the most “worshipful” acts are often those that are not profitable from a party point of view. Lancelot’s army captures Arthur, but he refuses to take military advantage from that, let alone kill him, as Sir Bors proposes:

> So whan kynge Arthur was on horsebak, he loked on sir Launcelot; than the teerys braste oute of his yen, thynkyng of the grete curtesy that was in sir Launcelot more than in ony other man. (*Works*, 1192)

Malory is acutely aware of the clash between political demands and personal sympathies, and tends to favour the latter. The real-life climate in which he operated was harsher. Scarcely more than a year after those lines were written, Henry VI, held captive in the Tower of London, was murdered by the Yorkist powers.

### The Ethics of Knighthood

If the criminal charges against Malory were justified, then he had a worrying resemblance to some very bad knights in his own book, like Perys de Forest Sauvage:

> “What?” seyde sir Launcelot, “is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravyssher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of Knyghthode, and contrary unto his oth. Hit is pyté that he lyveth.” (*Works*, 269)
The apparent mismatch between the *Morte’s* view of knighthood and its author’s career has troubled readers. Yet whatever Malory’s other alleged crimes, it would be rash to accuse him of simply being a turn-coat or opportunist. Malory distinguishes between “unhappy” knights like Mordred and Aggravain – we might call them “trouble-makers” – who deliberately cause political conflict for their own “prevy” (secret/private) reasons, and those knights who are just drawn into the conflict, even if the latter, like Lancelot and Gawain, contribute to the problem by recklessness or unreasonable revenge. He also distinguishes between those who fight to honour prior allegiances and those who betray their lords out of ingratitude or in the hope of gain. Lancelot’s followers are seen as right in telling him to rescue the queen from burning because “hit ys for youre sake” (1172), even though they see the undesirability of opposing so good a king as Arthur. But the narrative is indignant about Mordred’s knightly backers “that kynge Arthur had brought up of nought, and gyffyn them londis, that myght nat then say hym a good worde” (1229). Even then, we should remember Gawain’s warning that Arthur’s “people” will be killed “on bothe partyes” (1234) in the last battle, and that Mordred does his duty in fighting bravely that day (1236). Malory does not tend to treat fights, even this one, as allegories of good versus evil. It has been suggested that he had in mind some aspects of the actual Battle of Towton in 1461: the day-long combat; the fighting on foot; the pillaging of the dead by moonlight; the vast number killed. Deaths at Towton were estimated at 38,000, which as a percentage of the population is the modern equivalent of 760,000. (Field 2000).

To the modern outsider, and to an outraged enemy such as Gawain becomes, it would seem that Lancelot is a traitor to Arthur, since he has “held” the queen and fought against the king to keep her from his judgement and control. But Malory clearly does not see things that way. To him, Lancelot has saved Guenevere from an unjust death wished on her by liars and false counsellors, and saved Arthur from the shame of allowing it to happen. “Lancelot is in real
fact the only character who continues to be loyal to King Arthur throughout the war” (Radulescu 2003: 133). He is allowed an autonomy of action that exceeds the interpretation of loyalty as strict obedience to a lord.

Famously, the *Morte* complains that Mordred’s rebellion is an instance of chronic English fickleness: “Lo thus was the olde custom and usayges of thys londe, and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom” (1229). We cannot tell if these impolitic comments indicate a sympathy for Henry VI, whom the Yorkists had ousted, and so give a hint of why Malory was imprisoned so long and remained finally unpardoned. Perhaps they are simply an example of general discontent with an unstable political environment in which it had been too hard to fashion a succesful knightly career without incurring crippling enmity. Malory’s long “Book of Sir Tristram” is much preoccupied with the problems of ill-will, “envy” (hatred) and long-term feuding between knights, and how these might be resolved. Some divisions can be healed, as when Tristram and Palomides (a rival for Isode’s love) finally reconcile, but the inherited feud between the decendants of King Lot and King Pellinore seems unending, and results in the shocking murder of the good knight Lamerok, Pellinore’s son, by Gawain and three of his brothers. The great Tristram himself is murdered, we later learn, by his treacherous uncle, King Mark. In Malory’s world there are no guarantees that virtue will be rewarded, not only because of evil-doers, but because, as Lancelot laments, “fortune ys so varyaunte, and the wheele so mutable, that there ys no constaunte abdyngne” (1201). Like most Malorian comments on the political action, this one contains nothing historically specific, but is itself typical of fifteenth-century moralising.

**The Morte in its Time**
As a translator and adapter, Malory did not invent the most part of his Arthurian plot-line, and it would be a mistake to see *Le Morte Darthur* as a story written to illustrate the politics of his life-time. There is little agreement that we can identify its personages with actual figures, nor need the story be treated at all as a close commentary on contemporary events. It is a work of imaginative fiction and we must mainly look inside it for the meaning of its “history”. As has been said of Chaucer, we must “read the text as if it were its own politics (developed through its specific envisioning of possible social relations)” (Wallace 1997: 3). Malory’s vision is generically limited – he sticks closely to the matters of chivalric romance and chronicle (Field 1971) and prefers to deal with the adventures of great aristocrats – yet the narrative is saturated with the discourses, preoccupations and attitudes of the gentry of its day, an ambitious land-owning group of “gentlemen”, active in local and central government (Radulescu 2003: 9). They ranked below the “noblemen” (the aristocracy), but had been raised in political importance by the need of monarchs and magnates to secure their help, and had often received knighthood as a consequence (Radulescu 2003: 10-11).

The gentry were particularly prominent in the reign of Edward IV, when Malory wrote. Edward had promoted many of them in his household and council, and they were themselves collectors of material in “great books” that matched the interests of *Le Morte Darthur* – historical, political, religious and chivalric (Radulescu 2003: 39; Cherewatuk 2000). Malory was conscious of having produced a “whole book”, to be read “from the beginning to the ending” (Radulescu 2003: 45). Caxton, by contrast, seems to have offered Malory’s work to the public as a kind of chronicle, reference book and anthology – “for to passe the tyme thys book shal be plesaunt to rede in”, “wyth many wonderful hystoryes and adventures” (Caxton 1983: 3). It covers a range of gentry interests from religious observance, battles, tournaments
and love to marriage, genealogy and inheritance, law, hunting, land management and table manners. It could serve many functions for the reader: a history of Britain’s greatest era, a study of great kingship, a record of notable deeds of arms, a model of good conduct and deportment, a story of faithful love, and a work that inculcated religious piety (Riddy 1996; Cherewatuk 2000). These many interests are not confined to separate stories, though the quest of the Holy Grail is certainly the “holiest” of Malory’s books, but thematically and discursively intermingled within the whole structure, allowing the modern reader insights into the distinctive way they could mingle in a fifteenth-century mind-set. The story of Gareth combines an interest in food and proper ways of eating with a concern for “lineage, blood and wealth” as the basis of good marriage (Cherewatuk 2005: 23). The Fair Maid of Ascolat hopes that her love-pangs for Lancelot – she has unsuccessfully offered to become his wife or mistress – will be counted as part of her suffering in Purgatory (1093), and Malory says that Guenevere had a “good ende” (that is, died in a state of grace), because she was a faithful lover to Lancelot (1120).

Modern readers know the discourse of the fifteenth-century gentry mainly from the Morte itself. When one turns to other gentry documents it can be surprising to see similar language applied to mundane matters. Godfrey Greene wrote to Sir William Plumpton in the 1470s that they had been cheated over a promise to provide writs:

he hath driuen us from morne to euen, & in conclusion deceyued us, & hath receued vjs vjd. And I may nott arreast him nor striue with him for the mony, nor for the decept, because the matter is not worshipfull. And so there is none odere meane but dayly to labor him to gett the writts. …. The labor is great & perillous and the anger is more because of the
“Driven”, “anger”, “strife”, “perilous”, “labour” and “worshipful” are all prominent words in Malory’s vocabulary of knightly deeds. Lancelot performs a miraculous healing at the Chapel Perilous and refers to the Holy Grail quest as “the hyghe servyse in whom I dud my dyligente laboure”. His disastrous break with Arthur causes “a great anger and unhap”. Yet the same words could be applied to a “matter” that was “not worshipful”; it is mainly because we associate this language with *Le Morte Darthur* that it now seems lofty. Such “strife” and “labouring”, to manipulate patronage, influence the law, exert muscle in the neighbourhood or get money out of debtors, were part of the daily life of the fifteenth-century gentry. Their acquisitive and abrasive transactions suggest a normative connection between the world-view of a gentry family of Malory’s time and his main subject matter – war and combat. The language of gentry lawsuits is notably combative. They muster rolls of allies and reckon up enemies; divided into “parties”, they aggressively “defend” themselves; they “labour” jurymen and judges; they issue and receive “challenges”, which easily become more than metaphor. Law was only another way of seeking advantage, not at all incompatible with private physical force.

In this very competitive climate, defending one’s own interests often meant injuring someone else’s. Gentry letters about land commonly relate terrorising of householders and servants, violent raids and battles, and the forced occupation of disputed estates. John Frende wrote to Thomas Stonor around 1462 that he was housebound by the servants of Richard Fortescue, who
mauneseth me dayly, and put me in suche fere of my lyffe ... that I dere
not go to cherche ne to chepyng [market]…. hit is worse than ever hit
was …. thay putteth us in uttera nce daily that we schalbe undowe
[destroyed], for ye nel never come to helpe us. (Kingsford: I.56-7)

In 1466 the same Richard Fortescue, with forty others, allegedly kidnapped Frende for four
days and held him to ransom for five marks (Kingsford: I. 74-5). Malory would hardly have
named a person as lowly as Frende in a knightly romance. Yet in its humble way, Frende’s
situation is like that of the besieged Lyonesse in the tale of Gareth, or of Gawain and the
knights that Lancelot rescues from imprisonment by Sir Tarquin. Gentry figures were very
familiar with the requirement to help dependants and “well-willers” in trouble, and to deal
with “ill-willers”, just as they were with occasional demands for assistance by great lords. In
these and other respects, *Le Morte Darthur* can be seen as offering a nobler and aggrandised
version of the lives and responsibilities of fifteenth-century landed gentlemen. It is not
surprising that a prominent gentry figure like Sir John Paston was a collector of Arthurian
material, or that Sir Thomas Malory found the story so congenial. As a knight himself, and a
“gentleman” who bore “old arms”, Malory might have felt drawn to emphasise the inclusive
nature of his Round Table knighthood as an “Order”, like the Order of the Garter, that
included men of different consequence, even the king, on a notionally equal footing. Mador
de la Porte tells Arthur that “thoughe ye be oure Kynge, in that degré ye are but a knyght as
we ar, and ye ar sworne unto knyghthode als welle as we be” (1050).

Even the nature of Malory’s interest in space and place reveals aristocratic and gentry
attitudes. Malorian external space is not organised pictorially by “landscape”, but by markers
of transition from one scene of contact or conflict to the next, so spaces are either sites of
fellowship or disputed by “parties”. In peacetime, land is a means for monarchs to reward good service by gift, and to establish supporters in strategic places. It is wealth: a magnate speaks of “my lands” as shorthand for the income he receives from them. In wartime, land becomes a spatial roll of “well-willers” and “ill-willers”, where one finds support or opposition. It exists as a means of provisioning and enriching one’s own side through requisition, and of harming one’s opponents’ supply through burning and killing. In tournaments – these had been conspicuously promoted in the reign of Edward IV – space becomes a temporary theatre of “worship”, and in the most prominent form it is the “field” of combat, where opposing interests are directly arbitrated by force. As a story of how shifts in collectivity and competition affected “worship” and “profit”, *Le Morte Darthur* was highly relevant to the landed classes of its own day, despite the grand and sometimes improbable nature of its romance events.

**The “Historical” Arthur and the Nature of the Past**

This discussion has centred so far on how modern readers might relate Malory’s text to the history of his own times. We can also ask how the *Morte* represents the relation of its own times to the “historical” days of King Arthur, which it notionally but sketchily places in the fifth century. Critical answers to that question have been complex and stimulating. Catherine Batt remarks that the *Morte*’s readers are both credited with an intuitive understanding of the historical action, and distanced from it as faithless specimens of “nowadays” (Batt 2002). Felicity Riddy emphasises “fracture, separation and the division of wholeness” in Malory, concluding: “The dispersal of the Round Table has left nothing at the centre, and Arthur’s
mysterious departing is a departing from himself” (Riddy 1996: 153). Jill Mann argues that the repeated “emotional counterpointing” of “wholeness” and “departing”, of longing and distance, is what gives Malory’s narrative its characteristic power (Mann 1991: 2). She argues further that within this process Malory’s own characters are distanced from their own past (or future) history, which impinges on them “out of the blue”, and “stands in an utterly contradictory relation” to the present action in which they are participating (Mann 1991: 6-7). “Distance”, says Mann, including the distance of history, is “an experience apprehended by the actors in the narrative and thus by its readers”, as well as a feature of the Morte’s narrative mode (Mann 1991: 19). Her formulation stresses the collectivity of interest between textual characters and worshipful readers, and heightens a sense of their common predicament, each struggling to stabilise the sudden events of romance adventure within a frame of historical succession. In the starkest form, says Mann, an agent like the doomed Balin, or even Arthur or Lancelot, suffers “alienation from self”, is “marginalised in relation to ... [his] own story” (Mann 1991: 20), because his history is apprehended by him experientially in a series of separate episodic revelations, not as a conceptual whole, or not, at least, until too late. Yet for Malory’s readers, Mann says, events have “the simplicity and finality of destiny” (Mann 1991: 32), partly because, to quote P. J. C. Field, “the simple past tense of the verbs puts the story firmly in a distant and unalterable past” (Field 1973: 146, cited in Mann 1991: 37n). The destiny – tragic or heroic – that characters like Balin only intuit from within their unfolding adventures, the sense of “distance” from the story, readers find instantiated in the preterite form of the text.

All such judgments on a very long work like Le Morte Darthur depend strongly on the selection of examples and the critical emphases. The adventurous situations of participants within the narrative might also potentially model other relations between present and past, and
present and future, and engage readers in a more flexible and positive experience of “history”.
For one thing, nearly half the text is in speech, and in speech Malory’s characters use an
energetic mixture of tenses and moods, taking readers imaginatively into the time of utterance
to see events from their perspective. Here is an example from the moment when young Arthur
learns his parentage:

Thenne Arthur made grete doole whan he understood that syre Ector was
not his fader.

“Sir,” said Ector unto Arthur, “woll ye be my good and gracious lord
when ye are kyng?”

“Els were I to blame,” said Arthur, “for ye are the man in the world that
I am most beholdyng to, and my good lady and moder your wyf that as
wel as her owne hath fostred me and kepte. And yf ever hit be Goddes
will that I be kynge as ye say, ye shall desyre of me what I may doo and I
shalle not faille yow. God forbede I shold faille yow.”

“Sir,” seyde sir Ector, “I will aske no more of yow but that ye wille
make my sone, your foster broder syre Kay, seneceall of alle your
landes.”

“That shall be done,” said Arthyr, “and more, by the feith of my body,
that never man shalle have that office but he whyle he and I lyve.”

(Works, 15)

The episode provides a good example of a “distant” history striking a participant “out of the
blue”, but unless we force a prior knowledge of subsequent events into ironies – young Arthur
will be old and sad one day; Kay will make more trouble than he is worth – then it gives a very positive view of human resilience through time and change. Arthur converts the sadness of sudden distancing, of “losing” his blood family, into affirmation of them as his foster family. Then with the dawning realisation of his power as king, he makes his present will into a statement of future action, one which history will verify. He shows the magnanimity and openness to others’ virtues that will make him a great leader later on. Arthur cannot command destiny – Malory never suggests anyone can, even Merlin, perhaps even God – but he can command the “feith of his body”. When everything at Camelot is falling apart in the last book, even opponents still affirm that “there was never yet man that ever coude preve kynge Arthure untrew of hys promyse” (1173). This is a kind of integrity that is never taken away from Arthur’s story. Its sharing with readers over the course of the narrative binds them closely to the Arthurian world and implies their surviving recognition of its values. Even in the “dolorous” last battle, we see Arthur’s intent fulfilled and verified. Mordred is Arthur’s punishment for sin, as Merlin said long before (44), but Arthur’s killing of Mordred is also presented as a willed human deed, a right action, and part of the “worshipfull dethe” Merlin has prophesied for the king. In the horror of familial killing, like an extreme intensification of the civil carnage that has engulfed the scene and is taking the Arthurian world from us, an active sense of “making” history, of a completed virtuous projection from past to future, is also validated, though under such great stress that it may be very hard to accept as such.

Malory’s narrative treatment of history limits the power that the past should exercise over the present. Merlin does not only insist that one cannot guard against future misadventure (125). He also warns against caring too much about things that cannot be helped: “thou art a foole to take thought for hit that woll nat amende thee” (43). Merlin’s proverbial wisdom does not imply a narrow limit on sensibility, or a reductive fatalism, but an extension towards the
past of the same willingness to accept unforeseen and unwelcome outcomes that leads to
adventure in the first place. In the case to which Merlin refers, young Arthur is downcast
because the pursuit of an adventure has been denied him by birth – to chase the Questing
Beast is for King Pellinore’s family only – but what can he possibly do about that? As Merlin
goes on to reveal, Arthur’s birth (on the father’s side) has also made him king, and (on the
mother’s side) has meant that his sexual relationship with Morgawse was incest. Not all the
potential outcomes from one set of circumstances are likely to be desirable.

Just as tenses in Malory are varied, the reader’s sense of the anterior “distance” of the
historical narrative is a relative, variable factor. The sense of historical fragmentation and
separation of readers from the past arises partly because of a normative tendency to present
past history as if it were familiar and close. The norm of closeness is implied when the
narrative feels compelled to step in occasionally to explain differences, avoid
misunderstandings, and make sly critiques of “nowadays”: that “the custom was at that time
that all manner of shamefull deth was called treson” (1050); that “in tho dayes … for favoure,
love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente” (1055); that hermits
“in thos dayes”, were former “men of worship and prouesse”, who “hylde grete householdis”
(1076); that Launcelot and Guenevere may not have been in bed together because “love that
tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes” (1165). These moments of unlikeness are evident
because in its priorities and preoccupations the present is represented as fundamentally like
the past. Because Malory believes in the matter of the Arthurian story as accessible and
explicable in the terms of the present, the characteristic fear of the nostalgic subject that the
desired past is really “absent” and “inauthentic”, quite remote from “lived experience”
(Stewart 1993: 23) is muted. The Morte is retrospective, and finally centred on loss, but not
truly “nostalgic” in temperament, because its method disallows the full sense of present
difference and deficiency on which nostalgia depends. The great past never seems archaic and largely forgotten to Malory, as it does to a writer like Tolkien. For every critique of “nowadays”, Malory is just as likely to interpolate a “wit you well” or a proverb, endorsing the contemporary “gentle” audience’s ability to appreciate what is happening from their common stock of wisdom and experience.

Death is the source of Malory’s narrative endings, as Mann says, and many of the Winchester manuscript’s marginalia point to deaths, but death is also necessarily an imperfect marker of historical distance, because, read thematically, it is a force for continuity, common to all histories. While in linear narrative death divides characters from each other, and from the readers’ present, as a theme it also unites readers in sympathy with characters, and bridges past, present and potential lives. It takes the great figures away, leaving a diminished “us” of “nowadays” behind, but it leaves the significance of their human natures exemplary and memorable, and so ideologically persistent. Ector’s famous lament at Launcelot’s death, cited by Mann as a locus of division, also provides a precise check-list of the knightly qualities appreciated by Malory’s fifteenth-century contemporaries: “the curtest knyght that ever bare shelde”; “the truest frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors”; “the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde”; “the mekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyes” (1259). Readers, as they lament Lancelot with Ector, are invited to identify closely with the “gentle” values of an author who “assumed that the social distinctions of his time would last until the Day of Judgement” (Field 1993: 37).

While the Morte’s third-person narrative is past tense and retrospective (not in itself a very distinctive feature), its events continue to move forward, especially in those parts usually judged the saddest. The final scenes of Arthur’s life go forward at great pace. Left with
limited time for reflection, Arthur models for the reader, as for Bedivere, a fine balance between emotion and pragmatism, and shows the need to get on with things:

“No leve thys mournynge and wepyng, jantyll knyght,” seyde the kyng,
“for all thys woll nat avayle me. For wyte thou well, and I myght lyve myselff, the dethe of sir Lucan wolde greve me evermore. But my tyme hyeth faste,” seyde the kynge. “Therefore,” seyde kynge Arthur unto sir Bedwere, “take thou here Excaliber.” (Works, 1238)

….

“A, my lorde Arthur, what shall becom of me, now ye go frome me and leve me here alone amonge myne enemyes?”

“Comfort thyselff,” seyde the kyng, “and do as well as thou mayste, for in me ys no truste for to truste in. For I wyl into the vale of Avlyyon to hele me of my grevous wound.” (Works, 1240)

The Winchester manuscript has “I muste into the vale…” Caxton, followed by recent editors, has “I wyl…”. Something untranslatable between the two seems right: Arthur is going because he has to, and it is time, but nevertheless he is purposefully going, as the best thing he can do in the circumstances. He gives the moment a drive to action, demanding a continuing attachment to the temporal rather than the frustrated regression of nostalgia.

Nostalgia and Trauma
Le Morte Darthur has been called nostalgic for many reasons: because the author was romantically cast as a man born too late, self-consciously looking back from the “autumn” of the romance tradition; because it is assumed on a reflectionist model of literature that the text must be recoiling from the horror of civil war in his own times; or because, on a more sophisticated model of literary ideology, the text is taken to be repressing the trauma of its own times by turning to the past. It is true that Malory’s knightly attitudes sometimes take his story in opposing directions: for instance, he registers great sadness as “the noble knyghtes … [are] layde to the colde erthe” (1236), but also wants to say that Arthur has “won the fylde” (1236-7), when only four men are left alive! Nevertheless, Malory was not under compulsion either to tell or hide the true nature of war or of the English fifteenth century, as modern readers understand them. His narrative is ideologically produced and generically selective, limited by its exclusion of other contemporary factors – such as towns, trade and money – so that many areas of historical discontinuity between his own world and the world of the romances he tells are hidden or downplayed. It would be naïve to assume that under a nostalgic textual surface the trauma of England’s recent loss of France and current civil war lie repressed in the Morte as unconscious “truths”, just waiting to be outed in the end. Malory’s sadness about the end of Arthur and the Round Table includes some specific aspersions on English fickleness, but is not a wholesale indictment of his age, or of the project of chivalry, however much we may think it should be. He is sad because he thinks chivalry is still such a good thing, and Arthur’s reign gave the best example ever.

In medieval terms, the Morte’s drive to action distinguishes its sadness from ungenerative and static “melancholy”. Nor is its condition “melancholia” in Freudian terms, because within it loss of the loved Arthurian world does not result in a narcissistic self-critique and loss of the ability to love (Freud 1953). Rather, memory of the lost love object – Camelot – involves
some function of self-critique, but also excites continued attachment to the practices and values of an implied audience still – in continuity with the past – “all jantyllmen that beryth olde armys ought of ryght to honoure sir Tristrams” (375); “there was never worshipfull man nor worshipfull woman but they loved one bettir than anothir; and worship in armys may never be foyled” (1119). Certainly, the past may reproach the modern world, especially in the area of love, a theme as old as Chrétien de Troyes, but memory of the past is still a source of enthusiasm for love and arms and a revelation of their continuing importance. Memory is itself a narrative theme linking past and present. Remembering and “calling to mind” are key activities that worshipful personages within the fiction share with the implied audience. The famous passage in which Malory castigates “love nowadayes” as hasty heat which is soon cold concludes with an appeal to contemporary lovers to “calle unto your remembraunce the monethe of May, lyke as ded quene Gwennyver” (1120).

There is “wepyng and dolour out of mesure” (1259) in Malory’s last book, but he repeatedly follows his major characters’ deaths with the comforting rituals of late medieval mourning. Arthur’s stark, lonely and uncertain departure is most unlike the end of a mighty contemporary monarch, yet Bedivere, after one moment of terror at his abandonment, offers many years’ obedience in his little chantry to Arthur’s last command: “pray for my soul”. The long monastic careers of Lancelot and Guenevere convert their earthly worship into heavenly reward, displaying their surpassing quality still. Malory insists that Bors and his French kin were not stranded in England after Lancelot’s death – “that was but favour of makers” (“that was only made up by writers”) – but went to France to stabilise the lands Lancelot had granted them, and then to the Holy Land where they “dyd many bataylles” (1260). These figures turn from “the world”, but in ways that remain purposive and “worshipful”, and which fit well with fifteenth-century notions of a good end. There were notable fifteenth-century
crusaders, amongst them the tournament star and humanist Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers.

In short, loss and death are the end of Arthur’s story, but we do not need to read them as if the text or the fifteenth century found no ways of coping. The final book is full of references to English funeral customs – lyke-wake, vespers, mass, matins, dole and month mind – as if the deaths of close contemporaries were being mourned for and commemorated in familiar ways.

To conclude, *Le Morte Darthur* is a fictional “history” of Arthur and his knights, whom it treats as real. It is not a history of its own times, except in a few incidental references, but it is a very revealing document about contemporary attitudes, behaviours and mentality, especially amongst the landed, “gentle” classes. Like most medieval histories, it ends sadly, but it does not represent the present as a helpless condition of absence, alienation and utter division from the past. The narrative and its exemplary agents model for readers another reaction to loss and death – one of grief, memory and continuity.

**PRIMARY SOURCES**


REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


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