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Fee, Christopher R. Arthur: God and Hero in Avalon

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Fee, Christopher R.

Arthur: God and Hero in Avalon.

London: Reaktion Books, 2019. Pp. 224 + 50 ill. ISBN 978-1-78023-999-06 (hardcover) US\$25.

Aiming to appeal to a broad readership interested in all things Arthurian rather than to help shape scholarly debate, Christopher Fee's *Arthur* advances no central claim and thus impresses merely by virtue of its fervent enthusiasm for its subject matter. Trying to be all things to all people and assuming a relatively passive, observational perspective via comparative mythology, Fee provides a broad, general overview of Arthurian lore and its impact while occasionally gesturing toward some more scholarly resources available to those pursuing academic study and research. The book begins with a discussion of how Celtic myths, in combination with early medieval Welsh legends and folklore, evolved over the course of several centuries via many languages and literary traditions into a fully formed Arthurian mythology, replete with stories and subjects comparable to those found in any major mythological system. Having first reviewed some of the most significant primary sources feeding the wellspring of Arthurian mythology, the book attempts to chart the geography of Avalon on a modern map by recounting the search for the historical location of the legendary stronghold, variously considering the significances of places like Winchester, Callington, Cadbury, Killibury, and Tintagel, while also pondering the roles played by Glastonbury and the site of the Battle of Mount Badon in the development of Arthurian lore.

In the first chapter, Fee explores the identities of Celtic gods and goddesses, ancient heroes and monsters, and a veritable treasure trove of traditional names, settings, and stories drawn from British mythology, legend, and folklore that are thinly disguised behind the veil of medieval Arthuriana, beginning with ancient Welsh stories recounting the adventures of Owain, Peredur, and Gereint, who provide native British faces for three Arthurian heroes best known through their French doppelgangers developed by Crétien de Troyes. Finally, the chapter considers the mythic and folkloric attributes of Marie de France's Anglo-Norman poem *Lanval*, and those of the anonymous Middle English verse romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For the non-specialists who routinely teach these two canonical works of early English literature in their

undergraduate courses, this section of the book may prove useful for further grounding and contextualizing those works within the Arthurian tradition.

The second chapter consists of a discussion of archetypal Arthurian objects, including Excalibur—arguably the single most recognizable object in the Arthurian canon—and its associations with the Lady of the Lake; the Round Table as an emblem of Arthur’s court and its company of heroes, and featuring the Siege Perilous; the Holy Grail, which intertwines themes of sacred healing, sustenance, and plenty, with the hope of spiritual salvation; and the figure of the Fisher King, along with his Celtic analogue, Bran the Blessed. In the third chapter, Fee’s discussion moves to include some of the legend’s most salient features, characters, and events, including Arthur’s miraculous conception via Uther Pendragon’s magical transformation; the boy’s childhood feats, including the sword in the stone; Merlin, Arthur’s shaman guide, mentor, and surrogate father figure; Arthur’s treacherous and powerful half-sisters, including Morgan le Fay and Morgause, Arthur’s sister-wife and mother of Mordred, the demonic anti-hero; Launcelot, the flawed Arthurian knight; the final battle between Arthur and Mordred; and Arthur’s death, journey to Avalon, and apotheosis.

The book’s final chapter examines select aspects of some modern adaptations of the Arthurian legend—including novels, films, and television series—in order to ponder Arthuriana’s abiding appeal. Starting with Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Mark Twain’s roughly contemporaneous *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), Fee’s survey illustrates how Arthuriana’s national and generational retellings transform the stories to fit the needs and expectations of the audience at hand: while Tennyson (at Queen Victoria’s request) dedicated his *Idylls* to Prince Albert just months after the royal consort’s death—thereby overtly associating him with the Arthurian ideal—Twain’s irreverent American perspective lampoons ritual and hierarchy while criticizing and rejecting romanticized, rose-coloured idealizations of the past, thereby providing a satirical antithesis to Tennyson’s Victorian cycle. Moving into the twentieth century, Fee considers the cultural significances of T. H. White’s four-novel adaptation *The Once and Future King*, Disney’s animated film *The Sword in the Stone*, and the stage musical *Camelot*, whose Broadway run closely coincided with (and was explicitly tied to) the Kennedy administration. As the chapter proceeds, the discussion broadens to consider the novels of Mary Stewart, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Bernard Cornwell

(along with their eventual large and small screen adaptations), as well as a vast array of film and television productions, beginning with the 1953 *Knights of the Round Table*, which ushered in the modern age of Hollywood adaptations of the Arthurian saga. Whether considering Arthurian adultery on the silver screen, representations of Camelot in a series of comic strips, appropriations of Avalon in themed weekends at contemporary Renaissance fairs, the use of Arthurian tropes in popular fare like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Spamalot*, and *Knightriders*, or in fantasy film franchises like Indiana Jones, *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter, and *Game of Thrones*, Fee's focus remains set upon how succeeding generations can see reflected in the various iterations of Arthuriana (tailored to suit contexts and objectives) the oblique reflection of their own dreams and aspirations. The Grail, from this perspective, is simply a cup representing hope, while Arthur provides a canvas upon which we can paint portraits of our better selves, since his steadfast pursuit of the ideal good speaks to our own internal desire to achieve perfection—both in ourselves and in our world.

Carefully proofed and handsomely presented with fifty illustrations—almost half of which appear courtesy of the British Library, but none of which are indexed with complete source information—the book serves as a testament to its author's tangible passion for all things Arthurian. As an affordable overview for generalist readers and genre enthusiasts, *Arthur* successfully does its part to proselytize that passion.

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Grieco, Allen J.

Food, Social Politics and the Order of Nature in Renaissance Italy.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. 327 + 41 ill. ISBN 978-0-6742-4408-5 (paperback) US\$31.

A pioneer in food studies, Allen J. Grieco provides an interesting and erudite insight into Renaissance food culture. His book, a collection of previously separately published articles and book chapters, is organized in three sections. Part 1, “The Renaissance Table in Theory and Practice,” contains the longest