

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.

This attractively-produced book applies the term 'Victorian' rather loosely, since many of its examples post-date Victoria's reign. It also seems to equate Tennyson's vision with that of the age. Such a popular volume may fairly shun controversy, but less bland homage to Malory's, Tennyson's and Pre-Raphaelite models might have been admitted. Even Beardsley, in this reading, is turned to favour and to prettiness.

The reader is offered a brief introduction, plus six chapters on the subject of the growth of the Arthurian legend in the Middle Ages, the nineteenth-century revival, Tennyson's re-casting of the legend, Arthurian women (especially Elaine, Enide, Guenevere and Vivien), Tennyson's Galahad and 'the construction of Victorian Childhood' (102) (a topic pursued into the twentieth-century), and *fin de siècle* responses to Arthur. The book resembles a popularisation of parts of Girouard's influential *Return to Camelot*, with more Tennyson and more gender studies and a stylistic blunder like 'wide-eyed ingenuity' (32).

The survey seems to aim at non-specialists with no French and less Latin (even '*noblesse oblige*' is translated (38), though *Chevalier de la Charrete* is not (66)), and the blurb emphasizes reactions 'today.' Professor Mancoff acknowledges some academic mentors but, unfortunately, none seems to have been a medievalist, for the summaries of Chrétien's and Malory's narratives are full of inaccuracies, distortions and romantic embroideries: Geraint is not a Malory character (19), nor Gawain a Cornishman, nor Meleagant a king (66). Guenevere flees from Mordred to the Tower of London, not a nunnery (19); and Malory does not speculate about either's interior life. Even Malory's greatest admirer might hesitate to characterize his magnificently mysterious *Morte Darthur* as 'a clearly-crafted narrative' (20), and the Vulgate title is *Mort Artu* (78). (Cf. Thomas Gray who appears as 'Grey' (22).)

Professor Mancoff's persistent habit of calling Arthur 'the Once and Future King' and her allusion to the 'mists of Avalon' anachronistically evoke (one assumes intentionally) twentieth-century novels about the legend. Nothing is said about the extent of Tennyson's or the artists' firsthand knowledge of things medieval or of the power this conferred on those mediators of Arthurianism. Such flaws vitiate the author's thesis about 'Victorian transformation' (9).

More successful is the account of Victoria's and Albert's promotions of this 'transformation' during the 1840s, as well as of nineteenth-century prescriptive literature for women which imaged middle class home life as a transaction between a knight-errant and a Lady-wife (83). The point about the influence on children of 'medieval' domestic furnishings is a good one (106); and the quotation from N. H. Mallock's 1972 spoof of Tennyson is a delightful item (135).

Professor Mancoff is Chair of the Art History Program at Beloit College in Wisconsin, and her book will appeal chiefly through its copious colour and black-and-white illustrations, beautifully photographed by Kenneth Cain. It is a useful supplement to Muriel Whitaker's *The Legends of Arthur in Art*. She seems especially enthused by the figure of Elaine, represented by an excellent range of pictures, many from private collections, like the paintings by Arthur Hughes and Edward Corbauld

REVIEWS

(80, 81). Much space is given, too, to the female illustrators Eleanor Fortiscue Brickdale and Florence Harrison (neither Victorian), as well as to Julia Margaret Cameron. However, this aspect of the book also suffers from some shortcomings, such as the inaccurate descriptions of Riviere's painting (146). The account of one of Maclise's illustrations for Moxon's 1857 edition of Tennyson's *Poems* is both questionable and inflated (53), and Mancoff neglects to compare it with her previous reproduction of Beardsley's rendering of Arthur and the Lady of the Lake (50) which also incidentally contradicts her statement that 'there is never a trace of callow youth in (Arthur's) appearance' (56). There is no reference to the current theory that Morris's 'Guenevere' actually depicts Iseult, thus detracting from its value as iconography of Arthur's queen (93). The captions are erratic in assigning pictures' dates and dimensions, an irritating feature in a work intended to trace historical developments. This also gives disproportionate emphasis to small originals, such as Moxon's (153). As Professor Mancoff herself stresses, alluding to Burne-Jones's 'huge canvas,' *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (158-160) (which is captioned 9'3" x 21'2", but described in the text as 'eleven feet and a half by twenty-one and a half feet'), size really does matter.

KAREN HODDER
University of York, England