Prose, but Not Prosaic:
Narration in the Prose of Malory
and of the Paston Family

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I was born situationally insane—and so were you. We had been conscious for quite some time prior to birth: we registered sounds, movement, perhaps moments of increased heartbeat when our universe exercised, grew excited, or took fright. We probably even had a dim sense of time: that is, we knew—it may have been all we knew—that event followed event, that heartbeat followed heartbeat. Mostly, though, we floated amidst a universe which sustained, warmed, and fed us—but we were not conscious of being sustained, warmed, or fed. We had never known the contrasting fall, cold, or hunger which would underline them. Our existences had no pattern, and needed none: all our thought was simply, "I am." The lotus-eaters were a nervous lot by comparison.

Then came birth. Pressure and constriction, followed by light, colors, voices, abrasive touch, abrupt movement through cold space, the heartbeat gone… our entire universe went nova. Human voices woke us, and we drowned in new perceptions—went insane and screamed out our protest with vocal cords we hadn't known we had.

Humans have been called variously the erect animals, the tool-making animals, the laughing animals, the thinking animals: we were first, though, the organizing animals. Born insane, we had to find, or construct, patterns—to organize our perceptions so that time and

space, vision and sound, hunger and thirst, warm and cold, man and woman, made sense to us.

We're still trying to make sense of it all. One of the ways we academics do that is to read a lot. My Missouri-farm-raised father, by contrast, was not until recently a reader—but he is a narrator and a consumer of narratives. He structures his life, as we do ours, by narrative patterns. From nursery rhymes through fairy tales to T.V. and film, narrative gives a pattern to our lives. For example, some of us—and most of my students—think that if we fight off the ogres and save the prince or princess, we will marry him or her and live happily ever after. As Max Lüthi has suggested, that pattern structures, or did once structure, many of our lives.[1] If we don't already know that narratives structure our existence, J. Hillis Miller will tell us so. In Frank Lentricchia and Thomas MacLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, he suggests that

> [I]n fictions we order or reorder the givens of experience. We give experience a form and a meaning, a linear order with a shapely beginning, middle, end, and central theme. The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. (69)

In this essay, I simply provide an extended footnote to Miller's comment as I apply it to two major works of the English fifteenth century: Sir Thomas Malory's

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Morte Darthur and *The Paston Letters and Papers*. The thrusts of these two works differ; I shall suggest, however, that Malory's fictions and the Pastons' facts make sense because of common narrative patterns. I discuss first a syntactic pattern, then a "courtly" pattern of display.

Syntax

Unlike our modern syntax, Medieval English syntax was *not* shaped by punctuation. Malory, and the Pastons, could not use punctuation to shape meaning. Punctuation in the modern sense only began to appear a century after Malory's death.[2] Since punctuation is second only to word order in establishing syntax, both the Pastons and Malory needed some system other than punctuation to make sense of their narratives. They had one at hand, as appears in the analysis of the following:

Dere housbonde I recomaunde me to yow &c blyssyd be god I sende yow gode tydyngg*ys* of þe comyng and þe brynggyn hoom of þe gentylwomman þat ye wetyn of fro Redh*a*m þis same nyght acordyng to poyntmen þat ye made þer for yowr*e* self / and as for þe furste aqweyntaunce be twhen Iohn Paston and þe seyde gentilwomman she made hym gentil cher*e* in gyntyl wyse and seyde he was verrayly yowr*e* son and so I hope þer shal nede no gret trete be twyxe hym / þe parson of Stocton toold me yif ye wolde byin here agoune

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[sic: "a gown"] here moder wolde yeue ther to a godely ffurre the goune nedyth for to be had and of coloure it wolde be agodely blew or erlys [sic: "ellys"] abryghte sanggueyn / I prey yow do byen for me ij pypys of gold / yowr*e* stewes do weel / the holy Trinite have yow in gou*er*nau*n*ce wretyn at Paston in hast þe wednesday next aft*er* Deus qui errantib*us* for defaute of agood secretarye &c

<div align="right">

Agn*es*

Yowres   Paston

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[Letter to William Paston I, dtd "Probably 1440, 20 April"—Norman Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers* I, Plate II—cf. I, 26.]

We note here the simplest of narrative patterns. Agnes greets William and tells him that the gentlewoman he knows of has come on a visit, as he arranged; the gentlewoman and young John met, and she was pleasant to John; they are likely to match soon. William can safely consider buying a gown for her—and, by the way, Agnes needs two pipes of gold, the fish-ponds are doing well, she wishes William well, and she lacks a good secretary to write this letter.

We also note in this letter the simplest of syntactic patterns. Remember that Agnes was not only in default of a good secretary, but also in default of punctuation. When you don't have punctuation to help you, as Agnes and her secretary did not, what do you do to pattern your narrative intelligibly?

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Well, as you saw in the transcription, Agnes's secretary—even if not a good one—has used a simple but effective pattern. Commas, semicolons, or periods not being available, he has marked pauses chiefly with the word "and" and/or with a virgule, or slash. The next transcription contains my breaking up of Agnes's letter into the patterns created by virgules and by the word "and":

(1) Dere housbonde I recomaunde me to yow &c
[I assume a pause here, following the salutation]
(2) blyssyd be god I sende yow gode tyd ynggys of þe comyng and þe brynggyn hoom of þe gentylwomman þat ye wetyn of fro Redham þis same nyght acordyng to poyntmen þat ye made þer for yowre self/
(3) and as for þe furste aqweyntaunce be twhen Iohn Paston and þe seyde gentilwomman she made hym gentil chere in gyntyl wyse
(4) and seyde he was verrayly yowre son
(5) and so I hope þer shal nede no gret trete be twyxe hym /
(6) þe parson of Stocton toold me yif ye wolde byin here agoune here moder wolde yeue ther to a godely furre þe goune nedyth for to be had,
(7) and of coloure it wolde be agodely blew or erlys abryghte sanggueyn/
(8) I prey yow do byen for me ij pypys of gold/
(9) yowre stewes do weel/

(10) the holy Trinite have yow in gou*erna*unce wretyn at Paston in hast þe wednesday next aft*er* Deus qui errantib*us* for defaute of agood secretarye &c

                                        Agn*es*
                    Yowres   Paston

We easily follow the pattern created by "and" and virgules. It is not wholly consistent, to be sure; in the second and third word groups appear "ands" which don't mark a pause, and in the sixth group instead of a pause marker one finds repetition of the phrase, "the goune." Nonetheless, I repeat, this syntax is easy to follow—and though this example must seem to mark a desperately simple observation, it is central to understanding narrative patterns of the pre-punctuated ages. Word order without pause markers between clauses cannot signal meaning over long stretches of prose narrative; some sort of organizing marker is essential. Now and again, virgules, punctūs, or (as will appear) capitalized letters served as fourteenth- and fifteenth-century pause-markers. More commonly, however, conjunctions like "and" or adversatives like "but" work together to create what we now call a "paratactic," or coordinated, structure for the narrative.

As soon as one hears "paratactic," one thinks of Malory. The first thing anyone says about Malory's style is "paratactic"—that is, coordinated. And, certainly, his style is primarily coordinated; one reads along from

"and" to "and then" to yet another "and." Many scholars have written as if that stylistic element were somehow unique to Malory. It is not. That stylistic element is simply part of the received pattern with which Malory organizes his narrative. Like the hapless secretary of Agnes Paston, he must consider how to help a reader create syntax from words which Malory cannot order with punctuation. Remember: punctuation hadn't yet been invented. So what he does is what appears on the following, transcribed from a section of the Winchester MS, or British Library Additional MS 59678 (facsimile):

for þer was neu*er* worshypfull man nor worshypfull ~~man~~ woman but they loved one bettir than anothir and worshyp in armys may neu*er* be foyled but firste res*er*ue the honoure to god and secundely thy quarell muste com of thy lady and such love I calle vertuouse love // But now adayes men can nat love vii•ny3t but þey muste haue all þer desyres That love may nat endure by reson for where they bethe sone accorded And hasty heete some keelyth And ryght so faryth the love now a dayes sone hote sone colde thys ys no stabylyte but the olde love was nat so • for men and women coude love togydirs vii•yerys and no lycoures lustes was betwyxte them And than was love trouthe and faythefulness //

(facsimile, Winchester MS, folio 435r)

The syntactic pattern is not immediately clear to us, used as we are to separations made for us by modern editors. In Malory's time, though, reader response did more work in creating syntax than it does now. The next passage shows my reconstruction of the reader response a medieval reader would have given this passage; I simply show the pauses Malory's first readers would have constructed preceding conjunctions or following virgules, one punctus, and capital letters:

(1) for þ*er* was neuer worshypfull man nor worshypfull ~~man~~ woman

(2) but they loved one bettir than anothir

(3) and worshyp in armys may neu*er* be foyled

(4) but firste res*er*ue the honoure to god

(5) and secundely thy quarell muste com of thy lady

(6) and such love I calle vertuouse love //

(7) But now adayes men can nat love vii•ny3t

(8) but þey muste haue all þ*er* desyres

(9) That love may nat endure by reson

(10) for where they bethe sone accorded And hasty heete some keelyth[3]

(11) And ryght so faryth the love now a dayes sone hote sone colde thys ys no stabylyte

(12) but the olde love was nat so •

(13) for men and women coude love togydirs vii•yerys

(14) and no lycoures lustes was betwyxte them

(15) And than was love trouthe and faythefulness //

Note that the passages as separated are almost all short—only the "sone accorded" and "soon hot soon cold" narrative pronouncements have much length to them. To repeat: I suggest that a medieval reader automatically separated the passages in her/his mind as I have done here on paper.

I further suggest that one must begin any study of "style" in fifteenth-century prose by recognizing both this pattern and the necessary reader-response to the pattern. And I must note here that we scholars have allowed ourselves to become dependent upon editions, which editors have punctuated, capitalized, and separated into paragraphs for us. And in doing so we have lost touch with the manuscripts, and thus with the patterns of fifteenth-century narrative. In an age when reader-response criticism has already bloomed and faded, we have failed to note the reader response evoked by medieval texts. The implications affect our reading of all prose prior to roughly 1600. I merely note the existence of those implications, however, and move on to one other narrative pattern common to the Pastons and to Malory.[4]

The Courtly Pattern

Now consider what Malory might call "the pattern of worshipfulness" but what I shall simply call "the courtly pattern." Before I proceed, however, I must point out that Malory and the Pastons probably found this pattern

in the same place: Malory read the same books the Pastons read.

About books: Sir John Paston III was a knight, like his father before him. He took his knighthood seriously. Karen Cherewatuk points out, in a forthcoming essay, that the Pastons owned one of the "grete bokes" which instructed knights on worshipful behavior; I note that they also owned a book which looks very like one of Malory's sources for his *Morte*. In *The Paston Letters and Papers* one finds that Sir John Paston II left us an inventory of his books written in his own hand. The inventory dates between 1475 and 1479.[5] Part of the inventory, listed first, is the following:

> A boke had off my ostesse at þe Gorge… off þe Dethe off Arthur begynyng at Cassab<…>. (I,517—and see I, Plate VII)

Paston also lists "my boke off knyghthod and ther-in… off makyng off knyghtys, off justys, off torn<…> fyghtyng in lystys, paces holden by sou<…> and chalengys, statutys off weer…."[6] The ideology of knighthood clearly interested him. It interested his son as well, as appears in part of Sir John III's description of the marriage festivities of Margaret of York to Charles Duke of Burgundy ("the Bastard") on the 8th of July in 1468:

> [Paston opens by writing that the Bastard and twenty-three other knights have answered a

challenge to joust.] they xxiiij & hym selue schold torney w^t othyr xxv the next day aftyr whyche is on Monday next comyng and they that haue jostyd w^t hym in to thys day haue ben as rychely beseyn & hym selue also **as clothe of gold** & sylk & syluyr & goldsmythys werk ~~mygth~~ myght mak hem for of syche ger **& gold & perle & stonys** they of the dwkys [sic for "Duke's"] coort neythyr gentylmen nor gentylwomen they want non for w^t owt th*a*t they haue it by wyshys by my trowthe I herd neuyr of sogret plente as her is // Thys day my lord scalys justyd w^t a lord of thys contre but nat w^t the bastard for they mad promyse at london that non ofthem bothe shold neuer dele w^t othyr in Armys but the bastard was on of the lordys th*a*t browt the lord scalys in to the feld & of mysfortwne an horse strake my lord bastard on the lege & hathe hurt hym so sore that I can thynk he shalbe of no power to Acomplyshe vp hys armys and that is gret pete for by my trowthe I trow god mad neu*er* a mor worchepfull knyt And asfor the dwkys coort as of lordy [sic] ladys & gentylwomen knyt*ys* sqwyirs & gentyllmen I herd neuer of non lyek to it saue kyng Artourys cort…

 (Davis I, Plate VIII; cf. I, 538–39—emphasis added)

One notes that Sir John writes that this courtly display is similar to that of Arthur's court. Note also some comparable passages in Malory:

First, in the *Book of Sir Tristram,* several tournaments take place; Lancelot and Tristram avoid fighting each other, not for fear, but out of friendship.7 As appears above, the Duke of Burgundy and Anthony, Lord Scales, pursue a similar pattern. They have promised not to deal with each other in arms, as Sir John III tells us. We see a pattern of noble behavior here—one which structures both fact and fiction.

This marriage passage from Sir John Paston III's letter shows, like Malory's *Morte,* an approving view of the grandeur of outward trappings. Sir John's account notes how richly clad were the jousting knights and all their company. Compare the following passage from Malory, which occurs in the section titled by Vinaver "The Vengeance of Sir Gawain." A procession is taking place, as Lancelot returns Guinevere to King Arthur:

> Than s*ir* Launcelot purveyed hym an c• knyght*is* and all well clothed in grene velvet and th*ir* horsis trapped in the same to the heelys and eu*ery* knyght hylde a braunche of olyff in hys honde in tokenyng of pees And the quene had iiij•& xxti jantill women folowyng her in the same wyse and s*ir* Launcelot had xij• coursers folowyng hym and on ev*ery* courser sate a yonge jantylman [to fol. 465r] and all they were arayed in whyght velvet with Sarpis of golde aboute th*ir* quarters and the horse trapped in the same wyse down to the helys wyth many owchys isette w*t* **stonys and perelys in golde** to the nu*m*bir of a thousande And in the same wyse

was the quene arayed and s*ir* Launcelot in the same
of whyght **clothe of golde** tyssew…
  (facsimile fols. 464v–465r—emphasis added)

As appeared earlier, Sir John III describes courtly
display with many of the same words: his jousters, and
the Duke, are as

rychely beseyn, …as **clothe of gold** and sylk and
sylur and goldsmythys werk myght mak hem; for
of syche ger, and **gold and perle and stonys**,
they want non…
        (*Paston Letters and Papers,* I.538–39)

As both Sir John and Lancelot thought, such display was
worthy of "kyng Artourys cort" (*Paston Letters* I, Plate
VIII).

Conclusion

I have addressed syntactic and "courtly" narrative
patterns shared by the Paston family writing non-fiction
and by Malory writing fiction, and have presented some
of the syntactic and courtly patterns shared in these two
texts.
   I also offer two observations. One is that Malory's
non-punctuated syntax is by necessity paratactic. That
means that one must place in a broader context such
outstanding studies of Malory's syntax as Bonnie
Wheeler's "Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The

Case of Sir Gawain's Reputation" in *Arthurian Literature* XII.8

My second observation: Malory shares with the Pastons the view of courtly display as essential to the aristocratic life. Maurice Keen has commented at length on the social and economic importance of such display: in sum, he suggests that such parades of wealth and power reinforced in the eyes of all knights—which is to say, in the eyes of the leaders of the armed forces—the idea that success lies in emulating the aristocracy, and thus in supporting the aristocratic class. As a New Historicist might put it, display supports ideology—and ideology supports the ruling class (*Chivalry* 153–54).

In discussing syntax and courtly display in one paper, I have placed apples and oranges in the same sack. My only excuse is that these two phenomena shape much of Malory's *Morte,* and much of the prose found in the *Paston Letters and Papers.* We still seek such patterns in our fiction and in our factual accounts, and we still believe that our lives find meaning, or make meaning, because of them.

Notes

1. Lüthi writes that "[t]he fairytale makes the structural elements of existence visible": *The Fairytale as Art Form* 78.
2. M.B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect* 50–61. For illustrations of medieval unpunctuated prose, see the transcribed passages in this essay. See also N.F. Blake's "The Editorial Process," where he points out that Modern English has more punctuation marks than did Middle English, with "more precise functions," and that "punctuation is now used syntactically" (67). It was not used syntactically in the Middle Ages, but rhetorically, liturgically, or to regulate oral performance—e.g., in Gregorian chant (67–68).
3. The capitalized "And" would seem to mark a pause, but it appears in a short series rather than at the beginnning of a clause. This inconsistency troubles me; "and" does appear in series throughout medieval English prose and poetry, however. I can only assume that the capital letter is a scribal error.
4. For a fuller examination of the implications of this phenomenon, see D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., and Jennifer L. Fish, "Beside the Point."
5. John II died 15 Nov 1479 (Davis, introduction to document, *Paston Letters,* I, 516–17). The inventory which contains the book appears in I, Plate VII and in Doc. 316, I, 517–18.
6. Document 316, I, 516–18. In 1469 one William Ebesham, evidently a scribe, wrote a bill to Sir John

Paston for the copying of several documents and books. One of the items reads:

> "Item, as to the Grete Booke, first for wrytyng of the Coronacion and other tretys of knyghthode..." (Doc. 755, II, 392)

Another speaks of copying "the tretys of werre in iiij bookes"; yet another speaks of copying "the *Chalenges* and the *Actes of Armes.*" A fourth mentions "*de Regimine Principum*" (Doc. 755, II, 392).
7. In *The Book of Sir Tristram* Lancelot and Tristram, because of their friendship, avoid fighting each other. As Tristram puts it after Lancelot has graciously refused to fight him,

> 'And by that agayne I knew that hit was sir Launcelot, for ever he forberyth me in every place and shewyth me grete kyndenes'
> (Malory 453.17–18).

(Here and throughout I use the one-volume Oxford Standard Authors edition because it is so much easier of access than the recent 3-vol. edition by P.J.C. Field and Vinaver).
This principle appears in action just a few pages later: at the tournament at Lonezep, Lancelot and Tristram meet in the melée. Lancelot does not know he faces Tristram, so the two trade strokes. Dinadan, aware that Lancelot does not intend to meet Tristram in arms, calls

Tristram's name aloud. Lancelot's response is to cease fighting and to say,

> 'A, my lorde sir Trystram, why were ye now disgysed? Ye have put youreselff this day in grete perell. But I pray you to pardon me, for and I had knowyn you we had nat done this batayle.' (Malory 458.40–42)

8. Wheeler's observations about the effect of Malory's syntax seem to me both valid and valuable; however, where she suggests that parataxis is Malory's "preferred" grammatical and syntactic mode, and that parataxis is also Malory's "organizational strategy, preferred mode of characterisation and philosophic position" (110), one must realize that Malory shows in his writing not a preference, but rather a pattern that he shares with all other English writers of his time. That observation does not lessen the value of Wheeler's study.

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