

Notable History of the Arthurian Legend

c.1160-90 - **Chretien de Troyes**, the greatest of the medieval romance writers, makes his five contributions to the Arthurian cycle during this period. His Arthurian works are: "Eric et Enide," "Cliges" "Le Chevalier de la Charette" (The Knight of the Cart, or Lancelot), "Yvain" (or Le Chevalier au Lion, The Knight with the Lion) and "Perceval" (Le Conte del Graal, The Story of the Graal).

Chretien's work is noteworthy, not only for its quality, but for the introduction and further development of certain characters and themes into the Arthurian literature. He is, also, the first to apply the literary form of the romance, to the transmission of the stories of Arthur.

It is Chretien who first tells us of the Grail (Graal), but he never equated it with the cup of the Last Supper or the cup used to catch the blood of Christ. The word, grail, a commonly used term in the middle ages, simply referred to a dish or plate of a particular kind. One Helinand of Froidmont wrote in the 13th century ". . . a wide and somewhat deep dish in which expensive meats are customarily placed for the rich. . . and it is commonly called a grail" (Lacy, Norris J., ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, Peter Bedrick Books, New York, 1986, p.257). Chretien used the grail as a symbol of beauty and mystery, but he never presented it as an object of religious devotion (the spiritual aspect was introduced by later writers).

Chretien de Troyes is remembered as the first writer to give the name of Camelot to Arthur's headquarters and capital city. He, also, is responsible for the introduction of the famous knights, Lancelot, Gawain and Perceval, into the literature of Arthurian legend.

The War of the Roses

Central to an appreciation of the prose epic of *Morte D'Arthur* is an understanding of English culture of that time (the late 15th century). The War of the Roses, a dynastic English civil war, broke out in 1453 and ended 32 bloody years later. In 1460 Henry VI was temporarily incapacitated because of an attack by a mental disease he had inherited from his Valois mother. Duke Richard of York had been appointed regent. Queen Margaret had political ambitions of her own. When King Henry recovered, Margaret contested Richard's rule. Both sides assembled armed forces; the Queen's forces were defeated in 1455, King Henry taken captive in 1460. After escape and another defeat, he was sent into exile to Scotland; Richard's son Edward was proclaimed king. Henry VI., imprisoned in the Tower since 1470, in 1470 was restored to the throne by Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick. However, Edward IV. defeated the Lancastrian side once again in the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471 and had Henry VI. executed.

Edward IV. died in 1483, succeeded by his son Edward V. However, Edward IV.'s ambitious brother had a faction of English nobles declare Edward's succession illegal, had Edward and his brother Richard arrested in the Tower (never to be seen again) and had himself

declared king instead. A rebellion lead by Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, , supporting the candidacy of Henry Tudor, was crushed, but Tudor emerged victorious from the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, ending the Wars of the Roses and establishing the Tudor Dynasty.

The House of York wore a badge featuring the white rose; the House of Lancaster was associated with a red rose, hence the name of the civil war. The Wars of the Roses had their origin in the weakness of monarchy, which in cases of the minority of an heir, in case of no heir apparent or in case of a king incapacitated left the door open for ambitious persons to pursue their personal goals.

1399-1413	Henry IV.	LANCASTER
1413-1422	Henry V.	LANCASTER
1422-1461	Henry VI.	LANCASTER
1461-1470	Edward IV	YORK
1470-1471	Henry VI. (2nd time)	LANCASTER
1471-1483	Edward IV. (2nd time)	YORK
1483	Edward V.	YORK
1483-1485	Richard III.	YORK

Edward III

Edward III is the last Plantagenet (a family name) king. Both the Lancasters and Yorks are descended from Edward III's sons. Edward has seven sons; two die early and are therefore irrelevant to this chronicle. The remaining six are, in order of their birth, and therefore of their claim to the throne:

- Edward the Black Prince
- Lionel Duke of Clarence
- John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster
- Edmund 1st Duke of York
- Thomas of Woodstock

The order of these names becomes important in the struggle for the throne between the Lancasters and Yorks.

Richard II

Richard II is Chaucer's king. He is the son of Edward the Black Prince, the oldest son of Edward III. Richard acquires the throne after Edward III dies because Edward the Black Prince has already died; the crown passes therefore to Richard, as son of Edward the Black Prince.

Richard II was at times a brave and intelligent king--he singlehandedly faced and stopped the rebels from Kent in the Peasants' Rebellion--but in light of later events he is remembered as a weak king who overtaxed the people and waged wars in Ireland that are costly in terms of both money and human life.

In Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard in *Richard II*, Richard is deeply invested in the idea that the king is God's representative on earth. He is also morally flawed in that he callously "steals" Henry Bolingbroke's property after the death of Henry's father John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, to help pay for Richard's wars in Ireland. In Shakespeare's play, it is impossible to tell whether Henry leaves to return to England before or after hearing that Richard has confiscated his lands after the death of John of Gaunt. You cannot tell whether Henry simply wants his rightful lands or whether he has always had ambitions of being king. Richard is deposed in 1399, one year before Chaucer himself died, by his cousin Henry IV.

Edmund Mortimer

Richard dies without an heir, but he names as his official heir Edmund Mortimer, who is the great-grandson of Lionel, Duke of Clarence. Edmund is named as Richard's heir because he is the son of Lionel, the next surviving son of Edward III after Edward the Black Prince. *Richard II* confuses two Mortimer's--the heir to Richard II and the man who marries the daughter of Owen Glendower. This is historically inaccurate, but an easy confusion for Shakespeare to make.

Henry IV

Henry IV is Richard II's cousin. He is the son of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the fourth son of Edward III. Henry is not clear about whether he only wants his lands back, or whether he thinks he has a right to the throne, since he is a grandson of Edward III rather than merely a great-grandson, as Edmund Mortimer is. In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, it is also possible that Richard "voluntarily" surrenders the crown to his cousin Henry. Richard is placed in Pomfret castle, where he is murdered, probably at the order of Henry. Henry is the first Lancaster king, since he inherits the title "Duke of Lancaster" from his father, John of Gaunt. The Lancasters are represented by the symbol of the red rose.

Duke of Northumberland, Worcester, and Hotspur

Worcester and the Duke of Northumberland are brothers. Hotspur is Northumberland's son. These lords of the Northern border of England, who spend lots of time and money defending England against the Scots's invasions, were instrumental in supporting Henry IV in his takeover of the crown. When Henry comes to the throne, they feel unappreciated, and also have trouble accepting as God's representative on earth a man that without their help could never have been king. In *1 Henry IV*, they begin to think more about how Richard was the legitimate king, about how he had named Mortimer his heir, and about how ungrateful Henry IV is. Mortimer has lands in Wales, and therefore joins forces with Glendower, a powerful Welsh leader fighting for Welsh freedom from the English.

Henry V

Henry V inherits the crown peacefully from Henry IV--that is, once he is done monkeying around with Falstaff and his Eastcheap Tavern friends. At the end of Shakespeare's play *2 Henry IV*, Hal actually rejects Falstaff in the street in what many people (including Kenneth Branagh in his film "Henry V") consider to be a gratuitously unkind gesture. That rejection begins in *1*

Henry IV, when Hal gives his "I know you all" soliloquy, when Hal says that he does and will banish "fat Jack" and all the world, and when he apologizes to Henry IV and accepts a role in the fight against the rebels.

Henry V is very popular because he regains by military battle the lands in France that Edward III had won and had subsequently been lost. Henry not only regains French lands, but he also marries the French princess and regains the title of King of France, which Edward III had held.

Henry VI

Henry VI inherits the throne from Henry V, who dies at a young age. Henry VI is pious, but not particularly competent (at least according to later accounts of the War of the Roses). Henry marries Margaret of Anjou, an unpopular French princess, and loses the lands and titles in France that Henry V had gained. As the last Lancastrian king, he is deposed by his cousin Edward IV and is finally murdered at the Tower of London. Shakespeare depicts Richard III as Henry VI's murderer.

Edward IV

Edward IV is the first York king. The Yorks are represented by a white rose. Edward IV is descended from Edmund Langley, first Duke of York, a younger son of Edward III. Why does he think that he is entitled to the throne?

- First, because he characterizes Henry VI as incompetent.
- Second, because he characterizes Henry as a pawn of his French wife and her allies.
- Third--and this is complicated--because his father Richard 3rd Duke of York married a woman named Anne Mortimer, who is the sister of Edmund Mortimer, Richard II's chosen heir to the throne.

Thus, Edward IV is directly descended from Edward III's fifth royal son (Edmund first Duke of York), and is related through the maternal line to Edward III's second son (Lionel Duke of Clarence). Thus Edward IV is doubly related to Edward III, and his relation to Lionel (the second son) is more legitimate than Henry VI's relation to John of Gaunt (the fourth son of Edward III).

Edward marries a bourgeois widow, has in Jane Shore a famous mistress, is generally known for his high living. Edward IV dies after surviving a brief rebellion that puts Henry VI momentarily back on the throne. After Edward's death and a battle in which the last surviving heir of the Lancasters is killed, the Yorks are firmly in power.

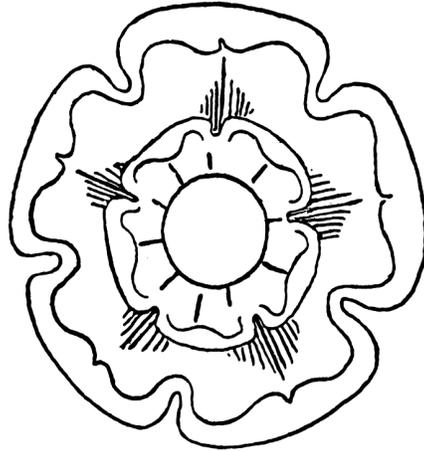
Richard III

After Edward IV dies, who deserves to be king? Edward has a son, one of the two royal princes who mysteriously die in the Tower of London. Edward's oldest surviving brother, George Duke of Clarence, also dies in the Tower. He is drowned in a butt of malmsey (wine). The next heir is therefore Edward IV's youngest brother Richard III, who is usually credited with all those mysterious deaths of those who stand between him and the throne. Shakespeare's *Richard III* contributes to this version of history, for Shakespeare, following Thomas's More's *Life of Richard III*, gives Richard a hump back and other undesirable traits. Richard is defeated in battle by Henry Richmond, who becomes Henry VII.

Henry VII

Henry VII is the first Tudor king. He wins the crown by defeating Richard at Bosworth field. He also has a complicated claim to the English throne. Henry Tudor is descended from John of Gaunt and his third wife, Katharine Swinford, who was previously John of Gaunt's mistress. Kathryn is the mother of a royal but initially illegitimate line of the Lancaster family known as the Beauforts. Henry VII is also descended from Owen Tudor, the second husband of Henry V's queen, so that he has two connections to the Lancasters.

Henry VII marries Elizabeth, daughter of Edward IV the Yorkist king, so that Henry VII combines Lancaster (red rose) with York (white rose) into the Tudor line. The Tudor monarchs regarded themselves as therefore healing the royal split between Lancaster and York.



the Tudor rose