INTRODUCTION

PLACES OF ROMANCE

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In the Winchester Manuscript of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, names are rubricated. The red ink makes knights’ names leap off the page. Some place names are rubricated, too, so as one turns the pages the names of the Arthurian world shine forth. They are an invitation to consider the play of places (not just the people) of *Le Morte Darthur*. The frequency of toponyms constantly reminds readers that the characters are from somewhere: Lamorak de Galys, Pellinore of the Isles, Gawain of Orkney, Tristram de Lyonesse. Yet the plentitude of names—some imaginary, some obscured by time and spelling, some bursting with unexpected familiarity—has too often lulled readers instead of rousing them. They may seem irrelevant, no more meaningful than the made-up names of a vaguely medievalist modern fantasy novel. Mark Twain has his Yankee complain, “Sir Marhaus the king’s son of Ireland talks like all the rest; you ought to give him a brogue, or at least a characteristic expletive... It is a common literary device with the great authors” and Sandy responds by having Sir Marhaus add an occasional “bejabbers.”1 In addition to the missing dialects, the lack of description, either of natural wilderness or of urban landmarks, allows readers of Malory, if they choose, to overlook places, to consider only people and action.

But if a careful reader takes the time and effort to keep track of the places of *Le Morte Darthur*, rich new patterns emerge. As Franco Moretti observes, “Then you make a map of the book, and everything changes.”2 Geography permeates narrative. The space of action determines what actions are possible and what they mean. It is so fundamental
that Mikhail Bakhtin can use chronotopes (characteristic treatments of time and space) to define genres. Yet geography is more than space: as Moretti notes, “Bakhtin’s essay on the chronotope . . . is the greatest study ever written on space and narrative, and it doesn’t have a single map.” Maps add place names, names whose meanings accumulate through so many other uses in so many kinds of text and speech, and maps put places in relation to each other. What sense of space we bring to a text helps determine what we see. Medievalists are therefore increasingly grappling with geographic imaginings.

Thinking about Malory’s geography shines a light on questions of politics, genre, and seemingly individual concerns. Looking at North Wales brings glimpses of Guenevere’s unnamed sister, who, once her presence is recognized, transforms our understanding of the feud between the houses of Lot and Pellinore, the gender dynamics of the Grail quest, and Arthur’s imperial policy in northwest Britain. Considering Cornwall in terms of geography/cartography reveals not only something of the structure of Le Morte Darthur but also how chivalric politics change with perspective: looking out from Cornwall rather than looking into it from the locale of Camelot/Winchester dramatically alters readers’ perceptions of the Arthurian world. Exploring what Orkney was in the fifteenth century and how it was represented in earlier Arthurian literature revises a reader’s sense of Gawain’s role at court, revealing a knight far less secure in his position than commonly imagined. Ideas of Britain’s role as a new power taking over from older ones turns out to draw on the travels of dead women’s bodies, and so Elaine of Ascolat, Pedivere’s wife, and Perceval’s sister weave a geopolitically suggestive web of connections across the map. Recognizing that Launcelot is specifically Gascon rather than generally French brings to the fore his fraught relation to Arthur and the continent, an unstable identity that chimes with issues from the Hundred Years’ War. In short, geography provides a new way of understanding Malory’s world. And when we understand Malory’s world in terms of the geographic and cartographic, we understand Le Morte Darthur much more completely.

**Mixed Genres, Mixed Geographies**

The geography of Malory is tricky to work with, which is why we say he uses an “(il)logics of space.” At times Malory is extremely specific, using unambiguous names, arranged in clear and realistic relationships, as when he identifies Camelot as Winchester and Ascolat as Guildford (92.1–2; 1065.3–4). It is in this mode that Malory shows “his liking for