

## *Alfred Tennyson, William Morris and the Revival of the Arthurian Legend in the Victorian Era*

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The Middle Ages, also known as The Dark Ages, was a period when Europe succumbed to social and economic chaos, the Black Plague, and many bloody wars. In these times of turmoil, the legend of King of Arthur was created to instill hope. Though it is part of England's folklore, this legend has become universally known. It is so popular, that medieval Arthurian romances have had many modern retellings. Of these, Alan Lupack argues that "no romance has been more influential or more often adapted or reworked... than *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory."<sup>1</sup> Malory was influential especially during the Victorian Age, when major Arthurian works based on *Le Morte* were produced.

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote one of those works. He wrote, in fact, the greatest Arthurian poem of the Victorian era: *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson's Arthur, however, is very different from Malory's. The latter's was conceived through trickery. King Uther, Arthur's father, was infatuated with Igraine, the wife of the Duke Gorlois. The magician Merlin agreed to make King Uther look like the Duke so that he could sleep with her. The mage helped the king because Uther agreed to let him raise the child that the King conceived with Igraine. Malory's Arthur, moreover, unknowingly had intercourse with his

half-sister, Morgause. It was through this incestuous relationship that Mordred-Arthur's future murderer - was begotten. *Le Morte's* Arthur, finally, was not an honorable figure at first. For upon Merlin telling him that, as a divine punishment for his incestuous affair the man who would destroy him would be born on Mayday, Arthur ordered all the children born on that day killed. His plan failed, however, for Mordred was rescued.

Tennyson's Arthur, on the contrary, is the "blameless King."<sup>2</sup> He did not have an incestuous affair with his half-sister, did not cruelly order all children born on Mayday to be killed, and Mordred is the son of King Lot, not Arthur's son/ brother. "So perfect is he," Lupack contends, "that Tennyson first defies his source [*Le Morte*] by making Uther and Igraine conceive him after the death of Gorlois and then by creating an alternative story of a mystical coming of Arthur."<sup>3</sup> In this alternative story, Bleys, Merlin's master, and Merlin himself find baby Arthur at a shore:

When Uther in Tintagilpast away  
Moaning and wailing for an heir, the two  
Left the still King, and passing forth the breathe,  
Then from the castle gateway by the chasm  
Descending thro' the dismal night- a night  
In which the bounds of heaven and earth were  
lost-Beheld, so high upon the dreary deeps  
It seem'd in heaven, a ship, the shapethereof  
A dragon wing'd, and all from stem to stern  
Bright with a shining people on the decks,  
And gone as soon as seen. And then the two

Dropt to the cove, and watch'd the great seafall,  
Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,  
Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep  
And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged  
Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame:  
And down the wave and in the flame was borne  
A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,  
Who stooped and caught the babe, and cried "The  
/ King!  
Here is an heir for Uther!"<sup>4</sup>

The reader never knows for sure if this alternative story to Arthur's birth is real or not, for when Merlin is asked to confirm its veracity, he responds with a riddle:

Rain, rain, and sun! a rainbow in the sky!  
A young man will be wiser by and by;  
An old man's wit may wander ere he die.  
[...] And truth is this to me, and that to thee;  
And truth or clothed or naked let it be.<sup>5</sup>

The tale's authenticity need not concern us, though. What really matters is the question of why Tennyson decided to create this alternate birth story. It is reasonable to argue that he did it to reinforce his contention that Arthur is a savior, different from the average human. In the night of Arthur's birth, Tennyson actually seems to be describing the birth of a divine being, for it was "a night / In which the bounds of heaven and earth were lost."<sup>6</sup> Because the celestial realm seemed to be intermingling with the terrestrial, one could argue that Arthur came from the heavens. To further substantiate this argument, Tennyson asserts that the ship in which Arthur was on, not only seemed to be in heaven, but it mysteriously disappeared very quickly:

Beheld, so high upon the dreary deeps  
It seem'd in heaven, a ship, the shapethereof

A dragon wing'd, and all from stem to stern  
Bright with a shining people on the decks,  
And gone as soon as seen.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that the newborn Arthur specifically "rode to Merlin's feet" pushed slowly specifically by the sea's ninth wave further reinforces the impression that he is a Messiah-like figure. For in Christianity, the number nine, which stands for finality and judgment, is associated with Jesus.<sup>8</sup> The wave, moreover, was in flames, and Christians link fire to the Holy Ghost. In the Bible's Act 2, for example, there is a passage which describes the apostles' encounter with the Holy Ghost: "Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. / And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Act 2: 3- 4).

When Arthur reaches adulthood, Tennyson continues to portray him as a supernatural – almost angel-like – being:

An four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt  
With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall:  
And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,  
And in the second men are slaying beasts,  
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,  
And on the fourth are men with growing wings,  
And over all one statue in the mould  
Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,  
And peaked wings pointed to the Northern Star.  
And eastward fronts the statue, and the crown  
And both the wings are made of gold, and flame  
At sunrise till the people in far fields,  
Wasted so often by the heathen hordes,  
Behold it, crying, "We shall have a King."<sup>9</sup>

Tennyson idealizes Arthur "almost to the point of unreality," partly as a result of the death of his beloved



In this speech Guinevere evidently belittled herself and exalted Arthur. She finally realized that her wanting Lancelot was wrong, and that she should have loved the “highest creature.” She tried, though, to explain her illicit affair by arguing that:

I thought I could not breathe in that fine air  
That pure severity of perfect light-  
I yearn'd for warmth and colour which I found  
in Lancelot [...] <sup>17</sup>

This justification is lame. Tennyson's Guinevere does not really make a strong case for her bad behavior, for her infidelity. She is a meek figure who, in the end, becomes a nun to try to compensate for her sin.

In his poem “The Defence of Guenevere,” Victorian artist and writer, William Morris, portrays the Queen very differently (his spelling of her name differs from Tennyson's as well). In this dramatic monologue, which is also based on Malory's *Le Morte*, Guenevere is defiant, and strongly and convincingly explained the reasons for her actions to the knights who tried her for treason and are planning to put her to death. Though her eyes water at times, she is not the hysterical woman who “grovell'd with her face against the floor” in *Idylls*. Here she:

[...] stood right up, and never shrunk,  
But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!  
Whatever tears her full lips may have drunk,  
She stood, and seemed to think, and wrung  
/ her hair,  
Spoke out at last with no more trace of  
/ shame. <sup>18</sup>

In her defense, she uses well elaborated arguments. “As she describes

the birth of the passionate attraction between herself and Launcelot,” Lupack says, “and reminds Gauwaine [one of Arthur's best knights] of the fatal outcome of his own mother's passion, she links herself to Morgawse [Gauwaine's mother] as a device for evoking sympathy at the same time she suggests the disastrous results of an inability to accept human nature or to pity a wrongdoer.”<sup>19</sup> Morgawse fell in love with Lamorak, the son of the man who killed her husband (King Lot) and Gauwaine's father. When Gauwaine's brother, Agravaine, catches Lamorak and his mother in bed, he kills her. He rashly murdered his own mother because he could not control his fury, because he let it take him over. Guenevere, warns the knights that, to avert a tragedy like that of Morgawse, they should not act against her, as impulsively as Agravaine did.

Remember in what grave your mother sleeps,  
Buried in some place far down in the south,  
Men are forgetting as I speak to you;  
By her head sever'd in that awful drouth  
Of pity that drew Agravaine's fell blow,  
I pray your pity.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps Guenevere's best argument on her behalf, though, is her metaphor of the angel who presents a man with a blue colored cloth and a red one. The angel tells the man he must choose one of the cloths and warns him that one will lead him to hell and the other to heaven. Because heaven is associated with blue, the man chose the blue cloth. The angel told him, however, that he had chosen wrong. With this analogy, Lupack argues, Guenevere “shows how difficult and arbitrary life's

choices sometimes are” (158). Hence, because mistakes can easily be made by anyone, Guenevere argues it is unfair for the knights to judge her so severely.

Though Morris’ Guenevere is witty, Lupack asserts that she is also ambiguous:

There is some doubt as to what Guenevere actually believes to be true and what she says for effect. She tells Gauwaine that he lies in his accusation of her, but it is not clear what she means by this. Perhaps she means that she never intended to be treasonous, to undermine Arthur and his realm. Perhaps she is suggesting that on the night she and Launcelot were surprised in her chamber, they had not slept together. Or perhaps she is merely denying the accusation to buy time until Launcelot comes to her rescue, as she knows he will. However the ambiguity is resolved, it is clear that Morris’ Guenevere stands in sharp contrast to the grief-stricken queen who grovels at Arthur’s feet in Tennyson’s *Idylls*.<sup>21</sup>

It is not outlandish to argue, moreover, that Guenevere acted the way she did because, due to his governing obligations, Arthur neglected her immensely. “I was bought,” she contends, “by Arthur’s great name and his little love.”<sup>22</sup> This, then, is not the “blameless king” depicted in Tennyson’s *Idylls*. Arthur’s careless behavior towards the queen partly explains her adultery.

Even though they were adapted from the same source - Malory’s *Le Morte-* it is evident, then, that Tennyson’s *Idylls* and Morris’ “The Defence of Guenevere,” two of the most recognizable poems of the Victorian era, are very distinct. Both authors, though, succeeded in creating their own unique characters. Tennyson’s Arthur is a

“blameless King,” superior to any human; Morris’ Guenevere, on the contrary, is too human. She admits her flaws but does not belittle or demean herself - as Tennyson’s Guenevere does - and is a defiant woman very much ahead of her time. Tennyson and Morris, not only created these memorable literary works, but they also helped to revive the Arthurian legend for the Victorian public in a major way. For, according to Lupack, “Malory was not printed or frequently adapted between 1634 and 1816.”<sup>23</sup> Tennyson and Morris made sure, then, that Arthur was not lost in the mists of Avalon, and resurrected the once and future King.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Alan Lupack, *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, “The Holy Grail,” London: Penguin Books, 2004, Line 85.

<sup>3</sup> Lupack, *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, “The Coming of Arthur,” lines 366-385.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 402-407.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 370-371.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 402-407.

<sup>8</sup> E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1921, p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, “The Holy Grail,” lines 230-245.

<sup>10</sup> Lupack, *Guide to Arthurian Literature*, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, “Guenevere,” line 207.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, line 412

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 420- 541

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 118- 119

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 607- 652.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 612-615.

<sup>18</sup> Cecil Yang, ed. *The Pre- Raphaelites and Their Circle*, Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1975, Lines 55- 59.

<sup>19</sup> Lupack, *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> Cecil Ynag, ed, *The Pre- Raphaelites and Their Circle*, lines 153- 158.

<sup>21</sup> Lupack, *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> Cecil Yang ed, *The Pre- Raphaelites and Their Circle*, Lines 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> Lupack, *Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, p. 146.