Arthurian Literature by Women

Edited by Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack

Arthurian Literature
by Women

ARTHURIAN LITERATURE BY WOMEN

ALAN LUPACK
BARBARA TEPA LUPACK
Editors

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published by Garland Publishing, Inc.

This edition published 2012 by Routledge

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

This book is dedicated to our sister
Donna Schurmann

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arthurian literature by women / edited by Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack.
p. cm. — (Garland reference library of the humanities ; v. 2137)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8153-3305-6 (alk. paper). – ISBN 0-8153-3483-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Arthurian romances—Adaptations. 2. Knights and knighthood—Literary collections.
3. Kings and rulers—Literary collections. 4. Women and literature. 5. Literature—Women authors. I. Lupack, Alan. II. Lupack, Barbara Tepa, 1951– . III. Series: Garland reference library of the humanities ; vol. 2137.
PN6071.A84A74 1999
808.8'0351—dc21 99–11197
CIP

Contents

Foreword

In recent years, women have been increasingly associated with the Arthurian tradition. From the historical retellings of the legendary stories to the original reworkings of them, from the versions set in Arthur's day to those set in modern times, from fantasy and science fiction to mystery and children's literature, contemporary Arthurian novels by women have garnered critical attention and gained popular acclaim.

Readers are probably most familiar with authors like Vera Chapman, whose "Three Damosels" trilogy—*The Green Knight* (1975), *The King's Damosel* (1976), and *King Arthur's Daughter* (1976)—popularized the device of female narration in contemporary fiction; or Mary Stewart, whose classic Merlin trilogy (*The Crystal Cave* [1970], *The Hollow Hills* [1973], *The Last Enchantment* [1979]) blends traditional and nontraditional accounts of Merlin, the self-tutored bastard son of Ambrosius Aurelianus and eventual overseer of Arthur's reign, and whose later novel *The Wicked Day* (1984) features a sympathetic Mordred who becomes the unwilling instrument of his mother Morgause's revenge against Arthur; or Rosemary Sutcliff, whose *Sword at Sunset* (1963) allows Arthur to tell his own story in the first person. Andre Norton, in her clever science fiction novel *Merlin's Mirror* (1975), in which Merlin is the product of cross-breeding with aliens, and in her many juvenile Arthurian fantasies, including *Steel Magic* (1965), *Dragon Magic* (1972), and *Witch World* (1963), the first volume of her most extensive and imitated series, helped to establish a new genre of Arthurian fiction—a genre that includes C. J. Cherryh's *Port Eternity* (1982), which features a marooned spacecraft peopled by clones modeled on Arthurian characters from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and Sanders Anne Laubenthal's *Excalibur* (1973), which brings the quest to the New World and Excalibur itself to Mobile, Alabama. Novels like *Merlin's Booke* (1986) and the "Young Merlin Trilogy"—*Passager* (1996), *Hobby* (1996), and *Merlin*

(1997)—by prolific author Jane Yolen and Katherine Paterson's *Park's Quest* (1988), which entwines the Grail theme with a young boy's odyssey to understand Vietnam and discover his heritage, have introduced the Arthurian world to children as well as to adults. Series like Fay Sampson's "Daughter of Tintagel" sequence about Morgan le Fay (*Wise Woman's Telling* [1989], *White Nun's Telling* [1989], *Black Smith's Telling* [1990], *Taliessin's Telling* [1991], and *Herself* [1992]) and trilogies by Gillian Bradshaw (*Hawk of May* [1980], *Kingdom of Summer* [1981], and *In Winter's Shadow* [1981]) and Persia Woolley (*Child of the Northern Spring* [1987], *Queen of the Summer Stars* [1990], and *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn* [1991]) have explored at greater length and often from nontraditional perspectives the tales of traditional Arthurian characters. And, of course, for many, women's Arthurian literature is epitomized by Marion Zimmer Bradley's best-selling and much emulated novel *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), which focuses on the legend's women—Igraine; Morgaine, her daughter by Gorlois; Morgause, Igraine's younger sister, later Lot's queen; Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, Igraine's half-sister, and mother of Lancelot; Niniane and Nimue; and Gwenhwyfar, Arthur's queen—and by its sequel, *Lady of Avalon* (1997), which spans the creation of Avalon and foreshadows the birth of Arthur.

Given the amount and scope of recent popular Arthurian women's fiction, it is surprising that there is so little awareness among readers and scholars alike of the significant earlier—and ongoing—tradition of Arthurian literature by women. That tradition goes back to the nineteenth century, to writers like Letitia E. Landon and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who were popular and widely read in their own day but who are now largely forgotten; and it continues into the twentieth century with Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Dorothy Parker, among others. That tradition incorporates a broad spectrum of Arthurian works, some of which are remarkably prescient in their attitudes towards social problems, religion, philosophy, and feminism. The position of Guinevere, who must serve as wife to an uncaring husband/king, is a recurring concern in this literature, as is the desire to discover—usually in the enchanted isle of Avalon—a place in which women can find refuge and a society in which they can at last achieve equality with men.

In fact, many of the techniques that are considered to be contemporary have their roots in the earlier neglected tradition of Arthurian women's literature. The device of female narration, for instance, in which female characters relate their stories in their own voices, is anticipated in several nineteenth-century works and realized in the early twentieth-century Guinevere poems of Teasdale and Parker. Numerous other seemingly recent devices—from the emphasis on

the role of women in the legends to the underscoring of the women's strength and will, from contemporized story settings to fantastic travels, from interesting and unconventional uses of traditional characters to the creation of new ones—also harken back to this forgotten tradition. Moreover, notions like the redemption of King Mark, the recasting of Morgan le Fey as healer rather than destroyer, or the depiction of King Arthur as "brother" to the common man, and the introduction of characters like the peasant girl who proves more noble than all the ladies and lords of Arthur's court, the page boy who wins a seat at the Round Table by "keeping tryst," or the dwarf who curses the holy cup but who eventually achieves the Grail when noble knights like Sir Lancelot cannot, seem like very modern twists to the familiar Arthurian stories; but all are actually the innovations of authors who wrote their poems and tales almost a century or two ago.

The purpose of *Arthurian Literature by Women: An Anthology* is to explore that rich but forgotten tradition and to afford it some of the attention it deserves. To that end, the volume does not reproduce works (or portions of works) that are readily available to contemporary readers—Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, for instance, or excerpts from Vera Chapman's trilogy. Rather, it attempts to introduce less known, but no less significant, Arthurian works that are out of print or otherwise difficult to access. Insofar as possible, those works are presented in their entirety; and the broadest selection of genres of women's writing is represented. Included, among others, are lais by Marie de France (newly translated for this volume by Norris Lacy); a translation of a tale from the *Mabinogion* by Lady Charlotte Guest; short fiction by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Mrs. T. K. Hervey; poems by Anne Bannerman, Jessie Weston, and Aline Kilmer; a short romance by Annie Fellows Johnston; a fantastic tale by Dinah Maria Mulock Craik; and a play by Martha Kinross. Two comprehensive bibliographies document the remarkable range of Arthurian fiction and of Arthurian poetry and drama by women. For it is only with a proper understanding of this forgotten tradition that the many recent developments in Arthurian literature can be fully appreciated and that the Arthurian canon can be redefined to incorporate the achievements of a number of these women writers.

Acknowledgments

We are sincerely grateful to Norris Lacy for providing new translations of *Chevrefueil* and *Lanval* for this volume and to Kristi Long of Garland Publishers, Inc., for her support of this project.

We would also like to acknowledge the many women whose contributions to Arthurian studies have enriched the field and influenced our own work, in particular:

Freya Reeves, publisher of *Avalon to Camelot*

Sally Slocum, the founder and for many years chair
of the Arthurian section of the Popular Culture Association

Elizabeth Sklar, the current chair
of the Arthurian section of the Popular Culture Association

Maureen Fries, who has written widely on matters Arthurian
and generously encouraged younger Arthurian scholars

Mildred Leake Day, editor of *Quondam et Futurus*

Bonnie Wheeler, editor of *Arthuriana*

Arthurian Literature by Women

Introduction

The Forgotten Tradition

Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack

Arthurian literature is traditionally considered the domain of men. The legends themselves are dominated by men, and the major canonical examples of the story are written by men. For the English-speaking world, Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte d'Arthur* established and continues to define the tradition, so much so that even later versions of the tales that bear little resemblance to what Malory actually wrote pay homage to him and suggest that he is their source. And, apart from Malory, the best-known versions of the Arthurian story claim descent from other male writers, in particular Alfred, Lord Tennyson and T. H. White.

Even those who are interested in women's literature and women in literature have typically been compelled to discuss the legend's women as treated by the men who wrote about them, as illustrated by a recent article like "What Tennyson Did to Malory's Women." Volumes such as *Arthurian Women: A Casebook* and *Women and Arthurian Literature*, whose titles imply a strong emphasis on women writers, focus instead primarily on male authors. And courses dealing with women in the Arthurian legend teach works almost exclusively by men.

Although traditionally women have not been associated with the creation of significant versions of the Arthurian story until the burgeoning of the fantasy novel in the late twentieth century, there is in fact a considerable body of women's Arthurian literature dating back as far as the early nineteenth century. (Admittedly, before that time—with the brilliant exception of two lays by Marie de France—women wrote very little about the Matter of Britain.) Much of that forgotten and neglected Arthurian literature is by authors who never achieved canonical status or whose Arthurian works, by deviating from convention, place them outside the main tradition. Yet several of these writers were tremendously popular in their day. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, for example, the author of more than fifty books, had an international reputation; and Dorothy Parker, Sara Teasdale, and

Edna St. Vincent Millay enjoyed a large and enthusiastic following as well. Others, like Letitia E. Landon, who wrote under the pseudonym L. E. L., are only now being rediscovered by a new generation of readers. Many of these writers, however, remain obscure; for a few, it is difficult even to establish their dates of birth and death. But all of these authors wrote notable versions of one or another of the Arthurian legends, and their combined works suggest that there are indeed certain traditions common to women writing on Arthurian themes.

Many of the women, for instance, demonstrate a willingness to depart from the familiar stories and the expected interpretations of the characters—a willingness, even a desire, to turn aside from the usual manner of telling and the conventional concerns of the Arthurian world, to "rebel," in Phelps's words, "against the story." Sometimes their reinterpretations of the received versions of the legend are radical, as in the redeeming of characters like King Mark who have been condemned in other accounts, or in the prominence of female characters like Guinevere or Isolt who are allowed to tell their own stories, often in their own voices. Sometimes the reinterpretations are topical, as in the tendency among some American women writers to democratize the legends by downplaying the notions of kingship and recognizing the nobility in the most common of characters. And sometimes the reinterpretations are highly individualized, as women writers concentrate on certain themes and motifs and adapt them to their own purposes. The legendary isle of Avalon, where Arthur is said to rest until he is needed again, for instance, is particularly popular; for many women writers it becomes a symbol of refuge and reconciliation, an emblem of a state of equality that is rarely achieved by women in mundane society.

While the taking of liberties with the Arthurian stories is not exclusive to women—Bulwer-Lytton, after all, sent his King Arthur to the Arctic to battle Eskimos and walruses; and American Arthurian authors, both male and female, routinely invent incidents quite alien to the original legends—it seems clear that women, by virtue of being outside the mainstream of Arthurian tradition, have been more inclined to radical reinterpetations and innovative reworkings of it. An excellent example is Mrs. T. K. (Eleanora Louisa Montagu) Hervey, whose *The Feasts of Camelot* (1863) is one of the earliest works of original Arthurian fiction by a woman and still one of only a few unified collections of short Arthurian fiction. Though Hervey's book consists of a series of tales modeled more on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* than on Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and though individual tales seem more Gothic than Arthurian, her story of Tristram, Isond (Hervey's name for Isolt), and Mark diverges both from the traditional medieval and from other Victorian versions of the tragic love. Hervey relates the account of these

characters over three chapters of the *Feasts*, beginning, in Chapter III, with an atypical tale of the typically evil "Mad King Mark." Tristram, called upon to fight for Mark's sovereignty, objects because he recognizes only Arthur as king in Britain. After Sir Maurice of Ireland taunts Tristram and repeats the stories of his cowardice spread by Mark, Tristram enters into the combat. (By contrast, in the traditional story Tristram is eager to fight to end the allegiance owed by Cornwall to Ireland.) After defeating, but not killing, Maurice, Tristram is sent to Ireland with a sealed message that contains two requests: that Tristram, suspected of plotting to usurp Mark's lands, be watched and that Mark be granted Isond's hand in marriage.

And Hervey again breaks from convention as she tries—at least by Victorian standards—to redeem Tristram and Isond by having them refrain from any adulterous or illicit acts. In fact, Hervey's Isond remains faithful to Mark, even proclaiming his kindness toward her before Arthur and his court. And Tristram, after escaping from Ireland through a bizarre plot devised by Isond, goes (as she has instructed) to her namesake in Wales. There he falls truly in love with and marries Isond of Wales. Tristram and his wife, the second Isond, are still happily wed as the tales at Camelot are being told.

Hervey's desire to redeem her characters extends even to the most traditionally wicked; at the end of Chapter III, for instance, she offers a defense of Morgan. When Merlin criticizes the bards who dare "to call our gracious lady Morgana, the 'Fay-lady,'" Guenever explains that it is because Merlin himself "taught her so many things that women seldom know of, that rumour has fixed upon her the blame of dealing with unlawful magic." This sympathic depiction of Morgan (paralleled in the Victorian age only in one other work—and that, unsurprisingly, by another woman, Dinah Maria Mulock Craik) is striking, particularly since it is couched in terms that are critical of male responses to women who attempt to exceed their expected roles. To set things right, Merlin takes steps to record the true story in books that are "fast locked in the great pyx" in the church of St. Stephen. "Heaven grant they never be lost," he adds, "or a sorry history will be given of us all in the ages to come!" The sorry history is obviously the traditional account of the unredeemed Merlin and Morgan and Tristram and Isond and Mark. And it is precisely such an account that Hervey, in the tales in *The Feasts of Camelot*, intends to correct.

Later, in Chapter XI, Isond relates Mark's "One Good Deed." Most of her telling, however, concerns not Mark but rather the deeds and misdeeds of two brothers, the elements of whose tale are reminiscent of events in Malory's account of Balin and Balan. One brother, Bertrand, is responsible for the death of the other, Walter, and at least in part because of the guilt he feels, dies shortly

thereafter. Mark's good deed is to have the body of Walter brought back to his castle to be buried beside the woman he loved and to have prayers said for both of them. Of course, as Arthur says, "It could be wished that the living rather than the dead had been so humanely dealt with."

The redemption of Mark is completed in Chapter XII, the last in the *Feasts*, which introduces the character of Alisaunder, the Alysaundir the Orphelyn who is "slayne by the treson of kynge Marke" in Malory. But here Alisaunder is not slain. In fact, it is he who responds to Arthur's request for a tale revealing that someone of Mark's "blood and race" has done "acts of nobleness and generosity, whence we may infer that nature is not all in fault, but that circumstance has wrought in him some of the ill that he has done." Alisaunder tells of the young Tristram's forgiveness of his wicked stepmother who twice tried to poison him. Tristram's intercession not only saves her from his father Meliodus' condemnation to death but also transforms her into a devoted woman who "loved him tenderly ever after" and a penitent who "scourged herself and wore sackcloth for her sin." After hearing the story, Arthur is forced to admit that Tristram, Alisaunder's father (Mark's brother), and Alisaunder himself show that there are "traits of nobleness and self-denial in the blood of King Mark's line."

According to Hervey, Mark's misdeeds—a fault of "circumstance," not of "nature"—can be traced to rumors about a prophecy by Merlin that "one near akin" to Mark "should usurp his power, and hold him captive till his death-day." Not knowing "from which hand his doom is to come, he [Mark] wages an unnatural war with all his race." Yet his cruel and unjust acts are committed only because he is "led to suspect treachery through a foolish rumour." Even Isond, who typically suffers most from Mark's abuse, confirms that "King Mark has ever been kind and tender to me." Once the reason for Mark's earlier unchivalrous conduct is properly understood, he is given a place of honor as Arthur's guest and invited to join in the feasting and fellowship. "And many a pleasant tale and touching song wiled away the last trace of care from the softened heart of King Mark."

An even more radical departure from the tradition occurs in Antonia R. Williams' play *Isolt* (1900), subtitled "A New Telling." Although it is one of the least successful of the seventeen Tristan and Isolt plays written in the first three decades of the twentieth century, *Isolt* takes a decidedly new approach to the material, first by turning the story into a rather heavy-handed allegory of "Two Ideas in Conflict: Love and Fear" and then by giving the tragedy a happy ending. Unfortunately, Williams' approach sacrifices too much of the tradition to originality; and ultimately her "New Telling" is just too artificial to be good.

A better play—in fact, among the most fascinating of all the Tristan plays—

is Martha Kinross's *Tristram & Isoult* (1913), which, despite its title, focuses on Isoult by juxtaposing her with Guinevere. Whereas Malory highlighted the tragedy of Arthur by contrasting his nobility to Mark's mean-spiritedness and cowardice, Kinross makes Guinevere a foil by means of which Isoult's independence and courage are revealed.

Early in the play, Guinevere says: "Isoult the fearless, I have envied thee / Thy Joyous Gard, and the avowéd years / Lived open to King Mark and to the world." This openness, coupled with a strength rare—or at least rarely emphasized—in the typical portrayal of Isoult, makes Kinross's heroine a compelling character. Isoult's fearlessness, from which her strength derives, is dramatically depicted when Mark confronts her in a tower at Tintagil. "I never fear," she tells him; and he, recalling an incident in which she gave the death blow to a bayed stag that was slashing her hunting hounds with its horns, replies "almost I believe thy vaunt." Determined nevertheless to break her spirit, he declares that it is "the end I set my life" to "make thee fear," and he forces her towards a broken parapet. But Isoult proclaims herself "undizzied," draws her dagger, and orders him to "take off thy hands." Her open confrontation amounts not just to contemptuous insult of Mark, whom she compares to a dog that sniffs "at the thresholds / Of doors are shut to thee," but also to an admission of her love for Tristram.

As the tower scene demonstrates, Isoult is no stereotypical damsel in distress; rather, she is a forerunner of the overtly feminist heroines of recent Arthurian literature. Her only real "fear," unconfessed to Mark, is that Tristram will forget her; yet even that fear grows not from weakness but from a passion as strong and as undiminished as Isoult's character itself. At the end of the play when, with Tristram dead, she drinks a poisoned cup that she refers to as "the Grail upraised," she again asserts her independence from conventional moral standards. By inverting the traditional life-giving and religious associations implied by the Holy Grail, Isoult affirms that she will define her own faith, choose her own values, and determine her own life and her own death.

Reinterpretations of the story of Isolt and Tristan, though not always as good as that of Kinross or as original as those of Hervey or Williams, have long offered women a vehicle for treating, in nontraditional ways, a traditional plot created and passed on by male authors. Of the twentieth-century dramatic versions of the story, three others—apart from those already mentioned—are by women. *Tristram and Isolt* (1905), by Martha Austin, uses Malory's conception of the characters and his contrast of the Tristram-Isoult-Mark triangle with that of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur; but the play is best when Austin avails herself of the "privilege" (6) of poetic licence. In a blending of legends, for instance, her

Tristram—who generally lacks guilt over his actions—goes so far as to compare the cup from which he drank the love potion to the Grail and Isoult to the "angel of the Grail" (48). Yet, while Tristram has the most dramatic potential, none of Austin's characters is developed fully enough to make the reader experience their tragedy as something personal yet legendary. Similarly, Amory Hare (a pseudonym of [Mary] Amory Hare Hutchinson) claims to use Bédier as a source, but her *Tristram and Iseult* (1930) is derivative and unfocused; and her notion of character creating destiny seems to be an afterthought rather than a determining force or an essential element in the development of the play. *The Tragedy of Pardon* (1911) by Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper (writing under the pseudonym of Michael Field) begins on an exceptionally promising note: the prologue finds Queen Iseult of Ireland in a laboratory preparing the love potion, which is empowered by "star-rays" that "fall on the alembic and ignite it" (3). And the play itself is full of action—Tristan, for example, shoots the spying Marjodo with an arrow and Melot buries the body; Iseult undergoes the ordeal of the hot iron to prove her innocence. Although some of the characters are not always treated consistently, Field nonetheless demonstrates a talent for dramatic spectacle, as is apparent in the ending, in which Iseult uses not a black or white sail but a golden one to announce her presence; and as Iseult dies over the dying Tristan, her hair fans out so that he mistakes it for a golden sail, a sign of the spatial and temporal confusion of the dying man. Such visual effects abound in *The Tragedy of Pardon* and make for good theater.

Among women novelists, the story of Tristan and Isolt has also been popular—and handled variously, with varying degrees of success. Some retellings, like Rosemary Sutcliff's *Tristan and Iseult* (1971) and Dorothy James Roberts' *The Enchanted Cup* (1953), are fairly straightforward. Others address the traditional legend but add original—and sometimes unfortunate—twists; Ruth Collier Sharpe's *Tristram of Lyonesse: The Story of an Immortal Love* (1949), for instance, transforms the story into a long and sentimental Gothic melodrama with a happy ending, in which Mark gives Ysolt a "Bill of Divorcement" that allows her to become the Queen of Lyonesse. Still other retellings update the story by setting it in modern times, as Maria Kuncewicz does in *Tristan* (1974), or by applying its lessons to contemporary characters, as Mary Ellen Chase does in *Dawn in Lyonesse* (1938) and again in "A Candle at Night" (1942). Some novelists, like Anna Taylor in *Drustan the Wanderer: A Historical Novel Based on the Legend of Tristan and Isolde* (1971) and Hannah Closs in *Tristan* (1940), focus on Tristan and filter events through his mind or allow him to tell his own tale. Still other novelists focus on the legend's female characters, who often narrate their own accounts of the tragic love and its

repercussions, as Iseult does in Dee Morrison Meaney's *Iseult: Dreams That Are Done* (1985) and Branwan, Esseilte's (Iseult's) cousin, does in Diana L. Paxson's *The White Raven* (1988).

Women poets have also been interested in the possibilities of the theme. The first to retell the story, or rather a carefully selected portion of the story, was the twelfth-century writer Marie de France. In her *Lanval*, Marie explored the romantic adventures of another knight, the title character Lanval, whose fairy lover swears him to secrecy; but when Guinevere makes advances to him, Lanval feels compelled to break the secret and reveal his love. All ends happily: despite his broken oath, Lanval is spared punishment by the timely arrival and intervention of his lady. *Chevrefueil* (*The Honeysuckle*), a much shorter lai, is no less important. It begins by acknowledging the ultimate tragedy but returns to a scene in the forest where Isolde and her exiled Tristan are enjoying a brief idyll. The passion of the lovers during their intense moment of love—and the entwining of their destinies—is evoked by the honeysuckle attached to a hazel branch.

Grace Constant Lounsbery depicts a similar moment of love in "An Iseult Idyll," which describes the instant when Tristram and Iseult first utter each other's names after drinking the love potion. Iseult's whispered "Tristram," in reply to his "Iseult," is followed only by "the sea's reverberate monotone, / With Love's own voice in unison." This interplay of soft sounds and silence ends the poem on exactly the right note of awe. But what is most interesting is that Lounsbery—as her title suggests—makes this an Iseult idyll: highlighted is Iseult's moment of awareness and not Tristram's, as is common in the versions of this story written by men. Likewise, Dorothy Parker portrays in her brief poem "Iseult of Brittany" a character even more neglected than her namesake from Ireland. Known as Iseult of the White Hands, Iseult of Brittany sees "a bitterness" in her hands, the physical feature that "might have been my pride" but which are "Too frail to cup a heart within, / Too soft to hold the free . . . ." Though Parker uses the word "cup" as a verb and not as a noun, she nevertheless evokes the image of the inevitable drinking of the love potion by Tristram and Iseult of Ireland; and she heightens the reader's awareness of the sadness that Iseult of Brittany's white hands, emblematic of her failure to "cup [Tristan's] heart within," represent to her.

By looking at the Arthurian legends in innovative ways, women writers create new versions of the familiar stories. One of the most frequent devices they employ is the placing of traditional characters in new roles or—as in "The Ylle Cut Mantell," the first American Arthurian work by a woman (the author identifies herself only as "a daughter of Eve")—by creating new characters to deconstruct the traditional tale. "The Ylle Cut Mantell," which appeared anonymously in *The*

Democratic Review in May, 1844, purported to be "A Romaunt of the Tyme of Gud Kynge Arthur Done into English from an Authentic Version," the authentic version being "The Boy and the Mantle," a ballad that Bishop Thomas Percy included in his widely read *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Percy's traditional ballad describes a test of faithfulness: putting on a mantle that "shall never become that wiffe, / That hath done amisse." Guinevere, of course, fails the test, as does Sir Kay's wife. Only the wife of Sir Craddocke, after confessing to the fault of having kissed her husband before their marriage, can wear the garment. While Guinevere, out of malice, accuses Craddocke's loyal wife of infidelity, two other tests, one with a carving knife and one with a drinking horn, ultimately confirm the mantle's judgment.

The American poem transforms Percy's ballad in some fascinating ways. Considerably longer than the earlier ballad, it presents the mantle as the only test of fidelity. As in the ballad, Guinevere fails the test; but in a departure from its source, the wife of "Caradois," here called Ella, also fails: the robe is too short on her "by half an ell." This is because "she had been faithless and untrue." There is no mitigating explanation, as in the ballad, that she had merely kissed her future husband. Following Ella's discomfiture, another character, Genelas, who has had many lovers, also fails; so do two hundred other ladies, all the women of Arthur's court, save one. That young woman, Coralie, had been brought to court to marry a lord named Hubert before "envious lips and lying tongue" poisoned his mind against her. Coralie, surprisingly, is only "a Norman peasant's child," a point the poem reinforces when the handsome young knight who brings the mantle to Arthur's court announces that "the magic robe was woven / for the poor Norman peasant girl" and proclaims her "of maids the pride and pearl."

In this way, "The Ylle Cut Mantell" rejects worth based on birth. As does much of the American Arthurian literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it underscores the notion that virtue is more important than rank or wealth, a lesson Hubert appears to have learned when he takes Coralie back to her native village to wed her rather than "amid regal pomp and show" at court. The anonymous author of "The Ylle Cut Mantell" thus significantly reworks the earlier English ballad, not only to make her poem more democratic and therefore more suitable to the readers of *The Democratic Review*, but also to suggest the integrity of the overlooked peasant girl, a simple woman who is inherently more noble than all the lords—and ladies—of the court.

In a short prose work called *Keeping Tryst: A Tale of King Arthur's Time*, another woman, Annie Fellows Johnston, perhaps best known as the author of the "Little Colonel" series for girls, creates a character who is excluded from the world of

knights and nobles until he proves his moral worth. Johnston tells the story of a page boy named Ederyn who asks a minstrel if it is possible for him to become a knight. The minstrel advises Ederyn that some win knighthood by slaying dragons or giants or by going on crusades but suggests that he forget his dreams of glory and be content to serve his squire. "For what hast such as thou to do with great ambitions?" he asks. "They'd prove but flames to burn away thy daily peace." A year later the minstrel returns with information that "there *is* a way for even such as thou to win the honours thou dost covet."The opportunity arises because of Arthur's desire to establish "round him at his court a chosen circle whose fidelity hath stood the utmost test. Not deeds of prowess are required of these true followers, . . . but they must prove themselves trustworthy, until on hand and heart it may be graven large, '*In all things faithful.*'" Ederyn is required to undergo and pass a series of tests of his faithfulness by keeping tryst despite obstacles and temptations. Since he answers each call without neglecting his duties as page and then as squire, he is finally knighted. Clearly, it is those qualities not immediately obvious and not related to birth and status—the numerous "little pearls" on his breast that he earns by his small deeds of devotion, not the few larger "jewels"—that make Ederyn suitable to serve the king.

Just as Johnston recasts the story of the achievement of knighthood by focusing on a simple page boy, another American woman, Sophie Jewett, retells the story of the Grail quest by focusing on another overlooked and underappreciated character. The protagonist in "The Dwarf's Quest" is Dagonet the dwarf, King Arthur's fool. The object of derision and even physical abuse by knights like Sir Kay, whose rude foot and fist "He bore with jest and sneer," Dagonet believes that he is not destined for the quest. But a divine voice gentler than Queen Guinevere's and "kinglier than the King's" informs him that "There waits one vision of the Cup / For thee and Galahad."This injunction to seek "the Cup" comes despite the fact that Dagonet, feeling hurt by his exclusion, had earlier "cursed" the Holy Grail. It is as if the King of Heaven, like the King of Camelot, can forgive the jester's biting words.

How different Dagonet is from the usual Grail knight is immediately apparent. In addition to being "an impish, mocking thing," he is "crooked and weak." By contrast, the face of Galahad, one of the traditional Grail knights, is "like a star"; and Galahad and Percivale ride in the "shining mail" that marks them as heroes of romance. But the divine voice deems Dagonet worthy of the quest because of his "heart's prayer." His physical deformity becomes less important than his moral qualities, which he demonstrates when he stops to care for Lancelot, who is seriously wounded.

As Dagonet tends to the unconscious Lancelot, he sees a bright light and four maidens, one of whom bears the Holy Grail. Thinking that Lancelot is the one for whom the vision has appeared, Dagonet tries unsuccessfully to rouse him; but his "answered prayer is punishment / Since my Lord might not see!" Indeed, as Dagonet hopes, Lancelot is cured by the presence of the Grail. Yet, unlike Dagonet, Lancelot fails in his quest to achieve it since he has not actually witnessed the Grail's appearance. When Dagonet returns to Camelot, he is mocked again for setting out on the quest "Till something in the rider's eyes / Silenced the merry jest."

In Jewett's poem, Galahad and Percivale also achieve the Grail; but Dagonet's role is unprecedented. Usually when there are three Grail achievers, the third is Bors. By substituting Dagonet the fool, Jewett redeems the character who initially curses the Grail, and she allows for a new kind of Arthurian hero, a typically American Arthurian hero: one who is not noble by birth and who is not skillful or strong but who has moral qualities that have been enhanced by his own suffering at the hands of those who considered themselves superior to him.

Another American writer, Katrina Trask, also takes a nontraditional approach in retelling the conventional Grail story in "Kathanal," one of three poems in her volume *Under King Constantine* (1892). Although Constantine is said by Malory to reign after the passing of Arthur, Trask admits her poems "have no legendary warrant." Nevertheless, they create a world different from the Arthurian only in the names of the knights and ladies who figure in them and in the lack of civil strife that earlier had wracked Britain, which now allows leisure for other knightly pursuits.

In "Kathanal," a poem that cries out for Freudian interpretation, Trask uses the Grail quest as a way of sublimating the love between the title character and Leorre, the wife of his "patron knight." Kathanal is drawn to the quest not by divine vision but by Leorre herself, who imposes it upon him as a way of dealing with their forbidden feelings for each other. Earlier in the poem, frustrated by his as yet unspoken love, Kathanal tears the plume from his helmet and tosses it into the sea. With his "knightly symbol lost," he feels dishonored, and his boyhood dream of being "a knight like Galahad, pure and true" seems unattainable. Having forgotten "loyalty / And truth and honour for the fair Leorre," Kathanal fears that if he stays near her "tempting charm"

> I shall, through some wild impulse, wantonly
> Fling my unsullied knighthood to the winds,
> As now I flung the plume from out my helm.

The poem then becomes a virtual orgy of sexual repression. Kathanal struggles between "deep yearning for some touch of love" and "brave endeavour for self-mastery." He proclaims his love to Leorre; she confesses that she reciprocates it. "My senses thrill," she tells him, "If you but touch the border of my robe." Leorre's confession prompts Kathanal to say he will remain with her, but she replies, "now, if ever, you will surely go." Lest their love become "inglorious" like that of Tristram and Isoud or of Launcelot and Guenever, she asks him to undertake the quest. Furthermore, to replace the purple plume from his helmet that her "longing gaze" often followed in tournaments, Leorre gives him "this spotless scarf, the girdle from my robe." Kathanal wavers but, resisting temptation, departs; and ultimately, through his self-denial, he achieves the Grail. His love for Leorre becomes "a glory, not a doom; / Love for love's sake, albeit bliss-denied."

Just as Leorre guides and inspires Kathanal's quest, another woman figures prominently in an equally unusual recasting of a Grail story, "The Christmas of Sir Galahad" by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Though now for the most part forgotten or overlooked, Phelps, author of scores of volumes of fiction, poetry, and essays, published three stories and a number of poems on Arthurian themes. In her own day, Phelps's writing was thought to have "vividness," "spiritual passion," and "the power to strike the human note"; and it was praised by prominent literary figures. She made her reputation writing fiction that was designed to console women who had lost loved ones in the Civil War as well as stories that commented on contemporary social problems, especially the question of women's rights and the treatment of women in a male-dominated society.

Given Phelps's social and feminist concerns, her Arthurian poems and stories at first seem hardly consistent with her other works. In fact, though, they are. In "The Christmas of Sir Galahad," perhaps the most didactic and melodramatic of her Arthurian stories, Phelps's Galahad is "Sir Galahad Holt," a worker in an organ factory who returns from his labor with "grimy, princely hands." He is in love with Rebecca Rock—the narrator calls her "Lady Rebecca"—who works in a necktie factory "cutting 'foundation' into strips for the public neck, eleven hours a day." Rebecca shares his feelings, but Galahad is married to Merry Ann, a "crazy" woman who "takes opium" and who, despite leaving him six years earlier, returns occasionally to his apartment. Galahad does not feel free to become involved with Rebecca; and so they wait four long years until Mery Ann finally dies.

The nobility of these characters, for Phelps, lies in their restraint. They never meet for a lover's tryst, never kiss, never even hold hands. In the romance terms that Phelps overlays onto their lives, Rebecca "had not even offered to embroider him a banner, nor to net him a silken favor, nor to fringe so much as a scarf for

the next tournament to be held in Primrose Court [the courtyard on which their building is located]."The only sign of affection between them is Rebecca's act of darning Galahad's socks—and even that occurs after they ask the landlady if it is proper. This innate nobility of character raises them to the level of legendary figures. The narrator notes that "if Di Rimini had worked beside Rebecca at the necktie factory, she would have learned a royal lesson. And Abelard might well have sat at the feet of Galahad, making organs with his grimy hands. And if Eve or Isaac had wandered into the first floor front, or second back corner of 16½, on a lonesome, rainy evening, they would have wept for pity, and smiled for blessing, and mused much."

The Galahad of the story, as well as the woman he loves—for women are always a concern to Phelps—must live a lonely life until his first wife dies. But Phelps's version diverges from other Galahad stories because her protagonist is ultimately relieved of his loneliness; and that relief comes not by a vision of Christ and saints but by Rebecca, the woman who reveals his integrity. The narrator asks, "Did you ever know a lost knight to be found until a woman tracked him? Is it, therefore, surprising that if it had not been for Rebecca Rock, Sir Galahad Holt would have escaped recognition completely, and the modest number of men and women now admitted to the secret of the discovery have gone the hungrier and the sadder for the loss?"Thus, even in this story of a male hero who traditionally achieves his fame in part because he is so chaste that he rejects women totally, Phelps manages to make a woman central to the plot. By casting characters from the lower classes in terms of the Arthurian legends, thereby ennobling them, and then by reinterpreting the Grail story so that a woman becomes both the Grail and the discoverer of the nobility of the Grail knight, Phelps transforms her source material into an innovative, contemporary quest tale.

This tendency to shift the focus from traditional concerns and to give women prominent roles can be seen even in a short poem such as Sara Teasdale's "Galahad in the Castle of the Maidens." Based on one of the murals executed by Edwin Austin Abbey for the Boston Public Library, this sonnet focuses, in almost cinematic style, not on the triumphant figure of Galahad but on a particular figure among the group of maidens in the image, who has "hid her face away" because of "Love's shame and sweet humility." Her reaction contrasts with the others' "queenlike grace" and even with Galahad's "dim" eyes. The reader is left to wonder about the maiden who has such deep feelings for the young knight but who is unwilling or unable to express her desire directly.

Just as women writers tend to rework the Tristan legend by placing the emphasis on one or the other of the Isolts or to focus on women in retelling the

Grail story, so too do they tend, in the larger legend, to emphasize female characters who play a relatively minor part or whose roles are less than ideal in the received versions by men. One such character is the figure who appears in the dual guises of Elaine of Astolat and the Lady of Shalott.

One of the earliest treatments of the story, or more precisely an analogue of the story, is by Letitia Elizabeth Landon, a poet and novelist who wrote under the pseudonym L. E. L. Her poem "A Legend of Tintagel Castle," first published in 1833, offers a fascinating variant of the Elaine of Astolat story, with a nymph dying of unrequited love for Lancelot. The nymph takes Lancelot to her cave where "They might have been happy" if, like the flowers, they could have dwelled in their own private place. But Lancelot hears "the sound of the trumpet," a symbol for the call of the world. As a result, "the wood-nymph was left as aye woman will be, / Who trusts her whole being, oh, false love, to thee." She waits, like Elaine of Astolat, for Lancelot to return, thinking that "every sun-beam that brightened the gloom" is "the waving of Lancelot's plume." His love, however, is for "Genevra," and when the lady realizes that, she dies. Like the Lily Maid's, her body floats down to Camelot in a barge:

> With purple sails heavily drooping around,
> The mast, and the prow, with the vale lily bound;
> And towed by two swans, a small vessel drew near,
> But high on the deck was a pall-covered bier.

Lancelot weeps at the sight. But the author, who recognizes the waste in the nymph's death, observes that "Too late we awake to regret but what tears / Can bring back the waste to our hearts and our years!"

A number of other women have also written short lyrical poems about the tragic character of Elaine. Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Elaine," a monologue by the title character, is notable less for its picture of Elaine's devotion than for revealing the desperation of her love, which even her studied composure can not hide, and for the way that love hints at her impending tragic end: as Elaine pleads to an absent Lancelot to return, she promises to be so unobtrusive that "You needs must think—if you should think— / The lily maid had died." As in Landon's poem, the shift of focus to the dying woman garners sympathy for her plight.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's "Elaine and Elaine," despite its title, deals with only one Elaine, the Lily Maid who dies for love of Lancelot. Like the title, the poem itself is somewhat cryptic: it seems to argue paradoxically for silence in the face of the tragedy. The two sections of the poem end with questions about whether

we should speak about Elaine if the steersman of her barge "speaketh not a word" and whether "If she [Elaine] / Sayeth nothing, how should we?" It may be that Phelps wishes her readers to be silent so they can reflect on the fact that Elaine's position is representative, as is the fate of the Lady of Shalott in Aline Kilmer's poem "For All Ladies of Shalott," in which the circumstance of the towered lady becomes emblematic of that of many women. Phelps's penultimate stanza—"Oh! the river floweth fast. / Who is justified at last?"—implies that all people end their journeys through life without any ultimate justification for what they have, or have not, done.

The most interesting reinterpretation of the Elaine character by a woman is found in another of Phelps's works, the short story "The Lady of Shalott," which translates Tennyson's poem of that name into a nineteenth-century context, thereby making it more relevant and realistic. The title character, now a seventeen-year-old woman, was crippled at the age of five when "her mother threw her down-stairs by mistake, instead of the whisky-jug." This bit of information, the author adds, is one "fact which I think Mr. Tennyson has omitted to mention in his poem." The alcoholic mother dies a few years later, leaving the Lady of Shalott with only a sister, Sary Jane, for support. Her life becomes still more pathetic because her immobility prevents her from weaving—or from doing anything else. In Tennyson's poem, the function of weaving implies artistic creativity, and while it cannot alone provide fulfillment, it does offer some happiness: "But in her web she still delights / To weave the mirror's magic sights," wrote Tennyson. In Phelps's story, the weaver is not the title character but Sary Jane, who "made nankeen vests, at sixteen and three-quarter cents a dozen." Sary Jane must work hunched over under the eaves of the small garret room in which the young women live, and the earnings from her piecework barely allow the two to subsist.

Their apartment, described ironically as a palace, is another point of contrast between Tennyson's Lady and Phelps's character. The former lives in "Four gray walls, and four gray towers," which "overlook a space of flowers." The palace in the story

> measured just twelve by nine feet. . . . There were two windows and a loose scuttle to the palace. The scuttle let in the snow in winter and the sun in summer, and the rain and wind at all times. It was quite a diversion to the Lady of Shalott to see how many different ways of doing a disagreeable thing seemed to be practicable to that scuttle. Besides the bed on which the Lady of Shalott lay, there was a stove in the palace, two chairs, a very ragged rag-mat, a shelf, with two

> notched cups and plates upon it, one pewter teaspoon, and a looking-glass. . . .

Moreover, Phelps's Lady of Shalott is trapped by her disability in a tower of sorts, for her room opens directly onto a flight of stairs so steep that in times of emergency they become a death trap rather than an escape route.

Phelps's narrative strategy here is obvious: looking to the traditional story, she offers analogous but more pathetic and oppressive details. Like the castle tower of Tennyson's Lady that becomes a slum apartment at the top of a dangerous flight of stairs, the river that flows past the tower in Tennyson's poem becomes "a dirty hydrant in the yard, four flights below, which supplied the Lady of Shalott and all her neighbors." And whereas the tower in the poem overlooks "a space of flowers," the only flowers in the life of Phelps's character are those provided by "the Flower Charity," which almost hide the odor of the slum. "You can 'most stand the yard with them round," says the Lady of the story. When Sary Jane brings her sister the flowers, however, the pathos of their situation is highlighted by the fact that they can afford only a single lemon between them for dinner.

But the primary correspondence between the poem and the story is the mirror through which Phelps's character sees her surroundings and the doctor, her Lancelot figure, who might have been her salvation. The smallness of her world is symbolized by the size of her mirror: "All the world came for the Lady of Shalott into her little looking-glass,—the joy of it, the anguish of it, the hope and fear of it, the health and hurt,—ten by six inches of it exactly."

The mirror is also used as a device for social commentary. Emphasizing the drastic inequalities in society, the narrator comments that "the Lady of Shalott would have experienced rather a touch of mortification than of envy if she had known that there was a mirror in a house just around the corner measuring almost as many feet. But that was one of the advantages of being the Lady of Shalott. She never parsed life in the comparative degree." Sometimes the mirror affords the Lady of the story views that disturb her, like the sad and hungry children in the window of the adjacent garret; and her only recourse is to tip her mirror so they do not come within its scope.

As in Tennyson's poem, the cracking of the mirror foreshadows the Lady of Shalott's death. In Tennyson's poem, the mirror cracks when the Lady sees Lancelot, and her world of shadows is no longer sufficient to sustain her. In Phelps's story, the mirror is cracked by a rock thrown by street urchins just after the Lady has seen in it the image of a doctor who is visiting the slum. In response to her cry, the doctor rushes to her room and takes pity on the sickly young woman.

Declaring her curable, he promises to tend "directly" to the terrible conditions outside the window in which Sary Jane sits and sews. (Although not described in detail, those conditions are gruesome enough to make the doctor turn away "with a sudden white face.") But two more days pass before the Board of Health arrives. They are met by "another board," a pine board on which the body of the Lady is being removed from her room. This Lady of Shalott does not rest in a wooden boat singing her last song but is carried, silent, on a plain wooden slab. Nor is there even the final compliment from her Lancelot figure—Tennyson's Lancelot says: "She had a lovely face; / God in his mercy send her grace"; but all the doctor can utter when he sees the body is: "We're too late, I see."

The plight of Phelps's Lady of Shalott is caused by a variety of social ills—her mother's alcoholism, the labor laws that allow her sister to be paid so little, the lack of adequate health care for the poor, and the slum conditions in which she is forced to live. Phelps's purpose undoubtedly is to call attention to these ills by means of analogy to Tennyson's familiar poem and by deromanticizing one of the most romantic and most recognizable images of the nineteenth century—that of the Lady of Shalott floating down to Camelot. There is nothing romantic about the pine board or the steep flight of stairs down which Phelps's Lady is brought.

While Elaine/the Lady of Shalott is truly a sad and compelling character, among the women of the Arthurian legends it is neither she nor Isolt who receives the most attention; rather, it is Guinevere. And it must be admitted that two Victorian men, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and William Morris, first perceived the possibilities inherent in the tale of the queen. Tennyson's first collection of idylls, *Idylls of the King* (1859), told the stories of four women: Enid, Elaine, Vivien, and Guinevere. Yet, in their final form, three of these idylls were retitled to include and even to give preeminence to male characters. "Enid" became two idylls: "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid"; "Elaine" became "Lancelot and Elaine"; and "Vivien" became "Merlin and Vivien." Only the idyll "Guinevere" retained its original name and the corresponding emphasis on the female character. Of course, the picture of the queen presented by Tennyson is typically Victorian: on one level, at least, she is the wife who has failed her husband. The modern reader, however, understands Guinevere's situation and empathizes with her. Married to the near-perfect Arthur, she has no chance to fulfill her normal human desires—except by turning to Lancelot. No doubt that is why Tennyson's final image of Guinevere groveling before the austere Arthur, who magnanimously but without warmth forgives her, troubles modern readers and especially feminist critics. It also troubled Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who responded to that image in her fiction.

The narrator of Phelps's "The True Story of Guenever" explicitly "rebel[s] against the story" as told by Tennyson because she "cannot bear to leave her [Guenever] there upon the convent floor." Phelps is, of course, alluding specifically to the passage in Tennyson's "Guinevere" in which Arthur visits his wife in the convent before the final battle:

> . . . She sat
> Stiff-stricken, listening; but when armed feet
> Thro' the long gallery from the outer doors
> Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell,
> And grovell'd with her face against the floor.

This scene becomes for Phelps a symbolic icon of the distorted relationship between man and woman: Guinevere yearning for forgiveness before the masterful, royal, almost divine Arthur. In the image of Guinevere, she writes, "we see a delicate, high-strung, impulsive creature, a trifle mismated to a faultless, unimpulsive man. We shudder to discover in her, before she discovers it for or in herself, that, having given herself to Arthur, she yet has not given all; that there arises now another self, an existence hitherto unknown, unsuspected,—a character groping, unstable, unable, a wandering wind, a mist of darkness, a chaos, over which Arthur has no empire, of which he has no comprehension, and of which she—whether of Nature or of training who shall judge?—has long since discrowned herself the Queen."

In "The True Story of Guenever," Phelps appropriates to the female voice a traditionally male story and provides a resolution that prevents her Guenever from groveling—but only by having her accept a less than satisfactory marriage. And, in the end, the appropriation of the story is more interesting and makes more of a feminist statement than the narrative resolution. Phelps's "true story," she says, came to her through her washerwoman, not from any of the number of male authors who tell of the queen's shame. This rejection both of the male voice and of class privileging is in itself a comment on the original story and a means of achieving truth about female characters. Phelps writes:

> Who can capture the where, the how, the wherefore of a train of fancy? Was it because I thought of Guenever that I heard the story? Or because I heard the story that I thought of Guenever? My washwoman told it, coming in that bitter day at twilight and sitting by the open fire, as I had bidden her, for rest and warmth. What should

> *she* know of the Bulfinch and Ellis and Tennyson and Dunlop, that had fallen from my lap upon the cricket at her feet, that she should sit, with hands across her draggled knees, and tell me such a story? Or were Dunlop and the rest untouched upon the library shelves till after she had told it? Whether the legend drew me to the fact, or the fact impelled me to the legend? Indeed, why should I know? It is enough that I heard the story. She told it in her way. I, for lack of her fine, realistic manner, must tell it in my own.

Phelps thus declares her version to be "the true story of Guenever the Queen," much as Hervey has her Merlin proclaim that the distorted image of Morgan le Fay is set right by the true account that he has locked in St. Stephen's Church.

In Phelps's redaction, Arthur—translated here into a master carpenter—is called "the blameless king." But obviously Phelps lays some of the blame for Guenever's actions upon him, for he fails to appreciate the delicacy and impulsiveness of her nature. Of late, Phelps says, Arthur "was often dull . . . what with being out of work so much, and the foot he lamed with a rusty nail." Arthur's dullness extends to his understanding of his wife's needs. At times he can hardly be more mistaken about what she wants. When Guenever has a toothache, Arthur's advice is merely to "Take some drops." But, as Phelps writes,

> There was nothing Guenever wanted to take. She wanted, in fact, to be taken; to be caught and gathered to her husband's safe, broad breast; to be held against his faithful heart; to be fondled and crooned over and cuddled. She would have her aching head imprisoned in his healthy hands. And if he should think to kiss the agonizing cheek, as she would kiss a woman's cheek if she loved her and she had the toothache? But Arthur never thought! Men were so dull at things. Only women knew how to take care of one another. Only women knew the infinite fine languages of love. A man was tender when he thought of it, in a blunt, broad way.

Phelps's Guenever is mismated not, as in Tennyson, because Arthur is so far above the average man that he is unable to understand human needs and desires, but rather because he is typical of the average man who, for Phelps, is unable to understand a woman's needs and desires. Arthur "supposed, if she had the toothache, she wouldn't want to be touched. He knew he shouldn't. So, not knowing what else to do, he just limped royally about and got the supper, like a dear old

dull king as he was." Launcelot—"the young bricklayer to whom Arthur and Guenever had rented the spare room when the hard times came on"—is more active in trying to help her; he goes to the druggist for laudanum to treat the pain. Unfortunately, Guenever cannot tolerate the medication, and so it is useless. Similarly, Arthur is unable to give even a simple compliment. "Secretly he liked to see Guenever in the bird-of-paradise chair, with the moody firelight upon her; but he had never said so—it was not Arthur's 'way.' Launcelot, now, for instance had said something to that effect several times."

In Phelps's "true story," as Guenever departs with her lover, she hears an old gossip saying, "Guenever has fled with Launcelot. The Queen has left the King. All the world will know it by to-morrow." Immediately she feels pangs of guilt. There comes to her "a revelation awful as some that might shock a soul upon the day of doom . . . that she was no longer a bewildered or a pitiable, but an evil creature." She finds herself in a stormy wilderness with only Launcelot, who provides no comfort. A voice tells her she can never be clean, but she is unsure whether the voice belongs to Launcelot or to "the deathly wind." When she says "Perhaps I have been dreaming or have been ill. Let me go home at once to the King!" the voice, "which seemed neither of Launcelot nor of the wind, but yet akin to both," tells her that "there is no mistake," and that "you are not dreaming and you can never return to the King. The thing that is done is done. Sorrow and longing are dead to help you. Agony and repentance are feeble friends. Neither man nor Nature can wash away a stain." But then another vision appears to her:

> It seemed then suddenly to the kneeling woman, that He whose body and blood were broken for tempted souls appeared to seek her out across the desolated moor. The Man whose stainless lips were first to touch the cup of the Holy Grael, which all poor souls should after Him go seeking up and down upon the earth, stood in the pure white snow, and, smiling, spoke to her.
>
> "*Though your sins*," he said, "*are scarlet, they shall be white.*"

Having begged divine forgiveness, Guenever apparently receives it. But in a striking reversal, almost as if the word of Christ cannot be trusted, she finds no redemption. She is in the same position towards Christ that she is towards Arthur in Tennyson's *Idylls*: "she groveled on the ground where the sacred Feet had stood, which now were vanished from her. Wretched woman that she was! Who would deliver her from this bondage to her life's great holy love? If Arthur would but open the door for her in the fair distance, where the palace windows shone; if he

would take a single step towards her where she kneeled within the wilderness"; but "the King took no step toward the wilderness. The King was mute as death and cold as his own white soul. On Arthur's throne was never more a place for Guenever." Guenever remains groveling, wretched because she must depend on Christ, who seems to deceive her, or on another man, Arthur, who is cold and uncaring, to deliver her from her bondage. And neither does so. It is up to the narrator, or the washerwoman who is her source, to give the Guenever of the tale what little relief she can obtain. Despite the statement of Launcelot, another unreliable male voice—if indeed it is his voice—that what has happened is no dream, Guenever wakes to find herself in Arthur's sheltering arms. She has been redeemed by the storyteller's suggestion that her escape with Launcelot was only a nightmare induced by too much laudanum. Thus the Queen can wake, morally unblemished, to a loving Arthur.

This ending raises Guenever from the convent floor and eradicates her "disgrace, exile, and despair." Yet the price she pays is certainly high: a tepid relationship with a man who holds typically nineteenth-century attitudes. By accepting the limitations of such an arrangement, she attains a modicum of peace and respectability but not the Holy Grail of female fulfillment, which Phelps's fiction suggests is an ideal not yet achievable by women in this world.

Another important figure in the development of the character of the queen, William Morris, was among the first writers to give Guinevere her own voice. By allowing her to speak for herself, Morris afforded genuine insight into her psyche and into her society. In Morris's poem "The Defence of Guinevere," the queen uses her wits to delay Arthur's death verdict. But, for all of her rhetorical cleverness, she remains a damsel in distress who does not act independently but instead awaits rescue by her knight in shining armor.

Later women poets also utilized the device of woman's narration to explore the queen's real position as a woman married to a king who places political above personal affairs. For example, in Sara Teasdale's "Guenevere," a monologue in the tradition of Morris's "Defence of Guenevere," the queen complains of being "branded for a single fault"; describes vividly her meeting with Lancelot; and reveals, with great emotion, her frustration with those who expect her to play a particular role, to "be right fair, / A little kind, and gownèd wondrously." Teasdale's *accent grave* on the *e* in "gownèd" highlights, simultaneously, the word itself and the artificiality of the role into which Guinevere is forced. The whole poem, in fact, can be read as a woman's rejection of the demand to conform. Woman is valued, the speaker of the poem seems to be saying, not for her own ideas or emotions but for her doll-like elegance. And when she fails to live up to expecta-

tions, she is branded, like the Guinevere in Phelps's story, a "hated thing," even by the beggars and kitchen maids.

Dorothy Parker's "Guinevere at Her Fireside" presents a very different kind of woman. Her thoroughly modern and more cynical queen respects the king but is unhappy that her bed has become just "a thing to kneel beside." Arthur's lack of attention to her because he is too involved with ruling, his inability to champion her because he is king (a motif found, for example, in Malory), is translated into sexual terms. As Parker's Guinevere explains in her own words, she decided to turn to Lancelot in order to compensate for Arthur's neglect. (Tristram, in her estimation the better catch, "was busied otherwhere.")

The tradition of giving voice to Guinevere is continued by contemporary writers like Wendy Mnookin. The very title of Mnookin's *Guenever Speaks* underscores the fact that the volume is a first-person account of the events that affect the queen. And that acccount is significantly different from the usual male-oriented versions of her story: Mnookin's poems treat subjects that are far removed from or neglected in more conventional tellings. In one poem, Guenever recalls a childhood incident; in others she prays for a child and then loses the baby. "Guenever Retreats to Almesbury After Arthur's Death" describes the simple sensuous act of working in the convent's herb garden and the subsequent modest activities of Guenever's day, which are charged with emotion and meaning because of the contrast they offer to her former life. And in the poem "Guenever Returns from the Garden," the queen declares her intention never to leave the nunnery or to look again on Lancelot—not because of an asceticism she has learned through the consequences of their love but because she "cannot lose him / again."

The sense of love of life and its pleasures that makes the confinement in Almesbury so tragic for Mnookin's Guenever is also evident in "Guinevere in Almesbury Convent" by Lizette Woodworth Reese, a poem published a century earlier and told not in the queen's voice but with some of the same empathy for her. Guinevere, though retired to the convent, is not yet resigned to her life there. In the opening stanza, as she "pores the missal on her knee," she catches by chance a sound or a smell that frees her "From the long days of fast and prayer; / And all about comes Camelot."The beauty of the Almesbury lilies or the song of the nightingales that Guinevere continues to notice enhances the pathos of her situation; and the reader realizes that she remains a woman with a great love for wonder, a woman who is ill-suited to her new life in the nunnery.

While many works focus on other figures, Guinevere is still the central female character in the Arthurian tradition, just as Arthur is the central male char-

acter. Therefore, it is not surprising that in addition to the poems discussed above, a spate of recent novels by women have retold the story of Camelot from the queen's perspective (the device of female narration in popular contemporary fiction having been popularized by Vera Chapman in her "Three Damosels" trilogy—*The Green Knight* [1975], *The King's Damosel* [1976], and *King Arthur's Daughter* [1976]). The trilogies by Sharan Newman (*Guinevere* [1981], *The Chessboard Queen* [1983], and *Guinevere Evermore* [1985]) and by Persia Woolley (*Child of the Northern Spring* [1987], *Queen of the Summer Stars* [1990], and *Guinevere: The Legend in Autumn* [1991]), like Nancy McKenzie's historical novels (*The Child Queen: The Tale of Guinevere and King Arthur* [1994] and *The High Queen: The Tale of Guinevere and King Arthur Continues* [1995])—offer Guinevere's own views of her youth, her difficulties adjusting to the sweeping and radical social changes inherent in Arthur's reign, and her attempts to maintain her own independence, particularly in the face of patriarchal attitudes toward women.

Of course, Guinevere's story, like Arthur's, ends tragically. Perhaps it is this fact that prompts so many women to set all or part of their retellings in Avalon, a place of refuge and escape. For novelists from Anya Seton in her *Avalon* (1965) to the pseudonymous Mary J. Jones, author of the "lesbian Arthurian romance" *Avalon* (1991) in which Gwenhyfar's daughter becomes the Lady of the Lake and defends Avalon in the name of the Goddess against the evil queen Annis, the island of Avalon is both magical and mystical. Modern readers are probably most familiar with Marion Zimmer Bradley's presentation of the enchanted isle as a sanctuary where women have real power in her wildly popular novel *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) and its sequel *Lady of Avalon* (1997), which offers a similarly strong feminine presence as it spans the creation of Avalon and foreshadows the birth of Arthur.

But Avalon also figures in the writings of nineteenth-century women. In "The Prophecy of Merlin" (1802), Anne Bannerman depicts Avalon as the place where Arthur is destined to remain until it is time to fulfill Merlin's prophecy of his return. As Arthur arrives at the "charmed Isle," he is greeted by a beautiful woman who gives him a cup from which to drink. As he does, he sees in the woman's face "a demon-smile"; but she is demonic only in the sense that she is otherworldy. In fact, she is performing a necessary function by helping Arthur to sleep—albeit for a long time—and thus to prepare for his eventual return. The poem ends on an appropriately peaceful note: nothing reaches Arthur's "burial place" except "the murmurs of the wave."

A much more unusual use of Avalon (or Avillion) appears in the story "Avillion," written in 1853 by Dinah Maria Mulock Craik. A newlywed nineteenth-century couple, the sickly Wilfred Mayer and his wife Lilias Hay, embark on an

ocean voyage during which they meet Herr Foerster, a German physician. Foerster is nearly monomaniacal in his quest for "the Island of the Blest," which he has been seeking at sea for ten years and where he believes he will find happiness and eternal life. Despite Wilfred's reservations, Lilias consults the physician about her husband's illness; and "she had her way, for it was the right way." Foerster gives a "rare drug" to Wilfred, who seems to die (although he never loses awareness of the events that follow, including his own burial at sea).

When Wilfred wakes, he finds himself in "the Happy Isles" of Greek mythology, where—in a conversation with Ulysses—he learns that "there was no to-morrow," no thought of the future, no goals or striving. But, realizing that he is different from those who inhabit this region, Wilfred decides he must leave. Seeing the moon create a "glimmering bridge of light" on the water, he determines to follow that bridge, whether it be "to Infinity or Nothingness," and he begins walking on the water away from the isle. Soon he sees another island, representing "another sphere of being," whereon is built a splendid palace.

As the light vanishes from beneath his feet, Wilfred sinks into the water. In answer to his prayer for aid, a boat appears and he is pulled from the sea by its pilot, who turns out to be Sir Galahad. Apparently, Wilfred has reached the isle of Avillion "where dwell many good Christian knights, with those knights of Faërie who serve God." This is a middle point in what is almost an evolutionary process, for Wilfred will pass on to "Eden-land, or the Happy Isle," a place surprisingly like the real world, or at least like a somewhat idealized version of the real world, where he feels the chill of autumn and discovers that the inhabitants perform productive labor.

Avillion is a step towards this third stage, for in the isle of Arthur, as Merlin tells Wilfred, there "is intermixed just so much of evil and of suffering as will purify and lift us one stage nearer to divine perfection." This view of Avillion as a stage in the improvement of its inhabitants is certainly unique, since traditionally there is neither sorrow nor suffering on the isle. But in Craik's Avillion—unlike the classical Isle of the Blest—people have desires: Merlin is still tempted by visions of Vivienne, and, except for Galahad, each of the inhabitants faces some kind of trial.

A significant aspect of "Avillion" is its portrayal of some of the women of the Arthurian legend. In his book *King Arthur's Laureate*, J. Phillip Eggers points out a remarkable anticipation of Tennyson's "Guinevere" idyll in Craik's depiction of a stern Arthur confronting the sinful Guinevere and sees this parallel as a sign of "the distinctively Victorian sentiments" of the idyll because they are so close to those in "this popular piece of fiction." But it may be more than just a case of two writers reflecting parallel sentiments. It may be that in his depiction of some of the women of the *Idylls* Tennyson actually used Craik's piece as a source. It may

even be that he got the notion of dividing the women of Camelot into the true and the false from the references in Craik's story to "the false queen" and again to the "false queen, false wife, false woman." In fact, the tale of Elaine might have suggested the frame for Tennyson's idyll of the Lily Maid, whose basic story duplicates some of the details of Craik's account. When Elaine says, "it is no more Sir Lancelot's fault / Not to love me, than it is mine to love / Him," her statement is similar to that of Craik's Elaine, who says to Lancelot: "Nay: it was no sin of thine. I worshipped thee, as one should only worship Heaven." And Craik's reference to the "cruel scorn which, knowing her pure love, instead of requital offered pitiful gold" may have been reworked into Lancelot's offer to Elaine in the idyll that should she marry a poor knight, he would "Endow you with broad land and territory / Even to the half my realm beyond the seas."

The brief description of Vivienne in Craik's account seems even more likely to have provided material for Tennyson. Craik's Vivienne is a young temptress, of whom the elderly Merlin says, "Dost thou not feel her young breath, that once came upon my already wrinkled brow like the breath of spring?" And the "lithe form" of Craik's Vivienne is reminiscent of the "lithe arm" that Tennyson's Vivien tightens and loosens serpentlike around Merlin's neck, just as Merlin's memory of Vivienne's "light laugh" that he hears just "as the spell-closed rock shut down upon me" suggests the scornful shriek of "O fool" that echoes in Merlin's ears at the moment he is entrapped in the oak in Tennyson's poem. Tennyson's reinterpretation of Merlin as an aged man, not as the young man or child typically depicted in literature of the Middle Ages, may also have been based on his knowledge of "Avillion."

Even if Craik's influence on Tennyson is not as direct as such strong parallels would indicate, her view of the Arthurian women is nonetheless as interesting as it is distinctive. Morgan le Fay, for example, is a character ignored by Tennyson and generally avoided by other male Victorian poets. But Craik gives her "Morgue la Faye" an important and unusual role as a figure in whom "woman's soul" shines "tearfully in her majestic eyes." She reminds the narrator of his beloved Lilias (though at the time he cannot remember enough of his earthly life to know of whom she reminds him). When Morgue looks on Wilfred, "a gleam of womanly pity softened the steel-like brightness of her eyes." Most notably, she restores his memory of the world he has left behind. In contrast to her villainy in some medieval works and in J. Comyns Carr's play *King Arthur*, one of only a few Victorian pieces to treat her, Craik's Morgue la Faye is both healer and wise woman.

Though the story of "Avillion" ends as a dream that Wilfred experiences while under the influence of the German doctor's medicine, the dream concludes with Wilfred's forgiveness of Foerster after he hears his story in the Happy Isle.