



A COMPANION TO  
*ARTHURIAN*  
*LITERATURE*

EDITED BY  
HELEN FULTON

A COMPANION TO  
*ARTHURIAN*  
*LITERATURE*

EDITED BY  
HELEN FULTON



 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009  
© 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at [www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell](http://www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell).

The right of Helen Fulton to be identified as the author of the editorial material in this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A companion to Arthurian literature / edited by Helen Fulton.

p. cm.—(Blackwell companions to literature and culture ; 58)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-5789-6 (alk. paper)

1. Arthurian romances—History and criticism. 2. Arthur, King. I. Fulton, Helen, 1952–  
PN685.C55 2009  
809'.93351—dc22

2008030353

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 11 on 13 pt Garamond 3 by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong  
Printed in Singapore by Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd

1 2009

---

## Notes on Contributors

**Elizabeth Archibald** is Reader in Medieval Studies at the University of Bristol. She is the co-editor, with A. S. G. Edwards, of *A Companion to Malory* (1996), and has published numerous essays on Arthurian literature; she is currently co-editing, with Ad Putter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend* (forthcoming 2008). She is also the author of *Apollonius of Tyre* (1991) and *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (2001).

**Susan Aronstein** is Professor of English at the University of Wyoming and the author of *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (2005). She has also published articles on medieval French and Welsh Arthurian romances, Arthurian film, and medievalism and popular culture. She and Robert Torry are currently co-writing a book on the films of Steven Spielberg.

**Geraldine Barnes** has a personal chair in medieval literature at the University of Sydney. Her main research interests are the ethos and development of romance in medieval England and Iceland, the reception of Old French chivalric narrative in Scandinavia, the Norse “discovery” of America as related in the “Vínland sagas,” and medieval influences on early modern English travel writing. Her books include *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (1993), *Viking America: The First Millennium* (2001), and the edited collection *Travel and Travellers from Bede to Dampier* (2005).

**Inga Bryden** is Principal Lecturer in English and Head of Research in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Winchester, UK. She has published on nineteenth-century literature and culture, including the book *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (2005), the Pre-Raphaelites, and the city in literature and visual culture.

**Lesley Coote**, from the University of Hull, is the author of *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (2000) and has written (and co-written) several articles on this subject. She specializes in teaching literature through film, and runs courses on

medieval outlaws, Arthurian and other medieval romance, Augustan satire, and the Hollywood western. Her recent article on Arthurian film for *Studies in Medievalism* was co-written with her late colleague Dr Brian Levy, for whose memorial volume she has produced an article on monstrosity and humor in *Richard Coeur de Lyon*. A committed educationalist and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, she has produced a “student-friendly” edition of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (2002) and has just completed two pedagogical projects on creative assessment in English Studies and on the use of electronic technology in learning and teaching English.

**Roger Dalrymple** is Principal Lecturer in Education at Buckinghamshire New University and publishes in both medieval English studies and education studies. He is author of *Language and Piety in Middle English Romance* (2000) and *Middle English: A Guide to Criticism* (2004) and co-editor of the monograph series, *Studies in Medieval Romance*.

**Tony Davenport** is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Literature in the University of London and Fellow of the English Association. His most recent book is *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction* (2004). He has essays forthcoming on the Welsh element in Middle English Romances, on *Pearl*, and on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

**Geraint Evans** is Lecturer in Media and Communication Studies at Swansea University. His major research areas are publishing history, radio and modernism, and the literatures of Wales, in Welsh and English. He has published a number of articles in these areas and is currently completing a book on David Jones.

**Laurie A. Finke** is Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Kenyon College. She is author of *Feminist Theory, Women’s Writing* (1992) and *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* (1999), as well as editor of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001). Professor Finke is a long-standing collaborator with Martin B. Shichtman, and they are currently co-authoring *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film*.

**Jeanne Fox-Friedman** is a Professor of Art History at New York University. She has published on both medieval and modern visual interpretations of the Arthurian legend. Her scholarly investigations include such diverse subjects as the Romanesque art of northern Italy, medieval women artists, and nineteenth-century children’s book illustration.

**Helen Fulton** is Professor of English at Swansea University and Director of the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Research (MEMO). Her main research areas are the interface between medieval Welsh and English literatures, multilingual manuscripts in Wales, political and prophetic poetry, and medieval representations of urban space. Recent books include an edited collection, *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society* (2005), and a co-edited volume, *Medieval Cultural Studies* (2006).

**Joan Tasker Grimbert** is Professor of French and Chair of Modern Languages and Literatures at Catholic University (Washington, DC). Treasurer of the International

Arthurian Society, she has published five books, primarily on Arthurian romance, including *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook* (1995), and, with Norris J. Lacy, *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes* (2005). Her current research focuses on the Prose *Cligés*.

**Andrew Hadfield** is Professor of English at the University of Sussex. He is the author of numerous works on English Renaissance literature, including *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (2005, paperback 2008), and *Literature, Travel and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance, 1545–1625* (1998, paperback, 2007). He is the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Spenser* (2001) and, with Abe Stoll, *The Faerie Queene, Book Six and The Mutabilitie Cantos* (2007).

**Will Hasty** is Professor of German Studies, Chair of the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies, and Co-director of the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies at the University of Florida. He has published extensively on court literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with particular focus on Germany and the romances of Hartmann von Aue, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Gottfried von Strassburg. His books include *Adventures in Interpretation: The Work of Hartman von Aue and their Critical Reception* (1995) and the edited collection *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan* (2003).

**Nickolas Haydock** is Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, where he has taught for the past thirteen years. His publications on films about the Middle Ages include *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (2008) and a forthcoming volume edited with Edward Ridsen, *Hollywood in the Holy Land: The Fearful Symmetries of Movie Medievalism* (2008). He lives happily on the enchanted isle with his dear wife, Socorro.

**Nicholas Higham** is Professor of Early Medieval and Landscape History at the University of Manchester, where he is currently also Head of History. His research interests center on the insular early Middle Ages in the areas primarily of history and archaeology, and the landscape history of medieval England, with a particular focus on the northwest. Recent monographs include *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (2002), *A Frontier Landscape: The North West in the Middle Ages* (2004), and *{Re}Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (2006), and he is also a frequent contributor to a variety of academic and popular journals.

**Karen Jankulak** is a Lecturer in Medieval History and Director of the MA in Arthurian Studies at the University of Wales Lampeter. Her research interests are in the connections between Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany, especially as shown in the cults of saints and the Arthurian legends. She is currently working on a volume on Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh tradition.

**Edward Donald Kennedy** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Chronicles and Other Historical Writing* (vol. 8 of *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, ed. A. E. Hartung [1989]) and editor of *King Arthur: A Casebook* (1996, 2002). He edits the

journal *Studies in Philology*, and he has written about 50 articles, primarily on Arthurian subjects. He is a subject editor for the forthcoming *Brill Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*.

**Roberta L. Krueger** is Burgess Professor of French at Hamilton College. She is the author of *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (1993) and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (2000). She participated in the TEAM translation of the *Lancelot–Grail Cycle* (1992–6) and has written numerous articles on medieval French romance, as well as on late medieval conduct literature, including the *Ménagier de Paris*, the *Enseignements* of the Chevalier de la Tour Landry, and the didactic work of Christine de Pizan. Her current research examines the intersection of conduct literature and courtly narrative in medieval France.

**Robert Paul Lamb** received his doctorate in American Civilization from Harvard University and is professor of English at Purdue University. The co-editor of Blackwell's *Companion to American Fiction, 1865–1914* (2005), he has authored *James G. Birney and the Road to Abolitionism* (1994) and numerous articles on Melville, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, Langston Hughes, naturalism, film theory, and pedagogy. His book, *Art Matters: Hemingway, Craft, and the Modern Short Story*, is forthcoming from Louisiana State University Press.

**Alan Lane** is Senior Lecturer in the School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University. He is a specialist in the study of the settlements and artifacts of the post-Roman Celtic West and North. His excavations and publications include the early medieval settlement of Longbury Bank, the Brecon royal crannog site of Llangorse, and Dunadd, the royal capital of early Dál Riata.

**Carolyn Larrington** teaches medieval English at St John's College, Oxford. She has recently written *King Arthur's Enchantresses* (2006), about Morgan le Fay and other Arthurian enchantresses, and she is currently working on some Old Norse versions of Arthurian texts.

**Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan** retired in 2006 as Head of Manuscripts and Visual Images in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. She is Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Welsh, Cardiff University, and a Member of the Centre for Medieval Studies, Bangor University.

**Alan Lupack** is the author of *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (2005) and co-author of *King Arthur in America* (1999). He has edited medieval and post-medieval Arthurian texts, serves as the Associate Editor of the TEAMS Middle English Texts series, and is creator and General Editor of the electronic database *The Camelot Project* at the University of Rochester.

**Andrew Lynch** teaches in English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia. His publications include *Malory's Book of Arms* (1997) and articles on Malory. He also writes on the medieval tradition of war and peace, on modern medievalism, and on Australian literature. He is co-editor of *Parergon*.

**Julia Marvin** is Associate Professor in the Program of Liberal Studies, the Great Books program of the University of Notre Dame, and a fellow of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute. She studies medieval historical writing and literature and is editor and translator of *The Oldest Anglo-Norman Prose "Brut" Chronicle* (2006).

**Lister M. Matheson** is Professor of Medieval Studies in the Department of English at Michigan State University. His publications include *Popular and Practical Science of Medieval England* (gen. ed., 1994), *The Prose Brut: The Development of a Middle English Chronicle* (1998), and *Death and Dissent: Two Middle English Chronicles* (1999). He has been an Associate Editor of the *Middle English Dictionary* and has also authored many book chapters and articles on a wide variety of topics in Middle English language and literature, including historical writings and fifteenth-century manuscripts and dialects.

**David Matthews** teaches medieval literature at the University of Manchester. He is the co-editor (with Gordon McMullan) of *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (2007), and is currently completing a book on English political verse of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

**Joseph Falaky Nagy** is a Professor in the Department of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has written books and articles on medieval Celtic literatures, including *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (1985) and *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (1997).

**Ad Putter** is Reader in English Literature at the University of Bristol. He has published widely on Arthurian literature and the Middle English popular romances. He is co-editor (with Jane Gilbert) of *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (2000). His latest book (with Judith Jefferson and Myra Stokes) is *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse* (2007).

**Raluca L. Radulescu** is Lecturer in Medieval Literature and Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies at Bangor University, UK. She has published a monograph, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* (2003), and several articles on Arthurian literature, and co-edited several collections of essays, one of them on Malory (2005). Her other publications, and current research, focus on historical writing and popular romance.

**Jan Shaw** is Lecturer in English Language and Early English Literature at the University of Sydney. Her research interests are primarily in feminist approaches to Middle English texts and their reconfigurations in contemporary fantasy. She also has a minor research interest in feminist approaches to the language of leadership. Her current research project considers religion in fantasy literature.

**Martin B. Shichtman** is Professor of English Language and Literature at Eastern Michigan University. He is co-editor of *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend* (1994) and author of more than 20 articles on medieval literature,



contemporary critical theory, and film. In a collaboration that has spanned twenty years, Professor Shichtman and Laurie A. Finke have written *King Arthur and the Myth of History* (2004) and co-edited a number of essay collections, including *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers* (1987).

**Tom Shippey** holds the Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at Saint Louis University. His most recent works are *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (2007), and the edited collection *The Shadow-walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous* (2005). Until recently he also edited the journal *Studies in Medievalism*.

**Juliette Wood** is Associate Lecturer in the School of Welsh, Cardiff University, and also a Director of the Folklore Society at the Warburg Institute, London. She specializes in medieval folklore and Celtic tradition and is interested in the modern revivals of magic and Celticism. In addition to television and radio work on folklore topics, she has just completed a book on the legends of the Holy Grail.

**Jonathan M. Wooding** is Senior Lecturer in Medieval Religious History in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales Lampeter. His research interests range across the medieval history of Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia. His publications include *Communication and Commerce along the Western Sealandes* (1996), *The Vikings* (1999), and the edited volumes *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* (2000), *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages*, with Karen Jankulak (2007), and *St David of Wales*, with J. Wyn Evans (2007).

---

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction: Theories and Debates <i>Helen Fulton</i>	1
<b>Part I The Arthur of History</b>	13
1 The End of Roman Britain and the Coming of the Saxons: An Archaeological Context for Arthur? <i>Alan Lane</i>	15
2 Early Latin Sources: Fragments of a Pseudo-Historical Arthur <i>N. J. Higham</i>	30
3 History and Myth: Geoffrey of Monmouth's <i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i> <i>Helen Fulton</i>	44
4 The Chronicle Tradition <i>Lister M. Matheson</i>	58
<b>Part II Celtic Origins of the Arthurian Legend</b>	71
5 The Historical Context: Wales and England 800–1200 <i>Karen Jankulak and Jonathan M. Wooding</i>	73
6 Arthur and Merlin in Early Welsh Literature: Fantasy and Magic Naturalism <i>Helen Fulton</i>	84
7 The Arthurian Legend in Scotland and Cornwall <i>Juliette Wood</i>	102

8	Arthur and the Irish <i>Joseph Falaky Nagy</i>	117
9	Migrating Narratives: <i>Peredur</i> , <i>Owain</i> , and <i>Geraint</i> <i>Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan</i>	128
<b>Part III Continental Arthurian Traditions</b>		143
10	The “Matter of Britain” on the Continent and the Legend of Tristan and Iseult in France, Italy, and Spain <i>Joan Tasker Grimbert</i>	145
11	Chrétien de Troyes and the Invention of Arthurian Courtly Fiction <i>Roberta L. Krueger</i>	160
12	The Allure of Otherworlds: The Arthurian Romances in Germany <i>Will Hasty</i>	175
13	Scandinavian Versions of Arthurian Romance <i>Geraldine Barnes</i>	189
14	The Grail and French Arthurian Romance <i>Edward Donald Kennedy</i>	202
<b>Part IV Arthur in Medieval English Literature</b>		219
15	The English <i>Brut</i> Tradition <i>Julia Marvin</i>	221
16	Arthurian Romance in English Popular Tradition: <i>Sir Percyvell of Gales</i> , <i>Sir Cleges</i> , and <i>Sir Launfal</i> <i>Ad Putter</i>	235
17	English Chivalry and <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> <i>Carolyn Larrington</i>	252
18	<i>Sir Gawain</i> in Middle English Romance <i>Roger Dalrymple</i>	265
19	The Medieval English Tristan <i>Tony Davenport</i>	278
<b>Part V From Medieval to Medievalism</b>		295
20	Malory’s <i>Morte Darthur</i> and History <i>Andrew Lynch</i>	297
21	Malory’s Lancelot and Guenevere <i>Elizabeth Archibald</i>	312

22	Malory and the Quest for the Holy Grail <i>Raluca L. Radulescu</i>	326
23	The Arthurian Legend in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries <i>Alan Lupack</i>	340
24	Scholarship and Popular Culture in the Nineteenth Century <i>David Matthews</i>	355
25	Arthur in Victorian Poetry <i>Inga Bryden</i>	368
26	King Arthur in Art <i>Jeanne Fox-Friedman</i>	381
<b>Part VI Arthur in the Modern Age</b>		401
27	A Postmodern Subject in Camelot: Mark Twain's (Re)Vision of Malory's <i>Morte Darthur</i> in <i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i> <i>Robert Paul Lamb</i>	403
28	T. H. White's <i>The Once and Future King</i> <i>Andrew Hadfield</i>	420
29	Modernist Arthur: The Welsh Revival <i>Geraint Evans</i>	434
30	Historical Fiction and the Post-Imperial Arthur <i>Tom Shippey</i>	449
31	Feminism and the Fantasy Tradition: <i>The Mists of Avalon</i> <i>Jan Shaw</i>	463
<b>Part VII Arthur on Film</b>		479
32	Remediating Arthur <i>Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman</i>	481
33	Arthur's American Round Table: The Hollywood Tradition <i>Susan Aronstein</i>	496
34	The Art of Arthurian Cinema <i>Lesley Coote</i>	511
35	Digital Divagations in a Hyperreal Camelot: Antoine Fuqua's <i>King Arthur</i> <i>Nickolas Haydock</i>	525
<i>Index</i>		543

---

## List of Illustrations

26.1	Tristan and Isolde, the “Tryst under the Tree.” Misericord, Chester Cathedral. By permission of the Chapter of Chester Cathedral.	385
26.2	Ywain’s horse protruding from the portcullis. Misericord, Chester Cathedral. By permission of the Chapter of Chester Cathedral.	386
26.3	The Round Table in the Great Hall, Winchester Castle, dating from the reign of Edward I with painting commissioned by Henry VIII. Photograph © Hampshire County Council, used by permission of Hampshire County Council, 2008.	392
26.4	William Dyce, <i>Hospitality: The Admission of Sir Tristram to the Fellowship of the Round Table</i> (1848). From the Palace of Westminster Collection, used with permission.	393
26.5	Dante Gabriel Rossetti, <i>Arthur’s Tomb</i> (1860). Photograph © Tate, London, 2006.	395
26.6	Morris & Co. stained glass panel (1880–90), designed by Edward Burne-Jones, <i>How Galahad Sought the Sangreal</i> . Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.	397
27.1	Triptych by Dan Beard, from the first edition of Mark Twain’s <i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court</i> (1889: 363).	411
27.2	“The troublesomest old Sow . . .,” <i>Connecticut Yankee</i> (1889: 237).	412
27.3	Portrait of Tennyson as Merlin, <i>Connecticut Yankee</i> (1889: 279).	413
32.1	<i>Camelot</i> (1967), directed by Joshua Logan.	484
32.2	<i>Parsifal</i> (1982), directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.	486
32.3	<i>Parsifal</i> (1982), detail.	488
32.4	YouTube Black Knight sequences.	493
35.1	<i>King Arthur</i> (2004). The battle on the ice, before and after CGI.	534
35.2	<i>King Arthur</i> (2004). Keira Knightley as Guinevere, woad warrior queen.	537
35.3	Inside Marius’s villa in the <i>King Arthur</i> video game.	540

---

# Introduction: Theories and Debates

*Helen Fulton*

Since the name and shape of Arthur began to emerge in manuscripts of the twelfth century, the set of legends and characters associated with him, along with the persona of Arthur himself, have been in a constant state of reproduction, reinvention, and, to anticipate Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman's concept in chapter 32, remediation.

If the essays in this volume teach us one thing, it is that there is no "original" Arthur and no originary or authentic Arthurian legend. There are, however, ideas – of leadership, kingship, empire, nation, social identity, religion, power – which, in order to be represented, require corporeal form and have, at various times and in different combinations, realized themselves through Arthurian characters. This volume, then, is not simply about Arthur or the characters associated with him. It is about representation and the processes of signification, the ways in which meaningful uses can be made of characters and legends embodying cultural beliefs and ideologies.

Drawing on the postmodern theory of Jean Baudrillard, it is possible to interpret Arthur as a simulacrum – that is, as a copy which has no original. The textual Arthurs that survive are reformatted copies of earlier ideas of Arthur, referring always to each other but never to an originary Arthur, since such a person cannot be identified or retrieved. The weight of this constant reinvention and copying causes lacunae in the legend, periods of time when the Arthurian legend falls out of fashion, when the baggage attached to the multiple Arthurs becomes too unwieldy for yet another reinterpretation. These are the moments when negative views of Arthur are inserted into the tradition, such as the Latin saints' lives mentioned by Nicholas Higham (chapter 2) or the satires and parodies popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as discussed by Alan Lupack (chapter 23) and David Matthews (chapter 24).

From the variety of Arthurian representations discussed in this volume, amid the whirl of floating signifiers and unstable meanings it is possible to isolate some central issues and debates that provide moments of coherence and stability. From the vantage point of these platforms, we can see that Arthurian literature of all ages and in all forms is effectively a site of ideological struggle, a place where competing viewpoints

engage in complex dialectics, interrogating contemporary concerns. However far in the past the literature is situated, it inevitably inscribes within itself the anxieties of the present. It is those moments of “the present in the past,” explicitly identified by most of the authors in this volume, that help us to read Arthurian texts as coherent and meaningful documents.

## The Question of Historicity

In a recent review for the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, Jonathan Powell wrote: “Scholarship, especially where the evidential base is limited, comes in two kinds: the constructive kind, which extrapolates the whole statue of Hercules from his foot, and the demolitionist kind, which asserts that all we really have is the foot and our own imagination” (January 4, 2008: 21). On the face of it, this seems an appropriate summation of the history of Arthurian scholarship, preoccupied as it has been with the big question of whether “Arthur” existed as a historical person. While some scholars, such as archaeologist Leslie Alcock, promoted a “constructivist” approach, reconstructing an authentic Arthur and his historical context from small amounts of surviving evidence, others, including David Dumville, have gone for the “demolitionist” approach, and in the first chapter of this volume Alan Lane charts the debate between these methodologies.

From a more theoretical perspective, however, the binary opposition of the two approaches collapses into a single act of imagination, which can be both constructive and iconoclastic. In the digital age, for example, film uses imagination not to demolish but to create a “real” – because fully realized – Arthur. This collapse of a binary opposition applies to the big question of Arthur’s historicity as well, still a question to which people return, though – as many of the chapters in this volume assert or imply – it is a question unlikely ever to be answered definitively.

In part this is because it is the wrong question to ask. Was Arthur a historical person or not? This apparently simple binary elides a number of ideological issues now comprehensively interrogated by poststructuralist and postmodern theory. The first issue is to do with individual identity and the extent to which it is stable, distinctive, and retrievable. A “real” Arthur implies that all individuals possess an intrinsic authenticity, an absolute meaning, which pre-exists the social formation and can be retrieved in exactly the same form at any point in time. Yet identity itself is plural, unstable, and adaptive to different situations. If we find it hard to identify “the real me” from the plurality of our social selves, how can we identify “the real Arthur”?

The second issue is that of representation. What connection might there be between a living, breathing “historical” Arthur and the many textual representations of Arthur that still survive? In literature, history, and iconography – all the material covered in this volume, in fact – there are plural Arthurs, constructed in many different forms and identities. Even when a “real” Arthur has been detected in the historical or

archaeological evidence (as a Romano-British chieftain, for example, as Tom Shippey describes in chapter 30), this version has no greater claim to authenticity or “reality” than any other of the textual versions.

This problem of multiple versions is connected with a third ideological viewpoint, which is the privileging of “history” over other forms of textual representation. The main reason why there has been a constant search for the “real” Arthur is because his name appears in some early documents, particularly the *Annales Cambriae*, which, despite recognized difficulties of authorship and date, are regarded as part of the historical record of early medieval Britain. The first two chapters in this volume, by Alan Lane and Nicholas Higham, deal admirably with the pitfalls and difficulties posed by this empirical evidence as a means of reconstructing a historical Arthur. The question has been whether the Arthur named in these chronicles refers to a “real” Arthur or to an already legendary figure from fiction. But this is the wrong question, because it sets up a false binary. What we should be assessing is the function of these chronicles as acts of imaginative reconstruction, something which Karen Jankulak and Jonathan Wooding attempt in chapter 5, in relation to the early historical context.

The big Arthurian question of historicity, then, is an example of “the present in the past”: it reveals more about twentieth-century preoccupations with identity, empiricism, historicity, celebrity, and authenticity than it does about the figure of Arthur, a floating signifier, empty of meaning until attached to a particular context in a specific period of time. Many film versions of Arthur have attempted to authenticate him by locating him in an identified historical period, whether the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages, and Nickolas Haydock gives an astute analysis of this historicizing impulse in his chapter on the film *King Arthur* (chapter 35). It is only with the rise of fantasy texts, written and digital, that a postmodern Arthur begins to emerge, one whose historicity and “reality” are less important than the qualities and cultural beliefs attached to him. Jan Shaw’s well-theorized chapter on the ideologies of Marion Zimmer Bradley’s novel *The Mists of Avalon* (chapter 31) and Susan Aronstein’s illuminating analysis of a number of Arthurian films in relation to contemporary political concerns (chapter 33) are exemplary studies of the post-historical Arthur.

### Chronicle, Romance, Fantasy

Relatively unconcerned about questions of historicity, literary scholars have traditionally focused on the kinds of texts in which Arthur appears as a literary character. These can be grouped together under the generic headings of chronicle, romance, and fantasy, which can be regarded as types of discourse rather than as separate genres. Malory’s *Morte Darthur* contains examples of all three discursive styles but is conventionally described as a “romance.” I have suggested (in chapter 6) that the dominant mode of Welsh Arthurian material is fantasy, though the discourses of chronicle and romance are also found in Welsh.



The chronicle style claims for itself the empirical status of written history and therefore a high “truth value” compared to either romance or fantasy. A major reason for the long debate about Arthur’s historicity is that his story first “went global,” as it were, via the medium of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century chronicle, *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Despite the misgivings about Geoffrey’s truth value, voiced in his own time and again in the modern period (as described by Lister Matheson in chapter 4 and Alan Lupack in chapter 23), Arthur’s placement in a purportedly historical chronicle endowed him with the status, however mythologized, of a historical figure, a populist reading that has outlasted all the scholarly attempts at “demolition.”

Yet we should not underestimate the impact of Geoffrey’s chronicle as the main conduit of Arthurian literature throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. I have argued in chapter 3 that the basic framework of the Arthurian legend was put into place by Geoffrey and transmitted through multiple versions of the text in a variety of translations. As a consequence of the rich transmission history of Geoffrey’s *Historia*, writers as various as Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, and Shakespeare were influenced by the very different versions that were available in their own times. As Julia Marvin shows in chapter 15, the development of the *Brut* tradition based on Geoffrey’s British history was central to the self-fashioning of English identity after the Norman conquest. We can add that this Galfridian version of English nationhood based on a British (rather than a Norman) past persisted right through the Renaissance and formed the bedrock of Shakespearean history and Tudor prestige. The political appeal of Galfridian chronicle is manifold: its authority is derived from the privileging of history as a form of documentary record, it foregrounds absolute kingship, and it invented a specifically British tradition of epic heroism located in its monarchy.

The historiographical tradition of Arthur begun by Geoffrey of Monmouth was equally salient for the Welsh, Cornish, and Scottish nations overshadowed by English rule. For the Welsh, Geoffrey’s account of British history authoritatively established the sovereignty of the British (ancestors of the Welsh) before the coming of the Saxons, a right to rule over the whole Island of Britain, which was claimed by successive generations of Welsh poets right up until the triumph of Henry VII, the first Tudor king, in 1485. To the Welsh, then, it was particularly important that Arthur was a “real” king, one of a line of legitimate British kings displaced by the Saxons. Juliette Wood has shown (in chapter 7) that Cornwall and Scotland made their own claims to the “original” Arthur and that, intriguingly, Scottish chronicles interpreted Geoffrey’s account of Arthur’s rule in a negative light, criticizing Arthur’s dubious birth and supporting Mordred as the legitimate ruler of Britain.

Largely thanks to Geoffrey of Monmouth, the British Arthurian tradition was essentially a chronicle tradition, based in history, however loosely defined, and concerned with the politics of kingship and the building of nationhood. The more familiar Arthurian world of Lancelot and Guinevere, tournaments, knightly adventure, and the Grail quest was the world imagined by French writers, inspired in part by the work of Geoffrey but also by tales told by singers and storytellers who amalgamated themes from Britain, Brittany, and France. In a rich and wide-ranging account of the