

"The Arthurian Romances".

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The Normans, who like the English were Germanic in origin, had, after establishing themselves in Normandy, so completely adopted and also improved upon the civilization of the Gaul and the Roman that scarcely an outward trace of their origin remained. They had become "the most courtly, cultured, art loving, and capable race in Europe; and when, in 1066, they conquered England, they were foremost in instituting chivalry." Their poets sang of battle, love and heroism. Of these songs, the Arthurian Romances were most popular.

"Arthur as a personality belongs to the Celtic traditions of Great Britain and Brittany." His name is familiar to "the first murmurs of British song." In style and spirit these songs were not Scandinavian, but French and Southern. Celtic, German, English and French writers worked to produce them, and this in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, flooded all Europe. These legends were in the care of the Welsh bards until the time of Henry II.

when they seem to have passed over to the charge of the monks of Glastonbury."

King Arthur is the principal figure about which all these romances cluster. The Arthur of history was a British Chief, living in the sixth century A.D. He fought many battles, and was finally killed at one near Bath, 520 A.D. He was buried at Glastonbury, and as legend says, a bardic chief pronounced the secret resting place to King Henry. In 1191, the Abbot of Glastonbury caused the excavations to be made. Between two pyramids near a church at the depth of six feet a flat stone was found bearing the inscription "Here lies buried, in the Island of Avalonia the renowned King Arthur." Ten feet deeper another stone with Arthur's name upon it was found, and under this a sarcophagus containing two divisions; in one were the bones of Arthur, in the other the bones of Queen Guinevere, and a tress of her golden hair. The historical facts of Arthur's life are woven so mystically with the legendary that the history is lost sight

of, and we have only the life and deeds of Arthur idealized.

The glory of Arthur belongs to all England and especially the southwestern coast is dedicated to his memory. The counties of Cornwall and Somerset were the scenes of Arthur's life. He was born at Tintagel Castle which is on the western coast of Cornwall. His parents were Uther Pendragon and Igerna. Legends state that he was sent by heaven to appease the land, and establish the faith of Christ, being cast up a babe out of the sea, and delivered unto Merlin the great magician, who prophesied of him "From the great deep to the great deep he goes." He was afterward set on the throne of Britain by Merlin. In Arthurian Legend, the Round Table was made by Merlin for Uther the father of Arthur, who gave it to the father of Guinevere from whom Arthur received it with one hundred knights as a wedding gift, upon his marriage to Guinevere. At Merlin's advice King Arthur founded the Order of the Round Table which was a new order

of knighthood, and the knight's oath was "to uphold the faith of Christ, and right all wrongs of men; and above all, themselves to live chaste lives, each with the one woman of his sacred choice."

The influence of the Germans upon these romances is probably found in the religious view of the stories which the German Minnesingers helped to introduce. For the fanciful features of Chivalry — the tender regard for women, and the idealization of love — we are indebted to the Celtic imagination.

In the legends, Arthur is represented as a Christian prince who struggles bravely to maintain the liberty and faith of his country against the pagan Saxons. In Tennyson's *Idylls* we find:

"Then he drove the heathen, after slew the
beast, and fell'd
The forest, letting in the sun, and made
Broad pathways for the hunter and the
knight,

And so returned." Arthur fought twelve battles against the heathen and overthrew them.

Arthur has twelve favorite knights, the bravest, who with himself, form the "Knights of the Round Table." The legends show how Arthur with his knights, strives to right all wrongs. In the end he is the only one left who is still pure and holy. From Arthur's Court, the knights go forth "to protect women, chastise oppressors, liberate the enchanted, slay giants and malicious dwarfs;" but one after another of the knights sinned, and others withdrew from the Court because of the sin and baseness. The last two knights, Galahad and Percivale were grieved by the baseness of the time, and went in search of the Holy Grail, or the Cup used at the Last Supper, believing that if the Holy Grail could be brought to Arthur's Court, men would become pure again. Sir Galahad was successful in his search, and Percivale who was with him tells of their journey, how they came to a Swamp crossed by bridges, "And Galahad fled along them bridge by bridge, and every bridge as quickly as he trod sprang into fire and vanished, tho' I yearnd."

To follow; and thrice above him all the
heavens

Open'd and blazed with thunder such as seem'd
Shoutings of all the sons of God and first
At once I saw him far on the Great Sea
In silver shining armour starry clear;
And o'er his head the Holy vessel hung,
Clothed in white samite or a luminous cloud
And with exceeding swiftness ran the boat,
If boat it were - I saw not whence it came.
And when the heavens open'd and blazed again
Roaring, I saw him like a silver star -
And had he set the sail, or had the boat
Become a living creature clad with wings?
And o'er his head the Holy Vessel hung
Deader than any rose, a joy to me.

For now I knew the veil had been withdrawn
So we find that the only one of the knights
worthy of finding the Grail was snatched
away with it. Others went in search of
it but were unsuccessful, and the Round
Table was broken up. Guinevere proved
false to Arthur, and he was left alone
His last battle was fought against Modred
who had seized the crown, and was fatally

injured. He was carried away in a barge by three queens.

"To the island valley of Avilion,
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard
lawns,

And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."
But he never returned, and the prophecy
of Merlin was fulfilled, "From the great
deep to the great deep he goes."

These legends have furnished material
for writers to work on up to the present
day. Each author who makes use of them
adds something which helps to perfect
them. They are a mixture of the legends
of four different races and this is what
makes them so characteristic.

Their first appearance in literature
was in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin
work, "Historia Britonum", 1147, which he
said was a translation from a manuscript
found by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, in
a convent at Armorica. If there ever existed

such a manuscript, it is likely to have been found at Armorica since this is the place to which the Britons fled during the Saxon invasions. Geoffrey compiled these stories in such a way as to give a chivalric interest to them. This was abridged by Alfred of Beverly.

A little later Walter Mapes, a French poet wrote "Sundry French Arthurian Romances". Then we find that Geoffrey Gaimar and Wace translated the stories into Anglo Norman about the middle of the twelfth Century. Layamon and Robert of Gloucester translated Wace into Seng-Saxon.

In 1485 appeared Sir Thomas Malory's "Morte d'Arthur". He sums up the growth of the legends of Arthur and his knights; this is the latest and finest of the great chivalric romances, whose artless and beautiful phraseology Malory himself has not always cared to alter. Malory possessed a vivifying and organizing power which aided him in making, out of the heterogeneous materials which he collected from so many sources, a consistent

and affecting whole.

Edmund Spenser is the next to make use of the romances. In his *Faery Queen*, published in 1590, he pictures Arthur as the central figure of his story.

Shakespeare knew the legends through Holinshed. From them, he gets his Character Lear for his *Tragedy*, 1605.

Milton collected material to write up the Arthurian Legends but it was never written. Instead he produced *Paradise Lost*.

Among the different legends making up the Cycle of Arthurian Romances, that of *Tristan and Isolt* seems to be the most popular. Arnold has written up this legend in dialogue. While he pictures two Isolts still there seems to be but one. Both have fallen in love with him (*Tristan*), the one dying with him. In his story, the Isolt of Ireland and Isolt the wife of King Mark are two different people.

At the close of the story the other Isolt tells her children the story of Merlin and Vivien.

The story of *Tristan and Isolt* was intro

duced into German Literature in the twelfth Century by Gilhard von Oberg. Also in the twelfth Century another epic was written by Gottfried von Strassburg.

The next important form which this story takes is in an Opera by the German musician Wagner, who wrote both words and music of this drama. It is divided into three great scenes. The first opens on the vessel on which Tristram is conveying Isolt to King Mark of Cornwall. In Wagner's version Isolt never became the wife of King Mark; in the last scene, where Tristram and Isolt die together, the king comes to give his consent to their marriage, but he is too late.

Swinburne has written on Tristram of Lyonesse. Tristram was one of the most celebrated knights of the Round Table and probably this accounts for the popularity of this romance in literature.

These legends have been brought to perfection by Thompson in his "Idylls of the King", which were published at different times from 1858 to 1886. In his final ar-

rangement of the different stories, they exhibit a unity of purpose, a cumulative interest, and a moral force and beauty of the one story of which they are all essential parts. "The Coming of Arthur" stands as a Prologue to the Idylls, and "The Passing of Arthur" as an Epilogue. Tennyson pictures Arthur as drawing from the bosom of the lake the Excalibur bearing the words "Take me" and "Cast me away!"

"And sad was Arthur's face
 Taking it, but old Merlin Counsell'd him,
 'Take thou and strike! the time to cast away
 Is yet far off! So this great brand the
 King

Look, and by this will beat his folmen down."

The Idylls of the King deal mostly with the fall of Arthur; only the Prologue and the first two stories of the Round Table - "Gareth and Lynette", and "Geraint and Enid" treating of the building up of the kingdom. Vivien is the first to bring discord into the Court. Sin springs up in the story of Elaine and Lancelot, then the quest of the Holy Grail helps to break up the Order.

Tennyson takes out all coarseness from the romances, and strengthens all good in them. "Arthur stands as a luminous back ground to the story of the knights, as a wide, bright sky that shows up against the breadth and brilliance of its purity the darker shadows that move before it." He has worked the stories over and over and rearranged them, until they stand a perfect representation of Chivalry idealized in Arthur.