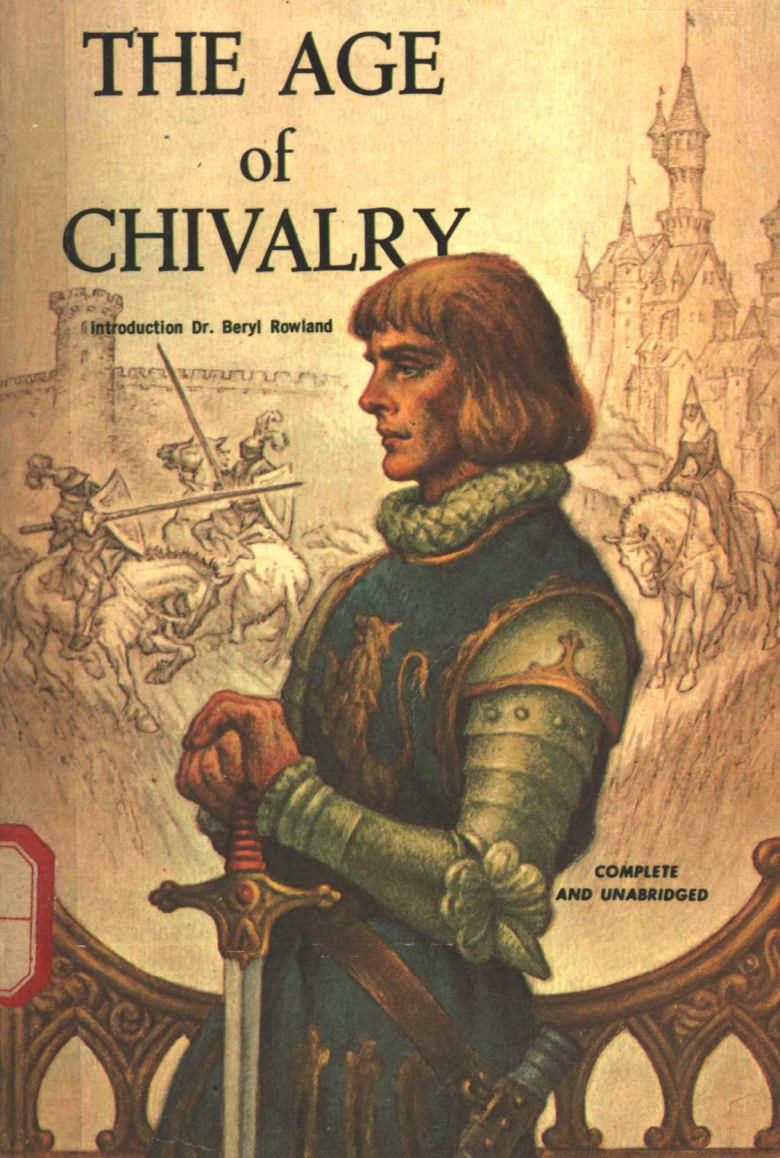


BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY:

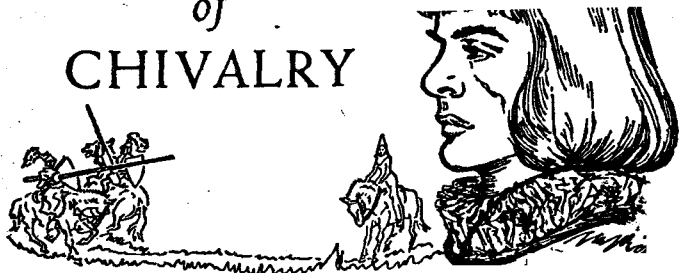
THE AGE of CHIVALRY

Introduction Dr. Beryl Rowland

COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED



THE AGE of CHIVALRY



THOMAS BULFINCH

Introduction

Of all popular heroes with the possible exception of Robin Hood, King Arthur is the one who has most widely captivated the imagination. The attraction lies not so much in the man but in the idea which he represents, the idea of chivalry. For King Arthur seems to belong to a glittering age of pageantry, when every knight performed deeds of valor at tournaments or on the battlefield, spared the poor and helpless, and devoutly worshipped God, King, and the ladies. So persistent are the values attached to such conduct that even today, when the noun has no current application, the adjective, chivalrous, has intrinsically the same meaning as it had in the Middle Ages. It not only denotes the nobility, courage, and courtesy of the true gentleman but frequently, also, the idea of unselfishness, reminding us that chivalry was based on the principle of *noblesse oblige*, the belief that with the privilege of rank went responsibility and service.

Chaucer's Knight in the late fourteenth century exemplified the virtues of the code. He loved "trouthe" or the keeping of his word, "honour, freedom (liberality), and

curteisie." Although he was an exceedingly valiant fighter, in his personal deportment he was "as meeke as is a mayde" and he "nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde/In al his lyf unto no maner wight." Here, indeed, was a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*.

But Chaucer was writing when chivalry was decaying. Behind the regretful remark of his contemporary Langland—"soap-sellers and their sons for silver are made knights"—is the historical fact that a trading class, with no interest in military prowess or its ethic, was becoming powerful and that many nobles were impoverished or were turning into hard businessmen through pressure of circumstance. Although the underlying idea of chivalry goes back to Graeco-Roman times, its practice in Christendom dates from the time of the First Crusade, when the sacred nature of the expedition caused Pope Urban II to exhort the knights to become true warriors of Christ instead of mercenary plunderers. Under such impetus, "Orders of chivalry" were created, manuals of chivalry with an emphasis on ritual were written, and by the next century the institution was in full flower. The knights were established as a military guild, a universal organization binding the whole warrior caste of Christendom into one great fraternity. Secular motives were masked by religious ideals. As Huizinga states in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*:

The conception of chivalry as a sublime form of secular life might be defined as an aesthetic ideal assuming the appearance of an ethical ideal. Heroic fancy and romantic sentiment form its basis. But medieval thought did not permit ideal forms of noble life, independent of religion. For this reason, piety and virtue have to be the essence of a knight's life.

Chivalry, however, will always fall short of this ethical function. Its earthly origin draws it down.

As wars decreased, social life, centering round the baronial household in which the lady of the castle held court, became more elaborate. There were not only tournaments but the pleasures of dalliance. Love affairs became as important as battles for church and state, and the chivalric code of devotion and service was extended to such activities.

Much of our Arthurian material belongs to this period which was the age of the great medieval epics and romances. Later, in 1469, the most famous of all the works on King Arthur, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory, was to gather up all these Arthurian tales and attempt to unify them for the first time.

Did Arthur really exist? He is mentioned by name as a historical figure in the Latin records of Nennius, early in the ninth century. Here he is a man of humble birth, chosen leader because of military ability to fight against the Saxons. One of his great victories occurred on Mount Badon and he appears to be the same man as Ambrosius Aurelianus of Roman origin mentioned by two previous historians, Gildas (c. 540) and Bede (731). The *Annales Cambriae*, possibly compiled about the same time as Nennius was writing, also records Arthur's victories at the Battle of Badon and he was apparently already a Celtic hero. Nennius himself includes some of the fabulous elements which were to turn the historical general into the miraculous King. Arthur slays nine hundred and sixty men singlehanded; a cairn in Breconshire called Carn Cabal bears on the topmost stone a footprint made by Arthur's dog Cabal when it was hunting a boar; Arthur's son Anir has a

marvelous sepulchral mound in Herefordshire which never measures the same but varies from six to fifteen feet. By the twelfth century historians were recording that Arthur, like the typical folk hero, was of gigantic proportions and that he was destined one day to return to earth. By this time, too, a reason had been established for his downfall. A hero as great as Arthur could not be conceived as falling except by treachery and so Arthur's nephew, Mordred (Bulfinch: Modred), the faithless usurper, was introduced by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), a work which appears to retain many of the Celtic Arthurian myths found in the *Mabinogion*.

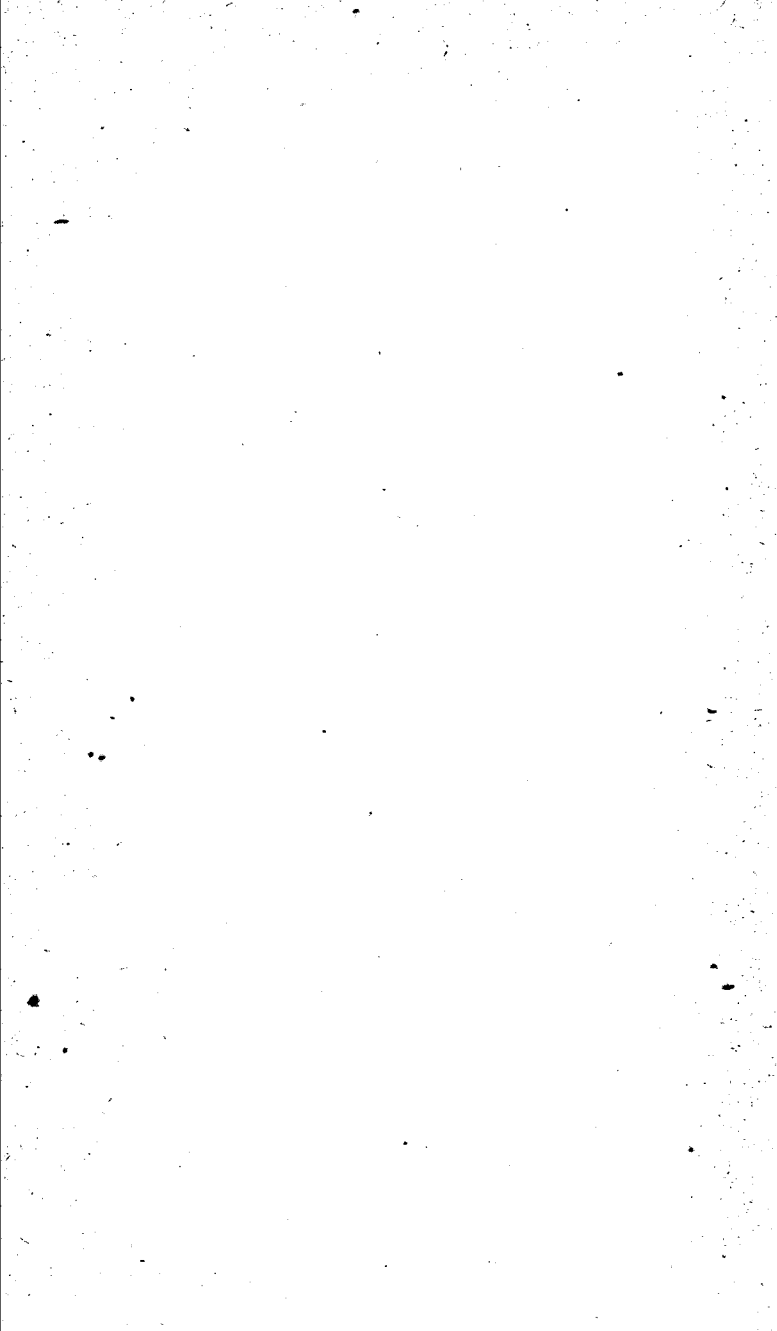
Geoffrey's work was in the form of a Latin chronicle purporting to be history. In the hands of the French, however, the story was romanticized and when it returned to Britain the basically simple themes of defense and conquest had been overlayed with the sophisticated rituals of aristocratic medieval society. Layamon, indeed, introduced the elegiac note of ancient native epic in his battles between the thanes and the invaders, and the Yuletide scene in the castle lacks even the earlier ceremonial etiquette of the meadhall. But the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (c.1360), with its tale of sin and punishment, and the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* (c.1400), telling of the love of the Maid of Astolat and the tragic end of the loves of Guenever and Launcelot and of the rule of King Arthur, is full of medieval local color, with references to tournaments, heraldry, hunts, battles in the English countryside, and an unknown contemporary of Chaucer handles such material with consummate artistry in *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Thomas Bulfinch was writing at a time when Tennyson was popularizing Arthurian themes and when the researches of medieval scholars were extending a knowledge of medieval manners and customs. Drawing from many

sources, he retells the great tales, the story of the miraculous sword Excalibar which made young Arthur king because he alone could withdraw it from the stone in which it was lodged, the adventures of Launcelot, of Gawain and the loathly lady, of Tristram, of Perceval, of the mysterious search for the Sangreal and, finally, the heroic conclusion as told by Malory. His theme is the Round Table itself; the fight is for the ideal. Such material allows the reader to identify himself with the protagonists. For while the hero may ride through the most shadowy of landscapes to Winchester or London, while he may exhibit superhuman prowess, yet he has to contend with the most human of failings in a world of changing values.

BERYL ROWLAND, B.A., M.A., PH.D.

York University, Toronto



THOMAS BULFINCH

(1796-1867)

Thomas Bulfinch was born on July 15, 1796, in Newton, Massachusetts, the son of a famous architect, Charles Bulfinch, and his wife, Hannah Apthorp. Young Thomas received his education at Boston Latin School, Philips Exeter Academy, and Harvard College, graduating from Harvard in 1814, at the age of eighteen.

Bulfinch taught for a year in the Boston Law School, then tried his hand in the business world, a field in which he was doomed not to find success. In 1818, he joined his illustrious father in Washington, D.C., where he remained until 1825. In that year, he returned to Boston, still trying for that elusive success in the business world. In 1837, when Thomas Bulfinch was forty-one, he accepted a clerkship in the Merchant's Bank of Boston, a job which he held for thirty years, until his death on May 27, 1867.

Although he never achieved success in the business world, Thomas Bulfinch's three books of mythology—*The Age of Fable* (1855), *The Age of Chivalry* (1858), and *The Legends of Charlemagne* (1862)—won him an enduring place in the world of letters. For during those years when he was considered a failure, this shy, retiring bachelor was storing up a wide knowledge of literature and history—from antiquity to the mid-nineteenth century. An excellent translator and a man of taste, he poured out all his vast knowledge of mythology in these three books.

TO MRS. JOSEPH COOLIDGE

Dear Madam:

To you, who have sympathized in my tastes, and encouraged my researches, I dedicate this attempt to depict the age of chivalry, and to revive the legends of the land of our fathers.

Your friend and cousin,

T. B.

THE AGE *of* CHIVALRY



THOMAS BULFINCH



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PREFACE

In a former work the compiler of this volume endeavored to impart the pleasures of classical learning to the English reader, by presenting the stories of pagan mythology in a form adapted to modern taste. In the present volume the attempt has been made to treat in the same way the stories of the second "age of fable," the age which witnessed the dawn of the several states of modern Europe.

It is believed that this presentation of a literature which held unrivalled sway over the imaginations of our ancestors, for many centuries, will not be without benefit to the reader, in addition to the amusement it may afford. The tales, though not to be trusted for their facts, are worthy of all credit as pictures of manners; and it is beginning to be held that the manners and modes of thinking of an age are a more important part of its history than the conflicts of its peoples, generally leading to no result. Besides this, the literature of romance is a treasure-house of poetical material, to which modern poets frequently resort. The Italian poets, Dante and Ariosto, the English, Spenser, Scott, and Tennyson, and our own Longfellow and Lowell are examples of this.

These legends are so connected with each other, so consistently adapted to a group of characters strongly individualized in Arthur, Launcelot, and their compeers, and so lighted up by the fires of imagination and invention, that they seem as well adapted to the poet's purpose as the legends of the Greek and Roman mythology. And if every well-educated young person is expected to know the story of the Golden Fleece, why is the quest of the Sangreal less worthy of his acquaintance? Or if an allusion to the shield of Achilles ought not to pass unapprehended, why should one to Escalibar, the famous sword of Arthur:

Of Arthur, who, to upper light restored,
With that terrific sword,
Which yet he brandishes for future war,
Shall lift his country's fame above the polar star? *

* Wordsworth.

It is an additional recommendation of our subject, that it tends to cherish in our minds the idea of the source from which we sprung. We are entitled to our full share in the glories and recollections of the land of our forefathers, down to the time of colonization thence. The associations which spring from this source must be fruitful of good influences; among which not the least valuable is the increased enjoyment which such associations afford to the American traveller when he visits England, and sets his foot upon any of her renowned localities.

The legends of Charlemagne and his peers are necessary to complete the subject, but they must be given, if at all, in a future volume.