

## The Story of King Arthur: Some Main Characters and Events

The Arthurian legend developed over many centuries, with the result that plot lines, characters and their motives, and incidents can all vary quite considerably from one telling to the next. However, it is useful, for this course, to have at least a general sense of some of the main players and incidents, so I have put together this brief synopsis.

Uther Pendragon, king of Britain, falls in love/ lust with Igraine, wife of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. He goes to war with Gorlois. Gorlois puts his wife in the castle of Tintagel to protect her, but Uther uses the arts of Merlin the prophet/ magician to change his appearance to Gorlois's. He enters Tintagel disguised in this way, and sleeps with Igraine. Arthur is conceived that night. When Gorlois is killed by Uther's army, Uther then marries Igraine, and reveals to her that he was the man she slept with on the night she conceived.

As he promised Merlin in exchange for his help, Uther delivers the baby Arthur to the magician. Merlin gives the baby to Sir Ector, who raises Arthur along with his own son Kay.

When Uther dies, rival kings war over the throne. Merlin has everyone gather in London at Christmas, and a sword, stuck through an anvil and into a stone, appears in a churchyard. Its hilt says that whoever draws it is the rightful king.

Arthur, now a teenager, comes to London with Ector and Kay. Kay is newly knighted, and has come to participate in the tournament. When he realizes that he has left Kay's sword at the inn, Arthur rushes off to search for another one. Seeing the sword in the stone, he draws it and gives it to Kay. Kay shows the sword to his father, who recognizes what it means. He reveals to Arthur that he is not his true father.

Arthur repeatedly draws the sword from the stone when others cannot, so the people acclaim him their king. Some rival kings resist, however, and Arthur must defeat them before he is secure in his kingdom. He receives his sword Excalibur from the lake.

Arthur then decides to marry. He chooses Guenevere, daughter of King Leodegrance. Merlin warns Arthur that Guenevere will have an affair with Lancelot, but Arthur chooses to marry her anyway. Merlin leaves the story not long afterwards, as he falls prey to a young enchantress who imprisons him forever under a rock.

Knights come from all over to join Arthur and his company of the Round Table. Many adventures for Arthur and his court follow. Arthur resists the claims of Lucius, Emperor of Rome, for tribute, and defeats the Romans in Europe before coming home; in some versions of the story, this is his final triumph, before Mordred usurps the throne. In other versions of the story, there is still a lot that happens before the final battle: knights such as Lancelot, Gawain, Tristan, and Gareth, among many others, have many adventures. Lancelot begins an affair with Guenevere.

One day a maiden appears at court and asks Lancelot to come with her. She takes him to a convent where he is introduced to a beautiful young man, whom he dubs a knight. He returns to court, and shortly the young man, Galahad, comes to court as well and sits in the "Siege Perilous," a special seat at the Round Table destined for him. Galahad is Lancelot's son, conceived by Elaine through deception (she made Lancelot think he was sleeping with Guenevere). The Holy Grail (the cup of Christ) appears to the Arthurian court, and Gawain is the first to vow to undertake a quest to find it. Galahad is the destined Grail knight, however: a knight must be pure (a virgin or chaste) to find the Grail. In the quest that follows, only Galahad, Perceval, and Bors will succeed. Galahad finds the Grail, escorts it to its new home, and after a short time dies and goes to heaven. Lancelot is repeatedly told that his failures are due to his sin with Guenevere, and he repents the relationship.

However, after the Grail quest has been completed, Lancelot resumes the affair. It is revealed through the malice of Agravaine and Mordred. Mordred is, in some versions, Arthur's illegitimate son by his half-sister. Lancelot escapes but Guenevere is condemned to burn at the stake. Lancelot rescues her, killing some of his old comrades in the process. Guenevere goes to a nunnery, and Lancelot withdraws to his own country. Mordred leads an army against Arthur. In the final battle, almost everyone is killed; Arthur kills Mordred, but is mortally wounded himself. At Arthur's request, Bedivere returns Excalibur to the lake. A ship with three queens appears, to take Arthur away to Avalon. The legend grows up that he will return one day; he is *rex quondam rexque futurus*, the once and future king.

Lancelot becomes a monk, and dies a holy man.