

THOMAS MALORY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

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Abstract. *This comprehensive academic thesis examines the definitive role of Sir Thomas Malory's late fifteenth-century masterpiece, Le Morte d'Arthur, in constructing the unified structural, stylistic, and ideological foundations of Arthurian romance. Writing amidst the catastrophic socio-political fracture of the Wars of the Roses, Malory systematically compiled, translated, and radicalized disparate materials into a singular, cohesive prose epic. This study explores the socio-historical context governing Malory's retrospective nostalgia, details the structural and ethical mechanisms of the Round Table via the Pentecostal Oath, evaluates the tragic triad of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, and analyzes how Malory's innovative English prose permanently shifted Arthurian myth from medieval episodic romance into an enduring pillar of Western secular literature.*

Keywords: Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte d'Arthur, Arthurian Romance, Chivalry, Pentecostal Oath, Middle English Prose, Camelot.

I. INTRODUCTION

The legend of King Arthur did not begin as an integrated narrative of chivalrous knights and mystical quests; it emerged from the murky geopolitical realities of post-Roman Britain, functioning primarily as a shifting vessel for ethnic, political, and dynastic ambitions. Early semi-historical accounts, such as Nennius's ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* and the tenth-century *Annales Cambriae*, presented Arthur not as a crowned medieval monarch, but as a fierce *dux bellorum* (war leader) fighting against the invading Anglo-Saxons. These early Celtic roots positioned Arthur as a regional champion of resistance, a far cry from the international symbol of courtly refinement he would eventually become.

The monumental transformation of Arthur from a localized warlord to an imperial sovereign occurred through Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century pseudo-chronicle, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). Geoffrey introduced key narrative architectures that would define the legend: the prophecies of Merlin, the establishment of a pan-European British empire, and Arthur's tragic betrayal by his nephew Mordred. Geoffrey's work served as political propaganda designed to legitimize the Anglo-Norman dynasty by providing Britain with a classical lineage matching Rome's.

As the legend crossed the English Channel into France, French writers injected the elements of courtly love (*fin'amor*) and individual knightly psychological exploration. Chrétien de Troyes, writing in the late twelfth century, introduced the iconic characters of Lancelot and Percival, alongside the mystical motif of the Holy Grail. Chrétien shifted the narrative focus away from the collective military conquests of Arthur's empire toward the individual, agonizing psychological dilemmas of knights torn between their desires and their duties. By the thirteenth century, these narratives swelled into the massive, labyrinthine French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Prose Cycles.

These textually dense, hyper-interlaced works spiritualized the Arthurian universe, superimposing a rigorous Cistercian Christian framework over the older secular chivalric models.

However, this vast accumulation left the Arthurian tradition deeply fragmented, contradictory, and scattered across multiple languages and generic formats.

By the late fifteenth century, the Arthurian tradition required a synthesizer—a mind capable of imposing order upon structural chaos. This study addresses how Sir Thomas Malory utilized this fragmented archive to construct a unified secular mythos amid the domestic trauma of the Wars of the Roses (1455–1487), which shattered the domestic peace of England, pitting brother against brother and exposing the utter hypocrisy and decay of late medieval feudalism.

II. METHODS

This study employs a historicist and structural literary analysis to examine Malory's compilation and adaptation methodology. The research analyzes how Malory systematically compiled, translated, and heavily adapted his sources—collectively referenced as his "Whole Book of King Arthur and His Noble Knights"—during his prolonged internment in Newgate Prison around 1469–1470.

The methodological framework focuses specifically on three core analytical vectors:

1. **Socio-Historical Contextualization:** Analyzing Malory's biography (as a knight of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire aligned with the Lancastrian faction) and the ideological catalyst of the Wars of the Roses to understand his implementation of retrospective nostalgia as a tool for social critique.

2. **Structural and Textual Analysis:** Evaluating the structural and ethical mechanisms of the Round Table, focusing specifically on the codification of the Pentecostal Oath as a constitutional and legal bedrock within the narrative text.

3. **Characterization and Triadic Modeling:** Analyzing the psychological density and internal ideological contradictions within the central tragic triad of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and Queen Guinevere to chart the internal collapse of the idealized state.

III. RESULTS

The textual, structural, and historical analysis yields the following primary results:

- **he Consolidation of Prose:** Malory successfully engineered a unified secular mythos from a chaotic, centuries-old archive of multi-lingual folklore and fragmented manuscripts. This was compiled into a single, cohesive Middle English prose work, later edited into twenty-one books and printed by William Caxton in 1485 under the title *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

- **Codification of Chivalry via Law:** Malory consolidated previously elastic and conflicting medieval ideals (secular fame, courtly love, and religious asceticism) into a singular, actionable legal and moral framework known as the Pentecostal Oath. Sworn annually, this oath transformed the Round Table from a loose collection of ego-driven adventurers into a cohesive civic institution dedicated to public justice and social order.

- **Re-engineering of the Tragic Triad:** The research reveals that the collapse of Camelot is an internal implosion driven by the psychological density and irreconcilable ideological contradictions of its central figures:

1. King Arthur is re-imagined as a dynamic, tragic statesman whose tragedy lies in his dual identity as a private human and public sovereign. His system collapses when civil law forces him to prioritize impersonal mechanisms over personal love.

2. Sir Lancelot embodies the ultimate paradox of secular chivalry, trapped in an irreconcilable

conflict between feudal loyalty to his king and courtly loyalty to his lover, Guinevere.

3. Queen Guinevere is treated with unprecedented dignity and agency, discarding older misogynistic tropes. Her choice to withdraw to a convent at Amesbury and her final refusal to see Lancelot demonstrate a mature moral agency.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that *Le Morte d'Arthur* represents the definitive consolidation and crystallization of the Arthurian romance tradition. Malory's literary project was fundamentally an exercise in urgent, retrospective nostalgia. In an era defined by political treachery, unstable royal successions, and the collapse of traditional feudal loyalty, Malory looked back to the mythical past of Camelot to construct an idealized blueprint for a stable Christian society. It was not a fantasy; it was a desperate, profound critique of the fractured world Malory inhabited, using the lens of ancient romance to examine the structural weaknesses of statecraft, oaths, and human nature.

By embedding the Pentecostal Oath into the structural heart of his work, Malory transformed

chivalry into a localized civic theology, showing how raw, destructive human violence could be successfully channeled and deployed for the common good under a legitimate sovereign ruler. However, despite the structural perfection of this framework, the subsequent collapse of Camelot reveals Malory's deep tragic vision: the kingdom's downfall is not precipitated by external threats, but is an internal implosion born from the very ideals and internal contradictions that built it.

In conclusion, Malory's innovative English prose permanently shifted Arthurian myth from medieval episodic romance into an enduring pillar of Western secular literature. His work successfully preserved the twilight world of medieval chivalry by translating it into a modern, accessible prose format that could survive the collapse of the very feudal structures that birthed it.

Every subsequent reimagining of Camelot, from Alfred Lord Tennyson to modern cinema, directly stems from the structural and emotional foundations laid down by Malory.