

Arthur in Victorian Poetry

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The Arthurian revival in Victorian Britain, part of a broader interest in medievalism, was both a literary and a cultural phenomenon. Arthurian themes were appropriated and reinvented in the areas of the visual arts, socio-political commentary, interior decoration, and war memorials, for example. In a literary context, a diverse group of writers resurrected King Arthur: besides key poetic works by Alfred Tennyson, William Morris, Matthew Arnold, and Algernon Swinburne, texts include the novelist and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton's eclectic epic poem *King Arthur* (1848); Dinah Mulock's (later Mrs Craik) imaginative *Avillion and Other Tales* (1853); the Reverend Robert Hawker's idiosyncratic *The Quest of the Sangraal* (1864); and Sebastian Evans' (journalist, politician, artist) Arthurian poems published under the title *In the Studio: A Decade of Poems* (1875).

Arthurian subject matter (the matter of Britain) was utilized across genres, although far more Arthurian poetry than Arthurian prose fiction was produced. This was partly due to the subject's association with the tradition of writing epic poems; the literary establishment sought to express nationalist sentiment in epic form, which was deemed more appropriate than the newer form of the novel. A constant stream of minor allusions to Arthurian legend in poetry, drama, and prose fiction is evident from 1800, but in the 1830s significant reworkings, such as Tennyson's first Arthurian poems *The Epic: Morte d'Arthur* and *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere: A Fragment*, appeared. By the early 1830s, then, the legends had achieved a "widespread currency" (Simpson 1990: 221). The 1880s were also a significant decade in the history of Arthurian literature as it witnessed the publication of Tennyson's *Poetical Works* (1886) in which the monumental *Idylls of the King* found its final form, besides Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), which counterbalanced Tennyson's moral Arthurianism.

Modern critical analysis has focused on Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the Pre-Raphaelite group of artists and poets, although discussion of a wider range of Arthurian poetry in the context of Victorian cultural concerns is evident in Roger Simpson's *Camelot Regained* (1990) and Inga Bryden's *Reinventing King Arthur* (2005). Nineteenth-century British and American Arthurian literature is discussed in Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer's *The Return of King Arthur* (1983). Additionally, Victorian Arthurian literature is referred to in studies of Arthur in Victorian art (Mancoff 1995; Poulson 1999) or in chapters in edited books (Baswell & Sharpe 1988; Lagorio & Day 1990; Cronin et al. 2002).

Although Arthur had fallen "out of literary fashion" (Curry 1990: 149) in the first half of the

eighteenth century (see chapters 23 and 24), and attempts by the poets John Milton and John Dryden to write an Arthurian epic had not come to fruition, the desire to glorify the nation in epic form remained. The nineteenth-century British cultural fascination with Arthur has its roots in a late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary and antiquarian context. Moreover, medieval Arthurian literature was reinvented as part of a new historicism, which acknowledged that history was to an extent fictional; consequently, Arthurian material need not be rejected out of hand as fantastical. Thomas Gray, in his poem “The Bard” (1757), highlights the notion that “Britannia’s Issue” refers to a literary tradition, as well as a dynasty: “No more our long-lost Arthur we bewail / All hail, ye genuine Kings, Britannia’s Issue, hail!” (Weinbrot 1993: 14).

Notable contributions to the revival and spread of interest in Arthur included Walter Scott’s edition of *Sir Tristrem* (1804), Joseph Ritson’s *Ancient Engleish Metrical Romanceës* (1802), George Ellis’s *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (1805), and John Dunlop’s *History of Fiction* (1814). During the 1840s, Ellis’s modernized Arthurian tales were available in a reasonably priced edition, together with a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1138). The most popular version of the legends was Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (1485), with its overarching theme of the knightly ideal – a group of cheap editions published in 1816 and 1817 helped create a wider readership. Ballad sheets and chapbooks in popular culture also featured Arthur, linking the Arthurian romances with childhood nostalgia. The latter aspect was a factor in William Wordsworth’s casting aside of the legend of Arthur, mentioned as a possible theme for *The Prelude* (1850). Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), which included six Arthurian ballads, and Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774–81) revalorized the Arthurian legends as historical artifacts: stories which encompassed both the chronicle tradition and the imagined world of Fairy Land allegory. Nineteenth-century British culture’s interest in fairies and in a “mythopoeic, poetic, pre-rational stage of human culture” (Simpson 1990: 154) was itself a form of nationalism.

The Arthurian past was also one among a whole array of pasts that the Victorians reinvented, and the critical literature on Victorian historicism is extensive. Indeed, the issue of Arthur’s paradoxical status as a historical and mythical figure was at the core of historiography’s growth as a discipline. How were Victorian poets to lay claim to him? In *The Epic: Morte d’Arthur* (1842), Tennyson has the poet Everard Hall ask, “Why take the style of those heroic times ... why should any man / Remodel models?” (Ricks 1987: 147). Similarly, nineteenth-century historians wondered how to appropriate the legendary king, with the “doubtful” lineage referred to in Tennyson’s idyll “The Last Tournament” (Ricks 1987: 939), into a suitable history for an industrializing nation. Tennyson’s epic cycle *Idylls of the King* draws attention to the difficulties of accounting for Arthur’s existence in linear terms, since Merlin stresses that Arthur goes “From the great deep to the great deep” (Ricks 1987: 690). The mysterious nature of Arthur’s coming and passing – “he will not die / But pass, again to come” (Ricks 1987: 690) – is articulated in many nineteenth-century Arthurian literary texts as a play of form, or shape-shifting, exemplified in Tennyson’s city of Camelot: “it is enchanted, son / For there is

nothing in it as it seems / Saving the King; tho' some there be that hold / The King a shadow, and the city real" (Ricks 1987: 701).

Yet in spite of this, Arthur was viewed as having direct social relevance for contemporary Britain. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is both an epic cycle and a domestic social narrative, in its form and content stressing the interrelatedness of the "condition of England" (symbolized in its landscape and built environment) and Arthur's domestic situation. Englishness, and relatedly the nature of Britishness, continues to be a live cultural issue. One of the most powerful myths of the origin of English national identity is Anglo-Saxonism, also known as Teutonism or Gothicism. The figure of Arthur (Christian Worthy, Once and Future King) came to embody manliness, honor, heroic leadership, and liberty – characteristics of Teutonism. Nineteenth-century Arthurians refashioned the Caucasian Arthur as a social model for the young knights of the nation and a Darwinian type of "modern gentleman," specifically referred to in Tennyson's *The Epic: Morte d'Arthur*.

However, as Stephanie Barczewski has pointed out, in the second half of the nineteenth century writers grappled with reconciling Arthur's role as a national hero with both a contemporary pride in Anglo-Saxonism and a tradition of anti-Celtic feeling. The pre-eminent response was to promote the idea of racial unity between Celts and Saxons (Barczewski 1997: 193) and this is evident in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's twelve-book poem *King Arthur* (1848), the first published Victorian Arthurian epic. The poem eschews the traditional matter of the Arthurian cycle and, although the narrative structure seems unwieldy in places, its overall effect is to produce a montage of cultures, races, and dynasties. Arthur defends the Cymrians against the Saxons, although Bulwer-Lytton sees the groups subsumed under the banner of the chivalric, patriotic "northernness" of the romance tradition. As befitting the hero of a literary epic, Arthur completes a series of tasks and is eventually victorious at the Siege of Carduel. The resulting dynasty and empire prophesied by Merlin can be read as an allegory of the creation of Queen Victoria's empire, albeit a sanitized version. Arthur will:

... live from age to age,
A thought of beauty and a type of fame; –
Not the faint memory of some mouldering page,
But by the hearths of men a household name:
Theme to all song, and marvel to all youth –
Beloved as Fable, yet believed as Truth.

(Bulwer-Lytton 1853: 2.37)

The popular radical causes at the heart of the "condition of England" debate are alluded to: the people appear, according to Simpson, as "the gloomy, pauperised, and famished creatures of the hungry 1840s" (Simpson 1990: 48). Crucially, Bulwer-Lytton suggests "racial unity as a solution to social disunity" (Bryden 2005: 37), echoing Thomas Carlyle in his 1843 essay *Past and Present*. Arthur (and the reader) learns from the different races and social models he encounters on his journey. Indeed, the evolutionary model is privileged in various ways in

Bulwer-Lytton's *King Arthur*: the origins of the physical world pepper the fictional landscape in the form of "lurid skeletons of vanished races" and "earliest reptile spectra" (Bulwer-Lytton 1853: 3.12), the British state is represented as a procession of monarchs, and Bulwer-Lytton self-consciously places his poem in the epic tradition, referring in the preface to Milton's unfulfilled plan for an Arthurian epic poem.

Bulwer-Lytton reinvents a mythical past to validate the present, simultaneously critiquing contemporary politics via an allegorical subplot. The Vandal court is Louis Philippe's and selected Cymric knights represent British parliamentary figures of the 1830s: Geraint is the Duke of Wellington and Cadwr (Cornwall's chief) is Hardinge of Lahore, a Waterloo veteran. Earlier Arthurian poems had anticipated *King Arthur's* invoking of a procession of monarchs and intertwining of military and literary triumphs as part of a myth of national origin. Whereas John Walker Ord's *England: A Historical Poem* (1834–5) had lamented the decline of the English (an expression of Tory regret at the 1832 Reform Bill and the influence of radical politics), Bulwer-Lytton's *King Arthur* celebrates the nation's progress and an emerging ideology of symbolic monarchy. Unsurprisingly, Tennyson, as poet laureate, modeled Prince Albert as Arthur: "Ideal manhood closed in real man" (Ricks 1987: 974).

In Bulwer-Lytton's epic Arthur undertakes a form of secular quest. Characteristically, Victorian poets interpreted the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail as destructive of the Round Table, and therefore of the moral and social values underpinning it. Contrastingly, the Grail itself came to symbolize unity, the implication being that achieving the "Grail" would restore faith and social cohesion to Britain. Social unity formed the ideological basis of medievalism, at least, the feudalistic branch of medievalism, according to Alice Chandler (1971). As Christine Poulson (1999) has observed, in the 1830s readers were likely to view the Grail as otherworldly. The popularization of the legend was to a large degree due to Tennyson's portrayal of Galahad as a type of moral virtue in the 1842 collection of poems (Simpson 1990: 225). The 1869 "Holy Grail" idyll further secularizes the quest, subduing the miraculous aspect of the Grail.

The figure of the Christian Arthur was appropriated by writers in the context of social and religious debate about how an ancient, now-fragmented faith might be modernized, reinvigorated, and made whole. Henry Alford's (later Dean of Canterbury) poem *The Ballad of Glastonbury* (1835) is framed by an account of the magnificent past and ruinous present state of Glastonbury Abbey. Arthur's funeral procession is one in a series of significant events in Glastonbury's history, and his burial at Glastonbury (identified as Avalon) is topographically linked with the arrival of Joseph of Arimathea and the founding of the Anglican Church. The placing of Arthur in the context of an evolutionary history, as with Bulwer-Lytton's poem, is characteristic of 1830s and 1840s Arthurian literature. The "fast perishing" towers of Glastonbury Abbey in *The Ballad of Glastonbury* seem to enact what Alford believes to be the state of modern religious faith. Appropriating Arthurian legend allows the poet to entreat "England's sons" to revive the faith of the nation specifically by restoring the ruined towers of her ancient monuments.

The quest proved a useful narrative structuring device, particularly for poets in the 1850s

who focused on the story of Lancelot and Guinevere and explored the tensions between religious devotion and secular passion. Moreover, the quest represented an individual's journey of self-discovery and, as such, could articulate the anxieties surrounding class, social status, and heroism within a secular culture. For example, Galahad, the hero of William Morris's monologue *Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery* (1858), questions the social worth of the Grail quest, while chivalric love is viewed as a distraction contributing to its failure. Galahad and the Grail legend were also the most popular Arthurian subjects in visual art of the 1850s.

Contrastingly, the Reverend Robert Stephen Hawker's unfinished poem *The Quest of the Sangraal* (1864) can be viewed as belonging to the broader socio-cultural mission to revive religious fervor, in tandem with national identity. The eclectic symbolism of the poem is striking, as are the references to muscular Christianity: King Arthur and the four knight-questers are "soldiers of the cross" and implicitly, at a time of colonial expansion, missionaries. Unusually among Victorian Arthurian poets, Hawker sees the quest as glorifying the Arthurian state (compare Thomas Westwood's blank verse *The Quest of the Sancgreall* [1868], which depicts social fragmentation as a result of the quest for spiritual cohesion) and the Grail is identified specifically with a Cornish regional identity. The "warning to the nation" takes the form, as in other Arthurian poems, of a succession of visions, showing the restoration and subsequent loss of the Grail. Yet according to Hawker, the visions also invoked contemporary "myths" of gas, steam, and the electric telegraph.

The figuring of Arthur as a savior-hero in Victorian Arthurian poetry can be read in relation to Thomas Carlyle's notion of heroism as expressed in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) and the broader cult of hero-worship. Arthur was peculiarly adaptable as a hero and, importantly, took his place among other medieval heroes as a progenitor of national character and a focus of patriotic attention (Barczewski 1997: 179). As Simpson comments, "paradoxically, as belief in the historical Arthur waned, it became increasingly possible to predict metaphorically an Arthurian Second Coming" (1990: 52). The legendary king provided appropriate patterns of social behavior for men to follow in everyday life. In a sense the return of Arthur to Victorian Britain, as a modern gentleman, had already occurred – in epic literary tradition. This is the conundrum of Tennyson's poem *The Epic: Morte d'Arthur*, in which the poet Everard Hall (who has destroyed nearly all of his epic *King Arthur*) questions the contemporary relevance of Arthur and epic poetry. Tennyson answers this question in the Dedication (1862) of *Idylls of the King* to Prince Albert and the Epilogue "To the Queen" (1873), drawing attention to his own meshing of the old and new in a reworked tale.

Malory's Knights of the Round Table were popular role models for young readers in an industrial society since "they combined distinctiveness of class and an ideal of public service with ... protectiveness towards women, and loyalty to a monarch" (Whitaker 1990: 265). Poems such as Andrew Lang's ballad-like *Sir Launcelot* (1863) and Thomas Westwood's blank verse *The Sword of Kingship: A Legend of the "Mort d'Arthure"* (1868) display the influence of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Lang uses archaic language in recounting Launcelot's

quest for the Grail. Interestingly, the narrative moment when the knight is excluded from the Grail chapel, left in a desolate, darkened landscape, is visually represented later in the century in Edward Burne-Jones's painting *The Dream of Sir Lancelot at the Chapel of the Holy Grail* (1896). In Westwood's text the legend of Arthur is woven with the legend of the Nativity, Westwood adopting the parallel between Arthur and Christ.

Rather than reconstruct a medievalized past, other poems wove Arthurian legend and heroism with political concerns, notably in the 1830s and 1840s. The Duke of Wellington (Arthur Wellesley) was linked with King Arthur; for example, the second volume of John Walker Ord's *England: A Historical Poem* (1834–5) is dedicated to Wellington, whose military and manly deeds have shaped “the chivalry of modern times.” In George Darley's “Merlin's Last Prophecy” (1838) Victoria is initiated into her new role as queen. Lang's poem “The White Pacha” (1892) connects the mystery surrounding Arthur's death and burial with the uncertainties about the details of General Charles Gordon's death. After Waterloo, military heroism was often associated with sport; from the 1850s, it was a component of the depiction of Christian heroism. In Arthurian literature particularly, the chivalric gentleman was seen to be so by dint of social and public achievements (Girouard 1981). The chivalric ethos was, however, critiqued by Tennyson among others: in “Gareth and Lynette” it is implied that the knightly vows Arthur insists on are too binding, “as is a shame / A man should not be bound by, yet the which / No man can keep” (Ricks 1987: 701).

Nostalgia for a romanticized, chivalric past is, arguably, the dominant preoccupation of Arthurian literature and art produced from the 1850s onwards, epitomized in the knights and damsels of Pre-Raphaelite texts. The term “Pre-Raphaelite” derived from visual art, but was “adopted and modified” to apply to literature (Smith 1995: 117). Poets such as “Owen Meredith” (Robert Lytton, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's son), William Morris, Matthew Arnold, and Algernon Swinburne focused on the domestic ideologies underpinning Arthur's kingdom, exploring the tensions between state-legitimated marriage and romantic love, between purity and adultery. Their poetry addressed the contemporary ideals and dilemmas of “modern love,” also articulated in George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) and the poetry of Coventry Patmore, most notably *The Angel in the House* (1854–6). These texts share features such as a focus on individual characters, particular dramatic moments and moral situations, pictorial settings, color-symbolism, and experimental narrative techniques, all characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite Arthurian texts.

In this context, how to deal with Arthurian women proved tricky; Guinevere and Iseult embodied moral ambiguity and a wider cultural unease, entangled in debate about the social function of modern courtly love and attitudes toward the regulation of female sexuality. Marion Wynne-Davies points out that whereas Walter Scott could, in *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), have Guinevere condone adultery, “a female writer such as [Charlotte] Guest was constrained to omit all sexual references even from a translation” (Wynne-Davies 1996: 117–18). Mark Girouard draws attention to the fact that “the only women on pedestals in the *Idylls of the King* are there as warnings, not for admiration, and they do not stay on them” (Girouard 1981: 199). The passion between Lancelot and Guinevere, as opposed to the impossible ideal of Arthur's

purity, is central to the tragedy of Tennyson's *Idylls*. That said, the queen is not always blamed in Arthurian poetry for the collapse of Arthur's empire: in George Simcox's "The Farewell of Ganore" (1869), the social context is held to be responsible.

In Owen Meredith's "Queen Guenevere" (1855), the queen is transformed into an idol of religious and courtly love through the eyes of the unnamed narrator. In "The Parting of Launcelot and Guenevere: A Fragment" it is Launcelot who worships the queen, in spite of doubts about love's "changing hue," and as the lovers embrace, a narrative voice interjects to distance and freeze the moment. The lovers, described with an intensity of detail and color, are rendered art objects, suspended beyond time. Such an ending is characteristic of Arthurian poetry focusing on the lovers; an endorsement of romantic discourse and a "love which knows no bounds." Just as Meredith's Launcelot and Guenevere find reconciliation in a final embrace, Swinburne's Tristram and Iseult, at the end of *Tristram of Lyonesse*, find a peace beyond death.

As with Meredith's Guenevere, the namesake of William Morris's poem "The Defence of Guenevere" (1858) is eroticized and, to a degree, depicted in isolation from society – the reinvention of Arthurian legend in this way allows the protagonists' psychological tensions to be exposed as memories or projected onto external surroundings. Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* (1858) was the first volume of poetry to be associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Armstrong 1993: 232). Indeed, four of the poems were inspired by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's watercolors of Arthurian subjects, in keeping with the themed pairs of poems and paintings produced by the Pre-Raphaelites (Pearce 1991). The title poem is distinctive among the Victorian Arthurian corpus in that Morris refuses to judge Launcelot and Guenevere and because the queen verbalizes her own "defense" against the charge of adultery. The sensuous, physical description of Guenevere, though, seems to undermine the text's assertion of her as a religious icon to be worshipped. Morris's Arthurian poem "King Arthur's Tomb" weaves the story of Guenevere and Launcelot with King Arthur's life and death, building multifaceted character portraits through use of characters' memories and conversations. The dramatic moment of the meeting between the former lovers, at King Arthur's tomb, is prefigured in Rossetti's watercolor *Arthur's Tomb: The Last Meeting of Launcelot and Guinevere* (1855). Ultimately, Morris's Arthurian poems are concerned with the impossibility of imagining the past, their radical aesthetics presenting a challenge to the conservative view of Arthur as a pillar of the establishment (Armstrong 1993: 232, 236).

Like Morris and Tennyson, the poet Matthew Arnold uses Arthurian legend as a means of comparing past with present and relating poetic technique to industrial society. The role of the imaginative artist in the context of "the dislocation between past and present that cultural medievalism was premised upon and sought to repair" (Bryden 2005: 108) is thus reassessed. Arnold's three-part poem "Tristram and Iseult" (1852) explores this relation through experimental narrative techniques such as flashbacks. In part one, for instance, the dying Tristram is nursed by his wife, Iseult of Brittany, but recalls his past with Iseult of Ireland. The introduction of Iseult of Brittany as wife and mother also contributed to the domestication of Arthurian legend. Significantly, the dying lovers Tristram and Iseult of Ireland are transformed

in part two of the poem: distanced and framed by the narrator's comments, they become the matter of art yet simultaneously represent the illusion of fully restoring the past in the present. Cleverly, Arnold then has the widowed Iseult of Brittany tell her children the story of Merlin and Vivian (which she heard as a child): oral and literary traditions are validated. Such endorsement allows the narrator-poet to observe that creativity, or the people's spirit, is being destroyed by industrialization.

As an antidote to Arnold and Tennyson's tempering of romantic passion and legitimating of an Arthurian moral system, Swinburne's nine-section poem *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882) revels in the transformation of Tristram and Iseult when they drink the love potion. The innocent lovers are free from society's blame in a celebration of adulterous passion; thus Swinburne's form of medievalism was theologically and socially subversive. In the epilogue to Swinburne's "species of epic" (Harrison 1988: 99), King Mark builds a chapel to house the lovers' tomb, but this, and memory of it, is eventually wiped out by the sea. Paradoxically, at the point when Arthurian legend "disappears" it is immortalized in poetry; Swinburne's poem becomes a memorial to the lovers. The poet seems to be suggesting that by submitting to love as a universal force, lovers such as Tristram and Iseult will gain immortality "through the resurrection of their story by future generations" (Lambdin & Lambdin 2000: 132).

The death and memorialization of Arthur was one of the most popular aspects of the legend in Victorian Britain, unsurprisingly perhaps, given the social concern about provision of public burial sites and the visibility of rituals surrounding death; the cult of commemoration. The legend of Arthur's Second Coming was also pertinent in the context of theological debate about the nature of immortality. Indeed, the story "Avillion, or, The Happy Isles: A Fireside Fancy," published in the popular collection by Dinah Mulock, *Avillion and Other Tales* (1853), reworks Arthurian legend partly as an attempt to understand what form life after death might take.

The dominant perception of Arthur's death, which was informed by literary, topographical, and archaeological traditions, had a contradiction at its heart. This tension is best represented in Tennyson's description of Avalon:

"But now farewell. I am going a long way
With these thou seest – if indeed I go –
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)
To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound."

(Ricks 1987: 163)

The “island-valley of Avilion” where Arthur will go to be “healed” is both specific (rooted in an identifiable, English landscape) and non-specific (static, otherworldly), drawing attention to the uncertainty surrounding Arthur’s death coupled with the desire for him to return at a time of need. Thomas Warton had earlier, in “The Grave of King Arthur” (1777), distinguished between the historico-chronicle tradition, which focused on Christian Glastonbury as the site of Arthur’s burial, and the romance tradition, which favored the notion of the grave as an “otherworldly” island, the latter highlighted in Edward Burne-Jones’s monumental, unfinished painting *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (1881–98). Tennyson’s *Morte d’Arthur*, from which the dying Arthur’s speech is taken, was written after the death of the poet’s close friend, Arthur Hallam, and later incorporated in the last idyll, “The Passing of Arthur” (1869). It highlights the extent to which *Idylls of the King* – and myth itself – is about cycles of change.

In Victorian Britain, quests to identify Avalon – for example, trips to “Arthurian” relics and burial sites undertaken by county historians, travel writers, and antiquarians – were reflected in topographical attitudes toward Arthur’s death expressed in written texts. The indices to the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* (1875), the *Archaeological Journal* (1878), and the *Archaeologia* (1889) are evidence of the process of excavating Arthur: they include summaries of visits Victorians made to Arthurian sites in Britain as possible locations of Arthur’s grave, as well as inventories and accounts of the objects found there. Early nineteenth-century travel writers and poets used Arthurian references to color their descriptions of local monuments, features, and landscapes: Celtic regions in particular were defined by Arthurian legend. Indeed, faith in the power of the imagination meant that, even though the existence of a historical Arthur was uncertain, he was invoked as a symbol of poetic imagination “which can, through association with certain scenery or buildings, establish a connection with the past, and then re-create that past anew” (Simpson 1990: 72). The link between the subject of Arthur’s death and a cultural interest in travel and place is evident in Coventry Patmore’s “Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table,” published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* (May 1846), which combines a critique of Malory’s *Morte Darthur* with a topographical approach.

With regard to speculation about Arthur’s burial, an important text in the Victorian literary and historical inheritance was William Camden’s *Remaines of a Greater Work concerning Britaine* (1605), which contained a description of the supposed exhumation of Arthur and Guinevere at Glastonbury. Also in this context, Taliesin, a Welsh bard writing during the late fifth and early sixth centuries, seems to have had resonance for the Victorians (see chapter 6). The martial poem attributed to Taliesin, “The Stanzas of the Graves,” also known as “The Graves of the Warriors,” was of particular interest since it subscribed to the idea of Arthur’s grave as a mystery. The comparative mythologist Algernon Herbert uses the poem in *Britannia after the Romans* (1836) to discount both Christian and pagan arguments about memorials (gravestones and cairns). Herbert’s text includes an account of the discovery of Arthur’s and Guinevere’s remains at Glastonbury, as well as discussion of possible links between sites called Avalon and fables about Avalon.

The figure of Taliesin, then, allowed Victorian poets to connect an Arthurian past with the present. Alaric A. Watts's poem "The Home of Taliessin," published in *Lyrics of the Heart* (1851), focuses on the remains of a dwelling supposed to have been inhabited by Taliesin and thus intact at the time of the legendary Arthur's reign. Crucially, the regional landscape is mythologized via the poetic imagination contemplating specific, material evidence. The assertion of national identity through connecting a regional landscape with Arthurian legend (particularly surrounding Arthur's grave) is evident in John Jenkins's *Poetry of Wales* (1873). In the introduction to the collection, which includes both poems on Taliesin and poems attributed to him, Jenkins points out that poetry is an imaginative expression of a nation's language, apt for Victorian Britain's forging of itself as a progressive, historically-self-conscious civilization.

Yet Arthur's death also came to symbolize pressing cultural concerns: with the efficacy of muscular Christian manliness as a heroic model and the reach of empire. Sebastian Evans's long poem "The Eve of Morte Arthur" (1875) can be read in the context of increasing secularization and a sense of cultural decline, post the great agrarian depression. The poem's narrator compares memories of a (courtly) Arthurian past with contemporary society, implying that quests for heroic glory are futile in both contexts. "The Eve of Morte Arthur," in common with other poems of the time, is nostalgic for empire, although it is distinctive in linking Arthur's death to the disintegration of Britain's empire. When Arthur ruled, the poet had cultural status in that he ensured Arthur's fame through storytelling. By contrast, modern industrial Britain does not value the "knightly words" of the poet, who then struggles to find a role, an appropriate language, and an assurance that Arthur will live on in verse.

Arthurian writing of the late nineteenth century reveals a contemporary preoccupation with the notion of transience, focused on the city. In reinventing Arthurian legend to connect Arthur's death with the loss of a civilization, writers were articulating broader fears about British cultural identity. Victorian medievalism was in one sense an attempt to reform industrial capitalist society and the "rebuilding" of the mythical Camelot in Victorian poetry was informed by contemporary debate about the nature of cities. An extended description of the nature of Camelot can be found in "Gareth and Lynette" in the final version of the *Idylls* (1889). The city appears and disappears in the mist, is both substantial and insubstantial and in a continual state of becoming; in other words, it is a constructed illusion like Arthur himself. This can be interpreted as a comment on the process of myth making; in "The Holy Grail" Camelot's destruction occurs due to the desire to attain a spiritual ideal. Twentieth-century critical interpretation of the *Idylls* is concerned with the construction of Tennyson's epic as myth making, a process which is then critiqued in the poem's self-reflexivity.

As Matthew Campbell has suggested, boundaries of one kind or another (land, language, perception) are in process in the *Idylls*. Even the "landscape of the Great Battle of the West seems almost to fall off the Atlantic edges of Europe" (Campbell 2002: 439). The Celtic fringes are implicated in the history of the aspiration and destruction of the newish state of the United Kingdom. Literary depictions, such as Tennyson's, of the battle in which Arthur receives his fatal wound can be read as prophetic of the horrors of the World War I, as

recognized by Wilfred Owen in “Hospital Barge at Cerisy” (1917).

According to legend, Arthur passes but does not die. He is, however, culturally reconstructed and appropriated in the cause of a range of ideological stances. Victorian poets employed Arthurian legend to convey a particular moral view or “to expose societal conflicts and to promote human change” (Lambdin & Lambdin 2000: 143). In doing so, they explored cycles of renewal and the tension between permanence and instability. This process drives both Arthur and folklore (Lindahl 1998: 15). Above all, Victorian Arthurian poets attempted to understand the paradoxical nature of Arthur’s passing and of their own resurrection of the past. Arthur, like the Romantic poet Thomas Chatterton whose early death was immortalized in Henry Wallis’s painting *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), “exist[s] on the interstices of the invented and the authentic” (Ackroyd 2002: 430). Despite debate earlier in nineteenth-century Britain about the “death” of poetry, Victorian epic poetry ultimately proved to be a “surprisingly vigorous anachronism” (Tucker 2002: 25).

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