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## TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *FALL OF ARTHUR*

### Abstract

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur* is his only venture into Arthurian literature, an unfinished poem of almost one thousand lines, written in alliterative verse, on which he worked in the 1930s. It was edited by Tolkien's youngest son, Christopher Tolkien, and published in 2013. The poem is an account of King Arthur's last campaign, his war against the Saxons, during which Mordred – appointed as regent – commits treason and allies with Arthur's enemies in order to seize power. Events described in the poem take place after Lancelot's adulterous relationship with Guinevere has been disclosed and he, Lancelot, has saved her from the pyre, accidentally killing Gareth and Gaheris, and after the lovers' exile and final parting, when Arthur agrees to welcome Guinevere back as his queen and decides to banish Lancelot from his fellowship and his realm forever. The news of Mordred's treason causes Arthur to return to Britain, but the poem is interrupted immediately before the final battle begins. This paper looks into the Arthurian tradition the author borrows from and examines the transformations he has made, arguing that the general atmosphere of the poem is predominantly Old English, that is, more archaic than that of medieval Arthurian works, whereas the portrait of Lancelot betrays the features of a modern-day character, as Tolkien gives us an insight, albeit brief, into Lancelot's inner life, an insight medieval authors never seem willing to reveal to their readers.

**Keywords:** Tolkien, *Fall of Arthur*, Lancelot, Malory's *Morte Darthur*

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## Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur* is his only venture into Arthurian literature, an unfinished poem of almost one thousand lines, written in alliterative verse. It was edited by Tolkien's youngest son, Christopher Tolkien, and published in 2013. The poem is an account of King Arthur's last campaign, his war against the Saxons, during which Mordred – appointed as regent – commits treason and allies with Arthur's enemies in order to seize power. It is not known when Tolkien started working on *The Fall of Arthur*, much less so why he left it unfinished. The only evidence that he worked on it in the 1930s is a letter from Tolkien's senior colleague, Raymond Wilson Chambers, written in December 1934, in which Chambers – Professor of English at University College, London – expresses a very favourable opinion of the poem and strongly suggests Tolkien finish it. Reflecting on the possible reasons why his father abandoned *The Fall of Arthur* (as well as a few other poems), Christopher Tolkien says, "one might look to the circumstances of his life after his election to the Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford in 1925: the demands of his position and his scholarship and the needs and concerns and expenses of his family" (Ch. Tolkien 2013: 11). The editor further claims that throughout his life, more often than not, his father was short of time and that "the breath of inspiration, endlessly impeded, could wither away". The inspiration reemerged, of course, but rarely led Tolkien to continue what he was previously working on; it rather took him to new, hitherto untrodden paths. Tolkien's attention seems to have been diverted from *The Fall of Arthur*, writes his son, due to the publication of *The Hobbit* (1937) and his work on *The Lord of the Rings*, because "*The Fall of Arthur* was a work of art to be built slowly: it could not withstand the rising of new imaginative horizons" (Ch. Tolkien 2013: 12).

In his edition of *The Fall of Arthur* Christopher Tolkien provides notes on the poem's text (four complete Cantos and the beginning of Canto 5), as well as three chapters: the first, "The Poem in Arthurian Tradition", points to Tolkien's two principal sources from the Arthurian tradition – *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* – the second, "The Unwritten Poem and Its Relation to *The Silmarillion*", explores the influence of Arthurian toponyms, notably Avalon, on his *Silmarillion*, while in the third, "The Evolution of the Poem", the editor looks into his father's manuscript and drafting of *The Fall of Arthur* and explains how the poem came into being.

## The Poem

Canto 1 opens with King Arthur's preparations to go eastwards, to the war against the Saxons, to put an end once and for all to their plunder of Britain's southern coast. The poem suggests that it is Arthur's last campaign but that his heart is brave, dignified and eager for war despite his old age:

As when the earth dwindles in autumn days  
and soon to its setting the sun is waning  
under mournful mist, then a man will lust  
for work and wandering, while yet warm floweth  
blood sun-kindled, so burned his soul  
after long glory for a last assay  
of pride and prowess, to the proof setting  
will unyielding in war with fate. (I, 14-17)

Mordred – appointed as regent – gives a speech before Arthur's departure, supporting his campaign and stating that Arthur's kingdom is safe during his regency. His speech is welcomed by all and nobody suspects imminent treason. The author specifies that Arthur journeys "from the mouths of the Rhine o'er many kingdoms" (I, 43), razing to the ground "[h]alls and temples of the heathen kings" (I, 41), but also that he misses Lancelot, his kin and fellow-knights – Lionel, Ector and Blamore. Apart from Gawain, whom Tolkien calls "defence and fortress of a falling world" (I, 55), Arthur's most distinguished men in the campaign are Bediver, Baldwin, Brian of Ireland, Marrac and Meneduc, Errac, Iwain, Cedivor and Cador. Cold and misty evening comes and the fires in King Arthur's encampment burn low. The dawn of the next day is ominously dark and before long Cradoc, on his swift steed, brings Arthur the news that Mordred has committed treason and allied with the king's enemies in order to seize power. Pale and astounded at first, Arthur soon regains his calm and becomes painfully aware that the Wheel of Fortune has taken a course contrary to his hopes. Sad at heart, he remembers the twenty battles he has victoriously fought and knows that his realm is doomed. When Gawain learns what has befallen them, Arthur admits that he misses Lancelot and asks his nephew's opinion on turning to Lancelot for help. Gawain doubts that Lancelot and his men are concerned about Mordred's treason and says that if they are, it is Lancelot who should swallow his pride and come to see if Arthur needs him.

Canto 2 takes place in Britain. There, in his castle, at the break of dawn, Mordred wakes up gloomy and distraught by the passion he feels for Guinever,<sup>1</sup> a passion that neither his war successes nor his usurpation of the throne can quench.

... his heart returned  
to its long thralldom lust-tormented,  
to Guinever the golden with gleaming limbs,  
as fair and fell as fay-woman  
in the world walking for the woe of men  
no tear shedding. Towers might he conquer,  
and thrones o'erthrow yet the thought quench not. (II, 25-31)

At the same time, beautiful and noble, but unprotected Guinever carelessly sleeps in Camelot. A squire alerts Mordred to the news a Frisian captain, the only survivor from a shipwreck, has to tell him. The news turns out to be that Cradoc has fled Britain and told Arthur about Mordred's treason, which makes war inevitable, as Arthur's army of nine thousand knights is soon to return to Britain. Mordred is advised immediately to march eastwards and confront the king, so he gathers a huge army made of Arthur's enemies and those barons who have committed treason against Arthur, in taking Mordred's side. Before going to war Mordred makes for Camelot to look for Guinever whom he finds in her chambers, frightened but composed. He tells her that he is the king now and offers her to be his queen because he loves her and would never leave her unprotected, as Arthur has done. Guinever fearlessly thanks Mordred for his offer and asks him how he can call himself king when kingly power has been entrusted to him only in Arthur's absence. The question enrages Mordred who grabs her by the arms saying that she will be his, either as his queen or his captive. Guinever then begs him to allow her some time to think over his proposal and Mordred, furiously leaving her chambers, says she must make up her mind by the evening. When the evening comes, Guinever flees Camelot with a few loyal companions and makes for Wales, to her home and her father, King Leodegrance. On her way she thinks of Lancelot and wonders whether he will learn of her misfortune.

Canto 3 stands out as deeply emotional and most poetic in tone. Therein we meet Lancelot for the first time, in his castle, in the French

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<sup>1</sup> Guinever is Tolkien's spelling of the queen's name.

region of Benwick. Pensive and despondent, leaning over the wall of the fortress, he is watching the sea storm, whirlwinds, pouring rain and dark waves, troubled by remorse for having committed treason against his liege lord. The verses that follow unfold Tolkien's version of Lancelot's destiny, the version which reads as a soliloquy although it is retold in the third person singular. Lancelot was King Arthur's very best knight, peerless in courage and courtesy, the knight whom only Gawain could match, but only in prowess. Tolkien makes it clear that Gawain is not an entirely accomplished knight since he has never been truly devoted to a lady and has never had a real friend among men – his only care has always been good service to his king and uncle, Arthur. Besides, Gawain was suspicious of the queen's fidelity to Arthur and had the habit of spying on her. Lancelot falls in love with the queen and his service to his lady gradually becomes more ardent than that to his king and fellowship: the queen on her part requites his love, which unleashes gossip at court. This relationship provokes Mordred's hatred and envy, spurring at once his secret hopes, and it becomes clear before long that the whole of Arthur's world will be destroyed. Without many details, Tolkien mentions Agravain's death, the conflict and split among Round Table knights, Guinever being sentenced to death and Lancelot's rescue of her from the pyre in which he accidentally kills Gareth and Gaheris. Lancelot regrets his deeds as soon as he becomes aware of his unequivocal guilt for the downfall of the Round Table. The exile the lovers experience afterwards shows Lancelot sullen and ill-tempered, which Guinever dislikes, just as she does their solitary banishment and the loss of courtly splendour. Their final parting is heart-breaking – Arthur agrees to welcome Guinever back as his queen and decides to banish Lancelot from his fellowship and his realm forever. The poem suggests though that Arthur secretly regrets Lancelot's departure. The news of Mordred's treason and Arthur's return to Britain reaches Lancelot in France and upsets him. At one moment he hopes Arthur will ask for his help but in the next is uncertain whether or not he would like that to happen. His thoughts, restless and fraught with care, wander from Arthur to Guinever. In less than twenty lines Tolkien provides an insight into Lancelot's inner world, a nuanced analysis of his hopes and anxieties, showing a deeply emotional, introspective man devastated by sinful love and troubled by an overwhelming sense of guilt:

Then half he hoped, and half wished not,  
to receive summons, swift commandment,  
to king the allegiance loyal recalling  
of Lancelot to his lord Arthur.  
Of Guinever again grieving thought he:  
there was woe in Britain, war was kindled;  
were her faith renewed firm and steadfast,  
then she stood in danger. Dear he loved her.  
Though in wrath she left him, no ruth showing,  
no pity feeling, proud and scornful,  
dear he loved her. When danger threatened,  
if she sent him summons, swift and gladly  
against tide and tempest trumpet sounding,  
he would sail overseas, sword unsheathing  
in land forlorn at the last battle  
by his lady bidden, though his lord shunned him. (III, 158-173)

But no word does he receive either from Arthur or from Guinever – “[o]nly the wind journeyd / over wide waters” (III, 175-6), writes Tolkien. In the lines that follow Tolkien briefly mentions Gawain and Guinever: due to Lancelot’s absence from Arthur’s host, Gawain is at the forefront of the impending conflict – which is a good chance for his glory to increase – while Guinever is on her perilous way to Wales on which she has to hide and endure dismal thoughts. Then he returns to Lancelot’s last day: still expecting a call for help Lancelot briefly considers gathering an army and going to Britain, but soon gives up such thoughts. Despite their respective hopes and wishes, Arthur, Guinever and Lancelot remain silent and each chooses to tread a solitary path to the final end. Lancelot’s comes first – when after a “sombre sleep” he wakes up the next morning, the tempest has abated and the sun is shining. No longer does he feel the heavy burden in his heart – he remembers instead a sweet, long-forgotten song and starts singing it to himself. Soon he becomes oblivious of the time and earthly tribulations:

The hour he knew not, that never after  
it would return in time, tempest bringing,  
to war calling with the wind’s trumpet.  
The tides of chance had turned backward,  
their flood was passed flowing swiftly.

Death was before him, and his day setting  
beyond the tides of time to return never  
among waking men, while the world lasted. (III, 221-228)

Canto 4 opens with a description of the barely passable roads to Wales on which Mordred's hateful men are looking for Guinever while Mordred is waiting for the news on the shores of Kent and watching for the arrival of Arthur's fleet. A squire brings word that, protected by night and rough nature, Guinever has fled to her father and is out of their reach. He even dares suggest Mordred forget her and focus on the war, which enrages Mordred who orders him out of his sight. Nervous, frightened, tormented by desire for the queen, Mordred is convinced that Guinever has let Lancelot know of her misfortune and asked for his help. Terrified by the prospect of Lancelot and his kin joining Arthur's army, Mordred spends time restlessly until one morning he is woken up by a cry that a sail is to be seen on the horizon. Soon it becomes clear that Arthur is on the way back to his realm, but Mordred is relieved on seeing that Lancelot's flag is not with Arthur's and that Gawain is leading Arthur's army. The war in Britain breaks out as Arthur's knights march through shallow waters towards the coast and are attacked by the enemy. In the battle, described in the fashion of Old English heroic poems, Arthur's army wins over the passage to the land and Gawain gets all the glory.

The beginning of Canto 5 shows Arthur on his ship, watching his kingdom, well aware it has reached the end as his closest allies have turned against him. Appalling pictures of ruins and devastated land are followed by Arthur's thoughts on the downfall of his fellowship. Arthur and Gawain discuss whether it would be wise to cancel the final battle and retreat westward, and this is where the narration is interrupted.

### **Tradition and Transformation**

As events described in the poem indicate, Tolkien's version of the Arthurian legend has undergone considerable transformations – of place, order, causes and outcome of incidents – and Christopher Tolkien helpfully summarizes them:

Here one may look back to see how to this point my father had treated, and transformed, the narrative tradition that came to be known in later times in England from Malory's last tale, *The Death of Arthur*.

He preserved the 'chronicle' tradition of Arthur's eastern campaign overseas, but totally changed its nature and purpose. Arthur defends 'Rome', he does not assault it.

He retained the treason and usurpation of Mordred and his desire for Guinevere, but in a greatly developed portrait.

He introduced (in a retrospect) the 'romance' legend of Lancelot and Guinevere (entirely unknown to the 'chronicle' tradition), but greatly simplified the complex motives, deriving from the French *Mort Artu*, and found in the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and in Malory's last tale, by excising Gawain's part. He preserved the sentence of burning passed on Guinevere and her rescue by Lancelot; but his banishment now arose as punishment for his relationship with the queen, and not from Gawain's hatred of him for his slaying of Gareth. Lancelot is banished to Benwick, but Guinevere is restored to Arthur's favour.

The attack on Benwick by Arthur and Gawain was entirely excised, and the news of Mordred's treason reached Arthur not at Benwick but in the distant east.

(Ch. Tolkien 2013: 110-111)

I would like to argue that another two transformations stand out as particularly significant: the transformation of Lancelot's character and that of the overall atmosphere.

As for Lancelot's character, lines 158-173 of Canto 3 clearly reveal his most intimate thoughts and are of great significance in the poem so persuasively Old English in tone and atmosphere. The portrait of Lancelot emerging from them seems to betray the features of a modern-day character. It is possible to imagine him walking restlessly to and fro, guiltily aware of the dead end his life and hopes have reached. His service to his liege lord is irrevocably over, yet he wishes to hear from Arthur and be given another chance to help him. But the next moment he cannot say for sure whether or not he truly wants to receive the king's summons. His thoughts then move on to Guinever and with her they



remain, cautiously suggesting that *she* and not the knighthood is the meaning of his life. Lancelot not only loves her, he admits it to himself twice in a short while, in simple yet deeply moving words: “Dear he loved her” (III, 165, 168). With utmost woe he thinks of her, worried about her well-being in a country in which war has broken out once again. Painfully aware of the nature of the conflict in Britain and of Guinever’s firm character, he knows that her life is threatened. Then, in lines 166-8, the frustrating ambivalence of the spurned lover’s feelings is revealed – more than anything else in the world Lancelot loves “proud and scornful” Guinever who has ruthlessly left him to resume her regal position with Arthur. And yet, if only she sent him a word asking for help, he would set sail for Britain the very next moment, regardless of the stormy sea, regardless even of the fact that he is banished therefrom beyond recall.

Tolkien can be said to have revealed much more about Lancelot in these lines than one of his principal sources – Malory – would have been willing to say in his “whole book”. Malory is famous for being cautious about treating Lancelot’s illicit affair with Guinevere, but he does not disclose much about Lancelot’s own inner life either. We learn about Arthur’s best knight in Malory from what he does and says, never from what he thinks. We somehow “feel” his love for the queen as an undercurrent which permeates Malory’s *Arthuriad*, but are deprived of the slightest insight into his burden and worries, his fears and tribulations, to such an extent that it eventually produces the impression that apart from being peerless in courage, courtesy and prowess Lancelot is also cold and unapproachable when it comes to his attitude towards women. Even if his treatment of the Fair Maid of Astolat is put aside as just the most extreme example of Lancelot’s harshness, it is still hard to think of him, even in relation to Guinevere, as a plain-spoken, direct man. Of course, much has been written in critical appraisal of *Le Morte Darthur* about Malory’s principal interest lying in knighthood and kingship rather than in love, and this should be acknowledged with due respect, but on the other hand, the truth also remains, if only from the point of view of a modern-day reader, that Malory’s Lancelot would have been much better off if less aloof and enigmatic. Although immersed in Old English civilization and its atmosphere, in building his portrait of Lancelot Tolkien appears to be a modern, twentieth-century writer in that he makes up for what Malory decidedly remained silent about and what *he* felt the urge to discover. As so many post-Malorian authors, Tolkien does

what Elizabeth Archibald calls “filling gaps of what they’ve been reading”<sup>2</sup> and thus transforms his source.

Regarding the overall atmosphere of *The Fall of Arthur*, the first impression one gets while reading it is that the alliterative verse makes it captivating, moving and tragic in tone. Although it is written in Modern English, the alliterative verse Tolkien uses not only suggests “a pervasive sense of the grave and fateful nature of all that is told” (as the book paper cover suggests), but also makes the poem similar to and reminiscent of *Beowulf* and Old English elegies, of a world ‘bereft of joy’, a world of dashed hopes, of gloomy, vast and foggy moors and hostile, troubled seas. Descriptions of the regions Arthur and his army go through on their way are particularly Old English in atmosphere; the following lines, for example, can be compared to the description of Grendel’s dwelling place in *Beowulf*, the ultimate source of which seems to be St Paul’s vision of hell from the Blickling Homily 17, also known as A Michaelmas Sermon:<sup>3</sup>

Dark and dreary were the deep valleys,  
where limbs gigantic of lowering trees  
in endless aisles were arched o’er rivers  
flowing down afar from fells of ice.  
Among ruinous rocks ravens croaking  
eagles answered in the air wheeling;  
wolves were howling on the wood’s border.  
Cold blew the wind, keen and wintry,

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Archibald, ‘For to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in’: Reading Arthur through the Ages, a plenary lecture at the 24<sup>th</sup> Triennial Congress of the International Arthurian Society (Bucharest, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> A Michaelmas Sermon, Blickling Homily 17, in *Anglo-Saxon Prose*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton, p. 135. “As St Paul was gazing towards the northern part of this world, where all waters pass below, he also saw there above the water a certain grey stone. And to the north of the stone there had grown very frosty groves; and there were dark mists; and beneath the stone there was the dwelling place of water-monsters and evil spirits. And he saw that on that cliff many black souls bound by their hands were hanging in the icy groves; and the devils in the shape of water-monsters were clutching at them, just like ravenous wolves. And the water under the cliff below was black; and between the cliff and the water was about twelve miles. And when the twigs broke, the souls which hung on the twigs dropped below and the water-monsters seized them. These were the souls of those who had sinned wickedly here in the world, and would not turn from it before their life’s end. But let us now earnestly beseech St Michael to lead our souls into bliss, where they may rejoice in eternity without end. Amen.”

in rising wrath from the rolling forest  
among roaring leaves. Rain came darkly,  
and the sun was swallowed in sudden tempest. (I, 72-82)

That the *Beowulf*-poet describes Grendel's moor as a hellish place is a long-known thing, but it is tempting to speculate why Tolkien did pretty much the same in his description of the far-off lands in which Arthur wages war. We know that "Arthur eastward in arms purposed / his war to wage on the wild marches, /over seas sailing to Saxon lands" (I, 1-3), with the principal aim "the heathen to humble". A few lines down in the same Canto, Tolkien calls the foreign lands "wild regions". Such images seem to imply that the abominable, vast, non-Christian and thus uncivilized spaces look infernal, especially when compared to "Britain the blessed" (I, 27) whence Arthur, the Christian king, and his Christian knights come in all their glory.

While in treating Lancelot Tolkien is 'modernizing' the Arthurian tradition so that Arthur's best knight looks like a twentieth-century man, in depicting the general atmosphere of the poem he does the opposite – his powerful Old English setting makes *The Fall of Arthur* more "archaic" than most medieval Arthurian works. This dichotomy is the principal impression Tolkien's Arthurian poem produces.

As has already been pointed out, Tolkien left his *Fall of Arthur* unfinished and Christopher Tolkien is absolutely right when he holds that this is "one of the most grievous of his many abandonments" (Ch. Tolkien 2013: 122). While editing the poem, he discovered in his father's drafting and notes many thoughts and ideas on the course of action and the behaviour of certain characters, including two outlines of the poem's ending. An interesting detail concerning Lancelot, for example, is Tolkien's suggestion that the verses which seem to describe Lancelot's hour of death (III, 221-228) should be understood as the moment in which he ventures to the sea and sails to the west, but never returns (Ch. Tolkien 2013: 157). As for the poem's ending, the two existing outlines have much in common. The first outline suggests that Arthur wants to retreat to the west, to protect his knights, but Gawain says they must confront Mordred sooner or later and insists on acting without delay as they have him near. Gawain marches forward with his men. The battle with Mordred begins, but Gawain soon falters. Yet, Gawain's sword breaks Mordred's helmet and he falls down, but manages to shoot Gawain through the breast and Gawain falls, calling upon Arthur. Arthur comes as Gawain dies (Ch. Tolkien 2013: 126-8). The

second outline has it that Arthur's ship sails towards the coast of Britain. Its ensign is a white lady with a child, while Gawain's ship flies a banner of a golden griffin, and he lands first. He fights with Mordred who catches a bow and shoots Gawain. Mordred is saved by Ivor and Arthur arrives ashore, to kiss Gawain farewell; Arthur laments Gawain (Ch. Tolkien 2013: 128-9).

If it remains unknown why and when Tolkien abandoned his work on *The Fall of Arthur*, the question of why he ventured into Arthurian literature is easy to answer – he was a lover and creator of mythology. In his biography of Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter writes that as a child Tolkien was excited by the legends of King Arthur (Carpenter 2012: 36). But the question of why he chose to write only on the tragic, gloomy last days of King Arthur's realm and not of its glory seems to be more intricate. When his Arthurian poem opens, King Arthur's fellowship is already broken beyond healing and his kingdom is coming to an end. Tolkien's Arthurian world is stripped of splendour, but not in the way Arthurian "chronicle" writers – Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Layamon – depict it before the notions of Camelot, the Holy Grail and Lancelot's love for Guinevere came into being. Tolkien not only uses Old English alliterative verse – his vision of the world seems to be "Old English" and, accordingly, his Arthurian poem can be read as a lengthy variation of the *Ubi sunt* motif, so frequent in Old English elegies, *Beowulf* and heroic poems. Thus, before the final battle with Mordred, Tolkien's Arthur is very much like one of Byrhtnoth's elderly warriors from *The Battle of Maldon*, famous for his words: "Courage shall be the fiercer, heart the bolder, spirit the greater, as our strength diminishes" (O'Brien O'Keefe 1998: 122).

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