

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Thomas Mallory (1405-1471) *Morte Darthur* (A, 301-318)

Though scholars still debate the life of Thomas Mallory, for whose work there are two possible claimants, it appears that the Thomas we have here is a well attested felon and jailbird, who set his literary imagination on a time and place, the mythical Arthurian period of English history, into which he could interject his disappointments and wishes. Like the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Mallory found in the roundtable world that same zone of chivalric lords and ladies which keeps Camelot alive before our thoughts even today. (Cf. for instance the legend of the Kennedy clan and their Camelot.)

Question: Dark Passion at the Heart of Chivalry

The question of this day is simple, and bears on the most striking passage in *Morte Darthur*. *What is Mallory's attitude toward the adultery between Lancelot and Guinevere, and toward Lancelot's behavior after that adultery?* This question begs attention because Lancelot is a generically noble figure in the Arthurian scene, and his relation to Arthur is defining for the whole society of the roundtable. Mallory says in an aside that he is not sure what the two lovers were doing in Guinevere's chamber. Is Arthur made a fool?

And yet another question: what is your view of the funeral oration for Arthur by Sir Ector? Does Mallory rise to a high level of poetry, in this assessment of a great man?

Comparative Literature:

1. The broad background to all the works of this Unit, and directly bearing on the Arthur legends, can be checked out in a book like G. M. Trevelyan, *A Shortened History of England (Books I and II; New York, 1974)*, which conveys you briskly and thoughtfully from the end of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance.
2. You might want to browse in the Troubadour poetry being composed in Southern France at the end of the Middle Ages, especially in the 13th century. You will find that poetry populated with love/death themes, in which idealized love for the noble lady leads either to dark illegitimate passion or a sublimation of love in which the lover is cancelled out. The thematic material touched there was ripely harvested in the love/death opera of Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde (1865)*; the same material is brilliantly anatomized in Denis de Rougemont's *Love In The Western World (1972; English translation.)*