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2002

## Alan Lupack, *Arthurian Literature by Women*

Alison Langdon

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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Alan Lupack and Barbara Tapa Lupack, eds. *Arthurian Literature by Women*. New York and London: Garland, 1999. Pp. xiii + 382.

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This is a timely volume, given the surge in scholarly and popular interest in women's voices in the Arthurian tradition. The explicit purpose of this anthology is to explore the "rich and forgotten tradition" of women writers' contributions to the corpus of Arthurian literature, sketching a female lineage of literary descent that traces "certain traditions common to women writing on Arthurian themes" (xi, 4). While the foreword provides an overview of more familiar women authors such as Rosemary Sutcliffe, Mary Stewart, and Persia Wooley, in their selections of works to anthologize Lupack and Lupack choose to focus on lesser-known texts that are out of print or otherwise not easily accessible to most readers—a laudable decision, and the works collected here would bring much to a course on women and Arthuriana or a general Arthurian literature survey. For manageability the editors limit themselves primarily to poems and short stories, though they also include three longer texts—a novella, excerpts from a collection of linked stories, and a play. Beginning with a brief foray into the Middle Ages with two *lais* by Marie de France, newly translated by Norris Lacy, the anthology then moves to the early nineteenth century and proceeds through the 1990s. Concluding the volume are two very useful bibliographies of Arthurian literature by women, one devoted to fiction and the other to poetry and drama.

According to Lupack and Lupack in their introductory essay, "The Forgotten Tradition," the characteristics which typify women's Arthurian writing are a tendency to choose non-traditional characters as narrators or protagonists; redemption of certain characters, such as King Mark, who have been condemned in more traditional versions; the portrayal of the isle of Avalon as emblematic of gender equality; and a recognition of nobility among the common folk, along with a downplaying of traditional notions of aristocracy. That the strategies described in the introduction are also employed by male authors such as William Morris, Alfred Tennyson, and Parke Godwin is a fact only grudgingly and cursorily admitted, a tactic which makes me distinctly uneasy. Acknowledging women writers' place within the Arthurian tradition, rather than attempting to establish their texts as a separate, parallel tradition, would do more, I think, to decrease the marginality of these writers—which is, of course, one of the stated goals of the anthology.

The most intriguing works collected here are those that use characters or motifs of Arthurian legend as metaphors through which their authors explore human experience. This technique often serves to illuminate different facets both of the nature of those experiences and of the legends themselves. Notable among these are stories and poems by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Wendy Mookin's Guenever poems. In "The Lady of Shalott," Phelps calls attention to social ills through a radical revisioning of Tennyson's lily maid as a room-bound invalid

whose ill-health is compounded by the slum-like conditions in which she lives, and whose death is the result of a forgotten promise by the physician who swore to attend her. Mookin provides an intimate and humanizing glimpse of Guenever's psyche in a series of poems which span her memories of childhood to her years of quiet isolation at Almesbury. At times the texts are not necessarily as revisionist as the editors would like them to be; though Dinah Maria Mulock Craik's "Avillion; or, The Happy Isles" does portray Morgan le Fay favorably as a healer and wisewoman, Guinevere is still cast in a decidedly unsympathetic light as an unrepentant hypocrite. Morgan herself remains a markedly ambivalent figure in Anne Bannerman's "Prophecy of Merlin," despite Lupack and Lupack's claim that her demonic portrayal is "demonic only in the sense that she is otherworldly" (24). Nevertheless, a number of the texts here provide fascinating reinterpretations of the major female characters in Arthurian legend that can then be used to explore their more traditional representations.

The anthology would benefit from the addition of more scholarly apparatus, such as bibliographical footnotes to the introduction (Thelma S. Fenster's *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*<sup>1</sup> and Marion Wynne-Davis' *Women and Arthurian Literature*<sup>2</sup> are mentioned by title only, without the authors' names or any other reference information) and line numbers provided for the poems. Little literary context is given for the anthologized texts; for example, Lady Charlotte Guest's "The Lady of the Fountain" is subtitled "A Translation," but the source text—Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*—is never identified. These oversights can easily be addressed in a subsequent edition. In the meantime, Lupack and Lupack provide us with a trove of texts with which to round out the Arthurian canon.

Alison Langdon  
University of Oregon

1 New York and London: Garland, 1996.

2 New York: St. Martin's, 1996.

