

PREPARING to Read

from *Le Morte d'Arthur*

Romance by SIR THOMAS MALORY

Retold by KEITH BAINES



Comparing Literature of the World

Le Morte d'Arthur and the *Ramayana*

This lesson and the one that follows present an opportunity for comparing legendary deeds in *Le Morte d'Arthur* and the *Ramayana*. Specific points of comparison in the *Ramayana* lesson will help you contrast characters and scenes in *Le Morte d'Arthur* with those in Valmiki's epic.

Connect to Your Life

A Second Chance Have you ever done or said something that you later regretted? If so, why did you regret it? Given a second chance, how would you have behaved differently? Share your thoughts with your classmates.

Build Background

Arthurian Legends The legend of King Arthur is one of the most popular and enduring legends in Western culture. Some historians believe that the fictional Arthur was modeled on a real fifth- or sixth-century Celtic military leader whose cavalry defended Britain against the invading Anglo-Saxons. However, the historical Arthur was undoubtedly very different from the king of later legend, who ruled an idealized world of romance, chivalry, and magic.

Since the sixth century, there have been many variations of the stories celebrating King Arthur. Most English-speaking readers have been introduced to the Arthurian legends through Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* or one of its many adaptations. Malory's work consists of a number of interwoven tales that chronicle the rise and fall of the Arthurian world. These tales are based on earlier English and French stories about Arthur's court and are populated by such famous characters as Merlin the magician, Queen Gwynevere (also spelled Guinevere), and a host of knights, including Sir Launcelot, Sir Gawain—whom you encountered in the previous selection—Sir Tristram, and Sir Galahad. Although the title *Le Morte d'Arthur* ("The Death of Arthur") perhaps applies best to the last section of Malory's work, it is by this title that the entire work has come to be known.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

acquiesce	ensue	ravage
assail	entreaty	redress
depredation	forbearance	reeling
dissuade	guile	succor
dwindle	incumbent	usurp

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization is the way in which writers guide readers' impressions of characters. Malory combines details of appearance, speech, thoughts, and actions with comments on the characters to establish the essential nature of his characters.

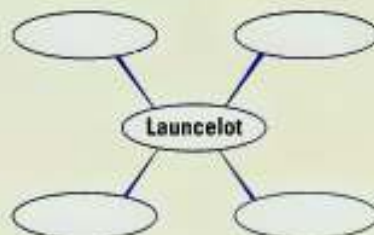
During the absence of King Arthur from Britain, Sir Modred, already vested with sovereign powers, had decided to usurp the throne. Accordingly, he had false letters written—announcing the death of King Arthur in battle—and delivered to himself.

As you read this story, be aware of details of appearance, behavior, and action that contribute to characterization.

ACTIVE READING UNDERSTANDING CHARACTERIZATION

In describing Malory's **characterizations**, one critic has said that Launcelot always seems noble in spite of his faults. As you read the selection, note Launcelot's words and actions and those of other characters in response to him. Think about whether these details of characterization support the view of Launcelot as flawed but noble.

READER'S NOTEBOOK Use a cluster diagram to record examples of Launcelot's speech and behavior, as well as the words and acts of others, that contribute to Malory's characterization of him.





KING ARTHUR'S FAVORITE KNIGHT, SIR LAUNCELOT, HAS FALLEN IN LOVE WITH THE KING'S WIFE, GWYNEVERE. THE SECRET LOVE AFFAIR IS EXPOSED BY SIR MODRED, ARTHUR'S SON BY ANOTHER WOMAN, AND GWYNEVERE IS SENTENCED TO BURN AT THE STAKE. WHILE RESCUING THE IMPRISONED GWYNEVERE, LAUNCELOT SLAYS TWO KNIGHTS WHO, UNKNOWN TO HIM AT THE TIME, ARE THE BROTHERS OF SIR GAWAIN, A FAVORITE NEPHEW OF ARTHUR'S. AFTER A RECONCILIATION, LAUNCELOT RETURNS GWYNEVERE TO ARTHUR TO BE REINSTATED AS QUEEN. AT THE URGING OF SIR GAWAIN, WHO STILL WANTS REVENGE ON LAUNCELOT, THE KING BANISHES LAUNCELOT TO FRANCE, WHERE THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT BEGINS.

Detail of Arthur from the Nine Heroes Tapestry (about 1385), probably Nicolas Bataille. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, Munsey Fund, 1932 (32.130.3a).

from

LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

The siege of Benwick

When Sir Launcelot had established dominion over France, he garrisoned the towns and settled with his army in the fortified city of Benwick, where his father King Ban had held court.

King Arthur, after appointing Sir Modred ruler in his absence, and instructing Queen Gwynevere to obey him, sailed to France with an army of sixty thousand men, and, on the advice of Sir Gawain, started laying waste¹ all before him.

News of the invasion reached Sir Launcelot, and his counselors advised him. Sir Bors spoke first:

"My lord Sir Launcelot, is it wise to allow King Arthur to lay your lands waste when sooner or later he will oblige you to offer him battle?"

Sir Lyonel spoke next: "My lord, I would recommend that we remain within the walls of our city until the invaders are weakened by cold and hunger, and then let us sally forth² and destroy them."

Next, King Bagdemagus: "Sir Launcelot, I understand that it is out of courtesy that you permit the king to ravage your lands, but where

will this courtesy end? If you remain within the city, soon everything will be destroyed."

Then Sir Galyhad: "Sir, you command knights of royal blood; you cannot expect them to remain meekly within the city walls. I pray you, let us encounter the enemy on the open field, and they will soon repent of their expedition."

And to this the seven knights of West Britain all muttered their assent. Then Sir Launcelot spoke:

"My lords, I am reluctant to shed Christian blood in a war against my own liege;³ and yet I do know that these lands have already suffered depredation in the wars between King Claudas and my father and uncle, King Ban and King Bors. Therefore I will next send a messenger to King Arthur and sue⁴ for peace, for peace is always preferable to war."

1. laying waste: destroying.

2. sally forth: rush out suddenly in an attack.

3. liege (lēj): a lord or ruler to whom one owes loyalty and service.

4. sue: appeal; beg.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

ravage (rāv'ij) *v.* to cause great damage to; devastate

depredation (dēp'rī-dā'shən) *n.* destruction caused by robbery or looting

Accordingly a young noblewoman accompanied by a dwarf was sent to King Arthur. They were received by the gentle knight Sir Lucas the Butler.

"My lady, you bring a message from Sir Launcelot?" he asked.

"My lord, I do. It is for the king."

"Alas! King Arthur would readily be reconciled to Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawain forbids it; and it is a shame, because Sir Launcelot is certainly the greatest knight living."

The young noblewoman was brought before the king, and when he had heard Sir Launcelot's entreaties for peace he wept, and would readily have accepted them had not Sir Gawain spoken up:

"My liege, if we retreat now we will become a laughingstock, in this land and in our own. Surely our honor demands that we pursue this war to its proper conclusion."

"Sir Gawain, I will do as you advise, although reluctantly, for Sir Launcelot's terms are generous and he is still dear to me. I beg you make a reply to him on my behalf."

Sir Gawain addressed the young noblewoman:

"Tell Sir Launcelot that we will not bandy words with him, and it is too late now to sue for peace. Further that I, Sir Gawain, shall not cease to strive against him until one of us is killed."

The young noblewoman was escorted back to Sir Launcelot, and when she had delivered Sir Gawain's message they both wept. Then Sir Bors spoke:

"My lord, we beseech you, do not look so dismayed! You have many trustworthy knights behind you; lead us onto the field and we will put an end to this quarrel."

"My lords, I do not doubt you, but I pray you, be ruled by me: I will not lead you against our liege until we ourselves are endangered; only then can we honorably sally forth and defeat him."

Sir Launcelot's nobles submitted; but the next day it was seen that King Arthur had laid siege to the city of Benwick. Then Sir Gawain rode

before the city walls and shouted a challenge:

"My lord Sir Launcelot: have you no knight who will dare to ride forth and break spears with me? It is I, Sir Gawain."

Sir Bors accepted the challenge. He rode out of the castle gate, they encountered, and he was wounded and flung from his horse. His comrades helped him back to the castle, and then Sir Lyonel offered to joust. He too was overthrown and helped back to the castle.

Thereafter, every day for six months Sir Gawain rode before the city and overthrew whoever accepted his challenge. Meanwhile, as a result of skirmishes, numbers on both sides were beginning to dwindle. Then one day Sir Gawain challenged Sir Launcelot:

"My lord Sir Launcelot: traitor to the king and to me, come forth if you dare and meet your mortal foe, instead of lurking like a coward in your castle!"

Sir Launcelot heard the challenge, and one of his kinsmen spoke to him:

"My lord, you must accept the challenge, or be shamed forever."

"Alas, that I should have to fight Sir Gawain!" said Sir Launcelot. "But now I am obliged to."

Sir Launcelot gave orders for his most powerful courser⁵ to be harnessed, and when he had armed, rode to the tower and addressed King Arthur:

"My lord King Arthur, it is with a heavy heart that I set forth to do battle with one of your own blood; but now it is incumbent upon my honor to do so. For six months I have suffered your majesty to lay my lands waste and to besiege me in my own city. My courtesy is repaid with insults, so deadly and shameful that now I must by force of arms seek redress."

"Have done, Sir Launcelot, and let us to battle!" shouted Sir Gawain.

5. courser: a horse trained for battle.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

entreaty (ĕn-trē'tē) *n.* an earnest request; plea

dwindle (dwīn'dl) *v.* to become steadily less

incumbent (īn-kūm'bant) *adj.* required as a duty or obligation

redress (rĕ-drēs') *n.* repayment for a wrong or injury

Sir Launcelot rode from the city at the head of his entire army. King Arthur was astonished at his strength and realized that Sir Launcelot had not been boasting when he claimed to have acted with forbearance. "Alas, that I should ever have come to war with him!" he said to himself.

It was agreed that the two combatants should fight to the death, with interference from none. Sir Launcelot and Sir Gawain then drew apart and galloped furiously together, and so great was their strength that their horses crashed to the ground and both riders were overthrown.

A terrible sword fight commenced, and each felt the might of the other as fresh wounds were inflicted with every blow. For three hours they fought with scarcely a pause, and the blood seeped out from their armor and trickled to the ground. Sir Launcelot found to his dismay that Sir Gawain, instead of weakening, seemed to increase in strength as they proceeded, and he began to fear that he was battling not with a knight but with a fiend incarnate.⁶ He decided to fight defensively and to conserve his strength.

It was a secret known only to King Arthur and to Sir Gawain himself that his strength increased for three hours in the morning, reaching its zenith⁷ at noon, and waning again. This was due to an enchantment that had been cast over him by a hermit⁸ when he was still a youth. Often in the past, as now, he had taken advantage of this.

Thus when the hour of noon had passed, Sir Launcelot felt Sir Gawain's strength return to normal, and knew that he could defeat him.

A TERRIBLE
SWORD FIGHT
COMMENCED,
AND EACH
FELT THE
MIGHT OF
THE OTHER.

"Sir Gawain, I have endured many hard blows from you these last three hours, but now beware, for I see that you have weakened, and it is I who am the stronger."

Thereupon Sir Launcelot redoubled his blows, and with one, catching Sir Gawain side-long on the helmet, sent him reeling to the ground. Then he courteously stood back.

"Sir Launcelot, I still defy you!" said Sir Gawain from the ground. "Why do you not kill me now? for I warn you that if ever I recover I shall challenge you again."

"Sir Gawain, by the grace of God I shall endure you again," Sir Launcelot replied, and then turned to the king:

"My liege, your expedition can find no honorable conclusion at these walls, so I pray you withdraw and spare your noble knights. Remember me with kindness and be guided, as ever, by the love of God."

"Alas!" said the king, "Sir Launcelot scruples⁹ to fight against me or those of my blood, and once more I am beholden to him."

Sir Launcelot withdrew to the city and Sir Gawain was taken to his pavilion, where his wounds were dressed. King Arthur was doubly grieved, by his quarrel with Sir Launcelot and by the seriousness of Sir Gawain's wounds.

For three weeks, while Sir Gawain was recovering, the siege was relaxed and both sides skirmished only halfheartedly. But once recovered,

6. fiend incarnate: devil in human form.

7. zenith: highest point; peak.

8. hermit: a person living in solitude for religious reasons.

9. scruples: hesitates for reasons of principle.

Sir Gawain rode up to the castle walls and challenged Sir Launcelot again:

"Sir Launcelot, traitor! Come forth, it is Sir Gawain who challenges you."

"Sir Gawain, why these insults? I have the measure of your strength and you can do me but little harm."

"Come forth, traitor, and this time I shall make good my revenge!" Sir Gawain shouted.

"Sir Gawain, I have once spared your life; should you not beware of meddling with me again?"

Sir Launcelot armed and rode out to meet him. They jousting and Sir Gawain broke his spear and was flung from his horse. He leaped up immediately, and putting his shield before him, called on Sir Launcelot to fight on foot.

"The issue¹⁰ of a mare has failed me; but I am the issue of a king and a queen and I shall not fail!" he exclaimed.

As before, Sir Launcelot felt Sir Gawain's strength increase until noon, during which period he defended himself, and then weaken again.

"Sir Gawain, you are a proved knight, and with the increase of your strength until noon you

must have overcome many of your opponents, but now your strength has gone, and once more you are at my mercy."

Sir Launcelot struck out lustily and by chance reopened the wound he had made before. Sir Gawain fell to the ground in a faint, but when he came to he said weakly:

"Sir Launcelot, I still defy you. Make an end of me, or I shall fight you again!"

"Sir Gawain, while you stand on your two feet I will not gainsay¹¹ you; but I will never strike a knight who has fallen. God defend me from such dishonor!"

Sir Launcelot walked away and Sir Gawain continued to call after him: "Traitor! Until one of us is dead I shall never give in!"

For a month Sir Gawain lay recovering from his wounds, and the siege remained; but then, as Sir Gawain was preparing to fight Sir Launcelot once more, King Arthur received news which caused him to strike camp and lead his army on a forced march to the coast, and thence to embark for Britain.



10. issue: offspring.

11. gainsay: deny.

The Day of Destiny

During the absence of King Arthur from Britain, Sir Modred, already vested with sovereign powers,¹² had decided to usurp the throne.

Accordingly, he had false letters written—announcing the death of King Arthur in battle—and delivered to himself. Then, calling a parliament, he ordered the letters to be read and persuaded the nobility to elect him king. The coronation took place at Canterbury and was celebrated with a fifteen-day feast.

Sir Modred then settled in Camdot and made overtures to Queen Gwynevere to marry him. The queen seemingly acquiesced, but as soon as she had won his confidence, begged leave to make a journey to London in order to prepare her trousseau.¹³ Sir Modred consented, and the queen rode straight to the Tower which, with the aid of her loyal nobles, she manned and provisioned for her defense.

Sir Modred, outraged, at once marched against her, and laid siege to the Tower, but despite his large army, siege engines, and guns, was unable to effect a breach. He then tried to entice the queen from the Tower, first by guile and then by threats, but she would listen to neither. Finally the Archbishop of Canterbury came forward to protest:

“Sir Modred, do you not fear God’s displeasure? First you have falsely made yourself king; now you, who were begotten by King Arthur on his aunt, try to marry your father’s wife! If you do not revoke your evil deeds I shall curse you with bell, book, and candle.”¹⁴

“Fie on you! Do your worst!” Sir Modred replied.

“Sir Modred, I warn you take heed! or the wrath of the Lord will descend upon you.”

“Away, false priest, or I shall behead you!”

The Archbishop withdrew, and after excom-

municating Sir Modred, abandoned his office and fled to Glastonbury. There he took up his abode as a simple hermit, and by fasting and prayer sought divine intercession¹⁵ in the troubled affairs of his country.

Sir Modred tried to assassinate the Archbishop, but was too late. He continued to assail the queen with entreaties and threats, both of which failed, and then the news reached him that King Arthur was returning with his army from France in order to seek revenge.

Sir Modred now appealed to the barony to support him, and it has to be told that they came forward in large numbers to do so. Why? it will be asked. Was not King Arthur, the noblest sovereign Christendom had seen, now leading his armies in a righteous cause? The answer lies in the people of Britain, who, then as now, were fickle. Those who so readily transferred their allegiance to Sir Modred did so with the excuse that whereas King Arthur’s reign had led them into war and strife, Sir Modred promised them peace and festivity.

Hence it was with an army of a hundred thousand that Sir Modred marched to Dover to battle against his own father, and to withhold from him his rightful crown.

As King Arthur with his fleet drew into the harbor, Sir Modred and his army launched forth

12. vested with sovereign powers: given the authority of a king.

13. trousseau (trōō'sō): clothes and linens that a bride brings to her marriage.

14. I shall curse you with bell, book, and candle: The archbishop is threatening to excommunicate Modred—that is, to deny him participation in the rites of the church. In the medieval ritual of excommunication, a bell was rung, a book was shut, and a candle was extinguished.

15. divine intercession: assistance from God.

WORDS TO KNOW

usurp (yōō-sūrp') *v.* to seize unlawfully by force

acquiesce (āk'wā-ēs') *v.* to agree or give in without protest

guile (gīl) *n.* clever trickery; deceit

assail (a-sāi') *v.* to attack, either with blows or with words

in every available craft, and a bloody battle ensued in the ships and on the beach. If King Arthur's army were the smaller, their courage was the higher, confident as they were of the righteousness of their cause. Without stint¹⁶ they battled through the burning ships, the screaming wounded, and the corpses floating on the bloodstained waters. Once ashore they put Sir Modred's entire army to flight.

The battle over, King Arthur began a search for his casualties, and on peering into one of the ships found Sir Gawain, mortally wounded. Sir Gawain fainted when King Arthur lifted him in his arms; and when he came to, the king spoke:

"Alas! dear nephew, that you lie here thus, mortally wounded! What joy is now left to me on this earth? You must know it was you and Sir Launcelot I loved above all others, and it seems that I have lost you both."

"My good uncle, it was my pride and my stubbornness that brought all this about, for had I not urged you to war with Sir Launcelot your subjects would not now be in revolt. Alas, that Sir Launcelot is not here, for he would soon drive them out! And it is at Sir Launcelot's hands that I suffer my own death: the wound which he dealt me has reopened. I would not wish it otherwise, because is he not the greatest and gentlest of knights?"

"I know that by noon I shall be dead, and I repent bitterly that I may not be reconciled to Sir Launcelot; therefore I pray you, good uncle, give me pen, paper, and ink so that I may write to him."

YOU MUST
KNOW IT WAS
YOU AND
SIR LAUNCELOT
I LOVED
ABOVE ALL
OTHERS.

A priest was summoned and Sir Gawain confessed; then a clerk brought ink, pen, and paper, and Sir Gawain wrote to Sir Launcelot as follows:

"Sir Launcelot, flower of the knighthood: I, Sir Gawain, son of King Lot of Orkney and of King Arthur's sister, send you my greetings!

"I am about to die; the cause of my death is the wound I received from you outside the city of Benwick; and I would make it known that my death was of my own seeking, that I was moved by the spirit of revenge and spite to provoke you to battle.

"Therefore, Sir Launcelot, I beseech you to visit my tomb and offer what prayers you will on my behalf; and for

myself, I am content to die at the hands of the noblest knight living.

"One more request: that you hasten with your armies across the sea and give succor to our noble king. Sir Modred, his bastard son, has usurped the throne and now holds against him with an army of a hundred thousand. He would have won the queen, too, but she fled to the Tower of London and there charged her loyal supporters with her defense.

"Today is the tenth of May, and at noon I shall give up the ghost; this letter is written partly with my blood. This morning we fought our way ashore, against the armies of Sir Modred, and that is how my wound came to be reopened. We won the day, but my lord King Arthur needs you, and I too, that on my tomb you may bestow your blessing."

16. stint: holding back.

Sir Gawain fainted when he had finished, and the king wept. When he came to he was given extreme unction,¹⁷ and died, as he had anticipated, at the hour of noon. The king buried him in the chapel at Dover Castle, and there many came to see him, and all noticed the wound on his head which he had received from Sir Launcelot.

Then the news reached Arthur that Sir Modred offered him battle on the field at Baron Down. Arthur hastened there with his army, they fought, and Sir Modred fled once more, this time to Canterbury.

When King Arthur had begun the search for his wounded and dead, many volunteers from all parts of the country came to fight under his flag, convinced now of the rightness of his cause. Arthur marched westward, and Sir Modred once more offered him battle. It was assigned for the Monday following Trinity Sunday, on Salisbury Down.

Sir Modred levied fresh troops from East Anglia and the places about London, and fresh volunteers came forward to help Arthur. Then, on the night of Trinity Sunday, Arthur was vouchsafed¹⁸ a strange dream:

He was appareled in gold cloth and seated in a chair which stood on a pivoted scaffold. Below him, many fathoms deep, was a dark well, and in the water swam serpents, dragons, and wild beasts. Suddenly the scaffold tilted and Arthur was flung into the water, where all the creatures struggled toward him and began tearing him limb from limb.

Arthur cried out in his sleep and his squires hastened to waken him. Later, as he lay between waking and sleeping, he thought he saw Sir Gawain, and with him a host of beautiful noblewomen. Arthur spoke:

"My sister's son! I thought you had died; but now I see you live, and I thank the lord Jesu! I pray you, tell me, who are these ladies?"

"My lord, these are the ladies I championed¹⁹ in righteous quarrels when I was on earth. Our lord God has vouchsafed that we visit you and plead with you not to give battle to Sir Modred tomorrow, for if you do, not only will you yourself be killed, but all your noble followers too. We beg you to be warned, and to make a treaty with Sir Modred, calling a truce for a month, and granting him whatever terms he may demand. In a month Sir Launcelot will be here, and he will defeat Sir Modred."

Thereupon Sir Gawain and the ladies vanished, and King Arthur once more summoned his squires and his counselors and told them his vision. Sir Lucas and Sir Bedivere were commissioned to make a treaty with Sir Modred. They were to be accompanied by two bishops and to grant, within reason, whatever terms he demanded.

The ambassadors found Sir Modred in command of an army of a hundred thousand and unwilling to listen to overtures of peace. However, the ambassadors eventually prevailed on him, and in return for the truce granted him suzerainty²⁰ of Cornwall and Kent, and succession to the British throne when King Arthur died. The treaty was to be signed by King Arthur and Sir Modred the next day. They were to meet between the two armies, and each was to be accompanied by no more than fourteen knights.

Both King Arthur and Sir Modred suspected the other of treachery, and gave orders for their armies to attack at the sight of a naked sword. When they met at the appointed place the treaty was signed and both drank a glass of wine.



17. extreme unction: a ritual in which a priest anoints and prays for a dying person.

18. vouchsafed: granted.

19. championed: defended or fought for.

20. suzerainty (sūz'ər-ən-tē): the position of feudal lord.

Then, by chance, one of the soldiers was bitten in the foot by an adder²¹ which had lain concealed in the brush. The soldier unthinkingly drew his sword to kill it, and at once, as the sword flashed in the light, the alarums²² were given, trumpets sounded, and both armies galloped into the attack.

"Alas for this fateful day!" exclaimed King Arthur, as both he and Sir Modred hastily mounted and galloped back to their armies. There followed one of those rare and heartless battles in which both armies fought until they were destroyed. King Arthur, with his customary valor, led squadron after squadron of cavalry into the attack, and Sir Modred encountered him unflinchingly. As the number of dead and wounded mounted on both sides, the active combatants continued dauntless until nightfall, when four men alone survived.

King Arthur wept with dismay to see his beloved followers fallen; then, struggling toward him, unhorsed and badly wounded, he saw Sir Lucas the Butler and his brother, Sir Bedivere.

"Alas!" said the king, "that the day should come when I see all my noble knights destroyed! I would prefer that I myself had fallen. But what has become of the traitor Sir Modred, whose evil ambition was responsible for this carnage?"

Looking about him King Arthur then noticed Sir Modred leaning with his sword on a heap of the dead.

"Sir Lucas, I pray you give me my spear, for I have seen Sir Modred."

"Sire, I entreat you, remember your vision—how Sir Gawain appeared with a heaven-sent message to dissuade you from fighting Sir Modred. Allow this fateful day to pass; it is ours, for we three hold the field, while the enemy is broken."

"My lords, I care nothing for my life now! And while Sir Modred is at large I must kill him: there may not be another chance."

"God speed you, then!" said Sir Bedivere.

When Sir Modred saw King Arthur advance with his spear, he rushed to meet him with drawn sword. Arthur caught Sir Modred below the shield and drove his spear through his body; Sir Modred, knowing that the wound was mortal, thrust himself up to the handle of the spear, and then, brandishing his sword in both hands, struck Arthur on the side of the helmet, cutting through it and into the skull beneath; then he crashed to the ground, gruesome and dead.

King Arthur fainted many times as Sir Lucas and Sir Bedivere struggled with him to a small chapel nearby, where they managed to ease his wounds a little. When Arthur came to, he thought he heard cries coming from the battlefield.

"Sir Lucas, I pray you, find out who cries on the battlefield," he said.

Wounded as he was, Sir Lucas hobbled painfully to the field, and there in the moonlight saw the camp followers stealing gold and jewels from the dead, and murdering the wounded. He returned to the king and reported to him what he had seen, and then added:

"My lord, it surely would be better to move you to the nearest town?"

"My wounds forbid it. But alas for the good Sir Launcelot! How sadly I have missed him today! And now I must die—as Sir Gawain warned me I would—repenting our quarrel with my last breath."

Sir Lucas and Sir Bedivere made one further attempt to lift the king. He fainted as they did so. Then Sir Lucas fainted as part of his intestines broke through a wound in the stomach. When the king came to, he saw Sir Lucas lying dead with foam at his mouth.

"Sweet Jesu, give him succor!" he said. "This noble knight has died trying to save my life—alas that this was so!"

Sir Bedivere wept for his brother.

21. adder: a poisonous snake.

22. alarums: calls to arms.



Illustration from an illuminated manuscript showing a wounded Arthur in the foreground waiting for Sir Bedivere, who watches a hand appear from the lake to take King Arthur's sword, Excalibur.

"Sir Bedivere, weep no more," said King Arthur, "for you can save neither your brother nor me; and I would ask you to take my sword Excalibur to the shore of the lake and throw it in the water. Then return to me and tell me what you have seen."

"My lord, as you command, it shall be done."

Sir Bedivere took the sword, but when he came to the water's edge, it appeared so beautiful that he could not bring himself to throw it in, so instead he hid it by a tree, and then returned to the king.

"Sir Bedivere, what did you see?"

"My lord, I saw nothing but the wind upon the waves."

"Then you did not obey me; I pray you, go

swiftly again, and this time fulfill my command."

Sir Bedivere went and returned again, but this time too he had failed to fulfill the king's command.

"Sir Bedivere, what did you see?"

"My lord, nothing but the lapping of the waves."

"Sir Bedivere, twice you have betrayed me! And for the sake only of my sword: it is unworthy of you! Now I pray you, do as I command, for I have not long to live."

This time Sir Bedivere wrapped the girdle around the sheath and hurled it as far as he could into the water. A hand appeared from below the surface, took the sword, waved it thrice, and disappeared again. Sir Bedivere re-

turned to the king and told him what he had seen.

"Sir Bedivere, I pray you now help me hence, or I fear it will be too late."

Sir Bedivere carried the king to the water's edge, and there found a barge in which sat many beautiful ladies with their queen. All were wearing black hoods, and when they saw the king, they raised their voices in a piteous lament.

"I pray you, set me in the barge," said the king.

Sir Bedivere did so, and one of the ladies laid the king's head in her lap; then the queen spoke to him:

"My dear brother, you have stayed too long: I fear that the wound on your head is already cold."

Thereupon they rowed away from the land and Sir Bedivere wept to see them go.

"My lord King Arthur, you have deserted me! I am alone now, and among enemies."

"Sir Bedivere, take what comfort you may, for my time is passed, and now I must be taken to Avalon²³ for my wound to be healed. If you hear of me no more, I beg you pray for my soul."

The barge slowly crossed the water and out of sight while the ladies wept. Sir Bedivere walked alone into the forest and there remained for the night.

In the morning he saw beyond the trees of a copse²⁴ a small hermitage. He entered and found a hermit kneeling down by a fresh tomb. The hermit was weeping as he prayed, and then Sir Bedivere recognized him as the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been banished by Sir Modred.

"Father, I pray you, tell me, whose tomb is this?"

"My son, I do not know. At midnight the body was brought here by a company of ladies. We buried it, they lit a hundred candles for the service, and rewarded me with a thousand bezants."²⁵

"Father, King Arthur lies buried in this tomb."

Sir Bedivere fainted when he had spoken, and

when he came to he begged the Archbishop to allow him to remain at the hermitage and end his days in fasting and prayer.

"Father, I wish only to be near to my true liege."

"My son, you are welcome; and do I not recognize you as Sir Bedivere the Bold, brother to Sir Lucas the Butler?"

Thus the Archbishop and Sir Bedivere remained at the hermitage, wearing the habits of hermits and devoting themselves to the tomb with fasting and prayers of contrition.²⁶

Such was the death of King Arthur as written down by Sir Bedivere. By some it is told that there were three queens on the barge: Queen Morgan le Fay, the Queen of North Galys, and the Queen of the Waste Lands; and others include the name of Nyneve, the Lady of the Lake who had served

King Arthur well in the past, and had married the good knight Sir Pelleas.

In many parts of Britain it is believed that King Arthur did not die and that he will return to us and win fresh glory and the Holy Cross of our Lord Jesu Christ; but for myself I do not believe this, and would leave him buried peacefully in his tomb at

Glastonbury, where the Archbishop of Canterbury and Sir Bedivere humbled themselves, and with prayers and fasting honored his memory. And inscribed on his tomb, men say, is this legend:

HIC IACET ARTHURUS,
REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS.²⁷

23. Avalon: an island paradise of Celtic legend, where heroes are taken after death.

24. copse (kōps): a grove of small trees.

25. bezants (bēz'ants): gold coins.

26. contrition (kən-trīsh'ən): sincere regret for wrongdoing.

27. *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus* (hīk yā'kēt ār-ūō'rōōs rāks kwōn'dām rāk'skwē fōō-ūō'rōōs)
Latin: Here lies Arthur, the once and future king.



Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What thoughts were in your mind as you finished reading this selection? Share them with the class.

Comprehension Check

- What happens when Gawain and Launcelot meet on the field of battle?
- What is Gawain's secret weakness in combat?
- What warning does Sir Gawain give to Arthur in a vision?

Think Critically

2. In your opinion, which character in the selection is most admirable, and which is least admirable?

THINK ABOUT

- the ways in which Launcelot shows loyalty and disloyalty to the king
- Arthur's willingness to forget his loyalty to Launcelot and follow Gawain's advice
- Modred's seizure of the throne
- Gwynevere's involvement with Launcelot

3. How much choice do you think Arthur has in determining his own fate?

THINK ABOUT

- the importance of chivalry to his followers
- the consequences of his long stay in France
- the warnings he receives in his dreams

4. If Arthur, Launcelot, and Gawain were given a second chance to resolve their conflicts, what do you think they might do differently?

5. ACTIVE READING UNDERSTANDING CHARACTERIZATION

Look again at your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. What did you discover about the characterization of Launcelot as you recorded examples of his words and behavior in the cluster diagram?

Extend Interpretations

6. **What If?** Suppose that Sir Launcelot had arrived with his army in time to help Arthur battle Modred. How might things have turned out differently for the major characters?
7. **Connect to Life** Would you say that the forces that end Arthur's reign are the same forces that bring down governments in the real world? Support your answer with examples from local, national, or world history.

Literary Analysis


CHARACTERIZATION The way in which writers guide readers' impressions of characters is called **characterization**. There are four basic methods of developing a character: (1) description of the character's physical appearance; (2) presentation of the character's speech, thoughts, feelings, and actions; (3) presentation of other characters' speech, thoughts, feelings, and actions; and (4) direct comments about the character.

Cooperative Learning Activity With a group of classmates, look back through this selection, identifying passages that help create readers' impressions of Launcelot, Arthur, Gawain, Modred, and Gwynevere. In a chart, record the character, passage, method of characterization, and the qualities of character that are revealed in the passage.

Character	Passage	Method	Qualities
Launcelot	"I will not lead you against . . .	Launcelot's own words	Nobility and honor
Arthur			

REVIEW ROMANCE The term **romance** refers to an imaginative adventure concerned with noble heroes, gallant love, a chivalric code of honor, and daring deeds. Romances usually have faraway settings, depict events unlike those of ordinary life, and idealize heroes as well as the eras in which the heroes lived. What characteristics of romance can you find in this excerpt?

Writing Options

Essay on Virtues Many virtues are portrayed in this excerpt from Malory. Write a two-or-three paragraph essay in which you explain which virtues of Malory's characters are most important to you in your life. Place the essay in your **Working Portfolio**. 

Sir Thomas Malory

1405?–1471

An Active Life A son of prosperous parents, the Thomas Malory who many scholars think to be the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur* led a surprisingly unsettled life that ended in prison. A native of Warwickshire, England, he fought in the Hundred Years' War, was knighted around 1442, and was elected to Parliament in 1445. Malory then became embroiled in the violent political conflicts that preceded the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses.

Political Turmoil A staunch supporter of the house of Lancaster and its claim to the throne, Malory was imprisoned repeatedly by the Yorkist government on a variety of charges, including robbery, cattle rustling, bribery, and attempted murder. He pleaded innocent to all the charges, and his guilt was never proven. It is possible that his outspoken opposition to the ruling family provoked enemies to accuse him falsely in some instances.

Prisoner and Writer Malory seems to have written *Le Morte d'Arthur* while he served a series of prison terms that began in 1451. He finished the book about two years before his death in 1471. William Caxton, who introduced the art of printing to England, published the first edition of Malory's work in 1485, giving the book the title by which it is known today. *Le Morte d'Arthur* remains the most complete English version of the Arthurian legends and has been the source of many later adaptations of the tales.

Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE: CONTEXT CLUES Choose the word that could be substituted for the italicized word or phrase in each sentence below.

- The king's followers began to *attack* his honor.
- Everyone marveled at the *patience* with which he reacted to the attacks.
- The king's enemies tried to *unlawfully take over* the throne.
- The king hoped to *discourage* them from doing harm.
- The enemies ignored the king's *plea* for peace.
- They used *trickery* and threats against him.
- The king had to *agree without protest* to a declaration of war.
- He felt that it was *laid as a duty* on him to fight for his honor.
- His army sought *repayment* for crimes against the king.
- The king knew that after he issued his challenge, a full-scale war would *follow*.
- His advisers warned that the war would *greatly damage* the land.
- The number of healthy soldiers began to *decline*.
- Wounded soldiers were seen *falling back* all over the battlefield.
- Other kingdoms were asked to give *assistance* to the weakened army.
- The plundering soldiers caused *damage* and sorrow throughout the land.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

acquiesce
assail
depredation
dissuade
dwindle
ensue

entreaty
forbearance
guile
incumbent
ravage
redress

reeling
succor
usurp

Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth study of context clues, see page 938.

from

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Le Morte d' Arthur

William Caxton, the first English printer, had a significant impact on the literature of his day. In his preface to the first edition of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, published in 1485, Caxton describes his anticipated audience and reveals his purpose in publishing the work.



I have, after the simple cunning that God hath sent to me, under the favor and correction of all noble lords and gentlemen, enprised to enprint a book of the noble histories of the said King Arthur and of certain of his knights, after a copy unto me delivered, which copy Sir Thomas Malory did take out of certain books of French and reduced it into English.

And I, according to my copy, have done set it in enprint to the intent that noble men may see and learr the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in tho[se] days, by which they came to honor, and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke; humbly beseeching all noble lords and ladies with all other estates, of what estate or degree they been of, that shall see and read in this said book and work, that they take the good and honest acts in their remembrance, and to follow the same; wherein they shall find many joyous and pleasant histories and noble and renowned acts of humanity, gentleness, and chivalries. For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame.

Reading for Information

The **preface** to a literary work typically sheds light on why the author wrote the work. Imagine that you are a printer at a time when books are scarce. What might you want to include in your preface to a first edition?

PARAPHRASING AND SUMMARIZING

As you might expect, Caxton's language and syntax are typical of 15th-century English. To unlock the meanings of such challenging texts, you can use the skills of paraphrasing and summarizing. Review the primary source as you complete these activities:

- 1 **Paraphrase**, or restate in your own words, the first paragraph. What sources does Caxton suggest Malory used?
- 2 Refer to your paraphrase of the second paragraph. What was Caxton's purpose in publishing *Le Morte d'Arthur*? What virtues does it portray? Who does Caxton expect will be his audience?
- 3 Look at your paraphrase of "that they take the good and honest acts in their remembrance, and to follow the same." What is Caxton hoping his readers will do?

Summarizing With a partner, summarize Caxton's main points. How has reading Caxton's words affected your understanding of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In what ways, if any, has your reaction to characters such as Sir Gawain changed?