



Arthurian Romances

Chrétien de Troyes

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Taking the legends surrounding King Arthur and weaving in new psychological elements of personal desire and courtly manner, Chrétien de Troyes fashioned a new form of medieval Romance. *The Knight of the Cart* is the first telling of the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Arthur's Queen Guinevere, and in *The Knight with the Lion* Yvain neglects his bride in his quest for greater glory. *Erec and Enide* explores a knight's conflict between love and honour, *Cligés* exalts the possibility of pure love outside marriage, while the haunting *The Story of the Grail* chronicles the legendary quest. Rich in symbolism, these evocative tales combine closely observed detail with fantastic adventure to create a compelling world that profoundly influenced Malory, and are the basis of the Arthurian legends we know today.

Arthurian Romances Details

Date : Published (first published 1190)

ISBN :

Author : Chrétien de Troyes

Format : Kindle Edition

Genre : Classics, Mythology, Arthurian, Historical, Medieval, Fiction, Fantasy, Literature

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From Reader Review Arthurian Romances for online ebook

Becky says

I decided that the first book on my challenge this year was going to be one that I have been working on for like... three years. It's been brutal, you guys, I hate it. Chretien was such a misogynist. At one point this guy complains that women are all afraid to give in to their passions, so you HAVE to rape them, because even when they really want it (and they ALWAYS really want it) they'll always kick and scream and say no, and then, when you go through all that trouble they don't even thank you for it. I'm not making this up, it's in the book. It took me so long to read because I wanted to rip my eyes out after every story. Cliges was the only story that I found interesting, and it has strong Romeo and Juliet overtones (yeah, yeah, I know, R&J had overtones of Cliges, not the other way around, but you know what I mean).

IDK what to tell you. It's very Knights of the Round Table... everything we've come to expect from these books, with all the bizarreness, misogyny, and "heroism" these kinds of books entail. So it does what it says on the tin. It's got the same depth and symbolism as other books of its time and genre so I should rate it higher I guess. But I'm not going to.

Also, it ends in an ellipsis, mid story. The notes suggest Chretien may have died without finishing it, and there were four people who transcribed it who added endings on to the story, all of which were apparently pretty similar. So that's a thing.

I'm not sure why I keep reading these, they make me so unhappy. I guess, for me they're like action movies: I love this genre, and I want to love the stories being told, but they are never FOR me. I'm never the target audience, and they are always full of things that act as a slap across the face. One of these days I'm going to find my Mad Max Fury Road or Jupiter Ascending of King Arthur stories.

But it's not this day.

Jo says

Four stories from the world of King Arthur translated from the original 12th century French. I don't think I was in the right mood for tales of courtly love because the attitude towards and treatment of women mostly irritated me and spoiled my enjoyment of the adventure in the stories.

Suzannah says

It finally happened.

I finally got around to reading Chretien de Troyes' Arthurian romances.

Everyone has been telling me how delightful Chretien is, and I've always believed them. I believe them even more now.

Read my detailed review now at [Vintage Novels!](#)

Nikki says

I can't believe it's taken me so long to get round to reading this. I've had it on my reading list for ages -- before I knew it'd be a set text -- and I'm glad I finally got round to it. It isn't a novel, as such, of course, but a set of somewhat connected stories, the last one of which is unfinished. I'm surprised by how great a part Gawain plays, even in the stories of the other knights, particularly in The Story of the Grail -- I don't think I've really seen him get so much attention in the grail story, except as a failure, in other texts.

In any case, I knew "Erec and Enide" from some other source, that preserved it almost entirely -- almost a translation, rather than a reinterpretation! No surprises in this one, for me. This edition has a good clear translation. Of course, by modern logic, Erec's treatment of Enide makes no sense at all and is horribly cruel -- I think the more modern version I read had him suspecting her of infidelity, and emphasising it as the reason for his treatment of her -- but we're not talking modern logic!

I hadn't read "Cligés" anywhere, though, although it was familiar from the similarities it had with "Tristan and Isolde". The behaviour of Fenice seems very much like a criticism of faithless Isolde; it'd have been interesting to read Chrétien's version of "Tristan and Isolde", if it survived.

"The Knight of the Cart" has survived quite well in later interpretations, although it's been pruned and added to. It was interesting to read this one, although funny that though Lancelot is praised here, he's not really present in the other texts. He isn't the model of excellence that Malory makes him: Gawain seems to have that role.

"The Knight with the Lion" is interesting. I think bits of it survive -- I knew the story about the spring -- but a lot of his wandering, and how he met the lion, was unfamiliar to me.

"The Story of the Grail" follows the Welsh knight, Perceval. I can't say I really enjoyed that much, with the contempt of the characters for the Welsh, and the way Perceval was pretty much characterised as a simpleton. But a large part of the story follows Gawain, which I enjoyed a lot, and most of his adventures in this story were new to me.

It's kinda fun reading this and reading about how silly the whole idea of chivalry -- that never really existed -- was. Idealisation or not, I do love Arthuriana for its ridiculous excesses: every maiden is the most beautiful in the world, more beautiful than Helen of Troy, and every knight is the best and the most courtly in the land... Medieval literature can get away with it; I'm afraid modern lit can't.

Gaetano says

Questo libro è la raccolta di 5 romanzi medievali e leggendolo mi sono trovato proiettato indietro nel tempo, in un mondo affascinante e ben diverso dal nostro.

L'autore ci racconta storie intrise di lealtà, eroismo, generosità e, soprattutto amore, quell'amore cortese interpretato magnificamente dai cavalieri della corte di Re Artù.

Combattimenti furiosi, eroi invincibili, duelli appassionati e scenari grandiosi, con l'amore per una damigella o una regina a fare da motore alle avventure mirabolanti, dove si guarisce con unguenti miracolosi e ci si

consegna spontaneamente, sulla parola, alla persona designata dal vincitore che ti ha graziato, anche se questa persona, dama o cavaliere, si trovi a centinaia di chilometri di distanza!

Nonostante gli anni passati (i racconti sono del XII secolo) e lo stile d'epoca, ho sognato ad occhi aperti e mi sono persino arrabbiato per il comportamento della regina Ginevra!

Daniel Pecheur says

I read Chretien de Troyes' famous Grail story of Perceval, which is the first story of the Grail legend. Unfortunately the work was unfinished so it's hard to look at the tale as a complete story. It was entertaining to read, certainly not great literature. Some parts are actually silly and laughable, which made it more interesting to read in light of having just read Cervantes' Don Quixote which mocks the genre of chivalry and knight's errant. Nevertheless it's got some good stuff in it, with the supernatural and fairy-tale-esque elements infused into the story to add a layer of mysticism and mystery to the Grail and bleeding lance legend surrounding the Fisher King. Of course the two knights in the story, Perceval and Gawain have godlike invincibility which becomes farcical at times. Of course that's what lends Don Quixote's illusions of grandeur so much humour, having been based on such legends like this in which the knights of King Arthur are enshrined. If you're interested in the stories of the Holy Grail, this is definitely worth checking out since it is the original. One should understand that the grail legend has a long and circuitous history, evolving over time into different manifestations. In Chretien's story the Grail itself is simply a sacred dish that contains these manna-like wafers that have a healing effect on the Grail king, father of the Fisher King. I love these stories for their fantastical and over-the-top qualities, it's just the stuff of great legends, though maybe not so much great literature.

Ensiform says

A prose translation with an introduction and footnotes, by William K. Kibler. I enjoyed them somewhat. The antiquated style, the endless repetition, the dry description and the meandering, random, red-herring plots that seemed to have been invented by Chrétien as he went along, were detrimental to absorbing and appreciating the stories fully. On the other hand, the dialogue was often witty and the character development good. Surprisingly, Chrétien wrote many strong women characters. The stories:

"Eric And Enide." This was translated by Carleton Carroll. A much shorter version of this is in Bullfinch (he uses the Welsh name for the hero "Geraint"). An original premise: Eric drags his wife off with him on adventures after she hurts his pride.

"Cligés." The monologues, in which Alexander and Soredamors, and then Cligés and Fenice, take turns ruminating ad nauseam on the caprices of Love, detract. Good combat scenes, however.

"The Knight Of the Cart (Lancelot)." Truncated versions of this and the two following stories appear in Bullfinch. A straightforward plot, but with so many ultimately useless divagations it's tiresome to follow.

"The Knight With the Lion (Yvain)." My favorite. An archetype of the courtly romance, with lots of fighting and fantastic elements (like Yvain's pet lion, which also undoubtedly represented courage or nobility). Yvain - "Owain" in Bullfinch and maybe history - is a true hero. There were also very strong women characters.

"The Story Of the Grail (Perceval)." The beginning is excellent, with the naive Perceval learning to become a knight. And there's some suspense and mystery. But on the whole there are too many subplots for my taste, especially when Gawain is involved. It ends mid-sentence, presumably with Chrétien's death.

Greg Lico says

Arthurian romances is a particular favorite genre of mine to read. Chretien de Troyes is more or less the originator of some of the most famous episodes in the Arthurian mythos.

In my junior year of high school, I took a class on Medieval literature and it was defiantly my favorite class in high school. I had a great teacher who was passionate about the subject and a class willing to learn. It was there that I first read Chretien de Troyes and his stories of chivalric romance. We only read one of his poems, *Yvain*. Later, I bought a copy of this book and read his other four romances.

Lancelot is the first story to introduce Camelot's greatest knight and the love affair between him and Guinevere.

Percival is the first ever story to feature the Holy Grail. It is the most mystical and haunting that Chretien wrote. Unfortunately, he died before he could finish it and we never find out if *Percival* obtains the Grail.

Yvain is the best in the book. In many ways it is the precursor of the modern novel. *Yvain* is the story of a knight-errant, who is rejected by his wife and performs a number of heroic deeds in order to regain her love. It features some very memorable episodes, like *Yvain* fighting two demons in a haunted castle, the rescue of a maid burning at the stake, and *Yvain*'s friendship with a lion. I don't know by Hollywood hasn't adapted this book yet. It is made for film.

Arthurian Romances is the fictional record of how a culture thought about how the upper classes should behave in court. Courtly love was a conventionalized view of love between a knight and married woman. He was supposed to love her from afar and perform deeds in her honor. How often this happened in Medieval Europe is difficult to determine. French poets, like Chretien, wrote poems like *Lancelot* and *Yvain* as how real knights should behave. Reading these poems for me helps me get into the intellectual milieu of the 12th century.

João Fernandes says

Exams are finally over, time to return to books and Goodreads! Will catch up on reviews as soon as I can.

Joe Totterdell says

From William W. Kibler's introduction the 1991 Penguin Classics edition of Chrétien de Troye's *Arthurian Romances*:

"Certainly no translation can hope to capture all the subtlety and magic of Chrétien's art. But one can hope to

convey some measure of his humour, his irony and the breadth of his vision. He was one of the great artists and creators of his day, and nearly every romancer after him had to come to terms with his legacy. Some translated or frankly imitated (today we might even say plagiarized) his work; others repeated or developed motifs, themes, structures and stylistic mannerisms introduced by him; still others continued his stories in ever more vast compilations.”

Written in the latter half of the twelfth century, the works that compose Chrétien de Troye’s *Arthurian Romances*—*Erec and Enide*, *Cligés*, *The Knight of the Cart*, *The Knight with the Lion*, and *The Story of the Grail*—are invaluable today for functioning as the basis of the Arthurian legends with which contemporary readers are now familiar. Interestingly enough, as the legends have survived until today in the form of only a few manuscripts, the manuscript containing the earliest and best copies of Chrétien’s romances, the Annonay Manuscript, was cut apart and used as filler for book-bindings (!!!) in the eighteenth century; only fragments of *Erec and Enide*, *Cligés*, *The Knight with the Lion*, and *The Story of the Grail* belonging to the Annonay Manuscript have been recovered. The Guiot Manuscript is the primary manuscript referred to in the English prose translations by William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll contained within this edition of Chrétien’s *Arthurian Romances*.

Chrétien did not finish writing two of the legends, and although we cannot be exactly sure why this is today, we have our hunches; the first of Chrétien’s unfinished tales, *The Knight of the Cart*, was actually completed by the clerk Godefroy de Lagny with the approval of Chrétien and is suspected to have been abandoned by Chrétien due to the failure of the subject matter, the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, to appeal to him (the reasons for why this could have been are the subject of contentious debate among literary critics and scholars), while the second unfinished Arthurian legend, *The Story of the Grail*, is suspected to have been left incomplete due to Chrétien’s death (for more on the continuations of the legend written by other authors, [click here](#)).

With Chrétien’s *Arthurian Romances* having been originally written in octosyllabic couplets in Old French, while losing the form and linguistic subtleties of Chrétien’s original verse, Carroll’s prose translation of *Erec and Enide* and Kibler’s prose translations of the other four legends preserve the most salient thematic features of Chrétien’s romances in their explorations of courtly love, adultery, chivalry, beauty, and Christianity during medieval times, with many an allusion to texts like the Bible and to characters in literature like Tristan, Isolde, Roland, and Ganelon by the erudite Chrétien as well as to Greek writers like Sophocles and Roman writers like Ovid and Virgil in Chrétien’s literary manifestations of the Classical theme of *translatio studii*. The contemporary reader will hopefully find these historical conceptions of love, masochistic in the way that they drive the protagonist of each legend to arduously great lengths in order to achieve a certain goal, fascinating despite their antiquity and obsolescence; in addition, they should appreciate Chrétien’s keen penchant for deftly interlacing the narratives of his Arthurian legends and his innovation in establishing unique motifs like the rash boon in these tales. He was, as far as I am aware, a writer way ahead of his time.

Evan Leach says

The British may have started the whole Arthurian movement, but the French really took it to the next level. French writers added a number of innovations to the legend we know and love today, including the character of Lancelot. Chrétien introduced the character in *Erec and Enide*, then added the whole Guinevere love wrinkle in *The Knight of the Cart*. Both of these poems are included in this collection, along with *Cligés*, *Yvain*, and *Perceval*.

Altogether this excellent collection contains all five of Chrétien's major poems. These works were highly influential to the later development of the Arthurian legend, and Camelot buffs will really enjoy this volume. C'mon...it's first appearance of Lancelot in world literature! If that piques your interest, you will like this book. **4 stars**, recommended.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in March 1998.

This Everyman volume contains the four romances *Erec et Enide*, *Cligés*, *Yvain* and *Lancelot*, translated into prose. It's always interesting to read the early source material for the Arthur legends. Although I had read both the *Mabinogion* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, these romances were new to me, though they are even earlier than the Welsh legends and I had known their importance for ages.

One of the most interesting parts of these tales is the way that the attempts made by Chrétien to remove the more grossly supernatural Celtic legends in his source material (trips to the underworld, encounters with Celtic deities) has led to the introduction of small inconsistencies and justifications which later turn into important parts of the legend.

There are two difficulties in reading these stories. The first is that they are written throughout in the present tense, which to a modern reader is rather clumsy and wearing. The second is the translation, which is not into modern English, but into the sort of English which *Ivanhoe* made generations think the right way of writing medieval English. (I've expanded on what I think of this in my review of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sir Nigel*.)

The stories themselves concern standard ideas from the Arthurian background; *Erec et Enide* is about a knight who becomes sufficiently uxorious to neglect his knightly duties; *Cligés* and *Lancelot* concern young men seeking to prove themselves as knights; and *Yvain* is a balance to *Erec et Enide*, about a knight who neglects his wife for jousting.

Ryan says

The predecessors to the medieval romance (of which the Arthurian tales are probably the most famous) were the *chansons de geste* (songs of deeds), epic poetry written down in the 11th and early 12th centuries, though sung much earlier. Their subject was war, which was plentiful, and martial honor, which was perhaps less so. Things started to settle down a bit as monarchies consolidated power, and with the rise of court culture comes a literature that develops elaborate codes of chivalry and courtly love, the direct ancestors to modern views of romance, 'courtship,' even personality. Stories tended to be of individual male heroes and their interactions with damsels (often but not always in distress), which was the impetus for some sort of chivalric adventure. Pagan (i.e. Celtic) folktales supplied most of the content, though they were refashioned to fit Christian, monarchical, and courtly needs. And lo! 'Fantasy' as we know it had its chief ancestor.

I checked this out of the library just to read *Perceval*, the oldest surviving written account of the Grail myth. It's both de Troyes' most famous tale and the least complete. You can find the plot on wikipedia, but it's interesting to note that the Grail has nothing to do with Jesus at this point, it's a pagan borrowing. Anyway, the story is pretty entertaining for the first half, then it switches abruptly to *Gawain's* story (which isn't as

well-paced), then both end unresolved. Later writers took this incompleteness as an opportunity.

About the Everyman edition: a functional introduction followed by prose translations of all five stories: *Erec* and *Enide*, *Cligès*, *Yvain*, *Knight of the Lion*, *Lancelot*, *Knight of the Cart*, and *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*. There are ok notes, but the translation is stilted and kind of boring. I recommend getting verse translations of one story at a time and a good companion. If you need the single-volume treatment, David Staines has a better prose translation but no notes.

Luís C. says

I really can't say enough in praise of this wonderful book. Each poem is translated into prose in a lively and vivid style. The dialogue is crisp and natural and the action non-stop. But Chretien's intentions go even deeper than merely telling cracking yarns. Each are sensitive and intelligent explorations of human nature.

Marital love is ever an important theme in Chretien. In *Erec and Enide*, the hero neglects his knightly reputation in order to devote himself to his new bride, and in *Yvain* the hero does the opposite and neglects his bride for valour. Both must set off on a series of adventures that culminate in them seeing the error of their ways and setting matters right. *Lancelot* is an excellent story. Nowhere does Chretien condemn the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, despite negative references elsewhere to the adulterous love between *Tristan and Iseult*. In the introduction are suggested that the theme may have been proposed by Chretien's patroness. Perhaps, then, Chretien was anxious not to offend the French Court. At any rate, he didn't finish the romance and gave it to someone else to do (this ending is included in this book). In *Perceval* Chretien masterfully captures the naiveté of the young hero. He delivers the most mysterious, powerful and influential Arthurian story of all. Here we see the holy grail, the bleeding lance and the castle of maidens, all of which have become essential ingredients in Arthurian lore. It's unfinished state presented an irresistible challenge to later poets, some of whom tried to finish it off. Others went back to the beginning and offered alternative versions. The only story that sometimes gets a little static is *Cliges*, where the characters occasionally go off into protracted musings on the nature of love. But once you've got past these bits, which to be fair are intelligent insights, it's still a fine read. All in all, I hugely recommend this book. And if it doesn't want to make you start exploring Thomas Malory, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and the rest, you've got no romance in your soul!

Diabolika says

Cavalieri cortesi, belli e valorosi; nobili dame e giovani pulzelle innamorate; giostre e tenzoni mortali... Un tuffo in un meraviglioso mondo passato, dove l'onore e la parola data valgono più della vita.

Solo 4 stelle perché il racconto *Perceval o Il Racconto del Graal* mi ha convinta un po' meno, con una trama un po' troppo ingarbugliata. Per il resto, una lettura che trasuda Medioevo da ogni parola. Bello, bello, bello!!!
