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Penguin and the "Shipwrecked Malory project"

"The existence of written archives exercises a power over what is the subject of academic discourse and even what is known more generally,"[1] but often this power is hidden in archives that contain so much evidence that searching for exactly what you want to find can be a long and often unrewarding endeavour. However, sometimes the careful labour through files of archival material can yield results: this paper explores the serendipity of such finds in the Penguin Archive at the Special Collections, Bristol University Library, where evidence exists that reveals new perspectives on a text familiar to all Arthurians: the Penguin edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.[2] Research on the publishing history of Eugène Vinaver's Clarendon Press edition of Malory has been published elsewhere,[3] but this work examines the way Penguin, a non-academic publisher, approached the text, opening it up, initially via the Penguin English Library series, to a wider reading public. The evidence found in the archive proves that the quality of academic involvement was no less ardently pursued by the Penguin editors than their Clarendon Press counterparts: this edition of Malory also has an extremely respectable Arthurian academic pedigree.

During the early years of the twentieth century in England, two liberal forces were contributing to an increasing demand for accessible literary texts: the first, a strong belief that classical and English literature was an essential tool for good citizenship, and the second, a movement of popular education and self-improvement: Paul Fussell claims that the volumes of the Oxford World's Classics and Everyman's Library were the "texts" that fed this demand, saying that "The intersection of these two forces, the one "aristocratic" the other "democratic", established an atmosphere of public respect for literature unique in modern times."[4]

It is against this background that Penguin launched their own classics list in 1946.[5] The vision was to make the classic accessible to the general reader.

Nonetheless, the general reader did not miss out on rigorous translation and edit-ing: W. E. Williams insisted that although Penguin's objective was to "break away from that academic idiom in which so many of the world's classics have been put before the general reader, and to present them in contemporary English" this was achieved "without any transgressions of scholarship and textual accuracy."[6]

Penguin Classics were designed to present ***translations*** of canonical works: as the list became larger and more successful, the Penguin English Library was launched in the 1960s to ensure that English classics got the same kind of edito-rial treatment and exposure:

> Each volume in the Library will have a separate editor whose task is
> to present for publication an introduction. . . an authoritative text and
> explanatory notes. The audience to aim at is the intelligent general reader
> who has always meant to read the English Classics. . .[7]

From these notes to editors, it is clear that the texts will be supported by an aca-demic apparatus: the series' aim was to be "a comprehensive range of the literary masterpieces which have appeared in the English language since the 15th centu-ry."[8] The new series was also a capitalisation on the growing demand for cheaper editions for the university student in the US, where Penguin were now also firmly established. The distinctive orange-spined books were amalgamated into the main Penguin Classics list in the 1980s, when the whole list got a redesign, rejacketed with the distinctive black-banded livery of the Classics list.

The Malory volumes were edited by Janet Cowen, from King's College London, with an introduction by John Lawlor, then Professor of English at the University of Keele. The publication year was 1969. In terms of Arthurian schol-arship, this was auspicious: the ninth IAS Congress was held at Cardiff that year, and Eugène Vinaver gave a speech marking what he saw as the change of focus from Arthurian origins, to "a new kind of medievalism, of a medievalism of *lit-erature as such*."[9] Vinaver's second edition of Malory was published by Oxford University Press in 1967, the year after the publication of William Matthews's controversial book, *The Ill-Framed Knight*. Derek Brewer had produced a small edition of the seventh and eighth tales with York's Medieval Text series in 1968, and R. T. Davies produced a selection of the stories with Faber in 1967.[10] All of these texts, except the last, are to play a part in the story that follows.

With growing numbers of undergraduate programmes around the world including Malory on their syllabi, the need for a more accessible edition than the three volume Clarendon was clear. Penguin was ideally placed to fill this

gap, but the route to publication was ship-wrecked several times, as the Penguin archive reveals. It is a tale involving major Arthurian scholarly figures from both sides of the Atlantic, and the personal histories revealed underline the truth of the archival theory that

> Archival records are the by-product of human activity. At their most transparent they are unself-conscious creations intended not to interpret or investigate a particular topic but to complete a normal and often routine transaction.[11]

In the archive file relating to the English Library's edition, there are letters from James Cochrane, the editor, to the academics involved. Surprisingly, these letters were not to either John Lawlor or to Janet Cowen until quite deep in the correspondence trail: the first letter is from Professor Roger Sharrock at Durham University. On the October 5th 1965 Sharrock suggests Derek Brewer as "a good man for the job" of preparing a "modernised version of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*". Brewer is approached by Cochrane, and in a letter written in January 1966, says he would like to do it, but worries about a possible conflict of interest with the edition he was working on for the York Medieval Text series. Then, on the February 23rd, Brewer writes again to say that he would not be able to prepare the text, but might be able to do the introduction if Cochrane cannot get Loomis to do it. This is the first time Professor Loomis's name is mentioned in the correspondence, but it has clearly been raised before, in meetings Brewer and Cochrane refer to in their letters. In this same letter, Brewer suggests some people who might be able to prepare the text, among them Janet Cowen, whom Cochrane writes to in June, offering her the task; meanwhile he also writes to Professor Loomis, and in a letter dated February 17th, 1966, asks if he will do the introduction, for the general reader and students "not too familiar with medieval studies or with Arthurian studies in general."[12]

Loomis replies a month later to say that he is "favourably inclined" towards the proposal, but that he would like more time to think about it. He lays down some conditions: he would prefer the text to be based on the Caxton rather than the Winchester, "possibly emending it where the Winchester ms offers better readings" as he "shouldn't like the edition to encroach on my friend Vinaver's preserve"[13] and he would prefer the title to be the *Book of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, rather than what he calls "Caxton's mistaken *Le Morte Darthur*": he is also worried about crossover with his recent work, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, and the risk of self-plagiarism. On May 9th, Loomis is ready

to commit, after repeating his wishes re the title, the choice of base text, and the fact that he does not want to step on Vinaver's achievements. By mid-June, the contracts have been signed and Loomis has sent through suggestions for Janet Cowen regarding how the text should be tackled. This list is of some minor interest to Arthurian scholarship, setting out, briefly, Loomis's priorities: modernising and harmonising names and spelling, correcting a couple of places where the text is in error, and using the chapter headings from Caxton's table of contents.

In July Loomis writes to Cochrane to say that it is "lucky" that he was not asked to write the introduction earlier, as "advance proofs of a book by William Matthews have been sent to me, which effectively disposes of the Malory of Newbold Revel, so long accepted as the presumptive author. A fair though inconclusive case is made out for a Yorkshireman of the same name…"[14] He finishes, "but I still think that the Caxton text will remain the standard, or at least the popular, text."

As progression through the letters in the file in the archive was made, so, too, were connections of comments found in them to those events which have helped shape Malory research, written in the hand of a scholar whose work still helps bring new students to the study of Arthurian literature. However, totally absorbed in the narrative, although the very shaky handwriting in the next letter, dated August 11th, was noted, my focus was more on the additional nine points for the text which Loomis set out for Janet Cowen, and, moreover, that he ends the letter by saying that he had started a long-hand version of his introduction and intended to have it typed up once complete. Since, he said, "there is no urgency" he would not set a date for this. On October 5th another letter follows, saying that he is sending one copy of the three he has made of his draft, so that Cochrane can reply with any thoughts on the proposed plan, which he lists as follows:

> Mrs Shaw's praise of Caxton as editor
> The Mystery of Malory's identity
> The historical Arthur
> The growth of the Matter of Britain
> Malory's immediate sources, and his treatment of them
> Some critical opinions

Loomis goes on to note that he will, "by happy chance" be having a visit from Vinaver that month, who, he hopes, "will give me the latest Arthurian news," including updates on reports that a second Malory manuscript had been found at Alnwick Castle.[15] The letter goes on to say he "disapproves thoroughly of Sir

Mortimer Wheeler's advertising of Cadbury Castle as the site for Camelot" but notes that "incidentally he might be creating a market for a new Morte Darthur!"[16]

It is such a lively, positive letter that the succeeding missive in the file, even if the biography of Loomis is known, comes as a shock. It is a letter from Dorothy Loomis, to Cochrane, on October 20th, telling of her husband's death on October 11th. Just a week after writing that last letter in the Penguin file, and sending over a draft plan of his Introduction, Loomis was dead. His phrase, "there is no urgency" in the August letter is now loaded with poignant irony. Mrs Loomis writes that her husband "wrote with incredible difficulties" but that "he wanted above all things to finish the Malory" and that it was very sad to her that he could not. She says that "his dear friend" Vinaver had offered to complete it as what she calls "a labour of love." In the same letter Mrs Loomis says that Loomis's will specifies that his papers should be destroyed: so, as a letter dated Nov 7th 1966 reveals, the draft introduction is returned to her. "He wanted above all things to be able to finish it", she repeats: "for he greatly enjoyed working on it and put aside an almost completed book to work on it."

But, just when the story seems to end, a further twist or two awaits: Mrs Loomis tells Cochrane that after consulting a lawyer, it will be possible after all for someone else to complete Loomis's introduction, and she reminds Cochrane of Vinaver's willingness to undertake the task. Cochrane writes to Vinaver on November 17th, offering him a contract to complete the work: Vinaver replies, just over a week later, but this response is far from the eager agreement Mrs Loomis's phrasing suggests will be forthcoming. Vinaver sets out very clearly what he is prepared to do: he will complete the Introduction as an anonymous author, but "if, however, what you have in mind is something in the nature of a co-editorship of the text, involving the writing of an additional section of the Introduction over my own signature, some rather difficult problems are likely to arise." Vinaver goes on to question the nature of the text of Malory that is being prepared:

> As you no doubt know, the *Morte Darthur* used to be printed entirely on the basis of Caxton's 1485 edition. This was legitimate until 1934, when a manuscript of Malory's writings. . . was found in the Library of Winchester College by W F Oakeshott. Nowadays no edition of the work which is not based upon a collation of the two texts could claim the kind of reliability that one expects from anything published in your series.[17]

These letters uncover a series of personal and academic misunderstandings

between Loomis and Vinaver, showing how Loomis repeatedly stressed his wish to respect Vinaver's academic space by avoiding it, and how Vinaver's perspective was that if Loomis respected his work he would have used the same approach to the text, not followed a different one. It is easy to see, with the privileged access the letters from both men allows, as well as the knowledge of the scholarly context around Malory editions, how this situation occurred, and how inflammatory it must have been for Vinaver. Cochrane's unenviable position was to try and mediate in this context, but he did not know it well enough to prevent further offending Vinaver. Cochrane writes, in placatory tone,

> as far as the text is concerned, it was one of Professor Loomis's stipulations that we should base our text on the Caxton edition rather than on the Winchester manuscript, partly so as not to encroach on a province that you had made your own, but our edition, . . . was to be modernised as regards spelling and the Caxton text was to be emended wherever the Winchester manuscript offered an obviously better reading.[18]

Unfortunately Cochrane paraphrases Loomis's letter from earlier in the year, which suggests the role the Winchester manuscript will play in the Penguin text will be to emend the Caxton, where a better reading makes more sense. Vinaver responds in a letter written on December 23rd:

> in the light of what you say, I cannot see myself contributing further sections to the Introduction to your proposed edition of Malory. . . and the reason is simply that I cannot introduce on my own behalf a text established in the manner you describe. You say that Professor Loomis himself had stipulated that you should base your text on Caxton's edition rather than on the Winchester manuscript 'partly so as not to encroach on a province that I had made my own.' I confess I do not understand this explanation and I doubt whether any of your readers will find it satisfactory. Surely in these matters there is no such thing as anybody's 'province'. Malory wrote one version of his text, not two, and what we are all trying to do is to get as close to it as we can on the basis of the surviving material. If Professor Loomis thought that my edition was based on sound principles I do not see how he could adopt or let you adopt diametrically opposed ones and still claim to be offering the reader a genuine text.

As explored above, the letters from Loomis clearly say, twice, exactly what

Cochrane repeats to Vinaver re the text. Vinaver does not believe Cochrane's transmission of this, however, seeing such a position a rejection of his work, and more than that, refuses to believe that Loomis would have laid himself open to the charge of producing what he calls "an unreal text": he is outraged, going on to write: "as a lifelong friend of Roger's, anxious to serve his memory in the best possible way, I should be sorry to see his name associated with an editorial venture of such questionable scholarly value, even if it were made clear that he was in no way responsible for the textual side of the project." Cochrane, in replying to this, is self-effacing, and apologetic, saying:

> I am not myself a medieval scholar and I think I have confused matters somewhat by suggesting that the Caxton text was to be emended from the Winchester manuscript. It was certainly Professor Loomis's firm desire that we should base our edition on the Caxton text but perhaps it would be best if I simply quoted from the note Miss Cowen sent me about the editorial principle we have adopted.[19]

Cowen's note does echo Loomis's own words:

> I had always assumed that we were producing the Caxton text entirely in its own right, emending only in cases where the text does not make readable sense. We are in no way using the Winchester readings to improve upon or add to the Caxton text, but I had assumed that a Winchester reading might be quoted in a footnote if it threw some light on an obviously impossible reading in the base text.

Though Cochrane's portrayal of what Loomis and Cowen's approach was could be misinterpreted, it is more of a stretch to do so in the way Vinaver does, and Cochrane's tact in not reiterating exactly what Loomis said about Vinaver's work does him credit: the publisher is seen as the arbiter of diplomatic relationships, even when under quite deep provocation.

The only other correspondence in the file from Vinaver is a telegram, dated March 24th, 1967, which simply says: "VERY SORRY UNABLE TO UNDERTAKE THE WORK. VINAVER".

This might look like the end of the history, except it cannot be, because we have the published volumes to prove that the edition of Malory did finally make it to production. So how did Cochrane move forwards? He contacted the indefatigable Derek Brewer again, asking about the suitability of William Matthews

to write the introduction, now that Vinaver was definitely not interested. Brewer replies in March 1967 promising to look into the *Ill-Framed Knight*, saying he is "sceptical" of some of the thesis, but that he has heard Matthews is "quite good in general". Alternatively, he suggests, he might do the introduction himself? There is no reply to this in the archive, but only a letter of the May 12th 1967, from Professor John Lawlor to Cochrane, agreeing to do the introduction.

The letters submerged in the Penguin Archive reveal voices from the past: voices that connect us to our Arthurian scholarly heritage. But like all shipwrecks, they do not always lie where you anticipate them to be: though the tale I have unfolded so far has come from the file on the Penguin English Library Malory, I looked through other files too, hoping to reveal more finds in less obvious sites. And this was how I found the most intriguing find of all: in the file on the 1959 Penguin Classics edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by Brian Stone, there is a memo. Dated April 10th 1958, and written from E. V. Rieu to A. S. B. Glover, three quarters of the two sides of the yellow slip discuss points about this edition. It was pure chance that my eye snagged on a phrase near the end of the small, hand-written note: Brian Stone, said Rieu, struck him as a "very able young man", and he might be suitable for further commissions with the series. "In fact", Rieu continued, "I got him interested in the ship-wrecked Malory project." Was there ever a more evocative phrase to find, tantalisingly stranded, in an archive? What was *this* "ship-wrecked Malory project"? The files for the English Library edition make no mention to this earlier version, and even a comment by Derek Brewer in the letter to Cochrane in January 1966, when he notes initial interest in helping with the introduction, saying he suggested doing Malory to the firm seven years ago, when he was told it was already in hand,[20] does not match up exactly, chronologically, although it *must* allude to the same project. So, the quest in the archives continues: though this paper shows how the Penguin English Library Malory was almost ship-wrecked several times by competition, scholarly disputes, and death, this is still not the whole story. There is a real ship-wreck out there, still to be discovered. The Penguin Malory represents more Arthurian scholarly debate than is obvious: a reminder never, ever, to judge a book just by its cover. Penguin's contribution to medieval scholarship, however, can be judged more confidently with all this evidence, and it is revealed as playing a significant part in the dissemination of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

Notes

1 David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson, *The Silence of the Archive* (London: Facet Publishing, 2017) p3.

2 I would like to thank Hannah Lowery, the archivist at Bristol University Library, for her help with this research, especially her patience with all my questions, and to the team there who have been so supportive. I would also like to thank Joanna Prior, Sarah McMahon, Anne Porter, and Joanna Byrne from Penguin, for giving me permission to work with and quote from the archival materials. Thanks also to my two research colleagues, Dr Leah Tether and Dr Rebecca Lyons, for suggestions and feedback, and to Professors Toshiyuki Takamiya and Peter Field for their interest and encouragement. The letters quoted from come from the Penguin Archive held at Special Collections, Bristol University Library from files: DM1107/EL43 and DM1107/EL44: Janet Cowen (ed.), John Lawlor (intro.), Thomas Malory, 'Le Morte d'Arthur' [Volumes 1 and 2] (October 1969). Includes correspondence with Roger Sharrock, D.S. Brewer and R.S. Loomis regarding the possibility of editing the work; costings; typescript of notes and glossary; correspondence with Janet Cowen and John Lawlor; contents; contract slips; and cover brief. 1 file, 2.5cm thick, September 1965–February 1975. Quotations from the letters in these files are hereafter footnoted by date and correspondents' names.

3 Samantha J. Rayner, "The case of the 'curious document': Thomas Malory, William Matthews and Eugène Vinaver", *JIAS* 2015; 3(1): pp120–138.

4 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p157.

5 https://www.penguinrandomhouse.co.uk/publishers/penguin-press/penguin-classics/

6 Steve Hare, ed., *Penguin Portrait: Allen Lane and the Penguin Editors* (London: Penguin, 1995) p187.

7 Hare, p297.

8 https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2012/may/24/new-penguin-english-library-2012 (accessed July15th, 2017).

9 Vinaver, *BBIAS* 1970: 115.

10 Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Sir Thomas Malory, *Malory: The Morte Darthur*, ed. Derek Brewer (York: York Medieval Texts, 1968); Sir Thomas Malory, *King Arthur and his Knights*, ed. R. T. Davies (London: Faber, 1967).

11 Randall C. Jimerson, "Archives and memory", *OCLC Systems & Services: International digital library perspectives*, Vol. 19 Issue: 3, 2003, p90 (https://doi.org/10.1108/10650750310490289).

12 February 17th 1966, James Cochrane to Loomis.

13 March 17th 1966, Loomis to Cochrane.

14 July 6th 1966, Loomis to Cochrane.

15 It should be noted that this manuscript was found not to be Malory at all: see 'Sir Thomas Malory's Romance and Chronicle' by Edward Donald Kennedy, in *Essays in Honour of P. J. C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004) pp 231–233.

16 October 5th 1966, Loomis to Cochrane.

17 November 25th 1966, Vinaver to Cochrane.

18 December 6th 1966, Cochrane to Vinaver.

19 January 11th, 1967, Cochrane to Vinaver.

20 January 21st 1966, Brewer to Cochrane.