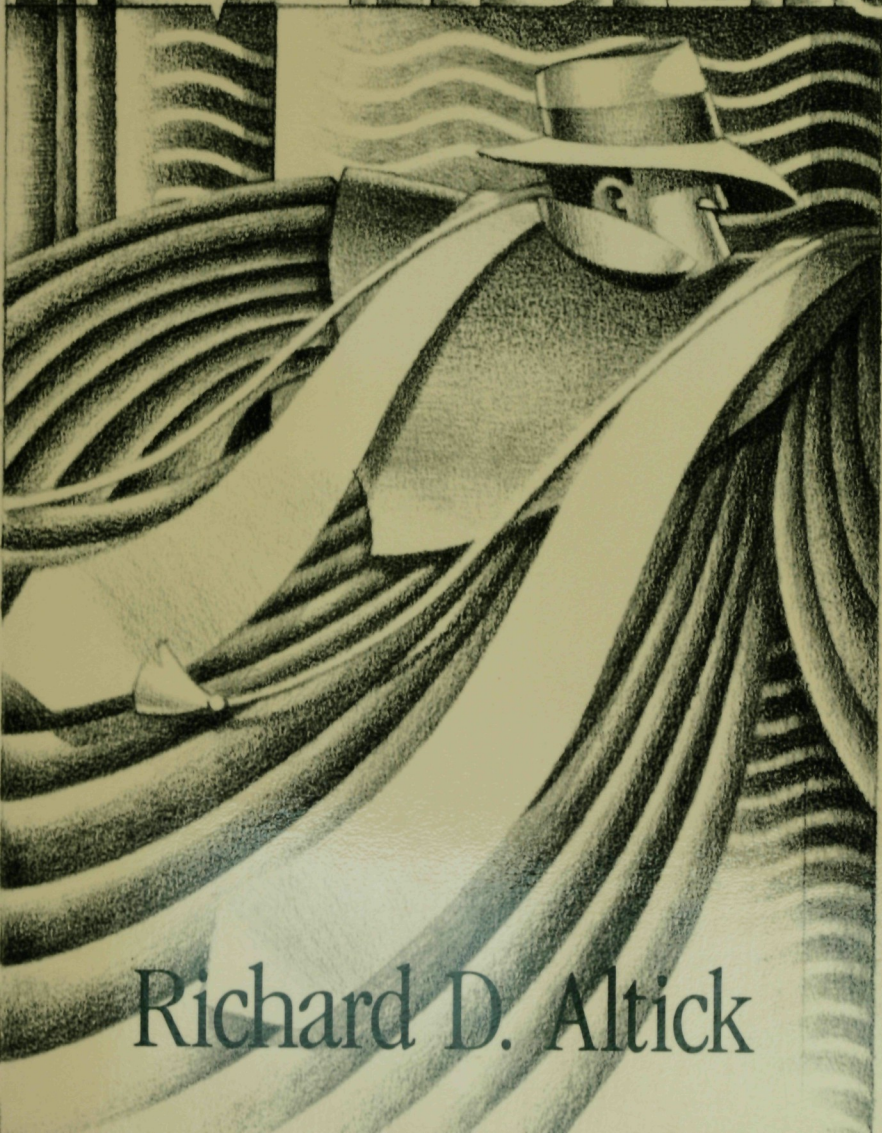


# THE SCHOLAR ADVENTURERS



Richard D. Altick

## **THE SCHOLAR ADVENTURERS**

ALSO BY RICHARD D. ALTICK

Preface to Critical Reading

The Cowden Clarkes

The English Common Reader: A Social History of  
the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900

The Art of Literary Research

Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography  
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Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of *The  
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EDITIONS

Thomas Carlyle: Past and Present

Robert Browning: The Ring and the Book

THE  
*Scholar Adventurers*

RICHARD D. ALTICK

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## CONTENTS

<b>Preface to the Ohio State University Press</b>	
<b>Edition</b> . . . . .	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction: The Unsung Scholar</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>I. The Secret of the Ebony Cabinet</b> . . . . .	<b>16</b>
<b>II. The Case of the Curious Bibliographers</b> . . . . .	<b>37</b>
<b>III. The Quest of the Knight-Prisoner</b> . . . . .	<b>65</b>
<b>IV. Hunting for Manuscripts</b> . . . . .	<b>86</b>
<b>V. Exit a Lady, Enter Another</b> . . . . .	<b>122</b>
<b>VI. A Gallery of Inventors</b> . . . . .	<b>142</b>
<b>VII. The Scholar and the Scientist</b> . . . . .	<b>176</b>
<b>VIII. Secrets in Cipher</b> . . . . .	<b>200</b>
<b>IX. The Destructive Elements</b> . . . . .	<b>211</b>
<b>X. Shades of Mrs. Grundy</b> . . . . .	<b>239</b>
<b>XI. Post-Mortems</b> . . . . .	<b>249</b>
<b>XII. On the Trail of Byron</b> . . . . .	<b>270</b>
<b>XIII. The Search for Sambir</b> . . . . .	<b>289</b>

XIV. Discoveries .....	298
<i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> —Medwall's <i>Fulgens and Lucrez</i> —The Poems of Thomas Traherne—The Poems of Edward Taylor—The Conway Letters—Browning's <i>Essay on Chatterton</i> —The Brontës' Childhood Fantasies	
Bibliographical Notes .....	319
Index .....	333

PREFACE TO  
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS EDITION

FEW WRITERS are fortunate enough to see one of their books restored to print a full thirty-seven years after it first appeared. Its new publishers are pleased to call it a minor classic, and it unquestionably conforms to one definition of the genre, as a book of a certain age that has been read and remembered by many and bought (if one's old royalty statements are any indication) by remarkably few. Perhaps this reissue will redress the balance.

Across the years, a gratifying number of professional students of English and American literature have told me that reading *The Scholar Adventurers* for the first time was a memorable and even influential event in their education, revealing to them the pleasures and rewards, even the occasional thrills, that literary research involves. Nonacademic book lovers, people who simply like to read books about books and their fortunes in the world, have couched their appreciation somewhat differently. Both kinds of readers have now and then asked me when they might expect a sequel. But the fact is that in the intervening years not many stories of adventurous literary investigations or lucky finds have come to my attention. Several that I did happen to hear about, including the discovery of thirty-six sermons by the New England poet Edward Taylor in a Nebraska bookstore, the surfacing of the manuscripts of no fewer than seventeen Restoration plays in an English country house, and the use of modern scientific techniques to shed fresh light on the place of the Winchester manuscript in the textual tradition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, are briefly told in the third edition of my *Art of Literary Research* (W. W. Norton, 1981). The "For Further Reading" list at the end of that volume, as well as certain of the practical exercises, supplement the bibliographical notes appended to the present one.

Still, somehow, finds continue to come to light. Ten or so years ago, a stamp dealer in Carlisle, England, sorting through a bundle of old letters he had bought for five pounds from someone he did



not publicly identify, found a large hoard of letters to and from members of the Wordsworth family, the most precious of which were thirty-one love letters exchanged between the poet and his wife in 1810–12. No one knows how these were separated from the main body of Wordsworth papers, or where they had been all those years, or how they came finally to be sold as scrap. The lot was bought by Cornell University to add to its rich Wordsworthian collection, but the British government withheld the requisite export license and so the papers went instead to the Wordsworth library at Grasmere.

Almost at the same moment (1976), a battered old traveling trunk was opened in a private vault in an old London bank which by that time had been acquired by Barclays. It had belonged to Byron's rakish friend Scrope Davies, who left it there in 1820 when, pursued by importunate creditors, he fled to the continent, never to return. The trunk proved to be laden with papers relating to Byron and his circle — a mass of invitations, receipts, visiting cards and other miscellaneous debris such as many people then accumulated in the course of everyday life, and more important, a fair copy of the original manuscript of *Childe Harold*, canto three, early manuscripts of Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Mont Blanc," and a fine assortment of letters exchanged by Byron and a number of his friends. The full story of the discovery and subsequent events, including the delivery of the treasure to the British Library in a horse-drawn coach, has been told by Bevis Hillier, who reported it for the *London Times*, in the introduction to T. A. J. Burnett's *The Rise and Fall of a Regency Dandy: The Life and Times of Scrope Berdmore Davies* (Little, Brown, 1981).

More recently, the international media headlined the discovery, in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, of a poem supposedly by Shakespeare. Its presence in a manuscript anthology of poetry dating from the 1630s, along with a note in an unknown hand

attributing it to Shakespeare, had been recorded in a printed catalogue almost a century ago, but nobody had previously taken the attribution seriously enough to look into the matter. Announcement of the find touched off a feverish debate among scholars, the progress of which can be conveniently traced through three issues of the *Shakespeare Newsletter* (Winter 1985–Summer 1986). To at least one disinterested observer, the quality of the lines Shakespeare allegedly wrote recalls Robert Browning's response, in a different context, "Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!"

After this book was first published there were startling new developments in the long-running drama called here "The Case of the Curious Bibliographers," Thomas J. Wise's criminous bibliographical activities proving to have been considerably more complicated and ramified than his original accusers had known or even imagined. The whole story has recently been laid out with authority and in exhaustive detail—a masterpiece of forensic bibliographical analysis—in Nicolas Barker and John Collins's *A Sequel to "An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain XIXth Century Pamphlets" by John Carter and Graham Pollard: The Forgeries of H. Buxton Forman & T. J. Wise* (Solar Press, 1983). The second edition of the 1934 *Enquiry*, which had long been out of print, was issued as a companion volume with an epilogue by Carter and Pollard themselves.

The first chapter in the present book, "The Secret of the Ebony Cabinet," also turned out to be only the prologue to a lengthy and equally absorbing course of events involving a series of further discoveries of Boswell papers and protracted behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing on the part of sellers, buyers, libraries, and publishers. The complete inside story has now been told twice, from the quite different perspectives of a Scottish lawyer (David Buchanan's *The Treasure of Auchinleck*, McGraw-Hill, 1974) and the former head of Yale's "Boswell factory" (Frederick A. Pottle's *Pride and Negligence*, McGraw-Hill, 1984).

Finally, the long-desired full-dress life of the scholar-forger John Payne Collier was written by Dewey Ganzel under the title *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (Oxford University Press, 1982). It is evidently not everything that specialists would have wished it to be, but for the ordinary reader it is an adequate and lively narrative set in the Victorian book world, where enthusiasm and credulity were as yet uncurbed by the rigorous standards of modern bibliographical study.

I have allowed my introduction, "The Unsung Scholar," to stand as it was first printed. In a number of particulars it is obsolete or, to put the best face on it, has become a period piece. My remarks on the low pay scholars in the humanities received in 1950 are, happily, no longer applicable. If I were rewriting my paragraphs on the Modern Language Association meetings today, my comments would take a different tack and would perhaps be less amiable. But more than one comic novelist, bemused by the busy spectacle of thousands of professional literary and linguistic students gathered for their annual saturnalia, paper-readings, gossip fest, and employment market, has taken care of that topic for me.

Whatever promise these chapters implicitly contain of important discoveries still awaiting the doughty researcher must be modified in the light of new conditions. There is simply less material waiting to be found. The steady flow of manuscripts and printed rarities into the permanency of public-access collections during the past half century means that the reservoir of literary documents in private hands is, to that extent, diminished. And it is less likely nowadays that researchers will come upon valuable items that arrived at libraries long ago but somehow fell through the cracks during the cataloguing or shelving procedure.

The primary message of the introduction, however, remains unchanged. Since I wrote about other people's adventures in such places as English country houses, the Public Record Office, and the Folger Shakespeare Library I have had adventures of my own which fully validate my exposition of the pleasures of research.

None of my finds have been as dramatic or worth recording as those in this book (though I did contribute a piece called "An Uncommon Curiosity: In Search of the Shows of London" to the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* in 1981). Instead of seeking rare individual documents, my research has been concentrated on gathering together masses of hitherto discrete and scattered data and discovering the patterns into which they fall as significant literary or historical themes. Such inquiries have taken me into several relatively unexplored fields on the periphery of literary studies, especially certain aspects of the history of nineteenth-century English social life and popular culture. Accordingly, I have taken my rudimentary apparatus of notepads and ballpoint pens to institutions more or less off the strictly literary scholar's beat. Although none of these provides, perhaps, the special ambience that is associated with the Huntington Library at San Marino, California, where honey-dew and the milk of paradise are served every day at lunch, or the rather more austere amenities of the British Library and the old Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, each has yielded up ample quantities of its own kind of richness. Following endlessly winding paper trails in settings as different as those of the Yale Center for British Art, London's Guildhall Library, the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library's newspaper library in a London suburb, and the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera has always paid off in some fashion. Everywhere I have delved, I have found out many things I wanted to know and more things I didn't know I wanted to know but was glad to find out about just the same. And that, in the long run, is the present-day scholar adventurer's measure of success. I stand by every word I wrote in the last paragraph of my introduction.

R.D.A.

## THE UNSUNG SCHOLAR

## I

MANY of the men and women who teach English in our colleges and universities lead double lives. They earn their living in the classroom, doling out facts and opinions about English and American literary classics to students who are, to say the least, suspicious of art in any form. Despite the frustrations and disappointments which are the bitter but inevitable lot of their calling, they are not unhappy in their teaching. But their consuming passions lie elsewhere. For outside the classroom they are scholars: patient delvers into history and biography whose great design is to add to the world's store of literary knowledge, to provide the raw materials of fact by which they, and eventually the public, may clearly understand and evaluate a work of literary art. And in that scholarly role they have adventures which are as exciting as any that have ever been told of their better publicized colleagues, the research scientists.

The bacteriologists have had their Homer in Paul de Kruif, the chemists have had theirs in Bernard Jaffe, and, most recently, the nuclear physicists have heard their exploits sung by a whole chorus of celebrators (which, according to many theories, is what "Homer" really was). But the teacher whose *alter ego* is the literary scholar, whose excitements are found not among penicillin cultures and cyclotrons but in great research libraries and the mouse-chewed papers of an old family in a dormant English hamlet, has never been much written about. It is time, I think, for someone to atone for that neglect.

To some tastes, indeed, the literary researcher has the most colorful

and dramatic of all the tasks of modern scholarship. He deals not with the inanimate or the subhuman phenomena of the world, but with human material; and he differs from the social scientist and the psychologist in that he is not primarily concerned with the mass behavior of men or the individual man as a scientific phenomenon, but with man as creator—the creator of one kind of art, the literary. Of course, his interest may nevertheless often overlap that of the social scientist and the psychologist. More and more, in recent years, the literary researcher has invaded the field of history itself in his desire to understand as fully as may be the various intellectual, social, and artistic milieus that furnished the raw materials of experience from which, by the mysterious catalysis we call the imagination, a work of literature was created. Similarly, the immense increase in psychological knowledge has afforded the literary scholar techniques hitherto unavailable to him for probing into the private temperament, the motivations, and the prejudices of a poet, no matter how long ago he may have lived. And so, borrowing knowledge and techniques on the one hand from the psychologist and on the other from the historian, the literary scholar goes forth to explore both the inner soul of a man and the outer envelope of contemporary circumstance which combined to make a poem or a drama what it is. He is, therefore, a historian of man in his imaginative-intellectual capacity.

But it is not this alone which lends literary scholarship its particular fascination. In addition, the literary researcher is confronted with a vast and tangled puzzle—the contradictions, the obscurities, the very silences which the passage of time leaves behind in the form of history. To repair the damage done by those who in past ages have falsified, distorted, or destroyed the written record, even in the dustiest corner of literary history or biography, requires detective talents—and staying power—of the highest order. The scholar's path may be barred at every turn by a result of one or another of the accidents of fate and human error. He must face the fact that a great deal more of the materials of literary history, including the very works of literature themselves, have been destroyed than have been preserved. He sustains the hope nevertheless that somehow the particular documents he needs have been spared from the bonfire of the moment and

the damp of the centuries, and that somewhere, if only he can find where by the use of the Geiger counters of historical sleuthing, they are safe and await his coming. He must solve knotty mysteries by cryptography, scientific analysis of ink and paper, and the cunning use of, say, old railroad timetables and army muster rolls. He must acquaint himself with the methods and the motives of the forgers and liars who have contaminated historical records. In the hope of finding the solution to a literary mystery he may travel to Italy or the Dutch East Indies. At the end of his trail may lie the imposing criminal record of the man who wrote the *Morte Darthur*, the truth about the last days of Christopher Marlowe or of the wretched prostitute who had been Shelley's child-wife, the proof that certain "facts" about Shakespeare were the invention of a Victorian scholar's twisted mind, the forgotten diary of an American Pepys, or the revelation that the spiritual agony of a great romantic poet was due in part to his having begotten an illegitimate child.

Literary research is frequently dull and laborious beyond description, and even the most devoted scholar will admit as much. Much of it ends in despair, because history, however briskly prodded, simply refuses to talk. A great deal of it, furthermore, gives the world nothing but a heap of uninteresting and unusable facts dredged up from the silt where they might just as well have remained to the end of time; and here again those scholars who retain perspective along with their professional convictions would agree.\* But that same research has nevertheless provided us with an understanding of the books we treasure which was impossible fifty or a hundred years ago. There is not a major author in English or American letters who has not emerged a clearer, more meaningful figure because of the work of the professional literary fact-finders, whether they have been breathing the choking dust of six hundred years in a grimy structure in London's

\* In the last fifty years a great deal of ink has been spilt in the debate over the utility of literary research; but in this book I shall be happy to let the reader draw his own conclusions. It is worth remarking, though, that during the Second World War the highly refined techniques developed in such research were put to important use in fields remote from literature. Many peacetime literary scholars were quickly and profitably converted into intelligence officers, cryptographers, propagandists, historians, and so forth.

Chancery Lane, the air-conditioned immaculacy of the lovely Georgian building at Harvard where rest some of the finest of Keats's manuscripts, or the languorous breezes of Melville's South Pacific.

## II

WHO, then, are these scholar adventurers?

Obviously there is no such person as a "typical" literary scholar, and there never has been. But it is remarkable that the greatest scholars two generations ago were, seemingly without exception, "characters": some in the mold of Sylvestre Bonnard, some a deal saltier. The pioneer medieval scholar and simplified spelling enthusiast F. J. Furnivall liked to scull on the Thames, while his long white whiskers streamed out behind him. The most famous of American scholars, George Lyman Kittredge, who was reputed to dip his beard in laundry bluing, strode across Harvard Square against the lights in defiance of trucks and streetcars ("Look out there, Santy Claus," cried the drivers and motor-men), had a marvelous knack of timing his lecture and making his exit from the classroom so that his last word and his students' last glimpse of him chimed with the bell, held midnight conferences over cigars at his home which are fondly remembered by hundreds of his one-time graduate students, and had habits of leisure reading that resulted in the Harvard Library's acquiring over the years one of the world's finest collections of detective fiction. An Anglo-Saxon specialist almost killed the graduate study of English in one of our great universities because he insisted on teaching all the courses himself; and another great American medievalist lost his hat at a meeting of the Modern Language Association many years ago, when he was rosily under the influence, and thereby started a famous legend—

But the great "characters" belong now to history, and to the affections or at least the esteem of the men and women, now themselves in middle age, who sat at their feet. In their place has come a generation of comparatively conventional, unspectacular men in business suits who may have their individual eccentricities, but who in the mass look like a squadron of insurance salesmen. But even if these do not



conform, externally at least, to the popular image of the unworldly academician, few of them, I suspect, are really at home with a group of prosperous businessmen. As John Livingston Lowes of Harvard, a prince among scholarly detectives, once observed, the college professor riding in a crowded Pullman smoking room at midnight tries his best to be unacademic, but the damnèd spot will not out.

It is my impression that in politics most scholars whose lives were at some point affected by the Great Depression—and that includes everyone who was struggling to make ends meet while in graduate school, or while holding his first job in a desperately impoverished college—are liberals of some sort, ranging from militant activity in the appropriate movements to a quiet attachment, sentimental or philosophical, to the principles of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Despite the wholly libelous legend that professional scholars take pride in having read nothing published since 1900, most of them, including some of the oldest, are deeply interested in contemporary literary trends, and can discuss Faulkner, Sartre, Kafka, Cyril Connolly, Ezra Pound, and all the splinter groups of poets and critics, with intelligence and heat of one sort or another. Most of them read the *New Yorker*, and not a few are Li'l Abner fans. Many of them collect records which they play, if they can afford to do so, on a custom-built phonograph with all the latest refinements of sound engineering. Their musical tastes are fairly sophisticated. I have a feeling that, if a poll were taken, the most favored of all composers would be Mozart; but Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms are also strongly represented on the record shelves, and in many collections such moderns as Hindemith, Schönberg, Bartók, and Shostakovich find hospitality. Although a Johns Hopkins scholar, in an apologia for his colleagues written in 1938, maintained that most members of the profession have "a possessive attitude toward at least one Hollywood star," the times have changed, and today the profession as a whole seems to reserve its enthusiasm for such classics as *The Informer* and the vintage pleasantries of the Marx Brothers, and for the excellent foreign movies which have been increasingly popular in America since the war. It need hardly be added that a picture like Olivier's *Hamlet* is good for an hour's controversy any time two or more scholars get together.

A few scholars, like Wilmarth S. Lewis, the twentieth-century apostle of Horace Walpole, have comfortable private incomes, and the advantages inherent in their personal lives carry over into their scholarly pursuits. They may wear English tweeds, go abroad in state every summer, and mingle socially with rich book-collectors. Like Chauncey Brewster Tinker of Yale, they may build up their own personal collections of rare books and manuscripts, which they house in suitable comfort in a city apartment or a place in the country.

By no means all scholars are professional teachers. A great deal of valuable research, especially in the field of bibliography, has been accomplished by men and women attached to great libraries. Ever since the day of Sir Frederic Madden, a hundred years ago, the British Museum has had on its staff learned bookmen who have combined independent research with their official duties, to the great enrichment of scholarly knowledge. One of the best contemporary authorities on the older English printed books is William A. Jackson, of the Houghton Library at Harvard. Curt Bühler of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York is another top expert in the field of early printing. Giles Dawson and E. E. Willoughby, Elizabethan bibliographical specialists, are on the staff of the Folger Library. Such men enjoy the advantage of the incomparable resources of their respective libraries almost within arm's reach, and in addition their daily business enables them constantly to profit from the knowledge of the specialists who work for the great rare-book dealers. The "curious bibliographers" who, as we shall soon discover, exposed the monumental fraud of Thomas J. Wise, were neither academic persons nor members of library staffs, but employees of rare-book firms.

Some distinguished scholars have done much of their work in what leisure they could find after completing their daily tasks in other professions. Two of the leading English experts on Elizabethan literature, Sir Edmund Chambers and John Dover Wilson, were for many years officials of the national Board of Education. Dr. Samuel A. Tannenbaum, whom we shall meet when we examine the case of John Payne Collier, was a Hungarian-born New Yorker who held an M.D. from the Columbia University medical school and had a busy practice

in psychotherapy. Occasionally an important contribution to scholarly knowledge is made by a stranger to all the learned professions. Twenty years ago a New England textile manufacturer named Walter Oliver wandered into the office of the Modern Language Association to announce that he held the key to a riddle which had long baffled students of the medieval romance—the geography involved in the story of *King Horn*. Once he had identified the “Suddene” of the romance with Southdean, on the Borders of Scotland, where he had spent his boyhood, most of the other geographical details fell into place.

Nevertheless, most scholars earn their living in the classroom or the administrative offices of a university, even if they got there, so to speak, by the back door. A few dedicated spirits entered literary research only after having practiced and abandoned a career in some other field. John Livingston Lowes first was a professor of mathematics at Washington and Jefferson College. Carleton Brown of New York University was a railroader and a Unitarian minister before he began his great work as a specialist in the medieval lyric. A leading present-day Johnson expert holds a degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And a surprising number of our American scholars, if confronted with the record, would have to confess that they misspent their undergraduate years majoring in such subjects as business administration.

The sacrifices involved in deserting a prospective career as stockbroker or advertising executive for the life of scholarship are the more impressive when we consider what scholars were paid in the late 1940's, when academic salaries in the United States were the highest in history. An instructor, the occupant of the lowest rung on the ladder, whose professional training had been as long and as expensive as that of a surgeon, might receive up to \$3,500 for a nine-month year. A man who had reached the dizzy eminence of a full professorship might receive \$6,000 or even as much as \$10,000. (Salaries were higher at a few institutions, such as Harvard, but to anyone not at Harvard the fact was only a curiosity to be noted wistfully in passing.) Such an income is not conducive to high living. It means limiting oneself to a Ford or a Plymouth, buying the bulk of one's groceries at the A. & P.,

-serving an inexpensive brand of whisky at all parties except the ones celebrating a promotion or the publication of a book, and practicing all sorts of petty economies.

Among scholars there is a pleasant camaraderie which links a man at Columbia with one at the University of California and another at Oxford, in the same way in which, say, surgeons have almost a worldwide fraternity. Some friendships begin in graduate school, when the necessity of posing temporarily as a lover of the Anglo-Saxon tongue and of brazening through the grueling three-day qualifying examination for the Ph.D. makes all men brothers over the two A.M. coffee. They are augmented when the young scholar is striking out for the first time on his own, with a summer of research at the Harvard Library or the British Museum in London, and he meets other aspiring researchers in the reading rooms or at the inexpensive restaurants he patronizes. And they grow still more a little later, when, having published two or three articles, he becomes known as a budding specialist in the metaphysical poets or the Pre-Raphaelites or Jonathan Edwards, and workers in the same and adjoining vineyards begin to exchange information and discuss their problems with him.

The spirit of cooperation that exists in modern literary scholarship is unsurpassed, perhaps, in any of the other learned professions. I can speak with some authority on the subject, because in the course of gathering material for this book I have had occasion to ask the help of scores of busy scholars personally unknown to me, and seldom have I been turned away unsatisfied. That is not to say that relations among scholars are always sweetness and light. There are specialists who like to hold exclusive dominion over their particular area of research, and who go to unseemly lengths to try to keep out poachers. Some, having found valuable new documents, persuade the owners to forbid anyone else to use them. Often this exaggerated sense of possessiveness has its comic side. Forty years ago two indefatigable Shakespeare scholars, Professor Charles Wallace of the University of Nebraska and Mrs. Charlotte Stopes of Scotland, found themselves, to their mutual irritation, working side by side in the Public Record Office in London. Each knew that the other had the same design—to find hitherto undiscovered documents relating to Shakespeare. It is said that Mrs. Stopes was so

much on Wallace's mind that, even when walking along the street with a companion, he would lower his voice and glance over his shoulder, fearful that she was trailing him in the hope of overhearing some valuable clue to the progress of his research. When he discovered a document, he would try (unsuccessfully) to have the Record Office authorities hide it away so that she would not know about it.

Once in a while, at the annual meeting of American literary scholars, two archrivals may be seen avoiding each other with desperate zeal. But the pervading atmosphere of these gatherings is decidedly fraternal. The Modern Language Association—"MLA" as it is always called by its members—is the professional organization for teachers and scholars in all the modern languages and literatures which are taught in American higher institutions. It is the counterpart, in the field of literary studies, of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which regularly steals the headlines from it if their conventions happen to be held at the same time.

Every year for three days between Christmas and New Year's, the MLA holds a meeting in a hotel in one or another of the large eastern or midwestern cities. The lobbies and corridors are jammed by a polyglot mob, numbering as many as three thousand. In addition to scholars in English and American literature, the crowd includes bearded professors of French or Slavonic, smoking cigarettes down to the last half-inch; lonely graduate students who are there because they have already been told it is "the thing to do," and who gaze with awe—mingled with distaste—at the celebrities of scholarship whose books they have been required to read; and beaten-down middle-aged men and women hoping against hope to persuade somebody to rescue them from a living death, at \$3,000 a year, at Dismal Seepage State Normal College.

The official reason for the MLA annual conclave is an elaborate system of small meetings in which some fifty groups of specialists in the various fields of research gather while three or four of their number read papers. To "read a paper at MLA," thereby getting one's name in the printed record, is one of the prescribed ways of advancing in the profession. It is generally agreed that nine-tenths of the papers read at these group meetings should have remained unread, if not

actually unwritten; but since no one is obliged to listen to the papers and everybody in the room except the reader is spending his time looking for familiar faces or trying to catch the attention of his fellow Dryden expert from Michigan, no real harm is done. The formal purposes of the MLA convention, indeed, are held in humorous scorn by a substantial proportion of the membership. In reality most seasoned MLA-ers travel long distances each Christmas season for the sake of renewing old friendships, trading scholarly and academic gossip, and checking up on the progress of one another's research.

These vital functions are accomplished partly at bars in the hotel and the surrounding neighborhood, and in the hotel suites rented by textbook publishers, whose representatives play the genial host while inwardly worrying about what the front office will say when they turn in the liquor bill. But the most uninhibited and most valuable gatherings at MLA are those in the bedrooms of the members themselves. At two A.M., three ice pails and an empty soda bottle or two outside a door mark a smoke-choked room where a medieval scholar is playing host to a Whitman specialist, a Shakespearean, and a Miltonist (all sprawled on the single bed), a Meredithian (in the armchair), a Henry James specialist (in the other chair), a worker in eighteenth-century periodicals and a student of Franco-American literary relations (on the floor). In the morning it will be hard to get up in time for the nine o'clock section meetings, at which two or three of them are scheduled to read papers; but these bedroom convivialities have their place in the scholarly plan of things. In the course of the conversation, the Miltonist may accidentally suggest to the Whitman specialist some exciting ideas about the origins of Walt's metrical habits; and the Meredithian, listening to the worker in eighteenth-century periodicals discussing his present research, may suddenly remember that in his college library in the Midwest is a file of the obscure magazine for which his acquaintance has long been looking.

The *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, a thick quarterly periodical dressed in a bright blue cover, is, at least when measured by both bulk and total circulation, the leading American publication in the field of literary research. Besides *PMLA*, as it is always called (the scholarly profession was far in advance of the New

Deal in adopting time- and space-saving abbreviations), there are in America a handful of other quarterly and monthly publications, all circulating fewer than a thousand copies, in which the scholar publishes the results of his research with no other reward than a sheaf of off-prints to hand round to his colleagues and to people who may some day offer him a better academic post. Known to the learned by their initials rather than their formal titles—*MLN*, *ELH*, *PQ*, *SP*, *JEGP*, and so forth—these periodicals struggle along from year to year on the subsidies granted them by the universities where they are edited. The British have two comparable journals, the *Review of English Studies* at Oxford and the *Modern Language Review* at the University of London. In addition to these periodicals of general scholarly interest, there are also a number devoted to special slices of literature, ranging from *Speculum* (medieval studies) to the *Journal of Nineteenth Century Fiction*.

### III

THE practice of literary scholarship, while it does not require expensive equipment such as is indispensable to scientific research, takes more money than the average professor can afford to spend. Scholars must own many expensive books important to their research; they need microfilms and photostats of their materials; they have to travel to the distant places where their quarry lies. The sums required are infinitesimal compared with those which are daily allotted to cancer researchers or to workers, for example, on Atomic Energy Commission projects; but they are much harder to get. Although some universities have relatively liberal provisions for aiding literary research—to the extent of a few hundred dollars per project—in others the scholar must pay his own way. He can escape doing so only by winning a grant or fellowship from one of the large libraries or foundations. A few of the great research libraries, such as the Folger, the Huntington, and the Newberry, award fellowships to scholars who have special programs of work they wish to pursue in those libraries. The Rockefeller Foundation has subsidized individual research in certain areas

of American literature, as well as contributed heavily to projects, like the Union Catalog at the Library of Congress, which are of use to all scholars. Every year a fair number of Guggenheim Fellowships, which allow each winner \$2,500 to \$3,000 for a year's uninterrupted study, are allotted to literary investigators. The Fulbright Fellowships for foreign study, recently instituted by the United States Department of State, are a most welcome addition to this lamentably small list.

When the *magnum opus* is finished, the product of ten years of hard work and rigorous self-denial, the scholar need not dread having to fight off publishers frantic to have his manuscript. It never was too easy to find a publisher for a scholarly book, and in the past few years it has become much harder to do so, when production costs have virtually prohibited the publication of books with strictly limited appeal. The American scholar's only recourse is to one of the university presses, which fortunately are increasing both in number and in prestige. But even if his manuscript is accepted by one of these academic publishing houses, he may have to subsidize the venture himself to the extent of thousands of dollars, with little hope of getting any of the money back in profits.

Why, then, considering these handicaps—the constant uphill struggle to accomplish their research and then to publish its results—do so many scholars persist in their occupation? Early in these pages I suggested part of the answer; the rest will be clear when we reflect how literary scholars are made. For they *are* made—not born. No adolescent boy in history, unless there is a case somewhere in the clinical records, ever asserted that his passionate ambition was to be a literary researcher. It is normal to aspire to be a doctor or a lawyer or even a clergyman, and plenty of today's top scientists were busy with Chemcraft sets when they were eight; but any tender youth who expressed a desire to spend his life working in libraries and writing learned articles he could be sure that no more than a handful of people would ever read, could well be thought to be more than a trifle peculiar.

Most scholars are the product of that harsh but presumably necessary weeding-out process by which nature, or society, reduces the number of creative writers in every generation. The famous remark—



was it Sainte-Beuve's?—to the effect that every man over forty carries a dead poet in his breast might have been made specifically of scholars. When a boy who likes to read books is in high school and college, he is going to be a writer—a journalist if he isn't aiming his sights too high, otherwise a critic like Edmund Wilson, a poet like T. S. Eliot, or a novelist like Thomas Wolfe. He probably gets some of his early efforts into print, in his school magazines and even in commercial publications. (An enterprising blackmailer, by the way, could do worse than dig up the novels and books of verse which today's eminent scholars published before they were thirty.) But somewhere along the line the aspiring artist realizes that the belly's crass demands take precedence over the fine frenzy of the spirit, and he must find some way of making a steady living. The obvious answer, since he can't live away from books, is to teach literature in what are somewhat dreamily called institutions of higher learning. To do so with any prospect of security and advancement he must have his Ph.D. So he goes to graduate school; and there he hears about scholarship, rubs elbows with practicing scholars, is even encouraged to take a trial flight himself. Despite the agonies he suffers when he is writing his doctoral dissertation, scholarship gets into his blood. Slowly, and in most cases painlessly (as the new fascination of historical inquiry fastens itself upon him) the dream of becoming a *littérateur* fades away. What had been, at least to this point, a third-rate writer dies, and what may possibly become a first-rate scholar is born. In very rare cases—two that immediately come to mind are those of Douglas Bush and the late John Livingston Lowes—the writer does not die, but is gloriously assimilated in the scholar, the result being books of scholarly weight and precision which are also joys to read. In some cases, the writer lives on under an alias. It is a curious coincidence that both England and America today have well known specialists in the Elizabethan drama who turn out successful detective novels in their spare time.

A devotion to books, then, is the primary requisite of a scholar. Such devotion extends not merely to their contents but to the sheer physical sensations of handling them, taking pleasure in their binding and typography and paper. There is a certain temperament, evident to a degree, probably, in every reader of this book, to which the dry

odor of the stacks of a large library is heady perfume. A few years ago a humble employee of a federal mint grew tired of hauling new pennies around all day and got a job, at a much lower salary, as a page in a big university library—simply, as he expressed it, to be close to books. He had at least some of the makings of the genuine scholar.

But that is not enough. Although the attempts which were made a generation or two ago to place literary research on the same footing as the natural sciences were absurd, it is true that the literary scholar must have the scientist's deep concern for exactness, for objectivity, for thoroughness, for getting every detail just right. He will not be contented unless he feels the kind of satisfaction that comes from the mastery of specialized techniques, things which he realizes he can do well and few other people can do at all. He must have an extensive and precise knowledge of, among many other things, the ways to use the vast array of bibliographical tools which have been produced to guide him through the twenty or thirty million different books printed since Gutenberg. As his command of method increases, as he moves with more and more confidence through the complexities of libraries and archives and solves his problems with neatness and dispatch, his pleasure grows, just as does that of the scientist who solves a formidable problem by the sheer exercise of intricate technique. The more practice he has in the tricks of his trade, the more successfully can he urge the past to give up its secrets; and that is what he is a scholar for.

Put the two together—a lively imagination focused in the art of literature, and a scientific devotion to truth in its minutest detail—and you have the literary scholar. The demands which research makes upon both of these faculties are no less than those which the act of artistic creation makes upon the poet or the novelist, or the attempt to verify a hypothesis makes upon the experimental scientist. They are simply of another kind.

The scholar is confronted with a vast jigsaw puzzle made up of countless fragments of truth; but many pieces are missing, and others are fitted into the wrong places. His first task is to tidy up the tiny sector of the puzzle which he has chosen for his own province, finding some new pieces that fit neatly into place and properly rearranging some old ones. To do so, he must re-create in his imagination the

circumstances under which the missing pieces were lost and the ill-fitting ones misplaced, and then, by a similar act of reconstruction, develop a plan for remedying the situation. This task calls for a high degree of ingenuity, patience, logic, and sheer imaginative talent. And in the process of assembling his materials, as well as in the synthesis that follows, the scholar must make even greater demands upon his imagination. To interpret the significance of this material in terms of literary art, he must re-create in his mind, in as minute and faithful detail as possible, the social, intellectual, and literary conditions of a past age, and make himself, as well, an intimate spectator of the inner life of a great artist. A Chaucerian must train himself to think according to medieval patterns of thought; a specialist in Hawthorne must recapture Hawthorne's special mood and outlook upon life. This is historical detective work, rooted in scientific command of numberless small facts but raised to the plane of the creative imagination, and it explains why literary scholarship has a peculiar fascination to perpetually inquisitive minds. In the chapters that follow, we shall get some idea of what a seventeenth-century Marquis of Halifax had in mind when he wrote of scholarly curiosity that it is "the direct incontinency of the Spirit," which "hath a pleasure in it like that of Wrestling with a fine Woman."

## THE QUEST OF THE KNIGHT-PRISONER

IN the year 1485 there issued from the press of England's first printer, William Caxton, a volume he called the *Morte Darthur*. Although only one perfect copy of the original edition now exists, the influence of the work was destined to be tremendous. Henceforth the multifarious stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, which, in their long-winded French and Middle English texts, had been for centuries the favorite fireside reading of lords and ladies throughout western Europe, would be preserved in colloquial English. The work was, indeed, a late fifteenth-century Portable King Arthur, into which the English author had distilled the very essence of the wonderful Arthurian legend. A classic of literature in its own right, because of the author's narrative genius and his sense of racy, realistic prose, it is one of the few books (the Bible being, of course, another) which have had an almost continuous influence both on English literary style and on the subject matter of later literature.

In his notable Preface, Caxton said that he had printed the *Morte Darthur* "after a cotype unto me delyverd, whyche cotype syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe." And at the very end of the book, having seen Lancelot's body borne to the Joyous Gard for burial and having, Dickens-like, tied up numerous loose ends of narrative, the author himself wrote:

I praye you all lentyl men and lentyl wymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and hys knyghtes praye for me whyle I am on lyue that god sende me good delyueraunce & whan I am deed I praye

you all praye for my soule for this booke was ended the ix yere of the reygne of kyng edward the fourth by syr Thomas Maleore knyght as Ihesu helpe hym for hys grete myght as he is the seruaunt of Ihesu bothe day and nyght.

This passage is largely conventional. Medieval writers almost automatically concluded their poem or prose piece with the same sort of explicit, or pious coda, saying in effect, whether it was strictly true or not, "I am a devoted servant of my God. And may all grateful readers of what I have here written pray for my well-being in life and my salvation after death." Since the phrase about good deliverance was a familiar formula, no one ever seems to have been struck by the possibility that it might have special significance in Malory's case. If anyone had had such an idea, and then tried to discover by research just what it was from which Malory so earnestly prayed good deliverance, the great mystery of his identity might have been solved earlier than it was.

For it *was* a mystery, which lasted more than four centuries. Despite the fame of his book, and the natural desire of many generations of readers and critics and historians to know something of the background and character of the man who was responsible for it, absolutely nothing was known of Sir Thomas Malory until the last sixty years. The restoration of the man as a figure in history has been one of the most exciting achievements of modern scholarship, the more exciting because the figure that has been rescued from the mists of oblivion is one that nobody bargained for.

Late in the nineteenth century several scholars made ineffectual attempts to identify Malory. Having found records of various families bearing the name, they assumed that Sir Thomas belonged to one or another of them, and let it go at that. But it was not until George Lyman Kittredge of Harvard, early in his illustrious career as scholar, attacked the problem systematically and with his usual amazing thoroughness that any progress was made. Whereas previous investigators had found but a few Malorys in history, Kittredge began by unearthing the names and habitations of hundreds of persons who lived in England before 1485 and were named Malory, Mallore, Maulore, Mallere, Malure, Mallery, Maleore, and so forth. Since medieval

spelling was always flexible, especially in family names, these records were all possible clues at least to the writer's family. But to qualify as the author of the *Morte Darthur*, any Malory found in the historical records would, according to the evidence deduced from the book itself, have had not only to be named Thomas, but to be a knight, alive in the ninth year of Edward IV's reign (March 4, 1469, to March 3, 1470), and old enough at that time to write the book. Any Sir Thomas Malorys aged, say, eleven in 1470 need not apply.

From his large collection of Malorys, Kittredge isolated the sole figure who fitted all these requirements. He was the Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, Warwickshire, whose life (or the more seemly part of it, at any rate) had been outlined in print as long ago as 1656, in Sir William Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, one of the many great old-fashioned tomes of local history and genealogy that are the despair and sometimes the joy of modern researchers. Although Dugdale's work was standard for Warwickshire, and was in constant use by Shakespeare students, looking for ancestors or neighbors of the poet, nobody before Kittredge seems ever to have paused over the lines devoted to Sir Thomas Malory.

This Malory, Kittredge found in Dugdale, had been member of Parliament for his county in 1445 and had died on March 14, 1471. If he had a talent for English prose, he could have written the *Morte Darthur*. Whether he did or not, Kittredge had no way of knowing; but the possibility of his having done so, there being no other Malory in sight who suited the requirements, was enough to give interest to such meager further facts as Dugdale offered. Malory, Dugdale recorded, came of a family long settled in Warwickshire, and his father had held high local offices and had sat in Parliament. It was conceivable, then, that Sir Thomas had had a gentleman's education, the advantages of which were by no means universally enjoyed by men even of his superior station in the fifteenth century. But most suggestive of all was the fact that Malory early in life had been in the retinue of Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, during the French wars. Beauchamp, as Kittredge pointed out, was recognized by all Europe "as embodying the knightly ideal of the age. The Emperor Sigismund . . . said to Henry V 'that no prince Christen for wisdom, norture, and manhode,

hadde such another knyght as he had of therle [the Earl] Warrewyk; addyng therto that if al curtesye were lost, yet myght hit be founde ageyn in hym; and so ever after by the emperours auctorite he was called the Fadre of Curteisy.' " The very events of Warwick's life, indeed, were like pages out of the *Morte Darthur*. There could be no doubt, therefore, that even if this Malory had not written the *Morte Darthur*, his early association with a liege lord who behaved like a star member of the Round Table had admirably equipped him to do so.

Kittredge first printed his identification of Malory in an encyclopedia article published in 1894. Without having seen that article, an Englishman named Williams two years later announced his independent discovery of another record concerning a Sir Thomas Malory who could have been the author of the *Morte Darthur*. In an ancient manuscript at Wells Cathedral in England, Williams found that "Thomas Malorie, *miles*," along with several others, was specifically excluded from a general pardon issued by Edward IV in 1468. The record gave no hint as to why Malory was in need of a pardon, or why the King took pains to deny it to him. In any case, Kittredge immediately assumed (rightly, as later discoveries were to prove) that this man and the one he had found mentioned in *Dugdale* were identical.

There the whole matter rested for twenty-five years, and in the interim the books that had occasion to speak of the *Morte Darthur* simply said that it might have been written by the gentleman from Newbold Revel who served with Richard de Beauchamp at Calais and died in 1471. This information was more than books published before Kittredge's announcement had contained; but it served only to sharpen the appetite for more relevant data.

In the early 1920's, several additional bits of data on a man (or separate men) named Thomas Malory were found. One was a brief mention, in a document from 1443, that one Thomas Smythe accused a man of that name of stealing goods and chattels. Another was an equally curt and tantalizing record that in 1451 Henry VI had had to intervene in some sort of dispute between a Malory and the Carthusian monks of the Priory of Axholme, Lincolnshire. A third document revealed that in the following year a warrant was out for Malory's arrest "to answer certain charges," unspecified. Finally, E. K. Cham-

bers, who had discovered two of the preceding records, also found that Malory had been excluded from the terms of a second royal pardon in 1468, five months after the one earlier discovered by Williams. There was nothing specifically to connect the men named in these records with each other, or with the man discovered by Kittredge and Williams. There might, of course, have been more than one Sir Thomas Malory in the fifteenth century. But if there had been, it was remarkable that all of them seemed to share the same weakness for getting into trouble. However, the next discovery settled the question.

A device frequently used by historians to distinguish between two men of the same name who lived at the same time and in the same place is to assemble the available evidence into a presumptive pattern of conduct for at least one of them. If one John Smith can be proved to have been a rake and the other an ascetic, and if subsequently the record of a paternity suit is found naming an otherwise unidentified John Smith, the probability will be that the culprit was the former and not the latter. In the case of Malory, what clinched the matter was the neatness with which the evidence found by our next researcher fitted into the pattern already established.

This is what happened. In the mid-1920's, a former student of Kittredge's named Edward Hicks went to the Public Record Office in London determined to find, in that vast haystack of government documents, a needle or two pertaining to the career of the man who wrote the *Morte Darthur*. If anyone found anything he wanted in the first few weeks of his labors at the Public Record Office, his case would probably be seized upon by a society for psychical research. Hicks's experience followed the usual course. He looked through the obvious files, those of criminal cases tried in Warwickshire, without success. Like every worker in the P.R.O., he then had occasion to curse the disposition of arrangers of public records to relegate documents difficult to classify to the "Miscellaneous" file—thus saving themselves infinite labor and guaranteeing it to posterity. In this instance some old overworked clerk turned out to have lumped great masses of papers relating to fifteenth-century criminal cases under the capacious title "Divers Counties"—meaning, presumably, all the counties of England. Hicks took a long breath and plunged in. "After a prolonged turning over of



parchment strips," he writes, "—some long, some short, and all more or less faded—and noting how in the fifteenth century the counties of 'Myddx' and Essex appeared to be responsible for most of the crime of England, the welcome words 'In Com. Warr.' attracted attention." Good: having gone through Middlesex and Essex, Hicks had come to a felony in the county of Warwick, and Malory was a Warwickshire man. He unrolled the parchment so labeled and found that it related to a stabbing affray in the streets of Warwick. Interesting enough, but no Malory was mentioned. More old parchments to turn over, no luck. Then another roll marked "In Com. Warr." Hicks opened it. "The document, of course, was in Latin, and a portion of the right-hand edge of it had been somewhat damaged; but, halfway down, the eye was caught and held by two words—'Thomas Malory'—written with almost copper-plate clearness. The hunt was over, the quarry secured!"

What Hicks held in his hands was the record of an inquisition (similar to a modern grand-jury hearing) held at Nuneaton, Warwickshire, on August 23, 1451. It recited an eight-count indictment drawn up against Sir Thomas Malory and presented to a commission composed of officials whose prominence in the county suggested that this was no ordinary occasion. Sir Thomas Malory, knight, was in trouble.

In fact, the future author of the *Morte Darthur* had been the ring-leader in a Warwickshire crime wave. In chronological order (not the order given in the actual indictment) these had been his alleged offenses in the past year and a half:

January 4, 1450.\* He and "26 other malefactors and breakers of the King's Peace, armed and arrayed in a warlike manner," had tried to ambush Humphrey, Duke of Buckingham. (They missed him, and Humphrey was now sitting, in defiance of what we would today consider the delicacies of legal procedure, on the bench at the hearing.)

May 23, 1450. Malory broke into the house of Hugh Smyth "and feloniously raped Joan, the wife of the said Hugh."

May 31, 1450. He extorted "by threats and oppression" from Mar-

\* The authorities who have studied the records of Malory's career do not always agree on the exact dates of the various episodes. I have followed Vinaver's dating wherever a choice had to be made.

garet Kyng and William Hales, at Monks Kirby, his own parish, the sum of 100 shillings.

August 6, 1450. He made a return visit to Hugh Smyth's domicile, "feloniously raped Joan" (again!), and stole forty pounds' worth of Hugh's property.

August 31, 1450. He extorted twenty shillings from John Mylner, also of Monks Kirby.

June 4, 1451. Malory went across the border into Leicestershire and there took "seven cows, two calves, a cart worth £4, and 335 sheep worth £22," driving the whole lot back to his home at Newbold Revel.

(July 23, 1451. At this point the law caught up with Sir Thomas Malory. Astonishingly, the offense that finally delivered him into the King's custody was none of the foregoing but rather one which is not even mentioned in the Nuneaton indictment, although Hicks found it recorded in another document. That was the unpleasantness, not further specified, between Malory and the Carthusian monks at Axholme Priory, which, as Chambers had earlier discovered, had already forced the King to intervene in the interests of the peace. Malory might have gone on blithely committing his larcenies, rapes, and extortions, and the law might have gazed the other way—but this dispute with the monks evidently was too serious to be ignored. The result was, at long last, that he was clapped into Coventry jail.)

July 25, 1451. Stone walls do not a prison make, at least not one that could hold Sir Thomas. No sooner was he thrown into a cell than he broke jail, swam the deep, wide, sewage-filled moat, and escaped into the night.

July 28, 1451. Sir Thomas acted swiftly. He and several other men of various social stations were at the head of a large band of "malefactors and breakers of the King's peace in the manner of an insurrection" who assembled before the Cistercian Abbey of Blessed Mary at Coombe, near the knight's ancestral home of Newbold Revel, stove in its doors with great wooden battering rams, and ransacked the abbot's coffers over his vigorous protests and those of his monks and servants. When the invaders departed, they bore loot consisting of a substantial sum of money, together with jewels and ornaments belonging to the abbey church.

July 29, 1451. Incredible though it may seem, Malory allegedly led a return visit to the abbey the very next day, breaking down eighteen doors, insulting the abbot to his face, forcing open three iron chests, and escaping with more money and jewels and two bows and three sheaves of arrows.\*

At that point Malory was rearrested, and Warwickshire and its surrounding counties breathed easier. In due time, the fifteen members of the grand jury, good and true, returned a true bill on all counts of the indictment.

It will now be convenient, as we proceed with our story, to merge the facts Hicks unearthed relating to Malory's subsequent career with the further ones discovered several years later by Professor Albert C. Baugh of the University of Pennsylvania. Baugh was working at the Public Record Office on a quest unrelated to Malory when he stumbled upon certain hitherto unknown fifteenth-century legal documents in which the errant knight's name figured. These provided him with clues which led him to a sheaf of about twenty additional documents, all of them helping to fill in the gaps in Malory's record. The following brief narrative is based on the combined data found by Hicks and Baugh, with the addition of one or two details found earlier and already mentioned in these pages.

Malory, then, stood indicted of the crimes alleged in the Nuneaton indictment. Within the next year all his accomplices had received sentences, most of them being outlawed. Malory, however, was taken before the King's court at Westminster and pleaded not guilty. Evidently he did not come to trial (indeed, there is no record of his ever having actually been tried by a jury, although he was on the verge of it several times), and within a year, or at the most two, he was again at liberty. From the contemporary records we may infer that it had been virtually a habit with the authorities to arrest Sir Thomas Malory

\* Hicks suggests that this count of the indictment referred, like the preceding one, to the raid of July 28, and that there was in fact only one attack on the abbey. Although every student of the life of Malory since Hicks has assumed that there were two separate raids, the similarity of the charges contained in the two counts, especially the virtually duplicate estimates of the monetary value of the loot, gives credibility to his suggestion. The charges growing out of the July 28 affair may have been repeated simply to emphasize the heinousness of the crime.

every time he went free, whether lawfully or otherwise. So it was in 1453. Malory was brought to the Marshalsea Prison, and early in the next year, for reasons we may be allowed to guess, the government thought it advisable to issue a reminder to his custodian, the Knight Marshal, that he was to take care not to let Malory go free. No doubt the Marshal was relieved when Malory found bail a few months later (May, 1454) and could legally be released. This was the third time Malory had left prison, but it was not to be the last.

What did Malory do with his new-found freedom? What had he done a few years earlier, when he had emerged, dripping, on the far side of the moat outside Coventry jail? He had led the raid on Coombe Abbey. If it is permissible sometimes to reconstruct biography on the basis of the known proclivities of one's hero, one would surmise that on this new occasion he reverted to form. And so, apparently, he did. Baugh found that some time between 1452 and 1456—the record is not clear as to the precise date—Malory was accused by Katherine, wife of Sir William Peyto, of having stolen from her manor in Northamptonshire four oxen belonging to her bailiff, and driving them to his estate at Newbold Revel, which seems to have been a major depot for stolen goods. (Charmingly enough, Malory's memories of this incident were revived when Katherine's husband, Sir William, was sent up for assault and joined Malory in the Marshalsea Prison in 1456.) Was the ox-stealing episode the first fruit of Malory's liberation? We cannot be sure, but dating it at this time delights one's sense of fitness.

The terms under which he had been released in May, 1454, required that he appear before the court on the following October 29 for further action on his long pending case. But when that date rolled round, his sureties appeared in court without Malory. "Where is Sir Thomas?" inquired the court. "In jail," replied his bondsmen, bitterly.

Yes, he was in again. At least he was enjoying a measure of variety: he had never before had an opportunity to sample the food provided in the jail at Colchester, Essex, where he was detained "under suspicion of felony." This time it was the company he had been keeping. Although perhaps not a direct participant in John Aley's felonious enterprises, he was known to have given aid and comfort to that gentleman as he conducted a series of horse thefts in Essex vil-

lages during May and June. Furthermore, while enjoying Malory's hospitality and, no doubt, benefiting by his advice, Aleyne had plotted a housebreaking, which unfortunately had been interrupted at an awkward moment. It was as a result of these activities, which would sadden the heart of any parole officer, that Malory was now entered on the rolls of Colchester jail.

The court in London, upon hearing that Malory was detained in the provinces, immediately issued a writ to the Essex jailer, commanding him to send his prisoner to London. But the writ arrived too late: for the second time in his career, Malory, armed with daggers and swords, had broken jail. He had less than three weeks this time in which to carry out any plans, larcenous or otherwise, he may have had in mind, because the law caught up with him, and on November 18 he was delivered to the court in London, which forthwith ordered him back to his old domicile in the Marshalsea.

It was at this juncture that Malory became the hapless battledore in a game of shuttlecock played by the keepers of no fewer than four London jails. For reasons still unknown to us, the government kept transferring him from one prison to another. From the Marshalsea he was sent to the Tower. In February, 1456, he made a bid for freedom by flourishing in the faces of the court a pardon he had received from the Duke of York (the King being incapacitated at the time) for all felonies, transgressions, and so on committed before the preceding July. This was a potent argument for liberation; but bail was still required, and Malory could not raise it. For fairly obvious reasons, his former sureties had decided that they could put their money to better use than in guaranteeing the peaceable behavior of a man who might be depended upon to land back in jail within a few weeks. So Malory was sent, this time, to the Marshalsea. Within a year his place of residence became the Newgate, and in the course of nine months in 1457 his custody shifted from the Newgate to the Ludgate, to the Marshalsea, to the Sheriffs of London, and back to the Marshalsea. By this time he probably was dizzy, and welcomed the few months of liberty which were his at the end of the year, when he finally succeeded in raising bail. But before the year was out, he was back in the Marshalsea. It was now six years since his raid on Coombe

Abbey (which seems to have been his most serious offense in the eyes of the law); and, so far as we know, he had not yet come to trial.

But Malory still was not reconciled to the life of a chronic prisoner; his prayer, in the *Morte Darthur*, for "good deliverance" plainly came from the heart. Somehow in 1458 or 1459 he got out of the Marshalsea once more, because a document dated from the Easter season of 1459 records that he was at large in Warwickshire, and curtly directs the Knight Marshal to bring him back and keep him in jail. The order has a familiar ring.

The next year (1460) Malory was transferred once more, this time to Newgate, the prison which was fifteenth-century England's nearest approach to the Bastille—a place where dangerous or politically inconvenient characters could be detained indefinitely at the King's pleasure. But in 1462–63 he was free again; so much we know from records noting that he was with the Earl of Warwick on a military expedition. Five years later (1468), as we have seen, he was specifically excluded from the two general pardons issued to the Lancastrians by the Yorkist King, Edward IV. That fact, however, does not necessarily mean that he was in jail at the time. Apart from these meager data, Malory's whereabouts between 1460 and his death in March, 1471 is unknown, except for clues lately given us, as I shall show, in his own writings.

Although we know that Malory was out of jail for a period in 1462–63, it is tempting to assume that he was in Newgate at least most of the time between 1460 and 1471, simply because to hypothesize his presence there, rather than in another jail or even at liberty, provides a convenient explanation of how he obtained the books from which he made his own. For lawbreakers whose tastes were literary and whose suits were forlorn, the Newgate was most happily situated. Just across the road was the monastery of the order of the Gray Friars; and within the monastery was an excellent library, to the establishment of which no less a personage than the former Lord Mayor of London, the almost legendary Dick Whittington, had contributed a substantial sum. Perhaps Malory heard from the older inhabitants of the Newgate that a former illustrious captive, the bibliophile Charles, Duke of Orléans, had improved his years of captivity by borrowing manuscript

books from across the way. However that may be, it seems fairly certain that it was from the Gray Friars Library that Malory, by buying such privileges from his keepers, got the "certain books of French" (and others in English which Caxton failed to mention) upon which he based his own English synthesis of the Arthurian legend.

If, that is, the Malory who seems to have been the very personification of the habitual criminal *was* the Malory who wrote the *Morte Darthur*! But so far we have not seen a shred of evidence, apart from the identity of the names, to connect the two. On the one side we have the numerous records, found in the past half-century or so, of a cattle-stealing, abbey-raiding, raping, extorting, jail-breaking Malory, and on the other the two pieces of evidence in the *Morte Darthur* itself that its author was named Sir Thomas Malory. Until only a few years ago, Malory was in precisely the state, historically speaking, in which Chaucer remains today. Diligent research has dug up a fairly large assortment of evidence relating to the official positions, the business and legal transactions, and the personal relationships of a fourteenth-century Geoffrey Chaucer; but there is still no positive proof that this man was the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, although no one today doubts that he was. In Malory's case the link *has* been found, through a dramatic discovery which has thrown a flood of light on the composition of the *Morte Darthur*. To show how that proof came into the open, we must take temporary leave of criminology and turn to the purer air of literature.

As was mentioned at the very opening of this chapter, only one perfect copy of Caxton's original edition of the *Morte Darthur* is known to exist. For it the late J. Pierpont Morgan paid in 1911 the then amazing price of \$42,800, and it is now in the Morgan Library in New York. Only one other copy, lacking eleven leaves, exists; it is owned by the John Rylands Library in Manchester.

Early in the summer of 1934, W. F. Oakeshott, then the librarian of the Fellows' Library in Winchester College, the ancient English public school, was examining the contents of that collection in search of some item he needed. By accident he came upon a manuscript volume which had lost eight leaves at both the beginning and the end.

A cursory examination was enough to show that it was a manuscript of the *Morte Darthur*, dating from the time of Malory himself. Where it came from, no one knows; it had been in the Winchester library as early as 1839, but when it was catalogued in that year its identity was not discovered because it lacked beginning and end, and nobody had taken the trouble to look at it further.

At the time of its discovery, the greatest authority on Malory, Professor Eugène Vinaver of the University of Manchester, was about to complete a new edition of the *Morte Darthur*, based on the two extant printed copies. As soon as he examined the Winchester manuscript, he realized that a great deal of his text would have to be revised, because the manuscript evidently was closer to what Malory had actually written than that which Caxton had used for his printed book. By a technical process too complicated to explain here, but based on a close comparison of the printed and manuscript texts, he concluded that the Caxton and the Winchester versions each came from a separate older version, and that these older versions were both descended in turn from a single ancestor, which derived, finally, from Malory's own manuscript. The essential point is that the Winchester manuscript supplies what we might call a "control" text, relatively unaltered by an editor, while Caxton's printed volume, it is now clear, represented a great deal of blue-penciling and scissors-and-paste work on the part of Caxton himself.

The manuscript shows us what we could not have known before: that far from being an organic whole, unified in tone and structure, when it left its author's hands, the *Morte Darthur* was extremely uneven in workmanship. It grew and improved as Malory's command of his art grew and improved. Originally it was intended as a series of separate narratives, each dealing with some particular episode or set of episodes in Arthurian narrative. The first ones that Malory wrote are plainly trial runs; they are marked at every turn by inexpertness of style and narrative technique. But there is a steady improvement, until in the last books we find Malory's genius at its peak. Confronted with this unevenness of execution, Caxton, the first "creative publisher," rearranged the narratives as they had come from Malory's pen and rewrote them with sufficient cleverness to persuade most



critics through the centuries that Malory had performed his whole task with a clear view of his whole design. The credit for much of Malory's grasp of structure, therefore, is rightly Caxton's.

It is not too much to say that the discovery of the Winchester manuscript, and the publication in 1947 of Vinaver's three-volume text based on both it and the printed edition, with his detailed comparison of the two, have revolutionized our view of Sir Thomas Malory, the first master of English prose narrative. Thanks to Oakeshott's lucky find at Winchester, we are admitted in effect to Malory's prison-house study, and can watch his art mature through the years. To only one other early English writer's development could we more eagerly desire such insight, and that is Chaucer's.

"Malory's prison-house study"? We return to our vital question: *was* there but one Sir Thomas Malory? To that riddle the Winchester manuscript gives us as nearly conclusive an answer as we shall ever have. Far from writing a long and unified book, Malory was simply writing short stories, one after another, to pass the time. This is proved by the fact that in the manuscript each separate narrative is concluded with an explicit. The explicit, a medieval literary convention, consists of variations of the same formula which, as we saw, served as a conclusion to the Caxton *Morte Darthur*. Two of these explicits in the manuscript, not adopted by Caxton in his revision, clinch the case. In one of them, at the end of the "Tale of Sir Gareth," Malory wrote: "And I pray you all that redyth this tale to pray for hym that this wrote, that God sende hym good delyveraunce sone and hastely. Amen." Which is to say: I am writing this in jail, and for heaven's sake, let me be set free. And at the end of another self-contained narrative he wrote: "And this book endyth whereas sir Launcelot and sir Trystrams com to courts. 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 . . ."

"For this was drawyn by a knyght presoner sir Thomas Malleorré": there it is. By almost incredibly good fortune, we have the proof that was needed. Whether or not Malory was in Newgate continuously from the date of his last recorded imprisonment, 1460, we cannot tell;

but we do know that he was in prison at the times he concluded two separate portions of his work, and that (from the evidence given at the very end of Caxton's book) he was there when the whole was finished. The Sir Thomas Malory of the criminal dossier and the Sir Thomas Malory of the *Morte Darthur*, dreaming perhaps hopelessly of release, were the same.

But now a final problem arises. Here we have the bare facts, wrung from old official documents. On the face of it, Malory was a remarkably persistent felon. May we then close our book and assume that a common criminal wrote the great English narrative of Arthur? It is not nearly so simple as that. For we have failed to consider the complex background of the times, the deeper implications of the charges made against Malory and of the way in which the government seemed dedicated to keeping him in its clutches. Just as today we are disinclined to dismiss a man with a protracted criminal record as being inherently and irreparably evil, and instead bring all our sociological and psychological knowledge to bear on the problem of why he behaves as he does, so it is necessary, in Malory's case, to try to reconstruct as best we can what his recorded career meant in fifteenth-century terms.

Thus the scholar must not merely be a discoverer of new facts; he must equip himself with an intimate knowledge of the historical background of those facts, which otherwise may be wholly misunderstood. Such knowledge is not easy to come by, especially for a period as remote and as chaotic as the fifteenth century. But by studying the histories of the men who appear with Malory in the records, either as his accusers or as his accomplices, by learning as much as possible of the position of the Church at the time and the swirling eddies of political struggle, and by shrewd application of facts learned from an analysis of parallel cases in Malory's age, it may be possible to understand, if not to palliate, his misdeeds.

The fifteenth century was a time of great confusion and insecurity throughout England. As one of the correspondents of the Paston family wrote without exaggeration, "the world is right wild." The Hundred Years' War drew to a weary end in 1453. The feudal order, which had kept society fairly well settled during the Middle Ages, was crumbling;

the supreme authority was passing, by no means painlessly, from the Church to the secular government, and from the feudal lords to the slowly emerging monarchy. During this long period of tortured transition, the forces of law and order had broken down, and men often felt that they had no alternative to asserting what they considered as their rights by direct and unlawful action.

Take, as an instance of how a wide historical knowledge may clarify the brief testimony of the records, the important matter of Malory's obvious antipathy toward the religious establishments. There was a rising tide of popular resentment in his time against the bloodsucking privileges of the religious houses, which had enjoyed for centuries the right to exact tithes and other payments from the laity. One manifestation of this antagonism—a noteworthy by-product of the shift from a corporate to an individualistic economy—was seen in the Lollard movement as early as Chaucer's time. What, then, caused the dispute between Malory and the Carthusians of Axholme, Lincolnshire? The answer may perhaps be conjectured from the fact that these monks owned *in absentia*, so to speak, the priory at Monks Kirby, only a mile or two from Malory's ancestral estate. Although the priory itself had declined into insignificance, the Carthusians still had the right to demand the traditional payments from landholders in its vicinity. Might not Malory then have taken some drastic steps to resist these levies or, having already paid them, to get them back?

Similarly, what of the raid on Coombe Abbey? Hicks was able to find in the early records several cases in which residents of the vicinity sought legal redress for the high-handed actions of the abbot, who had come to their properties and taken, "without reason or course of law," horses, cloth, and other chattels. He found, too, that in the very year before the Coombe Abbey affair, there had been a strikingly similar assault, by ninety men, on a Benedictine monastery in Huntingdonshire, and that that monastery had been pictured by a visiting bishop, a few years earlier, as everything that a religious house should not be:

The divine office, by night and likewise by day, is neglected; obedience is violated; the alms are wasted; hospitality is not kept. There is

nothing else here but drunkenness and surfeit, disobedience and contempt, p[et]tie aggrandise[men]t & apostasy, drowsiness—we do not say incontinence—but sloth & every other thing which is on the downward path to evil & drags men to hell.

If it was true, as seems not unlikely, that the monks at Coombe Abbey had been similarly indifferent to the requirements of their calling, one can understand why their stubborn insistence on the payment of tithes was intolerable to men like Malory. The attack on the abbey therefore may have been simply one more event in the continuous struggle between the economically ambitious laity and a Church that had grown corrupt and indolent (except where the collection of tithes was concerned) from centuries of rich living at the expense of everyone else.

It is possible, likewise, that the several accusations that Malory "extorted" money, cattle, and other property from his neighbors, and was in league with other thieves, may be laid to the absence of efficient law enforcement and means for obtaining justice. Hugh Smyth, John Mylner, Margaret Peyto, and the other complainants, including the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk, who alleged that Malory had relieved their deer park of six does during his spree in that memorable summer of 1451, may have been his debtors, and he may have considered that what he took back with him to Newbold Revel was rightfully his property.

Such explanations are, of course, completely conjectural. They gain a certain plausibility from what we know of conditions in Malory's age, but there is no way of telling whether they really provide us with a justification of his high-handed actions. Malory students have not been immune to the quite human temptation to find extenuating circumstances for a man's sins, especially if he has attained some status in the history of literature. This is true especially of the most sensational charge made against him, that of twice raping Joan, the wife of Hugh Smyth. Here the apologist for Malory shows his true colors. Kittredge maintained that the charge of "raptus" was nothing but a legal formula. He wrote:

On May 23, 1450, Malory and his servants searched Smyth's house in vain. Smyth's wife, who objected to the search, may have been

roughly treated; perhaps she was forcibly removed from the dwelling while it was ransacked. That would have been *raptus*. Then, on the first of August, the search was repeated with similar violence and with complete success, for goods and chattels valued (by Smyth!) at £40 were taken. On neither occasion is there any likelihood that Goodwife Smyth was actually ravished. The duplication of this particular charge is reason enough for rejecting such an idea; it is ridiculous to suppose that Malory actually ravished the woman twice. Anything, to be sure, is possible in what Sir Peter Teazle calls this "damned wicked world," but we are in pursuit of what is reasonable—and we are reading an indictment, not a verdict or the sentence of a judge.

Although one of the incidental purposes of this book is to suggest that literary scholars have a certain amount of worldly sophistication, Kittredge here, I am afraid, goes far to undermine my thesis. He was one of the greatest scholars of our time, but his refusal to believe that a man could rape the same woman twice reflects (to put it mildly!) a certain naïveté. The language of the indictment is so specific that the charge cannot possibly be dismissed as a mere legal formula. Malory, it was alleged, on the first occasion "Johannam uxorem dicti Hugonis ibidem ad tunc felonice rapuit & cum ea carnaliter concubuit," and again, six weeks later, "Johannam . . . apud Coventre felonice rapuit & cum ea carnaliter concubuit." That seems plain enough. If only we knew what Humphrey, Duke of Buckingham, and his companions on the bench read into such language! Since we do not know, the most convenient verdict no doubt is that of "Not Proven"—to be handed down with the incredulous words of Sir Lancelot, in Malory's own version, haunting our ears: "What," said Sir Lancelot, "is he a thief and a knight *and* a ravyssher of women?"

Some apologists for Malory take the view that most, if not all, of the accusations against him were frame-ups, probably arising from the concern of his political enemies to keep him *hors de combat*. If this is true, it is a rare tribute to Malory's character as a dangerous opponent, because, despite his demonstrated slipperiness, for at least ten years his enemies found it worth their while to keep clapping him back into jail. But such a theory is only speculative, because we have no real evidence as to his political affiliations, which probably shifted

with the extraordinary rapidity that was characteristic of the turbulent century in which he lived.

The most perplexing anomaly, however, appears only when we reflect on the incongruity between the book and the man. The *Morte Darthur* was sold to the public with the understanding that it was a work of uniformly edifying tendencies. According to his Preface, Caxton printed it

to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the jentyl and vertuoues dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho[se] days, by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vycious were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke; humbly bysechyng al noble lordes and ladyes . . . that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce, and to folowe the same;

. . . Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renomnee.

This pious assertion by a man anxious to sell his books stands in strange contrast to the judgment of Roger Ascham, less than a century later, that

the whole pleasure of [this] book standeth in two special points, in open manslaughter and bold bawdry. In which book those be counted the noblest knights that do kill most men without any quarrel, and commit the foulest adulteries by subtlest shifts . . . This [he adds, ironically] is good stuff for wise men to laugh at, or honest men to take pleasure at.

Actually both Caxton and Ascham are right. The *Morte Darthur* is replete with "open manslaughter and bold bawdry," but there is no question that Malory was also sincerely concerned to exalt the virtues of the Christian chivalric code.

What manner of man was he, with his flamboyant criminal record, that he could write a book celebrating the many articles of knightly behavior which he himself had honored far more in the breach than in the observance? We cannot, at this distance of time, answer the question with assurance; but it seems unlikely that Malory was a hypocrite, and so it is possible to view the writing of his book not quite as an act of contrition, but as a slow awakening to the realization

of what chivalry could mean. Through circumstances at which we can only guess, Malory's life at every point of which there is record found him betraying the ideals he had learned at the side of Beauchamp. When at last he began to write, a certain moral indifference was still in him. No modern reader of the opening stories of the *Morte Darthur* can help feeling that Malory's sole interest lay in telling the story and that he was quite unaware of—or uninterested in—the implications of the acts of even his heroes. "Open manslaughter and bold bawdry" are pale charges beside the actuality of deceit, rape, wanton cruelty, and even slaughter of the innocents that bloody these opening tales. The same reader, if he will follow the *Morte Darthur* to the end, will be deeply moved by the author's profound awareness of sin, of error, and of human responsibility—even more by Malory's compassion for the retribution which an errant humanity brings upon itself. The Malory who finally traced his tale through to its tragic end was not the Malory who started to while away boredom with the story of the begetting of Arthur or the taking of his kingdom.

How much time he had spent in prison reflecting on his own sins, we shall never know. Did he undertake deliberately to reaffirm the chivalry which he had been taught in his youth and from which he had departed so far? Perhaps. It would not have been the first time, nor the last, that a work of literature has sprung from a sensitive man's recognizing how tragically at variance his conduct had been from his ideals. But we can not doubt that under the spell of the books he read and the tales he found coming to life again under his hand he was deeply stirred by the meaning of the ideals he had violated. He was great enough to know them as impossible in a frail and tempting world, but he also knew—who better than the man who could not follow them?—how truly the fact that we cannot follow them is the stuff of human tragedy. Lancelot caught to the very end in his unhappy tangle of divided loves, Guenevere afraid to accept a final kiss, Bedivere fumbling between love for Arthur and greed for Excalibur—these are the final pictures of a man whose vision of reality simply transcended the vulgar counsel of Caxton. Thanks to our new understanding of the misspent life which preceded the writing of the *Morte Darthur*, we need no longer accept Caxton's explanation of the purposes that

underlay its composition. Might not Malory, had he lived in another century, have wished instead to borrow for the epigraph to his book the simple words of another repentant knight—Shakespeare's Prince Hal?

For my part, I may speak it to my shame.  
I have a truant been to chivalry.