King Arthur:
History and Legend

Course Guidebook

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MAGNUS ARTURUS REX
POTENTISSIMUS ANGLIAE
DOMINUS LUNCELOT DU LAC
EQUES INVICTUS

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Professor Dorsey Armstrong is a Professor of English at Purdue University, where she has taught since 2002. She received her A.B. in English and Creative Writing from Stanford University and her Ph.D. in Medieval Literature from Duke University. She also has taught at Centenary College of Louisiana and at California State University, Long Beach.

Professor Armstrong's research interests include medieval women writers, late medieval print culture, and the Arthurian legend, on which she has published extensively. She is the author of *Sir Thomas Malory's* Morte Darthur*: A New Modern English Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript* and *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's* Morte d'Arthur. In January 2009, she became editor in chief of the academic journal *Arthuriana*, which publishes cutting-edge research on the legend of King Arthur, from its medieval origins to its modern enactments. Professor Armstrong's most recent book, *Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies in* Le Morte Darthur (coauthored with Kenneth Hodges), is an exploration of the role played by geography in Malory's version of the story of King Arthur.

Other Great Courses taught by Professor Armstrong include *Turning Points in Medieval History*, *The Medieval World*, *Analysis and Critique: How to Engage and Write about Anything*, and *Great Minds of the Medieval World*. ∎

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Scope:

For more than 1,000 years, stories of King Arthur and his knights have fascinated people from all different walks of life. What is it about this story that has given it such enduring popularity? What are the themes and ideals of the Arthurian legend that have appealed to so many people across time and space? In this 24-lecture course, you will learn about the origins and development of Arthur's story from the end of the ancient world to the present day.

The course begins with the historical basis for the legend, attempting to answer the question, was there really a King Arthur? You will discover that the answer is yes, but the historical figure who is the foundation of the legend looks almost nothing like the noble king so many of us imagine. With the collapse of the Roman Empire and the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain in the 5th century, chaos and uncertainty plagued Western Europe. Into this vacuum of power and order, one British leader stepped up to protect his people and turn back the enemy. The actions of this one man—around the year 500—would give rise to a story that grew ever more complex and interesting over the centuries. It is a story that would be appropriated, rewritten, and deployed by a variety of different peoples, often with vastly different agendas.

In this course, you will explore the earliest references to Arthur in Welsh and Latin texts and come to understand how a cleric named Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in the 12th century, would produce a blockbuster best seller telling the story of a 5th-century king. Claiming to be translating "a very ancient British book," Geoffrey would be the first to link King Arthur and the magician Merlin, and the first to connect service to ladies with knightly identity. You will trace the impact of Geoffrey's text, exploring how the early French, German, and English writers of the legend adapted Geoffrey's work for their own purposes. Inspired by Geoffrey, writers like the Anglo-Norman Wace introduced the Round Table; Chrétien de Troyes would give medieval literature its first glimpse of the illicit love of Lancelot

and Guenevere and the serving vessel that would morph into the Holy Grail. From Germany to Italy to Scandinavia and beyond, other medieval writers would produce their own versions of the Arthurian legend, in each instance reflecting and commenting on the concerns of their own time and place. At the end of the Middle Ages, after centuries of monopoly by French writers, an Englishman named Sir Thomas Malory would reclaim the Arthurian legend, producing the most comprehensive, coherent, consecutively ordered version of the story of Arthur by a single author before the modern period. It is Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* that would put the definitive stamp on the Arthurian legend for the ages that would follow.

While literature was the medium in which stories of Arthur most often circulated, you will learn about the vibrant artistic traditions that depicted Arthur and his knights in stone, painting, tapestry, and wood carvings. You will learn about the earliest artistic representation of Arthur—an archivolt sculpture from Modena, Italy, that dates to as early as 1100—and discover how nobles, wealthy merchants, and even kings sought to use art to connect their own lives to Arthur's.

While the early modern period saw a decline in interest in the Arthurian legend, the 19th century was the time of the Victorian revival of Arthur, in which England's poet laureate—Alfred, Lord Tennyson—and the artists' collective known as the Pre-Raphaelites played a major role. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the paintings, drawings, and stained glass produced by artists like Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti would imagine the Arthurian period as a lost golden age of values and virtues. On the other side of the Atlantic, writers like Mark Twain would satirize both the idealization of the Arthurian legend and the Victorian Age in works like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

The course concludes with an examination of the Arthurian legend in the modern age, exploring how opera, movies, novels, and comic books have all offered their own unique take on the legend. You will explore manifestations of Arthuriana in popular culture—such as King Arthur Flour, the Excalibur Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Grail Ale, and the songs of rapper Jay Z—and discover how commercialization and tourism have affected places long associated with Arthur, such as Tintagel (the reputed birthplace of Arthur)

and Glastonbury Abbey (long associated with the mystical Isle of Avalon and reputed to be the burial site of Arthur and his queen, Guenevere). In the future, the number of books, films, art, and music associated with the legend show no signs of disengaging from this potent figure who has gripped the public imagination for more than 1,500 years; his story looks likely to be told and retold, in multiple forms, for millennia to come. ∎

The Origins of King Arthur
Lecture 1

When you hear the name "King Arthur," several images probably come to mind: Round Tables, stone castles, knights in shining armor, beautiful ladies, and mysterious wizards. Even if you've never read a story from the Arthurian tradition, the tales have been so popular for so long that you can probably even name a character or a plot point or two. You may think you know the story, but as you will learn in this lecture, reality bears very little resemblance to the stories we know and love.

The Historical Context of the Arthurian Legend

- By the beginning of the 5th century, the Roman Empire had overextended itself. It included much of what we think of today as Western Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. In the 1st century, Rome had even made it all the way to Britain, which it wanted to control because of its natural resources, such as tin. Once in Britain, Rome did what it did everywhere it went: It made a little Rome. Its citizens lived in villas and went to public baths. There was a coliseum, a stadium, and an impressive network of roads. There was taxation and bureaucracy, and once the emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity in 313, there were churches and monasteries.

- Rome had not succeeded in penetrating all the way north into Scotland. The Romans had also never fully made it west—some Britons remained independent from the empire. Part of what we think of today as Wales was independent from Rome, as was all of Ireland. These people in the north and west were not Romanized. Thus, they also were not Christian, and they were not politically organized into any kind of state or entity that had a strong centralized government. Life in Ireland, Scotland, and the northern part of the European continent was primarily tribal.

- By the year 410, those Britons who were part of the Roman Empire had been part of that empire for almost four centuries. And in 410, Rome itself was sacked by the Goths. As a result of this, Rome called all the legions back to the center of the empire. Those left behind were farmers, craftspeople, members of religious orders—in other words, people completely unprepared for what happened next. The Picts from Scotland, the Scots from Ireland, and all kinds of Germanic groups from the European continent recognized that Britain was ripe for raiding, and raid they did.

- The besieged Britons, still thinking of themselves as citizens of the Roman Empire, sent an official appeal for help to the closest Roman governmental representative—a man named Aetius who was across the Channel in Gaul, in what is modern-day France. The reply that came back was essentially that they were on their own.

- Unable to fight off the Picts, Scots, and other invaders by himself, a British ruler named Vortigern, a minor warlord who had risen to a localized power in the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Roman military, decided to hire some mercenaries from the European continent. Where once these Germanic peoples had been the attackers, Vortigern figured he might as well pay one enemy to fight off the other.

- Around the year 449, three boatloads of Germanic warriors, lead by brothers Hengest and Horsa, landed on the eastern shores of Britain. The Saxon mercenaries did their job, the Picts and the Scots retreated, and for just a moment, there was peace.

- But the mercenaries looked around Britain, liked what they saw, and sent word back to their families and friends on the European continent that there was lots of good farmland for the taking and that the people living there had no idea how to defend themselves or their land. Thus, the full-scale Anglo-Saxon invasion of England had begun.

- Pretty soon, boatloads of Germanic peoples landed on Britain's shores and started pushing westward. Their conquest was rapid

and dramatic, and it seemed like nothing could stop them—until something did. Around the year 500, the Saxon westward incursion was dramatically halted, and in some parts of Britain, archaeological evidence suggests that they reversed their progression, withdrawing to the east, and in a few instances, some groups of settlers may even have returned to the European continent.

- For about two generations, the east of modern-day Britain was Saxon, and the west was what we might call Romano-Celtic—traces of the Roman world remained, but that world was now to some degree "re-Celticized," with people reverting to something like the Celtic tribal system that would have existed before Rome had established itself.

- A large number of Britons fled south and east across the Channel to the part of modern-day France known as Brittany. The Celtic peoples who settled there would remain in contact with their British cousins for some centuries.

- So, for about two generations, people living in the west got their crops harvested and got a reprieve from Saxon burning and pillaging of their villages and homesteads. For a little while, it looked like a champion had arisen in Britain's hour of need to raise defenses and push back the enemy at the moment when it seemed like they would be overrun and the last traces of what had been a civilized world were in danger of being swept away in a tide of Anglo-Saxon conquest and destruction.

The Development of the Arthurian Legend

- How did this happen? Who managed to stop an unstoppable army? The evidence, scant as it is, seems to suggest that there was one amazing, shrewd, brave, canny, skilled guy who had rallied the people to him on a scale nearly impossible to imagine without the infrastructure of Rome to make it happen. He must have been incredibly charismatic, persuasive, intelligent, and good with a sword—a rare combination. And this is the figure who is the basis for everything that has come since then in the development of the Arthurian legend.

- The problem is that we have so little evidence from this period in time to help us answer these questions. The years 410 to about 600 are a "dark" age: The political and military infrastructure were gone, the land was overrun with raiders, and people were focused on basic survival—not recording the events of the day for future generations.

- In cases like these, sometimes the histories of the invading peoples can help, but the problem is that at this time, the invading peoples were still preliterate. Centuries later, when they had been Christianized and become literate, the Anglo-Saxons put together a history of their conquest of Britain, but it contains no mention of a man named Arthur. Because history is famously written by the victors, this doesn't necessarily mean anything one way or another.

- But there are a few clues, and if we piece them together, we can get some idea of what must have happened, even if that view of the past is only very patchy. One of the first places we can turn is to the account of British historian Gildas, whose text takes as its main theme the idea that it is because the British people fell into sin that God allowed the Saxons to invade and wreak such havoc on the population.

- If Gildas was born around the year 500, as we suspect, then his lifetime would have overlapped with that of whomever the British leader was who pushed the Saxons back. Gildas's text is the closest we can get to anything like a firsthand account. The following is what he tells us about the response to the Anglo-Saxon invasion.
  - "Then some time passed, and the cruel invaders retreated to their home bases … the survivors collected their strength under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus, a most temperate man, who by chance was the only person of Roman parentage to have come through the catastrophe in which his parents, who had once worn the royal purple toga, had been killed, and whose present-day descendants have far degenerated from their former virtue. He and his men challenged their previous conquerors to battle, and by the grace of God, victory was theirs."

ARTHURIAN FAMILY TREE
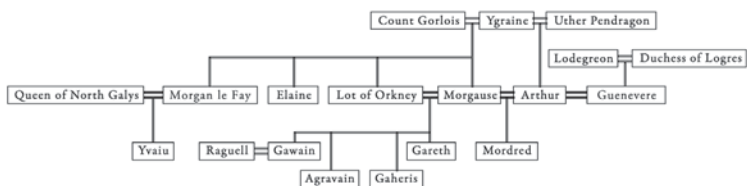
- There are a few things that are interesting about this passage. One of them is the explicit connection to Rome; the point that Ambrosius's parents considered themselves Roman citizens (and may have been of high rank) is important. The people living in the second half of the 5th century were a transitional generation—the Roman Empire had collapsed, throwing the native population back on their heels and compelling them to adapt and adjust to a new, terrible situation, but they were still close enough in time to the Roman past to know that this was not the way it had always been, nor did it need to continue this way. Resistance was possible, and civilized life could be achieved again. The timing was crucial, as there was a model within living memory of how much better things could be.

- The most obvious thing about this passage is that no one is named Arthur. But the interesting fact is that the person referred to as Ambrosius Aurelianus seems to have had a few different titles: The Welsh seem to have called him Emrys Wledig, and some scholars think that Ambrosius is the same as another Romano-British leader who is usually called Riothamus or Rigotamos.

- The 6th-century text known as the *Getica*, or *The History of the Goths*, by Jordanes, is in part a summary of a much longer history of the Goths by Cassiodorus. In it, Jordanes tells us how in the year

470 the man who was the supreme leader of the Britons came to the European continent in alliance with what was left of the Roman military to fight off a group of Goths. Independent scholar Geoffrey Ashe, among others, has offered persuasive evidence that Riothamus is a title, not a proper name; that it means "supreme leader"; and that this "supreme leader" was probably also Aurelianus.

- Another interesting thing is that this name, Ambrosius Aurelianus, is probably a Latinized form of a proper name that may have looked very different in its original Celtic form—and it seems that quite some distance has to be traveled to get from Emrys Wledig to Ambrosius Aurelianus. But what this does establish is the flexibility of names and titles at this time, the way they could be adapted by different peoples.

- Also, it should be noted that the name Arthur doesn't show up at all until a few generations after the lifetime of the historical Arthur. So, "Arthur" may have been an attempt to Celticize a Roman name or to simplify a more complicated moniker. What we do know is that in the middle of the 6th century, four royal houses of Britain all produced firstborn sons, and every one of them was named Arthur, a fact that the regnal lists—a maddeningly terse source of information—affirm.

- In fact, the earliest use of the name Arthur comes in a 6th-century poem from the north of Britain called *Y Gododdin*, written in an early form of Celtic. The following passage is about a great warrior named Gwarddur, who, we are told:

> "pierced over three hundred of the finest.
> He struck at both the center and the flank.
> He was worthy in the front of a most generous army.
> He gave out gifts from his herd of steeds in the winter.
> He fed black ravens on the wall
> Of a fortress, though he was not Arthur.
> Among the powerful in battle,
> in the van, an alder shield-wall—Gwarddur."

- The clear meaning here is twofold. First, everybody already knows who Arthur is, so the poet doesn't even need to explain to the audience. Second, Gwarddur is an all-around awesome leader, yet he pales in comparison to Arthur.

- So, we don't see the name Arthur anywhere before the middle of the 6th century, and then, suddenly, not only does it start to show up, but it shows up as the name that you would want to give the kid who would eventually grow up to rule your land. The timing is such that Ambrosius Aurelianus and Riothamus could arguably be the same person and also is such that this person could be Arthur. And there is much more evidence that there was a single individual who rose out of the chaos of the post-Roman world to lead and save his people.

Suggested Reading

Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*.

Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*.

Questions to Consider

1. What preconceptions had you brought to the idea of who King Arthur was before you began this lecture, and what new information did you learn?

2. What seems to be the most compelling piece of evidence for the existence of a historical figure named Arthur?

An Arthur-Like Figure in Cornwall
Lecture 2

There's a paucity of sources for understanding what happened in the years after the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain in the 5th century A.D., but what little evidence we do have points to the fact that there was some individual leader who managed to rise to power. There is other evidence, as well, for the existence of a leader named Arthur, or what Leslie Alcock, one of the leading authorities on the subject, called "an Arthur-type figure." In this lecture, you will learn about some evidence that offers support not only for Arthur's existence but also for his existence in places long associated with the legend.

Archaeological Evidence at Cadbury Hill

- The Arthurian legend begins with a mighty leader in Cornwall, in the southwest of Britain—a man sometimes identified as Gorlois, duke of the region. He has a beautiful wife, Igraine, and Uther Pendragon, the high king of Britain, falls in love with her. Gorlois sends her to the castle of Tintagel for safety, but through trickery, Uther manages to get past the castle defenses and sleep with Igraine. The product of Uther's lust is Arthur.

- For a long time, the Arthurian associations with Tintagel were thought to be romantic hearsay, but then archaeological investigations proved that this was maybe not the case. In 1998, while excavating an area that was confirmed as intact from the 6th century, investigators flipped over a stone and discovered a carving on it in what looks to be authentic 6th-century Latin. That carving says, "PATERN[—] COLI AVI FICIT ARTOGNOU," which translated into English means something like "Artogonou, father of a descendant of Col, made this."

- At the time, the dominant opinion was that the name Artogonou was a variation of the name Arthur because of the "Art" part, which in early Celtic is a root that means something like "bear." The fact that

it was securely dated to the 6th century, at a location that has had Arthurian associations for centuries, only added to the excitement. This discovery, and the other archaeological finds, affirms that there was a powerful ruler operating out of Tintagel at exactly the time the legend says this was the case.

- There are some other tantalizing pieces of evidence suggesting that in this time and place—late-5th- to early-6th-century Britain, in the areas in the south and west—what we might call an "Arthur-type figure" emerged as a leader of the native Celts against the Anglo-Saxon invaders. One of the sites that confirms this fact is a place known as Cadbury Hill or Cadbury Castle, which has been referred to as "Camelot" by the locals from time immemorial.

- If you see Cadbury Hill from the air, what becomes immediately apparent is that this natural topographical feature has been modified by human hands. One can see the outline of a series of earthen ramparts and ditches protecting the hill from anyone trying to attack whomever or whatever was on the top, and when archaeologists first investigated—in the 1960s—they discovered that this hill fort had originally been one of many fortified hill forts that had existed throughout Britain during what's called the Iron Age, which corresponds roughly to 1000 B.C. to 200 A.D. Once the Romans had established dominance in the greater part of Britain by the beginning of the 2nd century, these hill forts were mostly abandoned.

- The archaeologists discovered that, in the face of the Anglo-Saxon invasion, the once-abandoned hill fort known as Cadbury Hill was refortified on a massive scale in the late 5th and early 6th centuries. They expected that they would find pretty much the same thing at other Iron Age hill forts—abandonment during the Roman years, then reoccupation in the face of the Anglo-Saxon onslaught. However, to this day, no other hill fort has shown signs of reoccupation during what we might call the sub-Roman or even "Arthurian" age of Britain.

- In addition, the excavations of Cadbury Hill reveal that this was not some small, desperate group of persecuted people fleeing and hiding out until the Anglo-Saxon menace had passed. On the top of Cadbury Hill is not so much a retreat or an escape as a center of operations for a well-organized resistance faction. The best estimates guess that this was a community of more than 700 people who served both military and support functions.

- So, someone, in the right time and place to be Arthur, was able to command a remarkable degree of loyalty from quite a large group of people. He was also able to manage all kinds of difficult logistics—ranging from combat strategy to feeding, clothing, and housing his men and their families—and he was able to do it for a significant stretch of time, perhaps decades. Possibly the most impressive feat is that he managed to stay alive while being a true warrior, on the front lines, right in the thick of it. If this remarkable man wasn't actually called "Arthur," he most certainly served as the foundation on which later elements of the legend were layered.

The Tomb at Glastonbury Abbey
- In 1191, the monks at Glastonbury Abbey—which is not too far away from Cadbury Hill—began an excavation of the supposed tomb of the legendary King Arthur based on information they had received from King Henry II of England. According to the late-12th- and early-13th-century chronicler Gerald of Wales, King Henry got his information from a Welsh bard who claimed that the location of Arthur's burial site had been passed down among bards for centuries.

- According to Gerald, when the monks dug, they discovered a coffin made out of a hollow log, inside of which were the remains of a very large man who had a visible wound in his skull from an ax or sword blow. With the remains of the man was a set of smaller remains, presumably those of Guenevere.

- On top of the coffin they found a leaden cross that had carvings on it in Latin on both the front and back. On the front, it read: "*Hic

iacet sepultus inclitus rex Arturius in insula avalonia," or "Here lies buried the famous King Arthur in the isle of Avalon." Supposedly, on the back of the cross, the inscription continued: "with his second wife, Guenevere."

● There are some problems with this story, but this discovery relatively late in the sweep of Arthurian time helps put together some of the missing pieces of the King Arthur puzzle. First, as Gerald notes, Glastonbury is not an island—but it once was. Although in 1191 Glastonbury Abbey was located on firm, dry ground, in earlier centuries the area around it had been marshy and boggy, and Glastonbury Tor, which rises out of the ground, would have been for all intents and purposes an island. To get there in the 6th century, you would have needed to take a boat, but by the 12th century, much of the land had been drained and canals had been constructed for easy transport across the countryside.

● So, the "isle of Avalon" part on the cross is technically correct, but there are a few other suspicious things about this story. The abbey had suffered significant damage from a fire in 1184, and many people have pointed out that the sudden "discovery" of the bones of the legendary King Arthur and Queen Guenevere on the site might have brought in a flood of tourists, who would have presumably made donations that would have helped with the rebuilding of the church.

● If the monks were really going to perpetrate a hoax to raise some cash, they might have done a better job handling public relations. After the discovery, there's not any mention of extra excitement in surviving documents. The bones were transferred to the abbey's Lady Chapel, which had been completed in 1186, but we don't hear much of anything about new buildings or acquisitions of land.

● Also, if the Glastonbury monks were trying to achieve fame and fortune, they might have played up the association of the site with Joseph of Arimathea, who according to legend was present at the Crucifixion of Jesus and carried the cup that caught Christ's blood—

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In 1191, the supposed tomb of King Arthur was discovered in the cemetery at Glastonbury, England.

the Holy Grail—to England. It seems that it would have involved much less work to dummy up a Grail than it would the remains of a 6th-century king and queen. But the monks never tried to do this, as far as we can tell.

- The leaden cross apparently was brought in and placed on the altar of the Lady Chapel, and many visitors to the abbey reported seeing it. Some handled it and described its size—about a foot long—and one of those people actually made drawings of it. This is good, because the cross has been lost, as have the remains of whoever was buried there.

- The bones of what were reputed to be Arthur and Guenevere disappeared during the breakup of the monasteries under Henry VIII, but the cross was known to exist into the 18th century. There have been a few leads on the cross in the 20th and 21st centuries, but most of these have turned out to be hoaxes. Still, many historians

and Arthurian scholars hold out hope that it will eventually come to light so that a more thorough study can be made.

- It was William Camden who drew the cross and the inscription on its front side for inclusion in his magisterial work *Brittania*, which appeared in 1607. This text was a geographical and chronological survey of Britain and Ireland, and it includes many interesting facts about the realm ruled over by Queen Elizabeth I.

- There's no reason to doubt that Camden was faithfully representing an object that he had in fact seen and handled. The question is whether that object was authentic. The letterforms—the shapes—don't look like any known 5th- or 6th-century script, but they also don't look like 12th-century script, either.

- What's more interesting is the rendering of Arthur's name. We have to resort to calling him an "Arthur-type figure" because there were so many renderings of his name at different times and places. If you were going to dummy up a cross to try to play on the interest in the legend of King Arthur at the very end of the 12th century, you'd probably render his name as "Arthur," or "Artus," or most likely "Arturus"—all of which are attested in the 12th century, and Geoffrey of Monmouth gives his name as "Arturus" throughout his hugely important and influential text, *History of the Kings of Britain*.

- Geoffrey's text was a best seller in its day, known on the European continent and in Britain, so if you were going to pick a particular spelling, Geoffrey's text would be the place to turn. But that's not what's on the cross. "Arturius" is a very early form (we see it in the 7th century), and it seems unlikely that the monks would have known to render his name this way for the sake of authenticity. So, this fact is a point in favor of the find being legitimate.

- The "second wife, Guenevere" inscription throws some people for a loop. It's not visible on the side of the cross that Camden transcribed, and it could be that this line was on the backside of

the cross. The fact that she is named as his second wife actually gives the account even more authenticity; in some of the earliest accounts of the Arthurian story, we hear that Arthur has more than one wife, and both or all of those wives are named something like "Guenevere." In particular, accounts from the Welsh tradition suggest that this is the case, and Arthur is often associated with the west of Britain, particularly Wales.

- One more fact in favor of the monks' sincerity is that in the 1950s, scholars decided to find out if there had been an excavation at all. They dug where the monks said that they had dug, and they found that, in fact, the monks had engaged in an excavation, and they clearly had found the grave of someone. It wasn't possible to say whose grave they found, but there was clear evidence that for some reason the monks decided to dig at a certain place on the Glastonbury grounds and found what they had believed they would find.

Suggested Reading

Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*.

Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*.

Snyder, *The World of King Arthur*.

Questions to Consider

1. Where do you see historical and archaeological evidence landing on the "fertile ground" of myth and belief? How do these two aspects of the Arthurian legend seem to work together?

2. What piece of information you gleaned from this lecture speaks to this "Arthur-type figure" as a hero?

King Arthur in the Latin Chronicles
Lecture 3

This lecture will provide an examination of some of the Arthurian writings that survived the Middle Ages. In particular, the focus will be on the Latin tradition. You will take a closer look at Gildas's *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*—the title of which translates to *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*—and at the work of other chroniclers to see what can be learned not only about the origins of the Arthurian legend but also about how the legend was expanded and transformed by every age that sought to write about it.

5th- and 6th-Century Arthur

- There are three important points that can be taken from Gildas's *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*. First is his account of the Anglo-Saxon invasion, the misery of the surviving Britons, and the rise of Ambrosius Aurelianus, who Gildas identifies as coming from Roman heritage and who some scholars believe may in fact be Arthur, just under a different name. The two other points have to do with a comment he makes in Chapter 26 of his text, as follows.
    - "From that time, now the native citizens and now the enemy have triumphed … up to the year of the siege of Mount Badon, when the last but certainly not the least slaughter of these lowly scoundrels occurred, which, I know, makes 44 years and one month, and which was also the time of my birth."

- In this passage, Gildas gives both an important place name—*Badonici montis*, or Mount Badon—and a date, even though it's a little difficult to work out. Is 44 years how long it's been since Anglo-Saxon invasion? Is it the length of time since the Battle of Mount Badon? What's important is that we have what we might call Arthurian events taking place in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, and we have this mention of a final battle at a specific place, and these events are recorded by someone for whom they were still in living memory.

- Arthurian scholars have been trying to pin down the location of Mount Badon for centuries, but it was certainly somewhere in the south of Britain. Although we can't be sure where Mount Badon was, or even what it was, almost everyone agrees that this account has a ring of truth to it: A decisive victory over the Saxons was achieved, and the archaeological evidence confirms the fact that the Germanic invaders withdrew eastward and even headed back to the European continent sometime around the year 500.

- Scholar Geoffrey Ashe also points out that if we're talking about the year 500, Ambrosius Aurelianus would likely have been too old to lead the Britons, but there may have been another leader—one who effectively built on the strategy of opposition that Aurelianus had sparked with his initial resistance against the Saxons—and that this leader was Arthur.

- In fact, a later Latin chronicler, Nennius, asserts quite authoritatively that the Battle of Mount Badon was won by the Britons under the leadership of Arthur. The only problem is that his text, the *Historia Brittonum*, or *History of the Britons*, seems to have been compiled around the year 800—at least a few centuries after the events in question. However, Nennius was a Welshman, and we know that the Welsh had, and still have, a long tradition of storytelling and oral histories. It is entirely possible that this information had been preserved as oral lore for centuries before Nennius composed his text, or even that there are other earlier texts that recorded these events and that are now lost.

- When Nennius gets to the portion of his text that deals with Arthur, he tells us that the great leader was the victor in 12 battles. For many, the number 12 sets off alarm bells that this tale might be made up, but many scholars think that the details Nennius gives might mean that these battles did in fact happen. Indeed, perhaps Arthur fought many battles and Nennius decided to highlight these 12 battles.
    - "Then Arthur fought against these people along with the kings of the Britons, and he was the leader in their battles … The

twelfth was the Battle of Mount Badon, in which nine hundred and sixty men fell from a single attack of Arthur, and nobody put them down except him alone, and in every one of the battles he emerged as victor."

- There are some interesting facts here. The first is the mention of Arthur fighting alongside "other kings of the Britons." For the time period, this would be exactly right: Britain was divided into quite small territories, each ruled over by what we might call a "local king," which was a return to how the island had been managed in the time before the arrival of the Romans. So, we have an indicator that Britain has undergone a "re-Celticization" of sorts.

- The fact that Arthur leads all the other kings also makes sense. If he was really the great leader the archaeological evidence at Cadbury Hill suggests, then it would be fitting for him to be in charge. While the claim that Arthur himself killed 960 men seems laughable, it could mean that the men under Arthur's command accomplished this remarkable feat without help from any of the other men who were fighting under the leadership of the other British kings who had joined in the resistance.

- All this reasoning is somewhat undone when we note that Nennius tells us about two wonders associated with Arthur. The first is a heap of stones, on which Arthur's hunting dog, Cabal, stepped and left his footprint. People keep trying to steal the stone imprinted with the dog's paw, but after a day, the stone always mysteriously returns to the heap, which is called Carn Cabal. The second marvel is the tomb of a man named Anir, who is supposedly a son of Arthur. Nennius tells us the following.
  - "Men come to measure the mound, which is sometimes six feet long, sometimes nine or twelve or fifteen. However you measure it again and again, you will never get the same figure—and I have tried this myself."

- We have to wonder about the reliability of Nennius after we read these accounts, but at the same time, this kind of writing is typical for chronicles from the early medieval period.

- The next chronicle in Latin that seems significant is a text called the *Annales Cambriae* ("Cambria" is another name for Wales). The dates in the *Annals of Cambria* seem a little off, but there are some facts that corroborate Nennius and Gildas and also introduce some new details into the legend. The *Annals* give the date of the Battle of Mount Badon as 518, and then a new detail is added concerning Arthur's death.
  - "AD 539 The Battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut both fell, and there was widespread death in Britain and in Ireland."

- What's important here is the name "Medraut," which is an early form of the name Mordred, who in later versions of the legend is characterized as Arthur's nephew, then as his incestuously conceived son, and, especially toward the end of the Middle Ages, as the agent of Arthur's death. Later stories tell not only of how Mordred tries to usurp his father's throne while the latter is away but also how the two meet face-to-face on the battlefield on the final day of the final battle and mortally wound each other. But this entry says that both Arthur and Medraut fell. In fact, it could be that these two were not fighting against each other, but that they both died in this battle fighting side by side.

11th- and 12th-Century Arthur
- In the early 11th century, a Latin text focused on a Breton saint mentions the name Arthur. In this text about the life of Saint Goeznovius (1019), we get a quick recap of the disastrous decision made by King Vortigern when he invited Hengest and Horsa to come to Britain as mercenaries, and the anonymous author of the work tells us the following.
  - "Shortly afterward their arrogance was checked for a time by the great Arthur, King of the Britons, who forced them for the most part from the island or into servitude. But after this same

Arthur had brilliantly won many victories in Britain and Gaul, he was finally called from human life, and the way once again lay open to the Saxons to return to the island to oppress the British, to overthrow churches, and to persecute saints."

- In this account, Arthur is not a war leader—he's a king. In fact, he's king of all the Britons, and after he was done fighting off the Anglo-Saxons, he crossed the Channel and demonstrated his martial skills in Gaul, which is roughly equivalent to modern France. Scholar Geoffrey Ashe speculates that there may be a grain of truth to this story. He contends that the King Arthur described here—and his exploits on the European continent—may correspond with the man called Riothamus or Rigotamos in the 6th-century *History of the Goths* written by Jordanes.

- Through the 11th century and into the 12th century, the popularity of the Arthurian legend starts to increase. In 1125, William of Malmesbury composed his *De rebus gestis regum Anglorum*, or *The Deeds of the English Kings*, and in this history, he covers some familiar ground but, like the Goeznovius legend, adds some new elements. Key among these elements is the very flowery, dramatic language that William uses to describe Arthur and his exploits.
  - "This is that Arthur who is raved about even today in the trifles of the Bretons—a man who is surely worthy of being described in true histories rather than dreamed about in fallacious myths—for he truly sustained his sinking homeland for a long time and aroused the drooping spirits of his fellow citizens to battle. Finally, at the siege of Mount Badon, relying on the image of the Lord's mother, which he had sewn on his armor, looming up alone, he dashed down nine hundred of the enemy in an incredible massacre."

- William of Malmesbury then moves Arthur beyond the realm of the gods of ancient mythology by linking him to Jesus Christ by allusion: "However, the tomb of Arthur is nowhere to be found—that man whose second coming has been hymned in the dirges of old."

- Furthermore, William introduces a character we have not encountered yet in the Latin—Arthur's nephew Walwen, or Gawain, who will become one of the best-known and most-written-about knights. Although Gawain appears in Latin fairly late, we can be reasonably certain that he is one of the oldest characters of the legend, because we also see him in the Welsh tradition, where he is called Gwalchmai.

- At the end of the 12th century, Gerald of Wales—also known as Giraldus Cambrensis—wrote his *De instructione principium*, or *On the Instruction of Princes*, in which he describes the discovery of the tomb of Arthur and Guenevere at Glastonbury. Like William of Malmesbury, Gerald of Wales emphasizes the magical nature of Arthur's death and his heroic status. He also introduces a character that will become hugely important to the Arthurian legend as it develops: Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister or sometimes half sister, and also sometimes his enemy and at other times his ally. Gerald tells us that the following happened after Arthur's death.

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Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223), also called Gerald of Wales, was a 12th-century historian who described the discovery of King Arthur's tomb.

  - "Then too Morgan, the noble matron and lady-ruler of those parts, who was closely related by blood to King Arthur, transported Arthur after the Battle of Camlan to this island, now called Glaston, to heal his wounds. In the British language it was once called Inis Gutrin (that is, Glass Island), and for that reason the Saxons dubbed it Glastonbury since 'Glas' means "glass" in their tongue, and 'bury' is 'city' or 'camp.'"

- By the end of the 12th century, it has taken about 700 years for the major elements of the Arthurian legend to fall into place: the great king, who has attained almost godlike status; the key elements of the story, including Arthur's valiant fight against an enemy and death in battle; supporting characters, such as Gawain and Morgan, who will have their own story lines to flesh out; and key locations that serve as foci on a map for the major events that will play out as the legend grows.

Suggested Reading

Echard, ed., *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature*.

Lacy and Wilhelm, eds., *The Romance of Arthur*.

Thorpe, ed. and trans., *Geoffrey of Monmouth.*

Questions to Consider

1. Where do you see similarities among these texts? Where do you see differences? When do you see the greatest shift in the story of Arthur occurring in the Latin tradition as it's described here?

2. When comparing these written sources to the archaeological evidence discussed in the first two lectures, which do you find more persuasive, and why?

King Arthur in Wales—The *Mabinogion*
Lecture 4

In this lecture, you will learn about the Welsh texts that are most important to the story of Arthur. Because the existing manuscripts appear to be late editions of quite early texts, we can't be sure how the texts have changed from their origin to their current form. However, all kinds of evidence suggests that these texts were most likely very early and circulated in oral form before someone wrote them down, and then later copies were made of key texts, and the original might have been discarded or lost.

The Five Main Welsh Texts

- There are five main Welsh texts: *Black Book of Carmarthen*, *The Book of Aneirin*, *The Book of Taliesin*, *The White Book of Rhydderch*, and *The Red Book of Hergest*. Aneirin is the bard to whom the earliest mention of Arthur in a text is usually credited. That poem is called *Y Gododdin*, and it recounts how in a particular battle, a certain Gwarddur was amazing—but, the poet notes, "he was not Arthur." Other early texts from the Welsh tradition are similarly notable for the way in which they make rather casual reference to Arthur while focusing the largest part of their attention on some other character.

- In the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, there is a poem known as the "Stanzas of the Graves" that lists the burial locations of all the great warriors of ancient and early medieval Welsh tradition. Among these stanzas—more than 70—is the following.

  The grave of Gwalchmai in Peryddon
  As a reproach to men;
  In Llanbadarn, the grave of Cynon

  The grave of the son of Osfran at Camlan
  After many a slaughter
  The grave of Bedwyr on Tryfan hill

> The grave of Owain son of Uriens in a square grave
> Under the earth of Llanforfael;
> In Aberech, Rhydderch the Generous.

- There are a few important things to note in these three selections. One is the mention of "Gwalchmai" in the first stanza; this is the early Welsh form of the name Gawain, who is Arthur's nephew and one of his most famous knights. In the second stanza, there is a reference to Camlan, which is reputedly the site of Arthur's last great battle, where he received his death wound. In that same stanza, there's also mention of the name Bedwyr, who later on in the legend will morph into "Sir Bedevere," another well-known Arthurian knight.

- Then, there is mention of Owain, son of Uriens. In Welsh, there are several poems and references to a great warrior called Owain, who is the son of King Uriens of Rheged. We know that Uriens was a real historical person, and we roughly understand where the borders of his domain lay in northern Britain. Both Uriens and Owain—whose name gets changed to Uwain or Yvain over the centuries—become key players in the Arthurian saga in later centuries.

- Finally, there is the following stanza, which points toward the magic and supernatural elements that come to be associated with Arthur.

> A grave for March, a grave for Gwythur,
> A grave for Gwgawn Red-Sword;
> Hard to find in the world, a grave for Arthur.

- Scholars estimate that this poem was written down sometime in the 9th or 10th century. Even though the *Black Book of Carmarthen* dates from the 13th century, based on linguistic and scribal evidence, they believe that text to be a copy of one that is much older. But the form of the poem suggests that it was a part of a much more ancient, preliterate oral tradition. The grouping of verses into threes,

for example, would make it easier for the person reciting the poem to recall which lines went where.

- There is something similar happening with a text known as the *Triads of the Island of Britain*. This is a collection of important information that preserves the cultural memory of the Welsh; at a time when there was no writing, certain members of the community would be designated and trained to be able to recall and recite the important facts and historical events. Of the more than 90 triads that survive, at least 40 mention King Arthur in some way, indicating how important he had become as a cultural touchstone quite early in Welsh history.

The *Mabinogion*

- Perhaps the most important tales in the Welsh Arthurian tradition are those collected in the work known as the *Mabinogion*. There are five *Mabinogion* stories that are explicitly Arthurian. These include the three grouped as romances: "Owain, or the Countess of the Fountain," "Peredur, Son of Evrawg," and "Geraint and Enid." And then there are the two tales that are distinctly Welsh: "Culhwch and Olwen" and "The Dream of Rhonabwy."

- In the Welsh story "Culhwch and Olwen," the young hero, Culhwch, must complete a series of seemingly impossible tasks in order to win the hand of Olwen, daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden. These tasks include hunting a great boar named Twrch Trwyth—not to kill him, even though he is a fierce monster who has slain many people, but to obtain a razor, scissors, and a comb that for some reason are located on top of the boar's head.

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Culhwch is given a series of impossible tasks to complete at Ysbaddaden's court.

- Other tasks assigned to Culhwch are to capture the magical birds of the goddess Rhiannon, which wake the dead with their song and lull the living to sleep; to steal some of the beard of a figure named Dillus the Bearded in order to make a leash that will hold two of the pups whelped by the magical bitch Rhymhi; to talk to the oldest animals in the world, including the great Salmon of Llyn Llyw in order to find the whereabouts of someone named Mabon, son of Modron; and the list goes on and on.

- Most probably, the list of tasks is much longer than that which we actually see in the story of Culhwch and Olwen as it has survived in the two 14th-century Welsh manuscripts. The written text includes a number of clues that suggest it is a later version of an early oral story, and in a preliterate society with no other diversions, most evenings were probably spent around a fire, listening to stories. And a story like Culhwch's, which includes a young hero being given a series of seemingly impossible tasks, could be a several-part story that extended over many evenings and probably had local variations.

- It is this list of Arthur and his warriors that makes this arguably the oldest Arthurian tale in the way we tend to think of fiction today. There is an introduction, a clear plot, rising action, a series of adventures that can be expanded or compressed depending on the teller or the season, and a final conclusion to the story in which our hero is successful and gets the girl.

- In the story of Culhwch and Olwen, Culhwch's stepmother puts a curse on her stepson that he shall never marry unless it be to Olwen, daughter of Ysbadadden, Chief Giant. Culhwch bravely goes to press his suit, at which time the giant gives him the series of impossible demands that he must fulfill in order to win his daughter—because the catch is, once Olwen is married, Ysbaddaden will die.

- Being a resourceful young man, Culhwch decides to go see Arthur, who just happens to be his uncle, and ask him for help. One hint

that this story comes from an old oral tradition is the occurrence in multiple places of a set piece in which one character asks a gatekeeper for admittance. In every instance, the gatekeeper's response is exactly the same—a classic oral formulaic move meant to give the reciter of the story a brief respite to recall what comes next.

- When Culhwch asks for admittance to Arthur's court, the gatekeeper informs him: "Knife has gone into meat and drink into the drinking horn, and there is a thronging in Arthur's hall. No one may enter but the son of a king of legitimate rule or a craftsman who brings his craft."

- Because Culhwch is our hero, he manages to impress the gatekeeper and talk his way in, where he asks Arthur if he would trim his beard for him. Arthur's heart grows tender toward the young boy as he grooms him, and soon it is revealed that they are in fact related. He welcomes the boy to his court and asks what he can do for him.

- This court is nothing like what we tend to think of as a royal court in the High and Late Middle Ages. This is not a refined and polite gathering with high-ranking ladies and knights carefully observing rules of etiquette; this is the great hall where a war leader gathers with his men who ride out to battle with him. It is a tribal, not a monarchical, community made up of many characters. In most modern editions of the text, the list of Arthur's companions runs to four densely packed pages. The catalog starts with Kei and Bedwyr, who will become the better known Sir Kay and Sir Bedevere in later versions of the legend, and then turns to a bewildering array of names.

- The list of companions also engages in a series of time slips—they look ahead to events that will take place chronologically after the events of "Culhwch and Olwen" and indicate that these are stories with which the original audience was already familiar. For example, there's "Gwyddawg, son of Menestyr, who killed Kei (and Arthur killed him and his brothers to avenge Kei)." Arthur has some handy

folks among his companions, including a man who can understand every language, one who can talk to animals, and a number who have magical abilities of strength and skill.

- Ultimately, this is what is important about "Culhwch and Olwen": It is a story in which King Arthur assigns his followers to assist his nephew with all the tasks he needs to undertake to succeed in winning Olwen for a bride, rather than undertaking the tasks himself. Arthur is a great warrior, and he has reached his exalted position by getting slashing and stabbing with the best of them, but now he is so great—and so important as an idea rather than an actual participant—that it is best that he stay home and keep his royal person intact.

- This line between Arthur as an active warrior hero on one side and the ruler who sends others out to fulfill his duties and orders on the other is one the Arthurian legend skips back and forth over through the centuries. In some instances, Arthur's withdrawal from the field will be seen as a problem and a liability, but in "Culhwch and Olwen," at least, it results in the successful winning of the beautiful Olwen.

Suggested Reading

Bromwich, Jarman, and Roberts, eds., *The Arthur of the Welsh*.

Gantz, ed. and trans., *The Mabinogion*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the key differences between the texts found in the Welsh tradition and those found in the early Latin chronicles?

2. How does the Welsh interest with making lists—of events, of people, of quests—either engage or confound a reader of these texts?

Monmouth, Merlin, and Courtly Love
Lecture 5

I n this lecture, you will learn about the foundation of the legend of King Arthur as it came to exist in the High Middle Ages. That foundation is a text composed by a Welsh cleric in Latin in the first half of the 12ᵗʰ century. That text, the *Historia regum Britanniae*, or the *History of the Kings of Britain*, is arguably the single most important literary artifact of the Arthurian tradition. Although the text bills itself as a history or chronicle, it is deeply concerned with the politics of the England in which it was composed.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*
- Although the Arthur-type figure managed to hold off the Anglo-Saxon invasion for a time back in the late 5ᵗʰ and early 6ᵗʰ centuries, he was ultimately unsuccessful, which is why we speak English today and not some variation of a Celtic language like Welsh. So, between the 7ᵗʰ and 11ᵗʰ centuries, Britain becomes England, or Angle-land, the land of the Angles. England is a Germanic place, populated by a Germanic people, with close ties to Scandinavia—especially Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Iceland—until the 11ᵗʰ century, when the balance of power shifts.

- Some Germanic cousins of the English ruling houses settled in the part of France known as Normandy in the 10ᵗʰ century. Although the Normans were Germanic people and were well aware of their family connections with the royal house of England, culturally they essentially decided to become French. They adopted French social customs and the French language. In the 11ᵗʰ century, Duke William of Normandy claimed that he had a right to the English throne after his cousin, the last English king, Edward the Confessor, died without an heir. The English disagreed and recognized Harold Godwinson, Edward's brother-in-law, as the new king of England.

- In 1066, William brings a fleet across the English Channel, overthrows the English aristocracy and kills Harold Godwinson,

and turns Germanic England into what we call an Anglo-Norman society. The change was dramatic and happened very quickly. One of the most important things that occurred as a result of the Norman Conquest is that England's worldview, which previously has been focused mostly toward the north, will now, and forever after, be turned first toward continental Europe.

- When Geoffrey of Monmouth is writing, it is less than a century after the Norman Conquest. There has been some upheaval in the decades since the death of William I in 1087, and we can see an acute consciousness in Geoffrey's work to establish a pedigree for England and Britain that puts it on equal or superior footing with those nation-states firming up on the European continent while simultaneously currying favor with whomever might be in power on the isle of Britain.

- When most people encounter Geoffrey of Monmouth, it is through the section of his work that deals with the reign of King Arthur, so many people have the idea that that is all Geoffrey wrote about. But this is not true. While the portion dealing with King Arthur takes up the most space, it is neither the beginning nor the end.

- Importantly, the text begins with an account of how Britain was founded by Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, and, thus, the lineage of Britain and its rulers extends all the way back to ancient Troy. This is important, because it positions Britain as a major player on the European political scene from the beginning of what we might call the European political scene: the Roman Empire.

- But the beginning of the story is not actually where Geoffrey starts. He starts, importantly, with an explanation of how he came to write this text and a dedication to patrons that he wishes to please. Geoffrey opens by telling his reader that Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, brought to him "a certain very ancient book written in the British language" and instructed him to translate it into Latin, thus making this important history available for anyone to read. The *Historia regum Britanniae* is the result of these labors.

- This ancient British book, Geoffrey's source, has been lost. Indeed, most scholars tend to think that it never even existed, that Geoffrey is relying on some other sources and making up most of what he writes out of whole cloth. While it is true that medieval authors would often cite a source as an authority at exactly the moment they were fudging a point in order to try to hide that very fact, the amount of "creative writing" many scholars have attributed to Geoffrey beggars belief.

- In the multiple dedications that Geoffrey makes at the beginning of his text, and a few comments he makes directly to his patrons within the pages of the *Historia regum Britanniae*, we can see that Geoffrey has a clear agenda: to depict the "ancient" Britons as a noble people, thereby conferring glory upon their descendants, the Welsh and the Bretons; and to glorify the Norman aristocracy that currently ruled the island.

- In the text, after discussing Brutus's conquest of Britain by which the island acquired its name—"Brut" being amended to "Brit" and, thus, "Britain"—Geoffrey moves quickly through a line of kings, including King Lear and his three daughters, arriving finally at Vortigern, who hired the Anglo-Saxons as mercenaries in the first place. Then, he moves on to King Constantine, whom he says has three sons: Constans, Aurelius Ambrosius (clearly a kind of malapropism for Ambrosius Aurelianus), and Uther Pendragon— the father of Arthur.

Essential Elements of the Arthurian Legend
- There is no mention of Merlin in the earliest texts. He doesn't show up until Geoffrey of Monmouth takes the story of a real 6th-century bard named Myrddin, reworks him into a magician and prophet, and then places him in Arthur's court. "Myrddin" gets Latinized by Geoffrey to "Merlinus," who becomes Merlin.

- So, it's Geoffrey who gives us an Arthurian court at which the mysterious Merlin serves as adviser to the king. And in a move that works toward establishing the legitimacy, lineage, and legacy of

Britain, Geoffrey also gives to the Arthurian tradition the account of Arthur's conquest of Rome.

- According to Geoffrey, some time after Arthur has assumed the throne and brought any number of other lands under his rule—including Norway, Denmark, Gaul (or France), and others—a delegation arrives from the Roman emperor Lucius, demanding that Arthur acknowledge that he is a sub-king only and that he render tribute to Rome in acceptance of this status. Not only does Arthur not send any tribute back to Rome, but he goes to the European continent to make Rome pay tribute to him as supreme ruler. He conquers Rome and a whole lot more.

- Along the way, Arthur defeats a giant who has kidnapped a virginal duchess and absconded with her to the top of Mont-Saint-Michel, an episode that will, in many later versions of the legend, become a kind of set piece in the catalog of Arthur's adventures—and an important one, because usually Arthur is directly involved in this particular adventure rather than simply sending one of his knights to do his dirty work.

- Geoffrey also clarifies and solidifies another key component of the Arthurian legend as we've come to understand it—the betrayal of Mordred. While Arthur is still busy on the European continent, word is brought to him that his nephew and Queen Guenevere have "joined … in unconscionable lust." Arthur returns home, and he and Mordred meet in a final battle at the legendary Camlan, with thousands slaughtered on both sides. Mordred is killed, and Arthur is fatally wounded—or is he? Another key component of the legend emerges here: that of Arthur's mysterious departure and potential to come again. As Geoffrey tells us, we don't actually see Arthur die.
  - "Arthur, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to. He handed the crown of Britain over to his cousin Constantine, the son of Cador, Duke of Cornwall: this in the year 542 after our Lord's incarnation."

According to legend, King Arthur killed his son Mordred in battle.

- With Geoffrey, we see many of the essential elements of the Arthurian legend come together for the first time, including Merlin, the Roman conflict, and the treachery of Mordred. But there's one other key thing that Geoffrey's text does that might be his most important contribution to the Arthurian legend. When speaking of Arthur's court, Geoffrey notes that the ladies of the Arthurian court "deigned to love no man till he was three times proven in military combat. Thus the women were made more chaste, and the knights more valiant because of their love of them."

- This so-called courtly love is a classic component of medieval romance literature: Knights seek to win the favor of an unattainable lady who is placed upon a pedestal. In some cases, the absolute unattainability of a lady could be used by a knight to gain favor with a lord or a king. The knight could openly declare his undying love for the queen, for example, with the understanding that his love would never be realized, and then he could go out and do

awesome feats of valor and chivalry in her name, which could win the knight favor with her husband. Courtly love is a love ritual that plays out only in noble courts, and it is much more political than it is romantic or real.

- This idea seems such a commonplace for people who know even a little something about medieval literature that it goes unremarked when it pops up in Geoffrey's text. But the Arthurian texts that came before Geoffrey's do not say much of anything along these lines. They're concerned with battles, with God, with tribal customs. This moment in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* is the first time that romantic love is described as the engine of knightly endeavor in an Arthurian text.

- After Arthur's departure to Avalon, the *Historia regum Britanniae* quickly draws to a close. The Saxons take over, then there are several more kings in quick succession, and then Geoffrey—or, indeed, his very ancient British book—ends with the death of King Cadwallader, in 689. Cadwallader had been on the cusp of raising an army to rout the Saxons, but after consulting the prophecies of Merlin and hearing an angelic voice telling him to abandon this plan, he turned his attention to spiritual rather than worldly things, and the British resistance to the Saxons dissipated.

- The text closes with Geoffrey telling us that for once, the Saxons were starting to act sensibly—cultivating farmland and rebuilding cities—and the implication seems to be that they are being set up to fall in spectacular fashion when Merlin's prophecy will supposedly come true and the Normans will invade and conquer the isle of Britain.

- At least two of the extant *Historia regum Britanniae* manuscripts have a closing that one more time seeks to affirm the authority of Geoffrey's text. If you want to know about the Saxons and their kings, he says, go read the works of historians like William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon. And with that, Geoffrey claims, confirms, and indeed establishes the basics of the legend of

King Arthur as we have come to know it and in the form so many other medieval writers would use as the basis for their own stories.

Suggested Reading

Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*.

Thorpe, ed. and trans., *Geoffrey of Monmouth*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think Geoffrey of Monmouth's text had such an overwhelmingly positive reception throughout the medieval world?

2. Why do you think Geoffrey managed to successfully cultivate different patrons and cultural groups when other writers seemed bound to alienate one or another? How did he negotiate this tricky terrain? Was it the nature of his subject matter or his skill as a writer, or some combination?

The Round Table—Arthur in Wace and Layamon
Lecture 6

T he importance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* to the development of the Arthurian legend cannot be overstated. Geoffrey is the one who adds Merlin to the story, writes of Arthur's conquest of Rome, casts an aura of mystery around Arthur's death, and connects knightly feats of valor to romantic love. His text was so popular that within just a few years of its appearance, other writers were reworking his material and creating another series of firsts with regard to the story of King Arthur. This is the case with the two writers you will learn about in this lecture: the Anglo-Norman scribe Wace and the English cleric known as Layamon.

Wace's *Roman de Rou*

- Wace was a Norman Frenchman who was born on the isle of Jersey, which is one of the Channel Islands that lie in the English Channel, between Britain and the European continent. At various times, these islands have been claimed by the French, the Normans, the English, and the Norse, and all along, it seems they have considered themselves to have their own unique identity.

- This fluidity of identity extends all the way back to the Middle Ages, which is how Wace, who was born on Jersey, came to be educated on the European continent at Caen and then in Paris, and how he came to dedicate his *Roman de Rou*, a verse history of the Dukes of Normandy, to King Henry II of England sometime around the year 1160.

- Before that, however, he undertook to translate Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* into Old Northern French. In 1155, he dedicated this completed work, the first full account of the Arthurian story written in a vernacular language, to Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Wace knew a powerful woman when

he saw one and recognized when it was a good idea to curry favor with certain people in power.

- The choice of language is significant: If you were writing in Latin in the Middle Ages, then you were identifying yourself as a scholar, as an educated person who was writing for other educated people. If you were writing in one of the vernacular languages, then you were trying to reach a broader, more popular audience.

- Wace's work underscores the connection between the Britons and the Bretons; he specifically mentions how he has taken inspiration from Breton storytellers to compose his *Roman de Brut*, or *Book of Britain*—his attempt at translating Geoffrey of Monmouth. However, in Wace's work, he writes in rhyming octosyllabic couplet lines, not prose, and he is at his best when he is recounting romantic or dramatic episodes. His battle scenes, on the other hand, leave something to be desired. Wace brings to life the story of how Arthur was conceived and gives to the world—for the first time—the important fact that Arthur and his knights sat at the Round Table.

- Wace vividly renders the first meeting of King Uther Pendragon and Igerna, the Duchess of Cornwall, telling us, in James Wilhelm's elegant translation, the following.
  - "She was courteous, elegant, and wise and came from excellent lineage. … Uther kept staring at her during dinner, turning his whole attention her way. If he ate or drank or talked or sat silent, he was always thinking about her and glancing her way; and as he looked, he smiled, showing her signs of love. He honored her by having his private pages attend her with little favors. He joked with her, winked at her, and showed her every sign of affection. Igerna controlled herself, neither granting him anything nor denying it."

- Here and elsewhere, Wace is clearly building on the spark of that idea kindled by Geoffrey of Monmouth—that knights are interested in being awesome primarily because they are also interested in ladies. Here we can see so clearly how the idea of courtly love

that is going to become so prominent in medieval French romance is getting a boost of sorts. And given that this is Wace's main interest, it's also no surprise that he's not particularly good with battle scenes.

- Unlike Sir Thomas Malory or the anonymous author of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, it seems pretty clear that Wace is a scholar, maybe a cleric, but certainly not a warrior. This means that it's also not surprising that he is interested in an idea that seems engineered to work in the interests of peace—the Round Table, which makes its very first appearance in Wace's text. The following is how he describes it, again in James Wilhelm's translation.
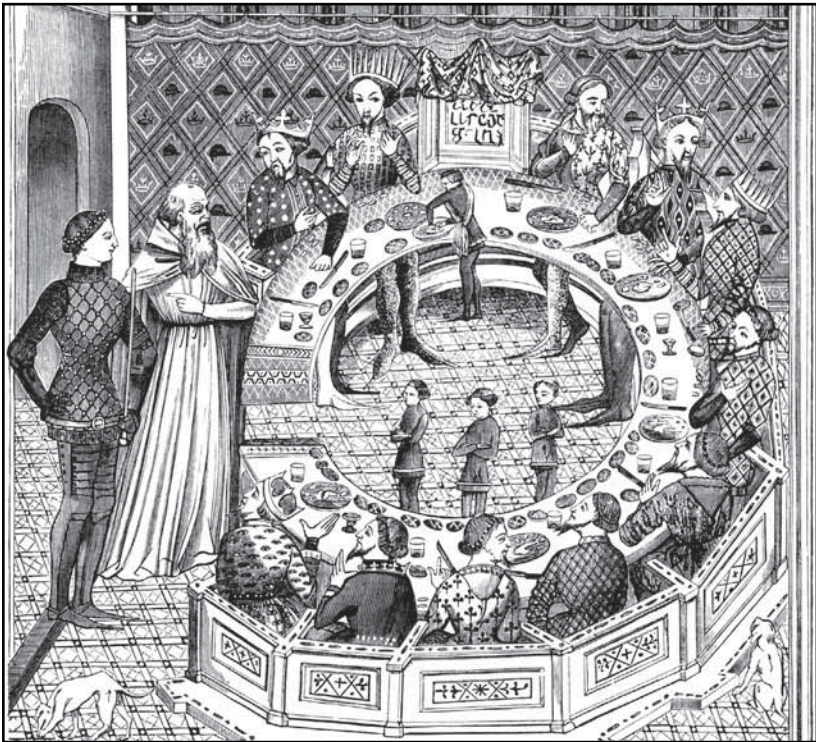
© Steven Wynn/iStock/Thinkstock.

King Arthur's Round Table makes its first appearance in Wace's text.

- ○ "Arthur created the Round Table, about which the Britons tell many a tale. There sat his vassals, all in royalty and equality; yes, they sat at his table in equal rank and were served equally; neither one nor another could brag that he sat higher than a peer. They were all gathered closely around the king; nobody was relegated to a corner. No man was considered courtly—not a Scot of Breton or Frank or Norman or Angevin or Fleming or Burgundian or man of Lorraine …—who did not come and stay for a while with Arthur in equality."

- There are a few things that are interesting about this passage. This is, in fact, the first mention of Arthur's Round Table, but Wace has gone to some pains to assert that it is already quite famous and much talked about. Again, we come up against the problem of sources, survival, and the predilection of medieval authors to often point to an authority at exactly the moment when they are making up something new as a means of disguising and legitimating that move. Perhaps the Round Table was quite well known in oral tales that were circulating in both England and on the European continent, but this is just supposition.

- What we can say for certain is that Wace is a major contributor to and innovator of the Arthurian legend. In addition to the Round Table, he adds some Celtic elements to the tale; he keeps Merlin, but he excises several pages worth of Merlin's prophecies that tend to make one's eyes glaze over when they're encountered in Geoffrey's text; and he expands on Geoffrey of Monmouth's messianic treatment of Arthur's death, calling the idea that Arthur might return one day to save his people the great "Breton Hope."

- Wace is also hugely influential on Arthurian writers such as Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and a slew of anonymous authors who, in the 12th and 13th centuries, would create that sprawling body of French Arthurian literature that we've come to call the *Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Lancelot-Graal*.

Layamon's Translation

- What's nice about the 12th century is that we can track the development of the Arthurian legend with some precision after Geoffrey of Monmouth's text appears around 1136. First, Wace makes a translation into Old Northern French rhyming octosyllabic couplets, and then, sometime after 1189, an English cleric named Layamon reworks Wace's text into English alliterative verse, giving us the first comprehensive account of King Arthur in English.

- Layamon was an English priest who was apparently quite the amateur historian. Although his primary source for his text—which we call simply the *Brut*—was clearly Wace, he also mentions in the opening to his text that he had consulted the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and had used also a third source, which he calls the "book of Saint Albin" and which scholars have yet to conclusively identify.

- One of the most interesting things about Layamon is that, while he is taking up the story of the Britons and his sympathies clearly lie with them, and while he is using a French source, he is resolutely and emphatically English when it comes to his style. Although any number of French vocabulary words came flooding into English with the Norman Conquest in 1066, Layamon seems at pains to use native English words whenever he can, deliberately rejecting French words in favor of English ones.

- By choosing to write primarily in alliterative verse, with only secondary use of rhyme, Layamon is also deliberately hearkening back to an English writing tradition—the tradition, in fact, of the people against whom the historical Arthur was fighting. Old English poetry is quite famously alliterative, as *Beowulf*, the oldest surviving English epic poem, attests.

- The fact that Layamon has chosen to go with an alliterative style, and that he's rejecting both the French and Latin traditions of Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth, has led some people to suggest that he's writing this text perhaps quite a bit later than 1189—maybe

after Henry III, son of King John, had ascended to the throne in 1216. Henry is famous, or maybe infamous, for his rejection of things upper class, including knightly activities, courtly pastimes, and the language of the upper class, which had been some form of French since William's conquest.

- At the same time, it has puzzled scholars as to why Layamon would choose to write in such a deliberately English style when the content of his text is very anti-English—or, at least, anti-Anglo-Saxon. Layamon is always on the side of Arthur as he strives to defend his land from the invaders—the people who, most likely, were Layamon's own direct ancestors.

- While we can't be sure why Layamon has chosen the mode and the style he's adopted, what we could probably say is that Layamon is writing with a specific audience in mind, and it's more likely that he is composing for the members of his religious flock in Worcestershire. In other words, he is writing his text to be read aloud to an illiterate group of commoners. While Norman French had been the language of the aristocracy for well over a century, the common people, comprising about 90 percent of the population, certainly still spoke some form of English.

- Whereas Wace was all about emphasizing the courtly and the genteel, Layamon seems much more interested in giving us all the gory details of battle. Layamon deletes almost every mention Wace makes about love, chivalry, romance, and courtly concerns and recasts the Arthurian community as a little more violent, brutal, and primitive than does Wace.

- For example, whereas Wace simply tells us that Arthur and his knights "lay siege" to the town of Winchester, Layamon is explicit in his account of how the town is burned and everyone in it is brutally slain. When Arthur and Gawain learn of the betrayal of Mordred and Guenevere, they not only bemoan what has happened, but they come up with some grisly ideas for revenge, including having Guenevere's arms and legs tied to four different horses

and making them run in different directions, so as to split her into quarters.

- But Layamon ends on a triumphant, positive note when he describes how Arthur departs from the world of the living. The following is James Wilhelm's poetic translation of this final scene.

> A light little boat came lilting over the waters
> Even as he spoke, gliding in there from the sea,
> And two women were in it of wonderful appearance.
> They raised Arthur up and rapidly took him away;
> They laid him softly down, and outwardly they sailed.
> And so once again there occurred what Merlin had uttered:
> Countless cares would be felt when Arthur was faring forth.
> The Britons still hold that he is alive in health,
> That he lingers on Avalon with the loveliest of fays,
> And they are always awaiting the time when Arthur returns.
> There never was a man who was born of a blessed lady
> Who can tell you any more about Arthur's true fate.
> But once there was a magus whose name was Merlin
> And he proclaimed these words, his prophecies were true:
> An Arthur will return who will redeem the Britons!

- Part of what's interesting here is that in both the Middle and the Modern English, the last line specifies not that Arthur will return, but that "an Arthur" will—some sort of reincarnation, perhaps, or an avatar of the original hero. This possibility fired the imaginations of the British—and the world—into the modern age. King Arthur would remain a potent symbol for centuries to come.

Suggested Reading

Barron and Weinberg, eds., *Layamon's Arthur*.

Burgess and Pratt, eds., *The Arthur of the French*.

1. Wace and Layamon have such different strengths and interests that their treatments of the Arthurian legend are often read side by side as complements to each other. What might account for the differences in their approaches to the legend?

2. Why do you think the messianic hope of Arthur returning—only hinted at by Geoffrey of Monmouth—is so emphasized by both of the writers in this lecture?

Chrétien de Troyes and Sir Lancelot
Lecture 7

As you will learn in this lecture, the great Arthurian writer Chrétien de Troyes's five Arthurian romances introduce fundamental elements of the legend that would become essential going forward, and his writing also would become key in terms of matters of style, tone, and emphasis. Chrétien gives us the great hero Lancelot and his adultery with Guenevere. He also gives us the first mention of the Holy Grail in the Arthurian legend, along with the fullest realization and most hyperbolic depiction of the idea of courtly love.

Chrétien's Arthurian Stories
- There's some question about Chrétien's sources and his texts' relationship with some of the romances contained in the Welsh collection of tales known as the *Mabinogion*. Three of Chrétien's romances—the story of *Erec and Enide*, the story titled *Yvain or The Knight with the Lion*, and the story titled *Perceval or The Story of the Grail*—have parallels in the Welsh "Geraint and Enid," "Owain, or the Countess of the Fountain," and "Peredur, Son of Evrawg."

- There is a long-running debate as to whether the Welsh tales are actually based on French sources, or the French stories are based on Welsh sources, or if both sets of stories derive from an older, common source, which seems to be the most likely case.

- We don't know much about who Chrétien was, but we do know that he was not only one of the best and most innovative authors of Arthurian literature specifically but also of French literature generally, and it would be fair to call him one of the greatest writers of medieval European literature. This is because with his Arthurian stories he basically invented a new fictional genre: the medieval romance.

- Medieval romance is a genre that has a few defining elements. These include a story that is concerned with characters who are from the nobility; that deals with the themes of love, chivalry, and knightly prowess; and that usually has some magic thrown in for good measure.

- Chrétien's Arthurian tales are all similarly structured. All of them are quite long—most have more than 7,000 lines—and most tend to divide the narrative into two parts, with the second part being usually almost twice as long as the first. On more than one occasion, the episode, or even the single line, that occurs at the dead center of a text is a very important event or moment or phrase that in some way provides the key to the whole text.

- While Chrétien's romances are definitely "Arthurian," they don't really feature Arthur. The main events of the text usually feature one of Arthur's knights as the main character, and Arthur is mainly important insofar as he is the figure who has created a society that can in turn produce valiant heroes who get to go on exciting adventures.

Cligès

- *Cligès* is a story about Alixandre, the son of the Emperor of Constantinople, and the many adventures he has on the way to securing the affections of his beloved. This story is only tangentially Arthurian, in that the action, toward the end, just happens to be set in Arthur's court. While it has an Arthurian ethos, it's not really that concerned with things that could truly be called Arthuriana.

Erec

- Chrétien's story of the knight Erec and his love Enide is more explicitly, engagedly Arthurian, and among the many reasons that it is interesting is because it participates in something that in French is called a *jeu-parti*. What this means is that the story engages in a kind of debate between two positions.

- In this case, much of the action hinges on the fact that Erec is a great knight until he manages to win the hand of Enide, but then

he caves into uxoriousness, and instead of going out on quests or participating in tournaments, he prefers to stay home, much to the detriment of his reputation.

Yvain

- Chrétien's story of *Yvain* or *The Knight with the Lion* involves a knight named Yvain who has a pet lion that accompanies him on his trips. Based on the account of another Arthurian knight, Sir Yvain rides out into the mysterious forest of Brocéliande to try his hand at an unusual challenge. There he finds a basin of water and a stone; he takes a dipperful of water from the basin and throws it on the stone. As soon as he does this, a great storm comes up, knocking all the leaves off the trees, and then the knight of the nearby castle comes out to challenge him to a duel.

- Yvain defeats the knight of the castle and eventually marries his widow, the beautiful Laudine, but along the way, there are some classic Arthurian moments. In addition to a helpful quest maiden named Lunette and a magic ring of invisibility, there is also the scene when Yvain, riding his horse into the castle, has it cut in half right under him when the portcullis comes down.

- There are several other episodes after Yvain's marriage to Laudine, and there's a kind of *jeu-parti* happening in this tale as well, as Yvain eventually returns to Arthur's court, supposedly just for a short time, but he gets so caught up in events there, he forgets the life he's made as the lord of the castle with the magic basin and stone. Lunette has to track him down and get her mistress and Yvain to reconcile for the sake of the land—because with Yvain gone, there's no one to fight should someone take water from the basin and pour it on the stone.

Perceval

- Chrétien's story of *Perceval*, also known as *The Story of the Grail*, focuses on a storyline popular in Arthurian literature particularly and medieval literature in general. This is the tale of "The Fair Unknown," or "*Le bel inconnu*." In this version of that story, the

noble Perceval is raised alone in the forest by his mother after his father and brothers have all been killed in knightly activities. She never tells him anything about knighthood or nobility, and he is raised essentially as a kind of peasant with no understanding of his birthright.

- The point of all "Fair Unknown" stories is to demonstrate that nature will always trump nurture; if you are born into the noble knightly class, you will have no choice but to eventually become a knight—your noble blood will always reveal your true nature in the end. This is what happens to Perceval.

- As a young man, he encounters some knights for the first time and, after that, is consumed by a fascination with all things knightly. Perceval proves to be ignorant of the niceties of court etiquette, but he's a natural with the sword, and he learns quickly. After some early blunders, he resolves to be more circumspect and reserved with his behavior, so when he finds himself a guest in the castle of a mysterious figure known as the Fisher King, or the Maimed King, he doesn't ask questions when all sorts of strange things happen.

- For example, at dinnertime, a procession suddenly enters the great hall. Beautiful youths and maidens carry a bleeding lance, two beautiful candelabra, and, most significantly, a jeweled grail. This is the moment when a grail and the Arthurian legend collide.

- Note that in the 12th century, there are plenty of grails about; grails are serving dishes or platters. In later versions of the story, this grail will become the Holy Grail, which is either the cup Christ drank from at the Last Supper or the cup used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch Christ's blood when he was on the cross, or both. But for now, while this serving dish is magical, it's not necessarily holy.

- Perceval keeps his mouth shut, resolving to ask about these strange events on the morrow. But when he wakes in the morning, the castle is deserted, and he finds no trace of the people or events of the night before. After returning to Arthur's court, a mysterious

woman appears and berates him for not having asked two questions. Apparently, if he had only asked *why* the lance bled and *whom* the grail serves, the Maimed King, his host, would have been healed of his wounds, and his whole land, which had become desolate, would have become fertile again.

Lancelot

- Chrétien's *Lancelot* or *Le chevalier de la charette* is his text that makes an indelible mark on the Arthurian tradition. In English, that's *Lancelot* or *The Knight of the Cart*, and it's called that because the fact that the great knight Lancelot rides in a cart is a key plot point. What's also important about this story is how it tells of the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guenevere, but it presents it in a positive light.

The love between the great knight Lancelot and Queen Guenevere is legendarily adulterous.

- The story begins when a knight named Meleagant shows up at Arthur's court and says that he is holding a bunch of Arthur's people hostage in his homeland of Gorre and that the only chance Arthur has of getting them back is to send one of his knights—with Queen Guenevere in tow—to meet him in the forest in single combat. If Arthur's knight wins, the queen and prisoners will be returned. If not, Meleagant gets to take the queen home with him.

- Sir Kay is sent into combat, is defeated, and the queen is abducted. Sir Gawain sets out to try to rescue her, as does a mysterious unnamed knight, who, we eventually learn, is Sir Lancelot. When Lancelot rides off in pursuit of the queen, he is so earnest in his

quest that two horses are ridden to death underneath him; lacking a mount, he is approached by a dwarf who is driving a cart. The dwarf says that Lancelot can hitch a ride, but riding in a cart is considered a shameful experience—carts are used to transport criminals to the gallows or the stake. According to Chrétien, Lancelot hesitates for two steps, and then decides to accept the ride.

- Eventually, he secures another mount for himself and can get off the cart, but in the Arthurian world created by Chrétien, the news that this particular knight has ridden in a cart quickly spreads, and no matter where Lancelot goes, he is immediately recognized as the knight who had to suffer the ignominy of riding in a cart.

- Clearly, Lancelot is willing to do anything to rescue his love, the queen. When he finally does get to the queen and all should be well, he discovers that she's angry with him. Just as everyone else seems to know that Lancelot rode in a cart, somehow she has learned that he hesitated before he got in. This enrages her—a knight should be willing to suffer any humiliation to save his beloved, and the fact that he delayed for an instant seems a slight she's unwilling to forgive.

- The lovers eventually patch things up, but this loving reunion happens with Lancelot standing outside the barred windows of Guenevere's chamber while she is inside. Finally reconciled and eager to be together, Lancelot manages to remove the iron bars from the window casing, enter the queen's chamber, and make love to her all night, not noticing that he has sliced his hand open and is bleeding all over her sheets.

- Lancelot departs before morning and replaces the bars, but when Meleagant enters the queen's chamber the next day and sees the blood all over the sheets, he accuses her of having slept with Sir Kay, who has been sleeping at the other end of the queen's room all this time and is still seriously wounded from his initial combat with Meleagant.

- Lancelot gets by on a technicality, vowing that he will prove in single combat that the queen did not sleep with Sir Kay—he doesn't swear to prove that she didn't commit adultery, just that she didn't commit it with Kay.

- Even though he and Queen Guenevere do commit adultery, many authors, starting with Chrétien, treat this act with some sympathy, even as they acknowledge that technically it's wrong. This fact, in some measure, reflects the reality of medieval noble marriages: These were almost always political and economic arrangements, and only the very lucky few managed to find something like love within those arrangements. Most people expected to find love and romance outside of marriage.

Suggested Reading

Burgess and Pratt, eds., *The Arthur of the French*.

Staines, ed. and trans., *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think it's possible that a character like Lancelot could appear, fully formed, in the work of this 12th-century writer? Or is it more likely that he was working from a lost source?

2. How do you see patronage and innate literary skill working together in Chrétien's literary output?

Arthurian Tales in Brittany and Burgundy
Lecture 8

I n the 12th and 13th centuries, French enthusiasm for Arthurian literature grew drastically. The Arthurian legend developed as a result of the foundations laid by Chrétien de Troyes, along with Marie de France and Robert de Boron—whom you will learn about in this lecture—and especially all the anonymous writers who took up unfinished texts and completed them, or took finished texts and improved them, or took an idea from an earlier work and created something entirely new.

Marie de France's Lais

- We know very little for certain about Marie de France, but what we do know is fascinating. At the end of her text *Isopet*, commonly called the *Fables*, which some sources say was derived from Aesop's Fables or other authors, there is an appended note written in French: "Marie is my name; I am from France." She would not bother to say that she is from France if she were in France, so while she's French, she is doing the bulk of her work away from her homeland.

- We are pretty sure that a single creative mind produced the 12th-century work known as the *Purgatory of Saint Patrick* along with the *Fables* and another collection known as the lais. All of these texts were written in French, but in England for a French-speaking audience, and it was probably Marie, arguably the first Anglo-Norman woman of letters, who composed all of them.

- The lais are poetic narrative accounts that most likely were performed aloud at court. There are twelve lais in all, and in the beginning of one of the surviving manuscripts that contain them, there is a brief explanation as to why Marie has chosen to compose these narratives: She says that she drew inspiration from the classical world and wished to produce stories that would both entertain and instruct.

- Of the 12 lais attributed to her, only two are overtly Arthurian. These are the lais called "Chevrefoil" ("The Honeysuckle") and "Lanval," named for its eponymous hero. "Chevrefoil" is a very short lai that tells a brief story about the knight Sir Tristan and his love, Isolde, who happens to be married to Tristan's uncle, King Mark of Cornwall.

- The love story of Tristan and Isolde seems to have been an independent and popular story circulating throughout the medieval world that at first had nothing to do with King Arthur and his knights. But the Arthurian legend tends to grab other stories and enfold them within its own tradition.

- "Lanval" is the most explicitly Arthurian of Marie's lais, but as was the case with the stories of Chrétien de Troyes, Arthur is a facilitator or an onlooker in this story rather than functioning as a principal actor. The lai begins on an Arthurian feast day, when

The love story of Tristan and Isolde circulated throughout the medieval world and was eventually incorporated into the Arthurian legend.

Arthur is dispensing gifts of land and wealth to his loyal retainers. Somehow, he manages to overlook Lanval, who decides to engage in some embarrassed, isolated pouting. To make himself feel better, he rides out into the forests of adventure.

- After about an hour of riding, Lanval encounters a fairy woman and her entourage. He spends some blissful time with her, and she promises to be his woman forever on one condition: that he never reveal her existence. But when Lanval returns to court, Queen Guenevere tries to seduce him, so he is compelled to reveal the existence of his fairy lover.

- When Lanval rebuffs Queen Guenevere, she tells Arthur that Lanval has tried to seduce her. Lanval denies this charge, and in front of Arthur and the full court he affirms that not only is his fairy lover more beautiful than Queen Guenevere, but also her serving women are more beautiful than the queen. Arthur orders him to produce these amazing beauties, but because he has broken his promise, Lanval realizes that the lady won't be coming to rescue him.

- After a short period, two beautiful women appear. Arthur and the court all acknowledge that they are both more beautiful than the queen and assume that one of these must be Lanval's lover. Instead, they are servants of the servants who directly serve the fairy lady. Shortly after these first two arrive, two more attendants make their appearance at court, and if anything, they are even more gorgeous than the first two. Finally, the fairy woman arrives, everyone acknowledges the rightness of Lanval's claim, and then he and the fairy lady ride off to Avalon together, never to be heard from again.

Finishing Chrétien's *Perceval* Story
- Marie knew the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth and probably was familiar with Chrétien de Troyes and his stories. When we put Wace, Chrétien, and Marie alongside each other, we see a clear development of a particular kind of ethos that will come to dominate Arthurian literature, in France and elsewhere, from here forward. This ethos

is concerned with luxury, romantic love (usually found outside marriage), knightly ability, the magical, the exotic, and the noble.

○ Chrétien's *Perceval* story had a little bit of all of these elements in it, but we can't be sure how everything was going to get wrapped up because he left the tale unfinished. But this only fired the imaginations of all the authors who came after him. Indeed, in the 13th-century French Arthurian tradition, *Perceval* continuations are something of an industry; everyone has an idea about how to finish, improve, enhance, and explore the story of Sir Perceval and his quest for the grail. The grail starts to morph in the French tradition, going from a beautiful serving dish to a magical vessel to a holy vessel to the Holy Grail.

○ Even though the text is called *Perceval*, it has a dual structure—something that in French romance is called *entrelacement*, which means that there is some "interlacing" happening in the story. In the case of the *Perceval* story, the narrative moves back and forth between Perceval and Sir Gawain—or Gauvin, as he would be called in French—who actually gets just as much time and attention as does Perceval.

● Those writers who attempted to continue or complete Chrétien's story of *Perceval* were certainly keenly aware of this literary tradition, as most of the continuations make a point of picking up the thread of Gawain's story. Then, by shifting back and forth between the movements of Perceval and Gawain, the narrative gets prolonged as more and more adventures can be piled up for each knight.

Robert de Boron's Texts

● Sometime soon after the year 1200, Robert de Boron, a man most likely from the court of Burgundy, in what is today part of France, composed three texts that would be key elements in the development of the Arthurian legend. These texts are known as the *Joseph d'Arimathie*, the *Merlin*, and a text about Perceval that is called a variety of different names. Robert de Boron's great contribution to Arthurian literature is his attempt to bridge the gap

between the secular and the spiritual, especially when it comes to knighthood.

- In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, the story of Aeneas's great-grandson Brutus founding Britain, along with Arthur's conquest of the Roman Empire, sought to establish for Britain a patrimony and status that went all the way back to, and derived from, the ancient world. The term for this passing of power from the classical East to the medieval West is *translatio imperii*, which means "transfer of rule" and is intended to suggest that the transfer of power has been unbroken, moving cleanly from emperor to emperor, to king to king, and at the same time progressing east to west, ending up ultimately in France and Britain.

- Robert de Boron takes this secular idea of *translatio imperii* and reworks it with the vessel of the Grail following the same trajectory, giving Arthur and his kingdom spiritual status as well as secular. According to Robert, the Grail is brought into the West by Joseph of Arimathea, who is following the directives of various angels and/or disembodied voices. One thing they instruct him to do is set up a table that is meant to recall or betoken the table from the Last Supper.

- Sometime after this, Joseph's sister and her husband have 12 children, all sons, who symbolize the apostles. One of these, Alain, is named as the keeper of the Grail, and he leads his brothers farther west, while they preach the Christian faith and await the birth someday of the "third man," whom we presume is Perceval, who will be the final guardian of the Grail. Supposedly, the Grail will finally make it all the way to Britain, conferring holy status on that land that exceeds even that of Rome.

- In addition to transforming the Grail from just a vessel into a potent, holy artifact, Robert de Boron also transforms the character of Merlin. Robert builds on the character as we see him in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, making him something more than the

mysterious figure who sets things into motion but then disappears from the text.

● Robert relates in great detail how Merlin was conceived when his mother was raped by an incubus, or evil spirit, while she slept. Merlin's mother is brought before a court and accused of fornication, but the young Merlin uses his magic powers to turn the tables and reveals to the judge that the judge's mother had committed adultery with a priest. Although Merlin's powers are from the devil, somehow he is redeemed for Christianity, but he gets to keep those powers and use them only for good. Thus, Merlin becomes a much more important element of the Arthurian legend than he had been in texts like Geoffrey of Monmouth's.
  ○ With his *Perceval* text, Robert de Boron continues his innovation. He decides to ignore the Gawain plotline altogether and instead just get Perceval back to the Grail Castle so that he can finally complete the task that was aborted in Chrétien's story when the young knight was too polite to ask about the procession of lance, candelabra, and grail in the household of the Fisher King.

● Robert makes Perceval triumphant, but when he does this, he also writes the conclusion to the whole Arthurian story; once the Grail has been achieved and Perceval has retired to the Grail Castle, there's not much point in continuing on.

● After the conclusion of the Grail Quest, the Roman war and its aftermath occur much as they are described in Geoffrey. Arthur conquers Rome but is betrayed by Mordred, is mortally wounded in fighting him, and is carried off to Avalon, where he may still be. Boron's Merlin reports these events to Perceval, and there the manuscript concludes.

● Robert's writings were in French octosyllabic verse, and they apparently weren't very good, at least in terms of style. Many writers were so intrigued by his plotlines that they went on to create

versions of his texts that we call the *mises en prose*, which means something like "putting into prose."

- It was through the prose redactions of Robert de Boron's work that his name became famous, and he started to be regarded as an authority on certain things Arthurian, especially the Holy Grail, Merlin, and the linking of secular knighthood to a spiritual ideal.

- Sometime in the first half of the 13th century, a French writer or writers expanded on the idea of Perceval and the Grail to produce a massive, complex text full of *entrelacement* that has come to be called the *Perlesvaus*—another version of Perceval's name in French. This text survives in three manuscripts, and the narrative is divided into 11 different branches.

- After so many texts in which the figure of King Arthur is a facilitator or background figure, this text emphatically returns the focus to the king. The constant that we find throughout the narrative is the duty of Christian knights to convert all those who are not Christians, including Jews, Muslims, and any pagans the agents of the Arthurian community might encounter.

- This is a story about how the new law of Christianity triumphs over the old law of Judaism, and in some ways, it's just a coincidence or of secondary concern that this story involves the knights of Arthur's court. Thanks to this text and those of Robert de Boron and Chrétien de Troyes, the story of King Arthur is now inextricably linked to the story of Christianity.

Suggested Reading

Burgess and Pratt, eds., *The Arthur of the French*.

White, ed., *King Arthur in Legend and History*.

1. Why do you think the story of a British ruler was so appealing to the French? What aspects of the Arthurian story might have appealed to a continental audience?

2. What surprises you about the early French treatments of the Holy Grail? Did you expect something different?

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle

Lecture 9

I n the 12th and 13th centuries, writers like Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Robert de Boron, and a slew of anonymous others gave the Arthurian legend many of its defining elements: courtly love, the Holy Grail, the love of Lancelot and Guenevere, the "Fair Unknown" tradition as expressed by the character of Sir Perceval, and a more fully developed Merlin. In this lecture, you will learn about the greatest of Arthur's knights, Sir Lancelot, and the massive 13th-century French text that is named after him: the *Lancelot en prose*, which is called Prose *Lancelot* out of convenience.

Prose *Lancelot*

- Lancelot is best known for his relationship with Guenevere, which some might say is what destroyed Arthur's kingdom. While this is partially true, their relationship actually benefitted the Arthurian community, especially in its early stages. Lancelot is the greatest knight, so it makes sense that he would seek to serve the most beautiful, high-ranking lady—Guenevere. Lancelot's devotion to courtly love and to Arthur's queen is what brings him to the Arthurian court in the first place, and once he's there, he is so great that he is responsible for elevating the reputation of Arthur's court.

Sir Lancelot is known as the greatest knight in the Arthurian legend.

- Although he first appears in the work of Chrétien, Lancelot gets his fullest treatment in the French Prose *Lancelot*, which has several

sections that deal with people other than Lancelot. Scholars have generally agreed that the Prose *Lancelot* comprises three parts of the five-part Vulgate cycle, also known as the Lancelot-Grail cycle. The five sections are *L'estoire del Saint Graal* (*The Story of the Holy Grail*); *L'estoire de Merlin* and its continuation, *La suite du Merlin*; the *Lancelot* proper; *La queste del Saint Graal*; and *La mort le roi Artu* (*The Death of King Arthur*).

- Because the various branches were composed over a long span of time, by different authors with different interests, we can't really refer to the Prose *Lancelot* as a single text—it is not unified in any way except that it is concerned with things generally Arthurian and specifically Lancelot. The tones of the various branches vary markedly.

- In terms of tone and focus, the *Estoire* is striking for how it combines religious fervor with military activity. Its obsession is with the spread of Christianity and the conversion or conquest of non-pagans. In this respect, it is certainly a text of its times, as it was written during the height of Crusading fervor.

- By contrast, the *Merlin* and its continuation are much more firmly in the realm of medieval romance, and it is here that many details of the Arthurian tradition are given their fullest and sometimes first treatment. Here, for example, is where Arthur draws a magic sword from a stone, thereby proving that he has the right to be king of the land.

- Many of the key family relationships of the Arthurian world start to be worked out as well. Arthur's nephews by his half sisters start to play more and more prominent roles, even though the *Merlin* and its continuation don't seem to be entirely certain about how many sisters Arthur has or how many nephews turn up at court to be knights. But we can see these details start to solidify.

- One half sister, usually identified as Morgause, marries King Lot of Orkney and is mother to Gawain, Gahuerret, Gaheriet, and Mordred, with another brother, Agravain, being added. Morgan le

Fay is specifically mentioned as another of Arthur's half sisters, and the foundation is laid for the mischief she's going to work later on.

- Another key element in the *Merlin* is that the project of questing for the sake of questing—the idea of seeking out adventure for its own sake—is specifically and explicitly identified by Arthur as one of the main functions of the Round Table.

- The *Merlin* section ends with Merlin disappearing from the text because he has fallen in love with Viviane, who imprisons him in a cave or under a rock or inside a tree, depending on the version you're reading, by using magic Merlin has taught her.

- This sets the stage for the most important branch of this cycle, the *Lancelot* proper, in which the eponymous hero comes of age and takes his rightful place among the greatest of all of Arthur's knights, and it is clearly established that Lancelot's love for Queen Guenevere is what spurs him on to perform ever-greater deeds of martial prowess and chivalry.

- Another key element of the Arthurian legend that gets developed here is the idea of knightly fellowship being in many ways similar or parallel to the romantic love between a knight and his lady. Bonds between knights are often portrayed as just as strong as bonds between lovers.

- If ever there were an Arthurian text that could be called "typical" or "standard" in its themes and narrative episodes, the *Lancelot* proper is it: There is magic, love, noble knights fighting for beautiful ladies, any number of adventures, a king who both proves himself out in the field and then stays home to facilitate the activities of the agents of his community, and a link between the secular world of knighthood and the spiritual world of religion.

The Grail Quest and the Death of Arthur
- The tone and emphasis of *La queste del Graal* are markedly different from the *Estoire*, the *Merlin*, and the *Lancelot* proper.

There are no longer "quest maidens," or damsels in distress, who seem to be lurking behind every tree in the forest, just waiting for a knight to ride by looking for adventures.

- In this section of the cycle, the forest damsels have been replaced by a huge contingent of hermits who hold forth for hours on matters theological and spiritual, explaining the meanings of dreams knights have had or visions they have seen and counseling them to confess their sins, to accept various penances, and to pay more attention to matters of the soul than of the body.

- The *Queste* has an allegorical landscape that is not just what it is but also always betokens something else. In this landscape, the usual rules of knighthood suddenly no longer apply. So different is the tone here that some scholars have suggested that this portion was in fact written by a Cistercian monk. The text's sensibility is much more seriously theological and spiritual than the rest of the Prose *Lancelot*, and thus it reflects a shift in religious thinking and philosophy that was making its way throughout the medieval world.

- The most important thing that the Grail Quest does is effect a shift in the understanding of what makes a good knight and what the main purpose of a community like King Arthur's should be. Knights like Lancelot and Sir Gawain—who had been long considered just second best behind the French knight—utterly fail on the Grail Quest, no matter how hard or sincerely they try to do their best.

- It is the virginal Sir Galahad, Lancelot's son—whom we meet in this text for the very first time—who surpasses his father and in the end "achieves" the Grail. In other words, he gets to look into the Grail and see the "marvel of all marvels therein," but readers of the text don't get to know what those marvels are. This climax of the Grail Quest happens in the Middle East, in the land of Sarras, far from Arthur's court, and the Grail then disappears up to heaven, along with Sir Galahad.

- The two knights who manage to accompany Galahad to this final destination are Sir Bors and Sir Perceval. The text makes clear that Galahad, Perceval, and Bors take first, second, and third, respectively, in the Grail Quest because of their states of chastity or virginity. Galahad is so perfect in this text that he's boring. He is not only perfectly chaste, but he also never experiences any temptation.

- Galahad reads the allegorical landscape of the Grail Quest with no difficulty. When he has to engage in combat, he always defeats his enemies, but he never kills them unless they happen to be pagans or a group of brothers guilty of raping their sister. He never knows ahead of time if he's being challenged by a noble knight or an evil villain, but regardless, he always does the right thing. He is so perfect, so much more monk than he is knight, that it makes sense that he is taken up to heaven once he gets to look inside the Grail.

- The final section of the Prose *Lancelot*, the *Mort Artu*, also helps put a definitive stamp on how the story of Arthur should draw to its conclusion. It shifts from the religious and didactic tone of the *Queste* to a narrative style that is more like that of the *Lancelot* proper—a medieval romance—but the author of this section also took pains to incorporate quite a bit of material from the Arthurian history and chronicle traditions while also making some important innovations.

- Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this narrative is the fact that the collapse of the Arthurian community has multiple causes, all of which suddenly come together to produce a tragic outcome. In earlier texts, Arthur's nephew Mordred had tried to usurp the throne and the queen while Arthur was away. Here, Mordred tries pretty much the same thing, but he's rendered much more villainous in that he is not only Arthur's nephew but also his son, the product of a liaison in which Arthur, not knowing his half sister, Morgause, slept with her and conceived Mordred.

- At the same time that Mordred wants the crown, Arthur is dealing with the sudden revelation that Lancelot and Guenevere have been

committing adultery; Guenevere is sent to the stake to be burned, and in rescuing her, Lancelot accidentally kills some of Arthur's nephews, which leaves the surviving one, Sir Gawain, so enraged that he forces his uncle to seek vengeance, even when Arthur seems tired of fighting and even after Lancelot does everything in his power to try to make amends.

- This is one of the key episodes that will cause Gawain to be called "the vengeful Gawain." Arthur, too, bears some of the blame, as he seems unable to think for himself or resist the demands of his nephew, even when he doesn't want to continue his fight with Lancelot anymore. The author here makes skillful use of the French *entrelacement* style, moving from thread to narrative thread and from place to place and time to time in an alternating pattern that builds suspense, especially because the readers are privy to all kinds of information that the characters are not.

- In the end, Arthur and his son meet in single combat on Salisbury Plain, where the king kills his incestuously conceived son but, in so doing, receives the wound that will mean his death, even though his other half sister, Morgan le Fay, attempts to heal him with magic.

- Arthur orders Sir Griflet to throw his sword Excalibur back into a lake, a clear signal that the power of the Arthurian community is no more and will not be passed on. In an episode filled with biblical and mythical allusions, Griflet cannot bear to do it and tries to lie to Arthur twice about having completed this task. Finally, on the third occasion, he obeys the king's request.

- When he finally hurls the sword toward the water, a hand reaches up and catches it, brandishes it, and then disappears beneath the water. Then, after Arthur dies, he is given a Christian burial. The text doesn't end there, however. There is redemption, in the end, for both Lancelot and Guenevere, who choose to enter religious life and finish out their days as a monk and a nun, repenting for their part in the downfall of the Arthurian community.

Suggested Reading

Burgess and Pratt, eds., *The Arthur of the French*.

Lupack, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the character of Lancelot change from his first appearance in Chrétien de Troyes to his representation in the Prose *Lancelot*?

2. What is most interesting about the character of Galahad? How does he enhance, critique, or confer positive qualities on the figure of his father?

The Early German Arthurian Tradition
Lecture 10

I n this lecture, you will learn about the most important continental treatment of Arthur after the French, and that's the development of German Arthurian literature. Specifically, you will be introduced to Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach, each of whom helped make the Arthurian legend a popular element of the medieval German Arthurian tradition. Thanks to them, the story of Arthur would be written and rewritten in German and explored in a variety of media through the Middle Ages and the early modern period to the present day.

Hartmann von Aue
- Hartmann was both a writer and possibly a knight—at the very least, he was a courtly, educated individual who seems to understand the customs of knights and knighthood in the way an insider would. The development of the German Arthurian tradition tended to happen at noble courts that were non-royal, but there was interest far beyond the noble, courtly audience.

- Hartmann's contribution to the German tradition of Arthurian literature is relatively small, but because he was the first to rework the writings of Chrétien de Troyes into German, he is in many ways the most influential and important. Hartmann wrote several texts over the course of his career, but the two Arthurian ones are adaptations of Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain* or *The Knight with the Lion*. In German, these are generally called the *Erec* and the *Iwein*.

- The basic plot of the *Erec* is as follows: The knight Erec has a series of adventures, proves his worthiness, and marries the beautiful Enite (the German version of Enide). But after he's married, all he wants to do is stay at home and make love to his wife. After some time, his reputation as a good knight starts to falter. When Enite lets him know that the scuttlebutt is that Erec has neglected his duties,

he becomes furious, telling Enite that he will prove his knightliness by taking her on some adventures. In the German version, it's that Erec has lost his balance of love and chivalry.

- So, off they go on a series of adventures, during which Erec is almost attacked or injured or even killed on multiple occasions—and he would be, if not for Enite's disobeying his explicit instructions to keep silent and taking it upon herself to warn him whenever a new peril appears. For her trouble, she is berated and mistreated by Erec. But she persists because, as Hartmann makes clear, she is a truly noble, virtuous woman who understands that her first duty is to help her husband.

- Hartmann has enhanced Enite as she exists in Chrétien's text, where she is certainly a good woman, but in Hartmann's treatment of her, she has become a more complex, interesting character. In the German text, she displays characteristics of a seductress; an obedient and submissive wife, heading in the direction of saintliness; a noble courtly lady who expects, and rightly so, that a knight should perform great feats to win her admiration and love; and, most interestingly, a partner to her husband.

- One key difference between Hartmann's Erec and that of Chrétien is that, finally, when Erec realizes what a shortsighted, arrogant fool he's been, he asks for his wife's forgiveness. In Chrétien's version, it is Enide who asks Erec to forgive her for speaking up when she was specifically told not to; in Hartmann's version, at the end of the adventures, Erec reconciles with Enite and apologizes, and they both seem to understand that chivalric, courtly relationships require balance.

- Hartmann also makes clear that the key element that has allowed this new balance to exist is that both characters recognize that the pure love that comes from God is the most important element in any relationship.

- In his other Arthurian text, the *Iwein*, an adaptation of Chrétien's story of the knight with the lion, Hartmann similarly emphasizes the need for balance and order in a relationship. This is the story in which Yvain rides out to a magical basin in a magic forest. When he takes water from the basin and throws it on a stone, a huge storm comes up, and the knight of the nearby castle is compelled to come out and fight him. Iwein is victorious and rides after the mortally wounded Lord Ascalon, where he is once again trapped between the portcullis and the inner gate of the castle.

- As in Chrétien, Iwein receives assistance from Lunete, handmaiden to the lady of the castle, Laudine. Lunete persuades Laudine that because her husband is dead, she needs to remarry—after all, someone has to challenge knights who throw water from the basin onto the magic stone. Lunete says that Laudine should marry Iwein; he defeated Ascalon, so chances are that he'd do a good job performing the duties that attach to fulfilling the requirements of the custom of the castle.

- So, the marriage happens, but back at court, Gawen reminds Iwein of what happened to Erec after Erec got married. So, Iwein asks his wife if he can have permission to go off questing for a year; she grants this, but he breaks his oath. Iwein has the opposite problem that Erec had: While Erec was inordinately in love with his wife, Iwein is inordinately in love with questing and adventure.

- Because Hartmann chose these two of all of Chrétien's works to adapt, it's clear that he's interested in the major problem presented by each: how one balances martial and marital duties and, in turn, how those duties need to be balanced with devotion to God.

- When Iwein has missed the deadline, Laudine sends her handmaiden Lunete to Arthur's court to publicly denounce him. The deadline has completely slipped Iwein's mind, and when he understands what he's done, he goes mad and wanders out into the forest, where he roams around for a while completely naked until a miraculous salve is applied to his body, allowing him to return to his senses.

- All the adventures he has from this point onward have to do with proving his knightly prowess, but the way he completes them is all about service to others and compassion instead of personal glorification. Eventually, he makes his way back and is once more accepted into the good graces of his wife.

- Hartmann takes themes or ideas that are only hinted at in Chrétien and explores them more fully in his own treatment of the stories, emphasizing the ideas of balance between noble love and knightly prowess and devotion to God. In order to do this, Hartmann does not shy away from offering critiques of the Arthurian court.

- In *Iwein*, especially, he uses irony and humor to suggest that Arthur's court is great, but its conception of knightly identity is limited. What it needs is the return of Iwein, who, after experiencing madness and rebirth, can offer a better model of the ideal chivalric knight, one whose devotions are first to God and then in equal measure to accruing honor for martial skills and winning the love and admiration of a lady.

Wolfram von Eschenbach

- Although Hartmann started it all, Wolfram von Eschenbach is the most famous and important of the German Arthurian writers. It was his treatment of Sir Perceval—or Parzival—that started an obsession in German culture with the Holy Grail that continued through the centuries. Wolfram's work proved to be incredibly popular in his day and only gained in popularity as the centuries went on.

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Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170–1220) wrote *Parzival*, one of the most profound literary works of the Middle Ages.

- Whereas Hartmann could be a little preachy and paternal, Wolfram isn't a terribly intrusive narrator, although his work is notable for the moments in which he pauses in his storytelling to reflect on the relationship between fiction and reality. This reflects an authorial self-awareness that was a relatively new thing in the literary traditions of the 12th century generally, and particularly in German writing.

- In the 11th century and before, writers tend to be anonymous; in the 12th century, they're proudly claiming their work. And no one seems to be more interested in and intent upon claiming his authorship than Wolfram von Eschenbach. But he shows that his skill is equal to his ego as he sets out to retell Chrétien's story of Perceval and the Grail, but with some very striking changes.

- The *Parzival* is still considered by many scholars to be one of the three most important texts written in German before the modern period. While Hartmann introduced Arthurian literature to the German-speaking world and influenced Wolfram, Wolfram's adaptation of Chrétien is far more dramatically different and original than anything Hartmann produced.

- For example, the Grail is nothing like how it appears in Chrétien. In the French text, the grail appears to be a precious serving vessel and may have its source in the ancient Celtic symbol of the cauldron or dish of plenty—a serving vessel that constantly refills itself with whatever is the favorite food of the person being served.

- The grail at this point is not the Holy Grail associated with the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples or with the chalice that Joseph of Arimathea used to catch Christ's blood when he was on the cross. Wolfram took the precious-but-not-necessarily-holy serving vessel of the French text and turned it into a stone.

- This is the only place in the Arthurian tradition in which the Grail is not at the very least something you might put on a table—whether it's the table of the Last Supper or the table of the ailing Fisher King,

in whose castle Parzival spends the night. But it still has associations with food. The Grail has become a magic stone that produces food and keeps all those who are in its presence eternally young.

- In Wolfram's version of the legend, words appear on the Grail stone indicating that if a stranger comes to the Grail and asks a particular question, then King Anfortas will be healed. In the case of Chrétien, Perceval was supposed to ask, upon seeing the grail procession with the serving vessel and bleeding lance, "Whom does the grail serve?" and "Why does the lance bleed?" In Wolfram's text, the question is much more logical—"Sir, what ails you?"

- In both texts, the Parzival character fails to ask the question or questions, which then results in his having to get back out on the questing trail and finish up this adventure. Wolfram follows Chrétien in devoting almost equal status to the character of Gawen, moving back and forth between the two characters and setting the one up as a foil, or contrast, to the other.

- Wolfram also enhances his source in other ways. He adds thousands of lines to the story in order to give us the backstory of Parzival's father and to delineate family relationships within the text, something with which Wolfram seems to be rather obsessed.

- And, perhaps most importantly, Wolfram finishes the story. After lots of questing, Gawen completes his adventure, which is to free four queens and 400 maidens who are being held captive. Parzival has managed, on his quests, to get himself a wife and twin sons.

- Parzival is finally called back to the Grail Castle, where, having learned his lesson, he asks the correct question of King Anfortas, who just happens to be Parzival's uncle. The question having been asked, Anfortas is healed, Parzival assumes the position of Grail King, and Parzival is joined by his wife and sons at the castle.

Jackson and Ranawake, eds., *The Arthur of the Germans*.

Mustard and Passage, eds. and trans., *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*.

Tobin, Vivian, and Lawson, eds. and trans., *Arthurian Romances*, *Tales*, *and Lyric Poetry*.

Questions to Consider

1. Although Hartmann's alterations to the Arthurian tradition are relatively minor, they have strong resonances. What change do you think is the most significant?

2. What seem to be the basic differences between the German tradition and other literary Arthurian traditions, and why are those differences significant?

3. How does Wolfram von Eschenbach's personality affect our interpretation or understanding of his version of the Grail Quest?

King Arthur's Other German Adaptations
Lecture 11

H artmann von Aue kicked off the German literary tradition in the 12th century with his adaptations of Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain* or *The Knight with the Lion*. Wolfram von Eschenbach's highly original reworking of Chrétien's story of Perceval and the Grail was the catalyst for a German obsession with the Grail, an obsession that continued well into the modern period. As you will learn in this lecture, Gottfried von Strassburg is a third great medieval German writer of Arthuriana, and throughout medieval Europe, the Arthurian legend flourished with the help of other German writers.

Gottfried von Strassburg

- In the first decade of the 13th century, Gottfried von Strassburg wrote about the knight Tristan and his love Isolde, who also happens to be married to Tristan's uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. The story of Tristan and Isolde is only tangential to the main matter of Arthuriana, and the main narrative points had probably existed independently of the story of King Arthur for centuries. But the Arthurian legend is like a medieval magnet, and whenever it encounters a plotline or theme it likes, it attaches it to itself.

- Gottfried's *Tristan*, even though unfinished, is a massively ambitious 19,500-line poem of rhyming couplets that uses the story of the star-crossed lovers to explore all kinds of matters of interest in early-13th-century German society, but most especially the complex relationship of Christian ideals to knightly or courtly ones.

- This text also clearly demonstrates that Gottfried had an impressive education, most likely at one of the Humanist cathedral schools that had come into being in the High Middle Ages, and he frequently alludes to or makes use of a variety of literary techniques and themes that go back to the world of classical antiquity and that in

some ways seem to anticipate the classical revival that will be such a key part of the Renaissance or early modern period in Europe.

- The German Arthurian tradition is the most important continental treatment of Arthur after that of the French, in no small measure because elements of the Arthurian story remained objects of fascination in German culture from the medieval period well into the modern.

Ulrich von Zatzikhoven

- In addition to Hartmann, Wolfram, and Gottfried, there were numerous other German writers who sought to make their own mark on the legend of Arthur and his knights. One of the most interesting of these is Ulrich von Zatzikhoven, who wrote a text called the *Lanzelet* at the end of the 12th century.
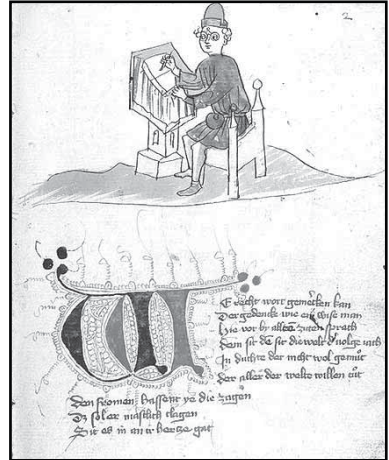
German 12th-century writer Ulrich von Zatzikhoven told his version of Lancelot's story in the *Lanzelet*.

- Ulrich bases his narrative not on French sources but seemingly on an older Celtic strand of the legend. The Arthur of his text is less courtly and more tribal, more like the Welsh Arthur than the French one. He tells us a version of the same story that Chrétien wrote about in *The Knight of the Cart*, but it seems that Ulrich didn't know Chrétien's story, only an older Celtic version that tells of Guenevere's abduction and rescue. Ulrich tells us several stories about Lancelot that we don't see prior to his text.

- In Ulrich's story of Lancelot, the hero is a version of the "Fair Unknown," as seen with Perceval in the different versions of his story. According to Ulrich, Lancelot is raised in a kingdom of magical women, completely ignorant of his birthright and identity,

until he is 15 years old, when he sets out to win a position in the legendary court of King Arthur.

- Still ignorant of his identity, Lancelot defeats three evil lords of three evil castles, and each time, the daughter or niece of that lord falls madly in love with him. The first two maidens disappear from the story quite conveniently, but Lancelot goes on to marry the third maiden, and she remains his wife throughout the story. Finally, he has performed enough impressive deeds of knightly valor that he gets to learn who he actually is—the son of a king, and a knight for whom such victories on the battlefield should come as no surprise.

- The abduction of Guenevere then takes place, a narrative thread that most likely goes back to a Celtic tradition of the *aithed*, which is an abduction narrative. Lancelot participates in the rescue of Guenevere from her abductor, as do several other of Arthur's knights, but all the courtly love stuff from Chrétien's text is missing, as is any mention of a cart and the dangerous sword bridge that Lancelot has to cross. Most importantly, there's no suggestion that Lancelot and Guenevere are in an adulterous relationship.

Wirnt von Grafenberg

- The *Wigalois* by Wirnt von Grafenberg is another important German text. This text is also quite early—it dates from the very beginning of the 13th century—and Wirnt invokes Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach. But Wirnt's text does not rely on either of those author's works, and although it's presumed that his source is French, it has never been reliably identified by scholars.

- Wirnt's story offers up yet another version of the "Fair Unknown" plot. An unnamed knight shows up at the court of King Arthur, bringing with him a magical girdle that he offers to Queen Guenevere. He also makes a challenge: Should the queen decide she does not want to accept his gift, then he'll take it back and challenge any and every knight of Arthur's court who wishes to fight him.

- This is one of the strange conditions and connections we see so often throughout medieval Arthurian literature: a gift to the queen has something to do with fighting among knights. Here we see the start of the tradition of things having meaning beyond themselves. This seems to be one of the earliest incarnations of this Arthurian tradition.

- Of course, Guenevere gives the girdle back and the knight accepts it, puts it on, and then the next day uses its magical powers to defeat all comers, the last of whom is Gawain, whom he brings back with him to his homeland, where Arthur's nephew marries the unnamed knight's niece, Florie.

- After some happy time spent with his new wife, Gawain sets off for Arthur's court for a visit, but because he's left the magic girdle behind, he can't find his way back to Florie. In his absence, Florie bears a son, Wigalois, and when he comes of age (around 20), he sets off for Arthur's court to discover his patrimony. When he arrives, he stuns everyone by sitting on a stone that will allow only the best knights of the world to sit upon it, and because of this, he is warmly welcomed to court, where Gawain becomes his mentor, although neither of them is aware that they are father and son.

- The story then turns to what we now think of as a standard and traditional Arthurian story of knightly endeavor. A damsel in distress comes to Arthur's court in desperate need of someone to help her and her mistress, who is a de facto prisoner in her own castle, awaiting the arrival of the knight who will free her from captivity and also become her husband.

- At first, the maiden who asks for a knight to help her and her mistress is horrified at the assignment of Wigalois to this task, as she thinks he is too young and untested. The adventures that Wigalois endures on the course of completing his quest seem to be standard for Arthurian literature.

- In the end, Wigalois defeats all his enemies and overcomes every challenge, wins the maiden, marries her, learns the truth about his father, conceives a son with his wife—the heiress of the land of Korntin—and that son, in turn, goes on to achieve great feats of knightly valor.

- Woven throughout the text is an emphasis on the triumph of Christianity over heathen powers, and Wigalois, unlike the protagonists we encounter in Hartmann and Wolfram, is a perfect knight. He is not a deeply flawed individual who overcomes some personal stumbling block to then succeed in even more fantastic fashion than he might have otherwise—he was born to be a hero. In this respect, he anticipates the saintly Sir Galahad, who will arrive on the scene in a big way in a century or so.

Other German Writers

- Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône*, or *The Crown*, which was composed sometime around 1230, is 30,041 lines long. Apparently, Heinrich wanted to make sure that he found a way to appeal to every potential reader of—or listener to—his text, so he made sure to include everything he possibly could.

- If nothing else, Heinrich must have been a serious student of Arthurian literature, because he displays a familiarity with practically every text, every theme, every symbol, and every narrative variance that was possible at this time.

- This poem is odd. On one hand, it works with and alludes to the most courtly of Arthurian romances, and it holds up King Arthur as the greatest of all rulers. Heinrich then switches to the individual stories of particular knights, and here the contrast with the noble, courtly King Arthur is striking; as with many of his narrative threads, Heinrich seems to look back to older Celtic tales. The juxtaposition between the two traditions—one very civilized and the other very rustic—has caused many critics to judge this text somewhat harshly.

- While many other knights play important roles, Gawain seems to be the hero of this text, and he indeed achieves the Grail, something he does in no other Arthurian text. In general, as a Grail knight, Gawain is a dismal failure, but not in Heinrich's text.

- By the end of the 13th century, the interest in German Arthurian romance in verse comes to an end with Albrecht's *Jüngerer Titurel*, and it's clear that the fascination with the Arthurian legend in what we think of today as Germany has passed its apogee.

- There are some key works in the 14th and 15th centuries, but many of these are reworkings or translations of earlier texts from the French, and they don't add much in the way of innovation to the German Arthurian tradition. However, the fascination with certain aspects of the tradition, particularly the Grail, would continue well into the modern period.

The Dutch Arthurian Tradition
- The Arthurian legend was popular in areas neighboring that of the German city-states, the Netherlands, and parts of what we think of today as Belgium. The Dutch Arthurian tradition was a vibrant if secondary one, and stories of Arthur and his knights had become popular there quite early. Although the legend was popular early, however, the composition of Arthurian literature in Dutch didn't take off until the 13th century—a bit later than the German and French traditions.

- In most cases, it seems that the writers were producing translations or adaptations from French sources, but there are a few texts that appear to be original interpretations, or at least the sources have been lost and are unknown to us today. Most popular was the Old French story of Lancelot from the Prose *Lancelot*, which shows up in Middle Dutch in two independent translations and one highly original adaptation. There are also Dutch versions of the *Merlin*, treatments of the Perceval story, and the stories of the quest for the Grail based on the French.

- Scholars have identified five Dutch romances that don't seem to go back to French sources, and they appear to have been written at the height of Dutch interest in the legend—so, in the second half of the 13th century. These include the stories *Lanceloet en het hert met de witte voet*, or *Lancelot and the Deer with the White Foot*; *Moriaen*, a story that relates the adventures of a Moorish knight by the same name and includes some adventures of Gawain, Lancelot, and Perceval; *Roman van den riddere metter mouwen*, or *The Knight with the Sleeve*; and *Walewien ende Keye*, which follows the adventures of Gawain and Kay.

- By the 14th century, Dutch interest in the Arthurian legend seems to have petered out, but during the 13th century, before it did, Dutch writers saw fit to produce manuscript collections of Dutch Arthurian works that are remarkably complete and thus a boon for scholars working not only in Dutch Arthurian literature but in German, English, and especially French, because the Dutch texts are helpful in filling in gaps from the other traditions.

Suggested Reading

Chinca, trans., *Gottfried von Strassburg*.

Jackson and Ranawake, eds., *The Arthur of the Germans*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which plot points or symbols seem most interesting in the texts discussed in this lecture?

2. Are there certain aspects of the German Arthurian tradition that seem to be particularly "German" and distinct from the kind of focus and emphasis seen in French, English, and Welsh Arthurian literature?

The Arthurian Sagas of Scandinavia
Lecture 12

I n the Middle Ages, the legend of King Arthur flourished and developed in fascinating ways throughout Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and beyond. But the legend also took hold in places that one might not at first think to connect with the story of King Arthur. This lecture moves far to the north and east of those areas traditionally associated with Arthur and discusses the legendary king in the traditions of medieval Scandinavia. In particular, the focus is on the Arthurian legend in Old Norse.

The Norwegian and Icelandic Arthurian Traditions

- When the world of continental Arthurian romance met the world of Vikings and Old Norse sagas, there was a bit of a culture clash between a courtly, civilized ethos and a Viking one. But this clash doesn't always show up as blatantly and obviously as one might suppose. One reason for this is that although we know that translations of Arthurian texts into Old Norse and Old Icelandic started as early as the year 1200, all the surviving manuscript witnesses are decades—if not centuries—younger than the originals.

- This means that we can't really tell if the changes from the Old French to the Scandinavian language are the product of the original translator, the scribe who put it into the earliest form in which we have it surviving, or somewhere in between. So, while there are distinct differences in ethos and sensibility between the continental and the Scandinavian versions of the Arthurian legend, we're not sure if they were dramatic and happened all at once or if they were more of a process.

- Norway is the center of a program of translation that began in the 13th century during the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson, also known as King Hákon IV or Hákon the Old. It was he who was interested in continental romances—not just of Arthur, but

of knights generally—and during his reign, numerous texts were translated into Norse and then called, collectively, the *riddarasögur*, which translates roughly to "sagas of knights."

- King Hákon's court was certainly the most important point of entry for Arthurian and other continental romances into the Scandinavian world, but there is evidence to suggest that the Icelandic monastery of Þingeyrar was also a place of Arthurian scribal activity quite early on. Some scholars theorize that stories of Arthur were circulating at least orally by the end of the 12th century.

King Hákon (1204–1263), who ruled Norway from 1217 until his death, used this seal during his rule.

- While King Hákon's court in Norway was the most important point of entry for Arthurian literature in the North, it was not the earliest—that honor goes to Iceland. In fact, the earliest Arthurian text in Scandinavia is a translation of the Merlin portion of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Brittannie*, in a text that has come to be called the *Merlinsspá*.

- By the year 1200, stories about King Arthur and his knights from all over Europe had consolidated, and by the beginning of the 13th century, we can start to speak of these works as comprising "the matter of Britain," or, as it is most commonly described in French, the *matière de Bretagne*. By the 13th century, these stories were popular enough that they were described in terms that paralleled the long-established literary traditions of "the matter of France"—stories and poems about Charlemagne and his companions—and "the matter of Rome"—accounts of Greek and Roman myths and the exploits of figures like Julius Caesar.

- In 1200, this excerpted version of the prophecies of Merlin was composed by a monk named Gunnlaugr Leifsson, and shortly thereafter, a complete translation of the *Historia* into Icelandic was made, in which language it was called the *Breta sögur*, or "sagas of the Britons."

- There are several interesting changes in the Icelandic version of the text in comparison with Geoffrey's version. Geoffrey composed his text in Latin to authenticate and legitimate the work and appeal to a scholarly audience. Even though the monks in Iceland were proficient in Latin—the country had become Christian in the year 1000—Icelandic historiographers wrote in the vernacular from the beginning.

- Thus, the *Breta sögur* are written in Old Icelandic. So is the *Merlinsspá*, but what's even more interesting is that Gunnlaugr took the prose original of Geoffrey and translated it into verse, and he used the verse form known as *fornyrðislag*, or "old story meter." In other words, Gunnlaugr took the Latin text of Geoffrey and gave it a distinctly Icelandic sensibility.

- There is only one Arthurian poem written in Swedish in the Middle Ages—a version of the story of Yvain—and there are no medieval Arthurian texts in Danish or Finnish, so the focus is on Norway and Iceland.

Works Commissioned by King Hákon

- When King Hákon Hákonarson came to the throne of Norway in 1217, the country was in a state of unrest and civil war. But Hákon proved to be an able king, unifying his country and putting down all opposition by 1240, and then he expanded Norway's reach on the world stage. He had a good relationship with the Pope and with the Holy Roman Emperor at the time, although these two individuals were in constant conflict and opposition with each other.

- King Hákon managed to solidify Norse control of the Orkney and Shetland Islands, as well as the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands, and

the Isle of Man. Near the end of his reign, he brought Iceland under Norse control as well.

- Most scholars agree that medieval Norse society reached its apogee under Hákon IV, and many also agree that with his decision to commission a series of translations out of French and into Old Norse, he was embarking on a program of self-improvement or horizon broadening—not just for himself, but for all Norwegians as well.

- The first securely dated text to be commissioned by King Hákon is a 1226 translation of the Tristan story, based on the version of the story of Sir Tristan written by a man named Thomas of Britain. It was this version that Gottfried von Strassburg adapted as he launched his career as a writer of German Arthuriana.

- After the *Tristan* story, King Hákon seems to have been increasingly eager for more and more Arthurian stories, specifically those of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France. In particular, when he commissioned these translations, he seems to have been interested in exploring models that described the ideal king; thus, it's not surprising that among the first texts translated into Old Norse was a version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Brittanie*, the text that started the fascination with all things Arthurian in the early 12th century.

- But the two cultures under discussion here were so different that it seems almost a certainty that something was going to get lost in translation, and several changes to the texts resulted as they made their way into Old Norse. For the most part, the elements of, for example, the works of Chrétien de Troyes that locate him so definitively as an author interested in matters of chivalry and especially courtly love get pruned away and trimmed down when the story comes into the medieval Scandinavian world.

- Three of Chrétien's Arthurian texts get translated—or adapted—into Old Norse: the story of Yvain, which becomes *Ívens saga*; the

story of Erec and Enide, which becomes *Erex saga*; and the story of Perceval, which becomes *Parcevals saga*.

● This last text underwent some additional revision. Chrétien's story of Perceval is also almost equally about Sir Gawain, but the Norse found the *entrelacement* clumsy and distracting, so they pulled out all the Gawain material, which they dropped into a new text, *Valvens þáttr*. Although the texts have been taken out of verse and put into prose, and although the plotlines and the characters are still identifiably Arthurian, they have been given a little Northern flavor.

● When these texts get adapted into Old Norse, much of what was definitive and significant about them in the French is scrapped. Gone are the authorial comments that Chrétien feels compelled to make throughout his narratives; gone, too, are lengthy descriptive passages, psychological analyses of characters and their motives, and most of anything that has to do with courtly love.

● There are other key changes in the Norse adaptations. In *Ívens saga*, the story of Yvain's adventures is cut down by more than half. In a few places, the Old Norse adapter has worked so hard to trim it down that the plot becomes even more confused and difficult to follow than in the original. But the main action of the original is maintained.

● Likewise, the story of Parceval is less about the mystery and symbolism of the grail and more about the education and training of a knight. And while Chrétien's text is unfinished, the Old Norse *Parceval* is complete, and its climax is focused almost entirely on secular rather than spiritual matters: We are told emphatically that Parceval is to be admired because he is a good husband, king, and exemplary knight.

● In *Erex saga*, not only is the plot drastically cut down, but long passages that relate characters' thoughts, or passages that include excessive description, are excised. Of the three, *Erex saga* is the one that is arguably most Scandinavian in style. While the accounts

of Parceval, Ívan, and Gawain (or Valven) all try to maintain a little bit of the courtly continental sheen of Chrétien's form by keeping the occasional rhyming couplet or stylistic flourish, *Erex saga* dispenses even with that.

- Also, the character of Enide—here called Evida—is both cut and expanded in fascinating ways. While her speeches are mostly excised and her inner thoughts are no longer available to the reader, she seems to have benefited from an early form of feminism. She is presented as a true partner in her marriage to Erec, and the text takes care to emphasize that she is the one who chooses him as her husband and that their marriage is valid because of her consent—not because her father has made some sort of arrangement with a questing knight who is passing through, as in the source.

- Although much of the courtliness was cut out of the works commissioned by King Hákon, enough remained that we can see that what he was trying to do was make his own court a little more civilized and cosmopolitan by introducing some of the themes so prevalent in the popular literature to the south.

The Saga of the Mantle
- In addition to the *Tristan* and the works of Chrétien, he also commissioned some of the lais of Marie de France and some texts that more properly belong to the *fabliau* tradition—so, works that are a little ribald.

- For example, *Möttuls saga*, or *The Saga of the Mantle*, was one of the texts commissioned by King Hákon to be translated out of French and into Old Norse, and as with the other French works, the original verse form is rendered into prose by the anonymous scribe. This tale is one of a group known as the "chastity-testing" tales that show up in the Arthurian tradition—and elsewhere—repeatedly throughout the Middle Ages.

- In *The Saga of the Mantle*, a mantle (or cloak) comes to King Arthur's court that will fit a lady properly only if she's been faithful

to her husband or knightly companion. After an opening that details all the glory of the court, the reader is told of a young knight who arrives with this magical piece of clothing. One by one, the ladies try it on, and it fits each of them differently.

● Pretty soon, everyone is discouraged, but finally they find one lady up in a bedroom, lying down. She's been sick, so she missed all the hullaballoo around the mantle. She is finally persuaded to come down to the hall and give it a shot, and the cloak fits. While at first this may seem like a failure—only one out of all these ladies is faithful—the knight who brought the mysterious mantle in the first place reveals that he has been to every court throughout the land, and Arthur's is the only one at which the mantle fit a lady. Suddenly, what had been a symbol of shame becomes a symbol of honor; all the court rejoices, and all is forgiven.

Suggested Reading

Kalinke, ed., *The Arthur of the North*.

———, *Norse Romance*, *II*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which element of the Arthurian legends do you think was most attractive to a Scandinavian sensibility?

2. What details or plot points in the texts described in this lecture do you find most interesting or surprising?

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Lecture 13

Unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, which was a bona fide best seller with more than 200 manuscript copies surviving, we have only one surviving copy of the poem that is the focus of this lecture: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It exists in a manuscript with three other poems, all of which are clearly written by a single, unique creative genius. And none of these poems is found anywhere else.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

- Many scholars consider *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to be the finest piece of writing ever produced in medieval England. What gives it this status is the author's combination of the lively spirit, intelligence, and artistry of a true poet in combination with the shrewd mathematical mind of an architect or engineer.

- At its most fundamental structural level, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem of 2,530 lines, broken down into 101 alliterative stanzas, each of which concludes with a little rhyming section. On another level, the poem is structured like a set of nesting boxes, and the story contained within it is one of the most entertaining in all of medieval literature.

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In the English tradition, Sir Gawain rivals Sir Lancelot as the greatest Arthurian knight.

- The story begins at Camelot at Christmastime, when the festivities are interrupted by the arrival of a green man in Arthur's hall. The *Gawain* poet takes great delight in slowing down the action of the poem for several stanzas to tell us, in exquisite

detail, everything about this visitor—from his green hair and beard that spreads down to his elbows, to the giant woodsman's ax he carries, to the green armor that covers his body, to the green mane of his horse.

- Because this man is not carrying a sword, he is specifically not a knight, even though we call the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and he is wearing armor. But the bearing of an ax seems a very deliberate move, intended to announce emphatically that he is of the woods, not the court.

- Shockingly, the green man asks if anyone at the court would be so kind as to chop off his head—provided that the knight who accepts the challenge will, in a year and a day, allow the Green Man to do the same to him. Everyone falls silent, but this causes the visitor to berate the court.

- In the face of an insult to the whole court, there's no recourse but for King Arthur himself to step up and take the challenge; he has to risk his own person in order to reestablish the honor of the court. Luckily, Sir Gawain politely asks if Arthur would grant him the honor of undertaking this challenge.

- When Gawain swings the ax, the Green Man's head bounces around the hall, but then the body picks up the head, addresses the court and tells Gawain to come to the Green Chapel on New Year's Day, and then rides off like the Headless Horseman. This portion and its parallel at the end of the poem make up what we call the "beheading contest" motif, and it's a kind of story that we see several examples of in early Celtic tradition. But in the hands of the *Gawain* poet, it becomes something altogether new.

Lord Bertilak's Court

- Throughout this poem, it is clear that Gawain is the most awesome knight ever to have been at Arthur's court. Usually this is Lancelot, but here we are seeing definite English pushback against the tradition that made the French Lancelot such a heroic and renowned

figure. In fact, around this time in England, there are several Gawain stories that start popping up, and this nephew of King Arthur starts to play a more and more prominent role in the story.

- But in no version is he quite so marvelous as he is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Indeed, so famous is he for all things chivalric and courtly that when at long last he arrives at the castle of Lord Bertilak in the middle of the wilderness, all the people of the court are thrilled that the famous Gawain is suddenly among them.

- When Gawain explains his errand to his host, Lord Bertilak is delighted. Lord Bertilak informs Gawain that the Green Chapel is only a mile away and offers Gawain a place to stay until the day of his beheading appointment.

- In fact, Lord Bertilak offers a wager: He will go out hunting every day, and whatever he catches, he will give to Gawain, as long as Gawain promises, in return, to give to Lord Bertilak anything he manages to get while lounging around the castle. We call this part of the poem the "exchange of winnings/temptation" motif. Gawain doesn't question this wager, perhaps because he is so polite with his Arthurian manners.

- For three days in a row, Lord Bertilak rises early, and he and his men engage in a vigorous and occasionally dangerous hunt, killing a deer, a boar, and a fox. Meanwhile, back at the castle, Gawain is the prey in another sort of hunt: Lady Bertilak slips into his room each morning and essentially traps him in bed. When Gawain tries to politely ask her to leave, she accuses him of being rude, saying that he can't possibly be the famous Sir Gawain with the exquisite manners. He cannot offend his host's lady by being rude and telling her to get out, but at the same time, she clearly is offering herself up to Gawain, should he want her.

- Essentially, every day, Gawain has to figure out how to politely get her to leave without either offending her or having sex with her and

thereby bringing shame to himself and his host. The compromise each day is a kiss—a chaste kiss, but a kiss nonetheless. So, when Bertilak returns and gives Gawain that day's take from the hunt, Gawain responds by giving him a kiss on the cheek. On the second day, Gawain gives him two kisses.

- On the third day, the lady says sadly that she wishes she could have a gift from Gawain. He replies with equal courtesy and sadness, saying that he has nothing that is fit for a lady such as she is. Then, she says that maybe she can give him a gift. He says that he could never accept a gift from her. When she offers him a ring, he turns it down. Then, she offers him a green sash that she is wearing. He tries to refuse again, and then the poet relates how she tells him that it has magic powers.

    > For whoever is girded by this green-colored sash
    > And wears it tightly wrapped around his waist,
    > No creature under the heavens may cut him down,
    > And he can't be killed by any earthly cunning.

- Gawain hesitates. Isn't he about to go get his head chopped off? Maybe this magical sash is just what he needs! He accepts it. But won't he just have to turn it over to Bertilak by the terms of their agreement? There's no chance to see if this is in fact what Gawain will do, because the lady immediately makes Gawain promise to keep the gift a secret from her husband.

- So, Gawain is in a largely impossible situation—he's being pressured by the lady to accept a gift and keeps honorably saying no, but then she dangles a magic belt in front of him. And he has honored his bargain with Lord Bertilak every day, but now his promise to the lady to keep this a secret seems to trump that arrangement. Is Gawain behaving dishonorably here, or is he just being practical and doing the best he can with all the different demands being made on him?

- This question becomes the crux of the final section of the poem, when our hero sets off for the Green Chapel, led there by only one of the servants of Lord Bertilak. They are about halfway there when the servant makes an impassioned speech about how great he thinks Gawain is and urges Gawain not to keep his appointment but instead to keep his life and hurry home, promising not to tell his secret. Gawain's response is emphatic. If he did such a thing, he says that the following would be true.

> I'd be a crass-hearted coward and could never be excused.
> No! I'm on my way to the Chapel, whatever chance lets fall;
> And I'll tell your cherished monster whatever I choose,
> Whether Destiny decides to deal me my destruction
> Or to save.
> Your man may have a mighty club
> That makes him an awesome knave,
> But Our Master is good at shaping
> Salvation for the brave!

- This is bravery and defiance in the face of such a grim fate, with such a trust in God—or is it? Does he believe in the power of the magic sash, or does he only hope that maybe there was some truth to what the lady said?

The Encounter at the Green Chapel
- These questions continue to swirl when Gawain finally meets the Green Knight again at this place called the Green Chapel. Gawain has kept his appointment, and he obediently bends forward and bares his neck for the ax blade to fall. The Green Knight raises the ax up and is about to bring it down, but he then sees Gawain's shoulders shrink in fear. Does Gawain believe in the magic of the girdle or not? The flinching suggests that maybe he doesn't, and in that case, what he's doing really is brave, honorable, gallant, and chivalric.

- The Green Knight takes another swing, but this one just passes close to Gawain's outstretched neck, causing him to feel a strong

breeze. But this time, he stays completely still. The Green Knight is impressed, and he tells Gawain that this time he'll strike him with the ax. The Green Knight swings again, just nicking the edge of Gawain's neck—making him bleed, but not causing any real injury.

- Gawain leaps to his feet and starts questioning what's happening. At this point, the Green Knight starts to laugh and reveals that he gave Gawain the first pretend swing just for fun, and in keeping with the agreement they made a year and a day ago in Arthur's court. Then, was the contest over with that first pretend swing of the Green Knight's ax, when Gawain's shoulders shrank away? Could the bargain have been considered fulfilled?

- The Green Knight continues his explanation, revealing that he is, in fact, Lord Bertilak. This means that he sent his wife in to try and seduce Gawain every morning. He admits that Gawain is impressive in his honorable restraint.

- Then, Bertilak/the Green Knight says that the only thing that Gawain is a little at fault in is that he accepted the green sash and kept it from Bertilak, not upholding his end of the "exchange of winnings" bargain. Immediately after that, Bertilak goes on to say that this is totally understandable. Bertilak is almost cheery as he says this.

- But Gawain is upset. He tears the sash off and starts to berate himself, calling himself a false coward, a traitor, and one who is flawed, and he is deeply ashamed of what he has done. Again, Bertilak makes light of it, asking Gawain to come back to Bertilak's castle where he, Gawain, and Lady Bertilak can all laugh about it. Gawain is horrified by the suggestion—he cannot go back and face Bertilak's court, and he must return to Arthur's court and tell everyone there of his great shame as a kind of penance.

- Then, there is another revelation: It wasn't just Bertilak pulling the lady's strings; in fact, the whole beheading contest that had started over a year ago was arranged by Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half sister

and Gawain's aunt. Why did she do it? The answer is because she wanted to scare Queen Guenevere to death. That didn't happen, although Guenevere was quite shocked at what she had witnessed.

- If scaring Guenevere to death had been Morgan's intent and it didn't work, why make Gawain fulfill the requirements of the original bargain? The poem raises many questions about agency, about loyalty and honor and shame, and it's a puzzle that generations of scholars and amateur enthusiasts have been trying to understand.

Suggested Reading

Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English*.

Stone, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why does the poem of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* present so many puzzles and conundrums only to resolve them rather quickly and unsatisfactorily? What kind of social work does this kind of literature perform?

2. Did Gawain behave with honor, as Bertilak and Arthur's court seem to believe, or did he bring shame to his reputation, as he himself seems to think?

The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*
Lecture 14

L ike *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poem you will learn about in this lecture survives in only a single manuscript. But we know that other copies of this poem, which has come to be called the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, existed and circulated in medieval literary circles. The manuscript in which it survives, known as the Thornton Manuscript, dates to the early 15th century, but scholars have concluded that the version of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* that's included in the manuscript probably was composed at the end of the 14th century and may actually date to the year 1400.

The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

- After centuries in which the figure of King Arthur has become a bystander or facilitator or background figure, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a text in which Arthur and his actions are the focus. On more than a few occasions in this text, at a moment when Arthur would typically send a knight off to complete some task, he does it himself.

- In addition to this notable shift, there are some other elements of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* that show up nowhere else in Arthurian literature—or maybe just one other place—and when all these unique elements are combined, the end result is a poem that is like nothing else in the Arthurian tradition.

- In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, there is a complex mix of ideas and traditions. Arthur is a glorious king who conquers the entire world, including Rome, but after he hits the peak of his powers, he seems to degenerate into a ruthless war leader who conquers not for right but because he can. The poet is unabashedly pro-Arthur and his knights—referring to them repeatedly as "our knights" and "our king"—but still seems comfortable offering some scathing criticism for some of their actions.

- In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Mordred gets one of the most sympathetic treatments he receives in any Arthurian text, even though he is, in fact, one of the villains of the piece. In addition, in almost every other Arthurian story, Guenevere is barren, but here she is fertile and bears children with Mordred—but not with Arthur. Furthermore, in this poem, Arthur has two prophetic dreams, and he also has two swords: Excalibur, his war sword, and another named Clarent, which appears nowhere else in the Arthurian tradition and seems to be a sword of peace.

- The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is also a generically unstable poem. Sometimes we seem to be in the expected realm of medieval romance, but at other moments in the poem, the genre tends to veer toward a chronicle or history that recounts Arthur's expedition on the European continent. At still other moments, we have ventured into prophecy, or tragedy, or epic, or even a genre called the *Fürstenspiegel*, or the "mirrors for princes" tradition.

- This poem is alliterative instead of rhyming and, along with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is considered part of the great 14th-century alliterative revival in England. This is a phenomenon in which many writers began to hearken back to the poetic traditions of England before the Norman Conquest of 1066 and write in a deliberately archaic style.

Arthur's First Prophetic Dream
- The main narrative action of the poem opens at Christmastime in Arthur's court, when Arthur and his society are at their height. On New Year's Day, an entourage from Rome enters Arthur's court, and their leader announces to Arthur that he's been sent to demand that Arthur and his knights come to Rome and pay tribute and do homage.

- Arthur is furious—so furious, in fact, that the Roman ambassadors cower in fear, saying that they've never seen such a fierce and angry ruler. They beg him not to take his anger out on them, as they are only messengers. Not only does Arthur not take revenge on them, but he treats them as honored guests. When they are sent back to

Rome, they tell the emperor Lucius Iberius that Arthur is a man to be reckoned with.

- Much of this scene and what follows is adapted straight from Geoffrey of Monmouth in terms of plot, but in terms of description, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* poet has embellished everything. Arthur's prophetic dream of a dragon and bear fighting each other that he has while on his Channel crossing is much more dramatic, and its implications seem much more serious.

- In this dream, Arthur sees a giant bear and a giant dragon fighting each other; to him, it seems that the dragon brings with him a great wave of water that drowns all of Arthur's people. When he wakes, he asks his advisers to explain the dream to him; they tell him that the dragon represents himself and that the wave has not drowned his people— it has only "drenched" them. The bear is either the Roman emperor Lucius or some foe that Arthur will have to fight in single combat.

- Scholarly debate has raged about this scene for some time. Are Arthur's advisers right? Could Arthur be the bear? Is the dream perhaps a foretelling of how Arthur's two natures are fighting against each other? That the poem doesn't give us a definitive answer is part of its greatness; it asks the reader to try to figure it out for himself or herself.

- Arthur marches on Rome, and there are several adventures and skirmishes before we get to the climactic battle, in which Sir Lancelot gives Lucius what at first seems to be his deathblow, but the emperor pops up a few lines later just so Arthur can deliver the real coup de grâce, which he does.

- Arthur and his men ride triumphantly into the city of Rome, and that, one might think, is the end of the poem. Indeed, when Sir Thomas Malory adapted the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* as one of the early sections of his *Morte Darthur*, he chose to end this narrative section with Arthur victorious and returning peaceably back to Britain. But in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, we're only halfway done.

- After the victory over Rome, Arthur decides that he'd like to conquer a few more territories. They come to the town of Metz, and its citizens put up a resistance, shutting themselves inside the city. Arthur and his men ride out to plan their attack, and Arthur comes dangerously close to the walls. One of his knights, Sir Ferrer, urges him to move out of range. Arthur's response is stunningly arrogant and reveals the beginning of a shift in his character. His response to Sir Ferrer is to scoff, affirming that he is perfectly safe, because God will always protect him.

- Eventually, battle is joined, and it is clear that the people of Metz are going to lose. The duchess comes out and, on her knees, makes a plea for mercy. Arthur grants it for most of the citizens, but he says that her husband is still accountable for his resistance, and he and his noblemen will have to pass the rest of his days in prison back in England.

- After enjoying the spoils of victory for a time, Arthur again grows somewhat bored, taking Como, Milan, and all of Tuscany, until eventually the Pope himself surrenders to Arthur. Even this is not enough for Arthur. He continues to make plans for which territories he will conquer next and determines that ultimately he will take back the Holy Land for Christendom, just like a Crusader. But he's not a Crusader; in effect, Arthur has become what Lucius was—a tyrant.

Arthur's Second Prophetic Dream
- One of the most important and original elements of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a second dream that Arthur has. This is his dream of the Wheel of Fortune, the medieval idea that every person is subject to the whims of Fortune, and the only thing consistent about Fortune is change. Those at the top will come down, and those on the bottom will come up.

- Arthur finds this dream most upsetting, and for good reason. He relates to his advisers that he dreamt he was in a wood, and there he encountered a beautiful woman, Dame Fortune. She dressed Arthur in nice clothes, combed his hair, lavished devoted attention

on him—until suddenly she turned the wheel and he found himself upside down, his face in the mud.

● While it's pretty obvious what the message is—that Arthur's fortunes have turned—what's fascinating is who else is on this wheel in Arthur's dream. There are only nine places on Fortune's Wheel, and one of those belongs to Arthur because he is one of what was known as the Nine Worthies.

● The Nine Worthies first show up in the 14th century in a French text known as *Les vœux du paon*, or *The Vows of the Peacock*. In this work, the author, Jacques de Longuyon, holds up nine great figures from history as examples of good kingship or leadership. They are grouped into triads—there are three Jewish worthies from the Old Testament, three pagan worthies, and three Christian worthies. One of the Christian worthies is Arthur.

● After his dream, the feared bad news arrives: Mordred has turned Arthur's people against him, taken Guenevere as his wife, and fathered children with her. When Arthur comes back across the Channel and his forces meet Mordred's in battle, Arthur sees that Mordred is wielding Clarent, the sword Arthur left behind, a suggested emblem of peace that Arthur deliberately chose not to select when confronted with the Roman threat.

The Nine Worthies are great historical figures that are regarded as examples of good kingship or leadership, one of whom is King Arthur.

- In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, it seems that the poet is saying that it was wrong for Rome to challenge Arthur, but what he could have done was send the messengers back across the Channel, and he could have stayed king in his country, only going to war if Rome should attack. Arthur could have chosen Clarent, the sword with which he dubbed so many of his allies as dukes and peers of the realm. Instead, he chose Excalibur, the sword of war, and war begets more war.

- Arthur and Mordred meet on the field of battle, and while Arthur kills Mordred, Arthur also receives his death wound. As in so many other versions of the Arthurian story, Arthur goes to Avalon to be healed, but in this text, there is no healing to be had. Recognizing that his death is upon him, Arthur bequeaths the crown to his cousin Constantine of Cornwall and orders that Mordred's children by Guenevere be hunted down and murdered. Then, he dies.

- There is deep mourning on the part of all the Britons, but there's no hint that Arthur might return—no hope even that *an* Arthur might return some day to save the Britons. Arthur is dead. It is the bleakest conclusion to any Arthurian story that has been considered so far in this course.

Suggested Reading

Göller, ed., *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

Krishna, ed. and trans., *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the relatively sympathetic portrayal of Mordred in this text cause you to rethink his character in other works?

2. What sort of lessons can we take from Arthur's rise and fall in this poem?

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*
Lecture 15

I n this lecture, you will learn about the version of the Arthurian story that has captured and, in some sense, set the legend for all the writers who would come after. *Le Morte Darthur* is the most comprehensive single-author treatment of the legend of King Arthur composed prior to the modern period. Written between 1468 and 1470 in Britain, in English, by a minor nobleman, Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, this massive work draws on multiple sources to both retell and expand the story of King Arthur.

Le Morte Darthur

- Arthur's story had been a medieval best seller since Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Brittanie* appeared in the 12th century, spawning a huge body of literature—especially in French—that dramatized the lives and exploits of Arthur and his knights. Malory, who completed *Le Morte Darthur* while imprisoned for some unknightly behavior, was the first individual medieval author who made a sustained effort to sort through and draw from the various strands of this literary tradition with the goal of synthesizing a cohesive narrative.

- More specifically, he relied on the history, chronicle, and romance traditions—sources in both French and English—that apparently were supplied to him by a friend or patron during his imprisonment. The end result of Malory's labors is a stunning achievement that brings together all the major plot threads of the Arthurian tradition.

- While most of the characters and adventures we encounter here were already well known—they were prominent features of Malory's sources—*Le Morte Darthur* is the only medieval text to attempt to tell the whole of this story in one continuous narrative. It is clear that crafting such a narrative was Malory's goal, as he carefully manipulated, reworked, rewrote, and stitched together

the stories in his sources to create something that was at once both deeply familiar and entirely new in the canon of Arthurian literature.

● At several moments in the text, Malory appeals directly to his readers, asking them to consider aspects of Arthur's story as ethical models or guides for their own behavior, while bemoaning on more than one occasion how poorly he and his contemporaries measure up to the standards of King Arthur's time.

● Malory's text simultaneously mourns chivalry and exalts it, reveling in the exploits of Arthur's knights (especially in battle and at tournament) while also critiquing them, and it looks on the Arthurian past with a nostalgia that is by turns resigned and hopeful.

● Many would hold that Malory's greatest contribution to the Arthurian tradition is primarily that he took a mass of textual material and molded it into a manageable form that would allow readers to start at the beginning, go on to the end, and spend time in the middle enjoying the individual exploits of their favorite knights.

● Indeed, Malory's *Morte Darthur* is the largest, most comprehensive, most ambitious single-author treatment of the Arthurian legend before the modern period, and it is his version that has put the definitive stamp on the legend. Almost every modern retelling of the story of King Arthur—including Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and movies like *Excalibur*—starts with Malory as a base from which to work.

The Pentecostal Oath

● The Arthurian legend's popularity arguably stems in no small part from Arthur being considered in many ways a Christ-type figure. He arrives to save his people in their darkest hour, and under his rule, a new civilization is born. When he dies, his death is not actually final in most versions; it is foretold that he will come again to save his people in their hour of need. He is "*rex quondam, rexque futurus*," the "once and future king."

- All of these elements were present in the literature before Malory began composing his text, but when he put all the pieces together, he made some highly significant and original contributions, the most important of which is called the Pentecostal Oath.

- After Arthur has established his Order of the Round Table and married Guenevere and his community has tested themselves in a few adventures, Malory adds something to the story that has no known source and quite clearly seems to be his original invention and that also expresses his personal views on matters chivalric.

- When the knights swear this oath, Malory tells us that Arthur "established" his knights. In other words, as their king, he provides for them by giving them titles and lands. This is a necessary component of the ruler-subject relationship, and one that had been more frequently seen in the breach than in the observance in Malory's own day.

- After establishing his knights, as any good 15th-century monarch should, Malory's Arthur goes on to detail what they should and should not do in order to remain in good standing as knights of the Round Table. First, there's "no outrage or murder." The knights should also "flee treason"—something that almost no one among the nobility of England had bothered to do between about 1453 and 1471.

- After detailing this list of what knights should not do, Malory adds another important rule: Knights should grant mercy to those who ask for it. Another thing knights should do is help women. But this positive view of a merciful, courtly knight is then tempered by Malory's admonition "Never to enforce them, upon pain of death." In other words, don't rape women.

- What's particularly fascinating about this clause is that when William Caxton, the first person to print Malory's text, set the type for *Le Morte Darthur* for his printing press 15 years later, in 1485, he deliberately omitted this comment.

- Malory was writing his text for a noble, courtly audience, and he expected his readers to be made up of members of the knightly class, to whom this would not be a cause for raised eyebrows. By contrast, Caxton was attempting to market tales of chivalrous deeds to a non-noble bourgeois class who were reading them, at least in part, to try to figure out how to act like nobles.

- While Caxton wanted to entertain, make a profit, and educate, what Malory was doing with the creation of the Pentecostal Oath was to offer up a social critique, a corrective for the seemingly very dark, corrupt, chaotic age in which he found himself.

Malory's Retelling of the Story of King Arthur

- When Malory sets out to retell the story of King Arthur and inserts the Pentecostal Oath, his original creation, he is offering an explicit guide for noble behavior, and as he moves through his massive text, he's testing this oath, seeing if it could, indeed, function as a useful guide in a variety of different situations.

- Malory discovers that this oath doesn't work as a corrective for all the social ills of the day. For one thing, there's a very important element of medieval life that is not addressed in the oath: God. And religion is kind of a big deal in the medieval world.

- Malory was certainly familiar with the Crusades, but he was fundamentally a soldier, a man who knew about the realities of a life lived mostly on the battlefield. So, it makes sense that Malory's guide—at least as he conceives of it in the Pentecostal Oath at the beginning of *Le Morte Darthur*—deals in practical, day-to-day details more than it does lofty abstractions. But once he had established this guide, Malory sought to test it, to stretch its possibilities, something made plain by the way he chose to structure his text.

- For the start of his story, Malory used a 13th-century French manuscript—the *Merlin* branch of the Prose *Lancelot*—as a base text. When it came time to tell the story of how Arthur had

conquered Rome, though, he turned to an English poem, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

- Moving on to the exploits of the greatest knight, Sir Lancelot, he borrowed heavily from the *Lancelot* proper of the 13th-century French Prose *Lancelot*. He next moved on to the story of Arthur's nephew Sir Gareth in a section of the *Morte Darthur* for which a source has never been conclusively identified, although a few scholars think this must have been either an English source or completely Malory's own invention. The massive middle portion of *Le Morte Darthur*—almost a third of the text—comes from another French text, the Prose *Tristan*.

- Then it came time to tell the story of the quest for the Holy Grail. We know that Malory had a version of the Grail Quest that was very similar in tone to what had come before—stories of knights and ladies and adventures that were preoccupied with matters of courtliness and chivalry and not too terribly concerned with religion. The *Tristan*, which Malory possessed, had a version of the Grail Quest that fit the bill. But he deliberately chose as his source for this adventure a French text known as *La queste del Saint Graal*, which is very different in tone from a typical medieval romance narrative.

- *La queste del Saint Graal* is more an allegory than it is a story of knightly adventure; the forests of adventure on this quest are not peopled with damsels in distress, as most of the rest of the text is, but with hermits who have some convenient prophecy to offer, have some biblical tale to relate, and are willing to hear your confession and absolve you.

- Malory made this choice of source text deliberately. He had set out this code of conduct, had deployed it on a series of adventures, and now wanted to test how it would function in the landscape of theology and allegory. It failed miserably.

- When Lancelot sees two groups of knights fighting against each other, one side black and one side white, he notes that the white side is triumphing over the black. He opts to help the weaker party, as he puts it, for "increasing of my chivalry." Later, one of the ubiquitous hermits explains that what he had seen was actually a representation of the forces of Christ against the forces of Satan; in trying to be a good knight, Lancelot had acted as a bad Christian.

- The only knight to truly succeed on the Grail Quest is the saintly Sir Galahad, who is so perfect and reads the landscape so effortlessly that he's actually rather boring, and we're kind of glad when he gets to see the mystery of the Grail and then ascends immediately to heaven.

- Malory's code of conduct has failed the test of faith, but what is interesting is that Sir Thomas seems, after the Grail Quest, to recognize that his chivalric code is not completely working as a means of maintaining social order but that it is still admirable in its aims.

- Even though Arthur's realm is beset by one trouble after another, Malory still seems to regard knightly values as decent goals for which to strive. Indeed, he seems to suggest that even though these rules aren't saving Arthur's kingdom, if more people in the England of his day had tried to adhere to them, they might not be in such a mess.

- In the end, in Malory's text, those who have tried their best to adhere to the code of knightly conduct get their reward. When Lancelot dies, his fellow knights are given a dream of him ascending through the gates of heaven, and Malory tells us that his corpse emits a sweet smell—a detail that evokes one of the tests for sainthood.

- Malory's great gift to posterity is that he holds a mirror up to his own age—and indeed his own profession—and shows how that time is passing away, but there is much about it that is still to be valued.

- Malory clearly seems to understand himself as writing for a reading audience composed of nobles who would both recognize the chivalric ideals of the Arthurian world and sympathize with his plight as a knight-prisoner. William Caxton, who printed *Le Morte Darthur* in 1485, recognized that the audience to which he wanted to market his text included not only the aristocracy Malory had imagined but also the upwardly mobile merchant class.

Suggested Reading

Armstrong, *Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur*.

Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*.

Field, ed., *Sir Thomas Malory*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Malory's text transform the Arthurian legend? What seems to be his most important contribution to the legend?

2. If Malory had been writing a century earlier—during the time of the Hundred Years' War, instead of the Wars of the Roses—how might his approach have been different?

Enriching the Legend—Tristan and Isolde
Lecture 16

T he story of Tristan, in its earliest forms, was not strictly Arthurian. At its inception, it was its own story, and the Arthurian legend in the Middle Ages—acting like a textual vacuum cleaner or magnet—sucked it up and attached it to itself, in an attempt to tell its own primary story better. Instead of exploring the legend in terms of chronology, or language and culture, this lecture will examine this narrative thread from its beginnings to its incarnation in the modern period.

The Story of Tristan

- In the story of Tristan, our hero is usually either Welsh or Cornish, and may have originally been Irish or Pictish, and he's a nephew of King Mark, who is usually imagined as King of Cornwall. Mark's sister is usually described as Tristan's mother, although in some sources it is Tristan's father who is Mark's brother.

- In most accounts, Tristan's mother either goes mad or dies on the occasion of his birth, which is why he is given the name "Tristan," which has as its root the French word "*triste*," meaning "sad." It's possible that this detail was a later addition to the legend; his name was probably originally something like "Drustan," which is attested in Celtic sources in the north and west of Britain.

- In the earliest versions of the legend, Tristan arrives at the court of his uncle and conceals his identity—a clear nod to the "Fair Unknown" motif—while he impresses everyone with his harping and hunting skills. Then, a chance to prove himself as warrior emerges. It turns out that the kingdom of his uncle—sometimes called Cornwall, sometimes called Lyonesse—owes tribute to Ireland and is behind on payment. The only way to settle this is for a representative of Ireland and a representative of Lyonesse to fight in single combat.

- Morholt, the son of the King of Ireland—or, sometimes, he's the king's brother—stands ready to do battle. Mark is in despair, because he doesn't seem to have attracted to him the kind of warriors that such a king might expect to have in his retinue, and there are no likely candidates hanging around court. Tristan steps up and accepts the challenge.

- During the fight, Tristan slays Marholt, but Tristan is seriously wounded. Although he is honored for having achieved victory, he can't enjoy any of those honors because his wounds refuse to heal. Finally, he is told that to seek healing he must go into the land that produced the weapon that wounded him. Once there, he is cured by Marholt's sister—or, depending on the version, his niece—the princess Isolde. In some versions of the tale, this is where their love begins to blossom, but in others, Tristan is only there on a practical mission to get healed.

- There's some difficulty when Isolde notices that Tristan's sword has a big chunk missing from it and that the empty space in his blade looks remarkably like the piece of metal she removed from the body of her brother. In fact, she has saved that piece of metal, and she runs off to get it. When she returns, she finds that it fits perfectly into the blade of Tristan's sword.

- Several people are upset by this, no one more than Isolde and her father, King Anguish. But after an initial explosion of grief and anger, they both recognize that the battle Tristan fought was a just one, and he fought nobly, and since his time in Ireland, he's done some really helpful and noble stuff, such as slaying a dragon that was ravaging the land. In the end, they forgive him, and he sets off for home.

- When he returns to Cornwall, or Lyonesse, and Mark starts to lament that he is in need of a bride, Tristan announces the perfect candidate: Isolde. In some versions, it is Mark who comes up with this idea, which Tristan is not too crazy about because he's already in love with Isolde, but in others, Tristan is not in love with her yet,

so he thinks this would be a good idea. The marriage is arranged, and then Tristan is sent to escort the bride-to-be back to Britain for her nuptials.

- On board the ship, Tristan and Isolde drink what they think is wine but is actually a love potion that was intended to be drunk by Isolde and Mark on their wedding night. Because Isolde and Tristan have drunk the potion together, they are now hopelessly in love, but Isolde still must carry out her obligation to marry Mark, and Tristan must carry out his obligation to serve his uncle by delivering Isolde to him for the marriage.

- But there's a problem: Isolde is now no longer a virgin, something Mark is going to notice on their wedding night. The problem is solved when Isolde's lady-in-waiting, Brangwain, volunteers to take Isolde's place in the marriage bed. Protesting an appropriate

Like the Arthurian legend, the love story of Tristan and Isolde developed its own distinct tradition over time.

and decorous amount of modesty, Isolde asks that there be no torches in the bedroom, and in the dark, Mark cannot tell who is in bed with him. The ruse is a success—except for the fact that Isolde and Mark are now married, and Isolde will have to play the role of the dutiful and obedient wife from this point on.

- After this rather consistent backstory, the tales of Tristan and Isolde that follow this point in the narrative are varied, and pretty much all of them have to do with how the lovers manage to keep their love alive, evade the suspicions of Mark—who reveals that he is undeserving of such a woman as Isolde—and ultimately end in tragedy.

- The ever-faithful Brangwain acts as a go-between here, bringing messages from one to the other and telling lies whenever necessary. For a time, Tristan tries to forget his love for Isolde, even traveling all the way to Brittany, where he marries another woman named Isolde—Isolde of the White Hands. The distraction doesn't work, however, and the marriage is never consummated, even after several years, which leaves Isolde of the White Hands a bit miffed.

- The plot device of the greatest knight of the realm being in love with the married queen should sound familiar. In fact, many of the accounts of Lancelot's adventures seem to have been based on stories of Tristan, and later stories of Tristan are based on the adventures of Lancelot. The similarities are impossible not to notice, although Malory and other writers work hard to distinguish Tristan from Lancelot once it's clear that the Arthurian tradition has decided that Tristan and his adventures should be a part of it.

Courtly versus Common Traditions

- The figure of the hero Tristan (or Drustan) is quite old and may have been in existence as a story that was told orally as early as the first stories of Arthur began to circulate. Indeed, Tristan's association with Cornwall and his very old pedigree are suggestively affirmed by the so-called Tristan Stone, the engraving on which is dated at least to the 6th century and which is found on the road leading to

the town of Fowey in Cornwall. The stone appears to be a grave marker. On one side it has a cross inscribed on it, and on the other is carved "*Drvstanvs hic iacet/Cvnomori filivs*," or "Drustan lies here, the son of Cunomorus."

- Tristan's story appears to have circulated orally both in Britain and in Brittany, just like Arthur's did, and he finally makes his first appearance in writing in a text by an Irish monk living in the north of Britain in a manuscript dating to the early 8th century.

- After the Tristan story gets written down, it starts to devolve into two distinct traditions in the High and Late Middle Ages. In the 12th century, the Tristan story grabs the imaginations of writers in much the same way that the legend of Arthur had, and it starts to develop its own distinct tradition.

- The Tristan story splinters into two distinct literary genres. One is called the "courtly" and is very concerned with courtly love and spends long passages musing over the emotional and psychological states of the characters. The other strand of the Tristan legend is called the "common" or "primitive" tradition. The texts belonging to this tradition are mostly concerned with action, particularly battles and adventures that ask the hero to risk life and limb.

- One of the texts in the common tradition is a text written in the late 12th century by a man who identifies himself as Béroul. In this text, as in so many others, the characters of Tristan and Isolde are presented sympathetically, even though technically they are sinners.

- At almost the same time that the "common" Tristan comes into literary existence, the "courtly" Tristan was making its debut in a poem composed by the Anglo-Norman writer Thomas d'Angleterre, or Thomas of Britain. His text is much more emphatic than Béroul's about how the desire of Tristan and Isolde to be reconciled with King Mark is not so much about personal preservation as it is about being acceptable to and accepted in their society.

Tristan's Story throughout the Ages

- Although King Arthur started making appearances in the Tristan story as early as the 12th century, it's not until the middle of the 13th century and the composition of the text we know as the French Prose *Tristan* that Sir Tristan is finally definitively co-opted by the burgeoning Arthurian tradition and becomes a knight of the Round Table.

- Of all the Tristan versions, this quickly became the most popular, and it was translated and reworked far beyond France and achieved some fame and popularity on the Iberian Peninsula in what is today Spain and Portugal. It even made it all the way to Italy, where it inspired the 14th-century text called *La tavola ritonda*—or *The Round Table*—and we find versions of it in traditions as diverse as the Danish and the Russian.

- If it seems somewhat ironic that the story of the British King Arthur would get its fullest and most interesting treatment at the hands of French writers in the 12th and 13th centuries, then it's similarly ironic that the wildly popular legend of Arthur and his knights would have its strongest initial showing in all these diverse locales in a version of the story that wasn't even about Arthur in the first place.

- The Tristan story has remained popular and important down to the modern day. In German, in particular, it has held a place in the cultural imagination, arguably culminating in terms of enactment in Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865.

- In a somewhat different fashion, the Tristan story inspired Modern English writers, such as Matthew Arnold, Algernon Swinburne, and especially Alfred, Lord Tennyson. It was not just literary artists who found potent material to work with in this version of the story, but artists such as Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Morris rendered moments in the Tristan story and other Arthurian events in paintings and other media.

- In the 20th century, several movies were made on the Tristan theme, but in the 21st, it does not seem to have attracted as much cinematic interest as more traditional Arthurian subjects. Still, it remains a vital and vibrant part of the Arthurian tradition—and with the legend of King Arthur, we see repeatedly that everything old will be new again.

Suggested Reading

Eisner, *The Tristan Legend*.

Grimbert, ed., *Tristan and Isolde*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is it about the Tristan legend in particular that made it so popular and interesting to so many medieval writers and readers?

2. How does the adulterous relationship of Tristan and Isolde compare to that of Lancelot and Guenevere? Why do you think they get such different treatment?

The Holy Grail from Chrétien to Dan Brown
Lecture 17

T he Holy Grail has fired the imagination of writers from the medieval world to the modern one and has taken various forms. For Chrétien de Troyes, the grail is a fancy serving dish; for Wolfram von Eschenbach, it's a magical stone; for Robert de Boron, it's the cup that Christ drank from at the Last Supper; for the comedy troupe Monty Python, it's a cartoon sketch that no one ever finds; and for Dan Brown, it's first a person and then a bloodline that leads to the Merovingian kings of France. In this lecture, you will learn about the symbol that is most fraught and imbued with meaning in Arthurian literature.

The Beginning of the Grail Story

- Chrétien de Troyes's work introduces the word "grail" into the Arthurian lexicon in 1191. The ultimate source of the word "grail" is the Latin *gradale*, which means something like "in stages." "*Gradus*" means "stages or steps"; this word in turn may come ultimately from the Latin *crater*, which is a borrowing from the Greek *krater*, which means a special bowl in which wine and water are mixed together. In Latin, *gradalis* means "cup or platter" and over time came to refer to a serving dish that was brought to the table at various times to serve the next course on the menu.

- By the time Chrétien encounters it, "grail" just means "serving dish." And in Chrétien's text, that's what it is, although it is a particularly fancy, bejeweled one, and we find it in a setting that is rife with elements of the magical and supernatural. Chrétien might be reaching back to early Celtic, pre-Christian traditions and is alluding to the mythical cauldron of plenty, which is always filled with whatever food a person most desires.

- Although Chrétien's text has a clear Christian perspective, he is most likely getting much of his source material from Breton storytellers, and those Bretons are Celts who fled from Britain to the European

continent in the face of the Anglo-Saxon invasion in the 5th century. Although they settled in Brittany, which is today a part of France, culturally they are much more Welsh than they are French.

- Chrétien is the first to connect the grail to the Arthurian legend, but when the procession passes through the hall of the Fisher King, he says only that there is *un grail*, or "a grail," meaning that it had become a common enough term for a platter at this point, and there wasn't yet any conception of a singular, unique Holy Grail.

- Chrétien's *Perceval* or *The Story of the Grail* remained unfinished, something that many continuators sought to rectify by finishing his story for him. One of these was the 13th-century writer Robert de Boron, who was intrigued by the serving vessel in Chrétien's text and decided to do something more with it. Specifically, he stated unequivocally that the Grail was the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper and also the cup that Joseph of Arimathea used to catch Christ's blood when he was on the cross.

- Robert's innovation is the most important in the long tradition of the Grail in the Arthurian literature. What's key in Robert's work is that the main emphasis is taken off the characters and their adventures and is redirected onto the object of the Grail itself. When he does this, the tone and approach also shift; his story has romance elements in it, but it reads much more like a quite different medieval genre, the saint's life.

- When it comes to sources, Robert is borrowing quite a bit from the Apocrypha, and his desire to have his version of the Grail story considered superior can be seen even in the way he titles it: In French, his version is *L'estoire dou Graal*, or *The History of the Grail*, while Chrétien's text is *Li contes del Graal*, or *The Story of the Grail*. In other words, one text is just a story or a tale, while the other is the true, historical account of all things Grail.

- Robert's stroke of genius is the way he connects the Round Table to the Grail. His text is suffused with Trinitarian symbology, so

there is a repeating theme of threes. He extends this theme to tables: There was the table of the Last Supper, and then the table at which Joseph of Arimathea and his followers sat after the death of Christ, and now there is the Round Table of Arthur's court.

- In Robert's account, Merlin tells Arthur that the Grail is the entire reason for the founding of the Round Table, and once it's established, one seat must be left vacant, and this seat—later called the Siege Perilous—can be filled only by a holy knight who is destined to achieve the Grail. Furthermore, none of Arthur's great ambitions—such as conquering Rome—can ever come to pass until his knights have participated in the quest for the Grail.

- The character of the Fisher King is a part of the Grail legend very early on and may represent a very ancient narrative plotline that originally had nothing to do with Grails or Christianity but that harks back to pre-Christian Celtic belief in the unity of the land and its ruler—when one is injured or wasting away, so is the other.

- In Robert's version of the story, Perceval is still the main Grail knight, but all the other knights of Arthur's realm head out in pursuit of this quest. Robert follows Chrétien closely in having Perceval, once he's at the Grail Castle, fail to ask the all-important question out of a fear of seeming impolite.

- Where Chrétien's text trailed off, however, Robert finishes his. Perceval wanders around for seven years before he finds his way to a hermit who hears his confession. He then encounters Merlin, who directs him back to the Grail Castle, and there he sees the procession again. This time, however, he is ready. "'Sire, by the faith you owe me and all men, tell me the purpose of these things I see.' And as soon as he had said this, he looked up and saw that the Fisher King was utterly changed, cured of his sickness."

- With this, the Fisher King departs the world and leaves Perceval behind as the keeper of the Grail. Before he leaves, the Fisher King tells Perceval the words Jesus spoke just before his death, which

were related to the Fisher King by Joseph of Arimathea. Alas, what those words are, we the readers are not allowed to discover.

- The story then concludes with the usual Arthurian dénouement—Arthur's battle on the European continent, the betrayal by Mordred back home, the disintegration of the Arthurian community—but, interestingly, the final detail is that Merlin retires to a cave where he tells his master Blaise what he has learned of the Grail, and he waits—but for what, it is unclear.

The Evolution of the Grail Story
- In the decades after its appearance, Robert's text would become the most definitively influential of Grail stories, but there are other traditions that are based initially on Chrétien only, and these take some weird turns. For example, the Grail in the story of "Peredur" in the Welsh collection of stories known as the *Mabinogion* is a serving vessel in which the head of a man floats in a pool of blood.

- But Robert de Boron's text is the seminal moment in the development of the Grail narrative, and almost the second he's done writing, other people seek to tell their own version of the story. One of these is in the Old French text known as the *Perlesvaus*, which is one of the most complex Arthurian texts. While it follows Robert and Chrétien in some respects, it is so strange in others that it's sometimes called "the least canonical Arthurian text."

- Whoever the anonymous writer of this text was, he seems particularly taken by the Christological significance of the Grail, and he focuses on that while also telling much of the Arthurian legend as a kind of allegory or symbol of the war between the Old Law of the Old Testament and that brought by Christ in the New Testament. In this respect, it is also very anti-Semitic—something not at all typical of Arthurian literature.

- By the time we get to the French Vulgate cycle, the Grail has solidified its form and is definitely a chalice. It is also an object of desire, and it makes an appearance at Arthur's court, where it flies

around the chamber kind of like a trapped bat, and every man there suddenly finds that he is being fed with the food he loves most in the world, and, suddenly, when the knights look around at their fellows, each individual appears fairer and nobler than they ever have before.

- But it is this version of the text—even more than that of Robert de Boron—that will become the most important, because it is this version that Sir Thomas Malory will incorporate into his massive *Morte Darthur*, which is the most important Arthurian text from the end of the Middle Ages and the one that most modern versions of the legend use as a base.

- The major change here involves the main character. Perceval plays a role, and he will once again be the most successful Grail Quest knight, but the title that we give this text identifies who the real protagonist is. Today, we call this massive work the Lancelot-Grail, and in its pages, we follow various knights while they're searching for the Grail, but we're interested in none of them so much as we are Sir Lancelot, who arguably tries harder than anyone else and also—in part for that very reason—fails dismally.

- In the Vulgate version of the Grail cycle, Galahad, Perceval, and Bors have to leave England on a magic ship and sail all the way to the Middle Eastern city of Sarras, which is somewhere near Jerusalem, we are told. Once they arrive, they have some adventures involving conversion of the people there, spend some time in prison, and then eventually become rulers in that far-off land. Finally, the Grail is revealed, but it's Galahad alone who gets to see it, and once he does, both he and the Grail are taken up to heaven.

Modern Grail Fascination
- In terms of modern fascination with finding the Grail, the Indiana Jones movie franchise famously sent that intrepid archaeologist in pursuit of the Grail. Before that, the Grail had become such a standard component of the Arthurian legend that it had to show up in any serious treatment of the legend after the Middle Ages.

- In the 20th century, John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance* argued that the Grail was a symbol that predated all religions. Several movies from the earliest decade of that century onward made the Grail a central object of fascination. The Monty Python comedy troupe famously lampooned this fascination in their movie. John Boorman's *Excalibur* sets the Grail Quest within a context of large mythic gestures and a memorable score featuring the *Carmina Burana*. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the mystery of the Grail is revealed to be a person—in fact, a descendent of Jesus Christ.

- The Grail's ability to continue to fascinate lies in its flexible symbolism. It can become a chalice, a stone, a person, or an idea. It's convenient, malleable, and part of one of the most entertaining, engaging, and popular legendary traditions the world has ever known.

- The Grail is tantalizing, because it is a thing that must be sought, and it is exclusive, because part of its nature is that only those who are most fit may find it, or even be in its presence. In other words, it has the right combination of magic, mystery, and possibility to keep people writing about it for hundreds of years.

Suggested Reading

Barber, *The Holy Grail*.

Mahoney, ed., *The Grail*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is it about the Grail that has made it an object of fascination for so many centuries?

2. Which Grail tradition—medieval or modern—do you find most interesting or intriguing? Why?

Arthuriana in Medieval Art

Lecture 18

This lecture will examine some highlights of the medieval Arthurian artistic tradition. We can be grateful for all the medieval Arthurian works of art that have survived, and we can mourn those we know we've lost—and mourn still more works of art representing Arthurian scenes that once existed and are now gone and about which we might never know a thing. As is the case with so much art from the medieval period, unless these representations were executed in stone, very little survives. But, at the very least, what seems clear is that the legend of Arthur and his knights was popular far beyond the realm of the purely literary.

Italian Arthurian Art

- There is not much Italian Arthurian literature, but it is in Italy that we find an incredibly early representation of the famous abduction of Guenevere—in the famous Modena Archivolt. The cathedral of Modena in northwest Italy began construction in 1099. Over the north portal, there is a carving done in high relief showing what appears to be a scene in which a noblewoman is being held captive in a stone castle that is being charged by three knights.

- Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, the text that caused the explosion in Arthurian interest across Europe, was completed around 1136, but the Modena Archivolt has been dated to as early as 1100, although some scholars think that the dating should be closer to 1120 or even 1140.

- Even if the later dates are right, this means that stories about Arthur had to have been circulating orally for quite some time. This suggests that the Arthurian legend, in a variety of forms, was hugely popular long before Geoffrey's text appeared; in fact, this might explain why Geoffrey's text was so popular: There was an audience who loved Arthurian stories and were ravenous for more.

- In Otranto, Italy, there is a Norman cathedral with gorgeous mosaic tiles depicting a variety of different scenes. In the middle of the 12th century, the archbishop commissioned a priest named Pantaleone to beautify the floor of the church with a series of mosaics made of marble and stones in a riot of colors. The scenes Pantaleone executed depict plenty of things you would expect in a church, including Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. In fact, most scholars think that Pantaleone was carefully copying from standard illuminated manuscripts, because his images are so faithful when compared to the sort of representations we usually see.

- But there's one image that, as far as we can tell, is Pantaleone's own unique contribution to the floor. Right between the image representing the expulsion from Paradise and the Cain and Abel story is a figure wearing a crown, holding a scepter, and riding an animal that looks like a cross between a goat and a unicorn. There is, helpfully, a label in inlaid stone that says *"Rex Arturus"*—King Arthur. But which Arthurian scene this is meant to depict is not at all clear.

Spanish Arthurian Art

- There is a scene from the story of Tristan in Spain, at the famed burial place of Saint James, the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. This church was—and still is—an important pilgrimage site. In the Middle Ages, people went on pilgrimages for all kinds of reasons: to seek healing for an illness, as penance to atone for sins, to give thanks for blessings received, out of a desire to express their deep faith, and also as a kind of social event.

- Alongside Jerusalem and Rome, Santiago de Compostela was among the top three pilgrimage sites in the medieval world. And on the north side of the church at the Portada de Platerías, there is a 12th-century scene that is unmistakably from the story of Tristan.

- In that legend, Tristan fights Morholt of Ireland, and when he gives Morholt a fatal wound, a piece of Tristan's sword breaks off. Morholt flees back to Ireland, where he dies, but Isolde, princess

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In the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, there is a 12th-century scene from the story of Tristan.

of Ireland, keeps the piece of sword that she finds in her kinsman's wound. Although Tristan has won the battle, Morholt inflicted a wound on that refuses to close, and Tristan finally learns that in order to be healed, he must go to the land whence came the weapon that delivered the poisonous blow.

●   This is what we see carved on the Portada de Platerías; it shows a man lying in a boat that has no sail or oars. This image is common enough in medieval romance and even has a name: the rudderless boat. Medieval romances—not just Arthurian ones—are full of episodes in which knights or damsels find themselves at the mercy of the Fates, drifting in a rudderless boat that may take them to some new adventure, or deliver them from danger, or reunite them with long-lost family members.

- In this case, we know it is Tristan lying in this boat, because the figure of the hero is holding up a sword that is carefully, deliberately depicted with a significant notch in the blade. What is this scene doing at such a holy religious site, and how did these people in Spain in the 12th century know the Tristan story?

- Religious locations would depict scenes from popular romance stories as a way of reaching and interesting the general population, and a clever churchman could engage the people's attention by telling the story of Tristan, or of Arthur, and then explaining how elements of that story could be considered similar to biblical stories or the Gospels.

- Stories about Arthur, Tristan, and other figures were certainly circulating orally and were very popular long before Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *History of the Kings of Britain*. Medieval France, particularly Brittany and the south of France, had a long tradition of traveling minstrels, or *jongleurs*. Most likely it was these itinerant storytellers who brought the legend south.

Arthurian Fiber Art
- Most artistic representations of Arthur were not to be found in houses of worship but were most frequently found in works of art privately commissioned by members of the nobility, including servings dishes, chalices, jewelry, decorative boxes, and tapestries.

- In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Arthur has a dream involving Dame Fortune and her wheel. In that dream, he sees that there are nine seats on the Wheel of Fortune, and one of them is reserved for him. In an elegant pattern of threes, we learn also that these seats belong to the so-called Nine Worthies: three from the Old Testament tradition, three from the Classical world, and three from the Christian tradition. The symmetry and balance of this idea proved inspirational to many artists, and we find the Nine Worthies appearing in all kinds of medieval artistic media.

- One of the most famous of these is a piece called the Cloisters Tapestry. We call the tapestry this because it is on display today in the Cloisters museum in New York, but it was originally woven at the request of the very wealthy Duc de Berry in the late 14th or early 15th century. Originally, it comprised three separate tapestries—each 21 by 16 feet—but today only two of the three are on display in the museum. These larger pieces were assembled from 95 smaller fragments, and they are breathtaking.

- Of particular interest is the way in which the background surrounding Arthur and the other Worthies is full of details of Gothic sculpture and architecture, and the gorgeous colors in the tapestry are clearly meant to evoke the beauty of stained glass windows. So many of these tapestries—commissioned in the Netherlands for a Frenchman—were lost during the years leading up to and immediately after the French Revolution.

- But we can be grateful that we have the things that have survived, that someone recognized them for what they were and rescued them from inevitable destruction. Such is the case with the Nine Worthies tapestry, whose topic not only inspired those who worked in the fiber arts but also proved a popular subject for those working in more durable media, such as wood and stone.

Arthurian Stone and Wood Art
- Although wood seems to have been a medium preferred over stone for depicting Arthurian subjects, there is a life-size stone sculpture—which is also painted—showing King Arthur as one of the Nine Worthies in the Hall of the Hanseatic League in the Rathaus in Cologne, Germany.

- Another rare Arthurian image in stone is found in the Church of Saint-Pierre in Caen, France. On the capital of a pillar there, there is carved a representation of Sir Lancelot crossing the sword bridge as in Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight of the Cart*. This same scene is represented on one side of an ivory box known as the Casket with Scenes from Romance, which is currently held in

the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This French casket made of ivory dates to roughly the early 14th century and includes several Arthurian scenes.

- Some of the misericords at Wells Cathedral, which is just a few miles from Glastonbury, depict Arthurian scenes. A misericord is a hinged wooden seat that one finds in medieval cathedrals. When one stands up, the seat comes up as well, and then it becomes like a shelf, and a person can lean on it for support if a church service should go long. The underside of the seat would often be carved with a popular image or scene, so when the chair seat flipped up, a piece of art suddenly became visible.

- In Wells Cathedral, the misericord with a carving of Yvain having his horse cut in two by a descending portcullis is also depicted in misericords in the cathedrals of Chester, Lincoln, Boston, Entville, and New College, Oxford.

- Chester and Lincoln also have misericords depicting what is by far the most popular Arthurian scene represented in medieval objets d'art: the "Tryst Beneath the Tree," from the story of Tristan and Isolde. In just one image, it captures all the important details of the Tristan-Isolde–King Mark triangle. Indeed, this same scene is also on the Casket with Scenes from Romance.

- In the late 13th century, when interest in the Arthurian legend was finally beginning to run quite high again in England after a long period in which the French had seemingly taken over, a massive wooden table was commissioned and built, probably as part of the celebration of a tournament that was being held in honor of the wedding of one of King Edward I's daughters. Rather than being a table at which people might have sat, it seems, quite early on, to have been regarded as a purely artistic rather than practical object, and it has been hanging in Winchester since probably the middle of the 1300s.

- For centuries, it was considered to be the Round Table of King Arthur, but in the 1970s, dating by means of carbon and tree-ring analysis established that the table dated from only the late 13th century, and it could hardly have sat the legendary 150 knights of the Round Table—probably 24 people could sit around it comfortably.

Suggested Reading

Loomis and Loomis, *Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art*.

Whitaker, *The Legend of King Arthur in Art*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do any of the artistic depictions of Arthur and his knights surprise you, or do they seem to fit logically with what we know of the development of the legend so far?

2. Which artistic representation of Arthur seems most interesting or unusual, especially compared to what we know of him from the literary tradition?

Spenser, Milton, and the Renaissance Arthur
Lecture 19

The legend of King Arthur reached its apogee in the period we call the Middle Ages. In Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia, and beyond, stories of Arthur and his knights were amazingly popular, especially starting in the 12th century. As we head into the period we call the Renaissance, or early modern period—which starts roughly around 1500 in most places, although arguably a little earlier in Italy—the Arthurian legend makes a brief final explosion in the popular imagination before interest in it begins to dwindle significantly.

Edmund Spenser and John Milton

- While stories of Arthur and his knights would never disappear from the literary or popular traditions, they were less prominent in the Renaissance. After four centuries of intensely creative output, perhaps writers and artists needed to pause and rest, carefully managing their energy to get ready for the next wave of Arthuriana that was just over the horizon.

- Edmund Spenser, who composed his unfinished epic *The Faerie Queene* during the second half of the 16th century, is a great indicator of how the Arthurian legend remained a subject of interest while also pointing out its relative decline in popularity because Spenser was a writer who was deeply concerned with the past.

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Edmund Spenser (1552/1553–1599) was an English poet whose epic *The Faerie Queene* was written in what is now referred to as the Spenserian stanza.

- Indeed, he was one of the first Renaissance writers to look back at the period we call the Middle Ages with a contradictory mixture of nostalgia for this period of human innocence and fascination with certain medieval practices that might be considered barbaric. Whenever possible, he would use a word out of Chaucer rather than a more contemporary one.

- Spenser was also deeply influenced by Italian writers. As the stone carvings on the Modena Archivolt—dated to as early as 1100—suggest, the Arthurian legend was popular in Italian oral traditions, even if not much from this earlier period has survived in writing. Those early mentions of it in writing seem rather negative and dismissive.

- Some Italian Renaissance writers were inspired by the Arthurian legend and wrote long epic poems that dealt with themes of courtly romance, chivalry, magic, and nobility, even if they weren't strictly Arthurian in their subject matter. Two of these important texts were Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, a late-15th-century text, and Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, written in the early 16th century. Both of these poets and their works would deeply influence Spenser when he set himself the task of writing a great epic poem in the English language.

- Like so many other writers of the English Renaissance, Spenser sought to gain the favor of Elizabeth I by writing works that expressed admiration for the queen by the use of clever allusions, metaphors, symbols, and other literary devices. In his case, however, he looked back to a literary form that was fast falling out of favor: the medieval romance.

- The *Faerie Queene* of Spenser's title is named Gloriana, a thinly disguised avatar of Elizabeth. The world over which she rules is an allegorical land of vices and virtues, and riding through this landscape is the knight Arthur, whose adventures—jousting, killing giants, rescuing damsels—are taken straight from medieval romance but whose exploits also are constructed as allegorical

experiences that make use of ideals drawn from Aristotelian thought and other classical traditions.

- Another example that demonstrates that the Arthurian legend both remained potent while also simultaneously being gradually replaced in the literary canon by works focusing on other topics is the example of John Milton, who was a great poet of the 17th century. The crowning achievement of his career was *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem that took as its subject the conflict between God and Lucifer and the eventual collateral damage from that conflict: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and, thus, the fall into sin of all humankind.

- Before he selected this as his subject, Milton spent a long time contemplating what should be the story that he would rework into a poem that he recognized was to be the most important work of literature produced not only by him, but by his age. And his first choice was the story of King Arthur. But after wrestling with the idea for a time, he gave it up in favor of this loftier topic—much to the delight of most literary critics, but to the deep chagrin of Arthurian scholars.

- Although Spenser is one of the few serious writers to actually take on the Arthurian theme in all earnestness, stories of Arthur continued to circulate in other forms. There was still an interest in the historiography of Arthur, and Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century text became popular again in the 16th century.

Other Renaissance Writers
- Several Renaissance historians sought to understand the British past. In the case of the writer Polydore Vergil, this meant taking exception to Geoffrey of Monmouth's story of the founding of Britain by the great-grandson of Aeneas in the decades following the Trojan War.

- Whereas in the 12th century this was a move that sought to put Britain on equal footing with other countries on the European continent, by Polydore Vergil's day, this claim diluted British power rather than enhanced it.

- Vergil was quick to assert that Geoffrey of Monmouth was wrong—Britain had been inhabited from time immemorial; indeed, the day after the waters of Noah's flood receded, Britain started to receive new inhabitants. In many ways, this connecting of Britain to biblical rather than classical history echoes Milton's decision to not write a poem about Arthur in favor of a poem that sought to "justify the ways of God to Man."

- In *Anglica historia*, his history of Britain, Polydore Vergil gives a list of British kings that follows Geoffrey of Monmouth's in general, but he drastically cuts the amount of time spent on the reign of Arthur. In fact, while Arthur takes up the biggest chunk of Geoffrey's text, he gets only one page in Vergil.

- Furthermore, Vergil goes so far as to say that stories of Arthur are exaggerations, or perhaps just complete fictions. Vergil's text is important in terms of Renaissance treatments of Arthur because he generated interest and a response. All the brouhaha that resulted might have been because Vergil was a Catholic Italian who was presuming to tell the history of a nation that was, at that moment, Protestant and English.

- We can be grateful for Vergil's dismissal of the Arthurian tradition because it inspired 16th-century Englishmen to try to round up evidence for the legendary king's existence. And although not all that much was going on with Arthur in the 16th century, antiquarian-wise there were some interesting developments afoot.

- One of the people who sought to refute Vergil was a man named John Leland, who wrote a book that was published in 1544 entitled *Assertio inclytissimi Arturi regis Britanniae*, or *Assertion of the Most Renowned King Arthur of Britain*.

- Leland undertook the task of writing this work in Latin. In the 12th century, this is the language in which Geoffrey chose to write his book, in order to make it more accessible for his potential audiences. In the 16th century, Latin's status as the language of the educated

classes was even higher than it was in the 12ᵗʰ century. Leland and Geoffrey both were authenticating the stories of Arthur and deliberately characterizing them as serious, historical matter. But by writing in Latin in the 12ᵗʰ century, Geoffrey was making an inclusive move; by writing in Latin in the 16ᵗʰ, Leland was being exclusive.

- Leland's text—which was translated into English in 1582—recounted evidence for Arthur's existence that the author had obtained by means of extensive travel throughout Britain. He recounts local legend from the area around Cadbury that had long associated the place with Camelot, and he also gives a description of the leaden cross that was supposedly found on the assumed graves of King Arthur and Queen Guenevere in an excavation at Glastonbury Abbey in 1191.

- This Arthurian discovery comes surrounded by a lot of doubt and scrutiny. But we know from Leland's account—and, even better, from a sketch done of the cross by another antiquarian, William Camden—what the cross looked like and what the Latin inscription said: "*Hic iacet sepultus inclitus rex Arturius in insula avalonia*," or "Here lies buried the famous King Arthur in the isle of Avalon."

- Camden's historical work *Britannia* appeared in the early 17ᵗʰ century, indicating that antiquarian and historiographical interest in Arthur was still in existence. A little more than a century after Camden, John Whitaker traveled throughout Britain, trying to nail down the exact locations of the 12 battles that the 9ᵗʰ-century writer Nennius identified as being fought by Arthur. In the course of these efforts, he identified more than 600 place names that had Arthurian associations.

- At the same time, however, even as early modern historians sought to affirm Arthur's existence and deeds, they took a cautious, rational approach to the medieval texts and took pains to acknowledge that there were plenty of examples of exaggeration in accounts of Arthur and his deeds.

- In addition to Leland and Camden, other writers who took up the "Arthur question" include John Stow, who wrote his *Chronicles of England* in 1580; Aaron Thompson, who translated Geoffrey of Monmouth into English in 1718; and David Hume, whose *History of England*, written during the 1750s, asserted both that Arthur was a real person and that his military successes had been exaggerated.

- Perhaps the most famous of these early modern historians was Raphael Holinshed, whose 1577 *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* served as a key source for both William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Indeed, even John Milton—whose place in the Arthurian canon was usurped by *Paradise Lost*—composed a *History of Britain*, which appeared in 1670 and tackled the Arthur question.

Arthurian Ballads, Songs, and Plays

- Arthur's star was somewhat on the wane as the subject of histories, but from the 16th to the 18th century, there seems to have been a concomitant rise in Arthur's presence in popular ballads, songs, and plays.

- In 1765, Bishop Thomas Percy published a collection entitled *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. It was full of songs and poems from the Middle Ages and the early modern period, including works about Sir Lancelot, the story of Arthur's death, and some lesser-known Arthurian subjects.

- Arthur also shows up on the stage during this period—something we have very little evidence for in the medieval period. In 1622, a play known as *The Birth of Merlin* was performed for the first time at a theater in London. This play is a rather broad comedy, and for a time, it was believed by some in the 17th century to be a collaboration between William Rowley and William Shakespeare, although most scholars now believe that while Rowley may have had some collaborators, Shakespeare was not one of them.

- In the year 2000, the widow of the late Professor J. E. Caerwyn Williams donated the contents of her husband's library to the National Library of Wales. Among them was a manuscript dating

to the 16th century that contained a heretofore utterly unknown Arthurian play written in Cornish: the *Bewnans Ke*. While much of it concerns the miracles of Saint Ke, it also includes a long section that deals with the story of Arthur's exploits on the European continent during his conflict with Rome. It affirms the long-standing imbrication of the Arthurian legend with the geographical place of Cornwall, its language, and its people.

- The *Bewnans Ke* and other plays and ballads from the early modern period demonstrate that even if Arthur was not the main subject of a literary tradition, he was alive in what we might think of as local folk traditions, and there was still fierce regional pride attached to his name.

- We can see this spark of national pride in Wales as we head into the 19th century, during which period Lady Charlotte Guest would take the collection of Welsh stories known as the *Mabinogion* and translate them into English, both reflecting and encouraging a newfound interest in all things Arthurian.

Suggested Reading

Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century*.

Michelsson, *Appropriating King Arthur*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the early modern period saw so little in the way of innovation and interest in the legend of King Arthur?

2. What does the influence of Italian writers on the Arthurian tradition at this time suggest about how the legend had spread and gained footholds in various countries during the Middle Ages?

Idylls of the King—The Victorian Arthur
Lecture 20

The Victorian period saw a veritable explosion of interest not only in all things Arthurian but also in all things medieval. In the 19ᵗʰ century, there was a fascination with what was perceived as the barbarism of the medieval period, but at the same time, an interest in the Middle Ages during this period would produce some of the most beautiful, philosophical, idealized writing that the Arthurian legend has been privileged to produce. In this lecture, you will learn about the writers and visual artists who would breathe astonishing new life into the legend of Arthur, including Tennyson, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
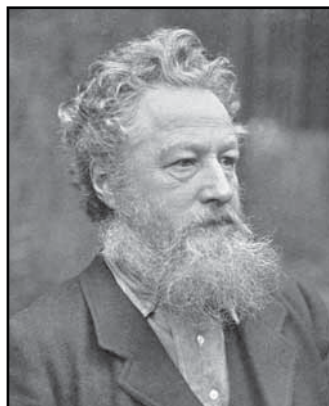
Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson's collection of poems on the subject of King Arthur, which eventually became known as the *Idylls of the King,* would almost single-handedly usher in a new age of Arthurian writing and scholarship.

- Tennyson recalled that his interest in the Arthurian legend was first sparked when he was a young boy and came across Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, which was the most complete, comprehensive, and definitive treatment of the legend from the end of the Middle Ages. Tennyson sought in Malory the inspiration for a series of poems that would treat the most important questions of his age: What is virtue? How should chastity be valued? What makes an ideal ruler? How does romantic love fit with all these other concerns?

- Tennyson started working on his Arthurian poems in the 1830s, but he started by writing in prose, offering a description of the physical beauty of Camelot. Considering that Tennyson had been deeply affected by the work of John Keats, this emphasis on the visual is not surprising.

- His first published poem on an Arthurian subject is the famous "The Lady of Shalott," which describes an episode found in Malory and his French sources; however, in this case, Tennyson was using as his source not Malory but an Italian text called the *Donna di Scalotta*. Later, Tennyson would rediscover Malory's version of the story and comment that he would have written a very different poem if he had had the medieval English instead of the contemporary Italian version of the story in mind.

- This poem proved incredibly inspirational to a number of artists working in visual media. John William Waterhouse's painting *The Lady of Shalott* is one of the most famous and recognizable of these artistic renderings.

- Tennyson then got to work writing other Arthurian poems and bringing to completion fragments he had begun earlier in his career. He worked on a poem that tells of the love of Lancelot and Guenevere, a poem exploring the idea of chastity through the figure of Sir Galahad, and then, in what was perhaps the most important poem from this early period, a work entitled "Morte d'Arthur," which is a faithful but embellished rendering of the death of Arthur in Sir Thomas Malory's text.

- Once the *Idylls* were complete, there were 12 poems in the collection, each focusing on a different aspect or virtue that was key to the Arthurian legend and that Tennyson considered critically important in his own time. Using Malory and the Welsh *Mabinogion* stories as his two major sources, Tennyson worked steadily on the *Idylls* over the course of several decades, publishing them singly and sometimes in groups between 1859 and 1885.

- Because they are all on different themes but are linked by the character of Arthur, we can call them a "cycle" of poems; in the *Idylls*, Tennyson takes on all the major episodes of the legend, focusing at times on lesser-known characters.

- When it came time to compose an idyll focused on the story of the Holy Grail, Tennyson found himself daunted by the task, until he finally settled on telling the story from the perspective of Sir Percivale, whom he characterized as a failed Grail Quest knight.

- So deep was Tennyson's interest in the Arthurian subject matter that even after the *Idylls* were completed, he went on to compose other works with Arthurian themes. And because of this unabated interest of one man, the 19th century went from being a period that had started as indifferent to Arthur to one that concluded as obsessed with all things Arthurian.

Pre-Raphaelite Art

- Perhaps nowhere is Tennyson's influence so obvious as in the drawings and paintings produced by those artists often referred to as the Pre-Raphaelites. In particular, the trio of William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Edward Burne-Jones would be hugely important in the world of Arthurian art.

British artist and author William Morris (1834–1896), a member of the Pre-Raphaelites, created Arthurian art in various media.

- Morris and Burne-Jones had been students together at Exeter College, Oxford, in 1853, where they had first encountered both Tennyson's Arthurian poems and their source, Malory's *Morte Darthur*. A few years later, Morris famously read Malory's text aloud to Burne-Jones and Rossetti while they painted images of Arthurian scenes in Rossetti's studio.

- Rossetti was one of the founding members of what has come to be called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; in addition to Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones, this group included William Holman

Hunt, Frederic George Stephens, Thomas Woolner, and John Everett Millais.

- The Pre-Raphaelites took their name from the fact that they wanted to bring back a style of art that had existed prior to Raphael, whose work they felt had corrupted the teaching of art in an academic setting. More than anything, they saw themselves as reformers of art, and to that end, not only did they create artwork that had, as they put it, "genuine ideas to express," but they also published a Pre-Raphaelite journal called *The Germ* and recorded their public debates on matters of art, society, and expression.

- A glance at the artistic output of this movement—whether it was Arthurian or not—shows similarity of style and approach to subject matter. Their art is much more than a picture pleasing to look at; the works all have something to say, try to tell a story, and try to render as faithfully as possible details from nature. They made sure to use a lot of rich, deep color, using the styles found in Quattrocento art as a guide or model.

- While not all Pre-Raphaelite painters depicted Arthurian subjects, many of the original seven and artists who later became affiliated with the movement certainly did. Subjects that were hugely popular with these and other artists include Sir Galahad, the death of Arthur, the Lady of Shalott or the Fair Maid of Ascolat, the story of Tristan and Isolde, and the Quest for the Holy Grail.

- One of the most successful collective artistic endeavors of the Pre-Raphaelites was the commission of what have come to be called the Dunlop Windows, sometimes called the Morris Stained Glass. In 1862, the interest in all things Arthurian had moved well beyond the scholarly and academic worlds and had permeated the merchant classes. Suddenly, it was a mark of status to have an artistic representation of an Arthurian subject in one's home.

- A merchant from the town of Bradford named Walter Dunlop commissioned a set of 13 stained glass windows for the music

room in his house. William Morris got the commission, and after deciding that the subject would be the Tristan story—specifically according to Malory's version of events—he then brought in other Pre-Raphaelites to execute the commission.

- Morris's company was also commissioned, in the 1890s, to produce a series of tapestries for William Knox D'Arcy that were to decorate the D'Arcy's dining room in his estate of Stanmore Hall. As in the case with the Dunlop Windows, Morris selected the theme of the tapestries and then assigned artists to execute them. In this instance, the story that Morris chose to tell was that of the Grail Quest, and once again he elected to use Malory's version of the story.

- These tapestries so impressed all those who saw them that other people commissioned reweavings of these scenes for themselves in the years that followed. Sadly, no complete set is still together, although individual panels and scenes are held by a variety of museums and individuals.

Engravings and Illustrations in the Text
- Engravings and illustrations were made specifically to accompany Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Perhaps the most famous artist to produce images for the *Idylls* was the French engraver Gustave Doré, who had achieved fame in the 19th century due to his illustrations for the works of Dante, Cervantes, and the Bible.

- Doré was commissioned by Tennyson's publisher to produce 36 images for the 1859 edition of the *Idylls*, which at that point consisted of four poems, not the final 12 that Tennyson would complete by the end of the 19th century.

- In his earlier works, Doré had done an engraving that would be copied by carving it onto woodblocks, and then the woodblocks could be inked and pressed onto a sheet of paper, which could then be stitched into the final version of the manuscript once it had dried. This was relatively inexpensive, but over time, the woodblocks would wear down because of repeated use and would have to be

recarved. Tennyson's publishers thought it would make more sense to have Doré do the images and then have English steelworkers render the illustrations in metal rather than wood.

● In the move from wood to steel, something seems to have been lost in translation. Critics generally feel that these illustrations, while impressive, are not up to the stunning standards of his work in Dante's *Inferno* and the Bible, and they wonder if perhaps this might be the fault of the engravers who were given the task of "translating" Doré's images into steel. Another point that critics make is that while Doré rendered scenes from the *Idylls* that are full of action and stunning detail, he doesn't always pick the most logical scenes to illustrate.

● While the poems initially inspired the artwork, because Tennyson's *Idylls* were constantly evolving and being added to over the course of his career, it seems very likely that in some instances, Tennyson was inspired to write certain lines of poetry in his later poems by something Doré had chosen to illustrate in an earlier version. From the end of the 19th century until well into the 20th—and even beyond—it was almost impossible to think of Tennyson without thinking of Doré, and vice versa.

Tennyson's Influence

● While many people were clearly inspired by Tennyson's work, not everyone was thoroughly enamored of it. Writers and public intellectuals, including Matthew Arnold, Algernon Swinburne, and even William Morris, made no secret of the fact that while they wouldn't argue that Tennyson's Arthurian poetry was bad, they thought that maybe they could do better. These writers didn't choose to distinguish their work from Tennyson's by taking on a new subject but instead felt compelled to respond to Tennyson's treatment of the Arthurian legend by writing more poems focused on the story of Arthur.

● Even more important than the influence Tennyson had on artists, writers, and public intellectuals was perhaps the interest in medieval

Arthurian texts that he kindled in Victorian scholars and academics. After over two centuries of flagging interest, suddenly Malory's text was taken up by 19th-century writers who sought to modernize it so that it would be accessible to a Victorian audience; the edition of James Knowles was reprinted seven times during the last half of the 19th century and was explicitly dedicated to Tennyson.

● In the early 20th century, English academics would start to make the case that while a college education that focused on the classical worlds of ancient Greece and Rome was certainly valuable, there could be merit in studying texts from the native English tradition. The fact that they had started to ask this question in the 20th century may be attributed at least in part to what Tennyson and his fellow Victorian writers and artists had done for the Arthurian legend in the 19th century.

Suggested Reading

Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*.

Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the Victorian Age in England was so marked by a sudden resurgence in fascination with the Arthurian legend?

2. What is most striking or unusual about the various kinds of artistic representations of the Arthurian legend that were discussed in this lecture?

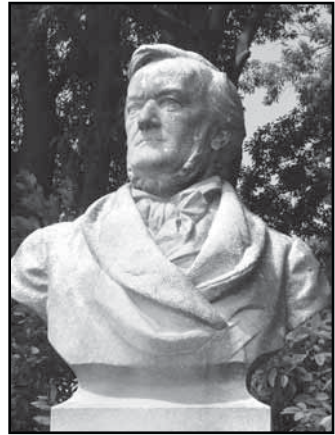# Wagner and Twain—King Arthur in the Late 1800s
Lecture 21

I n the Victorian Age, England was not the only place where the Arthurian legend was being put to social and cultural use. This lecture examines other 19th-century versions of the Arthurian legend that are dramatically different from one another. When we compare the English Tennyson and Pre-Raphaelites with the operas of the German Richard Wagner and with the adventures of the Connecticut Yankee as described by the American writer Mark Twain, we get a startling look at just how flexible, capacious, and appropriable the Arthurian legend could be.

Wagner's Arthurian Operas

- The seriousness of Wagner's operas is on par with the aims of Tennyson's poems and the Pre-Raphaelites' artwork, even if the medium is different. Indeed, Wagner felt that music was the most important, the most perfect, of all the arts, an opinion he had formed after reading and studying the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Today, Wagner is perhaps best known for his opera *Lohengrin*—which is the source of the popular wedding march—and his *Ring* cycle.

- Like Tennyson, Wagner was a well-educated man who happened to have drunk particularly deeply from the well of medieval literature. But whereas Tennyson had been inspired primarily by the writing of Sir Thomas Malory and, to a lesser degree, the Welsh Arthurian stories in the *Mabinogion*, Wagner had come to the Arthurian legend through the German branch of the tradition, particularly the writings of Gottfried von Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach, who were interested in the story of Tristan and with the quest for the Holy Grail.

- It's no surprise, then, that Wagner's two overtly Arthurian operas are *Tristan und Isolde*, which was performed for the first time in 1865, and *Parsifal*, which was performed for the first time in 1882. But Wagner had demonstrated a keen interest in the Arthurian

legend as far back as 1850, when his *Lohengrin* had focused on the life of the son of Sir Parsifal.

- When Wagner set out to tell the story of Tristan and Isolde, he made some very interesting changes to the narrative, changes that in some ways seem to reflect his thinking about the writings of Schopenhauer, who had had quite a bit to say about the human state of *Sehnen*, or "yearning."

German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) told the story of Tristan and Isolde in his operas *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*.

- The most important change that Wagner makes is in how he represents the love potion that Tristan and Isolde drink. In most versions of the Tristan story, Tristan is bringing Isolde home from Ireland as a bride for his uncle, King Mark. The Irish princess has been given a flask of wine that she and Mark are to drink on their wedding night. What she does not know is that it is a love potion. Onboard ship, Tristan and Isolde become thirsty, innocently drink the wine, and then fall madly in love with each other, even as they recognize that they cannot change fate and that Isolde will still have to marry King Mark.

- In most versions of the legend, it is, importantly, not their fault and not even their wish to love each other—this allows readers to feel sympathy for them and to view their adulterous relationship in a positive light. Indeed, Gottfried goes so far as to characterize Isolde as feeling hatred toward Tristan until she drinks the potion.

- Wagner, however, had quite a different take on this moment. In the opera *Tristan und Isolde*, he keeps Isolde's pre-potion hatred for Tristan intact, but then has her reveal that she hates Tristan because she actually loves him and he doesn't love her back. She believes

that the potion is in fact poison and drinks it to kill herself, offering it to Tristan in the hope that he will drink it and die as well. Tristan tells her that he wants to die, too, so he's happy to drink it with her.

- Once they've drunk the potion and they believe they are both soon to die, Isolde tells Tristan how much she loves him; he, in turn, tells her that he also loves her. They wait to die, don't, and then realize that it was just wine. Importantly, the potion doesn't make them fall in love in the opera; it only makes it possible for them to tell each other that they are in love.

- In *Parsifal*, Wagner's last Arthurian opera, he more fully explored the ideas of Schopenhauer, particularly his philosophies concerning the idea of the need to negate the will of the individual and how that will is tested, particularly with desire—sexual and otherwise. He also placed greater emphasis on the virtue of *Mitleid*, or compassion, in this opera; Wagner felt that this virtue above all others was the one that would save humanity.

- The leitmotif is a musical passage or theme that's associated with a particular character, scene, or idea, and the use of the leitmotif in opera can be a way of telling the audience something before the characters in the opera know it.

- For example, the character of Parsifal is what is known as a "pure fool"—a figure who is utterly innocent and pure. At a key moment in the opera, Parsifal is chased away from encountering the Grail and is told that he's not fit to be in its presence, so he goes away without protest, believing apparently that this is the case. But while this is happening, the "pure fool" leitmotif is being played by the orchestra, a clear signal to the audience that, in fact, Parsifal is holy and pure and eventually will win the Grail.

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*
- Wagner, in similar fashion to Tennyson, thought that using the Arthurian legend in his particular medium could be a way to share

ideals of society, the individual, and the religious and to promote these ideals as being linked with Germany itself.

- Across the Atlantic Ocean in America, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, decided to take a crack at the Arthurian legend, but his interest was primarily to critique rather than to praise or to elevate. Indeed, what he wanted to critique was exactly the kind of exalted reverence with which Germany and England seemed to regard the legend of Arthur and how it was inextricable from their own social structures and identities.

- The beloved author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain is one of the last of a breed of true public intellectuals—a man who could write novels, essays, short stories, and go on speaking tours that sold out. He combined humor and wit with social critique and felt particularly strongly and positively about America's independence from Britain.

- Twain's complex relationship to America and its policies—and to those of other nations—changed over the course of his life. Before 1899, he had been a fierce American imperialist; he later reversed his position and became an ardent anti-imperialist. In terms of revolution, he claimed that he had started out sympathizing with those who wanted to overthrow the French monarchy in a more moderate, less violent fashion, but as he grew older, the more radical his attitude became.

- His 1889 book *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is brilliant in its use of satire to critique late-19th-century European social and governmental issues, even as it then turns its scathing criticisms on 19th-century America.

- In this text, a 19th-century man from Connecticut, Hank Morgan, finds himself transported back in time to the 6th-century court of King Arthur. Initially thinking he's either dreaming or insane, Hank soon comes to realize that he has in fact traveled through time.

- Having alighted in a society where noble birth, family, and social connections are everything—and recognizing that he has none of these things—he will have to use his Yankee ingenuity to keep himself from getting burned at the stake and to rise to a position of power and then completely overturn a social structure that is feudalistic, class-based, and largely controlled by the Catholic Church.

- After using his 1,300-year advantage to convince Arthur and his court that he is a magician of great power, he then sets out to remake early medieval Britain into a version of 19th-century America. In the early pages of the book, this is done mostly through episodes that are humorous in nature.

- In one of the funniest episodes in the book, Hank has been assigned to help a needy maiden—the Demoiselle Alisande, whom Hank affectionately calls "Sandy"—on a quest to rescue a few dozen ladies of noble birth who are being held captive by two giants. This is also a key episode that reveals Twain's scathing opinion about the power of religious belief and the idiocy of humanity in the 6th century.

- When they find the maidens, Sandy excitedly calls Hank's attention to them, but all he sees is a herd of pigs that are being watched over by two swineherds. Hank is astonished when Sandy insists that what she sees is a group of noblewomen and two giants and then goes on to suggest that the reason Hank can see only pigs is because they have been enchanted to appear so.

- When it becomes clear that Sandy actually believes this, Hank finds himself flummoxed at these people who are more willing to believe in magic and sorcery than to accept what their own eyes tell them. Being a practical Yankee, Hank purchases the pigs from the swineherds, and then he and Sandy attempt to drive them back to Camelot, a task made all the more difficult by the fact that Sandy insists that all the pigs be referred to respectfully by their titles, or at the very least "your ladyship."

- The broad reach of Twain's satire is fully revealed by the illustrations that Daniel Beard was commissioned to create for the 1889 edition of the text. For modern readers, this is not immediately obvious, but to Twain's original audience, the extra commentary afforded by the illustrations would have been impossible to miss.

- In the episode with Sandy and the pigs, Hank refers to one of the swine as "the most troublesome sow of the lot"; in his illustration, Beard depicts this sow posed in courtly dress and jewelry in a pose that is an exact copy of the official portrait of Queen Victoria.

- While the reader is certainly meant to sympathize with Hank and sometimes admire his cleverness and agree with his criticisms of medieval society, Hank—and, by extension, American society—is held up for his own share of criticism.

- There is a recurring pattern of Hank's actions and ideas serving to critique a hierarchized, religiously dominated social structure like those of 19th-century Europe and then skewering 19th-century American ideals. For example, Hank sets up a stove-polish factory before he gets around to introducing stoves. He creates a stock market, at which Sir Lancelot is the most successful, and he introduces all kinds of 19th-century slang.

- At the end, the figure who comes in for the greatest condemnation is perhaps Hank himself; he has, as he puts it, "the civilization of the nineteenth century booming under [the sixth's] very nose!" Although Hank certainly sees this as an unequivocal good, Twain does not.

- The Industrial Revolution brought society many benefits but many horrors as well, and at the conclusion of the book, Hank succeeds in his stated goal of wiping out knight-errantry—by killing all the knights. He does this through mechanical means, deploying electric fences, dynamite, and other destructive implements, and in the end, he is put to sleep by his enemy, Merlin, and sleeps the next 1,300 years away, only to wake again in the 19th century.

- Upon finding himself back in the 19th century, the character of Hank eventually dies, sorrowing over the friends and loved ones who have been gone for 1,300 years. In this respect, he is rather like Sir Thomas Malory, who at the end of the 15th century had looked back to the Arthurian world with equal parts condemnation, admiration, regret, and nostalgia.

Suggested Reading

Geck, *Richard Wagner*.

Ward and Burns, *Mark Twain*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does pairing the operas of Wagner with the satire of Twain help you think about the Arthurian legend in new ways?

2. Why do you think Arthur did not become a major figure in various kinds of musical performances and composition until the modern period?

Once and Future—The 20ᵗʰ-Century Arthur
Lecture 22

I nterest in the Arthurian legend started picking up steam in the 20ᵗʰ century; today, in the 21ˢᵗ century, the fascination with King Arthur and his knights is arguably just as strong if not stronger than it was in the Middle Ages. Although there's no way for this lecture to do justice to the ever-burgeoning field of modern Arthuriana, this lecture will focus on some key texts that made important contributions to the Arthurian legend in the 20ᵗʰ century and that laid the groundwork for those that have appeared on the scene and are still to come in the 21ˢᵗ.

The Once and Future King

- T. H. White's tetralogy of novels that were eventually collected into one volume, called *The Once and Future King*, is one of the best-known, most influential, and most beloved 20ᵗʰ-century Arthurian texts. This is one of the most creative and inventive books in the Arthurian corpus, and the changes that White makes to the story of Arthur as he found it in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* reflect White's own obsessions and interests.

- The first book in White's Arthurian opus, *The Sword in the Stone*, tells of young Arthur's upbringing and education at the hands of Merlin the magician. While Malory tells us of Arthur's conception and birth, we don't see Arthur again until he pulls the sword from the stone and thus proves his right to be king. White fills in these gaps with a highly readable, whimsical account of Arthur's upbringing.

- In White's telling, Merlin undertakes the education of Arthur, who is given the nickname "Wart" in White's book. Merlin accomplishes this pedagogical program primarily by turning Wart into different animals. White adds the clever idea to the Arthurian legend that Merlin ages backward, so Merlin has already lived Arthur's future and can tell him what he'll be doing in it.

- As Wart puzzles over the lessons that Merlin has been trying to teach him, he comes to a realization that would be key in the Arthurian legend as it developed in the rest of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially on film, television, and the stage. The first part of this realization is that the people who have the might (power) go around telling everyone what is right, and they can affirm what is right because they have the might, even if what they say is right is actually wrong. The second realization Arthur has is that if someone had both might and wanted to do right, it could change the world.

- While the first book in the tetralogy reads more like a children's book, the later books become darker and more serious, taking up adult themes, such as the relationship of Lancelot and Guenevere and the issue of just governance. Indeed, in a striking departure from Malory and every other medieval Arthurian story, White has his King Arthur replace the customs of knight-errantry with a representative legal system.

- The series concludes at the moment just before Arthur is about to head into his fateful final battle on Salisbury Plain. In White's retelling, however, Arthur encounters a young Sir Thomas Malory, whom he charges with returning home and telling the story of Arthur's great experiment in Camelot. It is White's imagining of the Arthurian world that was the basis for the Broadway musical *Camelot*.

The Merlin Trilogy

- Mary Stewart's *Merlin Trilogy*—which starts with *The Crystal Cave*—and her standalone book told from Mordred's point of view, *The Wicked Day*, are worthy of mention not just because they're well written, but because they take a highly original approach to the story of Arthur. In addition, this woman has done her research into both the development of the Arthurian legend and the historical realities of sub-Roman Britain.

- In most versions of the story of Arthur and his knights, Merlin is an important but secondary character. He is usually a mysterious

magician who helps Arthur secure the throne and then offers him guidance in the early days of his reign. Then, he usually disappears.

● Stewart's approach is to offer logical explanations for all the seemingly magical things that Merlin does in his career, and she starts when he is a young boy living in the villa of his mother's Romanized Celtic family. We learn that, far from being a boy with no father, Merlin's mother simply refused to reveal that her lover was in fact Ambrosius Aurelianus, brother to Uther Pendragon.

● Stewart brings to life Arthurian characters that tend to be rather one-dimensional in the older versions, especially those figures for whom we also have historical evidence of their existence.

The Mists of Avalon
● Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* was such a radical retelling of Arthur's story that it arguably changed the course of modern Arthuriana. Although there had been some short stories that dealt with the women of the Arthurian legend as primary characters, the first full-length feminist retelling of the story of Arthur appeared in 1982, when Bradley's book was published.

● Bradley's book takes as its protagonist Morgan le Fay, here called Morgaine, and tells the story of Arthur's rise and fall from her point of view. The main conflict that Bradley sets up is a struggle between Christianity and the "Old Religion" or "old ways" of the British Celts. She characterizes Christianity as an oppressive, restrictive religion promulgated by dour priests who are forever telling women that they're going to hell because of Eve's sin. The faith of the Druids, or the "Old People" of Britain, on the other hand, is concerned with honoring nature and the Mother Goddess and is generally a faith of tolerance.

● As the book progresses and the conflict between Christians and devotees of the Goddess becomes more pronounced, the two worlds move further and further apart, and it becomes more and

more difficult for the followers of one tradition to find themselves in the other place.

- Arthur's story and the magical events surrounding his conception, birth, and rule are cast as attempts by followers of the Goddess to put and keep on the throne of Britain a man who will honor the old ways and who can be a bridge between both groups of believers.

- Given the fact that in the Middle Ages Arthur is regularly portrayed as a good Christian king, the Goddess and her followers are doomed to failure. Still, at the end, a kind of détente is established, with Morgaine realizing that the Virgin Mary is just another aspect of the Goddess, and thus, she will always remain alive in people's hearts and minds.

- *The Mists of Avalon* is a revolutionary retelling of the legend of King Arthur because of its overtly emphatic feminist point of view and unique characterization of many figures of the Arthurian legend that, for centuries, have been not much more than two-dimensional devices who help move the plot along.

Camelot 3000

- When it comes to Arthurian literature deserving of the adjectives "revolutionary" or "original," perhaps no work is quite so appropriately described in this manner as is *Camelot 3000*. This work is actually 12 works in one—to be specific, 12 comic books in a series. Published by DC Comics between 1982 and 1985, these 12 comics follow the adventures of King Arthur, Merlin, and all the other expected characters of the Arthurian legend when they are reincarnated in the year 3000 and tasked with saving a desperately overpopulated Earth from an alien invasion that is headed up by Morgan le Fay.

- While you might think reincarnation, the future, and space are innovation enough, what's really interesting and noteworthy about this series is how the reincarnated characters have not all necessarily been reborn in bodies like those they had originally.

- Lancelot, Guenevere, and Arthur are reborn into standard-issue bodies that will allow the love triangle to be played out without too much revision, but Galahad has come back not as a Christian warrior but as a samurai, Perceval finds himself in the body of a giant, and Gawain is a family man from South Africa.

- But where *Camelot 3000* does its most revolutionary work is in terms of gender identity. Sir Tristan finds himself, confusingly, born into the body of a woman instead of a man, but Isolde is reborn as a woman. They discover that they both still love each other, just as they did centuries before, but the sexual identity matter is a difficult one they have to deal with repeatedly. This plot point allows Barr to explore all kinds of issues related to gender and sexuality, and the final outcome is that the two become lovers once again in the year 3000, this time as a lesbian couple.

- The final defeat of Morgan by Arthur, who uses Excalibur to split an atom and create a nuclear explosion, also ends up killing Arthur, but most of the rest of the characters—Lancelot and Guenevere included—return to the lives they had before, in most instances better off than they had been and with a more positive spin on the ending than what we typically saw in medieval versions of the legend.

- In this series, Arthur's last act is to forgive Lancelot and Guenevere and to urge them to love each other. They do this, and Guenevere discovers that she is pregnant with what is most likely Arthur's baby. Both she and Lancelot are hopeful that this is the case and that Arthur's bloodline will be continued in a child they vow to love together. In the final scene, an alien on an unknown planet finds Excalibur in a stone, pulls it out, and is hailed as the king of his people.

The Fall of Arthur

- The unfinished epic poem *The Fall of Arthur*, written by J. R. R. Tolkien, is an older modern text—with its composition dating from

the 1930s—but it was not published until 2013. Tolkien is most famous as the author of *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and he was colleagues and friends with C. S. Lewis, most famous as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis and Tolkien were specialists in medieval literature at Oxford University, and all their work was deeply influenced by the literature of the Middle Ages.

- Tolkien had begun the Arthurian poem with enthusiasm, and then set it aside as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* began to occupy his attention more and more, but his personal correspondence reveals that he had shown early drafts to his esteemed colleagues E. V. Gordon and R. W. Chambers, both of whom encouraged him to finish the poem. The surviving lines of the poem are clearly structured as Old English alliterative half-lines that recall the early English epic *Beowulf*.

- There are many fascinating things about this poem, but one of the most interesting is how Tolkien's ideas about the imaginary land of Middle-earth have bled over into the Arthurian poem. For example, Tolkien writes of Arthur's queen that "Guinevere grew grey in the grey shadow/all things losing who at all things grasped," a line that brings to mind the Grey Havens and the departure of the elves from Middle-earth into the West.

- In the end, Tolkien didn't finish the poem, and one of the reasons may be that he was having difficulty finding a satisfactory way of dealing with the issues of lust—particularly when it came to Lancelot and Guinevere. While noble love makes an appearance in *The Lord of the Rings*, the base matters of lust are, by and large, absent. Even though Tolkien's treatment of Guinevere is largely unsympathetic, still there are some beautiful passages, and the canon of modern Arthurian literature is the poorer for not having Tolkien's completed poem in it.

Suggested Reading

Barr, *Camelot 3000*.

Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*.

Stewart, *The Merlin Trilogy*.

Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur*.

White, *The Once and Future King*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the preoccupations of modern Arthurian literature seem to differ from those found in medieval texts?

2. What seems to be the most creative, original take on the Arthurian legend in modern versions of the story?

Camelot Comes to Hollywood
Lecture 23

From the earliest days of silent movies, stories of Arthur have been incredibly popular subjects, and this remains true today for both the big and the small screen. You can reliably count on a big-budget Arthurian film coming to the screen and a television movie on an Arthurian subject at least once a decade, and every few years, there is a new television series and a special on the Discovery or History Channel about who the real King Arthur was. Although this lecture will be confined to the major motion pictures from the end of the 20th century to today, it will hit some of the highlights of Arthurian cinema.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

- One of the best pieces of evidence that the legend of King Arthur was reaching saturation levels in the popular consciousness of the later 20th century is the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Written, performed, and directed by the members of the British comedy troupe known collectively as Monty Python, this brilliant movie not only skewered the Arthurian legend but also, and more emphatically, mocked the deadly serious movies and television documentaries on King Arthur that had become so commonplace by 1975.

- In perhaps its best scene, Arthur, played by Graham Chapman, announces who he is to a couple of peasants: "I am Arthur, King of the Britons." The peasant woman responds, "Who are the Britons?" "Well, we all are. We are all Britons, and I am your king." "Well, I didn't vote for you," she says. "You don't vote for kings!" Arthur declares.

- The disconnect here between the ideal and the reality of the Arthurian world is hilariously underscored, as is the whole basis for Arthur's rule when he is forced to explain how he became king: "The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering

samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. That is why I'm your king." "Listen," says another peasant, "strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony!"

● In one moment of practical realism, the idealistic balloon of the Arthurian mythos is definitively punctured, and in hilarious fashion. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is perhaps not only the best Arthurian movie ever made but also remains arguably the best movie about the Middle Ages ever made.

Excalibur

● Another incredibly important Arthurian movie is John Boorman's *Excalibur*, which takes all the major elements and themes from all the key medieval Arthurian stories and tries to combine them in a single film. What Boorman is going for here—unapologetically—is an emphasis on the big ideas that transcend the Arthurian legend and could instead be said to be central tenets or elements of Western culture in general.

● In this movie, not a single person utters a line of dialogue that one could imagine a real person saying in any situation. Lines are delivered with great bombast and seriousness worthy of a Homeric poem.

● Boorman's film is full of rather heavy-handed symbolism, but he never pretended that he was going to make a film that wasn't. He went to great lengths
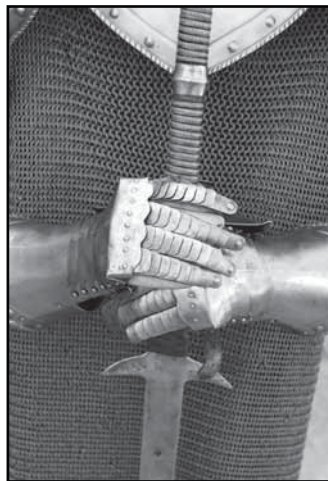
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In the movie *Excalibur*, Arthur and his knights ride through the land in monstrous, impractical, impossibly shiny medieval armor.

to get the visuals he wanted, and these, in combination with the thunderous score featuring Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, make the whole film an impressive accomplishment—and perhaps a bit overwhelming for the senses.

- A key moment in the film is when Sir Perceval has found the Grail and brought it to Arthur, who is both wasting away and cannot die. "You and the land are one," says Sir Perceval. "Drink." Here, Boorman is recalling the ancient Celtic belief that a king and his land were connected: If one were ill or waste, so would the other be. But the Grail restores the king, who suddenly with renewed vigor calls for his knights to ride out with him once more. Then, Arthur and his knights—clad in armor that is monstrous, impractical, and impossibly shiny—ride out through the land.

- Boorman was not going for authenticity—rather, its opposite. He deliberately created a Camelot that never was, or could have been, or could be—the castle itself looks rather like a gleaming metal cube—and at every opportunity, he signals deliberately that realism is not what he's after.

The Fisher King

- The pace of Arthurian movies and television series and specials was beginning to pick up real steam, but of the many productions that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, one of the more interesting and allegorically and philosophically oriented is 1991's *The Fisher King*. Starring Robin Williams and Jeff Bridges and directed by Terry Gilliam of Monty Python fame, this film is set in modern-day New York and tells the story of a shock jock, Jack Lucas (played by Bridges), whose star is rising and who is having a good time berating callers to his radio show.

- One caller, it turns out, is a mentally disturbed individual. One night, this guy calls in, and Jack mocks him for always wanting to talk and never doing anything. The the next we hear, the caller has shot up a restaurant full of people.

- Months later, Bridges's character is suicidal because of his contribution to this tragedy and is essentially wandering homelessly when he is rescued from a gang of thugs by Robin Williams's character, who introduces himself as Parry.

- We learn that Parry was one of the people in the restaurant that night and saw his wife killed right in front of him. At that time, he was a college professor whose area of research was the part of the Arthurian legend that focuses on the Fisher King—the wounded man who cannot die and cannot be healed, whose land is lying waste because of his own sins, and who can be healed only by the Holy Grail.

- The killing of his wife caused a psychic break, and now he calls himself Parry, a clear reference to Sir Perceval, the young man who grows up ignorant of his noble heritage but then discovers that he is destined to become a knight, and not just any knight, but a Grail knight.

- The unstable Parry is haunted by a vision of a red knight that seems to be chasing him through New York, and the combination of Gilliam's animation of the Red Knight with the special effects of the 1990s movie industry make this figure truly memorable and truly horrifying every time it appears on-screen.

- Throughout the film, the theme of the wounded man who cannot die is revisited repeatedly, with both Parry and Jack alternately occupying the positions of the Fisher King and Sir Perceval. *The Fisher King* is an audacious, edgy film—especially for a major movie studio—and is one of the most memorable modern treatments of the legend.

- Between *The Fisher King* and the year 2014, there were some other notable forays into Arthurian film. *First Knight*, starring Sean Connery, Richard Gere, and Julia Ormond, was notable because it's one of the few theatrical releases to engage with the narrative thread of the abduction of Guenevere. In addition, there were at

least three variations on *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and there was a rather forgettable reimagining of the story of Tristan and Isolde, starring James Franco.

- There were even some other non-Arthurian movies that made use of Arthurian themes and ideas. *A Knight's Tale*—starring Heath Ledger as a commoner pretending to be a knight and Paul Bettany as Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English poetry—lifts content straight from Chrétien de Troyes's 12th-century text *Lancelot* or *The Knight of the Cart*.

King Arthur

- By far the most important treatment of the Arthurian legend on-screen in the last decade is Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur*, starring Clive Owen in the title role, Ioan Gruffudd as Lancelot, and Keira Knightley as a warrior-queen Guenevere. This movie is set in the proper historical period—the late 5th to early 6th century—and the presence of Rome and the collapse of that empire loom large as plot points, as does the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Furthermore, Arthur is both a Briton and a Roman, and a Christian. All of these points are most likely accurate in terms of the historical facts behind the legend.

- While the makers of the film got some things right, they got others very wrong. One thing they did when deciding how to write the film was to go with what is known as the Sarmatian theory as a basic premise. This theory was popularized by Linda Malcor and C. Scott Littleton.

- In their book *From Scythia to Camelot*, they argue that there was, in fact, no King Arthur in the 5th century. Instead, they argue, the Roman military had conscripted Sarmatian nomadic tribesmen from the steppes of Asia Minor into the Roman military in the 2nd century. Some of these had served in Britain under a leader called Lucius Artorius Castus.

- Between the 2nd and 5th centuries, Sarmatian folklore had blended with the historical command of Castus, so by the 5th century, there was a new mythology in Britain that had made a great king out of a namesake of the original Castus, and all the names with which we have become familiar—Gawain, Bedevere, Kay—were never real people but were instead Sarmatian gods who had been anthropomorphized into great and noble warriors.

- The makers of the movie took some parts of this theory—that Arthur's knights were Sarmatian warriors—and then plunked everyone down in 5th-century Britain and put them all under the command of Roman-born Artorius, also called Arthur by his men.

- The main action of the film begins the day before the Sarmatians under Arthur are due to have completed their service to Rome and be given their freedom. One of the major themes of the movie is this idea of freedom, and Arthur is constantly affirming to all that every man is "free" from the moment he takes his first breath.

- The knights are all eager to get their freedom and return to Sarmatia after 20 years away, and everyone seems to think—ridiculously—that they're going to take a horse and some snacks, ride across Europe to a homeland and people who've probably forgotten who they were or are, and just pick up where they left off at the age of about 12.

- There are some other groaners in this film for serious Arthurian aficionados. Specifically, the film displays historical inaccuracies. The film is set in the 5th century but includes Merlin and other characters that are later, mostly French, imports. However, the story of Arthur is so ubiquitous that people going to see a movie called King Arthur would expect to see a Lancelot and a Merlin and all the rest, so the filmmakers couldn't really leave them out—especially because this was a big-budget film intended to be a box office success.

- Ultimately, this film gets a lot of important things about Arthur right by getting them wrong. For example, today, the name of King Arthur is invariably associated with justice, nobility, humanity, and doing what's right. Although in the film Arthur's anachronistic ranting about freedom and free will and the basic human rights of each individual isn't correct in a 5th-century context, it is correct in the way it conveys all the things Arthur has come to stand for throughout the centuries.

- The movie's anachronisms serve in part to highlight just how amazingly charismatic, good, just, and noble Arthur is, and it's not too far off the mark in terms of how the original followers of the original Arthur must have felt about him. Also, there are some pretty great battle scenes in the film.

Suggested Reading

Harty, ed., *Cinema Arthuriana*.

Olton, *Arthurian Legends on Film and Television*.

Umland and Umland, *The Use of Arthurian Legend in Hollywood Film*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do treatments of the Arthurian legend on film seem to differ from literary treatments of King Arthur and his knights?

2. What can film and television treatments of the Arthurian legend do that literary treatments cannot? Which has the greatest impact on an audience, and why?

King Arthur in the 21ˢᵗ Century and Beyond
Lecture 24

I n the 21ˢᵗ century, we are at a point 1,500 years after the events that would give rise to the legend of King Arthur took place. However, far from fading into obscurity, Arthuriana, in all its many forms, is still very much a part of modern culture, particularly in what we tend to think of as the Western world. In fact, the legend is sure to take new forms, and the possibilities are endless considering Arthur's story. As this lecture will solidify, Arthur remains today a symbol of strength, courage, right, and, most importantly, hope.

Stonehenge
- Arthurian scholars Elizabeth Sklar and Don Hoffman have declared that the Arthurian legend is empty in the 21ˢᵗ century: "the Matter of Arthur may be seen as an empty receptacle, waiting to be filled with whatever substance may speak to the individual or cultural moment." At least one of the substances that seems to be speaking to the cultural moment today is that of the ecocritical, or environmental, and one of the focal points where environmental concerns and the Arthurian legend intersect is at the ancient site of Stonehenge.

- Stonehenge first enters the Arthurian legend officially with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. According to Geoffrey, the stones originally came from Africa and were transported to Ireland. When Aurelius Ambrosius wanted a fitting burial site for himself and the kings who were to succeed him, he persuaded Merlin to use his magic and transport the stones to Salisbury Plain.

- As mysterious and awe-inspiring as Stonehenge is, there are new discoveries being made that reveal more and more amazing things about it. It dates to at least 3000 B.C., but archaeological evidence suggests that the site was in use—without the stones—as

The ancient site of Stonehenge is located on Salisbury Plain, the location of the fateful final battle between King Arthur and his son Mordred.

a place of worship well before that, maybe as early as 8000 B.C. Evidence discovered since 2010 suggests that it was part of a much larger complex that incorporated wooden structures, a ceremonial walkway, a river, and more.

- We don't know who built the Stonehenge. The first culturally distinct group that we can identify as moving into the British Isles is the Celts, and they did that around 500 B.C. When they got to Britain, the society of the Stonehenge builders was already thriving; we call these people the "aboriginal British," because we really don't know much else about them. When the Celts arrived, they incorporated these massive stone structures into their own religious ceremonies, which were overseen by a priestly group known as druids.

- In the 20th century, Stonehenge became part of the neo-druid, or neo-pagan, movement. Indeed, Marion Zimmer Bradley, author of *The*

Mists of Avalon, a feminist retelling of the Arthurian legend, was kind of neo-pagan. She cofounded the Center for Non-Traditional Religion and helped found the Society for Creative Anachronism.

- When Bradley described the religion of the Goddess that is so central in *The Mists of Avalon*, she drew heavily on the New Age ceremonial ideas and mythology that she and her group had come up with. The result was that many other neo-pagan groups read *Mists of Avalon* and believed that what Bradley had written was in fact largely accurate, so then they incorporated those practices and beliefs into their own system—creating a feedback loop. In the 20th century, people who self-identified as modern druids joined together and demanded the right to conduct ceremonies within Stonehenge on certain key days, especially the summer and winter solstices.

- The eventual restriction of access to Stonehenge was a harbinger of things to come. Starting in the 1990s, a former British soldier and biker named John Timothy Rothwell rechristened himself King Arthur Uther Pendragon and set out to take on what he sees as the restrictive and illegal policies of the English Heritage organization.

- Arthur Uther Pendragon has become a leader in the modern druid movement, with one of his key concerns being accessibility to important cultural sites in Britain that are maintained and controlled by English Heritage and the British government. Believing himself to be the reincarnation of King Arthur, he has filed several legal motions, some with the European Court of Human Rights.

- Arthur Uther Pendragon has been arrested numerous times, usually for protest actions, and these actions are mostly focused on Stonehenge; he and his followers believe that the monument should be free to and easily accessed by anyone and that the human remains that archaeologists have unearthed at the site should be reburied in a druid ceremony.

English Heritage

- The institution against which Arthur Uther Pendragon has expended so much energy—English Heritage—actually came into being in part because of a desire to protect a historical site associated with Arthur: Tintagel, on the west coast of Cornwall, the place where Arthur was conceived and born according to most versions of the legend.

- For centuries, Tintagel's association with the Arthurian legend meant that those interested in Arthuriana would make a pilgrimage there to see the famous headland on which once sat the stronghold of a great Cornish lord. The broad, flat headland is connected to the mainland by a very narrow causeway; therefore, it was easily defensible. It overlooks a small bay, which, evidence suggests, was used as a harbor at one point, but the passage up from the water was a steep one, again making it easily defensible.

- Even in the modern period, access to the headland at Tintagel was difficult, with Charles Dickens commenting that to reach the headland, he had to practically crawl up the hillside, grabbing onto tufts of grass to pull himself along. Surely, he said, something should be done to make this great, important site of British history more accessible—not to mention safer—for those who wished to visit it.

- In the early 20th century, the Ministry of Works undertook to make the passage across the isthmus safer for the public, but it wasn't until 1975 that a thoroughly modern wooden bridge was installed.

- Earlier, however, in 1899, there was another "improvement" built to capitalize on the revival of interest in all things Arthurian. Initially named the King Arthur's Arms hotel, the Camelot Castle Hotel looks out over the windswept Cornish coastline, but because its view is so breathtaking, the rest of the village of Tintagel gets to look at a large granite building blocking the view of the coastline.

- When it was first built, many locals were outraged, and it was this anger at the birthplace of King Arthur being so desecrated in pursuit of the almighty pound that led to petitions to the Ministry of Works, which at that point oversaw important historical sites, to prevent further such building and which ultimately—some scholars think—led to the creation of the English Heritage trust.

- English Heritage came into formal existence in 1983 with the stated goal of protecting and preserving important buildings, archaeological sites, and so on, but some people—such as Arthur Uther Pendragon—believe that their function has been more to keep people from the sites rather than make it easier for people to have access to them.

- But the situation is complicated, because the hordes of tourists that flood into Tintagel every year—especially in the summer—provide the major economic support for the area when they buy miniature Merlin figurines, or pay for parking at the Camelot Coach and Car Park, or visit any number of the crystal readers, psychics, and tarot card experts who have set up shop there.

Arthur in the Popular Consciousness

- There is plenty of evidence that the Arthurian legend continues to burgeon and produce new variations on its very old themes. The musician Heather Dale has a whole album of Arthurian songs that, through a combination of music and lyrics, offers a complex and sophisticated reworking of the Arthurian story. In 2002, Artist Glenn Kaino produced a piece entitled "The Siege Perilous," which reimagines the Round Table seat reserved for the saintly Sir Galahad as a modern office chair.

- One might think that in the age of the Internet, the Arthurian legend would become forgotten, a relic, but just the opposite seems to have happened: Google the term "Grail," or "King Arthur," or the name of any other character associated with the legend, and millions of hits will appear.

- Arthurian characters and themes have made it into online games, new comic books, and even a book—*Ready Player One*—about a young Perceval type who learns his identity as a knight in the world of the Internet and strives for the ever-elusive Holy Grail.

- Even in books, movies, comics, and art that officially have nothing to do with the Arthurian legend, certain images or ideas seemed to have seeped into the cultural consciousness. For example, at the end of the first *Lord of the Rings* film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the character of Aragorn is fighting for his life against one of the evil Uruk-hai. He stabs his sword through his enemy's stomach, and the Uruk-hai, snarling, pulls himself up the sword in order to get closer to Aragorn. Our hero promptly withdraws his sword from the other's abdomen and cuts off the Uruk-hai's head.

- This is a clear allusion to the final battle between Arthur and his incestuously conceived son Mordred on Salisbury Plain. In that battle, Arthur drives his spear through Mordred. Impaled at the far end of Arthur's spear, Mordred cannot get close enough to strike a blow, so he then commits an act that has remained one of the most vivid and enduring images in the Arthurian tradition. As Malory tells us in graphic detail in his 15th-century *Morte Darthur*, Mordred pulls the spear through his body and out the other side so that he can get close enough to deliver a fatal wound to his father and king.

- In the movie *Star Trek: Nemesis*, which came out in 2002, the character of Shinzon, a clone of Jean-Luc Picard, is impaled on a pole by his "father" and dies even as he tries to pull himself up and kill the captain of the *Enterprise*, a clear allusion to the Arthur-Mordred death scene.

- In 2013, rapper and media mogul Jay Z released an album entitled *Magna Carta Holy Grail* that includes a song also called "Holy Grail," featuring Justin Timberlake. This song won the prize for Best Rap/Song Collaboration at the 56th Annual Grammy Awards.

- In some ways, its lyrics perfectly capture the essence of the Grail: It is the object men desire to possess, which confers a blessing and makes a community whole even as it then inspires that community to disperse in pursuit of it. Countless knights in countless versions of the Arthurian legend set out to find the Grail, hoping to "crack its code," but they remain hopelessly lost in the maze—close to the Grail, sometimes even glimpsing it, but never actually achieving it.

- Clearly, the legend of King Arthur is still potent and vital in popular culture today. Indeed, the legend looks poised to become even more omnipresent. In 2014, producer/director Guy Ritchie began firming up plans to make six films that will tell the entirety of the Arthurian story; the first of these films is tentatively scheduled for a 2016 release date. The story of King Arthur will remain a potent cultural force in the decades and even centuries ahead.

Suggested Reading

Lupack and Lupack, *King Arthur in America*.

Sklar and Hoffman, *King Arthur in Popular Culture*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which modern manifestations of the Arthurian legend seem most intriguing or surprising to you?

2. If you had to guess, where would you say the Arthurian legend will go next—how will be reimagined and reworked in the next 10, or 15, or even 50 years?

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