“They ... toke their shyl dys before them and drew oute their swerdys ...”: Inflicting and Healing Wounds in Malory’s Morte Darthur

Stephen Atkinson

It seems unlikely that any substantial Middle English narrative contains a higher ratio of wounds per page than Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur. Wounds are simply the cost of doing business, whether the business is that of a fifteenth-century aristocrat or member of the gentry, or that of a Round Table knight. As Andrew Lynch puts it, “Blood is the basic currency of fights and quests.”1 Indeed, Malory’s depiction of the Arthurian world depends heavily on the lived experience of his own time. He is not writing fantasy, a category that does not yet exist in the minds of readers. His work is undeniably nostalgic and longs for a lost English polity that appears, for much of his narrative, to embody ideals of governance and chivalry only too clearly lost in his own time. Nor does he express the sort of doubts as to the historicity of Arthur’s Britain reflected, though disowned, in Caxton’s 1485 “Preface.”2 But though Malory presents a largely glorified picture of “tho dayes,” it is one which is glorified: chivalric combat in the Morte represents an exaggerated and enhanced version of the combats with which Malory and his first readers were familiar from experience.3 If Malory’s Arthurian world is more glamorous than the fifteenth century, the wounds and the techniques used to inflict them are those under-

1 Andrew Lynch, Malory’s Book of Arms (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 60.
2 “Caxton’s Preface,” xiii-xiv. References to Malory’s text are from The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. E. Vinaver, 3rd edition, rev. P.J.C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon 1990). Volume, page, and line numbers are given in parentheses. Both Caxton’s terminology, contrasting “fables” and “cronycles,” and the evidence he adduces for a historical Arthur, one of the Nine Worthies, testify to the absence of distinct modern categories, such as history, legend, or myth. Though the voice of the preface may well be read as disingenuous in some regards, it is clear that distinctions we would make today between, say, the Battle of Roncesvalle and Le Chanson de Roland, have not solidified. On the other hand, postmodernist thought has now questioned the solidity of the modern distinctions.
3 An exception might be noted at this point: historical jousts and single combats in the later Middle Ages were sometimes fought with deliberately diminished weapons: spears lighter than those which would be used in earnest, rebated swords. Needless to say, such practices
stood and practiced by Malory and his first readers. The causes behind them, though, are not, for instance, a petty rivalry between local “affinities” or even a larger encounter between Yorkist and Lancastrian partisans but, rather, chivalric ideals and the specific provisions of the Round Table Oath (1.120.17–24).

The *Morte* has never been out of print since Caxton’s first edition appeared in 1485. For more than 560 years, the text has been consistently adapted to the contemporaneous knowledge, interests, and values of its readers. The *Morte* has a reception history stretching across four and a half centuries, and that history has characterized the text in a host of ways, each appropriate to the time and the reader. Ultimately, the meaning of any text is the history of its reception. Nonetheless, it is clearly important, in a discussion of wounds and combat, to attempt to read the *Morte* as its first readers did – the only readers its author could have imagined.

The work attributed to Sir Thomas Malory was completed in 1469; it is preserved in a single manuscript, London, British Library Additional MS 59678, the so-called Winchester MS because it was discovered (accidentally) in 1934 in the library of Winchester College. Nothing beyond speculation suggests anything about its provenance or history, except that it appears to have been in William Caxton’s printing shop in the 1480s. What relationship it bears to Caxton’s 1485 printing of *Le Morte Darthur* (the title is Caxton’s) remains a matter of debate. Information about the author is equally obscure. The meticulous research of P.J.C. Field has convinced most scholars that the author is an obscure knight from Newbold Revel in Warwickshire; however, there are other available candidates. The Warwickshire knight led an interesting life, including long stretches in prison. While this enforced leisure may have given him the time to compose a work that runs to nearly 1000 manuscript pages, it does little to explain how he came to have access to the copious French manuscripts of the Vulgate cycle as well as the French post-Vulgate and English sources upon which he drew. This Thomas Malory also saw a good deal of combat (when not incarcerated), including service in France and England, as well as such local exploits as conducting an armed ambush of the Duke of Buckingham never occur in the world of Malory’s narrative. Every combat begins, at least, as one potentially a *outrance*, though far from all result in a death.
