

CONCEPTIONS OF KING ARTHUR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Raymond H. Thompson

Twentieth-century responses to the figure of King Arthur have ranged through every hue of the spectrum. To some authors he is an idealized figure, an inspiration to all who seek a nobler way of life, while to others he is an unscrupulous and brutal tyrant, spreading fear and terror among foes and followers alike; some perceive him as a man of destiny who shapes events through the force of his personality and vision, while others see only a struggling swimmer, soon swept away by the fierce tide of events beyond his control; some exalt his triumphs over rebellious Britons and invading Scots and Saxons alike; some lament the tragedy and pathos of his fate, betrayed by his wife and best friend; some rage against his follies as he squanders the chance to save his people; some laugh at the comical predicaments into which his aspirations lead him. Between these extremes just about every shade and combination of opinion may be found.

Amidst such bewildering variety, the task of discerning the major conceptions of King Arthur is a challenge. Indeed, it is easier in some ways to view the various representations of his figure as a series of points on the slope of a graph between different extremes or, to return to our original metaphor, as subtly differing shades along the entire range of the spectrum. Yet, just as to the human eye the spectrum seems to divide itself into distinct colors, so the representations of Arthur do lend themselves to certain noticeable, if at times overlapping, groupings.

Many of the works written earlier this century share, with those of the closing decades of the nineteenth century, an interest in the love triangle among Arthur-Guenevere-Lancelot. In these works Arthur may attract sympathy or criticism, but he never escapes some loss of status. He is, after all, the deceived husband, a man who has failed to satisfy his wife. However good his reasons or bad hers, he is robbed of dignity by being placed in a

situation that has been the butt of ribald jokes from time immemorial. In a patriarchal society, moreover, her defection is a sign of the waning power of an aging monarch, and it is both a cause and a symptom of the conflict of loyalties that breaks the Round Table. Without firm leadership, the unifying Arthurian vision loses its force, to be superseded by other, more personal, priorities.

At best Arthur is portrayed as noble but too trusting and naive, a man out of touch with the reality of what is going on at his court. It is thus that he emerges from Laurence Binyon's play *Arthur: A Tragedy* (1923). He even attains some tragic stature by recognizing that his own blindness and weakness have contributed to the fall of the Round Table. In John Erskine's historical novel *Galabad* (1926) and Georgez Davis's poetic drama *The Round Table* (1930), however, Arthur seems lamentably slow to recognize that his own self-deception has contributed to the downfall. John Steinbeck's novel *The Acts of King Arthur* (1977), like the many short poems celebrating the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, ends before Arthur has time to discover his betrayal. He thus remains ignorant of the passion that dominates the action in the latter part of the book.

Too often, however, it is left to others to enlighten Arthur and to explain to him how he has contributed to his own misfortune. In Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem *Merlin* (1917) Merlin emerges from seclusion to tell the king that he must place responsibilities to his realm above personal anguish over the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. The disastrous consequences of Arthur's inability to implement this advice, however, unfold in *Lancelot* (1920), Robinson's next Arthurian poem. In Clemence Housman's novel *The Life of Sir Agloval de Gatis* (1905) it is Agloval who dramatically confronts the king with his faults. Arthur and his court attain glory through the pursuit of honor rather than truth, of appearance rather than reality, and the king condemns Agloval as dishonorable because he admits his sins rather than deny them. Yet by refusing Lancelot the right to defend his own and the queen's reputation in trial by combat, Arthur is himself choosing the path of truth rather than honor. It is, however, too late. Many will not support the king "when, by the rule and custom he himself had established, himself would be not abide."¹ Moreover, pursuit of the truth will uncover other sins previously concealed by the splendor of the court's achievements, sins that include Arthur's incest and the murder of the children born on May Day. Trial by combat, on the other hand, would prove a ghastly mockery of justice, as all would recognize.

In Lord Ernest Hamilton's novel *Lancelot* (1926) Arthur fades into an anonymous figure, too easily swayed by Agravain's accusations against

Squire for King Arthur (1955) by Eugenia Stone, E.M.R. Ditmas's *Gareth of Orkney* (1956), and Catherine Parr's *Melos, King Arthur's Page* (1963), follow the various adventures and misadventures of the young people as they learn the responsible behavior that will win the noble king's approval. The fantasies, on the other hand, are more likely to place Arthur among, or at the head of, the forces fighting for good against evil, for Light against Dark. The young protagonists prove themselves by choosing to side with him despite the suffering they must undergo as a result. In Jane Curry's *The Sleepers* (1968) they help Myrddin foil a plot by Morgan le Fay and Medraut to destroy Arthur and his knights as they lie sleeping in an underground cavern; in Robert Newman's *The Testing of Tertius* (1973) they help Arthur and Merlin against Ullik, a black wizard and manifestation of the Dark Power; in Susan Cooper's *The Grey King* (1975) and *Silver on the Tree* (1977) they fight for the Light against the Dark that is rising to engulf humanity; in Pamela E. Service's *Winter of Magic's Return* (1985) and *Tomorrow's Magic* (1987) they help Merlin first to bring Arthur back from Avalon to lead Britain out of the new Dark Age of its nuclear winter, then later to fight against Morgan le Fay and her mutant hordes. Although not written exclusively for younger readers, *The Green Knight* (1975) and *The King's Damsel* (1976) by Vera Chapman also fit this pattern. Arthur is portrayed as the noble monarch whom the protagonists serve at the cost of much personal suffering.

These poems and juvenile novels allow but brief glimpses of Arthur, whose function is to represent a way of life made all the better by contrast with a most unattractive alternative, and it is the latter that is given more attention. Thus in *Merlin's Ring* (1957) by Meriol Trevor, Felix chooses to help those loyal to Arthur, recognizing that "the only real defeat is to give in to evil, to ambition and spite and greed."⁴ Arthur plays a larger role, however, in a group of science fiction and fantasy novels.

Under the tutelage of Merlin, Arthur tries to build a more civilized way of life for his people in *The Once and Future King* (1958) by T.H. White, in Andre Norton's *Merlin's Mirror* (1975), and in Stephen R. Lawhead's *Arthur* (1989). In White's novel Merlin, as an agent of some divine power only vaguely hinted at, transforms Arthur into a variety of creatures in order to teach him "that Might is only to be used for Right . . . turning a bad thing into a good";⁵ Norton's sage acts as an agent of benevolent extraterrestrial beings known as the Sky Lords, helping his protégé as he seeks to establish a kinder and more tolerant world; Lawhead's sage is one of the Fair Folk, descendants of refugees from the advanced civilization of Atlantis, and he assists Arthur's attempts to transform his realm into the Kingdom of Sum-