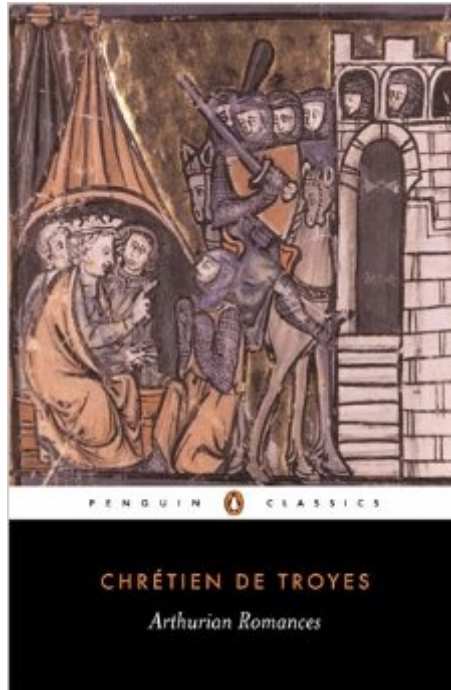


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Arthurian Romances (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Fantastic adventures abound in these courtly romances: Erec and Enide, Cligès, The Knight of the Cart, The Knight with the Lion, and The Story of the Grail. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Chretien de Troyes is an early French romantic writing, who wrote the first known story about the Holy Grail. De Troyes lived in the Champagne region of France during the latter twelfth century. Peripherally attached to courts including that of the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine, de Troyes stories of the Arthurian legends provides a foundation for almost all future Arthurian stories. Chretien's major works include four poems included in this collection: Erec and Enide, Cliges, The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot), and The Knight of the Lion (Yvain). For Grail seekers, the story of most interest will be the unfinished Perceval: The Story of the Grail. Although the tale exists in finished form (in fact, several variations of finished forms), de Troyes in fact only wrote the first 9000 lines of the approximately 32,000 line text. (De Troyes also was embellished or supplemented by later additions

to the tale of Lancelot, perhaps because de Troyes did not want to include an adulterous affair). The story of Erec and Enide is a love story between one of Arthur's knights, Erec, who while out with Guinevere encounters a mean-spirited knight Yder; Erec's pursuit of Yder leads to his meeting Enide, and the two have a stormy relationship (by medieval romantic standards) but ultimately are able to reconcile their love and relationship with public duty. The story of Cliges is one of tricky and forbidden relationships. Cliges, a native of Greece, falls in love with Fenice, his uncle's wife (Cliges' uncle happens to be the emperor). Their love is discovered, but with the aid of King Arthur, their relationship continues in Cliges' home country of Greece. Lancelot's story is one of the oldest ideas from the Arthurian legends - the rescue of Guinevere when she is taken captive. This could be done in a chaste and honourable way, but the tale of Arthur has both virtuous and dark elements. Even though this story comes from much older antecedents, de Troyes telling (with the possible additions by a later writer) became the standard Lancelot-Guinevere tale, being the principal one incorporated into Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The story of Yvain is one of romantic questing - Yvain is gone so long on his knightly quests that his wife refuses him to return home. However, with the aid of mystical powers (the lion is an otherworldly creature that symbolises knightly virtue - C.S. Lewis will develop similar symbolic material much later) he returns to his wife after going mad with despair at being barred from her. Perceval's story is that of the classic search for the Grail, which is also considered now a standard part of Arthurian legend - however, it is not clear that de Troyes was working from earlier stories here. William Kibler provides notes, an introductory essay, and an essay tracing the history of revisions and continuations to the Grail story. This is fascinating reading, and a must for anyone interested in the Arthurian legends.

I've been through this text now several times for private reading and for teaching classes on Arthur specifically and medieval studies generally. This book affords very good prose translations of Chretien's romances, from which both I and my students profited. The notes and introduction are quite sound. But something is clearly lost when verse is lost. I understand full well that there are serious complications when translating from the verse of another language into English (which has its own maddening complications, starting with its bizarre irregularities), but I sense something is lost, terribly lost, when the stories are not presented in verse. While they will cost you a good bit more than this volume, there are very fine verse translations available both from the U.Ga. press and from the Yale U. press. So a sensible strategy for the Arthurian seeker or scholar would be to start with this modestly priced volume and then move on to the verse translations.

I found the book to be fascinating, even for a person without a background in the classics. I felt the translation was fine, overall a very smooth read. I would highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in Arthurian legends.

This book was translated from the old French oddly, perhaps too literally, and the result is that sometimes the fact that it used to be in verse form gets in the way of the story. Most of the time, though, the stories are the fun and gripping legends Arthur-enthusiasts will love.

D.D.R. Owen, late professor emeritus of French in the University of St. Andrews, states of his translation that he kept "the needs of students" in mind. For that reason, Owen tells us, his "renderings...incline towards the literal." In other words Owen's translation of Chrétien of Troyes's "Arthurian Romances" shuns poetic and literary licence. Decide what you want. This is a scholar's book, a dry literal translation from twelfth century French of original tales that were too long to start with. General readers may find it dull. Near the end of his substantive Introduction (which itself makes a useful essay for students of Chrétien's times) Owen comments that "Chrétien has bequeathed to us a brilliant portrait of the society that gave him his livelihood." That's true, but these romances set up portraits that will seem "brilliant" only from a scholar's perspective. Chrétien's productive years spanned 1170 to 1182, the very pinnacle of chivalry -- and of chivalry's unlikely twin, courtly love. Chrétien was an eye-witness, working in the halls of noble patrons, observing and recording the highest values of the culture of his time. He wrote "Lancelot" around 1177, dedicating it to Marie of Champagne (Eleanor of Aquitaine's eldest child), and bringing the world the first mention of Camelot. By 1182, Chrétien was introducing the Holy Grail in "Perceval: the Story of the Grail." Before he won fame under Marie's sponsorship, one wonders if Chrétien had made his observations about the conventions of courtly love and chivalry earlier, at Eleanor's Court of Ladies in Poitiers (1168-'73). Owen was too much the perfect scholar to speculate, but we can. "Arthurian Romances" contains much that Chrétien absorbed from an influential source, a royal hall replete with courtly traditions, poets and bards. This book is a struggle, but it can be rewarding. By Robert Fripp, author of "Power of a Woman. Memoirs of a turbulent life: Eleanor of Aquitaine"

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