# 'Drawn out of Freynsh': Malory and His Sources

Malory repeatedly refers to his works as having been 'drawn out of Freynsh'. When a particular episode or assertion seems in need of verification, he will often reassert that his translation is 'as the Frenche book sayeth...'. But in fact, Malory's text in drawn from many sources, not a single book ? and not all of these were in French. Examining Malory's sources is an important route into understanding the text ? the ways in which he combines different, and sometimes conflicting, Arthurian traditions help explain what has sometimes been seen as the inconsistent or 'patchwork' nature of the text. Source studies can also help scholars to arbitrate when conflicts arise between the Westminster and Caxton variations (see 'Manuscript and Print'), and can provide clues when the existing text is confusing or unintelligible. Examining the sources from which Malory worked also helps us to draw conclusions about what Malory's readership would have known about the Arthurian legends and expected from an Arthurian story, and the changes that he makes to his sources also give some indication of his priorities as a storyteller.

Malory works from two major types of sources ? chronicles and romances. Medieval chronicles are an early form of historical writing. Although they may contain stories that appear fantastical to modern-day readers, they typically make truth-claims and purport to be 'factual'. In the chronicles, Arthur is usually given a specific (if at times fantastic) place in British history, grounded in a set location and time. The chronicle sources that Malory uses include Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittanie* (1136), which features Merlin and his prophecies, Arthur's Roman campaign, Mordred and Arthur's final retreat to Avalon. Wace's *Brut* (1155) is an Anglo-Norman account that introduces the Round Table and elements of 'chivalry', La?amon's *Brut* (c.1190) is an English translation and extension of Wace, and the very recent Hardyng's *Chronicle* (1457, 64), presented to Henry VI and revised for both Richard, Duke of York and Edward IV, is an extended narrative of British history to date.

Medieval romances, by contrast, are more abstracted and more fantastical, 'concerned with adventures of individual knights in a timeless setting' (Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library* (2008), p.2). They are typically written in verse (although some are in prose) and are always in the vernacular ? hence the term 'romance', which was originally used to distinguish French, English or other romance-language vernaculars from Latin. Romances are not necessarily concerned with love, and are certainly not 'romance stories' in the twentieth-century sense of the word (listen to the talk by Laura Ashe on The Birth of Romance in England [1]). While the French Arthurian that romances that Malory draws upon tend to be preoccupied with courtly love and magic, his English romance sources are often more concerned with knightly battles, prestige and adventure. Malory's English romance sources include *Sir Tristrem* (c. early 14th century), the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (c.1400) and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (c.1387-1400). Recent scholarship (see Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library*, 2008) suggests that small elements, such as names and motifs, may also be taken from *Sir Orfeo* (c. late 13th century/early 14th century), *Sir Tryamour* (late 14th century), *Gawayne and the Carl of Carlyle* (c.1400) and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (c.15th century).

Malory's French romances are drawn from an even wider net of potential source material. He appears to be working from the romances of Chrétien de Troyes (c.1159-1191), whose *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* ('The

Knight of the Cart') provides the first known written adventure for Lancelot (or 'Launcelot', as Malory tends to refer to him), the character who would become Malory's tragic hero. Interestingly, while Malory venerates Launcelot, he is somewhat reticent when retelling Chrétien?s tale, which depicts the knight undertaking the humiliating act of riding in a common cart while on the way to rescue Guinevere from a kidnapper. Malory cuts the story short, excusing himself on the grounds that '... bycase I have loste the very mater of Shevalere de Charyot I depart frome the tale of sir Launcelot' ('because I have lost the book of *Le Chevaier de la Charette* I depart from the tale of Sir Launcelot'). This may perhaps suggest discomfort on his part with the prospect of relating a story in which Launcelot is shamed ? or, of course, it may also indicate a genuine loss of source material!

Malory also draws upon texts from the Vulgate Cycle (c.1214-1235). This was the first great attempt to collect the existing Arthurian stories together into a 'cycle', creating a modular text that could be presented in different orders and combinations in various manuscripts. Encompassing the Prose *Lancelot*, the *Queste del Saint Graal* ('Quest for the Holy Grail'), *Le Mort Artu* ('The Death of Arthur'), the *Suite de Merlin* ('Story of Merlin') and the *Estoire del Saint Graal* ('History of the Holy Grail'), it aims to follow the story from its early origins, including the birth of Merlin and the pre-history of the Grail, to its conclusion with Arthur's death, an ambition that is broadly shared by Malory's work. Malory also draws upon Versions II and IV of the French Prose *Tristran* (c.1220-1240), the later Post-Vulgate Cycle (c.1225-1240), and other French romances such as the Prose *Merlin* (c.13th century), *Perlsevaus* (c.1200-1210) and *L'Âtre Périlleux* (c.1250).

Given Malory?s imprisoned status at the time that he was writing (see <u>Who Was Sir Thomas Malory?</u> [2]), how did he get access to these books? While it is possible that in some cases, he was working from memories of earlier readings, the detailed correspondence between phrases and word usage in some sections, such as 'The Queste of the Sankgreal' and 'The Tale of Arthur and Lucius', seems to imply that he referred closely to the sources while writing. As Vinaver reveals, the answer may lie in the location of Newgate Prison, in which Malory was held:

*In the monastery of the Order of the Grey Friars, across the road from Newgate, was a library from which another famous prisoner, Charles d'Orleans, released in 1440 after a long period of captivity, had borrowed many a manuscript book. It was possibly there that Malory found some of his 'books of French'. (Vinaver, Works I, p.xxvi).*

It is possible that a twentieth-century mental image of Malory as 'knight prisoner' ? with associated penury, dungeon-style accommodation and hardship ? may not match up entirely with his experiences in Newgate, which had been rebuilt in 1423 and now offered a fresh water supply, central hall and rooms containing chimneys and privies. Gaolers had been forbidden by statue from profiteering by selling food and drink to prisoners at inflated rates, and conditions were being regularly inspected. It is possible that Malory may have been able either to bring his books with him into prison, or to negotiate book loans that allowed him to complete his works under prison conditions.

As a work of translation, Malory's text is uneven ? Terence McCarthy describes it as a 'mix of accuracy and dishonesty, of quotation and camouflage' (Terence McCarthy, *Malory and his Sources* in Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Edwards, ed., A Companion to Malory (1996) p.77). He tends to emphasise scenes of battle, conflict and the winning of 'worship', or public acclaim and honour, and to cut references to the amatory, the magical and the spiritual. These cuts are especially evident in Books I, VI, VII and VIII, and can at times add to the confusing, somewhat dreamlike atmosphere of the text. One example is Malory's leaving-out of the explanation of Merlin's magical conception given in Geoffrey of Monmouth ? while in Geoffrey, a learned man explains that the boy Merlin has second sight because he was fathered by a demon/incubus on a Christian lady, Malory omits this by simply introducing the adult Merlin with no further information regarding the source of his powers. This means that later in the text, when Malory?s does follow his source material by having the damsel Nynyve insist that she does not want anything to do with Merlin because he is 'a devil's son', the comment appears to have come from nowhere ? heightening the text?s atmosphere of strangeness and confusion.

For more information, see the list of secondary critical material given below.

**Further reading:**

**Some helpful editions of sources:**

- W.R.J. Barron, ed., *The Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut* (2001).
- Reneé Curtis, ed., *The Romance of Tristan* (1994).
- William Kibler, ed., *Arthurian Romances* (1991) (Chrétien).
- Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* (1993-5).
- Michael Reeve and Neil Wright, ed., *The History of the Kings of Britain* (2007).
- Judith Weiss, ed.,*Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British* (2002).

  **Secondary criticism:**

  - Margery Bassett, 'Newgate Prison in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 18:2 (1943).
  - J.A.W. Bennett, *Essays on Malory* (1963).
  - P.J.C. Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources* (1998).
  - - - -., *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (1993).
  - Edward D. Kennedy, 'Malory and his English Sources', in Toshiyuki Takamiya, ed., *Aspects of Malory* (1986).
  - Terence McCarthy, 'Malory and his Sources' in Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Edwards, ed., *A Companion to Malory* (1996).
  - Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur* (2008).
  - Eugéne Vinaver, *Malory's Morte d'Arthur in the Light of a Recent Discovery* (1935).
  - - - -., 'Principles of Textual Emendation', *Studies in French Language and Medieval Literature Presented to Professor Mildred K. Pope* (1939).

  **See also:**

  - Thomas Malory - An Introduction [3] by Anna Caughey [4]
  - Print and Manuscript [5] by Anna Caughey [4]
  - Arthurian Afterlives [6] by Anna Caughey [4]

**Links**

[1] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/birth-romance-england

[2] http://writersinspire.org/who-was-sir-thomas-malory

[3] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/thomas-malory-introduction

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

[5] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/print-manuscript

[6] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/arthurian-afterlives