King Arthur

A Casebook

Edited by Edward Donald Kennedy

KING ARTHUR

ARTHURIAN CHARACTERS AND THEMES
Norris J. Lacy, *Series Editor*

King Arthur
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KING ARTHUR
A Casebook

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
EDWARD DONALD KENNEDY

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For Pat and Stephen

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Series Editor's Preface

This is volume 1 of Arthurian Characters and Themes, a new series of casebooks from Garland Publishing. The series includes volumes devoted to the best-known characters from Arthurian legend: Tristan and Isolde, Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere, Merlin, Gawain, and Perceval. One is also devoted to Arthurian women in general, and one to the Grail. Others may be added.

Each volume offers an extended introductory survey and a bibliography and presents some twenty major essays on its subject. Several of the essays in each volume are newly commissioned for the series; the others are reprinted from their original sources. The previously published contributions date for the most part from the past fifteen years, although a few older, "classic" essays are included in several of the volumes, the criterion being the continuing importance of the study. All contributions are presented in English, and each volume includes essays that are translated here for the first time.

Heaviest emphasis remains on the development of the legend and its characters during the Middle Ages, but appropriate attention has been given also to modern, even very recent, treatments. Similarly, the central focus is on literature, but without excluding important discussions of visual, musical, and filmic arts. Thus, a number of the volumes are intently interdisciplinary in focus.

The proliferation of scholarly studies of Arthurian material is daunting. When the *Bibliographical Bulletin of the Arthurian Society* began publishing annual bibliographies, the first volume (1949) included 226 items (books, articles, and reviews). That number has increased regularly until, in the most recent volumes, some 700 items are listed per year. This increase shows no sign of abating. Furthermore, the major contributions to Arthurian scholarship are often dispersed widely through books and journals published through North America, Europe, and elsewhere.

As a result, it is extraordinarily difficult even for the professional medievalist to keep abreast of Arthurian scholarship, and it would be very nearly impossible for the non-scholar with serious Arthurian interests to select and locate a score of the major scholarly contributions devoted to a particular character or theme. These difficulties clearly dramatize the value of this series, but they also remain an insistent reminder that even the most informed selection of fifteen or twenty major essays requires us to omit many dozens of studies that may be equally instructive and engaging. Editors have attempted to remedy this situation insofar as possible by providing introductions that present other writers and texts, as well as bibliographies that document a good many important studies that could find no room in these volumes. In addition, many of the contributions that are included here will provide discussions of, or references to, other treatments that will be of interest to readers.

This volume, edited by Edward Donald Kennedy, includes a detailed introduction surveying the development of the figure and function of Arthur. Following that introduction and a thorough bibliography, the editor offers fifteen essays varying from broad surveys to studies of Hartmann von Aue, the French Vulgate Cycle, Malory, Polydore Vergil, Tennyson, T.H. White, and others.

The contributions by Professors Parins, McDonald, Mancoff, and Thompson are original essays prepared for this volume; the others have been previously published. (In the introduction and bibliography, an asterisk beside a title or an author's name identifies studies that are included in this book.) Six of the essays, as indicated in the headnotes preceding them, were originally published in French or German, and they have been translated into English for the first time. The headnotes also document the original place of publication for articles reprinted here.

Because permissions from copyright holders sometimes prohibited us from modifying the texts in any way, the decision was made to present all of them in their original form, with changes generally limited to the correction of obvious typographical errors. However, in some cases authors have, with permission, chosen to update, expand, or rework their contributions.

The necessity to reproduce many essays in the exact form of their original publication inevitably produces some inconsistencies. Most essays use documentary notes, but one includes a list of works cited and inserts parenthetical references to those works. In addition, style, usage, and even spelling (British versus American) may vary as well. Offsetting these inconsistencies is the advantage of having in one's hand a substantial selection of

the finest available studies, new as well as previously published, of Arthurian characters and themes.

Herewith, then, a series of contributions to our understanding of one of the most famous figures in legend and literature.

Such a volume could not be produced without the generosity of museum officials and editors of presses and journals, who kindly gave permission for us to reproduce illustrations and articles. We are pleased to express our gratitude to all of them. Credits accompany essays and plates.

Norris J. Lacy

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Introduction

King Arthur is probably the best-known character from medieval literature. Most readers of English are familiar with some of the stories about him: the boy Arthur pulls the sword from the stone and is proclaimed king; with the help of Merlin he establishes the Round Table, which becomes associated with the ideals of chivalry; his incestuous union with his half-sister results in the conception of Mordred, the son/nephew who will betray his father/ uncle Arthur; the love of Arthur's wife Guinevere for his preeminent knight, Lancelot, leads to a civil war that ultimately destroys his kingdom; Arthur kills the usurper Mordred in combat; the wounded Arthur is taken to the Isle of Avalon, from which, according to some accounts, he will one day return. He is *rex quondam rexque futurus*, the once and future king.

Many of those familiar with stories about King Arthur know them not through medieval versions but through modern retellings for children; nineteenth- and twentieth-century poems and novels such as those of Tennyson, Mark Twain, T.H. White, Mary Stewart, Donald Barthelme, or Marion Zimmer Bradley; or films like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and John Boorman's *Excalibur*. New versions of the story of King Arthur appear in some form almost every year. Legends associated with him probably rank with the Bible and Greek and Roman mythology as popular sources for literature, music, art, and film. In the early 1960s T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* became the basis for the Broadway musical *Camelot*, the title song from which, with its suggestions of an ideal society, provided a theme for John F. Kennedy's campaign. Over thirty years later the July 5, 1993, issue of *Time* carried a review of its revival, with Robert Goulet, the original Lancelot, now playing King Arthur. John Steinbeck, who as a child was fascinated with Malory's *Morte Darthur*, attempted to rewrite it in modern American English, but gave up and left an incomplete manuscript that was published after his death as *The Acts of King Arthur and His*

Noble Knights (1976). In the summer of 1990 a seven-hour dramatization of Malory's book had a brief run at London's Lyric-Hammersmith theater. The list goes on and on. Over 1,200 nineteenth- and twentieth-century works of literature, film, and art have been influenced by the Arthurian legends; and more are on the way: at the beginning of 1993 Hollywood had plans for at least ten film projects concerning King Arthur.[1]

Although most modern Arthurian works were produced in Britain and the United States,[2] in the Middle Ages writing about King Arthur and his knights was much more of an international phenomenon, with medieval Arthurian stories found in most European languages, including Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Welsh, Serbo-Russian, German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic. From Italy there are also medieval versions with most of the Christian references omitted, written in Hebrew and Yiddish for Jewish audiences.[3] The fascination of writers from so many countries with King Arthur is not, however, due to any uniform conception of his character. Although Arthur usually enjoys a popular reputation as a great king, the ways in which authors, both medieval and modern, present him vary widely. Few have chosen to portray Arthur as a villain[4] (for then there would be no reason for noble knights to associate with him); he often, however, falls short of the ideal king, and many writers assumed considerable freedom in presenting him as they rewrote the Arthurian stories. In both medieval and modern literature there are many King Arthurs.[5]

Arthur in History and the Chronicles

Whether King Arthur and the stories about him have any basis in history has been a topic debated by scholars through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and while some argue vigorously for Arthur's existence, if not as a king, at least as a fifth- or sixth-century military leader who led British (i.e., the later Welsh) forces against the invading Angles and Saxons, others are more cautious and would agree with Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson that "nothing is certain about the historical Arthur, not even his existence."[6]

Although there were also some skeptics in the Middle Ages, most people in England at that time seem to have believed in a hero named Arthur. Legends about him circulated orally for centuries, particularly among the defeated British, who had fond and exaggerated memories of his triumphs. The elegy *Gododdin*, written about 600, includes a brief reference to Arthur: it says of one hero that although he had killed his enemies, he "was not Arthur." If this reference is not, as some suspect, a later interpolation,[7] it indicates that: 1) by the early seventh century Arthur had become a figure to whom other heroes could be compared; and 2) he was so well known that

no explanation of his identity was necessary. Occurrences of his name found in several Welsh Triads, or summaries of groups of three stories told by Welsh bards, offer further evidence of oral circulation of the stories, and his appearance as a character in early Welsh works such as *The Spoils of Annwfn* and *Culhwch and Olwen* indicates his reputation as a robust and vigorous, but far from courtly, leader to whom many warriors were attracted.[8]

Of more significance to the later development of the legend, however, are references to Arthur in chronicles. The *Historia Brittonum* ("History of the British," ca. 829–830), traditionally attributed to a chronicler named Nennius,[9] describes Arthur not as a king but as a *dux bellorum* ("leader in battles") and lists twelve great victories. At the last of these, the Battle of Mount Badon, Arthur is said to have slain 960 men—a statement that indicates that whatever historical basis existed for Arthur, by this time he had developed into a medieval Superman. Another reference to the Battle of Badon appears in the entry under the year 518 in the *Annales Cambriae* ("Annals of Wales," ca. 950), a work that also refers to the Battle of Camlann in 539 where Arthur and "Medraut" were killed.[10] The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury refers briefly in the first book of his *De Rebus Gestis Regum Anglorum* ("Deeds of the Kings of the English," ca. 1125) to the distinguished service of the warlike Arthur (*eximia bellicosi Arturis opera*), whose reputation, William thought, should be based on "truthful histories" (*veraces . . . historiae*) rather than on fallacious fables (*fallaces . . . fabulae*). Shortly after this, Henry of Huntingdon incorporated into his *Historia Anglorum* ("History of the English," ca. 1129) the Arthurian material from the chronicle attributed to Nennius; Henry of Huntingdon's work, however, indicates a significant change in Arthur's rank, for here he is described as "dux militum et regum Britanniae" ("leader of soldiers and kings of Britain," Chambers, 16–19, 249–51). This change was based upon a popular conception of Arthur as king that developed some time before Henry had written his chronicle: evidence for this is found in the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* (ca. 1100), where Arthur is "sovereign prince of this island," and early eleventh-century saints' lives, such as those of Goeznovius and Cadoc, where Arthur is described as a king. Moreover, MS 1097 of the Bibliothèque Municipale of Reims, a manuscript of English origin that includes a list of Anglo-Saxon kings written between the late eleventh and the first half of the twelfth century, lists the names "Artur" and "Wyrtgeorn" (Vortigern) at the head of a list of Anglo-Saxon kings, a context that indicates that these British leaders were also considered kings.[11]

William of Malmesbury's hope that Arthur would be remembered through "truthful histories" seemed to be realized with the appearance of

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain," ca. 1138), supposedly a translation into Latin of "a very ancient book written in the British language" that was unknown to other chroniclers. Although the *Historia* covers what, according to Geoffrey, was the history of Britain from its founding by Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, until the death of Cadwallader, the last British king, in 689, the most fully developed section concerns King Arthur. While some at the time questioned the truth of the *Historia*,[12] it offered to many a convincing account of Arthur's reign and elevated the legends of Arthur to the status of serious history.

According to Geoffrey, Arthur became king at the age of fifteen, defeated his enemies in Britain and Scotland, and married Guinevere, a lady of noble Roman lineage. Included among his knights were his nephews Gawain and Mordred, sons of Arthur's sister Anna and King Loth of Lothian. After conquering Ireland and Iceland, he began to attract knights from distant lands and became so powerful that he was able to conquer Norway, Denmark, and Gaul. By this time Britain surpassed all other kingdoms in its affluence. As Arthur was holding a great plenary court, however, ambassadors arrived from Lucius, procurator of Rome, and demanded that Arthur pay tribute. Arthur responded by declaring war on Rome. After conquering much of the rest of Europe and defeating the Romans, Arthur was ready to march on Rome when he learned that his nephew Mordred, whom he had left in charge of Britain, had usurped the throne and was living in adultery with Guinevere. Arthur returned home; in the ensuing battle Mordred was killed and Arthur was taken to Avalon so that his wounds could be healed.[13]

Many of the characters, episodes, and themes now commonly associated with King Arthur are missing. Merlin, who in later works appears as Arthur's advisor, disappears from the story before Arthur is born. Mordred is simply Arthur's nephew, not a son born of Arthur's incest with his sister. There is no sword in the stone, no Round Table, no Grail Quest, no Lady of the Lake, no Morgan le Fay, and no Lancelot. Although Guinevere commits adultery, it is with Mordred.

What Geoffrey presents is the basic story of the rise and fall of King Arthur, with the destruction of his kingdom resulting from the treachery of Mordred. Although Fortune is not mentioned, the story nevertheless follows the pattern of a Boethian tragedy in which a great hero at the height of his power falls, not because he has committed some sin or has some flaw, but because earthly things are transient and one may lose them at any time through no fault of one's own.

Geoffrey's *Historia* was one of the most influential books written in England in the Middle Ages. According to E.K. Chambers its effect on the legends of Britain was comparable to that of the *Aeneid* on the legends of Rome (Chambers, 20). It firmly established for many readers of later generations the conception of Arthur as a great king and conqueror. Surviving in at least 215 Latin manuscripts, the *Historia* circulated widely in England and on the Continent. It was translated into French verse by Geffrei Gaimar in the 1140s and by Wace in about 1155 and, through Wace's account, into English alliterative verse by Laȝamon sometime between 1188 and 1250.[14] Much of its importance, however, is due not merely to its circulation as an independent work but also to its influence on later chroniclers in England. As Felicity Riddy points out, Geoffrey wrote a Latin chronicle for a fairly select and learned group; but the group influenced by the *Historia* expanded in the later Middle Ages ("Reading for England," esp. 318–29). As chroniclers incorporated Geoffrey's *Historia* into their own Latin, Anglo-Norman, and English chronicles that told the whole history of England, the history not just of the British but also of the Anglo-Saxons and post-conquest English, they transmitted it to an ever-widening audience, and it changed from what was supposedly a work of Latin scholarship for a learned group of readers to one that became known to a much larger group, particularly as vernacular literacy increased in the later Middle Ages.

The later chroniclers sometimes modified Geoffrey's account by summarizing, questioning some points, and adding minor details and occasionally even whole episodes drawn from romances and other sources.[15] But although some chroniclers added romance material and although medieval readers did not make the distinction between history and fiction that modern readers do, for almost 400 years following the appearance of Geoffrey's *Historia* most of the chroniclers seemed to accept it as a reliable account of past events and used it as the basis for the history of the British up to the time of the Anglo-Saxon conquest. By incorporating the *Historia* into their chronicles, they gave it an authenticity that it would never have had if it remained simply a history of the British, as it was in Geoffrey and in the adaptations by Wace and Laȝamon. It was one thing for the late twelfth-century chronicler William of Newburgh to dismiss Geoffrey's book as impudent and shameless lies disguised under the honorable name of history; but when that history of the British was incorporated into a history of all of England, when it was included as the first part of a chronicle that also told of the Anglo-Saxons, the Normans, and the post-conquest English, it became more difficult to dismiss.[16] A fifteenth-century reader of a chronicle that began with the history of the British but that continued, giving the history

of England up to his own time, would know that there had been a Henry V and a Richard II, and he would believe that there had also been a William the Conqueror and a King Alfred; and if he believed that those rulers had lived, he could also believe that there had been an Arthur who, like Henry V, had achieved great victories on the Continent. The context in which the later chroniclers placed Geoffrey's work gave it legitimacy as history.

The Arthurian chronicles after Geoffrey, Wace, and Laȝamon have been ignored by historians as being worthless and by scholars of literature as having little merit. There are no modern editions or translations of most of them, and scholars' comments have done little to encourage interest in them.[17] These later chronicles were nevertheless quite popular. Just as modern conceptions of King Arthur are often formed, not by major works such as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*, but by more popular works that are ignored in the classroom, the chronicles were major sources of information about Arthur in England in the Middle Ages and did much to shape the conception that people had of him. Most of the English Arthurian romances, including major ones such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, survive in single manuscripts; Malory's *Morte Darthur* is also found in a single manuscript and does not appear to have circulated widely prior to Caxton's edition in 1485. While allusions to some of the other metrical Arthurian romances in works such as Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* and Malory's *Morte Darthur* suggest a wider circulation for them than their single surviving manuscripts might suggest,[18] manuscripts of the Arthurian chronicles are nevertheless far more numerous.

Although some of these manuscripts are handsome presentation volumes that were preserved because they never circulated beyond the wealthy families for which they were prepared, many are relatively simple manuscripts produced for people of more modest means for the purpose of teaching what was supposedly the history of Britain and England. Julia Crick's comment concerning the many manuscripts of Geoffrey of Monmouth—"Sometimes the popularity enjoyed by histories in the Middle Ages seems almost inversely proportional to the quantity of reliable information which they impart" (*Dissemination*, 1)—is applicable to many of these: the Anglo-Norman chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft is found in twenty-one medieval manuscripts;[19] the English metrical chronicle attributed to Robert of Gloucester, in fourteen medieval manuscripts and two different fifteenth-century translations into prose; the English *Short Metrical Chronicle*, in seven; the later version of the chronicle of John Hardyng, in sixteen; Higden's Latin *Polychronicon*, a work that expressed some doubt about the reliabil-

ity of Geoffrey's account, in at least 127; Trevisa's English translation of the *Polychronicon*, which argued against Higden's doubts, in eighteen; versions of the early fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman prose *Brut*, in approximately fifty; and its English translation, in at least 173. This latter chronicle, first translated from the French sometime between the middle and end of the fourteenth century, continued to be updated in some versions until after the middle of the fifteenth century. It was the most popular secular work written in English in the Middle Ages, the number of surviving manuscripts being outnumbered only by those of the Wycliffite Bible.[20] Moreover, thirteen printed editions of the prose *Brut* were published between 1480 and 1528 (with anywhere from 200 to 1,500 copies produced for each edition).[21] When to all of these are added the many other Latin, Anglo-Norman, and English Arthurian chronicles that survive in fewer manuscripts,[22] it is easy to see that chronicles would have had a major influence in England in forming the impressions that people had of King Arthur.

Later chroniclers usually retained the major episodes of Geoffrey's *Historia*, but they became even more enthusiastic about Arthur than Geoffrey had been. His victorious battle against the Romans was the greatest battle in the world, except for possibly that of Troy; people would talk of his deeds until Doomsday; Arthur was "peerlesse throughout ye world," the "wysest without pere," the "worthiest," "hardyest," "most coragious," "moste victorious," and "moste bounteous." During his reign each day was more like "an heuenly life, then erthely."[23] Geoffrey had offered basically a secular view of the history of Arthur's reign;[24] the prose *Brut* added to this secular account elements of popular piety: with the support of God, Arthur "brouȝt his lande in pees and reste"; his men went forth "in Goddes name" and God helped them because they were in the right. In its depiction of Arthur as a Christian champion fighting the pagans ("soche a noble Kyng, and so doughty") the prose *Brut* appears to be influenced by the Crusades as well as by medieval concepts of justifiable warfare and the increased sense of nationalism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[25] The enthusiasm of the chroniclers influenced Arthurian works such as John Lydgate's popular and influential *Fall of Princes*, where Arthur is presented as the "wisest prince & the beste kniht," who was "a briht sonne set amyd the sterris," and Malory's *Morte Darthur*, where Arthur is "the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde."[26]

Although the Arthur of the chronicles would have been a British enemy of the English, he came to be accepted by the English as if he had been one of their own leaders, and he was presented as a model for later English kings to follow.[27] Malory describes him as an English king, not a British one.

The conception of him as a king of England is due to a considerable extent to the interest the Norman rulers of England, particularly Henry II, had in having Arthur honored by everyone, not just the Welsh. They were interested in Arthur in part because stories about him had circulated in France, in part because, according to the chronicles, Arthur had established a great civilization on the island that they now possessed, and in part because they wanted to keep Arthur from being associated exclusively with the Welsh, for then he could become a symbol of nationalism that could help stir the Welsh to rebellion.[28]

The belief that Arthur had ruled a kingdom that had dominion over much of Europe also gave the Arthurian legend political significance in England that it did not have in the other countries of Europe that were interested in the legends. Arthurian chronicles justified Henry II's conquest of Ireland in 1171 and Edward I's control of Wales as well as the claim of Edward and later kings to sovereignty over Scotland. Edward III established a Round Table in order to appear to be following in the footsteps of King Arthur, and Edward IV and Henry VII both strengthened their own claims to the English throne by tracing their lineage back to the Welsh and thus to Brutus and by implication to Arthur. Henry VII named his first son Arthur with the hope of giving England a new King Arthur. Henry VIII alluded to Arthur's conquests to support his independence from Rome. Elizabeth found in Arthur's conquests support for her own imperialist ideas. And as late as the early seventeenth century James I claimed descent from Arthur to help justify the union of Scotland and England under one king. The Arthurian chronicles had also had earlier political repercussions in Scotland when some Scottish chroniclers writing from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries maintained, in response to English claims on Scotland, that Arthur had not been a legitimate king and that the true heirs to the British throne had been Mordred and Gawain, the Scottish sons of Arthur's sister Anna and King Loth of Lothian.[29]

That the story of Arthur should have had political implications probably seemed nonsensical in other countries of Europe. In France, for example, although the Arthur of the chronicles was known through Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and especially through Wace's French verse adaptation of it, most readers would probably not have taken these works seriously as history. The French had their own chronicles, most of which did not include an account of being conquered by the British. In his study of the Arthurian chronicles, Robert Huntington Fletcher cites only three Latin chronicles produced in France during the Middle Ages and early sixteenth century and three French chronicles produced in France in the fifteenth or

early sixteenth century that drew extensively upon Geoffrey, and two of the latter were histories of Brittany, where one might expect the readers to have more interest in material that concerned their British ancestry.[30]

Among the few chronicles written in France that tell the Arthurian story are ones that emphasize, like the Anglo-Norman and English prose *Brut*, Arthur's role as a Christian champion fighting the pagans. In one part of the thirteenth-century *Speculum Historiale* ("Mirror of History") of Vincent of Beauvais, Arthur is praised for his great service to the Christian church in France and Britain; his goal in conquering lands had been to spread the Christian faith. In Alain Bouchart's *Grandes Chroniques* ("Great Chronicles," 1514) Arthur is credited with founding the first church of Notre-Dame in Paris out of gratitude to Mary for his conquest of Gaul. In parts of Brittany Arthur was even considered a saint with a feast day on October 6.[31]

Most chroniclers in Germany and Italy had little interest in the history of Britain, and few included Geoffrey's account of Arthur.[32] Adaptations of the Arthurian story that mix elements from chronicle and romance appear in a few of the chronicles of Spain and Portugal.[33] Perhaps the major continental chronicler to treat it as serious history was the fifteenth-century Fleming Jean de Waurin. His massive chronicle of Britain and England, based to a great extent upon the prose *Brut*, included an enthusiastic account of Arthur as a pious Christian warrior; but Waurin, who fought with the Burgundians and English against the French, was writing for the English, with one of his manuscripts intended for Edward IV.[34] The other Flemish Arthurian chronicle of note is the fourteenth-century *Myreur des Histors* ("Mirror of History") of Jean d'Outremeuse (Jean des Preis), but the *Myreur* is difficult to judge as a serious attempt to write history since it added so much nontraditional material to its Arthurian section, some from romance, some apparently of the author's own invention.[35] One of Jean's departures from chronicle tradition, having Arthur march into Italy and be accepted by the Romans as their emperor before he receives the news of Mordred's rebellion, gave Arthur a more exalted status, and this addition also appears in the fifteenth-century English chronicle of John Hardyng as well as in Malory. For the most part, however, chroniclers on the Continent did not have much interest in King Arthur.

Continental skepticism about the truth of the Arthurian story is reflected in Boccaccio's account of Arthur in his *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* ("On the Fates of Illustrious Men"). Although Boccaccio's primary source was a chronicle, at the outset he describes Arthur as being known through "the celebrated English fables" and announces that he did "not recognize

the evidence of his greatness and his fate as worthy of credence."[36] In the early sixteenth century the Italian Polydore Vergil raised serious questions in his *Anglica Historia* ("English History," 1512–13) about the reliability of Geoffrey's *Historia*, and he dismissed the stories of Arthur's conquests on the Continent as *anilibus fabellis* ("silly little tales"). This chronicle, written for England's Henry VII, outraged many English readers,[37] but similar questions about Arthur's foreign conquests had been raised in England in the twelfth century by Alfred of Beverley and in the fourteenth century by Ranulf Higden, both of whom asked why chroniclers on the Continent did not mention Arthur's conquest of much of Europe.[38]

The conception of Arthur as a great and powerful king that was developed in the English chronicles nevertheless influenced continental conceptions of Arthur; and authors, whether they believed in the story of his conquests or not, often mentioned his name to connote valor. Several French chroniclers who do not tell the Arthurian story mention Arthur as a great figure from the past, although some of them, like Froissart, Jean le Bel, and Chandos Herald, were associated with the English court and were writing for people such as Edward III who had great respect for the Arthur of history.[39] In the romance *Voeux du Paon* ("Vows of the Peacock," ca. 1310) Jacques de Longuyon introduces Arthur, along with the other great conquerors Hector, Alexander, Caesar, Joshua, Judas Maccabeus, David, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon, as one of the Nine Worthies who represent the transience of earthly power. His conception of the Worthies inspired writers and artists in England, Scotland, Germany, and Italy as well as France. From these nine great figures others could learn how mutable all things on earth are. Those who used Arthur as a figure representing valor or mutability might believe, like the English printer William Caxton, that he was the "noble kyng and conquerour . . . borne wythin this royame and kyng and emperour of the same"; or they might, like the French author Jacques de Longuyon, add to their accounts of Arthur a skeptical "if his story is true."[40] Arthur, like a figure from Greek or Roman mythology, could represent valor or mutability, but authors who used him in this way did not necessarily believe the stories about him.

Medieval French Romance

Chronicles were only one source of early information about King Arthur on the Continent. Oral tradition flourished there as well as in Britain. The legends reached the Continent, probably at first through the Bretons, who began emigrating from Britain between the sixth and eighth centuries to escape the invading Anglo-Saxons, and later through Normans and crusad-

ers, who could have heard the stories from the Welsh as well as the Bretons. By the early twelfth century oral legends circulated at least as far away as Italy, as is evidenced by a scene dated between 1120 and 1140 on the archivolt of the north portal of the Cathedral of Modena in northern Italy that depicts Arthur, Gawain, and Kay attempting to rescue Guinevere.[41]

When Chrétien de Troyes, the earliest of the French Arthurian romance writers, began writing verse romances sometime after the late 1150s, he had access to both oral tales and chronicles. His use of the former is suggested, for example, by his reference at the beginning of his first romance, *Erec et Enide*, to earlier versions of the story that storytellers had told and by his allusions, without introduction, to characters such as Lancelot and Yvain who do not appear in the early chronicles but whose names were apparently familiar to the audience listening to the romance. The chronicle account of Arthur, on the other hand, was a source for some of the material in his second romance, *Cligés*.

Chrétien's five romances mark a major change in the presentation of King Arthur. Instead of being the principal character, he becomes a background figure in works emphasizing individual knights at his court. Even more significant for those interested in King Arthur himself is a change in the presentation of Arthur's character. While in *Cligés* Chrétien was influenced by the conception of Arthur in the chronicles as a vigorous, heroic king, in at least his last three romances (the *Chevalier de la charrete* [*Lancelot*], the *Chevalier au lion* [*Yvain*], and the *Conte du Graal* [*Perceval*]), he presents a weak Arthur, a king who, for example, is unable to protect his wife or the honor of the court and who even cannot stay awake at the table.[42] Scholars differ in their assessments of Arthur's character in *Erec et Enide*; and while some argue that Chrétien presents Arthur positively in his first romance, others believe that he presents him as a weak king in this work as well.[43] In any event, Chrétien for some reason introduced an Arthur who is far less heroic than the king found in the chronicles.

Scholars have suggested various reasons for Chrétien's conception of Arthur. Peter Noble, who argues that Chrétien's conception of Arthur changed after he wrote *Erec* and *Cligés*, believes that he could have developed different views toward a king after he stopped writing for a royal court or that Arthur's character was diminished in order to place more emphasis on other heroes (Noble, 234). The change in Arthur's character could also be due to changing political relations between France and England. Rosemary Morris suggests that the chronicles, which presented Arthur's conquest of Gaul as his most important early achievement, may have been a "political irritant" in France that was to be answered in some French romances

with the presentation of a much weaker King Arthur ("Growth of French Nationalism," 121).

Chrétien's romances influenced many later writers of Arthurian romance, not just in France but in other countries. In Germany Wolfram von Eschenbach adapted his *Perceval;* and Hartmann von Aue, his *Erec* and *Yvain;* in Norway and Iceland sagas were based upon *Erec*, *Yvain*, and *Perceval;* and in England the fourteenth-century metrical romance *Ywain and Gawain* drew upon his *Yvain.* Even when authors did not use Chrétien directly as a source, the structure he introduced for a romance (an initial challenge at Arthur's court, a knight's responding to the challenge, the knight's return to court) became a popular one (as, for example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in England). Moreover, after Chrétien, authors of Arthurian romances had two conflicting conceptions of Arthur from which to choose, the great conqueror and central character of the chronicles and the sometimes weak, lethargic minor character of Chrétien's romances. Those reading or listening to an Arthurian romance could usually be expected to have some familiarity with the two traditions and to be able to measure the work against either background.

Thus authors of the French prose Arthurian romances of the thirteenth century could draw upon either chronicle or romance or both in their portrayals of Arthur. The prose *Perceval* (or Didot-*Perceval*) follows the chronicles in presenting a heroic Arthur who conquers Gaul, defeats the Romans, and is overcome in his final battle against Mordred. Two other prose romances from this century draw upon traditions of both the heroic and the weak Arthur. In the *Perlesvaus*, a French romance that might have been written in England at Glastonbury, Arthur is depicted at the beginning as a king who has declined from his former greatness and lost all interest in his knights and his court; after making a pilgrimage to the chapel of St. Augustine, however, and receiving instruction from a hermit, he is once again able to hold court and take up his royal activities as a great king.[44] The prose *Lancelot*, a romance that in its shorter version Elspeth Kennedy has argued dates from the early years of the thirteenth century, presents Lancelot as its hero and focuses on the theme of the making of a young knight's name and the theme of love as an inspiration for chivalry.[45] Although this work describes Arthur as a noble and worthy king and alludes to his past triumphs, he is also presented as an often melancholy ruler who is in many ways inadequate: he has been unable to protect his vassal King Ban (Lancelot's father), receives a stern lecture on his failures as a ruler, is unable to defend his realm from the challenger Galehaut, and is twice duped by women and must be rescued by Lancelot.[46]

Although this shorter prose *Lancelot* apparently circulated as an independent romance, it was incorporated, probably between 1215 and 1230 (or 1235), into a series or cycle of Arthurian romances that scholars often refer to as the Vulgate Cycle. There it became the basis for the first third of a long romance, the Vulgate *Lancelot*.[47] The Vulgate Cycle, as it was originally planned, consisted of three romances, *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal* ("The Quest for the Holy Grail"), and *La Mort le Roi Artu* ("The Death of King Arthur"), apparently written by a team of writers who were following a plan designed by an author whom Jean Frappier describes as the "architect."[48] These three romances present a biography of Lancelot, beginning with his birth; they tell of his great achievements as a knight, his love for Guinevere, and his failure on the Grail Quest; they end with his death after the fall of Arthur's kingdom. Sometime shortly after the completion of the three original Vulgate romances two additional ones were added as introductory romances to the cycle: the *Estoire del Saint Graal* ("The History of the Holy Grail"), which tells of the Grail's being taken to Britain in apostolic times, and the *Merlin*, which tells of Arthur's early conquests prior to the birth of Lancelot.[49]

While the shorter version of the *Lancelot* had exalted the love of Lancelot and Guinevere as an inspiration for chivalric deeds, the Vulgate Cycle shows its disastrous results: the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere leads to Lancelot's failure to achieve the Grail in the *Queste* and to the destruction of Arthur's kingdom in the *Mort Artu*. Thus while the content of the noncyclic *Lancelot* and most of the first third of the Vulgate *Lancelot* are almost identical, the context in which the story is placed in the Vulgate Cycle gives it a different significance.[50]

The portrait of Arthur in the Vulgate Cycle is based upon both romance and chronicle traditions. While Arthur appears as a weak king, for example, in some parts of the Vulgate *Lancelot* that were originally a part of the noncyclic version, he plays a more positive role in some later parts of the Vulgate *Lancelot* that emphasize the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere. The authors of the Vulgate romances, particularly the *Merlin* and the *Mort Artu*, were at times influenced by the heroic conception of Arthur in the chronicles. Jean Frappier found the *Mort Artu*'s Arthur inconsistent: at times pathetic, passive, weak, vengeful, tortured by suspicion; but at others a king who fights bravely, rules with dignity and concern for law and justice (*Étude*, 328–29). Frappier's description could be extended to the portrait of Arthur elsewhere in the cycle. The authors knew both the heroic Arthur of the chronicles and the weak Arthur of, for example, Chrétien's *Charrete*, and they were writing for readers or listeners familiar with both traditions.

Sometime between 1230 and 1240 an anonymous author prepared an adaptation of the Vulgate Cycle now known as the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* ("Romance of the Grail").[51] Although this work, like the Vulgate Cycle, was made up of five parts, it differs both in length and in outlook from the earlier work and attempts to present a shorter, more coherent account of the history of Arthur's kingdom. Apparently with the intention of removing the Vulgate Cycle's emphasis upon Lancelot and focusing instead upon Arthur, it greatly reduces the space devoted to the *Lancelot*.[52] Fanni Bogdanow has described this romance as "the Epic of Arthur" in which the tragedy is caused primarily by mischance. In this work, she observes, Arthur becomes an active ruler with the "importance and dignity of a real hero."[53] The Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* attempts to reestablish the reputation of Arthur that the chronicles had created.

The romances of the Vulgate Cycle and the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* would have contributed greatly to the varied conceptions of King Arthur that were available in the Middle Ages. They circulated not only in France but in other countries as well, and parts were rewritten and adapted into English, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Hebrew in the later Middle Ages. Their popularity is suggested by the 120 surviving manuscripts of the versions of the prose *Lancelot* and by at least thirty-nine, forty-five, and fifty-four manuscripts of the *Queste*, *Mort Artu*, and *Merlin*. Although no complete French manuscript of the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* survives, there are at least thirty-nine French fragments as well as translations into Portuguese and Spanish.[54]

Another work from the thirteenth century, the prose *Tristan*, further contributed to a generally positive picture of Arthur by contrasting him with King Marc of Cornwall, who in this work is the most wicked of all kings.[55] This long romance, which survives in five or six versions in at least eighty-six French manuscripts, was the basis for Spanish, Italian, and Serbo-Russian versions of the *Tristan* story, and much of it was adapted into English in the fifteenth century in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.[56]

Middle English Romance

The variety in the characterizations of Arthur that began with Chrétien de Troyes is found in romances written in England as well as the rest of Europe, even though the tradition of the heroic Arthur of the chronicles was much more important there than it was elsewhere. One of the most negative portrayals of Arthur, in fact, occurs in the Anglo-Norman metrical romance *Yder*, probably written in England during the reign of King John (1199–1216).[57] A less heroic Arthur also appears in Welsh literature in the

thirteenth-century *Dream of Rhonabwy*, where Arthur is presented as an inactive player of games whose days as a warrior are long past.[58] When English metrical romances began to be written in the late thirteenth century, most were written for people who knew little if any French and who thus would have had little familiarity with the French romances. These English romances generally followed the pattern established by Chrétien and focused upon adventures of individual knights, especially Gawain, rather than upon Arthur, who in these works is often little more than a king who presides over a great court. He can be trivialized as a practical joker (*The Avowynge of King Arthur, Sir Gawan, Sir Kaye, and Sir Bawdewyn*) and also presented as unjust and vengeful (*Sir Launfal*). Romances written in northern England or Scotland (*The Weddynge of Sir Gawen, Golagrus and Gawain, Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*) present a bias against Arthur (since Arthur had conquered the North) that is also reflected in some of the Scottish chronicles.[59]

Although Chrétien's romances may not have been widely read in England,[60] many of the French prose romances were available there. The fourteenth-century English chronicler Robert Mannyng refers to them as the "grete bokes" about Arthur that "ffrensche men wryten . . . in prose" that "we . . . here alle rede" (line 383). They are frequently mentioned in book lists and wills, and allusions to them appear in works of poets who wrote for the court, such as Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, as well as in the works of alliterative poets of the English Midlands such as the author of the *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, where the account of Arthur as one of the Nine Worthies draws upon the Vulgate Cycle for some of its information, and the authors of major English Arthurian romances such as the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[61]

The influence of the French prose romances on the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is most apparent in the title, the portrayal of Arthur, and in the use of the Wheel of Fortune. Arthur is the major character in this complex romance/epic/tragedy that was written in the Northeast Midlands around the beginning of the fifteenth century (Hamel, 53–58, 62, 74–75). While this work concerning Arthur's Roman campaign is based primarily upon chronicles, its portrait of Arthur as a king who, although heroic, is punished for his sins of pride and excessive desire for conquest is foreign to the English chronicle tradition. The suggestion of punishment could have come from the Vulgate *Mort Artu* as well as from Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*.[62] The *Mort Artu* also suggested the dream in which Arthur is cast down from Fortune's wheel.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a sophisticated work that was

in all probability written for an aristocratic audience that was bilingual and familiar with French romances.[63] How one is to interpret the boyish, fun-loving Arthur of this work is perplexing. The anonymous author of this work alludes to the chronicles and thus assumes familiarity with this tradition, and he has as his hero Gawain, the most popular knight of English romance; but he also is indebted to French metrical romance for the structure of his work and to French prose romances, particularly the Vulgate *Merlin* and *Lancelot,* for some of its *matière* (Griffith, Rigby). Judging from questions that the author leaves unanswered (such as the reasons for Morgan le Fay's hatred of Guinevere), he appears to have expected his audience to have some familiarity with these French prose romances. Whether Arthur is to be seen here negatively as a frivolous king or positively as a king enjoying his court in the relatively carefree days of his youth is debatable.

Although most English metrical romances did not present Arthur as a major character, prior to Malory the only French prose Arthurian romances that were adapted into English were those that focused on either Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail (from the Vulgate *Estoire*) or Arthur (from the Vulgate *Merlin* and the *Mort Artu*). These three Vulgate romances were all associated with the history of Britain and would have had much the same appeal as the chronicles. The Vulgate *Merlin,* which presents the heroic Arthur of the chronicles, was adapted into English three times, twice in verse and once in a close prose translation; one of the metrical adaptations, *Arthour and Merlin,* survives in several manuscripts and was apparently fairly popular.[64]

The *Mort Artu* was translated into English as a metrical romance known as the stanzaic *Morte Arthur.* Its author apparently did not like the portrayal of Arthur in the French *Mort Artu* as an often weak, vengeful, and jealous king who, in spite of warnings to the contrary, foolishly goes into the last battle against Mordred without waiting for Lancelot's help. The English author also knew the contrasting portrait in the English chronicles and consequently revised the ending to make Arthur less responsible for the final disastrous battle and to make the final catastrophe result from mischance.[65] His conception of Arthur's fall thus has more affinity with that found in the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* than it does with the conception of the fall presented in the Vulgate Cycle.

The only English writer other than Malory to adapt any part of the Vulgate *Lancelot* into English was the later Scottish author of the metrical *Lancelot of the Laik* (ca. 1482–1500). This work is based primarily upon the episode in the first part of the *Lancelot* in which a wise man lectures Arthur on his failures as a king and tells him how to be a good and just ruler;

besides echoing the antagonism toward Arthur found in some of the Scottish chronicles, it was probably intended as a piece of *speculum regis* ("mirror for kings") literature for James III of Scotland.[66]

Malory and Caxton

The one medieval English work that is largely responsible for King Arthur's being a well-known character today is Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur.* Malory completed his book in 1469–70, before the Scottish *Lancelot of the Laik* was written. His major French sources were the *Merlin* of the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal*, the prose *Tristan*, and the Vulgate *Lancelot*, *Queste*, and *Mort Artu.* He also used the French *Perlesvaus*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and Hardyng's chronicle, and he had read several other English metrical romances. Of the French romances that he used, only the *Mort Artu* had previously been adapted into English (as the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*). Thus, in writing a one-volume compilation of Arthurian stories that began with the conception of Arthur and ended with the death of Arthur and Lancelot, he was an innovator in adapting for readers of English parts of French prose romances that others left untouched.

Although Malory throughout his book consistently refers to Arthur as the "noble kynge" and the "floure of kingis and knyghtes" and uses similar expressions that indicate his admiration for the king, his portrayal of Arthur, based upon works by different English and French authors, has seemed to some an inconsistent blend of strengths and weaknesses. Malory was selective in avoiding some episodes, such as those in the first part of the Vulgate *Lancelot*, that give a negative portrait of Arthur,[67] and he modified the portrayal of Arthur found in sources such as the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the *Mort Artu* in order to put Arthur in a better light.[68] Nevertheless, Malory at times retains some of the unfavorable material in his sources, and some of Arthur's acts, such as his attempt in the first tale to kill Mordred by drowning all of the children born at the time of Mordred's birth—an episode drawn from the generally pro-Arthur Post-Vulgate *Merlin*—seem inappropriate for the king Malory describes as "moste man of worshyp crystynde." In spite of such acts Malory's own enthusiastic view of Arthur as a king characterized by "grete goodnes," "knyghthode," and "noble counceyle" has prevailed with most readers. One critic, after cataloging what he considers to be the many shortcomings of Malory's Arthur, comments with apparent amazement, "Malory, somehow, succeeded in creating the impression of Arthur as an ideal king. . . . And this is exactly how many of the authors, inspired by Malory, were to portray the king" (Korrel, 267).

Malory's plan to produce a book based upon several romances was not unique to the late fifteenth century. His contemporaries Michot Gonnot and Ulrich Fuetrer were writing similar compilations in French and German; and his work might have remained as unfamiliar to modern readers as those of Gonnot and Fuetrer since it survives in a single manuscript that was discovered only in the twentieth century.[69] It became known earlier only because England's first printer, William Caxton, published an edition of it in 1485.

The only book that Caxton published that is better known than *Morte Darthur* is the *Canterbury Tales*. The publication of the edition of Malory, however, was probably a financial risk for Caxton: it was not a well-known work like some of his other editions, such as the *Canterbury Tales* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*;[70] it was written in prison by an enemy of the former king, Edward IV; it was based upon adaptations of French romances, most of which had not been previously adapted into English and would therefore have been unknown to those who could read only English; and it presented an account of Arthur quite different from that found in the popular chronicles. In fact, before publishing *Morte Darthur*, Caxton published the most popular chronicles in England: two editions of the English prose *Brut* in 1480 and 1482 (*The Chronicles of England*) and an edition of John Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* in 1482, books that, although unknown to most readers today, would, unlike Malory's work, have been certain of success.

Caxton wrote a preface to *Morte Darthur* that was intended to help sell the book. It reveals much about the status of the legend of King Arthur in England at the end of the Middle Ages. Caxton justifies the need for the book since many of the Arthurian stories were not available in English. His remarks also indicate the respect that some people in England had for Arthur, the "moost renomed Crysten kyng, . . . whyche ought moost to be remembred emonge us Englysshemen tofore al other Crysten kynges" (*Works,* cxlii). Caxton mentions, however, that some doubted there ever had been a King Arthur and believed that books about him were "but fayned and fables"; and he therefore cites evidence of Arthur's existence such as the accounts in the chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the *Polychronicon.* And perhaps because Caxton knew he was publishing a book for readers who would be familiar with the quite different account of Arthur in his own earlier editions of chronicles, he admits that many of the adventures in Malory's book may not be true and emphasizes instead its didactic value: the reader can find in the book "noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyté, frendlynesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue,

and synne" and should "doo after the good and leve the evyl" for "al is wryton for our doctryne" (*Works*, cxliii–cxlvii). Malory's story of Arthur may be different from the familiar chronicles, but it nonetheless offers readers valuable moral exempla.[71]

The Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries

In spite of any doubts Caxton may have had, Malory's book was a success and was published by other printers five more times between 1498 and 1634. The moral lessons that Caxton believed could be derived from it were not obvious to some. The Puritan Nathaniel Baxter described it as the "infamous legend of K. Arthur," and Roger Ascham denounced it for its "open mans slaughter, and bold Bawdrye" and complained that it was an immoral work that had replaced the Bible at the English court.[72] Nevertheless, along with the chronicles, it remained an important source for the conception that people had of King Arthur in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Also important in England and France were the many French editions of the prose romances, such as the *Merlin* and *Lancelot*, that indicated continued interest in the Arthurian stories.[73] English belief in the historical truth of the Arthurian chronicles diminished in the course of the sixteenth century, although some antiquarians and many members of the middle class would patriotically continue to believe that Arthur had been king, and imperialistic desire to claim other regions of the world during Elizabeth's reign caused a revival of interest toward the end of the century. Edmund Spenser, for example, cited Arthur's conquest of Ireland as proof of English sovereignty over it, and Elizabeth's astrologer Doctor Dee maintained that Arthur's conquests had extended as far as the Arctic.[74] Spenser also used Arthur as a major figure in his *Faerie Queene* to represent the virtue "magnificence," but for this he drew relatively little from Arthurian tradition.[75] The fact that Arthur appears in nine Arthurian ballads, some of which were based on Malory, suggests popular appeal of the legend (Dean, 114–15). Shakespeare apparently knew some of the Arthurian stories,[76] but the only Arthurian drama of note is Thomas Hughes's tragedy *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1588). Although this play is derived largely from chronicles, its King Arthur appears to have been modeled upon either Elizabeth or James VI of Scotland.[77] Arthur became increasingly irrelevant as a figure from history.

The author of one survey of Arthurian literature appropriately entitles the chapter on the Arthurian story in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "The Death of a Legend" (Merriman, 49). This title could, in fact, apply to the Arthurian legend throughout much of Europe at that period. Tastes had changed, and authors lost interest in the Middle Ages.

Michael Drayton's vast poem *Poly-Olbion* (1612–22) laments the attitude of his contemporaries toward Arthur: "Ignorance had broght the world to such a pass / As now, which scarce believes that Arthur ever was" (Kendrick, 103; also Dean, 121–22). Not many shared Drayton's interest in Arthur, and more typical is the attitude found in John Florio's rather free translation of Montaigne's *Essays* (1603): "For of King Arthur, of Lancelot du Lake, of Amadis, of Huon of Bordeaux and such idle time-consuming and wit-besotting trash of books wherein youth doth commonly amuse itself, I was not so much as acquainted with their names." Florio's translation is suitable here since, although Montaigne had mentioned Lancelot, Florio added King Arthur to the list.[78]

Milton had planned to write an epic with Arthur as his hero but abandoned the project; probably the most likely reason for Milton's loss of interest in Arthur is that the legend glorified a strong king, and Milton, as a supporter of Cromwell, had little use for the monarchy (Merriman, 55–60; Brinkley, 126–41). John Dryden and Henry Purcell also saw the political potential of the legend and attempted to use it to advantage in their opera *King Arthur* (1691). This work, in which Arthur is a great king who fights the Saxons, was intended as a tribute to Charles II, who died, however, before it could be performed. It has little relation to earlier Arthurian material and is remembered today chiefly for the parts of Purcell's music that have survived. Sir Richard Blackmore's long-forgotten epics *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697) had, like Dryden and Purcell's opera, little to do with Arthurian tradition: in what Brinkley describes as "a most incongruous melée of Geoffrey's history and *Paradise Lost*," Arthur is presented as an epic hero who fights Satan (Brinkley, 168). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there continued to be readers of Arthurian stories in France, where Arthur was at times presented far more favorably than he had been in some medieval French romances and where adaptations of the stories provided "fairy-tale escapism" in the days before the Revolution (Muir, "King Arthur: Style Louis XVI," 168). In England in the eighteenth century, however, Arthur's most notable appearance in literature is in Henry Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies, the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731); there Arthur is married to a virago Queen Dollallolla ("of whom he stands a little in fear") and, as "a passionate sort of king," is in love with Glumdalca, queen of the giants. Arthur had become the subject for burlesque.

The Nineteenth Century

The beginnings of Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought renewed interest in the Middle Ages; and while on the

Continent there was at this time little interest in Arthur, in England and Scotland the situation was different. Early nineteenth-century scholars such as George Ellis, David Laing, and Joseph Ritson published some of the English metrical romances as well as summaries of some of the major French prose romances. The major impetus for the revival of interest in Arthur, however, came from the rediscovery of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Three editions of it were published in 1816 and 1817 (one by Robert Southey), and Sir Walter Scott had planned another. These were the first editions of Malory's work in over 180 years. Altogether twenty-seven complete and abridged editions and adaptations appeared in the nineteenth century; the most popular of the complete editions, the Globe (1868), had by 1917 been reprinted at least twenty times. *Morte Darthur* has remained in print throughout the twentieth century.[79]

The publication of nineteenth-century editions of *Morte Darthur* occurred when many in England believed that medieval chivalry could be a guide to the conduct of a gentleman and when many looked with admiration to the Middle Ages as a time of harmony and order.[80] The emphasis in *Morte Darthur* upon what Malory called the "High Order of Knighthood" and its nostalgia for a nobler past made it well suited for the period. Although some disliked the book for having "the morality of the French novel" and criticized Malory's Arthur for being "what a Norman knight, a Keltic chieftain, would certainly have been, a gratifier of his own lust," and although editions were frequently bowdlerized to omit "such phrases or passages as are not in accordance with modern manners,"[81] many who read it were, to say the least, enthusiastic. It was, Dante Gabriel Rossetti reportedly said, one of the two greatest books ever written, the other being the Bible. William Morris and Edward-Burne Jones supposedly looked upon the book with such reverence that they were almost too shy even to mention it.[82] *Morte Darthur* offered nineteenth-century writers a new source for their work; and like their medieval predecessors, they began to rewrite the stories about Arthur and his knights. To some, such as Morris and Swinburne, the Arthurian legends depicted a simpler and more beautiful world from the remote past; to others, such as Tennyson (and Mark Twain in the United States), they were a way to convey to readers the authors' concerns about the present (materialism, sensuality, cynicism, misplaced idealism) through stories set in the Middle Ages. The Arthurian legends also became a major source of inspiration for artists such as Rossetti, Morris, Burne-Jones, Holman Hunt, Waterhouse, Dyce, Sandys, and Archer.[83]

Much of the credit for the modern popularity of stories about Arthur and modern conceptions of Arthur is due to the great success of Tennyson's

Idylls of the King. Tennyson spent over forty years developing his plan for the *Idylls*, with the first fragment, *Morte d'Arthur*, appearing in 1842 and the final version of the *Idylls* published in 1885. In this work he created an Arthur who, as Richard Barber writes, "appears as little short of perfect: warrior, statesman, the uniting force of the Round Table," with every knight "Stamp'd with the image of the King" (*King Arthur*, 156). Throughout the *Idylls*, from the beginning when, as a baby, Arthur is said to have been washed up on shore by the ninth wave to his journey to Avilion at the end ("From the great deep to the great deep he goes"[84]), Tennyson's Arthur represents an ideal ruler. He has "power on this dark land to lighten it, / And power on this dead world to make it live" (*The Coming of Arthur*, ll. 92–93). Tennyson re-created Arthur as a Christ-figure ("My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death: / Nay—God my Christ—I pass but shall not die," *The Passing of Arthur*, ll. 27–28), an innovation that seemed to some, such as Swinburne, to conflict with the conception of Arthur in medieval accounts (Buckley, 176). Tennyson, however, would have found justification for this conception in the legends of Arthur's establishing a great order, in the portraits of him as a Christian leader fighting the heathen, and in the hope of many that he would someday return.

Tennyson's Arthur is a practical king who tends to the needs of his kingdom. He understands that it is important for most people to take care of their duties in the world and not pursue the "wandering fires" and misplaced idealism represented by the Grail Quest; for most, such quests amount only to evasion of responsibility. Although some readers have found his Arthur too naive to deal effectively with others and have found him "woodenly imperceptive" in his treatment of Guinevere (see, for example, Buckley, 177), Tennyson intended Arthur as a king who set the standards by which others in the *Idylls*—and in Tennyson's own society—were to be judged. Arthur's initial desire to control the "great tracts of wilderness / Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less" (*The Coming of Arthur*, ll. 10–12) and his final disillusionment when he realizes "all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend / Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm / Reels back into the beast and is no more" (*The Passing of Arthur*, ll. 24–26) were as relevant to the industrialized nineteenth century as to the Middle Ages.

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) is the only other modern Arthurian work written by an author who is considered a major writer in the traditional literary canon. Although Twain originally intended much of the book to be a reaction against and a satire on Tennyson[85] and although much of the book is critical of the English class

system, an established church, and the Middle Ages in general, Twain's purpose was similar to Tennyson's in that he used the Arthurian story to comment on modern society, American as well as English. The modern narrator Hank Morgan has a name that associates him with the medieval Morgan le Fay, and Hank's mechanical ingenuity turns out to be ultimately more destructive than the other Morgan's magic. Throughout the book Twain draws implicit, and at times explicit, analogies between the status of medieval English serfs and those of nineteenth-century American slaves and factory workers (see Taylor and Brewer, 172–73).

Although the analogies with contemporary society were made even clearer by Dan Beard's illustrations for the first edition,[86] many reviewers in both the United States and England appear to have missed the relevance of the book to contemporary America. Reviewers in both countries saw it essentially as a criticism of England, and some of the English critics were offended by the irreverence with which Twain had treated the Arthurian legends. One complained that it was "discreditable to Mark Twain that he should have spoiled his reputation for humour by the foolish scurrilities of his burlesque upon Malory" (Parins, *Malory*, 308); another, that the book tried "to deface our moral and literary currency by bruising and soiling the image of King Arthur"; another, that "an attack on the ideals associated with King Arthur is a coarse pandering to that passion for irreverence which is at the basis of a great deal of Yankee wit" (both cited in Taylor and Brewer, 173).

Actually Twain's portrait of Arthur, while not idealized as Tennyson's was, is nevertheless generally positive. Arthur admittedly shows the limitations of one who grew up under a class system: when, disguised as a commoner, he attempts to teach the peasants something about farming ("the onion is but an unwholesome berry when stricken early from the tree . . . plums and other like cereals do be always dug in the unripe state"), his comments illustrate the ignorance and lack of practical knowledge of a sheltered aristocrat; he later exhibits foolish pride when, sold as a slave, he becomes outraged when he learns that he is worth only seven dollars but the Yankee is worth nine (*Yankee*, 439, 455). Yet Twain's Arthur is also a humane and courageous king who cares for his people. In a scene in a peasant's hut, for example, Arthur, with no concern for his own safety, carries a child dying of smallpox to her mother: "Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, no reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth of gold to gaze and applaud; . . . he was great, now; sublimely great" (*Yankee*, 372). His

basic goodness is also emphasized when Hank realizes that Arthur had not suspected the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere because he has "a heart that isn't capable of thinking evil of a friend" (*Yankee*, 532). King Arthur is, in fact, more favorably presented than the Yankee, who, known as "the Boss," creates orders of bureaucrats as subservient to him as any medieval serf was to his lord and who brutally kills those opposed to him with modern technology that eventually brings about his own downfall. Even with all its satire on the aristocracy, *Connecticut Yankee* leaves the reader with the impression that an American boss could be less admirable than a medieval king.

The Twentieth Century

Works that use Arthurian themes have become increasingly popular in the twentieth century. Considering novels alone, Raymond Thompson observes that while in the first half of the century about fifty Arthurian novels were written, the number was more than doubled between 1950 and 1980 (Thompson, *Return*, 3). In a number of these Arthur has been portrayed unflatteringly as a king unable to control political rivalries, a traitor, a brutal oppressor, a fat weakling controlled by Mordred, a capricious tyrant, an old despot, and an outlaw who has broken his tribe's taboo against incest (see Thompson, *"Conceptions of King Arthur"; Thompson, *Return*; Taylor and Brewer, 302). Most twentieth-century authors, however, treat Arthur as a basically good but flawed ruler. In Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex* (1978), one of the best of the Arthurian fantasy novels, Arthur is portrayed comically as an innocent, but a very gallant and generous one (Thompson, *Return*, 157–58; Taylor and Brewer, 298–300). In Edwin Arlington Robinson's long poems *Merlin* (1917) and *Lancelot* (1920), which are considered among the finest twentieth-century American versions of the Arthurian story, Arthur is given psychological complexity that he lacked in Malory. He is the "tortured king" haunted by "memories . . . / Of old illusions that were dead for ever,"[87] frightened, unable to handle either the adultery or Mordred's treachery; he is "Like a sick landlord shuffling to the light / For one last look-out on his mortgaged hills"; although "father of the law," he is "weaker than his child, except he slay it" (*Lancelot*, *Collected Poems*, 37–38; see also Starr, 23–37; Brewer and Taylor, 181–88). Robinson derived from the medieval story an Arthur afflicted with the weaknesses and malaise of twentieth-century man.

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), probably the best known of the modern Arthurian novels, presents Arthur as a king torn between his personal love for Lancelot and Guenevere and his sense of justice