



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE BOOK OF ARTHUR

Le Livre d'Artus

Volume of eight - Book III - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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THE BOOK OF ARTHUR

Of all the branches of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, none is so nearly lost as this. The Livre d'Artus, the Book of Arthur, survives in a single manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds français 337, a book broken at both its ends, which no modern tongue has ever rendered in full. It is a rival continuation of the Merlin: where the Suite du Merlin turns one way at the battle of Clarence, this book turns another, and runs on for a hundred and eighty leaves of wars and enchantments in which Gauvain, not Lancelot, is the flower of chivalry. What follows is re-told from Sommer's edition of the Vulgate text, the seventh volume, honouring the gaps that the centuries have torn in it. In the Old French it is called the Le Livre d'Artus.

THE BOOK THAT BEGINS IN THE MIDDLE

The Book of Arthur opens in the middle of a sentence, as a man wakes in the middle of a dream. Someone is speaking of a damsel, and of the way of her: how she had a speech so sweet and so soft that no heart could hold out against it, and yet how, when she was angered against any soul, her wrath was a thing terrible to meet. Who she was, the torn page will never tell. Those who have brooded over the fragment have guessed at Morgue la Fee, the king's half-sister, who is abroad and busy in the first battles; or at Sebile, the pagan queen and enchantress of Sarmenie, whose story the book will tell in its own time. The book keeps its secret. It is fitting that a romance so full of enchantresses should begin with one woman's face half in shadow, and never name her.

Then, with no more warning than a trumpet gives, we are in the war. The young King Artus is crowned and wedded to Genievre, whom the English call Guinevere, and his realm is not yet a realm but a battlefield. Out of the north and across the narrow seas have come the Saxon kings in coalition: Cristamanz and Mohanadap, Senayns and Senebrun, Senodalus and Pluinant, Sephar and Creons, Senaas and Fusabre, and with them Mohyanapus, uncle to King Rion and to Aminaduc of Denmark. Their war-cry rings through the first pages of the book: "Trail! Trail!" And against them stand Artus and his new knighthood, Ban of Benoit and Bohort of Gannes his allies out of Gaul, and the queen's own company, the Chevaliers de la Roine, the Queen's Knights, whom this book sets in the field long before any other branch of the Cycle thought of them. The king himself rides Plantamor, his great charger, and bears Escalibor, and where the sword swings the Saxons go down like barley.

The stubbornest of his enemies is no Saxon but a rebel of his own country: Herlais, duke of Rognes, and behind the rebellion stands Uriens, lord of Gorre, aggrieved and dangerous. For Artus had given the city of Clarence to Galeschin, the son of King Lot's house, and made him duke of it; and Uriens, who coveted the place and failed to take it, swore a revenge that would cost the realm dear before it was spent. The fighting ranges through the Gaut Destroit, the Narrow Wood, and about Brantant, whose constable holds the passes; and among the men who press into these wars comes a name that will matter in another book: Creomas of Sorelois, kinsman of Minadoras, who will one day be seneschal to a lord called Galehaut. The Book of Arthur is always sowing seeds whose harvest it will not live to see.

It was before Clarence that the wars buried one of their oldest giants. Hagodabran, the great enemy of the Merlin years, the Saxon champion whose coming had once shaken the young king's

host, was wounded in the fighting and could no longer hold the field. In the dead of night he fled the city, he and his three redoubtable nephews, four shadows on spent horses; and Gauvain, the king's nephew, whom later ages call Gawain, rode after him with Eliezer at his side. All the dark hours they hunted, till the woods were black on every side and the trail ran cold, and near midnight the two knights reined in and let him go. So Hagodabran passes out of legend: not slain in any last stand, not sung in any death-song, but dwindling into the dark with his wounds and his nephews, never seen by bard or book again. Other tellings give him other ends. This book simply lets the night have him.

DEAD YOUTH

In these same years the court gave a name, or rather two names, to a knight who would carry both to his grave: Sagremor of Constantinople's kin, whom all the Cycle knows as Sagremor li Desreez, Sagremor the Impetuous. He earned the first honestly. In the press of battle a frenzy would take him, so that he forgot danger, forgot reason, forgot everything but the blows before him, and no company could hold him and no enemy could stand him; and then, as suddenly as the fit came, it went, and he dropped from his saddle like a dead man and lay senseless while the fighting swept past. Men who saw it swore he had the falling sickness; men who fought beside him thanked God for it, for while the fit was on him he was worth twenty.

It was Keu the seneschal, Kay as the Welsh hills call him, who gave him the second name, and gave it in malice. Watching Sagremor carried senseless from the field, Keu laughed and christened him Mort Jeune, Dead Youth, and the jest ran round the court as such jests do, gathering cruelty as it ran. Sagremor heard it. There was a quarrel, hot words before the barons, and then more than words: the feud came to blows, and when it ended the seneschal of Logres lay with his arm broken, and the young hothead stood over him breathing hard.

King Artus, who loved order and loved his seneschal, took Keu's part at first, and the court braced for a lasting breach. But Merlin was still in the land in those days, the prophet moving among the barons like a counsellor among wayward sons, and he and the great men of the realm put themselves between the two. Keu was made to see that mockery in hall is a weapon like any other, and draws blood like any other; amends were made and accepted, and Sagremor kept his two names, the honourable and the mocking one, the way a man keeps both his scars and his medals. Yet the book does not let the seneschal rest as a mere fool, either. It has kept for him, further on, a day of glory such as no other branch remembers. The Book of Arthur loves to surprise us about familiar men.

THE PARTING AT VANDEBIÈRES

There is a scene at Vandebières, when the campaigning had paused, that the book lingers over with unusual tenderness: the farewell of Ban and Bohort. The two brother-kings of Gaul had come over sea with their knights and their treasure when Artus's cause was weakest, and had stood by him through the worst of it; now their own lands called them home, and the young king, who was not often a man of open feeling, took leave of them as of fathers. There were gifts given, rich and royally chosen, the old solemn currency by which kings say what their tongues cannot: horses and arms and gold, and promises renewed, and love declared before the whole host. They would meet

again in story, these three, and their sons after them; but the book seems to know that something ended at Vandebières, the first companionship of the wars, and it lets the moment breathe.

After the parting came the war of Estremores. Raolais of Estremores and his brother Maduc le Noir, Maduc the Black of the Black Isle, had offended against the king's peace, and Artus carried the war into their lands. In the fighting their nephew Plarés was slain, and the grief of it hardened both sides, until it was agreed that the quarrel should not consume more knights but be settled by two: single combat, Gauuain against Raolais. They fought long and grimly, for Raolais was no small champion; but the Orkney blood was up, and in the end Gauuain had him down and at mercy. And here the book shows what conquest meant to Artus's generation: not a corpse but a vassal. Raolais yielded, did homage, and took his place at the Round Table, and his brother the Black Knight of the Isle became the king's man likewise. So the realm grew, one defeated enemy at a time, each made a friend by the ceremony of submission and the grace of acceptance. This is the statecraft of the Book of Arthur: homage, gift-giving, marriage, the slow rituals by which a war-torn island was hammered into a kingdom.

THE QUEEN CARRIED OFF

Uriens of Gorre had not forgotten Clarence. The city he had failed to take festered in him, and the rebellion he led against his crowned king had, at its root, that single slight: a duke's coronet given to Galeschin that Uriens believed his own. When open war had spent its first fury, his revenge took a crueller road. In the confusion of the raiding he struck not at Artus but at Genievre, and carried off the queen.

It is the first abduction of Genievre in all the Cycle, long before Meleagant and the sword-bridge, and the book gives it the weight of a sacrilege. The realm that had been hammered together at such cost seemed suddenly frail again: if the queen could be taken out of the king's peace, then whose wife, whose daughter, was safe in it? Uriens held her in the fastness of his own country, behind the loyalty of men who had never forgiven the young king, and the court hung between grief and fury.

But the rescue belongs to the generation this book exists to praise. Gauuain rode for her, and Artus with him, king and nephew together, and where the king's host rolled over the marches of Gorre the knight rode before it, first at every barrier and first at every wall. "Sir king," men heard Gauuain say in the press of it, "let the realm see what manner of nephews it has." And the realm saw. Between the king's power and the knight's prowess the rebellion's proudest hour was broken open, and Genievre was brought back unharmed, and the court's rejoicing had in it something of relief and something of new resolve. The Queen's Knights, who ride through every campaign of this book, had gone with their lady into that dark hour and came out of it with her. Yet the book does not pretend the wound closed cleanly. Uriens was still at large, still unreconciled, and Merlin, who saw further than any man at that court, knew that the quarrel of Clarence was not ended. It had only changed its shape.

DAGUENET

Among the knights who grew up in these wars, none grew faster than Gauvain, and none loved more the game of the hidden name. When word came to court from Lore of Branlant, the Maiden of the Narrow Wood, besieged in her own lands by Waldin of the Fearsome Vale, a jilted and dangerous suitor who would have by force what he had failed to win by wooing, it was Gauvain who answered, and Gauvain who chose to answer in disguise.

He called himself Daguenet. Under that alias, unknown and unheralded, he rode into the Narrow Wood, found Waldin and his people pressing the siege, and overthrew the man of the Fearsome Vale in open combat. Then, the work done, he did the thing that marks the young Gauvain of this book: he departed unnamed. No boast, no revelation, no claiming of reward or of the maiden's gratitude; he rode back out of the wood as quietly as he had entered it, and Lore of Branlant was left with a deliverance and a mystery.

She unravelled the mystery in time, as maidens in these books always do, and learned that Daguenet was the king's own nephew. And with the knowledge came love, the hopeless kind, for the Gauvain of the Book of Arthur is not a marrying man. Her story was not finished with him: the wider telling of these matters darkens strangely, and in after days the Maiden of the Narrow Wood would be wife to Maduc the Black of the Black Isle, the king's reconciled enemy. But the Dame du Gaut Destroit rides in and out of the later pages of this book still, and the memory of the knight who saved her and would not tell his name rides with her. Of such threads is the tapestry of the Cycle woven: a rescue here, a wound there, a name withheld, and consequences that outlast the man who caused them.

THE SON AGAINST THE FATHER

The quarrel of Clarence came to its last field when Uriens marched on the city again, and this time the book arranged an ordeal such as few romances dare: the war was put to single combat, and the champion of the king's side was Yvain, Uriens's own son.

Yvain, whom the whole Cycle honours as the Knight of the Lion, was young then, and newly of Artus's fellowship, and the choice was no accident of the lists. He stood for the new allegiance his generation had sworn, the Round Table against the old rebellious lordships, and standing so, he must face his own blood. Father and son armed and came together before Clarence, and the chronicle of blows is terrible to read, for neither held back, and each knew the other. The old lord fought with the craft of thirty years of war, and fought for everything he had lost: the city denied him, the homage refused, the long grudge of a proud man. The son fought with a quieter heart and the steadier hand, and those who watched said afterward that his sorrow was his armour, for he had nothing to prove to the man who begot him and everything to prove to the king who had taken him up. But the younger strength and the newer cause prevailed: Yvain defeated his father, struck him down and held him at mercy, and the rebellion ended at the point of a son's sword.

What followed is the book's deepest statement about what Artus's kingship was for. Uriens, conquered by his own child, did homage to King Artus, and the rebel barons, seeing their leader kneel, came in and were reconciled. There was no execution, no attainder, no proscription; there was a ceremony, hands folded in hands, and a great lord made the king's man, and a son raised up a father he had been given the strength to humble. Other branches of the Cycle give this kind of

hour to Gauvain and his father King Lot. The Book of Arthur, characteristically, turns the same key in a different lock, and gives the moment to Yvain, and to Uriens a dignity in submission that the other tellings do not. It is a book that believes in second allegiances. So the barons' war closed, and the giants that stalked the marches in those years, for the book pauses for giant-fights as readily as for sieges, were hunted down by a court at last united enough to hunt them.

THE CAT OF THE LAKE

It falls to Merlin, in the midst of the middle wars, to tell a story before a monster-fight, and the story is stranger than the fight. At Ascension tide, he said, a fisherman went out on the lac de Losane, the lake of Lausanne, and vowed to God his first catch of the day. The first cast brought up a fish, and the fisherman looked at it and coveted it for his own table, and kept it. The second cast brought up a finer, and he coveted that too, and kept it, and the vow was twice broken. The third cast brought up no fish at all, but a kitten, blacker than a mulberry, and the man, who had rats in his house, kept the creature for his vermin, thinking no harm.

So the devil enters a house, said Merlin: small, and black, and useful. The kitten grew, and was fed, and grew beyond feeding, and one night it strangled the fisherman, and his wife, and his children, every soul under that roof; and then it went out from the house to the mountain beyond the lake, and there it waxed great and terrible beyond measure, a beast with a devil's heart, the horror men afterwards called Chapalu. Against that horror King Artus himself armed and went, and the book gives the fight its full weight, though it is Merlin's exemplum that outlasts it: a vow twice betrayed, a third gift taken in greed, and a household devoured. The wars of Logres were fought with swords; the wars of the soul, the prophet reminded his king, are fought with promises.

The book is just to Keu, too, in these campaigns, and gives him his one brilliant day. At a ford in the Saxon country, with Gauvain and Yvain beside him, it was the seneschal who invited the combat when the enemy pressed, and Keu who slew two of the pursuers with his own hand while each of his companions overthrew one. One day in a long life of mockery and broken arms; but the Book of Arthur, which loves the overlooked, set it down, so that no one should say the seneschal never earned his seat. And still the Saxon kings came: Minor and Malaquins and Cristans new-landed, and the old ones unwearying, and the war rolled on through Cambenig and beyond, year after year, as the middle leaves of the book burn with it.

THE VALLEY WITHOUT RETURN

Of all the enchantresses who move through this book, and they are many, none casts so long a shadow as Morgue la Fee, Morgan as the world now names her. She was King Artus's half-sister and Queen Genievre's own lady, high in trust and higher in pride; and she loved Guiomar, the queen's nephew, a knight of the royal house. The queen discovered the love and would not suffer it, and parted them; and from that parting, says the Book of Arthur, dates the hatred of Morgue for Genievre that runs under all the later branches of the Cycle like a seam of black ore under a green field.

What this book alone tells is where Morgue went. She flew to Merlin. She came to him as the discarded and the desperate come to the powerful, with her beauty and her grievance and her

quick, insatiable mind; and the enchanter loved her, with the old, unwise, world-wearied love that was to be his own undoing. He, who had read the heavens and the hour of his own end, could not read, or would not read, the woman before him. For love he taught her his whole art, withholding nothing, as men in love withhold nothing, though every gift was a weapon: the words that bind and the words that loose, the shaping of seeming, the governance of places, so that a valley could be made a gaol and a forest a fortress. She was the aptest pupil he ever had. She was also, though he would not see it, his rehearsal for Niniane. And when she had learned all he had, she used it. In a hidden place she founded the Val sanz Retor, the Valley Without Return, a valley bound about with such enchantments that no faithless knight who entered it could ever leave it; and her purpose was double, to regain power over Guiomar, whom she meant to draw into it, and to spite the queen and the whole Round Table by making a prison for their chivalry.

King Artus searched for his sister everywhere, through every country, and found nothing; and Queen Genievre, who suspected what the search might unearth, made Guiomar swear that he knew nothing of where she had gone. So the valley stood, and the book lays down, with the patience of a lawyer and the imagination of a poet, the chain of adventures locked into its spell. Only the knight who should achieve Escalon le Tenebreux, the Dark Ascalon, could break the enchantment of the Val; only he could lift from the river the bodies of two guiltless lovers who lay drowned in it; only he could achieve the Tour Douloureuse, the Dolorous Tower. Adventure answers adventure like link to link, and the reader begins to see the shape of this book's genius: it is a machine for explaining the world of the Lancelot before the Lancelot exists, every marvel a root, every root pointing at a story not yet told.

THE SELF-BAPTISED QUEEN AND THE UGLY APPEARANCE

Far to the east, in the pagan kingdom of Sarmenie, ruled Queen Sebile, an enchantress of great knowledge and, until these years, of no faith. Her land was besieged by Baruc li Noirs, Baruc the Black, called the Fairy Knight, li Chevaliers Faez, a champion of more than mortal power; and when the news of her need reached the Round Table it was Sagremor, Dead Youth himself, who took the adventure. The book delights in him here: the man mocked at court for falling from his saddle is the man who stands between a queen and a fairy host. Sebile, who knew enchantment as other queens know needlework, saw the kind of man her champion was, and loved him; and because his faith forbade the match while hers was darkness, she did a thing almost without parallel in these romances: she baptised herself, naming aloud the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and was a Christian by her own act and her own words, for love of her knight. Then she taught him what he could not have learned in any school of arms: how to strike down the enchantments of a magic orchard, where the very trees were bound in the Fairy Knight's power; and with that knowledge he prevailed, and the siege was broken, and the queen of Sarmenie wed the Impetuous One, and a kingdom and a soul were won in a single campaign. So magic and grace meet in this book, and grace, for once, is taught by the magician.

Against that gentle conversion the book sets a horror. On a river of Libya there appeared the thing men called la Laide Semblance, the Ugly Appearance, an apparition so hideous that its gaze turned living men to stone; the adventure of it, said the wise, had been established long ago by Judas Maccabeus, and it had waited since for its achiever. Keu the seneschal attempted it and failed,

which surprises no reader. The knight who achieved it the rest of the Cycle has forgotten: Greu of Alenie, the king of Alenie's son, a Round Table knight who exists only in this book, a recruit of the Saxon wars whom no other branch remembers at all. Greu went to the quest guided by the Wise Lady of the Forest of No Return, an enchantress as benign as Morgue was bitter, and with her counsel he passed the petrifying horror where Keu had failed. His reward had come to him disguised as a messenger: the Wise Lady's own niece was the damsel who had brought him word of the adventure, and he married her, a bride won out of the quest itself. As for the monster, Merlin dealt with it in the end as he dealt with most loose ends of the magical world: he took the Ugly Appearance and cast it into the gulf of Satellie, far away in the sea of Satalia, and the river of Libya had peace.

There is a pattern here that the Book of Arthur traces again and again: the enchantress who damns and the enchantress who saves, the valley that keeps and the forest that releases, Sebile's baptism at one pole and Morgue's valley at the other, and in the midst of them all the figure of Merlin, teacher of both camps, growing weary and growing doomed.

THE JUDGEMENT OF MERLIN, AND THE BREAKING OF THE BOOK

For Merlin, in this book, does not vanish into silence. Other branches end him with a sigh: a hawthorn in blossom, a tower of air, a voice heard crying from nowhere while the story hurries on. The Book of Arthur alone dares to tell what happened next: his captivity and his death are narrated, and what followed his death.

Niniane, for so this book spells the Lady of the Lake, was his undoing, as the parallel branches also say. He loved her; he taught her; she learned from him the art that mastered him, and the time came when the master of kings and enchanters lay bound in a prison from which no prophecy could free him, because prophecy had foreseen it. The book does not soften the account. Merlin was demon-engendered, the child of a fiend and a woman's woe, made for purposes not God's; and at the end he surrendered to love, flesh to flesh, and by that surrender his body was doomed. So the demon-born body of Merlin died in its prison, and every reader of the Cycle, until this book was found, believed the story ended there.

It does not. The Book of Arthur brings his soul before judgement, and there the unique thing happens. Divine intervention willed that his soul be saved, despite the sins of the flesh and despite his begetting: for his good deeds were weighed against his sins, and the good weighed heavier. The counsellor of kings, the baptiser's prophet, the builder of the Round Table's order, had spent a dark inheritance on works of light, and mercy, which is not arithmetic, counted the spending. And then the book does its boldest thing. It gives the imprisoned Merlin a prophecy of his own release, a release far beyond any horizon his captors could see: a knight called Perlesvaux, Perceval, shall one day free Merlin, but only after Lancelot is dead. The Lancelot branch itself glances back at this promise, saying that the story will later tell how Perceval delivered Merlin; and so the fragment, broken at both ends, reaches past its own breaking and points at an unseen future, at a deliverance scheduled beyond the death of the greatest knight of all. In the same pages the book tells how and why Merlin, in his might, made the Isle Tronoiant, the Turning Island, so that the cloud-voyage of Nascien's kinsman, sung of in the Grail history, here receives its root. Even dying, the enchanter is made the architect of the whole Cycle's geography.

The last leaves of the book hurry, as if the scribe felt the darkness coming for the candle. They give us the young Nascien of Noargue, son of the Damoiselle de la Blanche Nue, sitting at a hermit's feet while the old man unfolds the Gospel of Nicodemus: the witnesses before Pilate, the figures of Moses, the holy chrism, until the boy renounces knighthood and turns hermit himself; and woven into that instruction is the genealogy the whole Cycle rests upon, the descent of Lancelot from Joseph of Arimathea through Galaad. They give us the Widowed Lady of the Waste Forest, mother of Agloval and of Perceval, and twenty knights riding to succour Agloval, keeping a promise the book made long before, to tell what became of Perceval's brothers, whom the Lancelot barely names. They give us darker things, too: a knight cruelly ill-treated by Agravain, the first stain of that cruel nature; the Chastel de la Mort, the Castle of Death, of which the book says flatly that no man put into it ever came out except wholly dead, and in it Gaieriet slays Kaols sans Douceur, Kaols the Merciless, a fitting tenant for such a house; the Castle of Maidens, ruled in this telling by the Queen of Denmark, who hates the Round Table, where Sagremor vanquishes Greomar its master and Minoras li Preuz fights beside the king; and the same queen's enchanted garden, an otherworld orchard in which knights are detained, as if joy itself had learned to keep prisoners. And among them the book remembers small Senehaut, lady of the knight Blis, stolen and rescued by Sagremor, who bore her rescuer a daughter that resembled him more closely than a picture, a child Queen Genievre herself took into her household to rear.

Then, on the last surviving page, in the middle of a battle, the book breaks. A knight, so spent he can barely lift his arms, fights on because he is afraid to die; fear of death, says the text, made him quicker and lighter than his own strength could. Gauvain is spurring to a maiden's rescue. Nearly every thread has just been tied. And the sentence stops, and there are no more pages. The lost ending, the scholars say, was probably short; the story was nearly done. But it is not done, and never will be, and the Book of Arthur ends as it began, in the middle of a breath.

It remains only to say where the breath was going. This book had already told the noble origin of Galehaut, lord of Sorelois, which the Lancelot never troubles to explain; had shown Brandus des Illes, lord of Dolorous Garde before Lancelot's day, luring Gauvain and Yvain towards the Dolorous Chartre and its prisons, the very dungeons that Lancelot will one day break open and empty; had planted the Nameless City and the Terre Foraine and the lineage of Galahad. The Queen's Knights are mounted and waiting. The prophecy hangs in the air: Perceval shall free Merlin, after Lancelot is dead. Everything in this fragment leans forward towards a hero who has not yet entered it. So the supplement hands the story back to the greater Cycle: to the Lancelot proper, where the knight whom all this preparation awaits will come at last out of the Lake, and the wars and wonders of Arthur's youth will give place to the glory and the grief of his maturity.

SOURCE NOTE

This retelling is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the Old French text and not a translation. It follows the book order of the complete retelling: Book I the History of the Holy Grail, Book II the Story of Merlin, Book III the Book of Arthur, Books IV and V Lancelot of the Lake, Book VI the Quest of the Holy Grail, and Book VII the Death of King Arthur. Checked against H. Oskar Sommer, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 1908-1916. Ages 15 and up. © 2026 Mythopouch.

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