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Reclaiming Arthur:

Malory's Anglicization of the Arthurian Tradition in

Le Morte Darthur

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A dissertation presented to the

Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Doctor of Arts

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Reclaiming Arthur:

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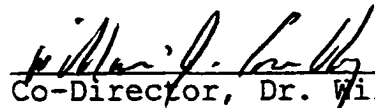*Le Morte Darthur*

by Brian A. Ray
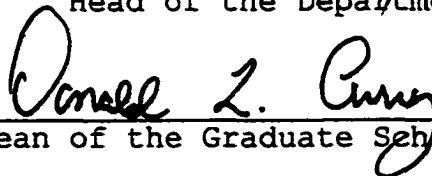
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Abstract

Reclaiming Arthur:

Malory's Anglicization of the Arthurian Tradition in

Le Morte Darthur

by Brian A. Ray

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is a landmark English
prose work that places the Arthurian tales, the matter of
Britain, into the history of England. Malory drew on the
French romance material associated with King Arthur and
created a comprehensive account of Arthur's life and his
ideals. His work reflects a synthesis of the best of the
narrative tools of Malory's French and English romance
sources and many narrative characteristics of earlier
literary genres. Commonly known as a romance, *Le Morte
Darthur* is something other than mere romance.

An analysis of structure, theme, and genre, measured
against Malory's sources, reveals that *Le Morte Darthur*
casts Arthur in an heroic English role. The narrative
structure of Malory's text reflects the cyclic nature of
Fortune's wheel and focuses the story on the character of
Arthur. Malory presents an image of heroic chivalry in the
actions of Arthur and his knights that reflects the heroic
principles of the English Anglo-Saxon heritage. The rise and
fall of Arthur and his ideals are the focus of Malory's
work, and the changes that Malory made to the character of
Arthur emphasize characteristics of kings and leaders
depicted in medieval heroic literature. For Malory, the

heroic king is an English king, a strong King Arthur modeled on an heroic ideal found in the hearts and minds of the common people and rooted in the history of England.

Le Morte Darthur has been called a romance, but it contains narrative elements of epic, chronicle, and history. Malory is writing about characters and events from the history of *his* England. He uses the elements of heroic age literature to tell, in English, the history of an English king and his reign, for an English audience. *Le Morte Darthur* is a *history* of King Arthur. In effect, it reclaims Arthur from the French romance tradition and places the story of his life and his ideals, the matter of Britain, in its proper place in the history of its English audience.

Acknowledgments

The spark for this project was kindled by Dr. Thomas Gasque, and I owe him a major debt of gratitude. King Arthur had always been just a fixture of my childhood, an interesting and entertaining story. Dr. Gasque first opened my eyes to the contrasting values embodied in Arthur's character in Chretién and Malory. That spark was fanned by the thoughtful guidance of Dr. Ted Sherman. The heroic nature of Anglo-Saxon literature and the powerful beauty of Old English poetry took root in my awareness through his guidance. The heroic perspective of Old English literature has colored my perceptions of nearly everything I have read since. Dr. William Connelly has been a constant source of support and encouragement. His infectious enthusiasm for all things medieval has been the catalyst for my perseverance with this project. Dr. Keith Taylor has also been instrumental in the conceptualizing of Malory's work in the context of other medieval literature. Without him, this project would have withered on the vine. I also owe heartfelt gratitude to Dr. June Hall McCash, whose patience and encouragement helped see me through some very difficult translations of Old French. I also want to thank my sister, Mary, for being invaluable as a critic and a soundingboard for ideas and for standing by me throughout this lengthy project.

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Chapter 1

Discord at the Round Table:

Backgrounds of Malorian Discourse

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is a landmark work in English prose literature. Using the existing widely diverse material of the Arthurian tales, the prose forms of which were primarily continental and mostly French, Malory created a tightly crafted prose work consisting of several tales derived from the matter of Britain. The tales in *Le Morte Darthur* are told in an English prose that reflects a synthesis of the best of the narrative tools of his French sources and his English sources. However, critics of Malory's work do not always agree on the source of Malory's narrative style, nor for that matter on much anything else. In fact, most aspects of Malory scholarship entertain an active discourse, sometimes heated, which serves to promote deeper and broader examinations of the text and its sources and analogues. These examinations, in turn, spark continued scholarly discourse. This nearly self-perpetuating action is due in large measure to the fact that there are two, and only two, surviving versions of Malory's work which have numerous differences in content, even though they are clearly based on the same original, and some stylistic differences, all of which may probably exist due to editing. The first of these two versions of *Le Morte Darthur* (and the only one available for nearly five hundred years) is William Caxton's edition published first in 1485.[1] The second is the

Winchester manuscript, edited and published by Eugène Vinaver in 1947.[2]

What we have in both Caxton's edition and in the Winchester manuscript is a collection of tales that, though largely derived from French romance sources, differs both thematically and in narrative style from those sources. Significant scholarship has been devoted to Malory's style and the ways in which it is indebted to and differs from the French tradition. His narrative style may or may not be representative of an English style distinct from the French, though there are some clear differences from the French romance style (i.e. brevity, clarity, and an emphasis on action over motive). The thematic differences evident in the surviving versions of Malory's text of the Arthurian tales are clearly what sets these tales apart from their French progenitors.

Before examining these thematic differences, it is necessary to establish a common understanding of the state of Malory scholarship and its major avenues of inquiry. To ensure an effective appreciation of the discourse upon which the present study is based, and since the thematic differences to be discussed are evident in both extant versions of Malory's text, it is necessary to review the current debates over issues concerning *Le Morte Darthur* in both of its major extant versions, Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript. Malory studies cover a fairly wide range of issues. Among them are the search for the identity

of Malory the author; an examination of Malory's sources and his role as redactor, translator, and interpreter; identification of the literary context in which he wrote; the analysis of Malory's narrative style and use of language; and an examination of the structure and order of the tales as reflected in the two extant versions of Malory's work. As pointed out by James Spisak in *Studies in Malory*, the discovery of the Winchester manuscript gave new energy to the study of this otherwise relatively neglected author and his work.[3] Consequently, though the nineteenth century discourse will be briefly mentioned, the bulk of this review will focus on the issues raised since the publication of Eugène Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript in 1947.

Most of the criticism concerning Malory and/or either of the extant versions of his work is far from consensus forming. In fact, nearly every aspect of Malory scholarship has at least two basic fundamental arguments that seem, to a large degree, mutually exclusive. As will be seen, in recent years a significant amount of criticism has been written to attempt to bridge some of the seemingly unbridgeable gaps and actually provide synthesis of differing ideas in order to foster consensus. However, this effort has not always been successful. Consensus building has occasionally created new divergences and intensified old disagreements. Page West Life notes that

Malory scholarship has been dominated by an
"either. . . or" fallacy; [. . .] assertions on
both sides often encouraged specious argumentation
and rigidity of opinion. The "either. . . or"
debates have nevertheless forced reconsideration
of important issues and generated new ideas and a
synthetic approach to Malory scholarship. (28)[4]

The major issues of note in Malory scholarship can be
divided into six categories--identifying the author,
establishing a pedigree for the extant versions, source
identification and study, structure/genre analysis,
exploring narrative style and methods, and consideration of
thematic elements. There is considerable overlap in several
of the categories, and few critical analyses can be
corralled solely into any one area. However, by breaking
them down into several distinct topics, the arguments can be
more easily considered and the opposing sides more clearly
seen. The arguments build one upon the other and in many
cases provide the springboard for further critical analysis.
For example, as Elizabeth Pochoda notes, some critical work,
such as clarifying the nature of *Le Morte Darthur*--whether
it is "more than a collected translation of continental
romances"--had to be completed prior to analyzing structure,
genre, and theme (3).[5] The primary scholarship in these
areas of Malory discourse has been thoroughly identified by
others.[6] What follows is not intended to be an updated
survey of all Malory scholarship. Rather, it is an overview

of the major issues, the major arguments concerning each, and a summary of some of the major critics and critical works supporting each view. The discourse about the identification of Sir Thomas Malory has no significance to the present study, so a review of the arguments in that area of scholarship is not included.[7] Some of the synthesis that Life suggests had been started in 1979, and which Spisak comments on briefly, has had varying effect. Synthesis does not always equate to consensus, as we shall see as we look at the various issues.

Establishing a Pedigree for the Extant Versions

There are essentially two versions of Malory's text. Caxton's edition of Malory's work was first published in 1485. After that, as Larry Benson notes, six different editions were produced in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, each based primarily on the edition preceding it.[8] Each editor modified the preceding edition of Malory's text in order to meet specific editorial goals. Generally, each was changed to meet the contemporary moral sensibilities of the reading public. These heavily edited editions remained the sole access to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* for nearly two hundred years. Then, as Benson further discusses, in the early nineteenth century, two new editions were published. They, in turn, were based on the latest of the earlier editions, which only compounded the

changes made since Caxton first published his edition.[9] It was eventually determined that these latest editions had, by modifying earlier changes, corrupted the text of Caxton's original edition with over 20,000 changes (Benson, "Sir Thomas Malory's" 88). In an effort to provide a reliable edition for scholarly use, Edward Strachey and H. Oskar Sommer determined to restore the text to what Caxton had originally published. Strachey's edition was published in 1868, and Sommer's three-volume edition with a somewhat more useful critical apparatus was published in 1889-1891 (Life 8-9). Strachey's edition, though based on Caxton's, still maintained the practice of editing passages reflecting questionable morals. As Benson notes, Strachey "omitted or rewrote any passage that might prove harmful to the morals of young boys" ("Sir Thomas Malory's" 89). Sommer's edition essentially restored the text of Caxton's original printed version and remained the standard version of Caxton's edition of Malory's text (being reprinted as late as 1973) until Spisak published his edition of Caxton's Malory in 1983.[10] Due to recent interest in both Malory and Caxton, several modern editions (some with modernized spelling, punctuation, and grammar and others with the spelling of the original versions, but with modernized grammar) have been published.[11]

In 1934, W. F. Oakeshott discovered a manuscript of Malory's text in the library at Winchester College.[12] The manuscript version of Malory's work was dated to the

fifteenth century and was determined to have significant differences from Caxton's version. Eugène Vinaver edited and published his edition of the Winchester manuscript in 1947. Lotte Hellenga notes that there is physical evidence on the manuscript that links it to Caxton's printing shop and suggests that there might be a relationship between the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's edition; it might have been used in preparing the typesetter's copy of the text, though no direct evidence confirms this.[13] Though the Winchester manuscript was in Caxton's possession at some time, it is probably not the direct source he used in preparing his own edition. Additionally, Vinaver postulated that there is at least a one-manuscript remove from each surviving version and Malory's own monograph. In fact, he states that "The work--or works--completed in that year [1469/1470] were transcribed several times before they appeared in print."[14] This is supported by Hilton Kelliher's examination of the manuscript's marginalia.[15]

When Vinaver published his version of the Winchester manuscript, the literary world was confronted with a watershed change in the manner in which Malory's text was perceived. While analyzing the manuscript text, Vinaver determined that Malory had written eight distinct but related romances and grouped them together into a single collection.[16] Vinaver noted that Caxton's edition had presented Malory's text as a single, unified work, albeit inconsistent and somewhat disconnected. Vinaver's findings

suggested that Caxton probably edited Malory's original collection of tales into something resembling a single work from what Vinaver believed to be a collection of separate tales. Further, Vinaver attacked Caxton's editorial practices as arbitrary, and in a tone that suggests that he believed Caxton's actions were somewhat malicious. He says that "Not only did he [Caxton] rephrase the text, depriving it of some of its original flavour, but he tried to make his readers believe that the volume he published was a single work" ("Sir Thomas Malory" 543). As a consequence of Vinaver's challenge and the existence of only two significant versions of the text, the focus of Malory scholarship soon shifted to an either/or study of the structural unity of the text.

The structural debate, discussed in more detail in another section, is grounded in the main differences between Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript. It remains essentially unresolved and, without additional texts being discovered, is most likely ultimately unresolvable. Each critic, since the appearance of Vinaver's edition in 1947, has had to grapple with this issue to some degree. In fact, almost every modern argument about Malory's work, even if it seeks to address an issue other than unity, begins with this issue in some manner--each critic deciding on *Le Morte Darthur* as a single work or as a grouping of tales--and only then proceeds to deal with the text from a particular perspective with respect to unity.[17]

Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript sparked a renewed interest in Malory that has continued since. His somewhat controversial interpretations have themselves been the subject of debate; however, the most rewarding outcome of Vinaver's edition is that he has provided a detailed and accurate text of the Winchester manuscript, one which has become the primary source document for most non-Caxton focused Malory scholarship. In addition to his landmark interpretation of the structure of Malory's work and providing a very accurate edition of the Winchester manuscript, Vinaver's edition has been essential in the discourse over Malory source study, a topic that will be discussed in detail in another section. Vinaver provided lengthy commentary on the text as it relates to the French sources that Malory had most probably used.[18] Brewer, in reaction to the critical apparatus of Vinaver's edition, said,

> The strength of Vinaver's commentary, and its
> principle concern, is the comparison between
> Malory's French originals, [. . .] and what Malory
> made of them. [. . .] The weakness, if one may use
> so bold a word, of Vinaver's commentary, is the
> lack of reference to contemporary or preceding
> English writing. This may lead to
> misinterpretation, but more usually simply a
> blank, and we get very little help in

understanding Malory's place in fifteenth-century English literature. ("Present State" 84)

Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript has not only spurred renewed scholarship concerning Malory, it has become the very foundation of most Malorian research in the last half century. This is particularly true of the literary discourse over Malory source study, and structure/genre analysis.

Source Identification and Study

Internal references in Malory's text note that Malory drew his tales from French sources. The first of some fifty-six such occurrences in the text is in the tale "Merlin:" "Soo in the grettest chirch of London—whether it were Powlis or not the Frensshe booke maketh no mencyon— alle the estates were longe or day in the chirch for to praye."[19] Another one occurs at the end of *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*. Speaking of the matter of the tales concerning Lancelot that he is not including in his text, Malory says:

> And so I leve here of this tale, and overlepe
> grete bookis of sir Launcelot, what grete
> adventures he ded whan he was called 'le Shyvalere
> de Charyot'. For, as the Freynshe booke sayth,
> because of dispyte that knyghtes and ladyes called
> him 'the Knyght that rode in the Charyot', lyke as

> he were juged to the jybett, therefore, in the
> despite of all them that named hym so, he was
> caryed in a charyotte a twelve-monethe; for but
> lytill aftir that he had slayne sir Mellyagaunte
> in the quenys quarell, he never of a twelve-moneth
> com on horsebak. And as the Freynshe booke sayth,
> he ded that twelve-moneth more than forty
> batayles. (669)

In addition to these internal textual references, several of the colophons omitted by Caxton but retained in the Winchester manuscript refer to French sources. The colophon at the end of *The Tale of King Arthur*, begins,

> Here endyth this tale, as the Freynsshe booke
> sayeth, fro the maryage of Kynge Uther unto Kynge
> Arthure that regned aftir hym and ded many
> batayles. (110)

The lengthy *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones* ends with the following colophon. Since the tale of Tristram is left incomplete, the colophon may suggest that Malory was working from an incomplete copy of the Tristram cycle.

> Here endyth the secunde boke off Syr Trystram de
> Lyones, whyche drawyn was oute of Freynshe by Syr
> Thomas Malleorré, Knyght, as Jesu be hys helpe.
> (511)

Malory once again notes his reliance on a French source at the end of the tale of the Holy Grail where he begins his colophon with the following statement:

Thus endyth the tale of the Sankgreal that was

breffly drawy[n] oute of Freynshe. (608)

Though these colophon references to French sources were
omitted by Caxton, he echoed them in his preface where he
describes his source copy of *Le Morte Darthur*, as "take[n]
oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe" (xv). In addition to his
French sources, Malory used English sources, the
identification of which has played an important role in
Malory source study. Malory's reliance on so many sources
led many nineteenth century critics to relegate Malory to
the role of translator, redactor, and compiler.[20] The
generally negative tone of this critical sentiment cast
aspersions on Malory's abilities as an author, and
essentially eliminated any consideration of Malory as a
creative writer. There were few early critics who saw any
significant originality in Malory's work.

In the earliest stages of nineteenth century criticism,
considerable emphasis was placed on identifying Malory's
French sources. This was quite difficult because Malory's
direct source manuscripts undoubtedly did not survive, at
least none that could be identified. However, by the end of
the nineteenth century several likely French sources, though
not the source manuscripts, for the various parts of
Malory's work had been identified. The drive to locate
source versions of Malory's tales was motivated in large
part by the fact that Malory's work was regarded as
essentially an amalgam of material translated from the

French and collected together into a single collection. Malory's use of several identifiable sources suggested this, as did his frequent references to French sources in the text. Also, Caxton, in his preface, had said as much:

> And *many noble volumes* be made of hym [Arthur] and
> of his noble knyghts in Frensshe, which I have
> seen and redde beyonde the see, which been not had
> in our maternal tongue. [. . .] Wherefore, [. . .]
> I have [. . .] enprysed to enprynte *a book of the*
> *noble hystoryes* of the sayd kynge Arthur [. . .]
> whyche copye syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of
> certayn *bookes* of Frensshe and reduced it into
> Englysshe" (xv, emphasis added).

It is clear that Caxton believed he was printing a single book out of a number of volumes, histories, and books. All of Caxton's references to Malory's French sources are plural.[21]

In addition to his French sources, nineteenth century critics had identified at least two English sources—the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*—to which Malory was indebted for source material.[22] By the time Sommer's edition was published near the end of the nineteenth century, most of Malory's probable sources had been identified, and he included a brief comparison of them to Caxton's text in his critical analysis.[23]

Early in the twentieth century, with much of the identification process complete, source identification

shifted to source study. As comparisons between his sources and Malory's work were made, there began a shift away from seeing Malory as a mere translator and toward seeing him as an original author. What Malory had written was different enough to allow some critics to entertain thoughts that Malory was something more than a mere translator and compiler.[24] However, the weight of opinion to the effect that Malory lacked any significant originality was so great that echoes of that opinion are still found in modern criticism. Vinaver, who obviously thought little of Malory's originality, addressed the trend in source study thus:

> A vast amount of work has been done in the last quarter of a century on Malory's indebtedness to his sources, with the avowed object of separating all that is creditable to him from whatever he may have borrowed; but it has too often been assumed that these two ingredients of the work are in fact separable. [. . .] The separable elements are generally those which matter least, such as the author's ideas, his prejudices, his conscious tendencies. It has been shown beyond dispute that Malory took a sceptical view of the supernatural, that he had no sympathy with the French courtly tradition, and that he had a practical, matter-of-fact conception of chivalry. But to say this is to describe certain aspects of his mind, not the nature of his work. And because so many

critics have evaded the latter issue we seem to be
on the whole better informed about the author's
ambitions and idiosyncracies than about his
ultimate achievement.[25]

Early source comparison study suggested that Malory was
familiar with a wide variety of Arthurian material and that
he probably knew several source versions of the tales he was
writing beyond the one which he chose to adapt in each
instance.[26] Malory had stamped the various tales he wrote
with a generally harmonizing, cohesive purpose. Malory's
originality rested in his selection of source tales, his
choice of material to be cut or kept, his manner of
translation and adaptation, and the net effect of his
compilation as making *Le Morte Darthur* an original work
artistically distinct from his sources.[27]

Before going further, perhaps it is best to note here
that there are several major problems with source study as a
critical technique. As Charles Moorman has noted, in
relation to Malory studies, there are at least three
significant problems. First, the exact sources that Malory
may have had in hand may never be accurately identified, nor
be discovered to have survived. Second, Malory may have had
access to/knowledge of multiple versions of each tale he was
writing. Consequently, any blending of different sources,
and to what degree, cannot be accurately determined. Third,
what may be determined to be an "original" passage in Malory

could in fact be borrowed from an as yet unidentified or no longer extant source (xix).[28]

In spite of these shortcomings, and as a consequence of the generally accepted nature of Malory's work as being derived from French sources, no matter how original he was in doing so, the attempt to establish an understanding and appreciation for Malory's work largely centers on the analysis of *Le Morte Darthur* in relation to its sources. Though several critics have warned that too much emphasis is being placed on Malory's sources and not enough on his text as a work of art in its own right, it has become commonplace in Malory scholarship to begin with an understanding of the sources, especially when discussing Malory's originality and evaluating what he brought to the telling of the tales of the Arthurian legends.[29]

Until fairly recently, this effort has reflected a general bias towards Malory's French sources. This was due in large part to the perception that Malory was writing a prose romance based in the French romance tradition and the consequent predisposition to look to French sources and models. Life notes that Vinaver's criticism, the starting point for a significant amount of modern analysis of Malory's work, "tended to project Malory against his French rather than his English background, [. . .and] because of Vinaver's emphasis on Malory's French sources, study of his English sources and background was a secondary consideration for many years" (13-14). Referring to a Wells Cathedral

analogy used by C. S. Lewis for appreciating the originality
and artistry of the accumulated nature of Malory's work,
Vinaver notes that Malory's

'books' and 'tales' are all adaptations from the
French, and if there ever was an 'Anglo-Norman
chapel' it has been absorbed in later French
accretions. Sometimes the sources of these
accretions are not extant; some may yet come to
light. And wherever Malory happens to tell a story
which is otherwise unknown, but for which he is
clearly not responsible, 'retrogression towards
the source' becomes a legitimate method. He is the
only author to have preserved what must have been
originally a French prose romance of Gaheret.
[. . .] Another text that has not survived except
in Malory is the last of the three *Lancelot*
fragments that constitute his *Noble Tale of Sir*
Launcelot du Lake. [. . .] There are also some
Arthurian romances which have come down to us in
copies distinctly more corrupt than the ones
Malory used. [. . .] The bulk of his work,
however, consists of 'late French bits' for which
reliable versions of his sources are available. A
careful comparison of his text with the French
makes it possible to discover a number of passages
creditable to his own invention. But if the 'pure
Malory' were limited to such passages it would be

difficult to say anything positive about his art
of writing. ("Sir Thomas Malory" 548-49)

Brewer notes that Vinaver's rhetoric against Malory's
originality has softened somewhat since 1947. However, in
reaction to the generally negative tone of Vinaver's
commentary, Brewer attempts to provide a middle ground, or
at least a counterbalance, in the originality debate:

> Vinaver still occasionally expresses a *parti pris*
> in favour of that French Arthurian romance which
> has not stood the test of time, and a contempt for
> Malory's English empiricism, interest in history,
> muddle, softness, moral concern, and bad French,
> in a work which still lives as literature. Vinaver
> can still contrast Malory's "prosaic context"
> unfavourably with the "poetry at its highest" of
> Chrestien, where surely the properly high
> valuation of Chrestien need not depress Malory's
> different currency. ("Present State" 85)

In spite of the influence of Vinaver to the contrary,
Malory did not use only French sources. As mentioned
earlier, critics have discovered that he probably had access
to and used several English sources as well. The two most
influential English sources include the Alliterative *Morte
Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Analysis of the
influence that these verse tales of Arthur had on Malory has
been the focus of a large number of critical works. The
Alliterative *Morte Arthure* was recognized as one of Malory's

sources early in the identification phase of source study. The primary critical editions of both versions of Malory's text, Sommer's 1890 edition of Caxton and Vinaver's 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript, identify the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* as a source. Consequently, the critical work applied to it has been largely comparative.[30] Comparative study has also frequently been used to support the unity debate, which is one line of the discourse on the structure of *Le Morte Darthur* that will be discussed in detail later. A brief example will suffice here. Both Mary E. Dichmann and Wilfred L. Guerin compare sections of Malory's work to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* in their analysis of Malory's changes to the source, which, they claim, show that Malory had a unifying intention behind the crafting of his work.[31] In another comparative study, Michael James Stroud compares Malory's second tale, *The Tale of King Arthur and Emperor Lucius*,[32] to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* in order to determine what types of changes Malory made in adapting this source. He concludes that the extent of Malory's originality lies in the changes he made to support his intended aim.[33] William Matthews' work in his *The Tragedy of Arthur* explores the extent to which Malory used the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* as a source, and to support his own interpretation of Malory's intended themes, he provides a detailed analysis of his comparative findings.[34]

The situation concerning the status of the Stanzaic
Morte Arthur as a possible source for Malory has not been an
easy one to solve. Sommer introduced the controversy in the
critical apparatus in his 1890 edition of Caxton's Malory.
Sommer held that Malory used a version of the Stanzaic *Morte
Arthur* as a direct source in conjunction with his French
source for the final sections of *Le Morte Darthur*. James
Douglas Bruce touched off a back and forth debate with
Sommer over the use of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as a source
for Malory. Bruce directly challenged Sommer's position that
it is a source and argued that the French *Mort Artu* is
Malory's source.[35] Vinaver, too, opts for the French *Mort
Artu* over the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as Malory's source for
the final tales.[36] There is significant critical support for
Bruce and Vinaver.[37] However, there seems to be at least as
much support for Sommer's position that the Stanzaic *Morte
Arthur* was indeed a source.[38] The strength of these critics'
arguments lies in the significant number of specific
parallels between the two texts that could be identified
through source comparison. Wilfred L. Guerin generalized
that Malory used the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* for a "narrative
guide" but felt free to expand the material either by using
Mort Artu or his imagination ("Tale of the Death" 270).
Several other critics have recognized that Malory either
used the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as his source, or that he
used it in conjunction with the French *Mort Artu*.[39]

Other English sources, such as Hardyng's *Chronicle* and several other English verse romances, have been identified as possible sources for elements of the narrative and some minor characters.[40] In addition, Benson has explored the debt that Malory owes not just to English source material but also to the narrative methods of the English romance tradition. As Spisak notes, "Benson suggested that Malory was anglicizing, rather than simply translating or modernizing, the French sources he used and that his method was characteristically that of an English romancer" ("Introduction" 4). Benson, in *Malory's* Morte Darthur, examines the techniques and characteristics of English romance and compares them to Malory. He explores the similarities and differences between the English romance tradition and Malory and gives the modern critic a clear picture of the literary craft and tradition within which Malory worked.[41]

Source study was the first area of serious textual study of Malory's work. As such, it laid an important foundation for all subsequent analysis of *Le Morte Darthur*. Due in large part to its inherent limitations, especially when dealing with Malory, source study has shifted away from being the focal point of critical analysis and instead has become a catalyst for other avenues of critical inquiry.

Structure and Genre Analysis

Because Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* was initially viewed as a compilation of several tales apparently presented by Caxton as a single work, and then was viewed as eight separate romances placed together in a single volume, the debate surrounding the structure and unity of Malory's work holds a central place in the mainstream of Malory criticism. However, it was not always that way. In the nineteenth century, Malory's work was viewed as essentially a compilation from French sources of translated material. As a compilation, there was no real attempt to analyze the structure or unity of the work. It was assumed, in spite of Caxton's attempts to the contrary, that Malory had gathered together the various tales associated with King Arthur and collocated them into a single text. If any nineteenth century critic even considered the issue of unity--after all, Malory's work was obviously a compilation, how could it be expected to have unity--it was believed to reflect only a vague sort of unity or wholeness based on its existence as a single work.[42]

Not until critics began to identify Malory's originality did they have to find a label for the form/genre of what he wrote. If it was no longer a mere compilation but an original medieval work, *Le Morte Darthur* had to be classified as something else. It was most often referred to as a romance, but some critics saw it as possibly an epic,

or at least as akin to the epic tradition.[43] The nineteenth
century English staple, the novel, also suggested some
comparisons. Both nineteenth and twentieth century critics
compared Malory's work to a kind of proto-novel, seeing it
as similar to a novel because it was a lengthy prose work.[44]
(Modern readers sometimes make this same mistake; however,
since most modern editions of *Le Morte Darthur*, Vinaver's
included, are intentionally laid out to resemble a modern
novel with its paragraphing and conventional punctuation,
virtually none of which existed in the fifteenth century,
this is understandable.) When judged by nineteenth and
twentieth century standards for what a novel should be,
Malory's work clearly cannot stand the comparison. In
addition to problems with plot, the issues of structure and
unity work against that notion. Malory's text suffers from
inconsistencies and repetitions. It is uneven in pace,
content, and style. Even when judged by neoclassical
Aristotelian principles of structural unity, Malory's text
does not meet the challenge.

Once again, therefore, the critics turned to the French
romance model and found the principles and methods necessary
for discussing Malory's work. Examining *Le Morte Darthur* in
light of the French romance tradition reveals some
interesting similarities and some intriguing differences.
Most, if not all, of Malory's basic stories clearly came
from the continental body of Arthurian material.[45] Also,
many of the narrative techniques that Malory used could be

seen to derive from French models, either directly or in opposition/reaction. By using the model of French romance, Malory's text could be analyzed through comparison and contrast. In many of the ways that Malory differed from his French model, he was similar to the English romance tradition: for example, his emphasis on brevity and action over motivation. Since no other form seemed to fit, and since critics were comfortable with considering it such, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* came to be accepted and labeled as a *de facto* romance, whether essentially French or English depends largely on which critic is making the comparison.[46]

One particular way in which Malory differs from the French romance model, but is conveniently defined in terms of that model, is in the thematic structure of his tales. French romance used a complicated thematic and narrative structure called *entrelacement* or multiple interwoven themes told in an interwoven plot/narrative structure that emphasized thematic inter-relationships sometimes at the expense of chronological plot clarity. Comparing Malory's text to his various sources, critics, starting with Vinaver, noticed that Malory had unraveled the complex interwoven structure of his models and created a structure of unlocked scenes or vignettes that reflected the French material, but presented them in a more straightforward, episodic, scene-by-scene manner.[47] Vinaver called Malory's process "a delicate and difficult process of unraveling, of collecting the various stretches of any given thread and letting it

unwind itself with as few interruptions as possible" (*Works* viii). The effectiveness and the worthiness of Malory's efforts, as well as his degree of success, varies from one critic to the next.[48] What remains common ground is the fact that he attempted this structural differentiation.

Further complicating the structural argument is the controversy centering on the question of intended unity. Caxton's edition presents Malory's work as essentially a single work from beginning to end. As noted earlier, when Vinaver edited the Winchester manuscript, he asserted that the text reflected a collection of eight separate but related, stand-alone romances combined into a single collection, though not forming a single narrative.[49] Vinaver declared that

> The 'whole book' is the collection which grew up
> by means of successive additions of romances often
> unconnected with each other. [. . .] There is
> undoubtedly in this collection of works a certain
> unity of manner and style; there is no unity of
> structure or design. ("Sir Thomas Malory" 544-45)

His pronouncement energized the unity debate. At the same time, Vinaver's detailed analysis of Malory's work in comparison with his French sources, of which the identity of at least one has been called into question,[50] tacitly settled the genre debate in favor of romance, at least for a while.

R. M. Lumiansky and Charles Moorman were the most vociferous of Vinaver's critics in the unity debate.[51] They argued based on close examination of the text and its probable sources and analogues that Malory intended to write a single, comprehensive, and unified tale of King Arthur and his knights. The inconsistencies, they claimed, were evidence of a preconceived strategy of cross-referencing between tales and narrative retrospective. This debate went so far as to require redefining the concept of literary unity. Lumiansky and Moorman identify two types of unity in literary terms: historical unity and critical unity. Historical unity is that unity which reflects an author's conscious intention to craft a unified work. Critical unity is that unity which the work itself displays regardless of the author's intentions.[52] According to the Lumiansky and Moorman school of critics, Malory's text reflects both kinds of unity.

After years of critical debate over this issue there still is no clear consensus.[53] Several critics--R. S. Loomis, Stephen Knight, D. S. Brewer, and C. S. Lewis among them--have tried to find some middle ground between the two extremes in the unity debate. Seeking to defuse a clearly divisive issue, judging from the tone of the rhetoric involved, some have sought to redefine literary unity in regard to Malory, and cast unity into terms that a medieval author (rather than a twentieth century critic) might understand. Loomis has argued for a general planned design

that may or may not have been present when Malory began to write, but that

> long before he completed his task, he surely recognized that the units could be worked into a larger, somewhat coherent whole, and, either in the course of composition or in revising, he took measures to achieve this coherence.[54]

Knight attempts to reach a compromise by rejecting the conventional, rigid concept of structure. Where most critics tend to analyze structure in terms of the whole work, Knight argues that the text is neither wholly a single unified work, nor is it a collection of separate distinct tales. Instead, he suggests that Malory's text has two differing kinds of unity, the first half of the text being episodic, connected by common setting and recurrence of action, and the latter half being a continuous cohesive narrative focused by common characters and a singular thread of theme and action. Knight contends that each part of the Arthuriad can only be evaluated in terms of structure pertinent to each section's particular style.[55] Brewer takes the position that there is a sense of cohesion between the component tales, derived from the "impressions of unity of atmosphere and of underlying concepts," that provides for a sense of connectedness (42).[56] Malory's work basically consists of a surrounding thematic framework that brackets all of the various disparate internal tales and elements and unifies them into a single composite whole, like "walls of a city,

enclosing a variety of dwellings" (22).[57] Brewer reflects on the impact of the unity debate sparked by Vinaver and the originality argument centered on the works of both Vinaver and Lumiansky, and claims that

> The result has been an increased awareness of the autonomy and greatness of *The Morte Darthur* as a work of art in its own right. [. . .] It is natural, therefore, that we have now a much sharper realisation of Malory's own contribution to this amazing corpus of legend. ("Present State" 90)

Lewis, seeing a sense of unity similar to that of Brewer (that is, one of common characters, themes, and cause and effect connections) addresses the very core of the structure debate. He questions whether a twentieth century analysis of structure based, as it is, in concepts foreign to a medieval author is even a valid course of inquiry.[58] In terms of the structure of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, Lewis concludes that

> The choice we try to force on Malory is really a choice for us. It is our imagination, not his, that makes the work one or eight or fifty. We can read it either way. We can read it now one way, now another. We partly make what we read. (22)

In contrast, Elizabeth Pochoda, who seems to lean more to the Lumiansky school of unity critics, summarily dismisses the unity argument. Instead of trying to seek a middle ground or synthesis of the arguments surrounding the

structure controversy, she considers it, though a valid line of intellectual analysis, to be a useless one in the consideration of *Le Morte Darthur* as a work of art in and of itself. She says,

> the debate about separate romances has become boring in addition to being barren. Fruitful and consistent readings of *Le Morte Darthur* will retain their value even if their assumptions about the book's unity (or lack of it) prove incorrect. (14)

Though dismissive, the basis of her rejection of structure as an issue is reminiscent of the observation by Lewis noted above.

Several recent critics have analyzed structure in ways other than in terms of unity. Narrative structure is intimately linked to thematic content in many ways. Several of the tales in *Le Morte Darthur* can be seen to have an internal structure that reflects at least one of the given tale's main thematic statements. Love, fellowship, and the chivalric sense of duty as thematic concerns are often seen to create an enveloping structure for a particular tale or scene.[59] Others have used the analysis of characters to support unity throughout the whole of Malory's work. Arthur, Guenivere, and Lancelot are the usual candidates for such an analysis; however, other characters have been used as well.[60] Though sometimes limited in scope and application,

examination of theme/structure relationships has proven fairly enlightening.

Two very interesting evaluations of the structure of Malory's work derive from a close examination of the Winchester manuscript in facsimile. Murray J. Evans examines the text and finds different division points within the text than those found by Vinaver. His resulting divisions break the text into five major sections.[61] The second evaluation, by Donald Hobar, finds that the manuscript version of Malory appears to have been prepared as a reading script for oral presentation to an audience.[62]

Yet another way to examine structure is suggested by the overall consideration of the content of Malory's work. It falls essentially into three sections. In the early tales, the narrative relates the birth and rise to kingship of Arthur, the middle tales relate the adventures of his knights, and the concluding two tales examine the fall of Arthur's kingdom and his death.[63]

Intimately linked with the structural debate is the discourse over what generic title should be given to Malory's work. As mentioned earlier, with the analysis by Vinaver focused so stringently on the French romance sources and Malory's obvious dependence on the tools of the English romancers, his *Le Morte Darthur* was, at least initially, labeled a romance. However, this label, because Malory's work has so many characteristics that challenge such a classification, has become less secure and accepted. Though

long considered a romance and often still categorized as
one, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* cannot be conveniently
classified as a particular genre. Despite early critical
labeling as an epic or a romance, some critics, including
Vinaver, recognize that there are in *Le Morte Darthur*
elements that do not seem to apply when examined strictly
along generic definitions. Most notable is Malory's seeming
realistic style of narrative and dialogue.[64] Recognizing
this difficult element of Malory's style which seems to defy
generic labels, Brewer suggests that instead of examining
the structure of Malory's work within strict confines of
definitions and rationalizations, critics might be better
served by the examples of "the apparently fragmented but
differently ordered structures of some modern visual art and
poetry" ("Present State" 95-96). He is careful, however,
like Lewis and others, to caution against the tendency to
see twentieth century concepts in a fifteenth century work
and not take into account the relevance of the historical
context of Malory's work.

Benson, though firmly supporting the English romance
tradition as the root of Malory's narrative, still seeks to
identify a genre for Malory's work, and in place of French
romance or epic, he suggests that *Le Morte Darthur* should be
classified as an English prose romance cycle.[65] Benson
retains the romance label though his argument seems to
suggest that there is much of the style of a history in
Malory's work. *Le Morte Darthur* lacks the unity that critics

grounded in the modern notions of unity imposed by the conscious or unconscious comparison with the novel expect to find in it. Yet, Malory has a continuity between the various tales that suggests a continuous narrative. Benson, instead, identifies in Malory a prose narrative structured similarly to the French prose romance cycles upon which it is based but also reflecting the stylistic qualities of his English contemporaries. He further notes that some of the larger continental romance cycles are not complete within themselves, at least insomuch as we are able to determine from extant sources. However, the tales which make up the cycles, like those which comprise *Le Morte Darthur*, "are not distinct and independent tales in the manner of earlier verse romances; each is part of a larger and coherent 'history' that comprehends all stories of Arthur and his knights" (*Malory's* 5).

The elements within Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* often suggest some other genre than romance.[66] Elizabeth Sklar has examined Malory along these lines and determined that Malory's work reflects a dismantling of romance. Essentially, she believes that Malory has modeled his narrative on French romances; however, it is not just a mere disentangling of the *entrelacement*, but is itself a rejection of the romance form.[67] Beverly Kennedy has examined the elements of tragedy that appear throughout Malory's work and considers them in terms of generic considerations of romance, epic, and tragedy.[68] In addition,

several critics have analyzed Malory's narrative for elements of heroic qualities in the characters, examined them in the context of a romance, and have tried to determine a thematic statement from the structural juxtaposition of heroic and romantic elements.[69]

Structural arguments, like source study, are fundamental to the discourse in Malory scholarship. As mentioned earlier, most critics begin their analyses of Malory by establishing a new structural argument or by adopting one of the either/or positions in the unity debate. Though probably not as barren and boring as Pochoda would have one believe, the structural argument has diminished as a focus of scholarship in its own right. Instead, it has become the bedrock of new research, especially into the issue of genre. If Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is not just a mere compilation, then it must be something else. It seems clear from modern criticism that Malory's work must be classified as something. Romance, whether derived from the French or cast in the English mold, does not seem to be sufficient. There are certainly elements of the romance in Malory's work, but there seems to be much more, since critics also see elements of epic, tragedy, and history in it as well.

Narrative Style and Methods

In discussing the style of Malory's work, it should be
noted that this is one area that most critics have generally
agreed on, at least as to its effect. Most have found his
prose style to be praiseworthy, but for differing reasons,
or as Brewer points out, "often for quite the wrong
things--its faded nostalgic beauty, for example" ("Present
State" 88). The terms with which early critics described
Malory's style were generally based on a reader's reaction
to the unadorned and forthright nature of Malory's
narrative. Life notes that two of the most frequent terms
used to describe Malory's prose in nineteenth century
criticism, were "simple" and "dignified" (20). There was
also a general consensus that his style was original and
unique. However, there the consensus ended. Since most
critics were simply voicing their own reader responses to
Malory's style, there was little objective data to form a
foundation for either criticism or analysis.

Part of the early scholarly discourse about Malory's
prose style and narrative methods was concerned with the
influence it had on later English prose and what influence
the medieval English prose tradition had on it. R. W.
Chambers recognized that Malory had been influenced by his
contemporaries with regard to his style. That is, he
reflected elements of the medieval English prose tradition
in his writing. However, Chambers claimed that Malory had no

significant influence on subsequent English prose.[70] There were of course dissenters to Chamber's claims. Three of the most significant were George Saintsbury and later R. M. Wilson and Norman Davis, who all believed that Malory was largely underappreciated in his influence on later English prose, particularly that of the Elizabethan period.[71]

After the publication of Sommer's edition of Caxton's version of Malory, and with the publication of Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript, systematic analysis of the elements of Malory's style began. With these two texts available, there were at last accurate enough editions to perform statistical analysis and comparisons. Syntax, grammar, and vocabulary were several of the areas to be tackled by early analysts. Several early critics examined Caxton's version to compare general language usage with other known fifteenth century works.[72] After the publication of the Winchester manuscript, studies comparing it to Caxton's version and to other fifteenth century texts became popular.[73] Detailed linguistic study, concentrating on word usage and syntactical variations, has been a primary focus for several Japanese scholars.[74] Comparison of word order between the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's edition, particularly that done by Ján Šimko in 1957, has revealed some very interesting information regarding Caxton's editing of Malory's text.[75] Šimko determined that Caxton made numerous changes in tale two in favor of Malory's source, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. In addition, it seems that

Caxton changed Malory's sentence structure, as represented
in the Winchester manuscript, to a simpler and more
consistent form. Arthur O. Sandved analyzed the differences
in use of language between Caxton's edition of Malory, the
Winchester manuscript, and other Caxton texts and determined
that the language and sentence formation that Caxton used in
his edition of Malory is significantly different than that
which he used in his own translating and other editing.[76]
Matthews examined the text of the Winchester manuscript to
attempt to identify the dialect of the language used by its
scribe. He used this in turn, since it proves to have a
significant northern color, to support his theory of a
Yorkshire candidate for the identity of Thomas Malory.[77]

The strictly linguistic analysis of Malory's methods
has its counterparts as well. Other critics have begun
instead to look at Malory's prose style in the context of
English prose of his own time period.[78] P. J. C. Field, in
Romance and Chronicle, compares Malory's style with the
English prose chronicle tradition and concludes that
Malory's style appears to be an outgrowth of that earlier
English prose tradition.[79] Brewer says of comparisons to the
English vernacular chronicle tradition that

> Such studies emphasize the simplicity and direct
> narrative bareness of his style, the lack of
> description, the simple but powerful moral and
> emotional response. [. . .] It is particularly
> valuable that we are beginning to be able to

> place Malory in a satisfactory native tradition,
> not in any parochial way to deny or limit the
> French influence, but in order to establish how
> the French influence could be accepted and used.
> ("Present State" 88)

Spisak argues that an author like Malory who is working in this native tradition should not be considered inferior simply because such a significant amount of his material and his tools are appropriated from other sources and styles. Responding to Field's comparison of Malory's style and that of the chroniclers, Spisak comments that "Field succeeds in convincing us of Malory's colloquial style without lowering our estimation of the fifteenth-century author, perhaps because the examples he cites also show us that Malory was, in fact, in control of his narrative" (*Studies* 6). Mark Lambert, in *Malory: Style and Vision in* Le Morte Darthur, discusses the similarities between Malory's prose and that of his fifteenth century contemporaries.[80] He also examines differences between Malory and the prose style of his sources to attempt to identify what elements in Malory's prose distinguish him from his contemporaries. In complying with English literary traditions of brevity and emphasis on action over both emotion and description, Malory has crafted an essentially historical style. This style, Lambert argues, is critical to maintaining the tragic nature of the ending of the story. Only by keeping his audience removed in time

from the events of the tales, can Malory illustrate the true tragic impact of the closing tales in his work.

In addition to romance, epic, history, and chronicle which have been mentioned earlier, other forms of narrative have been identified in Malory's work as well. These are usually limited in application, and consequently are not always useful in discussing Malory in the full scope of his work. Francoise Le Saux examines the role of epistolary style narrative in Malory's development of interpersonal communication in *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*.[81] Kathryn McCullough examines the structural similarities to the English homiletic tradition reflected in Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal*.[82] Examining the fairytale-nature of some of Malory's knights and their damsels-in-distress, Donald Hoffman explores the ideas of adventure represented by their exploits.[83]

It is in Malory's prose style that Vinaver sees some of that "pure Malory" referred to earlier in his arguments on Malory's originality. He says,

> The pure Malory is the prose-writer whose language
> has given new life to a dying tradition. [. . .]
> What makes his prose live is his way of
> subordinating his verbal material to a rhythm all
> his own, his instinctive discovery of a new
> stylistic pattern. ("Sir Thomas Malory" 550)

As noted earlier, the style of Malory's text focuses on action over motivation. Quite often in Malory, in contrast

to his sources, this is facilitated by the use of dialogue
instead of descriptive narrative. Malory's use of dialogue
is an important element of his style throughout *Le Morte
Darthur*. D. Thomas Hanks explores the contribution of
Malory's dialogue to both the effectiveness and
distinctiveness of his text, and he discusses the
significance of Malory's use of dialogue compared to the
narrative style of his sources.[84] Malory's work has other
various narrative elements, which, like narrative form, are
somewhat limited in scope, but that nevertheless contribute
to an appreciation of his style. These include using
patterns and leitmotifs to establish continuity and, in some
cases, to draw on traditional and/or mythic elements through
allusion.[85] Also, though Malory has been credited with
minimizing the use of supernatural elements in his work as
compared to his sources, a technique that tends to
distinguish him from the romance style, some critics have
explored the magical, mystical, and nonreal elements that
remain.[86] A related element that is contained in Malory's
work, though to a lesser degree than other medieval works,
is the use of dream as a narrative technique.[87]

Another aspect of Malory's style, and one that is quite
generally regarded as true, is that throughout the course of
the tales that comprise his work, Malory's command of the
narrative tools, methods, and techniques that he uses
improves from beginning to end. Brewer notes that

as a general rule Malory naturally enough gets

better as he goes further and clarifies to

himself, and for us, (not.necessarily

conceptually) the nature of his task and the

effects he desires. We need to remember Malory's

progress and consequently uneven achievement when

generalising about his style. ("Present State" 89)

It does certainly seem true that Malory's best writing

occurs in the latter sections of his work, and that the

improvement from beginning to end reflects an author growing

more proficient with his craft as he matures as a writer.

The discourse surrounding Malory's narrative style has

matured in a manner similar to Malory's maturation

throughout *Le Morte Darthur*. Initially, response to Malory's

style was based on reader's impressions and a general

appreciation for the distinct elements that differentiated

him from his sources. Since Malory came to be seen as

something more than a mere redactor and translator, the

study of his narrative style and the tools he used has

become more refined. Once considered a romancer, then a

romancer working in an English style, Malory has recently

started to be appreciated as something more than another

writer working in the romance genre of his sources. There is

something more to Malory's text, and the discourse of his

critics is beginning to explore these new possibilities.

Thematic Elements

Perhaps the first discourse over the theme of Malory's work centered on the moral nature of what he wrote. Certainly, Caxton's preface emphasized the moral, didactic nature of the text when he emphasized to his readers to "Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renommee" (xv). Other early editors, Wynkyn de Worde for example, also emphasized the moral nature of the knightly behavior in the tales, as is made evident by the following passage which he interpolated into his 1498 edition of Malory's work, and which was subsequently retained in later editions:

> Therfor me thynketh this present boke callid La mort dathur is ryght necessary often to be radde. For in it shal ye fynde the gracious knyghtly and vertuous werre of moost noble knyghtes of the worlde, wherby they gate praysyng contynuell. Also me semyth by the oft redyng therof ye shal gretly desyre tacustome yourself in folowynge those gracyous knyghtly dedes. That is to seye, to drede god, and love ryghtwisnes, faythfully & courageously to serve your soverayne prynce. And the more that god hath geven you the tryumfall honour, the meeker yo oughte to be, ever feryng the unstablynesse of this dysceyvable worlde.[88]

Though de Worde was working with Caxton's text in preparing his own, he found *Le Morte Darthur* to be essentially moral in nature and recommended it for its didactic value, as did Caxton.[89] In spite of the apparently moral "rightness" of the text, later editors found passages that were offensive. As noted earlier, many (if not most) of the editorial changes made by the editors of the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries were to soften the morally offensive language and action of the narrative. In spite of their efforts, a sixteenth century commentator, Robert Ascham in *The Scholemaster*, claimed that *Le Morte Darthur* was about nothing other than "bold bawdry and open manslaughter."[90]

In addition to the morality paradox in the debate about authorship,[91] the perceived morality of *Le Morte Darthur* was to lead to another controversial issue. Again, in spite of the efforts of early editors, the versions of Caxton's Malory that existed in the nineteenth century still raised the eyebrows of Victorian moralists. Nineteenth century adaptations of Arthurian literature, drawing on the popularity of Malory's work but written with social and political themes peculiar to the nineteenth century, spurred critical debate over Malory's work as if the nineteenth century literary works were also Malory's invention. Some critics, many influenced by the aims of Tennyson and other poets, interpreted Malory's work in quite unflattering ways.[92] It became clear that some historical perspective, divorced from the impact of nineteenth century social and

political aims, was needed in the criticism of a fifteenth century text.[93] The values of the nineteenth century simply were not the values of the fifteenth.

The debate over morality in Malory led to the first of many other thematic interpretations of his work. In 1894, Edward Strachey described *Le Morte Darthur* as a battle between good and evil, or more rightly

> the perennial battle between God and the
> devil,--the context between man's free will and
> his circumstances; the nemesis which attends his
> way during that contest, and his triumph by help
> of a higher power than his own. (52)[94]

The influence of a greater historical awareness of *Le Morte Darthur*'s context in fifteenth century England helped Saintsbury, in 1913, to refine this big-picture view--good versus evil--into a slightly narrower interpretation that was still grounded in the issue of morality. He asserted that Malory was writing about love, religion, and war. He noted that "The Round Table stories, merely as such, illustrate Valour; the Graal stories, Religion; the passion of Lancelot and Guinevere with the minor instances, Love" (*English Novel* 27). One can see here that not much had really changed in the way that Malory was perceived since de Worde urged his readers to dread God, love rightly, and to faithfully and courageously serve their sovereign lord.

Though historically the institutions of feudalism and chivalry were no longer vital in fifteenth century England,

they are elements of the Arthurian material, much of which dates from when those ideas were prevalent in Europe. Consequently, the idea of chivalry, with its inherent concept of loyalty, is prevalent in Malory, so it follows that the focus of many thematic interpretations should be centered on how *Le Morte Darthur* is believed to represent that institution.[95] Another central element to the Arthurian material is the idea of courtly love, which was added by the continental, mostly French, romancers.[96] Both of these thematic elements are important to the central tale of Arthur, Guenivere, and Lancelot, so it is not surprising that they should lie at the heart of the majority of critical inquiries into the thematic meaning of Malory's work. The line leading to this focus on chivalry, loyalty, and courtly love runs through several critics, but comes firmly into the modern context of the debate through the works of Vinaver. In 1921, following a rough line from Saintsbury's three-fold focus, Vida Scudder fixed her interpretation on the inherent conflicts in loyalty to lord, lady, and God (*Le Morte Darthur* 185). E. K. Chambers, in 1922, noted that the conflict was one between human love and loyalty.[97] And finally, in 1970, Vinaver identified the conflict as that inherent in the clash between the idea of chivalry and the practice of chivalry, the courtly ideal versus the pragmatic real.[98] Pochoda, in contrast, suggests that thematic analysis of these three elements, "chivalry, courtly love and Christianity, may not be the most rewarding

avenue of criticism, because his [Malory's] views of these three institutions are very likely of secondary importance in his narrative" (19). Instead, she suggests evaluating "the book's political context, the view of time which it displays, the nature of reality in its narrative, and the conception of tragedy operating in the last tales," because to continue to look only at chivalry, loyalty, and love as themes is to render the significance of Malory "simplified out of existence" or possibly too easily dismissed as mere romance (19).

Since Malory was writing at a time when chivalry and feudalism were dying out or already dead, Malory's focus on the high ideals of chivalry has been interpreted as either a lament for the passing of an ennobling institution of a bygone, golden era, reflecting a desire to return to "the good old days," or else as a condemnation of a system that failed, not because it was flawed, but because the people were flawed. In either case, Malory is taken to be looking back on a no-longer-vital institution. If these critics are to be believed, then Malory appears to have nothing new or significant to say. In essence, Malory is doing nothing more than telling a good story about the noble deeds of a long-dead king and the high adventures of the men and ladies who were his subjects. To modern readers, it may often seem to be the case that Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is an entertaining diversion but no more. However, there is a

sense that this may be as too-dismissive as Pochoda is with the themes of chivalry, religion, and love.

Writing during the Wars of the Roses that caused so much civil and political strife in England, Malory has been interpreted as writing a political allegory of his own times, intending to illuminate in the light of a golden age another waning and dying kingdom.[99] This idea is generally discounted even though some critics still see parallels between events and characters in Malory's text to the reality of the fifteenth century. Still others look at this tumultuous period and try to see *Le Morte Darthur* as a didactic tome pointed at the aristocracy of fifteenth century England, one aimed at teaching and revitalizing Malory's degenerate present through the example of the glorious past of virtuous, ethical chivalry.[100] This argument, too, has been debated recently, as Pochoda, in her examination of the political aspects of the themes of the work, has argued that Malory's work is a condemnation of chivalry as a remedy for fifteenth century ills rather than a suggested cure. She claims that Malory's work not only examines the failure of Arthur and his knights to live up to the ideals of chivalry, but that it points out that the "failures are reciprocal, that the individual has been predisposed to fail by the inadequacy of his code" (27).

The theme or themes of *Le Morte Darthur* are not always easily identified and pigeonholed. Certainly, the thematic threads of chivalry, love, and religion that have been

identified do occur throughout Malory's work. Chivalry and the chivalric code are present from beginning to end, conspicuous either in their knightly personifications or in their barbaric absence. Together with the thematic elements of love and righteousness, chivalry moves the story of Arthur and his knights forward. Love and righteousness are not as consistently present throughout the narrative. In the opening third of the book, chivalry alone seems to play a central thematic role. Later, as the tales of Arthur's knights unfold, chivalric duty, so clearly presented earlier, is confronted by duty to God and duty to Love. It is the conflict between these three that informs the latter portion of the book, the tales of the downfall of Arthur and his kingdom.

Modern readers will probably never know whether or not Malory intended his work to be a moral lesson, a political and social commentary, or even an allegory of the political climate in his own time. The critics, however, have identified in *Le Morte Darthur*, as it has been received, the effect of such a commentary. As reviewed above, the elements that suggest these many possibilities exist both in the text that Caxton edited and in the Winchester manuscript. Arguably, just as Lewis noted in his comments on the structure of Malory's work, much of what a reader takes away from the story in terms of theme can be seen to be what the reader's imagination brought to the story.

Often an integral part of the critical study of the themes of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, character analysis has proven to be a useful branch of the critical discourse on Malory's work. It is by no means solely a modern avenue of research. Malory and Caxton both identified this work as a book about King Arthur and his knights. In the final colophon, available only in a single surviving copy of Caxton's version, Malory names the subject of his work: "Here is the ende of the hoole book of Kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (726). Caxton clearly identifies the subject matter of his version when, near the end of his preface, he specifically introduces what follows: *Le Morte Darthur* is a book about "the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur, somtyme kyng of thys noble royalme thenne callyd Brytaygne" (xv). It is understandable then, that the characters in this work should be a focus of critical analysis. The examination of characters in Malory's work is largely done in support of the analysis of the larger thematic concepts of chivalry and love, and often centers on the major character of Lancelot in his relationships with either King Arthur or Queen Guenivere.[101] More recently, character study has been undertaken to explore deeper and/or subtler thematic threads that may run through a single tale or a portion of a tale, perhaps even a very short section, of Malory's work. Some of these inquiries seek to find parallels between characters (such as Gawain, Bors, and

Morgan Le Fay) that serve as exempla for one or more of the major characters/themes.[102] Modern explorations of Malory's characters often follow lines of critical theory that were probably quite foreign to Malory, but nevertheless have significant social relevance.[103] Many are examinations of Malory's portrayal of love or chivalry in the context of a given scene such as Rosemary Morris's "Uther and Igerne."[104] Some however, address the issues raised by contrasting Malory's depiction of religious righteousness in *The Tale of the Sankgreal* to his depiction of secular righteousness in the thematic threads concerning love and honor/duty.[105] Thematic analysis continues to be one of the most fruitful areas of modern critical work on Malory's text as the contents of a recent volume of *Arthuriana* attest.[106] The large number and sweeping scope of critical analyses that continue to be applied to Malory's work are a tribute to his effectiveness in portraying the humanity of his characters, of his time, and of the Arthurian mythos.

The thematic discourse concerning *Le Morte Darthur* is probably the least controversial of the areas of critical study of this landmark work. Beginning with Caxton, and continuing through to modern critical discourse, thematic analysis has built on previous work. Caxton urged moral uprightness for his readers, and de Worde identified the three-focus thematic threads of love, chivalry, and righteousness. These are, in turn, central to most subsequent thematic analyses of Malory's work. Though there

is not always agreement as to which of the three themes
warrants primary emphasis, it is generally accepted that one
or more of the concepts of chivalry, love, or righteousness
lie at the heart of the critical discourse of *Le Morte
Darthur.*

Conclusion

Malory scholarship remains a vital field of literary
inquiry because it is fraught with potential controversy.
Controversy spurs debate and critical discourse that in turn
vitalize critical analysis. There are no clear-cut answers
or simple solutions regardless of what a particular critic
may want to believe. Until other versions of Malory's work,
or even the author's monograph, are discovered, debate will
continue over various elements of Malory. Complicating this
situation is the fact that the actual manuscript sources
that Malory used have not been, and may never be,
discovered. The result is a fertile field for opinions and
analysis but few, if any, concrete, indisputable answers.

Modern critics will never know the true intentions of
Malory the author. What can be ascertained must come from
the evidence that we have. Essentially, that evidence must
come from the two extant, somewhat different versions of
Malory's work. The texts, surviving in the two versions of
the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's 1485 printed edition,
are themselves sources of great controversy. Examining the

texts for what they contain and convey, since neither version can be established as authoritative, has led to debate as well. Structure, genre, and theme can be gleaned from the text through an analysis of content and the narrative methods and tools which Malory used to craft *Le Morte Darthur*. We can never know with any certainty just what Malory's intentions were, though some viewpoints have rather convincing arguments based on the evidence in the texts. However, critical analysis of the texts can reveal the effect of Malory's efforts: that is, what the text says. Even this "knowing" is ambiguous at best. As the preceding review of Malorian critical discourse reveals, even the texts lend themselves to varying and sometimes contrasting interpretations. Too often, however, these interpretations balance an appreciation of Malory's work against something else. Comparison of *Le Morte Darthur* to the standards of Malory's sources, or to nineteenth and twentieth century ideals of style, or to nineteenth century moral and social codes, or to preconceived notions of narrative genre, or to either historically-biased or reader-biased expectations of theme, while arguably valid and often informative, seem to do Malory a disservice. *Le Morte Darthur* is so broad in scope and content that almost any comparative template applied to it will find support within its pages.

Rather than filtering our understanding of Malory's work through applied comparisons, we should start with Malory and see where *Le Morte Darthur* leads. Doing so, we

will find that *Le Morte Darthur* is much more than just a fairly comprehensive retelling of the matter of Britain in English. Malory's work, in effect, creates a permanent "English-ness" for Arthur and the tales of his knights. *Le Morte Darthur* essentially reclaims Arthur and Arthurian history for England and plants them firmly into the history of Malory's English audience.

In the examinations of the texts and contexts of *Le Morte Darthur* which follow, we will see first that, unlike the French sources which focus on the knightly exploits of the members of Arthur's court, Malory's work reinforces, through its narrative structure, the focus on the character of Arthur, his rise to kingship, his ultimate fall, and the failure of his ideals. Next, examining Malory's Arthur, we will explore the nature of kingship. Arthur, in Malory, differs from the character Malory found in his sources. Malory's Arthur is an English king imbued with the character traits and ideals of kingship which had their roots in the Anglo-Germanic culture of Anglo-Saxon England and which had been perpetuated and cherished outside of the Norman-French influence in London court society. Indeed, his Arthur reflects more closely the heroic ideals of *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Song of Roland*, and King Alfred. Lastly, we will see that though Malory's work contains significant elements of romance, and indeed even whole tales that may be considered romance, it is generically more of a medieval history than a romance. Though drawn from French

romance material, crafted with narrative tools of both French and English romance traditions, and containing elements of epic and tragic traditions as well, Malory's work does not serve the literary ends of those genres. Instead, it chronicles the tragic, nearly epic history of Arthur, the greatest king of England, and of his kingdom.

In effect, *Le Morte Darthur* portrays Arthur as an historical English king in an heroic tradition of kingship that had been established in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England long before the coming of the Normans. Using distinctly English traditional elements, Malory's work takes the material of the French romances and anglicizes them within an heroic cultural milieu that had continued, subsumed perhaps but still significant, from a pre-conquest England.

Notes

1 William Caxton, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*, Winchester, 1485, Facsim. ed., *Sir Thomas Malory: Le Morte Darthur. Printed by William Caxton 1485* (London: Scolar, 1976). Caxton's printed edition was published almost fifteen years after Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory's own monograph is not extant, so Caxton's edition is the earliest known version. See also James W. Spisak, ed., *Caxton's Malory*, by Thomas Malory (Berkeley: U California P, 1983).

2 Eugène Vinaver, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, by Thomas Malory, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967). Vinaver's edition is based on a fifteenth century manuscript copy of Malory's work.

3 James W. Spisak, "Introduction: Recent Trends in Malory Studies," *Studies in Malory*, Ed. James Spisak (Kalamazoo: Medieval Inst.-Western Michigan UP, 1985) 1-12.

4 Page West Life, *Sir Thomas Malory and the Morte Darthur: A Survey of Scholarship and Annotated Bibliography* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1980).

5 Elizabeth Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1971).

6 Life 1-42. This is probably the most useful of the surveys of scholarship since it also includes an extensive annotated bibliography. Current through the 1970's, Life's survey also provides a look at the major critical arguments of nineteenth century Malory scholarship, all of which were

fundamental to later critical work, but largely superseded by the analysis of twentieth century critics, most significantly since 1947. Life acknowledges the following earlier surveys for additional background: Eugène Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory," *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) 541-52; Pochoda 3-22; Larry D. Benson, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works*, eds. R.M. Lumiansky and Herschal Baker (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1968) 81-131; Derek S. Brewer, "The Present State of Malory," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 6 (1970); rpt. *Arthurian Romance: Seven Essays*, ed. D. D. R. Owen (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971) 83-97; and Robert H. Wilson, "Malory and Caxton," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. Albert E. Hartung, vol. 3 (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1972) 757-71. Another valuable source is Spisak's *Studies in Malory* (1-12). His discussion necessarily spans the period covered by Life. However, he provides a more thorough discussion of the primary critics' works, at the expense of lesser-known critics, and extends the coverage of the various debates through the early 1980's.

[7] For basic information on this area of debate, see George Lyman Kittredge, "Who was Sir Thomas Malory?" *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 5 (1896): 85-106; and William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight: A Skeptical Inquiry into the Identity of Sir Thomas Malory*

(Berkeley: U California P, 1966).

[8] "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" 87-88. Benson provides an interesting overview of the editors and their editions. The first after Caxton was Wynkyn de Worde's edition of 1498. Then Copland (1557) and East (1585) published editions based on de Worde that were the versions familiar to Elizabethan audiences. Richard Stansby updated and censored East's edition in 1634. Stansby's edition became the standard edition.

[9] Benson, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" 88-90. In 1816 two new "modernized" editions were published, both based on Stansby's edition of 1634. Upcott issued an edition of Caxton's version in 1817, but it was considered too archaic for the average reader. In 1858, Thomas Wright edited and published yet another version of Stansby's edition.

[10] Benson, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" 89. Strachey's 1868 edition based on Caxton's version was nonetheless severely censored and edited. Sommer's edition of Caxton in 1889 generally restored the unexpurgated text of Caxton's original, and became the standard text of Caxton's version for many decades.

[11] For example, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Intro. Elizabeth Bryan, Modern Library edition (New York: Random House, 1999); and Helen Cooper, ed., *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).

[12] W. F. Oakeshott, "The Finding of the Manuscript,"

Essays on Malory, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) 1-6. Oakeshott discusses how he discovered the manuscript in the Fellows Library at Winchester College in 1934. The manuscript was subsequently provided to Vinaver for editing.

[13] Lotte Hellenga, "The Malory Manuscript and Caxton," *Aspects of Malory*, eds. Toshiyuki Nakamiya and Derek Brewer (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1986) 127-141. Hellenga presents evidence, based on infrared analysis revealing ink stains and an offset of type from Caxton's known typesets, of a physical connection between the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's printshop. The assertion is that the Winchester manuscript may have had "prolonged and intensive use in or near a printer's shop; not as a printer's copy, [. . .] but most likely in preparing a copy which was then used by the compositors" (133).

[14] Eugène Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory" 543. Also, for a detailed explanation of Vinaver's analysis of the Winchester manuscript's relationship to Caxton's text, see his "Introduction: The Method of Editing," *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947) vol. 1, xclxxxvi-xci. Vinaver suggests that both the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's edit copy derived from a common source, but neither did so directly. Further, he contends that the common source itself was probably not Malory's autograph manuscript.

[15] Hilton Kelliher, "The Early History of the

Manuscript," *Aspects of Malory*, 143-158. Kelliher examines the possible early history of the manuscript based on marginalia, and he proposes the theory that the two scribes working on the Winchester manuscript had access to at least two copytexts, or possibly "a number of separate manuscripts, whether bound or in loose gatherings, each comprising one or more tales" so they could work simultaneously (146).

[16] Eugène Vinaver, ed., *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, (1947) vol. 1, xxviii-cix; and *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 2nd ed., (1967) vol. 1, xli-li. In the first edition of his version of the Winchester manuscript, Vinaver expounds his idea of a single manuscript "clearly divided into several different works," and presents his version, which "unlike all previous ones, appears in the form of eight separate romances" (xxx, xcviii). The question of unity had become so intense by the time the second edition was published that Vinaver included a response to his critics in the introduction to that edition.

[17] For example, consider that before arguing the thematic socio-political significance of Malory's text, Elizabeth Pochoda rejects the unity debate as being irrelevant, yet then tacitly agrees with Lumiansky that the work is unified (*Arthurian Propaganda* 13-17). Larry Benson begins his examination concerning the style and genre of *Le Morte Darthur* by arguing a consensus position that Malory's work has unifying elements, but remains separate tales. This

leads him into his generic argument that the text is a
cyclic prose romance, essentially assigning a hybrid
structure to it (*Malory's* Morte Darthur [Cambridge: Harvard
UP, 1976]). Donald G. Schueler argues for thematic unity to
support his position that the Tristram section of *Le Morte
Darthur* thematically functions as an analogue of the rest of
the work. Tristram and Isolt mirror Lancelot and Guenivere;
doing so, they enrich the reader's understanding of the
impact of Lancelot and Guenivere on Arthur's kingdom, and do
not merely function as an another example of infidelity
("The Tristram Section of Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Studies
in Philology* 65 [1968]: 51-66).

[18] *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947). Vinaver's
critical apparatus in the original edition of his version of
the Winchester manuscript is very detailed and useful. He
has identified most of the significant differences between
the probable French sources and the Winchester Malory. His
commentary consists of some 400 pages of the third volume of
this edition.

[19] Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed.
(London: Oxford UP, 1971) 7. Unless otherwise noted, all
direct quotations from Malory's work and Caxton's preface
are taken from this source.

[20] George Ellis, *Specimens of Early English Metrical
Romances*, 3 vols. (London, 1805). Ellis remarks that
Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is a "mere compilation" (1.308).
Henry Hallam, *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in*

the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries, 4th ed. (London, 1854). Hallam only acknowledges Malory's work as being a translation from various French sources. George P. Marsh, *The Origin and History of the English Language and of the Early English Literature It Embodies*, rev. ed. (New York, 1885). Marsh says that Malory's work "is a compilation from various French romances, harmonized and connected so far as Malorye [sic] was able to make a consistent whole of them" (487). William Minto, *Characteristics of English Poets from Chaucer to Shirley*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1885). Minto sees Arthur as a unifying character in a collection of tales translated from various French original sources, but he says that beyond that slim linkage, it is unreasonable to expect unity from "such a compilation of the unconcerted labours of different authors" (107). Gaston Paris, "Études sur les Romans de la Table Ronde. Lancelot du Lac. II. Le Conte de la Charrette," *Romania* 12 (1883): 459-534. Examining the tale of Lancelot and the episode of the cart, Paris determined that Malory took a significant portion of his version directly from that of Chrétien de Troyes. Alfred Nutt, *Studies in the Legend of the Holy Grail*, (London, 1888). Nutt considers Malory an inept compiler. He believes that Malory took the least appropriate sources to adapt and then made them worse by doing so.

[21] Vinaver uses this as one of his supporting arguments for his multiple romance argument in the introduction to his 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript.

[22] H. Oskar Sommer, "Studies on the Sources of *Le Morte Darthur*," *Le Morte Darthur*, vol. 3 (London, 1890). Sommer mentions both of these works as sources used by Malory. The acceptance of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as a source was a source of controversy for several decades.

[23] H. Oskar Sommer, "Studies on the Sources of *Le Morte Darthur*." Sommer identifies which sources correspond to the various sections of Malory's text as divided by Caxton and provides a brief discussion of Malory's use of each.

[24] Edward Strachey, ed., *Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table*, rev. 2nd ed. (London, 1891). Strachey's editing of Caxton's original version was somewhat heavy- handed, but he saw Malory as no "mere compiler and translator," but rather as a "maker" (viii). H. Oskar Sommer, "The Sources of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Academy* 37 (1890): 11-12. Sommer sees Malory as an adapter rather than only a translator and compiler. George Saintsbury, *The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory* (New York, 1897); and *A History of English Prose Rhythm* (London: Macmillan, 1912; rpt. 1965). Saintsbury, one of Malory's strongest nineteenth and early twentieth century supporters, sees Malory as an adapter, one who brought a completeness and stylistic uniqueness to the legend of Arthur, unlike any of his single sources. A. W. Pollard, ed., *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1900). In the introduction to

Pollard's edition of Caxton's text, based on Sommer's 1890 edition, Pollard addresses Malory's use of his sources and calls Malory a genius in combining the various sources so skillfully. W. P. Ker, *Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1905). Ker sees Malory as an artist in his own right. Not only is Malory's treatment of the body of material a unique endeavor, but Malory's style is original as well. Vida Scudder, *Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory: A Study of the Book and Its Sources*, (London: Dent, 1921). In spite of the book's title, Scudder urges readers to look at Malory's work independently from its sources in order to appreciate the artistry of Malory's "great original genius" (366).

[25] Eugène Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory" 546-47. I quote at length from Vinaver here for two reasons. First, it is made more easily evident from the full quote that Vinaver signals the existence of original elements identified by others, though he merely dismisses them out of hand due to his own apparent preoccupation with the French sources themselves and not Malory's "ultimate achievement." Second, the original elements that he acknowledges are key elements in the arguments to follow.

[26] R. H. Wilson, "Malory's Naming of Minor Characters," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 42 (1943): 364-85; "Addenda on Malory's Minor Characters," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956): 563-87; and "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance," *Texas Studies in*

English 30 (1950): 33-50. In these articles, Wilson argues that Malory had a wider knowledge of material in the English romance tradition and that of the Arthurian legends than had previously been recognized. Malory is able to supply the correct names for many minor characters left unnamed in his French sources through this knowledge of other minor works related to the legends. William Matthews discusses the influence of other English romancers on Malory, and consequently Malory's broad familiarity with their work (*The Ill-Framed Knight*). Larry D. Benson argues that Malory's stylistic artistry is largely influenced by his great familiarity with the English romance tradition (*Malory's* Morte Darthur). H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *Le Morte Darthur* (London, 1890). Sommer's identification of a wide variety of sources from which Malory adapted his work suggests a wide based awareness of French sources. As is the case with Sommer, Eugène Vinaver identifies several French sources as possible material for several of Malory's tales. Again, this suggests a fairly broad familiarity with a range of source materials and with the general corpus of the Arthurian legends (*Works of Sir Thomas Malory* [1947]).

[27] The most vocal of the early proponents of Malory's originality were George Saintsbury and Vida Scudder. George Saintsbury, *A Short History of English Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1898; rpt. 1960); *The English Novel* (New York: Dutton, 1913); and *The Flourishing of Romance*. Saintsbury's writing about Malory's work abounds with the highest of

praise for his artistry and is replete with superlatives describing Malory's achievement. Vida Scudder, Le Morte Darthur *of Sir Thomas Malory*. Scudder praises Malory as an artist and as a genius, and claims that his work stands as original in nature and in intention and is artistically independent of its sources.

[28] Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur: The Unity of Malory's* Morte Darthur (Lexington: U Kentucky P, 1965).

[29] George Saintsbury, *The English Novel;* and *A Short History of English Literature*. William Lewis Jones, *King Arthur in History and Legend* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1912). Vida Scudder, Le Morte Darthur *of Sir Thomas Malory*. All three of these authors recognize the validity and utility of source study but caution against concentrating on sources at the expense of Malory's text.

[30] Helen Iams Wroten, "Malory's *Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius* Compared with Its Source, The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," diss., U Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1950. Wroten's extensive line-by-line comparison of both versions of Malory and the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a definitive example.

[31] Mary Dichmann, "'The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius': The Rise of Lancelot," *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of* Le Morte Darthur, ed. Robert Mayer Lumiansky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1964) 67-90. Wilfred L. Guerin, "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution," *Malory's Originality,*

233-74.

[32] The tale's title as designated by Vinaver is *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself through Dignity of His Hands*. However, the shortened version used here is adapted from the colophon to this tale and is widely used among Malorian scholars.

[33] Michael James Stroud, "Malory and the *Morte Arthure*," diss., U of Wisconsin, 1970. Stroud generally concurs with Matthews (see following note) that Malory's changes reflect a desire to emphasize Arthur's majesty and rise to greatness.

[34] *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthur* (Berkeley: U California P, 1960). Matthews explains that Malory shortened his version by omitting the final quarter of the source. Doing so allowed Arthur to be triumphant, and delay the beginning of his downfall until later in Malory's work. In addition, Malory made Arthur nobler, and his acts less brutal, keeping with Matthews' interpretation of Malory's overall intention for the theme of his work.

[35] James Douglas Bruce, "The Middle English Metrical Romance *Le Morte Arthur*, Its Sources and Its Relation to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Anglia* 23 (1900): 67-100.

[36] Eugène Vinaver, "Notes on Malory's Sources," *Arthuriana* 1 (1928): 64-66.

[37] Others who believe that the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is not a source for Malory include George Ellis, *Specimens of*

Early English Metrical Romances, and George Kane, *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, and* Piers Plowman (London: Methuen, 1951; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970). Ellis believes that Malory could not have used the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* because they were "separated by a fundamental difference of conception" (67).

[38] Among those who argued that the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* was in fact a source for Malory are Robert H. Wilson, "Malory, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and the *Mort Artu*," *Modern Philology* 37 (1939): 125-38; and "Notes on Malory's Sources," *Modern Language Notes* 66 (1951): 22-26; E. Talbot Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*," *Studies in Philology* 47 (1950): 460-72; and Wilfred L. Guerin, "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur,'" *Malory's Originality*, 233-74.

[39] Marjorie B. Fox, "Sir Thomas Malory and the 'Piteous History of the Morte of King Arthur,'" *Arthuriana* 1 (1928): 30-36; Robert Mayer Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere': Suspense," *Malory's Originality*, 205-32; Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur," *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975): 190-234; and Phillip McCaffrey, "The Adder at Malory's Battle of Salisbury: Sources, Symbols, and Themes," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 22 (1977): 17-27. These critics begin with the assumption that the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is at least one of the sources of Malory's work and base their comparative analyses on it.

[40] Vinaver identifies Hardyng's *Chronicle* in his commentary for his 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript as a probable source of some material in the early books of Malory's works. Matthews briefly examines this source as well in his *The Tragedy of Arthur*. Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory's Use of Hardyng's Chronicle," *Notes and Queries* 16 (1969): 167-70. Kennedy explores in some detail specific passages in Malory's Book 1 and suggests that the Chronicle may have suggested an overall form for Malory's Arthuriad and may have had some stylistic influence as well. Robert H. Wilson, "More Borrowings by Malory from Hardyng's *Chronicle*," *Notes and Queries* 17 (1970): 208-10. Wilson expands on Kennedy's article and explores some more possible influences and borrowings from Hardyng.

[41] Benson examines Malory's work in the context of the fifteenth century literary traditions that influenced him and explores Malory's place within the overall context of the Arthurian legends and romance literature. He then analyzes English romance narrative style and compares it to Malory's style. Benson also explores the historical context and attempts to develop an understanding of an overall socio-political milieu in which Malory was writing. Benson's conclusions are intriguing. He assigns Malory to no specific literary tradition but instead suggests that Malory's work is something of a hybrid of his contemporary literary traditions.

[42] Bernhard ten Brink, *History of English Literature*,

Trans. L. Dora Schmitz, vol. 3 (London, 1896). Ten Brink contends that Malory's work is essentially just a compilation, but it does have a basic continuity, or unity, based on consistent themes. Alfred Nutt, "Review of: Ernest Rhys, ed. *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail,*" *Academy* 29 (1886): 195-96. Nutt refutes Rhys' assertion that *Le Morte Darthur* is an epic (see following note). Further, he says that Malory's work is a "late attempt at fusing into some sort of whole a number of independent, often discordant, stories" (196).

[43] Ernest Rhys, ed., *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail* (London, 1886). In the course of his examination of Malory's literary place in the context of the English prose tradition, Rhys compares *Le Morte Darthur* to the epic tradition. This drew a critical response by Alfred Nutt (see previous note). George Saintsbury, *The Flourishing of Romance.* Saintsbury sees Malory's achievement as having brought out "the full epic completeness of the legend" (127). Andrew Lang, "*Le Morte Darthur,*" *Le Morte Darthur* by Syr Thomas Malory, ed. H. Oskar Sommer, 3 vols. (London, 1889-1891) vol. 3, xiii-xxv. Lang examines Malory's work in the context of Homeric epic, and finds similarities in narrative qualities and thematic elements.

[44] Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel, Being a Short Sketch of Its History* (New York, 1894; rpt. 1925). Though examining it amongst other novels, Raleigh doesn't really

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consider Malory's work a novel, but he does assert that it
has excellent, almost novel-like qualities in both its
narrative and style. He finds *Le Morte Darthur* artistic, but
it is not a novel. George Saintsbury, *The English Novel*.
Saintsbury explores Malory's work for its artistic
qualities. He looks for and finds a continuity of purpose
and a unity of effect. Saintsbury considers Malory
successful in crafting a fine connection of the themes of
valor, love, and religion. Louis MacNeice, "Sir Thomas
Malory," *The English Novelists: A Survey of the Novel*, ed.
Derek Verschoyle (New York: Harcourt, 1936) 19-29. MacNeice
discusses the similarities between Malory's work and the
traits of a novel, but never directly labels *Le Morte
Darthur* as a novel. Lionel Stevenson, *The English Novel: A
Panorama* (Boston, 1860). Stevenson examines Malory's role in
the development of English prose fiction. He sees Malory as
an "historian, compiling material from the huge mass of
Arthurian romances, [. . .] feeling free to invent details
and to elaborate character in order to give artistic as well
as factual validity" (11). Margaret Schlauch, *Antecedents of
the English Novel, 1400-1600 (From Chaucer to Deloney)*
(London: Oxford UP, 1963). Schlauch sees Malory's work as an
early, if not the earliest, stage of modern English fiction.
His *Le Morte Darthur* is the end of an old style, a
culmination of a story-telling tradition, and as such,
Malory is a precursor to, but not a part of, a new prose
fiction tradition.

[45] Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth* has no clear analogues or probable source in the French romance material. Referring to this book in a list of Malory's sources, Vinaver notes that "the source of which is not known" ("Sir Thomas Malory" 544). Vinaver, "A Romance of Gaheret," *Medium Aevum* 1 (1932): 157-67. Vinaver postulates a missing French original tale of Gaheret as the source for Malory's tale. This view reflects a common view that the source of Malory's tale is an as yet unidentified romance with ties to several French romances that have similarities but no clear claim as a source. Claude Luttrell, *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1974). Luttrell provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the primary arguments and the possible source analogues of Malory's tale. Guerin, "'The Tale of Gareth': The Chivalric Flowering," *Malory's Originality*, 99-117. Guerin contends that this tale is original to Malory.

[46] Most critics considered Malory to be essentially a translator of French romance working in a French romance tradition. Most notable (and most influential) of these is Eugène Vinaver. Those who see Malory as indebted to an English romance tradition have been discussed above, but the most prominent are Ernest Rhys, *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail* (1886); George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm* (1912); Robert H. Wilson, "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance" (1950); William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight* (1966); and

Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur (1976).

[47] Several critics other than Vinaver have explored Malory's unraveling of the *entrelacement* of his French sources. Vinaver introduces the idea and discusses it at length in the introduction to his 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript. C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*," *Essays on Malory*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) 7-28. Lewis contends that the interwoven narrative structure remains in Malory's work. Vinaver responds to Lewis' comments in his chapter titled "On Art and Nature" (29-40) in the same volume by asserting that Malory's use of the unraveling technique was creative and artistic and by acknowledging that both interwoven and unraveled narrative structures exist in Malory and that each structure has its own unique aesthetic appeal. Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971). Gradon asserts that *entrelacement* still exists in Malory's works but on a larger scale than in his sources. Instead of having interlaced narrative, she claims that Malory has interlaced his work at a thematic and conceptual level; he blends the real with the unreal, the common with the supernatural.

[48] Vinaver, *Works of Sir Thomas Malory.* Vinaver seems to think that the unraveling was one of the most effective qualities of Malory's effort. C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*." Lewis doesn't address Malory's effectiveness directly, but he does note that the untangling of the

entrelacement is not as thorough as Vinaver would suggest. Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature.* Gradon contends that Malory elevated his use of *entrelacement.* Gradon's tone in discussing this aspect of Malory's work suggests that she believes he was successful.

[49] Vinaver based his analysis of the structure of the text in the Winchester manuscript in large part on explicits and colophons omitted by Caxton but retained by the scribes of the manuscript, inconsistencies in the texts between one book (or tale) and another (i.e. dead knights reappearing, knights being older earlier in the text than they are later in the text), and on Caxton's own preface where he refers to there being multiple books of Arthurian material.

[50] Vinaver identified the French *Mort Artu* as Malory's probable source for the last two books of his work. See "Notes on Malory's Sources," and *Works of Sir Thomas Malory,* vol. 3, 1572, 1600. However, Sommer and Bruce's argument about Malory's use of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* continued to raise doubts. Sommer held that Malory used a version of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as a direct source (Sommer, ed. *Le Morte Darthur*). Bruce contends that *Morte Arthur* is not a source ("The Middle English Metrical Romance *Le Morte Arthur*").

[51] Robert Mayer Lumiansky, ed. *Malory's Originality.* Lumiansky contends that it was Malory's intention to write a single book of unified tales all focusing on a common purpose. Lumiansky uses source study to identify differences

between Malory's text and his sources. In a collection of essays, like-minded critics examine how these differences help each tale contribute to the overall theme of Malory's work. Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*. Moorman argues that there are two kinds of unity, and that Malory's work has both. He further contends that *Le Mort Darthur* is unified throughout, and that Malory intended to write a single, focused narrative. Moorman introduces the concepts of planned cross-references and, what he calls, retrospective narrative, to account for the apparent inconsistencies in Malory's work identified by other critics. He also argues that the central themes of love, chivalry, and religion are unifying threads that hold the book together.

[52] Robert M. Lumiansky, "The Question of Unity in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Tulane Studies in English* 5 (1955): 29-39; and Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*. Lumiansky's article responds to both R. H. Wilson and Derek Brewer who advanced arguments that *Le Morte Darthur* has critical unity, but not historical unity. Lumiansky argues that both types of unity exist in Malory. Moorman's book echoes and expands the ideas put forward in Lumiansky's article and reasserts his argument of unity through common themes and examines the concept of time in *Le Morte Darthur*.

[53] For a thorough overview of the major threads of this argument, see Sam Dragga, "The Unanswered Question of Unity in the Writings of Sir Thomas Malory: A Review of the

Critical Studies," *Allegorica* 9 (1987-1988 Winter-Summer):
249-68.

[54] Roger S. Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian
Romance* (New York: Harper, 1964) 172. Loomis supports his
theory by examining the linking nature of many of the
explicits, the continuity of characterization throughout
Malory's work that is lacking in his sources, and the
authorial transitions that bridge gaps in the material and
tie separate scenes together. Loomis ascribes to the idea
that Malory's tales are both united and separate.

[55] Stephen Knight, *The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's
Arthuriad* (Sydney: Sydney UP, 1969). Knight's argument tries
to answer why critics see both unity and separateness in
Malory's work. He presents a somewhat radical departure from
the traditional examination of structure in terms of the
whole work in favor of a more fluid appreciation of
structure.

[56] Derek S. Brewer, "'the hoole book,'" *Essays on
Malory*. Brewer examines Malory's work as a work of art in
itself and not in comparison with his sources, as Vinaver
had. Brewer contends that Malory's work displays cohesion
based on its tone, and consistency based on its focus on
similar characters, themes, and actions.

[57] Brewer, *The* Morte Darthur: *Parts Seven and Eight*
(Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968). In the introduction to
his edition of Malory's final two tales, Brewer devotes a
section to a discussion of structure. Though dealing

primarily with the final two sections of Malory's work, Brewer contends that there is a sense of steady progress, a chronological urgency that impels the action forward. He also discusses the difference in medieval authors' sense of unity and that of twentieth century critics. He claims the former allowed for some inconsistency that modern strictness of definition will not allow.

[58] C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*." Lewis examines the results of Vinaver's critical analysis of Malory's work and concludes that the discourse had identified five paradoxes. They are: 1) the apparent differences in morality between author and text, 2) the perceived importance of fantastic elements in Malory and the apparent attempt he made to reduce or eliminate what he found of them in his sources, 3) Malory's use of interwoven narrative elements and the apparent disentangling of his sources' *entrelacement*, 4) the highly spiritual sense of Malory's tale of the Grail quest and his apparent evasion of the religious significance of the same tale, and, 5) the unified-work versus eight-separate-tales argument.

[59] For examples of a thematic element creating an enveloping structure, see Nancy H. Owen and Lewis J. Owen, "The Tristram in the *Morte Darthur*: Structure and Function," *Tristania* 3:2 (1978): 4-21; Kevin T. Grimm, "Knightly Love and the Narrative Structure of Malory's Tale Seven," *Arthurian Interpretations* 3:2 (1989 Spring): 76-95; "Fellowship and Envy: Structuring the Narrative of Malory's

Tale of Sir Tristram," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 20 (1993): 77-98; and Harry E. Cole, "Forgiveness as Structure: 'The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere,'" *Chaucer Review* 31:1 (1996): 36-44.

[60] For examples of using the characterization of Arthur to argue for unity, see William Minto, *Characteristics of English Poets*; Ernest A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (New York: Barnes and Noble; London: Witherby, 1924; rpt. 1957) 148-207 (Baker also explores the characterization of Lancelot and Guenivere as unifying elements); and Elise F. W. M. Ven-Ten Bensel, *The Character of King Arthur in English Literature* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1925; rpt. New York: Haskell, 1966). An example of using the characterization of Guenivere is Raachel Jurovics, "Virtuous Love, Unvirtuous Queen: The Contribution of Theme and Characterization to the Unity and Originality of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," diss., U California at Los Angeles, 1976. Among other characters who are used by critics to argue for unity are Balin and Gareth: see W. M. Richardson, "A Tragedy Within a Tragedy: Malory's Use of the 'Tale of Balin' as a Thematic Analogue," *Arlington Quarterly* 3 (1970-71): 61-71; and Victor Angelescu, "The Relationship of Gareth and Gawain in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Notes and Queries* 8 (1961): 8-9.

[61] Murray J. Evans, "Explicits and Narrative Divisions in the Winchester MS: A Critique of Vinaver's Malory," *Philological Quarterly* 58 (1979): 263-81).

[62] Donald Hobar, "The Oral Tradition in Malory's *Morte*

Darthur," diss., U of Pittsburgh, 1967. Hobar contends that the inconsistencies, repetitions, and textual divisions marked by capitals, red letters, and marginal notes are consistent with a text meant to be read to an audience. Hence, the problems that confound the unity argument for a text meant to be read, are not problems for a text meant to be recited.

[63] Patricia Carol Roby, "The Tripartite Structure of the Works of Sir Thomas Malory," diss., Marquette U, 1976. Roby discusses Malory's work as a unified trilogy.

[64] Vinaver, *Malory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929; rpt. Folcroft: Folcroft, 1977). Somewhat surprisingly, in analyzing Malory's style, Vinaver notes his emphasis on everyday detail and the legal ramifications of feudalism, along with the reduction of the fantastic and magical elements of his sources. He concludes that Malory's style approaches a "realism" that is "fundamentally prosaic and practical" (51). P. J. C. Field, "Description and Narrative in Malory," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 476-86. Field suggests that Malory's unadorned and somewhat abrupt style of narrative creates a sense of realism for the reader by creating an impression of immediacy between the reader and the narrator.

[65] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur. Benson, in the first portion of his book, provides a detailed comparison of the structure of earlier Arthurian prose romance cycles to Malory's work and argues that Malory crafted what was essentially the whole significant tale of

the life of Arthur into his own English prose romance cycle
of Arthurian tales, in a single work, by drawing on many
sources.

[66] For a good review of the genre discourse in relation
to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* see Duane Edwin Nystrom,
"Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Four Modern Perspectives on Genre,"
diss., Catholic U of America, 1983. Nystrom provides a
detailed explanation of the primary genre arguments of
Vinaver, Brewer, Moorman, and Benson. Also see Ruth Morse,
"Back to the Future: Malory's Genres," *Arthuriana* 7 (1997
Fall): 100-23. Morse examines the question of romance and
its applicability to Malory's work.

[67] Elizabeth S. Sklar, "The Undoing of Romance in
Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 20
(1993): 309-27.

[68] Beverly Kennedy, "The Re-Emergence of Tragedy in
Late Medieval England: Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*,"
*The Existential Coordinates of the Human Condition:
Poetic-Epic-Tragic: The Literary Genre*, Ed. Anna Teresa
Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984) 363-78.

[69] For example, Lee W. Patterson, "Heroism and the Rise
of Romance: An Essay in Medieval Literary History," diss.,
Yale U, 1969; and John Pierce Watkins, "The Hero in Sir
Thomas Malory," diss., U of Pittsburgh, 1964.

[70] R. W. Chambers, "The Continuity of English Prose
from Alfred to More and His School," Introduction, *The Life
and Death of Sir Thomas More*, by Nicholas Harpsfield, Ed.

Elsie Vaughn Hitchcock (London: Oxford UP, 1932; rpt. 1950) xlv-clxxiv.

[71] George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm*. Though Saintsbury questions the intention of Malory and even his conscious awareness of his narrative style, he asserts that Malory's style did have a notable impact, certainly greater than previously considered, on sixteenth century prose narrative. R. M. Wilson, "On the Continuity of English Prose," *Mélanges de Linguistique et de Philologie, Fernand Mossé in Memoriam* (Paris: Didier, 1959) 486-94. Wilson goes a little further than Saintsbury and asserts that Malory and Caxton both had influence on the development of all subsequent modern English prose. Norman Davis, "Styles in English Prose of the Late Middle and Early Modern Period," *Actes du VIIIe Congrès de la Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (Liège: U de Liège, 1961) 165-81. Davis argues for the influence of Malory on modern English prose, but he adds that both English religious prose style and French prose style had a more significant influence than Malory's style.

[72] For example, consider Charles Sears Baldwin, *The Inflections and Syntax of the* Morte D'Arthur *of Sir Thomas Malory: A Study in Fifteenth-Century English* (Boston, 1894); George Hempl, "The Verb in the *Morte D'Arthur*," *Modern Language Notes* 9 (1894): 240-41; and Arie Dekker, "Some Observations in Connection with B. Trnka: On the Syntax of the English Verb from Caxton to Dryden," *Neophilologus* 20

(1935): 113-20.

[73] K. C. Phillipps, "Contamination in Later Middle English," *English Studies* 35 (1954): 17-20. Phillips compares both Caxton and Winchester versions to each other and other fifteenth century texts. Ján Šimko, "A Linguistic Analysis of the Winchester Manuscript and William Caxton's Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Philologica* 8 (1956): 1-2; and *Word Order in the Winchester Manuscript and in William Caxton's Edition of Thomas Malory's* Morte Darthur *(1485)--A Comparison* (Halle, 1957). Arthur Olav Sandved, "A Note on the Language of Caxton's Malory and That of the Winchester MS," *English Studies* 40 (1959): 113-14; and *Studies in the Language of Caxton's Malory and That of the Winchester Manuscript* (Oslo: Norwegian UP; New York: Humanities P, 1968). N[orman] F. Blake, *Caxton and His World* (London: Deutsch, 1969). Blake compares Caxton's printed edition to the Winchester manuscript in order to identify changes that Caxton made. Bert Dillon, "Formal and Informal Pronouns of Address in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Annuale Mediaevale* 10 (1969): 94-103. Dillon compares Malory's usage in both Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript to that of his sources. William Matthews, "Caxton and Malory: A Defence," *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies*, Eds. Jerome Mandel and Bruce Rosenburg (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1970) 77-95. Matthews compares Caxton to the Winchester manuscript and evaluates differences in response to Vinaver. Margaret A. Muir and P. J. C. Field, "French Words and

Phrases in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,"
Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 72 (1971): 483-500. Muir and
Field compare Malory to his French sources.

[74] Shunichi Noguchi, "Writing in Malory," *Poetica* (12)
1979, 82-93. Kunio Nakashima, "Impersonal Verbs in Malory,"
Bulletin of the English Literary Society of Nihon University
15 (1964): 1-45; "Gerund in Malory," *Bulletin of the English
Literary Society of Nihon University* 17 (1967): 1-18;
"Present Participle in Malory," *Bulletin of the English
Literary Society of Nihon University* 18 (1968): 1-22;
"Reflexive Verbs in Malory," *In Spite of the Thirteen
Superstition* 2 (1968): 1-27; "The Noun in Malory," *In Spite
of the Thirteen Superstition* 6 (1973): 105-42; "Thou and Ye
in Malory," *In Spite of the Thirteen Superstition* 7 (1974):
157-77; "Personal Pronouns in Malory," *Bulletin of the
English Literary Society of Nihon University* 23 (1975):
353-76; "Demonstrative Pronouns in Malory," *In Spite of the
Thirteen Superstition* 9 (1976): 169-80; "Relative Pronouns
in Malory," *Bulletin of the English Literary Society of
Nihon University* 24 (1976): 1-34; and "Passive Voice in
Malory," *Bulletin of the English Literary Society of Nihon
University* 25 (1977): 163-84. Masanori Toyota, "Forms and
Functions of the Nominal Construction with Special Reference
to Malory's English," *Studies in English Literature [English
Literary Society of Japan]* English No. 1971: 176-78.

[75] See his "Linguistic Analysis;" and *Word-Order in the
Winchester Manuscript.*

[76] See his *Studies in the Language*.

[77] Matthews "The Locale of *Le Morte Darthur*," *Ill-Framed Knight*, 75-114. Matthews examines the differences in the dialects used in the Winchester manuscript's account of the Roman war in "The Tale of King Arthur and Emperor Lucius" and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. These dialectical differences suggest that the author of *Le Morte Darthur* was from a northern region of England and thus support Matthews' Yorkshire candidate for the author Thomas Malory.

[78] R. W. Chambers, "The Continuity of English Prose." Chambers claims that though Malory holds an important place in English prose history, he had virtually no influence on his contemporaries or on subsequent English prose authors. Norman Davis, "Styles in English Prose." Davis disagrees with Chambers as to the significance of Malory's influence on later writers. Larry Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur. Benson thoroughly explores Malory's close connection with his contemporaries. He contends that English writers in other forms (i.e. chroniclers) heavily influenced Malory.

[79] P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971). Field specifically examines Malory's style in terms of fifteenth century chroniclers.

[80] Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in* Le Morte Darthur (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975).

[81] Francois Le Saux, "Pryvayly and Secretely: Personal

Letters in Malory's `Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones,'"
Etudes de Lettres 3 (Jul.-Sept. 1993): 21-33.

[82] Kathryn McCullough, "Homily as Intrastructure and Extrastructure: Malory's Redaction of the *Queste del Saint Graal*," *Medieval Perspectives* 1 (Spring 1986): 167-73.

[83] Donald Hoffman, "Malory's `Cinderella Knights' and the Notion of Adventure," *Philological Quarterly* 67 (Spring 1988): 145-46.

[84] D. Thomas Hanks, "Malory, Dialogue, and Style," *Quondam et Futurus* 3 (1993): 24-35. Other useful examinations of Malory's use of dialogue include Peter R. Schroeder, "Hidden Depths: Dialogue and Characterization in Chaucer and Malory," *PMLA* 98 (1983): 374-87; and Ann Dobyns, *The Voices of Romance: Studies in Dialogue and Character* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1989). Schroeder compares Malory to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in terms of how dialogue contributes to character development and understanding of character by the reader. Dobyns compares Malory's use of dialogue to that of Emily Bronte and Sidney.

[85] Examples of these include James Leo Wyatt, "The Ways of Worship: Motif Patterns in Sir Thomas Malory's `Tale of Gareth,'" diss., U of Kentucky, 1986; and Arnold A. Sanders, "Malory's Transition Formulae: Fate, Volition, and Narrative Structure," *Arthurian Interpretations* 2 (1987): 27-46.

[86] One example of this is Wendy Tibbetts Greene, "Malory's Use of the Enchanted: A Study in Narrative Technique," diss., Indiana U, 1982.

[87] For an examination of the dream episodes in Malory, see Robert G. Bass, "The Dream as a Narrative Device in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," diss., Miami U, 1973.

[88] Wynkyn de Worde, *The Booke of the Noble Kyng. Kyng Arthur Sometyme Kynge of Englonde of his Noble Actes and Feates of Armes and Chyvalrye, His Noble Knyghtes and Table Rounde and is Devyded in to XXI Bookes* (Westminster, 1498). Quoted in Life 23.

[89] In his preface to his edition of Malory's text, Caxton notes for his readers that "al is wryton for our doctryne, and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne, but t'exersyse and folowe vertu, by whyche we may come and atteyne to god fame and renommé" (xv).

[90] Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster* (London, 1570). Quoted in Life 23.

[91] This was essentially about whether a moral reprobate, as the leading candidate for the author of *Le Morte Darthur* seems to be, could write an apparently highly moral collection of tales. For an overview of the paradoxical nature of the debate over Malory's character and the perceived morality of his work, see Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight*; C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*;" and Vinaver, "On Art and Nature."

[92] Alfred Tennyson, "To the Queen," *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1888). Tennyson alludes to Malory's work in this poem and paints a very negative moral picture of it. Tennyson speaks of the gray king

> Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's, one
>
> Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time
>
> That hover'd between war and wantoness,
>
> And crownings and dethronements. (41-45)

F. J. Snell, "The Age of Transition, 1400-1580," *Handbooks of English Literature*, ed. John W. Hales (London: Bell, 1905) vol. 2, 83-90. Snell claims to reject the notion that Malory's work is immoral, but then he condemns the apparent devaluation of marriage and a lack of respect for the sanctity of the institution. Canon Dawson, "The Morals of the Round Table: Malory's *Morte Darthur* Compared to the *Idylls of the King*," *Living Age* 267 (Dec. 3, 1910): 606-10. Dawson openly evaluates Malory in terms of nineteenth century moral standards and condemns Malory for being barbaric.

[93] Edward R. Russell, *The Book of King Arthur*, Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool (Liverpool, 1889). Though Russell considers *Le Morte Darthur* an inferior work, he argues that it must not be judged against contemporary standards. George Newcomen, "The Lovers of Launcelot (A Critical Study of Sir Thomas Malory's Epic)," *New Ireland Review* 11 (1899): 44-50. Newcomen argues that Malory's work should not be approached through preconceptions of intended or apparent moral purpose based on nineteenth century adaptations and interpretations. Instead, he urges readers to view and appreciate Malory's picture of humanity.

[94] Edward Strachey, "Talk at a Country House: 'Down to

Tower'd Camelot,'" *Atlantic Monthly* 73 (1894) 52.

[95] Those critics who primarily address the theme of chivalry include Charles Sears Baldwin, *An Introduction to English Medieval Literature* (New York: Longmans, 1914); Eugène Vinaver, *Malory*; Alec Reginal Myers, *England in the Late Middle Ages, 1307-1536*, Pelican History of England 4 (Baltimore: Penguin, 1952; rpt. 1959); David Jones, "The Myth of Arthur," *Epoch and Artist*, ed. Harman Grisewood (New York: Chilmark; London: Faber and Faber, 1959) 212-59; P. E. Tucker, "Chivalry in the *Morte*," *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett, 64-103; Stephen J. Miko, "Malory and the Chivalric Order," *Medium Aevum* 35 (1966): 211-30; Charles Moorman, "The Tragic Knight: Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *A Knyght There Was: The Evolution of the Knight in Literature* (Lexington: U Kentucky P, 1967) 96-112; T. J. Ray, "The Book of Knights Erring," *Forum* 7 (1969): 17-23; Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur; and Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the* Morte Darthur (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985).

[96] Those critics who include a discussion of both chivalry and love as themes in the analysis of Malory's work include George Saintsbury, *The English Novel*; Vida D. Scudder, Le Morte Darthur *of Sir Thomas Malory and Its Sources*; P. E. Tucker, "The Place of the 'Quest of the Holy Grail' in the *Morte Darthur*," *Modern Language Review* 48 (1953): 391-97; Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1963); and R. T. Davis, "The Worshipful Way in Malory," *Patterns of Love and Courtesy:*

Essays in Memory of C. S. Lewis, ed. John Lawlor (London: Edward Arnold, 1966) 157-77. Those critics who concentrate their analysis on the theme of love include Raachel Jurovics, "The Definition of Virtuous Love in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Comitatus* 2 (1971): 27-43; John Edgar Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (London: Hutchinson U Library, 1973); and Joan M. Ferrante, "The Conflict of Lyric Conventions and Romance Form," *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature*, ed. Joan M. Ferrante and George D. Economou (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1975) 135-78.

[97] E. K. Chambers, "Sir Thomas Malory," *Sir Thomas Wyatt and Some Collected Studies*, 1933 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965) 21-45.

[98] Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*, 123-39.

[99] For example see Nellie Slayton Aurner, "Sir Thomas Malory--Historian?" *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 48 (1933): 362-91. Aurner sees parallels between the characters and actions of Malory's work and claims that Malory has created an "allegorical presentation of the rise and downfall of a united English chivalry under the Lancastrian dynasty" (389).

[100] As is suggested by the prominence of the critics who hold this view and by the scholarly weight that their views tend to hold in critical Malory discourse, this appears to be the main focus of most discussion of chivalry as a theme in Malory. The critics include William Henry

Schofield, "Malory," *Chivalry in English Literature: Chaucer, Malory, Spenser and Shakespeare*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 2 (Cambridge: Harvard UP; London: Oxford UP, 1912) 75-123; Vida D. Scudder, Le Morte Darthur *of Sir Thomas Malory*; Eugène Vinaver, *Malory*; Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry: Studies in the Decline and Transformation of Chivalric Idealism* (Durham: Duke UP; London: Cambridge UP, 1960); and Michael Stroud, "Malory and the Chivalric Ethos: The Hero of 'Arthur and the Emperor Lucius,'" *Mediaeval Studies* 36 (1974): 331-53.

[101] Important studies on the character of Lancelot include August J. App, *Lancelot in English Literature: His Role and Character* (Washington: Catholic U of America, 1929; rpt. Haskell House, 1969); and R. T. Davies, "The Worshipful Way in Malory," *Patterns of Love and Courtesy: Essays in Memory of C. S. Lewis*, ed. John Lawlor (London: Arnold, 1966) 157-77. Davies examines Lancelot's relationship to Guenivere and to Arthur. Gilbert R. Davis, "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Lancelot' and the Question of Unity in the *Morte Darthur*, *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 49 (1964): 523-30; R. M. Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Lancelot': Prelude to Adultery," *Malory's Originality*; Marilynn Zarwell Stewart, "The Protégés of Lancelot: A Study of Malory's Characterization of Lancelot in the *Morte Darthur*," diss., U of Southern California, 1970; Maureen Fries, "Malory's Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte*

Darthur," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 605-13.
Fries presents Tristram as an intended counter to the
hero-nature of Lancelot. Janet Jesmok, "'A knight wyveles':
The Young Lancelot in Malory's *Morte Darthur, Modern
Language Quarterly* 42 (1981): 315-330; Gwenyth E. Hood,
"Medieval Love-Madness and Divine Love," *Mythlore* 16 (Spring
1990): 20-28, 34. Hood examines Lancelot's actions
attributed to his love for Guenivere in light of sixteenth
century Italian love poetry. Danielle Morgan MacBain, "The
Tristramization of Malory's Lancelot," *English Studies* 74
(1993): 57-65; and Derek Brewer, "The Presentation of the
Character of Lancelot: Chretien to Malory," *Lancelot and
Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (New York:
Garland, 1996) 3-27.

[102] Gawain is often discussed in connection with the
ideals of the Round Table and chivalry. See for example,
Barbara Gray Bartholomew, "The Thematic Function of Malory's
Gawain," *College English* 24 (1963): 262-67; William K.
Bennett, "Sir Thomas Malory's Gawain: The Noble Villain,"
West Virginia University Philological Papers 16 (1967):
17-29; and Clare Ruggles Smith, "The Character of Gawain in
Malory," diss., Texas Technical U, 1969. Bors is usually
contrasted with the religious ideals of the Grail quest and
is an example of Malory's secularization of his sources.
Consider R. M. Lumiansky, "Malory's Steadfast Bors," *Tulane
Studies in English* 8 (1959): 5-20; and Victoria L. Weiss,
"Grail Knight or Boon Companion? the Inconsistent Sir Bors

of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, *Studies in Philology* 94 (1997): 417-27. Morgan le Fay is generally held up as an exemplar of the inherent evil and dishonesty present in the world of Malory's Arthur. For example, see Henry Grady Morgan, "The Role of Morgan le Fay in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, *Southern Quarterly* 2 (1963-64): 150-68; and Myra Olstead, "Morgan le Fay in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 19 (1967): 128-38.

[103] Some recent critics have explored *Le Morte Darthur* in terms of modern social constructs. For example, see Jerome Mandel, "Constraint and Motivation in Malory's 'Lancelot and Elaine,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* (20 (1984): 243-58; Martin B. Schichtman, "Elaine and Guinevere: Gender and Historical Consciousness in the Middle Ages," *New Images of Medieval Women: Essays Towards a Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck (Lewiston: Mellen, 1989) 255-271; Donald L. Hoffman, "Dinadan: The Excluded Middle," *Tristania* 10 (1984-1985) 1-2, 3-16.

[104] Rosemary Morris, "Uther and Igerne: A Study in Uncourtly Love," *Arthurian Literature IV*, Ed. Richard Barber (Totowa: Brewer, 1985) 70-92.

[105] P. E. Tucker, "The Place of the 'Quest of the Holy Grail' in the *Morte Darthur*," *Modern Language Review* 48 (1953): 391-97. Tucker concentrates his examination of character on Lancelot. Charles W. Whitworth, "The Sacred and the Secular in Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal,'" *Yearbook of English Studies* 5 (1975): 19-29. Whitworth looks closely

at Percival and Bors to support his secular versus religious comparisons. Sandra Ihle, "Invention of Character in Malory's Grail Book: Medieval Studies in Honor of Douglas Kelly," *Conjunctures*, eds. Keith Busby and Norris J. Lacy (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994) 181-92.

[106] Guest-edited by Felicia Ackerman, this volume of *Arthuriana* contains articles covering thematic topics including the role of Providence in Malory's work, concepts of Fellowship, and depiction of emotions--specifically love and envy--and piety: *Arthuriana* 11 (Summer 2001).

Chapter 2

The Floure of Kyngis and Knyghtes:

Arthur's Place in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

An examination of the structure of the surviving versions of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* reveals that there is significant thematic relevance to the order of the tales as they survive in both Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript. Malory gathers a significant number of the stories tied to the Arthurian court into a single collection that begins and ends with the life of Arthur. These more heroic tales, in turn, surround the more courtly tales of the knights of Arthur. Eugène Vinaver notes that "The series [of Malory's tales] ends as it began, with a tale of heroic deeds performed in the service of a great kingdom" (*Works* vii). The reader's attention is not focused on the material contained within this narrative framing device. Rather, the story surrounding the contained tales is the focus, similar to many frame tales. The story of Arthur's rise and fall becomes the literary focal point that the stories within a story, the tales of Arthur's knights and their adventures, are intended to illustrate and clarify. Simply, in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the reader's focus should not be on the tales of the knights; instead, it should be on the telling of the heroic tale of Arthur: his rise to kingship and the ultimate defeat of his ideals.

As we begin to examine how the text focuses on the character of Arthur, it is first necessary to look at the

order of the tales as we have received them and the thematic significance suggested by the overall structure of the text. Since both Caxton's 1485 edition and the Winchester manuscript reflect the same order of the tales, it seems reasonable to conclude, as Vinaver does, that the order "was presumably the same in their common source" (*Works of Sir Thomas Malory* li). The common order of the tales in both extant versions takes on greater potential significance when compared to the probable order of composition of the tales. Though debate continues as to the precise order of composition based on various internal and historical clues, a general consensus has emerged that the tales were likely *not* composed in the precise order in which they stand in both versions of Malory's work.[1] What this consensus clearly suggests is that Malory, a scribe, or some other compiler, gathered these tales together into a single collection, possibly a single manuscript, in the order that they survive, and that arrangement probably was not the original order in which they were initially written.

The arrangement and structure of the component tales in *Le Morte Darthur* has been the focus of considerable scholarly discourse. Malory's work was initially viewed as essentially a compilation of several Arthurian tales drawn, translated, and reduced from several French romance sources. In 1485, William Caxton prepared and published the text as a single work. Caxton's single-text approach remained the only text of Malory, though subsequently edited and revised in

numerous editions, until Eugène Vinaver published his edition of the Winchester manuscript text in 1947. The Winchester manuscript of Malory's work was discovered by Walter Oakeshott in 1934 in the Fellowes Library at Winchester. The Caxton and Winchester manuscript versions of Malory's work, in addition to their similarities, present significant differences, in regard to the overall structure of the tales. As noted earlier, the arrangement of tales is the same in both versions. It is in the structure of the tales, however, that the significant differences lie. Caxton structured his edition as a single, united work, comprised of twenty-one books, each with several chapters. Vinaver, on the other hand, presented the text as eight disparate tales, each of which is capable of standing alone. The tales are related largely by thematic similarities and, to a lesser degree, by the chronology of the life and reign of King Arthur. The debate sparked by these differences in structural interpretation has run relatively undiminished since 1947.

The debate surrounding the structure and unity of Malory's work rested at the focal point of most Malory criticism for many years following the appearance of Vinaver's edition. More recently, it has become a springboard for other avenues of investigation. Before Vinaver's somewhat controversial interpretation of the structure of the Winchester manuscript, Malory's work was widely considered to be a compilation of translated tales,

crudely reduced from French sources. Despite Caxton's apparent attempt to fashion *Le Morte Darthur* into a single work, most early scholars, still considering it a compilation, made no real attempt to analyze the structure or unity of the work. However, some critics did consider Malory's work to reflect a vague sort of unity or wholeness based on its existence as a single work.[2]

Malory's text suffers from inconsistency and repetition thematically and in its structure. Most, if not all, of his basic stories derive from the continental body of Arthurian material. Actually, he used several different sources and chose selected elements from them to combine and create his own Arthuriad.[3] Malory's versions of these tales differ from their French romance models in their thematic structure. French romance frequently used *entrelacement*, a complicated interwoven thematic and narrative structure that emphasizes relationships between narrative threads sometimes at the expense of plot clarity. Malory unraveled the complex interwoven structure of his models and created a structure of unlocked scenes or vignettes that have a clearer plot and a somewhat more simplified thematic focus.[4] Malory focused his text on the life and reign of Arthur. The unraveled episodes are structured to emphasize their plot and theme relationships, either in parallel or contrast, to the surrounding elements of the tale of Arthur's rise and fall.

The concept of unity, mentioned earlier, has been the central issue of the debate concerning the structure of

Malory's work. Though unity *per se* is not the focus of this examination of *Le Morte Darthur*, it is necessary to begin the present examination of the thematic significance of the structure of Malory's work with a brief review of some of the evidence from the unity debate since so much of the analysis of the structure of Malory's work has centered on that issue. The central question in this debate centers on whether Malory intended *Le Morte Darthur* to be a single work or a collection of related tales. Caxton presents Malory's text as essentially a single work from beginning to end. In contrast, Vinaver asserts that the Winchester manuscript text reflects eight separate romances combined into a single collection, which, though thematically related, do not form a single narrative. In addition to thematic relationships between the various tales, Vinaver admits "a certain unity of manner and style," but further contends that "there is no unity of structure or design" ("Sir Thomas Malory" 545).

R. M. Lumiansky and Charles Moorman are the most prominent of Vinaver's critics in the unity debate.[5] They argue that Malory intended to write a single, comprehensive and unified tale of King Arthur and his knights. Recently, several critics have tried to find some middle ground by beginning to explore structure in terms other than unity. Their efforts, somewhat ironically, have centered on the areas mentioned by Vinaver earlier in his initial remarks on the apparent failings of Malory's unity: design and style. In addition, focus has shifted away from trying to identify

authorial intention and to exploring the effect of the structure of the text on its thematic elements. Roger S. Loomis has argued for the effect of a general planned design for the whole work that may or may not have been present when Malory began to write but that developed as Malory progressed.[6] Knight identifies a two-part structure based on an analysis of the style reflected in the work. He argues that the first half of *Le Morte Darthur* is highly episodic in style, held together by common setting and recurrence of action, and that the latter half is a continuous cohesive narrative focused by common characters and a singular thread of theme and action.[7]

Often included in the analysis of structure in terms of design and style is the consideration of themes. Design and style seem to offer methods for reading Malory's work not as a unified whole, whereas thematic elements seem to offer a way to argue for unity. Brewer, remarking on the concept of unity, notes that the component tales of *Le Morte Darthur* have a sense of being connected to each other which is derived from the "impressions of unity of atmosphere and of underlying concepts" ('the hoole book' 42). Malory's work has a thematic framework that contains all of the various disparate internal tales and elements and unifies them into a single composite whole, like "walls of a city, enclosing a variety of dwellings" (Brewer, *The* Morte Darthur 22).

The narrative structure of Malory's work is intimately linked to the thematic content in many ways. Several of the

tales in *Le Morte Darthur* have an internal structure that focuses on at least one of the main thematic statements. Love, fellowship, and the chivalric sense of duty as thematic concerns are often seen to create an enveloping structure for a particular tale or scene.[8] Characters, too, can be seen to serve as embodiments of thematic ideas and as foci of structure and unity. Arthur, Guenivere, and Lancelot are generally considered for such analysis; however, other characters have been used as well.

The structure of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, considered in terms of subject matter, suggests yet another natural division that consists, essentially, of three sections. In the early section, the subject of the narrative is the birth of Arthur and his rise to kingship. The subject of the middle tales consists of the adventures of the knights of Arthur's kingdom; and the concluding tales examine the fall of Arthur's kingdom and his death.[9] Terence McCarthy suggests that the structure of Malory's work, divided along subject matter lines, is a reflection of the turning of the wheel of fortune. He notes that the first part (Vinaver's Tales 1 and 2) tells of "establishing the king's authority at home and abroad and the founding of the Round Table community" and reflects "the upward movement of the wheel of fortune, a familiar medieval image" (3-4). The middle section (Vinaver's Tales 3-6) reflects the "age of glory of Arthurian chivalry, the period when the wheel seems motionless because [it is] at its height" (McCarthy 4).

McCarthy then continues the fortune's wheel metaphor by noting that the downward turn of the wheel is reflected in the division and strife in Arthur's kingdom in the final sections (Vinaver's Tales 7 and 8). We shall return shortly to this rather natural three-part division along subject lines of Malory's work.

The analysis of Malory's narrative structure has progressed through several stages. Each stage has considered the work in terms of a number of units. Caxton's edition omitted several of Malory's *explicits*, and arranged the work into twenty-one books, each of which was divided into chapters, most often at episodic shifts in the narrative. In spite of his divisions, Caxton apparently considered his edition of Malory's tales to be a single, roughly unified work. The headings he supplied in his table of rubrics are not always particularly appropriate; however, the divisions themselves generally follow many of the distinct shifts between episodes in Malory's work. Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript restored the *explicits* that had been omitted by Caxton. Further, based on both physical and internal evidence as Vinaver carefully explains, he divided the text into eight separate related tales with several chapters each.[10] This method of dividing Malory's work into eight separate tales is not wholly convincing, as has been noted. Other *explicits*, *implicits*, and textual evidence were selectively ignored.

In contrast to both Caxton's single work and Vinaver's eight-part work is Knight's two-part structural division of Malory's tales. As Knight explains, the first half consists of a series of "stor[ies] of some adventure of some knight" (35), and is linked loosely in a thematic way. The second half is more fluid and forms a more nearly continuous narrative focusing on the interrelation of a few themes and characters. In fact, Knight claims that "The book is a unity from that point [the end of the Lancelot and Elaine story]; its qualities are those of a unified work of art, and its failings are where it turns away from its strong unified theme" (60). The very fact that turnings away weaken its unity suggests that this section is not as unified as Knight claims. In fact, though the episodes are generally longer, and the digressive episodes shorter and fewer in number, this section is still episodic.

The foregoing structural arguments and analysis seem to overlook the clearest structural analysis of Malory's work: the three-part division suggested by the basic subjects of each of the tales noted by McCarthy earlier. Of the eight tales (as designated and titled by Vinaver), the first two-- *The Tale of King Arthur* and *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself through the Dignity of His Hands*--present the birth, youth, and rise to kingship of Arthur. The last two--*The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* and *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon*--present the challenge to, and dissolution of,

Arthur's ideals, which culminate in his death. Between these tales are four more: *The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot du Lake*, *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was called Bewmaynes*, *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, and *The Tale of the Sankgreal*. Though each of these four interior stories focuses somewhat inconsistently on the knight/object named in its title and generally only in passing refers to Arthur and his court, thematically they all serve the tales of Arthur's rise and fall. This structural division of Malory's works sets the rise of Arthur to kingship and the destruction of both him and his kingdom in opposition to the internal tales of knighthood, albeit quite probably a complementary opposition. It is also a structure that resembles the medieval notion of Fortune's wheel as noted earlier.

The thematic focus of the tale of the rise and fall of Arthur is emphasized through this juxtaposition of tales and their action. The thematic threads of chivalry, love, and religion run relatively unbroken in the two sets of external tales, and the four internal tales serve to accentuate the important elements of these themes as they arise in the tale of Arthur. To a large degree, chivalry and the chivalric code, as exemplified in the character of Arthur, move forward the story of Arthur and his knights. In the first two tales, chivalry alone seems to play a central thematic role. In the central tales focusing on Arthur's knights, chivalric duty is confronted and complicated by duty to God

and duty to Love. The conflict between these three aspects of knightly duty lies at the thematic core of the closing section of the book, the tales of the downfall of Arthur and his kingdom.

Character analysis is a valuable part of any study of thematic significance. In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, character analysis is often the starting point for a discussion of the themes. In the earliest commentaries on Malory's work, Malory and Caxton both identified this work as a book about King Arthur and his knights. Malory names the subject of his work in the final colophon: "Here is the ende of the hoole book of Kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (726). Caxton, too, clearly identifies the subject matter of his version as, "the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur, somtyme kyng of thys noble royalme thenne callyd Brytaygne" (xv). It is understandable, then, that the characters in this work, particularly Arthur, should be a focus of critical analysis. In spite of the fact that Arthur and his knights are the clear subject of Malory's work, the examination of characters in support of the analysis of the concepts of chivalry and love often centers on Lancelot instead of King Arthur.[11]

In contrast to the overwhelming body of critical analysis into the thematic import of Lancelot, there are few analyses of the character of Arthur as depicted in Malory's work. Those critics who have examined the thematic

importance of Arthur's character have most often done so in comparison/conjunction with another character. Arthur has been examined in his relationships to Guenivere, Lancelot, and Galahad, for example.[12] He has also been compared to King Mark in the Tristram segment, in an analysis of Malory's apparent emphasis on exploring the differences between good and bad kingship.[13] In a wider arena, the historical context of the character of Arthur has been explored across an expanse of English literature. Most notable concerning Malory's work are the works of Elise van der Ven-Ten Bensel and Christopher Dean.[14] They examine Arthur as a focal point for larger themes. Though most thematic analyses of Malory's work center on chivalry as at least one of the major thematic subjects, few focus on Arthur. However, it is King Arthur who is at the center of chivalry in *Le Morte Darthur*; in fact, he is at the center of the entire work, as we shall soon see.

Le Morte Darthur is a work that reflects a collecting together of tales from a variety of sources. In addition to its significance regarding the structure of Malory's work, this gathering together of material has another distinct effect: implied authority. Mary Crane's work on gathering and framing as discursive practices can help to explain this concept.[15] Crane discusses gathering textual fragments into commonplace books, and though Malory did not create a commonplace book, he did something very similar. From the probably quite large number of potential sources of

Arthurian material, Malory chose a number of different sources to gather together to form his version of the story of Arthur. Crane notes that "gathering offered a way to excerpt the most authoritative fragments" (4). Malory, like most medieval authors, is not interested in creating a new story; instead, he is interested in telling a story of Arthur in a particular new way. Consequently, though he gathers material from several sources, he frequently refers to his source as "the French book" to lend historical authenticity to his version. In fact, Malory clearly notes at one point that what he is telling his audience is not certain because he can "fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene auctorysed" (717). Crane notes that framing, as she uses the term, consists of "forming, arranging, and assimilating" gathered textual fragments within "the dominant cultural code [. . .] to create authentic and stable discourse" (3, 4). Malory's work does just this. The material from his sources is framed within the cultural context of Arthur's court, as Malory depicts it, in order to clarify and exemplify Arthur's life and ideals. These various tales have been gathered together, assembled into their present form to create a particular effect, and are presented as historically authentic.

What exists then in *Le Morte Darthur* is a selected gathering of tales concerning knights and knighthood sandwiched between tales of Arthur and the pursuit and ultimate destruction of his noble, heroic ideals. The

individual tales are not always consistent in their treatment of their primary subject. In the earlier tales, the structure is somewhat more episodic in nature as pointed out by Knight and reflected in Caxton's divisions. Frequently, these episodes temporarily shift focus away from the primary subject and relate adventures of other knights. In some cases, these shifts away may reflect Malory's unraveling of the interlaced romances of his French sources. However, in his work, these episodes are not entwined with other threads of the narrative; rather, they are embedded tales set off structurally from the material surrounding them. These embedded episodes reflect the overall structure of the whole of *Le Morte Darthur* in that they serve as episodes within a larger tale. They do not distract, however, from the overall subject-related structure of the story of Arthur's life surrounding the adventures of Arthur's knights. In fact, they provide recurring thematic linkage to the story of Arthur that surrounds them. This juxtaposed structure suggests an interrelated significance of one set of tales, the life of Arthur, with the other, the tales of the knights. If the interior tales are not significant to the tales concerning Arthur's rise and fall, then they could have been collected either before, after, or separately from the life of Arthur. Since the chronological flow of the tales of the life of Arthur is interrupted by being separated into two major parts by the enclosed tales, Malory must have had a reason to insert the bulk of the

tales of Arthur's knights between the two sections dealing more directly with Arthur himself. These interior tales, as well as those comprising the life of Arthur, are essentially separable, but they are intimately and thematically related, and the structure reflects and reinforces that relationship. The rise and fall of Arthur reflecting the rise and fall of Fortune's wheel are presented with the tales of the knights at the midpoint, the structural center, which is also the thematic central point. Arthur's life achieves the highest position on the wheel at its midpoint, and it is at this point that Malory's tale reflects Arthur's turning from rise to fall.

In addition to the subject-based structural ordering of the tales, Malory's *explicits* provide another textual device that serves to reinforce the subject divisions noted earlier. They provide an external reference to the structure. In them, there is an authorial voice that delineates the limit of the tales concerning Arthur, which in turn define the embedded tales of his knights. The external, authorial references emphasize and strengthen the subject divisions of the text. In addition to the *explicits* omitted by Caxton and restored by Vinaver, there are other textual authorial transitions. One brief example of these other transitions is that between Vinaver's Chapter 9 and 10 in *The Book of Sir Tristram De Lyones*:

> Now turne we from this mater and speke of Sir
> Trystram, of whom this booke is pryncipall off.

> And leve we the Kynge and the Quene, and Sir
> Launcelot, and Sir Lamerok.
>
> And here begynnyth the treson of Kynge Marke that
> he ordayned agayne Sir Trystram. (411)

The "Now turn we," or "Now leave we," narrative device of shifting episodes is a common one in Malory's work. Transitions between episodes such as these and the *explicits* which serve as transitions between tales separate the episodes of the story of the life of Arthur both from those in the tales of his knights' adventures and from Malory's world in which he is writing the text. At the end of each of the first two tales, the tale's *explicit* specifically mentions King Arthur as having been the subject of the tale. Those of the internal tales refer only to the name of a knight or to the grail. No mention is made of Arthur at all. The *explicit* to tale seven, *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, does not refer to Arthur specifically as the subject of the preceding tale, but the narrative does focus on Arthur and his court in that it examines the relationship that brings about the action that follows. In addition, this *explicit* leads directly into the *implicit* for the following tale, which does mention Arthur as subject. Concluding the final tale and consequently the whole of *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory's last colophon notes that it marks the end of "the hoole book of Kyng Arthur and of his Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (726). Though all of these except the last were omitted by Caxton, and only restored

with the discovery of the Winchester manuscript, these *explicits* provide specific internal support to what is readily evident in the subjects of the tales themselves. They support the structural division of the text by subject based on the first two and last two tales being about the life of King Arthur and the interior tales as being about his knights.

The focus of Malory's work is clearly Arthur's rise and fall, as the *structures of* both extant texts *suggest*. Caxton makes it quite evident in his preface that his intent was to publish "a book of the noble hystoryes of the sayd Kynge Arthur and of certeyn of his knyghtes" (xiv-xv). The concluding paragraph to his preface summarizes how Caxton envisioned his book's subject:

> the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur, somtyme kyng of thys noble royalme thenne callyd Brytaygne, [. . .] and treateth of the noble actes, feates of armes of chyvalrye, prowess, hardynesse, humanyté, love, curtosye, and veray gentylnesse, wyth many wonderful hystoryes and adventures. (xv)

Caxton's edition is about King Arthur and his ideals, first and foremost; that is the focus of the book. It *also* has many wonderful histories and adventures.

The three-part structure of *Le Morte Darthur* suggests, as alluded to earlier, certain similarities to visual art.

There is a sense of central matter bordered, or enveloped, by a framing story. In many ways, Malory's work is reminiscent of a frame narrative. However, to apply the criteria of frame narrative to Malory's text, like so many other styles and forms, would ultimately prove inadequate and too many faults would have to be explained away. It would be rather like fitting a round peg into a square hole. It could be done, but both peg and hole would be the worse for wear, and they would never convincingly fit. Instead, if the structure of *Le Morte Darthur* is examined for its similarities to frame narrative, and those similarities explored, then perhaps they would enrich our understanding of the work and clarify the thematic relationships among its component tales.

Since most critical analysis of medieval English frame narratives has centered around Chaucer's works, any consideration of the structural significance of medieval frame narrative must be concerned, at least in part, with the critics who have written about his works. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly examine certain elements of his *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In visual art, a frame often serves to enhance, or set off, what it contains. That is, as Allen Frantzen explains, "We ordinarily think of the frame as marginal and the picture as central."[16] The frame establishes limits or boundaries; it "defines space and controls assertions about art displayed within it" (Frantzen 35). It often suggests that what the frame

contains continues beyond the frame. It says that the world is much bigger than this image of it, but this is the portion that the artist wants to focus on. In Malory's work, the tales of the life of Arthur can be seen to act in this way as well. They establish the milieu of the tales they contain. In them, Malory establishes the rules and limits for the world of his knightly tales and the code of knightly conduct by which the knights in the interior tales govern their behavior. Also, by creating a detailed picture of Arthur, his kingdom, and his interactions with the rest of the world, Malory allows the reader to see beyond the knightly world of jousts and battles, even if he does not specifically encourage the reader to do so.

However, the frame is not merely a limiting device, for it can also be a vital part of the effect of the whole work. Shifting from the world of visual art to the written word, particularly as reflected in medieval manuscripts, we will see that the frame, or in this case margins, developed a particular significance of their own between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The margins of a page of manuscript can be seen as a type of frame enclosing and setting off the matter contained in the written text in the center of the page. However, as Michael Camille argues, for Gothic and Medieval artists and authors the difference between margin and center may not have been as clear-cut as modern critics might think.[17] His examination of marginal art in medieval manuscripts suggests that by the fifteenth century the

distinction between the center and the frame/margin had virtually disappeared. Referring to a fourteenth century manuscript of *Lancelot del Lac*, he notes that "in this manuscript the marginal 'play' glosses and provides an ironic commentary on the central action of the text and its illustrations, which narrate the adventures of the Knights of the Round Table" (106). However, in contrast, Camille says of the framing margin images in the *Spinola Hours*, a fifteenth century manuscript, that "this frame and its shadows that are the most 'real' part of the page [. . .] set up a relativity not visible in Gothic book design, where the script shares an equality with image and margin" (156). Whether Malory had knowledge of these particular texts may never be known. However, it seems clear that by the fifteenth century, the differentiation of "center" and "margin" had been blurred. At the time that Malory was writing, the center shared importance with the margins in textual art and in other representations as well, as Camille suggests. As we shall see, based on the work as it exists, Malory apparently wants his audience to look first at the frame.

In yet another concept of framing that is of particular interest when considering texts and literature, in frame narratives the frame device provides continuity in collections of tales. It becomes a unifying agent that holds together often quite diverse groupings of stories. Whether we use Caxton's divisions, Vinaver's, or some other set of

structural divisions, Malory's work is clearly a collection of related tales, but not inseparable ones. Most of them, in fact, can stand alone. Helen Cooper, in her analysis of the *Canterbury Tales*, provides the following explanation of the relationship between a story collection and a frame narrative:

> A story-collection is a collection of separable tales compiled and written, or probably re-written, essentially by a single author. [. . .] It is different [. . .] from an anthology or a manuscript miscellany, or a collection of separate works by a single man, where the different items do not necessarily belong together; and it is different from works such as interlaced romances, where there may be a number of stories but they are not at all easily extractable. The stories must be essential to the work, not incidental. [. . .] Story-collections can be divided very simply into three kinds in terms of their structural ordering. There are those that consist simply of tales, with no enclosing material at all; there are those that have a prologue and sometimes an epilogue but no linking matter between the tales; and there are some that have a fully-developed framework enclosing and connecting the stories.[18]

Malory's work is not merely a collection of tales, nor does
he provide a prologue or epilogue. Instead, what he does
provide is a story, the life of Arthur, which creates a
world within which the tales of his knights can be
understood and be seen to amplify Arthur's ideals. Based on
the work as it survives in Caxton's edition and the
Winchester manuscript, there is a frame narrative-like
structure created by the ordering of the tales. By
thematically linking the content of the tales with the
surrounding story of Arthur and his kingdom, Malory
"establish[es] causality and intentionality as [a] means of
interpreting the tales" (Frantzen 35). The world of Arthur
provides just such linkage among the tales of the knights.
It gives the reader a frame of reference for interpreting
the tales of the knights and their impact on the story of
Arthur's rise and fall itself. The "framing" tales of
Arthur's life do not focus our attention on the tales they
surround; rather, the internal tales serve as illustrations
for them. The knights' stories, though intriguing and often
thematically complex, do not introduce significant new ideas
or concepts to the story of Arthur. Instead, they focus our
attention on and clarify our understanding of the ideals and
characters in the tales surrounding them. Frequently, they
serve as object lessons of the ideals of Arthurian
knighthood that are introduced in the body of the stories of
Arthur's life.

Malory's work has similarities to earlier medieval frame stories. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, considered probably the most widely accepted example of an English medieval frame tale, has the frame story of the pilgrims. Katherine Gittes notes that, "The pilgrims are innocent purveyors of Chaucer's sophisticated design, [. . .] a network, a shadow of symmetry, an elaborate interlacing of themes and relationships."[19] Using the frame story of the pilgrims' intricate interactions, Chaucer provides structure and motivation for the tales that they tell each other and creates something much richer than just a collection of folktales. Chaucer's technique of the pilgrims introducing and telling the tales, and the interactions between the pilgrims and the tales and the pilgrims and each other is far more complex and sophisticated than the surrounding story in Malory's work. However, like Chaucer, Malory creates the literary world of Arthur's kingdom as a unifying structure into which he inserts his illustrative tales.

George Lyman Kittredge identifies a dramatic element in the structure of Chaucer's work.[20] He sees the tales as a kind of dialogue within the frame story focusing on the pilgrims and their reactions rather than primarily on the tales. He says that "the Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the stories, but *vice versa*" (155). Malory's internal tales certainly do not provide a dialogue. Instead, their dramatic echoes suggest a very early form of a Shakespearean Athenian wood or a Belmont. Just as Chaucer's pilgrims'

tales serve to illustrate and develop the characters who tell and listen to them, Malory's embedded tales develop the story of the life of Arthur through example and clarification. The internal tales are a place for the ideals of Arthur's court to be emphasized through contrast and/or illustration in a place, and sometimes with characters, other than those found in Arthur's court. Further, unlike Shakespeare's pastoral and alien settings which are often the place where much of the dramatic action of a play occurs, Malory's dramatic action, the life of Arthur, takes place in the surrounding tales, much like the dramatic action between the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. For Malory, the internal tales serve as illustrations of Arthur's ideals in various circumstances. Each of the embedded tales is essentially complete in its own action. In fact, most consist primarily of simple similar episodes relating similar actions: knight jousting with knight, or knight defeating some evil knight or king. Their dramatic energy is self-contained, however. They play themselves out, and only then do we move on to the next element in the narrative of the progress of Arthur's rise, fall, and destruction. The action in the story of Arthur's life moves forward only within the surrounding tales. The embedded tales merely serve to illustrate or clarify the actions or characters in that surrounding narrative.

This lack of thematic action which serves to move the story forward in the internal tales may be a part of the

reason why Malory left off without telling the full Tristram story and why he seems to break off in the telling of the Lancelot tales at the end of Vinaver's tale seven. In these internal tales and the embedded episodes, Malory's creative talents seem to have lost the vitality evident in the story of Arthur. As McCarthy notes, "although he [Malory] severely abridged the *Queste del Saint Graal*, what remains is very much a word for word translation" (143). Malory did little to change or creatively use the material of the source for *The Tale of the Sankgreal*. The material only serves the action in the outer story of what is happening in Arthur's kingdom, and developing it any further than he does would add nothing to the reader's understanding of Arthur and his ideals. McCarthy suggests that one possible reason for the lack of any significant originality on Malory's part in adapting the tale of the Holy Grail could have been Malory's "half-hearted interest in a part of his story which could not be omitted but which did not appeal to him" (143). It seems that Malory, like many readers, found that the internal tales lost interest for him when they digressed too far on their own and stopped illustrating or otherwise being significant to the story of Arthur. After all, as they exist in Malory's text, they have no thematically relevant action. That is, they do not advance the story of the rise and fall of Arthur, which by observing the structure of Malory's work as it survives, seems to be the thematic focus.

The structure of Malory's collection of tales drawn from the Arthurian material can be seen as a kind of framework of stories recounting the life of Arthur surrounding a group of tales that explore the feats of some of the Knights of the Round Table. The tales consist of episodes within episodes: each delineated along subject and thematic lines. The embedded tales and episodes serve to illustrate the surrounding narrative. The story of Arthur's life, embodying his ideals and the struggle to achieve them, establishes the boundaries and limits of the illustrative narratives of his knights and their adventures. It is his story that is reflected in the turning of Fortune's wheel.

Within the broad structure of the tales of Arthur surrounding the tales of his knights, there is a more complex and detailed structure that reflects a pattern that further emphasizes the life and ideals of Arthur. This structure consists largely of individual episodes combined to form tales. Episodes, as used in this analysis, are units of narrative that are generally separated by shifts in location or time and sometimes by changes in subject or theme. The relationship between episodes is often chronological. That is, the action of a given episode occurs following the action of the episode that precedes it in the narrative. For example, Malory frequently uses a journey motif in his tales. Events are narrated in the order that the characters encounter them as they travel from place to place. However, this is not always the case. When evaluating

the episodic structure of a text, it is important to consider the order of the episodes. As Morton Bloomfield notes in his essay on the narrative syntax of episodes,

> What is juxtaposed to what, is determined by the point or points the creator wishes to make, what significance he wishes to give his meaning and the audience he is addressing. The choice of episodes and their syntax or spatial sequential arrangement in narration is determined then by esthetic, mimetic, formal and rhetorical principles.(214)[21]

It is clear then that not only an author's choice of which elements are to be gathered together, but also in what order they are ultimately placed are both considerations for determining meaning and significance. In the case of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, we have two versions of his work, and neither is his autograph copy. Therefore, we can never be certain as to his ordering of the tales and episodes. However, since both versions are the same in terms of tale sequence and the order of the episodes, we may study the effect of the sequence of tales and episodes as if it was Malory's own and attempt to determine possible meanings and significances at the expense of certain intentions. In addition, as we explore the meaning and significance of the episodic structure of *Le Morte Darthur*, we need to keep in mind that

> We can have episodes which include other episodes--macro-or-micro-episodes or even

> macro-episodes. Sometimes a whole narration may be
> considered as a frame for sub-episodes. The
> relation between episodes can be chronological,
> abrupt, or with a subepisode acting as a
> transition. [. . .] In fine, the syntax of
> episodes can be very complex and is indeed a major
> artistic element in the creation and effect of a
> tale. (Bloomfield 218)

Though my analysis of the episodic structure of Malory's work concentrates on the thematic significance of the relationships of episode subjects and actions, some of those relationships are affected by the position of episodes in relation to each other and to the work as a whole.

Larry Benson, in his excellent analysis of Malory's work, has explored the episodic structure of *Le Morte Darthur* in conjunction with his analysis of Malory's style.[22] Comparing Malory's technique to the English Romantic style of writing, Benson examined the thematic interrelationships of various episodes within each tale to satisfy questions of connectedness and continuity. The thematic basis for establishing parallels between elements within tales can be just as effective in examining the thematic connectedness of larger elements of the tales themselves.

What follows is an overview of the episodic structural elements of Malory's Arthuriad. However, instead of examining each episode in detail, since many of them are

somewhat minor in importance, we will more closely examine the embedded "Tale of Balin," the episodes surrounding the wedding of Arthur and Guenivere, the shift into the tales of Arthur's knights in the *Noble Tale of Launcelot du Lake*, and several episodes in the *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones* as representative of Malory's use of episodes to reinforce his focus on Arthur.

Arthur's Rise to the Top: Tales One and Two

The Tale of King Arthur, the first of the eight tales as divided by Vinaver, provides a look at Arthur's life from the events leading to his conception, through his birth, his accession to the throne of England, his consolidation of power and authority over his own lands, and the establishment of his personal and public ideals of knightly behavior. Moreover, at several crucial points in this narrative of Arthur's early life and rule, Malory inserts exemplar tales or scenes to explore and clarify certain elements contained in the running story of Arthur. Generally, these digressive or illustrative episodes occur almost immediately following the part of the episode in Arthur's life where they are most suited.

In the opening section, titled "Merlin" by Vinaver, Malory's narrative explores the public view of Arthur as he ascends the throne of England. This is followed by an episodic shift to an examination of Arthur's personal role

as king and away from his public role as monarch. Malory
introduces Arthur's family relationships that will prove
significant in the latter portions of *Le Morte Darthur*: the
ultimate downfall of Arthur and the kingdom.

Within this episode is a sequence of two narrative
digressions, essentially micro-episodes. The first, the
knighting of Gryfflet and his subsequent joust with
Pellinore, opens the discourse on knighthood that will carry
through Malory's text from this point to the end. It also
serves as a foil scene for a later encounter between Arthur
and Pellinore. The second episode in this sequence also
points to crucial events in the tale of Arthur to be
encountered at a later point in the narrative. Emissaries of
the Roman emperor announce the Emperor's demand for tribute
and are brusquely rebuffed. This digression introduces King
Arthur's rise to be the greatest king, in fact emperor, of
Christendom.

Keeping with the theme of knighthood introduced by the
adventures of Gryfflet, Malory's text next turns to Arthur's
knighthood and his achieving of Excalibur and its scabbard
from the Lady of the Lake. The significance of this episode
is clear. Arthur, through his actions, indicates the role of
knighthood in his kingdom. Arthur is not merely the king
whom knights serve; rather he is the model knight as well.
Arthur's knights "mervayled that he wolde jouparde his
person so alone. But all men of worship seyde hit was myrry
to be under such a chyfftayne that wolde putte hys person in

adventure as other poure knyghtis ded" (36). Arthur is a leader who will lead by personal example. He is going to be the example upon which his knights will model themselves. All of them look to him, willingly, as should the reader.

At this point in the narrative of Arthur, the text takes its first tale-length turning away. Identified by Vinaver as the second division within *The Tale of King Arthur*, "Balin or the Knight with the Two Swords" is made up of five episodes that relate the exploits of Balin. Like so many English medieval romances, the action of this complete embedded tale of Balin begins and ends in the court of King Arthur. Balin, along with his brother Balan, experiences several adventures in this tale. On the surface it may seem to be merely a series of digressive episodes that have only superficial relevance to Arthur's life. However, as we shall see, Balin's tale of adventures reflects several of the elements recently encountered in Arthur's life, and provides an intriguing parallel to the whole of Arthur's rise and fall.[23]

The first episode of the "Tale of Balin" occurs in King Arthur's court in response to the challenge of King Royns. As Arthur's barons gather, a damsel comes to court. She is wearing a sword in a scabbard that can only be drawn by a pure knight, "withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson" (38). Arthur, perhaps because of his adultery with Morgan and his slaughter of the innocents fresh in the audience's mind (because they appear immediately before this

tale in Malory's text), is not pure enough to draw the sword. Instead, Balin, who notes that "worthynes and good tacchis and also good dedis is nat only in araymente, but manhode and worship ys hyd within a mannes person," draws the sword (as Arthur himself had done to achieve the kingship) and symbolically assumes the role for the remainder of this tale of exemplar of Arthur (39). Balin echoes Arthur's reaction to Excalibur encountered only pages earlier. Balin looks at the sword, and though cautioned by the damsel that for his own safety he should return the sword, he refuses and instead, chooses the "aventure [. . .] that God woll ordayne for me" (40).

Like many medieval Arthurian romances, the action of this tale occurs at Arthur's court, but he is decidedly not the focus of the action. Instead, like French romances, this tale centers on one of Arthur's knights. In fact, Arthur has become noticeably inactive and vacillating. However, unlike the continental models, this tale continues to reflect on Arthur's heroic ideals. Balin is, in effect, a mirror of Arthur himself.

In the initial episode of this section, Balin insults the honor of Arthur's court by killing the Lady of the Lake. Arthur, who had previously imprisoned Balin and then released him and apologized to him, now banishes Balin, not for the killing, but for the insult. Balin leaves Arthur's court.

The next episode shifts focus briefly from Balin to a knight called Launceor. A knight of Arthur's court, Launceor requests permission to track down Balin. Arthur allows Launceor to go. Significantly, Arthur does not send Launceor; rather, he allows Launceor to pursue Balin to avenge Arthur's honor. Launceor is killed by Balin, and Launceor's beloved throws herself on his sword in distress. Balin is unable to prevent her from doing so. Merlin, upon hearing of this, announces that Balin will strike the dolorous stroke, "a stroke moste dolerous that ever man stroke, excepte the stroke of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste" (45).

Balin, together with his brother Balan, who has joined him, are the focus of the third episode in this section. Together, they defeat King Royns and send him captive to Arthur. In subsequent battle against King Lot and the other enemies of Arthur's kingdom, Arthur, along with Balin and Balan, is victorious and kills all the kings fighting against him. In this battle, Pellinore kills King Lot which will precipitate the vengeance of Lot's sons (also Arthur's nephews--Gawain, Gaheris, Aggravayne, and Gareth) that figures prominently in the closing sections of *Le Morte Darthur*.

A brief narrative digression follows the burial of the defeated kings at the end of this third "Balin" episode. Not directly related to the action of the tale of Balin, it is nevertheless connected to the scene mechanically and serves to set up a future event in the life of Arthur. At the heart

of the tale of Balin, a knight whose adventure is focused on his sword, Malory's text reminds the reader of Arthur's sword, Excalibur, and its importance to Arthur. Merlin warns Arthur to keep Excalibur and its scabbard safe, so Arthur fatefully gives the sword and scabbard to Morgan le Fay for safe keeping.

Following this thematic reminder, the focus of the tale shifts to the telling of Balin's adventure with the invisible knight leading to the event of the dolorous stroke. Balin wounds King Pellam, three kingdoms are laid waste, and only the wounded Pellam and Balin survive. Balin rides forth into the wastelands where he encounters a grieving knight. Through Balin's intervention, the grieving knight discovers his false beloved with her secret lover and kills them and then himself. Balin trots off hoping to be clear of any blame.

In an authorial intrusion, Malory reminds his audience of an event that will be related in the *Tale of the Sankgreal*. Commenting on the unsuccessful attempt to help the lady of a castle with Balin's lady's blood, the narrator reminds us "that sir Percivall his syster holpe that lady with hir blood" (52). By calling attention to the parallel actions in these two episodes, Malory links them thematically as well. Balin reflects Percival, and the waste caused by the dolorous stroke is linked to the Grail, which will be its cure.

After Balin rides away from the garden with the bodies of the untrue lovers, the episode shifts to an adventure where he must joust with an unknown knight. In this fifth episode, the circumstances are such that Balin must fight with a knight defending an island, because it is the custom of the castle. Balin, carrying a shield not his own and unidentifiable as himself, fights his own brother Balan. Balan is likewise unidentifiable, since he has assumed the identity of the nameless knight of the isle. Consequently, the tragedy of the adventure is not revealed until both knights, who are mortally wounded by their battle, reveal their identities to each other as they are dying. This section of *The Tale of King Arthur* has its own colophon and explicit, which clearly establishes it as separate from the tale of the life of Arthur:

> Thus endith the tale of Balyn and Balan, two
> brethirne that were borne in Northumbirlonde, that
> were two passynge good knyghtes as ever were in
> tho dayes.

<div align="center">Explicit. (59)</div>

This embedded tale reflects Arthur's story. "The Tale of Balin" is essentially a self-contained, roughly drawn analogue of the complete story of Arthur, from the drawing of the sword from the stone to the mutual destruction of Arthur and Mordred on the plain at Salisbury. Balin, after achieving the sword through his lack of treachery, commits treachery in Arthur's court. Arthur, by right and

righteousness, draws the sword from the stone and gains a kingdom. He then commits adultery and infanticide. Balin fails to prevent the destruction caused by true love, and the destruction of Arthur's kingdom is precipitated by love's influence over duty. With aid of strong knights, Balin defeats the enemies of Arthur and helps Arthur to establish a peaceful kingdom that contains the seeds of revenge within its peacefulness. Threatened by destruction, Balin is forced to defend himself in a way that, ironically using a relic of Christ's passion, ultimately means the wasting away of certain countries. Arthur, hoping to maintain a splintering brotherhood of knights, sends them in search of the grail, another relic of Christ's passion. Finally, Balin, due to questions of identity and simple errors in judgment destroys his relative, his brother, and in turn is himself destroyed. Arthur, likewise, due to complex family loyalties and duties that overwhelm his ideals and the brotherhood of the Knights of the Round Table, destroys his family and his kingdom, and is killed by his own son.

Le Morte Darthur returns, after the tale of Balin, to the direct narrative of Arthur's life. The next section of The Tale of King Arthur, titled "Torre and Pellinore" in Vinaver's edition, recounts the events surrounding King Arthur's wedding to Guinevere. Contained within this surrounding tale are three loosely related tales of knightly adventure. Vinaver's title characters, Torre, and his

father, Pellinore, along with Gawain take on adventures that illustrate the role of knightly behavior toward women.

Just as the tale of Balin had, these tales begin and end in Arthur's court. The opening episode of this enclosed tale relates the events and circumstances surrounding Arthur's wedding to Guinevere. It also discusses the establishment of the Round Table. At the wedding feast, Arthur invests Torre (who in many ways is reminiscent of Arthur as a youth) and Gawain (Arthur's nephew) as knights. Then something strange and marvelous happens. A white hart runs through the banquet hall, followed closely by a white hound. A lady on a white horse rides in and complains loudly. Each of the three is either chased or taken away. Arthur tasks Gawain to retrieve the hart, Torre to retrieve the hound, and Pellinore to retrieve the young lady.

Unlike so many of the episodic shifts in Malory's work, the first of the wedding feast adventures has authorial intrusions in the form of an *implicit* and an *explicit*. The episode opens with the following: "Here begynnith the fyrst batayle that ever Sir Gawayne ded after he was made knyght" (64). In the course of his adventure, Gawain, in his haste caused by blind rage and a desire for revenge, inadvertently cuts off the head of a lady kneeling at the side of her wounded brother. On his return, Guenivere has Gawain tried by ladies of the court for his errant deed, and he is sentenced "for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes and to fyght for hir quarels; and ever that he sholde be

curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy" (67). This episode is clearly marked off with the following *explicit*: "And thus endith the adventure of Sir Gawayne that he dud at the mariage of Arthure" (67).

The next episode turns to the adventures of Torre. Torre, honoring a promise to a lady, cuts off the head of a treacherous knight. For his service, Torre receives a grant of land and a title. This episode also ends with a brief *explicit*: "And here endith the Queste of Sir Torre, Kynge Pellynors sonne" (71).

The adventure of King Pellinore is the next episode in this tale. Pellinore, in too much the hurry to pursue his quest, ignores the pleas of a lady for help. After Pellinore rides past, the lady kills herself in her sorrow. Pellinore completes his quest, and on the return trip, he passes by the lady, now dead, who had begged for his help. He takes the lady's head to Arthur's court. There, Merlin tells him that the lady was Pellinore's own daughter, and that Pellinore will suffer because of his failure to save her.

At the conclusion to these adventures, there is a charge that Arthur gives to all of his knights. Sometimes referred to as the Pentecost oath, this passage is most often referred to when critics discuss Malory's concept of chivalry. Arthur charges his knights

> never to do outerage nothir mourther, and allwayes
> to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that
> askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their

worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for
evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and
jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in
hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon
payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles
in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no
worldis goodis. (75)

Coming as it does after the three different examples of
knightly behavior performed in conjunction with the
adventure of Arthur's wedding feast, it sets those examples
in contrast with the ideal behavior suggested by the oath.
Each knight, to varying degrees, failed in some aspect of
the oath. However, the failings of these knights, occurring
before the statement of Arthur's code of knightly behavior
are less significant than those that will follow it. This
episode, dealing with the wedding of Arthur to Guenivere and
the adventures taken by Gawain, Torre, and Pellinore based
on the events at the wedding feast, ends with its own
explicit as noted earlier.

The fourth section of *The Tale of King Arthur*, a
relatively short section, titled "The War with the Five
Kings," consists of two brief episodes. In the first, Merlin
encounters Nenyve, and disappears from Malory's work. The
second shifts focus back to Arthur's martial prowess and his
relationship with Guenivere. This episode examines Arthur's
ability to maintain a delicate balance between his love and
devotion for Guenivere and his kingly role as warrior and

leader. The juxtaposition of these two episodes suggests that there may be some sort of parallel between them. At this point in the overall scope of Arthur's life, the parallel appears to be one of contrast. Merlin is betrayed by a woman who seeks only his power, and rejects him as a lover. Arthur's relationship, on the other hand, appears to be one of true love. Guenivere's later treachery seems to be merely foreshadowed in a heightened way by the apparent contrast in this passage. Further, Arthur is presented as the foremost knight. His public role as monarch is tested and he is victorious while at the same time upholding the ideals set forth in the Pentecost oath.

Arthur's private role as family member and king is tested in "Arthur and Accolon," the next section of *The Tale of King Arthur.* Morgan le Fay challenges the personal knightly prowess of Arthur, and his life is threatened. Through her magic and subterfuge, Arthur is nearly defeated in single combat. He loses Excalibur's scabbard but regains the sword. Arthur, as he was when his public role was challenged, is victorious. His mettle is tested, but he survives and maintains his ideals.

The family ties of Arthur serve as a link to the next series of episodes. The relationship between Morgan and Arthur is at the core of the next adventures. The final section of *The Tale of King Arthur* opens and closes in Arthur's court. The surrounding narrative provides continuity to the enclosed tales and facilitates the

travel/journey motif that also serves to hold together the three internal adventures. In the introductory episode, Ywain is sent away from Arthur's court because, as Morgan's son, he is held suspect when Morgan sends a poisoned gift to Arthur. Gawain, as cousin to Ywain, decides to leave Arthur's court as well. Shortly after leaving, they encounter Marholt and join forces for adventure with him. They come across three damsels sitting near a fountain. Each knight chooses a damsel, and accordingly they begin their adventures.

In the course of his adventures, Gawain fails to adhere to the knightly code of behavior; he does disservice to a fellow knight and deceives a lady for his own lascivious ends. In contrast, the adventures of Marholt and Ywain are examples of good knightly behavior. In true knightly fashion, Marholt achieves worship/honor for his king and himself and honorably serves his fellow knights. Ywain is the focus of the third narrative in this set of adventures. Ywain, like Marholt, is true to the knightly code of behavior. He earns honor for himself and his king.

This section ends by returning to the narrative of the enclosing story set in Arthur's court. Together, the three knights return to Camelot where they are all warmly received despite Gawain's misdeeds. Along with the tales of Arthur's prowess and adherence to knightly chivalry laid down in the Pentecost oath, Malory's text provides these three examples of knightly behavior. Arthur wins worship and honor through

his own actions and those of Ywain and Marholt. Gawain, on the other hand, has violated the code of knightly behavior in his scandalous treatment of Pelleas and his lady.

The colophon to *The Tale of King Arthur* reads, "Here endyth this tale, as the Freynshe booke seyth, fro the maryage of Kynge Uther unto Kyng Arthure that regned aftir hym and ded many batayles" (110). This first tale has traced the conception, birth, rise to power, and marriage of Arthur. In addition, we have seen him consolidate his strength as a king in his own country, repulse threatening neighbor kings, and establish a code of knightly behavior for his followers. The Round Table has been established and Malory has provided several examples along the way of both proper and improper knightly behavior. This opening section of *Le Morte Darthur* reflects the upward turning of Fortune's wheel. Throughout, Arthur has been placed at the pinnacle of knighthood and kingship. In fact, despite the several digressive episodes, we have focused on Arthur the man, Arthur the knight, and Arthur the king of Britain. Not only has Arthur been riding the rising wheel of Dame Fortuna, but his ideals have as well. Next, Malory's text turns to Arthur's role in the wider world, as the wheel turns to its full height.

Vinaver has titled the second tale in his edition of *Le Morte Darthur, The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself through Dignity of his Hands*. This title, taken from Malory's colophon, is often replaced with a title

derived from the *explicit* to this tale: *The Tale of King Arthur and Emperor Lucius*. Taken together, these two titles explain the major thrust of this part of Arthur's story. This tale consists of essentially a single episode which relates Arthur's refusal of the Roman emissaries' message demanding tribute, his subsequent leading of an army against the Emperor Lucius, and his march on Rome itself. In this tale, Arthur, who earlier had established his place in British history by establishing and maintaining a consolidated and peaceful kingdom, appears on the world stage and establishes himself as foremost among kings in the world. Drawing on his pedigree descending from past Roman emperors, Arthur lays claim to the throne in Rome and, through strength, achieves it. He has ridden Fortune's wheel round through the full rising part of its turn. As Malory turns to tales of Arthur's knights, Arthur, as both king and emperor, sits in glory at the pinnacle of his reign.

At this point in *Le Morte Darthur*, the narrative shifts focus away from Arthur and onto the knights of his Round Table. However, like the tales of Gawain, Ywain, and Marholt, the next two tales (*The Noble Tale of Launcelot*, and *The Tale of Sir Gareth*) present examples of Arthur's knights to mirror Arthur's achievement of unrivaled position in the world. Arthur has just been established as the foremost ruler in all the world. It is reasonable that the best knights in the world should serve him. In the tales of

Lancelot and Gareth, that is precisely what the text provides.

Arthur and His Knights in Their Glory: Tales Three and Four

The third tale in *Le Morte Darthur* is *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake*. This tale, as noted earlier, begins a sequence of four narrative sections of *Le Morte Darthur* that concentrate primarily on the knights of Arthur's Round Table. They deal largely with Arthur's knights as examples of his ideals of knighthood. Frequently throughout these tales, Lancelot, Tristram, Lamerok, and Gareth are referred to as the best knights in the world. For example, in the later *Tale of Sir Gareth*, Sir Persaunte tells Gareth that

> the worlde seyth that betwyxte three knyghtes is
> departed clerely knyghthode, that is sir Launcelot
> du Lake, sir Trystrams de Lyones and sir Lamerok
> de Galys. [. . .] For and ye may macche that Rede
> Knyght ye shall be called the fourth of the
> worlde. (193-194)

In addition to these four, I would add Sir Galahad. In achieving the Grail, he demonstrates an ideal as well. There are certainly many knights depicted in these central tales. But these five--especially when considered in opposition to the nephews of King Arthur (Gawain, Aggravayne, and Gaheris) who were the sons of Morgan le Fay, his sister, and King Lot, along with Mordred, Arthur's own bastard son with his

sister--set up a telling example of Arthurian knighthood.
The adventures and actions of these knights explore the
extremes of medieval knighthood from utter purity to
fratricide. Thus, the central tales that we are about to
examine serve as exempla of Arthur's concept of knighthood
in action.

The *Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake* relates a
series of episodes that reflect Lancelot's behavior in
several different experiences with women. Mirroring the
structure of *Le Morte Darthur* as a whole, the first
adventure is itself structured as a tale within a tale. The
outermost surrounding tale is that of Tarqyun. The next
layer is the tale of Bagdemagus and his daughter; and there
is even yet another enclosed tale, which is that of the
fight with Belleus. The first relates how Tarquyn takes Sirs
Lionel and Ector prisoner. In the second, Lancelot himself
is taken prisoner by Morgan le Fay, but is freed by
Bagdemagus's daughter so he can help her father. Lancelot
encounters Belleus in the third episode. In the fourth, he
restores Bagdemagus's honor in a tournament. And, in the
final episode of this adventure, Lancelot defeats Tarquyn
and frees the knights being held prisoner. In this
adventure, Lancelot's devotion to Guenivere, to the
exclusion of all other ladies, is first introduced.

In the next two adventures, each consisting of a single
episode, Lancelot further demonstrates his adherence to the
code of knightly conduct. In the first of these, he rescues

several distressed ladies from a knight, and his relationship with Queen Guenivere is more fully explained. In the second episode, he again rescues ladies, who are being held captive by two giants at Tintagel.

In the next adventure, following the chronological structure of the quest motif, Lancelot rescues Sir Kay, and then donning Kay's armor, Lancelot sets off into the next two episodes disguised, as he so often is in later tales. In them, Lancelot jousts with several knights of the Round Table, defeats them, and leaves them guessing about Sir Kay's knightly abilities.

Lancelot's next adventure consists of a single episode. In it, he encounters a wounded knight and the knight's sister. Through success at the Chapel Perilous, Lancelot is able to retrieve the relics necessary to heal the knight. Achieving relics and healing wounds is an important motif surrounding Lancelot throughout his adventures, one, in fact, that also mirrors the larger narrative of the grail story.

Next, Lancelot, through his exemplary devotion to the knightly code to aid ladies in distress, falls prey to the trap of Sir Phelot. Lancelot kills the treacherous Sir Phelot, but not Phelot's treacherous pawn, his lady. In a twist on the theme of treachery, in the next episode, which also constitutes his next adventure, Lancelot is escorting a knight and his lady. The knight kills the lady while she is in Lancelot's care. In spite of his own loss of honor,

Lancelot, ever the true model of Arthurian chivalry as embodied in the Pentecost oath, gives mercy to the treacherous knight when he begs for it.

In the final episode of this tale, Lancelot returns to Camelot and Arthur listens as Lancelot relates his adventures, but that is the extent of Arthur's direct involvement in this series of adventures. However, we get a sense of Lancelot's abilities and his integrity as a knight, in addition to being introduced to several motifs which will play a significant role later in the lives of Arthur and Lancelot. In fully realizing Arthur's code of chivalry, the reader comes away from this tale believing that Lancelot is well worthy of being called the knight of "the grettyste name of ony knyght of the worlde, and moste he was honoured of hyghe and lowe" (173).

The fourth tale of those that comprise Malory's work is *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was Called Bewmaynes.* This tale, like that of Lancelot preceding it, relates several adventures of its title knight. It begins and ends at the court of Arthur. In fact, it does so twice. Consisting of essentially two such patterned tales in one, *The Tale of Sir Gareth* encompasses seven episodes. They explore his prowess and devotion as a knight in service of a damsel and of his lord. A young man of apparently low social status and ridiculed in Arthur's court takes on a knightly challenge no one else cares to take and proves himself worthy of knighthood.

This tale, without a clear source as noted in the previous chapter, establishes Gareth as one of the four greatest knights in Arthur's kingdom. It also serves to place Gareth in a pivotal position in the circumstances leading to the blood feud that leads to the destruction of Arthur and his kingdom. Gareth is knighted by Lancelot rather than Arthur, at his own request. He becomes a devotee of Lancelot and a near constant companion of him. When, in later tales, Lancelot becomes the object of hate for his brother, Gawain, Gareth is necessarily placed in the middle due to his conflicting familial and knightly duties. As a true knight, Gareth generally holds to the ties of knightly brotherhood rather than the ties of family, as is the case in "The Great Tournament," in *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, which will be discussed later. Unlike Lancelot, Gareth's blood relationship to Arthur, being his nephew, adds a critical dimension to his characterization. While Lancelot is able to concentrate on knightly perfection, Gareth (as too, ultimately, his brothers, Gawain, Agravaine, Gaheris, and Mordred) and Arthur both are plagued by the need to balance family with knightly duty. It is somewhat ironic then that Lancelot is the character responsible for their final inability to achieve that balance.

Mark as Mirror and Foil, and Tristram and Lancelot:
Tale Five

Malory adapted the first two parts of a cycle concerning Tristram. It resulted in *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*. This section of Malory's work takes up approximately one-third of the total length of *Le Morte Darthur*. Sweeping in scope, this section concerns itself with much more than just the adventures of a single knight. Although it focuses on Tristram, it ranges throughout the knights of Arthur's kingdom and treats variously of their adventures. In addition to Tristram, prominent are Lancelot, Palomides, and Dinadan. It is here, for example, that we read of the significant adventures of Lamerok, one of the four greatest knights in the world. Vinaver has divided this book, or tale, into fifteen different sections. Since the story of Tristram is familiar, the summary of those sections treating directly with his adventures will be fairly brief.

The first section of *The Book of Sir Tristram* is titled, "Isode the Fair," which is somewhat misleading since the narrative focuses on Tristram throughout, and Isode is essentially a secondary character, like Merlin is in the section named for him in the first tale. Consisting of some twenty-two episodes, this section has a very complicated structure. The first half of this section deals with the conception, birth, and coming of age of Tristram, similar to the way the opening tale of *Le Morte Darthur* does with

Arthur. The first episode tells of his birth. Tristram is knighted and proves himself early in the fight with Marholt. Afterwards, he sojourns in Ireland to be healed. Soon after his experiences in Ireland, Tristram returns to Cornwall. At this point in the narrative of Tristram, this tale's significance to the story of Arthur is revealed. Tristram's king, King Mark, is a deceitful and self-serving king. He is jealous of Tristram's growing acclaim with the people. He is so jealous in fact that he plots to destroy Tristram. This is an ongoing motif in their relationship. Mark, blinded by his personal anger, frustration, and jealousy, loses sight of his kingly role as a monarch of his kingdom. Instead, he focuses on his personal role and centers his actions on revenge. Mark's kingship stands as an example of bad kingship to compare/contrast to that of Arthur.

In the middle of the narration of the adventures of Tristram, Malory inserts a brief episode relating how Lancelot rescues Gawain from the giant King Carados. Otherwise totally out of place in this narrative of Tristram, the narrator notes that Tristram, upon hearing of this event, says, "and I had nat this messayge in hande with this fayre lady, truly I wolde never stynte or I had founde sir Launcelot" (263). This seems to be a somewhat awkward attempt to mechanically link the story of Tristram to that of the knights of Arthur, especially to Lancelot. Aside from this mechanical linkage, the parallels between Tristram and Lancelot are numerous. Both are the best knights in their

kingdoms, both respect each other for their knightly qualities, both suffer for their unavoidable loves, and ultimately, both are destroyed by their lack of loyalty to their sovereign.

Once Tristram brings Isode to Mark's court, Mark plots Tristram's demise. A duplicitous king, Mark appears to accord with Tristram, but then he attacks Tristram out of jealousy and vengeance. In Brittany, Tristram helps King Howell and marries his daughter, Isode Blanche Mayns. Lancelot hears of Tristram's apparent disloyalty to his lady, Isode the Fair, and vows to destroy Tristram.

In this opening section of *The Book of Sir Tristram*, the significance of the entire story of Tristram is exposed. Tristram, Isode, and King Mark serve as contrasts to Lancelot, Guenivere, and King Arthur, respectively. So, too, does the love between Tristram and Isode the Fair serve as a contrast to the love between Lancelot and Guenivere. Tristram is a comparable knight to Lancelot; indeed, they are each one of the four best knights in the world. The similarities of Tristram and Lancelot are mirrored by the differences between King Mark and King Arthur. King Mark is an example of false kingship in contrast to the true kingship of Arthur. *The Book of Sir Tristram*, or more properly, the story of Tristram (since Malory's book contains so much more than just the story of Tristram) serves to clarify the story of Arthur that we have read/heard so far, as well as that part of the story that is

yet to come. Malory does not need to break up these examples to set them in direct opposition to the various parts of Arthur's story. His audience knows the history of Arthur, so the comparisons and contrasts will be readily apparent to them.

The next section of *The Book of Sir Tristram* is titled, "Sir Lamerok de Galys." This section is reminiscent of the tales of Lancelot and Gareth discussed earlier. There are four episodes that tell of the adventures of Lamerok with Tristram, with Lancelot, and with Gawain. In spite of his acclaim as one of the four greatest knights that lived in Arthur's kingdom, Lamerok's adventures are given very little space in Malory's work. Lamerok does not serve an important role in the life of Arthur, other than to serve as another example of good knighthood, so the relative absence of his exploits is actually not very surprising.

The section which immediately follows the tale of Lamerok is another example of the inherent nobility and goodness of true knights. Very similar to *The Tale of Sir Gareth* discussed earlier, "La Cote Male Tayle," begins and ends in Arthur's court, as do so many English medieval romances. Like that of Lamerok before it, this tale contains brief appearances of one of the best knights in Arthur's court, Lancelot. His appearances serve two purposes as they occur within the story of Tristram, which is otherwise mostly distinct from the story of Arthur and his knights. First, they remind the audience that *Le Morte Darthur* is

essentially a tale of Arthur and his knights of the Round Table; and second, they provide reinforcement of the proper behavior for knights according to Arthur's code.

The following section of *The Book of Sir Tristram*, titled "Tristram's Madness and Exile," begins the process of bringing Tristram fully into the story of Arthur. Throughout the first four episodes, Tristram encounters, in a series of jousts, several of the knights of the Round Table. In the fifth episode of this section, Arthur is led into the Perilous Forest under enchantment and is in danger of being destroyed there. The Lady of the Lake seeks help for him and finds Tristram who rescues Arthur. In this way, though Tristram withholds his identity from Arthur, the two stories have their first direct contact.

The next sections intersperse several adventures of various Round Table knights, including Bors, Ector, Lancelot, Gawain, Gaheris, Ywain and Dinadan. In these episodes, Arthur's ideals, as embodied by his knights, are challenged, tested, and clarified.

An interesting micro-episode between the second and third episodes in "The Round Table" then occurs that is unrelated to the material surrounding it. Sir Dynas's lady sneaks out while he is hunting to visit her lover, and she takes his hounds with her. Dynas discovers her with her lover, defeats him but lets him live, and rejects her. Dynas takes his hounds, leaves her with her lover, and returns home. This interesting, but very short (16 lines),

micro-episode contrasts intriguingly with the other tales of untrue lovers presented in Malory's work because Dynas is able to walk away from his adulterous wife. He kills neither her nor her lover; apparently, she doesn't mean as much to him as his dogs.

In the following episode, Tristram, who has been given a shield by Morgan le Fay that symbolically portrays Lancelot and Guenivere's adultery, participates in a tournament. Tristram jousts with both Ywain and King Arthur. This close association of Tristram with events in Arthur's life serves to strengthen the link between these two tales.

After his joust with King Arthur, Tristram continues on other adventures, encountering yet more knights of the Round Table, including Lancelot in disguise. In the final episode of this section, Tristram is made a Knight of the Round Table. With the joining of Tristram to Arthur's knights of the Round table, these two stories of Arthur and Tristram are joined completely together. The parallels between Tristram and Lancelot which allow the reader to compare the two stories are melded together, and the differences are erased. King Mark, no longer following a parallel but separate path than Arthur, is now placed in direct contrast to Arthur thus allowing the reader to see clearly the differences between the two kings.

The next section of *The Book of Sir Tristram* is titled simply "King Mark." As the title suggests, this section concerns primarily King Mark, who intrigues and plots the

destruction of Tristram and encounters and jousts with several of the Round Table knights. As an untrue knight and an evil king, Mark becomes the object of other knights' scorn and the butt of their jokes. Lancelot eventually brings him to Arthur where his treachery is revealed. Mark and Tristram return to Cornwall, nominally reconciled through Arthur's intervention, but Mark is deceitful as ever and plots to kill Tristram. The next several episodes shift focus away from King Mark and Tristram; however, the thematic element of vengeance is still at the core of the action. Gaheris murders his own mother because she is with Lamerok, whose father, Pellinore, killed Gaheris's father, Lot. Dinadan fights with Mordred and Aggravayne. In the last three episodes of this section, the focus returns to King Mark, who writes letters to King Arthur suggesting Arthur look to the trouble brewing caused by Lancelot and Guenivere's adultery. When the Saxons invade Cornwall, Mark is forced to call on Tristram to save his kingdom. Tristram does, and King Mark is incensed, not at his kingdom's salvation, but that it is achieved at Tristram's hands.

The story of King Mark's treachery continues in the next section, titled "Alexander the Orphan." Mark murders his brother, and his sister-in-law flees with her son Alexander. In exile, Alexander grows to manhood, is knighted, and is charged by his mother to avenge his father against King Mark. A promising knight, Alexander is encouraged to join with Lancelot. Instead, he marries and

raises a son, who ultimately avenges his father, Alexander, and his grandfather, Tristram (who had both been murdered by King Mark).

This family in-fighting and intrigue are also reflected in the next section, "The Tournament at Surluse." It relates the details of each day's jousting between the knights of Arthur's court and those of the opposing kings. More importantly though, it relates the evening hour battles of revenge, honor, and treachery. These jousts and battles begin to hint at the rivalries building between the various factions developing among the knights of the Round Table. Family in-fighting and bloodshed, prompted by jealousy and vengeance, begin to insinuate themselves into the adventures of Arthur and his knights.

In the section of *The Book of Sir Tristram* titled "Joyous Gard," focus is once again shifted to the story of Tristram, Isode, and King Mark. Mark continues to work his devious plans against Tristram, and Tristram joins Lancelot at Joyous Gard. The evil brewing at the heart of Arthur's kingdom continues when Lamerok is murdered by Gawain. Dinadan joins with Tristram, and together they fight with Gawain over the murder of Lamerok, and then they join with Gaheris who has split with his brothers over their un-knightly treachery.

In the following tales, "The Red City," "The Tournament at Lonezep," and "Sir Palomides," the reader is once again acquainted with the characteristics of good and noble

knights. Most notably, the adventures of Sir Palomides reveal that the characteristics of a good knight do not require that the knight be a Christian. However, Palomides shows that because of his noble, knightly virtues, one of which is to uphold Christian ideals, he is worthy of being a Christian.

The second to last section in *The Book of Sir Tristram* might more readily be associated with the story of King Arthur than that of Tristram. Titled "Lancelot and Elaine," this section shifts focus primarily to Lancelot but mirrors elements in the life of Arthur. The first episode is a scene reminiscent of the magical elements surrounding Arthur's conception between Uther and Igrayne, only in reverse. Lancelot, while enchanted, conceives Galahad on Elaine, the daughter of King Pelles and descendant of Joseph of Arimathea. Guenivere's jealousy over Elaine is too much for him, and he loses his mind. For two years, Lancelot roams the forest in madness until he is eventually cured by the power of the Holy Grail.

Completing *The Book of Sir Tristram* is a section called simply "Conclusion." In it, Tristram, his service to Malory's thematic needs complete, disappears from Malory's work as he returns to Joyous Gard. Malory intentionally leaves off telling the story of Tristram at this point. His colophon to this tale makes that clear: "Here endyth the secunde boke off sir Trystram de Lyones, [. . .] but here ys no rehersall of the thirde booke" (511). Tristram has served

his usefulness. The story has been told sufficiently long to clearly establish King Mark's bad kingship in contrast to Arthur's good kingship. The audience has seen Tristram's actions for his love of Isode the Fair, at least enough to compare them to Lancelot's actions for his love of Guenivere. Telling any more of the story of Tristram would only detract from the story of Arthur, so Malory leaves off. Troubling darkness is spreading deep in the heart of Arthur's kingdom. The end is set in motion. Still at its highest position, Fortune's wheel begins its downward turn; Arthur's fall is set to begin. The following section, while not depicting the actual failure of Arthur's ideals, provides the necessary circumstances to start the inevitable action. Palomides's virtuous knighthood and Lancelot's encounter with the grail establish the necessary links with the tale that follows.

Achieving the Holy Grail, or Why Arthur Had to Fail: Tale Six

Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal* is the sixth tale in *Le Morte Darthur*. Vinaver has divided this tale into nine chapters. The first two of these can be further divided into episodes, but the remaining seven each consist essentially of a single episode relating the experiences of one knight's quest for the Holy Grail. Like "The Tale of Balin" much earlier in the text, Malory's tale of the search for the

grail and the effect of that search on Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table is essentially an analogue of the larger tale of the life of Arthur. Galahad, like Balin before him, serves thematically as the exemplum of Arthur's ideals in this exploration of the kingdom, and Arthur, as it, and he, could have been.

The first section of this tale is called "The Departure." It has three episodes that relate, in turn, the knighting of Galahad by Lancelot, their arrival together in Camelot, Galahad's successful taking of Balin's sword, and the vision of the covered grail at the feast with the subsequent departure of the Knights of the Round Table on the quest for the Holy Grail. Balin's sword, like that sword which Arthur drew from the stone to become king, can only be drawn by a single pure knight. In this case, Balin's sword does not make Galahad a symbolic representation of Arthur; rather, he reflects the embodiment of Arthur's ideals in their truest form, which are ultimately achievable only by the untainted Galahad.

The next section, "The Miracles," encompasses six episodes generally delineated with "Now turn we"-type authorial transitions. The first three episodes explore the growth and purity of Galahad as a knight through his achieving of the shield of Joseph of Arimathea, the casting out of the demons of the un-Christian man's tomb, the knighting and rescuing of Melyas, and the single-handed raising of the siege of the Castle of Maidens. Episode four

provides a contrast to the splendor of Galahad by displaying the brewing darkness of Gawain, who encounters a hermit who knows what is in Gawain's heart. However, Gawain refuses to do penance because he is blind to his wrongdoings. In episode five, Galahad is shown to be the quintessential, essentially perfect, knight as he jousts with and defeats Lancelot and Percival. In the last episode of this section, a transition episode that leads into the following chapter and may be more readily attached to it rather than the present one, Lancelot rides into a wasteland and dreams of the chapel of the Holy Grail.

The preceding two chapters have established a framework for the remaining chapters. The spiritual world of the Holy Grail is one that is not fully within the world of Arthur's court as it has been encountered so far. Consequently, to understand the adventures of the knights on the quest for the grail, Malory removes them from the world of Arthur and places them in the world of the grail.

The next five sections, each named after one of the knights on the Grail quest, tell in single episode narratives of the adventures of the title character as he pursues the quest. These sections are "Sir Percival," "Sir Launcelot," "Sir Gawain," "Sir Bors," and "Sir Galahad." Each of these knights is shown to be all too human. The distractions and faults of each, being after all merely men, are seen to be sufficient to prevent them from achieving the grail.

The remaining two sections of the *Tale of the Sankgreal* tell of the two knights who complete the quest of the Grail. The first of these, titled "The Castle of Corbenic," begins with Lancelot and Galahad traveling in a ship for half a year and finally arriving in a forest near the Castle of Corbenic. There, Lancelot, the foremost worldly knight, and Galahad, the spiritually pure and untainted knight, go their separate ways. Lancelot comes to the castle, and comes as near to the covered Grail as he can. He is struck down, but not dead. After twenty-four days (a number symbolic of the years he has sinfully loved Guenivere), Lancelot recovers and eventually returns to Camelot, accepting his failure to fulfill the quest. The second section, and the last of *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, is titled "The Miracle of Galahad." In it, Galahad achieves the Grail because only he can, but only at the expense of forsaking all temporal, transient things.

Lancelot serves as the representative of all things temporal in Arthur and his kingdom. Lancelot is the best that a man in this world can be. Though he is the best knight on Earth, he is unable to achieve the Grail. He lacks the spiritual purity necessary to be completely successful. In depicting Galahad's success in achieving the grail as an act only possible through unstained purity, Malory illuminates the reason for Arthur's ultimate failure. Arthur, the king and the man, cannot be pure. The paradox is that he cannot abandon a kingdom he is destined to rule, but

only by doing so can he achieve the purity necessary to succeed. Arthur's kingdom is a kingdom of men, the pinnacle of human kingdoms to be sure, but still doomed to fall short of the ideal.

In addition to showing why Arthur had to fail, Malory's text clearly delineates the character traits that will play the biggest role in undermining Arthur's kingdom in the coming tale, *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*. Lancelot's human failing, his disloyalty to Arthur in his love for Guenivere, is cast into the highest relief possible in this tale of the Grail. Too, Gawain's blindness to his own shortcoming, namely his prideful insistence on vengeance, is highlighted. The clash between Lancelot's abandonment of an heroic ideal, loyalty to his lord, and Gawain's dogged pursuit of another, the duty to avenge one's kin, lies at the heart of the tales that follow. Malory lets there be no doubt as to what brings down Arthur's kingdom.

The Beginning of the End, Lancelot and Guenivere on the Path to Destruction: Tale Seven

The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere is the title of the seventh tale in Malory's work. Vinaver has divided this tale into five sections. Each deals with some adventure that focuses on Lancelot and Guenivere, except the last, which focuses only on Lancelot. The first four of these tales highlights the relationship between Lancelot and

Guenivere with all of its potential for negative repercussions. However, they also provide an opportunity to examine the responses to their relationship by various members of Arthur's court, and probably most importantly by Arthur himself. The final chapter in this tale shows very clearly Lancelot's relationship with Arthur, and Arthur's perception of Lancelot.

The first chapter, a single episode narrative, titled "The Poisoned Apple," finds Guenivere accused of attempting to poison Gawain. The accusation is settled by trial by combat between Sir Madore, the cousin of the knight killed accidentally, and Lancelot as Guenivere's champion, who arrives just in time to the expectation and relief of all, including Arthur. Lancelot successfully defeats Madore who then recants his accusation. Arthur is confident in Lancelot's abilities and in his devotion to the queen. Arthur, reassured by Lancelot's show of heroic loyalty and devotion, shows no outward sign of doubt in Lancelot in this tale.

The next section, titled "The Fair Maid of Astolat," concerns a great tournament. There are nine episodes in this section. The first two deal with a tournament where Lancelot, true to the knight's code of honor, champions a maiden and is wounded. Episode three details Guenivere's jealousy over Lancelot's apparent capriciousness. In the next four episodes, Lancelot recovers from his wound and rejects the Fair Maiden. Episode eight tells how the Fair

Maiden wastes away and dies for her unrequited love of Lancelot. At her request she is placed on a floating bier and let to drift down the river. The final episode of this section concerns Arthur and Guenivere's finding the body, reading the letter the Fair Maiden had written, and confronting Lancelot. Guenivere's jealousy fades as she learns that Lancelot was true to her, and her anger at him is once again replaced with love. Lancelot forgives Guenivere for her mistrust. Though questions are raised concerning Lancelot's integrity in regards to the Fair Maiden, Arthur shows only the slightest sign of doubt in Lancelot's loyalty or honor. Perhaps with a hint of awareness of Lancelot's affection for Guenivere, Arthur tells Lancelot, "for where he [a knight] ys bonden he lowsith hymselff" (641).

The next section, titled "The Great Tournament," deals with yet another tournament. In this single episode narrative, Lancelot fights against Arthur's side with Guenivere's token on his helmet. When he is set upon by Arthur and several of the Knights of the Round Table, Gareth switches sides and joins with Lancelot out of knightly loyalty to a fellow knight who was in trouble. Gareth's display of proper knightly behavior, though it contradicted his duty to his lord, prompts Arthur to forgive him.

The fourth section of the Lancelot and Guenivere tale has a fairly unique structural compared to the other tales in Malory's work. "The Knight of the Cart" begins with a

prologue delineating the joys of spring. It then proceeds in the otherwise standard structural style of Malory through four episodes filled with treachery and intrigue. In the first episode, Mellyagaunce abducts Guenivere and takes her to his castle, where eventually Lancelot rescues her. In episode two, Lancelot and Guenivere come very close to having their treasonous adultery discovered. Mellyagaunce, seeing a way to save his own honor, accuses the queen of adultery with one of the wounded knights who had been sleeping on the floor of her chamber. Knowing Lancelot would be her champion, and fearing to face him in combat, Mellyagaunce imprisons him. Though Arthur is convinced of her innocence, he knows that if she is not championed he must condemn Guenivere. In episode three, Lancelot escapes his prison just in time to, in episode four, champion Guenivere in trial by combat. Lancelot is once again victorious, and Arthur praises him with no sign of suspicion about him.

The final chapter in *The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere* does not have much to do with Guenivere, as mentioned before. However, it does look closely at Arthur and Lancelot. This chapter is a single episode in which Arthur plays a significant role. The action of this section revolves around an injured knight, Sir Urry, whose wounds can only be healed by the best knight in the world. Arthur, as an example to his subject kings and knights, attempts first to heal Sir Urry's wounds. Arthur, humbly aware that

he may not be the best knight in the world, says to Sir
Urry's mother, "nat presumyng uppon me that I am worthy to
heale youre son be my dedis, but I woll corrayge othir men
of worshyp to do as I woll do" (664). Arthur tries and
fails, as does every other knight in court. With the
opportune appearance of the son of Alexander the Orphan, Sir
Bellynger, Malory provides an abbreviated conclusion to the
story of Tristram and a final look at King Mark. Being the
evil king, King Mark has murdered his son and grandson out
of mere personal jealousy.

Arthur asks Lancelot, upon his return to court, to try
to save Sir Urry. Lancelot initially refuses out of humility
and a desire not to presume to be better than his king.
Arthur instead appeals to Lancelot's sense of duty. Any act
that he does in service to his king reflects honor onto the
king. Convinced, Lancelot puts his faith in God and seeks
divine help, wishing only to be God's tool in this act of
service to his lord. Ultimately, Lancelot heals Sir Urry's
wounds.

This book ends with a colophon that helps to focus what
follows on Arthur. Malory says, "And so I leve here of this
tale, and overlepe grete bookis of sir Launcelot, [. . .]
and here I go unto the morte Arthur, and that caused sir
Aggravayne" (669). There are more tales available to tell of
Lancelot, but they are not necessary. What needs to be said
of Lancelot has been said. Though Arthur is not yet aware,
or perhaps only slightly suspicious of it, Malory's reader

is cognizant of Lancelot and Guenivere's treasonous behavior. Fortune's wheel is slowly beginning the downward turn. Arthur's fall is imminent. It is now time, according to Malory, to turn to the end, the downfall and death, of Arthur.

An Ideal Unfulfilled,
The Death of Arthur and His Dream: Tale Eight

The final tale in *Le Morte Darthur* is called *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon*. Vinaver has divided it into five chapters. The first, "Slander and Strife," tells of the beginning of the end. The human failings of Lancelot and Gawain signal the end of Arthur's ideals and eventually his kingdom. "The Vengeance of Sir Gawain," the second of the five chapters, pits the factions of Arthur's court at each other's throats. Reconciliation, or the chance of it, is beyond reach. With the shift of location occasioned by the third chapter, "The Siege of Benwick," all hope vanishes as the final treachery is set in motion. The fourth chapter, "The Day of Destiny," ends the dream once and for all. And in the final chapter, "The Dolorous Death and Departing Out of this World of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," all that is left are the tears and the regrets.

The first chapter, "Slander and Strife," has five episodes. The first chronicles the treachery of Gawain and

Aggravayne and their plot to entrap Lancelot after they have created doubts in Arthur's mind, in spite of the fact that the narrator notes that "the kynge had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereoff. [. . .] Wyte you well the kynge loved hym [Lancelot] passyngly well" (674). After being caught in the Queen's chamber, Lancelot fights and kills all of the witnesses, save Mordred, who escapes. In episode two, Lancelot's supporters flock to his assistance. Episode three tells of Mordred's report to Arthur, the reluctant judgment against Guenivere, and Gawain's cautious advice. Episode four sets the stage for the death of Guenivere. Arthur commands Gawain and his brothers to attend the execution. Reluctantly they agree to be there but to wear no armor. In the final episode of this first section of the final tale, Lancelot rescues Guenivere, but in the accompanying struggle, Gareth and Gaheris are killed because they are without weapons and armor.

In the opening episode of the next chapter, "The Vengeance of Sir Gawain," Arthur ponders what has happened. He says,

> And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes
> losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for
> quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of
> good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no
> company. (685)

Unlike Sir Dynas who was able to take his hounds and leave his lady and go home, Arthur cannot recover the situation.

Arthur is not merely a man or a knight; he is a king--a fact made evident by the fact that by this point in the text Arthur is no longer referred to by name. Malory has shifted to identifying Arthur merely as the king.

This chapter has five episodes that explain how Gawain urges Arthur to avenge his brothers. However, Lancelot will not fight Arthur or Gawain, so finally the pope intercedes and directs a reconciliation. Guenivere is returned to Arthur, and Lancelot goes to France.

The third chapter, "The Siege of Benwick," has two episodes. The first relates how Arthur leaves Mordred in charge of the domestic front while he and Gawain go to France and attack Lancelot. The second tells of numerous solo fights between Gawain and Lancelot until Arthur receives news of Mordred's treachery at home. He has usurped the kingdom and attempted to compromise Arthur's queen.

In the chapter titled "The Day of Destiny" Arthur returns to Britain. Malory interjects an authorial intrusion at this point. As Arthur's kingdom crumbles around him, the narrative voice adds an aside. Speaking directly to the audience, drawing a parallel between Arthur's time and the author's present, it says,

> Lo all ye Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? [. . .] 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. Alas! thys

> ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for
>
> there may no thynge us please no terme. (708)

After this aside, the text returns to the action of Arthur's
story. He battles Mordred's forces, and Gawain is slain. In
the next episode, Arthur dreams of being destroyed and
envisions a warning from Gawain. In fact, Arthur's dream is
of Fortune's wheel. He is sitting at the highest point
looking down at

> an hydeous depe blak watir, and therein was all
>
> maner of serpentis and wormes and wylde bestis
>
> fowle and orryble. And suddeynly the kyng thought
>
> that the whyle turned up-so-downe, and he felle
>
> amonge the serpentes, and every beste toke hym by
>
> a lymme. (711)

Arthur glimpses what Malory's audience has been reading for
some time. Arthur's fall is essentially complete, and he is
now aware of it as well.

Next, as Arthur and Mordred treat for peace, fate
determines otherwise. The armies battle again, and Mordred
and Arthur kill each other. As he is dying, Arthur directs
Bedivere to return Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake because
there is no one worthy left to wield it. Then, Arthur is
transported to Avalon. In the next episode, Arthur is
buried, but the episode is interrupted. In another address
to his reader, the narrator/author announces that "Thus of
Arthur I fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene
auctorysed" (717). He then briefly reviews the alternate

belief that Arthur cannot be confirmed dead and buried, but adds that he can find nothing further written about it.

In the final chapter, "The Dolorous Death and Departing Out of this World of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," there are two episodes. The first describes Lancelot's arrival in Britain and his penance over the graves of Gawain and Arthur. He becomes a hermit, and eventually, a priest. In the concluding episode, Guenivere dies, and the service is performed by Lancelot. He dies, and is taken to Joyous Gard to be buried.

Lest this final chapter be construed as being focused on Lancelot and Guenivere, the final meeting between the two should clarify the true focus on Arthur. Guenivere announces to the ladies present when Lancelot arrives, that "Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne;" then, turning to Lancelot she adds, "For thorow the and me ys the floure of kyngis and knyghtes destroyed" (720). She bemoans not the loss of Lancelot and his love, nor does she complain of the sorrowful end that she is experiencing. Instead, she notes that it is Arthur, as well as his kingdom and his ideals, that their folly has destroyed.

Fortune's wheel turns full circle in Malory's telling of the rise of Arthur and his kingdom, the glory of his

ideals, and the essentially tragic and inevitable fall. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* provides a comprehensive look at the life of Arthur and his reign as King of Britain. Malory presents an image of proper knighthood in the service of King Arthur, and he has included several tales that serve to illustrate or amplify the qualities of Arthur's life, ideals, and reign. Structurally and thematically it mirrors the dominant medieval emblem of fate, Fortune's wheel of fate. In the first two tales--the upward turning--the reader is introduced to Arthur, and is shown his rise to power and the consolidation of that power within and without the kingdom of England. Further, the basic ideals of knighthood are espoused and illustrated by both good and bad examples. In these first tales, we are also accorded, by means of the analogous tale of Balin, an early reminder of the history of Arthur and his kingdom.

The middle tales, where Arthur is sitting in glory at the highest point of the wheel's circuit, serve to illustrate, using tales of the Knights of the Round Table, the qualities of both good and bad knighthood. Further, the qualities of kingship are given sharp relief through the comparison of Arthur's rule with that of King Mark. Lancelot, Gareth, Lamerok, and Tristram stand as examples of the best knights in the world. Their actions, motivations, and purposes reflect the ideals of Arthur and also reflect honor on him as the liege of each of the knights, as well as on each individual knight.

The *Tale of the Sankgreal* serves to illustrate the ideals of Arthur taken to a spiritual completeness. The human shortcomings of Arthur and his knights stand in stark contrast to the spiritual perfection of Galahad. However, whereas Galahad can give up his mortality, Arthur cannot. He must serve his people and his kingdom. It is his humanness that begins the downward turn of the wheel.

The humanity of Arthur and his knights is the focus of the final two tales. It is through human weakness that Lancelot fails in his duty to his lord. His flaw, his love for Guenivere, becomes the catalyst for the destruction of Arthur and his kingdom, symbolically depicted in Arthur's dream of a sudden fall into the black water filled with serpents and wild beasts. Though Malory's work continues through the telling of the deaths of Guenivere and Lancelot, the end of his story comes with the end of Arthur's life. Throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory has presented tales of many characters, but they all serve to illustrate Arthur's life and ideals. The three-part structural emphasis on Arthur's rise and fall mirrors the turning of Fortune's wheel, but this turning framework is focused on Arthur. Just as his knights looked to Arthur throughout Malory's work, so too, does Malory's audience.

Notes

[1] Eugène Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory.* Vinaver claims that Malory wrote Tale 2 (*King Arthur and Emperor Lucius*) before he wrote Tale 1 (*The Tale of King Arthur*). While this is largely accepted, there are opposing views. For example: Helen Wroten, "Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius' Compared with Its Source;" Edward Kennedy, "The Arthur-Guenevere Relationship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 4 (1971): 29-40; and Terence McCarthy, "Order of Composition in the *Morte Darthur*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 1 (1971): 18-29. McCarthy claims that stylistic evidence supports an order of composition of 6, 2, 5, 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 (numbers indicate Tale numbers as arranged in Vinaver's edition).

[2] For a discussion of the early view of the compiled nature of Malory's work and its seeming unity in spite of that nature, see for example: Bernhard ten Brink, *History of English Literature;* and Alfred Nutt, "Review of: Ernest Rhys, ed. *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail.*"

[3] Malory's probable sources were identified by H. Oskar Sommer in 1890 (*Le Morte Darthur*, vol. 3). However, this continues to be an area of active scholarship as new possibilities surface and further research is conducted.

[4] Vinaver introduces this idea in his 1947 edition of

the Winchester manuscript. See also: C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte;"* and Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature.*

[5] Robert Mayer Lumiansky, ed. *Malory's Originality;* and Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur.*

[6] Roger S. Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance.* His argument is based on an analysis of the plot's structure and the creation of a both forward-looking and backward-looking timeline to account for plot inconsistencies. He further focuses on the consistency of themes throughout *Le Morte Darthur* to support his analysis.

[7] Stephen Knight, *The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's Arthuriad.* The stylistic dividing point occurs in the larger *Book of Sir Tristram* at the beginning of the included tale called "Launcelot and Elaine." The latter section focuses thematically on the causes and events of the ultimate downfall of Arthur's kingdom.

[8] For examples of a thematic element creating an enveloping structure, see Nancy H. Owen and Lewis J. Owen, "The Tristram in the *Morte Darthur*: Structure and Function;" Kevin T. Grimm, "Knightly Love and the Narrative Structure of Malory's Tale Seven;" "Fellowship and Envy: Structuring the Narrative of Malory's Tale of Sir Tristram;" and Harry E. Cole, "Forgiveness as Structure: 'The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere.'"

[9] This idea is thoroughly examined in Patricia Carol Roby, "The Tripartite Structure of the Works of Sir Thomas

Malory."

[10] Vinaver's detailed explanation is contained in his introductory comments to his 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript.

[11] Important studies on the character of Lancelot include: August J. App, *Lancelot in English Literature: His Role and Character*; R. T. Davies, "The Worshipful Way in Malory;" Gilbert R. Davis, "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Lancelot' and the Question of Unity in the *Morte Darthur*;" R. M. Lumiansky, "'The Tale of Lancelot': Prelude to Adultery," *Malory's Originality*; Marilynn Zarwell Stewart, "The Protégés of Lancelot: A Study of Malory's Characterization of Lancelot in the *Morte Darthur*;" Maureen Fries, "Malory's Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte Darthur*;" Janet Jesmok, "'A knight wyveles': The Young Lancelot in Malory's *Morte Darthur*;" Gwenyth E. Hood, "Medieval Love-Madness and Divine Love;" Danielle Morgan MacBain, "The Tristramization of Malory's Lancelot;" and Derek Brewer, "The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot: Chretien to Malory."

[12] For example, see Mary Dichmann, "Characterization in Malory's *Tale of Arthur and Lucius*." Dichmann explores Arthur's relationships and his role compared to other rulers. See also Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*; and Edward D. Kennedy, "The Arthur-Guenevere Relationship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 4 (1971): 29-40. Kennedy concludes that for Arthur, the ideals of the Round Table overshadow his role with Guenivere

as spouse. Robert L. Kelly, "Arthur, Galahad, and the Scriptural Pattern in Malory," *American Benedictine Review* 23 (1972): 9-23. Kelly finds Arthur to be a prefiguring of Galahad in his role as the perfect knight.

[13] See Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur."

[14] Elise van der Ven-Ten Bensel, *The Character of Arthur in English Literature*. Chapter 6 focuses on the character of Arthur in Malory (pages 139-154). Ven-Ten Bensel discusses the central role that Arthur plays in the founding, defending, and ultimate destruction of an ideal kingdom. Christopher Dean, *Arthur of England* (Toronto: U Toronto P, 1987). Chapter 5 (91-107) deals with Malory's text. Dean explores the role of Malory's King Arthur as a vehicle for telling a tragic tale of moral flaws.

[15] Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). Though her work primarily addresses sixteenth century English humanism, the discursive practices she discusses were not original in that century. The particulars of her examples may not be pertinent, but the concepts and effects of these practices are consistent with the practice and not just the material. Consequently, what she has voiced about the purposes of these practices is relevant here.

[16] Allen J. Frantzen, Troilus and Criseyde: *the Poem and the Frame* (New York: Twayne, 1993) 35.

[17] Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992). Camille provides an enlightening look at medieval marginalia from the perspective of the social context that created it and which it represents.

[18] Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the* Canterbury Tales (London: Duckworth, 1983) 9-10.

[19] Katherine S. Gittes, *Framing the* Canterbury Tales: *Chaucer and the Medieval Frame Narrative Tradition* (New York: Greenwood, 1991) 116-117.

[20] George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1915).

[21] Morton Bloomfield, "Episodic Juxtaposition or the Syntax of Episodes in Narration," *Studies in English Linguistics--For Randolph Quirk*, Eds. Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (London: Longman, 1980) 210-220.

[22] Larry Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur. See particularly his discussion of each of Malory's first five tales in section two, "Malory and English Romance."

[23] This argument first appears and is discussed at length in W. M. Richardson, "A Tragedy Within a Tragedy: Malory's Use of the Tale of Balin as a Thematic Analogue," *Arlington Quarterly* 3 (1971): 61-71.

Chapter 3

Þæt wæs god cyning:

Arthur as Malory's Version of The Good English King

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is not merely a tale of Arthur and his ideals. Drawing from several sources, many French and most of the remaining derived from French originals, Malory changed the material that he adapted to reflect an ideal of kingship and a view of history that reflected those that he probably knew more intimately and valued more highly than what are presented in his sources. In examining Malory's text as we have received it and identifying the differences between his text and his sources, the ideals of kingship and the importance of history reflected in Malory's work are clearly discernible. Since Arthur is the focal point of Malory's work, as we have seen, the changes to the character of Arthur reflect significant differences between *Le Morte Darthur* and its sources. It is in the details of these changes that Malory's depiction of Arthurian kingship and English history is made manifest. Malory displays Arthur as an English king—at least one cast on an English model versus a French, continental one—with characteristics more consistent with monarchs and heroes depicted in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature.

Before examining specific examples from Malory's work and comparing those to his sources, it will be beneficial to briefly review the place of source study in the scholarship

concerning Malory and *Le Morte Darthur*. Early in Malorian
studies, the text of Caxton's edition of Malory's work was
examined in an effort to identify what source or sources
Malory drew on for his redaction of the tales of Arthur.
Caxton's preface to his edition of Malory's work prompted
this response by the critics. Caxton notes that he was
publishing a text that "Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn
bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe" (xv).[1]

In fifty-six separate internal references in his text,
Malory refers to a source book as his authority, suggesting
that he took his tales from a French source or sources. The
first of these occurs in the chapter titled "Merlin" in *The
Tale of King Arthur* when Malory discusses the church where
the sword in the stone is placed: "Soo in the grettest
chirch of London--whether it were Powlis or not the Frensshe
booke maketh no mencyon--alle the estates were longe or day
in the chirch for to praye" (7). Others occur at various
places throughout the work, often at places where Malory
wishes to establish an historical authority for his
assertions; where he seems to have lost, or wants to lose, a
thread of the narrative; or simply to summarize material
that is familiar to his readers but is otherwise irrelevant
to his apparent purposes. For example, at the end of *The
Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, Malory says:

> And so I leve here of this tale, and overlepe
> grete bookis of sir Launcelot, [. . .] For, as the

> Freynshe booke sayth, because of dispyte [. . .]
>
> he was caryed in a charyotte a twelve-monethe,
>
> [. . .] And as the Freynshe booke sayth, he ded
>
> that twelve-moneth more than forty batayles. (669)

In addition to these internal textual references, several of the *explicits* restored by the discovery of the Winchester manuscript refer to French sources. For example, the *explicit* at the end of *The Tale of King Arthur*, begins,

> Here endyth this tale, as the Freynsshe booke
>
> sayeth, fro the maryage of Kynge Uther unto Kynge
>
> Arthure that regned aftir hym and ded many
>
> batayles. (110)

The *explicit* to *The Book of Sir Tristram* not only suggests a French source, but reinforces the notion that Malory merely translated and redacted his work from a French original. It reads:

> Here endyth the secunde boke off Syr Trystram de
>
> Lyones, whyche drawyn was oute of Freynshe by Syr
>
> Thomas Malleorré, Knyght, as Jesu be hys helpe.
>
> (511)

The mention of a "second book" suggests that Malory may have been working from a copy of a Tristram cycle. Since medieval cycles normally consisted of three combined works, the incomplete nature of Malory's version of the tale of Tristram may suggest that he was working from an incomplete source, or it could simply suggest that Malory had no need to relate the further tales of Tristram since he had already

achieved his aim. The *explicit* does not provide sufficient evidence to support either theory.

Malory once again notes his reliance on a French source at the end of *The Tale of the Sankgreal* where he begins his *explicit* with the following statement:

> Thus endyth the tale of the Sankgreal that was
>
> breffly drawy[n] oute of *Freynshe.* (608)

Caxton echoes these references to French sources from the *explicits* contained in the Winchester manuscript (which were absent in his edition) in his preface, where he describes—as noted earlier—his source copy of *Le Morte Darthur* as taken from French sources. In addition to his French sources, Malory used several English sources either directly or indirectly. The nature and degree to which he used, adapted, and reduced his sources is a topic for continuing research, though much speculative analysis already exists. The sources to be considered here are those identified by prominent Malory scholars over the last several decades.[2] The changes to be considered will be based on an analysis of those sources.

Many nineteenth century critics relegate Malory's text to second-hand status and interpret his role as that of a mere translator, redactor, and compiler.[3] In the earliest stages of Malory criticism, considerable emphasis was placed on identifying Malory's French sources. The effort to find French sources was based largely on Malory's own references to such a source and to contemporary medieval English

authors' tendency to work from French material. Since
Malory's direct source manuscripts apparently have not
survived, that was a very difficult and inexact line of
inquiry. However, by the end of the nineteenth century
several likely French sources for the various parts of
Malory's work had been identified. In addition to his French
sources, Malory relied heavily on two English sources--the
Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.[4]

Since Malory's work was regarded as essentially an
amalgam of material translated from the French and portions
adapted from English originals and collected together into a
single collection, any appreciation of what Malory had
created had to begin with an analysis of his sources. Though
he refers throughout his work to what seems to be a single
French source book, critics have identified several sources
that were probably used in part or in whole by Malory.
Caxton, in his preface, reinforces this notion:

> And *many noble volumes* be made of hym [Arthur] and
> of his noble knyghts in Frensshe, which I have
> seen and redde beyonde the see, [. . .] I have
> [. . .] enprysed to enprynte *a book of the noble*
> *hystoryes* of the sayd kynge Arthur [. . .] whyche
> copye syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certayn
> *bookes* of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe.
> (xv, emphasis added)

All of Caxton's references to Malory's French sources are
plural. Caxton clearly understood that he was printing a

single work that had been taken out of a number of volumes, histories, and books. It is also clear from Caxton's remarks in his preface that he understood the text he was working with derived from earlier, albeit French, material; the story of Arthur is not Malory's invention. King Arthur's story is based in historical truth, regardless how obscurely, and has reached Malory via common knowledge as well as through his sources.

In the twentieth century, with much of the identification process complete, source identification shifted to source study. Comparisons of Malory's text with versions of his sources revealed hints of originality and allowed some critics to entertain thoughts that Malory was something more than a mere translator and compiler.[5] Despite critical work suggesting the opposite, echoes of the opinion that Malory was essentially a translator and compiler still exist in modern criticism. Vinaver dismisses Malory's additions to the tales of Arthur as "generally those which matter least, such as the author's ideas, his prejudices, his conscious tendencies" ("Sir Thomas Malory" 546). However, Malory gives his version of Arthur's life a generally harmonizing, cohesive purpose. Malory's originality rests in his selection of source tales, his choice of material to be cut or kept, his manner of translation and adaptation, and the net effect of his compilation that makes *Le Morte Darthur* an original work artistically distinct from his sources. In other words,

those things that Vinaver dismisses as irrelevant are precisely the qualities that define Malory's relevancy to the world of Arthurian literature.

In spite of the inherent problems with source study as a critical technique, and as a consequence of the shortcomings inherent in the redactive nature of Malory's work, no matter how original he was, there is a need to approach *Le Morte Darthur* through an analysis of its sources. At the risk of placing too much emphasis on Malory's sources and not enough on his text, we need to begin with an understanding of the sources, especially when evaluating what Malory brought to the telling of the tales of the Arthurian legends.[6]

Heretofore this effort has reflected a general bias towards Malory's French sources. This is due in large part to the perception that Malory's text is based in the French romance tradition and the consequent predisposition to look to French sources and models. Vinaver's criticism is the starting point for a significant amount of modern analysis of Malory's work, and his emphasis on Malory's French originals is reflected in most subsequent analysis. Vinaver notes that Malory's " 'books' and 'tales' are all adaptations from the French, [. . .] for which reliable versions of his sources are available" ("Sir Thomas Malory" 548).

Brewer notes that Vinaver has "a contempt for Malory's English empiricism, interest in history, muddle, softness, moral concern, and bad French" ("Present State" 85). It

seems that Vinaver's dislike of certain of Malory's apparent predilections has poisoned the well for subsequent analysis. Amazingly, however, the "English-ness" of Malory—reflected in Vinaver's concerns noted by Brewer above, and dismissed as worthy of consideration—is precisely the element in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* that makes it most significant to the body of Arthurian literature in English.

As has been discussed previously, Malory did not use only French sources; he had access to and used several English sources as well. The two most influential English sources include the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* was recognized as one of Malory's sources early in the identification phase of source study; consequently, the critical work applied to it has been largely comparative.[7] The comparisons of Malory's tale two, *The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*, to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* reveal that Malory used the English alliterative poem extensively as a source for his tale. More than just a prose redaction of a verse source, Malory's version presents significant changes which suggest a shift in emphasis to Arthur's triumphs and his nobility.[8]

The status of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as a possible source for Malory was initially somewhat controversial. Vinaver, in fact, argues for the French *Mort Artu* over the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as Malory's source for the final tales in *Le Morte Darthur*.[9] The strength of the various arguments

lies in the number of specific parallels between the respective texts that can be identified through source comparison. Since Malory's actual direct sources are unidentifiable and the comparisons are made with variant versions of probable sources, the comparisons are weakened. Neither *Mort Artu* nor the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is able to claim a clearly agreed upon status as Malory's direct source. In addition to these two English sources for large portions of Malory's work, other English sources, such as Hardyng's *Chronicle* and several other English verse romances, have been identified as possible sources for elements of the narrative and some minor characters.[10]

Source study was the first area of serious textual study of Malory's work. As such, it laid an important foundation for all subsequent analysis of *Le Morte Darthur*. Due in large part to its inherent limitations, especially when dealing with Malory, source study has shifted away from being the focal point of critical analysis and instead has become a catalyst for other avenues of critical consideration.

In examining Malory's work, as represented by both Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript, and comparing what is found there to the sources identified for the respective tales, Malory's changes can be identified and considered. As we have seen, the character of Arthur is the focal point of Malory's telling of the Arthurian tales. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the most

significant changes would be those concerning the character of Arthur, his ideals, and the concept of kingship that he embodies. The Arthurian tales that Malory had to draw from were largely French and/or closely derived from French models. In them, the character of Arthur appears to be different than in Malory. It is precisely those differences that we will examine, and it is in those differences that we will find the courtly French character of King Arthur being changed by Malory into a more heroic English character.

Before we look at Malory's Arthur in his sources and in *Le Morte Darthur*, it is necessary to establish a standard for each of the types of character that we will find. To define the character of the courtly French king, we will look first briefly at Vinaver's own analysis of the differences between the courtly French romance and the more heroic epic. Then, we will look at selected examples of Arthur and his court as depicted in the tales of Chrétien and the Lais of Marie de France.

Vinaver, in *The Rise of Romance*, explores the transition in literature from heroic epic to romance. Rejecting the somewhat oversimplified explanation for this shift suggested by W. P. Ker, Vinaver examines the motivating circumstances and the structural methodology of the writer's craft that resulted in such a shift. Ker concentrates on the thematic shift away from focusing on the defense of Church lands and interests and the ideals of a feudal society towards focusing on the thematic elements of

love and personal adventure.[11] In place of these thematic elements, Vinaver suggests a less definitive break that instead followed a social movement towards self-awareness and knowledge, a sort of internal intellectual quest. This spiritual quest, reflected in the silent reading of St. Ambrose as contrasted to the earlier accepted method of public readings of the scriptures, is reflected in the structural motif of the adventure quest made prominent by the works of Chrétien.[12]

Vinaver highlights another difference as central to his examination of the shift from heroic to chivalric literature. Epic, as Vinaver illustrates using the *Song of Roland* among others, relies on the narrative unit (or episode) that is complete unto itself and frequently only loosely related to the thematic whole: "what is excluded [in epic] is the consistent subordination of each single occurrence to a coherently developed scheme" (*Rise* 5). As we have seen, Malory's text uses the structural element of episodes linked thematically. Vinaver adds to his discussion of this paratactic style of French epic, the generic tendency of epic towards "repetition with variation" (*Rise* 7). This is strikingly similar to the Anglo-Saxon/Old English poetic devices of variation and enumeration.[13] Vinaver further explains that the modern notion of character motivation, a common characteristic of romance and later genres, was something not as central to epic writers. Noting that character motivation had been explored in other works

contemporary with the author of *The Song of Roland*, Vinaver remarks that "it would be a mistake to think that this is a pattern *unknown* to the Roland poet; all we can infer is that the Roland poet does not seem to think he has to adhere to it *consistently*" (*Rise* 13). The focus of the epic poet was not on the causal relationships of his various episodes and actions; rather, it was on the emotional impact of such events meshed together to achieve a response in his readers. As Vinaver notes, the epic "was a mode which sought not to enlighten, but to move and to impress—not a questioning or an explanatory, but a lyrical and a descriptive mode" (*Rise* 14). In his commentary on Malory's works, Vinaver is most critical of Malory's failings in adapting his French romance sources because Malory is too episodic and repetitive, and he lacks clear motivations for his characters, relying instead on narration of actions. For a critic looking at Malory and expecting to see romance, the differences may be considered faults. However, as we shall see, the effect of Malory's changes is not merely bad romance, but an author's seeming attempt to reclaim the heroic.

In his analysis of French romance as a genre, Vinaver focuses on yet another distinction between the two forms. Unlike the fairly forthright narration of actions common to epic works, Vinaver notes that romance authors instead sought to write their adaptations of earlier stories in new ways, in order to reveal meaning through embellishment and to invigorate through the use of keen understanding and

appropriate skill. This manipulation of material resulted in

the remodeling of the matter itself, or at least

of those parts of it which were at variance with

the thoughts and feelings one wished to convey.

Rhetoric could thus lead to a purposeful

refashioning of traditional material, and the

adaptor could become to all intents and purposes

an original author, except that, unlike some

authors, he would care above all for the *way* in

which he told his stories and measure his

achievement in terms of such new significance as

he was able to confer upon an existing body of

facts. (*Rise* 22)

Vinaver here extols the merits of French romance writers for

doing what he condemns Malory for accomplishing in *Le Morte*

Darthur. Malory is not original, says Vinaver, yet he has

refashioned the traditional Arthurian material to convey

particular thoughts and feelings and to give that material

particular significance. The refashioning that Malory has

accomplished, the shift from courtly ideals to more English

heroic ones, runs counter to those characteristics

identified by Vinaver as defining French romance.

Consequently, Vinaver faults Malory for those elements in

his work that do not reflect romance characteristics. The

differences between romance and epic and how they manifest

themselves in *Le Morte Darthur* will be more fully examined

later. For now, we need to shift our focus from more general generic concerns to the effect of genre on character.

Since Vinaver refers to Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France as examples of French romance authors, both of whom wrote works that contain Arthurian elements, it will serve to briefly examine their works for examples of romance presentations of Arthur. Malory has focused his work on the character and ideals of Arthur, so we will explore how his character is presented in both Chrétien and Marie.

Chrétien de Troyes wrote five romances dealing with the matter of Britain, but only two of them portray the character of Arthur in any significant detail. As most continental Arthurian romances do, Chrétien's tales focus on the exploits and adventures of knights other than King Arthur. The two tales that reveal anything about Arthur and his style of kingship use Arthur's court as a framing device and Arthur himself as a foil for their central character.

The first of these, *Erec et Enide*, presents Arthur as a self-focused figure-head dressed to look the part, and he is surrounded by equally self-focused, contentious, and somewhat condescending nobles. When the poem opens, Arthur announces that he intends to reinstate an ancient custom of hunting the white stag. When Gawain warns him that doing so would breed discontent at court because the nobles would quarrel over which maiden should be kissed as the reward to the successful hunter, Arthur dismisses him lightly:

Li rois respont: "Ce sai ge bien,

mes por ce n'an lerai [sic] ge rien,

car parole que rois a dite

ne doit puis estre contredite.

Demain matin a grant deduit

irons chacier le blanc cerf tuit

an la forest avantureuse:

ceste chace iert molt mervelleuse." (59-66)[14]

[The king responded: "This I know well, but on
account of that [quarreling at court] I will not
do anything, because a word spoken by a king may
not properly afterwards be contradicted. Tomorrow
morning, with great pleasure, we will all go to
hunt the white stag in the adventurous forest: the
hunt will be very marvelous.] (Trans. by the
author)[15]

While Gawain's counsel is sound in practice, his concern
reflects the chivalrous focus of Arthur's court and its
pettiness in quarreling internally over relatively
insignificant differences. After the hunt, Gawain advises
Arthur once again concerning the substance of the knights'
concern.

"Sire," fet il, "an grant esfroi

sont ceanz vostre chevalier.

Tuit parolent de ce beisier:

bien dient tuit que n'iert ja fet

que noise et bataille n'i et." (302-06)

["Sire," he said, "your knights are here with
great dread. They are all speaking of this kiss:
they all say it will not be done without argument
and a fight."]

Arthur responds seeking guidance and advice from his nephew:

Biax niés Gauvain, conselliez m'an,

sauve m'annor et ma droiture,

que je n'ai de la noise cure. (308-10)

[Fair nephew, Gawain, counsel me about it; save my
honor and my integrity because I don't care for
disagreement.]

Though Chrétien signals Arthur's response as "par san" [with
wisdom] (307), it suggests that the squabbling of his
knights is just so much noise and tedium to the king, or
possibly that he really does not know how to answer such
complaints. Either way, his response is not that of a king
in charge of his retinue.

As the poem progresses and Erec's vanquished knights
arrive at court, they pointedly do obeisance to the queen
prior to the king, and it is she who then urges the king to
take particular action.

Sire, avez antandu?

Or avez vos bien atandu

Erec le vaillant chevalier.

Molt vos donai boen consoil hier,

quant jel vos loai a atandre:

por ce fet il boen consoil prandre. (1215-20)

[Sire, have you heard? Now it is good that you
have waited for Erec, the valiant knight. I gave
you very good counsel yesterday when I advised you
to wait. For this reason, it is good to take
counsel.]

Arthur acknowledges the queen's insistence on the value of
good counsel:

N'est mie fable;

ceste parole est veritable.

Qui croit consoil n'est mie fos. (1221-23)

[That is truly no lie; that word is true. He who

believes in counsel is certainly no fool.]

Arthur then urges Guenivere, for love, to release the
prisoner that Erec had sent to her. Arthur portrays the
ideal of a courtly king acting in service of counsel and
emotions rather than due to any sense of honor, duty, or
loyalty.

When Erec arrives at court with his maiden, it is
Arthur, not a porter or other royal household servant, who
helps her down from her palfrey. In his subsequent speech to
his assembled court, asking their consent in his choice of
upon whom to bestow the kiss that was the right of the hunt
of the white stag, Arthur delineates the duties of a king.

Je sui rois, si ne doi mantir,

ne vilenie consantir,

ne fauseté ne desmesur;

reison doi garder et droiture,

qu'il apartient a leal roi

que il doit maintenir la loi,

verité et foi et justise.

Je ne voldroie an nule guise

fere deslëauté ne tort,

ne plus au foible que au fort;

n'est droiz que nus de moi se plaingne,

et je ne voel pas que remaigne

la costume ne li usages

que siaut maintenir mes lignages.

De ce vos devroit il peser,

se ge vos voloie alever

autre costume et autres lois

que ne tint mes peres li rois.

L'usage Pandragon, mon pere,

qui rois estoit et emperere,

voel je garder et maintenir,

que que il m'an doie avenir. (1757-78)

[I am the king, so I must not lie nor consent to
villainy nor treachery nor excess; I must defend
reason and integrity as is the duty of a loyal
king because he must maintain the law, truth,
faith, and justice. I would not be willing in any
manner to do disloyalty nor wrong, no more to the
feeble than to the strong; it is not right that
[due to wrongs] any should complain of me, and I
do not want the customs nor the practices to be

remanded, which so many in my lineage protect. It
would in truth be a heavy burden to you if I
raised up other customs and other laws in value
that were not held by my father, the king. I will
protect and maintain the practices of Pendragon,
my father, who was king and emperor, whatever the
future may hold for me.]

Arthur's catalog of kingly duties addresses maintaining the
status of high and low-born alike. Law, truth, faith, and
justice need to be upheld to prevent complaints of any of
the king's subjects. In addition, he subordinates his regnal
rights to tradition, customs, and inherited laws.

Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, a poem centered on the
adventures of Erec, serves to subordinate Arthur, a weak if
not ineffectual leader, and kingship to a code of inherited
traditions, practices, and laws. Instead of Arthur being a
lawgiver and enforcer, he is not merely subject to laws, he
is mired in them and the opinions of his nobles.

In *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, Chrétien uses the court
of Arthur to bracket the tales of Lancelot's adventures just
as he does in *Erec et Enide*. Similarly, the instigating
action for this tale of Lancelot is an event depicting the
non-kingly nature of Arthur. A boastful intruder knight
challenges Arthur:

Rois Artus, j'ai en ma prison,

de ta terre et de ta meison,

chevaliers, dames et puceles;

mes ne t'an di pas les noveles

por ce que jes te vuelle randre;

ençois te voel dire et aprandre

que tu n'as force ne avoir

par quoi tu les puisses avoir;

et saches bien qu'ainsi morras

quen je aidier ne lor porras. (51-60)[16]

[King Arthur, I have in my prison, of your land

and of your household, knights, ladies, and

maidens; I do not tell you this because I intend

to return them to you; rather, I want to tell you

and teach you that you do not possess the might

nor the resources to get them back; and be well

assured that you will die before being able to

succor them.]

Arthur's reply, considering that he is a king with a
reputation of daring and bravado, is pathetic:

Li rois respont qu'il li estuet

sofrir, s'amander ne le puet,

mes molt l'an poise duremant. (61-63)

[The king responded that he must suffer this, if

he could not remedy it, but it grieved him

deeply.]

Arthur, because he apparently cannot be successful--after
all the challenger said he could not--does nothing but
regret the fact that he is powerless. In response to
Arthur's failure to take action, Kay announces that he is

leaving Arthur's court. The king, unable to sway Kay's resolve, turns to his queen to sue for Kay's forbearance. To reclaim Kay's loyalty, Guenivere promises that she and the king will do Kay's bidding. In response,

> Li rois de joie an sopira
>
> et dit que son comandemant
>
> fera, que que il li demant. (168-70)
>
> [The king sighed with happiness and said that whatever he [Sir Kay] demanded would be his command.]

Arthur's reaction--no longer the wise man listening to counsel, but instead a desperate man with no idea how to act--sets into motion the events that eventually focus the bulk of the poem's remaining action on Lancelot.

Until the end of the poem, Arthur recedes into the background, presumably wringing his hands in anxious anticipation of salvation at the hands of Lancelot. Ultimately, Lancelot proves to be Arthur's savior, but he first proves to be Guenivere's champion and savior. It is only as such that he saves Arthur's kingdom. After Lancelot has defeated Meleagant,

> Li rois et tuit cil qui i sont
>
> grant joie an demainnent et font.
>
> Lancelot desarment adonques
>
> cil qui plus lié an furent onques,
>
> si l'en ont menéa grant joie. (7093-97)

[The king and everyone there showed great joy over it. Then, the most joyous among them disarmed Lancelot immediately, and they led him off with great joy.]

Arthur, a king, or at least nominally a king, joins with the masses to become merely one among many fawning admirers of Lancelot's noble prowess.

Marie de France's lai, titled *Lanval*, is the only one that directly portrays Arthur. In it, Arthur and his court are depicted as shallow and superficial. Lanval is forgotten or ignored by Arthur as he distributes gifts. The other nobles in Arthur's court, too, think little of Lanval:

Asez i duna riches duns.

E as cuntes e as baruns,

a cels de la table roünde

(n'ot tant de tels en tut le munde!)

femmes e terres departi,

fors a un sul ki l'ot servi.

Ceo fu Lanval; ne l'en sovint,

ne nuls des soens bien ne li tint. (13-20)[17]

[He [the king] gave out many riches to both counts and barons, to those of the Round Table (there was not their like in the whole world!), wives and lands he distributed to all but one who had served him. That one was Lanval; he [the king] did not remember him, and none among the king's good men gave him any attention.]

Once Lanval has made a name for himself and found true love, he returns to Arthur's court. Guenivere seeks to seduce him, and when he refuses, she accuses him of homosexuality. He defends himself by claiming to love the most beautiful woman in the world, one whose lowliest serving woman would shame Guenivere's own beauty. Insulted, Guenivere complains to Arthur. Incensed, Arthur vows that "s'il ne s'en puet en curt defendre, / il li fera ardeir u pendre" [If he [Lanval] cannot defend himself in court, he will be burned or hanged]; Arthur will avenge this slight to his queen (329-330). When accusing Lanval, Arthur extends, by association, the effect of Lanval's actions to himself, as well.

> 'Vassal, vus m'avez mult mesfait!
> Trop començastes vilein plait
> de mei hunir e avillier
> e la reïne laidengier.
> Vantez vus estes de folie!
> Trop par est noble vostre amie,
> quant plus est bele sa meschine
> e plus vaillanz que la reïne.' (365-372)
> [Vassal, you have done to me a great misdeed! This was a very lowbrow, wretched attempt to dishonor and disgrace me and to speak ill of the queen. You have made a foolish boast. For your beloved is far too noble if her maid is more beautiful and more gallant than the queen.]

In spite of the fact that Arthur has accused Lanval merely on the word of Guenivere, the barons who assemble to try Lanval struggle with their duty to their king and work to uphold the law.

> Li reis demande le recort
>
> sulunc le cleim e les respuns.
>
> ore est trestut sur les baruns.
>
> Il sunt al jugement alé;
>
> mult sunt pensif e esguaré
>
> del franc hume d'altre païs
>
> ki entre els ert si entrepris.
>
> Encumbrer le veulent plusur
>
> pur la volenté lur seignur. (426-34)
>
> [The king demanded the verdict due the claim and the response. Now it was trusted to the barons. They all went to the judgment, many were worried and distressed for the honest man from another land who had come among them into this situation. Many wanted to charge him because of the desires of their sovereign.]

In spite of Arthur's urging for a speedy resolution, the rule of law, not the law of rule, wins out. Before Lanval's maiden comes to rescue him, a series of visitors come to Arthur's court. Each demands that his court be prepared in some way to adequately receive Lanval's lady. The inadequacy of Arthur's superficial and pretentious court to receive the personification of beauty and love, mirrored in the contrast

between Guenivere's petty jealousy and Lanval's lady's seeming perfection, establishes a lower position for Arthur's court than the world of beauty, love, and truth. Arthur and his kingdom appear debased and undeserving of loyalty and worship. Lanval eventually abandons all that Arthur's court represents as he rides away with his lady.

The courtly, chivalric Arthur and his personal court appear to be shallow, superficial, and undeserving of respect and admiration in the French romances. The focus in them has shifted completely away from Arthur, and consequently, he is depicted as secondary to the knight at the heart of the romance. Kingship is entirely dependent on acceptability by the nobles and knights. In the French romances, Arthur is less a king than a figurehead. He is considered as a man first and a king last, if at all. His role as king is rendered as a cartoon to serve as foil for the knight-hero's aggrandizement. In French romance, as seen in Chrétien and Marie, Arthur the King takes a second or third place behind Arthur the action-less, helpless, equivocating, indecisive, and ultimately pathetic man. Arthur's role in French romance is to link the courtly tales of French-modeled knights, in the role that Vinaver has clearly explained, who are seeking personal adventure and serving courtly chivalric ideals of love, to an established milieu of narrative.

Next, in order to understand the nature of heroic English kingship, we will briefly examine the Anglo-Saxon/

Old English literary sources *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, the Old French *The Song of Roland*, and several historical Anglo-Saxon sources. There is no evidence to suggest that Malory knew any of these texts directly, but *Le Morte Darthur* shows that he was intimately familiar with the ideals that these works embody. *Beowulf*, in addition to illustrating heroic duty to the sovereign lord, addresses Anglo-Germanic ideals of heroic kingship directly. *The Battle of Maldon* does not depict kingship directly, but it does illustrate heroic leadership and the valued qualities of a leader. *The Song of Roland*, which also serves as Vinaver's primary example of the heroic epic that led into the chivalric French romance, provides numerous examples of heroic duty in Roland's actions for Charlemagne and in Roland's companions' service to him. It also, in a relatively brief passage, provides a glimpse into the heroic nature of kingship in the body of Charlemagne himself. Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, passages from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the accounts of several Anglo-Saxon kings will provide a look at the historical practice of heroic kingship. A brief examination of these works will prove enlightening in terms of the heroic nature of Malory's Arthur.

The Old English poem, *Beowulf*, illustrates the characteristics of heroic kingship/leadership as it traces the life and adventures of Beowulf. Three passages from the poem will provide examples of the characteristics of heroic

kingship that it reflects. The first of these is at the very
beginning of the poem. The poem opens with a brief
historical look at the death of Scyld, the king of the
Danes.

<div style="margin-left:2em">

Oft Scyld Scefing   sceaþena þreatum

monegum mægþum   meodo-setla ofteah;

egsode eorlas   syððan ærest wearð

feasceaft fundun;   he þæs frofre gebad,

weox under wolcnum,   weorð-myndum þah,

oðþæt him æghwylc   þara ymb-sittendra

ofer hron-rade   hyran scolde,

gomban gyldan.   Þæt wæs god cyning! (4-11)[18]

</div>

[Often Scyld Scefing seized mead benches from
threatening enemies and from many tribes. He
terrified earls, though he was early on found
helpless. He experienced the remedy for that. He
flourished under heaven, prospered in honors,
until each of them [the kings] surrounding him
over the seas had to listen to him, offer him
tribute. That was a good king!]

Scyld was a good king because he was a strong and active
leader. He had seized many mead-benches and grown in
strength until all of the surrounding kingdoms paid him
tribute. The poet both expands and interprets the definition
of Scyld's kingship in a later passage describing Scyld's
son, Beow's, success as a king.

<div style="margin-left:2em">

Swa sceal geong guma   gode gewyrcean,

</div>

fromum feoh-giftum   on fæder bearme,

þæt hine on ylde   eft gewunigen

wil-gesiþas,   þonne wig cume,

leode gelæsten;   lof-dædum sceal

in mægþa gehwære   man geþeon. (20-25)

[Thus should a young man, by good works, store up

marvelous fee-gifts in his father's house, so that

when he is old, his truly devoted retainers will

remain steadfast when war comes. Through

generosity shall a man prosper in all the world.]

In exploring the kingship of the founder of the Scylding

dynasty and his son, the *Beowulf* poet makes it clear that an

heroic king is not only successful in battle and honored

among his neighbors, but through good works he can

accumulate bounty and distribute it generously to his men to

ensure their loyalty in times of need. It is through such

praiseworthy deeds that a man will live renowned in all the

world.

The poet returns to the theme of good kingship in

Hrothgar's speech to Beowulf after he has defeated Grendel's

mother. Addressing Beowulf and his assembled men, Hrothgar

says,

Blæd is aræred

geond wid-wegas,   wine min Beowulf,

ðin ofer þeoda gehwylce.   Eal þu hit geþyldum

                           healdest,

mægen mid modes snyttrum.   [. . .]

```
                              Ðu scealt to frofre weorþan
eal lang-twidig        leodum þinum
hæleðum to helpe.      Ne wearð Heremod swa
eaforum Ecgwelan,      Ar-Scyldingum;
ne geweox he him to willan,      ac to wæl-fealle
ond to deað-cwalum     Deniga leodum.

.  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .  .

                              Hwæþere him on ferhþe greow
breost-hord blod-reow;     nallas beagas geaf
Denum æfter dome;      dream-leas gebad,
þæt he þæs gewinnes      weorc þrowade,
leod-bealo longsum.      Ðu þe lær be þon,
gum-cyste ongit! (1703b-1706a, 1707b-1712,
1718b-1723a)
```

[Your lineage is raised up, your fame is widely known, throughout every place, Beowulf, my friend. You maintain your strength steadily with wisdom. . . . You shall become a remedy, a long lasting one, and a help to your people. Not such a one was Heremod to the sons of Ecgwela, the Honor Scyldings. He did not let them grow to their desires, but bloodily slew and killed Danish men. . . . Despite that [God's gifts of strength and dominion], he grew fierce, his heart bloodthirsty. Never did he give rings to the Danes for glory. He lived joylessly, because of those works [killing and not rewarding] to his people, and ended his

life unhappy. From him you may learn what are true

virtues!]

After praising Beowulf's fame and wisdom, Hrothgar

illustrates what makes a king bad. Citing Heremod as an

example, he condemns killing one's countrymen and failing to

reward honorable service. Once again, the poet clarifies

these ideas.

>   He þæt wyrse ne con,
> oðþæt him on innan   ofer-hygda dæl
> weaxeð ond wridað,   þonne se weard swefeð,
> sawele hyrde;   bið se slæp to fæst,
> bisgum gebunden,   bona swiðe neah,
> se þe of flan-bogan   fyrenum sceoteð.
> þonne bið on hreþre   under helm drepen
> biteran stræle   --him bebeorgan ne con--
> wom wundor-bebodum   wergan gastes.
>
> . . . .
>
> gytsað grom-hydig,   nallas on gylp seleð
> fædde beagas,   ond he þa forð-gesceaft
> forgyteð ond forgymeð,   þæs þe him ær God
>   sealde,
> wuldres Waldend,   weorð-mynda dæl.
> Hit on ende-stæf   eft gelimpeð
> þæt se lic-homa   læne gedreoseð,
> fæge gefealleð. (1739b-1747, 1749-1755a)

[He knows no worse than that, until within himself

his portion of arrogance flourishes and grows,

because his guard, the soul's shepherd [the
conscience], sleeps. Because he sleeps too
soundly, bound up with worries, the enemy who is
very near, the one with the bow, shoots
treacherously. Then he is struck in the heart,
under the helmet, with the bitter shaft--he knows
of no defense--of the dark bidding of the wicked
spirit. . . . Angry and greedy, he never gives
rings to honor his men, and he forgets and forgoes
his future that God, ruler of Heaven, gave him
before, his portion of esteem. In the end,
inevitably decaying, it happens that his body,
doomed, fails him.]

Untempered arrogance and angry refusal of generosity result
in the loss of God's grace and death. Hrothgar urges Beowulf
to avoid the inglorious end of pride and greed, and instead
to "þæt selre geceos, / ece rædas" [choose the better
option, eternal gains] (1759b-1760a).

As Beowulf lays dying, some fifty-plus years later, he
recounts his own successes as a king in terms very similar
to those we have already encountered.

```
                              Ic ðas leode heold
fiftig wintra;      næs se folc-cyning,
ymbe-sittendra      ænig ðara,
þe mec guð-winum      gretan dorste,
egesan ðeon.      Ic on earde bad
mæl-gesceafta,      heold min tela,
```

ne sohte searo-niðas,   ne me swor fela

aða on unriht.   Ic ðæs ealles mæg,

feorh-bennum seoc,   gefean habban;

forðam me witan ne ðearf   Waldend fira

morðor-bealo maga,   þonne min sceaceð

lif of lice. (2732a-2743b)

[I have held this people for fifty years. Not any

of the surrounding kings dared to face me with

armies, to do battle. I experienced at home

whatever came my way, governed my own well, did

not seek out treacherous quarrels; I did not swear

many unrighteous oaths. In all these things, I

may, sick from this fatal wound, have happiness.

Further, the Ruler of men may not blame me for

murder killings of my clansman when life has gone

from my body.]

Beowulf can say that for fifty years none of the surrounding

kingdoms have felt able to threaten him. He has not sought

out intrigue, and he has not been guilty of murdering any of

his kinsmen. The earlier references to generosity are not

mirrored in Beowulf's words in this passage. However, at

this point in the action of the poem, he has just destroyed

the dragon, at the cost of his own life, in order to provide

his people with the riches of the dragon's hoard. His

actions speak of the ultimate generosity.

The parallels between the kingship depicted in *Beowulf*

and that illustrated by Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur* will be

more fully examined later; however, these qualities of heroic, epic kingship--unsurpassed might, generosity, and family/clan loyalty--are clearly mirrored in Malory's version of Arthur's rise to world dominance, the splendor and generosity of Arthur's court, and the Round Table, respectively.

In the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, Byrhtnoth displays another quality of good kingship/leadership. Though Byrhtnoth is not a king, he leads his band of coastal defenders in the king's name, and he serves as lord to those men, as well. Like Malory's Arthur, Byrhtnoth leads by example.

Þa he hæfde þæt folc   fægere gytrymed,

he liehte þa mid leodum   þær him leofost wæs,

þær he his heorþ-weorod   holdost wisse.

(22-24)[19]

[When he had those men properly arranged, he dismounted there with his people, where he was happiest to be, there with his hearth companions aware of their loyalty.]

After arranging his men for battle, Byrhtnoth gets off his horse. Though he has the advantage of speed and mobility of being on horseback, he dismounts, sends away his horse and stands ready with his retainers. He braces for the battle with his shield, one of many facing the threat shoulder to shoulder.

Þær ongean gramum   gearwe stodon

Byrhtnoþ mid beornum;   he mid bordum het

wyrcan þone wig-hagan   and þæt weorod healdan

fæste wiþ feondum. (100-103a)

[There, facing the fierce enemy, Byrhtnoth stood

among his soldiers. With his shield, he commanded

that host to endeavor to win, to stand fast

against the enemy.]

Exhorting his soldiers and encouraging each of them to do

his duty and fight valiantly against the Danes, Byrhtnoth

remains among the English defenders. He demonstrates a key

element of leading by example; he shares the hazard with his

men.

Stodon stede-fæste;   stihte hie Byrhtnoþ,

bæd þæt hyssa gehwelc   hogode to wige,

þe on Denum wolde   dom gefeohtan. (127-129)

[They stood steadfast. Byrhtnoth directed them,

bidding that each young warrior intend, in the

fight, to desire to win glory against the Danes.]

Byrhtnoth, leading in heroic style, remains with his

retainers, fighting valiantly against overwhelming odds

until he is slain. As he is mortally wounded, but before he

dies, Byrhtnoth kills several Danes. Then, just before

heathenish enemies dispatch him, Byrhtnoth urges his men on.

Þa-giet þæt word gecwæþ

har hilde-rinc,   hyssas bielde,

bæd gangan forþ   gode geferan. (168b-170)

[Still [he] spoke those words, the grey-haired

one, encouraging the young warriors, urging them

to go steadily forward together.]

Some cowards among the English flee the field after their

leader falls, but Byrhtnoth's most valiant retainers are

inspired by his valor to fight to the death to serve their

lord and uphold his and their honor.

In similar fashion, Charlemagne, in *La Chanson de

Roland*, prepares his men for battle to avenge the deaths of

Roland and the men who died with him. Charlemagne clearly

knows what his duty to his men is in return for their

service to him.

Li emperere recleimet ses Franceis:

"Seignors barons, jo vos aim, si vos crei.

Tantes batailles avez faites pur mei,

Regnes cunquis e desordenet reis!

Ben le conuis que gueredun vos en dei

E de mun cors, de teres e d'aveir.

Vengez voz filz, voz freres e voz heirs

Qu'en Rencesvals furent morz l'altre seir!

Ja savez vos cuntre paiens ai dreit."

Respondent Franc: "Sire, vos dites veir."

Itels .XX. miliers en ad od sei,

Cumunement l'en prametent lor feiz,

Ne li faldrunt pur mort ne pur destreit.

(3405-16)[20]

[The emperor calls out to his Franks: "Lord
barons, I love you and I trust you. You have
fought so very many battles for me, conquered
kingdoms and confounded kings! I know well that I
owe you a reward for my body, my lands and
everything I have. Avenge your sons, your
brothers, and your heirs who died at Rencesvals
the other night! You know that in countering the
pagans I am in the right." The Franks replied:
"Sire, You speak truly." There were twenty
thousand with him there, all together as one they
pledge their faith that they will not fail even if
it means death or distress.]

Charlemagne acknowledges his obligation to reward his men
for their service. Then he challenges them to avenge their
slain kinsmen. In turn, the twenty thousand men with
Charlemagne swear not to fail in their duty to him whether
it means anguish or death.

This brief scene of Charlemagne, in a poem otherwise
devoted to the heroic notions of duty to one's lord, echoes
the sentiments expressed in both *Beowulf* and *The Battle of
Maldon*. The heroic qualities of the lord's service to his
men--vanquishing neighboring kingdoms and enforcing peace,
pursuing righteous vengeance, and commanding undying and
unequivocal devotion from one's men--are seen in this early
French heroic poem. Though there is no evidence to support
the assumption, it seems quite possible that Malory may have

known this *chanson* in some form, unlike either *Beowulf* or *The Battle of Maldon.* Certainly, some of his audience would have known it. Though perhaps not the specifics of any given version of this poem, the heroic qualities of Charlemagne were very familiar to Malory and his audience. *The Song of Roland* is, in fact, the poem that Vinaver turns to in order to establish the heroic qualities that he claims led to the romance qualities of later French literature. Once again, in Charlemagne and Roland, we see many of the heroic qualities that Malory gives to his Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur.*

The courtly model of kingship, as reflected in the characterization of Arthur in the French romance models identified by Vinaver, is one of inaction if not ineffectiveness. Leadership is often couched in somewhat arbitrary and often counterproductive decisions. These are frequently questioned and demeaned by the king's nobles, whether privately or publicly. The king, Arthur, is moved into the background and reduced to a miserable observer. The focus shifts from the king's nobility--often presented instead as parody or satirical mocking--to the actions and exploits of knights serving largely personal ends first and only secondarily the king's ends.

The heroic model of kingship/leadership was firmly entrenched in the English psyche long before the Norman conquest and the influence of French romance ideals. Regrettably, there is no significant pre-Malory example of Arthur as heroic king, save for brief mentions in the works

of Nennius, Wace, and Layamon, and their accounts of Arthur are too brief, really, to provide any real glimpse into the nature of kingship/leadership that the character of Arthur might have possessed.[21] Arthur, when he appears in post-Conquest and pre-Malory Anglo-Norman literature, is portrayed similarly to the French model of a courtly king. Most of this literature was written by and for the French-speaking, Anglo-Norman court. The only significant known pre-Malory exceptions to the courtly presentiment of Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, portray Arthur in a more heroic role. Though Arthur was not often the focus of such treatments, the characteristics of the heroic leader model were familiar to the Anglo-Norman audience. In the waning influence of the *Chansons de Geste* these heroic qualities existed in the noble characters. As seen above, the heroic concept of kingship/leadership embraces military strength, generosity to loyal retainers, loyalty to family/clan, personal bravery, leadership by example, and devoted service from the men who serve the king/lord.

These heroic qualities of English kingship are not just literary constructs. The Anglo-Saxon kings, especially Alfred, exhibited many of the heroic traits that are demonstrated by their literary counterparts. Alfred reigned from 871 to 899. He struggled to maintain his kingdom against the invading Viking armies and ultimately was successful in maintaining the English national identity and

in establishing the foundation for stability, if not actual peace, between the English and the Vikings for the coming century.

Alfred was a warrior. Before he became king, he led his brother's armies against the Vikings. His leadership and military capabilities earned him success in battle and respect from his peers and future subjects. However, Alfred was much more than just a successful warrior, he was also wise; he respected and cultivated learning among all of his people throughout his reign. D. J. V. Fisher puts the significance of Alfred's kingship into perspective.

> It was not military prowess alone which made him a great king; there had been great war-leaders before his day and his own son, Edward, was to show himself at least as competent a general as his father. What distinguishes King Alfred from any other Anglo-Saxon king was the combination in him of outstanding military ability with an originality of mind and breadth of outlook which gave a new dimension to English kingship. His conception of royal authority, adopted and developed by his successors in easier political circumstances, made acceptable to all their subjects the expansion of the 'tribal' kingdom of Wessex into the territorial kingdom of England. (225)[22]

This suggests that the heroic characteristics of King Alfred were not limited to his reign. Instead, they seem to have become an integral part of the nature of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England.

The heroic qualities of Alfred's kingship are most clearly illustrated in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. As a contemporary account of Alfred's life, Asser's work sheds interesting light on the actions and events of Alfred's reign and presents them in terms similar to those in the literary works already examined. Asser's account of a battle in the year 871 presents an example of Alfred's personal bravery and leadership by example.

> Alfred (then 'heir apparent') could not oppose the enemy battle-lines any longer without retreating from the battlefield or attacking the enemy forces before his brother's arrival on the scene. He finally deployed the Christian forces against the hostile armies, as he had previously intended (even though the king had not yet come), and acting courageously, like a wild boar, supported by divine counsel and strengthened by divine help, when he had closed up the shield-wall in proper order, he moved his army without delay against the enemy. (79)[23]

This description of Alfred's actions and tactics is very similar to that of Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon*, as

well as of Arthur in the many battle scenes depicted by Malory.

When Alfred accedes to the throne shortly after the battle described above, Asser highlights several of Alfred's personal character traits. After his brother, King Ethelred, dies, Alfred assumes the kingship "with the approval of divine will and according to the unanimous wish of all the inhabitants of the kingdom" (80). Once again, there is a striking similarity between Asser's claim of popular support for Alfred and the support for the actions of Byrhtnoth and Arthur.

Asser continues his exhaltation of Alfred with an observation that he was considerably more worthy to be king than even his older brothers had been "for he surpassed all his brothers both in wisdom and in all good habits; and in particular because he was a great warrior and victorious in virtually all battles" (80-81). One of the first traits of an heroic king is success in battle; the first observation of Scyld's qualification as a good king is his strength in military matters. Here, Asser states clearly that Alfred was successful in battle, and throughout much of the early portion of Alfred's reign, Asser documents Alfred's military campaigns and most notably his success in the face of often overwhelming odds.

Alfred's heroic qualities go beyond military prowess. Like Beowulf, in his fifty years of good kingship, and like

Malory's King Arthur, Asser notes that "the king, amidst the wars and the numerous interruptions of this present life [. . .] did not refrain from directing the government of the kingdom" (91). Alfred's activities included a wide range of activities, such as hunting, various artistic pursuits, and reading and acquiring knowledge, in addition to "issuing orders to his followers" (91). Again, in the heroic tradition of giving gifts, Asser reports that Alfred

> similarly applied himself attentively to charity and distribution of alms to the native population and to foreign visitors of all races, showing immense and incomparable kindness and generosity to all men. [. . .] Wherefore many Franks, Frisians, Gauls, Vikings, Welshmen, Irishmen and Bretons subjected themselves willingly to his lordship, nobles and commoners alike; and, as befitted his royal status, he ruled, loved, honoured and enriched tham all with wealth and authority, just as he did his own people. (91)

Alfred's generosity was widespread, and interestingly, Asser notes that Alfred's behavior, the giving of gifts of wealth and power, was that expected of a king. In addition, Asser's catalog of the peoples surrounding Alfred's kingdom who paid him homage has echoes in the *Beowulf* poet's account of both Scyld and Beowulf's situation at the height of their good kingship and in the good kingship of Malory's Arthur.

In another parallel to Malory's Arthur, Asser notes
that Alfred established and personally enforced a code of
laws. He says that Alfred himself would "sit at judicial
hearings for the benefit of both his nobles and of the
common people" (109). Alfred's laws address issues relevant
to a society familiar with the Germanic ideals of heroic
behavior. Not all inclusive by any modern standards,
Alfred's law codified what he obviously thought was
important to ensure social stability among his subjects.

> For example, he lays great stress on the keeping
> of oaths; he announces severe punishment for
> treachery to a lord, and especially for treachery
> to the king; and he specifies procedures for the
> settlement of feuds without undue bloodshed.
> (39)[24]

Though Malory never specifically lists any of the laws of
his King Arthur, the spirit of these laws of Alfred and the
heroic Germanic issues that they address resound in the
ideals expressed throughout Malory's depiction of Arthur's
ideals and specifically in the Pentecost oath.

Alfred is not the only Anglo-Saxon king to portray the
heroic ideals displayed by the literary kings of Anglo-Saxon
literature. Edward, Alfred's son and successor, upheld his
father's ideals. He, too, was a successful military leader,
"his planning was meticulous, his handling of armies
masterly" (107).[25] In addition, Edward valued learning. He
educated his sons "that afterwards they might succeed to

govern the state, not like rustics but philosophers"
(108).[26]

Followed by similar examples of good heroic kingship, such as the reigns of Aethelstan and Edgar, there were also examples of poor kingship among the Anglo-Saxon kings of England. One of the most evident of these was Aethelred, who reigned from 979-1015. Aethelred is known with the sobriquet, "Unræd"-- mistakenly interpreted as "unready" but more properly translated as "without good counsel." Whereas his predecessors had the heroic traits of military prowess, generosity, loyalty, wisdom, and devotion from their followers, Aethelred had virtually none of these. An inept, ineffectual military leader, he nonetheless had heroic men serving him. Byrhtnoth, the leader chronicled in *The Battle of Maldon*, served King Aethelred. Ralph Whitlock characterizes Aethelred's reign as

> a period of unmitigated catastrophe; [. . .]
> England had sunk into a state of chaotic misery.
> [. . .] Treachery and duplicity flourished; no man
> knew whom he could trust. (140)

Aethelred serves as an example by ommission of the characteristics of heroic kingship valued in the monarchs of Anglo-Saxon England. He lacked what the people desired and had come to expect from their king; consequently, he is considered a failure as a king.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides numerous examples of heroic leadership qualities in its accounts of the battles

between various English kings and the armies of Viking raiders. In addition, as John Hill explores in his analysis of feud episodes in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the heroic trait of loyalty to both one's lord and to one's clan are illustrated.[27] Hill examines the episode of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the Chronicle entry for the year 755 and the account of Aethelwold's revolt against Edward (Alfred's son and Aethelwold's cousin) in the entries for 901 and 905. He compares these two chronicle entries against the literary parallels of *Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon*, and some of Alfred's own writings and concludes that the entries generally portray "an expression of loyalty to lord over life as well as loyalty to lord over kinship. [. . . They] demonstrate the proper, conventional heroic choices for the warriors on both sides of the stor[ies's] combats" (74). He notes that unlawful actions of a kinsman can outweigh required loyalty and that war-band bonds are nearly as strong, and sometimes stronger, than blood bonds between kinsmen.

It seems that in Anglo-Saxon life as in Anglo-Saxon literature kingship/leadership reflects the heroic, Germanic qualities of bravery; strong military and personal leadership skills; loyalty to lord, retainers, and clan; and gift giving, which in the reigns of Alfred and the other Anglo-Saxon kings embraces the achievement of peace and security through the establishment and enforcement of laws.

As we examine Malory's work, we will see that Malory's Arthur clearly represents the heroic characteristics of kingship/leadership identified above. In addition, by comparing passages in Malory's work to their probable sources, we shall see that Malory changed the character of King Arthur from the courtly model to one more reminiscent of the heroic model. This comparison will concentrate on the first two and last two of Malory's tales, those that are the focus of Malory's exploration of the life and ideals of King Arthur, his rise to the pinnacle of fortune, and his downfall and ultimate defeat. It is in these tales that Malory makes the most significant changes to the character of Arthur.

One of the earliest examples of Malory's changes to the character of King Arthur occurs during the episode of Arthur's coronation in *The Tale of King Arthur*. At his coronation, Arthur swears "unto his lordes and the comyns for to be a true kyng, to stand with true justyce fro thens forth the dayes of this lyf" (10). Previously, Arthur had won popular acclaim from the common people to be their king even though many of the nobles were reluctant to accept him. Malory depicts Arthur as a king of the people with their popular support. In Malory's probable source, the *Suite du Merlin*, King Arthur swears his first allegiance to the church.[28] He swears "d'aidier Sainte Eglyse et essauchier, et tenir loiauté en terre et pais" [to defend and exalt Holy Church, and preserve loyalty in the land and region] (146).[29]

This change in Arthur's allegiance, from the church to the knights and common people of his kingdom, is completely in keeping with Malory's emphasis on heroic qualities of kingship.

Several of Malory's changes to the material of his sources involve minimizing or eliminating supernatural elements in the story of Arthur. One such event is noteworthy for its effect in terms of emphasizing the heroic qualities of Arthur. Malory replaces the workings of Merlin's supernatural powers with the heroic personal prowess and leadership of Arthur. *The Tale of King Arthur* focuses on Arthur's rise to power. After he is made king, Arthur and his allies, Kings Ban and Bors, campaign to consolidate Arthur's hold on his kingdom. In doing so, at one point in the included tale of "Merlin," they must engage an army of eleven kings. In the *Suite du Merlin*, Merlin facilitates the victory: "Merlin lor envoia une si fere vent et un si fere estorbillon que totes les tentes e tut li pavillon chairent sur lor testes" [Merlin then sent them such a savage wind and such a savage whirlwind that all of the tents and all of the pavilions fell down on their heads] (Vinaver *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* 1291).[30] In Malory's version of this event, Merlin's enchantment is replaced by Arthur's military prowess: "Than kynge Arthur and kynge Ban and Bors with hir good and trusty knyghtes sette uppon them so fersely that he made them overthrowe hir pavilons on hir hedis" (18). A heroic king, though probably believing in the

supernatural, has no particular need for it in battle. The heroic king, King Arthur, can rely on his own martial skills and leadership along with the skills and service of his retainer knights or allied kings to ensure success in battle. Malory's change to the character of Arthur in this episode serves as an example of this element of heroic kingship.

Near the end of the "Merlin" section of *The Tale of King Arthur*, messengers from the Roman Emperor arrive at Arthur's court to demand tribute. Arthur's response to the emissaries is both defiant and heroic: "I owghe the Emperour no trewage, nother none woll I yelde hym, but on a fayre fylde I shall yelde hym my trwage, that shall be with a sherpe spere other ellis with a sherpe swerde" (32). This open defiance of Rome is, even as Vinaver concedes, "characteristic of M[alory]'s Arthur" and completely original to his work (*The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* 1300). In the *Suite du Merlin*, Arthur's response is significantly less aggressive:

> je suis chius qui riens ne li renderoie, ne riens ne terroie de lui. Ains di bien que s'il estoit demain entrés en ma terre pour occoison de gerroiier, il ne verroit ja mais a Roume, se Dieu ne me nuisoit trop durement. (180)
>
> [I have chosen not to pay back anything, no goods, no lands to him. Thus, I say that if tomorrow he had entered my lands for the purpose of making

war, he would never see Rome if God did not harm
me too harshly.]

This French version of King Arthur, though defiant, couches
his threats in somewhat indirect and ameliorating language,
that of the diplomat. In contrast to the king in Malory's
source, Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur* states his threats
directly and unequivocally. He is clearly ready to back up
his threat with force of arms; he's an heroic warrior king.
Vinaver, commenting on Malory's Arthur's response, notes
that Arthur's heroic answer "becomes worthy of an epic hero"
(*The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* 1300).

Another example of Malory's emphasis on the personal
prowess of Arthur comes near the end of the episode where
Arthur avenges Gryfflet. Arthur takes on the role of avenger
and nearly loses his life in the process. In his moment of
greatest peril, Arthur answers Pellinore's demand to yield
or die as follows: "As for that, [. . .] dethe ys wellcom to
me whan hit commyth. But to yelde me unto the I woll nat!"
(34). This part of the scene, while demonstrating Arthur's
bravado, is not unique to Malory. Malory's alteration of his
source becomes apparent after Arthur returns to court and
relates his exploits to his gathered knights. Here, Malory
adds a brief passage that illustrates the knights' reaction
to their lord's actions: "They mervayled that he wolde
joupardé his person so alone. But all men of worship seyde
hit was myrry to be under such a chyfftayne that wolde putte
hys person in adventure as other poure knyghtis ded" (36).

Malory's Arthur is a king, but he is also a knight. In fact, he is a knight who will dare to test his mettle as he expects his knights to do. In this scene, Malory emphasizes Arthur's personal bravery and his willingness to lead by example, as well as the loyalty engendered in his retainers by his actions. Each of these is one of the traits of heroic kingship/leadership noted earlier. Malory identifies this reaction in the retainers without prompting of his sources, for none of those identified contains a similar passage identifying these particular traits. Even Vinaver, in his detailed word-for-word comparison of the Winchester manuscript with Malory's probable sources, notes that this is an addition unique to Malory's work.[31]

In the essentially stand-alone and analogous episode "The Tale of Balin," Arthur's ideals are personified in the character of Balin. When a maiden seeking a champion looks at Balin, she sees a likely man who "but for hys poure araymente she thought he sholde nat be of no worship withoute vylony or trechory" (39). Comparing Balin's response to the maiden in Malory's probable source, the Suite du Merlin, and in Le Morte Darthur, we find a distinct difference between the concept of knighthood in each. In the French text, Balin says, "Damoisiele, ne m'aiiés en despit pour ma povreté: je fui ja plus riches. Encore n'a il nul chaiens a qui je veaisse mon escu" [Damsel, be not dismayed of me in spite of my poverty. I was once richer. Yet, there is no one here to whom I would refuse my protection.]

(216).[32] Malory's Balin expressly states that his worthiness is not merely in appearances:

> A, fayre damesell, [. . .] worthynes and good
> tacchis and also good dedis is nat only in
> araymente, but manhode and worship ys hyd within a
> mannes person; and many a worshipfull knyght ys
> nat knowyn unto all peple. And therefore worship
> and hardynesse ys nat in araymente. (39)

The idea that knightly actions and behavior, as opposed to courtly appearances, are the true indicators of worthiness clearly distinguishes Malory's heroic vision of knighthood from the courtly ideals embodied in his source.

Balin's self-sacrificing devotion to his liege lord, another heroic trait, is briefly mentioned when Balin meets with his brother Balan early in his adventure. Balin has been sent from Arthur's court for killing the Lady of the Lake. In spite of his ouster from court, Balin laments Arthur's displeasure: "I am ryght hevy that my lorde Arthure ys displeased with me, for he ys the moste worshypfullist kynge that regnith now in erth; and hys love I woll gete other ellis I will putte my lyff in adventure" (44). There is no corresponding statement in Malory's source to account for Balin's praise of Arthur and his willingness to put his life at risk for Arthur's sake.

Another major example of Malory's reworking of the nature of kingship/leadership occurs at the end of "Torre and Pellinore" in *The Tale of King Arthur*. After Torre,

Pellinore, and Gawain return from the quest of the white
hart, the white hound, and the lady, Arthur "stablysshed all
the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys" (75). This
generosity, though understated, reflects the important
heroic characteristic of gift giving, an integral and vital
part of an heroic king's duty to his retainers.

Another passage unique to Malory follows immediately,
which recalls the earlier emphasis on knightly heroic
behavior. In what has become known as the Pentecost Oath,
Arthur establishes the definition of the order of knighthood
and in essence, states Malory's concept of heroic chivalry.
Arthur has each of his knights swear

> never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes
> to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that
> askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their
> worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for
> evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and
> jantilwomen and wydows socour: strengthe hem in
> hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon
> payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles
> in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no
> worldis goodis. (75)

This passage is not merely a knightly code established for
the sake of appearances, that is, to pin to the courtly
accouterment of a knight. Instead, it is the code of
knightly action, as Malory later illustrates in his interior
tales.

In the section of *The Tale of King Arthur* called "The War with the Five Kings," Arthur's leadership and bravery are demonstrated. His enemies respect and fear Arthur because he

> hath the floure of chevalry of the worlde with hym, and hit preved by the grete batayle he did with the eleven kynges. And therefore hyghe ye unto hym nyght and day tyll that we be nyghe hym, for the lenger he taryeth the bygger he is, and we ever the weyker. And he is so corageous of hymself that he is com to the felde with lytyll peple, and therefore lette us sette uppon hym or day, and we shall sle downe of his knyghtes that none shall helpe other of them. (78)

Arthur's reputation and his military prowess are explored in this passage that outlines how his abilities affect the strategies of his enemies. In spite of their apparent cunning, these five kings eventually face King Arthur, Sir Gawain, Sir Gryfflet, and Sir Kay. The three noble Knights of the Round Table, together with their king and lord, fight and defeat the five kings. Arthur fights alongside his men. He shares the risks and even kills one of the five kings. A clear example of Anglo-Saxon litotes (whether intended as such or not) follows the last action of this battle. Sir Kay has just killed the last enemy king with a blow so hard that "the stroke clave the helme and hede to the erthe" (79).

Arthur, in a variant of what has become a relatively common English usage, remarks, "That was well stryken" (79)!

Immediately following this episode is one in which Arthur and his men destroy the remnants of the enemy army. In Malory's probable French source, the *Suite du Merlin*, Arthur only observes the battle against the remaining soldiers. However, in *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory has changed the events of his source to reflect a more heroic trait. Arthur once again participates personally as both leader and champion: "And therewithall com in kyng Arthure but with a fewe peple and slewe on the ryght honde and the lyffte honde, that well nye there ascaped no man, but all were slayne to the numbir of thirty thousand" (79). Malory's Arthur, unlike the French model, personally engages his enemies as does Beowulf, and like Byrhtnoth and Roland, he leads by example and fights alongside his men.

In the later *Tale of the Sankgreal*, Arthur, moved by his sadness at the departure of his Round Table knights on the uncertain quest of the Holy Grail, orders a tournament to prepare them for their quest. In addition, and possibly of even more significance, Arthur states his concerns to them. He says,

> I am sure at this quest of the Sankegreall shall all ye of the Rounde Table departe, and nevyr shall I se you agayne holé togydirs, therefore ones shall I se you togydir in the medow, all holé togydirs, [. . .] to juste and to tourney, that

> aftir youre dethe men may speke of hit that such
> good knyghtes were here, such a day, holé
> togydirs. (520)

Arthur perhaps senses the beginning of the end. His "family," the Round Table knights, has become the focus of his life. They are being dismissed to seek their personal fame and glory. In addition, they will bring glory and healing to the kingdom, if they are successful. Arthur, expecting *never to see many, if not all, of his retainers again,* wishes to fete them one last time. After the tournament, the king and his knights return to their supper where, "every knyght sette in hys owne place as they were toforehande" (521). The full contingent of King Arthur's retainers assembles one last time. It is not too surprising then that Malory gathers Arthur's knights whole together around their lord for a decisive moment in this tale, the appearance of the Holy Grail. Though the Knights of Arthur's Round Table cannot serve the same heroic function as the clan, since only a few of his knights are blood kinsman, they serve as an equally important heroic element, his warband of loyal retainers.

In the *Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* following the events of "The Great Tournament," Malory clarifies his definition of loyalty to one's lord. In this tournament, Lancelot fights fiercely against the Knights of the Round Table for their inaction when Guenivere needed a champion in the previous episode of "The Poisoned Apple."

When Arthur and his men attack Lancelot with superior numbers, Gareth changes sides from Arthur's retinue and joins with Lancelot. After the tournament, when all of the participants are feasting after the activities, Arthur chides Gareth for his decision. Gareth responds, "[Lancelot] made me knyght, and whan I saw hym so hard bestad, methought hit was my worshyp to helpe hym. [. . .] I shamed to se so many good knyghtes ayenste hym alone" (648). Acknowledging Gareth's correctness in taking the action that he has, Arthur concludes that it is always

> a worshypfull knyghtes dede to help and succoure
> another worshypfull knyght whan he seeth hym in
> daungere. For ever a worshypfull man woll be lothe
> to se a worshypfull man shamed, and he that ys of
> no worshyp and medelyth with cowardise never shall
> he shew jantilnes nor no maner of goodnes where he
> seeth a man in daungere, for than woll a cowarde
> never shew mercy. And allwayes a good man woll do
> ever to another man as he wolde be done to
> hymselff. (648)

As he had done earlier in Malory's work, in the Pentecost oath, Arthur here once again states the duties of a knight and delineates chivalric knightly behavior in heroic terms.

Arthur's initial reaction to the accusations made by Aggrevayne in the opening episode, "Slander and Strife," of the concluding tale, *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur*, illustrates the heroic concept of loyalty to his

family/clan. In this case, however, the clan is the brotherhood of knights that Arthur has created, the Round Table. When Aggrevayne accuses Lancelot and Guenivere of treasonous adultery, Arthur is

> full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir
> Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a
> demyng of hit, but he wold nat here theroff, for
> sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the
> quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge
> loved hym passyngly well. (674)

Neither of Malory's possible sources for this tale, *Mort Artu* or the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, has a passage like this. Arthur's reluctance to act in *Le Morte Darthur* is in direct contrast to his regret-tinged but unhesitant action against a traitor in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.

> "Alas!" then said the kinge there,
>> "Certes, that were grete pitee;
> So as man nadde never yet more
>> Of beautee ne of bountee,
> Ne man in world has never yet ere
>> Of so mikel nobilitee.
> Alas, full grete dole it were
>> In him sholde any tresoun be!
>
> But sithe it is so, withouten fail,
>> Sir Agravain, so God thee rede,
> What were now thy best counsel,

For to take him with the deed?" (1736-47)[33]

It is even further from the almost diabolically eager action of Arthur against Lancelot in *Mort Artu*. In it, Arthur tells Aggrevayne,

> De moi, [. . .] ne uos esmaies ia, mais de cou ke ie uos souiegne et vos metes en agait et en engien ke uos les prendes ensamble. Si uos requier sor la foi ke uos me deues et sor le sairement ke uos me iurastes, quant vos deuenistes compaignon de la Table Reonde. (95)[34]

> [As for me, have no worries, but do as I tell you and arrange to catch them together if you are able to. I require this of you on the faith that you owe me and on the vow you made to me when you were made companions of the Round Table.]

In *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory makes it clear that for Arthur the Round Table takes precedence over even Guenivere, Arthur's wife. To Arthur, as we shall see, the fellowship of the Round Table represents much more than his family. It has become the embodiment of his ideals and has taken the place of the heroic idea of clan. Ideologically, the Round Table Knights outweigh blood-tie concerns for Arthur. Somewhat ironically, it is in this regard that he ultimately fails.

In contrast to his devotion to the Round Table, Arthur's devotion to blood-ties is reflected in the next example. Lancelot is discovered by several of Arthur's knights in company with the queen in her chambers and fights

his way out. He kills all of the knights except Mordred.
After Mordred reports these events to the king, Arthur
condemns Guenivere for treason. Gawain urges King Arthur to
set aside his judgment against the queen, and when Arthur
refuses to heed Gawain's advice, Gawain refuses to attend
the sentenced burning of the queen. Arthur castigates Gawain
for his apparent disregard of necessary vengeance. Arthur
says,

> ye have no cause to love hym! For thys nyght last
> past he slew youre brothir sir Aggravayne, a full
> good knyght, and allmost he had slayne youre othir
> brother, sir Mordred, and also there he slew
> thirtene noble knyghtes. And also remembir you,
> sir Gawayne, he slew two sunnes of youres, sir
> Florens and sir Lovell. (683)

Arthur appeals to Gawain's sense of heroic duty to family
and clan. Gawain's response echoes Arthur's own words to
Gareth after the Great Tournament. Gawain notes that

> insomuch as I gaff hem warnynge and tolde my
> brothir and my sonnes aforehonde what wolde falle
> on the ende, and insomuche as they wolde nat do be
> my counceyle, I woll nat meddyll me thereoff, nor
> revenge me nothynge of their dethys; for I tolde
> them there was no boote to stryve with sir
> Launcelot. Howbehit I am sory of the deth of my
> brothir and of my two sunnes, but they ar the
> causars of their owne dethe. (683)

Gawain acts the part of the true knight as illuminated by Arthur in the Pentecost oath and after the Great Tournament. He refuses to take the part of ignoble knights regardless of their blood relationship to him. Arthur, in his attempt to supplant the heroic blood-tie vengeance bond with the brotherhood bond of the Round Table, has created the paradox that will become the catalyst for the destruction of his ideals. Malory carefully works out the intricate juxtaposition of loyalty and vengeance. In *Mort Artu*, what becomes Malory's expanded and detailed dialogue between Arthur and Gawain is contained in the following brief passage:

> Et quant me sire Gauains uoit ke li iugemens
> est a cou menes ke la mors la roine i estoit
> tote esclairie, Si dist, se Diu plest, ke ia
> ceste dolour nesgardera, kil uoie morir la dame
> del monde ki grignor honor li auoit tos iors
> portee. Lors uient au roi Se li dist: "Sire, ie
> uos reng quanke ie tieng de vos Ne iamais, tant
> comme ie uiue, ne vos sieruirai ne entor vos ne
> demorrai, se vos soufres ceste desloiauté." Li
> rois Artus ne respont nient a cou ke me sire
> Gauains li dist, car molt entendoit a autre
> afaire. Et me sire Gauains sen uait si grant duel
> faisant comme sil ueist deuant lui mort tot le
> monde. (107)

[And when Sir Gawain knew that the judgment that was pronounced meant the death of the queen, he said that if it pleased God, his grief would not allow him to view the death of the lady who had given him the greatest honor of the world. He went to the king and said, "Sire, I return to you whatever things I have from you. Never, as long as I live, will I serve you or remain with you, if you condone this disloyalty." King Arthur did not respond to what Sir Gawain had said, because he was very intent on another matter. And Sir Gawain went away, making such a great dole as if he saw the whole world dead in front of him.]

While the outline of the action of the exchange between Arthur and Gawain in *Le Morte Darthur* is suggested by this passage, the intricate counterbalance of loyalty and justice is Malory's own creation. Vinaver observes that "the *Mort Artu* probably suggested some of the emotional background, but all the substance and the rhetorical elaboration seem to be his [Malory's] own" (*The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* 1633).

When the awful truth of the calamitous results of Arthur's inability to resolve this paradox between the two ideals of heroic devotion becomes clear, he breaks down. When Lancelot rescues Guenivere and inadvertently kills Gawain's unarmed brothers, Gareth and Gaheris, Arthur knows that Gawain will not be placated by platitudes of how a good

knight should act. Unlike the situation where Lancelot killed Gawain's brother and sons, this incident resulted in the deaths of innocent men who were not the causers of their own deaths. In *Mort Artu*, when he kneels over the slain Gaheris, Arthur says, "Gaheries, biaus nies, a mal fust onques lespee forgie dont vos fustes si naurus et mal ait li bras ki si uos feri, Car il en a honni moi et mon linage" [Gaheris, fair nephew, it was an evil time when that sword was forged with which you were wounded [killed], and evil is the arm who struck you, because it has dishonored me and my kindred.] (116). However, Malory expands this last sentence to explore the repercussions of the recent events for Arthur's heroic ideals. In the French source, Arthur focuses on the end of himself and of his lineage. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthur laments what he finally understands to be his future:

> the deth of them woll cause the grettist mortall warre that ever was. [. . .] I shall never have reste of hym [Gawain] tyll I have destroyed sir Launcelottys kynne and hymselff bothe, othir ellis he to destroy me. [. . .] My harte was never so hevy as hit ys now. And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenes I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company. (685)

Arthur's confrontation of his inevitable future, the loss of the Knights of the Round Table and the ideals that they and he represent, begins Malory's telling of the end of his history of Arthur. Abandoning the ineffectual king of the French romances he was drawing from, Malory instead embraced the ideals of kingship embedded in the hearts and minds of the English people. The heroic king, with the traits of Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, Charlemagne, and Alfred was an English king. The king who withdrew into the background while his knights went on adventures in service of their personal glory was a courtly, French one. The romances of Chrétien and the Lais of Marie served this French model of a king. Malory, though adapting French sources, chose for his telling of the Arthurian story a king modeled on an ideal that had found fertile soil and long-lived roots in the social environs away from the Anglo-Norman court. Whether intentionally or not, Malory reclaimed Arthur, and at the same time many of his knights, and firmly cast him as an heroic and mostly English king.

Notes

[1] Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Le Morte Darthur* and Caxton's preface are taken from this source.

[2] Most of Malory's sources had been identified as early as the late nineteenth century, but recent scholarship continues to expanded the original list of possible sources. Most recent comparative analysis rests on those sources identified by Vinaver in his *Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947), and they will be the sources considered in this comparative analysis.

[3] The following critics consider Malory's work to be essentially only a compilation: George Ellis, *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*; Henry Hallam, *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries*; George P. Marsh, *The Origin and History of the English Language and of the Early English Literature It Embodies*; William Minto, *Characteristics of English Poets from Chaucer to Shirley*; Gaston Paris, "Études sur les Romans de la Table Ronde. Lancelot du Lac. II. Le Conte de la Charrette;" and Alfred Nutt, *Studies in the Legend of the Holy Grail*.

[4] H. Oskar Sommer, "Studies on the Sources of *Le Morte Darthur*." Sommer mentions both of these works as likely sources used by Malory.

[5] Edward Strachey, ed., *Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas*

Malory's Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table. Strachey classifies Malory as a creative and original author. H. Oskar Sommer, "The Sources of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*." Sommer sees Malory as an adapter rather than only a translator and compiler. George Saintsbury, *The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory;* and *A History of English Prose Rhythm*. Saintsbury, one of Malory's staunchest early supporters, sees Malory as bringing completeness and stylistic uniqueness to the legend of Arthur by creating his own telling. A. W. Pollard, ed., *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table*. Pollard calls Malory a genius in combining the various sources so skillfully. W. P. Ker, *Essays on Medieval Literature*. Ker sees Malory as an original and unique artist. Vida Scudder, *Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory: A Study of the Book and Its Sources*. Scudder urges readers to appreciate the artistry of Malory's originality.

[6] George Saintsbury, *The English Novel;* and *A Short History of English Literature;* William Lewis Jones, *King Arthur in History and Legend;* and Vida Scudder, Le Morte Darthur *of Sir Thomas Malory*. All three of these authors caution against concentrating on sources at the expense of Malory's text.

[7] Helen Iams Wroten, "Malory's *Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius* Compared with Its Source, The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*." This extensive line-by-line

comparison of both versions of Malory and the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a definitive example.

[8] William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthur.* Matthews notes that Malory omitted the final quarter of the source in order, apparently, to allow Arthur to be triumphant, and delay the beginning of his downfall until after the examination of Arthur's kingdom and ideals in the middle portion of Malory's work.

[9] Eugène Vinaver, "Notes on Malory's Sources."

[10] Vinaver identifies Hardyng's *Chronicle* in his commentary for his 1947 edition of Malory as a source of some material in the early books of Malory's works. Matthews briefly examines this source as well in his *The Tragedy of Arthur.* Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory's Use of Hardyng's Chronicle." Kennedy explores Malory's Book 1, and suggests that the Chronicle may have influenced Malory's work in both form and style. Robert H. Wilson, "More Borrowings by Malory from Hardyng's *Chronicle.*" Wilson explores some additional possible influences and borrowings from Hardyng.

[11] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature.*

[12] Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance,* 2-4. Vinaver identifies St. Augustine's account of the story of St. Ambrose's reading style, to himself, as a parallel to what was to become romance: "The birth of a world in which vernacular writings were to share with Latin texts the

privilege of addressing the reader through the medium of visible, not audible symbols" (4).

[13] Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, eds., *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, 3rd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971). In Old English poetry, variation refers to the technique of adding additional phrases that amplify the subject/object in order to clarify it but without adding a new referent. The technique of enumeration builds a series of syntactically parallel clauses that have different meanings, in effect creating a multiple subject/direct object to serve poetic purposes (266-67).

[14] Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, Ed. and Trans. Carleton W. Carroll (New York: Garland, 1987). All quoted passages unless otherwise noted are taken from this source. Though working with a dual-language, facing page edition, the translations are my own, but I must acknowledge the patient assistance and suggestions of Dr. June Hall McCash in reviewing my work with Old French.

[15] All translations from Old French and Old English, unless otherwise noted in the notes, are mine.

[16] Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, in *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes*, vol. 3, Ed. Mario Roques, *Les Classiques Français du Moyen Age* (Paris: Champion, 1975). All quotations are taken from this text unless otherwise noted.

[17] Marie de France, *Lanval*, *Lais de Marie de France*,

Ed. Karl Warnke (Paris: Le Livre de Poche/Lettres Gothiques, 1990: 134-167). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from this edition.

[18] Howell D. Chickering, Jr., trans., Beowulf: A *Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of the poem come from this text. Also, though working with a dual-language, facing page edition, the translations are mine.

[19] John C. Pope, ed., "The Battle of Maldon," *Seven Old English Poems* (New York: Norton, 1981) 16-27. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this source.

[20] *La Chanson de Roland*, Ed. and Trans. Gerard J. Brault (University Park: Pennsylvania State U P, 1984).

[21] Nennius, "The History of the Britons [Historia Britonum], *Six Old English Chronicles*, (1848) Ed. J. A. Giles (London: AMS, 1968) 381-416. Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, (1155), *The Life of King Arthur*, Trans. and Intro. Judith Weiss and Rosamund Allen (London: Everyman, 1997) 1-102. Lawman, *Brut*, (c.1200-1216), *The Life of King Arthur*, Trans. and Intro. Judith Weiss and Rosamund Allen (London: Everyman, 1997) 103-320.

[22] D. J. V. Fisher, *The Anglo-Saxon Age: c. 400-1042* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973).

[23] Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, Ed. and Trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 1983), 65-110.

[24] Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, eds. and trans., Introduction,*Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (London: Penguin, 1983), 9-64.

[25] Ralph Whitlock, *The Warrior Kings of Saxon England* (New York: Dorset, 1991).

[26] William of Malmsbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, qtd. in Ralph Whitlock, *The Warrior Kings of Saxon England* (New York: Dorset, 1991).

[27] John M. Hill, "Violence, Law, and Kingship in the Annals of West Saxon Feud," *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville: U P of Florida, 2000), 74-92.

[28] Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1967. Vinaver identifies four extant versions of this prose telling of the verse *Suite du Merlin* ascribed to Robert de Boron: 1) The Huth MS (British Museum Add. 38117) published as *Merlin, Roman en Prose de XIIIe Siècle*, 1886; 2) Cambridge University Library Add. 7071, an unpublished partial MS; 3) a German MS; and 4) a MS fragment known as the "Siena fragment." Of these four, the Huth MS is most complete, but the Cambridge MS appears, according to Vinaver, to have fewer corruptions.

[29] *Merlin, Roman en Prose du XIIIe Siècle*, 2 vols., Eds. Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1886). Unless otherwise noted, all references to Malory's French source for *The Tale of King Arthur* are taken from

this edition.

[30] Vinaver cites the Cambridge University Library Add. 7071 edition of the *Suite du Merlin*.

[31] Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. He notes that this passage does not exist in any of the extant versions of the *Suite du Merlin*. He also says, "The passage would seem to reflect M[alory]'s own view of how a chieftain should behave" (1302).

[32] Keith Busby, 10 Apr. 2001. E-mail to Dr. June Hall McCash. The translation of this particular vexed line of Old French text is the interpretation of Dr. Busby.

[33] Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English* Stanzaic Morte Arthur *and* Alliterative Morte Arthure (Indianapolis: Babbs-Merrill, 1974).

[34] J. Douglas Bruce, ed., Mort Artu: *An Old French Prose Romance of the XIIIth Century*, (1910) (New York: AMS, 1974). Unless otherwise noted all quotations from *Mort Artu* are from this source.

Chapter 4

Dispelling Myth and Legend:

Using Elements of Epic, Chronicle, and History

to Reclaim Arthur for England

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* presents the life and ideals of King Arthur fashioned on an English heroic model, but it also owes a considerable debt to the French romance tradition. Malory drew his material, in large part, from the romance cycles written by French romancers based on the Matter of Britain. He also used many of the narrative tools of his sources. The result is a work that in many ways resembles a romance, but in some rather significant ways it does not. Malory's style appears to be inconsistent when viewed from the perspective of a romance model; it displays elements of several different generic styles and forms. Elements of epic, chronicle, and history have been identified. Though most would agree that Malory's work is not an example of a single genre, the label of romance has been misapplied to *Le Morte Darthur*. Certainly several of the tales comprising Malory's work, such as *The Tale of Sir Tristram* and *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, are more nearly true romances, and quite likely fit the mold of French romance very closely save for the language in which they are written. However, those tales that form the focal point of his work are the furthest from the romance model. These tales--*The Tale of King Arthur, King Arthur and Emperor Lucius, The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, and

The Tale of the Morte Arthur--depict the life of Arthur and
the rise and fall of his kingdom. They emphasize the
narrative elements of epic, chronicle, and history, and
consequently seem to fit more closely the form of medieval
history than romance.

An epic addresses the experiences of a larger-than-life
hero from the perspective of history, though it may actually
be more or less pseudo-historical. A chronicle attempts to
relate factual occurrences, documenting important events in
order to provide a record for future generations. In
actuality, any given chronicle often falls prey to its
author's socio-political environment. History, especially
medieval history, as a literary genre, can often be
semi-fictional. Consider the writings of accepted medieval
historians such as Bede, Gildas, and Geoffrey of Monmouth.
Their works, though clearly not what modern critics would
consider to be history, were accepted by their
contemporaries, and for several centuries following, as the
historical record of a people and a nation.

Modern critics have identified the characteristics of
these literary genres. Though overlap occurs--as it must
when development consists of new ideas growing out of old
and then being grafted onto earlier forms--epic, chronicle,
history, and romance have distinguishing characteristics,
which when discerned in a work, allow that work to be
classified within the given genre. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*
displays many similarities with romance, but there are

differences from the romance model that seem to evoke other generic labels. Just as the romance tradition, from which Malory drew so much, came to England from France, so too, did the majority of the other generic traditions that show up in his work. Malory, in writing about Arthur, is not writing about characters and events set in another country, unlike the French writers from whom he borrowed. He is writing about characters and events which, though considered by modern critics to be myth and legend, are part of the history of *his* England. It is precisely this history that Malory writes about.

Since the analysis of Malory's text has revealed elements of epic, chronicle, and history, the generic identification of *Le Morte Darthur* as a romance is called into question. The romance-favoring critics contend that there are flaws in Malory's style. When examined in light of the characteristics of epic, chronicle, and history, these flaws can be seen to be attributes of these non-romance genres.

Before examining Malory's work in terms of genre, it will prove beneficial to briefly review how *Le Morte Darthur* has come to be labeled a romance. Interest in determining the genre of Malory's work was not an issue in Malory scholarship until critics began to discuss Malory's originality. Once it began to be viewed as an original medieval literary work, *Le Morte Darthur* had to be classified as something other than a redaction or

compilation. In the earliest classifications it was most often referred to as a romance. This was most likely due to the fact that most of Malory's French sources were considered romances. Some critics, however, viewed it as possibly an epic, or at least similar to the epic tradition.[1] As the novel form grew in popularity in the nineteenth century, its proponents suggested favorable comparisons between Malory's work and the novel. This comparison continues to be encountered periodically because Malory's work is a lengthy prose work.[2] However, Malory's work does not stand up to this comparison. There are significant problems with plot, as well as with structure and unity, that work against the notion of Le Morte Darthur as a novel, or even a proto-novel. Malory's work is too inconsistent, repetitious, and uneven in pace, content, and style to be considered a novel in the modern concept of that genre.

Many of the principles and methods necessary for discussing Malory's work are found in the French romance model of Malory's sources. However, there are inconsistencies between Le Morte Darthur and Malory's sources. Malory's basic stories clearly derive from the French body of Arthurian material, and many of Malory's narrative techniques are based in French models. In many of the ways that Malory differs from his French model, he reflects the English romance tradition: for example his emphasis on brevity and action over motivation. Some of the

narrative elements in *Le Morte Darthur* resemble those in the French and English romance traditions, but there are many that do not. In spite of these inconsistencies, early critics became comfortable with considering Malory's work to be a romance. Consequently, *Le Morte Darthur* came to be accepted and labeled as a *de facto* romance.[3]

One way that Malory's text differs from the model of his French romance sources, though still defined in terms of that model, is in the thematic structure of his tales. Malory's sources, as did much of French romance literature, used an interwoven plot/narrative structure, called *entrelacement*, to emphasize thematic inter-relationships, sometimes at the expense of plot clarity. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory unravels the complex interwoven structure of his models and in their place creates a more straightforward structure of unlocked scenes, or episodes.[4] Vinaver called Malory's process "a delicate and difficult process of unraveling, of collecting the various stretches of any given thread and letting it unwind itself with as few interruptions as possible" (*Works* viii). Though Malory's efforts in this unraveling are generally recognized in the body of Malorian scholarship, opinions as to the effectiveness and the worthiness of his efforts vary from one critic to the next.[5]

The consideration of the genre of *Le Morte Darthur* is linked to the common discourse over style, structure, methods, and to some extent, intention. Malory's work is

obviously derived from mostly French and a few English sources, and these are nearly all crafted in the style of romance. It is not difficult to understand then, especially with Vinaver's analysis of the Winchester manuscript stringently focused on the French romance sources and Malory's obvious dependence on the tools of the English romancers, that his *Le Morte Darthur* was, at least initially, labeled a romance. This label, because Malory's work has so many characteristics that challenge such a classification, is becoming less secure and accepted. The problem remains that Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* does not fit conveniently into any particular genre.

Despite early critical labeling as an epic or a romance, some critics, including Vinaver, recognize elements in *Le Morte Darthur* that do not seem to apply to strict generic definitions. One of the most notable of these is Malory's realistic style of narrative and dialogue.[6] Based in part on the realism of its style, Malory's work may have more in common with the freeform structures of modern art and poetics rather than adhering to formal generic definitions. However, care is needed to guard against the tendency to expect twentieth century concepts within a fifteenth century context.

Larry Benson, leaning as he does toward the English romance tradition as the root of Malory's narrative, asserts that *Le Morte Darthur* should be classified as an English prose romance cycle.[7] Benson retains the romance label

though he sees stylistic elements of the medieval history form in Malory's work. As mentioned previously, *Le Morte Darthur* lacks the modern sense of unity that comparison with the novel might suggest, but Malory's work has a continuity between the various tales that suggests at least a continuous narrative. Benson, less interested than other critics in establishing an argument for unity, identifies in Malory's work a cyclic form that echoes the French prose romance cycles upon which it is based, and at the same time reflects the stylistic qualities of his English contemporaries. Benson notes that since many of the continental romance cycles are not complete in extant versions, it is difficult to make determinations on unity, but he also says that the tales that make up the cycles, like those which comprise *Le Morte Darthur*, "are not distinct and independent tales in the manner of earlier verse romances; each is part of a larger and coherent 'history' that comprehends all stories of Arthur and his knights" (*Malory's* 5). There is a literary world of King Arthur, the Matter of Britain, from which most of the cycles' tales are drawn and to which they belong, creating an enveloping milieu based itself in the medieval perception of the historicity of the life, ideals, and reign of an historical Arthur.

The elements within Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* often suggest some other genre than romance. In fact, Elizabeth Sklar suggests that Malory's work reflects a dismantling of

romance. Essentially, Malory modeled his narrative on French romances; however, it is not just a mere redactive disentangling of the *entrelacement*, but is itself a rejection of the romance form.[8] Beverly Kennedy explores the elements of tragedy as a generic form that appear throughout Malory's work and then considers them in terms of their implications in labeling *Le Morte Darthur* as a romance. In addition, she considers how her findings impact the possible classifications of epic and tragedy for Malory's work.[9] Scholars have looked for elements of heroic qualities in particular characters, analyzed them in the context of a romance, and have then tried to determine a thematic statement from the structural juxtaposition of heroic and romantic elements.[10]

The issue of generic classification is firmly founded in the structural debate. Since nearly all critics begin their analyses of Malory by establishing a new structural argument or by adopting one of the existing positions, it has become the essential starting point of new research into the issue of genre. If Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is not just a mere compilation, then it must be something else. It seems clear from modern criticism that Malory's work must be classified as something. Romance, whether derived from the French or cast in the English mold, does not seem to be sufficient. There are certainly elements of the romance in Malory's work, but there seems to be much more, since

critics also see elements of epic, chronicle, and history in it as well.

Before we can examine *Le Morte Darthur* in terms of any genre, we must first know what the label of the genre says about the content of the text to which it is applied. Perhaps the best place to begin in defining epic is with W. P. Ker's *Epic and Romance*.[11] Though written in the last decade of the nineteenth century and often discussed in terms that discount the reliability of his arguments, his work remains at the vanguard of any discussion of both medieval epic and romance. Ker identifies and discusses three schools of epic literature that existed in the Middle Ages: Teutonic (or Germanic) Epic, Icelandic Histories/Sagas, and Old French Epic. Two of these are of interest to the current examination of epic as it applies to Malory's work. Germanic epic, which is fundamental to Old French epic as well, was brought to Britain by the Germanic tribes, the Angles and Saxons, which invaded after the withdrawal of the Roman legions. Elements of Germanic epic survived piecemeal in Anglo-Saxon literature in England until the Conquest, and subsequently survived into Anglo-Norman England in the heritage and consciousness of the populace. Old French epic derives from the culture of the Germanic tribes that, after the arrival of the Franks, were the primary peoples to populate what is now France. With its unique environment, separated culturally and geographically from its source, the Germanic epic traditions

in France developed into what Ker identifies as Old French epic. This Old French epic, in turn, developed into French romance. Malory received the influence of both epic traditions: Germanic epic, through cultural saturation, and Old French epic, through transmission in French literature.

Before we examine Malory's dual-epic inheritance, we should first identify the characteristics of each epic tradition. Ker founds his discussion of epic on Aristotelian descriptions and comparisons to classical Homeric epic models. In his comparisons of medieval epic to Homeric epic, several defining characteristics of medieval epic emerge. He begins by explaining that medieval epic reflects the social and political environment in which it is most often found, an heroic and feudal one. In his discussion of the social milieu of medieval epic, Ker identifies epic's most common type of adventure as "the defence of a narrow place against odds" (5). The society that epic depicts is generally larger than life. Medieval aristocracy is at the social focus of epic, and it is presented as grand and often spectacular. However, medieval aristocracy, Ker notes, is presented in medieval epic as not being contemptuous of the peasantry, unlike the depiction of noble classes in later romance. In fact, medieval nobility reflects many similarities in character with medieval peasantry; both high and low personages understand, and sometimes even appreciate, the roles of their opposites in society. Ker notes that

> The great man is the man who is best at the things
> with which every one is familiar. The epic hero
> may despise the churlish man, [. . .] but he may
> not ostentatiously refuse all community of ideas
> with simple people. [. . .] The art and pursuits
> of a gentleman in the heroic age are different
> from those of the churl, but not so far different
> as to keep them in different spheres. (7)

In heroic epic there is no formal code of behavior or
conduct other than the social requirements of feudal duty.
Further, the action of epic revolves around common things--
"cattle, sheep, piracy, abduction, merchandise, recovery of
stolen goods, revenge" (Ker 8). The characters, who are
central and essential to epic, are focused on their actions.
Ker claims that there are no allegories, symbols, or
abstractions posing as characters in epic, so the action of
the characters as they move through the narrative is the
focal point of epic, and in essence, "the whole business of
life comes bodily into [it]" (9). Epic, as we have it so
far, attempts to "represent great actions in narrative, with
the personages well defined" (Ker 14).

In addition to the great actions of the aristocracy of
a somewhat larger-than-life society portrayed by finely
drawn and relatively simple characters, epic narrative has
at least two other critical traits. The first is a sense of
the tragic, or "that resolute comprehension and exposition
of tragic meaning" (Ker 66). War, death, separation, tragic

errors, and tragic flaws are the stuff of epic.[12] Along with
the tragic element comes the dramatic nature of the
narrative. Focusing on the actions and words of the
characters rather than the motivations for them, epic
narratives evoke a sense of drama being played out on a
larger-than-life scale.

Ker addresses yet another quality of epic. Medieval
epic is grounded in history. It concerns historic
personages, events, or both. However, the presentation of
the actions does not necessarily reflect historical truth.
Rather, epic uses history as a means to connect to the
consciousness of its audience. It at once appeals to a sense
of nationalism and community that binds the audience to the
hero and his actions. Ker notes that

> the more original and native kind of epic has
> immediate association with all that the people
> know about themselves, with all their customs, all
> that part of their experience that no one can
> account for or refer to any particular source.
> (28)

Though based in historical details, epic is not bound to
relate history as history. Instead, history is a tool of
epic to connect with a particular audience. Ker,
summarizing, says that epic has no "strict historical duty;"
rather, history serves to provide "all manner of lively
passages from the general experience of the age, in a story
about famous heroic characters" (29).

In addition to his examination of medieval epic and
determining defining characteristics, Ker compares the epic
literature of the Germanic, or Teutonic, tradition to that
of the Old French tradition. He notes some interesting
stylistic differences.[13] While Teutonic epic is given to
poetic artifice, such as alliteration, and a more poetic
vocabulary, Old French epic, while verse, is less ornamented
and affected. Teutonic epic runs in fits and starts, each
line often virtually a solitary element. Old French epic,
though still largely made up of "separate scenes, with no
gradation or transition between them," retains traces of a
more lyric origin, and is more fluid and unlabored (290).
Old French epic tends to have "generally a larger political
field, more numerous armies, and more magnificent kings"
(292). Germanic epic focuses on the individual hero, and the
personal honor and glory gained by solitary heroic deeds. In
contrast, French epic focuses on more nationalistic and
Christian heroicism, and renders the individual hero subject
to larger themes and accomplishments. Heroes in Teutonic
epic act for the greater glory of themselves, their
families, and/or their sovereign. French heroes, on the
other hand, act for the greater glory of France and/or the
Church. This in turn leads to a difference in the clarity of
the characters between the two traditions. Germanic epic
tends to have clearer, better defined characters with
emphasis on the individual, while characters in French epic,
which focuses more on themes, tend to be more vaguely drawn.

Eugène Vinaver, in *The Rise of Romance*, also addresses the difficulty of defining epic as a literary genre.[14] He begins by stating the generally held assumption that the shift from epic literature to romance was the result of shifting thematic focus from feudal duty and knightly defense of the Church to a courtly love-duty (1). He also notes that after their initial interest in classical subjects, the French romance writers turned to the legends of King Arthur and his knights. As he points out, the romancers were not interested in the "pseudo-historical kingdom of the chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, but the imaginary land of pure chivalry whose fame rested on the exploits of King Arthur's knights" (1). Though not directly addressed by Vinaver, this turning away from historical or pseudo-historical subjects is an inherent part of his definition of the difference between French epic and French romance. He adds that defining a change in literary genre solely on a change in thematic focus is questionable at best. However, Vinaver also rejects the notion that epic grew into romance as a reflection of the maturation of society from a feudal heroic one into one dominated by a mature nobility steeped in early humanism and reflecting self-awareness over community service (3). Instead, Vinaver identifies two narrative techniques that he classifies as belonging to epic literature.

The first, in agreement with Ker, involves the structural tendency of epic to consist of many separate

scenes that are only loosely related. Each scene functions as a unit, and only in combination with other scenes is an overall sense of the story formed. Vinaver says that epic lacks "the consistent subordination of each single occurrence to a coherently developed scheme" (5). Discussing the most well known example of French epic, *The Song of Roland*, he points out that it lacks a sense of coordination and sequence. Citing Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Vinaver explains that French epic has "a paratactic structure consisting of very simple, extremely restricted, and yet often contradictory statements" (6). Lacking subordination and sequence, the paratactic structure of French epic extends beyond the sentence level and affects the larger narrative structure as well. Of this narrative structure, Vinaver says, "It invites simple acceptance, not elaboration; it does not conceal continuity and cohesion in silent intervals, but dispenses with such things" (6). French epic does not expect the reader to discern cause-effect relationships between component scenes; rather, an overall effect is created simply by the various element scenes with their similarities and differences being experienced together.

The second characteristic of French epic that Vinaver identifies also stems from his discussion of *The Song of Roland*. He notes that epic is "concerned exclusively with action and statement, not with motives" (11). The questions which modern readers ask often have no answer. There is no

explanation for "Why?". Motives simply are not the issue. And, as Vinaver says,

> if they are not explained it is not because the
> poet wishes to leave them to our imagination, nor
> because he prefers suggestion to analysis, but
> because he is more interested in the progress of
> events than in coherent motivation. (11)

For epic, the action is the meaning; the story is in the things that men of valor do, not in why they do them.

French literary historians, in defining French epic as a genre, also look to the *chansons de geste* of early French literature as their models. It is from the surviving examples of these twelfth and thirteenth century poems that the genre has been defined. These poems arose out of a need to embody a new spirit in feudal society that grew out of the first crusade and victories over the Moors in Spain, "un idéal nouveau, qui est celui de la chevalerie [a new ideal, one that deals with knights]."[15] Falling into three primary categories, or cycles, based on the primary subject of the poems, these works form the surviving material of French epic literature. These cycles center, in turn, on Charlemagne and his exploits, Guillaume d'Orange and his exploits, and on the tales of the revolts of Charlemagne's barons. All of these were historical personages, and the action of the epics contain elements, though often mere kernels, of historical events.

The French *chansons* are intentionally simplified in form and structure. Too, their narrative content is reduced, generally, to the essential elements of a single battle or a single campaign. This simplification extends to the characters as well. Once again, the emphasis is on their actions, not on the motivations of those actions:

> les héros épiques parlent peu, raisonnent peu,
>
> ignorent les raffinements de l'analyse. [. . .]
>
> Ils agisent; et l'auteur n'intervient jamais pour
>
> expliquer leur conduite; il se borne à décrire de
>
> l'extérieur, sobrement, les gestes qu'ils
>
> accomplissent. (Castex 15)
>
> [The heroes of the epics speak little, argue
>
> little, and are ignorant of the refinements of
>
> analysis. [. . .] They are active, and the author
>
> never intervenes in order to explain their
>
> behavior. He limits himself to describe, soberly,
>
> the outside appearance of the exploits that they
>
> accomplish.]

This simplification of content and emphasis on action serves to heighten the contrast between these elements and the nature of the characters and the events that the *chansons* portray. As we have seen in epic generally, the people and events of the *chansons* are larger-than-life:

> Les batailles sont colossales; les combattants,
>
> doués d'une force étonnante, peuvent d'un coup
>
> d'épée fendre en deux un homme à cheval; ils ont

des destriers magnifiques, des épées à la trempe

incomparable, sanctifiées par les reliques de leur

pommeau. Ce sont des hommes par le cœur; mais, par

leurs exploits, ils dépassent la commune humanité.

(Castex 15)

[The battles are colossal. The combatants are

endowed with astonishing strength, to have the

power to cleave a man on a horse in two with a

single stroke of a sword. They have magnificent

war-horses and swords of incomparable temper; they

are sanctified by the relics hanging from their

pommel. They are men at heart, but on account of

their exploits, they surpass common humanity.]

French literary historians have summarized the

characteristics of epic, those elements that distinguish it

as a generic form from other genres, and particularly

romance. Based on a comparison of the chansons de geste and

later French romance, they have identified eight primary

distinctions between French epic and French romance, six

deal essentially with thematic content and the remaining two

concern form. The eight distinctions are:

Base historique

Mœurs guerriéres

Idéal simple:

combattre pour Dieu et pour l'honneur

Pas ou peu de femmes

Pas ou peu d'amour

Merveilleux chrétien

Écrite en vers décasyllabes, assonants,

    groupés en laisses

Destinée à être chantée (6)[16]

[An historical basis; Have a warrior's manners; A

single ideal—to fight for God and for honor;

Nothing or little about women; Nothing or little

about love; Christian marvels; Written in

assonant, decasyllabic verse—grouped into

stanzas; Intended to be sung/recited.]

As we shall see as we now turn to examine *Le Morte Darthur*
in terms of these elements, the first six will be most
important. Since Malory's work is in prose, the formal verse
distinctions are of no concern, and the intended oral
presentation of epic, while interesting and arguable in
regard to Malory, is not of particular value in analyzing
content and will not be discussed.[17] These defining
characteristics should be emended to include those
additional distinct characteristics noted by Ker and Vinaver
above. Added to the list of the French historians would be
the following characteristics:

An aristocratic social milieu

A focus on action

Larger-than-life characters and events

A native setting as well as being historical

A focus on feudal duty

Thematically connected episodic structure

Each of these is present in Malory's text. The action of Malory's tales centers on the court of Arthur, and no characters from outside Arthur's court appear for any length of time at all. The characters are all more than what they seem. The knights are all best at what they do, or foils for those who are. They are larger-than-life individuals who we are not allowed to get to know very well. Malory very carefully gives specificity to the locations and times for the actions in his tales. The episodic structure of Malory's work has been discussed at length previously.

In his essay included in Sommer's edition of Caxton's Malory, Andrew Lang draws an early comparison between Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Homeric epic. He notes that

> Both have their distant undiscoverable sources in the high far-off lands of a society to which we can never return. Both gain a mystery and a magic from early imaginings, both have been touched with the colour of many ages, both have the noble melancholy of great deeds done and great enterprises attempted, to end as all human endeavour ends, leaving only a song or a story in the ears of men yet to be born. (xiv)[18]

We see here suggestions of the foundation in social history, of elements of mystery and the marvelous, and of a sense of the larger-than-life, tragic, and dramatic nature of the events and the characters.

Epic is often compared to romance, and vice versa. Where Ker and Vinaver seek to establish the differences between the two genres, D. M. Hill examines the similarities. Hill suggests that "Ker's approach to romance was through the epic" (98).[19] Seeing this as a biased approach, Hill instead examines epic in terms of romance. As he notes, "*Beowulf* is also reminiscent of the romances" (102). This seems to replace one bias with another apparent one, as if looking for hints of the son in the face of the father. He attempts to dispel the notion, which Hill attributes to Ker's argument, that romance is primarily differentiated from epic by containing elements of mystery and idealism. Instead, Hill examines the similarities between the two genres and explains that there are many motifs in epic that are also in romance. Among the similar characteristics and motifs he lists symmetrical structure, adversity for the hero, generosity/largesse, strange beasts, prophetic warnings, weapon pedigrees, the use of symbolic numbers, trial by combat/the "judicial fight," a consistently heathen enemy, and friendship of social equals (101-106). Hill then proceeds to discuss the ways that romance does differ from epic. He notes three essential differences. In the first of these, he notes that "Epic serves as a literature to a people for whom fighting (and, through it, enduring) is the essential requirement for survival;" romance on the other hand, reflects a people existing "some distance away from the immediate and stark

question of survival" (105). Secondly, in epic, the hero is tested, often to the point of death, in war service. In romance the same concepts as in epic are tested, but are done so in "a greater variety of contexts" and only infrequently to the point of death (105-106). Hill's third, and possibly most important, distinction is that epic tested the valor, integrity, honor, and nobility in the person of the hero, but in romance "it is the virtue rather than the person which the writer found important" (106).

In this examination of the similarities between epic and romance, the distinctions are blurred. Many times, the distinctions are reduced to a matter of degree, or a shift of emphasis only. In fact, the differences are so small, according to Hill, that as we look at the shift from epic to romance we should be "impressed by the continuity" as "epic broadens out into romance" (105), and we come to realize "how alike medieval epic and romance are in techniques and purposes" (106).

In contrast to this view of epic and romance as essentially similar literary genres, one growing out of the other, Nathaniel Griffin attempts to define the critical difference between the two genres. He does so based precisely on the apparent fact that in every circumstance wherein romance exists, "epic always precedes the romance in point of time" (52).[20] Griffin passes over, sometimes dismissing, other differentiating qualities between the two forms of narrative and instead concentrates on the causal

relationship between epic and romance that is suggested by
the temporal relationship of the two in the literary forms
of the societies where both occur (57). He claims that "epic
is an indigenous, the romance an exotic creation" (57).
However, before we explore the argument he presents and its
intriguing ramifications, Griffin makes some interesting
observations on the characteristics of both epic and romance
that need to be examined.

Griffin notes that "epic is national and the sentiments
by which it is inspired patriotic" (54). Though never
directly stated, the implication of this statement is that
romance is not necessarily so. This becomes much more clear
in Griffin's later analysis, but it is clear that he sees
epic as a patriotic literature celebrating the glories of a
nation, its heroes and ideals, and that romance appeals more
to men individually with its emphasis on emotions and
adventure (54-55).

Another important characteristic that Griffin claims
for epic is that "the epic author and his contemporary
auditors entertained a lively faith in the truth of the epic
narrative" (56). There is no sense in epic literature of
questioning the validity of any element of the epic tale.
The supernatural elements exist, essentially unquestioned or
attributed to divine influence, and form an integral part of
the epic narrative. In contrast, Griffin asserts that "the
author of romance on the other hand is totally indifferent
to the credibility of his tale so long as it is made

plausible or, failing that, amusing and diverting" (56). Epic is a celebration of a nation's glory, its victories, the nobility of its heroes, and the favor of the gods. Romance is an entertaining tale of human experience.

These characteristics are further explained and realized in Griffin's primary thesis. Epic is the literature of the people whose history it celebrates. This epic then becomes romance as it is incorporated into the literary traditions of a foreign people. "Foreign-ness" is not necessarily based on nationality. Griffin explains that time, cultural and social sophistication, and location are enough to make the necessary foreign disconnection between the epic source and the romance reinterpretation. There is an inherent connection between the author of an epic work and his audience. According to Griffin, epic

> presupposes a perfect accord between the poet and his hearer. The latter was in a position to understand and appreciate all that the former had to tell of persons and places, birth and burial customs, nuptial rites and hearth joys, feasts, feuds, and plundering expeditions. And the former, on his part, sought to satisfy none but anticipated cravings. The knowledge of a common fund of ancestral tradition thus at once established a mutual understanding between author and auditor. Not only need the former explain nothing but he was under an obligation to explain

> nothing, for the latter would, in child-like
> fashion, resent it if he did; everything had to be
> taken for granted. Hence in spite of the frequent
> repetitions the essential brevity and compactness
> of the epic recital. Formulas abound. (58)

The author of the epic literary work exists in a symbiotic relationship with his audience. He can, and is expected to, draw on the individual awareness of his hearers. He can allude to common historical events and persons and expect his audience to know the stories and their significance. Referring to a common heritage and history, the author can leave much unsaid but still rely on his ability to communicate to an understanding, sympathetic, and personally participating, eager audience.

In contrast, the romance author was burdened with interpreting the foreign concepts of his epic source material in terms that would be understandable and acceptable to his audience. Unlike the author of epic and his audience,

> these earlier epic ideas furnish no common basis
> of understanding between them [romance author and
> audience]. [. . .] He [the romance author] must
> replace them with others that can be interpreted,
> [. . .] bringing the original story into fresh
> harmony with the ideas of his own time. [. . .]
> For while able to understand or appreciate the
> code of ethics or the standards of conduct which

> the epic poet takes for granted, his auditors will
> nevertheless experience a certain respect for the
> antique traditions of the stranger folk from whose
> hands they receive these epic tales. (58-59)

Though basically foreign to their romance audiences, the
foundations of these epic source tales were expected to be
firmly set in history. This was a seemingly difficult
challenge for the romance author. As Griffin points out, the
romance audience was "as eager to know what it took to be
history as it was ignorant of what history really was" (59).
In consequence, in an effort to appease the desire for
historical veracity while reinterpreting epic ideals,

> the author of romance frequently found himself
> tempted to father his adaptations of epic story
> upon some reputable sponsor [. . .] for the sake
> of providing for his work an authentication
> sufficient to lead his hearer to accept that work
> as a genuine relic of antiquity. (Griffin 59-60)

This reliance on authority to provide the necessary
historical relevance and support was facilitated by the
foreignness of the source ideas and material. This was
largely because, as Griffin notes, the romance versions of
epic

> were stories which for author and audience
> contained an interest different from that which
> the stories from which they were derived
> possessed. They were stories from which had been

> expunged whatever was exclusively national and
> failed to possess meaning for the people for whom
> they were written. (61)

The nature of romance, as explored by Griffin, would suggest
that using epic as a foundation to achieve the purposes of
romance is far too difficult. Why would a romance author
choose sources filled with ideas and social constructs
utterly foreign to his readers? In answer to this concern,
Griffin asserts that

> the romancer requires the epic to build upon. He
> avails himself of the appeal of epic names and
> actions, the fame of which has already been
> brought to his own folk by common report, to serve
> as a means of first eliciting their interest in
> the story which he is about to tell. But into this
> story he is so wise as to put no more of the old
> epic ideas than are capable of being brought into
> harmony with the ideas of his hearers. (67)

The familiar stories serve as a framework for whatever new
material the romance author wants to explore. The romance is
linked to the epic by just so much familiar material, names
and events, as is necessary to draw in an audience. In a
very real sense, the matter of epic reappears in romance,
but the story is different, its purposes serving new
masters. As both Chrétien and Marie did with the Arthurian
material they used, the *matiere*, the Matter of Britain, is

the same from one genre to the next, but the *sen* is changed to meet the romance author's ends.

When the Normans supplanted Anglo-Saxon dominance in England, they also replaced the Anglo-Saxon epic literature with their own. As Griffin notes, "the Anglo-Saxons did not turn forthwith to the appropriation of foreign heroes made famous by the Normans and thus to the production of romance" (69). Instead, it was the Normans who appropriated the foreign heroes and "the richly imaginative and highly poetical traditions, [. . .] epic in spirit and intent. Chief among these epic materials was that which had to do with Arthur" (69-70). It was in large part the Norman-French influence that made the heroic, epic tales of Arthur into the romances free of their original nationalistic content.

Once again turning to the French perspective, recalling the characteristics of French epic as defined in histories of French literature, we will see the emphasis on historical elements. Edward Dowden, early in this century, noted that in regard to the *chansons*, "the deeds or achievements of a heroic person are glorified, and large as may be the element of invention in these poems, a certain historical basis or historical germ may be found, with few exceptions, in each" (9).[21]

From these additional critical analyses of epic, we can add the following characteristics to the previous listing:

> Generally patriotic/nationalistic in theme and
> subject

Considered to be true or at least credible

Founded on common ground between author and
audience

Firmly grounded in history of the audience and
author

Le Morte Darthur possesses these traits as well as the earlier ones. The last of these, the foundation in the history of the author and audience is most critical to understanding what Malory's work is and what it is not. The historical effect of his text and the historical nature of its subject, the life of King Arthur of Britain, serve to separate Malory's work from the French romance tradition.

The second generic tradition to which Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* has been compared is the chronicle tradition. P. J. C. Field has examined Malory's style at some length and has made some intriguing connections between the chronicle style and Malory's work.[22] The manner in which Malory changed his sources, most notably his abbreviation of what he found in the French originals, contributed significantly to his style. By adapting and condensing the matter of the French, Malory was forced to rethink and recast his own telling of the Arthurian tales in something other than a word-for-word translation that would have retained much of the stylistic quality of those sources. Malory's style, as explained by Field, is simpler than that of the French originals; and based on his stylistic choices, Field claims that Malory's version of Arthur's story "looked to the past rather than to

the future" (10). This looking to the past alludes to Malory's stylistic similarity to the style of the earlier chronicle tradition.

Field's examination of Malory's style begins with a look at his narrative techniques. He starts by pointing out that though Malory is writing based on French romances and that other romances existed contemporaneously with Malory's efforts, "Malory is not writing an ordinary romance. He is putting romance material into chronicle form" (37). The first distinction that Field notes about Malory's style is exemplified in the opening lines of *Le Morte Darthur*.

> Hit befel in the dayes of Uther Pendragon, when he was kynge of all Englond and so regned, that there was a myghty duke in Cornewaill that helde warre ageynst hym long tyme, and the duke was called the duke of Tyntagil. (3)

In this very matter-of-fact way, Malory begins to present his straightforward telling of the events that surrounded the conception of Arthur. Unlike the romances of his day and even those he was adapting, Malory "does not make us suspend our disbelief: he assumes our belief, and gains it by the very absence of suasions" (Field 37-38). Malory's work focuses on the material he is presenting rather than the method with which it is presented. Field notes that this is a trait "shared by the chroniclers and letter-writers of Malory's time" (38). Malory's focus is on the telling of the story of Arthur's life and ideals. Field contends that this

straightforward, "unselfconscious" intent is reflected in Malory's relatively simple narrative style (38). This simplicity, in turn, creates a sense of honesty in the telling of actions, and it is this simplicity that results in Malory's "characteristic tone of flat truth which the more accomplished, fluent, and varied subordination of clauses in his French sources cannot convey" (38).

This suggests yet another way that Malory's work reflects the chronicle tradition. *Le Morte Darthur* presents the truth of the history of Arthur. That is, it represents the historical truth of Arthur as Malory understood it. Field notes that Malory avoids the frequent use of the historical present in his narrative. He instead uses past tense. The effect of this apparent choice--apparent because it is different than his sources--is to separate the narrator/author and the reader from the time about which Malory is writing. This is because, as Field says,

> In his mind the story of Arthur was set in a distant past from which it could be contrasted with the degenerate present. The act of comparing past and present draws attention to the presence of the narrator, but the nature of these comparisons places the narrator and the story in different eras. So does the use of tenses, which also sets the action firmly in the past. Part of the impression in the *Morte Darthur* of a noble but vanished time is given us because we are never

> persuaded to imagine ourselves present in the
> past. [. . . Malory's] constant use of the
> preterit sets the scene of the story as firmly in
> the past in the reader's mind as it seems to have
> been in its author's. (54, 57)

These two narrative techniques, simplicity of narrative and consistent use of past tense, join together to suggest a chronicle style. This in turn suggests that the historical nature of a story told in a straightforward, unadorned, truthful manner is in fact a true history, and this is the effect that *Le Morte Darthur* gives to its reader.

In addition to Malory's chronicle style that accentuates the historicity of his telling of the life of Arthur, Field notes a characteristic of Malory's style that serves to emphasize the "English-ness" of his work. Many translators and other Anglo-Norman authors tend to allow foreign words to creep into their translations, and source language idioms and formulas, regardless of their meaning in the adapter's mother-tongue, are often literally translated, or transliterated, into the translated version. Field observes that, with relatively few exceptions,

> Malory does not give way to such overwhelming
> influence from his French sources. [. . .] We can
> fairly say that he does not put unknown French
> words into his English text. [. . .] Nor does he
> use marginally acceptable French words when there
> are more normal English ones. (65)

Field illustrates this claim by comparing the usage of the word *garçon* in the French *Merlin* to its counterpart in two English works derived from the French original. In the English prose *Merlin*, this word is given as "garcion." Malory changes the word completely to reflect less French influence: "boye" (65). Far from being perfectly consistent, Malory's text has words and passages that come directly from his sources, even some that are merely transliterated French. However, those places where, as Field notes, Malory's sources "overcame him," and there are not common English usages that account for the apparent French origins of a word or phrase, are few in number (66).

Malory's descriptive tools reflect those of the chronicle style, too. Generally devoid of thematically superfluous detail, Malory's text emphasizes details of physical appearance only to make a point, or to otherwise serve the needs of the action of his tale. Nowhere in *Le Morte Darthur* do we get a clear description of any of the characters so as to create a comprehensive mental image of what each looks like. We may learn of a wound or scar, a physical characteristic (i.e. a giant or dwarf), or some other unique character trait, but these only exist, in Malory's work, to serve some element of the narration of the action that is the focus of the correlated tale. This is a characteristic of the chronicle style. As Field notes,

> this sort of occurrence of physical detail in
> small memorable incidents of the 'man-bites-dog'

> type is a characteristic of chronicles concerned
> more with the matter than the manner of their
> story. [. . .] Incidents like these either explain
> some turn in the action, or catch the attention
> because they are strikingly odd. (84)

Malory does not spend time or energy creating visual images
of courtly grandeur for his readers. He concentrates on the
action, the embodiment of the themes that he is presenting,
and leaves the picture building to his audience.

The lack of specific detail in the descriptions of his
characters is only one of the techniques of the chronicle
genre that Malory adapts to his own use. His descriptive
style also relies on stock phrases. This is not too
surprising since the French and English romance sources from
which Malory was working also use a significant number of
stock descriptive phrases. Field attributes this, not to the
styles of Malory's sources--Malory's phrases differ
significantly from those of the French--but to "the
combination of a chronicler's attitude to his story with the
composition habits of spoken rather than written prose"
(85). This attitude of the chronicler is, Field continues,
one focused on the story and its telling, a concentration on
the matter; Malory's focus is on the life of King Arthur. He
portrays the characters of Arthur's kingdom in terms of what
they stand for; along with the actions of Arthur, his
knights, and his court, their moral and ideal traits are
better realized in the text of Le Morte Darthur than are

their physical descriptions. Speaking of Malory's
descriptions, Field notes that they

> are normally not physical but moral and emotive
> ones. They force a certain response on us. [. . .]
> We as readers have to create a physical appearance
> to fit our idea of a noble knight, instead of
> having some idea of the appearance of the man who
> plays out his part before us, and deciding for
> ourselves that he is noble. (86)

This is not to say, or make the claim, that Malory was
writing a sort of allegory. Quite the contrary. Malory was
writing an only too real account of the historical Arthur,
peopled with real characters. Instead of focusing on the
faces and features of the characters he is presenting,
Malory looks at their natures. He does not create a tale of
a king and his knights. He tells a tale of the "most noble
king" and the "best knights in the world." Instead of
characters left to the reader to judge, Malory's

> characters cannot be separated from the response
> he builds into them. In the action, the reader
> apprehends the indivisible unit of the 'noble
> king' or the 'good knight.' This is the basis of a
> story whose structure and substance are seen in
> the same terms: of good and bad, shame and honour,
> God and conscience. (Field 86-87)

In effect, the minimizing of descriptive detail tends to
emphasize the moral and emotional response of Malory's

audience. The chronicle nature of his text is also foregrounded. Malory pared away significant description from his French sources. Field observes that the effect of Malory's changes clearly indicates that

> his reshaping of the French was not accidental. In
> the *Morte Darthur*, physical detail is not the
> ultimate reality. [. . .] Malory's way emphasises
> the values of his story by underplaying its
> physical embodiment. (94-95)

Another chronicle characteristic that exists in Malory's work is the notion that the story that he is relating is historical and factual. In his narrative, Malory intrudes with authorial transitions, such as the "Now turn we" and "Here leave we" formulaic constructions. These differ from the romance characteristic of appealing to an authority, which Malory also does. However, in doing so, Malory achieves a different effect than the romancers. They try to ground their fictions in history to create credibility. Malory emphasizes the continuity of his historical account. These other authorial intrusions, the non-authoritative appeals, serve a similar purpose. They allow Malory to keep his narrative separated in time from his audience with the effect that it remains firmly anchored in the reader's past. There is very little doubt as to the time frame of Malory's story in relation to his audience. *Le Morte Darthur* begins in a distant past, "in the dayes of Uther Pendragon" (3). Malory's work, though not specifically

placed in chronological history, *is* firmly placed in the historical past. That historical past is kept fresh in his reader's mind, in part, by Malory's references to the "French book." Malory, like most, if not all, medieval writers rests his narrative on the authority of an older, presumably more reliable source. For Malory, that source is his frequently referred to "French book." Besides calling on historical authority, Malory includes allusions to future events already in the memories of his audience to reinforce the historical nature of his tale. These methods, together with the *explicits* between many of the tales and included episodes, serve to give *Le Morte Darthur* the sense of being "unalterable historical fact" (Field 145).

The cumulative effect of Malory's relatively terse, action-focused narrative style, concerned with the matter of the story and devoid of frivolous description, and the clear placement of the story in the historical past, echoes the chronicles of other medieval writers. In at least this sense, the reader of Malory's work with its "unwearying factual style in chronicling the adventures of the Round Table" is "given a definite sense of history, which is *ipso facto* unalterable, by the author or anyone else" (Field 145). It is this historical Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table that Malory is presenting to his reader. He is not telling entertaining and provocative romance tales concerning a mythical king and his court; rather, Malory is

relating the historical account of a legendary English king and his ideals.

The historical nature of *Le Morte Darthur* is the subject of a significant portion of Larry Benson's analysis of the structure and genre of Malory's work.[23] Benson's efforts focus on the exploration of the structural similarities between Malory's text and the narrative cycles it both derived from and sought to replace. Benson notes that Malory "wrote a peculiarly fifteenth-century Arthurian work, for his book belongs to the genre of one-volume prose histories that were popular at the time, a genre in which the old cycles were reduced to brief continuous narratives" (*Malory's* 4). In an effort to support his structural hypothesis, Benson notes numerous similarities between Malory's work and other contemporary works. Ultimately, though he notes numerous supporting arguments to the contrary, Benson identifies *Le Morte Darthur* as a cyclic prose romance. Since he seems to be primarily arguing the structural side of his generic argument, this classification is understandable; still, it is not entirely correct. While Benson's examination of Malory's text most convincingly supports his structural assertion, it also supports the historical nature of Malory's work. It is these arguments that concern us here.

The use of prose instead of verse is significant in distinguishing the purpose of the text. After the decline of epic poetry and its historically based stories, verse became

the medium for entertainment and the creation of imaginative narratives. On the other hand, due primarily to the desire to condense lengthy sources and the relative ease of composition, vernacular prose became the medium for recording and chronicling history. According to Benson, the fifteenth century prose writers'

> desire for brevity and their interest in history
> usually lead to a pronounced emphasis on action at
> the expense of the mysticism, psychologizing, and
> symbolism that we prize in the older romances. The
> result is a generally more matter-of-fact
> treatment of the older materials. (*Malory's* 25)

Once again, the emphasis is one of matter over manner.

In addition, as Benson notes, "The use of prose itself was a signal that the authors were dealing with 'facts,' and the prose writers took elaborate pains to authenticate their narratives" (*Malory's* 8). Malory, too, authenticates his work. He, like most medieval authors of Arthurian material, relies on the historical context of the sources, which themselves refer to authoritative sources. Tracing the line of authority back from Malory, Benson identifies Malory's claim of the authority of a "Frensshe booke" is based on the works of Robert de Boron, Helie de Boron, and Walter Map, or their derivatives. These writers of Arthurian romance material, in turn, base their works on the first-hand accounts, in oft-referred to but non-extant Latin works, of characters such as Merlin and Arthur himself. This reliance

on authoritative sources, or at least the claim of such, serves three purposes in terms of establishing historicity. First, the credibility of the authors' facts is grounded in first-hand historical accounts. Second, each of the various individual fragmentary works derived from the original sources is "carefully fitted into the overall framework of that history" (9). Lastly, the work of each author is linked to the history of the whole story of Arthur. This last element takes on greater significance when one realizes that unlike our modern perspective of Arthur's story as legendary instead of historical, the medieval perspective was of an historical Arthur who had become legendary.

The profusion of fragmentary tales and works claiming some authority and each forming a part of the "true history" of Arthur and his court became quite confusing. Many had only tangential connections, and others were even contradictory. A response to the confusion was a general demand for clarification and simplification, and for an authoritative "true" account. This situation led to

> fifteenth-century writers develop[ing] what is almost a distinct genre of one-volume histories that were produced by combining, condensing, and reordering the materials of several older volumes in order to produce a single volume shaped to the taste of the time. (23)

Benson notes several instances of this occurring in France throughout the fifteenth century. Caxton, Malory's first editor, clearly fits *Le Morte Darthur* into this same mold. He claims, in the preface to his 1485 edition of Malory's work, that he had been requested to produce a volume of the history of King Arthur: "Noble jentylmen instantly requyred me t'emprynte th' ystorye of the sayd noble kyng and conquerour Kyng Arthur and of his knyghts" (xiii). Caxton acknowledges that there seems to be some question as to the historical nature of King Arthur. To the request he received to print a history of Arthur, Caxton replies that "dyvers men holde oppynyon that there was no suche Arthur and that alle suche bookes as been maad of hym ben but fayned and fables, bycause that somme cronycles make of hym no mencyon ne remembre hym noothynge, ne of his knyghts" (xiii-xiv). Caxton, using the form of this conversation in his preface, puts the proof of Arthur's existence into the mouths of the noble gentlemen who are making the request. The evidence they give is circumstantial at best, but it apparently served to convince Caxton, and consequently he hopes to convince his readers with it as well. Caxton reports their response to his doubts thus: "In hym that shold say or thynke that there was never suche a kyng callyd Arthur myght wel be aretted grete folye and blyndenesse, for he sayd that there were many evydences of the contrarye" (xiv); they offer as proof Arthur's burial at Glastonbury; the account of Arthur's deeds in various works including Bochas's *De*

Casu Principum and Galfrydus's "Brutysshe book"; and several relics of Arthur and his knights that exist in Westminster, Dover, and Winchester (xiv). Based on this "evidence," Caxton concludes that "al these thynges consydered, there can no man resonably gaynsaye but there was a kyng of thys lande named Arthur" (xiv). Convinced that Arthur was an actual historical person, Caxton then decided to print a single volume work, reduced into English, encompassing the *history* of King Arthur:

> And many noble volumes be made of hym and of his noble knyghts in Frensshe, which I have seen and redde beyonde the see, which been not had in our maternal tongue. [. . .] Wherefore, suche as have late ben drawen oute bryefly into Englysshe, I have, after the symple connynge that God hath sente to me, under the favour and correctyon of al noble lordes and gentylmen, enprysed to emprynte a book of the noble hystoryes of the sayd Kynge Arthur and of certeyn of his knyghtes. (xiv-xv)

The result of this decision is Caxton's 1485 edition of *Le Morte Darthur*. Caxton's insistence on Malory's work being a history, along with his attempts to authenticate the historicity of Arthur by mentioning contemporary evidence and relics, clearly indicates that the intent of such a work is historical.

Malory's historical emphasis in presenting the life and ideals of King Arthur does not exist in isolation. Rather,

it derives from a pattern of writing that had its beginnings in the earliest stages of medieval literature. The epic tradition in literature certainly embodied a historical element for both its subject matter and its apparent intention. That is, the epic drew on historic events and characters, and though with invented material added to create particular effects, was often intended to reflect the actual spirit of the history contained in it. The chronicle, as a *form*, sought to document as accurately as possible, but with a certain creative freedom of embellishment, the important occurrences of a given monarch's life or the events affecting a particular kingdom. Another type of literary work that focused on history was the genre, or form, of the same name. These histories, though by modern standards inaccurate and misleading, were intended to provide a link for a contemporary age to those ages that preceded it. It is to these histories that we turn next.

Robert Hanning explores the nature of historiography of the Middle Ages in *The Vision of History in Early Britain*.[24] He focuses his analysis on the works of Gildas, Bede, and Geoffrey of Monmouth. The latest of these dates from roughly the twelfth century and so predates Malory by about three hundred years. However, there is a linkage between these works and *Le Morte Darthur*. The works that Hanning uses to develop his arguments are all, what he calls, "fall of Britain texts" (2). Malory's work, too, is essentially a fall of Britain text. It documents the rise and fall of

Arthur (almost the last British king) in his struggles against the encroaching Anglo-Saxons. Each of the texts that Hanning examines incorporates many of the historical events that surround the timeframe in which the tales and achievements of Arthur are historically set: the fifth and sixth centuries. Malory's work focuses its narrative on the life and ideals of Arthur and places those events in the distant, but non-specific, past of Malory's own fifteenth century audience. And lastly, each of the works that Hanning uses is considered, regardless of its effectiveness and accuracy, as a historical treatment of the events it relates. A brief look at the historigraphic characteristics of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* will reveal many similarities with *Le Morte Darthur*. Hanning begins by explaining that Geoffrey is building on the new developments already forming what he calls, "one of the most remarkable landmarks of a century rich in striking cultural and intellectual developments" (123). Breaking with the traditional historigraphic view of exploring, and at the same time cloaking, the didactic moral implications of historical events within a Christian context, eleventh and twelfth century Anglo-Norman historians began to explore new methods and manners. Hanning notes that

> they approached the human condition, the national
> past, and divine providence in novel and sometimes
> startling ways. [. . .] The rhetoric remained the
> same, but its flowers now sprang from the rich

soil of a new historical outlook. The providential
view of history was subtly modified to allow a
larger role for purely human causation, and to
reflect a lively interest in psychological
motivation; complementarily, divine providence was
impersonalized to a certain extent, and even at
times replaced by the concept of fortune's ruling
the affairs of men. (124, 126)

These are precisely the thematic elements at work in
Malory's work, whose emphasis is on Arthur, his ideals, and
the actions motivated by both him and them. Even though
divine elements are alluded to throughout Malory, such as
the emblem of Mary on Arthur's shield and the Grail, these
are balanced by supernatural elements, for example, Merlin's
magic and Gawain's waxing and waning strength. Fortune is
the overriding element. Arthur is very much at the mercy of
Fortune's Wheel, and the other providential powers, both
heavenly and magical, serve as either servants or tools of
fortune.

The rise and fall of fortune, often illustrated by the
turning of a wheel, evokes an image of cycles upon cycles.
This cyclical nature of fortune derives from observed
patterns of human existence throughout history and, as
Hanning notes, it is this "cyclic nature of history" that
lies at the heart of Geoffrey's narrative (140). The
Historia Regum Britanniae explores the rise of Britain from
the fall of Troy, paralleling the rise of Rome. The British

people's fortune rides upwards on the wheel only to be confronted by the Romans first, then the Anglo-Saxons: "In treating the relations between the three nations, Geoffrey establishes the cyclical nature of history by showing the similar effects of recurrent national crises upon each of the three as they pass through the stages of their political existence" (Hanning 140). *Le Morte Darthur*, too, treats the cyclical nature of fortune and British history. Arthur's rise and fall are part of the material that Geoffrey introduces.

In addition to the cycles of British national history that Geoffrey examines, Hanning notes that he is also concerned with the individual within the cycle of history. Hanning claims that

> Geoffrey exalted him [the individual] to a new stature, distinguishing him as a creature with a destiny and desires potentially different from those of his nation, and as an individual involved in a range of relationships not integral to, and even at odds with, the political relationships which determine national history. (143)

Malory's characters are exactly of this type. Lancelot, Guenivere, Mordred, Gawain, and even Arthur, are all destined, according to Malory's work, to the end which each encounters. Each works on a personal scale to achieve individual goals and desires. It is only through their combined, interrelated actions that the national history is

determined. Only Arthur works to overcome his personal
interests (not always effectively) and keep the national
ideals at the forefront of his actions. Willing to overlook
the treasons of Lancelot and Guenivere, wanting to avoid the
blood feud of Gawain, and hoping to avoid the jealous
threatenings of Mordred, Arthur fights for his kingdom and
his national ideals. Only when the forces of destiny and
fortune, acting through the characters of Lancelot and the
others, come together to realize the inevitable fall does
Arthur succumb to his destiny and ride Fortune's wheel to
his own destruction.

There is a line, albeit somewhat tenuous, connecting
Geoffrey's historigraphical efforts with those of Malory. It
cannot be claimed with complete confidence that Malory knew
of or studied Geoffrey's work directly. What can be said is
that Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* was the most
influential work of history, regardless of its modern
acceptability as such, through Malory's time and beyond.
Hanning points out that

> Geoffrey's influence on the following centuries
> was both enormous and normative. Until the
> sixteenth (and in some quarters the seventeenth)
> century, British history *was* Geoffrey's *Historia*,
> expanded, excerpted, rhymed, combined, or glossed.
> [. . .] Geoffrey's "facts" were reabsorbed into
> the over-all Christian and patriotic
> interpretations of history which reasserted

> themselves, apparently without difficulty, in the
> work of most medieval historians who cast their
> nets widely enough to include the pre-Saxon
> history of Britain. (173-4)

Hanning proceeds to explain that medieval romance grew out of Geoffrey's historigraphical style. Instead of examining the role of the individual in the history of the nation or culture, romance

> examined personal destiny in a deliberately
> ahistorical context--not at the Christian
> exegetical level of national and personal
> providence, nor as a factor in political
> evolution, but as an index of the human condition
> considered as a unique, continuous, ethical
> phenomenon. (175)

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* focuses on Arthur and his ideals, but unlike the purpose of romance, to examine the individual within the human condition, Malory uses Arthur to explore the effect of humanness on nations and societies.

Lee Patterson echoes the view of romance as ahistorical when he calls medieval romances "fictions largely unconcerned with historical reality" but adds that these "legendary histories, [. . .] found both their literary inspiration and political purpose in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*" (199, 200).[25] The romances, epitomized by those of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, are devoid of almost any national historical

elements, and those they do contain are backgrounded and often relegated to legend/myth status. They are completely focused on the individual's qualities, experiences, and virtues. Malory, in turn, reclaims the historical element for *Le Morte Darthur*. Unlike Marie and Chrétien, Malory's work is not merely set in the physical and social context of Arthur's court. He embraces the history of King Arthur and embeds his tales firmly in that history. He does not only tell a tale conveniently set in the court of Arthur, he tells the tale of the court of King Arthur.

Patterson clarifies the difficulty that many critics seem to find with Malory's work. Arthur's history had become so muddled with the legendary material of various authors that it was very difficult to discern the historical nature of many individual Arthurian tales. In the romances, the historical elements that exist in Geoffrey's work are enveloped by the material of the romancers and rendered indistinct in many ways by the efforts of those authors. Patterson claims that "The Arthurian romances inevitably surrounded their chronicle cognates with an aura of fictiveness, casting upon historiography a shadow of incredibility, [. . .] and Arthurian writing was never able to divest itself of this dubiousness" (206). The imaginative nature of romance, its falseness, is what Patterson believes the English medieval historian attempted to overcome. In his analysis of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Patterson notes that in an apparent effort to take Arthurian material and

focus on "the historical world and its meaning," the author chose to rely on "representational fidelity, carefully including specifics of dress, diplomacy, language, geography, and chronology [. . .] that are so precisely rendered that critics have considered the poem an anti-romance, an epic, and a pseudochronicle" (212-13). Malory used much of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* as the source for his *Tale of King Arthur and Emperor Lucius*. In addition, he adopted the narrative device of historical specificity to give the whole of *Le Morte Darthur* the same anti-romance effect.

The historical nature of *Le Morte Darthur* is not something Malory applied to the material he was adapting. In essence, he was actually restoring the historical nature of the Arthurian tales that had been pared away by the romancers. Robert Snyder examines Malory's work in the light of its historical nature and concludes that

> Malory was following the medieval aesthetic principle of adaptation, whereby the individual author, on the basis of *auctores*, refashioned an existing corpus of materials. Partly the offshoot of scholasticism and scribal recension, such an aesthetic presupposed a "canon" of legend, fact, and thought which had come to acquire the status of history. (135)[26]

The historical canon that Malory drew on was the body of Arthurian literature, the Matter of Britain, as it had been

captured "truthfully" and with authority in both the French tales and the imaginations of the people of his England. Snyder also notes that Malory's "'historial' orientation was not aimed toward settling the question of Arthur's historicity. [. . .] It was instead concerned with unraveling the pattern of human causation behind a political tragedy" (138). Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* uses the material, the *matière*, of the French romances and some of their earlier English adaptations. He crafts it, albeit with the tools of romance, to his own historical interpretation, giving it a particular perspective, a *sen*, a feeling. According to Terence McCarthy, this shift in perspective is due to Malory's rejection of the "central romance concern with private feeling" and taking on "the role of court historian and with it all the deference and distance that the public role requires. [. . .] Malory presents the material of romance in the historical mode" ("*Le Morte Darthur*" 148-49).[27] In Malory, as noted earlier, individual characteristics and concerns are secondary, the public role is primary. We know little about how Lancelot appears, but we know he is one of the best knights in the world. Guenivere is relatively unimportant as a woman; we never get a description, but we are never in doubt that she is the Queen. Throughout Malory's work, Arthur is the king first and a man second. His reactions to the events around him reflect first on his duties as king. Recall his reaction when the treason of his queen and his best knight is

discovered. He moans the loss of the fellowship of Knights of the Round Table, but queens are a lesser commodity:

> What goes on in private at the court of Camelot is not Malory's concern and as historian--as opposed to omniscient narrator--is something to which he has limited access. [. . .] Malory offers no scenes of private tenderness between Lancelot and Guinevere merely to give us an idea of the nature of their relationship. That the relationship existed is for him a historical fact we must accept. [. . . Malory's book is] one which is less private than his originals, more a book of English history than a *roman français*. (McCarthy "*Le Morte Darthur*" 151)

In this turning away from the private motivations, values, virtues, and characteristics, Malory is turning away from those elements of romance which seem to be the most common characteristics mentioned when describing the genre. The public roles and heroic values embodied in his work provide echoes of earlier genres of literature. McCarthy's analysis of *Le Morte Darthur* and Malory's public versus private *sen*, leads him to conclude that

> As Malory rejects the analyses of private feeling that point forward to later literary developments, so he turns back to the spirit of those older traditions where action not abstraction is

important and where a hero fights for a public

cause not for private ideals of conduct. (173)

McCarthy seems reluctant to suggest that the genre of

Malory's work is anything other than a romance, though

tempered by "the *sen* of heroism and 'authentic history'

which colours his romance *matière*" (174). Instead, it might

be more accurate to conclude that Malory's text is a history

filtered through the accretions of romance.

The reluctance to appreciate Malory's historical bent

in his tales of the life and ideals of King Arthur is quite

understandable. Rosalind Field, in her examination of the

historical elements of English romance, notes that

> Romance in England appears at its most
>
> characteristic in those works which claim to
>
> derive from the history of England. Such works in
>
> the Anglo-Norman and Middle English vernaculars of
>
> medieval England present particular problems of
>
> interpretation and evaluation. Their evident
>
> factual inaccuracies irritate the historically
>
> minded reader, while their deviation from the
>
> norms of the genre disappoint the reader whose
>
> expectations are set by the courtly romances of
>
> France. (163)[28]

Field explores the unique relationship between historical

writing and the development of English romance as distinct

from French romance. She attributes much of this to the

impact of the Conquest and William I's desire to legitimize

his assumption of the throne. English and British heroes and monarchs were tied to the Norman ruling house through whatever means possible, and in doing so, the Normans were linked to the history of Britain.

When approaching English romance from the perspective of nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century norms, there is a natural tendency to expect certain later "improvements" in literary form and sophistication. When they are absent, the work is often considered as having failed in some respect. For scholars trained in a given corpus of literature, the look back may be from a less dramatic literary distance, but the result may often be the same. Critics expecting to see qualities of flourishing French romance in its "offspring" genre and only finding bits and pieces muddled all together with elements of earlier eclipsed and rejected styles, are often disappointed by what they find. This seems to be particularly true in terms of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

Malory is indebted to the French romance tradition for many of the ideas and tools that he incorporated into his work. Yet, there are too many characteristics of epic, chronicle, and history in his work for it to be comfortably classified as a romance, even an English romance. Like the literary genres of epic, chronicle, and history, Malory's work focuses on action over motivation. It tells its tales with larger-than-life characters and events. It uses a thematically connected episodic structure. It treats as

subject matter the heroic feudal duties of knights and king and avoids the subjects of love and women, except where they serve the overall heroic themes. It is national and patriotic; Malory has written about an English king and the English monarchy, in English, for an English audience. In addition, Malory obviously considers his tale to be true, or at least credible. Most importantly, however, *Le Morte Darthur* as we have received it, is a *history* of King Arthur, an imminently English king. Adapted from mostly French sources where Arthur is a foreigner and is relegated to virtual obscurity in the background of knightly tales of individual glory, Malory's work, in effect, reclaims Arthur and restores the history of his rise and fall to the history of its English audience.

Notes

[1] For example, consider the following: Ernest Rhys, ed., *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail*; George Saintsbury, *The Flourishing of Romance*; and Andrew Lang, "*Le Morte Darthur*."

[2] Malory's text is considered as a possible proto-novel in the following: Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel*; George Saintsbury, *The English Novel*; Louis MacNeice, "Sir Thomas Malory;" Lionel Stevenson, *The English Novel: A Panorama*; and Margaret Schlauch, *Antecedents of the English Novel, 1400-1600*.

[3] Most critics considered Malory as working in a French romance tradition. Most notable of these critics and most influential, is Eugène Vinaver. The most prominent critics who see Malory as indebted to an English romance tradition are: Ernest Rhys, *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail*; George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm*; Robert H. Wilson, "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance;" William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight*; and Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur.

[4] Vinaver introduces this idea in the introduction to his 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript. Other critics who explore this concept, pro and con, include the following: C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte;*" and Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*.

[5] Vinaver, *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Vinaver seems to think that the unraveling was one of the most effective qualities of Malory's effort. C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*." Lewis notes that the untangling of the *entrelacement* is not as thorough as Vinaver would suggest. Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*. Gradon contends that Malory elevated his use of *entrelacement* by unraveling the action, and by weaving together the themes of his work.

[6] Vinaver, *Malory*. Vinaver notes Malory's emphasis on everyday detail and the reduction of the fantastic and magical elements of his sources. P. J. C. Field, "Description and Narrative in Malory." Field suggests that Malory's style of narrative evokes a sense of realism creating an impression of immediacy between the reader and the narrator.

[7] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur. Benson provides a detailed analysis of the structure of medieval Arthurian prose romance cycles and compares the structure of Malory's work to it.

[8] Elizabeth S. Sklar, "The Undoing of Romance in Malory's *Morte Darthur*."

[9] Beverly Kennedy, "The Re-Emergence of Tragedy in Late Medieval England: Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*."

[10] Lee W. Patterson, "Heroism and the Rise of Romance: An Essay in Medieval Literary History;" and John Pierce Watkins, "The Hero in Sir Thomas Malory."

[11] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (New York: Dover, 1957).

[12] For an informative overview of the idea of the tragic element in epic and detailed examples from the corpus of extant medieval texts, see Ker 65-75.

[13] These differences are discussed in some detail in Ker 290-317.

[14] Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971).

[15] Pierre Georges-Castex and Paul Surer, *Manuel des Études Littéraires Françaises du Moyen Age au XXe Siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hatchette, 1954), vol. 1. 5.

[16] Leon Verriest, *L'Évolution de la Littérature Française*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

[17] For a review of the possible intended oral presentation of the Winchester version of Malory's work, see Hobar.

[18] Lang makes some interesting comparisons between Malory and Homer's *Iliad*. Most actually are distinctions of kind. That is, Lang identifies Malory's differences from Homer. He uses these then to intensify the similarities that he puts forth. Interestingly, the differences almost all come from the more romantic central tales and the story of Lancelot and Guenivere. The similarities and epic parallels are often drawn from those tales that centralize Arthur.

[19] D. M Hill, "Romance as Epic," *English Studies* 44 (1963): 95-107.

[20] Nathaniel E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance,"

PMLA 38 (1923): 50-70.

[21] Edward Dowden, *A History of French Literature* (New York: Appleton, 1910).

[22] P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*.

[23] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur.

[24] Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain* (New York, Columbia UP, 1966).

[25] Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of medieval Literature* (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1987). Chapter 6 is an examination of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

[26] Robert Lance Snyder, "Malory and 'Historial' Adaptation," *Essays in Literature* 1 (1974): 135-148.

[27] Terence McCarthy, "*Le Morte Darthur* and Romance," *Studies in Medieval Romance: Some New Approaches*, Ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1988) 148-175.

[28] Rosalind Field, "Romance as History, History as Romance," *Romance in Medieval England*, Eds. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 1991) 163-173.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Thomas Malory drew from a widely diverse body of source material related to King Arthur and crafted his landmark prose work, *Le Morte Darthur*. It serves to firmly place the Arthurian tales into the history of England. What originated in the early medieval historical works of Nennius, Bede, Gildas, and Geoffrey of Monmouth was then transmuted into something completely foreign (the French Arthurian romances), and has once again been returned to its native cultural and geographic environment. To accomplish this, Malory drew on the Matter of Britain that had proliferated primarily in France and the Anglo-Norman court of Angevin England. He created a comprehensive telling of the tale of Arthur's life, his ideals, his rise to become a noble, heroic king, and his fall. *Le Morte Darthur* is a history of an age before Malory's in which an heroic British king strove to achieve and uphold noble ideals for his kingdom.

Malory's collection of Arthurian tales, derived from the Matter of Britain, is told in an English prose that reflects a thorough knowledge of the narrative tools of the French romance tradition and the ideas and methods native to English medieval literature. Malory scholarship entertains an active discourse and promotes thorough examinations of his work and its sources. This is largely due to the fact that there are only two extant versions of Malory's work. They clearly derive from a common original (though neither

does so directly), but they have numerous differences in content and some stylistic differences. The first of these two texts of *Le Morte Darthur* is William Caxton's edition published first in 1485.[1] The second is the Winchester manuscript edited and published by Eugène Vinaver in 1947.[2]

The versions of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* in both Caxton's edition and in the Winchester manuscript, though largely derived from French romance sources, differ both thematically and in narrative style from those sources. Much of the scholarship devoted to Malory's work centers on the ways in which it is indebted to and differs from the French tradition. His narrative style has some distinct differences from the French romance style (i.e. brevity, clarity, and an emphasis on action). In addition, there are significant thematic differences between both of the surviving texts of Malory's work and its French romance sources.

The unique history of Malory's work, and its impact on the Arthurian mythos in England, has made scholarly work on it both rewarding and extremely challenging. The publication of Eugène Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript in 1947 renewed scholarly interest in Malory's work. Since there are two texts of Malory's work, with neither of them having the better claim for authorial authenticity, almost every aspect of Malory scholarship has at least two generally opposing fundamental arguments. Though there have been attempts to provide synthesis of differing ideas in order to foster consensus, this effort has not been

particularly successful. The multifaceted arguments can be more easily considered and the opposing sides more clearly seen by breaking them down into distinct topics. There are six major areas of note in Malory scholarship: identifying the author, establishing a pedigree for the extant versions, source identification and study, structure/genre analysis, exploring narrative style and methods, and consideration of thematic elements. The arguments build one upon the other and often overlap categories, but their interrelatedness provides further avenues for critical analysis.

The Foundation

The very nature of scholarly work on *Le Morte Darthur* is complicated by the history of the extant versions of Malory's work. There are two, and only two, versions of his text. Caxton's edition of Malory's work was first published in 1485. There were several editions produced in the fifteenth through early nineteenth centuries, but each was based primarily on Caxton's version. For nearly four hundred years, these heavily edited editions remained the sole access to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In the late nineteenth century, in an effort to provide a reliable edition for scholarly use, H. Oskar Sommer prepared an edition, which essentially restored Caxton's text to the original.[3]

In 1934, W. F. Oakeshott discovered a fifteenth century manuscript of Malory's text in the library at Winchester

College.[4] Eugène Vinaver edited and published the Winchester manuscript in 1947. The Winchester manuscript is not likely the direct source that Caxton used in preparing his own edition, though physical evidence on the manuscript suggests it was in his possession at some time.[5] Vinaver suggests that there is at least a one-manuscript remove between each surviving version and Malory's own draft.

Vinaver's version of the Winchester manuscript completely changed the way that Malory's text was perceived. His edition touched off two major, related debates concerning *Le Morte Darthur*: the single text versus multiple tale structural debate, and the unity debate. Though there are significant differences between the two versions of Malory's work, the most radical one that Vinaver's edition introduced is his interpretation of the structure of Malory's work. Vinaver announced that Malory had written, not one, but eight distinct romances that had been grouped together based on subject matter into a collection of tales about Arthur and his knights.[6] Vinaver's shocking structural analysis shifted the focus of Malory scholarship to an either/or study of the structural unity of the text. Since the first appearance of Vinaver's edition in 1947, each scholar has had to grapple with the unity issue, and even if he/she addresses an issue other than unity, the argument begins with whether *Le Morte Darthur* is a single work or a grouping of tales.

Despite his somewhat controversial interpretations, Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript has become the primary source document for most non-Caxton focused Malory scholarship. In addition to a meticulously edited text, Vinaver provided lengthy commentary on the text as it relates to Malory's French sources.[7] It has not only spurred renewed scholarship concerning Malory, it has become the very foundation of most of the research in the last half century.

When considering Malory's unique contributions to the literary milieu of the Arthurian tales, it is necessary to consider the impact of his sources on *Le Morte Darthur*. Identification and comparative study of Malory's sources dominated early analysis of his work. Malory includes internal references in his text to his French source. In addition, several of the tales' colophons refer to French sources. These colophon references are omitted in Caxton's edition, but he echoes them in his preface where he describes his source copy of *Le Morte Darthur*, as "take[n] oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe" (xv).[8]

By the end of the nineteenth century, most of Malory's probable sources had been identified.[9] In addition to the French sources that were identified, Malory also used at least two English sources--the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur.*[10] With his reliance on so many sources, Malory was initially relegated to the role of translator, redactor, and compiler. There were few early

critics who saw any significant originality in Malory's work.

Once much of the identification process was complete, early twentieth century critics shifted from source identification to source comparisons. Malory's text was different enough from his sources to suggest that Malory's work reflected at least some originality and creativity. Early comparative analysis suggested that Malory was familiar with a wide variety of Arthurian material beyond the versions that he chose to adapt in each instance.[11] Malory's selection of source tales, his choice of material to be cut or kept, his manner of translation and adaptation, and the net effect of his compilation are what make *Le Morte Darthur* a work artistically original and distinct from his sources. However, since Malory's work is derived from French sources, the analysis of *Le Morte Darthur* must begin with an understanding of the sources, especially when discussing Malory's originality and evaluating what he brought to the telling of the tales of the Arthurian legends.

Source study has reflected a general bias towards Malory's French sources, largely influenced by Vinaver's criticism, which is the starting point for a significant amount of modern analysis of Malory's work. Vinaver emphasizes Malory's French sources, and plays down any influence there may have been from English sources. Vinaver notes that Malory's

'books' and 'tales' are all adaptations from the
French. [. . .] And wherever Malory happens to
tell a story which is otherwise unknown, but for
which he is clearly not responsible,
'retrogression towards the source' becomes a
legitimate method. ("Sir Thomas Malory" 548-49)

In spite of the influence of Vinaver to the contrary,
Malory had access to and used several English sources in
addition to the French romances. Analysis of the two most
influential English sources--the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*
and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*--has been the focus of a large
number of critical works. The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* was
recognized as one of Malory's sources early in the
identification phase of source study, and has been
extensively compared to Malory's tale two, *King Arthur and
the Emperor Lucius.*[12] The status of the Stanzaic *Morte
Arthur* as a possible source for Malory has been much more
controversial. Sommer holds that Malory used a version of
the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as a direct source for the final
sections of *Le Morte Darthur*, but James Douglas Bruce
disagrees and argues, as does Vinaver, that the French *Mort
Artu* is Malory's source.[13] There seems to be some hint of a
bias toward French sources, since the strength of the
argument, the significant number of specific parallels
between the two texts, seems to more readily support
Sommer's position that the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* was indeed
a source.[14] Other English sources, such as Hardyng's

Chronicle and some minor verse romances, have also been identified as possible sources for elements of Malory's work.[15] This is further supported by Benson's examinations of the many similarities between the English romance tradition and Malory's work.[16]

Malory's material and many of his narrative tools are built on the sources, both French and English, that he drew from. Consequently, source study provides an important *foundation for all other areas of analysis of Le Morte Darthur.*

The debate surrounding the structure, unity, and genre of Malory's work holds a central place in the mainstream of Malory criticism. The unity debate, whether Malory intended his text to reflect a single unified work or whether it is a collection of related but separate tales, grew out of the analysis of the structure of *Le Morte Darthur.* The generic classification of Malory's work is also a result of structural analysis. In the nineteenth century, Malory's work was viewed as essentially a compilation from French sources of translated material, so there was no real attempt to analyze the structure of the work. It was believed to reflect only a vague sort of unity or wholeness based on its existence as a single work. Once critics began to identify Malory's originality, they had to find a label for what he wrote. It was most often referred to as a romance, but some critics identified elements of the epic narrative tradition in *Le Morte Darthur.*[17]

Critics found many of the principles and methods necessary for discussing Malory's work in French romance. However, in addition to some interesting similarities, there are some intriguing differences. Malory's material is clearly drawn from the Matter of Britain, and many of Malory's narrative techniques are also derived from French models. In the ways that Malory differs from the French romance model, he is similar to the English romance tradition, for example his emphasis on brevity and action over motivation. No single genre seems to describe *Le Morte Darthur*, but since many of the narrative elements, though not all, seem to mirror his romance sources, critics became comfortable with considering it among such works, and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* came to be accepted and labeled as a *de facto* romance.[18]

Malory differs significantly from the French romance model in the thematic structure of his tales. French romance uses *entrelacement* or multiple interwoven themes. Malory unravels the complex interwoven structure of his models and replaces it with a structure of unlocked episodes that present the narrative themes of the originals in a straightforward manner.[19]

A complication of the thematic implications of the structure of Malory's work is the unity debate mentioned earlier. Caxton's edition presents Malory's text as a single work from beginning to end. When Vinaver edited the Winchester manuscript, he structured it as a collection of

eight separate but related, stand-alone romances combined into a single collection.[20] Vinaver declared that

> The `whole book' is the collection which grew up
> by means of successive additions of romances often
> unconnected with each other. [. . .] There is
> undoubtedly in this collection of works a certain
> unity of manner and style; there is no unity of
> structure or design. ("Sir Thomas Malory" 544-45)

While his editing spurred the unity debate, Vinaver's analysis of Malory's work, intimately linked to his French sources, tacitly, though not permanently, settled the genre debate in favor of romance.

R. M. Lumiansky and Charles Moorman argued that Malory intended to write a single, comprehensive, and unified tale of King Arthur and his knights.[21] They went so far as to redefine the concept of unity. Lumiansky and Moorman identify two types of unity in literary terms: historical unity and critical unity.[22] According to Lumiansky and Moorman, Malory's text reflects both kinds of unity, but there still is no clear consensus.[23] Brewer reflects on the impact of the unity debate and the originality argument centered on the works of both Vinaver and Lumiansky, and claims that

> The result has been an increased awareness of the
> autonomy and greatness of The Morte Darthur as a
> work of art in its own right. [. . .] It is
> natural, therefore, that we have now a much

sharper realisation of Malory's own contribution
to this amazing corpus of legend. ("Present State"
90)

Unity is not the only issue debated concerning the
structure of Malory's text. Whether unified or not, the
narrative structure is intimately linked to thematic content
in many ways. Several of the tales in *Le Morte Darthur* have
an internal structure that reflects the given tale's main
thematic statements. The thematic elements of love,
fellowship, and chivalry often create an enveloping
structure for a tale or episode.[24] Though sometimes limited
in scope and application, examination of theme/structure
relationships has proven fairly enlightening.

Subject matter suggests yet another way to examine the
structure of Malory's work. When considered along subject
matter lines, *Le Morte Darthur* falls essentially into three
sections. In the first two tales, as identified by Vinaver,
the narrative relates the birth and rise to kingship of
Arthur. The middle tales relate the adventures of his
knights, and the concluding two tales examine the fall of
Arthur's kingdom and his death.[25]

The structure of Malory's work yields clues to another
area of discourse, genre. As mentioned previously, *Le Morte
Darthur* was, at least initially, labeled a romance. This
label has become less secure and accepted, because
characteristics of several generic forms can be found in
Malory's work. *Le Morte Darthur* cannot be conveniently

classified as a particular genre. Despite early critical labeling as a romance, critics, including Vinaver, recognize that there are elements in *Le Morte Darthur* that do not seem to follow strict generic definitions.

Benson tries to identify a genre for Malory's work. Instead of French romance or epic, he suggests that *Le Morte Darthur* is an English prose romance cycle.[26] He retains the romance label though his argument seems to suggest that there is much of the style of a history in Malory's work. Like Benson's suggestions of history, style elements in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* often suggest some genre other than romance.[27] Elizabeth Sklar suggests that Malory's work is not just a disentangling of the *entrelacement*, but is itself a rejection of the romance form.[28] Beverly Kennedy considers Malory's work in terms of generic considerations of tragedy in addition to romance and epic.[29] Several scholars have explored the heroic qualities in Malory's characters and have tried to determine a thematic statement from the structural juxtaposition of heroic and romantic elements.[30]

Structural arguments, like source study, are fundamental to the discourse in Malory scholarship. Structural analysis has become the bedrock of new research, especially into the issue of genre. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is not just a mere compilation, and romance does not seem to be sufficient. There seem to be many more

possibilities since there are elements of epic, tragedy, and history in it as well.

The narrative style of Malory's work is one element that is generally appreciated as being original, but is not consistently definable. Most critics in the nineteenth century simply voiced their own responses to Malory's style; there was little objective data for either criticism or analysis. With Sommer's edition of Caxton's version of Malory, and after the publication of Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript, comparisons between the two and with Malory's sources revealed elements of Malory's style. Early work focused on syntax, grammar, and vocabulary, and linguistic study continues to be a vital area of scholarship.

In addition to linguistic analysis of style, Malory's text has been compared to the prose of his contemporaries. Examining Malory's style in terms of fifteenth century chroniclers reveals numerous similarities with that earlier English prose tradition. Malory's prose style differs from that of his sources. His use of the English literary traditions of brevity and emphasis on action over both emotion and description, results in an essentially historical style. There are other forms of narrative in *Le Morte Darthur* as well. These do not generally apply to Malory's work as a whole; they usually are limited to a single episode or tale, and are not very useful in discussing the full scope of his work.[31]

The style of Malory's text focuses on the English narrative concepts of brevity and action over motivation. In addition, Malory uses narrative tools that differ to varying degrees from his French romance sources. For example, he often uses dialogue instead of descriptive narrative.[32] Other narrative tools that Malory uses, though somewhat limited in scope, that help distinguish his work from his sources include the use of patterns, leitmotifs, mythic elements, and dream.[33]

The study of Malory's style focuses on the elements that differentiate him from his sources. Since Malory is more than a mere redactor and translator, the study of his narrative style and tools allows Malory to be appreciated as something more than another writer working in the romance genre. There is something more to Malory's text than translations of French romance. It is full of different elements that open up new possibilities.

The analysis of *Le Morte Darthur* in terms of its thematic elements has been relatively straightforward and consistent. The earliest concern with Malory's work centered on the moral nature of what he wrote. Caxton's preface encouraged his readers to "Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renommee" (xv). Other early editors also emphasized the moral nature of the knightly behavior in the tales, and in spite of the apparently moral "rightness" of the text, most of the

editorial changes they made were to tone down morally offensive language and actions.

The debate over morality in *Le Morte Darthur* led to the next significant thematic interpretation of Malory's work. Questions of morality led to questions of good versus evil. This was refined into a slightly narrower interpretation that was still grounded in the issue of morality. The themes of Malory's text were defined as touching on love, religion, and war. George Saintsbury noted that "The Round Table stories, merely as such, illustrate Valour; the Graal stories, Religion; the passion of Lancelot and Guinevere with the minor instances, Love" (*English Novel* 27). Over the course of almost five hundred years not much changed in the way that Malory's themes were perceived. A further refinement of the morality-based thematic elements in Malory's work results in a thematic focus on the idea of chivalry, with its inherent concepts of loyalty. Another central element to the Arthurian material is the idea of courtly love, which was added by the continental, mostly French, romancers.

Malory's focus on the high ideals of chivalry is seen as a lament for a golden past, or as a condemnation of a failed ideal. If either is true, then Malory is doing nothing more than creating a story to entertain his audience. However, this quick dismissal is premature. Analysis of Malory's text reveals that there is much more than mere diversion in *Le Morte Darthur*. The theme or themes

are not always easily identified and categorized. Chivalry
and the chivalric code are present from beginning to end.
Together with the thematic elements of love and
righteousness, chivalry moves the story of Arthur and his
knights forward.

Character analysis is a useful tool for thematic
analysis in *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory and Caxton both
identified this work as a book about King Arthur and his
knights. In the final colophon Malory names the subject of
his work: "Here is the ende of the hoole book of Kyng Arthur
and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (726). Caxton
also clearly identifies the subject matter of his version:
Le Morte Darthur is a book about "the noble and joyous
hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng
Arthur, somtyme kyng of thys noble royalme thenne callyd
Brytaygne" (xv). Character analysis supports the examination
of the thematic elements of chivalry and love, often
centering on Lancelot's relationships with King Arthur or
Queen Guenivere. Other character analyses seek to find
parallels between characters (such as Gawain, Bors, and
Morgan Le Fay) that serve as exempla for one or more of the
major characters/themes. Some explorations of Malory's
characters address the issue of religious righteousness in
The Tale of the Sankgreal.

Malory's effective characterization of the humanity of
King Arthur and his knights in *Le Morte Darthur* is probably
the least controversial area of critical study. Since the

moral exhortations of Caxton's preface, thematic analysis has built on previous work. The thematic threads of love, chivalry, and righteousness are central to most subsequent analyses of Malory's themes.

The Argument

The effect of Malory's work needs to be ascertained on its own merits before applying some template or filter. *Le Morte Darthur* is so broad in scope and content that any comparison applied to it will find support within its pages. We need to let Malory's text "speak" for itself. Instead of filtering our understanding of Malory's work through applied comparisons, we should start with his text, both versions of it, and see where Malory's words lead. Doing this, we find that *Le Morte Darthur* is much more than just a retelling of the Matter of Britain in English. The text, in effect, casts Arthur and his knights in an English instead of continental, French, or Anglo-Norman role. Malory's work reclaims Arthur and Arthurian history for England and plants them firmly into the history of England.

In an effort to open new avenues of critical inquiry, the current exploration of *Le Morte Darthur* builds on the long history of critical analysis and extensive scholarly work and attempts to identify elements in Malory's text that support the contention that *Le Morte Darthur* is much more than just a fairly comprehensive retelling of the Matter of

Britain in English. The text, in effect, creates a permanent "English-ness" for Arthur and the tales of his knights. Further, Malory's work essentially reclaims Arthur and Arthurian history from the myth and legends of the French romance tradition and plants them firmly into the history of England. An examination of the structure, the characterization of Arthur, and Malory's narrative style reveals very interesting support for this idea. The structure of Malory's text places the thematic focus of the text firmly on Arthur and his ideals. The changes that Malory made to the character of Arthur from the one in his sources reveal that Malory was crafting his Arthur on an English heroic model versus a courtly one. *Le Morte Darthur* is not merely a badly written romance; rather, it is a hybrid work, containing elements of many different literary genres, that comes very close to being a medieval history of the reign of King Arthur.

The structure of *Le Morte Darthur* provides an insight into the thematic focus of Malory's work as it exists in both Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript. Malory has gathered a significant number of the stories tied to the Arthurian court into a single collection that begins and ends with the life of Arthur. These tales surround the tales of the knights of Arthur. Eugène Vinaver notes that "The series [of Malory's tales] ends as it began, with a tale of heroic deeds performed in the service of a great kingdom" (*Works* vii). The story of Arthur's rise and fall is the

literary focal point that the internal tales of Arthur's knights illustrate and clarify. In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the reader's focus should be on the telling of the heroic tale of Arthur: his rise to kingship and the ultimate defeat of his ideals.

There are two significant elements to consider when examining the structure of *Le Morte Darthur*: the order of the tales and the overall structure of the text. Caxton's edition and the Winchester manuscript arrange the tales in the same sequence, so it seems reasonable to conclude, as Vinaver does, that the order "was presumably the same in their common source" (*Works of Sir Thomas Malory* li). The common order of the tales is particularly significant when compared to the probable order of composition of the tales. Based on various internal and historical clues, it is likely that the tales were *not* composed in the sequence that they exist in both versions of Malory's work.[34] The significance is that the tales were intentionally arranged into their current sequence, and that arrangement is probably not the order in which they were written. The intentional arranging of the component tales of *Le Morte Darthur* strengthens the effect of the thematic significance of that sequence.

Until now, the focus of the discourse on the structure of Malory's work centered on whether Malory intended *Le Morte Darthur* to be a single work or a collection of related tales. Caxton presents Malory's text as a single, unified work. In contrast, Vinaver asserts that the text reflects

eight separate romances combined into a subject-related collection of tales that do not form a single narrative. These opposing interpretations have been at the heart of the unity debate.

Other examinations of the structure of *Le Morte Darthur* have done so in terms other than unity. The focus has shifted away from authorial intention and is now focusing on the effect of the text. Roger Loomis argues that Malory's work has the effect of a planned design, whether intentional or not, that effectively unifies the text into a single work.[35] Stephen Knight argues that the first half of the text consists of numerous episodes tied together by common setting and recurrence of action, and that the latter half is a continuous narrative focused by common characters and a singular thread of theme and action.[36] In addition to physical textual clues, overall thematic continuity, and stylistic evidence, several of the tales in *Le Morte Darthur* have an internal structure that reflects at least one of the main thematic elements. Love, fellowship, and the chivalric sense of duty as thematic concerns are often seen to create an enveloping structure for a particular tale or scene. Characters, such as Arthur or Lancelot, and actions, such as the journey or quest, can also serve as embodiments of thematic ideas and can provide an element of structure.

The subject matter of the component tales of Malory's work, examined in the sequence they occur, suggests yet another natural structural configuration, essentially three

sections. In the early section, the subject of the narrative is the birth and rise to kingship of Arthur. The subject of the middle tales consists of the adventures of the knights of Arthur's kingdom; and the concluding tales examine the fall of Arthur's kingdom and his death. Terence McCarthy compares the division of *Le Morte Darthur* along subject matter lines to the turning of the wheel of fortune. He notes that the first part tells of "establishing the king's authority at home and abroad and the founding of the Round Table community" and reflects "the upward movement of the wheel of fortune, a familiar medieval image" ("Le Morte Darthur" 3-4). The middle section reflects the "age of glory of Arthurian chivalry, the period when the wheel seems motionless because [it is] at its height" (McCarthy "Le Morte Darthur" 4). McCarthy then continues the fortune's wheel metaphor by noting that the downward turn of the wheel mirrors the fall of Arthur's kingdom in the final section of the text.

Each stage of the analysis of Malory's text has considered it in terms of a number of units. Malory's work has been seen variously as reflecting a single unified work divided into chapters, as a collection of eight related but separate tales, or as two thematically related episodic narratives joined together in a single text. The clearest, and most natural, division within Malory's work seems to be the three-part division suggested by the basic subjects of each of the tales. The first two tales, *The Tale of King*

Arthur, and *King Arthur and Emperor Lucius*, present the
birth, youth, and rise to kingship of Arthur. The last two,
The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, and *The Most
Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon*, present the
challenge to, and dissolution of, Arthur's ideals, which
culminate in his death. Between these tales are four more:
The Tale of Sir Lancelot du Lake, *The Tale of Sir Gareth of
Orkney*, *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, and the *Tale of
the Sankgreal*. These interior stories focus inconsistently
on the knight/object named in their titles and only
fleetingly, if at all, refer to Arthur and his court.
However, thematically they all relate to the surrounding
tales of Arthur's rise and fall. The division of Malory's
work based on subject matter sets the rise and fall of
Arthur in a complementary opposition to the internal tales
of knighthood. It is also a structure that evokes the
metaphor of Fortune's wheel. The thematic focus on the tale
of the rise and fall of Arthur is emphasized through this
juxtaposition of tales and their action. Each of these
structural elements reinforces the others to create a
thematic focal point on the life of Arthur, his rise to
power, his ideals of chivalry, and his ultimate fall. Arthur
lies at the heart of *Le Morte Darthur*.

Examining the focus of Malory's work on the character
of King Arthur and the ideals embodied in him acknowledges
the value of character analysis in the study of thematic
significance of a work. In the criticism of *Le Morte*

Darthur, character analysis (though most often *not* of Arthur) is often a starting point for a discussion of the themes. Malory names the subject of his work in the final colophon: "Here is the ende of the hoole book of Kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (726). Caxton's subject is also clearly identified as, "the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur, somtyme kyng of thys noble royalme thenne callyd Brytaygne" (xv). Though Arthur is clearly the central subject of Malory's text, the examination of characters in support of the concepts of chivalry and love often centers on Lancelot instead of King Arthur. There are very few analyses of the character of Arthur as depicted in Malory's work, and the majority of those most often do so in comparison with another character. Most critical examinations of Malory's work explore the concept of chivalry as at least one of the major thematic subjects, but few focus on Arthur. However, King Arthur is at the center of chivalry in *Le Morte Darthur*; in fact, he is at the center of the entire text.

Le Morte Darthur is a collection of tales from a variety of sources. From the large number of possible sources of Arthurian material, Malory chose a number of different ones to form his version of the story of Arthur. The material he uses is framed within the cultural context of Arthur's court, as he has depicted it, in order to clarify and exemplify Arthur's life and ideals. These

various tales have been gathered together and assembled into their present form to create a particularly authentic effect. Malory's work is a selected gathering of tales concerning knights and knighthood sandwiched between tales of Arthur and his noble, heroic ideals.

The juxtaposed structure of Malory's work suggests an interrelated significance of one set of tales, the life of Arthur, with the other, the tales of the knights. The interior tales could have been collected either before, after, or separately from the life of Arthur. However, there is a reason to include the tales of Arthur's knights between the two sections dealing with Arthur himself. All of the tales in *Le Morte Darthur* are essentially separable (as suggested by Vinaver), but they are intimately and thematically related, and the structure reflects and reinforces that relationship. The rise and fall of Arthur reflect the rise and fall of Fortune's wheel and are presented surrounding the tales of the knights at the structural midpoint of the narrative, which is the thematically central point as well. It is at this point that Malory's tale reflects Arthur's turning from rise to fall.

There is textual evidence to support the subject-based structural ordering of the tales. Malory's *explicits* provide a textual device that delineates the limit of the tales concerning Arthur, which in turn define the embedded tales of his knights. The "Now turn we," or "Now leave we," narrative device is often used to mark shifts in episodes in

Malory's text. These transitions separate tales and episodes of the story of the life of Arthur from those in the tales of his knights' adventures. The *explicits* for the surrounding tales specifically mention King Arthur as having been the subject of the tale. Those of the internal tales refer only to the name of a knight or to the grail. No mention is made of Arthur at all. These *explicits* provide internal textual support for the structural division of the text by subject that focuses on the life of Arthur.

The three-part structure of *Le Morte Darthur* suggests certain similarities to a frame narrative. Though not a frame tale, examination of *Le Morte Darthur*'s similarities to frame narrative enrich and clarify thematic relationships between its component tales. Malory's tales of the life of Arthur establish the social context, the rules and limits for the world of his knightly tales and the code of knightly behavior for the knights in the interior tales. However, it is not the knights and their actions we are supposed to observe. As Michael Camille argues, the difference between margin and center in the fifteenth century may not have been as clear-cut as modern critics might think.[37] Based on the text as it exists, Malory apparently wants his audience to look first at the framing or surrounding tales.

Another concept of framing that is of particular interest when considering texts and literature, is that the frame becomes a unifying agent for groupings of stories. Malory's work is clearly a collection of related tales, but

it is not *merely* a collection of tales. *Le Morte Darthur* is a story, the life of Arthur, which creates a world within which the tales of his knights can be understood and be seen to amplify Arthur's ideals. The tales of the life of Arthur give the reader a frame of reference for interpreting the tales of the knights and their impact on the story of Arthur's rise and fall. The knights' stories, though intriguing and often thematically complex, do not introduce significant new ideas or concepts to the story of Arthur. The internal tales emphasize Arthur's ideals through contrast and/or illustration in a place, and sometimes with characters, other than those found in Arthur's court. The action in the story of Arthur's life moves forward only within the surrounding tales.

The three-part structure of *Le Morte Darthur* can be divided even further. Some of the tales have other tales fully contained within them like a structural miniature of the complete work, and each one consists of episodes within episodes: each delineated along subject and thematic lines. This detailed structure consists largely of individual episodes combined to form tales that reflect the pattern of Malory's complete work and emphasizes the life and ideals of Arthur. The elements that are gathered together and the order they are in can be used to help determine meaning and significance. Both extant versions of *Le Morte Darthur* have the same sequence of episodes and tales, so the sequence of episodes may well be Malory's own and the effect of that

ordering is his as well. The analysis of the episodic
structure of Malory's work reveals the thematic significance
of his work through the relationships of episode subjects
and actions.

The thematic significance Malory's episodic development
within the larger subject based three-part structure of *Le
Morte Darthur* can be clearly observed throughout his work.
The first of the eight tales, as divided by Vinaver, *The
Tale of King Arthur*, provides a look at Arthur's early life
from his conception to his consolidation of power and
authority over his own lands, and the establishment of his
personal and public ideals of knightly behavior. At several
points in this part of the narrative of Arthur's life,
Malory inserts exemplar tales that echo the elements
contained in the surrounding story of Arthur. The text makes
its first tale-length turning away in, "The Tale of Balin or
the Knight with the Two Swords." It consists of five
episodes relating the adventures of Balin and reflecting a
parallel of the whole of Arthur's rise and fall.[38] "The Tale
of Balin" is essentially a self-contained analogue of the
complete story of Arthur, from the drawing of the sword from
the stone to the mutual destruction of Arthur and Mordred on
the plain at Salisbury. In this embedded tale, Balin serves
as exemplar of Arthur and his actions.

The section of *The Tale of King Arthur*, titled "Torre
and Pellinore," provides an episodic account of the events
surrounding King Arthur's wedding to Guinevere. Within this

tale about a significant event in Arthur's life are three
thematically related, embedded tales of knightly adventure.
At the wedding feast, a strange and marvelous event prompts
Arthur to send Gawain, Torre, and Pellinore on an adventure.
The episodes that follow are not merely entertaining and
distracting. Rather, they provide illustrative material for
the final episode of this section. At the conclusion to the
knights' adventures, Arthur has all of his knights swear the
Pentecost oath. Arthur charges his knights

> never to do outerage nothir mourther, and allwayes
> to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that
> askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their
> worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for
> evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and
> jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in
> hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon
> payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles
> in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no
> worldis goodis. (75)

The examples of knightly behavior performed in conjunction
with the adventure of Arthur's wedding feast are compared to
the ideal behavior suggested by the oath. Each of the
adventurous knights in the embedded episodes fails in some
aspect of the oath. They serve as bad examples of knightly
chivalry. The episodes contained within the context of the
surrounding tale of Arthur's wedding serve to focus Malory's
text firmly on the ideals of Arthur.

The first of the four internal tales that deal with the adventures of Arthur's knights instead of with Arthur's life, *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot*, presents an example of Arthur's knights mirroring Arthur's own unrivaled position. Arthur is the foremost ruler in all the world, emperor of all Christendom. It is reasonable that the best knights in the world should serve him. This tale of Lancelot presents him as precisely that. It presents Lancelot, Arthur's knight, as an example of his ideals of knighthood in action.

The episodes of *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot* mirror the structure of *Le Morte Darthur* as a whole. Lancelot's first adventure is structured as a tale within a tale. These adventures follow the chronological structure of the quest motif. Arthur has very limited involvement in this tale, but we observe Lancelot's ability and his integrity as a knight. The reader comes away from this tale believing that Lancelot is worthy of being called the best knight because his actions reveal him to embody the very essence of Arthur's code of chivalry delineated in the Pentecost Oath.

The lengthy and highly episodic *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones* is concerned with much more than just the adventures of a single knight. It inconsistently focuses on Tristram as it ranges throughout the knights of Arthur's kingdom and their adventures. The significance of the story of Tristram is that Tristram, Isode, and King Mark serve as contrasts to Lancelot, Guenivere, and King Arthur, respectively. Tristram

is a comparable knight to Lancelot; indeed, they are each one of the four best knights in the world. Their similarities are mirrored by the differences between King Mark and King Arthur. King Mark serves as an example of bad kingship in contrast to the kingship of Arthur. The story of Tristram clarifies the story of Arthur through relatively simple comparison and contrast.

In the section of *The Book of Sir Tristram*, titled, "Tristram's Madness and Exile," Tristram is brought fully into the story of Arthur. In the final episode of this section, Tristram is made a Knight of the Round Table, and these two stories are joined together. The family in-fighting and bloodshed, prompted by jealousy and vengeance, so readily evident in the earlier tales of Tristram, begin to insinuate themselves into the adventures of Arthur and his knights. Once these stories are joined together, Tristram, his service to Malory's thematic needs complete, disappears from Malory's work. The needed material of the story of Tristram has been fully integrated into Malory's story of Arthur, and Malory intentionally leaves off telling the story of Tristram at this point. His colophon to this tale makes that clear: "Here endyth the secunde boke off sir Trystram de Lyones, [. . .] but here ys no rehersall of the thirde booke" (511). In the concluding tales, Malory's focus clearly rests on Arthur. Fortune's wheel begins its downward turn; Arthur's fall is going to begin.

The Tale *of the Sankgreal* illustrates the spiritual realization of Arthur's ideals. The mortal shortcomings of Arthur and his knights are illuminated by comparison to the spiritual perfection of Galahad. Galahad gives up his mortality, but Arthur cannot. Though a mere mortal king, he must, in heroic fashion, serve his people and his kingdom.

The humanity of Arthur and his knights, with all of its faults and imperfections, is the focus of the concluding tales. Though he is a perfect knight, Lancelot is only human, as clearly illustrated in *The Tale of the Sankgreal*. It is due to his human weaknesses that Lancelot fails in his heroic duty to his lord. His flaw, his love for Guenivere, his courtly failing, becomes the catalyst for the destruction of Arthur and his kingdom. Though Malory's text continues beyond the death of Arthur, through the telling of the deaths of Guenivere and Lancelot, the end of his story comes with the end of Arthur's life.

Fortune's wheel turns full circle in Malory's telling of the story of Arthur. *Le Morte Darthur* provides a comprehensive look at the life of Arthur, presents an image of proper knighthood in the service of King Arthur, and includes several tales that serve to illustrate or amplify the qualities of Arthur's life, ideals, and reign. *Le Morte Darthur's* structural emphasis on the rise and fall of King Arthur and his kingdom mirrors the turning of Fortune's

wheel, and Malory's reader remains focused on Arthur and his ideals just as his knights look to Arthur throughout his work.

Le Morte Darthur is not merely a tale of Arthur and his ideals. It reflects an ideal of kingship and a view of history that Malory seems to know and understand much more intimately than what is presented in his sources. The ideals of kingship and the importance of history reflected in Malory's work are clearly discernible. Arthur is the focal point of Malory's work, and the changes to the character of Arthur reflect an English king consistent with monarchs and heroes depicted in Anglo-Saxon, heroic literature.

Comparing Malory's text to his sources allows us to identify the changes to the character of Arthur. Malory took his material mostly from French romance sources. In them, the character of Arthur is different than in Malory. In his changes we will find the courtly French character of King Arthur being molded by Malory into a more heroic English character.

The transition in literature from heroic epic to romance needs to be examined in order to understand the motivating circumstances and methodology of the writer's craft that resulted in such a shift. W. P. Ker identifies a general thematic difference between epic and romance. Epic focuses on the ideals of a feudal society, and romance focuses on the thematic elements of love and personal adventure.[39] Vinaver rejects this idea and suggests a less

definitive shift towards self-awareness and knowledge, a sort of internal intellectual quest.[40]

Vinaver identifies a number of characteristics of heroic literature. Epic, as illustrated by the *Song of Roland,* relies on paratactic episodes that are self-contained and only loosely related to the thematic whole. Malory's text uses the structural element of episodes linked thematically. Vinaver also identifies the tendency of epic towards "repetition with variation" (*Rise* 7). This is similar to the Anglo-Saxon/Old English poetic devices of variation and enumeration.[41] Vinaver further notes that exploring character motivations is not common in epic. The writer of epic is not interested in causal relationships; rather, he is interested in the emotional impact of events. Vinaver faults Malory's adaptation of French romance, in part, because Malory is too episodic, too repetitive, and relies on narration of actions instead of exploring motivations. Expecting to see romance, Vinaver identifies Malory's narrative techniques as failings. The effect of Malory's changes is not inept romance authorship, but an attempt to reclaim the heroic.

Another distinction between epic and romance that Vinaver notes is that romance authors sought to reveal meaning through embellishment and to entertain through the use of keen understanding and appropriate skill. The romance authors' manipulation of material resulted in the remodeling of the matter itself, or at least

> of those parts of it which were at variance with
> the thoughts and feelings one wished to convey.
> Rhetoric could thus lead to a purposeful
> refashioning of traditional material, and the
> adaptor could become to all intents and purposes
> an original author, except that, unlike some
> authors, he would care above all for the *way* in
> which he told his stories and measure his
> achievement in terms of such new significance as
> he was able to confer upon an existing body of
> facts. (Vinaver *Rise* 22)

Vinaver praises French romancers for doing what he condemns Malory for accomplishing in *Le Morte Darthur*. Vinaver considers Malory to be unoriginal, yet he has clearly refashioned the Matter of Britain to convey his particular significance. Malory's return to English heroic ideals runs counter to the characteristics of French romance, so *Le Morte Darthur* is seen as faulty.

Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France are Vinaver's examples of French romance authors. A comparison of their presentations of the character of Arthur and that in Malory's work reveals how the differences between romance and heroic literature are manifest in *Le Morte Darthur*.

As most French Arthurian romances do, Chrétien's tales focus on the exploits and adventures of knights other than King Arthur. His tales use Arthur's court as a framing device and Arthur, himself, as a foil for their central

character. Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* subordinates Arthur, an ineffectual leader, to a code of inherited traditions, practices, and laws. Instead of Arthur being a lawgiver and enforcer, he is subject to laws and is mired in the opinions of his nobles.[42] In *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, Arthur recedes into the background, presumably wringing his hands in anxious anticipation of salvation at the hands of Lancelot. Ultimately, Lancelot proves to be Arthur's savior, but he first proves to be Guenivere's champion and savior. It is only as such that he saves Arthur's kingdom.[43]

Marie de France's lai, titled *Lanval*, is the only one that directly portrays Arthur. In it, Arthur and his court are depicted as shallow and superficial. Arthur and his kingdom appear debased and undeserving of loyalty and worship. Lanval eventually abandons all that Arthur's court represents as he rides away with his lady.[44]

The focus in French romance has shifted completely away from Arthur, and consequently, he is depicted as secondary to the knight at the heart of the romance. Kingship is entirely dependent on acceptability by the nobles and knights. In the French romances, Arthur is less a king than a figure-head. His role as king serves as foil for the knight-hero's aggrandizement. In Chrétien and Marie, King Arthur takes a second or third place behind Arthur the action-less, helpless, equivocating, indecisive, and ultimately pathetic man. Arthur's role in French romance is

strictly to link the courtly tales of French-modeled knights to an established milieu of narrative.

Malory's Arthur reflects ideals of heroic English kingship, and in order to understand what those characteristics are, we turn to several Anglo-Germanic sources including *Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon,* and *The Song of Roland.* Malory may or may not have known these texts directly, but his characterization of Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur* shows that he was intimately familiar with the ideals that these works embody. An examination of these works provides an insight into the nature of heroic leadership and illuminates these characteristics in Malory's Arthur.

In describing Scyld, the legendary founder of the Scylding dynasty, the *Beowulf*-poet makes it clear that an heroic king is successful in battle and honored among his neighbors, and through good works he accumulates bounty and distributes it generously. Hrothgar cites Heremod as an example of a bad king, and condemns killing one's countrymen and failing to reward honorable service as Heremod had done. His untempered arrogance and angry refusal of generosity resulted in the loss of God's grace and death. Hrothgar urges Beowulf to avoid the inglorious end of pride and greed, avoid the faults of Heremod, and instead to choose the better option. As Beowulf lays dying, he recalls his own successes as a king in familiar heroic terms. He has been a strong and good king, and he has not been guilty of

murdering any of his kinsmen. His actions in defeating the dragon to provide his people with the riches of his hoard speak of the ultimate generosity.[45]

The qualities of heroic, epic kingship displayed in *Beowulf*--unsurpassed might, generosity, and family/clan loyalty--are clearly mirrored in Malory's version of Arthur's rise to world dominance, the splendor and generosity of Arthur's court, and the Round Table, respectively.

In *The Battle of Maldon*, Earl Byrhtnoth, though not a king, leads his men in the king's name, and like Malory's Arthur does, Byrhtnoth leads by example. Leading in heroic style, he remains with his retainers, fighting valiantly against overwhelming odds until he is slain. After their leader falls, Byrhtnoth's most valiant retainers are inspired by his valor to fight to the death to serve their lord and uphold his and their honor. They display another trait of the heroic king. The heroic king inspires ultimate devotion in his followers.[46]

In similar fashion, Charlemagne, in *La Chanson de Roland*, prepares his men for battle to avenge the deaths of Roland and the men who died with him. He clearly knows what his duty to his men is in return for their service to him, and acknowledges his obligation to reward his men from his own wealth for their service. When he challenges them to avenge their slain kinsmen, the twenty thousand men with Charlemagne swear to stand by him without fail.[47]

This brief scene of Charlemagne, as does the whole of *The Song of Roland*, echoes the sentiments expressed in both *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. The heroic qualities these works identify--the lord's generosity, strength at arms, righteousness, and integrity--are present in Malory's Arthur as well. The heroic qualities of Charlemagne, Byrhtnoth, and Beowulf were very familiar to Malory and his audience. The Anglo-Saxon kings from Alfred up until the Norman Conquest also reflected the Germanic, heroic traits of kingship/leadership. In Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, these heroic qualities were attributed to Alfred, at least in part, because they were traits expected of a successful Anglo-Saxon king.

The courtly model of kingship in the French romance models is one of inaction if not ineffectiveness. Leadership is often somewhat arbitrary and often counterproductive. The king is often questioned and demeaned by his nobles, either privately or in public. Arthur is moved into the background and reduced to a miserable observer, and the focus shifts from the king to the actions and exploits of his knights.

The heroic model of kingship was firmly entrenched in the English psyche long before the Norman conquest and the influence of French romance ideals. The characteristics of the heroic leader, though not Arthur specifically, was familiar to Malory's Anglo-Norman audience. The heroic concept of leadership that Malory embodied in his character of Arthur embraces military strength, generosity to loyal

retainers, loyalty to family/clan, personal bravery, leadership by example, and devoted service from the men who serve the king.

Malory's Arthur clearly represents the heroic characteristics of kingship/leadership identified above. In comparing passages in *Le Morte Darthur* to their probable sources, we shall see that Malory *changed* the character of King Arthur to one more reminiscent of the heroic model.

In Arthur's coronation, Malory changes Arthur's allegiance from the church (a French romance characteristic) to the knights and common people of his kingdom, which is in keeping with Malory's emphasis on heroic qualities of kingship. Malory replaces the workings of Merlin's supernatural powers with the heroic personal prowess and leadership of Arthur. In the battle between Arthur and the eleven kings, Merlin's enchantment in the *Suite du Merlin* is replaced by victory due to Arthur's military prowess. King Arthur can rely on his own martial skills and leadership to ensure success in battle. Malory's Arthur's response to the emissaries from Rome is both defiant and heroic. In Malory's source, the *Suite du Merlin*, Arthur's response is significantly less aggressive and more diplomatic. In contrast to the king in Malory's source, Arthur, in *Le Morte Darthur* is clearly ready to back up his threat with force of arms; he is an heroic warrior king.

In an example unique to Malory, after Arthur has personally avenged Gryfflet, he returns to court and relates

his exploits to his gathered knights. Malory adds a brief passage that illustrates the knights' reaction to their lord's actions: "They mervayled that he wolde jouparde his person so alone. But all men of worship seyde hit was myrry to be under such a chyfftayne that wolde putte hys person in adventure as other poure knyghtis ded" (36). Malory's Arthur is a king, but he is also a knight. Malory emphasizes Arthur's personal bravery and his willingness to lead by example, as well as the loyalty engendered in his retainers by his actions. Each of these is a trait of heroic leadership noted earlier. Even Vinaver notes that this is unique to Malory's work.[48]

In "The Tale of Balin," Arthur's ideals are personified in the character of Balin. In the French text, the emphasis is on Balin's appearance, and his worth as a knight is judged in terms of how he looks. Malory's Balin expressly states that his worthiness is not merely in appearances:

> A, fayre damesell, [. . .] worthynes and good
> tacchis and also good dedis is nat only in
> araymente, but manhode and worship ys hyd within a
> mannes person; and many a worshipfull knyght ys
> nat knowyn unto all peple. And therefore worship
> and hardynesse ys nat in araymente. (39)

The idea that knightly actions and behavior, as opposed to courtly appearances, are the true indicators of worthiness is another characteristic that sets Malory's heroic vision

of knighthood apart from the courtly ideals of his French romance source.

The Pentecost Oath in *Le Morte Darthur* establishes the definition of the order of knighthood and in essence, states Malory's concept of heroic chivalry. Unique to Malory's version of the ending of "Torre and Pellinor," it is not merely a knightly code established to bolster the courtly accouterment of a knight. Instead, it is the code of knightly action.

In an episode in the included tale, "The War with the Five Kings," Arthur and his men destroy the remnants of the enemy army. In Malory's French source, the *Suite du Merlin*, Arthur only observes the battle against the remaining soldiers. However, in *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory has changed the material of his source to reflect the heroic trait of personal leadership. Malory's Arthur, unlike the French model, fights alongside his men, like Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and Roland.

Following the events of "The Great Tournament," in the *Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, Malory clarifies his heroic idea of loyalty to one's lord. During the tournament, Arthur attacks Lancelot with superior numbers. Gareth changes sides from Arthur's retinue and joins with Lancelot. Arthur chides Gareth for his decision, but after Gareth's proper knightly response, Arthur once again states the duties and behavior of a knight in heroic terms.

Arthur's reaction to the accusations made by Aggrevayne in, "Slander and Strife," an episode of the concluding tale, *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur*, illustrates the heroic concept of loyalty to his family/clan. In this case, the clan is the Round Table brotherhood of knights. Aggrevayne accuses Lancelot and Guenivere of treasonous adultery, and Arthur is

> full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir
> Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a
> demyng of hit, but he wold nat here theroff, for
> sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the
> quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge
> loved hym passyngly well. (674)

In Malory's possible sources for this tale, *Mort Artu* or the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, Arthur shows no reluctance to act. In the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, he takes regret-tinged but unhesitant action against a traitor. In *Mort Artu*, Arthur's actions are bitingly eager. Malory makes it clear that for Arthur the Round Table takes precedence even over Guenivere. The fellowship of the Round Table has become the embodiment of his ideals and has taken the place of the heroic idea of clan.

After Arthur is forced by circumstance to condemn Guenivere for treason. Gawain urges King Arthur to set aside his judgment against the queen, and Arthur chastises Gawain for his disregard of vengeance, a heroic concept. Arthur appeals to Gawain's sense of heroic duty to family and clan,

but Gawain acts the part of the true knight as outlined in the Pentecost Oath and by Arthur after the Great Tournament. He refuses to take the part of ignoble knights regardless of their blood relationship to him. Arthur, in his attempt to supplant the heroic blood-tie vengeance bond with the brotherhood bond of the Round Table, creates the paradox that will be the catalyst for the destruction of his ideals. In *Mort Artu*, Gawain confronts Arthur who ignores him, so he sadly leaves court. The exchange between Arthur and Gawain, the intricate counterbalance of loyalty and justice, is unique to Malory.

Malory abandons the ineffectual king of the French romances, and instead embraces the ideals of kingship embedded in the hearts and minds of the English people, an heroic king, an English king. The king who cowers in the background while his knights go out on adventures is a French, courtly one. The romances of Chrétien and the Lais of Marie serve this French model of a king. Malory chose for his telling of the Arthurian story an heroic and mostly English king.

Malory presents the life and ideals of King Arthur fashioned on an English heroic model, but he is also indebted to the French romance tradition. Malory drew his material from the romance cycles based on the Matter of Britain. He also used many of the narrative tools of his sources. The result is a work that both resembles and differs from a romance. *Le Morte Darthur* displays elements

of several different generic styles and forms. No single genre is sufficient to classify Malory's work, and because there are too many inconsistencies in its characteristics, the label of romance is misapplied to *Le Morte Darthur*. Several of Malory's tales, such as *The Tale of Sir Tristram* and *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, fit the genre of French romance very closely. However, those tales that focus on Arthur and are the thematic focal point of his work are furthest from the romance model. Instead, they emphasize the narrative elements of epic, chronicle, and history, and consequently seem to fit more closely the form of medieval history than romance.

Epic addresses the experiences and deeds of a larger-than-life hero from the perspective of history. Chronicle attempts to document important events to provide a record of the past. History attempts to explain and interpret past events for a contemporary audience. Modern critics have identified the characteristics of these literary genres, which allow a work to be classified within a given genre. The analysis of Malory's text reveals elements of epic, chronicle, and history, so the application of the generic identification of romance to *Le Morte Darthur* is questionable at best. *Le Morte Darthur* does have many narrative elements in common with Malory's sources, and in some ways it fits the mold of romance. However, there are flaws in Malory's style when considered only through the template of romance. The flaws apparent when viewed as

romance can be seen to be characteristics of epic, chronicle, and history.

In order to appreciate what the label of a genre says about the content of a text, we need to understand what the expected characteristics are of a given genre. The best place to begin defining epic is with W. P. Ker's analysis.[49] Ker provides several defining characteristics of medieval epic. He begins by explaining that medieval epic reflects the feudal, heroic social and political environment. The society that epic depicts is generally larger than life. Medieval aristocracy is at the social focus of epic, and it is presented as grand and often spectacular. Further, the action of epic revolves around common things--"cattle, sheep, piracy, abduction, merchandise, recovery of stolen goods, revenge" (Ker 8). Characters are central and essential to epic, which is focused on their actions. Epic attempts to "represent great actions in narrative, with the personages well defined" (Ker 14).

Epic narrative has at least two other critical traits. The first is a sense of the tragic; war, death, separation, tragic errors, and tragic flaws are the stuff of epic.[50] The second is the dramatic nature of the narrative. Epic narratives, with their emphasis on action over motivation, evoke a sense of drama being played out on a larger-than-life scale.

Ker addresses yet another quality of epic, one that is extraordinarily significant in its impact on classifying *Le*

Morte Darthur. Medieval epic is grounded in history. It concerns historic personages, events, or both. However, the presentation of historical actions is not necessarily accurate. Rather, epic uses history as a means to connect to the consciousness of its audience. It at once appeals to a sense of nationalism and community that binds the audience to the hero and his actions, and it allows interpretation of historical events within a contemporary context. Though based in historical details, epic is not bound to relate history as history. Ker says that epic has no "strict historical duty" (29).

Eugène Vinaver, in *The Rise of Romance*, defines epic as a literary genre but largely in terms of how it differs from romance.[51] He points out that the romancers were not interested in the "pseudo-historical kingdom of the chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, but the imaginary land of pure chivalry whose fame rested on the exploits of King Arthur's knights" (*Rise* 1). This turning away from historical, or pseudo-historical, subjects is an inherent part of his definition of the difference between French epic and French romance.

Vinaver identifies two narrative techniques that he classifies as belonging to epic literature. The first is the structural tendency of epic to consist of many loosely related separate scenes. French epic does not expect the reader to discern cause-effect relationships between component scenes; rather, an overall effect of the larger

whole is created simply by the various element scenes being experienced in combination. The second is that epic is "concerned exclusively with action and statement, not with motives" (*Rise* 11). Action is the meaning; the story is in the things that men do, not in why they do them.

French literary historians define French epic based on analysis of the surviving examples of the twelfth and thirteenth century *chansons de geste*. These poems embody the spirit of feudal society that grew out of the first crusade and victories over the Moors in Spain. These works center on historical personages, and the action of the epics contains elements of historical events. The *chansons* are relatively simple in thematic content and structure, and they emphasize action over motivation. As we have seen in epic generally, the people and events of the *chansons* are larger-than-life.

The characteristics of epic that distinguish it from other genres, particularly romance, as summarized by French literary historians, consist of six essential elements that affect thematic content:

An historical basis

A reflection of warrior's manners

A single ideal--to fight for God and for honor

Nothing or little about women

Nothing or little about love

Contain Christian marvels (6)[52]

The following distinct characteristics noted by Ker and Vinaver above should be added to the list of the French historians:

An aristocratic social milieu

A focus on action

Larger-than-life characters and events

A native setting as well as being historical

A focus on feudal duty

A thematically connected episodic structure

Each of these is present in Malory's text. The action of Malory's tales centers on the court of Arthur, and no characters from outside any court appear for any length of time at all. The characters are all more than what they seem. The knights are all best at what they do, or foils for those who are; they are their roles and not individuals who we are allowed to get to know. Malory very carefully gives specificity to the locations and times for the actions in his tales in order to give a sense of historical time and place. As we have seen, the structure of Malory's work is based in thematically related episodes.

D. M. Hill adds three additional differences between epic and romance. In the first of these, he notes that "Epic serves as a literature to a people for whom fighting (and, through it, enduring) is the essential requirement for survival;" romance on the other hand, reflects a people existing "some distance away from the immediate and stark question of survival" (105). Secondly, in epic, the hero is

tested, often to the point of death, in war service. In romance the same ideals as in epic are tested, but are done so in "a greater variety of contexts" and only infrequently to the point of death (105-106). Hill's third, and possibly most important, distinction is that epic tested the valor, integrity, honor, and nobility in the person of the hero, but in romance "it is the virtue rather than the person which the writer found important" (106). Once again, epic focuses on the individual's actions over motivations and the public perception of his attributes.[53]

Nathaniel Griffin examines the causal relationship suggested by the fact that epic exists before romance in the literary forms of the societies where both occur, and claims that "epic is an indigenous, the romance an exotic creation" (57). Griffin notes that epic is a patriotic literature, a celebration of a nation's glory, its victories, the nobility of its heroes, and the favor of the gods. Romance is an entertaining tale of human experience.

This concept leads to Griffin's primary thesis that epic is the literature of the people whose history it celebrates. Epic then becomes romance when it is incorporated into the literary traditions of a foreign people. There is an inherent connection between the author of an epic work and his audience. He can, and is expected to, draw on the individual awareness of his hearers, allude to common historical events and persons, and expect his audience to know the stories and their significance. Because

the epic author is referring to a common heritage and history, he can leave much unsaid while still being able to communicate to an understanding audience.

In contrast, the romance author must interpret the foreign concepts of his epic source material in terms that are understandable and acceptable to his audience. Though foreign to their romance audiences, these epic source tales are believed to be firmly set in history. In an effort to ensure historical veracity while reinterpreting essentially foreign epic ideals, the romance author relies on external, and preferably historical, authority. In a very real sense, the historical matter of epic reappears in romance, but the story (without its historical connection) is different, its purposes serving new masters. As both Chrétien and Marie did with the Arthurian material they used, the *matière*, the Matter of Britain, is the same from one genre to the next, but the *sen* is changed to meet the romance author's ends.[54] Edward Dowden echoes the emphasis on the historical element of epic, noting that "the deeds or achievements of a heroic person are glorified, and large as may be the element of invention in these poems, a certain historical basis or historical germ may be found, with few exceptions, in each" (9).[55]

The following characteristics can be added to or modify/clarify the previous listing of elements of epic literature:

> Generally patriotic/nationalistic in theme and
> subject
>
> Considered to be true or at least credible
>
> Founded on common ground between author and
> audience
>
> Firmly grounded in history of the audience and
> author

Malory's work possesses these traits as well as the earlier ones. The last of these, the foundation in the history of the author and audience is most critical to understanding what *Le Morte Darthur* is and what it is not. The historical effect of the text and the historical nature of its subject, the life of King Arthur of Britain, serve to separate Malory's work from the French romance tradition. Arthur is not a part of the shared history of the French romancers and their audience, but he is an integral part of Malory and his English audience's history.

In addition to epic, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* has been compared to the chronicle tradition. P. J. C. Field makes some intriguing connections between the chronicle style and that in Malory's work.[56] He observes that Malory's version of Arthur's story "looked to the past rather than to the future" (Field 10). Malory focuses on the historical material he is presenting rather than the method with which it is presented. Field notes that this is a trait "shared by the chroniclers and letter-writers of Malory's time" (38). Another way that Malory's work reflects the chronicle

tradition is that *Le Morte Darthur* presents the truth of the history of Arthur. That is, it represents the historical truth of Arthur as Malory understood it. The historical nature of a story told in a straightforward, unadorned, truthful manner suggests that it is in fact a true history, and this is the effect that *Le Morte Darthur* gives to its reader. Malory's sparing use of description also reflects the chronicle style. Generally devoid of detail, Malory's text emphasizes details of physical appearance only to make a point, or to otherwise serve the needs of the action of his tale. Nowhere in *Le Morte Darthur* do we get a clear description of any of the characters so as to create a comprehensive mental image of what each looks like. Malory does not spend time or energy creating visual images of courtly grandeur for his readers. He concentrates on the action, the embodiment of the themes that he is presenting, and leaves the picture-building to his audience. Malory's focus is on the life of King Arthur. He portrays the characters of Arthur's kingdom in terms of what they stand for. Their moral and ideal traits are better realized in the text of *Le Morte Darthur* than are their physical descriptions.

Like epic, a chronicle characteristic that exists in Malory's work is the notion that the story he is relating is both historical and factual. Malory's references to authority emphasize the continuity of his historical account. There is very little doubt as to the time frame of

Malory's story in relation to his audience. *Le Morte Darthur*
begins in a distant past, "in the dayes of Uther Pendragon"
(3). Malory's work, though not specifically placed in
chronological history, *is* firmly placed in the historical
past.

The effect of Malory's action-focused narrative style,
concerned with the matter of the story and devoid of
frivolous description, and the clear placement of the story
in the historical past, echoes the chronicle style of other
medieval writers. He is not telling entertaining and
provocative romance tales concerning a mythical king and his
court; rather, Malory is relating the historical account of
a legendary English king and his ideals.

Larry Benson's analysis of the structure and genre of
Malory's work focuses to a large degree on its historical
nature.[57] He focuses on the historical milieu of Malory's
text and concludes that Malory "wrote a peculiarly
fifteenth-century Arthurian work, for his book belongs to
the genre of one-volume prose histories that were popular at
the time, a genre in which the old cycles were reduced to
brief continuous narratives" (*Malory's* 4). Benson's
examination of Malory's text notes that Malory's choice to
use prose instead of verse is significant in distinguishing
the purpose of the text. After the decline of epic poetry
and its historically-based stories, verse became the medium
for romance narratives. Vernacular prose became the medium
for recording and chronicling history. Benson adds, "The use

of prose itself was a signal that the authors were dealing with 'facts,' and the prose writers took elaborate pains to authenticate their narratives" (*Malory's* 8). Malory, as we have seen, authenticates his work. He relies on the historical context of the sources, which themselves refer to authoritative sources. The reliance on authoritative sources serves three purposes in terms of establishing historicity. First, the authors' facts are grounded in reputed historical accounts. Second, each of the individual works derived from the original sources is "carefully fitted into the overall framework of that history" (Benson *Malory's* 9). Lastly, the work of each author is linked to the history of the whole story of Arthur.

Malory's historical emphasis in presenting the life and ideals of King Arthur derives from a style of writing that had its beginnings in the earliest stages of medieval literature. The epic tradition drew on historic events and characters, and was often intended to reflect the actual spirit of the history contained in it. Chronicle-style narrative sought to document freely, but as accurately as possible, the important occurrences of a given time. Another type of literary work that focused on history was the genre, or form, of the same name. These histories, though by modern standards inaccurate and misleading, were intended to provide an interpretive link for a contemporary age to those ages that preceded it.

Robert Hanning explores the nature of historiography of the Middle Ages, and focuses his analysis on the works of Gildas, Bede, and Geoffrey of Monmouth.[58] The latest of these dates from roughly the twelfth century and so predates Malory by about three hundred years, but the works that Hanning uses to develop his arguments are all, what he calls, "fall of Britain texts" (2), and Malory's work is also essentially a fall of Britain text. Each of the works that Hanning uses is, and was, considered as a historical treatment of the events it relates. A brief look at the historigraphic characteristics of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* reveals many similarities with *Le Morte Darthur*.

Fortune's wheel, an image associated with the structure and themes of *Le Morte Darthur*, evokes an image of cycles upon cycles. This cyclic nature of fortune derives from observed patterns of human existence throughout history, and as Hanning notes, it is this "cyclic nature of history" that lies at the heart of Geoffrey's narrative (140). The *Historia Regum Britanniae* explores the rise of Britain from the fall of Troy, paralleling the rise of Rome. The British people's fortune rides upward on the wheel only to be confronted by the Romans first, then the Anglo-Saxons. *Le Morte Darthur*, too, treats the cyclical nature of fortune and British history. In fact, Arthur's rise and fall are part of the material that Geoffrey introduces.

Hanning also explores Geoffrey's concern with the individual within the cycle of history. Hanning claims that

> Geoffrey exalted him [the individual] to a new
> stature, distinguishing him as a creature with a
> destiny and desires potentially different from
> those of his nation, and as an individual involved
> in a range of relationships not integral to, and
> even at odds with, the political relationships
> which determine national history. (143)

Malory's characters are exactly of this type. Lancelot,
Guenivere, Mordred, Gawain, and even Arthur, are all
destined, according to Malory's work, to the end which each
encounters. Each works on a personal scale to achieve
individual goals and desires. It is only through their
combined, interrelated actions that the national history is
determined.

The somewhat tenuous connection between Geoffrey's
historigraphical efforts and those of Malory lies in the
fact that Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* was the most
influential work of English history through Malory's time
and beyond.

Lee Patterson supports a view of romance as ahistorical
when he calls medieval romances "fictions largely
unconcerned with historical reality" but adds that these
"legendary histories, [. . .] found both their literary
inspiration and political purpose in Geoffrey of Monmouth's
Historia Regum Britanniae" (199, 200).[59] In the romances,
any historical elements that have not been pared away by the
author are backgrounded and often relegated to legend/myth

status. Romance is completely focused on the individual's qualities, experiences, and virtues. Malory, in turn, reclaims the historical element for *Le Morte Darthur*. Unlike Marie and Chrétien, Malory's work is not merely set in the physical and social context of Arthur's court. He embraces the history of King Arthur and embeds his tales firmly in that history. He does not only tell a tale conveniently set in the court of Arthur, he tells the tale of the court of King Arthur.

Arthur's history had become muddled with the legendary material of various authors. In the romances, the accreted material of the romancers masks the historical elements that exist in Geoffrey's work. Patterson argues that the imaginative nature of romance, its falseness, is what the English medieval historian attempted to overcome.

The historical nature of *Le Morte Darthur* is not something Malory applied to the material he was adapting. In essence, he was actually restoring the historical nature of the Arthurian tales that had been pared away or obscured by the romancers. Malory drew on the Matter of Britain as it had been captured "truthfully" and with authority in the French tales. *Le Morte Darthur* uses the material, the *matière*, of the French romances and some of their earlier English adaptations. Malory crafts it, albeit with the tools of romance, to his own historical interpretation, giving it a particular perspective, a *sen*, a feeling.

The reluctance to appreciate Malory's historical bent in his tales of the life of King Arthur is quite understandable. Rosalind Field, in her examination of the historical elements of English romance notes that

> Romance in England appears at its most characteristic in those works which claim to derive from the history of England. Such works in the Anglo-Norman and Middle English vernaculars of medieval England present particular problems of interpretation and evaluation. Their evident factual inaccuracies irritate the historically minded reader, while their deviation from the norms of the genre disappoint the reader whose expectations are set by the courtly romances of France. (163)[60]

Field attributes much of the relationship between historical writing and the development of English romance to the impact of the Norman Conquest. English and British heroes and monarchs were adopted by and linked to the Norman ruling house through whatever means possible in an effort to afford the Normans a link to the history of Britain.

Examining English romance from the comfort of a twenty-first century perspective allows a natural tendency to expect certain sophistication in literary forms and styles. Its absence is often considered a fault. However, the real fault lies in looking at Malory's work and expecting to see modern concepts of unity, consistency, and

thematic development. For scholars, trained in medieval French romance literature, the look back may be from a less dramatic literary distance, but the result may be even more critical. Expecting to see qualities of flourishing French romance in its "offspring" genre, as determined mostly by chronology and circumstance, and only finding bits and pieces muddled all together with elements from earlier styles, such as epic, chronicle, and history, critics are often disappointed by what they find. This seems to be particularly true in terms of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

Malory is indebted to the French romance tradition for many of the ideas and tools that he incorporated into his work. Yet, there are too many characteristics of epic, chronicle, and history in his work for it to be comfortably classified as a romance, even an English romance. Like the literary genres of epic, chronicle, and history, Malory's work focuses on action over motivation. It tells its tales with larger-than-life characters and events. It uses a thematically-connected episodic structure. It treats as subject matter the heroic feudal duties of knights and king and avoids the subjects of love and women, except where they serve overall heroic themes. It is national and patriotic; Malory has written about an English king and the English monarchy, in English, for an English audience. In addition, Malory obviously considers his tale to be true, or at least credible. Most importantly, however, *Le Morte Darthur*, as we have received it, is a *history* of King Arthur, an eminently

English king. Adapted from mostly French sources where Arthur is a foreigner and is relegated to virtual obscurity in the background of knightly tales of individual glory. Malory's work, in effect, reclaims Arthur and restores the history of his rise and fall to where it belongs, in the history of its English audience.

This examination of the structure, themes, and genre of *Le Morte Darthur* has opened new possibilities for research into Malory's landmark English work. Though there has already been considerable critical work done on Malory's text, both Caxton's version and Vinaver's version of the Winchester manuscript, it has focused on too narrow of a perspective. *Le Morte Darthur* has too long been examined through applied templates of romance, courtly love, and courtly chivalry. Arthur has too long been relegated to a secondary position. The current exploration of *Le Morte Darthur* builds on the long history of critical analysis and extensive scholarly work, but leads to the realization that *Le Morte Darthur* is more than an English retelling of French romances. We need to do less looking back at Malory's work, and instead let it speak for itself from its own context. If we do, the "English-ness" that Malory created for Arthur and the tales of his knights will call out to us. The structure of Malory's focuses the reader firmly on Arthur and his ideals. The character of Arthur reflects a noble, heroic king rooted in the Anglo-Saxon ideals that predate the Norman Conquest. In terms of genre, *Le Morte Darthur* is a

hybrid work, not a medieval romance, containing elements of many different literary genres, that serves to present the history of the reign of King Arthur. Malory's work, *Le Morte Darthur*, reclaims Arthur and Arthurian history from the myth and legends of the French romance tradition and plants them firmly into the history of Malory, his England, and his English audience.

Notes

[1] William Caxton, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*. See also James W. Spisak, ed., *Caxton's Malory*.

[2] Eugène Vinaver, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*.

[3] H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*.

[4] W. F. Oakeshott, "The Finding of the Manuscript." Oakeshott discusses how he discovered the manuscript in the Fellows Library at Winchester College in 1934. The manuscript was subsequently provided to Vinaver for editing.

[5] Lotte Hellenga, "The Malory Manuscript and Caxton." Based on infrared analysis revealing ink stains and an offset of type from Caxton's known typesets, Hellenga has established a physical connection between the Winchester manuscript and Caxton's printshop.

[6] Eugène Vinaver, ed., *Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947); and *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 2nd ed., (1967). Vinaver explains his idea of a single manuscript "clearly divided into several different works," and presents his edition, which "unlike all previous ones, appears in the form of eight separate romances" (xxx, xcviii).

[7] *Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947). Vinaver's critical apparatus identifies most of the significant differences between the probable French sources and the Winchester version of Malory.

[8] Thomas Malory, *Works*. Unless otherwise noted, all

direct quotations from Malory's work and Caxton's preface are taken from this source.

[9] H. Oskar Sommer, "Studies on the Sources of *Le Morte Darthur*." Sommer identifies which sources correspond to the various sections of Malory's text as divided by Caxton, and provides a brief discussion of Malory's use of each.

[10] H. Oskar Sommer, "Studies on the Sources of *Le Morte Darthur*." Sommer mentions both of these works as sources used by Malory. The acceptance of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as a source was a source of controversy for several decades.

[11] See for example: R. H. Wilson, "Malory's Naming of Minor Characters;" "Addenda on Malory's Minor Characters;" and "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance." William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight*. Matthews discusses the influence of other English writers on Malory, and concludes that Malory was familiar with their work. Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur. H. Oskar Sommers, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*. Sommers' identification of a number of different sources from which Malory adapted his work suggests an awareness of a significant number French sources. Eugène Vinaver, *Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947). Vinaver identifies several French sources as possible material for several of Malory's tales, suggesting a fairly broad familiarity with the general body of the Arthurian legends.

[12] Helen Iams Wroten, "Malory's *Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius* Compared with Its Source, The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*." Wroten provides a detailed

line-by-line comparison. Mary Dichmann, "'The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius': The Rise of Lancelot." Wilfred L. Guerin, "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution." Michael James Stroud, "Malory and the *Morte Arthure*." William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthur*. Matthews suggests that Malory omitted the final quarter of the source in his tale two in order to allow Arthur to be triumphant, and to delay the beginning of his downfall until later in Malory's work.

[13] James Douglas Bruce, "The Middle English Metrical Romance *Le Morte Arthur,* Its Sources and Its Relation to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*." Eugène Vinaver, "Notes on Malory's Sources." There are a number of critics who support Bruce and Vinaver.

[14] Among those who argued that the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* was in fact a source for Malory are: Robert H. Wilson, "Malory, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and the *Mort Artu*;" and "Notes on Malory's Sources." E. Talbot Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*."

[15] Vinaver identifies Hardyng's *Chronicle* in his commentary for his 1947 edition of Malory as a source of some material. Matthews briefly examines this source as well in his, *The Tragedy of Arthur*. Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory's Use of Hardyng's Chronicle." Robert H. Wilson, "More Borrowings by Malory from Hardyng's *Chronicle*."

[16] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur.

[17] Ernest Rhys, ed., *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail*. George Saintsbury, *The Flourishing of Romance*. Andrew Lang, "*Le Morte Darthur*." Lang finds similarities in narrative qualities and thematic elements between Malory's work and Homeric epic.

[18] Most notable and influential of the critics to see Malory as working in a French tradition is Eugène Vinaver. The most prominent critics to see Malory as indebted to an English romance tradition are: Ernest Rhys, *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail*; George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm*; Robert H. Wilson, "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance;" William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight*; and Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur.

[19] Vinaver introduces the idea of *entrelacement* and Malory's untangling of it in the introduction to his 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript. Others who address this concept include: C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*;" and Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*.

[20] Vinaver bases his analysis of the structure of the Winchester manuscript on textual evidence.

[21] Robert Mayer Lumiansky, ed. *Malory's Originality*. Lumiansky identifies differences between Malory's text and his sources, and examines how these differences contribute to the unifying theme of Malory's work. Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*. Moorman contends that *Le Morte Darthur*

is unified throughout, and that Malory intended to write a single, focused narrative.

[22] Robert M. Lumiansky, "The Question of Unity in Malory's *Morte Darthur;*" and Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur.* Historical unity is that unity intended by the author, and critical unity is that perceived by the audience whether intended or not.

[23] For a thorough overview of the major threads of this argument, see Sam Dragga, "The Unanswered Question of Unity in the Writings of Sir Thomas Malory: A Review of the Critical Studies."

[24] For examples of a thematic element creating an enveloping structure, see Nancy H. Owen and Lewis J. Owen, "The Tristram in the *Morte Darthur*: Structure and Function;" Kevin T. Grimm, "Knightly Love and the Narrative Structure of Malory's Tale Seven;" "Fellowship and Envy: Structuring the Narrative of Malory's Tale of Sir Tristram;" and Harry E. Cole, "Forgiveness as Structure: 'The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere.'"

[25] This idea is also explored in detail in Patricia Carol Roby, "The Tripartite Structure of the Works of Sir Thomas Malory."

[26] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur. Benson argues based on comparisons with other medieval cycles' style and structure that Malory crafted his own cycle of Arthurian tales.

[27] For a good review of the genre discourse in relation

to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* see Duane Edwin Nystrom,
"Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Four Modern Perspectives on Genre;"
and Ruth Morse, "Back to the Future: Malory's Genres."

[28] Elizabeth S. Sklar, "The Undoing of Romance in
Malory's *Morte Darthur*."

[29] Beverly Kennedy, "The Re-Emergence of Tragedy in
Late Medieval England: Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*."

[30] Lee W. Patterson, "Heroism and the Rise of Romance:
An Essay in Medieval Literary History." John Pierce Watkins,
"The Hero in Sir Thomas Malory."

[31] Some examples include: Francoise Le Saux, "Pryvayly
and Secretely: Personal Letters in Malory's 'Book of Sir
Tristram de Lyones.'" Kathryn McCullough, "Homily as
Intrastructure and Extrastructure: Malory's Redaction of the
Queste del Saint Graal." Donald Hoffman, "Malory's
'Cinderella Knights' and the Notion of Adventure."

[32] For the importance and impact of Malory's use of
dialogue, consider the following: D. Thomas Hanks, "Malory,
Dialogue, and Style;" Peter R. Schroeder, "Hidden Depths:
Dialogue and Characterization in Chaucer and Malory;" and
Ann Dobyns, *The Voices of Romance: Studies in Dialogue and
Character*.

[33] Examples of these include: James Leo Wyatt, "The
Ways of Worship: Motif Patterns in Sir Thomas Malory's 'Tale
of Gareth;'" Arnold A. Sanders, "Malory's Transition
Formulae: Fate, Volition, and Narrative Structure;" and
Robert G. Bass, "The Dream as a Narrative Device in Thomas

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*."

[34] Eugène Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Vinaver claims that Malory wrote Tale 2 (*King Arthur and Emperor Lucius*) before he wrote Tale 1 (*The Tale of King Arthur*). While this is largely accepted, there are opposing views. For example: Helen Wroten, "Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius' Compared with Its Source;" Edward Kennedy, "The Arthur-Guenevere Relationship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*;" and Terence McCarthy, "Order of Composition in the *Morte Darthur*." McCarthy claims that stylistic evidence supports an order of composition of 6, 2, 5, 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 (numbers indicate Tale numbers as arranged in Vinaver's edition).

[35] Roger S. Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*. His argument is based on an analysis of the plot's structure and focuses on the consistency of themes throughout *Le Morte Darthur* to support his analysis.

[36] Stephen Knight, *The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's Arthuriad*. Knight looks strictly at stylistic continuity and divides Malory's text into a two-part structure.

[37] Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. Camille argues that the text at the center of the page gradually lost prominence to the marginal notes, commentary, and drawings.

[38] W. M. Richardson, "A Tragedy Within a Tragedy: Malory's Use of the Tale of Balin as a Thematic Analogue." Richardson's work originally suggested this interpretation

to me.

[39] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance.*

[40] Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance.*

[41] Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, eds., *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader.* Variation refers to the technique of adding additional phrases that amplify the subject/object in order to clarify it but without adding a new referent. The technique of enumeration builds a series of syntactically parallel clauses that have different meanings, in effect creating a multiple subject/direct object to serve poetic purposes (266-67).

[42] Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide.*

[43] Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charrete.*

[44] Marie de France, *Lanval, Lais de Marie de France.*

[45] Howell D. Chickering, Jr., trans., Beowulf: A *Dual-Language Edition.*

[46] John C. Pope, ed., "The Battle of Maldon."

[47] *La Chanson de Roland,* Ed. and Trans. Gerard J. Brault.

[48] Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory.* This passage does not exist in any of the extant versions of the *Suite du Merlin,* and Vinaver concludes that "The passage would seem to reflect M[alory]'s own view of how a chieftain should behave" (1302).

[49] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance.*

[50] For an informative overview of the idea of the tragic element in epic and detailed examples from the corpus

of extant medieval texts, see Ker 65-75.

[51] Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*.

[52] Leon Verriest, *L'Évolution de la Littérature Française*, 2nd ed.

[53] D. M Hill, "Romance as Epic."

[54] Nathaniel E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance."

[55] Edward Dowden, *A History of French Literature*.

[56] P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*.

[57] Larry D. Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur.

[58] Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*.

[59] Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature*.

[60] Rosalind Field, "Romance as History, History as Romance."

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