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The Prose *Lancelot* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*: Two Examples of Cyclification and the Problems They Pose

The prose *Lancelot* (also called the Vulgate Cycle), in its most salient elements — the *Lancelot* proper, the *Queste*, and the *Mort Artu* — forms a corpus of extraordinary power and coherence, also, according to Lot and Micha, one of structural and doctrinal unity. I agree. Whether the end result is due to one author (Lot, Micha), to an "architect" (Frappier), or to slow development and accretion over decades (Vinaver) remains open to debate.

It is fascinating, however, to observe that *Morte Darthur*, the work of one author-compiler, Sir Thomas Malory, who translated and reduced the prose *Lancelot*, the prose *Tristan*, and other texts, may well evidence a diminishing of structural and doctrinal unity. This was Vinaver's point. Anglicists today stress that Malory probably meant to create one compendium volume of Arthurian history (Benson) and that *Morte Darthur* does achieve organic cohesiveness, whatever the author's intentions (Brewer).

I agree also. However, I am convinced that some other Anglicists, by wrenching French romances from their context and by judging them against Malory's intentions (or, rather, against a modern-critical, "great books" reading of Malory), distort both the Old French and the Middle English. Any number of qualities of high literature ascribed to *Morte Darthur* as being original to it are found equally in the prose *Lancelot*. Furthermore, I believe that because Malory devotes one-third of his text, the entire middle section, to a version of the prose *Tristan* (perhaps the right decision for a compiler of a compendium), he dilutes and decenters the thrust of the grand prose *Lancelot*: the rise and fall of the Arthurian world with Lancelot at the center, the rise and the fall bound to Lancelot and the Lancelot-Guinevere couple. The largely melodramatic, non-problematic, non-tragic Tristan section competes with the Lancelot story and, at the same time, distracts from the total *oeuvre*. Tristan's feats, and Lancelot's also, stand out as distinct episodes, blocks of adventure. In terms of adventure and of symbolism, they are superb. Yet they also contribute less to the unified, coherent presentation of the rise and fall of a world.

Malory in prose does basically the same things regarding his sources as the English metrical romancers did in the two previous centuries. Malory participates in the centuries-old English tradition of what elsewhere I call courtly translation and courtly adaptation. Like so many others, he practices rhetorical *abbreviatio* in contrast to *amplificatio* (Ihle). Like them, Malory concentrates on

the story and on ethical matters. He adheres to the plot, characterization, and ideas of his sources. What he retains is infinitely more important than what he adds or discards. When he does add or discard, it is not to create his own personal conception of unity or sense of history or vision of man. Malory modifies the French in order to make the courtly and chivalrous in his source more explicit, to make the exemplary more exemplary, to veil or delete what he deems unseemly, to underscore and to specify, to simplify and to melodramatize. Malory's is not the nostalgia and dream-like, romantic evocation of the past some have seen in him. Malory's chivalry is contemporary, as was the chivalry of the prose *Lancelot* two and a half centuries earlier, in France.

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