

## INTRODUCTION (from Encyclopedia.com)

The legend of King Arthur can be found in English stories and folktales as early as the sixth century. The greatest and most complete version, however, did not appear until the fifteenth century, with Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. To create the epic tale, Malory drew from many sources, most notably thirteenth-century French prose romances. He supplemented these French sources with English Arthurian materials.

Malory's story was originally written in Middle English, an early form of the English language, and consisted of eight books, or tales. The first tale concerns the conception, birth, and coronation of King Arthur. The second tale involves the invasion of France and Rome. The third tale, which focuses mainly on the knight Lancelot, was inspired by the French prose story *Lancelot*. Gareth, the brother of Sir Gawain—a brash knight of Arthur's Round Table—is the subject of the fourth tale, and the fifth tale centers on the story of Tristram and Isolde. Malory's theme for the sixth tale is the quest for the Sangrail, also known as the Holy Grail. The romance of Lancelot and Guinevere is the topic of the seventh tale. Malory's eighth and final tale concentrates on the discovery of Guinevere's affair, the battle between Mordred—another of Gawain's brothers—and Arthur, and ultimately Arthur's death. In addition to specific Arthurian sources, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and the French *Perclesvau*, among others, also inspired Malory's work. By collecting, combining, and abbreviating the stories from various sources, Malory produced a single compilation of Arthurian legends.

Of course, Malory did more in this classic work than simply copy sources. He adapted texts and brought together different of Arthurian legends and sources to create a work that is wholly

unique. For instance, unlike most of the Arthurian romances, Malory's narrative is written in prose rather than verse. In addition, certain elements of the text have no known sources and are purely Malory's creation. Indeed, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* has often been credited as being the first English novel ever printed, and his text has served as an inspiration for much of the Arthurian tradition as it is known today. Works from Alfred Tennyson's collection of Arthurian poems in *Idylls of the King* and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, to *Camelot* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* were inspired by Malory's version of the King Arthur tale.

The text of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, translated as *The Death of Arthur* in modern English, has been passed down from two sources: a 1485 version published by England's first printer, William Caxton, and a manuscript discovered at Winchester College in 1934. The Caxton version divided Malory's eight tales into twenty-one books. The latter manuscript, published in 1947 as *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, divided the tale into five books.

Little is known about Malory besides what he reveals about himself in his text. He wrote the manuscript while imprisoned for various crimes; in fact, what little is known about his life seems to be directly opposed to the golden ideal of chivalry that his work promoted. However, regardless of Malory's personal indiscretions, his story has met with much critical success since its publication over five hundred years ago.

Regarded as the most extensive and influential telling of Arthurian legend, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* provides a complete history of the Arthurian world. His story includes not only the birth and death of Arthur himself, but also individual histories of some of the most prominent knights of the Round Table. Indeed, although the book gets its title from the legendary King Arthur, who is the central figure

of the text, much of the book focuses on the famous knights who belong to the fellowship of the Round Table. As separate tales themselves, or interwoven with other tales, the stories of knights such as Lancelot, Tristram, Galahad, Gawain, Mordred, Bors, Palomides, and Lamorak are at the center of much of Malory's account. Malory also includes information about Merlin, the wizard who helped train and advise Arthur, as well as details about the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the romance of Tristram and Isolde, and a comprehensive account of the religious quest for the Holy Grail that the Knights of the Round Table pursue.

Overall, *Le Morte d'Arthur* can be viewed as a narrative of knightly adventure and quests undertaken to defend the chivalric code. The text celebrates the life of King Arthur and the chivalric ideals of his knights, and also chronicles the tragic collapse of those ideals through disloyalty and treason.

## PLOT SUMMARY

### **Book I**

*Le Morte d'Arthur* begins with King Uther Pendragon falling in love with the Duke of Tintagel's wife Igraine. The wizard Merlin helps Uther seduce Igraine by disguising him as the duke. The scheme works; King Uther and Igraine conceive Arthur and the real duke is killed. King Uther and Igraine are married, and upon Arthur's birth Merlin takes the baby away to be fostered by Sir Ector.

Meanwhile Uther dies, causing discord in the realm. Merlin invites the warring lords to London, where they find a mysterious sword in a stone, with the words "Whoso pulleth this sword out of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England." Many attempt the feat but all fail. Sir Ector, his son Kay, and Arthur come to London on New Year's Day. Arthur sees the sword in the stone and

removes it with ease. Arthur is eventually made king and establishes the court of Camelot.

After becoming king, Arthur fights three battles, enlisting the help of two knights, Bors and Ban, to aid in his success. Arthur then travels with Bors and Ban to defend King Leodegrance against King Roncevalles. After parting from Bors and Ban, Arthur sleeps with King Lot's wife Morgause, who unbeknownst to him is his half sister. They conceive the child Mordred, and Merlin warns Arthur that Mordred will be the cause of his destruction. Eventually Arthur comes to the Lady of the Lake; she gives him Excalibur, a powerful sword. Arthur has all babies born on May Day, including Mordred, sent away.

## **Book II**

Book II begins with the appearance of a mysterious damsel, or young unmarried woman, in Camelot. She has a sword in a scabbard that can only be pulled out by a great knight. Sir Balin succeeds at removing the sword, but then he is warned that sorrow will befall him. Meanwhile the Lady of the Lake comes to court, and Balin kills her in retribution for her having killed Balin's mother, which upsets Arthur. To appease Arthur, Balin and his brother Balan attack King Roncevalles, who yields to the two brothers. King Nero is angered by this assault and attacks Arthur in turn, but Arthur triumphs.

Balin next arrives at King Pellam's court and injures the king. Balin attempts to journey onward but is told he may not pass until he jousts with a local knight. The knight turns out to be Balin's brother Balan, but Balin does not recognize him. They kill each other in the joust, and Merlin buries them together. He leaves Balin's scabbard at their tomb, and puts the sword that Balin had removed into a block of marble in the river.

## BIOGRAPHY

### *Sir Thomas Malory*

Details of Sir Thomas Malory's life are uncertain, but evidence indicates that he came from Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, England. While the exact year of his birth is unknown—it was probably sometime between 1405 and 1420—most sources agree that he died in March of 1471. Although the details of Malory's personal life are obscure, records indicate that a Thomas Malory was knighted in 1441 and held various public offices until 1450.

Sometime after 1450 Malory apparently turned to a life of lawlessness. He was imprisoned for an assortment of crimes ranging from extortion to attempted assassination. Early in the text of *Le Morte d'Arthur* the author refers to himself as a knight prisoner, and one of the few certainties regarding him is that he wrote the book while he was in prison.

Whatever the exact details of Malory's life, it is clear that the politics of the time profoundly affected the creation of his text. Malory lived during the War of the Roses, a time of much political strife between two royal houses fighting for control of England. The personal rivalries and political disintegration of Malory's era clearly influenced his interpretation of Arthurian legend.

### **Book III**

Arthur courts a young noblewoman named Guinevere. Her father, King Leodegrance, gives Arthur the Round Table and a hundred knights. Meanwhile, Merlin explains the significance of the Siege Perilous, the one seat at the Round Table that will kill any who sits in it except a chosen knight whose identity is yet unknown.

Arthur and Guinevere are married. During their wedding feast a white hart, or male deer, bounds through the banquet hall pursued by hunting hounds. After the deer runs from the hall, Merlin tells Arthur that he must see that this adventure is brought to an end. Arthur sends Sir Gawain out to bring back the white hart.

Sir Gawain and his brother Gaheris, outfitted with greyhounds, chase the hart into a castle. The greyhounds kill the hart, and in turn, a knight emerges and kills two of the greyhounds. Gawain and the knight fight, but Gawain accidentally slays the knight's lady instead. Guinevere thus determines that in the future Gawain must always defend ladies, and the tale ends with Arthur giving his knights the orders of chivalry.

## **Book IV**

Merlin falls in love with Neneide, a damsel of the lake. Old and knowing that he will not be around much longer, Merlin warns Arthur of various future events, emphasizing that Arthur must keep his sword and scabbard with him at all times. Neneide leaves Camelot and Merlin follows her until she imprisons him in a rock.

In the meantime Arthur, King Uriens, and Sir Accolon go hunting and happen upon a ship where they are offered lodging. It turns out to be a trap set by Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister, in an attempt to have him killed. She switches his sword, Excalibur, with a brittle counterfeit and gives Excalibur to Arthur's opponent. The opponent, unbeknownst to Arthur, is Sir Accolon. Arthur survives the trap and reclaims Excalibur but loses his magic scabbard. Fearing the further treason of Morgan, Arthur sends her son Sir Uwain out of his court. Sir Uwain's cousin Sir Gawain leaves with him. The adventures of Uwain, Gawain, and their companion Marhault last until the end of the year, when they receive word that Arthur wants them to return to the Round Table.

## **Book V**

At least twenty-five years have passed since the end of Book IV, and the tale begins with the arrival of messengers from Emperor Lucius in Rome demanding tribute, a type of tax or tribute. Arthur refuses and the Romans respond by gathering an army against him. Arthur assembles his fleet and his entire army to meet them in battle, pausing only long enough to have a prophetic dream about his future and to slay a giant that has been tormenting the area. A battle ensues between Arthur's knights and the Romans. Arthur slays the emperor, and is eventually crowned Emperor of Rome himself. However, he and his men become homesick and return to England.

## **Book VI**

Book VI is concerned with the adventures of Sir Lancelot, who is introduced as a great knight and Queen Guinevere's love. Accompanied by his nephew Sir Lionel, Lancelot leaves Arthur's court seeking adventure. While sleeping he is captured by four queens, including Morgan le Fay, who try to seduce him. He is ultimately rescued by King Bagdemagus's daughter. He agrees to fight on behalf of her father in a tournament, which he wins.

After the tournament Lancelot learns that a knight named Sir Tarquin has captured sixty-four of Arthur's knights and imprisoned them. He triumphs against Sir Tarquin and frees the knights. Lancelot then helps various damsels by killing an unchivalrous knight, slaying two evil giants, and healing Sir Merliot. After other adventures, including battling knights of the Round Table while disguised, rescuing Sir Kay, and narrowly escaping a trap set by Sir Phelot, Lancelot returns to Camelot to tell of his adventures.

## **Book VII**

A nameless man arrives in Camelot, asking Arthur for three gifts; the first is food and lodging for a year, after which he will ask for the other two. The man is christened Beaumains (Fair Hands) by Kay, and spends the year working in the kitchen. When the year is up, a damosel arrives asking for help to fight against the Red Knight. Beaumains asks for his final two gifts: first, he wishes to go on this adventure, and second, he wishes to be made a knight by Lancelot. Arthur agrees.

The damosel is unhappy about being accompanied by a simple kitchen worker. Beaumains (who is really Sir Gareth of Orkney, Sir Gawain's brother) performs numerous feats, including nearly beating Lancelot and defeating numerous knights, before the damosel finally stops insulting him. Ultimately he defeats the Red Knight and saves the damosel's sister Lyonesse, whom he marries.

## **Book VIII**

Book VIII begins the tale of Tristram, nephew of King Mark of Cornwall. Tristram kills Sir Marhault of Ireland and receives a serious wound that can only be healed by going to Ireland. In Ireland, disguised as Tramtris, Tristram is lodged and healed by the king (Marhault's brother) and queen, whose daughter is La Belle Isode. However, Tristram's true identity is discovered and he returns home.

Tristram eventually returns to Ireland to retrieve Isode so that she can marry King Mark. On the return trip, Tristram and Isode both unwittingly drink a potion that causes them to fall in love. Mark marries Isode, but Tristram performs various feats of bravery for her, including rescuing her from Sir Palomides. Eventually Mark discovers that Tristram and Isode are lovers. Tristram escapes, but Isode is kept by the king. Tristram is wounded by a man in the forest, but since he cannot be healed by his Isode, he is told to

travel to Brittany and seek help from Isode la Blanche Mains. Though his heart always remains with La Belle Isode, Tristram marries Isode la Blanche Mains at the request of her father, King Howell.

## **Book IX**

This book continues the tale of Tristram, telling of his return to Cornwall to see La Belle Isode. It narrates his further adventures with Sir Lamorak and Palomides and tells of his being driven mad from believing Isode loves another. Tristram disappears for a time and everyone believes he is dead. While away, Tristram slays a giant and is discovered by King Mark's men. Not recognizing him, the men take him back to the king's court. When King Mark realizes Tristram is indeed alive, he banishes him.

Tristram arrives in England accompanied by Sir Dinadan. Once there, Tristram is involved in several battles with other knights and proves his worth as a great knight to all, including Lancelot, who continually praises him.

## **Book X**

In the final section devoted to Tristram, King Mark travels to England with plans to kill Tristram. Mark's plan is discovered, and King Arthur asks him to treat Tristram with respect. King Mark agrees, and he takes Tristram back to Cornwall with him so that Tristram may again see La Belle Isode.

The story briefly digresses to tell of Sir Lamorak: his lineage and his affair with the Queen of Orkney. When their affair is discovered by the queen's son Gaheris, the enraged Gaheris kills his own mother.

Meanwhile, King Mark again tries to have Tristram killed during a tournament. When that fails the king accosts Tristram while sleeping

and imprisons him. Tristram escapes with La Belle Isode to England, where he learns that Agravain and Gaheris have killed Lamorak. Tristram battles with the two to avenge Lamorak, but lets them go with minor injuries out of respect for King Arthur. Eventually Tristram and his enemy Palomides make peace, but when Tristram learns Palomides is still in love with Isode, that peace vanishes. The tale ends with Tristram receiving honor and glory equal to or greater than that of Lancelot.

## **Book XI**

A hermit comes to Arthur's court predicting that within the year, the person chosen to sit in the Siege Perilous will be born. Through deceit and enchantment, Lancelot sleeps with King Pelles's daughter Elaine and thus conceives Galahad, who it is believed will one day find the Sangrail, or Holy Grail. Guinevere becomes angry with Lancelot because of his infidelity and Lancelot runs away, mad with grief. Many knights from Arthur's court travel in search of Lancelot, but to no avail. The tale ends after Sir Ector and Percival, who have almost fatally wounded each other, are both revived and healed by a maiden who offers them each a drink from the Sangrail.

## **Book XII**

After leaving King Arthur's court, Lancelot wanders the countryside, surviving on whatever food he can find. During this period he has various experiences while living with Sir Bliant and Sir Selivant, and spends time, unrecognized, as a fool in King Pelles's court. Elaine recognizes Lancelot, and he is taken to the tower where the Sangrail is kept. He drinks from it and recovers from his madness. At first, Lancelot is too ashamed to return to Arthur and lives for a while as Le Chevalier Mal Fet (The Knight who has Trespassed); he is finally discovered by Percival and Ector and returns home.

The next part of this book returns to the story of Tristram. Tristram is on his way to a feast at Camelot in honor of Lancelot's return when he comes across Palomides. Tristram is not armed, so he borrows the armor of Sir Galleron, the knight Palomides had injured before his arrival, and Tristram and Palomides fight. Palomides yields, again makes peace with Tristram, and together they go to the feast.

### **Book XIII**

This tale marks the beginning of the quest for the Sangrail. Lancelot is taken away from Arthur's court to make a knight of Galahad, who is now a young man. Meanwhile, a sword appears in the water near Camelot. (This is the sword of Balin, put there by Merlin in Book II.) Galahad comes to Arthur's court, takes his rightful place in the Siege Perilous, and recovers the sword. The Sangrail makes a brief appearance to the Knights of the Round Table, all of whom vow to leave on quests to seek the object.

Galahad rides off in search of the Grail and comes to an abbey where he is given a shield. He next goes to the Castle of Maidens and frees the place of its evil customs through battle. The knights Gawain, Uwain, and Gareth are depressed because they cannot find any adventures to pursue. They separate, and Gawain encounters a hermit who tells him he is too wicked to achieve the Grail. The book ends with Lancelot learning that he also is too wicked for the Grail quest, because he has battled not for God, but for Guinevere.

### **Book XIV**

Next the tale turns to Percival. Percival comes to a monastery where he sees the four-hundred-year-old King Evelake, who has bargained to live until he sees the knight who shall reclaim the Holy Grail. Percival departs and battles twenty men; he is saved by

Galahad, who leaves immediately afterward. Percival then has an unusual dream. Soon after, a white ship arrives, carrying a priest who explains Percival's dream. Following that ship's departure a black ship arrives, carrying a lady who promises to take him to Galahad in return for a favor. The woman attempts to seduce Percival, but he rejects her advances and preserves his virginity.

## **Book XV**

The story turns back to Lancelot as he leaves the hermit. Lancelot meets a man who gives him the hair of a dead priest to wear, and tells him to avoid flesh and wine and to hear mass daily. All this must be done for Lancelot to have any hope of seeing the Grail. Lancelot then travels on, and he has a dream that he is told signifies his genealogy connects him with Joseph of Arimathea, the famous disciple of Jesus who is believed to be responsible for bringing Christianity to England.

Lancelot happens upon a tournament between black and white knights; he helps the black knights because they are weaker and their victory would therefore bring him greater honor, but he is beaten. He comes across a woman who explains to him that the tournament was a sign from God. The black knights represent the sinful seekers of the Grail, and he aided the sinners because of his pride. He is reminded again to live better, and as he leaves he meets a man in black who kills his horse.

## **Book XVI**

Ector and Gawain meet, complaining to each other about their lack of adventures. They come to a chapel where they have strange dreams. After awakening, they hear a voice that tells them they will never achieve the Grail because they are not holy enough. Gawain battles and kills fellow knight Uwain. While they bury him, a hermit

explains the dreams, saying that only Percival, Galahad, and Bors are pure enough to claim the Grail.

The tale turns to Bors, who meets a man who tells him what is required to achieve the Grail. Bors then aids a lady in regaining her lands. After this, Bors sees his brother, Lionel, and a damosel, both in need; he helps the damosel. Next, Bors comes to a woman who threatens his purity, but he avoids the trap. Bors runs into Lionel again, who tries to kill him. Bors flees, arriving at a white boat with Percival inside.

## **Book XVII**

Galahad meets with Bors and Percival. Together they free Earl Hennox from evil knights, after which they meet up with a maid who is Percival's sister. They come to a castle where Percival's sister dies from giving up a silver tray of her blood, as is the custom of the castle. Before dying she asks to be put on a boat that will arrive at the holy place of the Grail. After this, the three knights separate.

Lancelot and Galahad meet on the boat, spending half a year together before parting. Lancelot arrives at a castle where he manages to partially see the Grail, but he is left unconscious. After he awakens, he returns to Camelot and tells Arthur of his adventures.

Galahad meets Evelake, and Evelake dies after the two embrace. Then Galahad meets with Bors and Percival, and with the Maimed King (Pellam) they come to the castle where they see the Grail. After healing Pellam, the three knights leave with the Grail, traveling to the holy land of Sarras as divinely instructed. Ultimately, Galahad dies after clearly seeing the Grail, Percival dies in a hermitage a year later, and Bors returns to Camelot to tell of the adventure.

## **Book XVIII**

Despite his religious experiences while searching for the Sangrail, Lancelot again resumes his affair with Guinevere. The pair is the subject of much court gossip, especially from Sir Agravaine, Sir Gawain's brother. Lancelot tells Guinevere that they should be more discreet, and that he will therefore give attention to other damosels. Guinevere feels betrayed and tells Lancelot to leave Camelot.

Guinevere arranges a dinner for the Knights of the Round Table, to show that she does not favor Lancelot above any of them. The vengeful knight Sir Pinel poisons an apple intended for Gawain, but it is eaten by Sir Patrise instead, who dies. Patrise's cousin Sir Mador blames the queen for the death, since she arranged the dinner, and demands justice. Since Lancelot has left the court, Sir Bors agrees to fight Sir Mador on behalf of Guinevere. On the day of the fight, a disguised Lancelot replaces Sir Bors and overcomes Sir Mador in battle.

Afterward, Nenive, the damosel of the lake, appears at Camelot and reveals the true murderer of Sir Patrise. Sir Pinel, exposed, flees the kingdom.

Lancelot becomes involved in a tournament in which he disguises himself by wearing a damosel's token to fight against Arthur. He is injured in the tournament and Guinevere is angered that he wore another's token. Once he heals, Lancelot involves himself in various other tournaments. Mean while, the damosel whose token he wore dies from sorrow because she cannot have Lancelot.

## **Book XIX**

Guinevere is captured by Sir Meligruant, who is in love with her. Lancelot hears word of the kidnapping and frees her, but spares

Meligruant's life. Lancelot sneaks into Guinevere's chamber to spend the night with her, but cuts his hand while entering her window. Meligruant enters and spies Lancelot's blood on the queen's bed. He charges the queen with treason for being unfaithful to King Arthur. Lancelot defends Guinevere against the charge by battling and killing Meligruant. The tale ends with Lancelot healing the injured knight Urry.

## **Book XX**

This tale begins the fall of the Round Table. The problems arise when Agravaine catches Lancelot and Guinevere in adultery. Lancelot fights his way out of the situation and, knowing that his actions could lead to civil war, begins to recruit knights to his cause. Meanwhile Mordred informs Arthur of what has been discovered and charges the queen with treason. Guinevere's punishment is to be burned at the stake, but before this can happen Lancelot rides in to rescue her. Lancelot and Guinevere go to Joyous Gard, Lancelot's castle. Arthur arrives at Joyous Gard, and their armies battle. Eventually they receive a papal order ending the battle and forcing Lancelot to return Guinevere. Lancelot then travels to France pursued by Arthur, who leaves Mordred in charge at home. Gawain and Lancelot battle repeatedly, until Arthur hears news from home that forces him to return.

## **Book XXI**

While Arthur is in France, Mordred usurps the throne. He manages to persuade many to take his side, and when Arthur returns home a great battle ensues. Before his death, Gawain writes to Lancelot asking him for help to save Arthur, but before Lancelot can arrive another battle begins. Arthur inflicts a deadly wound on Mordred, but not before receiving one himself.

Near death, Arthur has one of his knights, Bedivere, return Excalibur to the lake where Arthur received it. A mysterious barge filled with fair maidens appears and takes Arthur away by sea. Bedivere arrives at a hermitage, where he moves in to pray over a body that is likely Arthur's. Meanwhile, Lancelot finally arrives to find that Guinevere has become a nun upon hearing of Arthur's death. Lancelot himself becomes a monk and dies six years later. The story ends with Sir Constantine of Cornwall being made the new king of England.