

Malory Paper
Due: Oct. 14
Length: short

For this paper I am looking for an argumentative discussion of one of the topics mentioned below. An argument should make a case for a position that could be otherwise. For example, “mastiffs are the best dogs” is the basis for a potentially interesting argument; “most mastiffs are big dogs” is the basis for an argument, but not likely one of much interest, and “mastiffs are dogs” is NOT the basis for an argument because it is simply a statement of fact, one that can be proved or disproved. Arguments, as people have realized since at least as far back as Aristotle, concern probabilities, not proof. So we can argue about something that may or may not be X, that is likely to be X, or that is probably X, but not about something that can be proven to be or not to be X. So when I ask for an *argumentative* discussion I am asking you to take a side, and to marshal evidence in support of your position. The word “discussion” suggests that I am looking for a fairly informal argument. You are welcome to use the first person pronoun (i.e. “I”), but if you have your own academic style of writing without the use of “I” then feel free to write like that. I guess the most important message I am trying to communicate by using the word discussion is that I want you to write in a way that is comfortable for *you*.

TOPICS

1. What is the *style* (to use the word kind of loosely) of *Le Morte Darthur*? I have seen it described as “documentary.” What “documentary” meant in that context, I think, is that the author managed to compose something that looks more like a historical account than a work of fiction, without actually writing something that achieves the status of history. In his “Apologie for Poetry” (1595) Philip Sidney argues that poesy (fictional writing) surpasses both philosophy and history by making the larger purpose it serves more attractive through storytelling, and therefore more likely to be taken to heart. *Le Morte* was written more than 100 years before Sidney’s “Apologie,” so don’t make the mistake of thinking that the author of *Le Morte* might have been consciously trying to take Sidney’s advice. But the first source for *Le Morte Darthur* seems likely to have been Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* which dates from about the 1130s. Sidney says that history concerns itself with precepts, with events that happened, and in doing so it becomes drier than a similar account of those events related in a fiction. Think about that, and discuss it using *Le Morte* as your material.
2. In “The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal” (pp. 496 – 587) it may seem that the knights, although they win all the time, just can’t win, in a more global sense. That is, there may be a conflict between their chivalric duties and their Christian duties. Is there such a conflict? If you find evidence suggesting there is, how do you see that playing out in the story? Might it have been possible, for example, for any knight other than Galahad to overcome the realities and the ideologies (Christian and chivalric) of his life?

3. Maybe the most obvious argument a person could enter into over *Le Morte Darthur* is the status of Merlin. Pick a side, and argumentatively discuss Merlin. There's an expression that says "to the victors go the spoils." One of the spoils of victory is the opportunity to shape history: i.e. to be the one who says what happened. Keep that in mind as you think of Merlin and Arthur. This is a series of tales told by Britons who rule, and who want to tie their privilege to an ancient lineage. So of course Merlin and Arthur look good in the telling. But imagine another side of the story. If Merlin has supernatural powers, where might they come from?
4. Finally, someone I greatly respect once used the phrase "that vexed concept of character" in a discussion about *Le Morte*. Someone else fastened onto something like the same idea in a way that I thought might be enlightening were the discussion to be framed around E.M. Forster's concept of flat and round characters. Imagine yourself jumping into such a discussion. Can we apply a modern notion of "character" to *Le Morte Darthur*? This discussion might overlap with or tie into the first topic I suggested, above. In a Shakespearean play like *Richard III* or *Henry IV, pt. 1* we get glimpses of the interiority of character. Richard says 'I'm a villain, and I like being a villain, watch what I do next,' and Prince Hal says 'I know I'm thought to be unworthy, but just wait' and in both cases we get a sense of who the character *really* is as opposed to how he appears to the other players on the stage. We are all accustomed to reading novels that take us completely inside the characters of the worlds they (the novels) create. I think it is safe to say we don't get any similar glimpses into the heads of Malorian characters. So do we need a different word than "character" to adequately discuss Merlin, Lancelot, Igrain (perhaps especially Igrain), Arthur, Gawain, etc.?
5. A topic of your identification, cleared through me, first. I'd be especially interested in topics concerning *Le Morte's* female characters (a word I will keep using until someone suggests something more appropriate, a la topic 4), or topics that can be seen to be feminist approaches to *Le Morte Darthur*.