

The Sword of Macsen Gwledig: King Arthur, Middle Earth, & Mythopoeisis

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Merlin's first two visions of the King Sword (in Mary Stewart's *The Hollow Hills*) came in dreams, of a jewelled blade hovering in the winter sky over Brittainy, but the third glimpse come sin his waking hours at Constantinople in a tapestry that depicts the execution of King Maximus by the Roman emperor, Theodosius at Aquilea. Then, at Bryn Myrddin, Merlin's cave in the hollow hills around Maridunum (Carmarthen, Wales), comes his fourth vision: in a dream a cloaked skeleton exhibits a sword with "King" inscribed on the blade and bids Merlin receive it; the specter adds, I am not your father but you are my seed. Take it, Merlinus Ambrosius. You will find no rest until you do." Prince Macsen—for the skeletal apparition is he—drops the sword into the darkness and Merlin awakes knowing his destiny is to discover the sword for Arthur. As Stewart formulates things, King Maximus (Macsen in Welsh), a Roman general from Spain who commanded the British troops, led a revolt among the Britons against Rome in 383 A.D. and stormed Rome which he held successfully as British regent until 388 when he was executed by Theodosius. His British followers returned to northern Wales with his sword and armor and hid these treasures for a later day, spreading the legene of Prince (Gwledig) Macsen.

Merlin journeys north to Segontium (Caernarvon) to Macsen's Tower, part of the remains of a Roman fortress once occupied by the Celtic usurper, Vortigern. Merlin locates the Temple of Mithras, and, in a power trance, hurls down the altar, discovering Macsen's sword in a box under the altar—100 years after Macen's retinue stashed it there for posterity. Merlin returns to the Chapel in the Wild Forest where a dying monk discloses the duplicate Mithraic altar with an identical sword carved in stone. Merlin deposits the authentic sword of Macsen Gwledig for the day when Arthur the Bear, still an adolescent at Count Ector's estate, comes of age, withdraws the sword from the stone altar, and claims his rightful kingship.

The King Sword, which Arthur will call Excalibur, came to symbolize the Celtic Rally, as historians call it, the newfound sense of cultural identity, potency, and independence for the native Britons. The 20 year reign of Arthur was a luxurious and creative lull between incessant Saxon invasions, a time for the curious amalgam of Celtic paganism and Christian theology that typified early 6th century A.D. Britain. For Merlin, the King Sword expressed his life's work, which was to be the midwife at the birth of Britain, and to nurture and guide its first ruler, King Arthur. Prince Macsen and Ambrosius tried to stem the Saxon tide with force of arms and they partially succeeded, laying the paving stones for a lasting peace; but it was King Arthur who would build Camelot and organize the Round Table Knights on this foundation, holding it fast for nearly a generation until that sorrowful day after the disastrous Battel fo Camlann when Arthur, mortally wounded, orders Bedevere to fling Excalibur out over Dozmary Pool in

Cornwall's Bodmin Moor. There the arm of the Lady of the Lake, draped in white samite, catches the sword, flourishes it three times, and disappears with it under the water, and the dying Arthur, the once and future king, is ferried to the immortal Isle of Avalon.

The Arthurian Fact

The stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table—Guinevere, Lancelot, Gawain, the treacherous Mordred, the “witches” Morgan le Fay and Morgause, the Grail Quest, the jousts, the image of a benign, wise king presiding over a court of marvels and chivalry—have delighted English readers for 1500 years. They've been retold and refashioned by nearly every generation to suit its own cultural preferences. But how much of this fateful Camelot was actually true and factual?

Enthusiasts of the Arthurian legend, the *matiere de Bretagne*, distinguish an Arthurian fact and an Arthurian legend. In June 1967 Barbara Robertson demonstrated this two-tiered cultural heritage dramatically at the Bath Festival in England by staging a King Arthur Pageant. There she fashioned a stage with two levels, with the lower level depicting the fact, while the upper portrayed the legend. On the fact stage, Chretien de Troyes, Gildas, Nennius, and other early chroniclers debated what happened while next to the the *dux bellorum*, Arthur, and other dark age figures enacted scenes of Saxon invasion and battle. On the upper stage, the luminous figures of legend—Merlin, the Grail Knights, Morgan le Fay—dramatized the legend; a staircase in the back enabled figures who appeared in both realms to pass from one stage dimension to the other. As Arthurian novelist Catherine Christian remarks, “Modern research and archeological discoveries have proved beyond question that behind the Arthurian Legend stands the Arthurian Fact.”

Rome had successfully colonized Britain under Claudius but by 425 A.D. Britain was independent and Wales in particular was undergoing a tribal resurgence. Tribal chieftains were called *gwledig*, and Celtic mythic heroes re-emerged from cultural obscurity. The monk Gildas (circa 545 A.D.) was a key witness to the Celtic Rally although clerical rancour, most scholars contend, constrained him from mentioning Arthur specifically as the victorious chieftain at Mt. Badon, the decisive twelfth battle of the Britons against the Saxons. Nennius (c800 A.D.) somewhat more graciously specifies Arthur, dubbing him *dux bellorum* and victor at Mt. Badon. The literature of the period reports a prominent war duke as well. In *Gododdin*, Aneirin, the Welsh bard, makes an indirect reference to Arthur as a great commander; *The Book of Taliessin* calls him *gwledig* (ruler); the *Black Book of Carmarthen* (c600 A.D.) hails Arthur as *amherawdyr* (emperor), an appellation repeated throughout that hoary compilation of early Welsh Arthuriana, *The Mabinogion*. Arthur assails fortresses, visits the underworld, and hunts the boar Trwyth. Arthur sits with Cei, Bedwyr, and Gwenhwyvar at his court in Caerleon-upon-Usk in Wales; he leads his knights on quests throughout Britain; he plays *gwyddbwyll* (a kind of chess) with Owein in a study of nonchalance as armies of ravens and soldiers battle outside the court; he bestows maidens and boons on supplicants; he is a fierce warrior when necessary, takes his “war band” and “champions of Britain” to Ireland, and slays the Black Witch herself. Arthur is mentioned frequently, too, in the common Welsh *Triads* as a popular folk hero with six companions. Some historians now

speculate that he may have assumed the regal title *Comes Britanniarum*, “the Count of the British Provinces,” at the time of his victory at Mt. Badon (c515 A.D.).

Victory at Madon established Arthur’s authority and he imposed his rule of orderly government throughout Wales and lowland Britain. Internal peace prevailed for about 20 years as Arthur upheld the restraints of truth and justice. With Ambrosius and his faithful retinue from Badon, Arthur sought to restore the glory of the Roman Empire in Britain. The *Cambrian Annals* (c950 A.D.) record that at the Battle of Camlann Arthur and Medraut fell, ending the two decades of unity and Arthur passed into legend as a king with noble intentions betrayed by treachery. As John Morris notes in his *The Age of Arthur*, Arthur was “a mighty shadow, a figure looming large behind every record of his time, yet never clearly seen.”

Archeological excavations in Britain in the past 25 years have substantiated some degree of plausibility to the nebulous literary legends and sometimes apocryphal records. Through a blend of techniques—soil conductivity tests, magnetic field studies, animal bone remains, geophysical aerial surveys, post holes, pottery shards, and literary clues—researchers have felt confident in assigning a certain though measured validity to the claims of such places as Glastonbury, Tintagel, and Cadbury as authentic Arthurian sites. Geoffrey Ashe, in his fascinating text, *The Quest for Arthur’s Britain*, writes:

“Excavation shows that we go wrong if we take the legends literally. But it also shows that we go more wrong if we refuse to take them seriously.”

Castle Gore in Golant, Devon, is believed to be King Mark’s stronghold, the trysting place for the adulterous Tristram and Iseult; Cadbury Castle, an old hillfort twelve miles south of Glastonbury in Camelford, Somerset, is reputed to have been the wondrous Camelot; and Glastonbury itself was probably the fabled Isle of Avalon where Arthur was brought after Camlann.

Glastonbury, geological evidence suggests, was once surrounded by marshes and lagoons and was situated like an island during wet weather. In 1190 A.D. the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey were probed by Henry II, seeking legitimacy for his claims to the heritage of Arthur; his royal assertions could be validated only if Arthur were demonstrably dead and buried—and exhumed. Supposedly, six feet down the diggers struck a stone slab and a lead cross with the inscription: “Here lies buried the reknowned King Arthur in the Isle of Avalon;” nine feet lower they uncovered a huge oak coffin containing the skeleton of a tall man whose skull was damaged, and, next to him, lighter bones with a scrap of yellow hair, presumably Arthur’s wife, Queen Guinevere. Many regard this story as spurious, contending the remains belonged to a deceased commoner, but fake or not it did help Henry II and the Plantagenets with their imperial claims. It also makes the story more intriguing in a troubling way for Arthur enthusiasts.

Tintagel has also been a key Arthurian site. The ruins of Tintagel castle stand on a bare upland on a rugged promontory overlooking the sea in northwestern Cornwall. Far below lies a small cove called the Haven, with a cave hollowed out of the rocks. This is reputed to have been Merlin’s den, and it’s surrounded by cliffs of almost black slate. The ruins sprawl from the precipitous cliff face across the isthmus to the mainland. This

is the alleged birthplace of Arthur and the castle of King Mark of Cornwall, husband to Arthur's mother, but not his father. The ruins are of a castle built in the 12th century on the site of an older Celtic monastery dating to perhaps 350 A.D. Many tourists flock to Tintagel in the warm months in curious pilgrimage to the shrine of their enduring legend. The gift shops abound with artifacts, maps, souvenirs, and books pertaining to King Arthur. Tintagel enjoys a pacific rivalry with other competing locations claiming Arthurian ancestry, such as Queen's Camel in Somerset, Colchester, east of London in Essex whose Latin name Camulodunum, linguistically invokes Camelot, and Caerleon-upon-Usk, in Wales, where, owing to the presence of the green circle of the amphitheater traditionally known as Arthur's Round Table, it is believed Arthur held court.

Arthur and the Celtic Reality

Catherine Christian, an Englishwoman, writes close to the authenticated Arthurian Fact in her highly impressive and entertaining contribution to the Arthuriad. In *The Pendragon*, Bedivere, Arthur's Chief Companion and Bard, narrates his former days with Arthur twenty years after Camlann and Arthur's death. Bedridden and nearing death himself at 75, Bedivere dictates his professional memoirs to Father Paulinus, an industrious, congenial Saxon who tends the failing Bedivere in his monastery. "For twenty years, I, Bedivere, have kept the flame of Arthur's memory burning among his own people, in the hills and lonely places, in outlaw camps and roadside resthouses, in farmhouse kitchens and turf huts of the Hill People, with my harp's singing." Bedivere, who mastered the somewhat contradictory careers of company commander, disciplinarian, and exasperated realist with initiate bard and intuitive harper, receives the Merlin jewel, the ring, and Merlin's harp, and the accompanying Power after Merlin is "struck by the bolt of Apollo" and runs mad in the woods, blind, helpless, convinced an evil power has imprisoned him in a dark cavern.

Bedivere, Cei, Gawain, and Guinivere are most commonly found in the early Arthurian legends, so it is fitting that they figure prominently in this story as it is also highly original to have Bedivere act as narrator. The account is crammed with historically factual details: hillforts, the Triads, Taliessin, St. Iltud, drinkhorns, torcs, leather head shields, the odor and dampness of the halls. Broader probable realities of Celtic culture permeate the lives of Arthur and his companions: the Gathering of the Clans, the Dragon Making, King Choosing, Wander Year, Cave Vision, Spring Sowing; and most of the key rituals are performed at either the Giant's Dance (Stonehenge), the mystery temple of the Old Faith, or *Yns Witrin* (Glastonbury), then the holiest place in Britain.

While Christian refrains from floating the grand myths of the legend, she introduces some changes of her own. For instance, Medraut's (Mordred) evil and Camelot's downfall stem from his mysterious "secret grievance" which he radiates as an Iago-like menacing gloom, and not, as tradition holds, from the tragic bastard parentage of Arthur and his sister, Morgause. Instead, Medraut is the offspring of Arthur's sister, Ygern, and an anonymous Saxon warrior who raped her. Peredur (the paramount Grail Knight; a variant of Parsifal) is here Lancelot's son by Elaine and although Arthur nominates him as his successor, he journeys to Jerusalem in search of the Grail and dies of consumption in Italy. Palomides the olive-skinned is rescued from the ineffectual

buffoonery of being King Pellinore's hapless side-kick in his search for the ridiculous Questing Beast (as in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*) and becomes Bedivere's intimate friend and the skilled camp physician. Excalibur is fashioned by Lob the Cunning of the Little People in a cave in the "very roots of the hills." The sword is forged from an unearthly metal, obtained from a dying star; when Celidon the Merlin and young Arthur visit Lob, he is urged to complete the third and crucial forging. The sword turns blue and doesn't shatter, which means it is ready for Arthur the King. Lancelot takes Guinivere to his castle Joyous Garde in Brittainy early in their adultery, but they both willingly return to nurse Arthur when he lies poisoned and possibly dying at Camelot. The embittered Aglovain resuscitates the latent slander of their adultery twenty years too late in an effort to arouse treason in court, but this is almost as an afterthought in Medraut's demented master plan of revenge.

These alterations are a storyteller's prerogatives and make reading new versions of the Arthurian legend endlessly rewarding. But Christian fashions even broader changes, and satisfying ones, too. Guinivere, whose mother came from the strange Mountain People, became a Moon Maiden, a Priestess of the Old Faith, at puberty; she took the Dark Draught at age thirteen which rendered her womb barren but gave her powers of distributive fecundity for her people, a munificence she exercised every year at corn sowing on May morning—and this neatly explains why there was no issue from her marriage with Arthur. Blaise, Merlin's remote and bookish correspondent who recorded events of Arthur's time, according to some storytellers at least, is here Blaize, the Arch-Druid. Merlin is now Celidon the Merlin (*The Merlin* is a specific Druidical role, third in importance), the People's Bard and Messenger. The revered Lady of the Lake is here the Chief Priestess and Arthur's mother by King Uther; she was taken to *Yns Witrin*, commanded to enact the rite of the "Traveller at the Ford," and impregnated by King Uther. Celidon, who maintains a guerilla band network throughout the back country and who harps the soldiers into battle fury, is not deceived by his female enchanter, Nimue or Vivien, who steals his powers and entombs him, but rather wanders out of his mind and through the dark forests of Britain.

It is with the Grail legend that Christian's high Celtic vision of King-making reaches its consummate expression. After the Saxons are subdued, Arthur introduces the Roman concept of *pietas* and inaugurates knighthood. The fertile blend of a Christian, Roman, and Celtic *Weltanschauung* coalesce in his vision of the Round Table, the Grail Knights, and the Crystal Cup of Life. The Cup, as Bedivere recounts it, is a symbol all faiths could share, a symbol to bind them together in a brotherhood—fusing Druid wisdom, the Bull-Slayer of Mithras, the Christ-God—and a young priestess with a robe of shimmering gold carries the Cup aloft around the hall, the Cup rose-tinged from the wine within. Peredur has an ecstatic vision of the Grail hovering in the air over the Table and he afterwards leads a large portion of Arthur's knights on a year-long search. Except Bedivere, who sees this as "madness" to abandon Camelot and he remains there to maintain security and supplies. Yet when he dies, which he apparently does on the last page, he has a mystical vision of his own of a "great translucent Cup, that glows the color of a red rose." It fills his entire vision as he passes in Arthur's realm.

Christian finds company with Victor Canning's *The Crimson Chalice*, which exhibits an admirable blend of historical precision and imaginative reconstruction in a realist's approach to the Arthurian material. In this surprisingly rich and inventive recasting of Arthur's formative days as a warrior, Canning portrays him as the pagan son of a tribal chieftain, Baradoc, of the Tribe of the Enduring Crow in Cornwall. Arturo, as Canning dubs him, is god-ordained and destined to be a great leader; Canning sets his hero in a landscape of Roman place names and crumbled Roman villas in the wild days of the Saxon invasions and after the demise of the Roman Empire. Arturo's claim to kingship does not derive from the serendipitous extraction of a sword from a stone; rather, it is the result of deliberate, patient plotting of 25 years, a time spent organizing guerilla bands in the countryside, gradually gathering Britons to his passionate mission for a unified Britain, cleansed of the plundering barbarians, the Saxons. Arturo is a warrior and a dreamer whose sword can destroy but whose tongue drips honey.

As he remarks in his preface, "I have made no attempt to conform strictly to the lines of the accepted Arthurian legend largely because I do not think it bears much relation to truth." Canning modestly admits of himself as a mythopoeist that he "enters the lists poorly armed but securely mounted on a horse I have ridden for years called Imagination." He rides his mount fitly and masterfully. Scores of vivid and arresting scenes lodge in the reader's memory: Baradoc's dawn sacrifice at Stonehenge; the winter seclusion of Tia and Baradoc on the desolate island of Caer Sibli; the ritual of the silver shoaling of the Enduring Crow; the dawn battle of Arturo and Inbar at Stonehenge. Canning recounts Arturo's protracted but god-blessed passage from adolescent precocity to boastful outlaw to *dux Bellorum*, war duke of all the kings of Britain. The crimson chalice—a mendicant monk's gift to Tia, Arturo's mother—becomes Arturo's talisman, the touchstone of his life's mission. The crimson chalice—"When he was crucified it was this bowl which caught the blood that dripped from the spear wound in his left side....It is said that if it is filled with water and held by one marked for greatness, the water flushes to the color of the Christos blood."—bears startling resemblance to the *Sangreal*, or Holy Grail, seen by Perceval (or Parsifal) and Galahad. The Grail, legend asserts, is a golden chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper and which Joseph of Arimathea used to receive the last drops of Jesus' blood at the Cross. The reader pauses in wonder at this sudden revelation and silently applauds Canning's subtlety.

The Crimson Chalice inaugurates other changes and alterations in the legend, consistent with Canning's original vision. Arturo is a pagan at heart and a "Christos follower" only out of expediency. Gwennifer courts him and commits adultery out of the pure desire to furnish him with a son since their marriage is barren. Mordred is Arturo's nephew, not bastard; and it is Merlin who comes for Arturo in the flat-bottomed boat at the end of his earthly life. Arturo, in a sublime moment, after disclosing his "immortal wound," a mark from the gods guaranteeing his destiny to one day return to human life to restore glory and peace, invites the reader into the process of his own mythopoeisis. "He let the silvered tongues of bards and singers run free, for he knew that...men had need to make of one of their own a god of flesh and blood. He had long ago lost the pathway of the true life and rode the shining way of truth." As Merlin draws the boat ashore through the mist, Arturo flings his sword into the water and surrenders his chalice,

remembering suddenly that all this had happened in his dream the night before. But his dream stopped with the boat; Merlin would have him “finish the earth dream from your own fashioning” as they paddle out into the Stygian vapors. And with them Canning assumes his place with Catherine Christian, T.H. White, Thomas Malory, and the many other bardic mythologizers who tend the green trees in the wasteland, and revive old tales against the day when they become a heap of broken images.

Merlin: Enchanter, Prophet & Madman

Merlin, the Wise Old Man, guide, and counsellor to young King Arthur, has always been a popular figure in the Arthurian Legend, but what facts, if any, can be pinned down to this legendary wizard? Possibly the earliest literary reference to Merlin occurs in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* from the 6th century A.D., in which a madman named Myrddin Wyllt stalks the Caledonian forest, observing the Battle of Arfderydd in which he watches his friend the king fall. Myrddin Wyllt contributed two poems to the *Black Book*: in one he describes the apple tree that shelters him; in the other, he addresses the piglet who is his sole companion. Myrddin Wyllt is closely associated with, if not identical to, Lailoken of Scotland and Suibne Geilt of Ireland, each a sylvan madman with prophetic powers. A Merlin-like figure appears in the early *Culhwch and Olwen* called Gwrhry, Interpreter of Tongues who speaks with animals. For Nennius, several centuries later, Merlin is the child prodigy who explains to Vortigern why his fortress crumbles every night. For Geoffrey of Monmouth (c1135 A.D.) in his *Historiaum Regum Brittainiae*, Merlin is the son of an incubus and a virgin mother; Merlin relocates the Giant’s Dance from Killare, Ireland, to Amesbury; and he delivers scores of prophecies in the presence of Vortigern and his feckless priests. Robert de Borron (c1200 A.D.) makes Merlin a prophet of the Holy Grail and the issue of the Devil’s plot to create an anti-Christ—thwarted by Merlin’s virginal mother. In the prose *Lancelot* (c1225 A.D.) Merlin instructs the Lady of the Lake in his magic and she imprisons him, then in *Estoire Merlin*, the prophet instructs King Uther Pendragon on how he might obtain the Round Table; here he serves as Arthur’s counsellor, yet as always he becomes infatuated with Vivien, who imprisons him in a rock. And so the Merlin legend grows with each writer to the present day and the three variations on his history that we’ll now consider.

Robert Nye in *Merlin* displays elements from the earliest Merlin stories in his witty and lascivious, light-hearted and brooding autobiography of Merlin, the Devil’s son. Here Merlin is the battlefield between his own free will and the dark designs of Lucifer, his father, who endeavors to create an anti-Christ out of him and who seems to stage direct most of the feebly-willed humans in Nye’s story. Although it’s customary to portray Merlin as the ascetic Gandhian *brahmacharya* who renounces sexuality for spiritual powers, Merlin here is more the once and future fool, Merlin the voyeur. He delivers Uther to Ygerne and observes with delight their protracted love-making, himself in the guise of Nineve, their serving-woman. “I like to watch them at it, Merlin the watcher.” So he watches in the form of a candle, sheet, spider, book, a gleam of water of the ceiling—it is a protean voyeurism. But Lucifer is discerning; he perceives Merlin’s unique Achilles Heel and gloats, “There’s enough here of weakness and error to turn the plot to our liking.” He and his lieutenants, Beezlebub and Astarot, cast a silken net about

Merlin's feet. Merlin boasts—"The devils have lost me. I will never do their will."—but soon he's enraptured with Nineve, whose body he earlier inhabited as a voyeuristic phantom in a sexually interesting solipsistic entanglement.

Merlin's satanic parentage and sexual peculiarities fuel the gloaming vision of Camelot and his gradual diffuse derangement that drifts ominously through Nye's snappy, impertinent pages. For Merlin, Arthur is "a creep;" he befuddles his monarch for two weeks running with the hallucinogenic fly agaric in a sadistic attempt to prevent him from committing actual incest with Morgan le Fay, his sister; instead, the drug induces the suggestible Arthur to commit wild, imaginative copulations somewhere in his head. Of this Merlin comments bitterly: "Camelot the golden, built upon a secret cesspool; Mordred, the truth about King Arthur and Camelot; a very perfect knight who likes to whip girls' bottoms. I, Merlin, alone, know the truth about all this."

Nineve, the Lady of the Lake, comes for Merlin to "take you to yourself," by way of the Glass Grail Castle, a vague prison situated in the forests of Broceliande in Brittany. There Merlin is imprisoned with "a little wolf, an apple tree, a pig called Jesus," in an enclosure that seems chronically to change shape and definition throughout Merlin's account of it, which he writes from within his glass Castle. The place is also called Diana's Manor, on the fourth and cleared side of the tree-bounded Diana's Lake, the same place, mythically, where Diana turned the peeping Actaeon into a stag worthy of the dog's chase. "It is the *esplumoir*, the cage of the moulting hawk, the place of transformations. It is my crystal cave. It is a wilderness of hawthorn. It is the tree that is one side flames and other side green leaves growing." It is perhaps also an expression of Merlin's self-imprisonment through self-delusion and self-absorption—but we don't know, not from Nye at any rate. In this flip, burlesque, yet thoughtful *roman a clef* of sorts, Nye draws on the earliest Merlin stories and the *Mabinogion* (source of the burning tree image) to craft a book that seems to resonate a little louder each time we reconsider it.

Meanwhile, in Michael de Angelo's stark, poetic narrative *Cyr Myrddin—The Coming of Age of Merlin*, apparently narrated by Arthur who had "these things from Merlin," Merlin's quest for his life's destiny is recounted in bare, nearly mythic prose. As an adolescent Merlin wants more from life than "some dreaming journey from womb to grave" and not knowing why, he leaves his comfortable sixth century A.D. home to commence his groping wanderings. After a romantic interlude with the sensitive Branwen, a stopping place in his purposeful tour, Merlin departs, disdaining homelife and domesticity: "Not for me, alone beyond all imagining, that will be my power. I must go; there is something ahead of me, that calls to me." Merlin continues his search for his chosen unfoldment and is tutored by Ioin (Galapas in Mary Stewart's version, as we'll note below) and reaches Tintagel Castle which in this telling is not the fortress of Gorlois and Igraine, but rather the headquarters for the Celtic priesthood in Cornwall. The priests solemnly reveal Merlin's fate: it is to create the unseen foundation of a nation strongest in the world. Tintagel would be its core.

Tintagel, in de Angelo's version, has been inhabited 400 years by priests dedicated to forging their vision of the warrior king, "a figure of loyalty and devotion, one who upholds the new faith" of Christianity. At the turn of the first century A.D., a high Druid prophesied that "when the great city falls, and the island weakens, the falcon will come from the north," which was essentially born out, at least in the story: London fell to the barbarian invaders, Britain collapsed into disorder, and Merlin, whose name designates the smallest of "our native falcons," comes from the north, from Llwyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey, an ancient Druid stronghold. Merlin, ecstatic yet stunned with his revealed destiny, stands under the shining stars, silent within, seeking guidance. "It was his own voice that came forth," as he pledges to sacrifice the remainder of his life to achieving this vision of Arthur the Bear, warrior king. His first gift to Arthur shall be "an island of power where you may find right dominion over the empire and sacred communion with the stars."

When the Romans stamped out the manifest expressions of the Old Faith, Druidism, the priests fled to the wild mountains of Wales, to Llwyn Cerrig Bach, wherein the votaries dispersed and the treasures were sequestered. The Druids are "the voice and vision of the tribes, of the unborn nation," and walkers in the hills can sometimes hear a faint ringing—that's the Bell of Llwyn Cerrig Bach tolling when danger nears. Ioin initiates Merlin in the mystery of the Sword of Maccsen Gwledig that lies waiting at the source of the waters of the Bach. Merlin finds the "spring of crystal clear liquid" and the imbedded steel blade as the Bell rings through the mountains. Cyr Myrddin, as the Briton folk now call Merlin, articulates the Celtic heritage and expectation, through refining his personal power, assisting in the fathering of Arthur, uncovering the Sword, and establishing the mythic connection between the Celtic heroic (though somewhat defeat-laden) past and the promising future of nationhood and independence. Arthur, in an inscription that opens de Angelo's book, describes Merlin's denouement: "You roamed the twilight forests long, before coming to that dreaded sleep of centuries, when You were laid down in the Enchanted Cave that is the darkness of their minds."

Mary Stewart's masterful and engaging trilogy—*The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, and most recently, *The Last Enchantment*—elaborates this grand teleological vision of the consolidation of Celtic Britain with Merlin as midwife. Here—the narrative voice is autobiographical—Merlin recounts his days from childhood, his prophecies before Vortigern, the fathering and nurturing of Arthur, his ascension, Merlin's infatuation with Nimue, his entombment, release, and old age. Clearly he emerges as the source of Arthur's triumph and the military strategist whose maneuvers led to the containment of the Saxon invasions. As with de Angelo, Stewart's Merlin has the gift of prophecy and The Sight (a form of spontaneous clairvoyance), and he performs prodigies of engineering, even occasional magic in military encounters. Mary Stewart, like Catherine Christian, abides with documented dark age legend, although she effaces Lancelot and advances Bedivere as Guinivere's lover; and Ambrosius, the exiled king-apparent who returns triumphantly to Britain after Vortigern's downfall, is, in fact, Merlin's undeclared father who subsequently values Merlin's Sight and employs him actively in the birthing of a unified Britain. In a profound sense, Merlin is Arthur's godfather and their perdurable

relationship—loving, respectful, symbiotic—is the guarantor of the flowering and stability of Camelot.

In the standard versions of Merlin, as in Malory and Geoffrey of Monmouth, Merlin disappears from Camelot soon after Arthur is established. His character is never developed beyond the stern, eccentric prophet. But Stewart parades the lovable though rigorously disciplined Merlin before us in his long career that dead-ends in his tender but disastrous infatuation with his own disciple and lover, Nimue. Merlin finds love and sexual fulfillment in old age and spends his golden months instructing Nimue in the use of The Sight as they ramble through Britain. Merlin's own powers dwindle noticeably as he becomes prey to "falling sickness," a species of abnesia and catatonia induced by Morgan le Fay's poison from years before. His affectionate tutorial concludes when he appears to die; he's sealed in his cave at Bryn Myrddin (home, incidentally, of the eponymous ancient hill spirit, Myrddin, whom local folk believe has taken bodily form as Merlin), the same cave where his tutor Galapas once taught him in the uses of The Sight in the crystal cave. But Merlin is not dead and eventually manages to escape with the aid of faithful Stilicho, his servant; he's joyously reunited with a grieving Arthur and a weeping Nimue, who had been unable to sort through her confused dreams and premonitions regarding the ambiguity of Merlin's destiny. Although Nimue becomes Arthur's counsellor and the Lady of the Lake, she never supplants Merlin in Arthur's (or the reader's) heart.

Mythologizing Camelot: Adding to the Heap

In the past 1500 years a small string of dark age facts about Arthur's Celtic Britain have burgeoned into the now vast corpus of Arthurian materials (and suppositions) centering around this enigmatic King and his retinue of Round Table Knights. Elements from diverse nationalities—Spain, Italy, Germany, France, America—have been swept up into this evolving expanding mythos. It's intriguing, then, to chart the literary development, the twists, confluences, permutations, and accretions in the polymorphous legends, to document the remarkable transformations of character and situation and nuance in the major story facets—Parsifal and the Grail, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Isolde, Mordred and Arthur—as they undergo their changeling life in the minds of each successive mythologizer.

The Battle of Camlann, at which both Arthur and Medraut fell (c535 A.D.), opened the door for the eventual Saxon establishment throughout England. Arthur was the last bulwark against their unwanted dominion. Arthur is generally credited with holding the Saxon tide at arm's length for a generation, for breaking up Saxon unity, during which time the Christian Church flourished and the barbaric qualities of the Saxons had a chance to temper. The domination, when it inexorably arrived, was slow and incomplete. Devon held out until 710, Cornwall until 825, and Wales never capitulated. For a time, the budding Arthurian legend withdrew to Brittany where there were fewer Saxons; there the legend regrew itself in the Old French. In the following centuries, aspiring monarchs would appropriate the Arthurian heritage in conceited attempts to develop a fortifying mythos for their own political reigns; often Arthurian mythologists would creatively fabricate their own stories specially tailored to their monarchs, even

down to the days of mid-19th century Alfred Lord Tennyson—all pressing the visionary kingdom into the service of a temporal one. And local legends, place names, and monuments with alluring attributions abounded throughout the British Isles such that Arthur had miraculously placed his feet on virtually every stone in the kingdom.

Throughout the 12th century and onward, stories of Arthur circulated richly in the French cultural sphere, bearing the notion that Arthur—and later Charlemagne and Frederick Barbarossa—never died, was still, somehow, available in a time of dire need. The French *chansons de geste* returned to Britain and inspired Geoffrey of Monmouth with their songs and poems. Geoffrey, a Church historian, would draw on Nennius and the Welsh Celtic traditions of Arthur to fashion “marvellous fabrications” in his *Historium Regum Britanniae* of 1136. This marked a decisive step in the mythologization—the protean mythopoesis—of Arthur and it initiated another round in the perpetual accretion of supposedly unrelated but sympathetic stories to the Arthurian matter, like mollusks upon a sunken barge. Chretien de Troyes introduced the Grail legend and presented the lives and struggles of various Arthurian knights, especially Lancelot, in 1180. Wace’s *Roman de Brut* in 1155 was an Anglo-Norman recasting of Geoffrey’s work, while Layamon’s *Brut* in 1200 was a Middle English version of Wace. The Vulgate Cycle of the 13th century (c1225) included the now famous adultery of Lancelot and Guinivere, the tragic romance of Tristan and Isolde, and intensified the Quest for the Holy Grail. Already Wolfram von Eschenbach had written about Parzival in 1170 and in 1370, *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* appeared, a key text ever since. Finally, in the late 15th century, an inspired common prisoner, so the legends tell us, Thomas Malory (who was also supposedly knighted: *Sir Thomas Malory*) gathered the multitude of strands in his monumental *Le Morte d’ Arthur*.

So by the time Malory published *Le Morte d’ Arthur* (essentially a retelling in English of the Old French collection of tales, edited by William Caxton in 1485), the mythic heap was growing. The legend prospered thereafter with Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, John Dryden’s opera *King Arthur*, and on through contributions by Tennyson, Thomas Hardy, Algernon Swinburne, Richard Wagner, John Masefield, Howard Pyle, Charles Williams, Rosemary Sutcliff, Victor Canning, John Steinbeck, Thomas Berger, and numerous others—all gathering us up in rapt allegiance around the fires of this unquenchable mythopoeic momentum. The International Arthurian Society reported in its annual bulletin for 1975 a list of 980 members from 33 countries, and they published a critical bibliography of new titles for 1974 alone: 424 books, articles, and reviews dealing with the matter of Arthur. Thus did Britain father Arthur, did Brittainy nurture the early days of his mythos, until Malory could reclaim Arthur for England again, and as other envious tongues borrowed from and elaborated the fertile legend, the British passionately quarried their national terrain, proudly foisting Arthur as king upon their shoulders, unfurling the banner of Camelot: *Rex quondam, rexque futurus*—Arthur, the once and future king.

That the story still exerts its Siren call today is amply evidenced by Thomas Berger, a lifetime Arthurian devotee, who, like Malory and T.H. White before him chose to reflect the full gamut of the enduring legend, supplemented of course by his own

vision, in this case a decidedly comic one. Berger's *Arthur Rex* is a marvellous recasting of the old favorites—Lancelot, Guinivere, Tristan, Isolde, Gawaine, Merlin, Arthur—with the Round Table symbolizing the heroic bard's divine mandate of *noblesse oblige* and chivalric comportment. The narration is couched in a mock-Malorian hortatory voice—pious, pedagogic, Christian—which occasionally intrudes upon the action with mild homilies and judgements. Berger's retelling is a grand concatenation of the slapstick and burlesque, the magical and surprising, with moments of deep feeling and genuine pathos, counterpointed by fanciful literary conceits (“severed German heads did strew the field like unto melons at harvest time”) and a bleak, tragic vision of the “spendid failure” of Camelot.

Consider these hilarious episodes. Uther Pendragon, desiring King Mark's winsome wife, has Merlin transform him into Mark's body; as he clangs and bumps about in the unfamiliar corridors looking for his “wife,” Berger comments, “his stride was unruly by reason of his concupiscence conjoined with the duke's borrowed shanks.” The adolescent Arthur, chaste and ingenuous, miraculously escapes (only temporarily, though) the blandishments and treachery of Ygraine, the perfidious seductress from King Lot; he shows her his neat and tidy bedroom, free of rats and well-ventilated, as if seeking parental approval for his domestic standards. Knights of the Round Table are always mistakenly jousting one another for entire days, thinking their mates to be enemies; maids under attack and imminent ravishment disdain rescue from improperly attired knights; and knights and damsels suffer “instant assottment” as moonstruck lovers at first bludgeon. The travail of cuckolded King Mark—locked in his closet, he's doped by tranquilizers, as Tristan and Isolde, his youngsupple wife cavort lustily in Mark's own bed—rivals in unbridled hilarity and buffoonery, Sir John Falstaff's similar ill-treatment in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Berger shows us magic, too. The invincible sword, Excalibur, is bequeathed to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, whose hand, clothed in white, appears above the waters of the lake, holding the sword. A grumpy dwarf who guards Arthur's treasure, turns into a dragon when accosted by thieves, destroying them all with his fire-breath. There is the *Siege Perilous*, the infamous hot seat at the Round Table that flashes “Galahad” when the consumptive yet “gentil parfait knyghte” sits down but burns the fannies off everyone else. When Arthur is wounded by Mordred, he is conveyed to the Lake by Bedivere, who flings Excalibur back into the water just as a barge, bearing Guinivere, Morgan le Fay the witch, and the Lady of the Lake, Arthur's tutelary trinity, arrive to bear him off to the blessed realm of Avalon.

Berger does not dwell for long on the superficial clang of *cap a pie* sword fights and jousts. Almost at the moment the reader grows restless with these surface glitters, Berger settles down to serious matters. Merlin, assotted with the Lady of the Lake, suffers her to brand him a mountebank, whose wizardry is but legerdemain, and she locks him into his alchemical cave of inventions and clever conceits—for eternity. The romance and bleak denouement of Tristan and Isolde and the heart-warming compassion of King Mark recall *Romeo and Juliet*, even to the funeral procession. And there is the tragicomic siege at Joyous Garde, with Lancelot holding out against his fellow knights

outside, “for they were all dear friends;” and Arthur’s valiant but doomed attempt to love Mordred, his bastard offspring; and Arthur’s bitter disillusionment as the fellowship of the Round Table collapses over the adultery of Lancelot and Guinivere. “I am a buffoon,” Arthur laments, “and our chivalrous principles will be seen but as a quaint curiosity.” Disclaiming personal injury, he further declares the true insult of their adultery: “Nay, Guinivere, not against me, for what I am in myself is nothing, but rather against the crown, which is all.” Numb with grief, wet from tears, exhausted from the conflict of his knightly ideals with his earthly experiences, Arthur watches his grand egalitarian utopia crumble, and his life’s work become a gesture of futility as every last knight meets his death.

The Individuated Hobbit

“The story of King Arthur and his knights is a myth,” writes psychologist L.J. Bendit, quoted by Catherine Christian in *The Pendragon*. “Like all great myths, it has deep psychological significance. Its roots reach down into the collective unconscious, and extend back into prehistorical race memory,” Joseph Campbell, the noted mythographer, expands on this perception: “Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation....The multitude of men and women choose the less adventurous way...but these seekers, too, are saved—by virtue of the inherited symbolic aids of society, the rites of passage, the grace-yielding sacraments, given to mankind of old by the redeemers and handed down through millenniums.” As an ardent student of the Arthurian legend yet an equally passionate devotee of the mythopoeic creation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, I’ve found it invigorating to approach Arthur through the prism of Middle Earth, and to reassess Tolkien through the vision of Camelot, because they both exhibit the wonderful transformation of thinly documented historical circumstances (Arthur more so, certainly) into panoramic legends.

Timothy O’Neill, a psychology professor at West Point and a self-proclaimed admirer of Tolkien’s pantheon, set himself the task of determining the psychological basis for the enormous popularity of Tolkien’s epic works. Armed with a Jungian lexicon of analytical psychology, O’Neill delved into Middle Earth and returned with many promising insights in his *The Individuated Hobbit—Jung, Tolkien, and the Archetypes of Middle Earth*. In this he summarizes Jung’s contention that the psychic life of Western humanity is one-sided and unbalanced; that commerce between the conscious/rational and unconscious/instinctual realms is inhibited; that the dwindling in meaningful religious expression has left a gap in our imaginative life; and that we live without potent life-supporting myths and symbols, that we live neurotically.

Jungian maps of the psyche depict the Shadow, or alter ego, says O’Neill, which symbolizes our repressed instinctual nature, the Frightful Fiend lurking over our shoulders at night, the “bestly pathogenetic heritage” that contradicts the proprieties of our socialized persona. This dynamic is clearly displayed in the relationship between the normal, socialized Hobbit, Frodo Baggins, and the atavistic, degenerate Hobbit, Gollum. When there is no outlet for archetypal expression in either our private or social life, this one-sidedness becomes the foundation for neurosis. An archetype is a primordial image

in the collective unconscious of humankind, a powerful psychic image—the Wise Old Man, the Trickster, the Great Mother, the Father, the Child, Family—that commonly informs fairy tales and myths. “The archetype,” writes C.G. Jung, “is something like an old watercourse along which the water of life has flowed for a time, digging a deep channel for itself. The longer it flowed, the deeper the channel, and the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return.” Individuation is the return of the healing waters, the integration of the whole personality through realization of the Self, which stands between the conscious ego and unconscious Shadow and to some extent includes both. Within the individuated psyche, archetypes find free expression, the Frightful Fiend and Beastly Shadow are accepted, even welcomed because with this friendly though wary gesture they are transformed from enemies to allies before our eyes—as with Tolkien’s Beorn the Berserker, the bear-man.

This scenario is overlaid on Middle Earth and fits snugly, claims O’Neill. The downfall of Numenor, Tolkien’s Atlantis, commenced the protracted neurosis of Middle Earth. Gondor flourished for a time with its Tower of the Sun (rationality), Tower of the Moon (instinctuality), and the Bridge of Osgiliath (the connecting Self). But as Gondor grows pre-occupied with the affairs of daylight, reason, material progress, and statecraft, the menace of the dark lord, Sauron, metastasizes; the powers of the Evil Eye capture the Tower of the Moon and rename it Minas Morgul, the Tower of Sorcery (the unredeemed, negative Shadow). Osgiliath is overthrown as the Tower of the Sun becomes Minas Tirith, Tower of Guard (against the Shadow). So when the dark side of the psyche is ignored or denied, its power only grows and threatens to overwhelm the conscious realm. The White Tree of Gondor, symbol of perennial hope, withers and dies, and with it the lineage of the Numenorean kings fails, imperilling Gondor. Sauron appropriates several Frightful Fiends to accomplish his designs: Shelob (monstrous spider), the Balrog (a primordial fire-spirit), Orcs (bestialized semi-human degenerates), each of whom stand for the psychic expression of the gathering, terrifying power of repressed instinctual, unconscious Shadow processes. On the other side of things, Gandalf is the Wise Old Man, the avuncular wizard-ally, whose pedigree as wizard is traceable to the founding days of Middle Earth; ordeal by fire and solitude only strengthen his powers. Tom Bombadil is the archetype of Anthropos, the Original Man whose antediluvian imperturbability (“his coat is yellow,” meaning his essential aura is Sun-like, invincible) pre-empts him from Sauron’s entanglements. Aragorn, the rightful King-apparent, is the Self, the healing King who will reunite the sundered, warring, ravaged realms. Symbolizing the vast standoff ruining the health of Middle Earth, on one hand there is the White Lady in Oromardi of the Undying Lands gazing east; on the other, there is Sauron and the Evil Eye peering out from Mordor, into the west; between these two visages lies the Sundering Sea and Middle Earth.

Tolkien’s two principal stories—the quest for the Dwarves’ treasures, the rediscovery of the Ring, the slaying of Smaug (*The Hobbit*); and the return of the Ring to the Fire and the destruction of Mordor (*The Lord of the Rings*)—follow the classic pattern of what Joseph Campbell calls the monomyth. The hero departs his comfortable home (the somnolent entirely conscious-dwelling Shire of the Hobbits), crosses the threshold of danger (the Old Forest), meets the Shadow and its emissaries (the dark riders), is himself

transformed (in this case from bearing the ring), accepts the boon (quasi-immortality in the Blessed Realm of the West), and returns with overflowing treasure (the world is purged of Sauron). The eucatastrophe—as Tolkien terms his apocalyptically happy ending—restores the health of the world and self, pretty much at the expense of the hero, Frodo Baggins the Ring-Bearer. Aragorn, as the Sun-illuminated Self, unites the opposites, as he employs the Dead of Dunharrow, the mythic sword of Isildur, breathes life into the White Tree, and joins the realms of Middle Earth through his royal *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage of King and Queen, mortal man with Arwen Undomiel, immortal Elven.

Mythopoeisis: Creation from Philology

“The imaginative road to the Shire,” comments T.A. Shippey, an essayist among many in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Scholar and Storyteller, Essays in Memoriam*, “leads through weak verbs; the road to Middle Earth lies between the lines of the Oxford English Dictionary.” As the essays in this volume attest, Tolkien pursued scholarly studies in Beowulf, Anglo-Saxon history, Chaucer, the Norse myths, drawing heavily from their motifs as he fashioned his own Middle Earth. “The sense of depth, truth, solidity, consistency, which nearly all readers agree is projected by the trilogy, stems from its substrata of ancient and modern lore,” Shippey notes.

The careful reading of Tolkien brings us in living, though transposed, contact with Anglo-Saxon history and mythology projected onto an apparent fictional landscape. In studying Tolkien’s sources we understand the imaginative uses of history and legend, and the raw materials of mythopoeisis. With the Arthurian legend our studies commence with a slender corpus of facts that have mushroomed into literary fancies, extrapolations, and grand legends; historical precision and archeological delvings are the necessary tools with which to break through the mythic stratum into something like evident reality. The Arthurian student journeys to Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, and Wales to contemplate possibly authentic Arthurian sites, to investigate the claims of local, tenaciously held legends; but the Tolkien enthusiast visits the British Isles to scour the landscape for topographical clues and nuances that might correspond to the imaginary lands of Middle Earth. Arthur grew a mythology from out of the Celtic landscape while Tolkien grew a landscape from out of Northern myths. For myself, as an amateur mythographer, I find myself shuttling back and forth between these two complementary, perhaps inverse, realms, trying to weave them together into a comprehensible fabric of mythopoeic creation. In a sense, what difference does it make if any of the Arthurian Legend is actually, verifiably true or that Middle Earth is a total fabrication? If not, they should have been true.

Tolkien makes history and scholarly research accessible, even engaging, to the general reader, while the Arthurian material makes them necessary. We are vitally interested in the historical past, the factual reality behind Arthur because, at least for the English, he still lives, still inspires the national identity, still brings the remote past more tangibly into the present moment, guaranteeing it a future as well. The sense of Arthur’s ethereal Avalonian presence, through his shadowy persistence at key sites like Tintagel, Glastonbury, and Cadbury Castle, and our deepening appreciation of the stories, re-

establishes for us the link with the past, our cultural antecedents and their roots in the soil of mythos. It positions us within a vast procession of events and people and necessities. "We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity," social critic Christopher Lasch writes, "the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time." Yet it's this fading continuity that speaks to us from the legends, as we recall Sam Gamgee's Everyman remarks as he wonders if he and Frodo and their deeds on behalf of the Ring would become part of a song that later generations would recite around kitchen hearths, another song in the repertory of Middle Earth folk memory. If physical immortality was not offered them, at least mythic immortality was.

Unlike the *matiere de Bretagne*, which has no primal Homer or original, core lexicon, Tolkien's mythos was privately, individually created, even artistically proprietary. Many enthusiasts have published their commentaries, companions, illustrations, indices, explaining or retelling the Middle Earth legends. Several animated movies and annual Tolkien calendars attempt to pictorialize the best scenes and heroic visages, wanting to keep the legend alive, growing, possibly in the same way that medieval tapestries and canvases depicted elements from the Grail Quest. But no matter what the external trappings, the contributors to the Tolkienad recapitulate that same gradual process of accretion and expansion observable in the progress of Arthur; now, with Tolkien gone from us, a seed remains, and we may expect this kind of mythopoeisis to accelerate in all directions.

No book more clearly demonstrates this mythogenetic process than David Day's magnificent *A Tolkien Bestiary*, a pictorial catalogue of beasts, flora, monsters, races, deities, and landscapes from Middle Earth, all retold in a formal, heroic language evocative of Tolkien's own high eloquence. Stunning color renditions depict characters and key events through the Ages of Middle Earth; for the fastidious among Tolkien's admirers, this may arguably be the most satisfying attempt to date. That this volume is a retelling and not recitation is the key to the mythopoeic process, that creation from philology attributed to the bard himself. Every retelling of the story involves a change in tone, syntax, emphasis, word choice, making it thereby a fresh, slightly different, perhaps expanded, fuller version of the protean material. Here we see the myth-making act *in flagrant delicto*, perhaps gradual, conservative at first, moving with incremental changes over a generation, then expanding as time and imagination permit. Myth-maker as wordsmith: we can reasonably expect further, ambitious elaborations of Middle Earth, clones perhaps, parallel Earths, equivalent worlds with mythic necessities.

Reforging the Broken Sword

T.S. Eliot, writing of the wasteland that is modern society, spoke of the sun beating down on "a heap of broken images," a land where no roots clutch, no branches grow, where "the dead tree gives no shelter, the dry stone no sound of water." The phenomenal popularity of Tolkien's Middle Earth and the perpetual interest in King Arthur are perhaps antidotes to Eliot's grave diagnosis, speaking of the imaginative effort to breathe reanimating life into the broken images. We need to understand the image from the Mabinogion, that tree half-aflame, half in green, growing by the river; the Grail

Knight Peredur discovers this remarkable tree on his quest. We need to contemplate the dream of Boromir that commanded men to “Seek for the Sword that was broken/In Imladris it dwells;” and Merlin’s Sword of Macsen Gwledig, imbedded in stone: “Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England.” The sword is the talisman, the powerful heirloom from the undying yet unfulfilled heroic past of a folk. The broken sword reveres the past, survives the present, awaits the future. For those living in the Wasteland, it’s the once chance for health and wholeness.

For Tolkien this sword is called Anduril, the Flame of the West, forged long ago by Telehar “in the deeps of time” in Numenor. Its original name was Tarsil, “Red and White Flame,” a unique sword that shone red in sunlight, cold white in moonlight; it became the heirloom of the house of Isildur after the Battle of Gladden Fields where Elendil, Isildur’s father, was slain by Sauron. Prophecies guaranteed the reforging of Tarsil on that occasion when the rightful King of the Numenoreans should return to Middle Earth. For Arthur, Excalibur is the King sword, Macsen’s treasure, forged under the deep Celtic hills by the Little People, a gift of the Lady of the Lake; and it all came to symbolize the Celtic Rally, again the return of the rightful, destined king. For both Anduril and Excalibur, the sheath is more potent, more magical, than the sword itself; it protects the swordbearer in battle. Yet the sword is the key to the locked door of the Self; the flaming metallic brand will set the waters flowing again through the parched channels of Middle Earth or Logres, the old name for Britain. The wasteland will be irrigated as a deed of the sword.

“The tale of the ‘Sword of Maximus’ is my invention,” writes Mary Stewart. “It follows the archetypal ‘seeking and finding’ pattern of which the Quest of the Grail, which later attached itself to the Arthurian Legend, is only one example...If I had even known how much there was to read, I would never have dared to start to write at all. By the same token I cannot list all the authorities I have followed. But I can hope, in all humility, that my Merlin trilogy may be, for some new enthusiast, a beginning.” We armchair mythological explorers can only hope for lots more of the same.

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