

REVIEW: *Le Morte Darthur: Selections*, edited by Maureen Okun. Broadview Press, 2015. Pp. 374. 7 b/w illustrations. Paperback: \$15.95. ISBN 978-1554811595.

Maureen Okun's edited volume of material from *Le Morte Darthur* and contextual material surrounding Malory's text comes as a pleasant surprise considering the portability of her *Selections*. In recent years, edited volumes on Malory's opus have worked to balance a focus on the text of the *Morte* with contextual materials surrounding chivalry in the later Middle Ages. Okun, along with a team of general editors, does an admirable job of centering generous selections of the *Morte* around well-chosen secondary sources and insightful historical information. Okun's *Selections* are flanked on one side by an incisive introduction into late medieval historical, cultural, and textual information surrounding the production and impact of the *Morte*, as well as linguistic features inherent to the text. On the other side is a surprising array of contextual sources, including both folio facsimiles of the Winchester manuscript of the *Morte* and selections from the French cycles (in translation of course), as well as selections from such culturally relevant works as Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore* and representative manuscript images punctuating selections with relevant artistic input. Indeed, much like criticism of the *Morte* itself, the central portion of the volume containing the selections from Malory's text is to some extent overshadowed by the ancillary texts and analysis that have been deployed to introduce and contextualize the volume's main subject, at least for advanced readers of Malory. Nonetheless, this is a stellar introduction of the *Morte* and Malory criticism, offering readers unfamiliar with Malory a veritable toolbox of information with which to discuss and interpret the text, as well as situating more advanced readers within a diverse milieu of secondary texts to research further.

The introduction to Okun's *Selections* contains a compact but effective overview of the history, influences, language, style, and textual provenance of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Okun succinctly describes the "intriguing" and even "unsavory" details we know of Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, allowing readers to come to their own conclusion as to what impact the historical Malory ought to have on the textual *Morte*. Okun's introduction also enumerates Malory's sources in detail, especially explaining which sections of the *Suite du Merlin*, the prose *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal* of the Vulgate Cycle, the prose *Tristan*, and *La Mort le Roi Artu* inform relevant portions of Malory's work. She also briefly mentions the influence of the *Alliterative* and *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* in constructing specific episodes. This is a short

but insightful overview for locating the influence of Malory's source texts in the narrative itself. For introductory readers, it can be difficult to piece together a mental map of the elements of prior texts at work in the *Morte* alongside Malory's revisions. Thankfully, Okun has done an excellent job of foregrounding the larger conversation of Malory's use of his sources in an easily accessible fashion, providing students eager for more Arthurian literature a ready shopping list of source texts to enquire about at their university libraries.

Also notable in Okun's introduction is a primer on medieval chivalry, both from a historical perspective as well as a critical overview of scholarly perspectives on chivalric codes of conduct, kinship loyalties, homosocial bonds between knights, courtly love, and the marginal yet essential role ladies play in the *Morte's* knightly games of conquest and prowess. However, unlike the previous enumeration of the *Morte's* source texts, we have no scholars or reputable works sourced in Okun's commentary on knightly society in the later Middle Ages. A few notable names, even in a footnote or endnote of the chapter (for there are copious footnotes spread throughout the *Selections* proper) would have made this section equally as useful for students just entering the field of Malory studies. A note about Richard Kaeuper's *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* would have served as an excellent reference for readers eager to learn more about why combat prowess was so "obviously prized in Malory's world." A mention of Kenneth Hodges's *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Morte Darthur* would have provided a launching pad for readers to learn more about the importance of kinship loyalty systems that come into such dramatic conflict with Arthur's idealistic chivalric project. And Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* practically begs to be cited when Okun alludes that "Malory's imaginative world *has been called* homosocial" (Okun 16, my emphasis). While I understand that this is not supposed to be a companion for further Malory research, the compact size of the *Selections* and its generous emphasis elsewhere on Malory's source texts proves difficult to reconcile with a lack of footnotes or endnotes in this section, or even a bibliography at the end of the book for further reading.

Nonetheless, this introduction is worthwhile for introductory medieval students especially, due to the fact that it includes an almost overly-generous primer on the *Morte's* Middle English language and style, focusing on regional elements of speech, French holdovers from Malory's source texts in place names and colloquialisms, differences in grammar between Middle and modern English, pronoun usage (especially the second pronoun *thou and thee*), possessives and plurals,

and popular Middle English constructions with no modern equivalent. Okun takes the time to give relevant examples of each, as well as devoting page space in the selections themselves to listing these constructions out and giving their modern-day equivalents. Okun also highlights stylistic choices Malory made to streamline his narrative, giving a glowing impression of the effect of these choices: “With little to slow down the powerful forward movement of the story, the narrative is all the more likely to sweep readers along. And what description there is stands out jewel-like, the more striking and memorable for being relatively rare” (22). Okun’s obvious enthusiasm for the grammatical and stylistic effects of Malory’s work is infectious, and it is easy to see the passion in fulfilling her intent for the text. In the note on using Field’s revised Vinaver version of the *Morte* to show respect for the importance of Caxton’s printed edition as well as maintain fidelity to the Winchester manuscript’s unvarnished beauty, Okun states that “the intent of this edition is to make Malory accessible to readers with little or no knowledge of Middle English, but also to allow them to experience much of the flavor of the original” (26).

The selections from the *Morte* are indeed generous, yet, like all abridged versions of Malory, cannot include every reader’s favorite instances of what Okun calls the *Morte*’s “wonderful strangeness” (26). Nonetheless, the selections draw mainly from the adventures of Lancelot throughout the text, even when Okun features books of other knights such as the Book of Sir Tristram. Numerous unbroken stories are presented for the reader, including the marriage of Uther to the crowning of Arthur; Lancelot’s wooing by the four Queens to donning Kay’s armor and defeating knights in his name; the further adventures of Lancelot in the Book of Sir Tristram concerning his mistaken conception of Galahad with Elaine and his resulting madness upon being rebuked by Guinevere; the beginning of the Sankgreal Quest and several of Lancelot’s adventures during the quest, up to Galahad’s ascension at the end of the Quest; Lancelot’s resumption of his pre-Sankgreal lifestyle to the healing of Sir Urry; and the final section of the *Morte* from the treachery of Aggravain and Mordred to Arthur’s final battle and the death of Lancelot. Okun’s sections are well chosen, if heavily weighted (as they must be) in favor of the adventures of the doomed Lancelot. The presentation of the sections utilizes modernized English with spelling corrections and paragraph breaks on the majority of the page, followed by copious footnotes instructing readers unfamiliar with Middle English on the colloquialisms of the period below. Footnoting this extensive shortens the viewing space of the text by up to a third in some places, creating a problematic situation where the cure for using a hybrid

modernized Middle English has required more page-space for corrections than a standardized modern English translation would, and where uncorrected Middle English texts would be expected to utilize a similar amount of footnoting anyway. Even in the last section on the death of Arthur, Okun is still noting “*pray*” as “Beg,” “*charge*” as “Order,” and “*wit you well*” as “You may be certain that,” amongst other vagaries of Middle English that remain as part of the text even through modernization. While Okun’s notes admirably serve her purpose in finding “a path somewhere between the manuscript’s original language and a completely modern rendering of the text,” they also limit the textual space that she can devote to the story itself over and above her monumental efforts to gloss difficult terms for readers entirely inexperienced with Middle English (26). The extensive glossing and explanatory notes will best serve introductory medievalists and aid in their transition to reading Middle English itself.

The final portion of Okun’s *Selections* is arguably the diadem of the collection: Okun includes contextual materials ranging from folio pages of the Winchester manuscript with facing-page transcriptions of unadulterated Middle English; Caxton’s Preface to the *Morte* with excellent referential footnoting; and a woodcut illustration from Wynken de Worde’s 1498 edition of the *Morte*. There are selections on chivalry from Ramon Llull’s *Book of the Order of Chivalry*, translated by William Caxton; from the “Contemporary Account of the Tournament between Lord Scales and the Bastard of Burgundy, 1467;” and on courtly love there are several sections from Andreas Capellanus’ *The Art of Courtly Love*, translated by John Jay Parry. Okun masterfully finishes this final portion of her contextual materials by providing several small selections of the source texts that Malory used, including footnoted Middle English passages of the *Stanzaic* and *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, as well as short translations of the *Vulgate Story of Merlin* by Rupert T. Pickens and the *Le Morte Artu* by Norris Lacy. Each of these passages is separated by beautiful black and white illustrations from the Manesse Codex and other folios, complete with bibliographical data so that enterprising students can search for the images themselves. This last section seemed almost bittersweet in its brevity, but even given a limitation on space Okun has woven some exceptional gems of the philosophy, art, and literature of Malory’s world into the tapestry of the *Morte*.

The presentation and focus of Okun’s *Le Morte Darthur: Selections* comes full circle in the closing sections of her volume, ensnaring the imagination of this reader with fascinating details and selections expertly presented. Okun and her team have most certainly fulfilled the promise to allow students “to experience much of the flavor of the original” *Morte*

Darthur and the world from which it came. This volume will be indispensable for any student encountering Malory for the first time, and it provides more than enough pleasant surprises for Malory specialists to be an excellent text to use in their own classes.

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