Writing the "Hoole Book" of King Arthur:
The Inscription of the Textual Subject
in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

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P. J. C. Field famously opened his influential study of Malory by observing how he was often "compelled to speak as if the literary characteristics of the *Morte Darthur* were the result of conscious art," despite the fact that "it is no part of my contention that he was a conscious artist: rather the reverse."[1] Field's perceptive observation would seem to disqualify any discussion of something like a construction of authorship in Malory's writing, particularly if authorship is understood to imply a deliberate and self-conscious engagement with literary traditions and expectations in order to construct an authorial persona. But although Malory certainly did not reflect on his own experience as a writer with anything like the sustained intensity and sophistication we find in the likes of Chaucer or Spenser, it is equally problematic to assume that he was entirely deprived of any form of self-understanding as a textual subject. I choose the term "textual subject" to refer to Malory because the term comes without the baggage associated with the words "author" and "authorship"—terms whose very use is likely to preclude our appreciation of the highly unusual, oblique, and often semiconscious ways in which Malory's writing encodes his subjectivity.[2] Rather than arguing for an elaborate "authorial" stance on Malory's

1. P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1971), 7.

2. I here build on A. C. Spearing's recent arguments concerning the anachronistic and misleading tendency to postulate narrator figures for late medieval texts, in turn implying fully self-conscious, integrated, and deliberate authorial intention and control. See A. C.

part, I suggest that Malory is concerned with articulating his own historically situated presence as a subject who also happens to be a writer—a subject whose agency is both expressed through and limited by/to textuality.

Malory is primarily concerned with ensuring the authority of the text he transmits: his self-understanding as a writer is conditioned by this concern. In the Winchester manuscript, Malory is identified explicitly as the writer of the narrative on five different occasions, and these instances of self-naming provide the main focus of my subsequent analysis.[3] I reconsider the claim that Malory's instances of intradiegetic self-naming in the Winchester manuscript "are not integral with the text,"[4] a notion that seems unduly influenced by Caxton's later decision to remove them from his printed text of the *Morte*, retaining only one instance in the concluding *explicit*. I will make a case for taking such inscriptions as integral features of Malory's project. Rather than positioning himself as an external, detached author whose name is relegated to a separable paratext—as in Caxton's printed edition of the *Morte*—Malory's textual "I" in the Winchester manuscript is inscribed within the very narrative he is transmitting. This implicates him as a subject in the *matière* he is reworking in powerful, intimate, albeit obscure ways that Malory himself never addresses explicitly but that are essential in lending the *Morte* its peculiar, haunting intensity as a work of literature. In the third section I suggest that Malory's self-inscriptions only acquire their full resonance when they are viewed in the framework of Malory's wider, sustained reflections on the paradoxical, monumental, yet slippery authority of the written word. Portions of the *Morte* that have as their actual subject the production of the written word—in the form of engravings, inscriptions, books, written documents,

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Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 17–31, and *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), esp. 1–32. See also his article "The Poetic Subject from Chaucer to Spenser," in *Subjects on the World's Stage: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert A. White (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 13–37.

3. Much of what follows will focus on the Winchester manuscript, quoted with parenthetical page references to Stephen H. A. Shepherd's edition, *Le Morte Darthur* (New York: Norton, 2004). For the instances of self-naming, see 112, 495, 587, 645, and 698. On the competing claims of the two versions see *The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Robert L. Kindrick, Michael N. Salda, and Bonnie G. Wheeler (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000); and Meg Roland, " 'Alas! Who may truste thys world': The Malory Documents and a Parallel-Text Edition," in *The Book Unbound: Editing and Reading Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge (University of Toronto Press, 2004), 37–57. A digitized reproduction of the Winchester manuscript can be found at *The Malory Project*, directed by Takako Kato and designed by Nick Hayward, http://www.maloryproject.com/.

4. Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, 154.

and letters—can be seen to reveal to us something about Malory's own implicit self-understanding as a textual subject. In the final section I discuss Caxton's decision to dissociate Malory's own textual subjectivity from the text of the *Morte*.

The implication of the writer in his narrative can take more complex and elusive forms than self-naming, such as Malory's latent but powerful sense of empathy with his characters, manifested by his explicit self-identification as a "knyght" whenever he names himself.[5] This suggests that at some level Malory might see himself as participating in the internal divisions of the chivalric community whose rise and fall he narrates, that he does so as a fellow knight rather than as a detached author. More specifically, the *Morte Darthur* presents a range of characters and situations that resonate with Malory's own personal experiences as they can be reconstructed from his life records. Numerous characters, such as Bors, Lancelot, and Gawain, but also Mordred and even the Fair Maid of Ascalot, are engaged in rehearsing, recording, and interpreting the adventures of a chivalric community to which they themselves belong, and thus provide Malory with ways of thinking through his own self-understanding as a chronicler of chivalry who is himself a knight. Here the writing subject is far from being a detached and unified authorial figure fully in control of his materials and standing above or outside the narrative that is handled by an interposed fictive and possibly "unreliable" narrator.[6] Instead, the writing subject is genuinely and intimately invested in his narrative— emotionally, ethically, and penitentially—in ways that fall neither within the perimeter of our own, modern interest in authorial postures and narrators, nor within established medieval positions and expectations concerning authorship.[7] Malory's own textual "I" surfaces at key moments as if to claim participation in the narrative through juxtaposition. This determines the fundamentally split, unfinished nature of his subjectivity, placed in resonance with the very narrative he is constructing in ways that remain to be unpacked by the reader. Malory is thus in equal measure the

5. This is manifested also in Malory's narrative technique, as characterized by Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, 142–59, for example: "Malory seems to be very much on the same level as his characters, in knowledge as he is in power" (147).

6. For Spearing's doubts concerning modern critical assumptions about authorial control, see in particular *Medieval Autographies*, 119–24, where he suggests that even highly self-conscious authors like Chaucer may be implicated in closer and more experimental fashion in their literary creations. This also illustrates Spearing's observation that "whereas the modern assumption has been that consciousness precedes narrative, the medieval assumption appears to have been that narrative preceded consciousness" (*Textual Subjectivity*, 26). Building on Spearing's observations, I suggest that in Malory such narrative not only precedes but helps to produce consciousness, albeit of a distinctive, fractured kind.

7. See, e.g., Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

"author" of his narrative and a subject "authored" by his very fiction, inscribed within the inherited-yet-contested, authoritative-yet-debatable textuality of the Arthurian tradition.

I intend such an analysis to shed light on a tenacious critical issue that is commonly referred to as the "moral paradox": the supposed discrepancy between the *Morte Darthur*'s idealizing chivalric fiction and the rather more sinister personal history of its most likely author-candidate, Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel.[8] Critics have often been tempted to resolve such an opposition by revising biographical data to make it fit with "evidence" provided by the text—or vice versa.[9] Such moves invite a reductive understanding of the *Morte* as a work celebrating an exemplary chivalric ideal and have helped to perpetuate rather obsolete, essentialist notions of subjectivity and biography. Poststructuralist critique has urged us to revise notions of the fully integrated, autonomous subject postulated by traditional biographical criticism, while also inviting us to adopt a modified, enlarged notion of the biographical as the necessary space within which all forms of textual production and interpretation inevitably occur.[10] While the biographical/historical subject as such remains inaccessible, it also constitutes the necessary, efficient cause of every act of writing, and hence cannot be abolished or dismissed altogether. This invites a renewed, nonreductive understanding of literary texts as being embedded within the biographical, itself understood as a contested and processual narrative space. Such a fluid understanding of the biographical finally forces us to accept the permeable and unstable nature of the boundaries between textuality and subjectivity. Precisely within the currently dominant historical or historicist orientation of literary studies, and in the wake of the inconclusive, maybe logically impossible, "death of the author," such an approach offers precious opportunities to reconnect texts, contexts, and individuals, balancing the demands of all three of these overlapping spheres.

Some critics of Malory have already urged us to dismantle the neat dichotomy between the psychological and the historical, the public and the private in the *Morte*. So Elizabeth Edwards usefully suggests that Malory's "romance world is . . . intermediate, between the external world of political reality, and the psychological world now perceived as interior; it is a

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8. I therefore accept the suggestion that the author of the *Morte Darthur* is to be identified as Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, based on the argument presented in P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993).

9. For a recent overview of the "moral paradox" in the history of Malory criticism, see Marie Wallin, "How to Be a Man: Malory and the Moral Paradox," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 27 (2011): 105–15.

10. See William H. Epstein, ed., *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991), esp. Stanley Fish, "Biography and Intention," 9–16, and Cheryl Walker, "Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author," 109–21.

liminal reality."[11] If we accept the challenge of responding to the "biographical" possibilities of Malory's self-inscription as an "I" within his text, then it appears that the devastating divisions and clashing loyalties of the *Morte*'s concluding books necessarily acquire psychological resonance—not because they are deliberate reflections on a subjectivity that lies elsewhere, as a preexistent, given historical reality, but because they crystallize the very texture of that subjectivity as heterodiegetic narrative. The interiority and conscience of Malory as a "knyght presoner" (112) writing during the Wars of the Roses remains by definition beyond our grasp—but it leaves its trace, its mark as an "I" punctuating the rise and fall of the Arthurian world, materializing out of its most intense and conflicted moments. If the political fragmentation of Malory's own England determines the internal contradictions and ethical opacity of the *Morte* as a whole,[12] it similarly produces the troubled, internally divided and self-contradictory textual subjectivity that is enmeshed in the text, even if that surfaces only intermittently and in fleeting manner.

As an oblique, at best semiconscious means to process the moral dilemmas and inner contradictions of his personal history, Malory's "hoole book" is not only a revisionist Arthurian history but also a metonymic penitential narrative of the subject, authorized and monumentalized with reference to the numerous samples of material writing it contains, such as letters, inscriptions, and epitaphs. In such a perspective the Winchester *Morte Darthur* itself becomes, for Malory, a self-authenticating material testament vindicating his own righteousness while underlining his own transience as a textual and historical subject, culminating in his prayer for "good delyveraunce."[13] Yet for all these efforts, Malory's testament fails to attain the authoritative status it desires. Caxton's decision to remove Malory's name from the narrative frustrates the *Morte*'s monumental and memorial aspirations but also provides a curiously fitting posthumous reflection on the unstable, elusive, and conflicted interiority behind Malory's "I," invariably mediated by textuality.

11. Elizabeth Edwards, *The Genesis of Narrative in Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), 6. Terence McCarthy's remarks are symptomatic for the tendency to short-circuit such instability; he emphasizes the *Morte*'s "rejection of the personal and private in favour of the public and official" (*An Introduction to Malory* [Woodbridge: Brewer, 1991], 156).

12. See esp. Christopher Cannon, "Malory's Crime: Chivalric Identity and the Evil Will," in *Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), 159–84, which develops observations by Jill Mann, "Knightly Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*," in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, pt. 1, vol. 1, ed. Boris Ford (London: Penguin, 1982), 331–39.

13. Malory urges the reader to pray for his deliverance on two occasions (227 and 698) and provides a prayer of his own (645).

AUTHORIZING THE "HOOLE BOOK"

If it is questionable whether notions of "authorship" in the strict sense are relevant to a study of Malory, it is clear that he was sensitive to the question of the authority of the written word he was ostensibly reproducing. Malory appeals to the "auctorysed" status of his sources twice (689, 697)—toward the end of his cycle where paradoxically his alterations to those sources are most radical—and he includes some seventy invocations of the French source, intended to lend authority to his account.[14] Such a desire to preserve an ostensibly historical truth of which "the Frensshe book maketh mencyon—and is auctorysed" (697) suggest that Malory seeks to present himself as a chronicler, a historian, or a scribe rather than an author[15]—even if the authorizing support afforded by the "French book" is often spurious and its function is essentially rhetorical.[16] Along with the ubiquitous French book, Malory also invokes several samples of documentary evidence found—or rather strategically placed—within the narrative itself. These are the chronicles drawn up by Arthur's clerks; the divinely authored inscriptions that appear on enchanted objects during Merlin's time and the quest for the Sankgreall; the amazingly verbose epitaphs that summarize the entire biography of deceased heroes; and the letters written by the various characters.[17]

These samples of embedded text combine to reify and monumentalize the written word through an intense focus on its materiality, thus hinting at the incontrovertible truth mediated by physical written documents. All of this is equally designed to validate metonymically the authority of Malory's own silent but radically revisionist Arthuriad. Malory enhances

14. It is often observed that Malory reduces the explicit appeals to the authority of the narrative found in his French sources, e.g., Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, 144; and Catherine Batt, *Malory's "Morte Darthur": Remaking Arthurian Tradition* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xvii–xix. This in no way diminishes the intensity of Malory's concern with the question of authority but rather reveals his anxiety on this issue, as Batt's study argues. Field counts some seventy mentions of the "French Book" (*Romance and Chronicle*, 145).

15. See, e.g., Field, *Romance and Chronicle*, 142–59; Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 125–38; Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 31–59.

16. Most recently see Roberta Davidson, "The 'Freynshe booke' and Its English Translator: Malory's 'Originality' Revisited," *Translation and Literature* 17 (2008): 133–49. See also Terence McCarthy, "Malory and His Sources," in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), 75–95, esp. 77–78.

17. See variously Kathy Cawsey, "Merlin's Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in *Le Morte Darthur* and the English Prose *Merlin*," *Arthuriana* 11, no. 3 (2001): 89–101; Kenneth Tiller, "En-graving Chivalry: Tombs, Burial, and the Ideology of Knighthood in Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur,'" *Arthuriana* 14, no. 2 (2004): 37–53; Jennifer Boulanger, "Righting History: Redemptive Potential and the Written Word in Malory," *Arthuriana* 19, no. 2 (2009): 27–41.

the rhetorical prominence of such samples of writing within the text, often transforming or amplifying their narrative function or their content, or even fabricating documentary evidence wholesale. Malory may not have perceived such interventions as being in any way deceptive or fraudulent. Rather, according to the epistemic expectations associated with medieval historical writing, his appeal to additional, pseudodocumentary written sources allows him to clarify and explain the inherited story.[18] This fits with notions of Malory as a traditional or archaic writer,[19] and Spearing has recently reminded us again of the danger of employing modern, mutually exclusive categories of historiography versus fiction to describe medieval practice: "When a medieval writer did invent new details for an existing story, they tended to be in explanation of the 'facts' already established in the previous versions."[20] Despite such freedom, however, Malory's confidence in his own ability to explicate the "facts" of an inherited Arthurian history with reference to the authority of the written word is fragile at best.[21]

Four out of the five inscriptions of Malory's own name within the text of the Winchester manuscript occur within passages that reveal a heightened awareness of the importance of the written record.[22] The first occurrence is at the end of the first major section, which sees the return of the questing knights to court to report their adventures:

> Here endyth this tale, as the Freynshe booke seyth, . . .
> And this booke endyth whereas Sir **Launcelot** and Sir **Trystrams** com to courte. Who that woll make ony more, lette hym seke other bookis of Kynge **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 &c!" (112)[23]

By naming himself at this juncture in the narrative—gathering the threads of the preceding adventures and pointing to other ones he has decided

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18. See Beverly Kennedy, "Malory's Lover: 'Trewest Lover of a Synful Man,' " *Viator* 12 (1981): 409–56, where she repeatedly stresses how Malory remains fundamentally true to the inherited "historical fact" or "history" (410, 443), but profoundly alters our perception of the matter of adultery between Lancelot and Guenevere.

19. McCarthy, "Sources," 77–78; D. S. Brewer, "Malory: The Traditional Writer and the Archaic Mind," *Arthurian Literature* 1 (1981): 94–120.

20. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, 22. For a reading of Malory much along the same lines, see Davidson, " 'Freynshe booke' and Its English Translator."

21. On the conflicted authority of Malory's text see esp. Batt, *Remaking Arthurian Tradition*, 1–35.

22. I omit the second occurrence, at the end of the Trystram section (495), less relevant to my argument here because it does not signal a reflection on the role of writing more generally.

23. The bold character here reproduces the rubrication of the Winchester manuscript, as given in Shepherd's edition.

not to include—Malory assimilates his own role to that of a discerning and authoritative Arthurian compiler. Yet by naming himself as "a knyght presoner, Sir **Thomas Malleorré**" (112), Malory also emphasizes his own knightly status, which assimilates him to the knightly heroes who are similarly engaged in an operation of textual authorization: indeed, the knights have just returned to Arthur's court to "telle hym all their adventures," and to authenticate them are asked to "swere uppon a booke" (111)—presumably the gospels as elsewhere in the *Morte Darthur*.[24] Here reported adventures are authorized by being brought into contact with the written authority of the gospels as a guarantee of the suitability of such reported chivalric adventures to be recorded in stable, definitive written form. By having his characters authenticate their adventures in such manner, Malory endows their accounts, and through them his own narrative, with a pseudoscriptural authority, and thus positions himself in a pivotal role in the transmission of such authorized Arthurian matter to later readers.

Further passages later in the narrative extend and elaborate this idea. The conclusion of the Tale of the Sankgreal, much expanded from the source, is particularly revealing. It casts Sir Bors—the "lone survivor" of the three successful companions of the Grail Quest—as the divinely appointed messenger, who, in Christ's own words, "shall com agayne and telle tydynges" (584). Bors's account immediately achieves the status of an authoritative report, as "the Kynge made grete clerkes to com before hym, for cause they shulde cronycle of the hyghe adventures of the good knyghtes" (587). The formulation is far more solemn than the cursory description in the French *Queste*, which does not use the verb "cronycle," and where "grete clerkes" are simply "clercs."[25] Malory also elaborates the metaphorical implications of the authorizing device of the book. He reiterates the transformation of reported tale into authoritative, monumental "grete bookes" (587—also not in the *Queste*), which are legated to a specifically English posterity by being entrusted to the "almeryes at Salysbury." Yet, most important, Malory appears to conceive of his own role in direct continuation of Bors's, as a knight-messenger-chronicler providing one further link in the unbroken chain that guarantees the stable and continued authority of Arthurian narrative.

His own name is inscribed on the very same page in the Winchester manuscript: "Thus endith the tale of the **Sankgreal** that was breffly drawyn oute of Freynshe—which ys a tale cronycled for one of the trewyst and of

24. See, e.g., 9 and 70. Elsewhere, as at the end of the Tale of Sir Lancelot, knights are more simply asked to "b[e]re recorde," as witnesses for the veracity of such reported narratives (176).

25. "Quant ils orent mangié, li rois fist avant venir les clers qui metoient en escrit les aventures aus chevaliers de laienz" (*Queste del saint graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet [Paris: Champion, 1930], 279, lines 30–31).

the holyest that ys in thys worlde—by **Sir Thomas Maleorré, kyght. O blessed Jesu, helpe hym thorow Hys myght. Amen**" (587). By naming himself at this point in the narrative Malory inscribes his own name within the process of textual transmission of "cronycled" historical truth that extends from within the narrative—with Bors reporting back his adventures to the court in the "historical" time of Arthur—to outside the narrative, into the unmistakably contemporary world of Malory's England. Here the *Queste*'s allusion to Salisbury acquires additional self-validating resonance for Malory, since it establishes a common English geographical space for Bors's report and Malory's own "hoole book."[26] Bors, and by extension Malory, become much more than simple heralds or messengers, and attain the status of something like apostles of knighthood, preaching the gospel of knightly deeds. Christ states that "ryght as I departe my postels, one here and anothir there, so I woll that ye departe . . . and one of you shall com agayne and telle tydynges" (584). The notion of apostles of knighthood, like Bors "departed" and sent out into a hostile world to scatter the grain of chivalry as the last survivors of a crumbling social and ethical system, appealed immensely to Malory, as is suggested by his nearly obsessive focus on the "departing" of the Round Table knights and the subsequent desire for reunification.[27] Bors here becomes a momentary surrogate for Malory's own fluctuating subjectivity, simultaneously aware of his isolation—"departed" from the rest of the fellowship—and yet striving to reconstruct a sense of meaningful unity and wholeness through narrative, by gathering, sifting for accuracy, and reproducing truthful reports of chivalric adventures in the stable, written form of physical "grete bookes" (587).

There are further reasons that push Malory to elaborate this concluding section of the Sankgreal. As is often remarked the *Queste* proposes a model of "new," celestial chivalry largely at odds with the ideal of earthly chivalry that Malory is primarily interested in celebrating. Malory seems to secularize the *Queste*, attempting to transform it into an apotheosis of earthly chivalry rather than its negation, and using it to initiate Lancelot's redemption.[28] What seems to be at the forefront of Malory's mind here is

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26. Malory added a large number of precise geographic references to English locations, for which see George R. Stewart, "English Geography in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*," *Modern Language Review* 30 (1935): 204–9.

27. The powerful and complex implications of the term "departed," implying both departure and division, were first identified by Jill Mann ("Knightly Combat," 332) and developed by Riddy (*Sir Thomas Malory*, 145–49).

28. See esp. Raluca Radulescu, "Malory and the Quest for the Holy Grail," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 326–39, and "'Now I take upon me the adventures to seke of holy thynges': Lancelot and the Crisis of Arthurian Knighthood," in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P. J. C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 285–96. See also Jill Mann, "Malory and the Grail Legend,"

the importance of recuperating the potentially divisive, traumatic experience of the grail quest, to reintegrate it within the wider totality of the chivalric accomplishments of the Knights of the Round Table. At some level this also reveals Malory's desire to restore a more homogenous, integrated ideal of chivalry than that presented by the different, often mutually discordant portions of the Vulgate cycle—a desire that shapes in a very fundamental manner his notion of a "whole book" of King Arthur. So while the tale of the Sankgreal begins on a divisive note—with Arthur bewailing the "departing" of the chivalric fellowship (501), no longer unified "holé togydirs" (502; see also 503)—it ends in reintegration and reconciliation, commemorated by the recording of the events in the same "grete bookes" (587) that also contain all the previous adventures of the Round Table knights, as if to suggest a natural continuity and integration.

Symptomatically the section ends with a detail absent from the French source, with Lancelot proclaiming solemnly to his cousin Bors that "ye and I shall never departe in sundir whylis oure lyvys may laste" (587).[29] Indeed, if anything, the integration of the *Queste*, "cronycled for one of the trewyst and of the holyest [tales] that ys in thys worlde" (587) within Malory's more capacious chivalric ideal, is designed to lend an even higher degree of authority and credibility to Malory's project as a whole, and to sacramentalize earthly chivalry rather than displace it. Finally, Malory's self-identification as knight-chronicler-apostle at this particular moment has the effect of including him both symbolically and textually, within that same, unified chivalric community signified by the reunion of Bors the Grail-knight and Lancelot the best knight among sinful men.[30]

PENITENTIAL NARRATIVE AND METONYMIC SUBJECTIVITY

If the reunion between Bors and Lancelot is symptomatic of Malory's desire to harmonize the different strands and ideologies of the Vulgate cycle, it also reveals his concern with affective bonds within the chivalric

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in Archibald and Edwards, *Companion to Malory*, 203–20, which emphasizes the elegiac tone of Malory's Sankgreal; and Larry D. Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 205–22.

29. On the importance of this often overlooked concluding scene, see Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur,"* 221–22.

30. Derek S. Brewer ("The hoole book," in *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett [Oxford: Clarendon, 1963], 41–63) first began to question whether our understanding of the "hoole book" should be primarily editorial. In the wake of Brewer's observations, the debate has often focused on the symbolic resonances of "wholeness" and division for Malory. See esp. Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, 116–17, 139–54; Andrea Clough, "Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the 'Hoole Book,'" *Medievalia et Humanistica* 14 (1986): 139–56; and Carol Meale, "'The Hoole Book': Editing and the Creation of Meaning in Malory's Text," in Archibald and Edwards, *Companion to Malory*, 3–18.

community, as well as of his own, persistent emotional attachment to the character of Lancelot. Lancelot, even more than Bors, provides Malory with a means to think through his own dilemmas as man and writer.

As is frequently observed, in Malory, Lancelot no longer appears as the morally degenerate sinner whose involvement with Arthur's queen precipitates the catastrophe but rather as a touchingly fallible, human, and yet determinedly idealistic tragic hero tangled in a web of conflicting loyalties—amorous, dynastic, familial, chivalric. It is significant that the third instance of Malory's self-naming in the *Morte* follows hard on the heels of what is undoubtedly Malory's most radical intervention to refashion Lancelot's reputation. With the episode of the healing of Sir Urry, absent from any of his French or English sources, Malory achieves the supreme vindication of the character of Lancelot. Lancelot remains a sinner, but a sinner who has completed a penitential process and attained redemption.[31] By placing the most emotionally intense redemptive moment of the "hoole book" in the immediate proximity of his own prayer for the redemption of "**le Shyvalere Sir Thomas Malleorré**, knyght" (645), Malory establishes an implied but powerful analogy between his own plight and the situation of his favorite and most complex character.

To speculate for a moment about the possible reasons behind such empathy: when looking back from his prison cell on a rather checkered career split between rival factions and punctuated by daring flights from prison, implications in murky plots to ambush rivals, accusations of *raptus*, along with many other more or less "chivalric" exploits, Malory may well have felt a deep affinity with Lancelot, faced with the constant need to prove his rectitude against an ever greater surge of slander, rumor, "noyse," and gossip bred by the hostile factional climate in the final stages of the *Morte*.[32] It is difficult to avoid thinking of Malory himself, "knyght presoner," when we encounter Launcelot confined in prison by the treacherous Mellyagaunce and initially prevented from rescuing the queen and vindicate his honor on the day appointed for judicial combat (635–36).[33] Malory's

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31. Raluca Radulescu, "Malory's Lancelot and the Key to Salvation," *Arthurian Literature* 25 (2008): 93–118; Karen Cherewatuk, "Malory's Launcelot and the Language of Sin and Confession," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 2 (2006): 68–72. See also Stephen C. B. Atkinson, "Malory's 'Healing of Sir Urry': Lancelot, the Earthly Fellowship and the World of the Grail," *Studies in Philology* 78 (1981): 341–52.

32. On the pivotal role of "noys" and "sklaunder," see Lambert, *Style and Vision*, 190–94; and John F. Plummer, "*Tunc se coeperunt non intelligere*: The Image of Language in Malory's Last Books," in *Studies in Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), 153–71.

33. The imprisonment of other characters equally seems to have triggered Malory's empathy. Field long ago suggested that the description of Tristram's imprisonment must have been inflected by Malory's own experience of captivity (*Romance and Chronicle*, 154); see also

evident emotional attachment to the figure of Lancelot suggests that he felt himself to be inextricably entangled in the events of the Arthuriad he constructs. Moreover, since the events of the *Morte* resonate on numerous levels with contemporary events in the Wars of the Roses,[34] this raises the related question of whether writing the "hoole book" became for Malory a compensation for his inability to vindicate his own righteousness through the usual means of knightly deeds.

Something of this sort appears to be happening in the frequently discussed episode of the healing of Sir Urry. The significance of the episode is both powerful and complex, but in the present context it is the emphasis on restored unity that is relevant.[35] The curse on Sir Urry meant that he "shulde never be hole" (639), but after Lancelot's miraculous intervention "the woundis fayre heled, and semed as they had bene hole a seven yere" (644). This evokes the potent semantic field of wholeness, and achieves healing/unification on multiple levels: for the entire chivalric fellowship, but also on the individual level—for Urry of course, but equally for Lancelot, whose past sins are mirrored in Urry's "seven grete woundis" (639). The scene thus primarily enables metonymic redemption for Lancelot himself, and acts as a visible, bodily, and public confirmation of his own successful penitential process. Indeed, since such forms of healing were often understood as a form of judicial ordeal,[36] the episode not only carries symbolic meaning, but provides what to Malory and many of his readers must have appeared to be indisputable forensic evidence of Lancelot's sincere repentance and spiritual regeneration—or, differently put, the restored innocence of a man who "wepte, as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn" (644).

By rewriting the character of Lancelot in such radical fashion, Malory is staking his own claim to participate in the moral regeneration of Lancelot and the wider chivalric community. In this sense the "hoole book"

Field, *Life and Times*, 120–21. Also Balyn, freshly "delyverde out of preson," who was "poore and poorly arayde [and] out hymselff nat far in prees" (41) seems to embody a sense of an inadequacy and social marginalization that may well have resonated with Malory's own self-perception, as also suggested by Field, *Life and Times*, 90.

34. Felicity Riddy, "Contextualising *Le Morte Darthur*: Empire and Civil War," in Archibald and Edwards, *Companion to Malory*, 55–73.

35. Radulescu, "Malory's Lancelot and the Key to Salvation," 117–18.

36. Symptomatically, Radulescu interprets the healing as an act analogous to ritualized combat, a "'religious tournament' of sorts" (ibid., 109–10). On the enhanced "sacral . . . appeal to the supernatural" of judicial duels in the context of the slippery judicial rhetoric and easily manipulated legal procedures during the Wars of the Roses, see Cannon, "Malory's Crime," 167–68. Cannon further explores the crisis of judicial language during the Wars of the Roses and its role in producing a highly contested, "positional" notion of criminality, making it difficult for us to situate Malory firmly within such an unstable political and judicial context.

consists of a revisionist narrative designed to restore the "whole truth" about the adventures of the Round Table, and specifically about the moral failures that lead to its downfall. Malory acquits Lancelot and lays the blame squarely at the door of Aggravayne in the passage where the fourth instance of self-naming also occurs, in the prominent *explicit* that concludes this section of the *Morte*: "And here I go unto the *Morte* **Arthur**—and that caused Sir **Aggravayne**. And here on the othir syde folowyth the moste pyteuous tale of the *Morte* **Arthure Saunz Gwerdon**, **par le Shyvalere Sir Thomas Melleorré**, knyght. **Jesu ayde ly pur voutre bone mercy. Amen**" (645).

If Malory's own subjectivity is truly reflected in his favorite character, then the self-naming in the aftermath of the healing of Sir Urry must be read as an almost desperate attempt to participate in that moral regeneration and the wider restoration of chivalric wholeness the episode seeks to perform. The healing may function for Malory himself as a metonymic penitential act, a self-healing, refracted through that of his favorite hero. It is as though the recovery of the "whole truth" about Lancelot could constitute for Malory an inherently meritorious penitential act.[37] The episode becomes an oblique request for public forgiveness and a plea for the recognition of Malory's own redemptive performance through writing—even if the public realm here exists only within Malory's mind, or at best within the textual, rhetorical space that frames and enables Malory's self-naming. It is appropriate and symptomatic that Malory's name should flicker across the page at this particular moment, crystallizing in the usual red letters used to rubricate personal names in the Winchester manuscript. Listed at the end of the lengthy and solemn roll call of Arthurian knights, Malory himself partakes for an instant in the redemptive possibilities of Lancelot's miracle.[38]

In this light, then, the prayer for deliverance that concludes the passage appears not so much as a conventional tag but rather as one of the most emotionally intense moments of the "hoole book," an appeal to transcendental but also readerly authority to override flawed human justice and assert Malory's justifiable motives for his past actions—actions easily construed as criminal and sinful in the divisive conflicts of the Wars of the Roses. Malory was doubtless as aware of his own moral shortcomings as he was of Lancelot's, and was aware of the destructive potential of the chivalric ideal. Yet he may well have felt that in his own case as well as Lancelot's, both personal moral fallibility and the intrinsic self-

37. See also Boulanger, "Righting History," 37.
38. On how rubrication of personal names in the Winchester manuscript places rhetorical and symbolic emphasis on issues of naming and identity, see Kevin S. Whetter, "Malory, Hardyng and the Winchester Manuscript: Some Preliminary Conclusions," *Arthuriana* 22, no. 4 (2012): 167–89.

contradictions of a flawed but irresistibly potent chivalric ideal could be overridden, redeemed as it were by the very intensity of one's loyalty to such an ideal—no matter how slippery and elusive.

If there is anything like a "moral paradox" in Malory, then, it is not so much the discrepancy between idealizing fiction and the harsh reality of history and biography but Malory's own determination, like that of his main hero, to act nobly despite the awareness that "good intentions are no protection whatever against committing acts with tragic and irreversible consequences."[39] In a world that, like Lancelot's, was torn apart by rival factions, and whose ethical and judicial standards were rendered opaque by malignant slander, rhetorical manipulation, and political conspiracy,[40] Malory imagines chivalry itself as oppressed with treacherous scheming, maligned, and ultimately banished, held in abeyance like its most fervent, albeit fallible, devotees. Prevented from proving his innocence in judicial combat against his own spectral Mellygaunce, and unable to perform a public penance like Lancelot's healing of Urry, Malory is reduced to making a rhetorical, solipsistic apology for his own personal history through metonymic narrative. Chivalric "grete bookes" have become surrogates for great chivalric deeds.

EPISTLES AND EPITAPHS

Malory's systematic rehabilitation of Lancelot also makes him a revisionist Arthurian chronicler who introduces new, indeed forged, evidence in the form of written documents. I shall address the status of such written documents in the *Morte* more broadly as a way of framing the significance of Malory's fifth, final act of self-naming. The most conspicuous among Malory's documents are the letters of the Fair Maid of Ascalot and of Gawain, both of which were written as deathbed confessions and function as revisionist personal narratives.[41] The former is taken over from the French *Mort le Roi Artu*, but whereas in the original the letter condemns Lancelot for his cruelty, in Malory the letter is tellingly used to exonerate him from blame.[42] Gawain's letter is entirely Malory's addition. These let-

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39. Elizabeth Kirk, "'Clerkes, Poetes and Historiographs': The *Morte Darthur* and Caxton's 'Poetics' of Fiction," in Spisak, *Studies in Malory*, 289.

40. See again Cannon, "Malory's Crime."

41. See also Boulanger, "Righting History," 34–37.

42. For the differences see Georgiana Donavin, "Elaine's Epistolarity: The Fair Maid of Astolat in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 13, no. 3 (2003): 68–82. I would suggest that Malory is not primarily concerned to "refashion dictaminal conventions in order to create a feminist epistle" as Donavin argues (69), but rather uses the letter to exonerate Lancelot in a public forum. In this sense the figure of Elaine is only a device for allowing Lancelot to be publicly exonerated.

ters, gaining their authority from the stability of the written word, both claim to present retrospective, definitive evidence that invalidates all previous, spoken accusations of immoral behavior leveled against Lancelot in the slanderous factional divide that characterizes the final books. The two letters thus restore a master narrative where Lancelot is victim rather than the cause of the decline; they assert his moral and ethical integrity as a character; and ultimately they complete, unify, and authorize a definitive written narrative that implicitly claims a greater degree of truth than the French sources it ostensibly reproduces.

The posthumous nature of these two samples of documentary evidence sheds light on Malory's own desires and anxieties about the status and authority of his own revisionist narrative. As I have already suggested, Malory's *Morte Darthur* often endows the reified written word with the stability and definitiveness of the monument, pitched against the slipperiness of the "noyse," rumor, and slander that Malory sees as the fundamental causes for the breaking up or "departing" of the Round Table. This monumentalist poetics is most evident in those moments of the narrative where the written word takes the form of an epitaph or funerary inscription containing retrospective personal histories.[43] This is the case with the unfortunate death of Sir Patryse, where only the epitaph retrospectively clarifies responsibilities and thus confirms Guenevere's innocence for the eyes of posterity (598).[44] Similarly, Gawain's letter, written at the point of death to establish Lancelot's innocence and nobility of character, is also validated with reference to a similar funerary aesthetic. It is followed by the evocation of Gawain's skull in Dover castle, an Arthurian relic intended to authenticate the document that precedes (682). Rhetorically, the letter itself functions as a relic: its materiality is stressed from the outset, as Gawain is brought "pauper, penne, and inke" (681). Indeed, the conclusion of the letter blurs the boundaries between personal written report and funerary monument, by inviting the addressee, Lancelot, "to returne agayne unto thys realme and se my toumbe and pray som prayer more other les for my soule" (682). The tomb itself is used as a token to validate the authority of Gawain's letter.

The *Morte* ends on a similar epitaph urging prayer, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Yet this time it is not one of its characters we are asked to pray for, but "Syr **Thomas Maleoré, knyght, as Jesu helpe hym, for Hys grete myght, as he is the servaunt of Jesu bothe day and nyght. Amen**" (698).

43. See Tiller, "En-graving Chivalry," 39–43.
44. The tombstone of the treacherous Mellygaunce has a similar function in explicating the circumstances of his death and of exculpating Launcelot, his opponent in the judicial tournament: "the Kynge suffird hym to be entered, and the mencion made uppon hym who slewe hym and for what cause he was slayne" (638).

This passage does not occur in the Winchester manuscript, which lacks its concluding quire, but is retained by Caxton. This suggests that it was originally contained in the manuscript and that it would have been rubricated like the four other instances of self-identification, to which it is unmistakably similar in tone and wording. Malory's final self-naming would thus have had the same rubrication as the inscription on Arthur's tomb toward the end of the Winchester manuscript—"**Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus**" (689). Accordingly, it would have partaken of this funerary aesthetic, engraving Malory's name in the form of a redemptive textual epitaph.[45] The same rubrication—which may well be authorial, although the status of the marginalia is more uncertain[46]—is also used to highlight the monumental status of Gawain's letter in a framed marginal note, the only one found in the "Death of Arthur" section of the Winchester manuscript (fols. 449r–84v). Still more interestingly, Gawain declares in the letter that it is "subscrybed [i.e., signed, authenticated] with parte of my harte blood" (682); in a manuscript making unprecedented and systematic use of rubrication to highlight personal names, this clearly invites readers to attribute symbolic significance to rubrication as a whole in the Winchester manuscript.[47] Gawain's "authorial" signature in his deathbed letter, rubricated in his own blood, becomes metonymic for Malory's own implication in his written text.[48] It suggests a nearly physical, visceral presence of the writer in the material substance of his work through the very ink of the blood-red letters that spell out both his name and the names of his characters.

Malory's textual subjectivity, inscribed not within a paratext but within the very letters of the book he produces, thus appears as inextricably entangled with the identity he imagines for his characters. They all strive to attain closure, an integrated "wholeness" that constantly eludes them. As is the case with the identity of his characters, Malory's final manifestation of "authorial" presence is articulated, paradoxically, in terms of the *absence* signified by the epitaph and the epistle,[49] a prayer for integration

45. See Boulanger, "Righting History," 37–38.

46. For a recent argument in favor of the authorial origin of rubrication of first names see Whetter, "Malory, Hardyng and the Winchester Manuscript," 182–83. See also Helen Cooper, "Opening Up the Malory Manuscript," in Wheeler, Kindrick, and Salda, *Malory Debate*, 255–84. On the status of marginalia, authorial or not, see, respectively, P. J. C. Field, "Malory's Own Marginalia," *Medium Aevum* 70 (2001): 226–39; and James Wade, "Malory's Marginalia Reconsidered," *Arthuriana* 21, no. 3 (2011): 70–86.

47. See also Thomas H. Crofts, *Malory's Contemporary Audience: The Social Reading of Romance in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), 62–71.

48. Despite Gawain's reference to his signature, no such signature actually appears in the letter as reproduced in the Winchester manuscript.

49. For the paradoxical function of tombs as simultaneous markers of presence and loss in Malory, see Tiller, "En-graving Chivalry," 48–49. On medieval epistolary poetics, and the

that reveals an insurmountable fracture. The same funerary overtones also inflect the overall conception of the written word in his "hoole book." To Malory it is a testament of chivalry, the textual relic that like Gawain's skull in Dover Castle can, posthumously and retrospectively, set the whole historical record straight. In the light of the opposition between the elusive "noyse" of the spoken word, and the material permanence of the written word, Malory's entire book appears as a lengthy epitaph, a message in the bottle sent by the "knyght presoner" in despair to his posterity. In this sense it is not unlike the Fair Maid of Ascalot's message to the court, floating downstream on a barge in the hope of being picked up and given a ceremonious public reading. Like Elayne's letter, the book is unable to change the historical "facts" and avert a personal disaster that, at the moment of reading, already lies in the past; yet both book and letter can, at least in Malory's mind, reconfigure the whole web of moral responsibilities of this Arthurian past, revealing the "whole truth" about the downfall of the Round Table and Lancelot's innocence—and through this meritorious act contribute to Malory's own redemption, for whose soul we are invited to pray.

Despite Malory's nearly obsessive desire to retrieve the original, "whole," true, and definitive story of the Round Table and to cast it in stone like an epitaph, the epistemological status of the written word is heavily compromised in the final sections of Malory's Arthuriad. Far from attaining the incontestable, monumental status that Malory longs for, even written words are increasingly slippery and unreliable, destabilizing the relationship between slanderous speech and authoritative writing. After his initial reluctance to acknowledge in public the "noyse" about Lancelot's affair with the queen—"he wold nat here thereoff" (647)—Arthur now sends at Gawain's instigation "lettirs and wryttis thorowoute all Inglonde" (659). He employs written means to generate official and nationwide consensus about Lancelot's guilt: "the kynge enfourmed hem how Sir **Launcelot** had beraffte hym hys Quene" (659). But soon afterward Arthur is urged to revoke his earlier writs by the higher authority of the bishop, carrying papal "bulles undir leade" (664). Arthur now sends the bishop with his own "grete seale and hys assuraunce" (665) to Lancelot, granting the queen forgiveness. Emphasis is once more placed on documentary authenticity as Lancelot receives Arthur's writs: "'This is sure ynow,' seyde **Launcelot** 'for full well I dare truste my lordys owne wrytyng and hys seale,'" (665).

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function of the letter as a surrogate for absence as much as a marker of presence, see Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, 211–48, which devotes particular attention to two further author-prisoners, James I of Scotland and Charles d'Orléans. See also the remarks in Spearing, *Medieval Autographies*, 100, and "Prison, Writing, Absence: Representing the Subject in the English Poems of Charles d'Orléans," *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1992): 83–99.

Yet Arthur's own change of heart already highlights the internal instability of institutionally authenticated documents, and this opens up a space for writing to be further manipulated as an instrument of dissension and slander rather than a token of truth. This crisis of written authority finally enables Mordred to "make lettirs as thoughe that they had com frome beyonde the see, and the lettirs specifyed that Kynge **Arthur** was slayne in batayle" (679). Worse still, Mordred employs writing not to put rumor to rest but to stir up slander and dissatisfaction; he sends "wryttes unto all thys baronny of the londe. And muche people drew unto hym; for than was the comyn voyce amonge them that with Kynge **Arthur** was never othir lyff but warre and stryff" (680).[50] The situation worsens not due to unsubstantiated slander but precisely because official written documents are so easily falsified and used to sanction widespread rumor and discontent. Ultimately, it is the credulousness of recipients and their respect for official written authority that enables Mordred to pull off his forgery, which further erodes the truth-value associated with written documents elsewhere in the *Morte*.

Mordred's forgery of documentary evidence raises the specter of Malory's latent, barely suppressed anxiety concerning the status of written authority more broadly. This leads to a blurring of the distinction between truthful written word and mendacious spoken word. This fundamental uncertainty culminates in Malory's treatment of what is the most prominent sample of reified writing in the *Morte*, Arthur's own epitaph. Here the blurring of the boundaries between the written and the spoken appears nearly total, since, Malory writes, "many men say that there ys wrytten uppon the tumbe thys [vers]: **Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus**" (689). The only guarantee for the monumental authority of this inscription supposedly carved in stone is, ironically, spoken report, unattributed and free floating; the authorizing link between Malory's written text and Arthur's epitaph is broken by an intervening verbal report. The report is rendered even less authoritative by the contradictory admission that "som men say in many partys of Inglonde that Kynge **Arthure** ys nat dede" (689). Finally, the written word too is nothing more than a derivative crystallization of rumor, and the authority of even the most permanent of writings—funerary inscriptions—is compromised by the slipperiness of reported speech.

Such breakdown of specifically written authority also destabilizes the epistemological status of Malory's revisionist Arthurian history. To a large extent this breakdown is self-inflicted, produced by Malory's overstated, nearly obsessive appeal to written authority within the narrative itself. His invocations of the French book to authenticate the *Morte* are in con-

50. See also Plummer, "*Tunc se coeperunt non intelligere*," 164–65.

stant danger of being undermined by his own awareness that such author-
ity is essentially spurious, and that its effect is merely rhetorical, aimed at
lending credibility to his heavily revisionist history. The same goes for Ga-
wain's and Elayne's letters: despite their ostensibly incontrovertible au-
thenticity as documentary evidence in the narrative, Malory must have
known that they were produced by his own, partisan emotional attach-
ment to Lancelot. I suggested earlier that Malory essentially saw himself
as sorting out the complexities of an inherited narrative, clarifying the
"facts" by discriminating between what he must have seen as the funda-
mental truth and the slanderous, apocryphal accretions of the French Ar-
thurian tradition. Ultimately, however, the nature and extent of Malory's
interventions is such that it threatens to undermine his own faith in the
authorizing strategy of invoking written chronicles, "grete bookes," letters,
epitaphs, and the "French book" itself. Since he relies on documents that
he knows to be creations of his own, and whose material status is merely a
rhetorical illusion, Malory compromises his belief in the ability of the writ-
ten word to retrieve and convey any sort of definitive, reliable truth.[51]

Finally, this also erodes Malory's confidence in his own ability to disen-
tangle the complex webs of moral responsibility in which his characters
are caught. Such loss of faith in the authority of the written word under-
mines the self-authorizing claims of the *Morte* and simultaneously pre-
vents Malory himself from stepping outside the narrative and claiming a
stable, unified authority as a writer. This also dooms Malory's metonymic
penitential investment in the writing of the "hoole book" to failure, mak-
ing it impossible for him to attain anything like an integrated selfhood or
a durable sense of redemption. Because it is so directly contingent on the
inconclusive healing of Arthurian chivalric wholeness, Malory's subjectiv-
ity itself remains finally self-divided, split, and ethically opaque like that of
his favorite hero Lancelot. Malory's name remains inscribed in the narra-
tive, but the place and agency of his textual "I" within the narrative are
finally uncertain, fluctuating, and inscrutable, shaped by the equivocal
ethical standards that the *Morte* shares with Malory's own England, torn
apart by factions, slander, and civil war. This crisis of authority threatens
to engulf the *Morte* as a whole and serves to illustrate Malory's own para-
doxical presence as a textual subject in his work: it is simultaneously active
and acted upon, productive and produced, affirmed and negated, memo-
rialized and elided. The very materiality of Malory's name in the conclud-
ing prayer threatens to become, like Arthur's epitaph, not so much a mon-
umentalized sign of his presence but a fleeting surrogate for his absence.
Yet Malory's self-naming also retains the haunting, spectral quality of Ar-

51. See Batt, *Remaking Arthurian Tradition*, e.g., xvii–xviii and throughout.

thur's epitaph, and it is this haunting presence that ultimately may have helped to rescue both Malory's name and his work from historical erasure.

AFTERLIFE: CAXTON

Like the Maid of Ascalot's letter, Malory's work in the end does, ironically, find its intended posthumous audience, largely thanks to Caxton's providential intervention. Although Malory's own wish for personal, political rehabilitation and "good delyveraunce" (698) was to remain unfulfilled, the "hoole book" does find the afterlife that Malory was seeking for it, and achieves—as text, epitaph, or relic—the monumental status desired by its author. Caxton perceptively tunes into Malory's monumentalist poetics, and by analogy with the Arthurian relics he evokes in his preface— "Gauwayns skulle and Cradoks mantel; . . . the Round Table; . . . Launcelottes swerde" (816)—he reifies the written words themselves, turning them into an indefinitely reproducible material "relic," a rhetorically fixed text containing the whole, definitive historical truth about Arthur.

Caxton, however, also further complicates and modifies Malory's vision as represented in the Winchester manuscript by altering both the manner and the significance of Malory's own self-naming within the work, transforming the deeper resonances of the *Morte* as a whole. Whereas Caxton unifies the narrative by presenting an editorially more coherent "hoole book," he all but deletes the marks of Malory's textual, grammatical presence in the work. Caxton indeed disengages the author's identity from that of his heroes, making him a mere translator by whom the Arthurian *matière* was "reduced into Englysshe" (Caxton's Colophon, 819). Also, Malory's name is relegated to the prologue, final *explicit*, and the epilogue of the printed version, which thus marginalizes the presence of a passionately invested yet divided and doubtful writing subject. The result is a normalization of the text-author relationship as understood from the perspective of our modern expectations: the author is neatly separated, detached from the text, clearly relegated to the paratexts where he appears in the third person as a discrete subject. By wishing to disengage a morally neutral, detached author from his ethically ambivalent fiction, then, it is Caxton, and not Malory, who introduces the possibility for a "moral paradox" into Malory's *Morte*. This is consistent with Caxton's practice elsewhere: in Seth Lerer's words Caxton's prologues generally strive to achieve a "distancing of author and reader."[52] This invocation of an author-translator separated from his text achieves the editorial tidiness upon which so much

52. Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 150.

of our modern literary criticism is based but conversely obscures the peculiar, unique, and haunting manner in which Malory's textual subjectivity inhabits the narrative in the Winchester manuscript.

This erasure of Malory's "I" from the body of the text also acts, however, as an almost ironic culmination of Malory's "penitential" narrative of the self—a narrative whose aim is not the affirmation of the self as in modern, deliberate autobiography but rather the processing and dismantling of a troublesome, flawed personal history, even the dissolution of subjectivity in and through textuality. In print, the monumentalized "book" finally displaces and obscures the fractured writing subject. To a certain extent the place vacated by Malory is occupied by Caxton's enhanced concern with the physical remains of the Arthurian past, which show us Caxton responding, in his own way, to Malory's funerary and monumentalist aesthetic. On the surface this association of bodily remains and funerary inscription is also nourished by Caxton's receptiveness toward the humanist topoi of the epigraph and epitaph. This is displayed by his Chaucer editions, where the printed text metaphorically incises the literary status of Chaucer and his writings in the manner of the tombs of classical authors.[53] But in the case of the *Morte*, it is not Malory's but Arthur's name that is memorialized through a textual epitaph. Arthur's body and the assorted Arthurian relics of the preface displace a fluctuating and uncertain textual subject who is not really an author.

Yet Caxton cannot overcome his own reservations about such dubious Arthurian relics, and ultimately disengages himself from their authenticating function. The printing is not his own initiative, and the repeated pleas and exhortations of the "many noble and dyvers gentylmen" (814) urging Caxton to produce "the noble hystorye of . . . Kyng Arthur" (815) underscore his agnostic position on the matter.[54] This does not resolve the issue of the historicity of Arthur, but distracts from the question of the authority of this particular version of the myth. Also, like the invocation of Malory as a simple translator, this short-circuits the intense and problematic implication of the writing subject in his text that we find in the Winchester manuscript. Instead, the reader is invited to extract for herself or himself the truthful, ostensibly universal moral content transmitted by the story: "Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renommee. And for to passe the tyme, thys book shal be plesaunte to rede in; but for to gyve fayth and byleve that al is trewe that is conteyned herin, ye be at your lyberté. But al is wryton for our doctryne and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne, but t'excersyse and folowe vertu" (817). This places a double, moral and her-

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53. Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 156.
54. See esp. Kirk, "'Clerkes, Poetes and Historiographs,'" 285–92.

meneutic burden on the reader, who is asked, as it were, to inhabit the uncertain and self-divided space vacated by Malory as writer, translator, compiler, and chronicler. In Elizabeth Kirk's words the reader is now even more "unprotected by authorial intention,"[55] but is also prevented from exploring the complex and hesitant place of the now elided textual subject within that narrative. This appeal to the reader to become an active participant in the construction of meaning has a stabilizing effect, at least on the rhetorical level. By suggesting that the distinction between "the good" and "the evyl," the true and the false is indeed possible, Caxton makes the *Morte* appear as a stable, indeed didactic, text with a definitive, extractable truth at its core—even if he remains evasive about the ultimate nature of the work's "doctryne."

I have tried to show that the didactic and detached reading implied by Caxton's remarks is not what Malory's "unconscious art" in the Winchester manuscript invites. Even Caxton's streamlined text hardly allows for a tidy moral interpretation. Caxton's comments essentially reveal his own desire for moral and hermeneutic closure and are expressions of his rather different notion of what such a "hoole book" was meant to achieve. But above all Caxton's tendency to disengage Malory's "I" from the narrative is likely to tempt us, as modern readers, to view the *Morte Darthur* as the work of a deliberately constructed authorial persona, created by a detached and fully self-conscious artist who can step back from the narrative, and whose inner contradictions as an actual human subject are supposedly irrelevant because they are, in themselves, irretrievable. I have argued that such expectations in many ways inhibit our own engagement with a more vibrant, emotionally intense medieval textual subjectivity such as Malory's—even if this subjectivity is problematic, self-divided, and opaque. Although Malory's own subjectivity remains ultimately inaccessible to us, we are called upon to acknowledge its intensely real, "literal," and paradoxical presence within the text of the Winchester manuscript.

55. Kirk, "'Clerkes, Poetes and Historiographs,'" 291. Speaking in more general terms Lerer also observes how Caxton's prologues achieve a "controlled displacement of authority from writer unto reader" (*Chaucer and His Readers*, 151).