

Arthurian Tales in English Literature through the Ages

Literary cycles are collection of stories grouped around common figures based on mythical or historic characters. Arthurian tales is one such famed literary cycle; the stories revolve around King Arthur, Sir Lancelot and Guinevere, adventures of Knights of the Round Table, magic of Morgan le Faye and Merlin, and medieval notions of chivalry and courtly love. The purpose of this essay is to trace the development of the Arthurian cycle in literary works studied as part of the E 316K (Masterworks of Literature: British) coursework.

The first step is to track the beginnings and early accounts of the legend before venturing into a group analysis of specific works. The earliest historical source for the literature of Arthurian legends can be traced back to c. 540 mention of an Arthur carrying the cross of Jesus on his shoulders, by Saint Gildas - a British historian and a Welsh monk. There are several subsequent shady references to Arthur such as a mighty warrior in the Welsh poem 'Gododdin' (c. 600), and as a Celtic warrior victorious over the Saxon invaders twelve times in Nennius' historical work 'Historia Britonum.'

However, the first significant work to introduce the figure of Arthur into European literature was the Medieval British chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Historia Regum Britanniae' (c.1139) - a mostly fictional history of the kings of Britain tracing the descent of the British princes to the Trojans. We get details about Arthur's conception and his marriage to Guinevere from this material. Additionally, elements of chivalric romance including Arthur's Round Table and the magical sword Excalibur were infused into the legend through the Anglo-Norman poet Wace's two verse chronicle 'Roman de Brut' (c. 1155).

The first account in the English language of Arthur and his knights was in Middle English poet Layamon's romance-chronicle the 'Brut' (c. 1200). It was modeled on Wace's work and paints one of the first pictures of Arthur as a national hero. To supplement to the military and bravery figure, the 12th century French poet Chrétien de Troyes' five romances 'Erec,' 'Cligés,' 'Lancelot,' 'Yvain,' and 'Perceval' (c. 1165-80) combined the adventures of the knights of King Arthur's court into interconnected stories. As a matter of fact, these earliest surviving Arthurian romances which were based on the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth also initiated the quest for the Holy Grail in addition to the character Lancelot and location Camelot into an Arthurian tale.

Thus owing to the scarcity of historical fact on Arthur, leader of Britons, much of the material existing today has been invented by the afore-mentioned historians, chroniclers and poets. Although no significant medieval Arthurian literature was produced on the Continent after 1225, the legend continued to flourish in England. This literary convention had captured popular imagination. These conventions and traditions have since then been continued in stories and poems of the Medieval ages and then again in the Victorian age. The accounts have sometimes been expanded, other times been condensed or otherwise altered giving rise to numerous versions and manifestations of the legend of King Arthur and his court at Camelot. The prose and poems read this term and discussed in this paper are in chronological order as follows.

Marie de France's 'Lanval' is a short narrative poem in verse written sometime between 1154 and 1189. 'Lanval' is an example of Anglo-Norman Literature of the Middle Ages. The arrangement is eight-syllable couplets, standard form of French narrative verse employed also by the author's probable contemporaries Wace and Chrétien de Troyes. This was a period before Arthur

became an English hero; stories about him and his knights originating in Celtic poems and tales were being adapted and greatly expanded in Latin chronicles and French romances. While *Lanval* is part of the Arthurian tradition found in Geoffrey of Monmouth (i.e. in terms of the period in which it was written), it offers a critical view of the Arthurian state of affairs, often bordering on disparaging. The battle triumphs of King Arthur are mentioned only in passing while concentrating on erotic fantasies and petty human emotions like jealousy (other knights' envy of *Lanval* for his "handsomeness" and "courage"). Several actions and traditions are called into question in the 650 line poem. For example, one is forced to contemplate what sort of noble king gives his knights "wives" as a fee along with land. Moreover, the courtly king's generosity is not universal as it does not extend to *Lanval*.

"Wives and land he gave in fee
To knights who served in his meiny,
Except for one: that was *Lanval*,"
(*Lanval*, lines 17 to 20)

Arthur's "noble baronage" is lacking in nobility of heart and is portrayed as patronizing politicians when during *Lanval*'s judgment, "some were willing to condemn" *Lanval* obliging Arthur, who in turn was a mere puppet to his queen's whims. The close male bonding of the chivalric knights is given a radically different perspective when Guinevere accuses *Lanval* of homosexual urges, (lines 275-280). Many critics are of the opinion however that since the author is a lady, it justifies the poem's motif of increased power of women over men.

The second piece is 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,' composed by an unknown poet in c. 1375-1400 and one of the finest Middle English romances in alliterative verse (same form as Layamon's 'Brut'). In this poem, Arthur is still a youth (perhaps younger than *Lanval*'s Arthur), Sir Lancelot a mere name in his list of knights, and Sir Gawain epitomizes the first blooming of Arthurian chivalry. The

Gawain poet subscribes to Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of Brutus founding Britain. Thus this Arthurian romance links fourteenth century England to Rome, a centre of classical antiquity. The knights herein are "gentle" and "rightful brothers" with no undercurrents of jealousy and enmity as in 'Lanval.' The tenets of courtly love and chivalry are depicted as noble worthy ideals without the negative eye of Marie de France. Sir Gawain's adulterous affair with the Green Knight's lady describes the delicate matter of a lady's teasing carnal desires and knightly restraint. In fact, this tight-rope scenario already applied in Chrétien de Troyes' romances will soon become a common source for parody of courtly flirtations. The verse also hints toward another future common motif - Morgan le Faye's traditional hatred for Arthur and his court. The Green Knight, in Part 4 of the poem admits that Gawain's misadventures have been caused "through the might of Morgan le Faye," (line 2246). Many subsequent versions of Arthurian legend portray Morgan, the evil sorceress as the enemy of the Round Table and a major player in Camelot's downfall.

What follows is perhaps the last important medieval work dealing with the Arthurian legend; 'Morte Darthur' (Death of Arthur) was the title given by the first English printer William Caxton to Sir Thomas Malory's retelling in the terse and direct prose style completed in c. 1469-70. This masterpiece was published 100 years after 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and 300 years after 'Lanval.' It is believed that Sir Thomas Malory found the 'Wars of the Roses,' the civil strife between the houses of Lancaster and York a fitting context within which to recount the Arthurian saga of a kingdom united and subsequently torn apart. The tone is wistful and often elegiac perhaps to highlight the loss of a unity in a once great state. Much of the tragic power of his romance lies in his sense of the irretrievability of past glory in comparison with the sorry state of his own period. The chapters from the omnibus we

focused on were 'The Conspiracy against Lancelot and Guinevere,' 'War breaks out between Arthur and Lancelot,' and 'The Death of Arthur.' Whilst the pitfalls of adultery and courtly love depicted are similar to 'Morte Darthur's' predecessors (Malory's "French books" or the Prose Vulgate Cycle), Malory seems to cherish an aristocratic male code of honor wherein men win or lose "worship" through their actions in love and war. However Sir Thomas Malory seems to favor Sir Lancelot and not King Arthur as the true hero of the drama. Clearly by this time, Lancelot seems to have gained popularity with respect to Sir Gawain. Even Lancelot's betraying Arthur's trust in having an affair with the latter's queen carries tones of innocence, "for love that time was not as love is nowadays." It is true that Arthur was not much of a heroic figure in either 'Lanval' or 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' but in those cases all the men were portrayed with a similar failing. In contrast, Malory downplays Arthur giving Sir Lancelot the highest or noblest character traits.

In the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser's exuberant multifaceted allegorical poem 'The Faerie Queen' (c. 1590) features Prince Arthur – the future king of Britain whose story runs through all the six books. Clearly, Spenser's Arthur, though not playing the most significant role in the action, is truly heroic, in a quest for the Faerie Queen and rescuing the Redcrosse Knight in Book I. Spenser also attempts to connect the line of his favored monarch Queen Elizabeth with that of King Arthur by narrating Arthur's lineage in a deliberately vague fashion. It is also believed that Arthur is likened to a Christ-like figure in Spenser's allegory. This is in direct disparity with the previous three literary pieces when Arthur is more of a figure-head or a has-been hero. 'The Faerie Queen's' Arthur is the legendary embodiment of valor, trained by the powerful magician Merlin.

Through the ages, especially during fifteenth, sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, chivalry was believed to be an ideal code of military and social behavior, implemented in medieval times to civilize the brutal activity of warfare. Sparing non-combatants, gentlemanly contests or jousts, brotherhood in arms and other manners of polite society and courtly love were some of its components. Courtly love specifically is often believed to be a literary convention giving rise to modern notions of chivalrous romance. The conventions of courtly love are that a knight of noble blood would adore and worship a young noble-woman from afar, seeking to protect her honor and win her favor by valorous deeds. He typically falls ill with love-sickness, while the woman chastely or scornfully rejects or refuses his advances in public but privately encourages him. Thus courtly love was associated with nobility, secrecy, adultery and paradoxically with chastity, since the passion is never meant to be consummated. However, in almost all the literature, such high ideals expected of the noble Arthurian knights are not kept by the characters, who give in to their passions with serious often tragic results. We see the consequence in 'Lanval' when the knight refuses Guinevere's advances and is straightaway tried for disrespect. In 'Sir Gawain' and 'Morte Darthur' Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot indulge in their passions for the lady of the Green Knight and Queen Guinevere respectively ultimately leading to sad plights. In the first case, Sir Gawain is forced to hide the green girdle consequently making him face the human failings. In the latter case, a whole glorious kingdom declines. This imagery of unrequited love and love from afar continued to fuel future literary pieces through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the Romantic period, even though there was a visible lack of Arthurian literature. Shakespeare's sonnets often emphasize this particular idea. Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of The Lock' parodies the mentality of giving an opposite appearance of what one actually

desires. Eliza Haywood's 'Fantomina' shows the efforts of a lady as a result of unrequited love and Beauplaisir's inability to freely converse with a high class lady.

There is no doubt about the distinct paucity in direct dealings with the Arthur subject. Even John Milton rejected the theme for his grand epic poem and instead composed the heroic versed 'Paradise Lost.'

The re-emergence of literary interest in King Arthur and his knights can be found in one of the most popular poet of the Victorian Age – Alfred, Lord Tennyson's story-poem 'The Lady of Shalott' (1831-32) and the large scale epic 'Idylls of the King' (1859).

All these compositions can be classified into two categories, the first wherein Arthur is the central character and the plot revolves around him and the second portraying his knights while Arthur functions merely as a figure-head or a contextual backdrop. 'Morte Darthur' and 'Idylls of the King' clearly fall in the first category while the remaining pieces fit in the second slot. Tennyson's account is morbid and more fatalistic than Malory's. Perhaps this conveys the times of the poet when industrialization and political circumstance proved very difficult. Tennyson's version is of a moral and ethical rather than a wistful tone. His detailed narration of Sir Bedivere's throwing the Excalibur in the waters while Arthur lies wounded is in stark contrast with Malory's quick brush through of the events. Tennyson describes the motivations behind the knight's failings the first two times. This reflects the increase in understanding behind the human mind and Freudian psychology which separates Lord Tennyson and Malory's times.

As far as the content of each Arthurian literary piece is concerned, the writing reflects some element of the author and the period in which it was written, while adhering to a few universal constituents of an Arthurian yarn. Nevertheless, there are

two constants which will be found throughout all the subsequent versions and manifestations of Arthurian tales; first commonality being the character of Sir Gawain. Even after Sir Lancelot gains the reputation to be the foremost Arthurian knight in later versions of the legend, Arthur's nephew remains "brave and sincere" whom everybody trusts and "holds dear," (lines 225-226). Sir Gawain is sometimes portrayed as Arthur's conscience, who visits him in dreams to warn of grave mishaps. The second feature is the tradition of courtly love and chivalrous romance, the flip side of which appears to be Guinevere's infidelity.

The Arthurian cycle has thus evolved into great legendary piece which has been constantly portrayed in movies and contemporary novels.
