



T.H. White's The Once and Future King (Arthurian Studies)

Elisabeth Brewer

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The *Once and Future King* defies classification. Is it for children, or for adults? Is it fantasy or a psychological novel? In its great range, it encompasses poetry and farce, comedy and tragedy—and sudden flights of schoolboy humour. White's 'footnote to Malory' (his own phrase) resulted in the last major retelling of the story based on Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and Elisabeth Brewer explores the literary context of White's finest work as well as considering his aims and achievement in writing it. White's story of Arthur begins with his 'enfances', set in an imaginary medieval England, but it is far removed from the conventional historical novel. White was writing in wartime England, a country increasingly absorbed by a need to find an antidote to war. Through the medium of the Arthurian story he found his own voice, his unique contribution to keeping alive the flame of civilisation. Malory's chivalric virtues are rejected in favour of White's own twentieth-century values; the love affair of Lancelot and Guenever is interpreted in terms of modern psychology. The books which eventually made up *The Once and Future King* of 1958 appeared in distinctly different editions. In discussing these, Elisabeth Brewer looks at some of the ways in which White drew on his own personal experience at a deep psychological level, while also incorporating into his story material inspired by his antiquarian pursuits and by his years as a schoolmaster. She completes her study with an account of White's use of historical material, and the relationship of *The Once and Future King* to the *Morte Darthur*. ELISABETH BREWER lectured in English at Homerton College, Cambridge. She is the author of books and articles on Chaucer and the Arthurian legends.

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