

## Virtual Special Issue of *Folklore* 3, 2012

### Folklore Studies and the Arthurian Legend

Podcast introduction by Juliette Wood—Transcript and reading list

Few stories are as well-known or as widely told as the exploits of King Arthur and his knights. Their adventures, as retold in medieval romances and folktales, conjure up images of an heroic past, and a growing sense of British identity in the nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in this tradition. New translations and editions of Arthurian texts appeared, and with them, new research into the sources for the narratives and of the nature of Arthur himself. The Folklore Society, at once international in scope and grounded in the new discipline of folklore studies, was well placed to contribute to this revival, and Alfred Nutt, publisher, editor of the Society's journal *Folklore* and considerable scholar in his own right, encouraged this discussion. New techniques such as comparative philology were applied to the study of mythology and literature as a means to reconstruct the context of an heroic age. Techniques of comparative analysis and cultural reconstruction could also be applied to two important questions in Arthurian studies, namely the relationship between Arthurian tradition and Celtic myth and the possibility that Arthur was an historical British figure. Significant stores of folktale material were being collected by Irish and Scottish collectors, and this seemed to link heroic literature and contemporary folklore and to justify the assumption that a pattern of heroic life could be recovered from ancient epics and contemporary folktales. Alfred Nutt's seminal work examined the role of Celtic hero figures in this context. In a presidential address to The Folklore Society, he examined links between what he called 'fairy mythology' and Arthurian literature which, in his opinion, enshrined features of archaic Celtic myth and heroic culture. (Alfred Nutt, 'The Fairy Mythology of English Literature: Its Origin and Nature', *Folklore* 8, no. 1 [1897], 29-53). Nutt highlighted Celtic parallels to Arthurian romance (Frank A. Milne, A. Nutt. 'Arthur and Gorlagon', *Folklore* 15, no. 1 [1904], 40-67), but other folklorists were interested in the wider context for Arthurian material. Moses Gaster, for example, edited and commented on a Jewish adaptation of Arthurian romance ('The History of the Destruction of the Round Table as Told in Hebrew in the Year 1279', *Folklore* 20, no. 3 [1909], 272-94) while W. P. Ker examined European versions of the Gawain story (W. P. Ker. 'The Roman van Walewein (Gawain)', *Folklore* 5, no. 2 [1894], 121-8). In 1958, one of the most influential Arthurian critics of the day, R. S. Loomis, provided an overview of the relationships between medieval Arthurian romance, Celtic myth and contemporary folk narrative. Loomis presented a nuanced and still useful analysis of the folklore sources for Arthurian legend. He recognised the role of literary as well as oral sources in relation to Arthurian traditions such as the stories about Arthur sleeping in a cave. Two years after Loomis's article appeared, Mary Williams presented a comprehensive survey of Arthurian material in her presidential address to The Folklore Society ('King Arthur in History and Legend', *Folklore* 73, no. 2 [1962], 73-88). Loomis and Williams represent the culmination of this early phase of Arthurian folklore studies. Comparisons of folk motifs based on reconstructions of 'oral' sources and the centrality of the 'heroic' age gave way to other considerations in folklore studies. Loomis's method, especially his focus on Celtic mythic roots based on somewhat speculative philology, was criticised by the Celtic linguist and polymath, Professor Kenneth Jackson. This controversy is summarised in Raymond J. Cormier's excellent article 'Tradition and Sources: The Jackson—Loomis Controversy Re-Examined' (*Folklore* 83, no. 2 (1972), 101-21). The critique of Loomis's universalising tendency is given a different perspective in a review by Professor Brynley Roberts who notes that 'oral tradition' is too often used in Arthurian arguments, especially when seeking an historical basis for the figure of Arthur, 'to justify statements or hypotheses without historical basis or confirmation.' The search for

early material in medieval Arthurian texts, he suggests, needs 'the context of historical horizon, channels of transmission and preservation, and significance for the people who have preserved it' in order that 'oral tradition' is not to be simply a variant of 'maybe.' Surveys and historical studies still have their place. The noted Arthurian scholar, Edith Ditmas examines the influence of Arthurian tradition outside the context of medieval romance ('The Cult of Arthurian Relics', *Folklore* 75, no. 1 [1964], 19-33; 'More Arthurian Relics', *Folklore* 77, no. 2 [1966], 91-104). Jacqueline Simpson updates the subject of Arthur's return (J. R. Simpson, 'King Arthur's Enchanted Sleep: Early Nineteenth Century Legends', *Folklore* 97, no. 2 [1986], 206-9), and Thomas Green considers chapbooks and popular literature as carriers of Arthurian tradition. ('Tom Thumb and Jack the Giant Killer: Two Arthurian Folktales?' *Folklore* 118, no. 2 [2007], 123-40). Contemporary folkloristics still contribute to the study and understanding of Arthurian tradition. Martin Puhvel presents a comparative study of Otherworld entries ('Snow and Mist in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—Portents of the Otherworld?' *Folklore* 89, no. 2 [1978], 224-8) in terms of the contexts of George Dumézil's structural theory rather than the antiquarian survival approach of the early phase of research. Finally Raymond H. Thompson ('The Perils of Good Advice: The Effect of the Wise Counsellor upon the Conduct of Gawain', *Folklore* 90, no. 1 [1979], 71-6; 'Gawain against Arthur: The Impact of a Mythological Pattern upon Arthurian Tradition in Accounts of the Birth of Gawain', *Folklore* 85, no. 2 [1974]), 113-21; "'Muse on þi Mirrou...': The Challenge of the Outlandish Stranger in the English Arthurian Verse Romances', *Folklore* 87, no. 2 [1976], 201-8) re-examines motifs as functional elements of narrative rather than evidence of earlier stages of cultural meaning.

### **Featured articles from *Folklore***

[King Arthur's Enchanted Sleep: Early Nineteenth Century Legends](#), by J. R. Simpson, vol. 97/2, 1986

[The Perils of Good Advice: The Effect of the Wise Counsellor upon the Conduct of Gawain](#), by Raymond H. Thompson, vol. 90/1, 1979

[Snow and Mist in \*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight\* – Portents of the Otherworld?](#) by Martin Puhvel, vol. 89/2, 1978

[Tom Thumb and Jack the Giant Killer: Two Arthurian Folktales?](#) by Thomas Green, vol. 118/2, 2007

[King Arthur in History and Legend](#), by Mary Williams, vol. 73/2, 1962

[The Cult of Arthurian Relics](#), by E. M. R. Ditmas, vol. 75/1, 1964

### **Further Reading**

[Gawain Against Arthur. The Impact of a Mythological Pattern upon Arthurian Tradition in Accounts of the Birth of Gawain](#), by Raymond H. Thompson, vol. 85/2, 1974

['Muse on þi Mirrou...': The Challenge of the Outlandish Stranger in the English Arthurian Verse Romances](#), by Raymond H. Thompson, vol. 87/2, 1976

[Review of Rodney Castleden, \*King Arthur: The Truth behind the Legend\* \(London and New York: Routledge, 2000\)](#), by Brynley Roberts, vol. 112/2, 2001

[More Arthurian Relics](#), by E. M. R. Ditmas, vol. 77/2, 1966

[The Fairy Mythology of English Literature: Its Origin and Nature](#), by Alfred Nutt, vol. 8/1, 1897

[Arthurian Tradition and Folklore](#), by Roger Sherman Loomis, vol. 69/1, 1958

[Tradition and Sources: The Jackson—Loomis Controversy Re-Examined](#), by Raymond J. Cormier, vol. 83/2, 1972

[Arthur and Gorlagon](#), by Frank A. Milne and A. Nutt, vol. 15/1, 1904

[The Roman van Walewein \(Gawain\)](#), by W. P. Ker, vol. 5/2, 1894

[The History of the Destruction of the Round Table as Told in Hebrew in the Year 1279](#), by Moses Gaster, vol. 20/3, 1909