

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.

A respected teacher of mine once made what, at the time, seemed to me to be a fairly startling remark. Critics of literature, he said, would do well to pay more attention to art historians and their practice and less attention to philosophers and theirs. I had always been, and continue to be, somewhat dubious of the analogy drawn between poetry and painting in older literary criticism. But my teacher's remark, I soon realized, had little to do with this shopworn critical practice and its often too facile employment. Rather, it had more to do with the simple fact that it is almost always more informative, and so more productive, to regard literary works with something like the art historian's eye for style of composition and arrangement of materials than it is to regard them with the philosopher's obsession with oracular pronouncements about the Nature of Being. It is also, I soon learned, more fun. I will not soon forget the excitement I felt when I first observed, for instance, that much medieval architecture, and particularly Gothic architecture, is paratactic in composition and, by what cannot be a coincidence, so is much medieval literature. And so, my teacher's advice, about which I initially had my doubts, soon proved to be true. My experience overcame my reservations.

I am reminded of all this by the appearance of Debra N. Mancoff's new book on the Arthurian Revival that figured so prominently in the culture of the Victorian period. One of the chief virtues of this work, of course, is its collection within one cover of a great number of representative paintings, drawings, and prints from a wide variety of artists whose works were informed by the renewed interest in the Arthurian cycle and transformed by the effort to adapt the Arthurian material to their own artistic practice. It is convenient to have these works readily available for study in a volume so attractively presented as this one. Reproductions, certainly, are hardly an ideal substitute for the real thing. But, as the real thing is not often so easily encountered, the convenience of access to these works Mancoff's book affords is a virtue not to be casually dismissed. More important, however, is the occasion the book provides to appreciate the contribution a volume primarily concerned with art history can make to literary criticism. While the philosophical and ethical uses the Arthurian revivalists made of the legends and the influences they exercised on the culture of the Victorian period are well documented elsewhere, a book such as this permits readers whose primary concern is literary not only to learn something about another artistic medium about which they may know very little, but to see and to study for themselves, within one cover, the ways in which strategies of representation from this other medium both correspond to, and diverge from, those of the literary medium.

This convenience of access (an altogether too pedestrian a term for this much appreciated virtue) is precisely what creates the opportunities Mancoff's volume offers for a first hand study of the ways in which individual pictorial adaptations of Arthurian material and individual literary adaptations of Arthurian material mutually informed one another during the Victorian period. The reproduction of James Archer's 1862 engraving *How King Arthur by the Meanes of Merlin Gate His Sword Excalibur of the Lady of the Lake* (54), for instance, with its deliberately archaic title and its portrayal

of Arthur, in Mancoff's words, as a 'classical hero disguised in medieval costume' (56), very clearly embodies the Victorian effort to fuse classical and medieval tactics for the representation of Arthurian heroism with the Victorian era's own notions of courageous and manly optimism. Tennyson's formal decision to portray his own embodiment of Victorian heroism through the medium of Virgilian blank verse is of a piece with Archer's formal decision to adapt these traditional strategies for contemporary artistic purposes.

Mancoff's book offers numerous occasions to observe how these traditional strategies were used for revisionary Victorian purposes. This is not, however, the only contribution a volume of art history such as this can make to literary criticism. In her discussion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's illustration of Arthur in Avalon for Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' (136), for example, Mancoff quite rightly notes that Rossetti's work 'strays far from Tennyson's description' in its 'claustrophobic vision' of its subject (137). To anyone acquainted with Rossetti's poetry, however, and in particular the sonnets from *The House of Life*, the claustrophobia and 'erotic fervor' of his 'Arthur in Avalon' will come as no surprise. The illustration is as crowded, in its own way, as is the characteristic Rossetti sonnet. Mancoff's straightforward presentation allows us to observe the important similarities between Rossetti's artistic strategies as painter and his artistic strategies as poet. These, in turn, tell us a good deal about Rossetti's highly idiosyncratic aesthetic practice in relation to the artistic culture of its period.

It is this last that permits me to recommend Mancoff's book to a readership beyond those whose primary interest is Arthurian. In addition, it is refreshingly lucid and modest in its designs on its audience. Its commentary is descriptive without being condescending; it is informative without being intrusive; it grants its readers the compliment of allowing them to form for themselves their own responses to the various works it presents and provides them with the means and the information necessary to do so. It is gratifying, for a change, to encounter a volume that respects the intelligence of its readers in this way. Mancoff's book is a valuable addition to the body of Arthurian study and makes a worthy contribution to the understanding of important aspects of Victorian aesthetics.

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