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Le Morte d'Arthur

Thomas Malory · *1485 (Caxton; completed c. 1469—70) · Caxton's 1485 text in modernized spelling*

Malory gathers the matter of Britain into one long book: Arthur's coming, the Round Table, Lancelot and Guenever, the Sangreal, and the last war. The hosted text is Caxton's two volumes (PG #1251 and #1252). This map follows the great arcs, not every episode, and watches how worship, love, and the Grail pull the fellowship apart.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a fellowship built on worship and a holy table survive the loves and treasons of the knights who sit there?

"Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England."
Letters on the sword · Book I, Chapter V

Arthur is given the kingdom and Excalibur, and for a time the Round Table holds. But the Grail judges worldly knighthood, Lancelot's love of the queen cannot be hidden, and Mordred brings the last war. The book ends in Avilion, with a prayer for a soul, not with a slogan about a once and future king.

KEY CHARACTERS

King Arthur
Rightwise king, founder of the Table, husband of Guenever, and the wounded man of Avilion

Sir Launcelot
Best knight of the world, whose love of the queen undoes the fellowship he serves

Queen Guenever
Arthur's wife; honored, imperiled, and finally a nun after the last war

Merlin
The king's counselor in the beginning, who sees more than he can prevent

Sir Gawain
Arthur's nephew; a great knight whose thirst for vengeance helps finish the Table

Sir Galahad
Lancelot's son, the Grail knight for whom the Siege Perilous was reserved

Sir Bedivere
The last companion, twice untrue with Excalibur, then faithful to the end

Sir Mordred
Arthur's traitor, who seizes the realm and meets him in the last battle

Sir Gareth
The kitchen-knight Beaumains, a pattern of courtesy among the later books

A SWORD GIVEN, AND A SOUL COMMENDED

> *"Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England."*
> **Letters on the sword** · Book I, Chapter V

> *"for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul."*
> **King Arthur** · Book XXI, Chapter V

01 The Coming of Arthur

BOOKS I—IV

A hidden child, a sword in a stone, and a second sword from the lake.

- Uther, by Merlin's mean, begets Arthur; the boy is raised in secret
- After Uther's death a sword appears in a stone and anvil: whoever pulls it is rightwise king born of all England
- Arthur draws it, is crowned, and fights the kings who will not have him
- His first sword breaks; from a lake an arm clothed in white samite holds Excalibur for him

> *"Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England."*
> **Letters on the sword** · Book I, Chapter V

02 The Round Table

BOOKS III—VII, AND THE GREAT QUESTS THAT FOLLOW

A fellowship is ordained, and worship is won in the field.

- Arthur weds Guenever; the Round Table comes with her, and knights are sworn to a high order
- Merlin's counsel and his later fate hang over the early reign
- Tales of Gawain, Torre, Pellinore, and later Gareth (Beaumains) show how a knight is made
- The court becomes the center to which every adventure returns—until adventure no longer can

03 Lancelot and Guenever

BOOKS VI, XVIII—XX

The best knight of the world loves the queen, and the court cannot bear the truth.

- Sir Launcelot comes to court and becomes the flower of chivalry, and the queen's knight
- His worship and his secret love grow together; many adventures both hide and reveal them
- The poisoning plot, the Fair Maid of Astolat, and the knight of the cart all press the same wound
- When the love is openly known, Arthur's justice and Gawain's wrath divide the Table

04 The Sangreal

BOOKS XIII—XVII

The holy vessel appears, and most of the fellowship is found wanting.

- At Pentecost the Sangreal appears in a sign at Camelot, and the knights swear to quest for it
- Galahad, son of Lancelot, is the knight for whom the Siege Perilous was made
- Percival and Bors come near the end; Lancelot sees something, and is told it is not enough
- Worldly worship, which the Table prized, is judged and found lesser than holiness

05 The Day of Destiny

BOOK XXI

Mordred, a last battle, and a king borne toward Avilion.

- Mordred usurps the realm while Arthur is away; father and son meet in the last war
- Arthur, sore wounded, bids Bedivere throw Excalibur into the water; twice the knight hides the sword
- The third time an arm and a hand take it, shake it, and vanish
- Arthur is put into a barge with three queens: "I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound."

> *"for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul."*
> **King Arthur** · Book XXI, Chapter V

Grades 9–12
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Kingship · Fellowship · Worship and Honor · The Grail · Loyalty and Treason · Death and Ending

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is Caxton's 1485 book in modernized spelling, two volumes (PG #1251 and #1252). This map follows major arcs; whole books of Tristram and lesser quests are left aside.
2. Excalibur comes twice: first the sword in the stone, then the sword from the lake. Bedivere's failure at the end is a failure to give back what was given.
3. The phrase "once and future king" is not in Malory. Arthur's last charge to Bedivere is to pray for his soul.
4. The Grail quest is not an adventure like the others. It measures the Table and finds most of it wanting, including Lancelot.
5. Watch how Lancelot's worship and his sin are the same career. The book will not choose one and discard the other.
6. Mordred's usurpation and Gawain's refusal of peace are as fatal as the love at the center of the court.

Quotations are verbatim from the Caxton's 1485 text in modernized spelling, Project Gutenberg #1251 + #1252, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/le-morte-darthur/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.