

Arthurian Legend in Literature

The earliest literary mention of King Arthur was in *Gododdin*, a Welsh poem written around the year 600. He next appeared about 200 years later, in the *History of the Britons* by Nennius. In this piece of work, Nennius draws upon the sixth century writings of Gildas, who discussed the battle of Mt. Badon but didn't mention Arthur's name. Nennius expanded on Gilda's report and wrote: "Then it was the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror." These words were the beginning of the Arthurian legend, written roughly 300 years after Arthur supposedly died. The writings of Gildas and Nennius are the only historical basis we have for the story of King Arthur.

In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote *Historica*, providing further details on the triumphs of King Arthur whom he depicted as the ruler of Western Europe. Soon after appeared Wace's *Roman de Brut*, which introduced chivalry and romance to the legend, followed by Layamon's the *Brut*, which, according to Columbia Encyclopedia, "gives one of the best pictures of Arthur as a national hero."

The romances continued with five titles written by Chretien de Troyes, including *Perceval*, which contains the first known literary account of the quest for the Holy Grail. Two medieval German poets who continued to develop the legend were Wolfram von Eschenbach and Gottfried von Strassburg. von Strassburg provided the first telling of the Tristram and Isolde story in *Tristan*.



The last significant medieval telling of Arthur's tale is *Morte d'Arthur* (c.1485) by Sir Thomas Malory. By the time Malory wrote his piece, the original premise of the Britons fighting against the Saxon invasion was gone. Malory presented Arthur as an Anglo-Saxon instead of a leader of the Celtic Britons - the Anglo-Saxons' enemies - and like all other "romancers", Malory filled his story with knights, 600 years before knighthoods were granted.

Malory's tale became fodder for the writers to come. Tennyson wrote his *Idylls of the King* between 1857 and

1885, and here Arthur has metamorphosed into a Victorian gentleman. In 1889, Mark Twain adapted the Arthurian legend in his *A Complete Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, where the Yankee Hank Morgan finds himself in England in the time of King Arthur. The book then proceeds as a victory of the modern age over the Middle Ages.

T.H. White also drew upon Malory's rendition. Between 1939 and 1958, White produced a trilogy, *The Once and Future King*, which included *The Sword in the Stone*. This is the best and most widely known version of King Arthur's tale, the result of being adapted into both a Broadway musical and then a motion picture (*Camelot*). "To enjoy these stories, the reader had better forget whatever he knows about medieval English history," warns writer L. Sprague de Camp. The setting of White's novels is not of this world but an imaginary one. Like Malory, White uses customs and items of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It has even been suggested that White modeled Arthur after Edward III (ruled 1327-1377). All these methods were used in an attempt to make the characters of the Arthurian legend more accessible to the reader. White fleshed out the details of the characters lives and personalities to make them appear more familiar, more recognizable. Instead of depicting them as heroes, White chose to display their human weaknesses so the reader can understand them and feel akin to them, to convince the reader that the Arthurians lived. White's purpose is clearly displayed in his inscription in the 1939 publication of *The Sword in the Stone*:

And now it is all gone – like an insubstantial pageant faded; and between us and the old English there lies a gulf of mystery which the prose of the historian will never adequately bridge. They cannot come to us, and our imagination can but feebly penetrate to them. Only among the aisles of the cathedral, only as we gaze upon their silent figures sleeping on their tombs, some faint conceptions float before us of what these men were when they were alive.

More recent versions of the Arthurian tale have included Welwyn Wilton Katz's *The Third Magic* (1989) and the 1981 film *Excalibur*. We can be assured that fantasy authors will forever continue to attempt to depict "what these men were when they were alive."

References

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