

Water as Space in *Le Morte Darthur*

Ruby J.P. Kuo

National Sun Yat-sen University

Abstract

Sir Thomas Malory's greatness as a translator, adaptor, redactor and creative writer lies in his ability to sort out immeasurable and highly interlaced Arthurian materials into a unified narrative. Yet, the tremendous scope of time and space of his version and vision has long kept daunting his readers. In terms of space, Malory includes some historical places such as Caerleon, Carlisle, London, Winchester and others as well as a large number of unnamed natural landscapes. Natural locations, like wells, springs, rivers and lakes, can create an empirically known world and an imaginary world to Malory's readers: some of these locales appear accessible although the audience has not been there personally, while others fall into a distant memory when the settings are vague, exotic, surreal, mystical, dangerous, transcending, biblical and apocalyptic. These natural waterscapes in different contexts of the romance perform material, sociological, political, religious and allegorical functions. The medieval perception of and reverence for water sources are concepts that the twenty-first century people can hardly reproduce. There is more awareness and appreciation of the subtle interactions between geology, topography and human activities then than now. On the mystical level, water as a source of life sees the beginning of both Arthur's and Lancelot's lives and witnesses the end of Arthur's life. Water as life-giver and its healing power, both literally and metaphorically, bring Malory's readers back to the Celtic imagination and veneration of water-related subjects, and back also to the shared cultural memory of the human and personal relationship with the *anima loci* of the waterscape, however implicit these connections might be. While some waterscapes in *Le Morte Darthur* belong to a "microspatial" imagination and some, a "macrospatial" thinking, others suggest an incorporation of these two spatial perceptions. On the psychological level, water as space also finds its expression in an appealing manner, as Lancelot's quality tears in "The Healing of Sir Urry" episode display. In this paper, I attempt to use Dick Harrison's concepts of microspace, macrospace and space as a qualitative concept, proposed in 1996, as a framework to discuss how Malory envisions water as space and its various dimensions in *Le Morte Darthur*.

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