

The Victorian Mediaeval Revival

All text and images C. Jonathan Brockbank

Throughout the 18th century the Middle Ages had been deplored as a time of superstition and barbarity by the Enlightenment, or celebrated as a time of superstition and barbarity by the Gothic novelists. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, of around 1798, hunts with the hounds and the hare, enjoying the novel's capacity to both arouse and dispel gothic dread. It is the voice of reason that has the last word and dominates the published novels that follow *Northanger Abbey*. As Austen was perfecting her style and subject, from 1811-16, Sir Walter Scott was popularising a reinterpretation of the past as a time of faith and loyalty, both religious and secular. One of his most famous works, *Ivanhoe* (1819), explored the reign of Richard I as a time when national patriotic and cultural roots were being forged through a merger of Norman and Saxon virtues. Consequently Scott inspired one strangest reversals of cultural fashion where the Medieval period became the locus of cultural and moral inspiration, not darkness and folly. The text finds equal chivalry and loyalty to Richard I in the high-ranking Ivanhoe and the outlaw Robin Hood, to offer a nineteenth century, made nervous by the political upheaval of the French Revolution and the social upheaval of industrialisation, the reassurance that ancestral England is a place of honour and allegiance.

The long time Tennyson spent working on *Idylls of the King* (1856-1885) reflects the continual fascination exercised by the Middle Ages over the Victorian era. At one extreme this interest generated a new scholarly and academic interest in mediaeval history, at the other, attempts to recreate the appearance or spirit of the Middle Ages in popular paintings (see *When Did You Last See Your Father*, Roy Strong, London, Thames and Hudson, 1978)

Though Malory was aware that his 'perfect gentle knight' was an unreal anachronism, the Victorian responded enthusiastically to the image of the lone, chaste hero following the glorious ideal of chivalry. Their enthusiasm was mostly expressed through poetry and art; there is no British equivalent of Wagner's Ring cycle, where what were taken to be national and nationalistic legends, were turned into music-drama. Where Malory's favourite knight was Lancelot, the 'official' heroes of the Victorians were Galahad and Percival.

A good example of this idealisation is Arthur Hacker's *The Temptation of Sir Percival* c. 1894 in Leeds Art Gallery

<http://www.celtic-twilight.com/camelot/art/hacker/index.htm>

(This site is idiosyncratic but well illustrated.)

Here Sir Percival, looking remarkably like a Victorian public schoolboy, resists the temptation of a seductive woman, by gazing at the cross formed by his sword hilt.

Such heroes were used to redefine the code of chivalry to urge young men to dedicate themselves to chastity, self-sacrifice, protection of women and upholding the British Empire. Mark Girould's *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, (London, Yale University Press, 1981) explores how such imagery pervaded the Victorian imagination from the founding of the boy scouts to the death of Captain Oates. Tennyson's Arthur is not the violent battle-hardened fighter of

Malory but a detached, dignified withdrawn figure, more reminiscent of Prince Albert than the Black Prince.

In 1875 the pioneering female photographer Julia Margaret Cameron produced photo-illustrations for *Idylls of the King volume 1*, choosing friends to pose for the pictures in Mediaeval dress. See for examples

<http://blogs.princeton.edu/graphicarts/2009/03/cameron.html>

Some Victorian painters like the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris tried to recapture a truer spirit of Malory by concentrating on the figure of Guinevere, whose love affair with Sir Lancelot transgressed Victorian expectations of femininity and morality. Rossetti's *Sir Lancelot in the Queen's Chamber* (1857) depicts the incident when Aggrevayne and Mordred and their twelve knights catch Launcelot in Gwenyver's chamber. The claustrophobic picture reads left to right, like a page. Armed knights pack the barred window, a tough and bitter Launcelot takes up his sword as Gwenyver stands stricken and her women weep.

<http://preraphaelitepaintings.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/dante-gabriel-rossetti-sir-launcelot-in.html>

William Morris's 1858 picture of a pensive medieval woman about to tie her belt is less specific. She has been identified as Queen Guinevere or La Belle Iseult.

<http://preraphaelitesisterhood.com/images-of-guinevere/>

This site not only explores other Pre-Raphaelite images of Guinevere but will sell you a 'Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood T-shirt'...

The model for the picture was Jane Burden. Morris allegedly wrote 'I cannot paint you but I love you.' on a preliminary drawing. (*The Pre-Raphaelites*, Christopher Wood, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981, p110). They married and Morris gave up painting to concentrate on the design work that made him famous. His legacy still continues:

<http://www.william-morris.co.uk/>

More importantly he welded together the Victorian nostalgia for the Middle Ages, Ruskin's Feudal Socialism and his readings of Karl Marx to inform a distinctively English vision of an ideal society. *News From Nowhere* (1890) looks back to the Middle Ages to imagine the post-industrial, hand-crafted, socialist-ecological perfect society to come. Significantly in this society there are still profound emotional discontents. The Morris' marriage was unhappy. Jane indulged in a long, deep emotional affair with William's former best friend, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This affair may well have been unconsummated: 'And whether they were abed other at other maner of disporrtis, me lyst nat therof make no mencion, for love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadays,' as Malory puts it (*Works*, Vinaver, bk xx, p676 ln2, Cooper p471)

More commonly Victorians liked to see the Middle Ages as an era of faith and inspiration that their age lacked. The Catholic Augustus Pugin and the Protestant John Ruskin tried to persuade the age to adopt a gothic style for buildings of architectural and moral importance. York obliged:



Skeldergate 1878: The bridge is essentially an iron structure, it was clad in stone and given mediaeval details, such as the turrets, to emphasise its solidarity. Note the heraldic details; the city arms and the arms of the archbishopric flank the arch.



Toll Booth: the bridge originally charged for passage; payment was made at this mini-fortress.



Lights: The lamps are given their own coat-of-arms, battlements, crowns and flags. The conceit has a frivolity at odds with the earnestness of Pugin and Ruskin or the slaughter of the defeated at Towton.



Magistrates Courts 1892: the Renaissance as well as the Middle Ages was plagiarised by Victorian architects. The frieze above the door represents justice in medieval terms with a strong king sitting on a bench flanked by spiritual and secular advisors. Not necessarily the most tactful image in a country ruled by a queen...

By 1859 Ruskin had reacted against the mock-Gothic: '[we] merely serve to caricature the noble buildings of past ages, and to bring their form into dishonour by leaving out their soul.' (*The Two Paths*, preface quoted in *Ruskin Today*, ed Kenneth

Clark, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967, p233) In 1866 he came to Bradford and genially denounced their pick-and-mix approach to architecture: 'You know there are a great many odd styles of architecture about; you don't want to do anything ridiculous; ... and you send for me, that I may tell you the leading fashion.' Instead he claimed 'All good architecture is the expression of national life and character; and it is produced by a prevalent and eager national taste or desire for beauty,' before intimidating his audience by declaring: 'Taste is not only a part and an index of morality; - it is the ONLY morality.' (*The Crown of Wild Olive*, John Ruskin, London, George Allen, 1895, p73/74)

Here he identifies the problem the Victorians faced in their attempt to appropriate the Middle Ages; were they not merely donning fancy dress? A picture that exposes the problem is Daniel Maclise's *Sir Francis Sykes and Family* c.1837 <http://www.john-william-godward.org/upload1/file-admin/images/new3/Maclise,%20Daniel-987294.jpg>

It looks like the sea-side/fairground attraction where people stick their heads through the openings in a life-size cartoon picture to have their photographs taken...

The appetite for reworking Arthurian matters is not dead. The BBC series *Merlin* has a distinctive set of 21st century subtexts such as camp, homo-eroticism and cleavages...