

CONCEPTIONS OF KING ARTHUR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Twentieth-century responses to the figure of King Arthur have ranged through every hue of the spectrum. To some authors he is an idealized figure, an inspiration to all who seek a nobler way of life, while to others he is an unscrupulous and brutal tyrant, spreading fear and terror among foes and followers alike; some perceive him as a man of destiny who shapes events through the force of his personality and vision, while others see only a struggling swimmer, soon swept away by the fierce tide of events beyond his control; some exalt his triumphs over rebellious Britons and invading Scots and Saxons alike; some lament the tragedy and pathos of his fate, betrayed by his wife and best friend; some rage against his follies as he squanders the chance to save his people; some laugh at the comical predicaments into which his aspirations lead him. Between these extremes just about every shade and combination of opinion may be found.

Amidst such bewildering variety, the task of discerning the major conceptions of King Arthur is a challenge. Indeed, it is easier in some ways to view the various representations of his figure as a series of points on the slope of a graph between different extremes or, to return to our original metaphor, as subtly differing shades along the entire range of the spectrum. Yet, just as to the human eye the spectrum seems to divide itself into distinct colors, so the representations of Arthur do lend themselves to certain noticeable, if at times overlapping, groupings.

Many of the works written earlier this century share, with those of the closing decades of the nineteenth century, an interest in the love triangle among Arthur-Guenevere-Lancelot. In these works Arthur may attract sympathy or criticism, but he never escapes some loss of status. He is, after all, the deceived husband, a man who has failed to satisfy his wife. However good his reasons or bad hers, he is robbed of dignity by being placed in a

situation that has been the butt of ribald jokes from time immemorial. In a patriarchal society, moreover, her defection is a sign of the waning power of an aging monarch, and it is both a cause and a symptom of the conflict of loyalties that breaks the Round Table. Without firm leadership, the unifying Arthurian vision loses its force, to be superseded by other, more personal, priorities.

At best Arthur is portrayed as noble but too trusting and naive, a man out of touch with the reality of what is going on at his court. It is thus that he emerges from Laurence Binyon's play *Arthur: A Tragedy* (1923). He even attains some tragic stature by recognizing that his own blindness and weakness have contributed to the fall of the Round Table. In John Erskine's historical novel *Galahad* (1926) and Georgene Davis's poetic drama *The Round Table* (1930), however, Arthur seems lamentably slow to recognize that his own self-deception has contributed to the downfall. John Steinbeck's novel *The Acts of King Arthur* (1977), like the many short poems celebrating the love between Lancelot and Guenevere, ends before Arthur has time to discover his betrayal. He thus remains ignorant of the passion that dominates the action in the latter part of the book.

Too often, however, it is left to others to enlighten Arthur and to explain to him how he has contributed to his own misfortune. In Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem *Merlin* (1917) Merlin emerges from seclusion to tell the king that he must place responsibilities to his realm above personal anguish over the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. The disastrous consequences of Arthur's inability to implement this advice, however, unfold in *Lancelot* (1920), Robinson's next Arthurian poem. In Clemence Housman's novel *The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis* (1905) it is Aglovale who dramatically confronts the king with his faults. Arthur and his court attain glory through the pursuit of honor rather than truth, of appearance rather than reality, and the king condemns Aglovale as dishonorable because he admits his sins rather than deny them. Yet by refusing Lancelot the right to defend his own and the queen's reputation in trial by combat, Arthur is himself choosing the path of truth rather than honor. It is, however, too late. Many will not support the king "when, by the rule and custom he himself had established, himself would he not abide."¹ Moreover, pursuit of the truth will uncover other sins previously concealed by the splendor of the court's achievements, sins that include Arthur's incest and the murder of the children born on May Day. Trial by combat, on the other hand, would prove a ghastly mockery of justice, as all would recognize.

In Lord Ernest Hamilton's novel *Launcelot* (1926) Arthur fades into an anonymous figure, too easily swayed by Agravain's accusations against

the noble Launcelot. In Graham Hill's play *Guinevere* (1906) and Philip Lindsay's novel *The Little Wench* (1935) he again emerges as a weak and suspicious character in his dealings with the lovers, and this alienates any sympathy we might have for him. Nor can he avoid responsibility for the double standard that prevails at his court. Thus in Lindsay's novel we learn that "Mellygraunce had misbehaved, not by the act of rape, but by permitting the act to become known."² Yet in some ways this willful blindness and anger against the adulterers is preferable to the helplessness that he sometimes exhibits as he is swept aside by events totally beyond his control. Thus in John Masefield's poem "Midsummer Night" (1928) Arthur is, according to Mordred, no more than an unwary victim of his son's plots.

This focus upon the love triangle inevitably damages Arthur's reputation. Sometimes it is because we are shown too little of his achievements to redress the balance, but too often his response—ranging from naiveté and blindness, through arrogant self-deception, irresponsible jealousy, and vindictive anger, to weakness, both personal and political—is unworthy of so renowned a monarch. Fortunately for Arthur, however, interest in the love triangle waned as the twentieth century progressed. Not only are his failures in love balanced by his achievements elsewhere, but the impact of the love affair is often significantly reduced. Sometimes it may even be omitted entirely, as a later French invention inappropriate in attempts to reconstruct the history behind the legend.³

Arthur is accorded the most undiluted admiration in three groups of works: poems that recall his reign as a golden age; juvenile novels where he represents the model of responsibility in serving his kingdom; and adult novels where he is idealized. The poems are mainly very short and they paint a nostalgic picture of the past, as in Marian Boyle's "Artorius Rex Invictus" (1987), which summons Arthur to return and restore a golden age. This nostalgia also permeates the many short lyrical poems that use places such as Tintagel, Camelot, and Avalon to initiate a philosophical meditation. Arthur's reign is recalled in glowing terms primarily to create a stark contrast with a troubled present. Thus John D'Arcy Badger's sonnet sequence *The Arthuriad* (1972) condemns the modern vices of cruelty, fanaticism, and selfishness, and it calls for a return to the values of moderation represented by Arthur. In order to dramatize contemporary problems, these poems refer only briefly to Arthur, using him as an appropriately distant symbol of better times.

The juvenile novels present Arthur as a great ruler in order to provide their young protagonists with the opportunity to serve a worthy figure. The historical novels, such as *Page Boy for King Arthur* (1949) and

Squire for King Arthur (1955) by Eugenia Stone, E.M.R. Ditmas's *Gareth of Orkney* (1956), and Catherine Peare's *Melor, King Arthur's Page* (1963), follow the various adventures and misadventures of the young people as they learn the responsible behavior that will win the noble king's approval. The fantasies, on the other hand, are more likely to place Arthur among, or at the head of, the forces fighting for good against evil, for Light against Dark. The young protagonists prove themselves by choosing to side with him despite the suffering they must undergo as a result. In Jane Curry's *The Sleepers* (1968) they help Myrddin foil a plot by Morgan le Fay and Medraut to destroy Arthur and his knights as they lie sleeping in an underground cavern; in Robert Newman's *The Testing of Tertius* (1973) they help Arthur and Merlin against Urlik, a black wizard and manifestation of the Dark Power; in Susan Cooper's *The Grey King* (1975) and *Silver on the Tree* (1977) they fight for the Light against the Dark that is rising to engulf humanity; in Pamela F. Service's *Winter of Magic's Return* (1985) and *Tomorrow's Magic* (1987) they help Merlin first to bring Arthur back from Avalon to lead Britain out of the new Dark Age of its nuclear winter, then later to fight against Morgan le Fay and her mutant hordes. Although not written exclusively for younger readers, *The Green Knight* (1975) and *The King's Damosel* (1976) by Vera Chapman also fit this pattern. Arthur is portrayed as the noble monarch whom the protagonists serve at the cost of much personal suffering.

These poems and juvenile novels allow but brief glimpses of Arthur, whose function is to represent a way of life made all the better by contrast with a most unattractive alternative, and it is the latter that is given more attention. Thus in *Merlin's Ring* (1957) by Meriol Trevor, Felix chooses to help those loyal to Arthur, recognizing that "the only real defeat is to give in to evil, to ambition and spite and greed."⁴ Arthur plays a larger role, however, in a group of science fiction and fantasy novels.

Under the tutelage of Merlin, Arthur tries to build a more civilized way of life for his people in *The Once and Future King* (1958) by T.H. White, in Andre Norton's *Merlin's Mirror* (1975), and in Stephen R. Lawhead's *Arthur* (1989). In White's novel Merlin, as an agent of some divine power only vaguely hinted at, transforms Arthur into a variety of creatures in order to teach him "that Might is only to be used for Right . . . turning a bad thing into a good";⁵ Norton's sage acts as an agent of benevolent extraterrestrial beings known as the Sky Lords, helping his protégé as he seeks to establish a kinder and more tolerant world; Lawhead's sage is one of the Fair Folk, descendants of refugees from the advanced civilization of Atlantis, and he assists Arthur's attempts to transform his realm into the Kingdom of Sum-

mer, which will embody the Christian virtues of peace, justice, and compassion. In Peter David's *Knight Life* (1987) and in *The Forever King* (1992) by Molly Cochran and Warren Murphy, Arthur returns to the present age and again finds assistance from Merlin: in the former he successfully campaigns to become mayor of New York; in the latter he defeats a wicked sorcerer whose life has been miraculously prolonged by the healing powers of the Grail. In *The Hawk's Gray Feather* (1990) by Patricia Kennealy, which transposes Celtic legend into a space-faring universe, Arthur battles to restore the legitimate royal house, of which he himself is a member, after the throne has been usurped by an evil magician.

Whether in the past, present, or future, Arthur is portrayed as a righteous and benevolent leader. He may not be without faults but they are invariably trivial, the consequence of youthful inexperience and the generous nature that makes him so beloved. By contrast, those who oppose him are marked by a barbaric cruelty and arrogant self-interest that make him all the more attractive. His downfall is accomplished by external forces of evil, rather than his own human frailty. Most works, however, offer a more balanced portrait of Arthur, ranging from the admiring to the critical.

The most impressive among them are three novels that reveal a hero whose own internal struggle mirrors the external war he must wage and who recognizes how his own flaws contribute to the final disaster at Camlann. In *The Pagan King* (1959) by Edison Marshall, Arthur eventually sheds his youthful illusions, discovering: 1) that he fulfilled the auguries of the predestined leader only through the manipulation of events by his great-uncle and mentor Merdin; 2) that Vortigern, his cruel foe, is none other than his own father; 3) that Modred, his half-brother and rival, is a generous antagonist; and 4) that he has been repeatedly and disastrously deceived by Vivain whose friendship masks bitter enmity. Arthur, however, does not brood. Armed with this dearly won lesson about the power of human credulity, he hands over the throne to his successor in a personally stage-managed exit on a barge with three queens, then exuberantly sets off with his true love in the guise of a bard, accompanying her songs that metamorphose harsh reality into glorious legend: "earth will remain uninhabitable, and life intolerable," he proclaims, "without kind lies."⁶

In Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset* (1963) Artos is clear-sighted about his faults from the outset of his career, acknowledging that his lapse of vigilance allows his half-sister to seduce him, that his neglect of his wife leads to her adulterous affair, and that his kindness of heart holds his hand from destroying dangerous enemies when the opportunity is given him. Yet Sutcliff makes it clear that these mistakes are the consequence of virtues

rather than vices. Artos's lapse in vigilance is a consequence of the trust of others; his neglect of Guenhumara is the result of his placing duty above personal feelings; his mercy stems from care for others. This care is most poignantly expressed in the grief that he feels for the death of those who follow him into battle, be they his faithful hounds, his courageous young warriors, or his closest friends, including Ambrosius, Aquila, and Gwalchmai. Furthermore, Artos not only accepts responsibility for his mistakes, but understands that he must pay the price. He recognizes his role as the Sacred King whose duty it is to die as a sacrifice for his people. It is a sacrifice that, like Christ, he makes out of love for them.

In Parke Godwin's *Firelord* (1980) Arthur emerges as "one of the most vigorous and attractive characterizations of the king in modern fiction, balancing idealism with pragmatism, romanticism with humor, compassion with heroic self-sacrifice."⁷ These qualities create an inspiring leader, but it is the growth of his sense of compassion that provides the structure for the novel. This learning process starts during his stay with Morgana and the Prydn when he recognizes that "we're human because we care,"⁸ and it culminates when he hears his weary men singing on the last day of the siege at Badon. He realizes then that he loves all his people, both the "flowers" and the "fruit" (p. 391). Yet he also accepts that this love entails sacrifice:

To be a king, to wear a crown, is to know how apart and lonely we are and still exist and *dare* to love in the face of that void. To crown your brow with knowledge as sharp as thorns, bright and hard as gold. (p. 91)

The image of the crown of thorns recurs throughout the novel as Arthur absorbs his painful lessons, particularly the loss of his dear friends Geraint and Kay.

Since Arthur is the narrator in these three novels, we follow step by step the inner struggles that he undergoes and establish a bond of sympathy with him. He emerges as an impressive figure, heroic enough to fight against heavy odds, yet compassionate enough to care for others; human enough to make mistakes, yet wise enough to learn from them. Other writers may paint a favorable portrait but because they tell the story from other points of view they allow fewer insights into his soul.

A number focus upon Arthur's military campaigns, and under such circumstances he usually plays a distinguished role. Two plays from 1942, Clemence Dane's *The Saviours* and A. Fleming MacLiesh's *The Destroyers*, both reflect the exigencies of war in their condemnation of its savagery even

while they commend Arthur's heroic resistance against his evil foes. This heroic spirit is emphasized in another play, Robert Cedric Sherriff's *The Long Sunset* (1955), in which Arthur rallies Romano-British resistance against the Saxon invaders.

Among the novels, several confine themselves to Arthur's earlier campaigns, culminating in his resounding victory at Badon. In W. Barnard Faraday's historical romance *Pendragon* (1930) Artorius is a valiant and dutiful soldier, but rather naive and slow-witted. Fortunately, his limitations are compensated for by the shrewdness of Gwendaello (Guenevere) who falls in love with him after he rescues her. We are accorded only a fleeting glimpse of Arthur in John Cowper Powys's *Porius* (1951) where we learn:

That fabulous hero with that historic sword was gone. The courtly emperor bestowing names upon brave steeds, and learning the names of beautiful ladies, was gone too. The man who dominated them now was a man of pure undiluted generalship, realistic, practical, and competent.⁹

The Duke of War (1966) by Walter O'Meara provides an account by a young Romano-British girl of the events surrounding the Battle of Mons Badonis. To her eyes Arthur is a noble and patient leader, determinedly holding together his quarrelsome allies on the one hand, while for the good of Britain he steadfastly ignores the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere on the other. In Keith Taylor's novella "The Brotherhood of Britain" (1992) an Irish bard saves the noble Artorius from a plot on the eve of his stunning triumph at Badon. By contrast Arthur is much less embattled in both Roy Turner's *King of the Lordless Country* (1971) and Douglas Carmichael's *Pendragon* (1977) where he moves remorselessly from victory to victory.

Those novels that deal with the last Battle of Camlann as well as the earlier campaigns reveal the consequences of the betrayals simmering beneath the surface of *The Duke of War*, and as a result they grow more critical of his failure to deal with them. In *The Emperor Arthur* (1967) by Godfrey Turton, *The Crimson Chalice* trilogy (1976-78) by Victor Canning, and *Excalibur!* (1980) by Gil Kane and John Jakes, Arthur is still a great and high-minded ruler who places duty before his own personal interests. In *The Bear of Britain* (1944) by Edward Frankland, however, he is too honorable to capitalize upon his triumph at Badon by enforcing unity on the feuding local tyrants: "A man may take it upon him to do as you counsel me to do," he tells Medraut in response to this advice, "and good may come of it; but for good or ill I am not that man."¹⁰ Because he is unwilling to use "lies and

treachery" (p. 177) as a means to an end, he finds that power steadily slips away from him until he is reduced to little more than a figurehead.

This pattern of an honorable leader unable to control the political rivalries that eventually destroy Britain recurs in other novels. In George Finkel's *Twilight Province* (1967, published in the U.S. as *Watchfires to the North*, 1968), Arthur is reduced to a rather remote war leader who is overshadowed by others such as the narrator, Bedwyr, and whose death has less impact upon his followers and allies than is usually the case. Although Arthur is made high king after his victory at Badon, his inability to control the minor kings causes him to fade gradually from the political scene in John Gloag's *Artorius Rex* (1977). In Marvin Borowsky's *The Queen's Knight* (1956) Arthur is presented as a slow-witted country oaf, set up by the powerful Lords of the Council as a puppet king. Although he wins support for his vision of a nobler world, he and it are both eventually brought down by those motivated by pride and ambition, by jealousy and treachery.

The poems that deal with Arthur's entire career are, as we might expect, more interested in developing his symbolic potential. In *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) Charles Williams examines the failure of Arthur's kingdom to fulfill its spiritual potential. Arthur's sin of egotistic self-love, which finds expression in his act of incest and his war against Lancelot, is both a cause and symptom of its decline from the values of visionary Logres to those of mundane Britain. He becomes, thus, a symbol of the human failure that leads to the loss of the Grail as well as the fall of his kingdom. John Heath-Stubbs's *Artorius* (1973) treats Arthur more favorably, showing him engaged in such traditionally heroic quests as the journey to the underworld to be shown a vision of the future. Here too, however, the focus is upon the symbolic value of such actions. The Arthurian story becomes primarily a vehicle for exploring the nature of literary tradition.

Female authors, by and large, pay closer attention than do their male counterparts to the domestic problems that play so large a part in Arthur's downfall, seeing them as an important symptom of the political divisions that destroy the Britons. Arthur remains a noble figure, particularly in Joy Chant's *The High Kings* (1984), where he displays compassion in the frame narrative, heroic energy in the traditional stories; and in Catherine Christian's *The Sword and the Flame* (1978, published in the U.S. as *The Pendragon*, 1979) where he even forgives Guenevere and Lancelot for their affair. Nonetheless, this focus inevitably shows him to less advantage than on the field of battle, where he can defeat his enemies through personal valor and tactical skill alone. In Jane Viney's *The Bright-Helmed One* (1975) the explora-

tion of the father-son conflict of Arthur with his sons Medraut and Anr on the one hand, and with his father Utha on the other, focuses attention upon his weaknesses in the area of personal relationships. The incest with his sister Morgause and the ceaseless plotting against him by her and various members of their mutual family loom large in a series of trilogies: Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973), and *The Last Enchantment* (1979), together with a fourth novel, *The Wicked Day* (1983); Gillian Bradshaw's *Hawk of May* (1980), *Kingdom of Summer* (1981), and *In Winter's Shadow* (1982); Sharan Newman's *Guinevere* (1981), *The Chessboard Queen* (1984), and *Guinevere Evermore* (1985, though here the roles of Morgause and Morgan le Fay are reversed); and Persia Woolley's ongoing trilogy of which *Child of the Northern Spring* (1987) and *Queen of the Summer Stars* (1990) have appeared to date.

In *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) by Marion Zimmer Bradley it is Morgaine, rather than Morgause, who commits incest with Arthur and gives birth to Mordred. There is genuine love between them, but guilt and political differences drive them apart and lead her to conspire against her brother. The focus upon the conspiracies reaches its peak in Fay Sampson's sequence *Daughter of Tintagel* (1989-92) in which all three of Arthur's sisters wield formidable power, both political and magical. In the fifth book, *Herself* (1992), Morgan confesses her love for her brother despite her hostile behavior on numerous occasions, but she places much of the blame upon Arthur for his unwillingness to share power with women.

The attention to Arthur's difficult relationship with his family and the plottings of various factions in the royal court reveal a beleaguered and often error-prone figure. Since his military victories usually take place off stage, they do not compensate for the inadequacies of his domestic conduct. He may be clumsy and tongue-tied in contrast to his sophisticated wife, as in Newman's *Guinevere*, or he may be unduly influenced by her compulsive demands, as in Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*; he may be unwisely reluctant to share love and power with Morgan le Fay, as in Sampson's sequence, or he may fall so deeply in love that he becomes emotionally dependent upon her, as in *The Road to Avalon* (1988) by Joan Wolf; he may be unduly suspicious of Morgause's influence upon Gwalchmai/Gawain in Bradshaw's *Hawk of May*, or not suspicious enough in Stewart's *Wicked Day*. Almost invariably, his judgment is suspect, his insight limited. Thus in both Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* and Sampson's *Herself* Arthur fails to achieve the full insight into the mistakes and character flaws that have contributed to his own downfall, unlike his half-sister. His inability to consider the needs of women inspires a number of short poems also, including Margaret Atwood's sequence

"Avalon Revisited" (1963). When he enters the world of women, thus, Arthur is revealed to be as lacking in understanding and consideration as any man, and the consequences, both for political stability and personal fulfillment, are disastrous.

Arthur's reputation has farther to sink, however. Where the female authors just discussed find him misguided and insensitive rather than malevolent, a group of male authors see him as a brutal oppressor. In *The Island of the Mighty* (1972), a three-part drama by John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, Arthur is a tyrant who manipulates people for his own political advantage. In *The Green Man* (1966) Henry Treece portrays him as an aging but basically admirable war leader despite his expedient tolerance of behavior he condemns. In *The Great Captains* (1956), however, the younger Arthur is ambitious and violent, while in *The Eagles Have Flown* (1954) his barbarism contributes to the disillusionment of the young protagonists. Perhaps worst of all, though, is his characterization in Peter Vansittart's *Lancelot* (1978) and *Parsifal* (1988). Here he appears as a suspicious and unprincipled tyrant who disposes of those he perceives as a threat: "The doomed merely vanish."¹¹ In these works Arthur represents the harsh and oppressive face of authority: his attempts to unite the kingdom are prompted by personal ambition rather than patriotism, and his punishment of dissent is seen as an attack upon individual freedom.

Arthur also figures prominently in two sword and sorcery novels, acting with the sadistic brutality typical of characters in the genre. In *The Bull Chief* (1977) by Chris Carlsen he treacherously slays a loyal follower, and in *The Dragon Lord* (1979) by David Drake he is driven by ambition to become a mighty conqueror, regardless of the cost in suffering to others. Arthur is diminished too by the satire aimed at the Arthurian world in Robert Nye's *Merlin* (1978). The chivalrous exterior of Camelot is, we discover, "built upon a secret cesspool" in which the king gives rein to erotic fantasies, "revelling in incest with his sister."¹²

Ironic treatments are rarely so harsh upon Arthur, however. In the short stories of P.G. Wodehouse and Theodore Goodridge Roberts, for example, he is but lightly touched by the gentle humor at the expense of chivalric pretensions, and in Don Marquis's "King O'Meara and Queen Guinevere" (1930) the kindly monarch worries more about the unhappiness of his best friend Lancelot than about the fact that this unhappiness is caused by love for Guinevere. In Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex* (1978), on the other hand, the idealism and innocence of Arthur, as well as his knights of the Round Table, yield comedy of the highest order. This innocence provides such protection against evil that Arthur is able to prevail over his foes until the

final battle of Camlann. As the king lies mortally wounded by the treacherous Mordred, he despairs at last over "the triumph of perfect evil over imperfect virtue, which is to say, of tragedy over comedy. For have I not been a buffoon?"¹³ He is comforted, however, by the ghost of Gawaine who reminds him, "can we not say, without the excessive pride which is sinful, that we lived with a certain gallantry?" (p. 483). This "certain gallantry" is the capacity for self-sacrifice in a noble cause, regardless of the consequences, and it transforms innocence into heroism and folly into wisdom, for only by being willing to embrace idealism, however impractical it may appear, can we hope to create a better world where love and decency can prevail.

One last major conception of Arthur remains to be examined, and that is as a figure whose actions are controlled by destiny. A number of the authors already discussed, notably Stewart and Canning, explore the influence of destiny on Arthur's life, but it has a special impact in a number of works that transpose his story from his own era to another. In Tim Powers's *The Drawing of the Dark* (1979) the spirit of Arthur is resurrected as Brian Duffy, an Irish soldier of fortune during the Turkish siege of Vienna in the sixteenth century. Duffy is reluctant to believe he is anyone other than himself, but he is fated to play a crucial role in repelling the invaders.

The love triangle of Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot is played out again by modern lovers in a number of works. Frank Davey's verse sequence *The King of Swords* (1972) describes the end of a love affair in terms of the life and death of Arthur; in Dell Floyd's one-act play *King Arthur's Socks* (1916) Gwen chooses to remain in her comfortable marriage with Professor Arthur Robinson rather than run away with Lance Jones, an artist; in Nicole St. John's gothic romance *Guinever's Gift* (1977), by contrast, the characters struggle unavailingly to break the pattern that repeats itself in two generations against the backdrop of archeological excavations at Glastonbury for the coffins of Arthur and Guinevere; *The Grail: A Novel* (1963) by Babs H. Deal transposes the tale to the setting of U.S. college football, where the love affair between the quarterback and the coach's wife dooms the team's attempt to complete an unbeaten season. The most impressive of these modern reenactments is *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988) by Robertson Davies. During the staging of *Arthur of Britain, or The Magnanimous Cuckold*, a fictitious opera by E.T.A. Hoffmann, an affair between the sponsor's wife and the director serves to explore the relationship between art and life, and the importance of assuming the right personal myth in order to flourish as both an artist and a human being. Arthur Cornish, the sponsor, saves his marriage by forgiving his wife, becoming, in other words, a magnanimous cuckold.

Some science fiction transposes the Arthurian legend into the future. In *The Dragon Rises* (1983) by Adrienne Martine-Barnes, King Arthur is an incarnation of an eternal spirit continually reborn as a successful war leader. He leads his space fleet to victory but manages to avoid the fatal love triangle and betrayal by showing greater consideration for his wife. In Michael Greatrex Coney's *Fang, the Gnome* (1988) and *King of the Scepter'd Isle* (1989) Arthur arrives on the scene to find that everyone already knows his story, and their expectations force the amiable young man into an aggressive and ultimately fruitless attempt he might otherwise not have made to impose upon others the principles of chivalry. In C.J. Cherryh's *Port Eternity* (1982) a spaceship with a crew whose psychological conditioning has been loosely modeled upon their Arthurian namesakes is marooned in space. Under the stress of this crisis they find themselves increasingly trapped by their Arthurian personae.

Arthur must also relive his story in three fantasy novels. In *Raven* (1977) by Jeremy Burnham and Trevor Ray he is reborn as a rebellious youth who becomes the reluctant leader of a conservationist movement to save an ancient network of caves linked, appropriately enough, with his own cave legend. In Guy Gavriel Kay's *The Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-86) he is summoned to fight for the forces of Light against those of the Dark in expiation for his sin of slaying the children in his attempt to kill Mordred. For their heroic self-sacrifice and devotion he, Guinevere, and Lancelot are freed from the recurring pattern of love and betrayal they have been forced to relive, and they sail off to their final rest. In Welwyn Wilton Katz's *The Third Magic* (1988) the two young protagonists eventually discover that they are Arthur and Morgan le Fay, doomed to live out their traditional story of love mingled with antagonism.

Whether forced to lead the resistance against external aggression once again, or to reenact the anguish of the love triangle, Arthur's destined role is to suffer. This accounts for his reluctance to undertake his responsibilities in *Raven*, *The Drawing of the Dark*, and *The Fionavar Tapestry*. Yet this understandable reluctance humanizes him, making all the more heroic his final acceptance of a destiny whose cost he knows only too well. Weighing the need of others against his personal feelings, he dons once again the lonely mantle of greatness or, as Godwin puts it, the crown of thorns.

It is this capacity for unstinting and clear-sighted self-sacrifice that marks the most admiring among the various conceptions of Arthur we have considered: the idealized king, the tragic hero, the inspirational military leader, even the impractical idealist. Although diminished by his failure in marriage, a failure that has attracted increasing attention in recent years as

writers reflect the values of feminism, his predicament inspires as much sympathy as criticism. But rarely is he depicted harshly, and even then it is as a man typical of a harsh age.

This reluctance to condemn Arthur is no surprise, because the power of the legend lies in its ability to inspire us with the same vision that inspired his followers so long ago. And that it will do as long as we continue to dream of a better and brighter world. Amidst the new Dark Age that seems forever rising, a darkness born of our own failure and despair, Arthur remains a beacon of hope, not of easy success, but of the ever-renewed determination of the human spirit to strive for a nobler way, regardless of the cost.

NOTES

1. Clemence Housman, *The Life of Sir Aglovalde de Galis* (1905; rev. ed. London: Cape, 1954), p. 236.
2. Philip Lindsay, *The Little Wench* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1935), p. 172.
3. Cf. the Author's Note in Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963).
4. Meriol Trevor, *Merlin's Ring* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 183.
5. T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958), pp. 254-55.
6. Edison Marshall, *The Pagan King* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 373.
7. Raymond H. Thompson, *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985), p. 128.
8. Parke Godwin, *Firelord* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 89.
9. John Cowper Powys, *Porius: A Romance of the Dark Ages* (London: Macdonald, 1951), p. 352.
10. Edward Frankland, *The Bear of Britain* (London: Macdonald, 1944), p. 177.
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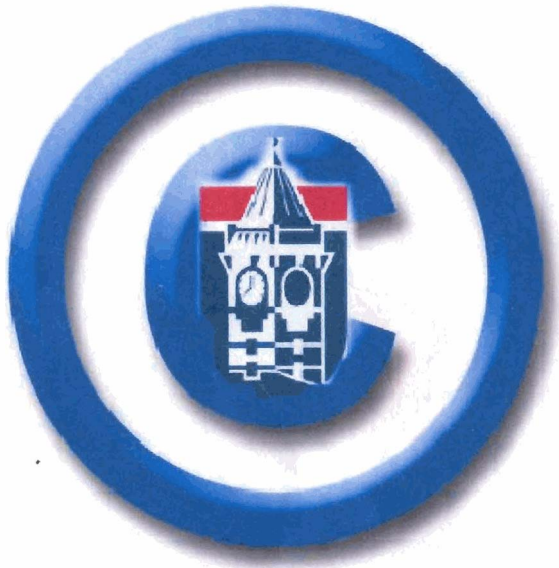
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