



Leeds Medieval Studies

A New Companion to Malory, ed. by Megan G. Leitch and Cory Rushton. Cambridge: Brewer, 2019. xiv + 330 pp. ISBN 9781843845232.

James McHale

corresponding email: hy20jem@leeds.ac.uk

Leeds Medieval Studies, 3 (2023), *pagination to be finalised

DOI: 10.57686/256204/27

ISSN: Print 2754-4575

ISSN: Online 2754-4583

© 2023 James McHale

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License 

For additional information about this article: [<https://ims.leeds.ac.uk/leeds-medieval-studies-journal/>](https://ims.leeds.ac.uk/leeds-medieval-studies-journal/)

Reviews

A New Companion to Malory, ed. by Megan G. Leitch and Cory Rushton. Cambridge: Brewer, 2019. xiv + 330 pp. ISBN 9781843845232.

The *Morte Darthur* by the ‘knyght prisoner’ Sir Thomas Malory continues to captivate scholarly imagination into the twenty-first century as an ever-influential staple of the English literary canon. It has now been over twenty years since the publication of the landmark 1996 *A Companion to Malory*, edited by Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards. This *New Companion to Malory* is, in the words of its editors, ‘a new series of [fifteen] essays [...] providing a synthetic overview of, and fresh perspectives on’ the *Morte Darthur* and topics like gender, geography, religiosity, violence and the postcolonial and its textual, literary, cultural and historical milieux (p. 1). In this learned endeavour, aimed at ‘upper-level undergraduates or new postgraduates’, the *New Companion* constitutes a worthy update: it bears the fruit of the seeds set by its precursor in positioning Malorian studies firmly at the forefront of exciting critical approaches (p. 1). In so doing, the *New Companion* points to further avenues of research, particularly concerning martial violence and gender.

Malorian studies has grown and changed enormously as a field since the publication of the 1996 precursor to the present volume: no fewer than eight new editions of the *Morte Darthur* have appeared. P. J. C. Field’s 2013 two-volume *Morte* is now considered the pre-eminent critical edition, a position formerly held for over half a century by Eugène Vinaver’s three-volume *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947, 1967, 1990). As the editors of the *New Companion* tell us, decades of critical work ‘proceeded according to the rules and impulses of twentieth-century literary criticism’ (p. 11). But this *New Companion* comes at a time when ‘relative agreement’ has been achieved on long-standing authorship debates, enabling scholars to turn their focus to interrogating the *Morte Darthur* through the lens of recent critical approaches (p. 2); a paperback edition has also recently been published. Accordingly, the volume’s essays are split into three sections: five in *The Morte Darthur: Text(s) and Contexts*; seven in *Approaches to Malory*; and three in *Malory’s Afterlives*.

In re-examining the *Morte*’s text(s) and contexts, Catherine Nall re-contextualises the *Morte* in a more nuanced reading of the text as implicitly a political allegory, whose content would still have produced an ‘uncomfortable resonance’ for people in the long fifteenth century (p. 31). Ralph Norris considers how recent advances in source studies are reshaping our understanding of Malory’s *Morte* and major points of debate in Malory scholarship over the last two decades. Significantly, Norris’ discussion underscores the wider mission of the volume to re-evaluate present methodological approaches.

Review

The Approaches to Malory section begins with Dorsey Armstrong's contribution in which she re-examines individual episodes and characters according to five themes of knighthood, gender, kinship, religion and kingship as well as how Malory manipulates his sources. Malory's 'dual manipulation' of both 'individual episodes and sources' skilfully achieves a deeper re-reading of the *Morte* in which his characters *evolve* so that we as readers are compelled to engage and care and can see its many trees while not losing sight of the forest (p. 163).

Amy S. Kaufman re-evaluates the recent historiographical consensus concerning the profundity of Malory's supposed misogyny. Kaufman interrogates the definition of 'agency' and proposes a new definition that centres on 'transformative and interpretive power rather than unlimited freedom of self-definition'; in other words, Kaufman focuses not on what women signify, but on what women *do* in Malory's text (p. 176). Through this new, and hopefully influential, lens, scholars should employ gender more widely as an analytical category in Malorian studies, 'transcend[ing] our strict critical categories' (p.176) and thereby produce multiple gendered readings of different elements in the *Morte* through intersectional methodological approaches.

Since the linguistic and affective turns of the mid- to late twentieth century, emotion has strongly emerged as a category of historical study for the medieval period (whose characterisation as an age of uncontrollable emotional outburst has only recently been thoroughly refuted by Professor Barbara H. Rosenwein, William M. Reddy, and others). And in this innovative spirit of advancing critical readings of Malory's text — long acknowledged as a deeply emotional work, touching 'joy, grief, anger, envy, pity, love, shame, hope and fear' (p. 177) — both Andrew Lynch and Raluca L. Radulescu separately examine emotions concerning the text's structures of power, community and gender, and spirituality.

However, the *New Companion* is too light on postcolonial readings — especially considering their relevance to Malorian studies — for its assertion that it provides an 'up-to-date guide to match Malory's centrality [...] to critical discourse' (p. 1). By the twelfth century, the British Isles had already been invaded by several peoples in the historical period and the fifteenth century was a politically tumultuous time. The *Morte Darthur*, then, is a text steeped in violence. Meg Roland, in 'Malory and the Wider World', has re-captured its martial nature: she reads Arthur as a king seeking to preside over a wider 'militant Christendom', but deeper postcolonial readings would bear more fruit (p. 227). Indeed, while the exploration of diverse medievalisms in the final section's three essays is welcome — including studies of Malory's reception in wartime Britain, America and Japan — more surely could have been included concerning medievalisms and later constructions of Arthuriana and empire.

Medieval Studies, a still intellectually conservative field, has proven frustratingly resistant to waves of critical theory in recent decades. But the dam has finally broken, and this *New Companion* to Malory's *Morte*, central in the English literary canon, proves a worthy successor to the original and is a testament to the changing times in the field and its exciting scholarly potential.

James McHale (University of Leeds)