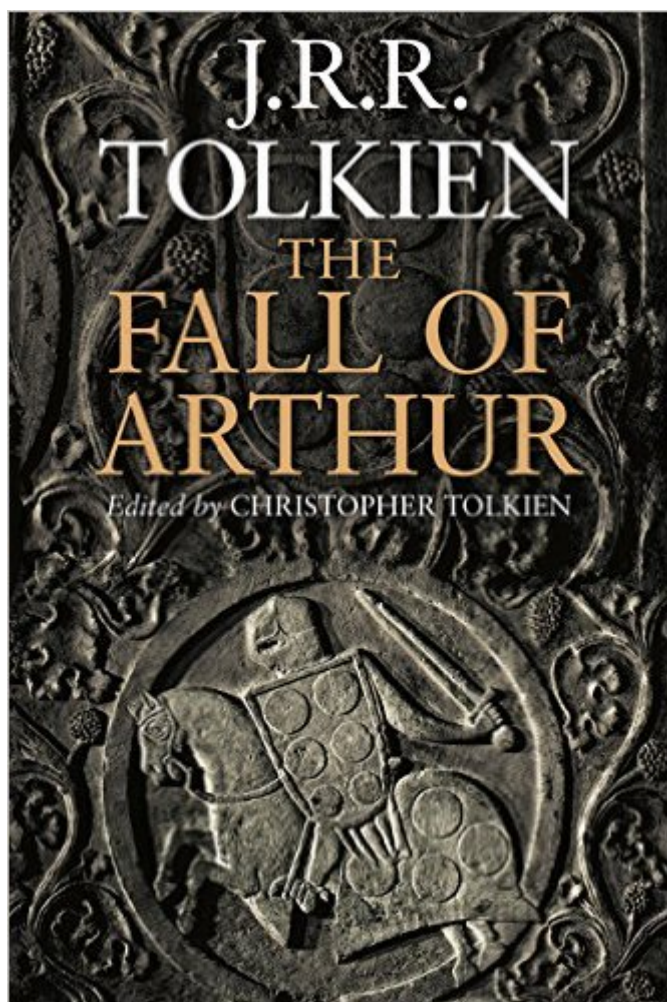


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The Fall Of Arthur



Synopsis

New York Times bestseller—An incomplete but highly compelling retelling . . . An action-packed, doom-haunted saga, full of vivid natural description. • "New York Times Book Review

The Fall of Arthur recounts in verse the last campaign of King Arthur, who, even as he stands at the threshold of Mirkwood, is summoned back to Britain by news of the treachery of Mordred. Already weakened in spirit by Guinevere's infidelity with the now-exiled Lancelot, Arthur must rouse his knights to battle one last time against Mordred's rebels and foreign mercenaries. Powerful, passionate, and filled with vivid imagery, this unfinished poem reveals Tolkien's gift for storytelling at its brilliant best. Christopher Tolkien, editor, contributes three illuminating essays that explore the literary world of King Arthur, reveal the deeper meaning of the verses and the painstaking work his father applied to bring the poem to a finished form, and investigate the intriguing links between The Fall of Arthur and Tolkien's Middle-earth. • Compelling in pace, haunted by loss, it lives up to expectations. • "Daily Beast • Erudite and beautiful. • " NPR.org

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Customer Reviews

Readers who have an interest in Arthurian literature should find this interesting for its exposition of Tolkien's source choices. Those who are only interested in Middle Earth, may have trouble associating this book with the Tolkien they know. Christopher provides some help in bridging the gap. Those who are expecting a full-fledged Arthurian experience will be disappointed. Most of the English speaking world knows of Arthur through Sir Thomas Mallory's 15th century version of the stories. With few exceptions, what appears in the popular media is based on Mallory. The

exceptions generally ignore the vast earlier base of Arthurian literature, borrow a few names and incidents, and invent new relationships between the characters and create new narrative. The film *King Arthur* (2004) is a good example of this. Tolkien made a conscious choice to focus on the most "English" aspects of the legends. Arthurian literature before the 12th century would fit on part of one page. Geoffrey of Monmouth sparked interest in the Arthurian stories, starting around 1150, when Arthur was included in his *History of the Kings of Britain*. Monmouth gave us about 33 pages of Arthurian "history". This was followed by an avalanche of writing in French and German that lasted 100 years, until around 1250. The English versions of the stories first appeared 100 years later, in 1350. One of these was the West Midlands *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by Tolkien and Gordon in 1925 while they were professors at Leeds. The other was the Stanzaic *Morte D'Arthure*. *Gawain and the Stanzaic* were used as sources for the Alliterative *Morte D'Arthure* around 1400. The Stanzaic and Alliterative were sources for Mallory. *Gawain* is borrowed from *Briciu's Feast*, an episode in Irish mythology, and adapted to the Arthurian legends. The importance of this is that Tolkien took the most direct "English" path to Monmouth when choosing his sources. As Christopher states in the comments accompanying the poem, Tolkien used the vein starting with Monmouth, then to the Alliterative, finally to Mallory. This is as close as he could get to an "English" version. Monmouth was born in England, of Breton parents. Mallory was also influenced somewhat by continental versions of *Chretien a Troyes* and the *Post Vulgate*, but Tolkien seems to have expanded on Mallory's choice to ignore important aspects of the post-Monmouth continental versions, like the role of Lancelot. He seems to have been interested in purging the continental influences not already present in Monmouth. It may surprise some that Tolkien, a scholar of language and mythology, once wrote (1951) that England "had no stories of its own..., not of the quality I sought". In the same paragraph he notes the Arthurian legends are "imperfectly naturalized, associated with Britain, but not with English". The *Lord of the Rings* and its accompanying literature were his attempt to create a mythology for England. It was published starting in 1954. Tolkien's first attempt to write his own mythology started in 1914. A 28 page "Sketch of the Mythology" was written in 1927. Tolkien started *The Fall of Arthur* sometime before 1933 and it was abandoned by 1934. He never returned to it. In 1937, he submitted an early version of what became the *Silmarillion* to the publisher of *The Hobbit*. The timing of *The Fall of Arthur* seems to indicate a fleeting hope that he could convert Arthurian literature into a myth for England. However, it is impossible to ignore the many ties this body of literature has to the continent, especially France. Connections to the continent even appear in his brief start, which includes Frisians, and for which the bulk of the text is concerned with Arthur's trip to the continent, leaving Mordred in charge, and Arthur's return from

France. Lancelot is French. Many stories in the wider body of the French and German stories are centered on what is now France, especially Brittany. Echoes of this even appear in *The Lord of the Rings*. "Rohan", for example is a place in Brittany where the plateau meets the rougher ground of Brittany. "Mirkwood Forest" seems to be patterned after the Forest of Broceliande, in Brittany, which is connected to many Arthurian legends, especially those of Merlin, Palamedes, and others. If the story had been completed, it would attract a larger audience. As it is, it is rather specialized. Those of us in that audience, are very grateful for it.

JRR Tolkien had a passion for ancient myths and legends. But for some reason, he never wrote much about the stories of King Arthur. That isn't to say he didn't write anything about the Once and Future King. In the 1930s, he wrote "The Fall of Arthur," an epic poem that he abandoned in favor of his more famous Middle-Earth books. This is not the genteel, courtly Arthur of Thomas Malory -- this is a rough, ancient-feeling poem that follows the rhythm and flow of Anglo-Saxon poetry. "Arthur eastward in arms purposed/his war to wage on the wild marches,/over seas sailing to Saxon lands,/from the Roman realm ruin defending..." The malevolent Mordred convinces Arthur and Gawain to set out to war, during which he will take care of Arthur's kingdom. The two battle their foes to the east, and are wildly successful..... until "from the West came word, winged and urgent,/of war assailing the walls of Britain." Mordred has treacherously turned against Arthur, and is even pursuing his beautiful queen Guinever, who flees the castle to avoid him. So Arthur heads back home to reclaim his throne, even as the exiled Sir Lancelot is drawn back to help the man he wronged. Sadly, the poem was never finished, and it ends after a rousing little speech by Gawain. So to pad out the book, Christopher Tolkien wrote a multi-part essay about the poem and its depiction of Arthur -- the Saxon overtones, the presence of Rome and other countries, Tolkien's use of language, and comparisons to other works of medieval Arthuriana. He also expounds on its connection to Tolkien's "Silmarillion" (aka the Elf Bible), the various notes that Tolkien left behind that indicate his intentions for the remainder of the poem, and the evolution of the poem, based on Tolkien's multiple drafts. These parts are not particularly interesting except from a scholarly standpoint -- the real draw is the poem itself. Though Tolkien wrote "The Fall of Arthur," it feels as though he uncovered a forgotten piece of parchment and simply translated the story. This is a very Anglo-Saxon Arthur, with none of the polished medieval flavor that most stories have -- he's depicted as an Invasion-era Briton who bravely fights back against the eastern invaders. And anyone who has studied "Beowulf" will recognize the way this was written -- short lines, strong alliteration, caesura (mid-line pauses) and kennings (two words connected to form another one: "the

wind-wreckage in the wide heavens"). The entire poem has a strong oral flavor, with the swaying rhythms of old Saxon poetry. And Tolkien's use of language is as exquisite as ever ("Grey her eyes were as a glittering sea; glass-clear and chill"), evoking feelings of a wild but civilized world, of banners with ravens, ships ablaze on the sea and castles overlooking the sea. "The Fall of Arthur" is not a work for the casual Tolkien reader -- instead, it's a beautiful, sadly incomplete epic poem that makes you wish he had been immortal, so he could have one day completed it.

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