Sir Thomas Malory
(c. 1405–1471)

The historical identity of Sir Thomas Malory, the author of Britain's most famous work on King Arthur, is almost as uncertain as the identity of the hero of his *Le Morte d'Arthur* (*The Death of Arthur*). All we know for sure about Malory is that he was a knight familiar with chivalric romances who was writing in the years 1469–1470. We know this from a sort of postscript that appears in the manuscript of Malory's work that William Caxton printed in 1485. In this postscript, Malory asks his readers to pray for his deliverance, suggesting that he was in prison during some of the time he was writing his stories about Arthur.

Since the fifteenth century, scholars have been trying to find out more about the actual person who wrote the work Caxton entitled *Le Morte d'Arthur*. At one time as many as five different "historical" Malorys were proposed. However, most scholars have come to accept the Thomas Malory born in Warwickshire as the most likely author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

This Warwickshire Malory served in France during the Hundred Years' War and apparently fought at the siege of Calais in 1436. A few years later he married a woman named Elizabeth, who bore him a son. Sir Thomas was elected to Parliament at least once and died in 1471, perhaps from the plague.

The record of this aristocratic war hero, however, also contains a series of arrests for theft, burglary, and assault, including the robbing of an abbey in which he supposedly broke eighteen doors and roughed up the monks.

But the charges against Malory were merely accusations, and there is no record of any trials or convictions. The late fifteenth century was a time of great political partisanship and civil disorder, so it is very possible that Malory's imprisonment was politically motivated. He might simply have backed the wrong side in a political conflict.

The Arthur in Malory's work is not the historical sixth-century general who helped his fellow Britons defend themselves against the invading Saxons. No, Malory's Arthur is a consolidation of later legends that developed in England and on the Continent. Using Celtic and Continental sources, Malory created a mythic Arthur who later became the very embodiment of British values.

*Le Morte d'Arthur*, coming as it does at the end of the fifteenth century, serves as a kind of literary swan song to the feudal order of the Middle Ages, with its castles, knights, and chivalric codes. Malory's readers lived in a different world. Cities were growing, and money and competition were replacing the old feudal ways of barter and mutual obligation. Something in the chivalric order that Malory portrayed, however, seems to have answered a longing in his audience for a more orderly world.

Detail from fifteenth-century French manuscript of *Le roman du roi Arthur et les compagnons de la Table Ronde* by Chrétien de Troyes.

The Art Archive/Biblioteca Nazionale Tursin/Dagli Ort.

Collection 2 • The Middle Ages
Before You Read

from The Day of Destiny

Make the Connection
People hate to let go of their heroes. In fact, many cultures tell stories in which the hero promises to return in an hour of need to help the people once again. How do we try to keep our heroes alive? We build statues to them and record their portraits on canvas, coins, and film. Most of all, though, we tell their stories—stories that we hope will keep our heroes and the values they respect alive in the memories of future generations.

Literary Focus
The Romance Hero
From the thirteenth century onward romance was a term applied to a verse narrative that traces the adventures of a brave knight or other hero who has to overcome danger for the love of a noble lady or some other high ideal. The typical medieval romance is a narrative set in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are suspended and idealized heroes fight, and almost always conquer, the forces of evil.

Malory’s Arthur is in many ways the archetypal, or typical, romance hero—the medieval descendent of the epic hero. The romance hero is usually born under mysterious circumstances, grows up in obscurity, and undergoes a childhood initiation involving a magic weapon. In his maturity he fights to defeat evil and promote peace. Throughout his life he is aided by magic weapons and wise mentors. Mysterious events surround his departure from this world, suggesting that he may return when his people need him the most.

Background
Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur contains a series of tales about the birth, education, adventures, and death (or disappearance) of King Arthur. In the early tales, Arthur persuades his knights to unite in the fellowship of the Round Table and to dedicate themselves to the chivalric code of honor. For a while, Arthur’s vision is realized, and justice prevails in the kingdom. But human frailties, including Arthur’s own, gradually corrupt the fellowship of the Round Table. Arthur becomes vulnerable to evil forces, personified by Sir Modred, who is Arthur’s own illegitimate son. In this last episode, Arthur is about to meet his wicked son in battle.

Vocabulary Development
righteous (ri’thæs) adj.: morally right.
prevailed (prē’väl’d) v.: gained the desired effect.
dissuade (di’swād’) v.: advise against.
brandishing (bran’dish′ing) v.: used as adj.: shaking in a threatening way.
piteous (pit′e-as) adj.: deserving of pity.

A romance hero is a larger-than-life figure, usually of mysterious origins, who performs extraordinary deeds with the aid of magic.

For more on the Romance, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Sir Thomas Malory 215
Then, on the night of Trinity Sunday, Arthur was vouchsafed\(^1\) a strange dream:

He was appareled in gold cloth and seated in a chair which stood on a pivoted\(^2\) scaffold. Below him, many fathoms deep, was a dark well, and in the water swam serpents, dragons, and wild beasts. Suddenly the scaffold tilted and Arthur was flung into the water, where all the creatures struggled toward him and began tearing him limb from limb.

Arthur cried out in his sleep and his squires hastened to waken him. Later, as he lay between waking and sleeping, he thought he saw Sir Gawain, and with him a host of beautiful noblewomen. Arthur spoke:

“My sister’s son! I thought you had died; but now I see you live, and I thank the lord Jesu! I pray you, tell me, who are these ladies?”

“My lord, these are the ladies I championed in righteous quarrels when I was on earth. Our lord God has vouchsafed that we visit you and plead with you not to give battle to Sir Modred tomorrow, for if you do, not only will you yourself be killed, but all your noble followers too. We beg you to be warned, and to make a treaty with Sir Modred, calling a truce for a month, and granting him whatever terms he may demand. In a month Sir Launcelot will be here, and he will defeat Sir Modred.”

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1. **vouchsafed** (vouch·sāft\(^\text{1}\)) v.: graciously given.
2. **pivoted** (piv′ət·id) adj.: turned.

**Vocabulary**

**righteous** (ri′chəs) adj.: morally right.
Thereupon Sir Gawain and the ladies vanished, and King Arthur once more summoned his squires and his counselors and told them his vision. Sir Lucas and Sir Bedivere were commissioned to make a treaty with Sir Modred. They were to be accompanied by two bishops and to grant, within reason, whatever terms he demanded.

The ambassadors found Sir Modred in command of an army of a hundred thousand and unwilling to listen to overtures of peace. However, the ambassadors eventually prevailed on him, and

**Vocabulary**

*prevailed* (prē-vāld′) v.: gained the desired effect.
in return for the truce granted him suzerainty of Cornwall and Kent, and succession to the British throne when King Arthur died. The treaty was to be signed by King Arthur and Sir Modred the next day. They were to meet between the two armies, and each was to be accompanied by no more than fourteen knights.

Both King Arthur and Sir Modred suspected the other of treachery, and gave orders for their armies to attack at the sight of a naked sword. When they met at the appointed place, the treaty was signed and both drank a glass of wine.

Then, by chance, one of the soldiers was bitten in the foot by an adder which had lain concealed in the brush. The soldier unthinkingly drew his sword to kill it, and at once, as the sword flashed in the light, the alarums were given, trumpets sounded, and both armies galloped into the attack.

"Alas for this fateful day!" exclaimed King Arthur, as both he and Sir Modred hastily mounted and galloped back to their armies. There followed one of those rare and heartless battles in which both armies fought until they were destroyed. King Arthur, with his customary valor, led squadron after squadron of cavalry into the attack, and Sir Modred encountered him unflinchingly. As the number of dead and wounded mounted on both sides, the active combatants continued dauntless until nightfall, when four men alone survived.

King Arthur wept with dismay to see his beloved followers fallen; then, struggling toward him, unhorsed and badly wounded, he saw Sir Lucas the Butler and his brother, Sir Bedivere.

"Alas!" said the king, "that the day should come when I see all my noble knights destroyed! I would prefer that I myself had fallen. But what has become of the traitor Sir Modred, whose evil ambition was responsible for this carnage?"

Looking about him King Arthur then noticed Sir Modred leaning with his sword on a heap of the dead.

"Sir Lucas, I pray you give me my spear, for I have seen Sir Modred."

3. suzerainty (süzər'əntē) n.: position of feudal lord.

"Sire, I entreat you, remember your vision—how Sir Gawain appeared with a heaven-sent message to dissuade you from fighting Sir Modred. Allow this fateful day to pass; it is ours, for we three hold the field, while the enemy is broken."

"My lords, I care nothing for my life now! And while Sir Modred is at large I must kill him; there may not be another chance."

"God speed you, then!" said Sir Bedivere.

**Vocabulary**

dissuade (di-swād') v.: advise against.
Arthur is mortally wounded, from Roman du Saint Graal (detail) (early 14th century).

The British Library, London.

When Sir Modred saw King Arthur advance with his spear, he rushed to meet him with drawn sword. Arthur caught Sir Modred below the shield and drove his spear through his body; Sir Modred, knowing that the wound was mortal, thrust himself up to the handle of the spear, and then, brandishing his sword in both hands, struck Arthur on the side of the helmet, cutting through it and into the skull beneath; then he crashed to the ground, gruesome and dead.

King Arthur fainted many times as Sir Lucas and Sir Bedivere struggled with him to a small chapel nearby, where they managed to ease his wounds a little. When Arthur came to, he thought he heard cries coming from the battlefield.

“Sir Lucas, I pray you, find out who cries on the battlefield,” he said.

Wounded as he was, Sir Lucas hobbled painfully to the field, and there in the moonlight saw the camp followers stealing gold and jewels from the dead, and murdering the wounded. He returned to the king and reported to him what he had seen, and then added:

“My lord, it surely would be better to move you to the nearest town?”

**Vocabulary**

brandishing (bran’dish•ing) v. used as adj: shaking in a threatening way.
“My wounds forbid it. But alas for the good Sir Launcelot! How sadly I have missed him today! And now I must die—as Sir Gawain warned me I would—repenting our quarrel with my last breath.”

Sir Lucas and Sir Bedivere made one further attempt to lift the king. He fainted as they did so. Then Sir Lucas fainted as part of his intestines broke through a wound in the stomach. When the king came to, he saw Sir Lucas lying dead with foam at his mouth.

“Sweet Jesu, give him succor!” he said, “This noble knight has died trying to save my life—alas that this was so!”

Sir Bedivere wept for his brother.

“Sir Bedivere, weep no more,” said King 4. succor (suk’or) n.: help.

A CLOSER LOOK: SOCIAL INFLUENCES

The Archetype of Arthur

If you remember your old myths and fairy tales, you’ll recognize many of the same elements in Arthur’s story. Even movies and cartoons today use these archetypes of the romance hero. (For more about the heroic archetype, see pages 54–55.)

In Malory’s mythic form, Arthur has the mysterious birth typical of the romance hero. His childhood points to his kinship with such mythic and romance heroes as the Greek Theseus and the German Siegfried. His strange death, departure, and promised return also place him among other “once and future kings”—heroes whose return is always hoped for.

The Arthurian tales were carried into the Elizabethan age. They were resurrected in the nineteenth century by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (see page 894), in his group of poems called Idylls of the King. Tennyson brought Arthur and his knights back at a time when the English nation, embarked upon building an empire, needed a reminder of its heroic past and special destiny.

The Arthurian legend was revived yet again in the twentieth century by T. H. White in his bestselling book The Once and Future King (1958). Though White’s treatment of the Arthurian material is ironic (in keeping with an ironic age), it still inspired the 1960s musical play and movie Camelot, which capture the romantic imagination of another generation struggling with disillusion and social disorder.

The Lady of the Lake, from Morte d’Arthur, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898).

The Art Archive.
Arthur, “for you can save neither your brother nor me; and I would ask you to take my sword Excalibur\(^5\) to the shore of the lake and throw it in the water. Then return to me and tell me what you have seen.”

“My lord, as you command, it shall be done.”
Sir Bedivere took the sword, but when he came to the water’s edge, it appeared so beautiful that he could not bring himself to throw it in, so instead he hid it by a tree, and then returned to the king.

“Sir Bedivere, what did you see?”
“My lord, I saw nothing but the wind upon the waves.”

“Then you did not obey me; I pray you, go swiftly again, and this time fulfill my command.”
Sir Bedivere went and returned again, but this time too he had failed to fulfill the king’s command.

“Sir Bedivere, what did you see?”
“My lord, nothing but the lapping of the waves.”

“Sir Bedivere, twice you have betrayed me! And for the sake only of my sword it is unworthy of you! Now I pray you, do as I command, for I have not long to live.”

This time Sir Bedivere wrapped the girdle around the sheath and hurled it as far as he could into the water. A hand appeared from below the surface, took the sword, waved it thrice, and disappeared again. Sir Bedivere returned to the king and told him what he had seen.

“Sir Bedivere, I pray you now help me hence, or I fear it will be too late.”

Sir Bedivere carried the king to the water’s edge, and there found a barge in which sat many beautiful ladies with their queen. All were wearing black hoods, and when they saw the king, they raised their voices in a piteous lament.

“I pray you, set me in the barge,” said the king.
Sir Bedivere did so, and one of the ladies laid the king’s head in her lap; then the queen spoke to him:

“My dear brother, you have stayed too long; I fear that the wound on your head is already cold.”
Thereupon they rowed away from the land and Sir Bedivere wept to see them go.

“My lord King Arthur, you have deserted me! I am alone now, and among enemies.”
Sir Bedivere, take what comfort you may, for my time is passed, and now I must be taken to Avalon\(^6\) for my wound to be healed. If you hear of me no more, I beg you pray for my soul.”

The barge slowly crossed the water and out of sight while the ladies wept. Sir Bedivere walked alone into the forest and there remained for the night.

In the morning he saw beyond the trees of a copse a small hermitage.\(^7\) He entered and found a hermit kneeling down by a fresh tomb. The hermit was weeping as he prayed, and then Sir Bedivere recognized him as the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been banished by Sir Modred.

“Father, I pray you, tell me, whose tomb is this?”
“My son, I do not know. At midnight the body was brought here by a company of ladies. We buried it, they lit a hundred candles for the service, and rewarded me with a thousand bezants.”\(^8\)

“Father, King Arthur lies buried in this tomb.”
Sir Bedivere fainted when he had spoken, and when he came to he begged the Archbishop to allow him to remain at the hermitage and end his days in fasting and prayer.

“Father, I wish only to be near to my true liege.”\(^9\)
“My son, you are welcome; and do I not recognize you as Sir Bedivere the Bold, brother to Sir Lucas the Butler?”

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6. **Avalon**: legendary island, sometimes identified with the earthly Paradise.
7. **hermitage** (hur’m'a-tij) n.: secluded home.
8. **bezants** (bez'ants) n. pl.: gold coins of Byzantium.
9. **liege** (lēj) n.: lord or sovereign.

**Vocabulary**

**piteous** (pit'e-as) adj.: deserving of pity.

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5. **Excalibur**: Arthur’s sword, given to him by the mysterious Lady of the Lake.
Thus the Archbishop and Sir Bedivere remained at the hermitage, wearing the habits of hermits and devoting themselves to the tomb with fasting and prayers of contrition.¹⁰

Such was the death of King Arthur as written down by Sir Bedivere. By some it is told that there were three queens on the barge: Queen Morgan le Fay, the Queen of North Galys, and the Queen of the Waste Lands; and others include the name of Nyneve, the Lady of the Lake who had served King Arthur well in the past, and had married the good knight Sir Pelleas.

In many parts of Britain it is believed that King Arthur did not die and that he will return to us and win fresh glory and the Holy Cross¹¹ of our Lord Jesu Christ; but for myself I do not believe this, and would leave him buried peacefully in his tomb at Glastonbury, where the Archbishop of Canterbury and Sir Bedivere humbled themselves, and with prayers and fasting honored his memory. And inscribed on his tomb, men say, is this legend:

HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS.¹²

¹⁰. contrition (kan-trish'an) n.: here, remorse for having offended God.

¹¹. Holy Cross: cross on which Jesus was crucified.

¹². Latin for “Here lies Arthur, the once and future King.”
Response and Analysis

Reading Check
1. What does King Arthur dream of on Trinity Sunday?
2. What is Sir Lucas’s advice to Arthur? What does Arthur do?
3. What happens when Arthur and Sir Modred meet?
4. Where does Sir Bedivere take the wounded king? What happens to Bedivere?

Thinking Critically
5. “The Day of Destiny” includes many romance motifs, or archetypes, that often occur in epics, legends, myths, and folk tales. Fill in this graphic organizer to show how each of the archetypes listed appears in the story of Arthur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romance Motif</th>
<th>Arthur Story</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faithful follower</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise old man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing of follower</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betrayal</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. Over the centuries many people have searched for Arthur’s grave. According to this old story, what should archaeologists look for in their search for the tomb?
7. What mysterious details surround Arthur’s last hours? How could these details—combined with the inscription on Arthur’s tomb—suggest that Arthur did not die?

Writing
Comparing Heroes
In a brief essay, discuss the ways in which King Arthur is like the ancient epic heroes who preceded him—heroes like Gilgamesh (see page 58), Achilles (see page 67), and, especially, the first archetypal British hero, Beowulf (see page 21). How is Arthur unlike such heroes? Use specific examples from the texts to back up your ideas. Before you write, gather information from the texts about these details that pertain to heroes:
- is a leader of the people
- has devoted followers
- has superhuman strength
- is courageous
- fights evil
- has magic weapons
- encounters supernatural elements

Vocabulary Development
Etymologies
righteous dissuade piteous prevailed brandishing
For each Vocabulary word listed above, look up its etymology in a dictionary. If a word has a prefix or suffix, look up its meaning as well. Make a chart like the one below for each word. Remember that prefixes and suffixes are defined separately in the dictionary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Prefix or suffix</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>righteous</td>
<td>-ous, “full of; characterized by”</td>
<td>(OE) rihtwis, meaning “right”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>