

## Epilogue

# Alfred Tennyson and Victorian Arthuriana

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of unprecedented interest in the stories of King Arthur and the Round Table. Painters, writers, and literary scholars turned to the medieval world of Camelot with intense dedication. Tennyson's poetry did not stand behind all the Arthurian art and literature of Victorian England, but it did serve to raise the subject-matter to a new level of literary respectability. The neglect and abuse of the Arthurian legends which characterized the romantic and early Victorian attitudes gave way to the literary eminence of the world of Camelot by the end of the nineteenth century. Though a complete analysis of the Arthurian art and literature of the period remains outside the realm of this study, a survey of the major Arthurian works does reveal the pervasive influence of Tennyson.

In the world of painting, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite associates often turned to the Middle Ages for their subject-matter. Rossetti found in Malory incidents which would serve as objective correlatives for his own feelings. His Arthurian paintings usually present two episodes from the legends: the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere or the quest of the Holy Grail. For Rossetti, the earthly and the spiritual were opposing forces vying for man's soul. In Lancelot's love for the Queen, he saw his own passion for womanly beauty; in the Grail quest, he saw the mystical experience that he and Lancelot would never attain.

Though it is impossible to date Rossetti's first encounter with Malory,<sup>1</sup> his admiration of Tennyson's early poetry may have been his

1 In *Dante Gabriel Rossetti—His Family Letters with a Memoir* (London, 1895), William Michael Rossetti commented about his brother's plans for the Oxford Union: "He thought the bays of the Debating-room would be suitable for wall-paintings and suggested that they should be covered with tempera-pictures from the Romance of King Arthur. This was not a specifically appropriate theme, but Rossetti had not at

first introduction to Arthurian stories.<sup>2</sup> The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was aware of Tennyson's plan to write an Arthurian epic a decade before the appearance of the first volume of the *Idylls*.<sup>3</sup> When Rossetti turned to Malory in the early eighteen-fifties, he knew that Tennyson, now Poet Laureate, had established the literary stature of the Arthurian legends.

Tennyson provided Rossetti with his first extended employment of Arthurian material. For the 1857 illustrated edition of Tennyson's *Poems*, Rossetti contributed five illustrations; three of them depicted Arthurian episodes.<sup>4</sup> The Arthurian trio did not prompt Rossetti to consult Malory; indeed, he used Tennyson's poetry only as a suggestion for the illustrations.<sup>5</sup>

In 1858 Rossetti began *God's Graal*, his only attempt to write an Arthurian poem. He was unable to complete it at that time. The publication of Tennyson's *The Holy Grail* prompted Rossetti's return to his unfinished poem.<sup>6</sup> In 1870, however, his understanding of the polarity of

that time any clear notion of the purpose which the room was to serve. Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is a book to which, so far as memory serves me, he had not paid any marked attention in earlier years. Perhaps Mr. Morris, rather than his self-directed readings, had impressed its interest upon him, and Morris, at the same time as Rossetti, offered to paint something in the Union Room. At any rate my brother was now in a vigorously Arthurian mood, which lasted some years, and never left him entirely" (I, 196).

- 2 " 'If any man has any poetry in him,' he [Rossetti] said to Burne-Jones again and again that summer, 'he should paint, for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint it.' The feeling which Morris had shared with his contemporaries at Oxford, that Tennyson represented the end of all things in poetry, no doubt received a powerful stimulus or revival from this doctrine of Rossetti's" (J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* [London, 1899], I, 110-111).
- 3 The Pre-Raphaelite journal recorded on December 18, 1849: "His [Tennyson's] poem of King Arthur is not yet commenced, though he has been for years past maturing the conception of it; and he intends that it should occupy him some fifteen years" (*Preraphaelite Diaries and Letters*, edited by W. M. Rossetti [London: Hurst and Blackett, 1900], pp. 238-239).
- 4 For Moxon's 1859 edition Rossetti contributed *The Lady of Shalott* (Lancelot descending into the barge where the Lady's body lies), *King Arthur and the Weeping Queens* (an illustration of the lines describing Arthur in *The Palace of Art*), and *Sir Galahad* (an illustration of the third stanza of the poem). In *Tennyson and His Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators* (London: E. Stock, 1894), G. S. Layard noted Rossetti's intention to make another illustration of Sir Galahad, which he never created (p. 49). For a description of Rossetti's Arthurian paintings, see Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971).
- 5 "It must be said also that himself only, and not Tennyson, was his guide. He drew just what he chose, taking from his author's text nothing more than a hint and an opportunity. . . . As to our great poet Tennyson—who also ought to have counted for something in the whole affair—I gather that he really liked Rossetti's designs when he saw them, and he was not without a perceptible liking and regard for Rossetti himself, so far as he knew him" (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti—His Family Letters with a Memoir*, I, 189).
- 6 Rossetti wrote to Swinburne on December 21, 1869: "One thing is that I shall proceed with additional zest to my projected poem of *God's Graal* (Lancelot losing the Sancgrail), wherein God and Guenevere will be weighed against each other by another table of weights and measures" (*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, edited by Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965-1967], II, 779).

the earthly and the spiritual was changing so that Lancelot's quest became an example of the superiority of the earthly.<sup>7</sup> To re-create Malory so that Lancelot's failure was not essentially tragic perplexed Rossetti and the poem remained incomplete.<sup>8</sup>

Tennyson's early Arthurian poetry may have fostered Rossetti's initial interest in the Arthurian legends; his later poetry did prompt Rossetti to return to his only effort at an Arthurian poem. And the *Idylls* may have caused Rossetti's increasing hesitation to employ Arthurian themes. When the 1859 volume of the *Idylls of the King* appeared, Rossetti read about an Arthurian world which bore little relationship to his more passionate Camelot. The moral tone of Tennyson's account of the Grail story influenced his decision to attempt a different version, yet the popularity of Tennyson's Arthurian poetry may have been the final factor in his inability to create his own Arthurian world.

Rossetti's associates showed similar fascination with Arthurian themes, and they too entered the world of Camelot through the guidance of Tennyson. Their Arthurian paintings were either illustrations of Tennyson's poems<sup>9</sup> or depictions of incidents which originated in Tennyson's Arthurian world.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, Tennyson became the source of their understanding of the legends. Their medievalism owed more to Tennyson than to the medieval world and the *Idylls of the King* came to hold the inspirational force that Malory occupied for Tennyson.

Among the Pre-Raphaelite associates, Edward Burne-Jones was the most devoted disciple of the Arthurian legends. When he first read Malory in 1855, he discovered a world that would become his natural

- 7 Rossetti wrote to Swinburne on March 9, 1870: "The poem I shall do (if any) will be, I believe, *God's Graal*—i.e. the loss of the Sangraal by Lancelot—a theme chosen to emphasize the marked superiority of Guenevere over God" (*Letters*, II, 812).
- 8 On March 22, 1870 Rossetti wrote to Swinburne: "If I do anything else it will be *God's Graal*, the Lancelot poem, but this baffled me rather on taking it up, owing to the limitations of the burden I had adopted. However I may tackle it yet, but the time runs short" (*Letters*, II, 824). The unfinished poem was first published in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, edited by William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), p. 239.
- 9 Holman Hunt made one illustration of *The Lady of Shalott* for the 1857 edition; his later painting of the same title took the illustration for its basis. Daniel Maclise made two illustrations of Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* for the same edition. For both Hunt and Maclise, Tennyson's poetry provided the inspiration for their only attempts at paintings with Arthurian subjects. The only extant work by John Everett Millais on an Arthurian subject is a pen-and-ink drawing, *The Lady of Shalott*, dated 1854, an illustration of the third stanza of the fourth section of Tennyson's poem.
- 10 F. G. Stephens found inspiration in Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* for his unfinished painting of the same title. The painting, his only Arthurian work, dated 1849, showed its indebtedness to Tennyson, not only by its title, but by its figures, one knight trying to carry a dying Arthur. Stephens followed Tennyson in reducing Malory's presentation of two knights to one attendant in the final scene. Arthur Hughes turned to Tennyson's poetry for his three Arthurian paintings: *The Lady of Shalott*, *Sir Galahad*, and *Enid and Geraint*. G. F. Watts made two Arthurian paintings: *Sir Galahad* and *Enid and Geraint*.

and perpetual haunt;<sup>11</sup> like Tennyson he made his artistic career an attempt to re-create the beauty and the power of the legends.<sup>12</sup> Yet his endless re-creation of the medieval world found its initial inspiration in Tennyson. Burne-Jones first encountered Arthurian characters in Tennyson's early poetry. He never realized his early plan to form a "small conventual society," but his plan emphasized his admiration for Tennyson and especially for his early Arthurian poetry.<sup>13</sup> When he discovered Malory, he found further inspiration, "reading the *Morte d'Arthur*, the chapters about the death of Percival's sister and the Shalott lady."<sup>14</sup> His first Arthurian painting, *Sir Galahad*, was his entrance into the world of Camelot and his unconscious acknowledgement of his debt to Tennyson.<sup>15</sup> For Burne-Jones and his Pre-Raphaelite associates, Tennyson opened the door to the wealth of the Arthurian legends.

Tennyson's re-creation of the Arthurian legends precipitated an abundance of literary treatments of the story of Camelot.<sup>16</sup> The three major literary figures who also employed Arthurian material shared both an interest in the subject-matter and a dislike of Tennyson's re-creation.

- 11 "It was Southey's reprint of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*: and sometimes I think that the book never can have been loved as it was by those two men. With Edward it became literally a part of himself. Its strength and beauty, its mystical religion and noble chivalry of action, the world of lost history and romance in the names of people and places—it was his own birthright upon which he entered" (Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* [London: Macmillan, 1904], I, 116). Burne-Jones described his affinity with the story of Camelot: "I can't expect people to feel about the subject as I do, and have always. It is such a sacred land to me that nothing in the world touches it in comparison" (*Memorials*, II, 247); "nothing was ever like *Morte d'Arthur*—I don't mean any one book or any one poem, something that never can be written I mean, and can never go out of the heart" (*Memorials*, II, 168).
- 12 Burne-Jones completed ten paintings with Arthurian subjects. In addition, he left a series of unfinished Arthurian paintings and some Arthurian cartoons for stained glass. For a complete listing of his works, see Malcolm Bell, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones* (London, 1898).
- 13 "Remember, I have set my heart on our founding a Brotherhood. Learn Sir Galahad by heart. He is to be the patron of our Order. I have enlisted *one* in the project up here, heart and soul. You shall have a copy of the canons some day. (Signed) General of the Order of Sir Galahad" (*Memorials*, I, 77). On May 1, 1853 Burne-Jones wrote to Morris: "I am well pleased that our taste in poetics is concurrent. If Tennyson affords you as many hours of unmitigated happiness—I speak without affectation here—as he has to me, you will look with gratitude to any who helped you to appreciate him. When I take up the works of any other poet, save Shakespeare only, I seem to have fallen from the only guide worth following far into dreamland" (*Memorials*, I, 76).
- 14 *Memorials*, I, 117. It is significant that Burne-Jones came to refer to Elaine as "the Shalott lady," an appellation indicative of his debt to Tennyson since Malory referred to her home as Astolat.
- 15 Malcolm Bell described Burne-Jones's first Arthurian painting as "one of the few traces in the artist's work of the influence exercised by Tennyson over the school to which he was affiliated. Even this is rather an expression of the feeling of the poem than an illustration to it, since it depicts no actual incident therein" (p. 21).
- 16 For a listing of the major Arthurian writings of the nineteenth century with commentary on specific works related to Tennyson's poetry, see Eggers, pp. 215-252.

Despite their criticism and their own Arthurian works, Tennyson's poetry continued to exert enormous influence in Victorian England.

Matthew Arnold did not approve of Tennyson's medieval characters:

The fault I find with Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King* is that the peculiar charm and aroma of the Middle Age he does not give in them. There is something magical about it, and I will do something with it before I have done. The real truth is that Tennyson, with all his temperament and artistic skill, is deficient in intellectual power; and no modern poet can make very much of his business unless he is pre-eminently strong in this.<sup>17</sup>

Arnold's only Arthurian poem, *Tristram and Iseult*, never satisfied its author; his revisions and additions only served to emphasize his artistic failure.<sup>18</sup> As an Arthurian work his poem became isolated in its own time. The fact that no other writer followed his originality in the depiction of the second Iseult as a mother of two children is final proof of the curious unimportance of the first modern English treatment of the Tristram story in the history of Arthurian literature. Despite his criticism of Tennyson's Arthurian poetry and his vow to "do something with it before I have done," Arnold never returned to the Arthurian legends.

William Morris shared Arnold's appreciation of the Middle Ages and his dislike of Tennyson's treatment of the legends. His first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, begins with four Arthurian poems; each of them is a distinct, dramatic, and vividly realized incident borrowed from Malory with varying degrees of fidelity.<sup>19</sup> Morris employs personal names, the basic structure of certain incidents, and the general portrait of the *Morte d'Arthur*, but closer examination reveals the dissimilarities, the distinctly Pre-Raphaelite intensity of depiction and the sense of heightened passion which he imposed upon basic beginnings offered to him by Malory. Morris continued to study the medieval Arthurian world, but later years found him increasingly suspicious of his own ability to employ that world effectively. He disapproved of "the transfusion of modern sentiment into an

17 "Letter to Miss Arnold, December 17, 1860," *Letters of Matthew Arnold 1848-1888*, edited by George W. E. Russell (London, 1895), I, 127.

18 Arnold's poem was first published in 1852; the following year he brought out a second edition which included a long preface about Tristram's history from Dunlop's *History of Prose Fiction*. In a letter to Clough of May 1, 1853, he admitted: "I wish I had you with me to put marks against the places where something is wanted. The whole affair is by no means thoroughly successful" (*The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, edited by H. F. Lowry [London: Oxford University Press, 1932], p. 136).

19 The four poems are *The Defence of Guenevere*, *King Arthur's Tomb*, *Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery*, and *The Chapel in Lyoness*. For a detailed study of Morris' employment of his Arthurian sources, see my essay, "Morris' Treatment of His Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*," *Studies in Philology*, 70 (1973), 439-464.

ancient story,"<sup>20</sup> which he observed in the *Idylls of the King*; he did not attempt, however, to realize his original plan of an Arthurian cycle. His early idolatry of Malory and the popularity of Tennyson's achievement seemed to unite in preventing him from employing Malory in his own literary efforts.

Like Morris, Swinburne turned to the Arthurian world and re-created Malory according to the Pre-Raphaelite devotion to pictorial intensity. His earliest Arthurian poem, *Queen Yseult*, is an unsatisfying combination of medieval narrative romance and Pre-Raphaelite detailed depiction. His other early Arthurian efforts are further attempts to create some kind of Arthurian cycle.<sup>21</sup> His rejection of the Pre-Raphaelite creed marked the end of Morris' influence upon his treatment of Malory, yet he never abandoned his interest in the legends. *Tristram of Lyonesse* and *The Tale of Balen*, his major Arthurian poems, are deliberate reactions against Tennyson's Arthurian world. In each he tries to retell the medieval story without any embellishments. *Tristram of Lyonesse* is more than a retelling; it is a re-creation that becomes a celebration of love. In *The Tale of Balen* Swinburne observes such close fidelity to Malory that the poem is his most unoriginal Arthurian work; it is little more than a dramatic paraphrase. His explicit denunciations of Tennyson's treatment of the legends<sup>22</sup> make him adhere closely to his source; such adherence dictates the form of his final employment of Arthurian material. It is ironic that *The Tale of Balen* employs the stanza of *The Lady of Shalott*<sup>23</sup> and achieves a degree of structural and verbal fidelity to Malory that Tennyson never sought after his early *Morte d'Arthur*. Swinburne's rejection of Tennyson's method of handling the legends led him to a method of retelling them that is both a direct

20 Mackail, I, 299.

21 In addition to *Queen Yseult* his early Arthurian poems were *Joyeuse Garde*, a short narrative about the love of Tristram and Yseult when they are at Joyeuse Garde; *King Ban*, a lamentation by Ban; *The Day Before the Trial*, a soliloquy by Arthur on the day before Guenevere's trial; *Lancelot*, the title figure's soliloquy about his mystical aims and his earthly love. For a detailed study of Swinburne's Arthurian poetry, see my essay, "Swinburne's Arthurian World: Swinburne's Arthurian Poetry and Its Medieval Sources," *Studia Neophilologica*, 50 (1978), 53-70.

22 Swinburne's most explicit attack on the *Idylls* was published in 1872 in his essay, "Under the Microscope." In a similar vein he wrote to Theodore Watts on August 29, 1874: "If the mystery of our redemption is thus to be associated by ribald writers with the badge of cuckoldom, what wonder that our Laureate should find in the ideal cuckold his type of the ideal man?" (*The Swinburne Letters*, edited by Cecil Y. Lang [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-1962], II, 335). A further instance of Swinburne's dislike of Tennyson's Arthurian world was a notice in the "Weekly Gossip" column of the *Athenaeum* of March 14, 1868: "Mr. Algernon Swinburne is composing a poem on Tristram and Yseult; and is also to write, next year,—if rumour is not mistaken,—an essay on the Women of Arthurian Romance, for the Early English Text Society's edition of Malory's 'Morte Darthur'; in which Mr. Tennyson's view of Guinevere, Vivien, &c., will not be adopted" (p. 394).

23 Swinburne borrowed the stanza from Tennyson's poem, although he added a syllable to the fifth line and he did not attempt to create a refrain in the final line of each stanza.

criticism of Tennyson's method and an acknowledgement of the influence and popularity of Tennyson's poetry.

The final testimony of Tennyson's importance to the development of interest in the Arthurian legends is the sudden emergence in the latter half of the nineteenth century of scholarly commitment to Malory. Whereas the first half of the century saw the publication of three editions of Malory which were not reprinted, the second half witnessed the appearance of several new editions.<sup>24</sup> More significantly, in 1862 James Knowles compiled *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*, the first modernization of Malory and a volume destined to pass through seven separate editions before 1900. Knowles dedicated his book to Tennyson: "This attempt at a popular version of the Arthur legends is by his permission dedicated, as a tribute of the sincerest and warmest respect."<sup>25</sup> Five more modernizations appeared before the end of the century and each of them noted the importance of Tennyson in the steadily growing interest in Arthurian stories.<sup>26</sup>

- 24 Thomas Wright brought out a three-volume edition of *La Mort d'Arthur* in 1858; a second edition appeared in 1866, and a third in 1889; the third edition was reprinted in 1893 and 1897. In 1868 Edward Strachey published a one-volume edition of the *Morte Darthur*; published in March, the edition was followed by a second edition in August of the same year. The latter edition with an added index was published in 1869 and reprinted in 1871, 1876, 1879, 1882, 1884, 1886, and 1889. Another edition by Strachey appeared in 1891 and was reprinted in 1893, 1897, 1898, and 1899. Ernest Rhys edited a series of small editions of selections from Malory: *Malory's History of King Arthur and the Quest of the Holy Grail* (London, 1886); *The Book of Marvellous Adventures and Other Books of the Morte D'Arthur* (London, 1893); *The Noble and Joyous History of King Arthur* (London, 1894). Between 1889 and 1891 H. O. Sommer's three-volume edition of the *Morte Darthur* appeared. Israel Gollancz edited a four-volume edition of Malory (London, 1897); the first edition, brought out in May, was followed by a second edition in November of the following year and a third edition in August, 1899. A. T. Martin edited *Selections from Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur* (London, 1896), and W. E. Mead edited *Selections from Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur* (London, 1897).
- 25 James T. Knowles, *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* (London, 1862). The volume ends with Arthur's disappearance on the barge; no final scenes from Malory are retained. Knowles accepted Tennyson's ending as an appropriate conclusion to his modernization. Though Knowles became Tennyson's close friend, he had not met the poet at the time of this edition. In his third edition (London, 1868), he noted: "The revival of the Arthur legends, under the influence of the 'Idylls of the King' has interested so many in the subject, that an outline of the noble story has almost become a necessary item of general information" (p. iii).
- 26 *La Morte D'Arthur. The History of King Arthur*, abridged and revised by Edward Conybeare (London, 1868); Conybeare did retain Malory's ending. The other modernizations were *La Mort D'Arthur*, edited by B. Montgomerie Ranking (London, 1871), the subtitle being "The Old Prose Stories whence the 'Idylls of the King' have been taken by Alfred Tennyson," even though appropriate material from the *Mabinogion* was included; *The Life and Exploits of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table: A Legendary Romance*, edited anonymously (London, 1878), a volume which returned to Tennyson's ending; *The Boy's King Arthur*, edited by Sidney Lanier (London, 1880); *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. A Modernized Version of the Morte Darthur*, edited by Charles Morris (London, 1892).

By the beginning of the twentieth century the Arthurian legends attained the literary stature they had commanded in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance.<sup>27</sup> The story of Camelot inspired many artists in Victorian England. Behind this revival of interest in the material stood the august figure of the Poet Laureate, who first employed the legends when they seemed to lack proper respectability for artistic consideration. At the same time that his lifelong commitment to the material created the *Idylls of the King*, which, “regarded as a whole, gives his innermost being more fully, though not more truly, than ‘In Memoriam,’ ”<sup>28</sup> his Arthurian poetry created the Arthurian renaissance of the nineteenth century. The *Idylls* presented Victorian England with an avenue into the medieval accounts of Camelot. Some contemporaries employed Tennyson’s poetry as a medieval document and failed to study the original legends. Others turned to Malory as a rebuttal of Tennyson’s treatment of the material. In any event, Tennyson’s pervasive presence and influence are evident.

Tennyson never answered Coleridge’s question about King Arthur: “What have *we* to do with him?” He re-created the medieval legends to present a “mundane” rather than “national” poem. At the same time the *Idylls of the King* raised Arthur to a stature which made him assume epic dimensions within English literary tradition. Tennyson brought the Arthurian legends to the consciousness of the English people; his poetry re-established their literary eminence. Though Tennyson made no attempt to answer Coleridge’s question, many of his contemporaries would agree with Edward Strachey’s assertion: “it was well that the old order should yield place to the new, or at least make room for it at its side. And such are the thoughts and sentiments with which the lover of the old Morte Arthur will, if he be also a student of the growth of our national character, read the new *Idylls of the King*.”<sup>29</sup> Tennyson re-created the medieval legends according to his own idealistic philosophy so that the Arthurian world of his creation stands both after and beside the Arthurian world of medieval England.

27 For the development of Arthurian literature in the early twentieth century, see Nathan C. Starr, *King Arthur Today* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1954).

28 *Memoir*, II, 128.

29 *Le Morte Darthur*, edited by Edward Strachey (London, 1891), p. xxvi.