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Editing Malory: Eugène Vinaver and the Clarendon Edition

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Few events can have led to such a radical re-conceptualization of a literary work as the publication, in 1947, of Eugène Vinaver's edition of *The Works of Thomas Malory*. The title itself indicates the editorial vision of the work, abandoning the traditional title, *Le Morte Darthur*, to reflect Vinaver's sense of Malory's design as a series of loosely linked separate narratives rather than a single unified one. This vision has proved controversial and it is not my intention to examine it here.¹ But one partial gloss on Vinaver's work can be provided by some consideration of the pre-history of his edition. This was marked by various kinds of controversy that prefigure the post-publication disputes about the edition and Vinaver's interpretation of crucial evidence unavailable to any previous editor.

Vinaver's view of Malory's work was shaped, of course, by the discovery of the Winchester manuscript, in Winchester College Library, by Walter Oakeshott in 1934. But this event is itself part of a larger history, the history of the preparation of Vinaver's edition, a protracted editorial process that extended over nearly twenty years. This history has never been recounted. It remains not wholly clear but it is partly accessible through previously unexamined materials, mostly in the archives of Oxford University Press, which can be supplemented with other previously unexamined evidence.² These materials offer some insight into the evolution of Vinaver's edition as it moved from one based on a printed text, Caxton's 1485 edition, to one based on the Winchester manuscript, and to its final modern printed form. As will become

¹ The most influential opposition has been Derek Brewer's in his article, 'Form in the *Morte Darthur*', *Medium Aevum*, 21 (1952), 14–24, reprinted in revised form as "The hoole book", in *Essays on Malory*, ed. by J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 41–63.

² I quote, with permission, materials that are copyright Oxford University Press. I am grateful to Dr Martin Maw for allowing me access to this material and arranging permission for it to be published. Documents in the Oxford University Press Archive are cited parenthetically in the text as 'OUP Archive' followed by the date. As will be clear, I have been able to examine papers from the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, the Pierpont Morgan Library, Winchester College Archives, and an unpublished account by Walter Oakeshott of his meeting with Vinaver in June 1934, now in private hands. For help of various kinds I am indebted to Miss S. Foster, Archivist, Winchester College, John Bidwell, Astor Curator of Printed Books and Bindings, Pierpont Morgan Library, and Julia Halkyard, John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester, Dr Lotte Hellinga, and Professor Toshiyuki Takamiya. Professor Takamiya has kindly advised me that he purchased, from Professor Barry Gaines, Vinaver's side of the correspondence he had with Oxford University Press. This correspondence may contain materials not in the Oxford University Press Archive; unfortunately, Professor Takamiya tells me that he is currently unable to locate this material in his library.

clear, it is a story that reveals much more about the personality of Malory's editor than about his editorial methods.

The story begins in 1929. The then young Eugène Vinaver (1889–1979) had just become Reader in the French Department at Manchester University. Vinaver was an emigré Russian Jew who had fled Russia in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and been educated at Paris and at Oxford.³ He had already earned a reputation as a scholar of promise chiefly on the basis of two books, *Le Roman de Tristan et Iseut dans l'œuvre de Thomas Malory* (1925) and a more recent critical study of Malory published by the Clarendon Press in 1929.⁴ The latter book had brought him to the attention of the learned Secretary to the Delegates at Oxford University Press, R. W. Chapman (1881–1960). It is clear from the Oxford University Press Archive that Chapman wanted a new edition of Malory to replace Sommer's outdated and out of print one of 1889–91. By 11 December 1929 Vinaver was in detailed discussion with Chapman's Assistant Secretary, the equally learned medievalist, Kenneth Sisam (1887–1971). Vinaver wrote to Sisam then to outline the scope of the proposed new text. He envisaged a quite modest Introduction of about 13,000 words, a text based on the Morgan Library copy of Caxton's edition, the only complete witness to the text then known, with modern punctuation and lightly regularized orthography, commentary, and glossary. The total word count he estimated at about half a million words (OUP Archive, 11 December, 1929). Sisam responded with encouraging enthusiasm (OUP Archive, 14 February, 1930).

It was on the basis of this plan that Chapman wrote in early 1930 to Belle da Costa Greene, the colourful Director of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, to enquire with rather roguish archness: 'If we could screw ourselves up to a really swagger edition of the *Morte Darthur*, do you think you could allow us to pay for a set of rotographs of your copy?' (OUP Archive, 2 February 1930). Chapman makes clear to Greene the scope of the edition:

What we are out for is a corrected text with a certain amount of commentary, and this our man is uniquely qualified to do from his knowledge of the French sources, which exist only in manuscript and have not previously been tapped. That being so, our plan is to make a reasonably readable text, preserving the spelling in general. But normalizing capitals and punctuation. (OUP Archive, 24 March 1930)

It took some time to get the rotographs, but by March 1931 Vinaver could report to Sisam 'I have received all the rotographs [...] and the work will be in full swing before long' (OUP Archive, 9 March 1931). By July, Sisam had also hired E. S. Murrell, a young scholar, to collate the Morgan and Rylands copies of Caxton, to regularize spelling and capitalization for the edition, and to prepare an index of Arthurian characters (OUP Archive, 27 July 1931).

There is no record of how matters progressed from this point. The next correspondence is in June 1934 when the Winchester manuscript was discovered by Oakeshott. There is no way of assessing the truth of Vinaver's claim, as reported by Oakeshott, that his edition was complete in typescript by this point, but the lack of corroboration from the OUP Archive makes this seem unlikely.

The story of the discovery of the manuscript of the *Morte* is the stuff of scholarly legend. The most extensive account is by Oakeshott, in a brief and characteristically self-deprecating essay, nearly thirty years later.⁵ Then a junior master and Moberly Librarian at Winchester

³ The standard account of Vinaver's life is in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* on which I have drawn for factual information.

⁴ Eugène Vivaver, *Le roman de Tristan et Iseut dans l'œuvre de Thomas Malory* (Paris: Champion, 1925) and *Malory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929).

⁵ 'The Finding of the Manuscript', in *Essays on Malory*, ed. by Bennett, pp. 1–6.

College, he had found it in a box under the headmaster's bed, where it formed part of the Fellows' Library. The immediate consequence of the discovery of the manuscript was his first meeting with Vinaver.

Oakeshott recounts in his essay how, a day or two after the first reports of the manuscript had been published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'Professor Vinaver, who had been working already for some years on a new text of Malory [...] appeared from Manchester on my doorstep, asking to see the book.'⁶ Oakeshott was wholly unable to comply with this request: 'The book was not mine, nor did it even belong to the library of which I had charge. So I took him down to see [the MS] in the showcase, but refused to do more for him till I had instructions from the Warden and Fellows.' He ruefully concludes '[...] it must have seemed uncommonly churlish to a man who had made Malory already his life's work'.⁷

This is not the only account of this encounter that survives. Oakeshott published a subsequent version dated 'March, 1976' in the Winchester College magazine, *The Trusty Servant*;⁸ and there is an enlarged unpublished account that seems to have formed part of an unpublished memoir by Oakeshott.⁹ Neither of these includes the sentence I have just quoted. And the unpublished version is richer in circumstantial detail and significant in other respects. It comments on the insistence of Vinaver's demands and includes the detail that he claimed that he had already completed his new edition.¹⁰

Vinaver has left his own account of what he terms 'my extraordinary adventures at Winchester' in a series of letters to Sisam. He dwells at some length on the intransigence of the College authorities. 'It seems hardly credible that they refused to let me examine the manuscript except through the glass-case in which it is exhibited.' But in the event this was all he could do. He expressed his views to Sisam in terms that may seem revealing in the light of later events:

I felt and still feel extremely hurt at the way they dealt with my application. I have worked in greater and more ancient libraries in my time, and I am not accustomed to being told even by distinguished librarians that a manuscript which is essential to my work can only be shown to me through a glass. (OUP Archive, 3 July 1934)

But, in spite of this, Vinaver was able, on the basis of a single opening seen at a distance, to arrive at a clear-cut conclusion that he felt able to express to Sisam. 'The only thing that struck me as fairly certain was that the manuscript could not have been copied from Caxton. Nor is it very likely [...] that Caxton used it. There remains, therefore, only one possibility which can be expressed as follows:

	Malory	
/		\
Winchester MS		Caxton
		(OUP Archive, 30 June 1934)

It was this textual conclusion, so swiftly arrived at, that was to inform Vinaver's editing of the Winchester manuscript as it finally appeared in his Clarendon Press edition.

⁶ 'The Finding of the Manuscript', in *Essays on Malory*, ed. by Bennett, p. 4.

⁷ 'The Finding of the Manuscript', in *Essays on Malory*, ed. by Bennett, p. 5.

⁸ 'The Malory Manuscript', *The Trusty Servant*, no. 41 (June 1976), 2–5.

⁹ It seems to have been employed by John Dancy in his biography of Oakeshott, *Walter Oakeshott: A Diversity of Gifts* (Norwich: Michael Russell, 1995), in his account of his first meeting with Vinaver, pp. 66–67.

¹⁰ I am much indebted to Dr Lotte Hellinga, who permitted me to examine a copy of this document.

But the publication of that edition still lay thirteen years ahead. The manuscript remained at Winchester over the summer so that Oakeshott could produce the first studies of it.¹¹ On 24 September 1934 Oakeshott sent the Winchester Manuscript on deposit to the John Rylands Library in Manchester. (It was returned to Winchester on 22 November 1935.) By October 1934 Vinaver had started work.¹² His way of proceeding is not without interest. It seems clear that he never envisaged doing himself much of the tedious work, like transcribing the manuscript. He tells Sisam: 'I may have to order rotographs of some parts of the manuscript so as to divide the work among several people' (OUP Archive, 24 October 1934), and he worries about the Press's willingness to defray his expenses (money is a recurrent theme in his correspondence with Sisam). However, at this time he is confident: 'if all goes well I am hoping to send you the text for the first volume before the end of the year' (OUP Archive, 24 October 1934). Sisam enthusiastically endorses the need for expedition: 'The sooner it is, the better' (OUP Archive, 25 October 1934). At this stage Sisam still believed it would be possible to adhere to Vinaver's original estimate of size: half a million words in two volumes (OUP Archive, Sisam memorandum).

After this there is a gap of nearly four years in the Press correspondence. When Vinaver reports to Sisam in July 1938, he stresses the burdens of his undertaking and the need for more money from the Press. These burdens are such, as he reports, that

during the current academic Session I have had to engage a permanent Assistant, with a weekly salary. I do not know whether I have been at all extravagant, but I have worked all the time on the assumption that anything that is likely to improve the edition is worth paying for. (OUP Archive, 8 July 1938)

Such a model of selfless scholarship invites admiration. However, matters were not quite as Vinaver indicated. He had indeed hired a typist, at £3 a week. And he had charged her to transcribe the Winchester manuscript directly into typescript. It should be pointed out that for this and earlier generations of scholars it was not uncommon to farm out transcription work. Nevertheless, there are some immediately curious aspects to his choice. His assistant was only nineteen and untrained in Middle English palaeography. And she lived in London, not Manchester. But Vinaver appears to have found her abilities satisfactory. He 'was impressed by the accuracy of [her] transcriptions [of the Winchester MS]' as he told her in a letter. But in the same letter he goes on 'switching midway through his letter to charming, eager French, to say that although he felt half dead from over work, he counted on the sight of her to restore him as if by magic. He could hardly wait to catch the train from Manchester to London on Friday night, when he would break all speed records by taxi over the short distance from Euston station to [her] street door, which he begged her to leave on the latch.'¹³ It is clear that Vinaver's sense of the role of his assistant ramified beyond the narrowly academic. He had, it would seem, become infatuated with her, and the Press was apparently funding his infatuation. What makes this event particularly noteworthy is the identity of the object of his affections. She was Sonia Brownell (1918–1980), who, in 1949, was to become the second wife of George Orwell. The relationship, whatever form it took, does not seem to have lasted. There appears

¹¹ In *The Times* on 25 August 1934, the *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1934, p. 650, and, at greater length, in his subsequent study 'Caxton and Malory's *Morte Darthur*', *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, (1935), 112–16.

¹² His first study of the manuscript quickly followed: 'Malory's *Morte Darthur* in the Light of Recent Discovery', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 19 (1935), 438–57.

¹³ Hilary Spurling, *The Girl from the Fiction Department* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002), pp. 26–27.

no way of establishing how much of the Winchester manuscript Sonia Brownell transcribed. Sonia's name is absent from the acknowledgements in the first edition of Vinaver's *Malory*.¹⁴

There is another large gap in the Press records, until November 1945. It is clear that during this interval proofs had been steadily produced. Sisam observes in a letter of this time that 'this book has been trickling through the Press irregularly for so many years; the volume of Commentary has still to be printed' (OUP Archive, 26 November 1945). At this juncture an issue emerges that introduces a new, very sour note into the final stages of the preparation of Vinaver's edition. It is initiated by a letter to Sisam from the formidable figure of Sir Frederic Kenyon (1863–1952), head of the British Museum and also head of the Fellows of Winchester College. In this latter capacity he had been properly protective of both the College and Oakeshott's interests when the manuscript was first discovered; he had also read first proofs as they came from the Press. He had ensured that Oakeshott was enabled to publish his preliminary accounts of the manuscript in *The Times* and in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1934 before Vinaver was given access to it. He had also been conscious of the claim of 'finder's rights' and had encouraged Oakeshott to consider editing the manuscript himself. But, he waived his claim in deference to Vinaver.

Now, eleven years later, Kenyon read the draft of Vinaver's Preface and he protested at 'such an inadequate recognition of Oakeshott' whose discovery was not acknowledged at all there. He also points out that Oakeshott not merely identified the manuscript but that 'he might reasonably have claimed the right of publication for himself' (OUP Archive, 25 November 1945). Sisam was quick to agree with Kenyon and raised the point in various letters to Vinaver. His response must be quoted *in extenso*:

[...] no one can dictate to me what I ought to say about the work done by Mr Oakeshott. Whatever illusions Sir Frederic Kenyon may have about his scholarship, the facts of the matter are that he is the author of two or three articles on Malory which display abismal [*sic*] ignorance; that he should never have been allowed to attempt a study of the MS., let alone keep it for himself for nearly a year; and that the 'discovery' that brought him fame was only possible because it required no acumen on his part; he simply stumbled upon the book and recognized, as any moderately educated Englishman would have done, that it was Malory's text [...] I am not prepared to give him any more publicity, no matter what pressure is brought to bear upon me. (OUP Archive, 4 December 1945)

Vinaver's claims are curious: when Oakeshott's article had appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1934 he had said that 'I think his account of the MS is on the whole correct' (OUP Archive, 9 October 1934). And Oakeshott did not 'keep it for himself for nearly a year'. The manuscript was sent to the Rylands on 24 September 1934 less than three months after it has been found and was certainly in Vinaver's hands in Manchester by 11 October as a letter from him to the librarian there confirms.

Sisam characterized this letter as 'not merely as mulish but as insolent' (OUP Archive, 6 December 1945) and assured Kenyon, who lamented Vinaver's 'lack of common courtesy', that the Press would 'do something effective'. But nothing was done in the end as Sisam acknowledged when he sent a copy of the edition in March 1947 to Oakeshott, now headmaster at Winchester. He kept a dignified silence. Kenyon did not. He wrote to the *Times*

¹⁴ She was not alone in having her transcriptional role suppressed. It is clear that when S. B. Meech prepared his edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* for the Early English Text Society that 'the actual task of transcription was undertaken by Meech's wife, Ruth, who typed directly from the rotographs' (see John C. Hirsch, *Hope Emily Allen: Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1988), p. 118). When the edition appeared, she

Literary Supplement on 7 June 1947 pointing out the importance of Oakeshott's own work on the manuscript and his generosity in ceding his own rights to Vinaver:

I cannot help thinking [he writes] that a fuller recognition of these obligations would have been in accordance with the usual courtesies of scholarship; and having been concerned as an intermediary in the negotiations I feel bound to call attention to the omission, in order that the lovers of English literature may realize the debt that they owe to Mr Oakeshott for his revelation of Malory's great work in its original form.¹⁵

This letter prompted Vinaver's final, most egregious intervention. He wrote to Sisam suggesting that the Press should respond in his defence ('I certainly cannot engage in a controversy') and concluding disingenuously that 'I am sure Oakeshott himself would be grateful to you if you could put things right' (OUP Archive, 14 June 1947). Sisam's reply was brief: 'The Delegates, who have considered it, would certainly not agree to any public statement' he wrote; 'certainly Oakeshott would have more supporters in the discussion than you' (OUP Archive, 16 June 1947). Here the record ends.

Several things are curious about this history apart from the light that it sheds on Vinaver's personality. The most striking is the absence of any insight into his most significant conclusion about the Winchester manuscript that led him to title his edition *The Works of Malory*, to see it as a series of narratives rather than as the 'whole book' of Malory's own phrase. It is the most crucial point in his thinking, but history seems to have left no way of glossing it. Nor is it wholly clear how much of the work of the edition can be credited to others. Among those who are acknowledged in the Preface to his edition are Dr Gweneth Hutchings 'who [...] assisted me in the transcription of the text with the skill of an expert palaeographer' and Dr J. A. Noonan who 'transcrib[ed] with extreme accuracy several sections of the Winchester MS' (p. xii). And we know that at least one other had a role. The Glossary was the work of G. L. Brook. In some aspects Vinaver seems not to have been wholly comfortable with Middle English. Sisam acknowledges that he 'is better on the French than on the English side' (OUP Archive, 13 March 1947) and in some aspects he seems to have been content to have a broadly supervisory role. And about some things he was oddly incurious. For example, he never examined first-hand the only complete copy of the Caxton edition in the Pierpont Morgan Library and seems to have had little concern to look at the only other surviving copy, in the Rylands itself.¹⁶ His chief energies may have gone into his commentary on the text, the preparation of which seems to have been a factor in delaying publication of the edition.

There is one edifying footnote to this not always edifying story. In 1959, twenty-five years after the discovery of the Winchester manuscript, it was proposed that Vinaver be made an honorary fellow of Lincoln College Oxford, where he had been a student while reading for his B. Litt. in the early 1920s. The Rector of Lincoln at the time, who was to die knighted and heavy with academic honours, supported the proposal. He was Walter Oakeshott.¹⁷

is not mentioned in the Acknowledgements; see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Sanford Brown Meech, EETS o.s. 212 (1940), pp. li–lii.

¹⁵ *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 June 1947.

¹⁶ Among the materials in the John Rylands Library is a letter of 7 July 1932 from Vinaver to the Librarian there, Henry Guppy, advising him that his 'friend and pupil, Mr J. A. Noonan' is to do 'some of the work' involved in the collation of the Rylands copy of Caxton's Malory.

¹⁷ Oakeshott wrote an obituary of Vinaver in *Lincoln College Record* (1978–79), 26.