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The Death of King Arthur by Peter Ackroyd (review)

Samantha J. Rayner

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Reviews

PETER ACKROYD, *The Death of King Arthur*. London: Penguin, 2010. Pp. 336. ISBN: 978-1-846-14193-5. \$43.50.

In late Autumn 2010, Peter Ackroyd's *The Death of King Arthur* was released in hardback by Penguin in the UK. When asked where the idea for the book came from, Alexis Kirschbaum, Editorial Director at Penguin Classics, revealed that she had commissioned it herself. She had a belief that the time was right for a more accessible version of Malory—and chose Ackroyd as the writer best fitted to bring that belief to market. This was good business sense: Ackroyd's name has cultural capital, and would have impact on the review circuit as well as on bookshop shelves. His work includes an imaginative remediation of Chaucer in *The Clerkenwell Tales*, a biography, *Chaucer: Brief Lives*, and a modern retelling of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* for Penguin Classics, (a brave move since Neville Coghill's verse translation was and is still on their lists and is still the best known and cited modern version). Like Caxton five hundred years earlier, Kirschbaum wanted to bring Malory to a wider readership. As Editorial Director of the Penguin Classics titles, it is her role to keep that list appealing to readers, drawing in new ones and tempting those already familiar with canonical texts to read them again. Penguin Classics already has the two-volume edition of Caxton's Malory in their portfolio—a steady seller since it came out in 1969. When Kirschbaum decided that Malory was due for a revamp, she wanted to make a more streamlined, less episodic approach available to the reading public. On the Penguin Classics website (<http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/static/penguinclassicsfeatures/index.html>), she argues: 'The stories are by now so famous that it may feel like we already know them—but how many of us have actually read Malory's... Middle English original? Most likely, despite an interest, most of us have never been able to pick up the book. It was always a little forbidding, a little old, much too long and never attractively presented.' She speaks with some authority about the reading habits of book-buyers and—though scholars perhaps rarely consider the commercial aspect of textual transmission and consumption—without successful marketing and sales, a book will simply cease to exist. With current media exposure for the Arthurian legends still very constant, a book launch was a logical business move by Penguin.

Kirschbaum was not just approaching this project from a publishing perspective, however. She has an MPhil after researching Edmund Spenser. In the same feature on the Penguin Classics website she reveals: 'I've always been drawn to the romance (small "r") of the Middle Ages: the jousts, kings and queens, intrigue at the highest

echelons of power, the quests, moral compromise, sense of duty and “man love,” not to mention the secret affairs with the potential to bring down kingdoms.’ Compare this to Caxton’s list of Malory’s appeal (‘the noble actes, feates of armes of chyvalrye, prowess, hardynesse, humanyte, love, curtoyse, and veray gentylnesse, with many wonderful hystories and adventures’) and the temporal shift in reading habits is plain to see. What strikes one in particular is the emphasis Kirschbaum puts on the power struggles that have politically strong ramifications. Caxton, of course, could not have been this suggestive: his readers and buyers made up a class largely within the dynamic of power, and so these two paratexts show much about the nature of publishing and reading both then and now.

Kirschbaum gave very strong direction to Ackroyd, suggesting, in her notes to him, that he cut distracting parts of the narrative, such as the tale of Balyne and all of Lamorak, to flesh out the main narrative themes, and to include more descriptive titles that link each section to a sense of the greater plot. This last note connects back to Caxton’s own practice of breaking down the tales into smaller chunks, listed in his Preface. Kirschbaum’s main stresses are for Ackroyd to make the style ‘more colloquial and modern’ but she also notes that ‘there is a vocabulary of arcane words that readers expect of quest literature that evokes another world’ so ‘care should be taken not to over-familiarise the language.’ She also suggests that Ackroyd should revisit Tolkien’s essay in *The Monster and the Critics* on the dangers of over-modernizing, and her final comment is a reminder that E.K. Chambers ‘was perturbed by the “over-growth of chivalric adventures,” by Malory’s failure to maintain certain characters “on the same plane throughout,” by his apparent inability to tell completely “two of the world’s dozen great love stories”—that of Tristan and Iseult and that of Lancelot and Guinevere’ (‘Notes for PA on first draft’: allowed access to this by Kirschbaum, July 2011). Kirschbaum’s evocation of scholarly epitexts shows the way that those become embedded, alongside the core narrative, even when the key impetus of this new version is for general, not academic, readership.

Is the book a success? In publishing terms, yes. It has already reprinted in the UK, and a deluxe edition appeared in October 2012 in the USA. Kirschbaum’s decision to commission a new retelling of Malory demonstrably draws on techniques evident through paratextual readings that connect this with Caxton’s own publishing endeavours. Both used new technologies to bring their books to a wider reading marketplace. Time—and further research—will help reveal if Kirschbaum’s commission will win her a stake in the future. It does what she, as an editor, wanted it to: as a result, it is a very streamlined, very readable rendition of some of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. It is also, therefore, full of mis-readings, mis-tellings, and mistakes in terms of Malory’s detail and language. This will irritate the purist, and certainly doesn’t convince one that this will be a really useful core text for students of the Arthurian legend . . . at least not yet. It is a reflection of Malory, but not a true replication of his style or his range of sources and preoccupations. This is a buffet, not the banquet of a reading experience you get from the Winchester or Caxton versions, but the taste of Malory is there. Ackroyd and Kirschbaum have created an accessible gateway for readers who may indeed have found earlier editions ‘forbidding,

a little old, much too long and never attractively presented.' Care has been taken to address these reactions, and the result is a book worth reading on its own (very clearly defined) terms.

The Arthurian legend, as Vinaver himself acknowledges in his preface to the 1947 edition, 'are a remarkable example of literary revival . . . They transform the legacy of one nation into a cherished possession of another and in the same token effect the transition from the medieval to the modern conception of the novel—from early romance to a type of fiction able to carry its message to the modern world' (viii). Kirschbaum and Ackroyd's latest efforts prove, at the very least, that the modern world is as receptive to Malory as it was in 1485.

SAMANTHA J. RAYNER
University College London

C. STEPHEN JAEGER, *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. 427. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4329-1. \$69.95.

Readers who have had the chance to follow C. Stephen Jaeger's research and publications over the years could notice a progressive line taking him from the *Origins of Courtliness* (1985) to a study of the rise of cathedral schools in his *The Envy of Angels* (1994), then to an exploration of the spiritual dimension of courtly love (*Ennobling Love*, [1999]), and now, after having edited the intriguing volume on *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics* (2010), culminating, in a way, in his *Enchantment* (2012). Surprisingly, Jaeger here takes a pretty radical turn away from medieval studies and mostly focuses on the global issue of charisma, as it found its most dazzling expression in western art from antiquity to the present. Jaeger does not ignore the world of the Middle Ages, but his topic takes him all over the map, from the Homeric epic to Maxim Gorky, with a strong emphasis in-between on Albrecht Dürer's self-portraits and Goethe's *Faust I* and *II*. The chapters on Rainer Maria Rilke and the twentieth-century American cinema also appeal through their trenchant analysis of the charismatic element. Woody Allen fans will equally be delighted that Jaeger has discovered charisma in his cinematographic works, but all this cannot really concern us here, as significant the critical discussion of enchantment, aura, and charisma proves to be in a universal context, often, if not always, bordering on faith and religion. As Jaeger defines the charismatic person at the very end, 'He or she gathers the force of suggested qualities and gathers bundled promises, promises of great things, beyond any hope of attaining or experiencing on our own: this individual is our conduit, our channeler, and our music . . .' (373–74). While children resort to fairy tales to internalize myth for the purpose of their own growth, adults seek redemption to gain a sense of meaning of life, which Jaeger clearly demarcates from the usual 'happy end.' Offering a kind of psychological reading, he concludes by arguing that movie-goers, for instance, look for more than just entertainment, instead for a charismatic enlightenment (my wording). Certainly, this might apply to a small