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Arthuriana, Alive and Well at Memphis State

[Essay Review]

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The Arthurian legend—that mixture of myth, enchantment, adventure, love-story, and tragedy—has developed into perhaps the largest single body of imaginative literature ever produced. Furthermore, this medieval best-seller remains relevant. It speaks to mankind's enduring need to recognize personal integrity, to cherish true love, and to create a good society. Consequently, it continues to haunt the imagination of writers, and hardly a year passes without some retelling of the legend. This lasting enthusiasm for the Arthurian tales is promoted at Memphis State University, where a topflight journal, *Arthurian Interpretations*, is published twice a year by the English Department. This multidisciplinary journal of Arthurian studies that span the beginnings to the present attracts worthy contributors throughout this country and abroad. The range of their interests in the legend is also broad, as is reflected in the following random sampling from past issues.

In "The Image of Arthur and the Idea of King" (Spring 1988), Mark Allen, from the University of Texas at San Antonio, summarily states what the legendary King Arthur has meant to English-speaking people. He notes that Arthur is the representative figure of the idea of king for Anglo-American culture and that as the role of king changed historically, the Arthur of literature changed accordingly, "reflecting social and political developments in metaphorical, literary portraits." Allen, however, credits Arthur with more than just encapsulating the social and political past: "he also reflects interpretations of the past, providing means both to survey historical kingship and to epitomize modern understanding of what kingship implies" (p. 1).

Initially, King Arthur was not a king. Allen says that the Arthur of history, "the best surmises tell us," was not born to royalty but was a romanized Celt warrior, who defended Britain against invading Anglo-Saxons in the late fifth or early sixth century. Some three hundred years later, Nennius, a monk, in his history of Britain, introduces the Arthur of literature, also a warrior. The regal Arthur first appears in the twelfth century in Geoffrey of Monmouth's fanciful history, when the age of feudal barons and their warriors has slipped away and the age of kings is dawning. Geoffrey looks back on Arthur not only as Britain's greatest king but also as a king whose ability to rule is derived from

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mysterious forces. By the fifteenth century when Thomas Malory writes *Morte Darthur*, this mysterious power undergirding Arthur's kingship has solidified into the tradition of the divine right of kings, a tradition that was to be held for at least two centuries.

Allen observes that "as the idea of king went, so went the image of Arthur" (p. 7). Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, for example, presents the high idealism of Victorian times. Likewise, in the present century, President John F. Kennedy's administration was dubbed *Camelot* after the stage and screen musical, with its opulent and youth oriented society—so prized by modern Americans. Allen commends T. H. White for his ability in *The Once and Future King* to bridge "the distance between ourselves and the idea of king," and its rich mixture of history, mystery, majesty, and nostalgia. The idea of kingship is in prominent use from children's games to heads of state; moreover, its cultural importance is evident by the continued popularity of Arthurian literature (pp. 12-13). More Arthurian materials have been published since 1950 than in any other comparable period in the history of the legend.

The years have yielded much speculation on the fall of the Round Table, and the blame for the failure of this great society has been assessed many times. David V. Harrington, from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, challenges some long-standing opinions on this subject. In "The Conflicting Passions of Malory's Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot" (Spring 1987), Harrington contends "that Malory does not blame the fall of the Round Table on the decline of chivalry; nor is the fall because of the immorality of Sir Lancelot and the Queen...nor is it unavoidable fate...." On the contrary, Harrington sees the major characters of *Morte Darthur* "fulfilling in their own ways the values, obligations, or commitments that mean the most to them both individually and in their special relationship with each other." Harrington credits the knights with, as a rule, respecting the chivalric code. He believes the Table toppled "mainly from indomitable passions growing out of their individual forms of chivalric idealism" (p. 66).

Harrington bases his theories on the actions of Sir Gawain, Sir Lancelot, and King Arthur. He says that although Malory, in the concluding sections of *Morte Darthur*, presents Gawain, Lancelot, and Arthur in seemingly contradictory behavior, they are really just being true to their own chivalric standards. These noble characters fulfill themselves by adhering to the best forms of noble idealism in fifteenth-century chivalry.

Harrington says that even though Gawain's implacable vengeance is a dominant factor in the fall of the Round Table, his earlier, steadfast

loyalty should not be overlooked. For example, he defended Lancelot against the King's charges of disloyalty even after Lancelot had escaped the trap laid for him in Guenevere's bedroom and had slain Gawain's sons and his brother. Gawain admits that he had warned them not to contend with Lancelot, and he further concedes that Lancelot's intentions may have been honorable.

Gawain is obviously willing to make allowances for Lancelot up to a point, and that point is reached when Lancelot unintentionally slays Gawain's beloved brothers, Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris. Thereafter, Gawain's heart is forever hardened against Lancelot. Harrington says: "One might say that he cannot forgive Sir Lancelot for being less than perfect in his chivalry" (p. 65).

Lancelot's behavior also appears contradictory. His rescue of Guenevere, when she is about to be burned at the stake on a charge of adultery, is the epitome of knightly valor. He is invincible as he gallops in, swoops her up, and speeds away, "a fearless and irrepressible champion." Nevertheless, when Arthur and Gawain come to Lancelot's castle seeking vengeance, Lancelot avoids a confrontation with them. His closest friends are humiliated because they feel that he appears to be a coward. Likewise, at the siege of Benwick when Arthur and Gawain burn his lands, Lancelot again refuses to fight them. It seems that Lancelot cannot bring himself to fight the King, not because of fear but from the love and respect he holds for him.

Arthur's behavior is also at times contrary to what would be expected from the King. Arthur had no desire to investigate the relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere and does so only at the insistence of Aggravayne and Mordred. After the situation has deteriorated to the point that Arthur is compelled to take action, he weeps "with regret at his obligation to pursue the man he most admires in the world." Harrington points out that Arthur's inability to stand up to Gawain "conflicts with his more commonly expressed admiration for Sir Lancelot and with his desire to preserve a unified kingdom" (p. 65).

Harrington feels that each of these characters is "torn between obligations to the people he most admires and the codes of behavior by which each of them lives." These contradictions in character do abet the failure of the great fellowship, "but not because of degeneracy or immorality or weakness" (p. 69). Harrington credits them with following the best forms of noble idealism in Malory's day.

In contrast with Harrington's scrutiny of the King and his knights, Harold J. Herman, from the University of Maryland, compares Arthurian women in a modern work with those in earlier works. In "The Women in Mary Stewart's Merlin Trilogy" (Spring 1984), he says

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that Stewart's concept of women distinguishes the Merlin trilogy from earlier Arthurian works. Her women are strong and self-sufficient, unlike the frightened, submissive creatures in the analogues, existing to please a man. A prime example is Igerne, the Duchess of Cornwall, destined to be Arthur's mother.

In both Geoffrey's and Malory's versions, Igerne is a weak, innocent dupe of Uther and Merlin. Uther lusts after Igerne, a guest in his home, and he has Merlin, an expert in shapeshifting, arrange a rendezvous with her. Believing herself to be in the arms of her husband, Igerne conceives Arthur. Soon after, Uther desposes of the Duke of Cornwall, similar to the way in which David destroyed Uriah in order to possess the beautiful Bathsheba. And like David, Uther marries the ill-obtained beauty, who wisely registers no objections.

Stewart, however, neatly turns the tables by making Igerne have designs on Uther. Igerne enlists Merlin to help her, because she believes he is wise, cold, and committed to no one—thus able to understand her situation. She was married at sixteen to the Duke of Cornwall, a worthy old man, whom she was relatively contented with until she saw Uther. She describes herself as a lovesick woman but “no trashy Helen for men to fight, die, and burn down a kingdom for,” (p. 104). Her terms at all times are regal. Merlin pays her a supreme compliment by saying that he can speak with her as he would with a man. She is not duped into having sex with Uther transformed as her husband. On the contrary, she arranges for the king to come to her disguised as Gorlois, her husband, because she does not want to dishonor her husband.

Herman says that Stewart's trilogy abounds with strong women, from commoners to nobility, from servants to queens. And Stewart's disdain for women who live solely to bear and rear children is apparent. An example is Branwen, Arthur's wet nurse, “whose devotion to the baby, following the loss of her own, blinds her to all else” (p. 107). Merlin describes her as the kind of woman whose life is devoted to the bearing and rearing of children. He says she is “weak and biddable to the point of stupidity” (*The Hollow Hills*, p. 149). Herman provides numerous other examples supporting Stewart's overall theme of strong women who reject traditional feminine roles.

Whether one's interest lies in Arthurian ladies or gentlemen, in early or late versions of the legend, in a traditional viewpoint of the legend or a controversial one, in conducting research or reading for pleasure, this interest has been addressed and is apt to be again in *Arthurian Interpretations*. In the words of Valerie M. Lagorio, guest editor for the inaugural issue in 1984: “Let it be known that Camelot

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U.S.A. is now located at Memphis, Tennessee.” A subscription to this journal (\$10.00 annually) is a must for anyone who likes to escape into a world of romance, a world of heroes whose integrity shines as brightly as their armor, and a world of heroic exploits and lovely ladies. Arthurian literature serves as a reminder to all that mystery and majesty are grand memories for anyone.