

ANDREW LYNCH, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997. Pp. xx, 170. ISBN: 0-85991-511-5. \$53.

Specialists will derive great pleasure as well as profit from this subtle and challenging study. Dr. Lynch is well-read in Malory, in *Morte Darthur* scholarship, and in literary theory, and his enjoyment of literature, history, and ideas is infectious. He aims, he tell us (p. xvii), not to produce a single reading as intended by the historical author or implied by the *Morte Darthur*, but to identify features below the level of aesthetic patterning or conscious code, which might be thought of as the building blocks of Malory's imaginative structures or the outcroppings of his ideological predilections.

This is a strong starting point. Numerous inconsistencies in the *Morte Darthur* suggest that it is the unsystematic product of an unacademic mind, although that has not prevented numerous Procrustean attempts to impose one or other intellectual or imaginative system on it. Lynch contends that the meaning of the *Morte Darthur* is most fully embodied in combat, which in Malory's time could be an elaborately structured activity symbolically asserting a surprising range of meanings. That, however, does not lead him to propose yet another all-embracing schema. Instead, he accepts the book's inconsistencies and contradictions, and relishes them.

One of Lynch's best passages is a sophisticated argument (pp. 72-3) for accepting localised meanings in Malory. Lynch's own meaning is often equally localised. He gives us an introduction and six loosely related essays, on good name, the realities of combat, the thematics of combat, Malory's 'Book of Sir Tristram', the character of Palomides, and emotion and gender. Within the essays, sections and subsections are equally loosely related, but they are always succinct and intelligent, and the knotty arguments are often put with striking felicity.

We are given, among other things, a fine account of how Malory's combatants are united by the reciprocity of their fighting, and the blood they shed physically embodies their nobility. Lynch is shrewd too on the implications of envy as a counterforce undermining that nobility. His use of mediaeval philosophy to elucidate the nature of will in Malory's characters is a tour de force. On gender, he demonstrates that the way Malory associates weakness with women is less a characterization of their sex rather a reflection of their social situation in his time: his male characters in situations of powerlessness behave in precisely the same way. (I wish he had extended his consideration of women in situations of power to include Igrayne at Uther's court, Elaine of Ascolat, and Guenivere in Mellyagaunte's castle.)

His judgement is not consistently reliable. Chapter 1 is damaged by exaggerating the differences between shame-cultures and guilt-cultures, and distorted by a curious attempt to deny status as persons to author, narrator, and characters while attributing it to the *Morte Darthur* itself. Chapter 2 minimises the moral dimension in Malory's combats in a way that is difficult to reconcile with Chapter 3, and makes the *Morte Darthur* sound like a Rambo film. Although Lynch manages a splendid demonstration of the internal contradictions of Malory's views on social status (in Ch. 3), he several times seriously misreads Malory's views on money, rank, and power, asserting, for instance, that the system of honour in the *Morte Darthur* must be a disguise for

inequalities of power. Malory seems to me to imply that inequalities of power are (in the right hands) something to celebrate. There are other suspect 'anxieties' as well.

Although this book contains many more good judgements than bad, they alternate unpredictably. The weak first chapter includes brilliant observations on the way Malory's psychological terminology implies that behaviour is habitual and people do not change. Conversely, in the course of what may be the most penetrating observations ever made on the nature of Malory's characterization, Lynch denies Malory's characters a secret inner life, while himself shrewdly—and characteristically from politics—showing why they should have one (p. 135), as some of them sometimes very memorably do. Read this book: it will make you think.

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