The fortunes of Arthur: Malory to Milton


Abstract

This chapter follows the fortunes of Arthur as a figure contested and celebrated in equal measure between Malory's Morte Darthur (1485), and Milton's History of Britain (1670). Malory depicted the French wars under the guise of Arthur's sixth-century campaign against Rome, and Arthur was key to medieval and Renaissance representations of sovereignty and resistance. One critical view suggests that by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Arthur became an inconvenient myth, retaining poetic and propagandistic potential but scoffed at by serious scholars. The Reformation and the rise of antiquarianism engendered suspicion of medieval sources, and Arthur and Brutus were undone by the rise of Anglo-Saxon studies. Yet Arthur maintained momentum even as myth morphed from history to poetry, and writers such as Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare still found purchase in the legend. Looked at closely, Milton's disparaging of Arthur appears less absolute, refashioning as it does Malory's Arthurian political allegory.
King Arthur has been an important figure in English literature since singers and story-tellers first described his great exploits in the 6th-century. Of course, the legend of King Arthur has been appropriated by many story-tellers and poets, who have embellished upon the first, most modest tales. Part of the intrigue of the stories, which became part of Arthurian romance, though, is the mixture of myth, adventure, love, enchantment, and tragedy. In the end, his attempt fails. Sir Thomas Malory: Morte D'Arthur. The chivalric code was slipping away even in the 14th-century when the anonymous Gawain-Poet was putting pen to paper. By the time of Sir Thomas Malory and his "Morte D'Arthur" in the 15th-century, feudalism was becoming even more obsolete.