

## REVIEW

*Sir Thomas Malory: Le Morte Darthur*. By Peter Field (ed.). 2013. D. S. Brewer. Vol. 1 (text) Pp. xliii + 940. Vol. 2 (apparatus, commentary, glossary and index of names) Pp. xxxi + 988.

Reviewed by Malwina Wiśniewska-Przymusińska (Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań)

The original version of *Le Morte d'Arthur* has been lost for centuries and there has been a number of attempts at reconstructing the text from the surviving editions (e.g., Shepherd 2004). The two volumes produced by Field constitute a paramount contribution to Arthurian studies, providing a well-thought synthesis of available knowledge on Malory's original text and sources reflecting almost eighty years of scholarship. This critical edition consists of two volumes of considerable size, with almost two thousand pages in total. The first volume contains the introduction and the nine chapters of Malory's fiction. The second volume contains the "apparatus and commentary" on the contents of volume one.

The first volume contains the *Introduction*, *King Uther and King Arthur* (with four tales), *King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*, *Sir Launcelot du Lake*, *Sir Gareth of Orkney*, *Sir Tristram de Lyones: The first book* (with six tales), *Sir Tristram de Lyones: The second book* (with ten tales), *The Sankgreal* (nine tales), *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere* (five tales), *The Morte Arthur* (five tales). Volume Two contains the References and Abbreviations, Bibliography, and the critical commentary on all of the chapters from Volume One, as well as the five Appendices, an Index of Proper Names, and a Glossary.

In the *Introduction* Field justifies the reasoning behind the creation of a new edition of Malory's text, and devotes a lot of space to explaining how he identified and corrected the errors present in the *Winchester Manuscript* and Caxton's version, referring to these versions as W and C respectively. Field explains that he uses the W version as his primary source, which can be considered an arduous task, with its missing fragments, scribal corrections and omissions. Moreover, Malory drew his inspiration from a number of sources, even whole fragments at times, which creates a plethora of trails that need to be identified and followed.

Field utilises these sources with precision and a seemingly clear goal ahead of him – an edition closest to Malory’s original text. He uses Vinaver’s *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* as his starting point and in the introduction, he takes the reader through the process of identifying and selecting sources for his corrections and amendments of the text. Firstly, the author presents the complex history of the Winchester Manuscript, which was the basis for Vinaver’s version as well as of Caxton’s edition, explaining how both sources are related and what were their supposed backgrounds and correlations. The story of the two scribes who produced *W* presents an interesting picture of the pair, with the experience of Scribe A, and inexperience and technical mistakes of Scribe B. Those, along with apparently deliberate spelling choices of the two scribes constitute elements specific for *W*. Moreover, whenever a scholar wants to use *W* for reference, they have to deal with the lack of paragraphs and page-breaks all together. The scribes’ conscious effort to maintain neat and even pages result in some specific changes of spelling, errors or variants, in order to fit the page. Field describes these variations in detail, what he decided to correct and what to leave as it was, based on their frequency of appearance in *W* and in other sources. Next, the author explains his approach to the text’s layout and how he approached the reconstruction of Malory’s original organisation of the text. The lack of paragraphs and somewhat confusing narrative divisions in *W* constitute a substantial problem. Caxton’s specific approach to the topic also does not help with the issue. Field supports the idea that out of the two texts, it might be *W* that follows Malory’s idea of organisation rather than *C*, but identifies which elements might have been scribal errors and interferences into the layout. However, the author does not trust *W* completely and admits that its line-breaks might not represent Malory’s original. Errors are approached in a different manner than in Vinaver’s edition, and Field devotes a whole subsection of the Introduction to explaining his reasoning and methods. He explains how he managed to dive deeper into the issue of different readings of *W* and *C*, using both sources to find a version that makes most sense. The author lists and describes in detail the different kinds of errors he detected and amended. More data on errors can be found in the second volume, where the critical commentary lists all corrections done by Field. The commentary is clear, each fragment is easy to find through page and line references.

In his edition, Vinaver tried to follow the readings of the *W* manuscript, even if another interpretation would seem more correct, and this constrained him in a way that Field tries to avoid in his reconstruction. Nevertheless, he agrees with Vinaver’s opinion that although *W* contains errors, many of them are actual errors made by the scribes and their correction is easier to perform when compared to Caxton’s purposeful interferences in the text. However, the whole scheme of following *W* seems to fail in the parts where larger fragments are missing and

Field has to use *C* as a primary source. *King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius* constitutes a more problematic fragment, where *W* and *C* contain different versions of the story – where *W* contains a summary or leaves out a piece, *C* has more developed fragments. Field chooses one version over the other, and his decisions seem to be more subjective than objective here. However, these choices are always explained, thus, even if one disagrees with a particular editorial choice, the evidence and reasoning behind it is in the critical commentary. The author's decisions are not set in stone, but they seem well supported and constitute a definite step forward in reconstructing Malory's original text.

The text itself is definitely easier to approach in Field's version as the tales are not obscured by countless footnotes and different kinds of brackets. With the amount of reconstructive work done by Field, it is visible that this kind of layout is a logical choice. It seems that the reader's comfort as well as usability and functionality have been thought out. Moreover, volume one is an independent text on its own, volume two is a supplement for more scholarly readers. Practically, it is like using a large dictionary while reading a book, one line or fragment at a time. Some might be discouraged by that, while others might find it the most functional approach. Whether Field's linguistic choices are always correct or not, this edition is still an interesting addition to Arthurian literature studies and can be used both by students and academic scholars for different purposes.

## REFERENCES

- Field, Peter (ed.). 2013. *Sir Thomas Malory: Le Morte Darthur*. D. S. Brewer.  
Malory, Sir Thomas. 1485. *Le Morte Darthur*. Printed by William Caxton.  
Shepherd, Stephen H. D. (ed.). 2004. *Sir Thomas Malory: Le Morte Darthur*. W. W. Norton & Company.  
Vinaver, Eugene (ed.). 1947. *The works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Clarendon Press.