

# The Morte D'arthur



Sir  
Thomas  
Malory

# *The Morte Darthur*

by

Sir Thomas Malory

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## Foreword

In this abridgment of the *Morte Darthur* we have attempted a new method of presenting Malory. Believing not only that he is a significant figure in the development of English prose but that he also tells a story well (once the reader is able to thread his way through the intricacies of digression), we have tried to present the essential elements that for nearly five centuries have placed the *Morte Darthur* among the glories of English prose narrative.

We have therefore sought to preserve all of Malory's story except the incidents which threaten to destroy its unity. That story, we believe, records the rise of Arthur as a great legendary monarch, the institution of the Round Table, the search for the Grail, the surpassingly beautiful love story of Launcelot and Guinevere, and the inevitable crumbling of Arthur's kingdom. The story of Tristram and Iseult perforce finds a place here. Consuming about a quarter of Malory's entire book, however, it badly needed pruning. We have reduced it severely, without losing, we think, anything vital to the story.

Several improvements, we hope, have been made. Since Caxton's text is hardly sacrosanct, we have treated it with not too much reverence. His book and chapter divisions we have nearly always ignored, preferring to block out Malory's story into divisions and subdivisions of our own. Furthermore, rather than present the usual book of fragmentary selections, we have attempted to draw our materials together into a continuous narrative. Consequently it has been necessary at times to break with Caxton's sequence. We have not scrupled to create a new continuity when it served the purpose of presenting a coherent story. But in general we have preserved Caxton's sequence. Throughout, Malory tells his own story; but by the prompting of the "redactors," he silently omits large blocks of digressive adventures. Plenty yet remains to give a flavor of medieval chivalry. And the removal of some of the underbrush has at times thrown the characters into startling relief.

Other innovations demand a word. We believed that the narrative would be improved by paraphrasing, but instead of paraphrasing after

the manner of the modern novel, we have used a block method, which retains to a large extent the rhythm and the solid quality of Malory's prose, and yet enables the reader to find occasional resting places. To facilitate the reading still further we have punctuated the dialogue within these blocks. We hope that the present method will recommend itself on the ground of unity and continuity.

The modern reader demands a readable text. That requirement, we believe, we have met, not only by mechanical innovations, but by retaining the important materials, strongly braced and sharply outlined.

In such an abridgment of Malory we have found it necessary to transpose only a few passages. The reader who is already acquainted with the *Morte Darthur* will readily discover these, the most notable of which are concerned with Excalibur, with Merlin's prophecy that Mordred shall slay his father at Salisbury, and with the concluding passages in the Tristram story. Interpolations composed of Malory's own phrasing transposed from their position in the Caxton text have not been indicated. Interpolations of words other than Malory's have invariably been placed in brackets.

# Introduction

## I. ARTHURIAN STORIES BEFORE MALORY

Malory comes at the end of the Middle Ages, a period in which stories multiplied by the hundreds. These dealt with widely varied subjects. In addition to numerous tales treating miscellaneous materials, there were large bodies of stories dealing with what scholars have come to call the three great "matters," concerning Rome, France, and Britain. The matter of Rome dealt not only with narratives about Rome itself, but also with those about Greece, Thebes, and Troy. The matter of France dealt in the main with the deeds of Charlemagne and his warriors. The best and most famous story using these materials was the *Chanson de Roland*, a French poem containing some epic qualities. But by far the most popular of the three, and that which produced the richest yield of stories, was the matter of Britain. This dealt with King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. The literature which arose from it became known and loved over almost the whole of Western Europe.

The stories about Arthur seem to have had their beginning in Great Britain. It is generally believed now that they have some basis, however slight, in history. Scholars have discovered evidence that a Briton chieftain or military leader, who came to be called Arthur, distinguished himself by fighting against the Saxons in the last years of the fifth century and in the early years of the sixth. It is thought that he gained some military knowledge and experience from serving with the Romans; but that he found his great opportunity to make a name for himself as a fighter and leader after the Roman legions had withdrawn and left the native Britons vulnerable to the attacks of fierce Saxon pirates and plunderers. He must have fought in many battles, but the achievement which probably more than any other caused his countrymen to remember him was the part he played in the great victory which the Britons won over the Saxons in the celebrated battle of Mount Badon (c. 500). Here the Saxons were so badly defeated that thereafter for almost fifty years they let the Britons alone. This battle has been identified with the last and great-

est of the "twelve great battles in the West" in which, according to later stories, King Arthur fought. It seems, therefore, in spite of very meager information available about a truly historic Arthur, that someone sufficiently distinguished himself near the year 500 to gain a permanent hold on the imagination and affections of the English people, and to become the center of an ever-growing legend.

Before the twelfth century the extant documents relating to Arthur are rare. One of Arthur's contemporaries, Gildas, a churchman proud of his Roman citizenship, wrote in Latin a history in which he tells of wars between the Britons and the Saxons and dwells in particular on the great victory won by the Britons at Mount Badon. But he nowhere names Arthur. Some scholars attempt to explain this omission by pointing out that Gildas was in general pessimistic about the ability of the native Briton leaders so that even if he knew about Arthur he may still have thought it not worth while to extol him. Arthur is first mentioned by one Nennius in a Latin chronicle, *Historia Britonum*, written about 826. Nennius seems to have attempted to make use of all the records relating to British history which were available to him. He says specifically that Arthur fought in twelve great battles, the last of which, Mount Badon, resulted in a great victory for the Britons. He indicates that Arthur held a military position of some rank: "*Ipse dux erat bellorum.*" His Arthur was not a king, but he was famous.

Probably there were other early writings about Arthur which have been lost. Certainly, long before the twelfth century all kinds of pseudo-historical and imaginative stories about him had risen and gained popularity among the common people of Great Britain, France, and even Italy. In the eleventh century babies in northern Italy were being given the names of Arthur's knights; and the exploits of these knights were being commemorated in the sculpture of the Cathedral of Modena. In Wales the oral tradition of stories concerning Arthur seems to have been particularly vigorous. The *Mabinogion*, a collection of tales translated from the *Welsh Red Book of Hergest* found in a fourteenth-century manuscript, contains stories which suggest folklore going far back through the centuries; and some of these stories are Arthurian. Furthermore, William of Malmesbury, a very able English chronicler of the early twelfth century, again mentions Mount Badon and, after referring to the "deceitful tales and dreams" about Arthur which were popular among the Britons, declares that Arthur deserves a better fate and should be celebrated in "true history." The chief significance of his comment lies in its implication that the oral tradition of stories about Arthur

had in William's day become so lively that he was somewhat annoyed.

Not until the twelfth century was well under way, however, did the stories about Arthur come into their own. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin chronicle, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1137), is the first noteworthy extant treatment of Arthur in literature. Although Geoffrey professed to be a historian and used the form of the chronicle, his work is really the first Arthurian romance. He said that he took his material from a book given to him by his friend Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford; but such a book has never been found. Geoffrey could have used a book which has been lost, but it is fairly certain that he treated his source materials, whatever they were, with great imaginative freedom and shaped them to serve purposes of his own. Inspired by patriotism, he attempted to provide the ruling class of Normans, who had now lived in Great Britain long enough to love the land, with a British king or emperor who would appear as great as Charlemagne. Thus Geoffrey's chief purpose was political. In elaborating the story of Arthur, he connected him with Brutus, the legendary father of the Britons, who was said to be the great-grandson of the Trojan Aeneas. His Arthur, furthermore, conquers even the Romans. Thus Geoffrey, mingling scholarship with imaginative liveliness, was the first to represent Arthur as the brilliant and powerful king who would appear again and again in later romances and who would become the center of a great number of stories about the exploits of many gallant knights. But Geoffrey did not complete the story: much was to be added later, including the stories of Tristram, Launcelot, and Galahad and the Grail.

Geoffrey grew up in a Benedictine monastery near Monmouth in Wales. Wace, the next important writer who told the story of King Arthur, was born in Jersey, however, and lived most of his life in Normandy. Translating and modifying Geoffrey very freely, Wace produced a narrative in octosyllabic French verse which was much longer than Geoffrey's. Wace's poem, *Le Roman de Brut* (c. 1155), has more romantic coloring than Geoffrey's and places greater emphasis on the ideals of chivalry. It makes abundant use of sharp, vivid details; and its settings relate to definite geography, not to fairyland. Wace also adds some interesting information about the Round Table. His story indicates how important French qualities of imagination, French taste, and French ideals and manners were in shaping the stories about Arthur. Thus in the twelfth century, the century which more than any other before or since gave to the stories about Arthur the peculiar glory and brilliance which have made them one of the

great treasures of literature, the French joined the English in enjoying and elaborating these stories. Not only Wace, but Geoffrey Gaimar, another translator of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the talented Marie de France, who composed highly polished poems called *lais* about Arthur and other subjects, wrote in French.

But the most gifted French poet who treated Arthurian stories in this century, and one of the most gifted who have ever treated them, was Crestien de Troyes. In his poems the metrical romance of the Middle Ages came into full flower. He wrote these poems—*Erec*, *Cligés*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain*, and *Perceval*—some time between 1160 and 1189. Launcelot, the perfect knight and lover, was his favorite hero. Crestien, a highly sophisticated and refined poet of excellent taste and of admirable craftsmanship, composed his romances in a manner that would appeal to the lords and ladies of the courts and to other people to whom the social graces meant much. He was thoroughly familiar with tenets of the "Courtly Love" system, and was fond of interpreting the behavior of the knights and ladies in his romances in terms of his own psychological beliefs and the teachings of this system.

Courtly Love, or *Pamour courtois*, though its ultimate origins are none too clear, appears to have come into existence in the poetry of the Troubadours in Provence during the last years of the eleventh century. From there it made its way to northern France. It began as a literary formula, but before long it recommended itself as a code of ethics to certain people, notably Eleanor of Aquitaine, who endeavored to introduce Courtly Love to the court of Louis VII when she went to Paris as his queen. Her daughter, Marie, who married the Count of Champagne, continued her mother's interest in this system, and became a person of significance because of her patronage and protection of Crestien.

And what was Courtly Love? It was a system or a cult of love, more easily described in its several characteristics than defined. First of all it was a sentiment of a specialized kind, which was created by the poets at a particular period. It was predicated upon a recognized social structure: a court, lords and ladies, retainers attached to the court; in short, the feudal society. An aristocratic cult, it excluded from its mysteries all those of common birth or humble station. Only the "gentle" were capable of love, and not all of those, for the perfect knight was compelled to follow carefully the prescribed ritual of the cult. The service of love, indeed, was like that of the vassal to his lord: the lover must be subservient to the desire, even the whim of his lady.



"Courtesy" and humility were among the chief characteristics of this love. Courtesy could be attained usually only by the knight who was well-born and trained in courts. It was conferred by love, and it demanded gentility. The knight swore to protect all gentle ladies (but not all women) and to obey without question the commands of his lady in the service of love. He followed her every caprice and against her displeasure he had no defense. He must humbly lay his devotion and his life (if necessary) at his lady's feet. With great humility he must accept her praises and condemnations alike. He revered her almost as a deity. Indeed the lengths to which the reverence and worship of the lady was carried inevitably suggested the parallel in religion; and the cult of love took over from religion many elements, at first perhaps as burlesque or parody, later as a serious and essential part of the ritual. It became a Religion of Love.

The lady who was the object of all this reverence was, of course, usually of noble blood, the wife of a king or lord. And this fact suggests another important element in courtly love: adultery. The Queen, or the Lady of the Castle, was generally the arbitress of manners and taste. For the landless knights attached to the court marriage was out of the question. But what was marriage? It was a contract founded not on this romantic love, but upon convenience, comfort, worldly position, and so on. The cult of Courtly Love did not have for its object marriage; and therefore the idealization of romantic love became essentially an idealization of illicit love. This aspect of the cult to some extent survived in Malory.

The anti-matrimonial basis of Courtly Love is quite clear, and it was ingeniously justified in elaborate arguments. Granted certain premises, the defense, as worked out by the poets, was cogent. Love, they argued, can be enjoyed only by those who are free to choose. There can be only affection, not love, in marriage because in marriage is the element of duty or necessity. The wife's love for her husband is not a result of free choice. Love is really a reward for merit and service, and such reward can be conferred only by a superior. Love must, in the best courtly manner, be kept secret. Secrecy in love was part of the ritual. Now, a wife can not be called a superior; indeed she is an inferior, because she must take orders from a husband. Therefore, no love in marriage is possible. Furthermore, there is nothing furtive about married love, and therefore it violates the Courtly Love tenets. The ideal situation is met when the lady confers love upon a knight. He is really her inferior, not only in worldly station, but is made so because of his vows of humility and courtesy. She can, therefore, reward his merit, always maintaining secrecy in

her relation with him. The consequent apotheosis of romantic love, with the accompanying concepts of its ennobling power and the assumed rights of precedence accorded ladies, stems from this Courtly Love. No passing fad, it contributed to the modern world concepts that have persisted with considerable influence upon life in the Western world. Unknown to classical antiquity, romantic love has since the eleventh century continued to be the theme—a universal theme—of imaginative literature in whatever form it assumes. Inevitable mutations in the details of the concepts have appeared, notably the falling away of adultery, and the substitution of a happy marriage as the result of successful romantic love. The ideals of courtesy, sometimes appearing as “good manners,” remain with us; and a consideration of social conduct in the day-by-day life of all of us would reveal many details traceable to the romances of Crestien and other writers who were influenced by this artificial cult of love.

Although the ideals of Courtly Love and those of Chivalry were not always identical, Courtly Love did provide a basis upon which certain ideals of Chivalry were built. Ultimately Chivalry discarded what was excessive and artificial in Courtly Love, but retained beliefs and modes of conduct which are of permanent significance.

After Crestien, the next important treatment of Arthurian material was Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1204), written in the English vernacular. Layamon lived at Ernley, on the Severn River close to the Welsh border. Although he used Wace's *Brut*, he was not content merely to translate it. Just as Wace enlarged upon Geoffrey of Monmouth, Layamon enlarged upon Wace. His Round Table, for example, far more wonderful even than that of Malory, seats sixteen hundred men; yet it possesses magic properties which enable Arthur to carry it with him easily. Such details were not to be found in any of his predecessors, but may have been ready for his use in the living folk tales of the near-by Welsh people. His narrative is in verse which makes use of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. His instincts, like Malory's, are strongly English. He lacks the easy grace, the courtliness, and the refinement of Wace and Crestien; but his style has qualities of rugged strength which indicate his comparatively blunt but honestly forthright and practical nature. The *Brut* has been called “the chief monument of early Middle English speech.”

Many other treatments of Arthurian stories, particularly those which deal with individual knights, appeared in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Tristram was a great favorite. His story was told by many, including the French Thomas (c. 1170) and

the Germans Eilhart von Oberg, Gottfried von Strassburg, Ulrich von Tûrheim, and Heinrich von Freiberg. Noteworthy, too, were the *Parzival* of the German Wolfram von Eschenbach, the French *Joseph of Arimathea* and *Merlin* of Robert de Boron, some of the bits of story told in Latin by the Norman-Welsh Walter Map, and Thomas Chestre's delightful poem *Sir Launfal*. Numerous metrical romances dealing with Arthurian subjects appeared in English. Usually of anonymous authorship, these varied greatly in merit. Many of them contained an abundance of incident but little else that would appeal to the modern reader. Frequently they were extremely long and were lacking in structural unity.

But about 1370 *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the best of all the English metrical romances, appeared. Very little is known about the author of this poem except that he was Chaucer's contemporary. He wrote in the West Midland dialect, and, like Chaucer, knew how to tell a good story. He was particularly skillful in blending romantic with realistic story elements. In his poem *Sir Gawain*, one of the knights most loved in the Middle Ages, is at his best: he is both admirably chivalric and charmingly human. The poet who wrote this poem happily combined Crestien's grace and courtly refinement with English earthiness. His poem, like Chaucer's tales, represents medieval storytelling at its best.

## II. SIR THOMAS MALORY AND WILLIAM CAXTON

Despite intensive search for materials about Sir Thomas Malory, scholars have succeeded only in partly lifting the veil that obscures the facts of his life. The year of Sir Thomas's birth is not known, but conjecture places it about 1400. It seems certain now that he was of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, the son of a John Malory (Malleore), who sat as a Member of Parliament for that county. No information as to his early life is extant, beyond the fact that early in his career he was engaged in military service in the retinue of Richard Beauchamp, the Earl of Warwick, a man who won renown in many lands—as a noted warrior, and as a distinguished representative of fifteenth-century Chivalry. Indeed, he was called the “Father of Courtesy” and it was said that “no Christian Prince hath such another Knight for Wisdom, Nurture, and Manhood.” The exploits of Warwick may very possibly have suggested to Malory a pattern for the many accounts of chivalric knights and deeds of courtesy in his *Morte Darthur*.

As a follower of Warwick the young Malory probably saw considerable service in France during the Hundred Years' War, about the time when Joan of Arc was rallying her compatriots against the English. Since the Earl of Warwick was present when Joan of Arc was burned in the market place of Rouen in 1431, it may be presumed that Malory was a witness to that historic event.

After the Wars, in 1445, Malory reappears, this time as a Member of Parliament for Warwickshire, a position which may suggest his importance in the community of Newbold Revel. Nothing more is known of his Parliamentary career; and he again drops out of sight, to reappear nearly seven years later in a role quite unlike what we should expect.

In July, 1451, Malory, with others, was arrested, charged with breaking into the Abbey at Coombe (near Newbold Revel), insulting the abbot and the monks, and making off with a considerable amount of goods and money. In the formal indictment drawn up—and since preserved—Malory was charged with many other offenses, ranging from what appears to be sedition to assault and battery. After a preliminary hearing in Warwickshire, on eight charges, to which Sir Thomas pleaded not guilty, he was remanded to London, in the custody of the Marshal of the Court. Despite the fact that he could present letters patent to prove that the king had pardoned him for old offenses, Malory continued to be kept in one prison after another, with occasional periods of freedom.

Of Malory's personal life during these years we know little. He was married to a woman whose first name was Elizabeth; he had at least one son. Possessed of estates in three counties, Sir Thomas was apparently a man of some substance; yet he had not enough influence to effect his release, and when he died (in prison) he left no estate. It may earlier have been transferred to his wife.

The last years of Malory's life, during which he wrote his great book, were spent in a progress from one prison to another—Ludgate, the Marshalsea, and at last Newgate Gaol. Here, probably through his wife and a bribed keeper, Malory seems to have enjoyed some freedom of movement and some concessions, one of which may have been the privilege of visiting the Library of the Grey Friars, situated almost adjacent to the prison. At this library, it is thought, Malory had access to the many manuscript versions of the Arthurian stories, which he "reduced" into English.

The passing of the years left little hope of release. Excluded from a general pardon granted to many other prisoners in 1468 by Ed-

ward IV, Malory had nothing to look forward to. Within three years, in March, 1471, he was dead, probably of the plague. But he had completed the *Morte Darthur*—the most ambitious and important piece of prose in English up to that time.

### William Caxton

As great as Malory's work is, it owed much to a man whose name is inevitably linked to that of the author—William Caxton. Without the interest, the enthusiasm, and the business acumen of this first English printer the *Morte Darthur* might never have found its way into print.

For thirty years—until 1475 or 1476—Caxton was a successful merchant and an English mediator and governor of trade disputes and trade interests in the Low Countries. He resided at Bruges, where he learned the new art of printing from movable type, and where he published the first books in English. Returning to his native land, he set up the first English press in London and began his active career in 1477. From that year until 1491 a constant stream of books came from his press. In July, 1485, he completed the printing of the *Morte Darthur*, fourteen years after Sir Thomas had died in prison. Only two copies of the black-letter edition of 1485 are extant; one of these is in America.

Caxton, as may be seen from his preface to Malory's book, was somewhat more than a printer: he was also editor and in a limited sense, collaborator. Since Malory's manuscript has not survived, it is impossible to know how much of the original work Caxton changed.<sup>1</sup> He tells us that he divided the work into books and chapters. The twenty-one books into which Caxton divided it are of unequal length, and many of the divisions are purely arbitrary. So too are the chapters within the various books.

Although Malory and Caxton could hardly have known each other, there seems to have been a congeniality of spirit between the two men. When Caxton, in his "Preface," states the purpose of the printing of the work to be to set before men good and honest acts, with the exhortation "Do after the good and leave the evil," he was certainly saying what Malory would have said and, indeed, did say in the whole of his book.

<sup>1</sup> The discovery in 1934 of a manuscript of the *Morte Darthur*, transcribed about the time of Caxton's printing, indicates a considerable number of changes which must be laid to Caxton's hand.

## III. MALORY'S TREATMENT OF HIS MATERIALS

Malory's *Morte Darthur* is a prose narrative showing many characteristics of typical medieval romances. These romances were characterized by a tendency to cater to the taste of the nobility and to treat chiefly the manners and deeds of knights and ladies; by a definite refinement of tone and style; by a tendency to absorb into their stories the political, social, and religious ideals of their day; by imaginative freedom and a willingness to use materials which drew on the supernatural and on fairy lore; by a marked tendency to expand through a process of accumulation, to get out of proportion, and to lose sight of the whole in giving attention to details; and by a restless and energetic spirit which could be satisfied only by incessant activity, variety, and change. Some of these characteristics Malory willingly took over from his sources and even attempted to throw into relief; others which were in his sources found their way into his narrative even though he may have cared very little about them or even combated them; still others are not conspicuous in his story.

Again and again he speaks of "the French book" as his source. Scholars now believe that his chief source was a French manuscript made up of several volumes. It is known, however, that he used at least one English manuscript; and he may have used others, for the source of some of his stories, notably the Beaumains story, has never been found.

Caxton tells us that Malory "reduced" his story from the French. Unlike many earlier romancers, he undoubtedly did greatly condense his originals. He seems to have made an effort both to exclude irrelevant materials and to give unity and form to what he retained. He was notably successful in working out the larger structure of his work, but in handling the details of component stories and episodes he frequently got lost in the wide-stretching wilderness of knightly adventure. In spite of the fact that he was apparently more interested in psychology than in adventure, he could not always keep his restless knights in hand. For the most part, however, he did succeed in keeping King Arthur at the center of his story and in using him and other dominant characters to draw the various parts of the narrative together.

Professor Eugène Vinaver (*Malory*, 1929), who has carefully compared Malory's book with its French sources, suggests some of the ways in which Malory's own talents and tastes went into the making of his narrative. He says that Malory knew French well; that he was

particularly good at handling the idioms of both French and English; that he gained directness and force over his originals; that he avoided both artificiality and coarseness and achieved a style which was easy and natural, a style that combined the spirit of romance with epic forthrightness; that he was inclined to add a sentimental coloring to his stories, to the Tristram story in particular; that he was fond of pictures and presented a brilliant succession of scenes; that he had a very sharp sense of color, red and gold being his favorites; and that, like many Englishmen, he was more prosaic and practical than romantic.

Doubtless, too, Malory was something of an antiquarian. Living long after the time when chivalry was in full flower, he repeatedly lamented the fact that in his day lovers lacked the stability of the lovers of old; and he tells his tale throughout in the spirit of one who thinks wistfully of the good old days of long ago which can never return. Chivalry, with its three loyalties—to the overlord, to the lady, and to God—and with its emphasis on the ideals of courtesy, gentleness, kindness, strength in combat, justice, and fair play, meant much to him. His avowed purpose was that of providing his contemporaries with models of chivalric conduct. We may feel sure that the inconsistencies of behavior which are more than once to be found in his characters were carried over from his sources and that they persisted in spite of his efforts to eliminate them. It is significant that he tried to delete Dinadan, a knight who in earlier romances had become a satirist and critic of chivalry; but that he merely succeeded in weakening him and his position.

Whatever Malory's shortcomings were, and it is easy to over-emphasize them, he achieved an English style which has won high praise from his day down to ours. It is easy-flowing, flexible, seemingly spontaneous, and unaffectedly simple. At times it has perfect transparency; at other times it absorbs into itself the dim twilight colors of the stained glass in Gothic cathedrals. It may move along leisurely and quietly, or it may rush forward with tremendous force as it loses itself in the excitement of knightly combat. Like all good styles, it usually adjusts itself to the occasion. It is, furthermore, highly euphonious. But in his appeal to the ear, as in his diction and syntax, Malory avoids the over strenuous and the sensational. Nothing could be further removed from his liquid tones than Macaulay's prose of the blaring brass band and booming bass drum. Malory's melody is quiet and unobtrusive, suggestive of intuitive good taste and of an ear which did not miss subtle sound effects. At times Malory uses such devices as alliteration, assonance, and the repetition of groups of sounds; but

he never overdoes these devices; and when he uses them he seems to do so without effort and almost unconsciously. Although his prose has a cadence, it is a soft, delicate cadence, the mysterious echo of a rhythm in distant music slowly dying away. This melody, indeed, is appropriate to the telling of stories concerning the mellow past in which time has to some degree subdued the noisy clamor of fighting men and the loud lamentations of overwrought lovers.

#### IV. THE ARTHURIAN MATERIAL SINCE MALORY

Malory wrote of a world of romance and chivalry which had long been dead. Malory himself was standing on the threshold of the modern world. A few years before the publication of the *Morte Darthur*, the Renaissance was under way; a scant half-dozen years after, Columbus had discovered the New World. For the next century the medieval world was yielding to the modern on all fronts: religion, politics, economics, science, literature, geography, philosophy—all were undergoing remarkable changes. Yet, despite the intense and accelerating interest which men of the sixteenth century were taking in the actual world, Malory's romance had a persistent appeal, and it held its own against the competition of Tudor prose. During the hundred years 1485-1585 the *Morte Darthur* was reprinted four times, and once again in 1634. Not again until 1816, however, after the romantic temper had superseded the prosiness of the eighteenth century, was Malory's romance reprinted.

Although the *Morte Darthur* was not often reprinted between 1585 and 1816, it was nevertheless read, and what is more significant, became a source for a continuing interest in the Arthurian legends. As such it has exerted an incalculable influence upon many later poets and upon many generations of readers.

The first poet of note, after Malory, who was attracted to the stories of Arthur was Edmund Spenser. In his *Faerie Queene* are many reminiscences of the Round Table and Arthur's court. Apparently attempting to create a new story rather than simply to retell the old, Spenser uses Malory as his source book, keeping the medieval spirit, but not the tone. That is more modern. With great freedom, and with a great admixture of allegory, he uses the familiar names, characters, episodes, places for a new and individual purpose.

The epic qualities inherent in Arthur had long been recognized, and in the seventeenth century two great poets projected epic poems, with Arthur as the hero. Milton was for years attracted by Arthur and the material of the Round Table as proper subjects for a great



epic; but he eventually decided in favor of the fall of man in *Paradise Lost*. Though Milton never actually wrote a poem on Arthur, Dryden did. The great legendary figure of Arthur (epic in proportions) haunted him for years. His preliminary studies were finally produced in the form of a dramatic opera, which he called *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*. Milton and Dryden did not write epics on this material, but Sir Richard Blackmore, a first-rate physician to William III and a third-rate poet, brought out two: *Prince Arthur*, in 1695, and *King Arthur*, two years later. Neither has been considered a worthy treatment.

The eighteenth-century indifference to Malory extended also to Arthurian material generally. Growing romantic feeling, however, drew attention to antiquity, and the Arthurian legends again became of interest. Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) included a half-dozen versified stories. After the opening of the nineteenth century, three editions of Malory, two in 1816, and another in the following year, testified to the growing interest in Arthur. From 1816 to the present the *Morte Darthur* has continued to be reprinted, in its entirety and in selections. And Malory has claimed more and more attention.

To record the poets who in the nineteenth century found the Arthurian stories and Malory a continuous source of inspiration would be to list the most important in the century. Tennyson, early in his career, was drawn to the significant portions of Malory's book. He recognized, indeed, that the poetic treatment of Arthurian stories, from a modern point of view, was to be his great work. Certain of his early lyrics, like *The Lady of Shalott*, formed a prelude to the more extensive *Idylls of the King*. In 1842 he published his *Morte d'Arthur*. From time to time, at intervals of some years, he composed book by book until he had completed, in 1885, the whole design of the *Idylls of the King*. The epic qualities in Arthur, Tennyson recognized, and the division of his *Idylls* into twelve books is an indication of the epic plan. Though Malory's book was Tennyson's continuous source for episodes and characters, he took a poet's privilege of imposing his own interpretation upon the materials and of applying nineteenth-century moral standards.

In addition to Tennyson other first-rate poets were writing poems of great distinction on selected aspects of the Arthurian canon. William Morris in 1858 published a volume entitled *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, which contained four Arthurian pieces: *The Defence of Guenevere*, *King Arthur's Tomb*, *Sir Galahad*, *A Christmas Mystery*, and *The Chapel in Lyonesse*. Malory's *Morte*