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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Arthurian Imagination in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Art

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### **Arthur and the Gothic Revival?**

As Debra Mancoff notes in her authoritative work, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* (1990), the production and fate of art depicting episodes from Arthurian legend were tied firmly to the legend's fluctuating reception and significance. With the legend having "lapsed into scepticism and burlesque" (24) as early as the sixteenth century, visual depictions of Arthurian figures largely disappeared from the canon of artistic production.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, eighteenth-century Britain has been presented as a period largely devoid of Arthurian art (Lacy and Ashe 493), and important studies, such as Christine Poulson's *The Quest for the Grail* covering the period 1840 to 1920, assess only a modest range of pre-Victorian works for context. The study of important and well-known examples of Arthurian art from the Victorian period has therefore displaced any sustained discussion of earlier works from what is considered to be a "lull" in the subject.

Mancoff has also argued that despite languishing in obscurity, Arthur and Arthurian legend found an easy home in what has been termed the "Gothic Revival" (Girouard 16–28):

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<sup>1</sup> See also Girouard 178–96, esp. 178.

The Arthurian Revival was the major monument of the Political phase of the Gothic Revival. Its symbolic language and expressive sentiment were the cumulative result of the preceding generations of interpretative exploration. . . . The long course of the Gothic Revival had transformed medieval reference into intelligible signs and had taught the general audience to read them. The ideational legacy of the Gothic Revival, through revitalization, interpretation, and habituation, renewed the relevance of the Arthurian tradition. (Mancoff 11)

Here, though, the Gothic Revival referred to by Mancoff is that of the nineteenth century; a revival separated in terms of form, ornament, meaning, and cultural overtones from its earlier iteration in the eighteenth century. This revival, as contemporary and most modern critics have asserted, was rooted not in Arthur, but, instead, in architecture and applied design.

The apparent disconnect between Arthurian legend and the Gothic Revival can be seen in Charles Locke Eastlake's *A History of the Gothic Revival* (1872): the first published history of the Gothic Revival in England. The subject of his enquiry is firmly of an architectural nature and representative of how the exponents of Gothic did not take into account Arthurian legend, even in the nineteenth century, contrary to Mancoff's thesis. In the Preface to this history, he writes,

for some years past it has seemed to me that the causes which brought about, and the events which attended, one of the most remarkable revolutions in national art that this country has seen were worthy of some record, if only to serve as a link between the past and future history of English Architecture. (vi)

Some mention is made of sculpture and painted decoration throughout Eastlake's *History*, but Arthurian art is certainly not within the purview of his Whiggish narrative; the built environment was instead of paramount concern. Thus, whilst the Gothic Revival extended beyond architecture to articulate and encompass the knightly virtues of chivalry with the attendant display of arms, armor, and heraldry—in themselves compatible with Arthurian legend—as exemplified by the interiors at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire, and Abbotsford, Roxburghshire, Arthur cannot be seen to figure consistently in the revival (Lindfield, “Hung Round”; Anstruther; Girouard 88–110).

Exploring Arthurian art's complex and seemingly contradictory relationship with the Gothic Revival, this essay demonstrates that the movement's medieval spirit had far reaching consequences, and that “modern Gothic” art depicting Arthurian legend was, indeed, produced from the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, whilst Arthurian legend was absent from the revival of medieval architecture in eighteenth-century Britain, this revival, combined with the medieval origins of the Arthurian legend itself, influenced the production of some very important, but limited number of Arthurian images presented in a Gothic mode. Below, I complicate and flesh-out our understanding of Arthurian art by locating a range of Victorian works across different media, including wall paintings and photographs, within the context of earlier, eighteenth-century examples, some of which have been almost entirely overlooked in Arthurian studies. I show that there existed, contrary to current thought, a number of important manifestations of Arthurian imagery in the eighteenth century, and that such art was located within an interest of the historical “Gothic” past rather than being an essential component of the Gothic Revival. Work by William Kent, John Hamilton Mortimer, and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Mancoff 9–11; Whitaker 176–77.

especially Thomas Barritt provide exceptions to the rule linking eighteenth-century Arthuriana and the visual language of the Gothic Revival. They also provide context for prominent and lesser-known Victorian works, ranging from William Dyce's frescoes and pre-Raphaelite Arthurian art to the photography of Julia Margaret Cameron.

### **Eighteenth-Century Antecedents**

Whilst the eighteenth century has been considered a period devoid of Arthurian art, a number of important and hitherto overlooked examples were produced before 1800 and they provide some context for later nineteenth-century examples. William Kent's illustrations to *The Faerie Queene* are notable, early examples with figures depicted in scenes dominated by Gothic structures. *Arthegal fights the Sarazin Polente*, for example, includes a castellated fortification and a Gothic bridge (**Fig.1**) as contextual, historically grounding features that locate this scene within a generically old, medieval past (Lindfield, "Hung Round" 74–76).<sup>3</sup>

<FIGURE 1 HERE> This and the remainder of Kent's sketches for *The Faerie Queene* are preparatory drawings: engravings were made after them and these were published eventually in the 1751 edition of the text. The most significant Arthurian painting produced in the eighteenth century is, in fact, *Discovery of Prince Arthur's Tomb* by John Hamilton Mortimer (1740–79), a work that is now lost, but which is preserved in a preparatory watercolor sketch and later engravings (**Fig.2**). <FIGURE 2 HERE> Mortimer seems an unusual figure to break the Arthurian "silence" in mid eighteenth-century British painting given that he is known

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<sup>3</sup> Kent's drawings are at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and include *Arthegal Fights* and *The Redcross Knight*. These illustrations were not published until 1751 and can be found in the edition of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* by Stephen Wright and John Brindley.

primarily as a painter of contemporary figures and landscapes.<sup>4</sup> Yet his Arthurian painting—the discovery of Arthur’s tomb—is nevertheless consistent with some of his other history paintings, such as *St Paul Preaching to the Ancient Druids in Britain*, exhibited in 1764; both paintings demonstrate a shared interest in and treatment of history (be it real or imagined) (Myrone 42–43). Mortimer also painted and exhibited, in 1778, *Sir Arthegal, the Knight of Justice, with Talus, the Iron Man* (**Fig.3**), a monumental, larger than life-size painting (2.43x1.46m) based upon Edmund Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene* illustrating Sir Arthegal holding the invincible sword, Chrysaor. **<FIGURE 3 HERE>** Like *St Paul Preaching*, Mortimer’s *Discovery of Prince Arthur’s Tomb* and *Sir Arthegal* depict their scenes as heroic history pieces: this type of art had been considered the most prestigious since the Renaissance, and this elevated category of painting, courtesy of its reliance upon knowledge and history, continued to attract prestige in Georgian Britain. Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), in his *Discourses on Art*, wrote that “a painter of portraits retains the individual likeness: a painter of history shows the man by showing his action” (Johnson 103–04). Thus, Reynolds differentiates between “low” and “high” art; Jonathan Richardson (1667–1745) in *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1725) similarly advanced the prestige of history painting by stating that “as to Paint a History, a Man ought to have the main qualities of a good Historian, and something more; he must yet go higher, and have the Talents requisite to a good Poet” (18–19). Mortimer’s *Discovery of Prince Arthur’s Tomb*, and Arthurian art in general, thus qualified on intellectual, didactic, and historical terms as “high” art, even though this art was visualizing myth. This apparent dichotomy is resolved, however, due to the flexible definition of authenticity in the eighteenth century, where the imagined past was treated as actual, tangible history and could be represented visually as such (Clements).

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<sup>4</sup> Examples include *George Thompson, his Wife and (?) his Sister-in-Law*, circa 1766–68 (N06158), and *Rocky Landscape with Banditti*, circa 1770–80 (T00342), both in the Collection of Tate.

While Mortimer's painting stands out as one of the best visual examples demonstrating the eighteenth-century interest in Arthurian legend, it was not the only example of Arthuriana created at the time. King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and Merlin appealed to Thomas Barritt (1743–1820), an English antiquary who has attracted relatively little scholarly attention until recently (Lindfield, "Lancashire's Armoury" and "Heraldic Antiquarianism"). Working as a saddler out of his shop on Hanging Ditch near to the center of medieval Manchester, Barritt was interested especially in heraldry and the members of the aristocracy in and around Lancashire.<sup>5</sup> In his earliest traced manuscript, now in the collection of the Bodleian Libraries (MS Eng. Misc. e. 994), a clear thread exploring Arthurian legend emerges as part of his broader and burgeoning interest in the history and development of heraldry. The reason for his interest in King Arthur and Arthurian figures is quite clear: Barritt traces a number of cultural phenomena, especially heraldry, back to the Middle Ages and the legend of Arthur and his knights.

Not only does Barritt write about Arthurian legend, but he also illustrates the protagonists and related material in the manner of antiquarian and medieval Arthurian texts. Firstly, he depicts the heraldic shield of King Arthur as the seventh member of the Eight Worthies: "King Arthur," he writes, "had his shield thirteen Crowns 3.3.3.3.&1" (folio 22v). The thirteen gold crowns, which Barritt depicts on a field of azure (Whitaker 138), is taken from a tradition first introduced in the fourteenth century that probably confused *treis* with *treise* and saw the arms' crowns increase from three (Pickford),<sup>6</sup> as depicted on the Nine Heroes Tapestry at the

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<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of his manuscripts are now held by Chetham's Library, Manchester.

<sup>6</sup> This change, perhaps by accident, meant that each crown represented one of Arthur's kingdoms. Arthur's arms were further confused and represented with thirty crowns in British Library, MS Royal 20 A II 4r. See Brault 46.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, to thirteen (*King Arthur*). The exact time in which Arthur is claimed to have lived is subject to speculation (Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1154/5) placed his reign to 455–75, whereas the date of his Battle at Mount Badon, according to *Annales Cambriae*, was 516/18; Archibald and Putter xv). This speaks to the flexible nature of the legend and how treating it as “precise” history is problematic. What can be said for certain, however, is that heraldry did not exist in the period that such texts claim Arthur lived, and not as depicted in medieval and post-medieval Arthurian art. His arms exist because, along with the other Knights of the Round Table, he had been retrospectively ascribed them in the later Middle Ages. Arthurian arms, which attest to their inventors’ knowledge of the formalized traditions of late-medieval heraldry, were recorded in illustrated lists, reproduced in manuscript volumes, and circulated widely in the high to late Middle Ages. Examples include MS Typ 131 (**Fig.4**) at Cambridge’s Houghton Library, Harvard, which is purported to have been written and compiled by Jacques d’Armagnac, Duc de Nemours, circa 1470 (27–36). **<FIGURE 4 HERE>** Barritt’s depiction of Arthurian arms in his own manuscript is thus consistent with Arthurian figures’ heraldic augmentation in the medieval period.

Barritt’s next mention of Arthur and his knights appears alongside an entry concerning “the Antient Order of the renowned Knights of the Round Table.”<sup>7</sup> He writes,

it is said by many writers that the order of the Garter was instituted in imitation of the Round Table, but I am [certain] I can give no great assurance of it; only I believe it probable enough the beginning of them both agreeing also in some kind of Analogy.

This of the Round Table (for so much as is remaining in History) appears to me to be

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<sup>7</sup> See Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Eng. Misc. e. 994 47v (text), 48r (illustration).



have been the most noble in the world either before or since for any thing I can understand. And Pity it were the memory of it should perish as it is almost being buried in the metamorphosis of ridiculous fables and by what means characters with the shadowy reputation of a Romance in the words of many & indeed most men. (47v)

The accompanying illustration depicts Arthur and eight knights at a round table; Arthur's shield, displaying twelve of his thirteen crowns (the thirteenth is off the edge of the composition), lies in the front right, with the remainder of the knights' shields conspicuously absent, or blank (**Fig.5**); **<FIGURE 5 HERE>** Barritt here is curiously disengaged with the art that he is so interested in and about which his manuscript notebook is concerned; perhaps he was not familiar with lists of the knights' arms, such as those found in MS Typ 131, or, perhaps, he did not wish to divert attention away from Arthur. Irrespective of the reason for the armorial omissions, this is an important demonstration of the antiquarian tradition of linking text and image to offer a visual interpretation of, and frame of reference for what is being discussed. These illustrations also provide secondary information, such as a distinct hierarchy differentiating Arthur from the remainder of his knights: it is impossible to overlook Arthur, whose sword and crown draw attention to him.

Barritt's next Arthurian image in this manuscript comes six folios after his depiction of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, and presents Merlin within a landscape (**Fig.6**). He writes that,

the ensuing portrait is in Memory of the Learned British Prophet Merlin whom King Arthur consulted in all his undertakings & reverenc'd him as a Druid this Antient

Hermit lived at Carmarthen in Wales where he lived a devout life in his Cave or Hermitage of which there is a representation next to his portrait. (51v)

Depicted as a mendicant, Merlin appears in front of a hermitage not too dissimilar to the type of wooden building advanced by James Hall in his essay presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, “On the Origin and Principles of Gothic Architecture.”<sup>8</sup> **<FIGURE 6 HERE>** Hall argued that buildings made from pieces of thin wooden branches were the origin of medieval Gothic architecture: here, dressed as a medieval friar and placed in front of a proto-medieval Gothic building, Merlin is located within a generic “Gothic” past that clearly postdates the claimed Arthurian period. Such anachronisms continue in a subsequent depiction of Merlin, this time in front of an imaginary castellated structure that, once again, relates to medieval castle architecture rather than to the architecture of the supposedly “real” Arthurian world around the sixth century. The caption, written in Barritt’s personal cipher, reads “arise my son all worldly things defy / if this thou to thou shalt be bleset on high” (84r). In this instance, he presents an imaginary scene in which Merlin encourages a knight to rise from rest. Barritt does not show the legend to be part of the Gothic Revival, but rather that they are complementary with one another; he thus Gothicizes Arthurian myth and locates it within a generic “ancient” time.

Another imaginative scene appears later in the manuscript depicting a battle between two knights where a selection of weaponry lies at the foot of their prancing horses, and a trumpeter signals the engagement. Indeed, the castle included in this drawing is a distinctly Georgian caricature of medieval architecture—a cursory recreation of Gothic based upon a

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<sup>8</sup> Barritt’s drawing is undated, and it almost certainly pre-dates Hall’s essay of 1798, but the similarities with Hall’s plates are uncanny, and more probably reflect similar conceptions of early and crude Gothic.

limited array of architectural forms including battlements and a portcullis—and Barritt’s caption reads: “Sr Lancelot in [sic] his way to Manchs’t [sic] defeats the champion of Shrewsbury” (85r). In all cases, the presentation of these figures, their clothing, and the architecture are only vaguely medieval. The loose “Gothic-ness” of these scenes is similar to Kent’s illustrations for *The Faerie Queene*, and they are thus very different to Mortimer’s *Discovery of Prince Arthur’s Tomb* where the figures adopt dress found in Renaissance history paintings. In some limited number of cases, then, it is possible to see Arthurian art filtered through the lens of the British Gothic Revival and Gothic imagination in the eighteenth century, but this was hardly a widespread occurrence: the Gothic Revival was in no way anchored upon Arthurian legend (Mancoff 10–26).

### **Nineteenth-Century Murals: Arthur’s “Bursting” Onto the Artistic Scene**

The most significant catalyst for Victorian Arthuriana was the destruction of the Palace of Westminster by fire on 16 October 1834 (Shenton, *The Day*). It was rebuilt following a competition won by Charles Barry (1795–1860); Barry was assisted by A. W. N. Pugin (1812–52), the prodigious Victorian Gothic Revivalist and the new Palace’s exterior and interior were overwhelmingly Gothic (Atterbury and Wainwright, Atterbury). Crucially, the competition to select the new building’s architect also specified that the parliamentary complex should be either Gothic or Elizabethan (House of Commons 1).<sup>9</sup> Although this decision was not universally accepted, it had merit; as Julian R. Jackson’s 1837 essay asserts,

Gothic is eminently English in every respect: by its early adoption and very general use for ages, and by its having been brought to the greatest perfection in this country. It is

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<sup>9</sup> See also Shenton, *Mr Barry’s War*.

the architecture of our history and our romance. Our kings of old held court in Gothic structures. In buildings of a similar character our British barons held their lordly revels, or, in times of feudal warfare, aided by their kinsmen and valiant vassals, withstood the assaults of rival chiefs. In Gothic halls, our ancestors met in the council to frame laws, and weigh affairs of state. The seat of every great event of England's olden times is connected, in some way or other, with the pointed arch. (46)<sup>10</sup>

This eminently British structure's interior was made suitably nationalistic by its Gothic architectural fittings, furniture, and even wallpaper. Arthurian art was also part of this scheme. Given the romantic treatment and depiction of Arthurian legend in nineteenth-century art, Jackson's presentation of Gothic as an historic style connected indelibly with the past was highly relevant to such choices made for the building.

A Fine Arts Commission was established in 1841 to supervise the Palace's decoration. Chaired by Prince Albert, the Commission wished for the art to be accessible, and that it ought to champion and celebrate England's history and literature. The Scottish painter William Dyce (1806–64) was chosen to paint the Queen's Robing Room with scenes taken from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* in an historic fresco medium (**Fig.7**). **<FIGURE 7 HERE>** Not wishing to be limited by Arthur's biography, or, indeed, the actual age to which Arthur is supposed to date, the frescos struck out from these seemingly linear and historic terms. Writing in July 1848, Dyce questions,

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<sup>10</sup> For the Englishness of Gothic, see Frew.

Whether I ought to adopt a plan as would enable me to introduce adventures of all the great personages of the Romance, or confine myself to the “Mort d’Arthur”:—in other words—whether the Series of works ought to be historically consecutive, or to consist of a number of pictured adventures of Arthur and his Knights, forming a series only with respect to their allegorical or moral signification. (qtd. in Whitaker 179)<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, he wished to emphasize the allegorical and moral power of Arthur and his knights. He writes,

I should propose to consider the Companions of the Round Table as personifications of certain moral qualities and select for representation such adventures of Arthur and his Knights as best exemplified the courage magnanimity, courtesy temperance fidelity, devoutness and other qualities, which make up the ancient idea of Chivalric greatness.

(qtd. in Whitaker 179)

Dyce’s frescos depict the chivalric values of hospitality, generosity, mercy, religion, and courtesy, and are of such a large scale as to reflect their status as history paintings. The narratives’ representation and reordering only served to add to and enhance their intellectual qualities. He also offered *Piety: The Knights of the Round Table about to Depart in Quest of the Holy Grail*; however, it was rejected. This proposed scene presents all those characteristics that came to epitomize Arthurian art, including a sense of medievalism (not necessarily codified as Gothic, with architecture, dress, or accouterments obviously “ancient” and old fashioned), and these qualities are presented in his executed work at Westminster,

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<sup>11</sup> See also Boase.

such as *Generosity: King Arthur, Unhorsed, Spared by Sir Lancelot*.<sup>12</sup> The completion of Dyce's Arthurian cycle was tortuous: he complained about the difficulties in painting frescoes only during the English summer; the dampness and dirtiness of the walls; the practicalities of getting up and down from the scaffolding; and the tedium of painting chain mail (of which there was a lot) (Boase 351). Dyce worked for fifteen years on the cycle, and he died in 1864 leaving his last mural, *Hospitality: The Admission of Sir Tristram to the Fellowship of the Round Table*, unfinished.<sup>13</sup>

Dyce's Arthurian fresco cycle, showing the relevance of the episodes to Victorian society, was an important moment in the development of Arthurian art. The figures and architectural backgrounds to the paintings reveal the influence of historic examples and are a branch of "pre-Gothic" medievalism. Dyce, in contrast to Barritt and Kent, used Romanesque-style architecture, for example in *Religion* and *Hospitality*, to locate the scenes within a period of time closer to which Arthurian legend is set. Dyce's paintings feature bold, round-headed Romanesque architecture and the frescos pre-Gothic character is emphasized by the filigree ornament framing them that Pugin took from late medieval Gothic buildings, such as the adjacent and highly ornate Perpendicular Gothic Henry VII Chapel at Westminster Abbey.<sup>14</sup> Whilst Dyce's pre-Gothic medievalist style is clearly very different in form, style, and appearance to Pugin's Gothic work in the Robing Room, they are nevertheless related: the cycle's promotion of Arthurian legend and the moral virtues of chivalry tally with the rehabilitated, morally virtuous style of Gothic architecture promoted by Pugin and outlined in

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<sup>12</sup> The watercolor version exists at Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, D 4789.

<sup>13</sup> This was completed by Charles West Cope (1811–90).

<sup>14</sup> This contrast between Romanesque and Gothic architecture is further underlined in the room's decoration by a series of pre-Gothic bas-relief panels by Henry Hugh Armstead (1828–1905) narrating Malory.

detail in *Contrasts: Or, a Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day* (1836/41). The relationship between form and meaning at this time, therefore, is complex.

### **Pre-Raphaelite Arthurian Art**

Formed in 1848 London in response to the Royal Academy's promotion of the late-Italian Renaissance master Raphael (1483–1520), the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was the most active group of artists to embrace and produce Arthurian art in Victorian England. Its members also pushed back against the then popular genre paintings, and, instead, valued the natural style advocated by John Ruskin (1819–1900).<sup>15</sup> With a concerted effort towards achieving realism in their paintings, there was a natural overlap with Ruskin who celebrated Gothic for its expression of artistic creativity. The Arthurian paintings produced by the Pre-Raphaelites are too numerous to list and assess here, so a couple will be cited as exemplary of their production. Their most significant Arthurian cycle can be found on the inside upper walls of the Oxford Union's debating chamber (now the library, **Fig.8**). **<FIGURE 8 HERE>**

The building was erected in a polychromed type of Victorian Gothic by Benjamin Woodward (1816–61) in 1856; the entrance tympanum from Frewin Court features a relief carving, designed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), depicting King Arthur and his knights and showing the feast that initiated the Grail Quest, and thus anticipates the Union's Arthurian murals from 1857. The tympanum's figural composition, centered around a table akin to that depicted in the Bibliothèque Nationale's FR. 343 (3r), reveals the Pre-Raphaelite dependence upon symbols, including a peacock representing pride, and bread and wine representing the

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<sup>15</sup> Prettejohn is one important source on this.

body and blood of Christ. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was involved heavily in the decorative scheme of the Oxford Union, and their involvement is retold by Rossetti:

Thinking of it only as his beautiful work and without taking into consideration the purpose it was intended for . . . I offered to paint figures of some kind in the blank spaces of the gallery window bays and another friend who was with us—William Morris—offered to do the second bay. (*The Letters* 405–06)

As recorded by Georgiana Burne-Jones (1840–1920), wife of the great Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98), these frescos were influenced by the source defining the nineteenth-century Arthurian Revival:

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. (116)

It is clear that the narrative's claimed historical fact was crucial to the Pre-Raphaelites and their decoration of this space. *Morte d'Arthur* provided not only the context for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's Arthurian work, but its nineteenth-century republication supplied them with a wealth of material.

Works by members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, as well as related artistic endeavors by William Morris (1834–96), repeatedly addressed Arthurian topics. Not least among these



are the prints illustrating the 1857 Moxon edition of Alfred Tennyson's *Poems*: Rossetti provided the models for *The Lady of Shalott* (page 75) and *Sir Galahad* (305); John Everett Millais supplied *St Agnes' Eve* (309); and William Holman Hunt also depicted *The Lady of Shalott* (67). Rossetti's 1860 watercolor *Arthur's Tomb* displays a number of characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's art: the medieval costume (including heraldry, shield, chain mail, simple painted surfaces on the tomb chest of Arthur), and drama—in this case the rejected advancement of Sir Lancelot to Guinevere. His *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanct Grael; but Sir Percival's Sister Died by the Way* (1864) is very similar to *Arthur's Tomb* in terms of the medievalized presentation of the characters. The dress, props, and saturated color are all of a medieval appearance, or associated with the medieval period in Victorian Britain. Rossetti (who claimed that Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* was one of the greatest books), combines two of Malory's scenes into one in this watercolor: Percival, at the center of the narrative, has achieved the Grail quest with his knights Galahad and Bors; and Percival's sister can be seen giving her life to save a woman (depicted lying down) who can be healed only by the blood of the Virgin.

The Scottish painter James Archer (1822–1904) specialized in themes from medieval literature and history, such as his *Emelye* (1866) from Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales." This eventually—perhaps inevitably, given the popularity of Arthurian themes and his pre-existing interest in "medievalized" art—extended to painting Arthurian scenes, such as *La Mort d'Arthur* (1860). The drama, realism, attention to fine detail, and historical nature of the iconographic scheme, including the dress, heraldry, and arms, all speak to the artistic traditions established by the Pre-Raphaelites. Further examples in this vein are plentiful, including Joseph Noël Paton's *Sir Galahad and an Angel* (1884–85), which celebrates the

textural characteristics of armor, and Frank Dicksee's *Chivalry* (1885), which has the added feature of salvation and rescue.<sup>16</sup>


### **Ancient Legend Redefined by a Modern Medium**


With the development of photography in the first half of the nineteenth century, a new medium was introduced into the Arthurian canon. But unlike painters, who could generate their art without the need for physical props to create and sustain the atmosphere and illusion of the Arthurian world, photographers, by the nature of the process, needed a repository of props to call upon. Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79), known for her large-scale and especially soft-focus photography, is one of the nineteenth century's most well-known and written about female photographers (Friedewald; Cox et al.). As already mentioned, Alfred Tennyson's Arthurian literature not only generated book illustrations, but also independent paintings. Cameron, living on the Isle of Wight, moved in elevated circles, and she was a neighbor of Tennyson's. Alive to the need to generate income to offset the costly business of taking and developing photographs, Cameron seized the opportunity when Tennyson, her neighbor, asked if she could produce a series of photographs to illustrate his *Idylls of the King*. This compendium of Tennyson's Arthurian poetry, published in the summer of 1859, attracted widespread applause, and contributed to the century's vogue for literary depictions of Arthur. As such, Cameron's photographs, re-presented as woodcut prints, became central to the Victorian visualization of Arthur. Tennyson's *Idylls* promoted Arthurian legend yet further and within a decade of its publication Arthurian imagery was inescapable across different contexts and spaces. Tennyson had transformed Arthur into a modern hero fit for Victorian society: "the king who does not wear his crown or pursue the grail, who distrusts

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<sup>16</sup> Dicksee's *Chivalry*: private collection.

excess of all kinds and who speaks tentatively about his destiny—and yet who rages against his enemies with the fire of God in battle”(Eggers 54–55). A fine model to emulate.

Cameron’s photographic tableaux for *Idylls* required props, costumes, and also actors and actresses who needed to dress up and act their parts. Merlin was played by Cameron’s husband, Charles Hay Cameron (1795–1880) (**Fig.9**), and William Warder, a dockhand, was employed to act as Arthur; however, Cameron had difficulty finding a Lancelot (Lukitsh; Mancoff 224). **<FIGURE 9 HERE>** These photographs and their staging were undertaken at her own expense: Cameron hired the necessary costumes and sought out models to pose as the various other figures in the *tableaux vivants*. She also needed to take a large number of exposures to secure a suitable body of photographs.  In short, this was a costly process, but the commission’s significance was such that it helped offset the costs.

The photographs produced for *Idylls* possess Cameron’s trademark soft focus, demonstrated ably by *King Arthur* (**Fig.10**) and *Vivien and Merlin*, and they are actually representative of her photography in a broader context. **<FIGURE 10 HERE>** Despite having difficulty securing her cast of actors, those photographed convey a real sense of emotion, either on their own, or when interacting with others. Props possessing historical associations were selected to  dress and stage these photographs; their selection and use accord with the approach seen in Pre-Raphaelite art where scenes were intended to appear historical and date back to the medieval period or earlier. Tennyson used the photographs as intended—woodcut copies were made after them—but only three were incorporated into *Idylls*. Cameron, however,

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<sup>17</sup> The exact number of exposures taken by Cameron for the *Idylls* project remains unclear, however the number could be as high as 245; Cameron herself claimed it to be 180. See Mancoff **320**.

produced a photography book in two volumes, *Idylls of the King and Other Poems* (1875), that included twenty-five of her images accompanied by hand-written extracts she had made of poems they illustrate (**Fig.11**). **<FIGURE 11 HERE>** In doing so, she spread copies of her photographs to an audience that otherwise would not have been able to see them included in Tennyson's own *Idylls*. Whilst a modern medium, and lacking the Gothicism of, for example, Barritt's and Kent's illustrations, these photographs reflect the Victorian propensity to represent Arthurian history in a quasi-medieval setting. The technique also possessed a verisimilitude that paintings rarely possessed, and, by capturing "real" scenes, they present Arthurian scenes rooted in Victorian Britain.

## Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, Arthurian art was created in the eighteenth century for a variety of public and private ends. Whilst the Gothic Revival was initially concerned with design—particularly architecture, interiors, furniture, and literature—and absolutely not the legend of Arthur, this aesthetic nevertheless also impacted the presentation of Arthurian legend, particularly through background contextual settings. And despite Arthurian art being considered part of the Gothic Revival by modern scholars, this was not particularly the case until the nineteenth century. The relationship between Arthurian art and the Gothic Revival in the eighteenth century, particularly when compared with that in the nineteenth century, is not straightforward: in both centuries, we find examples of art displaying Gothic and medialized contexts that are, nevertheless, not sufficiently ancient to truly reflect the period in which Arthur is claimed to have lived. Yet even those paintings that self-consciously eschewed medieval architecture in favor of a pre-Gothic aesthetic may still be said to reflect the values and preoccupations of the Gothic revival. This is, I have argued, a nuanced relationship based upon ideas rather than explicit appearance—the ideas of chivalry and morality. To put it

another way, Arthuriana and the Gothic Revival are close bedfellows, even if not always expressed visually. And whilst Arthurian art is generally considered to be a nineteenth-century theme, it has been shown here how Arthur and the knights of the Round Table were of interest to eighteenth-century artists and antiquaries, too. The breadth and depth of Arthurian art, including Dyce's self-consciously ancient fresco techniques employed in the decoration of the New Palace of Westminster and Cameron's production of incredibly modern techniques reveal the gamut of art produced at the time. When combined with other works by, for example, Barritt, we can see that there is a preoccupation to engage with and present a visualization of Arthurian legend grounded in the past.

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