

CARLOS A. SANZ MINGO*

University of Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom

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■ CHANGING MOTIFS IN ARTHURIAN LITERATURE: TOWARDS A NEW ROUND TABLE

INTRODUCTION

Literature serves several purposes, and one of them helps an author to manipulate people's opinions. Just a look at the quantity of books published under Franco's regime about Spanish past glories (the Empire, the conquest of America) can give us an idea of it: by looking back to the past, the readers could forget about their present problems. Novels written in the Romantic period also helped in this aim of evading the present.

The authors of Arthurian literature, past and present, have been well aware of the power that a text has. Consequently, they have used their ideas to influence people or to criticize contemporary affairs under the cover of a narration of the past. This is especially evident in the case of religion and the role of some of the characters. This paper analyses several texts from different literary periods, mainly concentrating on Bernard Cornwell's Arthurian trilogy to demonstrate this idea. The first part of this paper will concentrate on the so-called Early Arthurian Literature, following the nomenclature used by Lacy, Ashe and Mancoff (1997), the period which finishes with Malory's masterpiece. In the second section, the analysis focuses on the Modern Arthurian Literature, written after Malory.

EARLY ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

It is a well-known fact that one of the earliest mentions to the Arthurian world, but not to Arthur himself, is the diatribe wrote by Gildas in the sixth century. He was a monk, probably the son of a powerful chieftain of the Clyde area; his birth date is estimated c.500, which makes him a contemporary to a hypothetically real Arthur. As it was customary at the age, and thanks to his privileged position, he attended an illustrious school founded by St Illtud in southern Wales, in modern Llantwit Major. It is reasonable to think that his religious background had an influence on his views on contemporary affairs. In *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, he criticises five kings, whom he calls *tyrants*, a term which has caused lots of debates over its intention, since in classical Greek it meant both an aristocratic ruler (over a small area) and also

* Kontakt podaci (Email): semcsm@groupwise.cf.ac.uk

a dictator. It is very likely that when he talks of these five tyrants, he is using the first meaning, although the way he describes them does not rule out the second. Gildas says that the Isle of Britain “has kings, but they are tyrants; she has judges, but they are wicked. They often plunder and terrorize- the innocent; they defend and protect- the guilty and thieving” (White 1997: 4). He continues his condemnation with the aim of comparing the coetaneous kings to the previous generation, in which an outstanding leader, whom he calls Ambrosius Aurelianus, checked the advance of the Saxons at the battle of Mount Badon. Later writers attached this victory to Arthur.

The way he contrasts these two situations (before and after Mount Badon) is by describing the Isle of Britain, which used to be a wonderful place to live in: “But the cities of our land are not populated even now as they once were; right to the present they are deserted, in ruins and unkempt... That was why kings, public and private persons, priests and clergymen kept to their own stations.” (White (ed.) 1997: 3-4) By way of contrast, contemporary rulers are “adulterous and enemies of God” (White (ed.) 1997: 4). For this reason, God has decided to punish them after they left behind the old good Christian customs. He describes Britain as a paradise “decorated with wide plains and agreeable set hills, excellent for vigorous agriculture, and mountains especially suited to varying the pasture for animals” (Winterbottom 1978: 17). However, his contemporary Britain is “fertile of tyrants”. The British have rebelled against the good order, God, and against their fellow countrymen. Gildas’s diatribe is political, but, above all, religious: as Jeremiah with Israel, Gildas understands the afflictions of the Brits are the wage for their sins. He states that “the old saying of the prophet denouncing his people could have been aptly applied to our country: “Lawless sons, you have abandoned God, and provoked to anger the holy one of Israel. Why go on being beaten for adding to your wickedness?” (Winterbottom 1978: 25) Later authors, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, also attributed the Anglo-Saxon invasion to the sins of Brits, and this became a classical topic in medieval Arthurian literature. It is important to emphasise here that the condemnation has a clear religious nuance, but it is directed against the political rulers of the age- not against the Church as an institution.

The next step in the composition of Arthurian propaganda corresponds to Geoffrey of Monmouth, who can be considered the author of Arthur’s “biography”. Although he was probably born in Wales, his main interest was on Brittany and Breton history, something that some academics have taken as a proof of his Breton ascendancy; however, other scholars (Padel 2000) affirm that there is nothing which can prove that Monmouth was of Breton stock. Whatever the case may be, in 1151, he was anointed Bishop of St Asaph at a time when the Anglo-Norman monarchy did not consecrate Welshmen bishops in Welsh sees. He mainly addressed his *Historia Regum Britanniae* to two men: Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the illegitimate son of king Henry I, and Waleran, Count of Mellent, both of Norman stock, so it is easy to assume that he wanted to satisfy the Norman audience.

However, he also wanted to please the Church. In fact, this institution helped the Normans in their process of conquest. Geoffrey’s Arthur is crowned by Dubricius, Archbishop of Caerleon, and some of the most important Christian holidays, such as Christmas, are also explained in detail. The importance of the Church is also stressed in the necessity to atone for one’s sins and the best example of that is Queen Guinevere.

When Arthur goes to fight the Romans on the continent, she is left in charge of the country along with Mordred, who was “living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinevere, who had broken the vows of her earlier marriage” (Thorpe (ed.) 1966: 257). She has to pay a price for this sin and decides to become a nun in Caerleon “and there, in the Church of Saint Julius the Martyr, she took her vows among the nuns, promising to lead a chaste life” (Thorpe (ed.) 1996: 259). The topic developed into one of the most important and recurring themes of Medieval Arthurian Literature; Guinevere becomes a nun in the French *La mort le roi Artu*, in the English *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and *Alliterative Le Morte Arthur* as well as in Malory’s work, all texts characterised by its religious content. There are some more indications of the importance of religion in Geoffrey’s work: the anachronism of choosing a Muslim Spanish King to help Roman Emperor Lucius in his battle against Arthur, or Mordred, helped by the Saxon Chelric, who brings “eight hundred ships filled with armed pagans.” (Thorpe 1996: 258)

British medieval authors were not the only ones to take advantage of the propagandistic features of literature. French Arthurian Literature, with close connections with the British, also made use of them. The first great figure in French writing on Arthur is Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote five romances, all complete and finished under the patronage of Marie de Champagne, except for the last one, *Perceval* (c.1182), whose sponsor was Philippe, Count of Flanders. Philippe’s patronage fits in with the idea expressed by Köhler (1970) that these texts were mainly commissioned by the nobles, at a time when both nobility and royalty were at odds: by presenting a passive king (Arthur, as *roi fainéant*), the nobles laid their claim of being a more positive, socially-engaged class. Furthermore, the knights that Chrétien and his followers described fulfilled the idea of the medieval Christian champion, who served God, his king and his lady and, by extension, the whole society.

Early Arthuriana reached its peak with Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory must have read the *Lancelot*, the *Queste du Saint Grial* and *Le mort le roi Artu* from the Vulgate as well and maybe the Post-Vulgate *Merlin*. But he also made use of some native sources, mainly the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur*. All these sources shaped the text that many scholars hold as the summit of Arthuriana and also gave a final touch to some of the most common motifs: (a) the king’s birth, his marriage with Guinevere, the alliance with Merlin and the first chapters dealing with Lancelot’s life; (b) the king’s successes, the institution of the Round Table, the search for the Grail and the definitive establishment of the four most important knights of the cycle and their role on the search for the Grail; and (c) the motif of the Wheel of Fortune, even though underplayed by Malory, Arthur’s fall due to Mordred’s betrayal and Guinevere’s affair with Lancelot.

Malory attached importance to human love, but especially to knighthood. We must not forget that Malory was a soldier himself so, despite having the works of Robert de Boron, and some French romances in mind, his ideal was not only love, but also war. His being very religious, he also attached much importance to Christian perfection and, in point of fact, even though he criticises the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, he also dramatises their Christian salvation. Lancelot visits Guinevere in her nunnery and, in a touching speech, she tells him to return to France and marry, to which he replies that he will also take the vows and both die peacefully. Lupack points

out that, as a consequence, Lancelot “can, like a saint, be taken to heaven by angels”, while, at the same time, “he can also be praised by Ector as the most courageous knight, the truest lover, the most gentle man, and the sternest knight when facing a foe.” (Lupack, 2005: 144)

MODERN ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

After Malory, Arthurian literature underwent a period of decay, stressed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By contrast, the nineteenth century witnessed the renaissance of Arthuriana thanks to the work of Lord Tennyson. However, before him, another English poet and writer had composed some texts about Arthur. Thomas Love Peacock was born in 1785 and worked for 37 years in the Company of the Eastern Indies, period in which he wrote and composed two poems of Arthurian matter: “Calidore” (1816) and “The Round Table; or, King Arthur’s Feast” (1817), a parody in which Merlin tries to cheer his bored king up by convening British different kings. However, his masterpiece is the short romance called *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829), in which, through an image of the Wales of the sixth century, the author criticises his contemporary society, including the king.

Peacock’s age was that of the post Enlightenment, a period characterised for the animosity against the church. The antireligious ideas were prevalent at a time when poverty was striking the lower class in the British Isles, while the Church was still leading a luxurious life. Peacock’s text, therefore, became a pioneer in criticizing the institution. He says that the Church is only interested in getting richer, and, in an ironic commentary, he echoes the argument existing about the origin of the expression Ynys Avalon, meaning “Isle of the Apples”, and states that “the brethren of Avalon were the apples of the church” (1829: 101), while the monastery is described as “the most plump, succulent and rosy” in Britain. The abbot of Avalon himself is a plump man who drinks because his “blood runs so cold when I think of the blood-thirsty Saxons, that I take a little wine medicinally, in the hope of warming it” (1829: 104). But his satire does not end up with the criticism towards the Established Church. The trenchant parallels run further; when he condemns the contemporary political system, he does it through six-century Wales:

The science of political economy was sleeping in the womb of time. The advantage of growing rich by getting into debt and paying interest was altogether unknown (...) They had no steam engines, with fires as eternal as those of the nether-world, wherein the squalid, many, from infancy to age, might be turned into component portions of machinery for the benefit of the purple-faced few. They could neither poison the air with gas, nor the waters with its dregs: in short, they made their money of metal, and breathed pure air, and drank pure water, like unscientific barbarians. (Peacock 1829: 47-8)

This criticism continues some lines below, this time addressed at the prevailing class: “Still they went to work politically much as we do. The powerful took all they could

from their subjects and neighbours; and called something or other sacred or glorious when they wanted people to fight for them." (Peacock 1829: 48) He even allegorically identified "Seithenyn's rotten damn with the English constitution." (Lacy 1996: 354) Even though Peacock's work was overshadowed by Lord Tennyson's, his views on religion, his criticism of the present through the past, and his irony make of him a more modern author than the Poet Laureate.

Although modern Arthuriana still follows many of the patterns laid out in the Middle Ages, there are also some interesting changes. Arthur, modelled upon the Norman kingship by Geoffrey and upon King Henry V by Malory, is a warm sympathetic character in modern texts. He is not presented as an overall sovereign, who embarks on wars against Rome. Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Lantern Bearers* (1959) shows a human Arthur: "That was always the way with young Artos; a horse or a hound or a man in pain or trouble, and Artos seemed to feel the ache of it in his own belly." (2000: 161)

One of the most interesting modern views on Arthur and Arthuriana is the trilogy written by Bernard Cornwell with the title *The Warlord Chronicles*, formed with *The Winter King* (1996), *Enemy of God* (1997) and *Excalibur* (1988). Arthur is again a sympathetic character who, expressed in a modern way, wants the state of welfare for his people. He is lord (not king) over Dumnonia, whose laws he revises; he also helps to improve the crops, and reinforces the security of the kingdom. He is not the powerful king of medieval texts and by no means wants to be one. Unlike the Arthur of Wace and Layamon, whose wounds in battle would be enough to kill any other man, Cornwell's Arthur suffers from a severe cold which prevents him from attending the funeral of a close friend and ally, King Tewdric of Gwent.

We cannot ignore that the authors of modern Arthuriana still have an agenda, but it is not religious. Indeed, it can be considered antireligious, or, more precisely, anti-extremist. The trilogy spins around four religious creeds (Christianity, the cults of Mithras and Isis and the native British Pagan religion) which will provoke the final upheaval. The most displeasing characters of the trilogy are consequently placed at one end of the religious extremism. An example will suffice to understand Cornwell's message: only five Christian characters are positively described. Of those five, three of them also worship other gods, and only two can be considered "truly Christian". The rest of them are negatively described, with the main emphasis on Bishop Sansum and King Meurig, King Tewdric's son. Christians are criticised for their ambition, eagerness, and zeal to become richer and more powerful, something in common with Peacock's points of view. The best example of this is Sansum, who becomes one of the most influential members of the Council of Dumnonia, Arthur's kingdom, after his marriage to Morgan. The key point here is that Sansum is clearly homosexual, so this is not a marriage for love, but for power. Indeed, "neither sought the pleasure of each other's flesh" (Cornwell 1998: 378). Sansum is unscrupulous and he has no doubts to change sides, even with non-Christian kings, in order to do well in politics. It is interesting that, unlike the religiously monolithic texts of the Middle Ages, modern literature is a kaleidoscope of beliefs. This can be attributed to two main influences: the secularisation of Western society, as hinted at by Thompson (2002: 101-104), and the new light shed on the Dark Ages by modern research, firstly pioneered by Morris (1973), who stated that

conversion to Christianity did not mean that the convert ceased to be a pagan. As among many modern peoples, the same mind could accommodate several different religions at the same time; the Church Fathers might proclaim that “the same mouth cannot praise Christ and Jupiter”, but the poet Ausonius, consul and prefect, gave them the lie by composing hymns to Christ and also to Jupiter; and for centuries church councils found it necessary to disapprove of families who attended mass on Sunday morning, and sacrificed to their household gods on Sunday afternoon. (Morris 1998: 27)

Other contemporary historians, like de la Bédoyère (2006), confirm that many believers did not fully understand the exclusivity in Christian worship, as opposed to other beliefs, and the “fact was ignored by some who happily added Christ to their list of favoured deities.” (de la Bédoyère 2006: 230)

The native British pagan religion is not so severely attacked, except for one of its followers, druidess Nimue. Her aim is to damage Christian religion, which is gaining ground in Britain. Firstly, she uses the same speech that Gildas used in his diatribe against the kings of his age, but turning it upside down and concluding by saying that the British “will be abandoned by the Gods and left to the brutes. And those fools in there (...) will ruin that chance unless we fight them. And there are so many of them and so few of us” (Cornwell 1996: 57). Secondly, she puts words into action and tries to restore the old gods back to the British Isles in a bloody ceremony in which she kills Prince Gawain and is about to kill Arthur’s son. Merlin refuses to perform the sacrifice and, accordingly, she will kill him later in the trilogy. Human sacrifices have not been performed in the Celtic society for hundreds of years, with the exception of two possible sacrifices in the second century in the British Isles, but some scholars think that this is more probably the case of a ritual murder or a thanksgiving offer to the gods after a battle (Green 2005). However, Cornwell makes an anachronistic use of human sacrifice (not only of Gawain or Merlin, but also of a Saxon prisoner called Wlenca, whose death is interpreted by Morgan as an omen for Mordred’s reign) to condemn the unnecessary deaths of innocents in the name of different faiths.

The end of *The Warlord Chronicles* clearly exemplifies the two points we have just stated. It begins the way any aficionado of Arthuriana knows: the fated Battle of Camlann, in which Arthur kills Mordred and the latter wounds his father mortally (in the trilogy, his uncle). However, there is an interesting twist: the Christians, led by Sansum and king Meurig, are hidden while the battle is going on, letting the parties do away with each other. When Arthur is taken on the barge which leads him to Avalon, the Christians get into the battlefield and overpower Mordred’s and Arthur’s remaining men. At the same time, Nimue, who goes to the battlefield in order to recover Excalibur, sees how the sword sinks forever in the sea, symbolizing the final triumph of Christianity, led by two destructive and despicable characters, in a hopeless battle which none of the parties was supposed to win, only Christianity with beguiling tactics. Cornwell’s personal experience with fanaticism in religion is in the background of the trilogy. Shortly after being born, he was adopted by a family who belonged to a sect called *Peculiar People*, nowadays extinct. The followers of this sect took Puritan ideas to extremes. Therefore, Cornwell grew up attracted by all that the sect forbade. It was

maybe all these prohibitions which induced him to study and complete a degree in Theology, which ultimately helped him to extricate himself from the sect. Besides, as Thompson has explained, religious zeal, which is the core of Cornwell's text and of many other modern novels, "seeks to subject people to the will of someone else, and it continues tearing apart communities throughout the world." (Thompson 2002: 102)

There is more about the way in which Cornwell has reshaped some of the most common motifs in his trilogy, such as the importance of the feminine characters, very actively engaged in the plot, if compared to the passive women who populated Middle Ages Arthuriana. More interesting is the fact that the four most important female characters are linked to the different religions in the trilogy. The most fascinating change is that of Morgan, who begins as a druidess and later becomes a staunch defender of the Christian faith, foretelling the final triumph of the belief. It must be highlighted that, in sharp contrast to their medieval counterparts, these central feminine characters are the active engine for the story to develop.

To conclude, we can say that religion has been one of the most important factors in the growth of Arthurian literature and probably its more outstanding propaganda exercise. From the first texts, deeply religious because of the author's upbringing, or the historical period, dominated by the Crusades, religion projects over, and entangles with politics. Arthur is a Christian and his acts are performed according to the Church, while other characters, such as Morgan, are condemned because of their devilish acts. Modern Arthurian literature takes on religion, but in order to point at its main shortcomings, the ambition of the Churchmen and their zeal. The latest texts, such as Cornwell's trilogy, focus on the extremism of the different faiths and all the useless wars for stupid reasons. There are also some other changes: in a society in which women have a more specific importance, Morgan and their female friends become the centre of the Arthurian world. Bearing all this in mind, there are reasons to think that Arthuriana will continue changing and adapting to times, fascinating the once and future audiences.

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SUMMARY

CHANGING MOTIFS IN ARTHURIAN LITERATURE: TOWARDS A NEW ROUND TABLE

The latest Arthurian Literature is changing the ideas we had about its characters, motifs and main important adventures and chapters.

Old topics and characters, long-forgotten since the medieval tradition, are back in the Arthurian universe. More important, there is a new view on religion, contemptuous at times, a different reshaping of characters, and a new perspective of what we could consider Arthurian minorities.

This article analyses some of these changes as represented in some of the most representative texts in modern Arthuriana and studies them from a historical, cultural and comparative perspective.

KEYWORDS: Early Arthurian literature, modern Arthurian literature, religion, propaganda, Bernard Cornwell.