

norris lacy, *A Camelot Triptych*. Rochester, NY: Round Table Publications, 1997. Paper. Pp. 80. isbn: 0-9630918-2-4.\$10.

Readers will be familiar with Norris Lacy's contribution to Arthurian scholarship, but this work of fiction represents a happy combination of his creative and critical abilities, demonstrating how the two are closely allied. The three sketches contained in this work reveal not only Lacy's encyclopedic knowledge of the Arthurian tradition(s), but also his awareness of the legend's seemingly endless possibilities for renewal. *A Camelot Triptych* demonstrates that a new work of art can be made from materials that would seem to have been exhausted long ago.

The three narratives in this work activate some of the more familiar events from that heterogeneous pool known as the 'Arthurian legend,' such as Merlin's role in Arthur's conception, birth, and rise to power; the illicit love of Lancelot and Guinevere; Mordred's birth and his eventual strife with Arthur; and the fall of the Round Table. Lacy relies upon a rich store of traditions, both medieval and modern, yet he manages to make us see new light from old windows. The common threads that unite these three works into a triptych include the narrative device of a 'recorder' (Merlin, Guinevere, and Mordred relate to a scribe their versions of important events) and the emphasis on political motives in each sketch.

The first sketch, 'Merlin's Tale,' relies upon an early tradition of the sage dictating to his 'master,' Blaise, his own role in Arthur's birth, rise to power, and his imminent demise. The narrative stops short of depicting the final battle that will lead to Arthur's death, but there is a sense of impending doom (as there is at the end of E.A. Robinson's 1917 poem, *Merlin*). Here, Merlin is left contemplating who should succeed Arthur. Lacy's innovation is the motivation he provides for Merlin's actions and their subsequent effects. Merlin, a political pragmatist and/or opportunist, becomes a 'king maker' whose motives are not always above reproach. The central question of who will rule in a 'post-Arthur era' smacks of Elizabethan anxiety; Merlin's preoccupation with 'image making' is suggestive of the charlatanism of Twain's magician coupled with that of a political campaign manager (Bishop Berkeley's 'Esse est percipi'). This angle, along with Lacy's wry humor, is in large part responsible for making 'Merlin's Tale' this reviewer's favorite of the three.

'Winter's Queen' is transcribed by a sister/scribe in the convent where Guinevere seeks refuge and spends her final days after the fatal battle between Arthur and Mordred. The Queen confesses and reflects upon her previous life, and the narrator feels obliged to share it with posterity. Guinevere contemplates her marriage to and eventual estrangement from Arthur, engineered by Merlin (corroborated by the earlier tale). The condescending treatment she receives at court represents the tale's effort to cater to a distinctly modern sensibility.

'The Mordred Manuscript' employs also the device of the character relating his story to a scribe. The author is inventive here, when he employs one 'John of Carlisle' who is hired by Mordred to record his version of the story. Mordred's animosity towards Merlin exceeds that of Guinevere; he blames Merlin for Arthur's rejection of him as a son and heir. Mordred sees Merlin as a Machiavellian figure who manipulates Arthur for his own profit. Although John of Carlisle does not trust him entirely, he does record Mordred's claim that Merlin and Arthur are megalomaniacs who are preparing to launch an aggressive campaign to take over the world. Mordred thinks he must prevent this because most are unable to discern this plot; moreover, he views himself as heroic and his acts as noble: 'anyone who decides to take someone's life for political purposes is a murderer unless he gives up his own at the same time' (73). One may question (as does John) whether Mordred is self-deluded, but there is little evidence to contradict his observations regarding Merlin and his influence over Arthur.

All three tales suggest Merlin's culpability in the Arthurian tragedy, albeit not entirely from selfish motives. Indeed, Merlin does create the estrangements between Arthur and his wife and between the king and his illegitimate son. If the other characters are less than ideal (Lancelot is especially debunked) Merlin nonetheless must shoulder a great deal of the blame for the catastrophic end of Arthur's realm. Even if Mordred exaggerates when he views Merlin as a flim-flam man *a la* Twain's 'rival magician,' there is some truth to his claims. *An Arthurian Triptych* is an enjoyable read for anyone interested in the continuing Arthurian tradition.

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