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978-0-521-67788-2 - The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend

Edited by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter

Excerpt

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AD PUTTER AND ELIZABETH ARCHIBALD

Introduction

When Lazamon, a Worcestershire priest, wrote around 1200 (quoting Merlin) that Arthur would be food for storytellers till the end of time, he prophesied more truly than he could have imagined.¹ Eight hundred years later, Arthur still has very extensive name recognition. Continuously from the twelfth century to the present day, authors and artists using various modes – romances, poetry, plays, novels, sculptures, manuscript illuminations, frescoes, paintings, operas, films, graphic novels, cartoons – have produced variations on the basic theme of the great king who saved Britain from enemies at home and abroad, conquered much of the Continent (even Rome, according to some sources), and established a court which became a magnet for the best and bravest knights in the world, only to be brought low by treachery in the end, like many other legendary rulers. Fortune's wheel, such a potent symbol in the Middle Ages, turns inexorably, carrying him up to the very top, and then throwing him down.

The Arthurian legend became one of the dominant narrative themes of the later Middle Ages. According to Jean Bodel, there were three: the Matter of Rome (from the fall of Troy to Æneas' establishment of the Roman Empire), the Matter of France (the deeds of Charlemagne and his lords), and the Matter of Britain (the story of Arthur and his Round Table).² The story of Alexander was also very popular, but more often as a cautionary tale of excessive ambition. Although Arthur was a British king, his legend was known and retold much more widely. An early Welsh tradition, partly oral, seems to have underlain the first 'biography', that of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey's work circulated widely and its influence was soon felt; the first Arthurian chivalric romances were written in France, quickly followed by German adaptations. The many versions of the legend, in Latin and every western European vernacular, offer a series of kaleidoscopic variations on the main themes, and offer modern scholars a fascinating and inexhaustible series of examples of reception and intertextuality. Medieval writers saw no shame in plagiarism; indeed, it was *de rigueur* in the sense that a text needed

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to be authorised, in the most literal sense, by having a declared source, whether real or invented.³ So Arthurian writers draw on earlier sources, but some also introduce major new developments, such as Lancelot's love for Guinevere, or the quest for the Grail, and then later writers choose whether, and how, to respond to these developments.

This intertextuality gives the Arthurian legend a special richness when combined with the remarkable flexibility and infinite expandability of the central story. Other major narratives are limited by the focus on a single hero (Alexander), on a short span of that hero's life (Robin Hood), on a fixed set of locations and cast of characters (the Troy story), or historical context (Charlemagne). Part of the success of the Arthurian legend can be attributed to the shift of focus from Arthur to his knights (or, in some modern versions, to the women associated with his court). The protagonist of an Arthurian romance can be a major figure like Gawain or Lancelot or Tristan, or a new character, a would-be knight like Percival; in modern texts it can also be Guinevere or Morgan.⁴ The focus can be on a single protagonist, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or on a group, as in the Grail quest. Established heroes can acquire previously unknown siblings or children. So Arthur's nephews are Gawain and Mordred in Geoffrey of Monmouth, but later they are joined by Agravain, Gaheris and Gareth, and also at least one sister. A sub-genre of Arthurian romance develops in the Fair Unknown stories whose young protagonist usually turns out to be Gawain's son (or brother in the case of Malory's *Sir Gareth*). In *The Secular Scripture*, Northrop Frye points to identity lost and recovered as a crucial romance theme, and it is widely used in Arthurian texts, with accompanying recognition scenes.⁵ Such themes may be doubled and patterned: a knight who initially does not know his own identity may later discover that he has a grown son, as both Arthur and Lancelot do (though we never see the first meeting of Arthur and Mordred in any medieval text).

The evergreen popularity of the Arthurian legend across Europe for over a thousand years makes it very hard to cover it comprehensively in a single book. R. S. Loomis managed to cover the whole of the Middle Ages in the seminal volume he edited in 1959, which remained indispensable for many decades (*ALMA*). Now, however, its scholarship is out of date, and it is being replaced by a series of multi-authored volumes (each dedicated to a particular language or in some cases group of related languages); these have become the definitive guides.⁶ There are a number of valuable surveys of Arthurian literature which include post-medieval versions, but some are inevitably very selective (for instance, Derek Pearsall's *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* [2003]), and those which aim to be comprehensive are descriptive rather than analytical (for example, Alan Lupack, *The Oxford*

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Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend [2005]). Our aim is to strike a balance between the descriptive and the analytic, so this *Companion* is divided into two parts. The chronological section shows how the legend evolved from the shadowy Welsh tradition through medieval chronicle and romance and post-medieval scepticism to modern novels, cartoons and films. Here we have concentrated on the Latin, French and English traditions for the Middle Ages, and on Anglophone versions for the post-medieval period. In the thematic section we have chosen themes which seem to us to be key to understanding Arthurian literature; all essays in this section deal with both medieval and post-medieval material, though the main focus is medieval.

Many rich areas of Arthuriana have had to be omitted, for instance art and music.⁷ Arthurian texts were produced in the Middle Ages in Scandinavia, in Italy and the Iberian peninsula, and even in Hebrew; they add to the rich intertextuality of Arthurian studies, but only a few could be mentioned here. Our aim in the chronological sections is not completeness but an overview of the evolution of the legend in the dominant traditions (Latin, French and English). We cannot do full justice to this remarkable evolution – Norris Lacy notes in Chapter 7 that ‘just over 80 per cent of all Arthurian works in English date from the twentieth century’ – nor can we treat more than a few of the major Arthurian themes.

Evolution

The evolution of the Arthurian legend from the beginning to the present day is traced in seven chronological chapters. To begin at the beginning is, of course, to ask the question whether or not there ever was an Arthur, and if so, who, what, where and when. This question takes us back to the earliest sources – for it is here that one would hope to discover the footprint of the man before he entered the world of legend. However, as Ronald Hutton shows in ‘The Early Arthur’, it is an inconvenient truth that Arthur had already entered that world by the time his life-records begin. The earliest sources associate him with the shadowy period around 500, when the Romans who had earlier colonised Britain withdrew and left the native Celtic population (the Britons) vulnerable to attack by Germanic tribes. The language of the new invaders, Anglo-Saxon, is the immediate ancestor of Modern English. In the first chronicle that mentions Arthur, the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* (sometimes attributed to Nennius),⁸ he is already larger than life. Twelve battles by the Britons against the pagan Saxons are said to have taken place under his leadership, and in the one battle that is independently confirmed by other early medieval chronicles, the battle of Mount Badon, Arthur himself is said to have killed 960 men in a single attack. Gildas in his chronicle

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(c. 548), writing shortly after these twelve battles are presumed to have taken place, confirms there was indeed a famous battle at Mount Badon. It happened, he says, in the year he was born, though unfortunately he does not say where Badon is, and makes no mention of Arthur. In the *Gododdin*, a Welsh poem extant in a thirteenth-century manuscript but centuries older in origin, Arthur is already a byword for supreme heroic achievement. The poem praises the prowess of Guaurthur, an excellent warrior ‘even though he was no Arthur’. Try as we may, we cannot go back to a pre-mythical Arthur via the earliest sources.

In the cultural renaissance of the twelfth century, the period covered by Ad Putter, some writers were as troubled as we are by the absence of reliable historical sources. William of Malmesbury in his *Deeds of the English Kings* (c. 1125) wrote that Arthur is ‘the subject of false and dreaming fable’ (*fallaces fabulae*) but surely deserves the support of ‘true histories’ (*veraces historiae*).⁹ A decade later, Geoffrey of Monmouth took up William’s gauntlet and produced the *History of the Kings of Britain*, a work that had all the semblance of true history, and included a life of Arthur from his birth to his death. Geoffrey’s *History* became the founding text of the Arthurian chronicle tradition, which flourished in the medieval period and beyond: Michael Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* (1613) carried the tradition deep into the Renaissance. In the chronicles Arthur is the king of the Britons, scourge of the Saxons, Picts, Scots and Irish, the conqueror of northern and western Europe, and tragic victim of Mordred’s treachery. Needless to say, Geoffrey’s *History* was not really a *verax historia* (true history) at all, but medieval readers generally gave credence to it. Shorter synopses of Arthur’s biography were soon incorporated into universal histories produced in Britain and on the Continent, and thus Arthur enjoyed, for a while, the unquestionable status of fact. In the Celtic lands of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, Arthur’s destiny as *rex quondam et futurus*, the once and future king, was a matter of regional pride and political importance. The ‘Breton hope’ was that he would one day return to rid the homeland of all foreign invaders. A commentary on the prophecies of Merlin (attributed to Alain of Lille, 1128–1203) warns readers not to mention Arthur’s death when in Brittany: those who do risk being cursed and pelted with stones by the locals.

The *fallaces fabulae* would not go away, however, and later in the twelfth century, when the French poet Chrétien de Troyes composed the earliest surviving Arthurian romances, stories about Arthur and his knights passed from oral into literary art. A world of difference separates the Arthurian romances from the chronicle tradition. If in the latter Arthur is the central hero, a warlike leader whose warriors literally sacrifice their lives in his cause, in romance he often becomes a marginal figurehead, eclipsed in glamour

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and interest by specific knights of the Round Table, whose adventures in love and chivalry now take centre stage. The focus on the collective interest of Arthur's realm in times of war shifts in romance to the individual hero's self-realisation in times of peace. The 'honest' chronicler, who impresses on us the weighty significance that attaches to historic events, makes way in Chrétien's romances for the self-conscious creator of fiction, who withholds the meaning of events and the identities of characters, and by so doing invites us, like knights-errant, to find out by 'taking the adventure'. In short, the distance between the chronicles and the Arthurian verse romances is vast, and in between it there lay a world of future possibilities.

It was the idea of reconciling these two traditions, romance and chronicle, and of absorbing them into a coherent model of romance-history, that inspired the prose writers of the thirteenth century who are the focus of Jane Taylor's chapter. In the world outside Arthurian fiction, this was the century of the *summa*, the encyclopaedic compendium of theology, philosophy, canon law (or all three combined); and the great Arthurian cycles of the thirteenth century, the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles and the Prose *Tristan*, could well be described as Arthurian *summae*. In them different romances are harmonised both with one another and with the Arthurian chronicle tradition – with the result that it becomes hard to say whether they were meant to be taken as 'fables' or 'histories'.

English literature lagged behind in these developments by a couple of centuries. As John Burrow remarks in his chapter on the fourteenth century, the heyday of Middle English Arthurian romance was the reigns of Edward III (1322–77) and Richard II (1377–99). The highlight is undoubtedly *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. After languishing in obscurity for almost 500 years, *Sir Gawain* was rediscovered in the nineteenth century and is today acknowledged as the great masterpiece of English Arthurian romance, an inspiration to modern writers and artists.¹⁰ The transition to prose also occurred much later in English Arthurian writings than in French. The first Arthurian prose romance is the mid-fifteenth-century Prose *Merlin*, and a couple of decades later Sir Thomas Malory created in his *Le Morte Darthur* (c. 1470) a noble and nostalgic Arthurian *summa* in English prose. Since it is Malory who mediated the medieval Arthurian legacy to post-medieval English writers, his importance in shaping the Arthurian tradition can hardly be overstated: he is, and deserves to be, the towering figure in Barry Windeatt's chapter on the fifteenth century.

With some notable exceptions (e.g. Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, Malory's *Morte Darthur*), the literature of knighthood was in the Middle Ages the creation of clerics who could read and write at a time when these skills were still rare. Not all churchmen approved of the glorification of

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chivalry. The theologian Peter of Blois, Chrétien de Troyes's contemporary, worried that audiences everywhere were moved to tears by stories of Arthur, Gawain and Tristan, yet listened stony-faced to stories about God.¹¹ The Holy Grail in Arthurian romances is the symptom of the tension between the knightly and the godly. The perfect Grail hero, Galahad, combines religious purity with chivalric accomplishment and is rewarded with a vision of the Grail, but he is not for this world, and there are not many other knights in literature who succeed on both chivalric and religious fronts. The attempt by medieval writers to redeem Arthurian chivalry by infusing it with religiosity backfired after the Protestant Reformation. 'The vile and stinking story of the Sangreall' did not go down well with the sixteenth-century puritan Nathaniel Baxter,¹² and even in the nineteenth century, the heyday of the Gothic revival, when the Middle Ages were far enough away to seem exotic and glamorous, the Catholicism of the period and its culture needed exorcising. In the *Idylls of the King*, Alfred Lord Tennyson managed, against the grain of his source, to transmute Malory's episodic histories into concentrated poems. It is a humbling experience to read Tennyson's *Idylls* alongside Malory, and to witness there the poet's persuasive realisation of imaginative possibilities – lyrical beauty, psychological drama, thematic cohesion – that are only glimpsed in Malory. But one also notices prejudice. When Balin enters the room of Pellam (the Maimed King and keeper of the lance with which Longinus pierced Christ), Tennyson describes Balin's Protestant disorientation before Pellam's shrine 'In which he scarce could spy the Christ for Saints'.¹³ The anti-Catholic barb is unmistakable.

Rob Gossedge and Stephen Knight, in their chapter on post-medieval Arthurian literature up to 1900, draw attention to several other factors that changed the face of Arthurian literature. The rise of the nation state, always accompanied by the 'monopolisation of legitimate violence' (in Norbert Elias's phrase), soon turned 'knight-errantry' into a hopeless anachronism. Roger Ascham, tutor of Elizabeth I, condemned Malory's idealisation of knightly adventures (and of course Lancelot's love of Guinevere) as 'open mans slaughter, and bold bawdry',¹⁴ though Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur* (1889) was able to see some commercial benefit from knights-errant provided they were sent out wearing advertising boards instead of shields. Another important factor in the transformation of Arthurian legend was the gradual evaporation of the belief that Arthur's story as told in the old chronicles had actually happened. The first deadly blow to Arthur's historicity was struck by the humanists, most notably by the historian Polydore Vergil, who being Italian had no particular investment in England's national foundation myth and debunked it in his *Anglica Historia* (c. 1512). Although the book damaged Arthur's historical

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credentials, it also released him into a world of fantastical history. Edmund Spenser in his *Fairie Queene* did not have to burden ‘Prince Arthur’ with any more historical baggage than the fact – which even Polydore Vergil conceded was true – that he ruled after his father Uther Pendragon. For the rest of Spenser’s allegorical narrative, Prince Arthur is at liberty to disregard his place in historical chronology, to dream of a lady greater than himself, and to go in quest of her: that lady is the Fairy Queen (figuring Elizabeth I). John Dryden’s *King Arthur* (1691), in which Arthur competes with the Saxon prince Oswald for the hand of the beautiful Emmeline, could only have been written at a time when writers no longer felt obliged to respect the ‘historical facts’.

This dislocation of Arthur from any authoritative master-narratives, be they historical or literary, sums up his fate in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which are surveyed by Norris Lacy. So much has happened in this period that it is hard to see the wood for the trees. All we can do here is to single out important new developments. One of these developments, to which this *Companion* belongs, is the rise of Arthurian scholarship. Sir Walter Scott’s edition of *Sir Tristrem* (1804), which is still remarkably useful, is an early precursor of this development. A landmark in Arthurian criticism is Jessie Weston’s extraordinarily influential study of the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which argued – entirely implausibly, it must be said – that the Grail is a remnant of pagan fertility rites, the sacred object that could transform the waste land into plenitude.¹⁵ T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was inspired by Weston’s book, and even now she casts her shadow over New Age interest in the ‘pagan’ Arthur. In Marion Zimmer Bradley’s remarkable novel *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), the Grail is the ritual cup of ancient religion – until it is stolen by ‘the Merlin’ and pressed into Christian service.

Another notable development in the history of Arthurian literature is Arthur’s transformation into the hero of children’s literature.¹⁶ T. H. White’s *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), subsequently reprinted as the first part of *The Once and Future King* (1958), is the great classic of Arthurian children’s literature. White’s Arthur (the ‘Wart’) is the open-hearted boy in short trousers, tutored by master Merlin, who is the kind of teacher every pupil dreams of: a teacher who positively encourages youthful adventure and curiosity. The work is one of those surprisingly happy marriages between a modern author’s own interests – White was himself a schoolteacher – and those of his source, Malory’s ‘Tale of King Arthur’, where Arthur is still young and has lots to learn, before and after he has been propelled to the throne by pulling the sword from the stone. Through the animated version by Walt Disney (1963), White’s *Sword in the Stone* secured a place in

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the history of film. The Arthur who once triumphed in battles against the Saxons has now conquered the modern media of film, radio, and children's literature: he has proved himself to be indeed *The Once and Future King*.¹⁷

Themes

As well as engendering a distinguished literary history, the Arthurian legend became a focus for the exploration of heroic and chivalric themes and ideals, some of which are familiar from the legends and folklore of other cultures and centuries: a great warrior leader comes to power and wages many successful wars, but is finally brought low by treachery from within his inner circle. Legendary leaders with bands of outstanding warriors include Agamemnon and Priam at the siege of Troy, Charlemagne with Roland and his comrades, and the Irish hero Fionn MacCumhail (Finn McCool), who not only has an impressive warband, but loses his beautiful young wife Grainne to one of his men, Diarmid (this may be a source for the Tristan and Isolde story which gradually became attracted into the Arthurian sphere).¹⁸ In the early Welsh tradition represented by *Culhwch and Olwen* and in the later romance tradition, Arthur's knights go on quests to find adventure or to rescue people in trouble: other heroes whose adventures involve travel, difficult tasks, or ordeals include Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Jason and Hercules, and Beowulf. Arthur's unexpected ascent of the throne after pulling the sword from the stone, an apparently impossible task, is the stuff of folktale.¹⁹ Arthur's futile attempt to eliminate Mordred, the son fated to destroy him, is reminiscent of many classical stories – for instance, Oedipus and Perseus. In some later medieval versions, Arthur and Mordred kill each other in battle: the duel between father and son is a theme with a long history, though it is unusual for both to be aware of their relationship, and for both to die. But in the Arthurian context, such universal themes take on special resonances, as Jane Gilbert argues in her discussion of Arthurian ethics.

The chronological chapters in this volume attest to the enduring popularity of the legend, and the rich range of intertextual responses to it across Europe over a thousand years. These chapters are of necessity brief surveys. The thematic section of the volume takes a diachronic approach, discussing both medieval and post-medieval responses to the legend. We begin with two chapters on the ways in which Arthurian values have been questioned throughout the evolution of the legend, by setting criticism against idealisation, and on the distinctive ethics of Arthurian texts. The subsequent essays highlight selected aspects of the legend which raise fundamental issues both of literary treatment and of reception: imperial conquest, love and adultery, magic and religion. We end with a chapter

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on Arthurian geography, a field which has inspired both rigorous and imaginative responses through the ages.

Arthur's court moves around the country, from Caerleon to Carlisle to the mysterious Camelot, and onto the Continent in time of war, but what it stands for does not change. It is a magnet for ambitious knights who want to prove themselves, to establish and increase what Malory calls their 'worship' (honour, reputation, standing). Arthur is the supreme warrior and leader, the conqueror of the Saxons and other marauders. In the early Welsh tradition he gathers exceptional warriors around him, some of whom have superhuman powers (see the catalogue in *Culhwch and Olwen*), and this pattern continues with the rise of romance in the twelfth century. Some are his relatives (Gawain, Mordred, Ywain), but others are foreign, whether they come from inside the British Isles (Tristan is Cornish) or from overseas (Lancelot is French, Palomides is a Saracen). Geoffrey of Monmouth, author of the earliest birth to death 'biography' of Arthur (*History of the Kings of Britain*, c. 1135), explains the king's policy and its results:

Arthur then began to increase his personal entourage by inviting very distinguished men from far-distant kingdoms to join it. In this way he developed such a code of courtliness in his household that he inspired peoples living far away to imitate him. The result was that even the man of noblest birth, once he was roused to rivalry, thought nothing at all of himself unless he wore his arms and dressed in the same way as Arthur's knights. At last the fame of Arthur's generosity and bravery spread to the very ends of the earth; and the kings of countries far across the sea trembled at the thought that they might be attacked and invaded by him, and so lose control of the lands under their dominion. (Thorpe, ix.11, p. 222)²⁰

Geoffrey may be inventing this, though it is clear that by the early twelfth century Arthur's name was already widely known in continental Europe (see Hutton in Chapter 1 and Putter in Chapter 2). If Geoffrey did invent it, he was a very effective spin-doctor; within a few decades romances appeared describing the court and the knights who aspired to be part of it.

Camelot has become a byword for high standards of chivalry, and for courtly ideals and values, but Arthur and his court were not universally admired in the Middle Ages. Some of the earliest references to him occur in saints' lives where the protagonist asserts his authority over the king. The all-conquering warrior of the early tradition, whose biography represented the last great period in British history for Geoffrey of Monmouth, was soon replaced in many romances by a surprisingly passive and ineffective king who stays at court while his knights have adventures and show their prowess. (The television series *Star Trek* offers an interesting analogue: in the first

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series, Captain Kirk often leaves the Enterprise to save planets, confront aliens, and dally with ladies, but in the second series, *The Next Generation*, the focus widens and Captain Picard frequently remains on the ship while crew members such as Riker take on the adventures.) As we have seen, this somewhat negative characterisation begins with Chrétien de Troyes, widely regarded as the father of Arthurian romance, and continues, through his successors and imitators, up to the present day. Elizabeth Archibald discusses a wide range of texts in which Arthur or his court or Arthurian ideals are questioned and challenged, to varying degrees, through comedy, irony, parody, satire, or open criticism. Often the criticism is implicit and is balanced by praise, but in Marie de France's *Lanval*, the hero leaves Arthur's unfriendly court to accompany the fairy mistress who has saved him from unjust punishment. One might expect Latin Arthurian writers to be more critical than vernacular ones, since romance was often castigated by clerics as frivolous, and many of the pursuits of Arthurian knights go against Christian values (tournaments and the pursuit of renown might be seen as encouraging most of the Seven Deadly Sins other than Sloth). Some criticism is implied in the *De Ortu Waluuanii* or *Rise of Gawain*, a twelfth- or thirteenth-century account of Gawain as a Fair Unknown, and in the Arthurian episode in Andreas Capellanus' treatise on love (late twelfth century).

The introduction of the Grail into the Arthurian world challenges existing values and behaviour: Lancelot is found wanting, whereas his illegitimate son Galahad proves to be a perfect Christian knight, too good for the world. Gawain does particularly badly on the Grail quest, but England showed little interest in Grail adventures until the later fifteenth century, and Gawain remained extremely popular there. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* plays with the audience's familiarity with Gawain and the French romance tradition – but does this tantalisingly subtle poem criticise Arthurian values and literature, or vindicate them? Arthurian literature repeatedly raises the issue of heroism, and it seems that in the later Middle Ages there was a fashion for flawed heroes, such as Gawain and Lancelot, and indeed Arthur himself. They were certainly seen as flawed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, as Chapter 10 by Gossedge and Knight makes clear. Tennyson's Arthur is a return to the early conqueror, rather than the *roi fainéant* of the romance tradition, but Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee finds much to criticise in Arthur's realm, as do some twentieth- and twenty-first century novelists and film directors.

Though Arthurian ideals and values are sometimes honoured in the breach, and are sometimes mocked or criticised, they are nevertheless part of what makes Arthurian texts distinctive. An account of the legend such as that of