

DEBRA N. MANCOFF, *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend through Victorian Eyes*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995. Pp. 176, color illus. ISBN: 0-8109-3782-4. \$35.

Rounding a corner in the Museo de Arte in Ponce, Puerto Rico, a few years ago, I was ravished by my first sight of Edward Burne-Jones's *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*—surely the jewel in the crown of that bejeweled museum, the largest repository of pre-Raphaelite painting in our hemisphere. It is reproduced as the final and double page full-color illustration in Debra Mancoff's book on the nineteenth-century Arthurian Revival and—like the reproductions of the other 130-plus *objets d'art* represented here—of very good quality indeed. One would have liked more color (Frederick Sandys's gorgeous *Morgan le Fay*, for instance) but one understands about the costs of art books, and visually, at least, this volume lives up to Jo Goyné's advance billing when she asked me to review it, as a 'really gorgeous' production.

But Mancoff aspires to discuss more than art, and there's the rub. 'Retold in the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Morris and Sir Walter Scott' as the dust-jacket blurb has it (there are other literary, mainly brief retellings) the legend's Victorian ambience is (generally) rendered quite well. But ambience is one thing, textual accuracy another, and even in her Victorian retellings Mancoff's prose is filled with errors which will pain Arthurian scholars and misinform the amateurs who will buy this as the coffee-table book it seems at least partly intended to be.

Let us begin, as all modern aficionados of the legend must, with the supposititious Malory, whose works were not 'written after his release' (Mancoff, p.19): had they been, why would he—specifically exempted from all general pardons—call himself more than once a knight-prisoner and pray on the last page of his book for 'good delyveraunce' (Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd, ed. p. 726)? Mancoff's plot summary of *Le Morte Darthur* is riddled with other mistakes: in Malory's book the sword does not get into the stone through a deathstroke thrust of Uther (19)—that detail is John Boorman's in his freely adapted film *Excalibur*—but through the agency of Merlin (*Works* 7); the Lady of the Lake's command as she gives Arthur Excalibur is not 'that he use it in the cause of justice and...return it when his work is completed' (19) but that he 'woll gyff me a gyffte whan I aske hit you' (*Works* 35); Gawain does not come from 'as close as Cornwall' (19) but from (Lothian and) Orkney; Geraint is a figure from Welsh Arthuriana rather than the Erec known to Malory from his French sources and is in any case and under any name not one of Malory's prominent Round Table knights as Mancoff implies (19); Merlin is not 'removed from the court' (19) but removes himself.

Traditional courtly characters are equally misprized: 'Tristram's character is not 'deformed...into a sensualist bent on earthly pleasure' (64) by Tennyson, but from his beginnings and not from 'later works...obsessed with adulterous love' (65)—always ambiguous and his adventures always ambivalent, this is the knight who participates in a blasphemous oath to protect his affair in Gottfried von Strassburg's classic early thirteenth-century version of his story and who in Malory has 'suche chere and ryches and all other plesauance that he had allmoste forsakyn La Beale Isode' (*Works* 273). Chrétien de Troyes' Guinevere does not scorn Lancelot because of his choice of the cart 'rather than walk the long miles to save her' (66–67)—for me

the most puzzling of Mancoff's misreadings—but because, a noble equestrian, he has hesitated to mount a base vehicle to effect her rescue. Nor does Lancelot carry 'Guinevere back to his sovereign's court' (67) after his first defeat of Meleagant: only after two imprisonments does he return (Guinevere and Gawain have preceded him by a long stretch of narrative) to his ultimate victory. Nor '[i]n the medieval tradition' does Lancelot '[t]ime and again[descend] into madness': (67)—his Guinevere-induced dementia is notable for depth rather than repetition, nor is his final payment for his passion a Victorian invention 'unimagined in medieval times' (70)—for who could imagine a more harrowing decline than his groveling upon Guinevere's and Arthur's graves, accompanied by anorexia and wasting away 'by a kybbet shorter than he was' until he is 'strake dede': however 'sweetest savour aboute hym,' Lancelot's Malorian end causes an understandable 'grettest dole' among his nearest and dearest (*Works* 723–724).

As mistaken as are Mancoff's readings of Malory, however, more surprising are her wrong interpretations of Tennyson's *Idylls*. Especially misleading is her version of Tennyson's Pelleas: this knight and his scornful lady, Ettarre, never 'become lovers' (60), an error Mancoff repeats by grouping him with '[o]thers' who follow Lancelot and Guinevere: 'Tristram with Isolt, Pelleas with Ettarre' (60) (Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (NY: Airmont, 1969). Pelleas, moreover, earns no mention in her fourth chapter, 'Woman Worship,' a phrase she notes 'entered the Victorian vocabulary' during 'the 1860s' as an implied 'definition of womanhood as an ideal moral existence' (72). Yet he is the only character in the *Idylls* who uses that term. Transformed by his experience with Ettarre (Tennyson omits Malory's happy ending, in which Pelleas marries The Lady of the Lake) and become the lawless Red Knight presiding over a court of 'ruffians' and 'harlot-brides,' Pelleas 'howl[s]' to Arthur, "'art thou not that eunuch-hearted King / Who fain had clipt free manhood from the world—/ The woman-worshipper?"' (*Idylls* 270–271). Pelleas, scorning 'woman worship,' meets a terrible fate: fallen, drunk, from his horse, 'leapt upon' by Arthur's knights who trample 'out his face from being known' and sink 'his head in mire' before they wipe out his followers (male and female alike) and fire their tower home (271–272), he is the last and now conquered obstacle to Arthur's safe 'ways...from shore to shore' but his end leaves the King with a heart where 'pain was lord' (272). Had Mancoff used this episode—one of the most intriguing in the poem—she could have explored the paradoxical and tragic implication of 'woman worship' in the work as a whole (see my 'What Tennyson Really Did to Malory's Women,' *Quondam et Futurus: A Journal of Arthurian Interpretations* 1 (Spring 1991): 44–55).

Other careless details abound: in Tennyson's 'Merlin and Vivien,' the ensorcelment of Merlin ends not 'beneath a rock' (94) but 'in the hollow oak' where 'he lay as dead' (*Idylls* 17). Over-generalizations emerge even in the discussion of Victorian culture: 'Victorian children' do not entirely 'appear in art and literature as angelic beings' (101), and Mancoff would have been wise to consult the photographic record *Victorian Children*, where preteen pregnant child prostitutes and homeless street urchins appear alongside the more respectably middle-class subjects. As beautiful

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and lavish as its illustrations are, the text of *The Return of King Arthur* is deeply flawed and this book must be approached with the strongest of *caveats*.

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