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The Death Of King Arthur



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Synopsis

Recounting the final days of Arthur, this thirteenth-century French version of the Camelot legend, written by an unknown author, is set in a world of fading chivalric glory. It depicts the Round Table diminished in strength after the Quest for the Holy Grail, and with its integrity threatened by the weakness of Arthur's own knights. Whispers of Queen Guinevere's infidelity with his beloved comrade-at-arms Sir Lancelot profoundly distress the trusting King, leaving him no match for the machinations of the treacherous Sir Mordred. The human tragedy of The Death of King Arthur so impressed Malory that he built his own Arthurian legend on this view of the court - a view that profoundly influenced the English conception of the 'great' King.

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Customer Reviews

While "The Death of King Arthur" is the shortest romance in the entire Lancelot-Grail cycle (formerly known as the "Vulgate Cycle" and a principal source of Sir Thomas Malory) it is also one of the best suited to modern tastes. Unlike the earlier segments of the cycle (the Lancelot or the Quest of the Holy Grail particularly) it does not underline its themes through endless variant repetitions that

irritate the modern reader. Instead, the plot is remarkably linear and focuses on the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the disastrous consequences that their affair wreaks on King Arthur and his entire kingdom. Because it was originally written as a sequel to the Lancelot and Grail portions of the cycle, certain knowledge is assumed for the reader. The reader is assumed to know that Arthur is the King, that Lancelot is his boldest knight, and that the Round Table is recovering slowly from a long and very destructive Grail Quest. Without the lengthy process of interlacing adventures between Lancelot and Gawain or Bors and Gareth, it can be difficult for the true weight of the story to come across to the uninitiated. Cable's translation is workmanlike and readable, and serves as a worthy introduction to this classic tale until such time as the recent English translation of the entire cycle (*Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, edited by Norris J. Lacy) is available in an affordable paperback series. (I bought the hardback at an exorbitant price per volume myself.)

I could not put this book down once I began to read. The story begins after the Grail Quest, when the King recounts all those who were lost. The loyalty King Arthur feels towards his knights, living or dead, is moving in comparison to today's vacuum of leadership. The complicated love affair between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere is unsettling because as one reads, the unraveling of Camelot is slowly exacerbated by their innocent yet treacherous passion for each other—including the King. King Arthur's self denial of the love affair is touching and stretches faith to its limits. But one can't help take both sides because the story is so well rounded from all points of view. Compared to other translations such as Keith Baines, of Signet Classics, this James Cable translation by Penguin is superior because it keeps the arcane language used in the period, thus capturing the flavor of the times, whereas Baines seems to water it down.

I was surprised to find this book on a reading list for medieval French literature. King Arthur belongs to British folklore, no? As I did some digging, I found that the tales from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (which incidentally was written in Latin, not English) travelled the channel into French literature, to be taken up by writers such as Chrétien de Troyes. It was at this point that the warrior king reclaiming Britain from the barbarism of the Picts and the Scots succumbed to the pressures of the French courtly love tradition and became the tragic, somewhat weak-willed king of the later tales. It was the French who added characters such as Lancelot and elements such as the quest for the grail. This particular volume, written anonymously in the 13th century is significant because it is the first prose telling of the Arthurian tales. All previous versions

had been in verse. This book covers only the fourth section of the story, beginning after the knights' return from the quest for the grail. It serves as a sequel to other volumes written by Chr tien de Troyes. The tale itself was familiar to me, but nonetheless enjoyable. Tournaments, secrets, wounded knights, scorned lovers, fire, battles, and tragedy. I've never particularly cared for Lancelot as a character and prefer versions where Arthur is the hero of the story, as opposed to this one where Lancelot takes the pedestal of heroism throughout. Overall I found it to be an engaging read, and particularly enjoyed reading the sections about the Lady of Shalott, the poem by Tennyson being one of my favorites.

Not the easiest read, but fantastic when you sit down and put some effort into figuring out exactly what's going on. There's a lot of depth that you don't see at first glance.

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