



ON IDLE WORSHIP

Commentary by Anthony More

We have, gentlemen, a new sacred cow in our midst. Worse, it is of the proliferating kind, leaving in its wake a spoor of useless pseudo-scholarship and fanciful question-begging. Understand, the cow itself is innocent; it's what's being done to the poor beast that's foolish and, more important, damaging to the creature.

A while back, I had occasion to read a longish piece by J.R.R. Tolkien. It consists, as you know, of four volumes: the first by intent a children's book, the succeeding three forming a massive trilogy for adults who happily remain part child. I remember enjoying all of this, and a couple of my friends whose judgment means something to me have suggested that The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings may indeed survive us--and, I might add, the idle worship to which they have so unkindly been submitted in the past couple of years by a non-critical clutch of self-styled enthusiasts intent on making more out of it than it is because they have forgotten the beauty of simplicity and the elegance of unforced verissimilitude.

Now, talking about good books is a fine thing, and subjecting them to whatever critical faculty one may have is the essence of appreciation; it is also healthy for

the critic and vital to literature. It is indeed one of the happier aspects of reading, one of the dimensions of interest which non-readers never realize they are missing

But that is not what is happening. The shock of a piece of writing decently conceived and fully carried out has caused readers of fantasy and science fiction, a notably uncritical lot, to claim a children's art fairy tale and an allegorical romance as fantasy, their fantasy; this because, reading so uncritically in the field they have never, or rarely, experienced such through-writing before. And, having staked out such a false claim on what really isn't theirs, they've started clubs and published amateur magazines and used one of Tolkien's place-names for their homeland in a convention bid. Only recently, I was shown a thoroughly spurious and biologically unsound article trying to explain the physiology and biochemistry of one of Tolkien's races. In simple fact, these people do this because they cannot take the marvelous at face value. They must explain the gross because they are unwilling to probe the discreet.

These people are a kind of literary spoiler, cultists like all fan-atics, attending to precisely the wrong elements on all accounts, missing all points and seeing fancy always and sense never. If Tolkien lives, he will live in spite of these protestations of admiration which are merely the kinds of identification which are necessary to the immature mind.

In descending order of quality from The Hobbit through The Return of the King, Tolkien's stories of the Ring were superlative, full of enchantment, fascination, and excitement, often profound, but also quite often very bad indeed. I loved reading them. For God's sake, if you did too, lay off. Idle minds, idle worship.

Arthur of Albion by Richard Barber; London, Barrie & Rockliff, 1961; 212 pages; \$4.20.

Several years ago, stimulated by T.H. White's The Once and Future King, I started to dig into Arthurian romances. Being very naive in this field, I fully expected to find just a few books on the subject, and that I would easily find my way through the literature. But it was not long before I found that the literature of the Arthurian romances, the matiere de Bretagne as it is known, is very complex, difficult, and not without formidable scholarly interest. Furthermore, the study of Arthuriana is very old, dating back easily 100 years, and many of the early books and texts in the field had never been reprinted. Nevertheless, I have managed to put together a substantial library consisting of the classic works in the field, both textual and critical. Life would have been much easier for me if I had had Arthur of Albion back in the beginning of my investigations.

Barber's book is not primarily written for the scholar; rather it has been written for those people who are fascinated by Arthurian romance, but have little background to appreciate the more esoteric aspects of this study. Nevertheless, it is not a book which can be read at leisure, for Barber knows his subject well and in the 200 pages of the book he attempts to cover the field in some detail. Since Arthurian romances exist in English, French, Welsh, Irish, Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Dutch, Scandinavian, Tagalog, and Hebrew, a survey of the entire literature would have necessitated a much longer book. Barber has wisely limited most of his discussion to those works in the English language.

Starting with the question of the existence of Arthur, he continues through a discussion of the chronicles, romances, and poems, and finally ends up with a discussion of Arthur as he appeared in the more modern works of Tennyson, Masfield, Charles Williams, and White. There are several maps showing the alleged conquests of Arthur in some of the chronicles, and also a number of charts showing genealogies and the like. Several appendices add to the usefulness of this work including a small but very choice bibliography (annotated), a chronological list of English Arthurian literature, and some notes.

Among the many mysteries of Arthurian romances which Barber discusses is the carving on the north doorway, or "Porta della Pescheria," of Modena Cathedral. I've heard about this piece of art work, but was never sure of its significance. Barber makes it very clear. This semicircular frieze, which is shown in the only plate of the book, the frontispiece, represents what is generally agreed to be an episode from Arthurian romance. A castle is shown besieged by Arthur, Gawain, Kay, and other knights; the defenders include Caradoc (Carrodo) and Mardoc. As Barber points out, "...there is nothing remarkable in the carving; a not unfamiliar Arthurian scene, albeit far afield. But when it comes to the date of the work, much has to be explained. For although art historians cannot give precise dates on the basis of style alone, it is generally agreed that this sculpture was executed between 1100 and 1120, before any Arthurian romances of any sort other than the fragments in Welsh had been written down." (Italics are Barber's)

David Jones, who wrote the foreword to this book, relates the following: "A friend of mine, finding her child in tears and supposing him to be unwell, discovered that his grief was occasioned by the reading of a child's popular version of what is called in Malory, 'the moste pyteous tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Gwerdon.' For this child, at least, the spell still holds; and they say that children can father men." The spell also holds for me. This book is highly recommended to all who love fantasy, to all who love T.H. White, and to all who like literary puzzles.

--Victor la Pater