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Thomas Malory - An Introduction

In 1469-70, a man named Thomas Malory (1405-1471) sat down to write a book [1] about the adventures of King Arthur and his knights ? a book that indirectly gave rise to works ranging from the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson to the Prince Valiant comics and Camelot musicals of the twentieth century.

Produced at the height of the Wars of the Roses (c.1469-70), then published by England's first printer, William Caxton, in 1485, Malory's text has been seen throughout the past five hundred years as both an idealisation of perfect knightly behaviour and a thoroughly bad example... and sometimes as both at once. Writing from prison, Malory adapts a bewilderingly wide variety of sources ? including English histories, books of prophecy, popular romances and prestigious French Arthurian cycles ? to produce a text that is often seen as the point of inception for modern-day Arthurian storytelling. Preserved in two prints and a long-lost manuscript, all dating from the late fifteenth century, it encompasses, in Caxton's words, 'noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin', and is still widely read and studied today.

Who was Sir Thomas Malory?

The text now known as the *Morte Darthur [2]* (see 'Print and Manuscript' [3]) is signed repeatedly by its author, who styles himself as both "Sir Thomas Malleorré, knyght" and "knyght presoner, Sir Thomas Malleorré". Moreover, the first printed version of the text attests that 'book was ended the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth, by "Sir Thomas Maleore, knight" ? in either 1469 or 1470. The first problem in identifying the figure of Malory is that there are public records of at least three men with the same name alive during this period ? Thomas Malory of Papworth, Huntingdonshire, Thomas Malory of Hutton Conyers, Yorkshire, and Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, Warwickshire. Biographical and linguistic evidence uncovered in the 1890s by H.O. Somner and George Kittredge suggests that Malory of Newbold Revel is the most likely candidate ? which reveals interesting information about his status as 'knight prisoner'.

Historical records show that a Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel was charged and convicted with offences including ambush, attempted murder, robbery, blackmail and rape. A particularly lurid story relates him being arrested for theft and assault and locked up in the Mountford manor house in Warwickshire on the 27th of July, 1445... then, later that evening, breaking out, swimming the moat, and spending the following two nights breaking into nearby Coombe Abbey to steal ornaments, money and silverware (P.J.C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, p.101). It is known that he spent most of the period 1452-1460 in London prisons, and he was later excluded from a number of general wartime pardons issued by Edward IV during the Wars of the Roses:

- 14 July, 1468: General pardon for war prisoners excludes "Thomas Malarie, kt"
- 24 August, 1468: Pardon "shall not extend to Thomas Malorie, miles"

- 1 December 1468: Pardon "not to inlcude any customer, nor Humfrey Nevyll knight, Thomas Malarie knight"
- 22 February 1470: Malory again excluded from fourth general pardon

Justice

Why, then, would a man with such a dubious relationship to the law commit himself to writing a long and detailed account ? over 430 leaves in the Caxton print ? of honour, worship and the upholding of the knightly Pentecostal Oath?

One explanation may be seen in the preoccupation with imprisonment that runs through the book. The knight Balin, hero of one of the earlier stories and the maker of 'The Dolorous Stroke', begins the tale as "a poore knyght with kynge Artre that had bene presonere with hym half a yere for sleyng of a kniyght which was cosyne unto kynge Arthure" ? having attracted the disfavour of the king for having killed the wrong person at the wrong time. Malory also writes about the imprisonment of Sir Tristram with a tellingly personal touch:

sir Trystram endured there grete payne, for sikness had undirtake him, and that ys the grettist payne a presoner may have. For alle the whyle a prysoner may have his helthe of body, he maye endure under the mercy of God, and in hope of good delyveraunce. But whanne sekenes toucheth a prysoners body, than may a presoner say all welth is hym berauffte, and than hath he cause to wayle and wepe...

(Sir Tristram endured there great pain, for sickness had overtaken him, and that is the greatest pain a prisoner may have. For all the while a prisoner has his bodily health, he may endure under the mercy of God and in hope of a good deliverance. But when sickness touches a prisoner's body, then may he say that all wealth is taken from him, and then has he cause to wail and weep...)

Launcelot

The figure of Sir Launcelot, whose role Malory expands and enlarges from his French source material [4], also provides a way of negotiating issues surrounding sin, punishment and redemption. Throughout the text, Launcelot spends a significant proportion of his time being taken prisoner ? by evil witches, lustful queens and traitorous knights such as the dastardly Sir Melleagaunt ? and subsequently fighting his way clear to emerge more honourable and victorious than before. Yet Launcelot is also a compromised figure, who cannot wholly erase the traces of his errors: as he discovered in the Grail Quest that takes place towards the end of Malory's work, his prowess is unparalleled but he remains 'the best sinful knight of the world', left behind when the more perfect Galahad ascends to heaven.

See also:

- Print and Manuscript [3] by Anna Caughey [5]
- 'Drawn out of Freynsh': Malory and His Sources [4] by Anna Caughey [6]
- Arthurian Afterlives: Early Modern Arthur [7] by Anna Caughey [6]

Links
[1] http://writersinspire.org/content/morte-darthur
[2] http://writersinspire.org/content/la-mort-darthure-v-1
[3] http://writersinspire.org/content/print-manuscript
[4] http://writersinspire.org/content/drawn-out-freynsh-malory-his-sources

[5] http://writersinspire.org/../people/anna-caughey
[6] http://writersinspire.org/people/anna-caughey
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