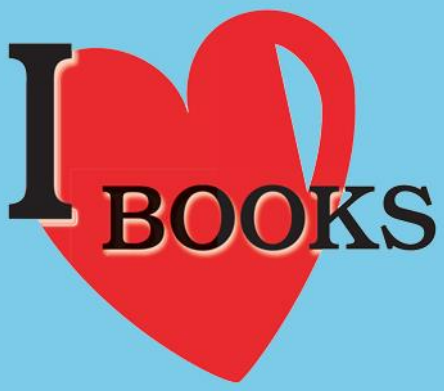


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Opening extract from

# Queen Guinevere: Other Stories from the Court of King Arthur

Written by

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For my sister-in-law Anna Baldwin, a real mediaeval scholar, with love — M.H.

For my precious Poppie and Kiki and our beloved 'Shaman' — C.B.



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# QUEEN GUINEVERE

and other stories from the court of King Arthur

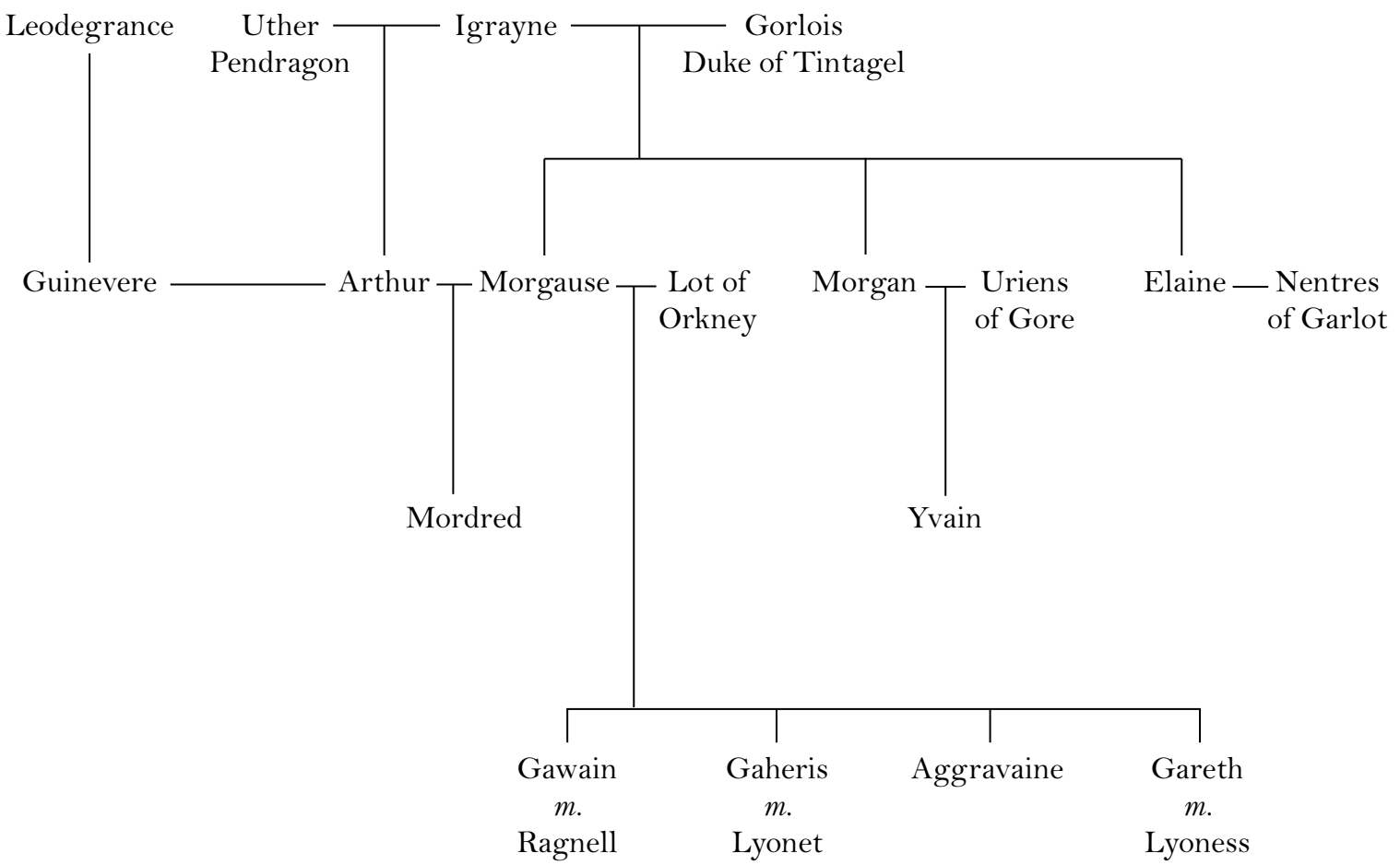


Mary Hoffman · Christina Balit

**Frances Lincoln**
Children's Books

# King Arthur's Family Tree





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# Introduction

If you have heard the name Camelot, it may conjure up knights in shining armour, riding off to rescue damsels in distress or to joust in tournaments, wearing a lady's token in their helmets. This was an important part of the life of King Arthur's knights of the Round Table, but you won't find many of those stories here. Instead, you will read about the women, the ones who were left behind when the men went out on quests and adventures.

But these weren't just stay-at-homes. They were influential queens and powerful sorceresses, and even the ordinary women were determined and resourceful. In spite of the restrictions of their lives, the women often lie at the heart of the stories and, by one means or another, they make things happen...

# Mother *of* Magic: Igrayne's Story

*This is the story of the woman who became mother to Arthur, the most famous king England ever had. But she also had three daughters, and they made their glorious half-brother's life as difficult as possible.*

I never thought of myself as beautiful. When I was a girl, all those long years ago in Wales, my mother thought I was a terrible scapegrace and I never took any account of how I looked. When I was little, I often wouldn't stand still long enough for my hair to be brushed, let alone braided. Strange to think I now wear the stiff gowns and heavy jewels of a queen and the hours hang heavy on my hands. Then, the days just weren't long enough for all I wanted to do. There were dogs to run with, horses to ride, fields and woods to explore.

But those wild days came to an end when my mother told me that I was nearly a woman and must learn how to sit still, to smile and to sing. My father said I would never get a husband by running in the woods, and gave me a harp and a tapestry-frame. I didn't mind the singing; my teacher was a young troubadour with a lovely smile of his own. But how I hated that tapestry!

The days were long indeed as I sat making knots in my thread and pricking my clumsy fingers. My younger sisters had no such duties and labours. And the evenings were even longer when I had to serve the visitors at my hospitable father's table in the Hall, wearing an awkward long-sleeved dress, instead of taking my meat with my brothers and sisters in the winter parlour.

The best part was when everyone had eaten their fill and I could slip behind a pillar and listen to Rhodri the handsome troubadour, playing his harp and singing of Bran the Blessed or Rhiannon the witch. According to Father, we can trace our ancestors back to Bran – which gives me a strange feeling when I hear the stories that are told about him, how his head talked after it was cut off, and how he never died, but will come back to save Britain in its hour of need.

It was on one of those evenings that I first saw my husband – my real husband, I mean, the one I loved. It was he who made me realise I was beautiful. Our visitor never took his eyes from me all that first evening, until I became confused



and stupid, splashing tunics with wine and dropping a platter. In the end my father sent me out of the Hall and I buried my burning face in my bolster and went to sleep without any supper.

It didn't take me long to find out that this lord was the Duke of Cornwall and that his name was Gorlois. And he wasted no time in finding out my name either. Almost as soon as he knew it, he asked my father to give me to him for a wife. We hadn't exchanged above half a dozen words before I was on my way to Cornwall with him as my husband, leaving my family behind in Wales.

It was all so sudden. What did I know of being a wife and running a noble household? I was barely sixteen, as ignorant and innocent as a Welsh hill sheep. But Gorlois didn't mind. When he brought me into his castle at Tintagel, on a Cornish coast as wild as any in my home country, he gathered me in his arms and, smiling, taught me all I needed to know.

He was older than me by about ten years and had a smoothly-running household already. "What do you need a wife for?" I used to tease him, lying in his arms all that first long summer, and he would tease me back, "Just for ornament, my beauty." How happy we were! I would not have thought it possible to be any happier, but by the next spring we had our first little girl, Morgause, and we were even more in love.

Gorlois never minded not having a son, never showed a moment's disappointment when Elaine and Morgan were born in the years that followed. "Let Cornwall have a duchess!" he'd say. "Morgause is a good enough heir for me." But I wanted to give him a son and perhaps I would have done, if it hadn't been for my accursed face.

I blame Rhodri, the troubadour, who left my father's house and eventually entered the king's service. I didn't know it then, but I found out later that he had made up a ballad about me, called "The Fair Maid of Wales". He sang my praises, literally, at the court of King Uther, until the mighty king himself asked Rhodri what had become of me.

It was silly, of course. I wasn't a maid any more, but a wife and mother and, as for fair, was I the only good-looking woman in the country? I don't deny that I was beautiful. Gorlois told me I was, and so had Rhodri during our harp lessons when I was a girl. But I wasn't vain about my looks. If I could have kept my true love and the life we had those first few years at Tintagel, I would gladly have given up a pleasing countenance and pretty figure, things which time would have stolen in due course anyway.

I was looking out of a window when the messenger rode across our narrow bridge. My blood seemed to stop its journey around my body when I saw the livery of Uther Pendragon. That's the second sight. All the women in our family have it; some more than others.

My mother had been at Tintagel for the birth of all my daughters and little Elaine was the only one she had no word of prophecy about. When Morgause was born, after a long





hard time of it, my mother held her and said, "Her sons will be greater than their father, all except the last," and, "She will be a thorn in her brother's side." But when she held new-born Morgan, she almost dropped her. "This one has more power in her than the rest of us put together," she said, before forgetting what she had seen.

She was always like that, having visions and then unable to remember them. But I never forgot what she said about Morgause's brother. That's why I always thought Gorlois and I would have a son. Remembering Mother's other prediction, I decided to put Morgan in a nunnery as soon as she was old enough.

The day the messenger came, I knew my intuition hadn't played any tricks. Gorlois was entertaining Uther's courtier in the Great Hall.

"My Lady," said Gorlois, "we are honoured indeed. The king has sent a most gracious invitation that we should both attend him at his court."

I was silent throughout the meal, but my mind was racing. Morgause and Elaine were old enough to leave behind, almost out of their childhood, but Morgan was still a baby. I was nursing her myself, so I could not travel to London without her. But when I spoke to Gorlois alone, he brushed all my objections aside.

"It would be madness to refuse an invitation from the king himself," he said.

"But the baby," I protested. "I don't want to leave her!"

"Then we'll take her with us," he smiled, gathering me into his arms. "I am sure King Uther won't mind. And before you say anything about the other two, there are women enough at Tintagel to look after them until we return."

We left our castle on a summer morning, riding our horses over the high bridge, but once over, I travelled the rest of the weary way in a litter with my baby. She fussed and fretted for most of the journey, and as we entered the king's palace, she began a high wailing.

I could hear her still when I left her in our chamber with my waiting-woman and went down to meet the king. I took little trouble with my hair and dress at first, but Gorlois made me do it all again. It was the only time in all our happy marriage that he was angry with me. He said I must wear the richest gown and my most precious jewels, or I would shame him before the king.

I knew as soon as Uther looked in my face that he had made up his mind to have me. I have heard the rumour that went about in later years, that I bewitched him, but it is not true. He bewitched himself. He fell in love with a woman in a song, and sadly for me, I was that lady.

I tried to tell Gorlois my fears. "Please let us go back to Tintagel," I begged. "I know that ill will come of this visit."

Gorlois was used to the women in my family having an extra sense about such things.



"My darling," he said, stroking my hair, "I have seen the way the king looks at you, and I think you may be right. I will protect you from him with my life, but I cannot risk offending him by leaving without a reason."

We soon had a reason. Uther sent a golden cup to my chamber, bidding me to drink my wine from it. Soon afterwards, when I was alone, he came himself. I remember nothing of what he said, only that Morgan, who was in her crib, stopped her wailing when he came into the room. I would have said she was studying his face, as if to remember him.

When I showed Gorlois the cup and told him of the king's secret visit, he agreed that we must leave with all haste. How happily I rode out from that hateful palace! My heart grew lighter with every pace the horses took towards Cornwall.

But my joy was short-lived. Within a few hours of our return, a message came to say that Uther was pursuing us from London. He was very angry that we had left without permission.

As soon as we reached Tintagel, Gorlois raised his men and set out to fortify his other castle, a few miles away at Damelioc. Castle Terrible, the locals called it, and it was terrible indeed for us. I saw my husband only once more. Uther sent a great army, far more soldiers than a duke could command. I stayed mewed up in Tintagel, hardly sleeping, not daring to believe that my beloved could overcome a king.

So imagine my delight when one night I heard horses' hooves on the narrow bridge. I ran to the window. It was my lord! We had been apart so long that we fell into each other's arms with no thought of anyone else. We spoke little that night. Gorlois stole away from our chamber before daybreak back to Castle Terrible – or so I thought.

But at dawn there came a messenger to say that Gorlois was dead; my lord and love had been killed in a sortie from Terrible by Uther's men. That was tragedy enough, but the messenger went on to say that my husband had died the night before – three hours before Gorlois came to my bed!

I think I must have lost my reason for some days after that. Only the thought of our daughters stopped me from jumping from the battlements on to the rocks below. I know my waiting-women thought I might kill myself, for they watched me every hour.

As the days went by, I found another reason to live. I knew the signs well enough by now and I was sure that this time I would bear a son. Foolish wretch that I