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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 51

Sir Thomas Malory

By

E. K. Chambers, C.B.

January 1922

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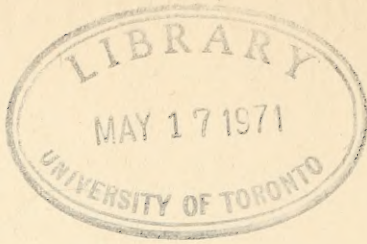
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SIR THOMAS MALORY

SIR THOMAS MALORY came late to his high theme. The hey-day of Arthurian romance was over by the middle of the thirteenth century. Then began the period of scribes and interpolators, with their sequels and *enfances*. The outlines of the old stories were blurred, their movement slowed down under the accumulation of subsidiary adventures, conventional and interminable. They had always been long-winded enough; the evenings in a mediaeval castle, when the day's fighting was over, were long. The alliterative revival of the fourteenth century gave some fresh impulse, but it passed. Then the *Romance of the Rose* brought in the new mode of sentimental allegory, and Chaucer followed with his quicker and more vivid way of telling tales. Moreover, the best of the romances were still in French, and cultivated England was ceasing to talk French. They became old-fashioned, and at the most contributed to balladry. It is the popular literature—ballads, carols, miracle-plays—which counts most in the fifteenth century; except for Malory himself, who has nothing to do with all these. And so when Malory began to turn over the faded manuscripts in the window-seat of some country manor, and to shape them into his strong new prose, he was almost as deliberate an archaist as the writer of *The Faerie Queene* or the writer of *The Defence of Guenevere*. It was not all loss. Detached from the tradition, he had to pour some new wine into the old bottles, to bring his antiquarian findings into some kind of vital relation to the thought and conditions of his own day. I shall come back to that.

Just now I want to remind you how difficult Malory's material was to handle, and to note some weak points in his handling. I am not going to linger over this; it is an intricate subject, for which all the evidence is not yet available, while some of what is available has not always been wisely used. But I think it is clear that the process of 'reducing' out of French into English, of which Caxton's preface to the *Morte d'Arthur* speaks, must have involved not merely the work of an abbreviator and translator, but also a good deal of selection and compilation from different sources. There is no trace of any single French book which remotely resembles Malory's. He must have had several manuscripts at his disposal, perhaps more than one would expect to find kept together, anywhere outside some great household. A few of them contained versions of tales other than those contained in the manuscripts we know, or tales not otherwise

known at all. But as a rule we can determine the kind of manuscript he used. He must have had the comprehensive romance of *Lancelot*, of which there are five sections, the Early History of the Grail, the Merlin, the Lancelot proper, the Quest of the Grail, and the Mort Artus. This was itself to some extent of composite origin, although the latest investigation, that of M. Ferdinand Lot, tends to ascribe four of the five sections to a single hand, and to regard only the Merlin as an interpolation. He had the other vast romance of *Tristan*, in a late and debased form. He had, perhaps unfortunately, a variant of the Merlin, written to lead up to a version of the Quest of the Grail, other than that given in the *Lancelot*. And, Caxton notwithstanding, he had English sources, as well as French; the alliterative *Morte d'Arthur*, upon which he based his account of Arthur's wars with Rome, and perhaps the fourteenth-century metrical *Morte d'Arthur*, which shares many of Malory's divergences from the *Lancelot* in the last stages of his story. I have said enough to show that the material was complex. The bulk alone was very great; ten times that of the *Morte d'Arthur*. (Some of the adventures told were essential to the working out of the main themes; others were incidental, and led nowhere. There was an obvious danger, in a drastic reduction, of taking the incidental and missing the essential. Moreover, the romances had slowly grown into their latest forms. They had influenced and counter-influenced each other in diverse fashions. They had heroes and adventures in common, but the adventures did not always work out in the same way, and the heroes did not always sustain the same characters. Sir Thomas Malory had not, even to the extent to which we have, the clue of scholarship to enable him to thread these mazes. With all deference to a really great writer, I think that, so far as the first half of the *Morte d'Arthur* is concerned, he rather bungled his structural problem. We expect a work of fiction to have a beginning, a middle, and an end; to progress, however deviously, through the medium of consistent personalities, to an intelligible issue. The *Morte d'Arthur* does not satisfy this expectation. That is why, through so much of it, we walk perplexedly. It is, in the phrase of a poet of our own day, 'the dim Arthuriad'. It is full of beginnings which have no end and of ends which never had a beginning. It does not perhaps matter much that knights who have been killed in one book live to fight and be killed again in another. But Merlin comes and goes, and we are never told who or what Merlin is. First Pellinore and then Palamydes pursues the questing beast, but the nature of the quest remains dark. The adventures of Balin bear many suggestions of their significance in relation to the

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Grail, but when the book of the Grail comes, they are found not to have been significant. Malory has in his hands two of the world's dozen great love stories, and does not succeed in telling either of them completely. The earlier scenes between Tristram and Iseult are hidden in an overgrowth of commonplace chivalric adventures, the chief purposes of which are to pit Tristram against Lancelot, to let Iseult write sentimental letters to Guenevere, and to make King Mark quite unnecessarily contemptible. And then we are told, 'Here endeth the second book of Sir Tristram. But here is no rehearsal of the third book.' And so we are left to hear of Tristram's death by a casual report in a later book, and then it is not the pathetic and imaginative story of the black sail, with which we are familiar from the old poems, but only a treacherous stabbing in the back by Mark. It is not altogether Malory's fault. He did not know the old poems, and the prose *Tristan* was the worst of models. Perhaps he would have done better to have left the *Tristan* alone, and kept to the *Lancelot*. But if he robs us of the end of Tristram, he robs us of the beginning of Lancelot. There is nothing of the changeling boyhood, nothing of the coming to court and of Lancelot's trembling at the sight of Guenevere; not even that episode of the first kiss, of which Dante makes such unforgettable use in the *Divine Comedy*. The outcome of Lancelot's relation with Guenevere, as we shall see, is nobly treated; but the relation itself is taken for granted, and is not led up to. It therefore, to some extent, fails to carry us with it. One point more, and I shall be glad to have done with depreciation. A solution of continuity which affects character is more serious than one which merely affects plot. And one important character at least, that of Gawaine, is not maintained on the same plane throughout. In all the earlier Arthurian romances Gawaine is the noblest of Arthur's knights; he is 'Gawane the gay, gracious, and gude', the embodiment of courtesy, always contrasted with Kay the churlish and crabbed. Then somebody, Walter Map or another, invented Lancelot, and made him the queen's lover, and the imagination of the romance writers took hold of Lancelot and he became the leading knight of the Round Table, ousting Gawaine. But for the purposes of the Lancelot romance Gawaine, although relegated to the second place, must remain noble, and Lancelot's true comrade in arms, until some inevitable break comes, which dissolves the high companionship, and precipitates the ultimate tragedy of the Mort Artus. And so it is in Malory's opening and closing books. But so it is not throughout the story. I do not merely mean that Gawaine, as a worldly man and a lover of light ladies, is not thought worthy to achieve

the Holy Grail, and, to say the truth, does not much mind whether he achieves it or not. Lancelot himself does not achieve the Holy Grail. But in the Tristram section there is a systematic blackening of Gawaine's character as a knight. He slays the good Sir Lamorak by treachery, and we are told that privily he hated Sir Lancelot and all his kin, and that 'after Sir Gareth had espied Sir Gawaine's conditions, he withdrew himself from his brother Sir Gawaine's fellowship, for he was vengeable, and where he hated he would be avenged with murder, and that hated Sir Gareth'. Malory has forgotten this, when he comes to the Mort Artus, but the reader cannot forget.

What then should be the attitude of criticism in the face of all this structural incoherence? One way is to demonstrate that Malory is much more subtle than we took him for, and that, when he seems most artless, he is really laying the threads of his deliberate design. This is the way adopted in a recent book on the *Morte d'Arthur* which reached me as I was meditating these observations. The other is to accept the facts, and to take Malory for what he can give, and not for what he cannot give. That is, I think, the better way. There are stirring and amusing tales enough in the earlier books, even if they are episodic and do not advance a main theme; the tale of Arthur's fight with the giant on Mont St. Michel, for example, or that of Gareth's adventures with the minx Lynette. Or you may regard the whole thing as a tapestry; half close your eyes and watch a pleasant landscape, full of running waters, and moated castles, and hermitages, and green lawns, and 'plumps' of wood, amongst which move bright little figures in blue and white and red armour, every now and again stopping to lay spears in rest and upset one another, and then swearing eternal friendship and riding away again. Here is a ford perilous, and at the door of a pavilion a dwarf watches a shield, hung there for the challenge of any knight who has a mind to end an ill custom. There a tired knight sleeps under a great apple-tree that stands by a hedge, and presently his horse grimly neighs, and by sweep four queens on white mules under a canopy of green silk, and cast an enchantment upon him. They are Morgan le Fay and her sisters, high-born dames, but 'nigromancers' all. And presently knights and ladies begin to gather from their several adventures, and turn their horses' heads all one way. They are making for the great tournament beside Lonazep. The name sounds full of promise. But it is not worth while following them; the great tournament beside Lonazep is a tournament like any other. And throughout you have the delight of Malory's admirable prose; as finished an instrument in its way as any prose the sixteenth century can show, but with the

freshness of the early world still upon it. A formal analysis of style would be tedious. I choose three points only for illustration. The first is the constant use of vivid words, which have now gone out of the language. A knight rides 'a great wallop' until he comes to a fountain. Another is smitten on a ship and falls down 'noseling' to the shipboard. Lancelot tilts with Gawaine and charges him 'so sore that his horse reversed up so down'. A tall lad is a 'much young man'. Arthur has a dream of a fight in the air between a boar and a dragon, in which 'the dragon flew away all on a height, and come down with such a swough, and smote the boar to powder, both flesh and bones, that it fluttered all abroad on the sea'. Sometimes there is an echo of the alliterative poems. Gawaine comes to battle 'as brim as any boar'. Bedivere sees 'the waters wap and waves wan'. Such phrases are racy of the vernacular, but it is French, although it sounds like English, when Gawaine bids Lancelot 'deliver the queen from thee and pike thee lightly out of the court'. It is both French and English, when Sir Bors sees 'a spear great and long that came straight upon him pointling'. The tempers of the two languages are coalescing. So much for my first stylistic point. The second is that, although there is little word-painting, Malory is alive to the sweet influences of the Pleiades. His adventures are hung about, like English sport, with outdoor sights and sounds. Knights ride to keep their tryst, and 'lodge them in a little leaved wood, beside there the tournament should be'. They fight with such dint of strokes 'that the noise and sound rang by the water and the wood'. A fight lasts all day, and at evensong 'they set them down upon two mole-hills there beside the fighting place, and either of them unlaced his helm and took the cold wind'. A tired man comes to a fair well and puts off his helm 'to drink of that burbley water'. Another is caught in a storm, when there fell 'a thunder and a rain, as heaven and earth should go together'. More elaborate is the picture when Arthur meets a churl at the door of his castle in Sherwood. 'He was all befurred in black sheepskins, and a great pair of boots, and a bow and arrows, in a russet gown, and brought wild geese in his hand, and it was on the morn after Candlemas day.' It is Merlin in disguise, coming across the snows of Candlemas. My third point is a trick of dialogue. Malory can be rhetorical, when a dramatic need calls for it. But for the most part the knights are of brief speech. They are men of their hands. Arthur has to face the challenge of six kings at once, and asks advice of his barons. 'They could no counsel give, but said they were big enough.' Could a war debate among English lords be better or more briefly rendered?

But a wind-bag will get his answer. 'As for that threatening, said Sir Gringamore, be it as it may, we will go to dinner.' And when Turquine has flung his defiance at the whole of the Table Round, 'That is over much said, said Sir Lancelot.' The phrasing may shape itself in gnostic homespun. 'What nephew, said the king, is the wind in that door?' When Lancelot's time of trouble comes, his fellowship recall that they have had much weal with him and much worship. 'And therefore, Sir Lancelot, said they, we will take the woe with the weal.' These brevities of speech are Malory's nearest approach to humour. Fundamental humour, the humour of a Chaucer, is perhaps incompatible with romance. It shatters the dome of many-coloured glass. Chaucer and Shakespeare between them did not leave much romance about Troilus and Cressida.

Towards the middle of the *Morte d'Arthur*, light breaks over the story. We no longer see men walking as trees darkly. They begin to arrange themselves in definite patterns, and to move through real conflicts of character and passion to a deliberate end. Henceforward everything centres round Lancelot; we get clear of the *Tristan*. Malory is ruthless in abridging his source, taking only so much from the intricate adventures of the French *Lancelot* as will establish, firstly, his hero's priority to all the other knights of the Round Table, secondly, the special link between him and Gawaine and his brother Gareth, thirdly, his love relation with Guenevere, and, fourthly, his parentage of Galahad. Lancelot may not himself see the Grail, but he cannot, in a Lancelot romance, give place to any of his fellows. So the Grail-winner must be his son, and as Lancelot will love no woman but Guenevere, the existence of a son must be explained by bringing Lancelot under a spell. Spells are always legitimate in romance. Galahad is born, grows up, comes to court, and achieves the siege perilous. And so the story slides into the Quest of the Grail. I hope I shall not imperil sympathy if I say that I do not regard the Quest of the Grail as one of the most satisfactory parts of the *Morte d'Arthur*. Again it is not altogether Malory's fault. He follows the French *Lancelot* closely here, and the Quest, as he tells it, was an integral part of the *Lancelot*, perhaps from the beginning, and certainly in the version which came down to him and has come to us. But the much-told tale is told better elsewhere. The Galahad Quest has not the mystery of Chretien de 'Troyes' original fragment; it may be just because it is not a fragment. It has not the tender melancholy of the *Perlesvaus*, the version translated as *The High History of the Holy Grail*. German scholars find a deeper humanity in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. The

introduction of the theme into the *Lancelot* explains itself well enough. It is a quite legitimate attempt to bring romance into the service of religious mysticism. It points from the way of earthly achievement to the way of spiritual illumination. The chivalry of heaven is set against the chivalry of the Round Table. But the initial inspiration, whatever its worth, is insufficient to carry the writer through his long series of symbolic adventures and still more symbolic visions, with a hermit waiting at every crossroads to expound the symbolism in its bitterest detail. The hermit had ill success with the frivolous Gawaine. 'Sir, said Sir Gawaine, and I had leisure I would speak with you, but my fellow here, Sir Ector, is gone, and abideth me yonder beneath the hill. Well, said the good man, thou were better to be counselled.' Do not our hearts, in these long books, sometimes go down the hill with Gawaine? Structurally, too, the Quest makes a false issue in the story. When Galahad comes to court with his unearthly beauty, and all the knights turn to their new avows, Arthur is 'displeased'. He foresees the end of the Table Round.

'For when they depart from hence, I am sure they all shall never meet more in this world, for they shall die many in the quest. And so it forthinketh me a little, for I have loved them as well as my life, wherefore it shall grieve me right sore the departition of this fellowship, for I have had an old custom to have them in my fellowship. And there with the tears fill in his eyne.'

The Round Table had worked for the betterment of human life, but of this, as the history of religious thought has shown, the mystic impulse may take hardly more account than of 'the vain glory of the world, the which is not worth a pear'. But if a theme of mysticism was to be the issue of Malory's story, surely it should have ended with this theme. It ends quite differently. The Grail vanishes. The knights who achieve it are those who have least to do with the Round Table. The old motives of life re-establish themselves. Only in *Lancelot* is a little sting of conscience left; he has been of the Quest, and has failed. And the ultimate debate, upon which the fortunes of Arthur and his fellowship break and are dissolved, is not between the ideals of Camelot and the ideals of Corbenic, but a purely human one, the familiar conflict between human love and human loyalty.

The two books which follow the Quest contain four great adventures of *Lancelot*. Three of them concern his relations with Guenevere; his services to her in the delivery from the stake and the rescue from Sir Meliagrance; his renunciation for her in the beautiful

tale of the fair maid of Astolat. The epilogue hints at the problem which is coming.

‘For, Madam, said Sir Lancelot, I love not to be constrained to love; for love must arise of the heart, and not by no constraint. That is truth, said the king, and many knights: love is free in himself, and never will be bounden; for where he is bounden he loseth himself.’

There is already tragic irony here. The fourth adventure shows Lancelot at the top of his knightly renown. He alone, of all the Round Table, may touch Sir Urre’s wounds and heal them. And when the adventure is over, ‘ever Sir Lancelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten’. That is a fine touch of Malory’s. The *περιπέτεια*, the tragic reversal of fortunes, is upon us. And now, with the last two books, Malory rises to the full height of his epic theme. May I call it epic? Professor Ker, to whom in all things mediaeval we are bound to defer, draws a sharp distinction between epic and romance, between Roland or Beowulf and Lancelot. For him the epic is the heroic. The defence of a narrow place against odds, dramatically told; that is a typical heroic or epic adventure. Well, I do not wish to deny the differences in temper between the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Lancelot*, with a century or more of romance-writing between them; although Lancelot was in a tight place enough when he slew Sir Colgrevance at the door of Guenevere’s chamber, unarmed against fourteen knights who ‘had gotten a great form out of the hall, and therewith they rashed at the door’. But common usage, I think, allows of many different tempers and manners of writing within the notion of epic, insisting only on dignity and scope of treatment, and on the linking up of individual fortunes with those of some greater whole, a house, a nation, an empire, humanity itself. This linking up does not fail in the *Morte d’Arthur*. Professor Ker does not admit that the national or ‘ecumenical’ theme is of the essence of epic; he finds this rather in ‘dramatic representation of the characters’. And he quotes Aristotle—always an excellent thing to do. Aristotle praises Homer because, while other poets ‘tell their story straight on’, he ‘with little prelude, leaves the stage to personages, men and women, all with characters of their own’. It is true. But Aristotle is here contrasting the manner of a good epic poet with the manner of some bad epic poets. He is not trying to define the notion of epic. He does not say whether its theme should or should not have a national or ecumenical aspect. Certainly the *Iliad* is the tale of Troy, as well as the tale of the wrath of Achilles, and the *Odyssey* is not

unconcerned with the dynasty of Ithaca. However this may be, Aristotle ought to have approved of the last two books of the *Morte d'Arthur*. Malory follows his precept exactly. There is a little prelude, and then, with rare comments, Malory stands aside and lets his characters speak and act for themselves. Here is the little prelude.

‘In May, when every lusty heart flourisheth and burgeoneth; for as the season is lusty to behold and comfortable, so man and woman rejoicen and gladden of summer coming with his fresh flowers, for winter, with his rough winds and blasts, causeth a lusty man and woman to cower and sit fast by the fire. So in this season, as in the month of May, it befell a great anger and unhap that stinted not till the flower of chivalry of all the world was destroyed and slain; and all was long upon two unhappy knights, the which were named Agravaine and Sir Mordred that were brethren unto Sir Gawaine.’

The stage is now set. The action is swift, the conclusion inevitable; there is a full sense of the pity of it. The web of the psychological situation is closely woven. It is not merely the ‘eternal triangle’; Lancelot, Arthur, Guenevere. Lancelot is the midmost figure, drawn this way by fidelity to his king, and that way by fidelity to his mistress. But there is also Mordred, the child of Arthur’s sin, and destined from birth to be Arthur’s undoing, working now actively with Agravaine for Lancelot’s overthrow. And there are Gawaine and Gareth, bound to Lancelot by all knightly bonds. He has rescued Gawaine from Carados and Turquine; he has knighted Gareth and loves him. When the crisis comes, Gawaine is for long true to Lancelot. Then, in rescuing Guenevere for the second time from the stake, Lancelot unwittingly slays the unarmed Gareth, and Gawaine’s love is turned to hate. His fiercer spirit compels the reluctant king to besiege the lovers in Joyous Gard. At this siege Lancelot’s behaviour is perfect in its sad deference to an ancient loyalty. It is long before he will level a spear, and when Bors unhorses Arthur, Lancelot alights and horses him again, and ‘the tears brast out of Arthur’s eyes, thinking on the great courtesy that was in Sir Launcelot, more than in any other man’. The Pope intervenes and bids Arthur take his queen again and ‘accord’ with Lancelot. Arthur consents. Lancelot rides with the queen from Joyous Gard, which hereafter shall be Dolorous Gard, to Carlisle, both clothed alike in white cloth of gold tissue, with an hundred knights in green velvet, and every knight ‘with a branch of olive in his hand in tokening of peace’. It is his last pageant. He perjures himself, as others in like case have done, and will do again. Guenevere’s reputation is to be unstained. And now you think that

her adventures at least are ended, and that she will live it out at Carlisle or Camelot, like that Helen whom Telemachus beheld at Sparta, when Troy fires had long been dust, *τανύπεπλον*, a comely housewife with her distaff among her handmaidens. The story will have it otherwise; but now it goes with Lancelot. Arthur may be reconciled, but Gawaine will not be reconciled. Lancelot must 'pike' him out of that court, of which he had been at once the stay and ornament. Arthur and Gawaine and their host follow him over the seas to Benwick, and there, stung by Gawaine's insults, Lancelot twice lays him low, and twice refuses to take his life. Then Mordred strikes again, raising rebellion in Arthur's absence, and claiming to wed Guenevere. Arthur returns. Gawaine dies of his old wound at Dover, and relents, but all too late, bidding Arthur send for Lancelot, and begging that Lancelot will visit his tomb. The rest is familiar; the death of Arthur, the pathetic farewell between Lancelot and Guenevere, their edifying ends in their several hermitages, Lancelot's burial at Joyous Gard, and Ector's threnody over his bier. No doubt it is in all the anthologies, but I cannot forbear to quote it.

'Ah Launcelot, he said, thou were head of all Christian knights; and now I dare say, said Sir Ector, thou Sir Lancelot, there thou liest, that thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand; and thou were the courteoust knight that ever bare shield; and thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse; and thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman; and thou were the kindest man that ever strake with sword; and thou were the goodliest person ever came among press of knights; and thou was the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies; and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the breast.'

Such is Malory's music and such his meaning; and now he has nothing to do but to date his book, and bid his readers 'pray for me while I am on live that God send me good deliverance, and when I am dead, I pray you all pray for my soul'. What does he mean by 'good deliverance'? Until recently, little has been known of Malory's personality. Of himself he only tells us that he finished his work in 1469 or 1470, and that he was a knight, which has not prevented perverse commentators from arguing that he was a priest. But the research of Professor Kittredge has reasonably identified him with a certain Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, who served in the train of that last paladin of chivalry, Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, and, if he did not himself see Agincourt, must at any rate have spent his youth in the atmosphere of national unity and military enterprise, of which the name of

Agincourt remains the symbol. In later life he became a knight of the shire for Warwickshire, and it is probable that he was also the Thomas Malory, knight, who was excluded with others from two pardons of Edward IV, in 1468. If so, the 'deliverance' for which Malory prayed in 1469 or 1470 was deliverance from prison. I hope he got it. Probably he did. I do not think it should be inferred that Malory was a Lancastrian. A Warwickshire man is likely to have been a follower of Warwick the 'king-maker'. But the 'king-maker' was behind the disaffections of 1468. In 1469 he was at open war with Edward, and if Malory did not benefit by the amnesty of that year, he can hardly have remained a prisoner during the brief 're-adeption' of Henry VI, which began on October 9, 1470. A few days before it ended Malory died, on March 14, 1471. 'Valens miles' was on the tomb in the London Greyfriars, where he lay until the Reformation scattered his ashes. The direct echoes of his life in his book are not many. As I have said, like Homer, he rarely intervenes. But even as blind Homer introduces the blind Demodocus, so Malory, when he has described how Tristram fell into prison, passes to a comment:

'So Sir Tristram endured there great pain, for sickness had undertaken him, and that is the greatest pain a prisoner may have. For all the while a prisoner may have his health of body, he may endure under the mercy of God, and in hope of good deliverance; but when sickness touches a prisoner's body, then may a prisoner say all wealth is him bereft, and then he hath cause to wail and to weep.'

This is one of three or four reflective passages which, so far as we can tell, Malory did not find in his sources. The most famous is the chapter on 'How true love is likened to summer', which introduces the tale of Guenevere's Maying. Some blossoming bough has flung itself across the window of his prison, and the old knight stops to muse on spring and love. This, too, is in all the anthologies. Another, and perhaps critically the most significant, is in the account of Mordred's rebellion, when the people were 'so new fangle' that for the most part they held with him.

'Lo ye all Englishmen, see ye not what a mischief here was, for he that was the most king and knight of the world, and most loved the fellowship of noble knights, and by him they were all upholden, now might not these Englishmen hold them content with him. Lo thus was the old custom and usage of this land. And also men say that we of this land have not yet lost ne forgotten that custom and usage. Alas this is a great default of us Englishmen; for there may no thing please us no term.'

Here then Malory reads a lesson. And indeed to regard the *Morte*

d'Arthur as no more than a piece of archaistic romancing would be to mistake its temper. After all, Malory is writing with his eye on the fifteenth century. The Wars of the Roses were no crusade. Chivalry was not much in evidence when Lord Clifford stabbed young Rutland at the bridge of Wakefield. Lancelot would not have done that. And so Malory, who remembers Agincourt, will set before his countrymen the ideal of a better England, an ideal in which the knights are charged

‘never to do outrageosity, nor murder, and always to flee treason. Also, by no mean to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy . . . ; and always to do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succour upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, ne for no world’s goods. Unto this were all the knights sworn of the Table Round, both old and young.’

Can he bring back the days of King Arthur—or is it the days of King Henry V?

Certainly the *Morte d'Arthur* is a book that makes for righteousness. It was a singular aberration of criticism when Roger Ascham wrote of it that ‘the whole pleasure standeth in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter and bold bawdry : in which book these be counted the noblest knights, that do kill most men without any quarrel, and commit foulest adulteries by subtlest shifts’. I do not claim that Malory sees his way quite clearly through the queer spiritual tangle of the twelfth-century *amour courtois*. Perhaps such casuistry was not for him. He knows that love is good, and therefore of Guenevere he will ‘make here a little mention, that while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end’. But he knows also that sin brings tragedy. It is not merely that the sinful man will not see the Holy Grail. The tragedy is here and now. ‘For as well as I have loved thee’ says Guenevere to Lancelot, ‘For as well as I have loved thee, mine heart will not serve me to see thee; for through thee and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed.’ Better than by Ascham, the spirit of the book is held by William Caxton, who, after the ‘simple cunning’ which God hath sent to him, will put it into print for an ‘ensample’.

‘For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renomnee.’

I sometimes wonder what democracy, with its transmutation of all literary as well as all social values, which is before us, will make of the *Morte d'Arthur*. Malory’s is a very aristocratic ideal. The

churl does not count for much in it. Agincourt was all very well, but I daresay Malory sat holding his spear at the siege of Rouen, when the townfolk, after living on 'cattis, hors, houndis, rattis, myse, and all that myght be etynne', were driven out of the gates by the garrison 'for spendyng of vitaille', and remorselessly driven back into the moat by Henry's forces. I hope that he was one of the knights told off to take them a Christmas dinner there. In the *Morte d'Arthur* itself, the distinction between noble and churl is fundamental. If there are sparks of nobility in a cowherd's son, like Tor, or a kitchen knave, like Gareth, you may be sure he will turn out to be a king's son in disguise. There is much emphasis on lineage. That Lancelot and his son are 'the greatest gentlemen in the world' is quaintly explained. They are of the lineage of Jesus Christ. Percivale and his brother may not dwell at home, 'for we be come of king's blood of both parties, and therefore, mother, it is our kind to haunt arms and noble deeds'. Even the hermits in Logres are of gentle birth.

'For in these days it was not the guise of hermits as is nowadays. For there were none hermits in those days, but that they had been men of worship and of prowess, and those hermits held great household, and refreshed people that were in distress.'

Malory goes out of his way to give this bit of antiquarian lore. He must have known anchorites in his own time, whose salad even a wandering knight would not want to share. Well, when democracy comes to its own, I suppose that Lancelot will have to go through the crucible, with Plato's wardens and Aristotle's magnanimous man. And yet, after all, the transmutation of values is not the extinction of values. An economic redistribution will not wholly remove the need for chivalry. Even in the New Jerusalem, I think, there will be courtesies to be exchanged, wrongs to be righted, public service to be done. And so, perhaps, the lamps that burnt for our fathers may still glimmer upon our path, and it may still prove true that 'in him that should say or think that there was never a king called Arthur, might well be aretted great folly and blindness'.

NOTE

Professor Kittredge's investigation of Malory's life is in a paper on *Who Was Sir Thomas Malory?* (1896, *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, v. 85) and a shorter contribution to W. E. Mead, *Selections from Morte d'Arthur* (1897), xiv. One correction of fact and two or three additions, from sources not accessible when Professor Kittredge wrote, are desirable. Professor Kittredge, following Dugdale, gives the date of Malory's death as 1470. But this represents 1471 in our reckoning, which begins the year from January 1, not March 25. The original record, printed from Cotton MS. Vitellius F. xii in C. L. Kingsford, *The Grey Friars of London* (1915, *British Soc. of Franciscan Studies*), 93, runs 'In Capella Sancti Francisci . . . sub 2^a parte fenestre 4^o sub lapide iacet dominus Thomas Mallere, valens miles: qui obiit 14 die mensis Marcij, A^o dⁿⁱ 1470, de parochia de Monkenkyrkby in comitatu Warwici'. Monks Kirby is near Newbold Revel, and the Malory arms were once in its church window. Here, too, was a priory once a cell of the monastery of St. Nicholas of Angiers. On the suppression of the alien priories under Richard II, it was transferred to the Carthusian house of Epworth in the isle of Axholme, Lincolnshire. Henry IV restored it to Angiers, and Henry V in 1415-16 to Epworth again. The last transfer was confirmed by Edward IV in 1468-9. Some dispute as to this priory probably lies behind two commissions of Henry VI in which Malory figures (*Calendar of Patent Rolls, Hen. VI*, v. 476; vi. 61). The first, of July 13, 1451, directs Humphrey Duke of Buckingham and Richard Earl of Warwick to arrest Thomas Malory, knight, and his servant John Appelby, and cause them to find mainpernors who will mainprise for them under a sufficient penalty that they will do no hurt to the prior and convent of the Carthusian house of Axiholme or any of the king's people, and that they will appear in person before the king and council on the quinzaine* of Michaelmas next to answer certain charges. The second, of March 26, 1452, directs the Duke of Buckingham, Sir Edward Grey of Groby, and the Sheriff of Warwick and Leicester to arrest 'Thomas Malorre, knight', to answer certain charges. In view of the date of Edward IV's confirmation to Epworth it is of course possible that some renewal of this dispute and not sedition led to Malory's imprisonment in 1468. Professor Kittredge cites from a Wells register (*Hist. MSS. Comm. 10th Report*, App. iii, 183) the pardon of August 24, 1468, from which Malory is excluded. He is also excluded from a later pardon of December 1, 1468, preserved in the same register (*H. M. C. Wells MSS. i. 407*).

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