

ARTHUR RESURGENT

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One question invariably asked of “Arthurians” engaged in euhemeristic pursuits is this. Why has the memory of this “King” who never existed as such, not to mention his doughty knights, who never existed at all, been kept alive? Arthur first emerged as we know him from local nationalism. Neither of his near (6th century) contemporaries, Gildas and Aneirin, the poet of the *Goddoddin*, mention his name and Taliesin, another close contemporary, treats him as minor and legendary. Yet by the middle of the 9th century a chronicler known as Nennius had made Arthur into a Welsh champion, victor of many battles. By the 12th century this phantom with a probable (but by no means certain) genesis in early Welsh folklore had already entered the English national conscience as a patriotic hero. Like the hero of the *Song of Roland*, unquestionably a fictitious figure, Arthur was probably at first fictional, becoming “historical” at a much later date by a process of gradual transformation.

Arthur’s hoped-for return from Avalon, *Rex quondam rexque futurus*, in T.H. White’s elegant rendering “the once-and-future king”, denoting a defeat of death, was a usefully protective resurrection myth that came into being after the Conquest in the face of a reigning Norman culture. It may even have veiled a subconscious desire for cultural isolation since a messianic hope for the restoration of lost national fortunes must have stirred yearnings for the return of the fabulous past and encouraged hopes and prophecies of a certain retribution to come. Thus Uther Pendragon, Igerne and Mordred were also received as historical figures and the multiplying appurtenances of Arthur’s immortal knighthood descended through a succession of kings and royal princes seeking reassurance of lineage. With the help of writers anxious for patronage, the legend, whether taken at its face value or not, retained its political usefulness until the late seventeenth century. Thereafter its continuing appeal was mainly to delvers into antiquarian lore and authors of popular versions but even today no serious historian could conscientiously deny the possibility, however remote, that Arthur was more substantial than myth.

The few undisputed facts behind the legend have been adorned by speculations which leave the question of his historicity open. The time-span of alleged Arthurian campaigning is about 200 years, somewhere between the final exodus of the Romans and the foundation of the Saxon kingdoms (ca. 450-650), a “Dark Age” period about which little is known save what is related by generally unreliable chroniclers. Students of Arthurian lore, having exhausted the scanty

data, now prefer to seek origins of the literary as distinct from the historical Arthur in 6th-century Welsh tales by Taliesin and Aneirin and in the 12th-century bardic genealogies and triads but mainly in the romances known through Lady Charlotte Guest's 1837 translation as *The Mabinogion*, in their late 11th-century versions. *The Mabinogion* includes the love story of Culhwch and Olwen, wherein Arthur's court, later named Camelot by Chrétien de Troyes, first appears, associated with a Welsh legend of a wild boar-king who is Arthur's mortal enemy and a giant who sets his knights a series of impossible tasks. Arthur gives the orders and occasionally takes direct action himself, an impressive figure not from history but from faery legend possessing warrior strengths allied with virtues of sagacity and generosity.

Much of the material of the *Mabinogion* is derived from earlier (9th-century) Welsh and Irish sources. For the poet of the *Mabinogion* Arthur is a supernatural entity, the leader of a knightly order of equality who unites his heroic followers under a code of obedience. In the bardic stories, which were of oral composition and not written down until the late 12th century, many familiar names appear, such as Gwalchmei (Gawain), Bedwyr (Bedevere), Cei (Kay), Gwennyvar (Guinevere) and Medrawd (Modred) but not Lancelot. The supernatural element is pervasive in the triads though in one group the battle of Camlann is noted. Though the settings are primitive, it is here that Arthur begins to acquire the vestigial characteristics of an esteemed overlord of a more civilized society. In addition, a new type of womankind begins to emerge in these stories, which elevated the lady and gave her a more independent will.

Ulterior motives inevitably attracted authors who found the Arthurian legacy a promising path to royal patronage. It came to be seen as a useful vehicle for propaganda. Arthur's burial place was "discovered" at Glastonbury in 1189 and his crown in 1283, after Edward I had finally crushed Welsh independence. It was during this period that the legend was expanded and enriched. First in the field was Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Welsh or possibly Breton author of a Latin *History of the Kings of Britain*, composed before 1140. He described the Arthurian era, making free use of his predecessors, mainly Nennius, but in the modest fashion of the time claiming as his source "a very ancient book in the British tongue". He informed his audience that Arthur was the love-child of Uther Pendragon and Igera, wife of the Duke of Cornwall. Arthur is called "king" and traced back through a royal line to Brutus and the legendary Troy.

Geoffrey's Arthur is a mixture of timeless epic hero and Welsh nationalist symbol, a near-replica of the admirable figure depicted in *Culhwch and Olwen*, on a par with actual leaders like Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and possibly William of Normandy. Geoffrey upholds Arthur as a bold, wide-ranging conqueror, the hammer of his enemies, who expels the Saxons, defeats the Scots, Irish, Scands and Gauls and sets out to attack Rome. At Caerleon-upon-Usk he invites the world's rulers to a tournament and receives adulation as the sovereign lord of the universe. While absent on his final campaign against Rome his envious nephew Modred, appointed in trust as Regent, steals Arthur's wife, the Lady Guanhumara.

It is this act of infidelity which results in the fatal battle. Arthur kills Modred but is mortally wounded.

Geoffrey was a popular story-teller seeking clerical advancement, not an enquiring historian recording undoubted facts nor even speculating on probabilities. The *History* had a mixed reception at the time and a contemporary, Willian of Newburgh, called it a tissue of lies. But the *History* was influential, extant in over fifty *mss* and inspiring several continuators. One question difficult to answer confidently concerns the literary as distinct from the personal motives of Geoffrey himself and of paraphrasers like Wace and Layamon who expanded his account and made Arthur shine even more brightly. The uncertainty is perhaps easier to banish in Geoffrey's case, since his book preceded the finding of "Arthur's grave" by nearly fifty years. The incorporation of Arthur into English history could well have become a double-edged sword and Geoffrey may have succeeded too well in giving the myth solid body. By this "exhumation" and the consequent establishment of Arthur's death the legend lost any power it might have acquired from Geoffrey to threaten royal security with the spectre of an avenging conqueror resurrected from the distant past.

The (presumably) political purposes behind the additional material soon afterwards contributed by Wace, who forecast Arthur's return, and Layamon, who emphasised Arthur's more violent exploits, are harder to account for. Was the legend as reconditioned by Wace designed to benefit the now more confident Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Angevin dynasty pleased to trace its lineage back to the Trojan Brutus? From Henry II and his son Richard I to the Tudors it suited the anointed kings of England to accept the myth of this pretended descent. Hard evidence is lacking but Richard is supposed to have ordered a magnificent new tomb for Arthur and Guinevere in Glastonbury Abbey, whence they were allegedly placed in 1278 by Edward I, another lavish patron.

On the other side of the coin, might Layamon's version of this revered tradition have been intended as a likely rallying point for languishing Celtic aspirations to reconquest by arousing patriotic emotions in Arthur's name, even to the point of ridiculing present indolence? Layamon, after all, lived in Worcestershire, just across the Welsh border. A similar explanation has been attached to the composition of "Blind Hary's" *Wallace* in the Scotland of James III. *Wallace* was pseudo-history in *chanson de geste* style which by recounting the violent exploits of a real guerrilla chieftain in a greatly exaggerated fashion expressed popular feelings of betrayal felt by patriots contrasting present shames with past glories and looking back admiringly and perhaps with remorseful impotence at the triumph of Robert Bruce over the old Southron enemy 160 years earlier.

The title of Wace's work, named by scribes, is *Roman de Brut*. "Roman" implied oral history in a "romance" tongue, distinguishing it from written history in Latin. Wace himself called it a *geste*, which also implied history in the sense of exciting individual adventures in verse rather than the duller unrolling of past incident expected of the ecclesiastical chronicler. The spirited additions of fable, legends about Arthur and *verbatim* speeches which Wace and Layamon injected into

Geoffrey of Monmouth's account resulted in a *chanson de geste* carrying the reputed truth and authority of their Latin model. Later important contributors to the legend, Chretien de Troyes and Marie de France, referred their audiences to *ms*s allegedly preserved in monastic libraries in order to establish historical authenticity, though what they composed were also *chansons de geste*. Citing authorities who may or many not have existed was a common device of the mediaeval writer claiming disingenuously to speak truly when first-hand evidence or commanding testimony was absent.

Those named and anonymous poets who changed the course of the legend derived most of their materials from Celtic folk-lore but reflected their own feudal conditions and the tastes of their hearers in the free-inventive fashion of the *trouvère*. Such embellishment of the legend made Arthur less of a stereotype and lent him a greater humanity. Writing, according to his own statement, for the rich, Wace, a Norman poet claiming birth in Jersey and upbringing in Caen brought in Guinevere and the Round Table but the Worcestershire Layamon's model was more akin to Byrthnoth of *The Battle of Maldon*, a grim Saxon *eorl*, the popular defender unflinching in the face of his enemies, his knights a loyal *comitatus* devoted to their leader. Through Chretien de Troyes, undoubtedly the founder of the Arthurian romance *genre*, courtly love and the Holy Grail were introduced. With a small stretch of the modern critical imagination, Wace's Round Table has been made to stand for united Christian defence under his patron Henry II, the usurper Mordred for the forces of darkness allied with heathen Saxons and Irish and Arthur himself for future political reunification to be accomplished on his return from Avalon.

More attractive to those who insist upon a basis of written record is Geoffrey Ashe's controversial but very welcome hypothesis first advanced in 1981 suggesting that his namesake might have been a more faithful recorder than is generally believed. Mr. Ashe enquired if there might not be a substratum of truth in the Monmouth version since, casting round for authentic sources, he had found some circumstantial evidence, summarized as follows.

A man described as "King of the Britons" and dignified as "Riothamus" (Supreme King) carried on a campaign in Gaul and Burgundy (468-70). Sidonius Apollinaris, a bishop of Clermont from 470 and an invaluable informant on this period, wrote to him. This extant correspondence fits in with the Nennius account of Arthur's war on the continent so since such a personage undoubtedly existed, was he the spring of the popular legend? If he was, then much in Nennius is supportable, all twelve of Arthur's battles for example, though Nennius's dates fall much later (e.g. 542 instead of 470 for the last conflict with the Burgundians). Ashe made a case for equating Riothamus with Arthur even though the former has a sound historical basis which the latter lacks.

These continental military actions undoubtedly did take place so if Riothamus and Arthur are not one and the same and Arthur was never a single, identifiable individual, is it possible, even probable, asked Mr. Ashe, offering an acceptable alternative, that he was first begotten by a bardic desire to celebrate the brave

resistance of a group, deliberately given a strong-sounding name, an uncommon Welsh or Irish form derived from the Roman "Artorius" and endowed with full credit for the deeds of others? Whether Arthur originated in fact or fancy his magic name came to adorn local battles, transforming them into heroic achievements by long association. Again, the truth is unknowable. All that may be stated with assurance is that for various reasons it suited later chroniclers of Britain's early times to emblazon Geoffrey of Monmouth's account and indeed Welsh patriotic writers continued to do so until the late 19th century.

Thus in official circles it was generally accepted that Arthur the venerated warrior-monarch conquering his enemies had existed in the flesh. Edward I was one royal admirer who in 1302 ordained a Round Table at Falkirk and in Edward III's reign Arthurian chivalry represented a still-living ideal. Many annalists mention Arthur and list his knights. The opening of the early 13th-century Northumbrian *Cursor Mundi* extols Arthur and praises Gawain, Kay and the Round Table. Froissart related Edward III to the Arthurian prototype. Like other Scots chroniclers, from John of Fordun to Hector Boece, Froissart's contemporary the Aberdeen Archdeacon John Barbour could hardly have been an admirer of Arthur, supposed subjugator of the Scots, yet he mentions him as making Britain mistress and lady of twelve kingdoms, of conquering France and Rome and dying at the hands of Modred through treason and wickedness. An even more fervent foe of the English, the author of *Wallace*, said of his Scots hero that he had no peer since Arthur while the writer of the alliterative *Morte Arthur* cast his powerful portraits of the valiant king from the Plantagenet mould. Prose stories of the Round Table added a leavening of implausible or supernatural elements. Like the poets, their authors cited Latin originals. Living knights, like William Mareschal and Bruce's Bannockburn adversary Robert de Bohun, tried to uphold the tenets of chivalry but by the fifteenth century such practices had declined and it was left to the mysterious Malory to reconstruct the legend. He left no stone unturned. A quarter of the 120 romances in Middle English (excluding those of Chaucer and Gower) are Arthurian and to read *Morte DArthur* is to read all the known stories, inherited and enhanced by Malory from his various sources, which he claims (in 56 places) was a French book, never identified. Since Malory and the halt of the legend's literary development by the printing presses, nothing substantial has been added to it.

Malory depicted the Arthurian warrior as Layamon had done, as an English man-of-action, stalwart, full of integrity and loyal to his leader. As in most English romances (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an exception) the martial aspects of courtesy were given far more prominence by Malory than were Gallic ideals of aristocratic love. The doughty knights of the Round Table usually relegated gentler emotions to a subordinate place, though Lancelot's adulterous relationship with Guinevere introduced a tragic note which became central to the plot. Malory's aims have been disputed but most scholars now agree that he did not seek to urge a return to higher standards of conduct nor to record a conflict of chivalric loyalties. *Morte DArthur* does reflect the decline of the Arthurian pattern of

conduct in Malory's own century, when the old feudal structure was perceptibly weakening, but aside from its value as an ironic assault on chivalry, the narrative is "pure" incident. The hearer is being entertained, neither deliberately made aware of the writer's reformatory intentions nor lured into personal involvement with an authorial point-of-view. Though individual knights carry on the fighting they are "types" of warrior rather than individually significant characters in an unfolding drama. They may seem to direct the course of events episodically but never assume narrative precedence over Arthur himself; even in episodes where the King does not appear his presence is paramount.

Arthurian literature had entered a new and "Gallicised" phase three centuries earlier with Chrétien de Troyes, given credit for immensely sophisticated techniques of "analogical" composition and for skilfully adapting devices of classical rhetoric to suit his courtly purposes. Chretien injected the Grail concept into the legend and made Perceval his hero. Old and new ideals conflicted as individual knights quested after the Grail, a myth adopted into the Arthurian tradition as a Christian symbol but probably of Celtic or even Arabic origin. Chretien's noble Arthur is an elder statesman who remains at court living the life of action vicariously through his brave knights who go out into the world to seek personal adventures to be recounted to their king on return. Successive episodes of individual valour are linked by a connecting narrative involving certain leading figures, notably Gauvain, who makes appearances in the exploits of Yvain, Lancelot and Perceval. Although in one version it is he and not Perceval who finds and restores the Grail Gauvain deteriorates as a character in the course of the stories and is occasionally a butt for the author's humour. In *The Knight of the Cart*, the hero Lancelot becomes bound by his adultery and loses integrity as an instrument of divine purpose. Although *Perceval* stressed "cure" or care of the soul as a key to life's fulfilment Chretien's narrative inclines to the secular and loses the symbolic thread suggesting that he came to find the Grail quest less absorbing than the knightly skirmishes *en route*.

Compared with the French work, which in part it follows closely while remaining distinctly original, Wolfram von Eschenbach's Grail romance *Parzival* is ethically more weighty and his hero is often shown as inept and a prey to his own follies. He fails at his first attempt to enter the Grail castle and shift the spell but after a five-year search and a series of adventures he learns modesty and sympathy. Led finally to the Grail, in Wolfram's narrative not a chalice but a stone, he redeems the knightly order by his own unsullied actions and becomes King of the Grail. Gawain, open to critical interpretation in Jungian terms as Parzival's other more earthly Self, defeats the enemies Orgeluse and Malcreatiure but is consistently tempted by the flesh and does not get near his holy object; in fact, in an episode recalling the OHG *Hildebrandslied*, Parzival nearly kills Gawain on the battlefield without knowing his opponent's identity.

The degeneration of Gauvain is more marked in the prose *Lancelot-Graal* of 1220-30, a clerically-inspired epic in which Arthur is finally defeated not by conventional warfare but by a *lacuna* of internal cause and effect. Implicit

criticism of conventional chivalric values —the courtly love code, religious dedication to concepts of honour and the virtue of mortal combat— runs through this extensive anti-heroical, anti-secular work of multiple authorship which claims to be a complete history of Arthur and sets the legend against itself. Malory grounded his *Morte DArthur* on it.

The prose *Lancelot*, of about the same date, is one branch of the compilation known as the *Vulgate Cycle*, the longest and most impressive version of the Arthurian story. Another and influential branch, the prose *Queste del Sangraal*, elevates Galaad (Galahad) as the uniquely successful hero. Stories of the Grail quest all derive from the Christian revival of the legend, of which the hero is a knight-errant seeking the source of regeneration. Lancelot, the most likely to succeed on the knightly criterion of courtesy alone, is bewitched and under a spell commits adultery with Elaine, thinking she is Guinivere. The fruit of this illicit union is Galaad, the immaculate.

The Grail material is complex, hard to define and has led to much sterile controversy regarding sources and significance, well distanced from the mainstream of Arthurian scholarship. As a Christian symbol it affected the legend through Chretien, Wolfram von Eschenbach, the *Queste del Sangraal* and eventually Malory who described the end of the quest in Book XVII of *Morte DArthur*. English Arthurian romances, though more religious in content than the French, which dealt rather with the practice of arms and the steadfast maintenance of honour in the field, were influenced by certain of the Grail conventions, which sought to unite religious and secular in one individual knight. The Grail is not held up as the goal but a quest for human perfection is constantly implied. The immediate standards sought are secular —the seemingly impossible test accepted in order to find fame, to be honoured by the hero's peers, to win his lady's favour, as a stimulus to heroic exploits and sometimes involving a conflict between love and duty.

In the later middle ages Arthurianism implied a certain standard of practised knightly courtesy prized by ladies of the noble class but which in Malory's world is ineffectual. His knights are judged according to this criterion but fail to uphold it by a greater or lesser margin. Gawain, for example, appears in a dozen romances and his conduct varies from near-perfection to baseness. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* he is seen at his most virtuous. He boldly volunteers to represent Arthur, responds to the Green Knight's challenge and sets out on his travels aiming at a goal of perfection involved with the keeping of promises. Chivalric idealism and religious faith determine his actions on his journey to the Green Chapel, a quest that may be interpreted on several levels, one of which, as in the *Lancelot-Graal* prose-narratives, is as an ironic criticism of contemporary aristocratic habits. The ideal hero is balanced between *sapientia* and *fortitudo* but Sir Gawain is caught by the Green Knight in a conflict of duties, which he cannot resolve completely because he is humanly deficient and dependent on external powers. On this occasion he makes his own judgment of the situation and unexpectedly fails.

The Christian knight needs a world of change in order to nurture his hope, but is always aware of an impinging other world, which denotes his mortality. He

searches deeply for his finest Self, displaying an immaculate integrity of character and finds this elevation of personality in mortal combat, embodying a tradition of manhood idealised but incarnated in an ideal “high-mimetic” hero whose finest qualities are geared to action. Like the pagan Germanic warrior admired by Tacitus, who discovered his apotheosis at his moment of death the true quester after the Grail yearns to die in battle, at the peak of his physical and mental strength, but he does not carry the pervasive death-wish of the former. In this Knightly-Christian scene of action, pagan and Christian merge in a sublime unity whereby the finest Christian knight in this world is also the ideal Christian man, an ideological brother of the monastic. He seeks to live in the world actively but with honour and so to obtain divine mercy; through him the “useful” and the “honest” or suitable (*utile et honeste*) are linked with the highest good.

In the *Queste del Sangraal* Lancelot himself fails because of his adultery and of the three knights Galaad, Perceval and Bohort (Bors) who prove themselves worthy to receive Mass from the Grail at the hands of Christ himself only the first, ironically Lancelot’s natural offspring, is permitted to pierce the heart of the supreme mystery. To this paragon alone is the vision of the Grail vouchsafed and he and the Grail go to the Christian Heaven. The Nordic warrior’s Valhalla has no place in this hallowed arena. Galaad, however, is a hermit’s ideal of perfection, a Christ-figure, not a true chivalric hero drenched in flesh and blood like the others.

The well-beaten path of the romance tradition was not followed as a political policy for preserving Arthur as an unchanging model of a communal champion, an ikon of stability defending the faith against alien threats. Such realliance on the ethical demands of the past was rejected by Renaissance authors like Spenser, who used inherited Arthurian trappings to give life to the political and religious tensions of his own world. Spenser’s knights, like Malory’s, are practical men who know their limitations and do not expend energy in a blinkered chase after an insubstantial honour though their own honour—defined as “courtesy”—is real enough and solidly-based on affairs of contemporary church and state. Though recent scholarly work on the impact of the legend after Malory and the printing presses plays down its importance, during this Elizabethan period of increasing literacy and national enrichment popular audiences were being stirred to appreciate heroic devotion to great causes. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History* was reprinted in 16th-century versions and Elizabethan poets and dramatists, including Spenser, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, drew on selected aspects of the legend to celebrate this cumulative English ideal of character. A humanist *élite* of severer tastes, best represented by Roger Ascham, found *Morte DArthur* lacking in power of instruction and unedifying for young noblemen but such schoolmasterly strictures carried little weight outside the study; love of romances touched all social classes and editions of the *Morte* continued to be printed until 1654.

Like Jonson twenty years earlier, Milton initially chose the legend as an epic subject but finding it inadequate as history took his stand with Cromwell and his Parliamentarians and their claim to ancient Saxon rights. Dryden likewise considered Arthur’s epic potential and eventually adapted the legend to suit

dramatic opera along the lines of *The Tempest*, but with pro-Royalist political motives. Sir Richard Blackmore returned to Geoffrey of Monmouth (and Spenser) for his Arthurian epic of 1695-1700, unsubtle political propaganda for William of Orange, though by this time the alleged historicity of the ancient British line of kingship had long outlived its usefulness.

The English antiquarian movement of the 18th century, represented by Hurd, Percy, and the Wartons, imbued with social optimism, looked back at the Middle Ages with mixed feelings, despising its feudalism and crude serfdom as a reality while admiring what they believed were its true ancient chivalric glories. Thomas Warton's attitude to the old romances was a mixture of wonderment and enthusiastic patronage. In 1777 he published an ode to Arthur's grave and a sonnet on the Round Table. The first scholarly approach to the Arthurian romance came from Scotland when in 1804 Sir Walter Scott, believing it to have been composed by Thomas the Rhymer or Erceldoune, edited *Sir Tristram*, an early 14th-century romance of Northern origins from an incomplete Scots *ms.* Scott provided his own ending to fill the deficiency. The antiquary Joseph Ritson produced a pioneering study of Arthur in 1825. Malory's *Morte* was printed again in 1815 and twice more within twenty years, ushering in a fresh revival of interest in "the Matter of Britain".

Tennyson's bland assertion that there was no greater subject than Arthur obscurely echoed Caxton's 1485 description of what the reader might expect to find in Malory's book — "noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and sin". Such a catalogue of contents is surely an excellent reason for the legend's continued vitality.

But there is another justification. Long survival has demonstrated that the enduring strength of the Arthurian myth has always been its adaptability to suit contemporary conditions. Wagner made grand opera of the Tristan story and so pervasive was the high social appeal of the chivalric "golden age" that royal artists presented Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert in portraits and engravings as the ideal knight, an inheritor of ancient moral values. In the late 1930s, a crude propaganda poster of Hitler attired him, absurdly, as a knight in shining armour. Poets, writers and artists have been drawn to Arthur and his champions. The Victorians, Arnold, Peacock, William Morris, Swinburne, Tennyson and the leading pre-Raphaelite painters Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were followed in the present century by C. S. Lewis, John Masefield, Charles Williams and T. H. White. In America the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson composed an Arthurian trilogy (1917-27) and Steinbeck, who read Malory in childhood years, made his version of *Morte D'Arthur* in the 1950s. T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* inspired a stage musical, *Camelot*, by Lerner and Loewe, subsequently turned into a film.

The legend's latest guise is that of a vehicle for visionary sentiments. Tennyson's, Charles Williams's and T.H. White's Arthurian narratives reflect modern fears of social disintegration. In Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* the otherwise perfect Arthur's fatal misjudgement of his Queen brings tragedy. For T. H. White's

Once and Future King the Arthurian struggle becomes an end in itself, as Charles Williams put it in riddle form —“The king made for the kingdom or the kingdom made for the king?” The perceptions of these three authors merge into one another, denoting aims doomed to failure. White recast Malory’s work as an Aristotelian tragedy showing that though perfection is not to be realised because of the tragic thwarting nature of the human condition yet such failure is itself an inspiration, a kind of redirecting *katharsis*. Life is not to be despaired of as just a futile thing denoting defeat, in spite of its repeated betrayals. On the contrary, it is the lack of opposition, with everything made easy, which destroys. Wells, Huxley and Eliot shared the same misgivings. For White the barren Waste Land is there to be redeemed but not by human perfection. *Harmatia*, long thought to be the corrupting mortal flaw, is really essential to man’s nature and is to be regarded not as a tragic disadvantage, but rather as the indispensable catalyst of creation. The best interpretation of Malory’s “brave new world” in terms of our century is surely White’s.

Finally, what should be expected of future generations of scholars delving into this “large felde” or Arthuriana? Their current inheritance is rich. Recent work on the Arthurian romances has established their Gallicization, placing Chrétien de Troyes at the beginning of the “English” tradition. Other scholarly developments have included an approach to the romances involving Jungian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory and demanding sophisticated methods of literary analysis. These novel procedures have uncovered hitherto-unremarked symbolic patterns and subtle qualities of style but are not without their misleading allurements. Over-imaginative flights away from the text and forays into Druid country without appropriate supply lines have to be guarded against.

It must be said, therefore, that such winds of change, some more welcome than others, have blown many an eager enthusiast off course. Enticing theories translating Arthur into self-conscious allegory constructed for propaganda purposes or judging individual relationships in psychoanalytic terms are on occasion inventive and may seem to answer some questions but appeal more to the novelist than the scholar. Thus John Steinbeck, writing in the 1950s, interpreted Lancelot as the necessarily flawed father and his offspring Galahad as the paternal hope for perfection in the child (realised when Galahad achieves the Grail). This type of explication has its supporters on the fashionable fringes of literary criticism but though ingenious it is historically out of context and even critically misleading.

Conclusions drawn at a recent symposium held at Odense University in November 1987 on “The Vitality of the Arthurian Legend” included regrets that with a few exceptions radical study of *mss* had suffered neglect. The absence of a dependable philological base such as the EETS series established had been a fundamental drawback and it is fortunate that improved editions of primary sources are now becoming available, for example the verse-texts by Chretien’s successors known as the epigonal romances. These are no longer to be judged as inferior reflections of their model, but as evolutions of the *genre*.

Even so, it was realised that some inconvenient gaps still remain to be bridged

in French Arthurian studies, in particular by re-editing Chrétien's romances. Further investigation of earlier Latin vernacular writing and research into the extent of the *trouvères'* acquaintance with Greek stories was suggested. No serious scholar will deny that novel tendencies in literary theory claiming to advance understanding of the legend must always be supported by reliable textual criticism. Without that sound base, approaches involving psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, deconstruction, reception theory and other recently-promoted stylistic trends risk a journey into the wilderness.

References

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- Ashe, Geoffrey, «A Certain Very Ancient Book: Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*» (*Speculum*, vol 56 no 2 (1981), 301-23. Geoffrey of Monmouth did use sources including Gildas and Nennius, and probably others. Ashe sought a hitherto unknown source.
- ed., *The Queste for Arthur's Britain* (Lond 1968). Chapter 11, "The New Matter of Britain" discusses writers since Tennyson.
- Barber, Richard, *King Arthur, Hero and Legend* (Woodbridge 1986). The legend as recorded goes back to the early history of Wales, in course of time reduced to a dozen great battles cited by an anonymous 7th-century Latin writer, usually called "Nennius", in his *History of the Britons*. Nennius is the first to name Arthur as *dux bellorum* or war chieftain, victor in twelve battles against the Saxons, the last of which took place at Mons Badonis (Badon Hill). A short 10th-century chronicle, *Annales Cambriae*, stated that Arthur and his arch-enemy Medrant or Modred both died at the battle of Camlan in 539; the *Annals*, following Nennius, also notes Badon Hill, dating it 516 or 518. This decisive final battle was described as a "siege" by Gildas in his gloomy account *The Ruin of Britain*, completed in about 570. Gildas was mentioned by the Venerable Bede, the most reliable chronicler of these times, who gave the date of

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