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Anne Woehrle
Oberlin College

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Real People Tell the Whole Story:
Dialogue and Characterization
in Malory's Morte Darthur

Anne Woehrle
20 April, 1984

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Eugene Vinaver published his edition of the Works of Sir Thomas Malory (generally known by the title Morte Darthur apparently given it by its first publisher, William Caxton), critics have disputed the interpretation that governed his editing. Vinaver based his edition on the "Winchester Manuscript," discovered in 1934, contending that Morte Darthur was written as a series of eight separate "tales" and has therefore nothing that resembles the comprehensive structure of a novel, a play, or even a simple romance. He based his argument on features of the manuscript, such as explicits and decorated letters marking tale divisions, and on inconsistencies of plot and characterization.

Several critics have taken issue with the use of the manuscript as an argument, pointing out that some of the explicits are weak and that at least one of Vinaver's divisions is almost nonexistent.¹ As always with handwritten material, there is also the problem of the reliability of the scribe. Vinaver's stylistic judgment is open to debate as well. I have found, on first reading and in subsequent study, that characters speak in individual styles, which are strongly affected by the narrator's tone. The appearance of different members of the cast generates subplots but does not interfere with the overall structure of the drama of Arthur's reign.

¹Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 32.

The middle third of the work, the section focusing on Sir Tristram de Lyones, is thoroughly interwoven with previous and subsequent sections. It serves as an alternate lens through which to view the important characters. Tristram acts as a complement to Lancelot, strengthening his position as the protagonist of Morte Darthur. The narrator assumes a comic mask, drawing on the reader's sympathy and sense of humor and revealing very human characters, so that the solemn and tragic tales that follow can develop dramatic tension.

Morte Darthur's survival as a popular work is unique in fifteenth-century English literature, and it is one of the most influential versions of Arthurian legend in all literature. Malory chose his material well, and he relates it in a style that combines a graceful medieval formality with the earthiness of everyday English. The "Tristram de Lyones" section is particularly casual, both in structure and in narrative style, which allows for a wide variety of dialogue. Study of the literary context within which Malory wrote, and the way he used or neglected conventions of the time, reveals the importance of dialogue in the Tristram material as it serves to unify the entire Morte Darthur.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: MALORY AND THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

When Malory wrote Morte Darthur, he was compiling material from the legends of Britain that had been continuously popular for several hundred years. He was one of many, in England and all across Europe, who collected and selected stories of King Arthur's court and translated or retold them; he was one of several who attempted to weave them into a single coherent romance. Gouffier in France and Fretter in Germany wrote similar works within a few years of Morte Darthur's appearance, although their versions were not published as widely as was Malory's. Morte Darthur also incorporates the story of Sir Tristram de Lyones, which originally had little to do with Arthur but eventually included connections with the Round Table. The prose Tristan was probably the most popular of all the Arthurian romances in the late Middle Ages.²

The fifteenth century saw a boom in the popularity of prose, after several centuries of preference for poetry. Arthurian legend was, in fact, available mostly in prose form; Malory probably worked mostly from prose sources.³ European aristocracy supported the form, and the English followed suit, joining the craze for re-written and translated prose romances. The Amadis de Gaula in Spain, David Aubert's French Perceforest, and Orlando innamorato by the

²Benson, p. 6

³Ibid., p. 4

Italian Boiardo were among the most widely read works during the fifteenth century.⁴ The patrons favored stories with the flavor of documented history, and condensation of material into a manageable one-volume text became a high priority. So although Malory had few English examples after which to model his style, he was working in strong traditions of both form and content.

Malory incorporates a great deal of dialogue in the text of Morte Darthur. In order to understand his characterization, it is necessary to analyze the speech of the large group of characters in whose words much of the story is told. Such study reveals more individual traits than Malory is often credited with providing, and it also explains the structure of relationships between characters upon which the drama of Morte Darthur depends. I have chosen to work mainly with the middle third of the book, which focuses on Sir Tristram de Lyones, because the leisurely pace and casual tone of the narrator in this section allow for reporting of details on a scale precluded by the heroic spirit of the first part and the awe-inspiring mysticism and tragedy of the final few tales. It will be helpful first to discuss some particulars of fifteenth-century conventions for the writing of dialogue.

Several forms of discourse were common and intermixed in fifteenth-century English prose. Characters could speak in direct discourse, with varying degrees of narrative intrusion in their voices. They could speak singly, or they could chatter in unison, sometimes with large crowds delivering extended paragraphs. The collective form is very common in Malory's contemporaries.⁵ Mark

⁴Ibid., p.3

⁵Mark Lambert, Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur (New Haven:Yale University Press,1975),p.16.

Lambert describes collective discourse as a spontaneous abandonment of individual identity for group identity.⁶ Indirect discourse, he claims, enhances the conformity of characters to a group standard of diction when the narrator does not adopt the character's individual speech traits in relating dialogue; he sees this lack of "the proprieties of realistic dialogue" as a problem, at least for the modern reader, in forming impressions of distinct characters in Malory's work.⁷ This is less true, however, in the Tristram section than in the rest of the work, and I think he states the case too strongly for the Morte Darthur as a whole. The "problem" is not that the characters all sound alike, but that because the content of their speech is generally observation instead of opinion (as pointed out by Lambert himself in a later chapter), we get a fairly superficial view of the speakers. The appearance of conformity is strengthened by our distance from fifteenth-century speech, which makes the characters sound more like each other than like us.

The narrator in many fifteenth-century works has insights that the character lacks, and indirect discourse can lead to narrative intrusion on an irritating scale if not handled carefully. Malory does better in that respect than most of his contemporaries.⁸ The episode in which Tristram assumes the name "Tramtryst" illustrates Malory's facility in handling the relationship between narrator, character and reader. The narrator switches back and forth between

⁶Ibid., p.16

⁷Ibid., p.5

⁸Benson, p.114

"Trystrames" and "Tramtryst," depending upon whether the reader is to adopt the narrator's omniscient viewpoint of the limited point of view of other characters. The first instance of this happens at the moment in which Tristram introduces himself to King Angwyshe, asking for his daughter's medical aid.

"I am of the contrey of Lyones, and my name is Tramtryste . . ."
 "So God me helpe," seyde kynge Angwyshe, "ye shall have all the helpe in this londe that ye may have here . . ."
 And then he told sir Tramtryste . . . (pp.287-288*)

The story continues for several pages, as Trystram/Tramtryste recovers from his wound with the help of the experts Isode. When he is ready to go home, the king, impressed with his abilities but distressed by the news that "Tramtryste" has been Marhalt's murderer, demands that he reveal his identity and lineage. Tristram, in a speech still attributed to "Tramtryste," explains the situation. The king answers with expressions of surprise and forgiveness. The next speech is back in the mouth of "sir Trystrames," and so he is called for the rest of the book.

Some critics see the period of transition from middle English into modern as a time of uncertainty with regard to sentence structure and vocabulary. Even the most stylistically self-conscious writers could not handle complex sentences smoothly because of the "lack of a controlling pattern of usage in these matters: that is to say, and accepted standard for the emerging national language."⁹ Incomplete subordination, the use of pleonastic (reinforcing) personal pronouns, and inconsistent use of relative pronouns were some

*The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, Eugene Vinaver, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954). All references to pages in Morte Darthur refer to this edition.

⁹Margaret Schlauch, The English Language in Modern Times (London: Oxford University Press), p.56.

of the more common features of fifteenth-century clumsiness in handling complex sentence structure. The transition from indirect to direct discourse causes a special problem; the word "that" usually signals the change, but fifteenth-century writers do not always stay with indirect discourse after they have indicated it. A switch in the opposite sense can occur; Schlauch illustrates with this sentence from Malory: "'Sir,' he sayde, he saw nothyng but watirs wap and wawys wanne."¹⁰ Malory handles most of his transitions of discourse gracefully, however, which is due in large part to his straightforward prose style. By keeping his sentences simple, he avoids the problems that frequently befuddle his contemporaries.¹¹

Lambert terms "confirmation" the device of repeating a character's words in the voice of the narrator, or vice versa. Constant use of this pattern leads the reader to expect it and to approve of the character and trust his speech if the narrator confirms it. A character whose dialogue lacks confirmation by the narrator will be judged by the reader subconsciously to be less trustworthy than average. The oft-cited medieval demand for historical accuracy (apparent in Malory's frequent reference to "the Freynshe booke") would heighten the sense of integrity in a character whose point of view closely coincides with that of the narrator. I would extend this point to include confirmation between two important characters who have been established as heroes; the mutual echo of Arthur and Lancelot, which is spread throughout the story, allies them and reinforces their integrity in the mind of the reader.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 58

¹¹Ibid., p. 59

Stock phrases were another favorite feature in the fifteenth century. They established a standard, identifying characters with certain classes or roles, much as dialect in a modern novel identifies a character with class and geographic location. Both narrator and characters in Morte Darthur use them freely. There are stock descriptions of battles ("and he smote to the right and to the left"), introductory comments such as "So God me helpe," and phrases suited to certain common situations. ("Kepe yourselff!")

Field discusses the distinction between the formal/respectful "you" and the informal/contemptuous "thou," which modern English has lost, and he concludes that, "by Malory's time, the 'thou' of intimacy was probably rather old-fashioned."¹² Thus the use of "thou" reveals characters' attitudes toward each other, and frequent use of the word leaves an impression of arrogance. This may be illustrated by the observation that in the Tristram section, where the characters are at their most formal, the only character who thou-s people repeatedly is King Mark. "Thou" is used almost exclusively in moments of anger, or when someone is addressing a servant, as Tristram sometimes does with Governayle.

Formality in any narrative gives keys to characterization, and Malory is no exception. Lambert sees it as another normative factor, using the conversation of lovers as an example.¹³ However, some characters handle formality better than others, and Lancelot is the only one, at least in the Tristram section, who is consistently successful in this regard. Tristram, Malory's favorite knight,

¹²P.J.C. Field, Romance and Chronicle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 105

¹³Lambert, p. 20

rarely displays rhetorical talents; Palomides tries, but he cannot often organize anything more complex than a series of independent clauses. King Mark fails miserably, (though we can assume that a monarch is at least trying to sound formal a good deal of the time) by lapsing into angry oaths and exclamations.

Most of Malory's characters, and even his narrative voices, speak in short, fairly simple sentences. The deviations identified by Schlauch can make characters seem more logical (Lancelot) or verbose (Angwyshe and other royalty), especially when they rearrange the common order of phrases to leave the essential statement for the end, which Malory attempts mostly in short sentences. The device is an English adaptation of classical Latin style. Another favorite classical construction, which Malory's characters use rarely, is the insertion of a long modifying phrase between subject and verb; some writers lose track of the sentence's original direction.¹⁴ Malory seems to have preferred, for the most part, a more colloquial approach to English prose, thereby avoiding the complications of ambitious construction after Latin models. Lambert considers Malory's dialogue to be as consistently complex as his narrative voice, which detracts from individuality in favor of consistent style and character credibility. A closer look at particular sections of the book -- especially "Sir Tristram de Lyones" -- shows that a great many exclamations, short speeches, and clumsily organized spoken sentences (as opposed to the clearer organizations of the narrator's own language) distinguish characters from each other and from the narrator.

Although Lambert and others see Malory and the fifteenth century in general as uninterested in character development, a reader

¹⁴Schlauch, p. 59

can find many individualizing details for separate characters in Morte Darthur. Lambert is correct in observing that Malory avoids psychological analysis of his characters,¹⁵ a feature prominent in his sources and in contemporary romances. It does not follow, however, that Malory fails to characterize his knights and ladies. His handling of dialogue gives the reader strong clues to personalities and allows us to develop sympathies with and opinions about the characters. They have particular habits of speech, such as Tristram's oaths, Alexander's vulgar expressions, Lancelot's coldly logical explanations, Guenever's exclamations, and King Angwyshe's use of negative phrasing. The habits are not wholly limited to those characters -- such concentration would make the romantic gentlemen and heroes into comic caricatures -- but they do help us to recognize individuals.

In an article on "Dialogue and Characterization in Chaucer and Malory," Peter Schroeder analyzed an exchange between Lancelot and Guenever in order to discover why Guenever seems so enigmatic to the reader and how she is different from her model in the French material. Her illogical demands (why didn't Lancelot do better by Elaine of Astolat, she wants to know, having established that this potential rival has been rejected by Lancelot) force readers to explain the sequence of her conversation by inventing the mental image of a capricious, rather spoiled young lady. Lancelot, by contrast, almost never lets passion interfere with speech. Thus we perceive a character almost coldly in control of his own emotions. Schroeder says that most characters in medieval romances are either explicitly drawn or passed over. "But some characters like Guinever and Criseyde,

¹⁵Lambert, p.60

at the same time puzzling and plausible, are anomalies in the Middle Ages: the texts themselves direct our reconstruction up to a point and then draw back, leaving gaps that we must fill."¹⁶

Much of Malory's humor is based on diction. Irony and understatement sometimes result when "the fundamental knightly quality of self-possession," as expressed in speech, is misplaced. This situation is typical of Malory, but unusual in his contemporaries.¹⁷ Lancelot's "Ye sey well" to the woman who has just tried to kill him, and Gareth's "Damsell, your charge is to me a pleasure," to the merciless maiden who leads him on his debut adventure, exemplify this subtle, humorous twist of knightly speech.

Malory's characterization may be hidden from a twentieth-century reader by the unfamiliar sound and spelling of fifteenth-century English. Yet he is less concerned with Latin grammatical features than are many of his contemporaries, and he uses the differences between formal and colloquial English to differentiate individuals. The same is true of stock phrases and confirmation: Malory uses the conventions of his time to achieve specific effects, which include individualizing characters at some points and identifying them with groups at others. In the section entitled "Sir Tristram de Lyones," he creates distinct characters by using some common fifteenth-century devices.

¹⁶Peter R. Schroeder, "Dialogue and Characterization in Chaucer and Malory," PMLA 98:3, p.384.

¹⁷Field, p.111

II

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRISTRAM MATERIAL IN MORTE DARTHUR

Analysis of the dialogue in the Tristram section of Morte Darthur reveals character relationships that broaden the scope of the thematic material and lay groundwork for the drama of the book's ending. The section includes some characters who reappear in other tales, such as Lancelot, Arthur, Guenever, Perceval, and the Orkney clan; others, such as Tristram, Isode, Dynadan and Lamorak are hardly mentioned outside this middle section. The entire characterization of the latter group is done in the voice of a comparatively relaxed, informal narrator, who candidly reports conversations and incidents that make some of these characters more memorable individually than their stylistically formal counterparts in other parts of the Morte Darthur. The narrator also takes this opportunity to allow Guenever to laugh heartily, Perceval to act impulsively, and King Mark to behave childishly.

Malory's use of the conventions described in Chapter 1 of this paper, and his departure from them, help explain both the lighter tone of "Sir Tristram de Lyones" and its function in the context of Morte Darthur as a whole. There is less narrator confirmation and less frequent use of classical models of syntax; collective discourse disappears almost entirely. Certain stock phrases become associated with particular characters. There is more room for humor, both in situation and in style; Dynadan, the Morte Darthur's only clown, is an important character. We can form some fairly detailed impressions of the characters because of the relaxed narrator.

Tristram's punchy, informal speech and personality, as the focus of the section, makes casual narration easier. Malory seems to have felt closer to Tristram than to any other character. He even breaks into the story personally at one point, violating the otherwise consistently detached narration of the Morte Darthur. After a lyrical description of Tristram's prowess as a hunter, he asserts that "all maner jantylmen hath cause to the worldes end to prayse sir Trystram and to pray for his soule. AMEN, SAYDE SIR THOMAS MALLEORE." (p.506) Were such commentary inserted in the Holy Grail section, it would give the reader a violent jolt. But the Tristram section is filled with characters who remark on each others' attributes and behavior, and its narrator reports frequent vulgarities of dialogue. Tristram himself is a man of quick emotion and sharp-tongued wit, so Malory and his narrator can afford to be irreverent.

Malory's informal style in the Tristram section can depart far enough from that of his contemporaries that he sounds more like a twentieth-century novelist than a fifteenth-century weaver of romance. At one point, he reverses the narrator-controlled discourse form, allowing character voices to intrude collectively: "So they sente unto hym and prayde that stronge knyght 'to telle us his name,' and whethir he were of kynge Arthurs courte other nat." Malory could very well have stuck to indirect discourse throughout the sentence. The direct quotation simultaneously lends credibility to the narrator and brings the characters closer to the reader, reducing the formality of the prose.

Confirmation is an important element in Malory's style, and it is noticeably lacking from the Tristram section. Arthur and

Lancelot speak in tandem, reinforcing each others' credibility with speeches of equivalent length and similar vocabulary, but Tristram rarely receives such support; nor do the rest of the characters in his tale. The interaction of Arthur and Lancelot contains many instances of rhythm and phrasing that echo each other. One example of Lancelot's and Arthur's mutual reinforcement occurs during a conversation in the midst of the tournament at Lonezep. "So God me helpe" is one of Arthur's favorite phrases, and Lancelot picks it up, with a slight variation.

"So God me helpe," seyde kynge Arthure, "that was unknyghtly done of you as of so good a knyght, for I have harde many people calle you a curtayse knyght."

"Sir," seyde sir Palomydes, "I knew nat sir Trystram, for he was so dysgysed."

"So God helpe me," seyde sir Launcelot, "hit may well be, for I knew hym nat myselff."

(p.562)

This is minimal confirmation, but there is so little obvious repetition among the characters in this section that this instance stands out. A second example, in the next exchange between the two, strengthens the relationship.

"How now?" seyde sir Launcelot unto kynge Arthure, "yondir rydyth a knyght that playyth his pageauntes."

"So God me helpe," seyde kynge Arthure, "ye shall see this day that yondir two knyghtes shall do here wondirs."

(p.563)

The words "yondir" and "that" are used for different functions in the two sentences, but they, along with "knyght(es)," serve to link the two characters that use them, singling them out from the group of knights and royalty participating in the tournament.

Aside from the echoes between Lancelot and Arthur, very little confirmation appears in the Tale of Tristram, either between characters or between character and narrator. Other parts of the Morte

Darthur yield a plethora of examples of the technique. For instance, Lancelot and a minor character, Sir Raynolde, are in the midst of a bloody battle when the following exchange occurs.

"Now let be," seyde sir Launcelot, "I was not far from the whan thou were made knyght, sir Raynolde, and also I know thou arte a good knyght, and lothe I were to sle the."

"Gramercy," seyde sir Raynolde, "for your goodnesse, and I dare say as for me and my bretherne, we woll nat be loth to yelde us unto you, with that we know youre name; for welle we know ye ar not sir Kay."

"As for that, be as be may. For ye shall yelde you unto dame Guenyvere, and loke that ye be there on Whytsonday and yelde ye unto hir as presoners, and sey that sir Kay sente you unto hir."

(p.200)

Words such as "loth" and "yeld us [or "you"] unto," along with a host of other examples, constitute a standard vocabulary of knight-hood. The standard is still good in "Sir Tristram," but it is not so carefully reinforced; individual diction is more noticeable than class distinctions.

The large cast of characters in Morte Darthur features some knights with favorite phrases and exclamations. In the opening and closing series of chapters, these are often stock phrases that identify knights as members of a class. In the Tristram section, however, certain characters use single phrases that then become associated with individual personalities. Everyone seems to say "wyte you well" once or twice, but Tristram can hardly hold a conversation without it, probably because he is always challenging someone to a verbal or physical duel. The narrator even mimics the habit. "Whan sir Tristram was so hurte he was passynge hevy; and wyte you well he bled passynge sore." (p.579) King Angwyshe frequently gives negative twists to his statements. Having straightened out Trystram's name and identity, he delivers this speech:

"So God me helpe!" seyde the kynge, "I may nat sey but ye dud as a knyght sholde do and as hit was youre parte to do for your quarrell, and to encrece your worshyp as a knyght sholde do. Howbehit I may nat mayntayne you in this contrey with me worship but that I sholde displese many of my barownes and my wyff and my kynne."

(p.293)

Both sentences are constructed around the obviously negative "nat." Angwyshe also displays a certain self-consciousness in overworking his formal style. The first clause holds the content of the whole sentence, everything from "as hit was youre parte" onward being contained within the idea of what a knight sholde do; Angwyshe complicates his speech, with negatives and redundancies, perhaps in an effort to sound impressive. King Mark does just the opposite, using clipped exclamations and thou-ing people frequently, revealing a quick temper. Palomydes, amid his abundant delivery of verbiage, is fond of addressing others as "fayre lady," "fayre knyght," "fayre syrris." Even if these speech habits are not obvious at first reading, they contribute to both humor ^{and?} (an) characterization, giving us handles on individual personalities.

Some characters in the Tristram section make only brief appearances in other parts of the Morte Darthur, if they are included at all. Others continue throughout the book, with varying degrees of stylistic consistency in their dialogue. Alisaunder, Dynadan and Palomydes are all important characters who have parallels (Galahad, Dagonet and Gawain) but do not appear in the rest of the book. Perceval continues throughout, but the middle section provides him with a depth of personality made possible by the more casual style of dialogue.

Alisaunder is Tristram's nephew; he plays a role in the story

even before his birth, and is fated to grow up to be a marvelous knight, in a tale similar to that of Galahad. His language reflects his family ties; short sentences, frequent exclamations and a touch of vulgarity make him Tristram's echo. He is a great knight, but he is also an amusing character. His refusal to make love to Morgan le Fay is a favorite quotation among critics. "'A, Jesu defende me,' seyde sir Alysaunder, 'frome such pleasure! For I had lever kut away my hangers than I wolde do her any suche pleasure.'" (p.480) The conversation of courtship between Alysaunder and Alys la Beale Pellaron lasts about ten lines, during which a volley of exclamations and brief formalities establishes that they were made for each other. "So there was grete love betwixt them," Malory concludes, and he moves on to the next event, a fray between Alysaunder and two foes. Such brevity makes Alysaunder the object of sympathetic laughter, as he falls in love at first sight, with an amazing verbal efficiency that echoes Tristram's brevity.

Perceval, who will be second only to Galahad in the success of his quest for the Holy Grail, is a pious knight, strong but gentle. Or at least, so he seems in conversation with monks and damsel~~s~~ in the tale of the quest. The mystical mood of the tale brings out the high spirituality of the Round Table, which is reflected in the knights' courteous, formulaic conversation. Perceval says to a maiden who helps him, "What ar ye that proferyth me thus so grete kyndeness?" He prays frequently, and he comports himself with saintly humility and grace throughout the Grail quest.

Before launching the quest, Malory acquaints us with the more approachable adolescent Perceval, within the "Sir Tristram" tale.

He sneaks away from his brother Agglovale when they are lodged at the castle Cardycan, taking Agglovale's squire with him, and seeks adventure on his own. He finds Persydes, a fellow knight, and as Perceval loosens his comrade's bound hands, a strange approaches. "Sir, beware! For yondyr commyth a knyght that woll have ado with you," Persydes cries. "Lat hym com!" Perceval responds, with an eagerness for combat that puts a sharp edge on his saintliness. Two pages later, he and Ector get into an argument about who will die first because of wounds inflicted by the other; neither sounds particularly courageous. And then the soon-to-be devout Perceval lapses into some fairly strong language, prefacing remarks with "A, Jesu!" and "So God me helpe!" (p.603) This earthy image serves as humanizing groundwork for the impending mysticism of the Grail episode. er/?

Humor plays a large role in the middle section of Morte Darthur. Larry Benson describes this part as a "lively, leisurely account of Arthurian chivalry in all its variety,"¹⁸ and dialogue here becomes important in creating the humorous tone. Some of the humor lies in ironic comments that the characters make on each others' behavior. For instance, the amiable Gareth, deserted by his comrades in a tournament, tells Isode, "Madame, I had a grete buffette, and I suppose I gaff anothir, but non of my fealowys, God thanke hem, wold rescowe me." (p.540) The ironic "God thanke hem" points up the unknighthliness of his supposedly heroic companions.

As Tristram leaves Cornwall, he leaves a biting message for

¹⁸Benson, p. 109

King Marke, enumerating his services to the ungrateful monarch.

" . . .and sey hym well am I rewarded for the fyghtyng with sir Marhalt, and delyverd all hys contrey frome ser-vayge. And well am I rewarded . . ." (p.376)

Instead of simply recounting the incidents, Tristram uses the sarcastic "well am I rewarded," over and over again in a long paragraph.

Dynadan, the clown of the Morte Darthur, is a good knight who makes fun of courtly custom. He scolds Tristram ~~for~~ always taking the hard way out. "And I may curse the tyme that ever I sye you, for in all the worlde ar nat such two knyghtes that ar so wood as ys sir Launcelot and ye, sir Trystram." (p.379) He uses a fairly graceful complex sentence to deliver the message, "You're crazy, man!" One of his more famous lines is his description of the knight lying by the well. "And there he laye lyke a fole grennyng and wolde nat speke, and his shyld lay by hym, and his horse also stood by hym. And well I wote he was a lovear." (p.511)

Dynadan's commentary in another knight's behavior, which is common in "Sir Tristram" but unusual elsewhere, paints a vivid picture in quick, simple language. The final sentence, short and prefaced by the casually personal "well I wote," is a classic punch line.

Palomides might have been a villain, hating and threatening Tristram, but he is too comic to be taken seriously. He tends to make long, convoluted speeches, stringing multiple clauses together and changing tenses midstream. He also has chronic hoof-in-mouth disease. During the "Joyous Gard" episode, he delivers the following "tydyngs" to two knights whose identities he does not know, but who have been revealed to the reader as sir Trystram and the infamous Brewnys Saunze Pite. foot?

"Sirris, wyte you well that kynge Marke of Cornwayle is put in preson by his owne knightes, and all was for the love of sir Trystram, for kynge Marke had put sir Trystram twyse in preson, and onys sir Percivale delyverde hym, and at the laste tyme La Beale Isode delyverde sir Trystram and wente clyerly away wyth hym into this realme. And all this whyle kynge Marke is in preson. And this be trouthe," seyde sir Palomydes, "we shall hyre hastely of sir Trystram. And as for to say that I love La Beall Isode peramoures, I dare as for to make good that I do, and that she hath my servyse abovyn all other lays and shall have all the terme of my lyff!" (p.507)

Aside from the absurdity of the situation, Palomydes' speech is amusing beacuse of its run-on, gossip-y qualities. Notice the change from past to present tense -- "and at the laste tyme La Beall Isode delyverde sir Trystram and wente clyerly away wyth hym into this realme. And all this whyle kynge Marke is in preson" -- that resembles the pattern of a child excitedly recounting a story. His wordiness ("as for to say . . . I dare make good") further robs him of seriousness and credibility.

The lightness of narrative tone in "Sir Tristram de Lyones" allows Malory to use stylistic devices for characterization. He selects the conventions that can help differentiate voices, choosing direct discourse over indirect and deviating from formal grammar to give his characters idiosyncracies of speech. Stock phrases also become associated with individuals, attaching tags to a few important personalities. The results can be both personalizing and humorous. Characters who appear in other parts of Morte Darthur are seen from a fresh angle. And a parade of characters unique to the Tristram section adds color and depth to the population of Malory's Arthurian world.

III

TRISTRAM AND LANCELOT

Our introduction to Tristram as a speaker shows him applying to King Meliodas, his father, to save the life of the stepmother, who has just tried to poison Tristram. With adolescent confidence bordering on arrogance, Tristram argues with the king.

Then seyde yonge Trystrams, "Geff me the lyff of your quene, my stepmodir."

"That is unryghtfully asked," seyde the kynge Melyodas, "for thou oughte of ryght to hate hir, for she wolde have slayne the with poyson, and for thy sake moste is my cause that she sholde be ded."

"Sir," seyde Trystrams, "as for that, I beseche you of your mercy that ye woll forgyff hir. And as for my parte, God forgyff hir and I do. And hit lyked so muche your hyghnesse to graunte me my boone, for Goddis' love I requyre you to holde you promyse." (p.279)

Trystram is not exactly irreverent in his references to God, but at the same time it is unclear whether the stepmother has been officially absolved as Tristram suggests, or whether "God forgyff hir and I do" is meant to indicate that Tristram is palying by his own rules. "I requyre you" is a strong phrase for a son to address to his father and king in a formal setting. His first sentence is not preceded by any form of address, which is especially noticeable because Malory consistently places the attribution oa a quoted sentence between an introductory word or phrase and the main body of the sentence. ("Sir," seyde kynge Marke, "I woll gyff you what gyffte I may gyff you." --p.456) The request for a gift should be prefaced by a respectful address, as Arthur does in speaking with Mark: "'Sir, gramercy, seyde kynge Arthur, 'this woll I aske you . . .'" (p.456) Instead, Tristram leads off with the blunt statement of his

request. It is an appropriate beginning, for bluntness and economy characterize his speech throughout the book.

In his phase of madness, Tristram becomes downright rude. While he is hiding out in the wilderness, a giant threatening a knight is spotted by a herdsman, who appeals to Tristram to "Helpe yondir knyght!" "Helpe ye hym," Trystram replies petulantly, ready to renege on his duty as a knight. (p.373) He does wind up slaying the giant, but his handling of the incident can hardly be called courteous.

Throughout his tale, sir Tristram speaks in short, simple sentences. He rarely delivers more than two or three sentences together; if he does, they are generally interrupted by extra attributions. This comparatively long speech shows his syntactical simplicity:

"Nat be my counceyle," seyde sir Trystram, "for I se by their pavylouns there woll be four hondred knyghtes. And doute ye nat," seyde sir Trystram, "but there woll be many good knyghtes, and be a man never so valyaunte nother so bygge but he may be overmatched. And so I have seyne knyghtes done many, and whan they wente beste to have wonne worshyp they loste hit; for manhode is nat worthe but yf hit be medled with wysdome. And as for me," seyde sir Trystram, "hit may happen I shall kepe myne owne hede as well as another." (p.521)

Three out of these four consecutive sentences are broken by the narrator's "seyde sir Trystram," something that rarely happens in speeches by the more sophisticated Lancelot. Even Palomides, who is no more sophisticated but is certainly more verbose than Tristram, gets away with longer stretches of uninterrupted speech. Moreover, Tristram's speech is primarily a series of independent clauses, with few subordinations and no relative pronouns. The only identifiable "conclusion" is what sounds like a standard proverb: "for manhode is nat worthe but yf it be medled with wysdome," which does not cull any words (or even a very clear idea) from the preceding

lines. The speech is typical of Tristram's brief, loosely-jointed style.

Throughout the Morte Darthur, Lancelot speaks courteously, in long, well organized paragraphs. He is so well known for his courtesy that when he appears disguised at a tournament, he is recognized by his speech. "Anone sir Trystram undirstood by his persone and by his knyghtly wirdis hit was sir Launcelot du Lake . . ." (p.551) Even when he loses his temper, he speaks in lengthy, logical sentences and uses "thou" sparingly. When Palomides oversteps the boundaries of knightly behavior in the heat of success at Lonezep, Lancelot begins to sound like Tristram but gains control by the end of the first clause.

Wyte thou well thou haste done me this day the grettyste despyte that ever ony worshipfull knyght ded me in tourne-ment othir in justys, and therefore I woll be avenged uppon the. And therefore take kepe to youreselff. (p.547)

The threat ends lamely but calmly, with the more courteous "youreselff" following "I woll be avenged uppon the." The logical tone introduced by "therefore," probably Lancelot's favorite word, shows that he has suppressed his anger. After Palomides begs mercy, with his usual verbal excess, Lancelot gallantly delivers a well-constructed speech of forgiveness. The general simplicity and reliance on parataxis in Morte Darthur makes a tightly constructed speech sound very dignified; this happens almost exclusively in dialogue,¹⁹ and some characters do it better than others. Lancelot carries off complex structure with finesse; Palomides shows how it can backfire when the speaker loses control of his syntax.

¹⁹Field, p.130

The temperamental differences between Lancelot and Tristram show clearly in their different ways of relating to the same cast of characters. Palomydes provokes each of them into angry speeches. Lancelot's response is a sermon; Trystram's is the ultimate challenge. Compare Lancelot's response to Palomydes, quoted above, with Trystram's answer to Palomydes' chafing.

"How now?" sayde sir Tristram. "For now I have the at avauntayge," seyde sir Trystram, "as thou haddist me thys day, but it shall never be seyde in no courte nor amonge no good knyghtes that sir Trystram shall sle ony knyght that is wepynles. And therefor take thou thy swerde, and lat us make and ende of thys batayle,!" (p.622)

Lancelot begins by using "thou," but by the end he has returned to the cooler "youreselff." Trystram stays with the exasperated "thou" and "thy." He also deviates from the "therefore take kepe to youreselff" formula, which is usually followed (as in the episode involving Lancelot and Palomides) with the description of a joust. Instead, he throws in a personal touch, "lat us make an ende of thys batayle," summarizing the rocky relationship with Palomides that has plagued him through most of his knightly career.

Trystam and Lancelot are each asked to knight a young man, a device through which their authority is reinforced. They perform the ceremony using patterns of dialogue that can be said to represent their respective styles. Beaumains (Gareth) asks Lancelot to knight him in a long exchange that I shall pick up in the middle.

"Than I pray you," seyde Beawmaynes, "geff me the Order of Knyghthod."

"Sir, than must ye tell me your name of ryght, and of what kyn ye be born."

"Sir, so that ye woll nat dyscover me, I shall tell you my name."

"Nay, sir," seyde sir Launcelotte, "and that I promyse you by the feyth of my body, untyll hit be opynly knowyn."

Than he seyde, "My name is Gareth, and brothir unto sir Gawayne of fadir syde and modir syde."

"A, sir, I am more gladder of you than I was, for evir me thought ye sholde be of grete bloode, and that ye cam nat to

the courte nother for mete nother drynke."

Than sir Launcelot gaff hym the Order of Knyghthode; and then sir Gareth prayde hym for to departe, and so he to folow the lady. (p.217)

And then there is Sir Tristram's knighting procedure, which takes place while he is traveling incognito in Ireland.

And therewithall suddeynly sir Trystrams ran unto the squyre -- his name was called Ebes le Renownys -- and prayde hym hartely in no wyse to telle his name.

"Sir," seyde Hebes, "I woll nat discover your name but yf ye commaunde me."

Than sir Trystramys asked hym what he dede in this contreys.

"Sir," he seyde, "I com hydir with sir Gawayne for to be made knyght, and yf hit please you of your hondis that I may be made knyght."

"Well, awayte on me as to-morne secretly, and in the fylde I shall make you knyght." (pp.289-290)

Which he does, without further verbal exchange.

It is not surprising that Gareth says much more than Hebes, because he is the focal character of the tale in which his knighting takes place. However, Tristram's knighting of Hebes is important, because Isode overhears the conversation and begins to suspect that Tramtryst is not just your average knight. He has only one spoken line in the whole episode, which consists of his usual short, independent clauses. He does not respond, as Lancelot does, to the reasons given by the candidate for his request of knighthood; there is no formal speech of welcome, only a command and a promise. Instead of the vocative that begins each of Lancelot's sentences, Tristram launches into his single sentence with the cryptic and less formal "well." This important step in Tristram's progress to the magic circle of supreme knights is dispensed with in a few simple and efficient lines.

Lancelot's manner of speech in certain situations is consistent within and outside the tale of Tristram, and this consistency serves

to unify Morte Darthur. In a situation similar to the clash with Palomides, he is cornered by Gawain and Arthur. He flies off the handle in response to a taunt from Gawain, addressing him with sarcastic deference, but the sentence ends with a strong declarative statement addressed to "ye."

"Hit may well be," seyde sir Launcelot, "but wyte thou well, my lorde sir Gawayne, and me lyste to com oute of-thys castell ye shuld wyn me and the quene more harder than ever ye wan a stronge batayle." (p.837)

His confident and slightly disrespectful approach to Gawain resembles Tristram's behavior toward Palomides, but it carries the same force of concise organization that characterizes Lancelot at all times. This consistent style individualizes and strengthens Lancelot's character.

Isode seldom speaks, but when she does, her sentences are carefully organized; her logic echoes the even-tempered sophistication of Lancelot. "'Sir Palomydes,' seyde the quene, 'I wote nat what is your desyre, but I woll that ye wete, howbehit that I profyrde you largely, I thought non evyll, nother, I warne you, none evyll woll I do.'" (p.319) She is a woman to be reckoned with; her intellectual abilities are brought out by her complex speech patterns. Her coolness also complements Tristram's tendency to arrogance and excessive enthusiasm. Malory gently pokes fun at Tristram by making his lady verbally his better half; by so doing he also creates a delicate balance of tones among Tristram, Isode, Guenever, and Lancelot.

Guenever appears rarely in the "Tristram de Lyones" section of Morte Darthur, and when she does, she most often acts as a detached commentator at tournaments if she speaks at all. She, too, is an occasional vehicle for sarcastic humor. When everyone who is anyone

has gathered at Camelot, "then the quene sente for sir Launcelot and bade hym com to her chambir that nyght, 'other ellys,' seyde the quene, 'I am sure that ye woll go to youre ladyes bedde, dame Elayne, by whome ye gate Galahad.'" (p.592) Of course, a bedroom-mixup scene follows, and Lancelot is once again caught kyssynge and clyppyng in the wrong bed.

Beneath the humor lies the precarious network of human relationships that will eventually topple and leave Camelot in ruins. By attending to personalities in relating dialogue, Malory engages the reader's sympathy with the characters whose ill fate and human fallibility create the climax of the story. In additon to adding variety to the text, the casually realistic and individualized dialogue of "Sir Tristram de Lyones" reveals amusing and attractive characters whose fate really matters, for personal reasons. Because of the attention to his complement, Sir Tristram, sir Lancelot becomes by far the most fully developed character in Morte Darthur. The gentleman and the hero take center stage, and stylistic as well as thematic relationships determine the positions of other characters around them.

IV

THE EFFECTS OF MALORY'S DIALOGUE

Malory's use of dialogue and direct speech places Lancelot at the center of the cast of Morte Darthur; the Tristram section strengthens his position as protagonist. Tristram acts as an extension of Lancelot, and the part of the book entitled "Sir Tristram de Lyones" offers an extension of the more conventional style that characterizes both the beginning and the end. The part concerning Tristram occupies a full one-third of the work, and it contains elements of the plot that are essential to the structure of Morte Darthur, including the introduction of Perceval and the affair of Lancelot and Elaine that leads both to Galahad's birth and to the breakdown of the relationship between Lancelot and Guenever.

X The shift in focus from Lancelot to Tristram enables the narrator to explore the relationships among characters that create the tension in the tales of the Holy Grail, Lancelot and Guinever, and the Death of Arthur that end the book. Malory both deepens our sympathies and offers entertainment in the Tristram section. He individualizes dialogue and allows characters to talk about each other, which means that readers can laugh with (and sometimes at) the knights and ladies who can be so awesome in other parts of Morte Darthur. Lancelot, however, emerges stronger than ever, his solemnity and faultless self-control made striking by contrast with Tristram's boisterousness. He is the straight, strong axle about which rotates Malory's image of King Arthur's England.

The relationship between Tristram and Lancelot involves both contrasting personalities and complementary roles. Tristram offers the more approachable version of knighthood, while Lancelot is clearly the ideal hero. Although his narrator sometimes pokes fun at Tristram, Malory identifies closely with him, leading the reader to do the same. Lancelot may impress us with sophisticated logic, but Tristram makes us chuckle. He is the gentleman hunter, who is occasionally victimized by such capricious ladies as Segwarides' wife, and who often employs colorful and sometimes vulgar language in moments of stress. X

By including the Tristram material in his version of King Arthur's story, Malory extends the ideals of knightly deportment beyond the boundaries of Camelot and makes them accessible to the reader with humorous and realistic dialogue. Cornwall and Ireland, instead of being just two more neighboring kingdoms (as they are in the more tightly-focused twentieth-century novel versions, for instance), are populated by real people who speak, in fact, the most realistically of any group in the book. They also conform to the various class standards for diction established in Malory's early tales, using knightly stock phrase, attempts at monarchical formality, and a great many expressions derived from Christianity. Many, including Sir Tristram himself, reflect other characters in Camelot, so that the characterizations of the Tristram section not only extend Camelot, but examine it with a magnifying mirror that picks out details overlooked by the more grandiose style of the final books. The details give Malory's readers something to grasp in the more important characters as we follow them through the mystical pursuits and tragic relationships that end Morte Darthur. X

The four-way balance in the styles of Guenever, Lancelot,

Tristram and Isode provides a network of contrasts that reinforce Lancelot's position as hero of the story. Isode, like Lancelot, uses complex grammatical structures. Tristram, like Guenever, is given to disjointed sentences and highly emotional style. The two pairs reflect each others' modes of expression in complementary relation. This works well between Tristram and Lancelot, too, allowing Tristram to bring knightly language down to earth. Because Tristram is greatly admired by the narrator, his similarity to Guenever invites the reader's sympathy for her cause, heightening the tension between Lancelot and Guenever that will develop later.

Lancelot's confirmation by Arthur, which involves word choice, sentence length, speech length, and rhythm, also strengthens his position as protagonist. The fact that it continues during the Tristram section, where confirmation is otherwise rare, suggests that Malory intended Lancelot and Arthur to remain heroic in spite of the lighter narrative tone. Lancelot is Arthur's only stylistic support in this section, while Lancelot himself has Isode as echo and Tristram as complement. From a stylistic standpoint, the "Tristram de Lyones" section is the decisive factor in establishing Lancelot as the ultimate hero of the story of Camelot.

An air of formality pervades fifteenth-century English literature, manifest in Lydgate's formulaic descriptions or in the convoluted sentences of Caxton's prologues and editions. The grammatical transition from middle into modern English causes some inconsistency in the use of relative pronouns, and dialogue compounds such difficulties. Malory stays away from complex sentences. His characters are capable of delivering long, formal speeches, but they do so mainly in two situations: in formal court settings, or when they

are strongly moved by an event that is pivotal to the plot, as in Isode's farewell to Tristram or Guenever's speech to the abbey nuns summarizing her relationship with Lancelot. Palomydes, of course, is fond of extended delivery, but his outbursts are full of exclamations and tend toward simple parataxis rather than dependent or relative clauses. He ends up sounding like a chatterbox, not an orator. Lancelot, on the other hand, makes a statement, backs it up, and puts his point across with admirable clarity, often accomplishing the whole process in a single well-balanced sentence. Because of his logic, he would seem dignified in any literary context, including the twentieth century; he is the *moreso* within the fifteenth century because of the prestige of Latin-based style among learned writers. X

Malory can handle formal structure, but he generally avoids it. This is particularly true of the Tristram section, where the narrator is more interested in entertaining readers than in impressing them. He reserves his best formal style for Lancelot's ideally heroic character, which gives complex sentences extra impact in moments of high drama. Some characters who attempt formal speeches, such as Palomydes and Angwyshe, overreach the limits of coherence and end up sounding pompous or even foolish.

No 900-page fictional work should be without comic relief, even if it involves the best-known material in the history of a culture. Malory's treatment of the "matter of Britain" has remained popular through five centuries. It is one of a great many accounts of the Round Table story; its popularity must be attributable to more than just content. The answer is simple: it is an entertaining book, a fun thing to read. Malory's prose is straightforward,

especially by comparison with fifteenth-century conventions, and his characters engage the reader's sympathy. Because the drama evolves from a few intimate relationships, the impact of Morte Darthur depends upon the reader's complete involvement with the individuals who live the story.

Humor often leads to insight; the leisurely pace of the Tristram section allows Malory's narrator to introduce some clowns and describe some entertaining moments that would not be compatible with a grander style. It is these details that disclose the presence of human individuals in the crowd of knights, ladies, sorceresses and monarchs. Palomides without his hoof-in-mouth syndrome would be just another love-inspired knight; Dynadan without his scolding would fade into Tristram's entourage. Perceval could very well have pulled off the Grail quest without showing us his adolescent awkwardness, but his ultimate virtue is more effective when it evolves from common weakness.

Malory has often been accused of neglecting to characterize individuals. It is true enough that the narrator seldom comments explicitly on a character's behavior. On the other hand, the Tristram section is filled with different people's comments about each other, from Guenever's evaluation of tournament proceedings to Dynadan's assessment of Tristram and Lancelot as the two craziest men he's ever met. In addition, the characters have distinct speech habits; they use features of structure and vocabulary that tag them in the mind of the reader. Palomides is fond of making long speeches full of qualifiers and tangents. Isode says little but is capable of very complex syntax. Even if these are not profound psychological keys, they do establish an array of identifiable voices.

Such differences also give colorful variety to the text, adding interest simply by the juxtaposition of styles.

CONCLUSION

Morte Darthur has maintained its popularity now for five centuries; scholars continue to study it and lay readers to enjoy it. The fascinating "matter of Britain" combines with Malory's entertaining style to create a world of fantasy and romance that is yet close enough to realism to engage the reader's sympathies. It is certainly the most popular English work surviving from the fifteenth century, and few romances from any period compete with it in breadth of appeal. Without undertaking to discover Malory's secret of success, we can look to him for some tips on how to attract continuing audiences of admiring readers.

The tales of Arthur's court can't be beat for rich material, but Malory selected and combined them in a fashion that distinguishes his work from that of scores of contemporaries who were dealing with the same material all across Europe. While many English writers were incorporating the formal Latin grammar of scholarship, into vernacular English, Malory tells his story in common speech, lending humor and realism to his characters and simplifying the narrative. He uses sparingly the romance tradition of plot interlacing, tying many "tales" together but allowing his focus to wander into several characters' lives for a personal effect that would be precluded by too much shifting of subject matter. He varies the tone and pace of his narrative, including enough "historical" details to satisfy his fifteenth-century audience's penchant for "the truth" but avoiding the psychological and spiritual commentary that slows the pace

of some of his sources, such as the Vulgate version of the Grail story.

The Tristram section features casual narration and a great deal of narrative discourse, both of which attach personal qualities to the characters involved. Two groups of characters should be considered for analysis: those who are involved only in the Tristram section and those who appear in other parts of the Morte Darthur. In both cases, their dialogue features individual characteristics that create distinct voices for some of the more important personalities. The differences affect word choice, complexity of sentence structure, speech length and organization, and emotional content as expressed in oaths and exclamations. Their conformity to some of the standards of courtly dialogue established in the first few tales serves to maintain their stature as participants in an important recreation of history. Their individuality makes them personally memorable, drawing the reader close to the story.

Lancelot's speech changes little in Morte Darthur; it remains sophisticated, well organized, and moderate in emotion, while everyone around him had been altered to some degree. While the society that surrounds him is explored and evaluated in "Sir Tristram de Lyones," Lancelot rests solidly at the hub of courteous idealism, imperfect in his judgment (even he can make mistakes, which is how Galahad comes to be born) but irreproachable in spirit. His strength of character shows in his consistently correct and graceful speech.

Sir Tristram appears almost exclusively in his own section; Lancelot is present throughout the Morte Darthur. He is, in fact, a strong rival for the focus of the "Tristram" tale. Tristram acts as a complement to Lancelot; together they are gentleman and hero, wit and integrity, candor and sophistication, bravery and restraint.

All of these qualities show in their dialogue. Their differences broaden the scope of the thematic material; their conformity to the requirements of knighthood and their parallel love relationships bind them together.

The Tristram section extends the tales of Camelot, from the legendary reign of a king somewhere in the Dark Ages to the accessible fifteenth century, and from Arthur's court to all of chivalric society. The narrator relaxes into an informal style that allows him to report details of dialogue not compatible with the heroism of the earlier sections or the mysticism and tragedy of the last. Such characterization heightens the tension of Morte Darthur's climax by making individuals important and memorable to the reader. Breadth and entertainment value are added to the story by means of characterization through dialogue. The character called Tristram serves as Lancelot's personal extension beyond Camelot; the "Tristram de Lyones" section solidifies Lancelot's position as the protagonist of a stylistically unified Morte Darthur.

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READING LIST

The Saga of Tristan und Isonde

The Book of Margery Kempe

Libretto to Wagner's opera Tristan und Isolde

Les poemes de Tristan et Iseut (extraits -- Nouveaux Classiques
Larousse)

The Paston Letters written between 1424 & 1506, vol.1

Lydgate's Temple of Glas

Bedier's Tristan et Iseut, translated into English by Hilaire Belloc

IF I CAN FIND A COPY: English translation of Gottfried von Strassburg's
Tristan.