

Summary of Malory Lectures, September 22 and 24, 2014

KEYWORDS: KING ARTHUR, ROMANCE, CHIVALRY, MANUSCRIPT TO PRINT

We discussed the broad outlines of the story of King Arthur, a British hero who might have originated in the 5th or 6th century

We discussed how Arthur's earliest appearances present him as a formidable warrior defending both the British and Christianity against non-Christian, Saxon invaders: there is a nationalist flavour, at least potentially, in the story from the start

In his earliest appearances, Arthur is a warrior king of a sort familiar to us from epic/ heroic texts like *Beowulf*, but in later adaptations, the "romance" strain comes to dominate

Romance (the term originally simply means a text in the vernacular, instead of Latin) concentrates on the individual knight, whose actions are often inspired by, or in service of, women (or, in the case of the Grail quest, God)

But some Arthurian romance still has a strong interest in the bonds between warriors, and between leaders and their war bands

The *Morte Darthur* is by Thomas Malory (d. 1471), who tells us at the end of his *Morte Darthur* that he was a "knight prisoner;" it shows a strong interest in both Arthur and his knights, and a particular fondness for Lancelot, who was also a chief focus of medieval French expansions/ adaptations of the Arthurian legend

William Caxton wrote a preface for his printing of Malory: I read some of it to you

"And I, according to my copy, have done set it in imprint, to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in those days... Wherein they shall find many joyous and pleasant histories, and noble and renowned acts of humanity, gentleness, and chivalry. For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renown.... Then to proceed forth in this said book, which I direct unto all noble princes, lords and ladies, gentlemen or gentlewomen, that desire to read or hear read of the noble and joyous history of the great conqueror and excellent king, King Arthur, sometime king of this noble realm, then called Britain; I, William

Caxton, simple person, present this book following, which I have enprised to imprint: and treateth of the noble acts, feats of arms of chivalry, prowess, hardiness, humanity, love, courtesy, and very gentleness, with many wonderful histories and adventures."

Caxton's preface presents Malory's text as an entertaining story from which readers can also learn: he is reflecting the common notion that literature should teach and delight

Caxton offers Malory to his readers as examples of "chivalry"

The term chivalry comes from *chevalier*, the French word for a mounted warrior, a knight

Chivalry has by Malory's day come to be a code of courtly, knightly behavior: chivalrous knights were expected to behave honorably and generously, to be loyal to their lords and their companions, to be virtuous, and to protect the weak

Malory used French and English sources to create his long prose narrative about King Arthur and his knights. His various sources mean that he combined a chronicle-history approach (which concentrated more on the King and on warfare) and a romance approach (which concentrated more on the adventures of individual knights; on love; and sometimes on their spiritual development)

One of Malory's favourite phrases, when describing love or lust, is "out of measure"; he tends to see male/ female relationships in terms of how they disrupt the bonds among men

Malory shows a persistent concern with people ignoring prophecies and other apparently clear signs of God's will (Arthur has to draw the sword from the stone many times; Arthur chooses to marry Guenevere despite Merlin's warnings; Arthur chooses to fight Mordred despite the dream in which the ghost of Gawain appears): why raise this concern over and over? Is an Arthurian storyteller is always rather like Merlin, knowing what is going to happen, but being unable to change the course of events?

When Arthur fights the Romans, Malory points to the presence of giants and Saracens in the Roman army; the enemies of the British are shown to be alien, "other"

The Quest for the Holy Grail shifts chivalric values from the martial to the spiritual: Lancelot, the greatest knight, cannot succeed because of his sin with Guenevere. Malory shows us Arthur's concerns over losing his war band in the

Quest; is Malory dubious about the appropriateness of this kind of activity for knights?

Most of the knights fail at the quest: only three knights, characterized by their purity, succeed

Malory treats the end of the Arthurian world as the result of malice and bad luck: he seems to resist the idea of the affair; later, Arthur fights Mordred despite warnings, and the focus is on the “wicked day of destiny.” Is Malory exploring questions of fate and free will?

In 1485, England’s first printer, William Caxton, printed Malory’s text

In 1934, a manuscript copy, the Winchester Manuscript, was discovered

Differences between the two versions have led scholars to wonder which version most closely resembles what Malory might have written

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