

## ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЕНИЕ

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### Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Literature

Numerous literary works founded on the Arthurian legend occupy an important place in the history of English literature. The time when it flourished was late medieval (Gothic) period, the domineering genre being romance. In the later centuries several outstanding authors turned to the Arthurian legend for subject matter.

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The Arthurian tradition has assumed a prominent place in English literature through numerous works by such outstanding authors as Geoffrey of Monmouth (XII c.), Layamon (beg. of XIII c.), Geoffrey Chaucer (XIV c.), Thomas Malory (XV c.), Edmund Spenser (XVI c.), William Morris and Alfred Tennyson (XIX c.). Arthurian legend is considered to be “one of the most potent myths of the English Middle Ages and Renaissance” (9, p. 12).

The stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table date back to the ancient Celtic legends. As M. Mincoff notes, “The growth of the Arthurian legend is a most fascinating through intricate study” (7, p. 80). The name Arthur is usually considered to be a Welsh form of the Latin “*Artorius*” (9, p. 12). The authors of the famous “Oxford Anthology of English literature” speak about him as a historical figure that may have been a British king, who resisted the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the VI century (9, p. 446). M. Mincoff also considers him to be originally a historical figure (7, p. 80). W. Caxton, the original publisher of the great work “*Morte d'Arthur*” (1485), writes in his preface that “King Arthur ought most to be remembered before all other Christian Kings” (6, p. 4). Admitting, that “divers men hold opinion that there was no such Arthur” (6, p. 4), declares that “there are many evidences of the contrary: in diverse places of England many remembrances be yet of him and shall remain perpetually, and also of his knights” (6, p. 4).

The most famous early historical mention of Arthur is found in the work “*Historia Britonum*” by the VIII c. chronicler Nennius. In it the author speaks of

“the crushing defeat Arthur inflicted on the Saxon invaders at Mount Badon” (7, p. 80), having won a dozen enumerated battles against them, the 12<sup>th</sup> being at Mount Badon (8, p. 41). For Nennius, however, Arthur was not a king but *a dux bellorum*, fighting under kings (7, p. 80). Welsh Annals of the X century (“*Annales Cambriae*”, 516) also mention the battle of Mount Badon, which they place in the year 516, and here, for the first time, the Battle of *Camlan* is mentioned, where “*Arthur and Medraut* (i. e. Mordred) fell” (7, p. 81; 8, p. 41). There's no doubt that before the first literary work with King Arthur as one of the main characters appeared in the XII c., stories of the king and his knights existed in the oral tradition for about 3 centuries.

The first detailed source of the legend of king Arthur that we possess is, undoubtedly, “*Historia Regum Britanniae*” (History of the Kings of Britain) by *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, written in 1135–1138 in Latin. It purports to be a history of British kings from the time of their mystical ancestor Brutus, or Brut. W. Crawshaw calls it “a very imaginative compilation of Welsh legends” (8, p. 42). Geoffrey seems to have gathered all existing “traditions” about King Arthur, perhaps “adding some of his own” (9, p. 446), so that the picture of Arthur and his court as a model of knightly society was established. We shall probably never know how much of Geoffrey's history is actually based on traditions and how much is pure intention. But, as M. Mincoff points out, probably the general facts of Arthur's life, as he recounts it, were already traditionally established (7, p. 81). Though the author mentioned

his reliance upon an ancient Cymric history, received from the *Archdeacon of Oxford*, some contemporaries accused him of manufacturing the source, adding to the story “figments of a riotous imagination” (8, p. 43). We can’t but agree with J. D. Bruce, that probably Geoffrey deliberately created Arthur “the example of chivalry, the British counterpart of the French Charlemagne” (8, p. 43).

The most important *characters* and *elements* added to the Arthuriad by Geoffrey of Monmouth are as follows:

a) Modred (Mordred) – the traitorous nephew (in some versions, the natural son) of King Arthur, and killed by the latter in battle;

b) Uther Pendragon – father of Arthur by an adulterous union with Igera (Igraine) wife of the Duke of Tintagel, in Cornwall;

c) Merlin – the magician, “perhaps originally a Welsh God, and subsequently a bard called Myrddhin” (8, p. 44).

d) States that Arthur was carried to the island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds.

W. B. Otis notes, that Geoffrey’s imperishable romancing makes the work “the most significant product of the age” and it makes him the popularizer of the Arthurian tradition “quite faithful to the form known today” (8, p. 43). Of course, the great work shouldn’t be underestimated, as it’s “a book of which it has been said that, except for the Bible, no other work has had such an influence on English literature” (7, p. 80).

In the same century *Robert Wace* wrote “a free paraphrase of Geoffrey of Monmouth into Norman-French” (8, p. 45) – *Roman de Brut*. At the beginning of the XIII century *Layamon*, an English priest, creates a long chronicle poem based mainly on Wace’s “Brut” and through it – on Geoffrey’s great work using a similar title – “Brut” (the legendary founder of Britain). Originality of the work lies in “Amplification of old and introduction of new material” (8, p. 45). The same critic (W. Crawshaw) praises it for vividness and realism. He notes its assimilation of Welsh and Norman influences and the fact that “it was the first to naturalize in the English tongue the great story of King Arthur and his knights” (1, p. 43). As *Layamon* writes in the introduction to his poem:

“... He would of the English the origins tell  
What they were called and whence they came  
Who English land first had owned”

(quoted from 1, p. 41)

The literary genre in which Arthurian legend flourished in the Middle Ages and won European

fame was *Romance*, which prospered for about 300 years (1200-1500) as the most important and typical literary form in the Middle Ages in England. The following characteristic features of the genre of the English Romance have been pointed out:

– a passion for the strange, the marvelous, the impossible or the improbable;

– an exaggeration of the vices of the human nature and an idealization of virtues;

– the presence of religious element;

– the presence, in one form or another, of a Quest;

– the presence of a supernatural element is common though not absolutely necessary;

– an emphasis upon supreme devotion to a fair lady;

– scenes laid in the past, with the manners and morals representing some aspect (or aspects) of the contemporary ideal of chivalry.

The traditional approach to classification of English medieval romances dates back to the XIII century, distinguishing three “matters”, or divisions:

“The Matter of Britain”,

“The Matter of France”,

“The Matter of Rome the Great”

(quoted from 8, p. 39)

In the XX century Arthurian Romances began to be distinguished as the most significant division (see 1, 7). It must be noted that scholars also distinguish separate romances and cycles of romances (see 1, 3, 7, 8). Such romances as “*Morte d’Arthur*”, “*Arthur and Merlin*”, “*Awntyrs (adventures) of Arthur at the Tarn Wadling*” belong to the first group. Here King Arthur is the main character, superior to the others. “*Kilhwch and Olwen*” is a tenth-century literary work in the form of “romance or fairy tale” (8, p. 42). Here, Arthur is really the central figure, assisting his cousin *Kilhwch* to gain the hand of *Olwen*, daughter of the King of Giants. The latter in yielding up his daughter, says to *Kilhwch*: “She is thine; but therefore needest thou not thank me, but Arthur, who hath accomplished this for thee” (4, p. 314). The other main characters of the Arthurian legend are: *Sir Lancelot*, *Sir Galahad*, *Sir Gawain*, *Queen Genevieve*, *Tristan and Iseult*. Magician *Merlin* – enchanter and prophet – represents *Destiny*.

Remaining the supreme as well as the central figure in the whole division of romances, Arthur is not always the main hero in all the cycles. In general, they are romances of love and tournament, of quest and conquest. In a number of them the quest of the *Holy Grail* plays an important part.

It has been noted by a number of scholars (see 1, 2, 4, 7, 8) that by accident or design the romances fall into a tragic sequence:

- the youth of Arthur and his unconscious sin;
- the mysterious birth of Merlin;
- the fatal love of Sir Lancelot and Guinevere;
- the coming of the Grail and the quest of the Grail by many knight;
- the failure of all but Sir Percival and Sir Galahad in the quest;
- the falling of Lancelot and Guinevere to their old love again;
- the sorrows and treacheries that precede and lead up to the King's last "Battle in the West", the fatal Battle and Arthur's passing to Avalon.

The most outstanding literary work of all the Arthurian Cycle of English medieval romances is considered to be "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (see 6, 7, 8, 9). For originality, vividness of narrative and description, feeling for nature and high moral tone it is far superior to most works of its class (1, p. 53). The story is close-knit but "ornamented with blazing set pieces" (9, p. 285) – such as the description of Arthur's Christmas feast, the account of the castle, miraculously appearing in the wildness, the hunts. The main character, who is being tested, is the best knight of Arthur's court, "a flower of chivalry" (8, p. 49). King Arthur is "charming and cheerful, child-like and gay", "a ruler royal and tall" (9, p. 289). As for Guinevere, "No man could say he had seen a lovelier, but with a lie" (9, p. 288). The powerful imagination of the unknown author gives life to each figure, describes every scene sharply and fully; but we must agree with M. Mincoff, that the work "bears a moral purpose over and above the artistic one it achieves so well" (7, p. 121). This verse-romance of 2530 lines unites 2 old folk tales derived from Celtic legend and consists of 4 parts: "The Challenge", "The Compact", "The Testing" and "The Counter Buffet". As critics point out, originality lies less in its material than in the feature of its careful construction and masterly story telling (see 7, 8). The unknown author harmoniously unites humour and vividness, directness and mystery, freshness and originality. It must be noted, that in spite of the supernatural Green Knight, the miraculous appearance of the castle, the reference to the sorceress Morgan le Fay, the supernatural element can't be called domineering: "We are already on the way to Malory with the strong sense of reality and the actual" (9, p. 285).

In the XV century Sir Thomas Malory created the famous work "Morte d'Arthur" (printed in 1485)

which was to become the great prose achievement of its century. This work is a great collection of Arthurian legends, brought into a "fair degree of unity" (1, p. 79) about the central conceptions of King Arthur and the Round Table. Glorifying noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity it may in a sense be said "to gather up in a single book the whole spirit of medieval romance" (8, p. 92). W. H. Schofield calls it "a work of retrospect tinged with sadness for passing of the good old days, ... a work of patriotism when the land was being wasted by civil strife" (8, p. 93).

As for the matter, the author himself mentions cycles of old French romances, which he had translated, but he also draws upon English sources, which he had translated, but he also draws upon English sources and makes some original contributions (perhaps based on some old Welsh legends). A number of critics: W. H. Crawshaw, W. B. Otis, G. Gawlor point out Malory's manner of narration and style as his strong points, and with that we can't but agree. He truly possessed "the power of lively and interesting narrative clothed in vivid style" (1, p. 79). In spite of some inconsistencies of plot, "Morte d'Arthur" is direct, vivid and homogeneous. The authors of the great "Oxford Anthology" (see 9) consider it "the first – and only – English version of the Arthurian chivalric stories, which is both comprehensive in scope and great as literature" (9, p. 444).

In the period of Renaissance King Arthur appears as one of the heroes in E. Spencer's "*Fderie Queene*". The 12 contemplated books were to tell each of the adventures of one knight, representing one of the 12 virtues. All the virtues were to be shown combined in the central figure of Prince Arthur, the ideal knight, symbolizing Magnificence (i. e. Highmindedness or Gentlemanliness).

In the XVII century Arthurian legends were less popular, and were neglected in the XVIII century – "the Age of Reason". In XIX century they flourished again in the works of A. Ch. Swinburne, W. Morris and in A. Tennyson's magnificent poetry: "*Sir Galahad*", "*The Lady of Sharlotte*" and the great poem "*Idylls of the King*", in which the author several times turned to the Arthurian legend.

So, fact and fiction, romantic impossibility and historical likelihood are intertwined at all stages of Arthurian story, which has played an important part in the history of English literature.

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