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Arthurian Literature and Society by Stephen Knight (review)

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study is a particularly *fulsome* account of early medieval uses of Jonah' (p. 239)? Or does 'fulsome' to her mean what 'full' means to me?

One cannot be entirely out of sympathy with a reader of these poems who seeks to trace and convey the wealth of allusion they would have offered the fourteenth-century audience, but equally one cannot help wishing that it had been attempted with a sharper focus.

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STEPHEN KNIGHT. *Arthurian Literature and Society*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Pp. xvi, 229. \$25.00.

The trouble with most studies of the Arthurian legend, says Stephen Knight, is their limitation of approach: they are frequently little more than surveys of the material and, even at that, are too "idealist;" that is, "they treat the Arthurian legend and its literature as if it exists in a world of its own, not in the periods and the societies that produced and consumed the material." He suggests that "a proper history of the Arthurian legend will investigate its historical function. It will ask what these texts were written for, what role they fulfilled in their period. It will be a history not of the legend itself, but of its integration in history." It will, in fact, be the book that Knight has written.

As Knight points out, such a work could hardly be comprehensive without being encyclopedic; consequently, he has chosen to treat in detail certain particular works—*Culhwch ac Olwen*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum britannie*, Chrétien's *Le Chevalier au Lion*, Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, as well as, more briefly, such works as *Y Gododdin*, Nennius, *The Black Book of Carmathen*, and several twentieth-century treatments of the story of Arthur. Knight's basic approach has been to demonstrate, with admirable supporting detail, how each work mirrors the social and ideological concerns of the society which produced it. Thus, for example, the *Historia* serves as an extended meditation on the nature, the joys, and the dangers of kingship, especially as perceived by the Norman rulers of Britain. The narratives in the *Historia* (and especially in

the history of Arthur) on the one hand comfort the Normans by revising disturbing history and on the other hand warn them of possible dangers, particularly the danger of losing everything. Geoffrey as historical revisionist may be seen in the story of Mont-Saint-Michel (in history Henry I, who had taken refuge there, was forced to leave in humiliation; in the *Historia* this shame is reversed and exorcised in Arthur's defeat of the giant), and in the episode of the Roman war (Arthur's campaign against Lucius has, Knight argues, a broad historical parallel in Henry's campaigns against Louis VI, with the major exception that, whereas Henry failed, Arthur succeeded).

But there is fear-fulfillment as well as wish-fulfillment in the *Historia*: the treachery of Mordred and the consequent downfall of Arthur warned the Normans of the internal political and social tensions that could destroy them. Chrétien's romances are concerned less with kingship than with the anxieties and hopes of the barons who seek a place of their own in the social system. Malory's *Morte* is seen to deal with the tensions surrounding a fifteenth-century king who depends upon the power and loyalty of his lords and who, when they break into warring factions, is nearly helpless. Tennyson's *Arthuriad* is perceived as an almost reactionary document defending the patriarchal and aristocratic state and identifying women or "feminizing" as the prime destructive force in a masculine society. *Yankee* is a satire not just (or even primarily) of the Middle Ages but of the social and political abuses to be found in nineteenth-century Britain and America. Knight's evaluations of the ideological relevances of these works are not lightly made; they are supported by frequent reference to contemporary events and concerns, with the result that, through the accumulation of data, he convincingly builds up his case.

Such an approach is not without its problems. One is that, as long as he holds to his thesis, there are parts of the texts about which Knight can say little—hence his brief treatment of Malory's "Sankgreall," which is, of course, spiritually rather than politically motivated. Another problem is that the sheer momentum of the thesis leads Knight to seek out ideological and political relevances where they are not particularly relevant. It does not, for example, much matter whether there was a fifteenth-century precedent for noblewomen taking the veil (As Guinever does in the *Morte*), or that, in Malory's time, Warwick attempted—unsuccessfully—to have the papal legate threaten the enemies of the Yorkists with excommunication (as the pope does in the war between Arthur and Lancelot): these incidents were in Malory's sources and would likely have been

included whether or not there were historical parallels; their relevance to Malory's society is accidental. And the thesis leads to occasional forced readings: it may be possible, for example, that Geoffrey refuses to comment further on the adultery of Mordred and Guinevere because it suggests the sort of betrayal from within the power structure that the Normans had to deal with in the past and might have to deal with again — that is, this is a tactful silence on a sensitive subject. No doubt Geoffrey is being discreetly silent — but the text seems more naturally to suggest that he is disturbed not by the political overtones of the adultery but by the idea of a nephew sleeping with his aunt.

But this is, in the larger context of Knight's work, quibbling over details. *Arthurian Literature and Society* provides an interesting and different understanding of the significance of some of the major texts. It has the double virtue of being frequently quite convincing and, when not entirely convincing, provoking in a healthy and stimulating manner.

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V. A. KOLVE. *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984. Pp. xiv, 551, 175 illus. \$39.50.

Given the well-deserved influence of Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (1966), it is surely no exaggeration to say that the present volume has been long awaited, not only by Chaucerians but also by those interested in medieval literature more generally and iconographic approaches to literature more specifically. *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* is an imposing volume, wide-ranging in its sources, thoroughly documented, elegantly written, and at the same time readable. The erudition that comes from living with material over a long period of time is worn lightly. Moreover, it is an extremely handsome volume, ornamented with 175 splendid illustrations conveniently placed in the body of the text. Nevertheless, it is a book about which serious questions must be raised.

As its subtitle — *The First Five Canterbury Tales* — indicates, the readings are limited to the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales*. For those five tales