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MALORY: TEXTS AND SOURCES

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Malory's Mordred and the Morte Arthure

One of the most surprising passages in Malory's *Morte Darthur* comes at the end of the first section of the first tale,¹ when King Arthur attempts to frustrate a prophecy that a child born on May Day will destroy him. He has the boys born on that day sent to sea in a ship that is wrecked and drowns nearly all of them, but Arthur's son Mordred, who is destined to destroy him, survives:

Than kynge Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; for Merlyon tolde kynge Arthure that he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May-day. Wherefore he sente for hem all in payne of dethe, and so there were founde many lordis sonnys and many knyghtes sonnes, and all were sente unto the kynge. And so was Mordred sente by kynge Lottis wyff. And all were putte in a shypp to the se; and som were foure wekis olde and som lesse. And so by fortune the shypp drove unto a castelle, and was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was caste up, and a good man founde hym, and fostird hym tyll he was fourtene yere of age, and than brought hym to the courte, as hit rehersith aftirward and towarde the ende of the Morte Arthure.

So, many lordys and barownes of thys realme were displeased for hir children were so loste; and many putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthure. So what for drede and for love, they helde their pece.

The reader must assume that Arthur put the babies into the ship intending them to drown. The ship is clearly the unmanned ship of traditional story,² which allows perpetrators of deeds like this to claim technical innocence of their victims' deaths.

The surprising thing about the passage is that it puts King Arthur in such a bad light. Not only is Malory uncensorious in general; he also takes particular pains to portray Arthur as admirable. The most substantial study of characterization in the *Morte Darthur* describes Malory's Arthur as:

¹ Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver and P.J.C. Field, 3 vols (Oxford 1990), p. 55.19–33.

² Compare for instance Chaucer's Tale of Constance, *The Man of Law's Tale*, in *Canterbury Tales* lines B439, 799, 868; Margaret Schlauch, 'The Man of Law's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago 1941), pp. 155–206; *Emaré* lines 265–75, 584–719, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London 1973); and *King Horn* lines 105–40, 192, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands (New York 1966).

s us none of the signals we get from Chaucer or More, neither the conventional narrator's omniscience. On the contrary, he himself, as I have argued at length elsewhere,⁶¹ as distinctly fallible. Signs of fallibility that concern us here are, for instance, his confession that he has lost part of a source; and on another occasion his putting something his sources have told him but which he seems unable to do if, although he was dubious about it, he could do no better.⁶² Although he appears to have searched conscientiously for the true version of the narrator's death, his very emphasis raises the possibility that he might not find it.⁶³

Even in keeping that such a man should himself sometimes make errors, and in such a man, readers can tolerate errors that they could not in a perfect narrator, provided the errors are in the strict sense negligible, as generated above are. Malory's character as narrator allows us to excuse those errors as having been committed by a narrator who cares who has tried to find the 'auctorysed' version of his story, who, if he had noticed an error in his story would have put it right, not merely (as he would in comparable circumstances)⁶⁴ apologised for it; but who in his analysis is writing about something other than factual consistency. His emphasis on the nobility of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, that they were together there was ever an hundred and fifty. It is significant that the words of the *Morte Darthur* get that number wrong.⁶⁵ The error is not trivial, but even if it is not, the attentive reader will not be much displeased if Malory gets the nobility right.

¹ *Romance and Chronicle* (London 1971), pp. 142–159.

² 1154.12–14, 1257.27–8.
1242.

³ In the case of *Pendennis*, Thackeray apologises for having killed off the Marquess of Pendennis's mother in one chapter and then having made her beseech him not to marry her again in a later one.

⁴ Of course because it is the odd statement out compared with *Works*, pp. 98.10–11, 293.25, 942.5, 946.4–16, 1146.33–1147.1; and cf. 1324 (note to p. 98.33).

a just, unselfish, strong ruler, and father of his people, his virtues far outweighing his one weakness of undue partiality to his nephew Gawain. This character . . . is built up by the greatest number of changes devoted to any personage except Lancelot, and in its contrast to the picture provided by the sources, of a somewhat ineffectual, fiercely passionate monarch, it presents the greatest originality in characterization which can be attributed to Malory.³

This effect was produced by consistently alternating material from seven or eight sources across the length of a substantial book.

The passage quoted from the *Morte Darthur*, however, portrays a child-murderer whose iniquity is made more conspicuous by his resembling that byword for infamy, King Herod, in his most infamous act, the Massacre of the Innocents. Herod too was faced with a prophecy about the imminent birth of a boy who might supplant him, and attempted to frustrate the prophecy by ordering the killing of all new-born male children in his country. Herod too brought about the deaths of all the children except the subject of the prophecy, who was carried off to another country, where, until the danger passed and he could return to work out his destiny, he was 'fostird' by 'a good man'. (The only description of St Joseph in the nativity story is as 'a just man'.⁴) In this context Mordred takes on unexpectedly flattering associations,⁵ and Arthur, rather than (as one might expect) Mordred, begins to look like Antichrist.⁶ Since Arthur does nothing even approaching this in wickedness anywhere else in the *Morte Darthur*, the discrepancy demands explanation.

The respect Malory expresses throughout his book for his 'French books' makes it natural to suggest first that he unthinkingly reproduced material from his French source,⁷ which for this part of his story is one of the components of the thirteenth-century French Post-Vulgate Cycle, its *Suite du Merlin*. Artus's part in the corresponding episode of the Post-Vulgate *Suite*,⁸ however, is much less discreditable, and may be summarised thus:

³ Robert H. Wilson, *Characterization in Malory: A Comparison with His Sources* (Chicago 1934), pp. 65–79, esp. 65–6, 74, 79.

⁴ Matt. i 19.

⁵ For a recent short history of Mordred's character, see Kuniko Shoji, 'The Failed Hero: Mordred, Gawain's Brother', *Poetica* 37 (1993), 53–63.

⁶ For Mordred as Antichrist see Roy Rosenstein, 'D'Eden a Armageddon, ou la pomme et le serpent: Sir Thomas Malory, *laudator temporis acti*', in *Fin des temps et temps de la fin dans l'univers médiéval* (Aix 1993), 459–74, esp. 461, 466–7, and more generally, Helen Cooper, 'Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances', in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford 1997), 141–62, at 152–5.

⁷ Cf. Wilson, 'Malory's "French Book" Again', *CL* 2 (1950), 172–81.

⁸ All known manuscripts of the *Suite* are incomplete, but the source passage survives in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 7071, on fols 244^d–246^d, and in London, British Library, MS Additional 38117 ('the Huth MS') on fols 95^d–99^d (= *Merlin: Roman en prose du XIII^e siècle*, ed. Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich, 2 vols (Paris 1880), i 203–12).

Artus reminds Merlin that the time is coming when the child who will destroy the realm is to be born, and says he will have all boys born in that month collected and looked after until he decides what to do with them. His subjects, poor as well as rich, send him their boys.

King Lot and his wife put their new-born son Mordres in a splendid specially-made cradle, and dispatch him and a suite of knights and ladies from the city of Orquenie. A terrifying storm drives their ship on a rock, drowning all except the child, who floats away in his cradle. A fisherman in a small boat finds him and takes him home secretly to his wife. After debating what to do (the options do not include killing the child), they finally take him to the castle of their lord, Duke Nabur le Desreez, hoping for a reward. The duke rewards them and decides to bring the child up with his infant son Sagremor and knight them together when they reach the proper age.

Artus meanwhile decides to have the other boys killed, but in a dream an imposing figure denounces him for this. If he persists, God will make an example of him; he must instead put the boys into an unmanned ship with the sails set, and Christ will show that He can protect them. Artus does so, and the boys arrive safely at the castle of King Orians in Amalfi.⁹ An elderly knight just back from Logres guesses who they are, and on his advice the king has them brought up in a secluded castle.

Meanwhile in Logres the barons find out what Artus has done, and ask Merlin to explain. He tells them the king was trying to frustrate a prophecy about the birth of a child who would cause a battle in which every fighting-man (*preudome*) in Logres would die, and that their children will be returned safe and sound in ten years time. This makes peace between Artus and his barons, and averts serious trouble for the country.

In Malory's source, therefore, Artus never has the chance to kill Mordres. He only decides to kill the other boys after apparent hesitation, and promptly has his warning dream and repents. He is shown momentarily as someone willing to massacre babies and for much longer as someone who will not, and never looks much like Herod: the separateness of the stories of Mordres and the other boys prevents it. His sending the babies to sea is not an attempt at murder, but obedience to a supernatural command. Malory did not therefore take the ideas of Arthur as willing mass murderer or second Herod from his source.

That being the case, it is difficult to see how his book came to include notions so contrary to the rest of it. Perhaps they might have come into being by accident. Malory's creative urge plainly included a drive to retell the authentic story of Arthur and his knights, which could sometimes at least override his desire to present the characters he liked in a good light.¹⁰ He does not, for instance, shirk the 'fact', well-established in Arthurian tradition, that

⁹ The story has already related that Nabur's son Sagremor will become a Knight of the Round Table, and now adds that Orians's son Ascanor will become one too, and that he will be nicknamed *le Lait Hardi*. The Commentary to *Works* wrongly says Orians himself will have that nickname.

¹⁰ See *Works*, p. 1260.8.

his favourite character, Lancelot, commits adultery with his friend's wife, and so brings about his own death and that of almost everybody else. Malory apparently found the illicit affair distasteful, but rather than omitting it, he abbreviated it drastically, as he did with the Mordred episode. With the Mordred episode, the reduction ratio is about twenty to one, and haste, carelessness, and savage compression together might have produced effects Malory did not intend or notice.

Simple carelessness seems unlikely. Malory certainly took trouble to understand the whole episode before shortening it. Only in that way could he have combined the two ships into one, the three 'good men' (fisherman, duke, and king) into one, and brought the duke's castle forward in the narrative to be the site of the shipwreck. He also had clearly in mind the place of this incident in the larger narrative, casually particularising the precise day of the ominous birth, which the source only specifies some dozens of pages earlier.¹¹ Even a careful author, however, might be distracted from the results of a complicated task by the effort involved, so a précis designed to preserve the plot-line might produce a narrative dominated by fact, a quasi-chronicle whose objective literary characteristics were morally neutral. That, however, seems unlikely too. Malory habitually compressed his French sources, but the resulting narrative, whatever other chronicle-like characteristics it possesses, usually has a strong moral thrust.¹² The generally increased moral stature of his Arthur is one component of this. Moreover, in the episode now being considered, Malory's source included much that would have reinforced his urge to give his story a moral perspective: it is full of religious and moral judgements, including an explanation of why people might send children to sea in an unmanned ship:

Il ne porront pas soffrir quil morissent deuant eus.¹³

That explains the action as a form of cowardice, a vice Malory seems particularly to have despised. Among the source's many other moral observations, none is more emphatic than its condemnation of the intended murder of the children. The speaker in Artus's dream tells him that God, who has made him 'the shepherd of His lambs',¹⁴ will be so offended if Artus persists in his intention to kill these 'holy and innocent creatures' that He will punish Artus with a fate that will be a warning to posterity for ever. Even if Malory overlooked the biblical echoes in that, he would have had to have been extraordinarily distracted not to have noticed that the action that the French Artus would *not* commit, but which he himself was attributing to his Arthur represented a degree of moral depravity rare in life or literature.

Nor is it likely that Malory would have invented the parallels between Arthur and Herod without noticing them. In fifteenth-century England, the

¹¹ Camb. fol. 233^c, Huth fol. 79^d (= Paris & Ulrich, i 159).

¹² See P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle* (London 1971), pp. 36–102.

¹³ Camb., fol. 246^{b-c}; Huth, fol. 98^b (= Paris & Ulrich, i 210).

¹⁴ Cf. John xxi.15.

Massacre of the Innocents was one of the best-known events of history. Everyone was reminded of it once a year by a feast-day that struck a sombre note during the twelve joyful days of Christmas, and many were reminded again on the feast of Corpus Christi while watching miracle plays, in which the ranting of Herod seems to have been one of the high points.¹⁵ In the world of mediaeval romance in particular, it has been persuasively argued that familiarity with the Herod-story is an interpretative key to *Havelok the Dane*.¹⁶

The number of things that Malory would have had to fail to notice or refuse to respond to in order to create his child-killing episode accidentally is so large as to make the idea difficult to credit. Given that, even in his source, the episode is so much at odds with the rest of his book, it is surprising that he did not simply omit it, as he often did with parts of sources that he did not like or did not need. The *Morte Darthur* starts by leaving out two-thirds of the French prose *Merlin*. It is hard to see how it would have been damaged by losing the attempt on Mordred's life. Whereas Lancelot and Guenivere's adultery provides the mainspring of the plot and what is arguably the major theme in much of Malory's own book and in his most important source, the French Vulgate Cycle, the mass-murder and Herod ideas serve no obvious purpose, either in the action as a whole or locally, except to blacken Arthur's character and complicate the relationship between him and Mordred. Neither idea is developed later either in Malory's own story or in that of any of his known sources. The vulgate story is driven sufficiently by two factors, that Mordred is Arthur's sister's son, so that Arthur makes him regent when he leaves the kingdom, and that he is ambitious and treacherous, which drives him to usurp Arthur's throne. Mordred being Arthur's own son, although it does not add much to the plot, serves thematic functions by showing sin bringing about its own punishment and provides contrasts with other illegitimate sons in the story: Galahad, Tor, and others, including on some interpretations Arthur himself. Having Arthur try to kill Mordred, however, adds little to plot or theme. It could have provided Mordred with a motive or excuse for trying to kill the father who had tried to kill him, and the attempt, particularly if it involved other children, could make Arthur deserve his fate more than he might be felt to deserve it for a sin (incest) that although grave in itself, he believed to be the lesser, and notoriously easily-excused, sin of adultery. Neither Malory nor any of his known sources, however, shows much interest in developing these aspects of the story.

There is, however, a further possibility, which is best addressed by considering the elements in the story that have no counterpart in the *Suite*. It is easy

¹⁵ Cf. Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* A3383–4; *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, 2 vols (Oxford 1971–6), ii 426; Ebenezer Brewer, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed. Ivor H. Evans (London 1970), *s.v.*, and cf. *OED*, *out-Herod*.

¹⁶ Diane Speed, 'Havelok and the Great Code', a paper read at the Fourth Biennial Conference on Romance in Mediaeval England, at Winchester, April 1994.

enough to guess how most of them came into being. Malory's insistence that only the gentry's sons were under threat, where his source spoke of both rich and poor, may show a preference for a story set wholly in knightly society. That Arthur issues his command 'on pain of death' may be a stroke of authorial intuition about character derived from the actions being related. Mordred may have been taken up as jetsam rather than flotsam because Malory read his source's *rive* as 'shore', rather than, as the original context requires, as 'river' or 'sea'. Malory may have changed the ending to one of contained political tension because he felt that, after what had happened earlier, the reconciliation in the French story was unbelievable.

The longest element not in the *Suite*, however, is harder to explain. It is the assertion that a good man

founde hym, and fostird hym tulle he was fourtene yere of age, and than brought hym to the courte, as hit rehersith aftirward and towarde the ende of the Morte Arthure.

Eugène Vinaver observed in the commentary to the standard edition that there are four texts Malory might have called 'the Morte Arthure' in this context – the final tale in his own book, its two principal sources (the Old French Vulgate *Mort Artu* and the English stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*), and the English alliterative *Morte Arthure* – but none of them gives an account of Mordred being brought to court at fourteen, or any other age.¹⁷ A fifth possible text, the Old French Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, which slipped Vinaver's mind, does not give any such account either.¹⁸

It is unlikely that the *Mort Artu* ever included an account of Mordred coming to court. The text varies so little in the many surviving manuscripts¹⁹ that it would be unreasonable to explain the inconsistency in Malory's book by postulating a variant containing an incident as marginal to its story as the arrival of Mordred at court, particularly as the incident would have been retrospective. Since Mordred is already a Knight of the Round Table in the Prose *Lancelot*, it would have had to have been set at least two romances back in the time-scheme of the Vulgate Cycle. Something similar applies to the English stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, which is a much-abbreviated version of the *Mort Artu*. It would be surprising if anyone had added to its pared-down and fast-moving story anything as peripheral as the arrival of Mordred at court in a notionally distant past. It would certainly have been at odds with the original inspiration of the poem, and a later *remanieur* who wanted to add it would have had, in addition to other difficulties, to cast the extra material in a moderately complicated stanza-form. Malory's last tale is broadly a conflation of the

¹⁷ *Works*, p. 1303, note to p. 55.32–33. That note is unchanged from the previous (1973) edition, which was wholly Vinaver's.

¹⁸ William Matthews, 'The Besieged Printer', *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997), 63–92, at 86–8.

¹⁹ See Jean Frappier, *Étude sur La mort le roi Artu* (Paris 1961); Brian Woledge, *Bibliographie des romans et nouvelles en prose française antérieurs à 1500*, 2 vols (Geneva 1954–75), s.v.

latter part of those two romances. Since his Mordred too is a Knight of the Round Table long before the tale begins, it is difficult to see what would have been gained by its including Mordred's arrival at court. Much the same is true of the Post-Vulgate romance, which, judging from the small number of surviving copies, may also have been difficult to get hold of.

These objections, however, do not apply to the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which, as the major source of Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius', is his most important English source. As Vinaver observed, it alone among Malory's major sources implies that Mordred spent his youth at Arthur's court: early in the poem, Arthur calls Mordred *my nurree of olde* and *a childe of my chambyre*, and says he has trained and chosen him for high office.²⁰ One of Malory's probable minor sources, *The Awyntyrs of Arthur*, also says that Mordred was brought up at Arthur's court,²¹ but too briefly to be the source of what Malory says about Mordred's upbringing. The passage on Mordred's upbringing in *The Awyntyrs* might be based on a version of the alliterative *Morte*: the lines that immediately precede it certainly are.²² A number of factors point to the alliterative poem as the work Malory had in mind. It has often been suggested that the only surviving manuscript of the alliterative *Morte*, the Thornton Manuscript, is a shortened version of the poem as originally composed.²³ Although that view has not been universal, one scholar even contending that Malory used the Thornton Manuscript itself,²⁴ a fuller version of the poem could well have included (late on, as Malory's wording requires) a passage recalling Mordred's arrival at court. Because the alliterative poem is relatively autonomous compared with the *Mort Artu* and the stanzaic poem, and its elaborate set-piece descriptive passages make it relatively slow-paced, such a passage would not be as out of place there as in the other two romances.

Moreover, Malory apparently had the alliterative poem in mind shortly before he composed this episode. In an episode taken from the *Suite de Merlin*, he tells of the arrival of an embassy from the Roman Emperor, who demand

²⁰ *Works*, loc. cit. and cf. *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Mary Hamel (New York 1984), lines 689–692. The primary sense of *nurree* is 'foster-child'.

²¹ *Awyntyrs* lines 308–11, in *Ywain and Gawain, Sir Percyvell of Gales, The Anturs of Arther*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London 1992), pp. 161–82, at p. 170. The *Awyntyrs* may have given Malory the name of one of his minor characters, Galleron of Galloway: Larry D. Benson, *Malory's 'Morte Darthur'* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), p. 41.

²² Ed. Mills, p. 202 (note to lines 305–11).

²³ E.V. Gordon and Eugène Vinaver, 'New Light on the Text of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*', *MÆv* 6 (1937), 81–98; Tania Vorontzoff, 'Malory's Story of Arthur's Roman Campaign', *ibid.* 99–121; J.L.N. O'Loughlin, 'The English Alliterative Romances', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R.S. Loomis (Oxford 1959), pp. 521–6. For a recent assessment of lines possibly missing from the alliterative poem and surviving in Malory, see Aidan Clark, 'Malory and *Morte Arthure*: Some Problems in Sources', Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales Bangor, 1996.

²⁴ William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative 'Morte Arthure'* (Berkeley, Calif., 1960), esp. p. 211. For other views see Wilson, 'Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance', *UTSE* 29 (1950), 33–50, at 47–9; *Morte Arthure*, ed. Hamel, pp. 5–14.

tribute from Arthur.²⁵ This is clearly the beginning of a story that had long been established as part of the legendary history of Britain, the story of Arthur's Roman War.²⁶ The surviving versions of the *Suite*, oddly enough, nowhere relate the rest of the story, but the entire story forms the plot of the alliterative *Morte*. Reproducing a fragment of the story from the *Suite* apparently brought to Malory's mind a passage from the alliterative poem's version of it. His Arthur tells the ambassadors:

on a fayre fylde I shall yelde hym my trwage, that shall be with a sherpe spere
othir ellis with a sherpe swerde. And that shall nat be longe, be my fadiris
soule Uther!

Vinaver, who thought Malory wrote his second tale first and his first tale second, asserted that the first sentence was 'an obvious reminiscence of the corresponding scene' in 'Arthur and Lucius'.²⁷ Even if he were right about the order of composition of the *Morte Darthur*, Vinaver's assertion would be hard to defend. There are actually two corresponding scenes in 'Arthur and Lucius': one in which the ambassadors make their demands and another in which Arthur gives his reply. In neither does Arthur make an ironic joke about tribute or even use the word *trewage*, nor does he do so in the corresponding scenes in the Thornton text of the alliterative *Morte*.²⁸ The nearest approximation to the passage quoted comes later: in both texts, when Arthur despatches the corpses of the Roman commanders to Rome, he makes a grim joke about the bodies being the *trybute* the Romans demanded.²⁹

However, although the passage quoted does not echo the Thornton text of the alliterative poem, something very like its first sentence could well have appeared in Arthur's formal reply in a lost fuller version of the second scene with the ambassadors. When Arthur sends the corpses to Rome in 'Arthur and Lucius', Malory's style takes on something of the archaic diction, alliteration, and humour of alliterative poetry, all of which stylistic features derive from the corresponding scene in his source. In the first sentence above, diction, rhythm, and alliteration also seem to echo the style of alliterative poetry, although the words and the alliterating patterns do not appear in the corresponding scenes in the Thornton Manuscript text. Furthermore, if something like that sentence stood in a fuller version of Arthur's reply to the ambassadors, the way his ironic speech dispatching his enemies' corpses to Rome echoed his (now lost) original response to their demands would be highly characteristic of the alliterative poem, which puts great emphasis on making and fulfilling vows. The second sentence quoted above is also uncharacteristic of Malory. Its word-order is archaic, and it provides the only instance

²⁵ *Works*, p. 48.15–27.

²⁶ It goes back to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*.

²⁷ *Works*, p. 1300, note to p. 48.22–24.

²⁸ *Works*, pp. 185.8–187.13, 190.13–191.8; *Morte Arthure* lines 78–165, 419–66.

²⁹ *Works*, p. 225.26–226.8; *Morte Arthure* lines 2344–64.

in the *Morte Darthur* of swearing by someone's soul. It too may come from the alliterative *Morte*, even though it has no counterpart in the Thornton text. The only point in any of Malory's major sources in which Arthur swears by his father's soul seems to be in the *Mort Artu*, when, just after an ominous dream about the Wheel of Fortune, Artus refuses the advice of the archbishop to withdraw from imminent battle with Mordred and wait for Lancelot.³⁰ There is no evidence that Malory had the *Mort Artu* in mind in either of his first two tales – the first sign of its influence is his reference to Lancelot saving Guenivere from the fire at beginning the third tale – but the alliterative poet certainly used the *Mort Artu*'s dream of the Wheel of Fortune, expanding it into a spectacular episode that is one of the high points of the poem.³¹ He could easily have remembered and used Artus's oath from the next episode. There is a real possibility, therefore, that both the sentences quoted might derive from a lost fuller version of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

If the child-killing episode is reconsidered in the light of these things, it will be seen that the narrator's assertion about Mordred that a good man

founde hym, and fostird hym tylle he was fourtene yere of age

forms a passable line of alliterative verse. This must be decisive. If Malory's memory conjured up here, for the second time in a few pages, a memorable alliterative line from the story he was telling, we must surely assume that the *Morte Arthure* he refers to here is the alliterative poem of that name. It follows that Malory cannot have used the *Morte Arthure* in the Thornton manuscript, because it does not contain the alliterative line he remembered, which is why the line has not been identified before.

It may be possible to take matters further by considering two other passages in the alliterative *Morte* that have implications for Mordred's childhood, but which Vinaver overlooked. In the first of them, almost at the end of the poem, Gawain calls Mordred a *fals fosterede foode*.³² Since *foode*, like *nurree* in the previous passage, primarily means a foster-child, the phrase might be tautology qualifying the earlier assertion that Mordred was fostered by Arthur. It would say in effect 'something must have gone wrong with the fostering', that Mordred had not responded as he should to an upbringing in the chivalrous ethos provided by the household of the greatest of all the kings of Britain. That, however, would not fully explain the third passage, in which, later still, the narrator describes Mordred as a *churles chekyne*.³³ That might be no more than a reflex insult, a denial of membership of his class to one who was thought to have disgraced it, a product of the impulse that makes quarrelling knights shift to second person singular pronouns; but it is surprisingly

³⁰ *Mort Artu*, ed. J. Frappier (Paris 1936), § 162.

³¹ Wilson, 'Malory's Early Knowledge', 33–40; *Morte Arthure*, ed. Hamel, p. 42.

³² *Morte Arthure* line 3776.

³³ *Morte Arthure* line 4181.

specific, and not a normal accusation between knightly enemies in the *Morte Arthure*.

An alternative hypothesis can be put forward that would explain the oddities in these passages and in the passage in Malory more satisfactorily. That hypothesis is that the alliterative poet reworked the very passage from the *Suite* that Malory used. The poet was very well-read – his best editor has described him as having ‘poured a life-time’s reading into his poem’³⁴ – and if he had access to a copy, the serious-mindedness of the Post-Vulgate Cycle would have appealed to him. We may suggest that he altered the story to have Mordred fostered not by the duke but by the fisherman, who would be the poet’s *churl* and Malory’s *good man* (or better, *goodman*, ‘a worthy man not of knightly status’). If in the poet’s story, as in Malory’s, Mordred was fourteen when he was brought to Arthur’s court, several key words about his upbringing define themselves in secondary although in each case well-recorded senses. Readers will already have grasped from the context that as a *child* (of a king’s chamber) Mordred is not a baby but a young man in service, but similarly as a *norree* he is not a nursling but a ward, and as a *foode* not primarily a fosterling but ‘a young man, especially a young warrior’.³⁵ All three terms, however, would still imply that their subject was a beneficiary who owed a debt of gratitude to his benefactor, which was the more binding in that he would be old enough to know it.

If this is the picture of Mordred evoked by the poem, then the ‘false fostering’ that Gawain speaks of will not be a tautology. It will refer primarily not to a failure by Mordred to respond to the ethos of Arthur’s household, but to Mordred’s having been fostered by someone of the wrong social class. It may even be that *churles* is plural, meaning the fisherman and his wife: that – like Kay but more so – Mordred had become villainous through having imbibed the milk of a *villain*.³⁶ That such a meaning will be uncongenial to the egalitarian twentieth century is no reason for rejecting it.

The apparent fragment of alliterative verse in the *Morte Darthur* is not the only thing about that anomalous passage that may have been brought about by a lost fuller version of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Such a lost version could explain several of the features of the passage that have no counterpart in the *Suite de Merlin*. The alliteration in *begotym of lordis and borne of ladyes* might have been inspired by it; the threat of death would be characteristic of the terrifying Arthur of the poem, who threatens to have the ambassadors hanged, drawn and quartered if they do not follow his commands to the letter; and even the ending on a note of political tension might have been inspired by the disaster that is impending in the poem in a way that it is not in the *Suite*. Most important of all, the influence of the alliterative poem may explain both why

³⁴ Hamel, pp. 34–62, at p. 34.

³⁵ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *child* 5–6, *norri*, and *foode* 3a.

³⁶ For Kay, see Linda Gowans, *Cei and the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge 1988), pp. 108–9.

Arthur’s character is blackened in this episode when Malory consistently improved it elsewhere, and why he did not cut the episode out of his story altogether.

The first issue is straightforward: something so uncharacteristic is more likely to be the product of conflation than of gratuitous invention. In this first tale, moreover, Malory is much given to supplementing his ‘French book’ from minor sources, most of which seem to have been in English.³⁷ For the most part these minor sources give him only supplementary details of events and names for characters anonymous in his major sources. He probably felt they lacked the authenticity, whatever that was, of his major sources, most of which were French cyclic romances. Among English Arthurian stories, however, the alliterative *Morte* seems to have come near to the French romances in Malory’s esteem: he retold its story almost in full as his second tale, making only such changes as would harmonise it with the rest of his book. Since he apparently knew it when he composed his first tale, it is reasonable to suppose he would have taken supplementary material from it when the opportunity arose. If, when working up the child-killing episode from the French *Suite*, he remembered some of the same events being related in an English source he valued, it must have seemed an ideal opportunity for producing the most authentic version of this part of the Arthurian story.

The second issue can be addressed partly from the same evidence: the authenticity that Malory attributed to the alliterative poem must have pushed him towards incorporating what it said into his book even when it was uncongenial to him. There may, however, have been a secondary cause: that what he took from the alliterative *Morte* helped him make an incident that contributed to his book *as he then expected it to be*. That may not be quite the book we now have. The book we have is indebted above all to the most popular of the French romance cycles, the Vulgate Cycle, and next to the second most popular, the Prose *Tristan*. When composing his first tale, however, Malory may not have known either of them very well. The Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal*, the fourth Vulgate Cycle romance, is the major source that Malory was to follow most closely and which, to judge from the title he gave it, he admired most, yet in this tale he confused two of its three principal characters with other Arthurian characters whose names sounded similar.³⁸

When Malory was writing his first tale, however, the French romance to which he will have been closest must have been his major source. That source was part of the Post-Vulgate Cycle, a set of romances notable for its severe morality, including its stress on retribution for sin. By the time he reached the

³⁷ See Wilson, ‘Malory’s Early Knowledge’; and more recently, ‘Malory and Chrétien de Troyes’ and ‘Author, Scribe, and Reader: The Case of Harleuse and Peryne’, elsewhere in this volume.

³⁸ *Works*, pp. 1037.8–11 (title of the ‘Tale of the Sankgreal’), 92.2–3 (Perceval confused with Pelleas), 180.10 (Galahad confused with Galahalt the Haute Prince). Malory’s memory of *Perlesvaus* seems also to have been confused in this tale and clarified later: see ‘Malory and *Perlesvaus*’, elsewhere in this volume.

child-killing passage, Malory had already reproduced from his source an account of the incestuous conception of Mordred and the revelation to Arthur that his incest would cause his own death and the deaths of all his knights.³⁹ Malory, as we have seen, also knew the alliterative *Morte Arthure* well, and some powerful passages in that work also stress retribution for sin.⁴⁰ The child-killing passage may therefore be an attempt to conflate major and minor sources so as to develop that theme. Malory's 'as hit rehersith aftirward' looks like a promise to re-emphasise that theme of retribution for incest later by relating Mordred's arrival at court as part of an account of the downfall of the Round Table. He may already have planned to base that account on the *Queste del Saint Graal* and the *Mort Artu*, but those romances could easily be read as saying that the deaths of Arthur and his knights were primarily caused by Arthur's incest, even without the help of the Post-Vulgate *Suite* and the alliterative *Morte*. Malory might have planned to make more of the theme in other ways as well, although in the event he did not do so, despite echoing the alliterative poem from time to time in his last tales. It may have influenced what his final tale says about Arthur winning the Holy Cross, Arthur's epitaph, Ector's threnody for Lancelot, and the last words of the story.⁴¹

There are still uncertainties left. Even if we were certain that the child-killing episode was produced by conflating the corresponding passage in the *Suite de Merlin* with a lost fuller version of *Morte Arthure*, it would still be difficult to say what, apart from the fragment of verse Malory remembered, was in that passage in the alliterative poem. We certainly cannot subtract from Malory's episode everything that has a counterpart in the *Suite* and say that the rest appeared in a similar form in the original *Morte Arthure*. He might have needed no other stimulus than a memory of the alliterative poem's picture of ruthless royal self-assertion. Its mountains of adult corpses might have led his imagination to a shipload of dead children, its breaches of the laws of war to a breach of the more fundamental taboo protecting the innocent and helpless. Arthur's assertiveness in the poem might have been enough to make Malory imply that his motives are wholly selfish, whereas the *Suite* seems to suggest that Artus really cares for his country, perhaps even more than for himself.

On the other hand, there is a real possibility that a lost fuller version of the alliterative poem described Arthur as a mass child-killer and second Herod. The poet certainly did not share Malory's distaste for blackening Arthur's character: his picture of Arthur is sufficiently critical to have led one scholar to argue that the poem was a satire on an authoritarian king bent on overseas

³⁹ *Works*, pp. 41.11–30, 44.16–30.

⁴⁰ E.g. *Morte Arthure* lines 3398–406, 3446–55.

⁴¹ *Works*, pp. 1242.25 and 29, 1259.9–21, and 1260.15. For the second, see John Withrington, 'The Arthurian Epitaph in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *AL* VII (1987), 103–44; for the others, Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales*, ed. P.J.C. Field (London 1998), pp. 2109, 2458, and 2498.

conquest.⁴² Portraying Arthur as a child-murderer and even, perhaps implicitly, as a latter-day Herod, would stretch the characterization of Arthur in the poem as we have it, but would not be incompatible with it. In a poem arguably written to show Arthur as an imperious tyrant, an echo of Herod would fit very well with some of the things seen in his wars, such as his threat to kill every man in Lorraine and Lombardy who obeyed Lucius's laws, the deliberate devastation of civilian property in his Italian campaign, and his death-bed command that Mordred's children should be killed and their bodies be thrown into the sea.⁴³ The lost material might even, as suggested above, have been partly based on the very passage from the *Suite* that Malory used.

Although we cannot be certain, it is a reasonable guess that Malory abandoned his first intentions for his story as he got to know his other 'French books' better, because of what he felt to be their greater authority. When he found Mordred appearing as an adult in most of the tales he was telling, he may have had practical difficulties in finding a place in his story for a retrospective account of Mordred's arrival at court; but that difficulty would not have been insuperable, if only because the story of the healing of Sir Urry, the episode that introduces the final tale, includes several retrospective vignettes. By then, however, Malory seems to have developed, partly from his various sources and partly in opposition to them, more complex and arguably theologically more orthodox ideas about the fall of Arthur and his knights. Those ideas left Mordred as little more than a part, however necessary, of the machinery that brings about that fall, which may be why Malory did not give Mordred's past and motives even a few parenthetical lines in the Urry episode to match those on Sir Marrok that record that Marrok's wife turned him into a werewolf.⁴⁴

It may be asked why, if Malory changed his mind about the kind of book he was writing, the *Morte Darthur* still promises to relate Mordred's arrival at court. The obvious explanation is that Malory forgot it, as he forgot his promise in the fifth tale to relate the death of La Beale Isode's hapless suitor Keyhydins.⁴⁵ Leaving the child-killing episode is a second lapse, because it is plainly incompatible with Arthur's character as presented elsewhere in Malory's book. The duplicated account of the arrival of the Roman ambassadors, the short version from the *Suite* in the first tale and the long one from the alliterative *Morte* in the second, constitute a third lapse, because they are incompatible with one another, like the double 'first appearance' of Sir Ironside at Arthur's court in the fourth tale.⁴⁶ However such duplications may sit in the twentieth-century experimental novel, in the *Morte Darthur* they must be

⁴² Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur*.

⁴³ *Morte Arthure* lines 429–30, 3150–75, 4320–2.

⁴⁴ See *Works*, p. 1150.27–29.

⁴⁵ See *Works*, p. 493.10–11.

⁴⁶ *Works*, pp. 326.13–32, 336.28–338–6.

flaws, since Malory as author made such an effort to remove them. He omits the last third of the alliterative *Morte*, which duplicates the story of the death of Arthur that he relates in his eighth tale; the 'Third Book of Tristan de Liones', which duplicates the Grail-quest he relates in his sixth tale; and the Roman War story in the *Mort Artu*, which duplicates his entire second tale, but these smaller duplications in his first tale seem to have been overlooked.

There are ways of coming to terms with such flaws even as literature,⁴⁷ but we may regret them the less because they give us clues to something about which we have very little other evidence: the conception and development of the *Morte Darthur*.

8

Hunting, Hawking and Textual Criticism in Malory's Morte Darthur

Whatever medium they work in, all copyists tend to corrupt what they reproduce. This happens whether the copyist uses a quill pen or a word-processor, but naturally tends to happen more often when the copyist is unfamiliar with the subject of the work copied, and especially when that subject is one, such as law, seamanship, or architecture, that generates an extensive private vocabulary.

To this rule of universal professional depravity, Malory's scribes were no exception. In particular, the scribes who copied the unique manuscript of the *Morte Darthur*, the Winchester manuscript, seem to have been more concerned with producing attractive-looking copy than with accuracy,¹ so it is not surprising that they made mistakes in matters in which Malory was knowledgeable and they, we may assume, were not. They made such mistakes, for instance, over words to do with warfare and weapons.² Chivalric romance alone might have made Malory familiar with some of the jargon of warfare, but we know that he experienced the reality as well, in the northern campaign of 1462–63, in local skirmishes in the Midlands about 1450, and perhaps before that in the dying phases of the war against the French in Gascony:³ from their errors we may guess that his copyists had little familiarity with either.

Malory also seems to have known more about another pair of subjects, hunting and hawking, than his scribes, and it is aspects of those subjects that this essay will particularly address. His book shows his enthusiasm not merely for the pursuits themselves but for the jargon of their devotees, which he praises as one of the distinguishing marks of a gentleman:

[Sir Trystram] began good mesures of blowyng of beestes of venery and beestes of chaace, and all maner of vermaynes, and all the tearmys we have yet of hawkyng and huntynge. And therefore the booke of venery, of

¹ See *The Winchester Malory: A Facsimile*, ed. N.R. Ker, E.E.T.S. s.s. 4 (London 1976), p. xvii; Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver and P.J.C. Field, 3 vols (Oxford 1990), pp. 175–63 (notes to pp. 266.23–4, 426.32, 918.33–4).

² *Works*, pp. 1753–62 (notes to pp. 27.4, 703.31, 864.22).

³ See P.J.C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge 1993), pp. 86–7. We may also notice that Malory's epitaph described him as *valens miles*, a phrase that claims distinction in arms: London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius F.xii, fol. 284r.

⁴⁷ See Field, 'Author, Scribe, and Reader'.