

Le Morte Darthur Paper

Sir Arthur Malory completed a vast compilation of tales mostly concerning King Arthur and his knights in 1470. He died within a year of finishing, and his original text is still lost. In 1485, however, William Caxton published the stories in a compendium made up of 21 books each with about 25 chapters, with 507 chapters in all. Though Malory titled his work The hoole booke of kyng Arthur & of his noble knyghtes of the rounde table, Caxton appeared to prefer the title of his final tale, Le Morte D'Arthur (The Death of Arthur in French) and published it under that name which is used today. Malory's original manuscript disappeared and scholars like Wynkyn de Worde, William Copland, and Thomas East continued to revise his work using Caxton's version and subsequently the most recent. Another compilation totally separate from Caxton's revision, the Winchester Manuscript, was discovered in 1934 in the annals of the Winchester College Library. Its small differences from Caxton's version offered a little insight into Malory's true intentions though the original from which they both derived is still missing.

Le Morte D'Arthur is a novel written in Early Modern English, similar to the writing of Shakespeare. With effort, a present-day American English speaker can understand it after overcoming the distinct spelling differences. Though most versions of the novel today are fixed to fit today's grammar and spelling, many scholars prefer to read the original. Considering the early form of English used, the French name is misleading, as it only serves as homage to the Malory's sources of the tales. Even though the setting of the stories is mostly in Britain and the history of Arthur descended from the Welsh and Britons, the first romanticized stories that resemble today's Arthur legends

were by French authors. These embodied the importance of chivalry and read less like textbooks as the British variants of the seventh through tenth centuries did. The French writing, however, was mostly in the form of brief poetry and short stories. Versions by writers like Chrétien de Troyes of France preceded Malory and gave him most of his ideas, but are not as important because they contain much less content and are not considered the “bible” of Arthurian Legend. Malory’s prose version contained almost everything his French predecessors thought of and more.

The story contained in Malory’s work is not completely focused on Arthur or any one character. Most of the early sources related only one tale due to their short length. These were mostly about Arthur’s death, Lancelot and Guenivere’s adultery, or another singular episode. His version, however, had over 300,000 words to work with. This means that it not only related the tales of Arthur, but also gave detailed characterization and in depth accounts of Sirs Lancelot, Galahad, Bors and the other Knights of the Round Table. It is interesting to note that Sir Tristram (the star of a 2006 film) is the main hero of at least three of the twenty-one books (8-10) and others, including Sir Lancelot, Bors, Percival, and Galahad are the focus of books eleven through seventeen. This expanded characterization of smaller roles leads to the major difference that Malory’s version introduces to Arthurian lore.

Books 13-17 concentrate on the quest for the Sangreal or Holy Grail. Malory makes one of his few major changes to the recorded legends in this central part of the epic. Instead of allowing Percival alone to attain the Grail, he sends Bors, Percival, and Galahad together to reach Sangreal. This puts an emphasis between the contrasts between the great but flawed Lancelot and his illegitimate better pure son Galahad as he receives

the Grail and de-emphasizes Percival changing him into a sidekick rather than the most glorious knight. This large change that is a staple of the modern versions of the tale and the immense amount of material packed into *Le Morte Darthur* make it the Arthurian “Bible.”