

*The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art 1840-1920* by Christine Poulson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999. 268 pp. 74 illus., 14 in colour. ISBN 0-7190-5379-X. £45.00 (cloth). 0-7190-5537-7. £17.99 (paper).

This book deserves to be widely read. Christine Poulson's informative study of the significance of Arthurian myth in British culture from the early Victorian period to the Great War is a veritable neo-medieval banquet of a book: a feast for both mind and eye. As well as offering an excellent discussion of the titular subject Poulson's work also touches on many facets of Victorian culture which the Arthurian rubs alongside: "religious controversy, religious doubt, and spiritualism, the occult, witchcraft and mesmerism, solar physics, solar mythology, millenarian-ism, physiognomy, national and racial identity ... and debates centring on marriage, women's rights, and sexual identity" (xii). The scope of this list demonstrates the extent of the Victorians' need for the stories of King Arthur and his knights to come alive amongst them again.

Any discussion of Arthurian legend must inevitably invoke Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the work above all that "rediscovered in the nineteenth century ... enabled the Arthurian legends to achieve such a grip on the imagination of the Victorians" (3). Poulson's Introduction offers an overview of the eleventh and twelfth century texts which contain references to Arthur as well as significant discussion of *Le Morte Darthur*. She then tracks responses to Arthurian legend up to the start of the Victorian period. From a literary point of view the references here--to figures such as Southey, Scott, and Digby--aren't necessarily new, but one of the great pleasures of this book for me is how literature is read so well alongside the visual arts, and from the outset *The Quest for the Grail* is stuffed full of painted representations of Arthurian myth, many of which are not well known.

Chapter 1 discusses the perhaps surprising choice of scenes from Arthurian legend as a subject to decorate the Queen's Robing Room in the newly-built Houses of Parliament, contracted to William Dyce. What Poulson highlights here is one of the central issues that keeps circulating around the use of the Arthurian in the Victorian period: the appropriateness (or not) of its appropriation as idealized English history, and (intimately bound up with this) the moral fitness of the various characters that people Malory's tales to be the models of masculinity and femininity and right relations between the sexes (and therefore from this a model of rightly-ordered society) that the Victorians so desired them to be. As Poulson notes, "the plot of *Le Morte Darthur* pivots on episodes of illicit, sometimes even incestuous, sex" (28), and as the two most famous Arthurian queens--Guevere and Isoud--are both adulterous, Dyce encountered the same issues of censorship and interpretive containment that would figure for many of the nineteenth-century representations of these tales.