

THELMA S. FENSTER, ed., *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, introduction by Thelma S. Fenster. Arthurian Characters and Themes, vol. 3, Norris J. Lacy, Series Editor. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996. Pp. lxxvii, 344; 10 black-and-white plates. ISBN: 0-8153-0623-7. \$35.

Thelma Fenster has gathered here a useful and interesting collection of nineteen essays focusing on women characters from Arthurian literature of many eras. The essays are mainly reprinted pieces, but four were written for this collection and two, those by Laurence Harf-Lancner and Anne Berthelot, have been newly translated from the French. The reprinted essays in the collection date from the earliest, Sue Ellen Holbrook's fine 1978 *Speculum* essay on 'Nymue, Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's *Morte Darthur*' to the excerpt from E. Jane Burns's provocative and splendid 1993 book *Bodytalk*, 'Rewriting Men's Stories: Enid's Disruptive Mouths.' To have all of this material in one place—discussing the same general topic from diverse critical perspectives—is a good thing, and Fenster notes in her lengthy introduction to the volume that Arthurian women have languished unheeded by much critical scholarship. She envisions the volume as encouraging others to contribute to the discussion. An ample and helpful 'Select Bibliography' of publications, concentrating on works after 1975, follows the introduction.

The editor has chosen her offerings wisely, arranging the collection from work on medieval Arthurian literature in various national traditions (Regina Psaki's piece on the Italian Arthurian women—a much-neglected area—is especially welcome in this context), to Spenserian treatments (Judith H. Anderson's on Argante), to nineteenth- and twentieth-century permutations of the topic. The penultimate organizational category in the volume is 'Another Look,' comprising two iconographic studies about depicting Arthurian women: Joanne Lukitsh on 'Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographic Illustrations to Alfred Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*,' and Muriel Whitaker's 'The Woman's Eye: Four Modern Arthurian Illustrators,' plus Constance W. Hassett and James Richardson's essay which complicates spectatorship and gender in Keats and Tennyson, 'Looking at Elaine: Keats, Tennyson, and the Directions of the Poetic Gaze.'

Initially I thought throwing such a wide net and including the final grouping 'Revisionary Tales: Guenevere and Morgan in the Twentieth Century,' a mistake leading to an inevitable devolution into the pop-fic, fantasy, and sci-fi genres. But the mix of obscure dramatic and prose Arthurian works coupled with T.H. White in Elisabeth Brewer's essay on 'The Figure of Guinevere in Modern Drama and Fiction' makes for an apt study of how various twentieth-century authors have interpreted this character and her sexual morality. Furthermore, the last two essays by Marilyn R. Farwell on theorizing lesbian narrative space in the pop-fic *Mists of Avalon*, and Raymond H. Thompson on Morgan le Fay in some of the recent Arthurian fantasy-narratives, do seem to carry forward and amplify the collection's unifying idea of examining the interpretation of gender and women characters in the Arthurian legends through time, although Thompson's consists in large part of plot summary of the books which encode what he terms the characteristic twentieth-century addition to the Arthurian story: a love affair between Arthur and the 'new hero' Morgan le Fay, 'a

queen truly worthy, at last, not only of the Once and Future King, but also of a new generation of women who are seizing responsibility for their own lives' (342). Something more profound along Cultural Studies lines might be said about this ephemeral material and its insistence on Morgan's importance.

The pieces by Burns, Holbrook, Sheila Fisher (on the crucial nature of the role of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), Roberta Krueger (on *Yvain* and the female reader), Anne Marie Rasmussen (on Princess Isolde/Queen Isolde and their problematic love for one another in Gottfried's *Tristan und Isolde*), Hassett and Richardson, and Geraldine Heng ('Feminine Subtext in Malory') struck me as theoretically sophisticated and revisionary in the best way about women characters and readers. Whitaker's piece, too, on four women Arthurian illustrators provides an eye-opening presentation of how each artist envisioned her subject and her relation to the author of the work she was illustrating, though more plates should have been included to add visual power to her argument. It is troubling that Lukitsh's study of Cameron's wonderful and eerie Victorian photographs of Arthurian subjects is so suggestive, but finally is not fully worked-out in the terms she sets out at the beginning of her essay. The reader wants more analysis of Cameron's artistic response to Tennyson's interpretation of the Arthurian story than this thin essay delivers.

A substantial failing of this book (and not of its editor or contributors) is the skimpiness of the format Garland has provided. Larger type-face, margins and in general a more amply-sized volume seems in order for a collection of this sort. When I opened it I was unpleasantly reminded of the compact edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but—alas—no magnifying glass was included. As a book no doubt destined to be put on library reserve and read and photocopied by graduate students (at \$35.00 one would not order this as a class text), the meagerness of its physical layout is disappointing and downright difficult to use and detracts from the vitality of its contents.

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