



An Aubrey Beardsley illustration for Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*

Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1405 – 14 March 1471) was an English writer, the author or compiler of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Most modern scholars assume that he was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire. A reason for some confusion is that his surname appears in various spellings, including Maillorie, Mallory, Mallery, and Maleore. The name comes from the Old French adjective *maleüré* (from Latin *male auguratus*) meaning *ill-omened* or *unfortunate*.

Few facts are certain in Malory's history. He was probably born sometime around 1405 (though some scholars have suggested an earlier date). He died in March of 1471, less than two years after completing his lengthy book. Twice elected to a seat in Parliament, he also accrued a long list of criminal charges during the 1450s, including burglary, rape, sheep stealing, and attempting to ambush the Duke of Buckingham. He escaped from jail on two occasions, once by fighting his way out with a variety of weapons and by swimming a moat. Malory was imprisoned at several locations in London, but he was occasionally out on bail. He was never brought to trial for the charges that had been levelled against him. In the 1460s he was at least once pardoned by King Henry VI, but more often, he was specifically excluded from pardon by both Henry VI and his rival and successor, Edward IV. It can be construed from comments Malory makes at the ends of sections of his narrative that he composed at least part of his work while in prison. William Oldys speculates that he may have been a priest, based on Malory's description of himself in the colophon to *Le Morte d'Arthur*:

I pray you all, gentlemen and gentlewomen that readeth this book of Arthur and his knights, from the beginning to the ending, pray for me while I am alive, that God send me good deliverance, and when I am dead, I pray you all pray for my soul. For this book was ended the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth, by Sir Thomas Maleore, knight, as Jesu help him for His great might, as he is the servant of Jesu both day and night. (Malory p. 531)

A young Malory appears as a character at the end of T.H. White's book *The Once and Future King*, which was based on *Le Morte d'Arthur*; this cameo is included in the Broadway musical

Camelot. Many modern takes on the Arthurian legend have their roots in Malory, including John Boorman's 1981 movie *Excalibur*, which includes selected elements of the book.

Context of *Le Morte d'Arthur*

At the end of the Middle Ages and the end of a long efflorescence of medieval romance in many languages, Malory endeavored to digest the Arthurian romances into English prose, using as his source chiefly an assortment of French Arthurian prose romances. But this traditional material has not been organized so as to convey any coherent significance either as a whole or, for the most part, even locally. Malory persistently misses the point of his wonderful material. (This may be partly because he had no access to the earlier and better sources - if we except the fourteenth-century English alliterative *Morte Arthur*- and was dependent, or chose to be dependent, on his French prose romances.) The comparison with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is in this respect -as, indeed, in nearly all respects - fatally damaging to Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. What is it, then, that constitutes the charm of the book, that draws readers back to parts of it again? Partly, it is the 'magic' of its style - those lovely elegiac cadences of the prose, that diffused tone of wistful regret for a past age of chivalry, that vague sense of the vanity of earthly things. Yet the charm of the prose is a remote charm; the imagery is without immediacy; there is a lifelessness, listlessness, and fadedness about this prose for all its (in a limited sense) loveliness. There is also the fascination of the traditional Arthurian material itself, even though we feel it is not profoundly understood. The material fascinates the reader in spite of Malory's 'magical' style which seems to shadow and obscure rather than illuminate it. Malory's Grail books, for example, include some of the most fascinating of his original material. We find here once again the Waste Land, the Grail Castle, the Chaple Perilous, the Wounded King, and so on but reduced to little more than a succession of sensations and thrills. The recurrent appearance of the corpse or corpse-like figure on a barge and the weeping women - fragments of an ancient mythology though they are - become in Malory merely tedious after a number of repetitions, and the final effect is one of a somewhat morbid sensationalism.

Some qualifications of these structures should be made on behalf of the last four books of Caxton's Malory, which may be felt to have an impressive kind of unity of their own. The lawless loves of Lancelot and Guinevere, the break-up of the fellowship of the Round Table through treachery and disloyalty, the self destruction of Arthur's knights and kingdom in a great civil war, the last battle and death of Arthur, and the deaths of Lancelot and Guinevere have, as they are described, a gloomy power, and are all felt as in some degree related events. This set of events appears to have been deeply felt by Malory, partly as a reflection of the anarchy and confusion of the contemporary England of the War of the Roses.

(Source: [Penguin Classic](#))

The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18
Volumes (1907–21).

Volume II. The End of the Middle Ages.

XIV. English Prose in the Fifteenth Century. II.

§ 3. Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

Like *The Golden Legend*, the *Morte d'Arthur*, the publication of which holds a chief place in Caxton's work, looks back to the Middle Ages. Based on translation, a mosaic of adaptations, it is, nevertheless, a single literary creation such as no work of Caxton's own can claim to be, and it has exercised a far stronger and longer literary influence.

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If, as is possible, Malory was the knight of Newbold Revell, he had been a retainer of the last Beauchamp earl of Warwick, he had seen the splendours of the last efforts of feudalism and had served in that famous siege of Rouen which so deeply impressed contemporary imagination. Apparently, he was a loyalist during the Civil Wars and suffered from Yorkist revenge; his burial in the Grey Friars may, possibly, suggest that he even died a prisoner in Newgate. In any case, he must have died before the printing of his immortal book, which comes to us, therefore, edited by Caxton, to whom, possibly, are due most of the lacunae, bits of weak grammar and confusions in names. Nevertheless, the style seals the *Morte d'Arthur* as Malory's, not Caxton's. It is as individual as is the author's mode of dealing with the material he gathered from his wide field. This material Malory several times says he found in a French book — *the French book* — but critics have discovered a variety of sources. It is in the course of the story that the multiplicity of sources is at times discernible — in the failure of certain portions to preserve a connecting thread, in the interruption of the story of Tristram, in the curious

doubling of names, or the confusion of generations; the style reveals no trace of inharmonious originals. The skilful blending of many ancient tales, verse and prose, French and English, savage and saintly, into a connected, if but loosely connected, whole is wrought in a manner which leaves the *Morte*, while representative of some of the nobler traits of Malory's century, in other respects typical neither of that nor any particular epoch, and this is an element in its immortality.

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If such an ascetic purity and rapt devotion as glows in the *Grail* story was practised among the mystics, such a fantastic chivalry portrayed by Froissart, such a loyalty evinced by a Bedford or a Fortescue, yet the *Morte* assumes the recognition of a loftier standard of justice, purity and unselfishness than its own century knew. These disinterested heroes, who give away all they win with the magnanimity of an Audley at Poitiers, these tireless champions of the helpless, these eternal lovers and their idealised love, are of no era, any more than the forests in which they for ever travel. And, if the constant tournaments and battles, and the castles which seem to be the only places to live in, suggest a medieval world, the total absence of reference to its basic agricultural life and insistent commerce detaches us from it again, while the occasional mention of cities endows them with a splendour and remoteness only to be paralleled in the ancient empire or in the pictures of Turner.

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Medieval stories were, naturally, negligent of causes in a world where the unaccountable so constantly happened in real life, and a similar suddenness of adventure may be found in tales much older than this. Malory, however, on the threshold of an age which would require dramatic motive or, at least, probability, saved his book from the fate of the older, unreasoned fiction by investing it with an atmosphere, impossible to analyse, which withdraws his figures to the region of mirage. This indescribable conviction of magic places Malory's characters outside the sphere of criticism, since, given the atmosphere, they are consistent with themselves and their circumstances. Nothing is challenged, analysed or emphasised; curiosity as to causation is kept in

abeyance; retribution is worked out, but, apparently, unconsciously. Like children's are the sudden quarrels and hatreds and as sudden reconciliations. The motive forces are the elemental passions of love and bravery, jealousy and revenge, never greed, or lust, or cruelty. Courage and the thirst for adventure are taken for granted, like the passion for the chase, and, against a brilliant and moving throng of the brave and fair, a few conceptions are made to stand forth as exceptional—a Lancelot, a Tristram, or a Mark. Perhaps most skilful of all is the restraint exercised in the portrayal of Arthur. As with Shakespeare's Caesar and Homer's Helen, we realise Arthur by his effect upon his paladins; of himself we are not allowed to form a definite image, though we may surmise justice to be his most distinct attribute. Neither a hero of hard knocks nor an effective practical monarch, he is not to be assigned to any known type, but remains the elusive centre of the magical panorama.