

The Arthurian Tradition: The Myths and Realities of the Arthurian Legends. Multimedia CD-ROM, Films for the Humanities & Sciences, \$149.00

Not too long ago, I heard the head of a respected university press comment that there are two barriers to general acceptance of the multimedia CD-ROM. First, the CD suffers from its early reputation of having more style than substance; and second, most computer-savvy consumers expect to be able to find the same content on the World Wide Web at no cost.

The Arthurian Tradition, at a purchase price of \$149, is a case in point. Clearly, this is not intended for a widespread audience at this price, but one wonders to what pedagogic use it can profitably be put. Produced for Films for the Humanities & Sciences by Cromwell Productions, it offers shallow content in an attractive package. But the novelty of the medium will not compensate for its deficiencies of content, and the same material can be presented, with equal effectiveness and at far lower cost, with an Arthurian reader, a coffee-table book, the A&E *Ancient Mysteries* video on Camelot, and resources freely available on the World Wide Web such as the Camelot Project at the University of Rochester Library

Technically, the CD is largely a workmanlike production. The installation process was trouble-free, and the presentation begins with about thirty seconds of opening credits, followed by a 90-second video introducing the dichotomy of the historical Arthur, a post-Roman British leader, and the literary creation of the Middle Ages and beyond. The opening menu appears to offer a rich banquet of choices: influential literature; British and Continental source literature, A.D. 546–1596; analyses; gallery; legends; characters; primary texts; filmography; and Arthurian sites. Texts are attractively presented in windows with deckled edges, vellum-like backgrounds, and vaguely medieval-like typefaces, and with period music playing in the background. (Sadly, the background music can become annoying because the CD itself offers no on/off switch or volume control.)

If the background music is annoying, the content can only be described as disappointing. The information about the sources is very brief, as are most of the excerpts from most of the primary texts. Background on characters, legends, sites and other topics is also brief and is presented without references. The bibliography, a sub-link from 'Analysis,' is neither annotated nor arranged topically, and is obviously intended for a popular audience. The 'Gallery' consists of thirty-four images, mostly muddy, ranging from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century.

Some of the sections are misleading and one wonders whether an instructor would want his or her students exposed to some of this material. For example, under 'Literary/Historical Links,' theories such as the Shroud and Grail theory, the Holy Blood/Holy Grail theory, and the Sinclair theory are presented with virtually no indication of their provocative and controversial nature. Throughout the sections, the novice reader has no way of knowing whether a statement is supported by the scanty historical record, by a literary reference, or by nothing in particular. Textual content was apparently truncated to make way for more 'multimedia' content—videos and voiceovers. These offer up some startling incongruities—an excerpt from one translation of an early text, for example, is accompanied by a voiceover from yet

another translation. The constant reference to the Dark Ages carries, of course, its own intellectual baggage. One video showing how warfare was conducted in the Dark Age—all in the mist, apparently—is accompanied by excerpts from Dvorak's *Symphony From the New World*. One shudders to think of the relationship between visuals and score, unless it is intended to reinforce the Sinclair theory. The analysis section includes eight interview excerpts from a clearly pained Nikolai Tolstoy, who strives mightily to introduce some texture to a discussion in which the interviewer is patently trying to elicit sound-bites. If the developers had left out just one of their videos, there would have been room on the disk to double the text materials, but this might have strained their scholarly resources.

In evaluating the usefulness of this disk, only one question remains. Will its novelty value entice a student to further study? To answer this question, the reviewer asked a colleague's sixteen-year-old son to review the disk. His terse comment: 'It's pretty lame.' The hard-core collector of Arthuriana may want to purchase this in order to have no lacunae in his collection; otherwise, it cannot be recommended.

laura blanchard
University of Pennsylvania Library