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King Arthur and the Seductions of Chivalry

Bonnie Wheeler

The chivalric knight remains a stock figure of today's movies and the media. King Arthur is the medieval knight who is constantly "recreated" as a paradigmatic figure in contemporary popular culture. Arthurian and chivalric studies are constantly invigorated by broad public interest in the subject; strong scholarship and innovative pedagogic practice have equally distinguished this field. Even students who are suspicious and disdainful of "old stuff" expect to enjoy Arthurian Studies, and sometimes even their non-medievalist academic advisors agree. The subject's appeal enhances any academic department's bottom-line elective enrollments. Put the words "chivalry" or "King Arthur" in an undergraduate course title, and students from disparate fields will register. In this essay, I describe one classic version of a course which, with lots of variations, I have taught for several years. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* is the pivot for the pluridisciplinary approach of my course on the figure of Arthur and the development of chivalric cultures.¹ Keeping Geoffrey at the center, I look backward and forward from the 1130s.

If few figures fascinate contemporary students as does Arthur, teaching Arthurian materials is nevertheless fraught with hazards as well as pleasures. The field is hardly coherent: it is not historically straightforward; its narratives are fractured. Thus those of us who teach medieval courtly literatures associated with the figure of King Arthur face a peculiar challenge since King Arthur is only as vivid as he is spectral. Our students desire and sometimes demand firm answers about this speculative subject, and my intellectual goal is to thwart them, bringing students instead to consider the protean nature of this complex narrative stock. When I teach King Arthur, then, I enter a rich mix of

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history, literature, archaeology, economics, theology, and other disciplines. Students of Arthurian chivalry either tolerate a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty or fall into sloughs of despondency: my students always want to know the “real” truth about King Arthur. As a teacher, I always want them to interrogate their “need to know.” For me, this provides a nexus of competing and invigorating desires in the classroom.

I set the stage for our consideration of chivalry and of individual Arthurian stories—from their origins in the Middle Ages to their popularity in our own day—by addressing several questions: When did Arthurian stories emerge? Where did the Arthurian story come from? Who is King Arthur? What political, spiritual, and philosophical issues ground the Arthurian traditions? And why do stories of King Arthur and the Round Table knights still compel our attention?

I begin to address these questions in my courses by looking *backward*, into the dim past of the British Dark Ages—that period between the departure of Roman power (around 410) and the re-introduction (or the imposition, depending upon your point of view) of serious literacy, circa 700 (the Age of the Venerable Bede). The theme for this section of my course—recently quoted without attribution to advertise a TV program—is: “Did the greatest king who ever lived ever live?” I take my students on a cook’s tour of this period as it is seen by historians, philologists, and archaeologists.² Scholars often trace the legend of Arthur to a point in the sixth century (how early is a matter of some dispute), when the onslaught of Germanic Saxon raids to Britain suddenly ceased. Why did these rapacious pagans suddenly decide to avoid the rich treasures that Britain represented? According to some scholars, this long hiatus was due to the ferocity and military success of an historical personage of Romano-Celtic (that is, native British) ancestry, an aristocrat perhaps named Arthur (a Roman name) but *referred* to as Ambrosius Aurelianus (perhaps a title). Long after Rome withdrew from England to protect its own beleaguered Italian cities, this war-leader commanded his forces in an extremely

important battle at a mysterious site which from earliest times is called Mount Badon. Few documents survive from Dark Age Britain, but a surprising plurality of these records (most of which were written as testaments to the building of British Christianity) includes stories of this warlord's success at Mount Badon. Around 540, the monk Gildas berated the British for their sins, which he argued led to their frightened retreat from the Saxon plunderers until the moment that their leader, the Romano-British Ambrosius Aurelianus—Gildas describes him as a *vir modestus*, a moderate man—claimed victory at Mount Badon.³

Many archaeologists argue that evidence of Saxon invasions vaporized for about half a century. Onomasts tantalize us with the notion that about this time, and persisting into the seventh centuries, an extraordinary number of boys in Celtic areas were named Arthur. The great historian Bede (d. 735), an early practitioner of the "historical method," used Gildas as his source when he reported the story of Mount Badon. By the time of Charlemagne (768–814), when the Welshman Nennius chronicled the story, the name "Ambrosius Aurelianus" had been fully transmuted to the name "Arthur," who now entered the historical stage as a model hero at the same moment that he was recorded as a magical figure, capable of killing 960 Saxon enemies with his own hands at Mount Badon, and whose dog Cabal—a dog called horse—was so strong that his paw prints impressed themselves on stone.⁴

We do not know whether the earliest mentions of Arthur are from Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, or the edge of Gaul facing England called Little Britain, Brittany; all of these are Celtic areas. Most but not all scholars presume that the earliest stories of King Arthur emanate from these regions. In very early Welsh triads and poems, and in the later medieval story collection we call the *Mabinogion*,⁵ Arthur is the highest lord, a man who commands loyalty and deep affection, who is invested with the highest physical prowess, and who has powers that sometimes seem magical.

What I suggest to my students, then, is that when we look *backward* at “histories” and “stories,” at archaeological remains and all available evidence, we are attempting permanently to “fix” a developing picture of the lordly Arthur—who, if an actual historical personage, did not live in an elegant crenellated stone castle. If he reigned, it was probably in a former headquarters of a Roman legion in Britain, and the peaked headdresses and flowing chiffon scarves of cinematic fashion were not seen on the heads of Camelot’s women. In fact, the very idea of the lady had yet to be invented in the moment of any historical Arthur, if there was such a moment. When we look backward, I suggest to my students that we *assemble* an Arthur from history’s scrap basket.

Something rather different happens when we look *forward*. When we shift our gaze forward, we start with the moment in which medieval history shifts from the sacred to the secular. We move to the late 1130s and to another Welshman, Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose monumental *History of the Kings of Britain* climaxes with the appearance of a King Arthur who seems quasi-historical and quasi-mythical.⁶ Descended from a long line of kings whose stories Geoffrey also tells, Arthur is the highest achievement of Christian Britain. The conqueror of the whole of the island, Arthur extends his rule to all of Europe. Parallel in heroic personality to Alexander the Great, Arthur is most importantly the culmination of the blood of the Trojan Aeneas, that pious city-lover and founder of Rome, from whose descendant Brutus Britain claimed its name and antique empowerment. Arthur’s continental war, though not his early Norwegian invasion, is presented by Geoffrey as an honorable, legalistic quasi-crusade waged defensively for the protection of Christians against the corrupt Roman emperor Lucius and his “oriental” allies. Geoffrey’s Arthur has charismatic authority, and he attracts the enduring loyalty of an international mix of warriors—these two characteristics persistently mark his precise heroism in earlier as well as later literature. Geoffrey’s wildly popular Latin *Historia* was thought by many readers to be historically accurate. My students understand why, since it

includes hundreds of well-wrought stories of power and pain (it is here, for example, that we first encounter the tragedy of King Lear and his daughters), and it elaborates the imagistic prophecies of Merlin, whose magic is as scientific as it is visionary.

Geoffrey tells us that he himself is looking backward, merely translating “a certain very ancient book” from archaic Welsh into the Latin preferred in his day. We know that between 1129 and 1151, Geoffrey was attached to the collegiate church of St. George in the Castle—a precursor to Oxford University—which remains today as part of Oxford Castle.⁷ Geoffrey wrote his history as the Normans consolidated their post-1066 stranglehold over the defeated Anglo-Saxons. Geoffrey’s project in his *Historia* was to provide the Normans with a heroic trajectory for a non-Saxon, pre-Saxon, anti-Saxon but securely competent native, Christian, and Roman line of power—a power best imaged by Geoffrey’s extraordinary culminating hero King Arthur, whose family line the Norman kings claimed to be continuing and restoring. From this perspective, the Norman Conquest was really an act of liberation from the Saxon oppressor.

When my students catch Geoffrey looking backward, then, they join those scholars who now think we actually capture Geoffrey living in his own political moment, using a superb King Arthur in order to authenticate his Norman present. I ask my students to consider whether *looking backward*, then, is one way that imperialist aggressors can forge cheerful publicity for themselves as protectors and liberators. The *Historia* is a strong model of history told from the perspective of the winners, in which even the conquered victims are meant to feel good about losing. Whether the dexterous Geoffrey of Monmouth was exploited, or an exploiting propagandist, he was certainly the author who made King Arthur a pan-European hero of mythic dimensions: he is the pivot of King Arthur’s past. For academics who study folklore, it is ironic to think that King Arthur—forceful leader of men, roaring out of the deep mists of craggy Tintagel—may have been invented in a quiet Oxford study.

Through our close analysis of Geoffrey, I hope to make my students comfortable with the idea of being “situated” in history. Looking back from the perspective of Geoffrey also allows students to see how historians and archaeologists invent as well as discover the Arthurian past. We don’t yet, and may never, know when the Arthurian story emerged or where the Arthurian story came from, but by now my students are intrigued by how thoroughly our answers to these questions depend upon our own situations and range of vision. Is it possible, I ask them, for us to look backward or forward without impressing our preconceptions on history as thoroughly as the dog Cabal impressed his paw print on the stone? What is a true, objective, historical record, we ask ourselves? History is also (often surreptitiously) a rendering of the fault-lines of our own moment and our yearnings for the future: we wring what we need from the past. Was there an historical Arthur? We don’t know, but we do know that even now (perhaps now more than ever), all sorts of people care, often desperately, about this issue. Do most moderns care as desperately about the “real” Charlemagne or Alexander the Great? Why do we care so much about a “real” Arthur? That is perhaps the most teasing issue of all for me and for my students.

I then turn in my course to a related matter: Are there “identity markers” of King Arthur in medieval stories? Like the preacher Gildas and the pro-Norman Geoffrey of Monmouth, each of the many authors of Arthurian stories has particular purposes in mind when choosing and molding a King Arthur as a hero, and each Arthur is as distinctive as the narrative in which he is embedded. Geoffrey and the slightly later French romancer Chrétien de Troyes are the eloquent artistic pillars of the emerging medieval story, but we consider ways in which their characterizations of Arthur are incompatible. Each time I teach Arthurian literature, I vary the texts we read (my “big four” are always Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, and, as a coda, Cervantes), but I inevitably return to several cruxes, and here I will discuss merely four: King Arthur in mythic, moral, tragic, and comic dimensions.

1. MYTHIC

We begin to imagine Arthur's "identity markers" by seeing first who King Arthur is not: he is not a boy who knew his father or mother; he is not a father who raised his son; he is not a husband whose wife was sexually faithful; he was not a famous chivalric lover. Nor was he inevitably the "best knight of the whole world." Insofar as we can talk about story-stocks, how do they present this King Arthur? Who is he? Arthurian stories present differing views of their heroes. I suggest to my students that in the absence of a real historical Arthur, all Arthurs and Arthurian stories are equally authentic, although in the English tradition, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1469) has for most readers the stamp of orthodoxy. Malory himself looked backwards when he re-medievalized King Arthur; Malory's editor, the great early printer William Caxton, kept his eye on the present and looked forward when he published the *Morte* in 1485, the year the Tudors (who claimed royal legitimacy as descendants of King Arthur) took the throne.⁸

My class considers Arthur's mythic associations, yoked to archetypal structures (story types that different cultures seem to have in common). We think like folklorists when we consider the archetype of water gods, since Arthur's great battles and disappearance are associated with water; the archetype of returning gods and heroes, since like Charlemagne, Jesus, and even John F. Kennedy, King Arthur is a hero who will presumably return to his people in their hour of need: he is *quondam et futurus*, as Geoffrey called him, the once and future king. Subordinate to these are their communal motifs of magical conception and birth. In most versions of the story, Merlin engineers the disguise of Uther Pendragon so that he can couple with Ygerne, and in exchange Merlin takes the child they produce to rear. We also consider the powerful common motif of magical disappearance. Did Arthur die or just disappear? At the end of the twelfth century, Gerald of Wales told the story of the discovery of Arthur and Guenevere's tomb in Glastonbury:

Henry II (then in serious political trouble in the aftermath of Thomas Becket's murder) supposedly told the abbot about his dream in which he envisioned the precise spot of Arthur's tomb. They dug, they found, and they put the Arthurian tomb in a richly renovated and increasingly enlarged Glastonbury Abbey, which quickly became a site of pilgrimage competing with Canterbury for secular and holy tourists. Yet the motif of magical disappearance also kept bubbling to the literary surface, with a still-living Arthur disappearing over the water in the company of black-robed queens.

2. MORAL

Arthur is also a figure who provokes students to reflect on moral anxieties and ambiguities. In Gildas, the only personal attribute of the Arthur-figure was that he was a moderate man. For Aristotle, moderation in all things was the measure of excellence, but do we think of moderation as a mark of heroism? What then, we ask, is heroism? Students see Arthur as propelled toward "the good." With his fellowship of knights, he is quick to love, slow to wrath. His moral posture develops a distinctive rhetorical style in the English literary tradition, which is much celebrated and imitated in the American "western": Arthur is the Quiet Man of few words and strong action. Whenever you hear someone say, "I am going to speak briefly and to the point," and whose few words provoke others to action, you are in the presence of someone who reveres Arthurian British masculine style. Think Clint Eastwood, I suggest, "Go on, make my day." But students also see other Arthurs: in the French stories, for example, Arthur is often sulky or just plain stupid.

Arthur is above all the hero of "the chivalry," the medieval warrior class that developed its own code of behavior in which men displayed prowess, loyalty, great generosity, an intense sense of honor, religious values, and (above all) courtesy, especially to women. Inevitably, teachers and students consider the development, technology, and ethics of chivalry, which as a

code instilled constraint in martial culture. The chivalric world developed highly regulated behavior—social, individual, martial—fundamental to Arthurian culture and expressed in the metaphor of the quest. Arthurian society is hierarchical, with systems of reward and punishment based on loyalty and honor, good reputation coming from good deeds. In our readings, we explore the assumptions of Arthurian chivalry that are as illogical as they are lovely: God and Arthur will reward the righteous and punish the wrongful; everyone will always be able to tell the difference between the good and the bad, since everything ugly is bad. In chivalric civilization, justice and mercy are expected to flourish in equal measure, and thus Arthurian chivalry constrained men, linking their public virtue to private disciplines of restraint. But what happens, my classes ask themselves, if you aren't good or great enough, or if you don't measure up?

3. TRAGIC

My students are also drawn to Arthur as a tragic figure. From early times, Arthur's story is that of a man caught in a web of family intensity, of family jealousies, of an incestuous son and a flawed marriage. He is a victim of Lancelot and Guenevere's passion, of his sister Morgan le Fay's murderous rage. He fails to achieve lasting peace or to go on Crusade against the infidel. In Malory's haunting words, when Sir Bedevere cries out to the disappearing King in anguish: "What shall become of me now that ye are gone from me?" Arthur says, "Comfort thyself, for in me is not truste to trust in." In most versions (as, alas, with most heroes), a large part of the tragedy is the reader's keen awareness of Arthur's loneliness.

The ethics of Arthurian culpability are somewhat different from notions of the tragic flaw found in classical literature. Arthur is never entirely ideal. The Arthurian story is embedded in Christian ethics: no one is perfect, but everyone can get better. Everyone (including Arthur) sins, but everyone can repent and achieve salvation. On the other hand, the story is unrelenting:

one of Arthur's horrific moments of deviance is liminally Oedipal—he unknowingly commits incest and engenders Mordred, the son who will try to slay him. Arthurian writers (and students of Arthurian literature) relentlessly confront moral questions: Is Arthur culpable for the sin of incest if he didn't know that was his sister? Are we ethically responsible for our acts committed in ignorance? Is ignorance of the law an acceptable excuse? When we ponder these questions with our students, we come close to the essence of liberal education.

4. COMIC

Yet students also perceive Arthur as a comic figure. The template I like to suggest is the great story of the dumb kid who gets smart. As a child and young man, in many versions of the story, Arthur is passive, easily duped, and never very smart. Though he was well-connected, he needed a lot of on-the-job mentoring. I suggest that his youthful stupidity is rooted in his lack of proper curiosity about himself (he never asks who his father or mother are) and about his world (in the least explicable of all possible reactions, he is deadeningly indifferent when confronted with the Questing Beast). Malory provides an exemplary scene in which Merlin tells Arthur he must be curious or be dishonored: at his own wedding feast, in Malory's version, mysterious beasts and an emblematic knight and a weeping lady precipitously arrive and chase each other around his hall, in what Merlin calls a "strange and wonderful adventure," yet Arthur is numbly unresponsive. His relief when the weeping lady mournfully departs is surely the set-piece for sexist comedy (and Arthur's relations with women in general): "So when she was gone, the king was glad, for she made such a noise." Merlin teaches Arthur to walk the fine line between restraint and undue lassitude. As he learns to be curious, he learns literally and figuratively who he is: his father's son, a repentant sinner, a full-bearded man, a heroic conqueror, and the Holy Roman Emperor whose desire to go on Crusade is checked only by his men's plea

to go home to their wedded wives. They return home instead of going to the Holy Land: as Arthur says, "enough is as good as a feast." But I ask students also to consider Arthurian comedy in deeper structural terms, rooted as it is in Christian perceptions of return and recovery, of secular as well as spiritual regeneration. Even when Arthur dies, the story of Arthurian civilization continues as his nephew Constantine takes the throne.

Inevitably, my classes also consider some larger political, spiritual, and philosophical values that ground Arthurian chivalry. The most striking political image of Arthurian fellowship and community is the Round Table, that feminine symbol always connected with Guenevere's dowry. This image (often of the alliance of stereotypical female mercy with stern masculine justice) allows writers to ally stories of King Arthur to their own, often conflicted, political sensibilities about masculinity and fraternity. The Round Table is a powerful emblem of democracy wedded to elitism. Around it, everyone is theoretically equal, but some knights (Gawain, Lancelot, etc.) are recognized as more equal than others because of their superior achievements and talents. Arthur's superior authority is rarely challenged. Thus, however irrationally, the Round Table peacefully blends political systems. That blending was the goal of medieval parliaments and law, in which English lords were called peers of the realm. Only later did kings rule by divine right, as it was called. In the Middle Ages, blood-ancestry and the consent of the peers were the basic ingredients of kingship, and superiority in arms was always useful.

My students are interested in how easily the Arthurian polity accepted imperialism, and this has more negative connotations for our post-colonial consciousness. Medieval Western writers sustained the paternalistic, colonializing notion that Round Table culture—that is, Western Christian chivalric culture—was superior to other political systems, and thus Arthur

should annex all other countries to his just rule. Not surprisingly, the nineteenth-century Victorian revival of Arthurian literature coincided with high British imperial designs.

Yet students are equally fascinated with Arthurian spirituality. The most vivid religious image that becomes connected to Arthurian stories is the Holy Grail. When all Western nations are subdued, Round Table knights pursue the elusive Grail, usually thought to be the sacramental cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper: some legends asserted that Jesus's kinsman Joseph of Arimethea brought the Grail to England and that it went into hiding until it inspired Round Table Knights to their greatest venture. What they found, in general, is that religion is too sacred to be mixed very successfully with secular statecraft. Knights who found God didn't want to dine at any table but His. In Malory, the pursuit of the Grail split Arthur's Round Table, and it was never securely resuscitated: the spirit and the world are forever in conflict. To be excellent in one sphere—to have prowess and a keen fighting edge—is to be a sinner in the other, which requires one to turn the other cheek, to lose rather than compete. Both of these attitudes had great appeal in the Middle Ages (as they do now). The Arthurian story became marked by profound ambiguity about deep passion for the world and for the spirit.

As we draw our circle around our subject in my class, we look backwards ourselves. We've investigated the sources and moment of the Arthurian story, and the contours of Arthur's identity as a hero. We've touched on some major political, spiritual, and philosophical issues that ground the Arthurian traditions. We conclude by asking ourselves why these medieval stories are still worth reading. Why do stories of King Arthur and the Round Table knights still compel the attention of writers and readers?

Some of the story's allure generates our suspicions, since writers and readers seem continually to yearn for a simplified and nostalgic Arthurian world in which everyone has, knows, and accepts his or her place. Writers of Arthurian materials preserve

the superiority of Western Christian chivalric culture even when they seem to question and undermine them. Do readers love these stories because the narrative reassuringly concerns one class (upper), one gender (masculine), and one religion (Christianity)? I encourage students to think from post-colonial positions about race, class, and gender in Arthurian stories, asking them to reflect on the different valences of these ideologies in the medieval West. In this literature, there was one true religion, so everybody's best interests were served by conversion as quickly as possible. In this literature, birth tells you whether you can be a knight, and talent tells the rest. Just as class structure is clear in this literature, so too is proper subordination of one race to the other, of one sex to the other, and, of course, of one language to another. The small continuing matter of imperialism just shows some gumption and self-sacrifice: we will sacrifice a lot—at a minimum our comforts, at most our lives—to prop up structures imposed upon indigenous people. On the other hand, my students are sensitive to the ways in which some contemporary Arthurian writers try to re-imagine more inclusive Arthurian politics.

The positive dimensions of the stories also compel my students' admiration. A whole society is constructed with the goal that each member aspires to perfection. That this fails is not surprising. What is surprising is that such ambitions produced such passionate literary effects. What we call "Arthurian" can just as well be called the "American" dream, a hope that humankind can progress toward infinite individual "perfectibility." On the one hand, good people strive for perfection. That striving, like Arthur's, makes them both great people and great fools, doomed like all the seed of Adam and Eve to fail, to look as silly as they do in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (the one great Arthurian movie that I always show my students, all of whom bring their own coconut steeds to class). Early in life, Arthur becomes king and brings together the Round Table; most of the rest of the Arthurian stories concern knights who quest to prove who they are: good, good enough, or the best the world has to offer. No point in having an excellent fight in a forest unless it

can be re-told, usually twice. In medieval Arthurian stories, everyone reports to Camelot on Pentecost to tell the stories of their deeds, to bring in their prisoners, to explain their situation. To whom? To King Arthur, of course, who in his full maturity is the *pater familias*, the secure Father, who listens to them tell their stories and through whose eyes they see who they have become through their stories. Arthur rarely responds, but until he listens, the knight's stories are not yet Round Table stories. For the Round Table community, Arthur's "listening" is as profound as Beowulf's "boasting": each of them produces inevitable results. Knights can be ranked against each other, can be accepted when they failed, praised when they succeeded, and reproved when they have been unchivalric, but they are always Arthurian knights, and the Arthurian texts we read are the written memory of Arthur listening—not Arthur at war, but Arthur staying still. Medieval courts were movable affairs, but where the king temporarily resided was "home." To his knights, Arthur was "home," and to his readers, he often remains so: he is the father who will always listen, never criticize without offering help.

So these are some of the themes, issues, and structures that I try to keep in mind when I teach individual Arthurian stories. Students usually begin the course seduced by chivalry. By course's end, I hope they ask themselves about the coercive power of all utopian schemes. If my students feel that they find answers about themselves in these stories far more than they find answers about King Arthur, then I believe it's been a useful experiment.

NOTES

¹With the exception of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, I use only materials that have been translated into modern English for my undergraduate courses on King Arthur and Chivalry, and I refer exclusively to such materials here. Since I prefer parallel text/translation, I use such materials when possible. All teachers of chivalric and Arthurian materials will enjoy (and frequently consult) *The Study of Chivalry: Resources and Approaches*, ed.

Howell Chickering and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1988). For teaching Geoffrey's *Historia*, I use Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

²For a terrific overview and full bibliography of historical matters, see Christopher A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, A.D. 400–600* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998). Still the most useful overview of the historical development of chivalry is Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984). For arguments about the historical status of Arthur, the fullest treatment is still *Arthuriana* 5.3 (Fall 1995): Special Issue on the Historical Arthur. My students are fascinated by the current archaeological reports on the 1998 Tintagel excavations at <<http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Archaeology/projects/tintagel/index.html>>.

³On *vir modestus*, see my "The Masculinity of King Arthur: From Gildas to the Nuclear Age," *Arthurian Interpretations* (Winter 1992).

⁴The most convenient current teaching text for earlier materials remains *The Romance of Arthur*, ed. James J. Wilhelm and Laila Z. Gross (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), which gives translations of the many early Arthurian texts, including Latin chronicles and early Welsh writings.

⁵My preferred version is *The Mabinogi*, trans. and ed. Patrick K. Ford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); also see the more accessible *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, Everyman's Library (London: J. Dent, 1994).

⁶Teachers will want to consult Robert W. Hanning's ground-breaking *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966) and Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne, 1994).

⁷As is well known, the morally persuasive force of these narratives either conferred or reinforced the traditionally respected historicity of these *historiae* from the mid-twelfth century until at least the early sixteenth: cf. Caxton's explicit assumption that the

Arthurian tradition is 'true history' in his preface to the printed edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1485). Why do these narratives possess a comparable authenticity for modern students? Perhaps because the moral valency of *historia*—as opposed to morally irrelevant *fabulae/nugae* (see Paul Zumthor, for one)—has retained some of its medieval cogency. This is one question we engage as the course progresses.

⁸I recommend as a compelling teaching text the recent edition of *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004).