CHAPTER 2

“For This Was Drawyn by a Knyght Presoner”

Sir Thomas Malory and Le Morte Darthur

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“What?” seyde sir Launcelot, “is he a theff and a knyght? And a ravyssher of women? He doth shame unto the Order of Knyghthode, and contrary unto his oth.”

—Sir Thomas Malory

Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur, one of the best-known medieval versions of King Arthur’s legend, was also one of the first English books put into print in 1485. Le Morte Darthur remained popular for centuries, shepherdng King Arthur and his knights into the modern age. Filmmakers, novelists, video game developers, and television writers continue to rely on Malory’s work for their visions of noble knights, grand tournaments, extravagant feasts, and codes of honor. Even as we enjoy Malory’s romance of Arthur in a myriad of modern forms, few realize that the grand, nostalgic legends that tout knightly honor, true love, and a simpler, nobler past sprang from the inhospitable setting of a late medieval prison.

Although we know that Sir Thomas Malory wrote his Arthurian legend while in prison, scholars are certain about little else. Clues to his confinement and the period in which he writes can be gleaned from two specific colophons, one near the beginning of the work and one at the end. The first follows the conclusion of Malory’s “Tale of King Arthur”:

Here endyth this tale, as the Freynshe booke seyth, fro the maryage of kynge Uther unto kyng Arthure that regned aftrir hym and ded many batayles.
And this booke endyth whereas sir Launcelot and sir Trystrams com to courte. Who that woll make ony more lette hym seke other bookis of kyng Arthure or of sir Launcelot or sir Trystrams; for this was drawyn by a knyght presoner, sir Thomas Malleorré, that God sende hym good recover. Amen. (I.180)

[Here ends this tale, according to the French book, that begins with the marriage of King Uther and ends with Arthur, who reigned after him and did many battles. And this book ends when Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristan come to court. Anyone who wants to know more, let him seek other books of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, or Sir Tristan, for this was composed by a knight prisoner, Sir Thomas Malory, may God send him recovery. Amen.]

The second is at the end of the book:

I praye you all, jentylmen and jentylwymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and his knyghtes from the begynnyng to the endynge, praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce; and when I am deed, I praye you all praye for my soule.

For this book was ended the ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the Fourth, by Syr Thomas Maleoré, Knyght, as Jesu helpe hym, for Hys grete myght, as he is the servaunt of Jesu both day and nyght. (III.1260)

[I pray you all, gentlemen and gentlewomen, who read this book of Arthur and his knights from beginning to end, pray for me while I am alive that God send me prompt release; and when I am dead, I ask you to pray for my soul.

For this book was completed in the ninth year of the reign of King Edward IV by Sir Thomas Malory, knight, as Jesus helps him through His great might, for he is the servant of Jesus both day and night. Amen.]

These colophons, along with Malory’s other rare insertions, teach us what little we know about Le Morte Darthur’s author: His name is Sir Thomas Malory, he is a knight, he is in prison, and he finished writing between 1469 and 1470 (the ninth year of Edward’s reign). He prays for “good recover” and “good delyveraunce,” and whereas many medieval authors rely on this trope within colophons asking for deliverance from their sins, Malory’s “delyveraunce” has a more practical meaning: Release from prison while he is still alive is distinguished from the condition of his soul, which the reader is asked to pray for after Malory’s death. The knight-prisoner, far from expressing guilt or repentance, seems resigned but not necessarily contrite, as though his imprisonment is subject to conditions beyond his control.

Who Sir Thomas Malory really was and why he was sent to prison are not easy to discern from his text. No fewer than nine men named Thomas Malory were alive in England when Le Morte Darthur was composed. Scholars