CHAPTER II

ARTHURIAN LEGENDS
KING ARTHUR

Who was King Arthur? Was he a real or mythical personage? Who spun the yarn of the Table Round or is it based on historical facts? A tremendous amount of research has been conducted in recent years individually as well as in collaboration to answer these queries. In spite of it all, our knowledge about the central figure of this romance is still very limited, shrouded as it is in the thick haze of several centuries.

The legend of King Arthur appears to be of Celtic origin though there is some diversion of opinion on this point. J. L. Weston,\(^1\) supported by John Speirs,\(^2\) casts doubt on its

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1 J.L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge, 1920)
Celtic origin and suggests that its original source is the ritual of the Ancient Greek world and it is only superficially Celtic. R. S. Loomis, on the other hand, on the basis of explicit evidence proves that it belongs originally to Celtic folk-lore.

The historicity of King Arthur lies beyond the scope of the present work which is mainly concerned with tracing the evolution of the legend through the existing literature. The fullest apparent historical reference to Arthur is contained in the fifth and sixth chapters of Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* according to which he might have been born in the year 465 A.D. Two more historical references to Arthur are recorded in the *Annales Cambriæ*, the oldest extant MS of which was compiled probably around 950. The first entry, under the year 516, runs:

The battle of Badon, in which Arthur bore the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ three days and three nights on his shoulders, and the Britons were victorious

and the second, 537, 'The Battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell'. 'There may have been a Supreme British

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Commander of genius in the late fifth century who bore the
Roman-derived name of Arthur, though it would be wrong to
deduce anything about his background from the name.\(^5\)
He fought the Picts and the Britons reaching the heyday of
his career around 500 A.D. His deeds of prowess were sung
of in the traditional Welsh oral literature. Nennius
summarised the Welsh tradition in Latin. The process of
involvement of this historical general in popular stories
and his resultant glorification had already set in. The
humble Arthur of history was well set for transformation
into an elfin king of miraculous powers.

In early Welsh verse, references are made to Arthur as
a leader of a band of wonderful monster-slaying heroes. In
Culhwch, Arthur playfully cuts the Black witch into two to
get her bleed. One of the Triads tells us how he killed the
destructive monster, 'Palug’s Cat'. An early poem, The
Spoils of Annwn\(^6\), describes a disastrous expedition
undertaken by Arthur and his men in his ship Prydwen to a
certain city representing Annwn, the Celtic Otherworld,
from which only seven men returned. Another poem, Culhwch

\(^5\) Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, 'The Arthur of History',
Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R. S.

\(^6\) The Book of Taliesin, no. xxx.
and Olwen, is only a euphemistic version of Arthur's expedition to Annwfn, Ireland.  

Myths and legends, facts and fiction, get intertwined as Arthur rises in stature and draws to himself not only the legends of historic persons but also the mythic heritage of Irish and British isles. The true Arthur fades in the twilight of myth and there emerges the glorious King Arthur surrounded by men of astounding wizardry and martial prowess second only to himself. The earliest of knights to be associated with Arthur are Cai (Kay), the Seneschal, and Bedwyr (Bedivere), the butler. Both of them are inseparable and are great champions of King Arthur. They fall together in the battle against the Roman empire.

Vain were it to boast against Kei in battle; when from a horn he drank, he drank as much as four men; when he came into battle, he slew as would an hundred; unless it were God's doing, Kei's death would be unachieved —

such were the fantastic tales told by the bards about Arthur and his men.

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Norman Wace rightly summed up:

The tales of Arthur are not all lies nor all true. So much have the story-tellers (cunteur) told and so much have the makers of fables (fableur) fabled to embellish their stories that they have made everything seem a fable.

The credit of retrieving the figure of Arthur from the haze of myths and of transforming him overnight into a national hero of unquestioned integrity for at least a few centuries to come, goes to Geoffrey of Mormouth. Taking a hint from Nennius's story, he makes Arthur a direct descendant of King Brutus who gave Britain its name. Not only that, in the first six books of his Historia Regum Britanniae, he tells a complete story of King Arthur's predecessors. After devoting one book to the weird figure of Merlin, he passes on to the military exploits of King Arthur.

With the help of Merlin's magic acts, King Uther enters the Castle of Igrerna in the guise of her husband, Gorlois and begets Arthur who succeeds to the throne at the young age of fifteen. He at once embarks upon his career of conquests. He subjugates not only the Saxons, Scots, and Picts but even

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Ireland, Norway and Denmark. He invades and conquers Gaul, and the climax is reached when he humiliates Lucius Hiberus, Emperor of Rome. Having established peace in the country and restored it to its old glory, Arthur, 'took unto himself a wife born of a noble Roman family, Guanhumara, who, brought up and nurtured in the household of duke Cador, surpassed in beauty all the other women of the island.'

His court, now attracts not the fantastic warriors of earlier times but nobles and barons from Western Europe. The 'Kingly palaces' of Caerleon-upon-Usk vie in magnificence with those of Rome itself.

'At that time was Britain exalted unto so high a pitch of dignity as that it did surpass all other kingdoms in plenty of riches, in luxury of adornment, and in the courteous wit of them that dwelt therein. . . . And the dames no less witty, would apparel them in like manner in a single colour, nor would they deign have the love of any save he had thrice approved him in the wars. Wherefore at that time did dames, wax chaste and knights the nobler for their love.'

Since such a great hero as Arthur could not be conceived as falling except by treachery, so Geoffrey introduced Modred. When Arthur marches to Rome to avenge the fall of several of his illustrious chieftains, his treacherous nephew Mordred declares himself the king and marries Guinevere.

11 Historia Regum Britanniae, Bk. IX, Ch. XI.
Arthur returns home, and in the final battle fought on the bank of river Camel, Mordred is defeated and slain and, 'even the renowned King Arthur himself was wounded unto death, and was borne thence unto the island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds.'\textsuperscript{13}

It is a known fact that Geoffrey of Monmouth was no stickler for truth and he created out of his own imagination the greater part of King Arthur's story. William of Newburgh openly denounced him saying that it was he (Geoffrey of Monmouth) who, 'disguised under the honourable name of history, thanks to his Latinity, the fables about Arthur which he took from the ancient fictions of the Britons and increased out of his own head.' 'It was he who made the little finger of Arthur thicker than the loins of Alexander the Great,'\textsuperscript{14} added the same ironic chronicler.

Whatever the case be, it cannot be denied that Geoffrey of Monmouth breathed new life into the story of Arthur making him a national as well as literary hero enabling him thereby to become the centre of the greatest of romantic cycles. In the Mordred and Guinevere episode we find the

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Historia Regum Britanniae}, Bk. X, Ch. XIII.
\textsuperscript{14} William of Newburgh, \textit{Historia Regum Anglicarum}. 
first deliberate suggestion of the love-tragedy which the romancers were quick to seize upon and to expand.  

The next significant contribution to the development of King Arthur's legend is made by the Norman clerk, Wace. In the literature extant, he is the first to mention Arthur's Table. The board was fashioned at Arthur's order to prevent quarrels over precedence. 'At the table they sat on an equality and were served equally... All were seated within the circle and no one was placed outside.' Layamon further embellishes the tradition of the Round Table. He tells how when Arthur was in Cornwall, after a quarrel among his knights, he met a man from overseas who offered 'to make him a board, wondrous fair, at which sixteen hundred men and more might sit'. Though it was so huge, by some magic, it could be carried by Arthur as he rode and set by him wheresoever he willed. Robert de Boron of France in his Merlin adds a new dimension of symbolic significance to the legend of the Round Table. He regards it as a true replica of the table of the Grail fashioned by Joseph of Arimathea, which in turn was a replica of the

16 Wace, Brut ed. Arnold, ii, vss. 9747-60.
17 Layamon, Brut ed. F. Madden (London, 1847), ii, 22, 910 sqq.
table of the Last Supper; and the three tables form a symbol of Trinity. The Round Table thus stands for an ideal of action, for the defence of the church.

As the Matter of Britain passes into the hands of the French romancers, Chrétien De Troyes, Marie De France, the traditional British Arthur departs altogether and we are transported into a 'no man's land' of chivalry. Arthur's court serves just as a convenient meeting place for a moving row

Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go

in quest of adventures which bear hardly any relation to the British King. New themes and new characters are drawn into the orbit of Arthurian tradition, such as those of courtly love and Christian mysticism; the legends of Tristram and Iseult and of Lancelot. The figure of King Arthur starts receding into the background. But before we turn our attention to the growth of other legends that are only superficially connected with the figure of Arthur, it will be useful to go into the legend of Arthur's survival after death which was widely believed in since early days.

The birth and death of all mythical heroes are generally shrouded in mystery perhaps to mark them apart from ordinary mortals and to distinguish them as Superhuman beings.
Layamon tells how, when Arthur was born, 'alven' (fays) took him and bestowed on him three gifts—strength, dominion, and long life. Some say that Arthur, dropped down from Heaven, was washed ashore to the feet of Merlin:

And down the wave and in the flame was borne
A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,
Who stoopd and caught the babe, and cried 'The King!
Here is an heir for Uther.'

It was but natural that such a hero should supersede Death and live on in some mysterious way so as to be able to stage a return at a later date.

There appears to have been a widespread faith in Arthur's survival in Wales, England and Brittany in the medieval period. In the Verses on the Graves, copied in the Black Book of Carmarthen about 1200, we read:

A grave of March, a grave for Guythur, a grave for Gwgaun of the Red Sword; concealed till Doomsday the grave of Arthur.

Since Arthur's grave was nowhere to be found, the ancient ditties prophesied his return. William of Newburgh said

18 Layamon, op.cit., 11.384.
that the Bretons were for the most part such brutes that they still expected Arthur to come again and would not hear of his death.21 It is recorded by Alanus de Insulis in Propheta Anglicana as late as in the second half of the twelfth century that in Brittany a denial of faith in Arthur's return could cost a man his life. Arthur was supposed to have been borne to Avalon by Fay Morgan, and people waited for his return.

Geoffrey of Monmouth in his Vita Merlini (1150) and Guillaume de Rennes in Gesta Regum Britanniae (1235) give elaborate accounts of this blissful isle — of its evergreen vegetation and long-lived denizens, and of its faery mistress who was to heal Arthur's wounds.22 Such was the faith of people in Arthur's return that Henry II, wishing to stifle this hope, induced some monks to do some excavation in a cemetery in Glastonbury which came to be identified with Avalon and to identify the remains as those of Arthur. Yet it did not put a halt to the widespread belief in Arthur's return. Thomas Malory concluding his story of Arthur writes:

Yet some men yet say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu in another place. And men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross.23

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22 Ibid., pp. 256 f.
But cautiously, he adds, 'Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I would say: here in this world he changed his life.'

Attempts at locating the imaginary island of Avalon make interesting study. Many sources, including a poem about Ogier place Avalon in the Far East, a little this side of the Earthly Paradise. A Danish redactor of Ogier drew the natural inference that Avalon was India. It was also identified with Sicily. The author of Floriant et Floreto states that the chief fortress of Morgain was Mongibel, that is, Etna, and that Arthur was destined to be brought there.

In the neighbourhood of Cadbury Castle, in Somerset, country-folk firmly believed till the last century that Arthur lived on under the hill and a party of antiquaries who visited this spot were accosted by an old man: "Have you come to take the king out?" The old track near the camp at Cadbury was called King Arthur's Lane and on rough winter nights, it is recorded by Gervase of Tilbury,

people heard the King and his hounds going for a hunt.\textsuperscript{28}

QUEEN GUINEVERE

The earliest reference to Guinevere (Gwenhwyfar) is found in the Welsh triads in the \textit{Red Book}. Modrawt (Modred) raids Arthur's court at Kelliwic 'and he dragged Queen Gwenhwyfar from her throne and raped her violating the divine law of marriage.'\textsuperscript{29} Two significant Arthurian poems 'Culhwch and Olwen' and \textit{Rhonabwy's Dream} published in the \textit{Mabinogion} by Lady Charlotte Guest make no mention of Queen Guinevere. It is significant because out of the five poems belonging to the Arthurian Orbit in the \textit{Mabinogion}, these two poems appear to be absolutely free from continental or Anglo-Norman contamination.\textsuperscript{30} This does not imply that the character of Guinevere is a later addition of the French romancers to the story of Arthur, although it cannot be denied that it was Chrétien de Troyes who developed it into a full-blooded character in \textit{Lancelot}. There is

\textsuperscript{28} Gervase of Tilbury, \textit{Otia Imperialia}, ed. F. Liebrecht (Hanover, 1856), p. 12.


another Arthurian poem, a so-called dialogue between Arthur and Gwenhwyrfa but Evan Jones rightly asserts it is actually a dialogue between Meleagant (Melwas) and Gwenhwyrfa (Guinevere) because the context is the abduction of Gwenhwyrfa by Melwas. The story resembles too closely the story of abduction in Chrétien’s Lancelot for its influence to be denied.

It is quite probable that the faithlessness of Queen Guinevere was fairly well known even before Chrétien had composed Lancelot. There is an old Welsh rhyme:

Guinevere, Giant Ogurvan’s daughter
Naughty young, more naughty later.

There is, however, no mention of Lancelot in the old Welsh. Layamon, who was well steeped in the popular poetry of the eleventh and twelfth centuries must have also known it because it underlies the portentious dream of Arthur that he introduces in his Brut. Arthur dreams that he is sitting astride the roof of a hall with Walwain before him. Modred came with a battle-axe and hewed the posts which upheld the building, and Wenhaver (Guinevere) pulled down the roof so that Arthur fell and broke his right arm. Gripping his

31 Speculum, xiii (1938), 38 ff.
sword in his left hand, Arthur smote off Modred's head so
that it rolled to the floor, and he hacked the queen to
pieces. 33 As the cult of courtly love and woman-worship
developed under the French influence, Queen Guinevere came
to be judged less harshly. Chrétien de Troyes portrays her
in Lancelot as a domineering female, a type of 'femme fatale'
or 'la belle dame sans merci' who enjoys submitting the most
valiant of knights to most humiliating trials. But there
is a tragic strain in the character of this haughty mistress
who judges herself guilty of grievous wrong to her lover.
Malory polishes her character further. She is depicted as
a woman of great charm, dignity and composure. Her love
for Lancelot does not disqualify her in any manner from
gaining others' love or admiration. King Arthur marries
her in spite of the warning sounded by Merlin 'that Guenever
was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned
him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again'. 34
Guinevere's turning a nun in the end for the atonement of
her sin after King Arthur is killed in the battle, ennobles
her character. In reply to Sir Lancelot's request to
accompany him to his land, the Queen says, "...for through

33 Layamon, op. cit., iii. 118-20.
34 Malory, op. cit., III, (1), p. 64.
thee and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed. Therefore, Sir Launcelot, go to thy realm, and there take thee a wife and live with her with joy and bliss, and I pray thee heartily pray for me to our Lord, that I may amend my mis-living." 35

LANCELOT

In the Matter of Britain, before it travelled to France, we do not come across the name of Lancelot which proves it conclusively that he is of French origin. He appears in all the three romances that Chretien wrote on the Arthurian matter. In Cliges, Lancelot du Lac appears at the tourney near Oxford; in Erec, he is ranked third in the list of knights of the Round Table and in Lancelot or Le Chevalier de la Charrette, he is the central figure.

His name, Lancelot du Lac, implies the existence of a legend about his childhood spent under the care of a water-fay. The Lanzelot of Ulrich von Zatzikhoven preserves a version of this legend. It cannot be said with certainty that how and when Lancelot came to be the guilty lover of

Queen Guinever. In the *Lanzelet* no reference is made of this relationship.

Chrétien, in the prologue to *Lancelot* shifts the whole responsibility of praising the adulterous love between Lancelot and Guinevere to the Countess of Champagne who alone, he says, is responsible for the 'matière' and the 'sen' that is, its 'subject matter' and the 'controlling purpose'. Whether the work was undertaken at the behest of the Countess of Champagne or under the impact of the growing popularity of the Tristram romance, the greatest problem that the poet faced was how to render credible a hero who was an epitome of physical prowess and virility and at the same time a lover ecstatically submissive to a tyrannical mistress. The problem, however, served as a challenge to Chrétien who achieved a brilliant success in creating the character of Lancelot, for centuries a rival, in popular favour to Tristram. The story may thus be briefly summarized.

Lancelot accompanied with Gauvain goes in search of the abducted Guinevere and falls into a love trance when he sees her from a distance going in a procession escorted by her captor Meleagant. Next morning he again sets out in her pursuit but, parting from Gauvain, is hurled from his saddle into a ford by a knight because he is lost in dreams
of Guinevere. But soon, he avenges himself. At another castle this perfect lover resists the temptations of the flesh offered by a seductive hostess. However, when he beholds a court by a spring with the golden tresses of his mistress caught in it, he adores them with religious fervour. The adventure of the cemetery, where he raises the heavy stone lid of a tomb destined for himself, reveals his messianic role. In his combat with Meleagant, his failing strength is revived when a damsel calls his attention to Guinevere who is watching from a window and he overthrows his adversary and frees the Queen who unexpectedly treats him with scorn because earlier in the day Lancelot had hesitated for a second before getting into the cart—technically, riding in a cart is derogatory for a knight but he accepted this disgrace in order to save the Queen. But when she hears a fake report of Lancelot's death, she relents and reproaches herself. On the other hand, Lancelot is prevented with difficulty from hanging himself from his saddle bow on hearing a rumour of the Queen's death. Both the lovers are reconciled and the Queen invites him to her window that night. He breaks the bars that separate them, kneels before her, as before a saint, and enjoys her favours to the full. In the morning Meleagant finds her bed stained with the blood of Lancelot who had cut his finger at the bars. Lancelot is ambushed and imprisoned when he sets out
to rescue Gauvain who, later on freeing himself, escorts Guinevere to Logres. With the connivance of his jaileress, Lancelot is able to take part in a tourney which Guinevere attends. He, incognito, eclipses all the jousters, but at the Queen's behest plays the coward and again at her behest carries off the palm. Imprisoned again, he is freed by Maleagent's sister and he returns to Arthur's court to defend the Queen. Maleagent, is killed this time at the hand of the Knight of the Cart (Lancelot). It is believed that an ancient myth of Celtic origin forms the basis for the story. The impact of the Tristram story is visible in the episode of the blood-stained bed. The reveries and trances of the lover are modelled after the experiences of the religious mystics of the day. Chrétien conceives of Love as a virtue with claims that override the claims of social law and thus he initiates the cult of woman-worship which later culminates in the art of chivalry.

The story and character of Lancelot is further developed in the vast prose romance, *The Lancelot* (1215-30), generally attributed to Walter Map. Here Lancelot appears

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37 Ibid.
as a descendant of King David, born of Ban of Banoic but a child of calamity. When still a babe, he is kidnapped by the Dame du Lac who conducts him at the age of eighteen to Arthur's court to be knighted. The long discourse that this foster mother delivers to Lancelot at the time of his induction into the world is focused round the origin of knighthood, the symbolic significance of his armour and horse, and the duties and obligations of a knight, which are the protection of the weak and the defence of the Holy Church without pride or egotism. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Malory delineates the character of Lancelot most lovingly. Lancelot is 'the flower of all noble knights' whom 'Arthur cherished above all knights'. In fact his character is beautifully summed up in the lament of Sir Ector at his death:

'Aha Launcelot...thou were head of all Christian knights; . . . thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand; and thou were the courtliest knight that ever bare shield; and thou were the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse; and thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman; and thou were the kindest man that ever strake with sword; and thou were the goodliest person ever came among press of knights; and thou were the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in halls among ladies; and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest.'

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40 Malory, XXI, (xiii), p. 486.
TRISTRAM and ISEULT

The story of Tristram and Iseult is one of the oldest subsidiary Arthurian legends and of a distinctly Celtic origin, although it drew at the same time on Irish, Welsh, Cornish and Breton traditions too. Further, in this composite legend elements of such heterogenous nature as folk-tales, Arabic romance, and Orient tales of trickery and deception are also visible. Another distinctive quality about this legend is its consistency. In spite of small variations in detail, the general framework of the story is fairly uniform.

A young noble named Rivalen came to Cornwall to take service with King Mark, fell in love with his sister Blancheflor, married her and begot a son named Tristan. The mother died at childbirth. When the child grew up into an accomplished youth, he arrived at the Court of King Mark and won his favour. He slew in combat the Irish champion Morholt who had demanded a tribute of Cornish youths. Later he was sent to Ireland in search of a bride for King Mark where he slew a dragon ravaging the land. As he lay unconscious, overcome by poison, he was recognised by princess Isolt by a breach in his sword that matched the piece she had preserved from Morholt's skull to avenge his death. She,
however, spared his life to save herself from the false seneschal and was won by Tristram as his uncle Mark's bride.

On the voyage to Cornwall, the two drank of the magic love-potion meant for the bridal couple and thenceforth were bound to each other by its spell. The lovers resorted to all kinds of trickery to stay together and escape the perils of detection. To gratify their consuming passion, they sacrificed name, fame, and virtue and became medieval types of what true love should be. Eventually, however, King Mark convinced of their adultery banished them, and they fled into the forest Merois. One day Mark discovered them during one of his hunts, asleep with a naked sword between them. Reassured once more of their innocence, he recalled Isolt but banished Tristram who then married Isolt of the White Hands, the sister of Kaherdin, the son of the ruler of Brittany. But Tristram remained faithful to his earlier love. Finally when Tristram was fatally wounded, he sent for Isolt of Ireland to heal him. If she came with his messenger, the ship was to hoist white sails, if not, black sails. Isolt hastened to her lover, but his jealous wife reported that the sails were black. He died in despair and when Isolt found he was dead, she too died of grief beside him. 41

41 This is the version of Thomas. Thomas, Tristram, ed. J. Bedier (Paris, 1902-5).
When Tristram story became attracted into the Arthurian orbit is not known. The earliest reference to the story is made in a Welsh Triad. One Drystan (Tristam), son of Talwck was the lover of Essyllt (Iseult), the wife of his uncle March (Mark), son of Meirchiawn. The legend, in all probability, was preserved in many oral lays before it came to be embodied in any of the twelfth century poems by Thomas, Eilhart, Beroul which Bedier terms the 'primary' versions of the romance. Tristan und Isolt of Gottfried Von Strassburg, according to its author, is based on the poem of Thomas of Britain but the metaphysical interpretation of the love between Isolt and Tristan is entirely Gottfried's own. He sees in their love a reflection in human terms of the bond between the mystic and his God. Tristan, the mystic, never feels at home in the King's court and has little interest in knightly achievements though he is capable of performing feats far greater than those of his companions. The love-potion that the lovers drink, subject them to

42 Bedier, ed. Thomas, Tristram.
43 Eilhart von Oberge, Tristrant, ed. F. Lichtenstein (Strasbourg, 1877).
45 Thomas, ed. Bedier.
46 Gottfried, Tristan und Isolt, ed. F. Ranke (Berlin, 1930).
sensual passion from which they can be freed only by death and the death in love means that the lovers can be reunited in mystic love, freed from all grossness and carnal desire.

Chrétien de Troyes is also credited with a lost Tristram poem which is supposed to be the source of the long prose Tristan upon which Malory drew largely. Malory abides by the old tradition in presenting Tristram as a great and powerful knight second to none but Launcelot. Besides, he is a harper par excellence, a daring hunter and a skilled hawkier. 'Sir Tristram was that time called the best chaser of the world, and the noblest blower of an horn of all manner of measures.' 47

And La Beale Isoud is 'the fairest lady of the world, except ... queen dame Guenever'. 48 As for the story of the lovers' death, Malory discards the popular one connected with the sails and adopts an older Celtic version. As Tristram 'sat harping afores his lady La Beale Isoud, with a trenchant glaive', 49 King Mark slew him and 'La Beale Isoud died, swooning upon the Cross of Sir Tristram'. 50

49 Malory, XIX, (vii), p. 448-449.
50 Ibid.
MERLIN

Merlin or the Welsh Myrddin appears to be the central figure of an independent legend of Welsh origin which by and by drew into the orbit of the Arthurian miscellany. In the Welsh tradition, he appears as a prophet and of the several poems ascribed to his authorship, six remain which are found in the Black Book of Carmathen, and the Red Book of Hergest. These prophecies deal with the early history of the Welsh and their later struggles against the Normans and the English.

The legend of Merlin, as it survives in the Welsh texts, might have developed from the well-known folk-lore theme of the 'wild men of the woods'. There is a story in a fifteenth century manuscript. St. Kentigern met a certain naked, hairy madman named Lailoken, said by some to have been 'Merlin' (Merlynnum) who was doomed to live alone in the company of the beasts, tormented by a sense of guilt.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was the first to associate Merlin with Arthur by identifying him with the Ambrosius of Nennius and make him both a magician and a prophet. He wrote two

52 British Museum, Titus A, XIX.
books on the subject of Merlin — *Prophetiae Merlini* which he later incorporated in *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*. Through him and Wace, Merlin became well-known in England as a wizard bard, very similar to Taliesin. The character of Merlin is further developed by Robert de Boron in his poem of which only a fragment is extant now and on which are based the French *The Vulgate Merlin* and *Suite du Merlin*, two prose romances. Here Merlin is portrayed as a mage with uncanny wisdom. He is the offspring of a devil but born of a pious mother who by exercising her influence on him, makes him an agent of Heaven instead of Hell. Merlin helps not only in bringing Arthur into the world, but also in putting him on the throne and directing his destiny. From *Suite du Merlin* is derived the striking story of 'Balin and Balan'. The tale of Merlin and Vivien is called by some an 'antifeminist fabliau' but it is made most touching on account of the inescapable fatality depicted in it. Merlin is dominated by morbid passion; he succumbs to a destiny which he knows in advance. In spite of being endowed with foreknowledge, he accomplishes his own ruin. Malory has based his description of Merlin closely on *Suite du Merlin*.

Merlin, being the offspring of Satan and Saint, possesses a dual nature and as such he epitomises all humanity in the nineteenth-century poetry. Like Faust, he could exclaim,
"Two souls, alas! inhabit in my breast."

THE HOLY GRAIL

The grail legend is marked with such irrationality, disharmony and inconsistency that it is very difficult to trace its origin and development. It is an odd medley of old Celtic themes, Welsh traditions, pagan myths and Christian rituals and therefore, opinions widely differ regarding its origin. Jessie L. Weston remarks that the legends of the Grail are:

a confused record of a form of worship, semi Christian, semi-pagan, at one time practised in these islands, the central object of which was initiation into the sources of life, physical and spiritual.

On the basis of the literature extant, Chrétien is given the credit of drawing this legend into the Arthurian cycle but, of course, he could not have invented it, he drew on an amorphous mass of traditional matter at hand. In the old Welsh literature, we find parallels of the Fisher King, his wound, the wasteland and the Grail itself. This supports the view that the legend of the Grail is of Celtic origin adapted to the ideas and manners of medieval France.

The texture, the colouring, the essential conception of the older Grail Quest stories can be paralleled from early Celtic mythic romance and from no other contemporary European literature.  

Alfred Nutt divides the Grail literature into two parts—one dealing with the 'Quest' proper and the other with the 'Early History'. The best-known versions of the 'Quest' are the 'Conte del Graal', of which the earlier portions are by Chretien de Troyes, the Parzival of Wolfram von Eschenbach and the Welsh Mabinogi of Peredur. Of the 'Early History' the chief versions are the Joseph of Arimathea and Merlin of Robert de Boron, and the Queste del St Graal attributed to Map. In the 'Quest' the interest is focused on the personality of the hero who goes in search of some talismans, which include a sword, a bleeding lance and a 'grail' whereas the other stories in the section of 'Early History' dwell upon the nature and origin of these talismans. The key to the understanding of the Grail legend lies in the right identification and interpretation of the term 'Grail'. Different suggestions as to its form and interpretation have been put forward. For example, it is a wide capacious dish.

56 Ibid.
that may contain a salmon or a lamprey, or the dish from which the worshippers partook of a communal feast; the magic vessel belonging to the Euhemerised god Bran; the Welsh horn of plenty; the magic stone that granted perpetual youth; the cup of the Last Supper in which was treasured the Holy blood of Jesus; or the cup in juxtaposition with the lance standing for male and female energies.

The original hero of the Grail Quest is said to be Gawain who is soon displaced by Perceval who, in turn, is superseded by Galahad who 'exemplifies, in a yet more uncompromising, yet more inhuman spirit, the ideal of militant asceticism.'

The youth Perceval, brought up by his mother was given first lesson in the management of horse and arms by Gornement, a goodly va:asour, who warned him not to speak too much. A few days later, Perceval came upon two men fishing in a river and one of them invited him to his castle for the night. While he was talking to his host in the castle, a squire

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58 Chretien de Troyes, Perceval.
60 H.Newstead, Bran the Blessed, pp. 17-22.
63 Robert de Borron, Joseph of Arimathea.
64 J.L.Weston, From Ritual to Romance, p. 12.
65 Nutt, op.cit., p. 72.
crossed the chamber holding a bleeding lance. Then followed
two others bearing candelabra, then a fair damsel holding a
'grail' of gold studded with precious gems shedding a
brilliant light; still another damsel carried a carving
platter. Perceval desired to ask what it was but kept
silent as advised by Gornement. Then he was served with a
sumptuous meal from the 'grail' and with each course the
procession passed through the hall. On waking up in the
morning, he found the Castle deserted, so he went out. On
the way he met a damsel holding a headless knight in her
arms. When Perceval related the strange experiences of the
previous night, she told him that the fisherman was a king
who was wounded in both the thighs, but would have been
magically cured if Perceval had asked a question. Now a
great calamity was awaited. The land would be wasted far and
wide, the ladies would be widowed, and knights slain.
Perceval vowed that he would not rest until he had learnt
the secret of the 'grail' and the 'bleeding lance'. Five
years later he learned from his hermit uncle that the father
of the Fisher King had been sustained with a single mass-
waffer brought to him in the 'grail'.

66 Different authors of the Grail texts contradict one another on such significant

66 This is a short sketch of Chrétien's Perceval so far
as it concerns the 'Grail'.
points as to the number of kings in the 'Grail Castle'; their names and physical state; the cause and the exact nature of the Wasteland; the name of the hero and the attributes of the Grail itself.

One wonders why this particular section of the Arthurian romance should have been marked for religious ends from the beginning. One theory attributes this sanctification to the influence of Glastonbury Abbey and the Plantagenet kings but it is not supported by the Glastonbury documents. R. S. Loomis puts forth the view that the sanctification of the Grail legends is the result of a series of misreadings and misunderstandings of the old texts by the translators. The word 'corn' has two meanings — horn and body. As 'horn', it stood for 'the horn of plenty' but as 'body', it came to signify the body of Jesus Christ. This small mistake in understanding went a long way towards the glorification of the legend, which lent itself readily for serving the ends of Christianity. The church, however, never gave formal sanction to these fantastic stories. In fact, The Quest of the Holy Grail is a guide to the spiritual life aimed at the court rather than the cloister and, therefore, translated in the most popular currency of the day.

69 R.S. Loomis, ALIMA, pp. 287-88.
GAWAIN, BEDIVERE, KAY and MODRED

Gawain, Bedivere and Kay are the earliest of King Arthur's knights. The names of Bedwyr (Bedivere) and Cei (Kay) are found as Arthur's companions in Culhwch, in the Life of St. Cadoc, in the Black Book of Carmarthen and in Geoffrey's Historia. Both are presented as mighty warriors capable of performing wondrous feats of valour. Cei, in addition, possesses some remarkable qualities such as, to grow to the height of the tallest tree and to provide heat for his comrades in cold weather. Although he displays a kind of grim humour, yet he is completely free from the disagreeable character attributed to him in later romances. In Chrétien's Lancelot, Kau (Kay) appears as the comic lover of Queen Guenievre. He is eager to seek her favour but is easily vanquished in all combats. Malory in Le Morte D'Arthur stresses his surly temper and lack of courtesy and manly strength.

Gawain, unlike Bedivere and Kay, appears independent of Arthur in the early Welsh triads. Gwalchmei ap Gwyar (Gawain) and his father were heroes of the sixth-century wars against the Angles and are sung of in The Book of Taliesin. In 'Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight', he is a man of flawless
valour, true nobility and of deeply religious nature. In courtesy and chivalry he is a match for Lancelot. In one of the German poems, he is even the hero of the Grail quest. Chrétien casts him in a parallel role with Perceval by entrusting to him the quest of the bleeding lance in Perceval. But, when compared with Perceval, beneath his outward tact and elegance, Gauvain hides a basic frivolity, a preoccupation with worldly glories and an incurable weakness for casual amours. Sir Thomas Malory is criticized by some for departing from the old tradition in not depicting Gawain as the very counterpart of Lancelot in knightly character. Malory portrays him as a man of powerful emotions which drive him at times to unknighthly and unworthy deeds. Otherwise, he is a right honourable knight with matchless feats of arm to his credit.

As the wave of religious enthusiasm that accompanied the early crusades, swept over Europe, the earlier heroes of the Round Table came in for criticism. Percival is thrown in the shade by Galahad; Arthur instead of being a blameless King is tainted with incestuous sin and Sir Tristram is reduced to the status of a cruel, envious knight, a voluptuary and an assassin saved from the charge of worthlessness by some physical daring and surface courtesy alone. Same was the case with Gawain. Tennyson, inheriting this trend treats him as a light person. Throughout the Arthurian literature,
Modred, the nephew of King Arthur is painted in the darkest shades. Earliest references to him are made in *Annales Cambriæ* and *Rhonabwy's Dream*. An entry in the former reads: 'Battle of Camlaan, in which Arthur and Medraut fell.' 70

In *Rhonabwy's Dream* reference is made to the Battle of Camlann fought between Arthur and Modred. 71 The treachery of Modred is an invention of Geoffrey. A hero as great as Arthur could not be conceived as falling except by treachery. When Arthur is away fighting in Rome, Modred crowns himself the king and marries Guenevere. Malory, perhaps drawing upon some earlier sources, makes Modred, the son of Arthur and his unknown sister and thus by transferring the burden of guilt on Arthur, casts him in the role of a tragic hero.

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