MALORY'S *MORTE DARthur* IN THE LIGHT OF A RECENT DISCOVERY

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CAXTON'S edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur* printed at Westminster in 1485 has so far been regarded as the earliest extant version of the work. In the preface to his edition Caxton remarked that 'many noble volumes' had been written about King Arthur in French, but that none was available in English. 'Wherefore', he added, 'I have, after the symple connynge that God hath sent to me, under the favour and correctyon of al noble lorde and gentylmen, enprynte a book of the noble hystoryes of the sayd kynge Arthur and of certeyn of hys knyghtes, after a copye unto me delyvered, whyche copye syr Thomas Malory dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frenssshe and reduced it into Englysshe'.

Until quite recently no manuscript of Malory's 'copye' was known to exist; all the innumerable editions of the *Morte Darthur* from the fifteenth century down to the present day were based directly or indirectly on Caxton's print.

The fact that the study of Malory depended so completely on Caxton and his 'simple cunning' was a serious obstacle to an accurate understanding of the work. Caxton like most early printers, was not merely careless; he was dangerously full of initiative and he had the unwelcome habit of silently editing his texts. We knew from his own Preface that he had divided

1 Elaboration of a lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 12th of December, 1934.

2 Two copies of this edition are extant: one in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the other in the John Rylands Library. H. O. Sommer's reprint of the *Morte Darthur* (London: Nutt, 1889-1891) is based on the Rylands copy.
the text into books and chapters, but we were otherwise completely in the dark as to his treatment of Malory's legacy. We could not separate Malory from his printer.

A fifteenth-century manuscript of the Morte Darthur which had been in the possession of the Library of Winchester College for at least a hundred years came to light a year ago.\(^1\) Mr. W. F. Oakeshott, Librarian of the Fellows' Library, who was the first to draw attention to this document, published an account of it in two successive articles: in The Times on 25 August, 1934, and in the Times Literary Supplement on 27 September. I have since been able to make a close study of the manuscript preparatory to an edition of the Morte Darthur,\(^2\) and the object of the present essay is to give a preliminary survey of some of the problems arising out of the newly discovered text.

1. The Two Versions.

The Winchester manuscript belongs much to the same period as Caxton, but whether it was produced a few years before or after Caxton's edition remains uncertain.\(^3\) Our first task is therefore to look for such internal evidence as would enable us to determine their relation to one another. \textit{A priori} there are three possible alternatives:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
(1) & C \ (\text{Caxton}) & (2) \ W \ (\text{Winchester}) & (3) \ X \ (\text{Common source}) \\
& W \ (\text{Winchester}) & C \ (\text{Caxton}) & \\
& C & W
\end{array}
\]

To solve our problem we must eliminate on grounds of textual differences any two of the above diagrams. Now it stands to reason that none of them can be eliminated as long as we are

\(^1\) The Times, 26th June, 1934. The manuscript lacks a gathering of eight leaves (out of some 492) at both ends. It is indeed regrettable that this should have prevented its identification and correct cataloguing for so long.

\(^2\) I am much indebted to the Warden and Fellows of Winchester College for their kind permission to use the manuscript, and to the John Rylands Library for having accepted its custody during the current year.

\(^3\) Neither linguistic nor palæographical evidence would warrant a more precise dating. Mr. A. J. Collins, of the Manuscript Department of the British Museum, has identified one of the watermarks with that on a document dated 1475. (Cf. The Times, loc. cit.).
limited to our two texts. \( W \) may seem to us to contain 'better' and more 'correct' readings than \( C \) or \textit{vice versa}. But such readings may only be 'better' from our point of view without necessarily belonging to the source. \( W \) may clarify some passages in \( C \) just as \( C \) may help to interpret some obscurities in \( W \), but in neither case is there any certainty that the clearer of the two readings is authentic and that the more obscure one is a corruption. And in the absence of any further evidence as to what Malory really wrote the problem would remain for ever unsolved.

Fortunately such evidence exists: it is provided by Malory's sources. His \textit{Morte Darthur} was not an original work. It was an adaptation, in a shortened form, of earlier romances. Chief among these were the various branches of the French Arthurian prose Cycle of the thirteenth century which Malory followed very closely, not to say servilely, and which, to use Caxton's phrase, he 'reduced' into English.\(^1\) If we take this into account we can supplement our alternative diagrams as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad F \quad (\text{Malory's sources}) \\
(2) & \quad F \\
(3) & \quad F \\
\quad \quad (\text{Malory}) \\
\quad \quad (\text{Malory}) \\
\quad \quad (\text{Malory}) \\
\quad C \\
\quad W \\
\quad W
\end{align*}
\]

Malory must obviously be placed in each case on the line connecting \( F \) with its nearest derivative (\( C, W, \) or \( X \)), and for all we know may be identical with \( C, W, \) or \( X \). For the purpose of the present discussion, however, we must limit ourselves to the three \textit{extant} authorities: \( F, C, \) and \( W \); our object is to decide, by a process of elimination, which of the above diagrams would account correctly for the relation of these three texts to one another.

Diagram 1 implies that C is an intermediary between F and W, and that, barring mere coincidence, whatever is common to F and W must also be found in C. This, however, is emphatically not the case. To give one example out of many, the spelling of proper names in W is very often similar to F but different from C; e.g. Marhalte in W; Morhoult in F; Marhaus in C, and it is clearly impossible to admit the derivation Morhoult > Marhaus > Marhalte. There are numerous instances of this kind and the acceptance of diagram 1 would imply a series of incredible formulae such as Brangien > Bragwayne > Brangwayne, or Esclabor > Astlabor > Asclabor. All these and many other examples make it imperative to conclude that C is not an intermediary between F and W and that consequently diagram 1 is untenable.

Diagram 2 stands condemned on similar grounds. Many traits common to F and C are not found in W (e.g. F [Merlin]: s’en ira la dont il estoit venu; C: as I cam; W: as I am.– F [Queste]: qui i bout si i entre: C: who that knocketh shall enter; W: who that knoweth shall enter; etc.); they suffice to prove that W did not serve as an intermediary between F and C and that therefore our second alternative is as incorrect as the first.

The third alternative—that which makes both C and W derive from a common source—is, then, the correct one.\(^1\) It alone agrees with our data, and it explains why in some cases F may go with W against C, while in others it goes with C against W. It is from X, their common source, that both C and W must have inherited all the passages in which each of them agrees separately with F.

Whether that X was the Morte Darthur as Malory wrote it or some later copy of it, we have no means of knowing. But it certainly brings us a stage nearer Malory, and our next and foremost task is to determine the best method of reconstructing it.

\(^1\) Mr. Oakeshott in his second article (Times Lit. Suppl.) suggests the same conclusion but, in my opinion, fails to prove it. His remarks on Book XV are perhaps more convincing than the rest, but even here his evidence is slight. Of the passages he quotes from Caxton, Winchester, and my edition of the corresponding section of the French Queste, only one (ch. 1) is at all significant.
2. Reconstruction of the Lost Source.

It is of course obvious that whatever is common to our two texts must be attributed to their common source, and fortunately this alone covers a large portion of the work. But what is to be done with the passages in which C and W differ? If we were to follow the traditional method we should have to decide in each case which of the two texts gives the more 'better' reading and select from both the best readings they can offer. It is in this way that most of the so-called critical editions of old texts have been produced. This method implies that any 'mistakes' found in extant versions must be attributed to the scribes; it further implies that the critic is able to decide in each case what is and what is not a mistake. It means believing in the infallibility of both the author and the critic, and moreover identifying the critic's logic with that of the author. It may be well to remember in this connection the famous case of Sancho in Part I, chapter 23, of Don Quixote. A bandit steals Sancho's ass and Sancho is obliged to walk behind his master. They come upon a sack containing a hundred gold pieces, and in the excitement of a new adventure Don Quixote orders Sancho to dismount and tie up his ass (y así mandó a Sancho que se apease del asno, y atayase por la una parte de la montaña), although in the very same chapter the ass has been stolen. This is not a scribal error; it is the author's own mistake which no editor has any right to correct. But the editors of mediaeval texts are not easily discouraged by this or any other example of inconsistency in the great works of literature. Their reluctance to abandon the 'logical' method of editing is understandable, if not excusable. It is difficult not to believe in one's own critical faculty, especially when there is no other reliable guide. Indeed, if in face of two conflicting versions the editor does not rely on his judgment for his choice of the 'correct' variant, if he does not follow his own 'logical' preference, what can he do? How is he to establish his text from two different and equally authoritative manuscripts?

Our answer is that he cannot and that he need not, unless he has further evidence. If no such evidence is available he must
limit his efforts to editing one particular version rather than concoct a composite text. He must give up all hope of reconstructing the ‘lost original’ and be content to reproduce what is extant. This procedure has its unpleasant side: it limits the initiative of the critic. It appeals to his modesty and fails to satisfy his intellectual pride. But it has the immense advantage of safety, and for this reason it has been adopted and preached in recent years by the greatest living mediaevalist, M. Joseph Bédier. As one of his opponents has said, such a complete mistrust of our methods may do harm to textual criticism; but it may be argued that it is at least certain not to harm the texts.

If, then, our knowledge of Malory were confined to Caxton’s edition and to the Winchester manuscript, we should have to refrain from reconstructing those portions of the text in which they differ. But fortunately here as in the case of the three alternative diagrams we can seek guidance from Malory’s sources. It is because Malory was such a faithful imitator, sometimes a mere translator, of French romances, that his ‘French books’ can provide clues to most of our textual problems. Just as they have made it possible to establish the derivation of Caxton and Winchester from a common original, so they can help to decide between the two in cases of conflict. No other criterion is valid or safe. The way to reconstruct the original Malory is to add to the two existing versions of his text a third witness, and to settle every dispute between Caxton and Winchester with the help of that witness. The same will apply, of course, to the reconstruction of any other text, provided that the ‘third witness’ is the source of the text we are reconstructing. But the use of this method seldom proves quite as fruitful as in the case of Malory. Indeed, in practically every case of serious divergence between the two extant versions it enables us to supplement and to explain one by the other. A few representative examples will suffice to illustrate this.

The sonne, says the Winchester scribe (f. 374 r°), shall not beare the wyckednesse of the sonne. Caxton says instead: the

1 See his Introduction to his edition of the Lai de l’ombre (Société des anciens textes, 1913) and his articles in Romania, April and July-October, 1928.
sonne shall not bere the wyckednes of the fader nor the fader shalle not bere the wyckednes of the sone.\footnote{Sommer's edition, p. 661.} Although the latter reading makes distinctly better sense it cannot be attributed to Malory on the sole basis of cogency: Malory may easily have made the mistake which is found in the Winchester manuscript. But it so happens that here the French source\footnote{La Queste del Saint Graal.} fully supports Caxton and proves Winchester wrong. The scribe must have telescoped the sentence by omitting the words of the fader nor the fader shalle not bere the wyckednes.

A similar case of homoeoteleuton is found in the story of the discovery of Tristan’s identity by the Queen of Ireland:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{llll}
\textbf{F (MS. B.N. fr. 103f. 43r6b)} & \textbf{C (Sommer, p. 290)} & \textbf{W (f. 158r6)} \\
Et la royne si oeuvre son escrin et desvelope la piece de l’espee qui avoit esté trouvée en la teste du Morhoult, si lui adjoint, si y fut tout a point comme celle qui en avoit esté esgrunee a l’estendre (esteurdre ?) & And thenne she ranne with that pyece of yron to the swerde that laye upon the bedde And whanne she putte that pyece of stele and yron unto the swerd hit was as mete as it myghte be when it was newe brokyn & And than she ran wyth that pyese of yron unto the swerde that laye the swerde hit was as mete as hit myght be as when hit was newe brokyn
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

This comparison shows that the italicised words in C must be attributed to Malory.\footnote{But it would not warrant the inclusion in Malory’s text of the words that laye upon the bedde in spite of the fact that they make excellent sense.} But for the support of the French, W would have had an equal claim.\footnote{Caxton and the French do not only supply what is missing in the Winchester manuscript; they often help to explain its obscurities. As a typical example we may refer to the story of Balin’s fight with Garlone which contains the following sentence (f. 30 v6): Now geff me youre troncheon seyde Balyn that he slew youre knyght with And anone she gaff hit hym. Who ‘she’ was the manuscript does not say, but Caxton (Sommer’s edition, p. 93) and the French Huth Merlin (ed. G. Paris et J. Ulrich, vol. 2, p. 6) clearly state that Balin is addressing these words ‘to his lady’ (a la damoisele).} Perhaps the most curious case of all is the description of the preparations for a tournament in Caxton’s Book VI. Caxton says that for the benefit of the spectators there were scaffoldis and holes that lordes and ladyes myghte beholde. This has
always been regarded as an absurd and corrupt line. How can the 'holes' be justified? Various explanations have been suggested. Mr. Oakeshott in his article in The Times Literary Supplement seems to think that he has found the correct solution in the reading of the Winchester manuscript which is *scaffoldis and towrys*. *Towrys* may seem at first glance to make better sense, but textual data show this to be a delusion. In the corresponding passage the French source relates how stands were erected and *windows (fenestres)* made (presumably in the woodwork) so as to enable the spectators to watch the tournament. These 'windows' are clearly identical with the *holes* to which Caxton refers, hence they must have occurred in Malory. Caxton's 'absurd' reading is thus justified, while the seemingly 'better' version of Winchester turns out to be a corruption.

In all these instances Caxton agrees with the French against Winchester. If we now take some of the reverse cases we shall find them equally instructive. In the episode of the 'dolorous stroke' Caxton describes the sudden collapse of a castle. There were two people particularly affected by this accident: Pellam and Balin. In Caxton's words the castle 'laye upon Pellam and Balyn for three dayes'. How they survived the pressure Caxton does not say. He simply adds that at the end of three days Pellam still suffered from some minor injuries while Balin recovered. This incredible story appears in most of the existing editions of the *Morte Darthur*, and the mere fact that it is preposterous is no argument against attributing it to Malory. But the Winchester manuscript, in full agreement with the French *Huth Merlin*, shows us what Malory really wrote and at least acquits him of the charge of complete absurdity. It says that 'the castle brake roffe and wallis and felle downe to the erthe And Balyn felle downe and myght nat styre hande nor foote and for the moste party of that castell was dede thorow the dolorouse stroke Ryght so lay kynge Pellam and Balyne iii dayes' (f. 31 v). In other words, Pellam and Balin were injured by the fall of the castle and lay wounded for three days.

1 Vulgate Versions of Arthurian Romances, ed. Sommer, vol. 3.
2 Sommer, p. 93.
But the Winchester manuscript makes it clear that they did not lie buried under the ruins of the castle.

Practically any chapter in the Morte Darthur would provide instances of this kind, but perhaps for our present purpose two more quotations will suffice. One of the best known episodes in the French Romance of Tristan is that of the fatal potion which Tristan and Iseult drank on their journey to Cornwall. It was the potion that Iseult's mother had entrusted to the care of her servants, asking them to give it to Mark and Iseult on their wedding night. The potion was so made that those who drank it would be bound by ties of ever-lasting love. By mistake Iseult drank the potion with Tristan before they reached the land of king Mark. The whole essence of the story depends on Iseult's being unaware of the virtues or even of the existence of the potion until, by a fatal error, she and Tristan have become its victims:

Il ne m'aime pas, ne je lui,
   Fors par un herbé dont je bui
   Et il en but : ce fut pechiez.¹
   Por ce nos a li rois chaciez.²

Contrary to this traditional version Caxton suggests that Iseult's mother gave the potion to Iseult, and the whole sequence of events from this point becomes practically unintelligible:

'Thenne the quene Isouds moder gaf to her and dame Bragwayne her doughters gentilwoman and unto Governaile a drynke and charged them that what day kynge Marke shold wedde that same daye they shold gyve hym that kynge Marke shold drynke to la beale Isoud'. The Winchester manuscript shows this to be a corrupt reading.⁴ It says that the Queen gave Iseult a servant whose name was Brangwayne (the conjunction between her and dame in Caxton is therefore redundant) and

¹ An interesting case (quoted by Mr. Oakeshott) occurs in the story of Lancelot's visit to the hermit. 'They saw in,' says Caxton, 'a hideous figure.' The preposition in seems at first redundant and the sense is clearly unsatisfactory, but the Winchester manuscript helps to restore Malory's original reading. It states that 'they saw the fyennd in an hydeous fyigure' which is supported by the French: voit l'ennemy en . . . hideuse fourme.
² misfortune. ³ Béroul, Le Roman de Tristan, ed. Muret, ll. 1413-16. ⁴ quene Isodes modir gaff dame Brangwayne unto hir to be hir jantyll woman and also she and Governyale had a drynke of the quene.
adds in the next sentence that Brangwayne and Governaile ‘had a dryne of the quene’. What Caxton did was simply to turn *gaf dame Brangwayne unto her* into *gaf to her and dame Bragwayne*. He obviously failed to realise the far-reaching consequences of this alteration, and it is gratifying to know that at least in this point it was Malory’s printer and not Malory himself who misinterpreted the Tristan legend.

Until the discovery of the Winchester manuscript it was, however, quite legitimate to think that the author committed another serious error. In Caxton’s edition we find the statement 2 that ‘syr Tristram slewe kynge Marke’, while in the French Prose Romance the reverse happens: Mark kills Tristan. Some critics, including myself, 4 assumed in despair that *Tristram* was accusative—a most unsatisfactory hypothesis. The Winchester manuscript provides the real solution, and the whole difficulty now appears to be due to the omission of two words by Caxton. The manuscript reads as follows: 5 ‘Sir Bellyngere revenged the dethe of hys fadir sir Alysaundir and sir Trystram for he slewe kynge Marke’. This means that Mark was killed by Bellingere, and the significance of the words *for he* will be readily understood by those who know that Mark had previously murdered Alexander and Tristan. By omitting the words *for he* Caxton makes Tristan kill Mark and causes Mark to be killed. Thanks to the Winchester manuscript the traditional version of Tristan’s death can now be restored to Malory.

By using the two extant texts of the *Morte Darthur* in conjunction with its various sources we can find clues to the majority of controversial passages, but not to all. There still remain a number of divergences between Caxton and Winchester that cannot be solved by the method we have outlined. This happens when a variant occurs in a section for which no source has yet been found; book VII—the Romance of Gareth—

1 See note 4, p. 446. 2 Sommer, p. 309. 3 Ibid., p. 792. Caxton contradicts himself: a few lines above he says that *that traytour kyng slewe the noble Knyghte syre Trystram*.

4 Cf. my Roman de Tristan et Iseut, p. 220. 5 Folio 447 recto.
is an instance in point. It also happens in the passages for which the sources are available but in which all the three texts—Caxton, Winchester and the source—offer different readings. In such cases the work of ‘reconstruction’ must naturally cease. Whenever our ‘third witness’—Malory’s source—is absent we must refrain from deciding which is the better of the two conflicting variants. We may occasionally—and only very cautiously—attribute purely mechanical errors to the scribe or to the printer. But as a general rule we must not attempt to recapture the original Malory when his sources are silent and the two extant versions differ; we must be content with an incomplete reconstruction. And the procedure to be adopted by any editor of the text may be formulated as follows: one of the extant versions (preferably the Winchester manuscript as the more complete of the two) should be chosen as the basic text; variants from the other version should only be introduced if they are supported by Malory’s sources or if they help to correct obvious mechanical errors; and wherever such variants are introduced they should be distinguished from the body of the text by the use of brackets or italics. In this way no harm will be done to the extant tradition; and at the same time a very substantial part of the original text of the Morte Darthur will be restored.


1 Variants of English spelling (except the spelling of proper names) and a number of minor variants of wording fall into this category.

2 The following variant occurs at the beginning of Book VII: in describing a gathering of Arthur’s knights at the Round Table Caxton says that they were all there onle tho that were prisoners or slayne. Winchester reads: onles that ony were presoners or slain. The Winchester reading may seem preferable but in the absence of the source we cannot definitely accept it, especially as Caxton’s variant is not meaningless: ‘only’ can mean ‘except’, and Wright’s Dialect Dictionary records this connotation. Another interesting divergence which cannot be solved occurs in Caxton’s Book X, ch. 76. Caxton says that a knight ‘satte under a fayre welle from the field’ while Winchester has ‘under a thorne a good way from the field’. Mr. Oakeshott (Times Lit. Suppl.) thinks that Caxton is wrong but there is no evidence to prove this, as the source of Book X (MS. B.N. fr. 99) to which Mr. Oakeshott does not refer, contains no parallel to the variant. All it says is . . . ‘un chevalier qui du tournoiement s’estoit despartis auques navrés et si se faisoit desarmer a une part’ (f. 483 r°b).

3 See pp. 452-4 infra.
MALORY'S Morte Darthur

3. The New Arthurian Epic.

The reconstruction of Malory's text, however incomplete, throws light on many vital points; in particular, it reveals the character and the rhythm of Malory's prose, and it adds to our understanding of the structure and meaning of the work as a whole. It is with the latter aspect alone that I intend to deal here.

To appreciate its full significance we must again remember that the Morte Darthur is largely an adaptation of a much more complete Romance; and to discover the mechanism of the work it is essential to consider some characteristic features of the French Arthurian Cycle. This Cycle was a narrative of amazing dimensions, containing many hundreds of episodes. It was an attempt to put together and to expand some of the twelfth-century poems about Arthur and his knights. But the fact that the adventures generally started at Arthur's Court did not prevent them from becoming completely irrelevant to the 'Arthurian' theme. The characteristic pattern of such adventures may be summarized as follows:—A knight sets off to rescue a lady in distress, and on his way meets another knight. Before they can recognize each other a fight takes place. It is usually a fairly long one, but in the end one of the knights is thrown out of his saddle. This is generally followed by a peaceful conversation: the knights introduce themselves to each other and swear never to fight again for, as they now know, they both belong to Arthur's fellowship. Then the second

1 In a recent review of Sir Edmund Chambers's Collected Studies (Medium Aevum, vol. 3, pp. 237-240) Mr. C. S. Lewis has suggested a new interpretation of some aspects of Malory which strikes me as truly penetrating and convincing. But I do not feel with Mr. Lewis that those who see too much of Malory's sources are apt to overlook the book 'as it is in itself'. We must obviously avoid eating 'all the raw ingredients of a pudding along with the pudding itself' for 'such eating is emphatically not the pudding's proof' (p. 238), but literature is one of the few things to which the metaphor of the pudding does not apply. Knowledge of the recipe may spoil the taste of a pudding, but it need not distort our immediate impression from a literary work. It is of course possible to read Malory 'as if we knew nothing about his sources', but our understanding of him will be deepened, not spoilt, by the knowledge of what is peculiar and unique in his work. The only object of separating him from foreign ingredients is to obtain this knowledge.
knight tells the first that he has undertaken a dangerous quest of some sort and that he is at the moment looking for a mysterious knight who will not reveal his identity. They go in search of the unknown knight together, but with no result; on their way they come across another supposed enemy who overcomes one of them and rides away. The code of Chivalry demands that he should be followed by the victim’s friend and challenged again. Thus a third quest is added to the other two, only to be succeeded by a fourth and a fifth, and by this time the author seems to have forgotten what he originally intended to tell us. It is in fact difficult to believe that there was much to forget and that there ever was a dénouement in the writer’s mind. The method he uses is that of interweaving as many adventures as possible and throwing into the Romance the largest possible number of half-anonymous characters. Such a method was perhaps inevitable as long as the stories were concerned with knights-errant: the narrative technique of the Prose Romances was simply modelled on the habits of knight-errantry. Knight-errantry is chiefly characterized by the vagueness or even the absence of a final purpose. It is essentially a search of adventures each of which has an independent aim and interest. The life of a knight-errant lacks organic unity; it consists of an endless series of strange and disconnected attempts to show one’s valour, strength, bravery, and sometimes generosity. It was natural enough for the French prose-writers to build up their stories in accordance with this, and to disorganize their material in the same way as the knights-errant had disorganized their mode of living. The process was enhanced rather than hampered by the fact that the prose-writers used an Arthurian setting: Arthur’s only function was to encourage adventures of all sorts, and he had early acquired what has been aptly described

1 M. Ferdinand Lot (Etude sur le Lancelot en prose, Paris, 1918) thinks that there was a well thought-out scheme behind the seemingly disconnected incidents of the Prose Lancelot and deduces from this his theory of single authorship. This ‘scheme’ would not account for all the episodes of the Cycle; and as far as it existed at all in the author’s mind he must have taken infinite pains to conceal it.

as the ‘convenient habits’ of always granting a boon before he knew what it was, and of declining to eat at supper until he had heard of a new adventure and had entrusted it to one of his knights.

Malory’s work shows in this respect a striking peculiarity. Both extant versions of his text clearly suggest that he had a strong objection to the methods of French romance-writers. He reduced the adventures of Arthurian knights to the minimum, or at least to what he thought ought to be the minimum, and simplified most of the battles and quests that he found in his sources. Compared to these, the movement was accelerated: the number of episodes was not so great and they followed one another in a more rapid succession. But it would be a mistake to think that as a result of this change Malory’s version gained much coherence. His method was based on an artificial distinction between important and unimportant incidents, a distinction which was inapplicable to the mediæval romances of chivalry. In a romance of the type we have described practically each adventure was, or seemed to be, as important and at the same time as irrelevant as any other. One had just as much reason to sacrifice any particular combat or quest as to preserve it, and therefore no amount of shortening could ever make the story as a whole consistent or harmonious. A mere reduction of its size could not alter its character. It was impossible to modernize it by purely mechanical means as Malory tried to do. As a result, his work still lacked the consistency and harmony of a modern production, while it failed to preserve the fascinating profusion of detail which had been the distinguishing mark of its French sources.

But there is in Malory’s work something which explains and in a sense compensates for his method of ‘reducing’ the story. He is primarily concerned not with the telling of adventures, but with the glorification of Knighthood as an institution. He often refers to the High Order of Knighthood

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1 He reduced them by about one half in the Queste and Mort Arto sections (Books XIII-XVIII and XX-XXI), three-quarters in the Merlin (Books I-IV), five-sixths in the Tristan (Books VII-XII), and seven-eighths in the Lancelot proper (Books VI and XVIII). See my Malory, pp. 30-31.
when his sources contain no such allusion. Knighthood to him is not an adventurous mode of living; it is a well-established centralized order with its head-quarters firmly fixed in the household of a great prince. Arthur plays the part of that prince, and this is why the *Morte Darthur* is so full of veneration for him. In the French romances the court of King Arthur was only the conventional starting point of adventures, and Arthur was treated as a fantastic character, as a king of Fairyland. Malory tries to make him more dignified and imposing. He seldom forgets to give him the title of King which the French romance-writers very often omit, and even goes so far as to make him Emperor, a title for which there is no authority in the early romances. It would appear that from Malory's point of view the High Order of Knighthood was controlled by a central power, just as the Order of the Garter was presided over by Edward III, and the Order of the Golden Fleece by Philip of Flanders. The 'wandering' aspect of knight-errantry is to him far less important than its monarchical basis. It may almost be said that Malory's book was largely intended not as a record of disconnected adventures, but as a glorification of the King's authority supported by the institution of Knighthood. At least this is the impression suggested by the few alterations that Malory made in the material which he had inherited from the French.

And yet, if we only read Caxton's version we shall find it difficult to reconcile this fondness of the author for King Arthur with the fact that most of the purely Arthurian stories are so drastically shortened. The attitude of the author to his hero is quite apparent, but it seems to be inconsistent with the way in which he cuts down the record of his hero's deeds. There is one section in the *Morte Darthur* where one would expect Malory to have given Arthur at least as much space as he had in the sources: I refer to the story of Arthur's Roman campaign—the most herioc of all his achievements. This story existed both in French and in English before Malory's time, but it was particularly cherished by English readers. The English alliterative *Morte Arthur* is very closely related to the source that Malory used. Yet, in size, the account published by Caxton (Book V
of his edition) is very much inferior to the relevant section in the English poem: each line in Caxton corresponds to some ten lines in the *Morte Arthur*, and Book V happens to be one of the shortest in Caxton’s edition. But if we turn to the Winchester manuscript we shall find that this apparent inconsistency is due not to Malory, but to Caxton’s ruthless shortening of his ‘copy’. The Winchester version of Arthur’s Roman campaign is about twice as long as Caxton’s. Passages missing in Caxton are found both in the Winchester text and in the *Morte Arthur*; hence they must belong to Malory. And the moment we reconstruct Malory’s text in this way it becomes abundantly clear that for this section of his work he was using an English alliterative poem\(^1\) and that he followed it even more closely than any of his French sources. No doubt he shortened his source to a certain extent—the architecture of the book made this inevitable—but he shortened it considerably less than the non-Arthurian branches of the French Cycle. He preserved detailed descriptions of Arthur’s herioc adventures and in many long passages followed his source word for word.\(^2\) The Winchester manuscript provides ample evidence that he was genuinely fond of his theme. He is so much in sympathy with the matter and the manner of the story of Arthur the ‘Crowned king’ that he surrenders his usual narrative technique and even his style. Not only does he reproduce in detail the main episodes of the English poem, but he preserves its language and rhythm and mingles them in a strange fashion with his own. He does this for the same reasons that made him ‘reduce’ the French romances of Lancelot and of Tristan, namely to lay more stress on the Arthurian Epic and to throw into greater relief the political aspect of Knighthood as opposed to its French romantic interpretation. Arthur appears as the true embodiment of the virtues of heroic chivalry. He is the ‘Conqueror’, the English

\(^1\) Even in Caxton there are cases of verbal agreement with the *Morte Arthur*, but before the discovery of the Winchester manuscript the English provenance of Book V could not be definitely proved. Cf. *my Malory*, pp. 134-8, and Trautmann, *Der Dichter Huchoun und seine Werke, Anglia*, vol. I, pp. 145-6.

\(^2\) The Winchester manuscript contains some alliterative passages not attested by the Thornton MS. of the *Morte Arthur* while in the passages common to both texts it sometimes offers more satisfactory readings. It seems likely that Malory’s original was an older version than the Thornton.
counterpart of Charlemagne, and he claims by right the possession of the Roman Empire. Beside him the great Emperor Lucius is a mere impostor. Arthur is the champion of the weak and the oppressed—witness his fight with the giant who had caused so much distress to the people of Brittany. But he has some of the characteristics of the more primitive type of warrior. The Roman messengers are terrified by his 'grim countenance' and on their return advise Lucius not to venture against an enemy whose attacks no army can resist. Their misgivings are fully justified. Arthur does not stop at a wholesale massacre of the Romans and his cruelty in battle is only equalled by his enormous strength. Nor is he lacking in a special kind of epic humour. He sends to the Emperor Lucius the dead bodies of the Roman Knights 'to pay his tribute' and offers to send him more, for 'other tribute he owes him none.' The great king is thus shown in all his primitive glory: not as an 'adventurous knight,' but as a political and military leader conscious of his responsibility for the welfare and the prestige of his kingdom. The Roman campaign brings him to the highest point of power and fame, and it is significant that Malory deliberately delays the tragic ending of the story. He interrupts his account immediately after Arthur's victory. The account of Mordred's treachery and of Arthur's downfall which he had before his eyes in the source is relegated to the very end of his compilation. Malory obviously wanted to give first of all a picture of Arthur's complete triumph, free of any tragic forebodings, and between the Roman campaign and Arthur's death, which in all other versions follow one another, he interpolates the romances of Lancelot, of Tristan, and of the Grail. He obviously meant the 'Book of Arthur' as he calls it to be the culminating point of his work and not a mere prelude to the final catastrophe. This design does not appear clearly enough in Caxton. The Roman campaign is curtailed to such an extent as to seem almost out of place. But the Winchester manuscript restores both the external balance and the inner meaning of Malory's work. Arthur's career acquires the weight and the dignity of a national epic and can serve its political purpose: it is, apart from all else, a timely warning to all those who in Malory's own day had forgotten the sanctity of the royal title.
The Morte Darthur had a moral as well as a political aim, and if Caxton did injustice to the latter, he certainly sympathized with the former. According to his Preface, the book was ‘sette in enprynte to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyualrye, the jentyl and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes by whyche they came to honour and how they that were vycious were punysshed and often put to shame and rebuke.’ This passage is true not only of Caxton’s ‘intent’ but also of Malory’s. Malory was a moralist as much as Caxton if not more; he seldom missed an opportunity to use his story as a moral ‘ensample.’ But the great difficulty of his critics and biographers has always been the strange contrast between his moralizing tendency and the few known facts of his life. He has been identified with a Warwickshire knight of the name of Thomas Malory (or Malore, or Mallere, or Malorie) of Newbold Revel who had a very eventful career. We know from reliable documents that he was imprisoned several times and that the causes of his imprisonment varied practically each time. Of all the offences of which he was convicted the most pardonable seems to have been that of sedition. He was a Lancastrian, and towards the end of his life he suffered from Yorkist revenge. Before that time he appears to have been found guilty on charges that one might mildly describe as non-political. He was implicated in several robberies one of which included the theft of various jocalia and ornamenta as well as bags of money from the Abbey of Blessed Mary of Coombe. On other occasions he is supposed to have stolen cattle from William Rowe and William Dowde of Shawell; extorted money from John Mylner, Margaret Kyng and William Hales; and broken into the house of Hugh Smyth of Monks Kirby and ‘feloniously raped’ his wife Joan. What has always puzzled critics is the fact that a man who was clearly not a loyalist and who had so little respect for conventional morality should have written a book which stood both for the cultivation

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1 See G. L. Kittredge, *Who Was Sir Thomas Malory?* Boston, 1897. E. Hicks, *Sir Thomas Malory, his turbulent career, a biography.* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1928; and my *Malory*, pp. 4-6 and 121-3.
of that morality and for the defence of the royal authority;\footnote{It was probably this contrast between the man and the book that induced G. L. Kittredge to deny some of the charges brought against Malory. See Hicks, op. cit., pp. 52-3.} a book which was intended to serve as a moral ‘ensample’ to ‘noble lorde and ladies,’ and to reprove them for ‘areysing their peple ageynst their kynge.’ It is for this reason that some doubt still remained in our minds as to whether the author of the book was really identical with Thomas Malory, the Lancastrian knight and burglar, who spent so many years in prison and was excluded from a general pardon granted by Edward VI in 1468. Some indications that the book was written in prison were found, it is true, in Caxton’s text: considerable importance was attached to the concluding sentence in which the author asks his readers to pray God for his ‘good delyveraunce,’ and to an earlier discourse on the hardships of imprisonment.\footnote{G. L. Kittredge, op. cit. In support of this theory I conjectured (loc. cit.) that ‘good delyveraunce’ was modelled on the contemporary French legal term plaine deliorance and meant in Malory’s time ‘release from prison,’ although the earliest example of his use recorded in the Oxford Eng. Dict. is two centuries later (1660).} Both these passages were thought to reflect Malory’s own experience. But that was a mere conjecture, and a definite proof of the book having been written by a prisoner was lacking. Now this proof is provided by the Winchester manuscript. At the end of the folio immediately preceding the story of Arthur’s Roman campaign (see facsimile facing this page) the author bids farewell to his reader and says that the book was written by ‘sir Thomas Maleorre presoner.’ This passage does not occur in Caxton, probably because Caxton thought that it might reflect discredit on the book; and for the same reason it is difficult to believe that anyone but the author himself could have written it. It seems certain, therefore, that he was a prisoner at the time of writing; the connection between the \textit{Morte Darthur} and the historical Thomas Malory thus receives strong support.

It is further strengthened, or at least facilitated, by the fact that the Winchester manuscript helps to some extent to explain the contrast between the author’s life and his work. In a
stronge but serve broghte (honne y) unde ymu a buffette wha a spere. And at a newe fepte for Pellhead and sir charley, were made broghte of yrome table for ymere y. Sir two words for. y. Broghte were slaine p. ym. mony. And grave joy had syngage antyme of sir Pellhead and of Tyrsainte But Pellhead loved not after sir Bawayne But ad he spared hym for ylode of y syngage but often tymede it justid as tournament. Sir Pellhead quytte sir Bawayne for so quy serenity in the booke of frendly. So sir Tyrsainte made many darde after songed at sir marquise in ay Haude and y they and a grete battle. But y laube for Tyrsainte newe sym. So Sir Tyrsainte was won ded from the he mostye recon and lay at a Pernype half a grene. And sir Pellhead was a worshopfully broghte and was one of y wy easterne y. Samgreal. And p demesque of y laube made by ym meane that nest he had a doo for Lancelot de laube for an ymu for Lancelot was at our castel or at our tournament she wold not suff my sym to be p y that day but y fes were on y side of Sir Lancelot there endynt p. the tale ad y stryng the booke sent y the marriage off syngage off syngage off syngage that were ad after sym and many batayles y had that booke endynt were as sir Lancelot and Sir Tyrsainte come to comere. Who sente ywold make ony more late hym sake of booke of syngage of sir Pellhead and of Lancelot or Sir Tyrsainte for that was done up by a broghte preserue Sir Thomas Walleroyne that god sende hym good recon demes of.

Explicit

Facsimile of f. 70v of the Winchester Manuscript of Malory's Morte Darthur.
number of passages not reproduced by Caxton it refers to the author in clear and eloquent terms. Here are a few examples:—

F. 148r. And I pray you all that redyth this tale to pray for hym that this wrote that God sende hym good delyveraunce sone and hastely Amen

F. 346v. Here endyth the secunde boke off syr Trystram de Lyones whyche drawyn was oute of freynshe by sir Thomas Maleorre knyght as Jhesu be hys helpe Amen

F. 409r. Thus endith the tale of the Sankgreal that was breffly drawyn oute of freynshe which ys a tale cronycled for one of the trewyst and of the holyeste that ys in this worlde By sir Thomas Maleorre knyght O blessed Jhesu helpe hym thorow hys myght Amen

F. 449v. And here on the othir syde folowyth the moste pyteous tale of the morte Arthure saunz Gweron Par le shyvalere sir Thomas Malleore knyght Jhesu ayed ely par voutre bone mercy Amen

These passages, and especially the explicit of the Grail story (f. 409), suggest that Malory regarded the writing of his book as a pious task. His argument is simple: the book is ‘the truest and the holiest that is in the world’; therefore may Jesus help the author ‘through His might.’ The implication is that his work might redeem his offences, moral and political. And it is not unlikely that it was written by one who regretted his own vagaries and wished his fellow-countrymen to reflect on the moral teaching of chivalry, on the glorious deeds of a great king, and on the treachery of those who had caused his downfall. ‘Thys is a grete defaulte of us englyssh men for there may nothynge plese us noo terme.’ There are hints throughout the Morte Darthur that by insisting on his new moral and political creed the author hoped to achieve better fame and expiate the sins of his early days. This is why towards the end of his life he would settle down to write a book which was essentially a glorification of ideals that he had otherwise failed to uphold; the very contrast between these ideals and his own deeds may have inspired him to produce his ‘moste pyteous tale.’ And in the light of the newly discovered passages the last reference to the author in the Morte Darthur—the only one reproduced by Caxton—would seem to acquire a deeper significance: ‘For this book was ended the ix yere of the regyne of kynge Edward the fourth by sir Thomas Maleoure knyght as Jhesu helpe hym for Hys grete myght as he is the servaunt of Jhesu bothe day and nyght’.