

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic. Will, PhD

***Morte d'Arthur* (1465)**

Sir Thomas Mallory (1425-1470)

AUTHOR AND WORK

Both the life of Thomas Mallory and the implications of his text are hard to interpret. Thomas Mallory is only indirectly known as a person, and makes little reference to himself, except for a self-description as a 'knight prisoner,' which could quite possibly refer to his involvement with his nation's current political life-- Henry V had just been installed as the new King of England, and was aggressively asserting his power against the French; and he expected active fealty from his English subjects, a loyalty one might think hardly to be taken for granted in the mind and behavior of someone as imaginative and recusant as our Thomas Mallory.

As for Mallory's work itself, part of the twelfth century *Matter of Britain*, the chief locus of the Arthurian myth world, it takes us to the heart of the almost early modern Briton at work recreating his historical setting around him. In other words we find ourselves confronting, in Mallory, a man whose sensibility aligned him with the mindset of a high mediaeval recounter like Layamon, but also with a two centuries later literary master like Chaucer.

PLOT: macro and micro

With Mallory we find ourselves in the mid 15th century, in a 1000 page text of Middle English historical fiction (right there, in trying to characterize this work; we raise more questions than we answer; the work is created in a poetic prose, of which it can be said that it is closer to modern English than is Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* pose a serious reading problem even for today's educated reader of English. Is 'prose fiction' the right term for Mallory's work?, or would we better say 'romance? That observed,, concerning the language and genre issue, we will need to refine our nomenclature of 'historical fiction.' Both words need refining. We know that there is an incremental growth of the historical sense in English writing, as the Middle Ages morph into the premodern. We can track his line, in this regard, from the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* through Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, to Layamon's *Brut*; a sequence in which we find an increasing inter-penetration of fancy with landmarks of actuality. *La Morte d'Arthur*. as its title suggests, digs into the thickly mythical quasi history of Britain, which reflects what were the actualities of British resistance to late stage Roman occupation, the growing settledness of countryside Britain, the sophistication of the monarchy, but also reflects such actualities as the invention of the printing press, that world historical event which coincides with, and gives fresh life to, Mallory's work.)

This swellingly rich macro plot, which exfoliates into literary history shortly after the advent of the printing press, might be surveyed as follows: Book One/ Birth of Arthur; Book Two/ Arthur accrues power in the area of the western Roman Empire; Book Three/ Diverse episodes; Book Four/Young Gareth; Book Five/Arthur's Adventures with Lancelot; Book Six/ The Holy Grail and the Quest for it; Book Seven/ Lancelot's affair with Guinevere; Book Eight/ Guinevere ordered to be burned for adultery; Book Nine/ Death of Arthur; Book Ten/ Dissolution of Camelot.

This capsule indication of the salient events of the plot line confirms the looseness of the development of this entire narrative, which is episodic, takes leaps in time, and cycles in fresh characters and themes.

THEMES

Chivalry The chivalric, as it plays out in cultural history, means many things and plays many roles, The chivalric suggests a culture of kindness and gentleness--the image of the Virgin Mary underlies much of this thinking, for we are talking about a Christian behavioral tradition--but also a culture of manliness

and hardiness, which suggests the prowess needed to care for others. In the *Morte d'Arthur* some of the extended battle scenes, in which Arthur's knights fight pitched battles against their assembled enemies, show us the geometry of the battlefield melee---knights clashing and de horsed from opposite angles of the field, friends rushing to provide horse-backs for downed allies, everywhere the clamor of clashing greaves. The terminal courtesy of many knights is displayed in their readiness to sacrifice themselves to horse an ally. This is the chivalric tradition at its most dramatic. As such it feeds us back into the Homeric tradition, centuries earlier in the formation of a kindred chivalry. The format of the Homeric chivalric act is different, as we see it in the early books of the Iliad. Homeric heroes confront each other in the middle of the battle, on foot and encumbered by heavy metal armor. The moment of grace or death is at hand. On occasion, though such moments of grace are rare, the two combatants will start talking, and discover that they are distantly related. With additional luck a favoring deity, perhaps related to one of the two fighters, will intervene, and clinch the approaching peace deal. The warriors will 'shake and go home.'

Honor Though much stress is put on honor, as the crowning virtue of a knight, Mallory frequently assumes a cynical stance toward the issue of knightly honor. He doubts the ability of the Arthurian knights to reach The Holy Grail. They are, with the exception of Sir Galahad, not pure enough to teach the grail. We return in thought to the plausibly very human Thomas Mallory, to a man who, probably, had seen the inside of a jail cell. We return to a creative process more than capable of giving Mordred a dark central place at the end of the tale.

Love Love comes in two forms in the *Matter of Britain*. The vassalage system implies the closest possible bonding between knight and vassal, for the betterment of mankind, under a Christian understanding of these terms, to be sure; while the man woman relationship--at its most torrid and dangerous in the pairings of Tristan and Isolde or Lancelot and Guinevere--permanently skirts a dangerous frontier, which threads this dilemma, that the woman is in love with a noble man who is at the same time a vassal of the king. The point of crisis is destined for the moment when the lover, Lancelot, falls in love with the wife of King Arthur, Guinevere. Conflicts of personal interest cannot become more thorny.

Power Power in the broad sense is of dominant importance in Mallory's work. The power of adventure and battle derives largely from a viral impulse. However women exercise abundant power. Although men are easily disposed to think of women as their property, women of consequence, like Isolde and Guinevere, can define their marriages, and play culture-shaking adultery games from within them. This is not to mention the mysterious powers which a lady like Morgane le Fee exercises, and which can make men tremble.

Betrayal In the *Morte d'Arthur* betrayal of one another by lovers is far more acceptable than betrayal of knights by vassals. We touch here on the consequences of profound cultural change. Whereas high level marriage--marriage between individuals of elite wealth and standing--was in the earlier mediaeval period viewed primarily in financial terms, wealth being the key to power, by the High Middle Ages, breach of marriage could be justified as love, driven by the power of such as Tristan and Isolde. Throughout the mediaeval period, however, betrayal of knight by vassal was deeply condemned, for it threatened the bonds upon which the entire feudal system depended. The Knights of the Round Table, King Arthur's select fellowship of brother knights--co-equals and all of noble blood--typify the essential bonding of the community of knights, bonding in a magical spot, Avalon, where their pure prowess, the culture of Camelot, guarantees them oneness in shared chivalric values.

CHARACTERS

Arthur. A mythical figure out of earliest British historiography. Though known in many guises to the Welsh and other Celtic peoples, as well as to medieval French historiographers, he remains predominately a figure of superior virtue and depth of loyalty. His signal honor and distinction is to have gathered around him a stellar honors-corps, the Knights of the Round Table. A growing conflict with his bastard son, Mordred, leads at the end to a deadly fight, in which both men--and the world of Camelot--die.

Guinevere, wife of Arthur, mediaeval British queen from the ancient cycles of mediaeval literature. There are many interpretations of her --from whore to goddess--throughout the course of mediaeval literature. She and Lancelot become adulterous lovers, right under the nose of Arthur, but when the secret comes out it is the end of the Arthur mystique.

Mordred, Arthur's bastard son by his half-sister. Mordred was brought up to hate Arthur, and it is only poetic justice that the two men slay one another, bringing the tale to an end.

Lancelot, deeply embedded in mediaeval myth, and close comrade in arms to Arthur. At the same time he becomes the lover of Arthur's wife, Guinevere. Lancelot is no ordinary mythical lover, but is closely associated with the mystery of the lacustrine, the area to which his spirit is attuned; it makes emotional sense that Lancelot is subject to occasional fits of madness. The trace of the exceptional carries over into Lancelot's son, Galahad, the purest of all Arthur's knights, and the only one to attain the Holy Grail.

Bedivere, one of Arthur's most loyal allies, and the first to be knighted. Carries out numerous missions for Arthur, for instance the mission to ask for the hand of Guinevere in marriage. Responsible for the final disposition of the sword, Excalibur.

EVENTS

In a tale like the *Morte d'Arthur*, the events are the way the events are recounted. Let us think of the initial chapters, thru to the point where Arthur proves his miraculous powers through extracting Excalibur from the stone. What is the narrator's challenge, as Mallory confronts it?

He must construct a plausible plat form on which to construct a miracle story. How does he do this?

He establishes a mythical space in which hypothetical events can transpire, Arthur events. That's the space in which Arthur-events can occur. 'It befell in the days' generates an account to which there are no boundaries...but also no goalposts. In that space reigns a King, He surges forth as a god figure, to whom an anti figure is opposed. We are in a kind of figure-antifigure free space. Some conflictual reconciliation is required. Is it not like a metaphysical thriller, out of which the hearer? Reader? Can extrapolate further emergent universes? Is this kind of geometrical calculation part of what makes up the creative imagination?

Terms must be found, in any case, and Thomas Mallory must find them in the character stock box available to him. We must get rid of the Duke of Cornwall. And at this point enters a convenient pop up figure, Merlin the magician, who can take hold of Uther Pendragon, and bring Arthur forth as the Wunder Kind and miracle-former around a tale told in pure language time. By such prestidigitations, and shifts of language level, Mallory sets the stage for a powerful king who will quite naturally be the only one with the gift for sword extraction and absolute leadership.

The primary imagination, which Coleridge brought onto the stage of English literary theory, wants reviewing in the light of the present talk-through of the creative process in Mallory. Imaginative creation, in mythography as well as in the romantic dance of invention, faces challenges in getting from here to there in language. Mythography is more comfortable in the geometries of language programming, while theorists of primary imagination are freed by the languages of transformation, happy when, like Coleridge, they can attend to Schelling's unique admonition to 'make it new.'