

Arthurian Afterlives

While Caxton promotes the text as a piece of enjoyable literature that will instruct its readers in the correct way to behave as gentlemen if they 'do after the good and leave the evil', by the sixteenth-century it became seen as an actively bad influence on its readers. Courtier and schoolteacher Roger Ascham rails against the corrupting influence of Malory's text in *The Scholemaster*, begun in 1563 but published after his death in 1570:

In oure forefathers tyme, whan Papistrie, as a standyng poole, couered and ouerflowed all England, fewe booke were read in our tong, sauynge certayne booke of Cheualrie, as they sayd, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in Monasteries, by idle Monkes, or wanton Chanons: as one for example, Morte Arthure: the whole pleasure of which booke standeth in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye

(In our forefathers' time, when Catholicism covered and overflowed over all England like a stagnant pool, few books were read in our language except for certain books of chivalry which were read for pastime and pleasure. These, as some say, were made in monasteries by idle monks or wanton canons: for example, Morte Darthur, the whole pleasure of which book lies in two points: in open manslaughter, and in bold bawdiness.)

Ascham also stresses that while Malory may provide 'good stuffe, for wise men to laughe at' ('good stuff for wise men to laugh at'), it is utterly inappropriate for children: 'What toyes, the dayly readyng of such a booke, may worke in the will of a yong ientleman, or a yong mayde... wise men can iudge, and honest men do pitie' ('What pieces of foolishness the daily reading of such a book may work in the will of a young gentleman, or a young maiden... wise men can judge, and honest men do pity'). Histories of the 'nine worthies' (traditionally, Hector, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Joshua, King David, Judas Maccabeus, King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon) made during this period were divided on the desirability of Arthur as a figure to emulate. Richard Lloyd, writing *A Briefe Discourse of the Nine Worthies* (1584), singles out Arthur for condemnation regarding his pride, and the sexually scandalous nature of his court:

*Then Arthur, Charle-mayne and Guy, were christians as I gesse,
The one was plagde in his most pompe, for his lasciuiousnesse:
The other two were godly men, wherfore they dyed well.*

*(Then Arthur, Charlemagne and Guy were Christians, as I guess,
The one was plagued in all his pomp, for his lasciviousness,
The other two were Godly men, therefore they died well.)*

Similarly, in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587), Thomas Hughes casts the king as a figure of misery: 'Th'unhappiest seemes, to haue beene hapie once. / Twas Arthur sole, that neuer found his ioyes / Disturb'd

with woe, nor woes relieu'd with ioye... / Now made a wretch, not one, that spares his spoile' ('The unhappiest person seems to have been happy once / It was Arthur alone that never found his joys / Disturbed with woe, nor woes relieved with joy... Now made a wretch, spared by no-one').

However, towards the end of the sixteenth century, Arthur began to be rehabilitated. Philip Sidney, in his *Defence of Poetry* (published 1595, nine years after Sidney's death, but circulated during his lifetime) argued for the importance of Arthurian legends as a way of connecting with the common man: 'For poetry is the companion of camps. I dare undertake, Orlando Furioso, or honest King Arthur, will never displease a soldier... Even Turks and Tartars are delighted with poets'. Milton contemplated an Arthurian epic on 'the kings of my native land, and Arthur... or the noble-hearted heroes of the Round Table', but eventually abandoned this project. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1589-96), in elevating the figure of Gloriana, venerates Arthur as the ideal avatar of 'magnificence' or good leadership and largesse:

I laboure to pourtraict in Arthure, before he was king, the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertues, as Aristotle hath devised: which if I find to be well accepted, I may be perhaps encoraged to frame the other part of pollitike vertues in his person, after he came to bee king.

(I worked to portray in Arthur, before he was king, the image of a brave knight, perfect in the twelve private moral virtues that Aristotle has devised. If I find this to be well accepted, I might be perhaps encouraged to frame the other part, the political virtues, in his person after he came to be king).

By the late seventeenth century, Nathaniel Crouch's *The History of the Nine Worthies of the World* (1687) was stressing the importance of Arthur as an English hero. Crouch argues that although:

The British Writers have related such strange and miraculous Actions and Adventures of this worthy Prince, that many intelligent Men have been apt to think all which hath been written of his Heroick Deeds is meer Fiction and Invention... we may be thought guilty of Incredulity and Ingratitude to deny or doubt the honourable Acts of our victorious Arthur.

In 1691, Dryden and Purcell created a successful opera entitled *King Arthur, or, The British Worthy* (1691), the plot of which revolved around Arthur's battles with the Saxons and attempts to restore the sight of his intended, the blind Princess Emmeline. This was later revived by Giffard as *King Arthur, or, Merlin the British Enchanter* (1735).

Arthurian literature fell strongly from favour after the death of Henry VIII, as Malory's attitudes to violence and extra-marital sex were seen as corrupting influences. Ascham's comments regarding 'Papisty' also suggest that the more French-derived sections of the book – particularly those concerned with magic, monastic hermits, and the Holy Grail – were perceived as being too Catholic for a Reformation-era English audience. However, the text regained popularity during the late sixteenth century, and had been returned, by the time of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* [1], to a point where the figure of Arthur could once more be favourably placed alongside the reigning monarch.

18th-19th Century Arthur

In the 1750s, the antiquarian Thomas Percy paid a visit to his friend, Sir Humphrey Pitt. In Pitt's house, he saw 'an old book, 'lying dirty on the floor, under a bureau in the parlour [?] being used by the maids to light the fire'. Percy stopped the maids and investigated the book, which was revealed to be a medieval manuscript including, among other texts, *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine, King Arthur's Death*, and *The Legend of King Arthur*. Some years later, Percy published the contents of the manuscript as a collection entitled *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). This collection, which can in some ways be seen as the first 'modern edition' of a medieval text, gained the attention of poets and scholars, and is credited with reviving interest in medieval literature in the eighteenth century and beyond.

One of the authors inspired by Percy's discovery was Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), whose romantic novels helped to popularise medieval-themed stories at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Scott was taking notes on the *Morte* as early as 1792, presumably working from the 1634 edition, and incorporated Arthurian material into his *Marmion* (1808) and *The Bridal of Tremain* (1813). This helped to fuel a minor vogue for Arthurian publishing at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1816, the printers Walker and Edwards produced a reissue of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and they were followed by the poet Robert Southey in 1817.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson were helping to re-popularise Arthurian literature on a grand scale. Tennyson himself spoke of having been 'no more than a boy [when] I first lighted upon Malory', and suggested that in his *Lady of Shalott* (1832) and *Idylls of the King* (1859-85) he aimed 'to represent the Ideal Soul of Man coming into contact with the warring elements of the flesh'. Tennyson's poetry was accompanied, not coincidentally, by a dramatic upswing in visual representations of the Arthurian characters. In 1857 the publisher Edward Moxon issued a deluxe illustrated edition of Tennyson's poems to date, which contained engravings by young artists such as William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. These two, together with other artists associated with the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' such as John William Waterhouse, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, would go on to produce Arthurian- and medieval-themed artworks for the remainder of their lives. Following Tennyson's emphasis on female characters such as Elaine of Astolat ('The Lady of Shalott'), Nimue/Nynive and Guinevere, pre-Raphaelite images of Arthurian characters often focused upon themes of containment, sexual longing and sensualism as well as more traditional chivalric themes.

In addition to his contributions to pre-Raphaelite visual art, William Morris also composed a number of Arthurian poems, including *Palomyde's Quest*, *St Agne's Convent* and *The Chapel of Lyonesse* (1855-7), and *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). Algernon Charles Swinburne also composed Arthurian poems, focusing on the figures of Tristram and Isolde in *Queen Yseult* (c.1857, unfinished) and *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), Balin in *The Tale of Balen* (1896) and Lancelot's father King Ban in *King Ban* (1915). The popularity of Arthurian storytelling was also reinforced in 1893-4 by a deluxe edition of Caxton's text featuring modern spelling, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley and published by Joseph Dent.

This period also saw the first inception of versions of the Arthurian story produced specifically for children. The first of these was published by James Knowles in 1862, who reprinted Malory's text with the deliberate intent to bowdlerise it 'where changed manners and morals have made it absolutely necessary to do so for the preservation of a lofty original ideal'. The idea that Malory's text was in need of 'cleaning up' for young readers was reinforced by Sidney Lanier in his 1880 *The Boy's King Arthur*, which provided a richly illustrated text and invited (male) children to join the 'fine fellowship... of lordly Sir Launcelot, of generous Sir Tristram [and] of stainless Sir Galahad'. For the American market, Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903) and its sequels stressed the ways in which boy readers should seek to emulate (nineteenth century antiquarians' ideas of) knightly conduct, while in 1908 Robert Baden-Powell seized upon King Arthur and his knights when looking for role models for his fledgling Boy Scouts: in *Scouting for Boys* (1908), the original Scout Manual, he gives a short account of Arthur's Round Table and advises:

You Patrol Leaders and Scouts are therefore very like the knights and their retainers, especially if you keep your honour ever before you and do your best to help other people who are in trouble or who want assistance. Your motto is 'Be Prepared' to do this, and the motto of the knights was a similar one, 'Be Always Ready'.

Further examples of Baden-Powell's Arthurianism can be seen in texts such as *Yarns for Boy Scouts* (1910) and *Young Knights of the Empire* (1916, full text available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6673/pg6673.html> [2])

From Percy's *Reliques* onward, the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a repopularisation of Arthurian writing. In particular, the children's editions of Malory, and associated popularised Arthurian

storytelling such as that seen in *Scouting for Boys* suggest that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Arthurian story had been returned to something approaching the cultural position that it held in Caxton's day: a text in which young readers could be advised to 'do after the good and leave the evil' with confidence that emulating the characters' good actions would prove worthwhile.

See also:

- [Thomas Malory - An Introduction](#) [3] by [Anna Caughey](#) [4]
- [Print and Manuscript](#) [5] by [Anna Caughey](#) [4]
- ['Drawn out of Freynsh': Malory and His Sources](#) [6] by [Anna Caughey](#) [4]

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