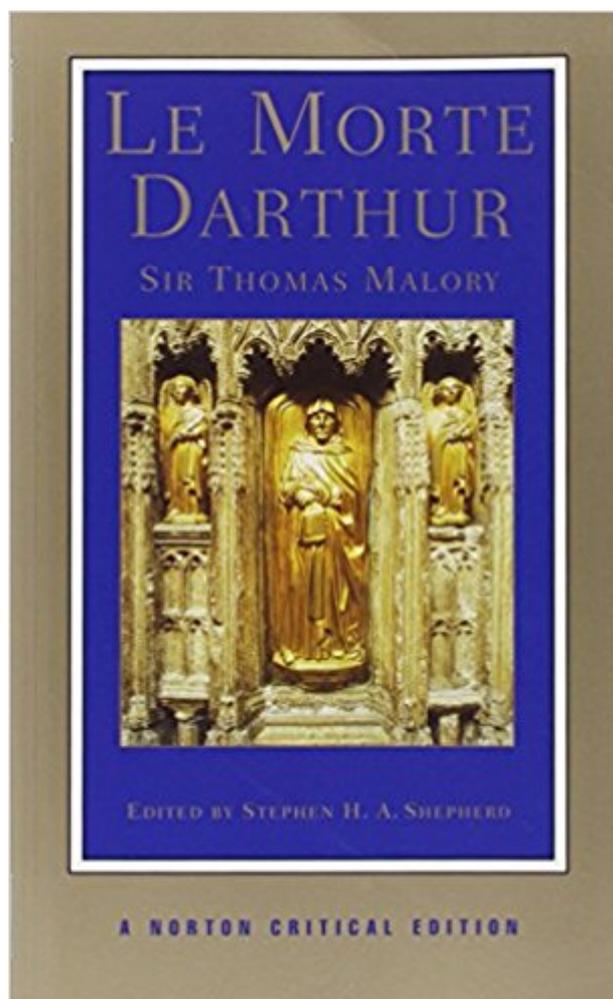


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Le Morte Darthur (Norton Critical Editions)



Synopsis

The text is unabridged, with original spelling and extensive, easy-to-use marginal glosses and footnotes. No other edition accurately represents the actual (and likely authorial) divisions of the text as attested to by its two surviving witnesses—Caxton's 1485 print and, especially, the famous Winchester Manuscript. The Winchester Manuscript is now generally agreed to be the more authentic of the two earlier texts. The Norton Critical Edition is the first edition of Malory to recover important elements of this manuscript: paragraphing marginal annotations hierarchies of narrative division as signaled by size and decorative intricacy of initial capitals and font changes The Norton Critical Edition also represents, in black-letter font, the striking rubrication of proper names in the Winchester Manuscript, reconstructing for readers something of an authentic medieval reading experience, one which gives visual support to Malory's extraordinary representation, in character and setting, of a chivalric ideal. No other student edition of Malory contains such extensive contextual and critical support.

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Customer Reviews

The Norton Critical Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd partly replaces Eug ne Vinaver's *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* and is in many ways a better effort. This edition stands somewhere between a scholarly, critical edition and a popular edition. It is based mainly on the Winchester manuscript with emendations and additions from

Caxton's 14th century printed version. Abbreviations are expanded, major (but not minor) corrections of the text are noted, the obsolete characters thorn and yogh are replaced by modern letters, use of u and v, i and j follow modern usage. and word division, punctuation, and capitalization also edited to follow modern conventions, including use of quotation marks. But otherwise spelling is not modernized, large capitals in the manuscript are indicated in the printed text by lombardic capitals of approximately the same relative size, paragraphing is mostly followed exactly (with even the // paragraph break marks being rendered by indentation followed by the symbol ¶) and further paragraphing without ¶ where other punctuation or capitalization anomalies indicate sectioning. Vinaver's edition became, eventually, notorious for ignoring the divisions given within the manuscript itself, an especially unfortunate defect since Vinaver's theories about Malory's composition supposedly depended on paying especially close attention to such matters. In the manuscript, rubricating (that is, red lettering) was employed in scribing almost all personal names as well as on some other names and in marginal notes and is here represented by a black-letter font.

A reviewer can propose, but only disposes. Way back in 2004, I was unable to review the then-new Norton Critical Edition of "Le Morte Darthur" (Winchester MS version -- see below) because I had already posted a review of the Penguin English Library/Penguin Classics edition (Caxton's text). In the end, I wound up discussing Shepherd's treatment in a review of the Oxford Standard Authors edition, edited by Eugene Vinaver under the idiosyncratic title of "Malory: Complete Works." Now that the NCE (Norton Critical Edition) has its own page, I've decided to slightly modify that combined review, and post it where I originally wanted it to go. This is mainly a review of two old-spelling complete editions of the work commonly known as "Le Morte D'Arthur" (Anglo-Norman French for "The Death of [King] Arthur"), both available in paperback. The language they are in can be called either very late Middle English, or very early Modern English; other, easier-to-read, editions will also be mentioned below. For those who are already familiar with the "Morte" from modernized-spelling popular editions, and the existence of two sources for a "definitive" text, and are looking for a more scholarly, but affordable, edition, here is the short view of the situation: The sole choice used to be Eugene Vinaver's "Malory: Complete Works," in the Oxford Standard Authors series (from Oxford University Press; the title will be explained shortly). Available since 1971, it is in (rather small) plain type, with no special features on the page except some marginal notations, and the occasional footnote. S.H.A.

"Le Morte D'Arthur" comes at a turning point in English literature. It is both a summation of the courtly legend and lore of the Medieval world and indicator of literary times to come. Not quite a novel, not quite a collection of tales, not quite an exemplar of etiquette and ethics, it was still one of the great creative accomplishments of the 15th century. Countless generations of writers, poets and artists and felt its influence. Unfortunately, my memories of Malory's work are tainted by my memories of the difficulties of reading the book. In college I was sentenced to reading small paperback editions with tiny, cramped print. It was never possible to settle into the task for more than a short time without feeling a headache coming on. As a result my impression of the book was that it was both interesting and impenetrable. It was with great relief that I went on to other classes and texts. Lately, I found I needed a copy of "Le Morte D'Arthur" again, and in reviewing the available editions discovered this new edition, edited by John Matthews and illustrated by Anna-Marie Ferguson. When it arrived, I was amazed and delighted. Academically the edition is much as one would expect. It is basically a reprint of a Medici Society version of the Caxton original. Matthews has corrected some spelling problems. He has also silently interpolated some snippets of the manuscript version (some 20 total) where these make the narrative clearer. It is unfortunate that he did not document these additions to prevent scholastic confusion, but he did not wish to break up the narrative with footnotes. I have found several of the changes and they all make the sense better.

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