CHAPTER NINE

VICTORIAN MEDIEVALISMS
REHABILITATING ARTHUR IN E. L.
HERVEY’S THE FEASTS OF CAMELOT

Renée Ward

While the works of Eleanora Louisa Hervey are generally unknown in the present day, the works of this prolific writer circulated widely during her lifetime (1811–1903), appearing in popular journals, magazines, and anthologies, sometimes alongside the works of renowned poets. Much of her work, including poems, songs, novels, short stories, and at least one play, participates in the strategies of medievalism, which she employs across her corpus to explore issues central to Victorian culture, especially those of racial and national identity, empire, and just rule. Her works also frequently foreground female perspectives and experiences, and articulate progressive ideas about motherhood and marriage.

The Victorian practice of returning to the medieval past to reimagine the present is well established, and in recent years numerous critics have shown that women writers in the nineteenth century, like their male counterparts, had a vested interest in deploying the medieval in order to critique the world around them. Much of this scholarship revolves around the excavation of works by “forgotten and neglected” women writers (Lupack and Lupack). Alan Lupack and Barbara Tepa Lupack include Hervey in this category because of her volume King Arthur’s Court and provide excerpts from this text in their collection, Arthurian Literature by Women (1999). As Lupack and Lupack note, while Victorian references to the Arthurian legend abound, Hervey’s text is “one of the earliest works of original Arthurian fiction by a woman and still one of only a few unified collections of short Arthurian fiction” (4). However, despite their early identification of the points of interest in this text, it has received no critical attention in the almost thirty years since. This chapter, then, takes up the threads they have loosened and begins to unravel what is a particularly complex and innovative contribution to the Arthurian world.

The volume’s full title, King Arthur’s Court; or The Feasts of Camelot, with the Tales that Were Told There (Feasts), immediately makes explicit its participation in Arthurian medievalism. The most obvious Arthurian references include the frame narrative’s setting of the legendary feast hall; the presence of established
Arthurian characters, including King Arthur, Guenevere, Merlin, and Gawain; and its contents, which offer further testimony of the enduring legacy of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.\(^7\) Despite encompassing these familiar Arthurian tropes, Hervey’s text also demonstrates Lorreta Holloway and Jennifer Palmgren’s remark that the Victorians “could make Arthur up or into anything wanted or needed, and they did” (1). Indeed, *Feasts* has several features that render it far from a straightforward adaptation: it frequently blends traditional Arthurian narratives with other medieval sources as well as with non-medieval materials; it presents revisionist adaptations that frequently invert more widely known character traits or plot incidents; and it foregrounds a number of tales specifically concerned with female experiences. While these features on their own are not unique—other nineteenth-century writers were wont to likewise blend Malory with other medieval sources or to highlight female characters—Hervey’s selections and reworkings of materials in *Feasts* are often original and strategic, underpinning the text’s central thematic concerns. In this chapter, I examine Hervey’s interventions in the narrative structures and motifs typically associated with the Arthurian myth; her use of the medieval narratorial art form, interlacement; and her rewriting of a well-known (non-Arthurian) story which foregrounds the themes of motherhood and wifehood. All three, I argue, contribute to her critique of patriarchal structures and gendered social roles that disadvantage women, as well as to her interpretation of Arthur as an exemplary figure of benevolent and just rule.

**DISRUPTING THE FEAST HALL**

The twenty-two chapters of the volume traverse two parts, which are named after the calendar feasts of Whitsuntide (the seventh Sunday after Easter) and Christmas. Part one has ten chapters; part two has twelve. The opening of each part employs one of the most common settings of medieval Arthurian romance, that of the feast hall, into which a figure from outside the courtly community normally enters and operates as a catalyst for adventure. The fourteenth-century alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers what is perhaps the most iconic union of the feast hall setting and this interruption, the “intruder at the feast” motif (Byrne). In the opening fitt, the poet describes the fifteen-day revelry at Camelot, which includes tournaments, jousts, and dancing, and which culminates on New Year’s Day in an extravagant feast of sumptuous dishes and double helpings. Against this backdrop, Arthur makes his famous vow not to eat until he witnesses some marvel or adventure. As if on cue, the Green Knight bursts in and offers his neck to the court, an offer which Gawain, somewhat belatedly, accepts. Thus begins the shocking beheading game and the knight’s subsequent quest.

Initially, the framing of Hervey’s text suggests it will reproduce fully the hall and feast setting and intruder at the feast motif. Its subtitle—*The Feasts of Camelot*—certainly creates expectation for any reader familiar with the Arthurian myth, and the text does indeed open with a Whitsuntide feast, presenting Arthur and his court at the board as daylight dwindles. All of Arthur’s best knights are present, with the exception of Gawain, whom we are told “by reason of some dispute, had departed from Camelot” (4). The narrator also sets the scene for an interruption, telling
readers “there was no lack of strange encounters” (3) at Arthur’s court, whether it be “strangers and pilgrims from afar, who, together with foreign minstrels, were admitted at all hours” (4). But the narrator then explains, “As no knight seemed ready with fitting tale of adventure, and no stranger guest had yet appeared to satisfy the custom of the time, King Arthur turned him to his old friend and ever-wise counselor, Merlin, and begged of him a history” (4). The anticipated opening disruption from an external force is thus unfulfilled, signaling to readers that what will unfold might not meet expectations.

In response to Arthur’s request, Merlin says he will tell a story of his youth, something that was “written down in the books of [his] uncle Bleise” (5). What Merlin actually recounts, though, are the circumstances of Arthur’s conception and rise to power. And this version of Arthur’s birth includes a number of significant deviations from the established myth. Although Merlin aids Uther in his pursuit of Igraine (here Igerna), he does not employ magic or disguise to do so, nor does he facilitate a sexual encounter between the two prior to the Duke of Cornwall’s death. Instead, after the Duke dies in battle, Merlin relays to Igerna Uther’s desires for her and the details of the king’s two dream visions, the first of a kingdom torn apart if he dies without an heir and the second of the two wedded, with a son who “was the best and wisest prince of this or any other time, and a great champion of Christendom” (18). The Christian element of the second vision wins Igerna’s trust, and she acquiesces to meet Uther, but only after an appropriate period of mourning. The narrative then highlights how the king—who is by no means a perfect character—is reformed by his love, becoming “so handsome and so courteous, and so frank in his bearing” because “he so truly loved Igerna” (14). The two undertake an appropriate courtship, fall in love, marry, and only then conceive Arthur.

The opening chapters subtly draw the reader in and reimagine Arthur’s origins. The text initially creates mystery and suspense by focusing the reader’s attention on the absence of Gawain rather than immediately deploying the intruder at the feast motif. Even if readers are unfamiliar with this feature of the myth, the narrator’s direct statement about Gawain’s absence is enough to raise questions about what type of dispute would keep one of Arthur’s best knights from court. This is a keen ploy, a hook if you will, as the only way to find out the answer is to keep reading. The narrative then sanitizes core elements of the myth, removing content that could have been viewed as highly problematic—references to pagan magic, extra-marital sexual encounters, and illegitimate births. It thus remolds Arthur’s story in a way that maintains social practices of concern for Victorian society: marital vows are upheld, as are mourning practices, legitimate conception, and legitimate succession. Hervey, then, reinforces Arthur’s position as an appropriate “social model” (Bryden 370) and extends the positive attributes associated with his figure to his traditionally more questionable progenitor, who is reformed by Igerna’s love.

What is innovative in this story is the way the narrative turns back in upon itself. The intruder at the feast typically constitutes the marvel that Arthur desires, and their arrival initiates narrative action, most of which occurs outside of the space of the court. Further, in many late-medieval texts Arthur and Camelot are secondary to the stories of individual knights as they undertake quests. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, to draw upon this example once more, introduces the marvel of the Green Knight, whose decapitated corpse horrifies and astounds the Arthurian court,
and then leaves it behind to detail Gawain’s travails and personal growth outside of Arthur’s realm. Even though the “aunter” (“adventure”; line 27) starts and ends in Camelot, the majority of the narrative occurs outside of its confines and the marvel derives from external forces. In *Feasts*, however, the initial mystery or wonder derives from within the court itself, not only from Gawain’s unexplained absence but also from the king. Arthur’s own origin story becomes the wondrous interruption he desires. The reader’s attention is drawn inward, to the king’s life, and to the example of his governance. Merlin’s response when the king remarks that the story is, unexpectedly, his own confirms the centrality of Arthur to the narrative. “The life of a good subject,” he says, “is bound up in the life of his king” (25). This focal shift suggests to the reader that greater attention should be paid to Arthur, to his words and actions as he interacts with the members of his court.

Hervey’s next intervention in the narratorial frame amplifies the attention devoted to Arthur in a move that simultaneously reveals her intimate knowledge of another medieval text popular in the Victorian period: Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Once Merlin completes his story, Arthur instructs him to select the next speaker, so that “the tale may go round” (28), signaling to readers that this particular version of the Arthurian feast hall has a unique story-telling context. As the chapters progress, different speakers emerge. Part one has eight different narrators, while part two has ten, ranging from recognized members of Arthur’s court—such as Tristram, Urien, Isond, and Gareth—to guests in the hall—such as an unknown pilgrim, a harper, and another minstrel. The text’s division into sets of stories evokes the intended structure of Chaucer’s text and the Host’s challenge to the pilgrims to tell two tales each way during the round-trip journey to Canterbury. While the event is not identified as a competition—certainly, the speakers are considerably more polite to each other than are some of Chaucer’s pilgrims (no bombastic millers or drunken cooks grace these pages)—members of the court are not afraid to interrupt and criticize each other, especially Merlin. Ulfius, for instance, condemns the counselor for removing the infant Arthur from his familial home (27), while Guenevere chastises him for teaching Arthur’s sister “unlawful magic” (89). In this structure, Arthur operates as the Harry Bailey of his court, managing interactions and directing the overall sequence of speakers and tales. Each chapter concludes as the respective speaker closes their tale and selects, under Arthur’s guidance, the next storyteller, in a process reminiscent of the conversations and links between the tales and the fragments of Chaucer’s text. *Feasts*, then, is a type of medieval mash-up, blending Arthurian and Chaucerian elements. To use J. R. R. Tolkien’s metaphor, Hervey has dipped her ladle into the cauldron of story, with unique results.\textsuperscript{10} Yet as Tolkien also notes, “cooks do not dip in the ladle quite blindly. Their selection is important” (47). Hervey’s mash-up, like those of the medieval writers of Arthuriana, is indeed intentional rather than haphazard.\textsuperscript{11}

**MEDIEVAL BORROWINGS**

Chaucer held an eminent position in the nineteenth century; he and his work were often heralded as the epitome of English culture and identity (Brewer 2: 6; Collette; Richmond).\textsuperscript{12} Unlike Malory’s text, his *Canterbury Tales* had remained in print through the centuries; it circulated in multiple editions, as extracts or series...
in popular journals and periodicals, and in adaptations, especially for children. Hervey’s decision, then, to draw upon the *Canterbury Tales* rather than another medieval source is a strategic move, one that imbues her adaptation not only with a recognition factor that extends beyond its Arthurian content but also with the authority associated with the poet himself.

More importantly, Hervey’s adaptation reveals her intimate knowledge of a key tool employed by medieval romancers, *entrelacement* (interlacement). A type of narrative structure, interlacement brings together previously self-contained stories, weaving them into a cohesive whole, a series of parallel adventures that intersect at some points or stand alone at others. As Eugène Vinaver explains, this technique was favored by thirteenth-century prose writers, especially those working with Arthuriana, and “consisted . . . in forging significant and tangible links between originally independent episodes; it aimed at establishing, or at least suggesting, relationships between hitherto unrelated themes” (68). “Each initial adventure,” he continues, “can be extended into the past and each final adventure into the future by a further lengthening of the narrative threads” (76). What might initially appear to be a digression from the main plot ultimately reveals itself to be a hidden element of it instead.

As seen below, the stories in Hervey’s *Feasts* often overlap or speak back to each other through shared characters and events, with later tales often completing earlier ones or providing extra information about their characters. Storylines also carry across from part one to part two, linking the text’s two sections and building suspense by forcing the reader to wait for a tale’s completion, sometimes until much later in the reading experience. The opening chapters of each part, “The Whitsuntide Feast” (1.1) and “The Christmas Feast” (2.1), make explicit their connection through both their repetitive titles and their foregrounding of the frame’s narrative setting. Beyond these examples, however, chapter titles imply very little about their relationships to each other. A quick overview of the table of contents might even suggest that the volume contains primarily unrelated or stand-alone tales. “Of a Strange Damsel and of Three Questions” (1.4), for instance, bears no evidence that it links to “Sir Gareth’s Tale of the Moorland Mystery” (2.2), while “The Lady Angelides’ Tale of the Terrible Horn” (1.10) evidences no obvious connection to “Queen Isond’s Tale of the One Good Deed” (2.11). Even if readers familiar with the Arthurian myth identify the latter two narrators (Angelides and Isond) as figures that feature in the stories associated with King Mark, the chapter titles make no explicit reference to each other. However, the majority of the volume’s chapters cluster around characters, whether they be members of Arthur’s court or protagonists of the stories told (and, in some instances, both). As Table 9.1 demonstrates, such clusters are pervasive in the structure of the narrative and only five chapters operate as independent episodes, although even here plot elements and characters may have links to Arthur.

The stories of Tristram, Isond, and King Mark constitute the largest cluster, traversing six chapters, and including, in addition to the third-person omniscient narrator, five separate storytellers. Tristram tells the well-known story of his own troubles with King Mark, his journey to Ireland, and his introduction to Isond, although in this version their relationship remains entirely chaste and platonic, while Angelides recounts her own experiences of King Mark’s jealousy and violence,
specifically Mark’s attack and wounding of her husband and his brother, Baldwin. After hearing the latter story during the Whitsuntide Feast, Arthur promises to seek out and deal with his fellow king, a point the opening of part 2 recalls when a fully recovered Baldwin appears at the Christmas feast with his wife and members of the court speculate that Arthur “must have slain King Mark” (121). Baldwin eventually reveals how a hermit nursed him back to health and describes how, as he made the treacherous coastal journey home, a mysterious and agitated Black Knight (later revealed to be Mark) followed him. Queen Isond tells a story of generous benefaction—Mark’s reunion of a slain knight with his deceased wife and his construction of “a costly tomb of pure white marble” (229) that commemorates the pair. Meanwhile, Alisaunder, the son of Angelides and Baldwin, tells the story of a young boy (whom readers soon learn is the young Tristram) whose kindness reforms the evil heart of his stepmother.

The thread that binds these stories together is their connection, either directly or indirectly, to King Mark. Moreover, this network of tales echoes the strategies highlighted by the initial focus upon Arthur’s origins (especially marital vows and mourning practices) and rule as it simultaneously presents a trajectory of rehabilitation for Mark’s character. The stories of Tristram and Angelides present Mark as a jealous and cruel king, but their accounts give way to stories that emphasize his repentance and subsequent kindness. They likewise reinforce Arthur’s figure as an appropriate social model.

After Baldwin’s story, Merlin reveals that the mysterious Black Knight was King Mark, whom Arthur had urged to seek out and make amends with his brother. Arthur expands his counselor’s revelation, suggesting that the newly reformed Mark was troubled by guilt over his behavior and ultimately fled his brother’s company because of “shame for the past” (230). While Mark is unable, in that moment, to approach his brother, his shame and desire for reconciliation create narrative space for his character’s continued rehabilitation. Arthur also confirms that his fellow king’s improvement arises from his own intervention: “We have met,” he tells the court, “but in no deadly encounter. He has heard me patiently” (219). This scene highlights Arthur’s just rule. Rather than overthrow his fellow king, Arthur instead, through his own example of benevolence, steers Mark toward his acts of kindness. Isond’s subsequent account of Mark’s good deed confirms the effectiveness of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlaced or Clustered Chapters</th>
<th>Independent Chapters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1, 2.1</td>
<td>Opening or Frame Narratives (Feasts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3, 1.10, (2.1)</td>
<td>Mark, Tristram and Isond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10, 2.11, 2.12</td>
<td>1.2 Arthur’s Origins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4, 2.2, 2.3</td>
<td>1.9 The Purfled Mantle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6, 1.7</td>
<td>1.5 Wild Wood-Ranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4, 2.5, 2.6</td>
<td>1.8 Mountain Voices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7, 2.8</td>
<td>2.9 King Sweno</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.1 Interlaced or clustered and independent chapters in Hervey’s Feasts
Arthur’s example. Mark’s recovery is complete when he undertakes acts of kindness that have no grounding in reparation but are, rather, entirely altruistic.\textsuperscript{15}

The larger story of this well-known trio, then, unfolds slowly across the volume, creating moments of hermeneutic suspense and wonder through the unexplained appearance of characters at court or unexplained episodes in the stories; as each story is told, questions are answered, or mysteries are solved. The final installment even returns the reader to the starting point of the sub-plot (or thread, if we use the tapestry metaphor) by focusing on the speaker of the first of the interlaced tales, Tristram himself. The thematic elements emphasized by the circular pattern of this story cluster confirm Hervey’s understanding of how medieval narratorial patterns work. “The recurrence of a theme,” as Vinaver notes, “can confer fresh significance upon it” (83). In accordance with this principle, this cluster circles back upon itself, echoing the inward-looking gaze and key themes by recasting King Mark as a reformed just king and thereby recalling the opening sequences focused on Arthur’s exemplary life and court, and Uther’s rehabilitation. These strategies allow Hervey to deploy interlacement as deftly as any of her medieval predecessors and to present key Arthurian figures in a new light. In doing so, she reveals a nuanced understanding of how to combine the familiar Arthurian topoi found in her source texts with new elements and structural devices.

\textbf{GWENELDA OF WALES: REHABILITATING BRUNO THE PITILESS}

Further notable examples of how Hervey innovatively blends her source material arise out of her thematic focus on women’s experiences. This focus is most apparent in “Eliot the Harper’s Lay of Gwenelda of Wales” (1.6) and “Sir Percival’s Tale of Bruno the Pitiless” (1.7). This pair of chapters combines to create a sequential rather than interlaced narrative (although with different voices for each section) and operate as a microcosm for the way in which Hervey blends her source materials. Chapter 6 in particular is visually distinguished from the rest of the text, as it is one of only two verse interludes within the larger prose narrative of \textit{Feasts}. Its form thus signals the importance of its content.

In a poem of twenty-two quatrains, the harper recounts an event that he witnessed as a youth in Caerleon, the court of Uther Pendragon. During a feast, the king requests entertainments in the form of “a test” (10), a gesture that recalls Arthur’s desire for some story or marvel. A knight named Bruno of the Tower boasts to Uther of his obedient wife, whose loyalty he has tested thoroughly. Bruno summons into the presence of the court “Her, who for love of me / Gave up to swift and bloody death / The babes upon her knee!” (lines 18–20). When the wife, Gwenelda, appears, her distress is apparent. The narrator describes her as “like a spirit from a grave” (39), while her words make palpable her grief and regret. She describes herself as a one who has

\begin{quote}
Sinned ’gainst the holy rights of home, 
Whose threshold I have trod;
’Gainst earth, and ’gainst the heaven to come,—
’Gainst motherhood and God! (57–60)
\end{quote}
Gwenelda’s words articulate the difficulty of reconciling the social roles women occupy, specifically those of wife and mother, when the responsibilities or obligations of those roles ultimately clash. As a wife, Gwenelda succeeds, obeying her husband and thus performing this social role as expected. As a mother, however, she fails. By obeying her husband, she forfeits her children’s lives. Her speech identifies her behavior as unnatural (against both “earth” and “motherhood”) and as un-Christian (against “God”). She suggests that her actions condemn her soul eternally—they are an act against “heaven to come,” and therefore against her ability to enter the realm of God in the afterlife—and they likewise destroy the sanctity of the family unit or household as a sacred domain (“the holy rights of home”). The severity of Gwenelda’s words reveals that her failure as a mother is more significant than her success as a wife. It is no surprise, then, that she appears wraithlike in Uther’s court: Gwenelda’s actions rob her of purpose in life and condemn her in the afterlife.

This is another Chaucerian borrowing: Hervey adapts the medieval story of patient Griselda, which was popularized by Chaucer, as well as by the authors of his sources, Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio. Griselda’s husband Walter also tests her loyalty by removing each of their children after birth and, supposedly, arranging their murder. The patient Griselda of the medieval tales bears all and utters not a single word of blame or protest. Hervey’s Gwenelda, however, laments her actions, naming herself as an ultimate sinner who has failed to protect her children and has hence failed as a mother. She articulates, in her own words, the trauma of her experience and the consequences of her actions. Her grief is palpable. Yet, Hervey does not simply rewrite the widely known elements of Griselda’s story: the description of her pastoral life; details of her oath of loyalty and marriage to Walter; her husband’s repeated testing of her loyalty via the abduction and supposed murder of her children; and her reunion with the children, marked by the famous swooning scene. Rather, Hervey offers a sequel to the medieval narrative, providing only a brief, retrospective account of Griselda’s trials and then beginning her narrative at the point of her reunion with her children and restoration to her position within her Walter’s household. And it is here that we see a radical departure from her literary antecedents.

After recounting to Uther’s court his harsh testing of his wife, Bruno entreats Gwenelda to speak out and comment upon his conclusion that she is “A woman of a steady mind / And of a lowly voice” (lines 43–44). He firmly places her story within the frame of Uther’s desire for “a test,” asking, “have I judged you well?” (48). When, in response, she utters the above words of self-condemnation, he commands “peace, peace, good wife!” (61) and directs her to “Come to this beating heart once more, / Back to these arms again” (63–64). Gwenelda, though, defies his instruction, instead “slip[ing] from his embrace” (66) exclaiming

God knew my heart, and gave me grace
A holier state to fill:
I dare not stand before His face
The bond-slave to your will.
True wifehood hath a soul;—’tis gone!
You knew it; you forgot.
The love I gave you once is flown;—
Alas, you loved me not! (73–80)
Her words constitute a wholesale rejection not just of Bruno’s authority but also of patriarchal structures, reinforcing the idea that being overly obedient to one’s husband, a “bond-slave to [his] will,” goes against the holy state of motherhood. She tells Bruno that his tests reveal his false affections, and, more importantly, that he knew his actions went against her motherly duties. While Gwenelda recognizes her part in the loss of her children—her final admonition is that she is a “False mother, and no wife” (88)—she likewise places blame firmly with the conflicting expectations of her social roles of mother and wife, as well as with the male heads of the social system that so cruelly pits these roles against each other. As Gwenelda’s husband, Bruno is the immediate perpetrator of her trauma, but as her king and as the person desirous of a “test,” Uther bears responsibility, too; weaknesses in his knights reflect upon his own rule, and his court provides the forum for entertainments or tests such as her own.

The poem ends with Gwenelda’s request of the “good father” who accompanies her (whom readers soon discover is not her father Janicula but an elderly monk) to “take [her] back again / To the old home” (83–84). Hervey thus, in Chapter 6, rejects the pattern of her medieval sources. Through this ending and especially through Gwenelda’s words, she suggests that the somewhat consolatory ending of her antecedents, in which Griselda, without complaint, reunites with Walter and her children, is an inadequate resolution to, even expression of, the trauma and anguish of her experiences.16 She likewise condemns the patriarchal system that continues to shape society, highlighting how readily this system, at both the domestic and the national levels, fails women.

Once Eliot the Harper puts down his harp, Sir Percival resumes the tale, returning to the thematic concerns seen in the stories of Arthur’s origins and in the interlaced cluster surrounding King Mark. Specifically, his continuation, which constitutes Chapter 7, reinforces the exemplary nature of Arthur’s rule and the possibility of redemption for all. In the chapter’s opening, Percival describes Uther’s response to the events witnessed in his court, clarifying that the king “had known nothing of the cruel masque” (68). The king’s reaction suggests that he does not condone his knight’s behavior; it also reveals his own method of rule. As Gwenelda departs, Bruno “caught the amazed and angered glance of the great Uther Pendragon . . . Something in that glance of King Uther’s eye he liked not: he felt sure it boded him no good. When the kingly blood was up no man could meet that glance and not rue it” (68). These words suggest that the king is quick to anger and that his rule is predicated upon fear. If a knight capable of such cruelty can be quelled with a glance, Uther’s wrath must be severe indeed. Bruno’s premonition rings true when his lord banishes him, telling him to “break in twain [his] forfeit sword” because he is “unworthy to bear it” (68). He, too, then leaves Caerleon.

This episode creates an explicit contrast between Uther and Arthur. Readers are reminded of the opening chapters in which they learn of the former’s questionable character, subsequent rehabilitation, and his son’s exemplary rule. While this story is set in the past (the events occur when its two narrators are themselves youths), it brings into the present and questions the quality of Uther’s rule. Bruno’s account of his cruel testing of Gwenelda, as a type of entertainment in Uther’s court, is set against the story-telling competition of Arthur’s hall. Simultaneously, this episode foreshadows the volume’s closing chapters in which Arthur contributes to the
rehabilitation of Mark, whose cruelty provides a retrospective parallel to Bruno’s. When readers later learn of Arthur’s wise counsel to his fellow king—that Mark seek out and make amends with those he has wronged—and then witness the positive outcome of such counsel, Uther’s solution to his knight’s behavior—chastisement and banishment—appears wanting. The narrative’s suggestion that Bruno could be redeemed heightens the contrast. As Gwenelda departs Caerleon with her children, her husband thinks to intercede but then refrains from doing so because “a touch of nature and manhood struck home to his heart” (67–68). A solution to his knight’s behavior other than banishment exists, but Uther, blinded by his own anger, fails to recognize the opportunity. Arthur is thus, once more, confirmed as an exemplary figure.

The remainder of Chapter 7 returns to the question of female experiences and foregrounds the ideas of forgiveness and redemption central to Arthur’s rule. Hearing of Bruno’s banishment, Gwenelda is moved by pity and decides to seek out her husband. After extensive and unsuccessful searching, she turns to the local convent and to the abbess who taught and cared for her in her younger years. When the abbess hears her former pupil’s story, she offers further condemnation, and, in doing so, amplifies the narrative’s concern over the conflicting loyalties of motherhood and wifehood. “Thou wert ill taught indeed to render up thy soul to this man when thou didst give thy heart into his careless keeping,” she declares, “was he a god, that thou shouldst offer up thine Isaac twice over, without a word at his bidding? Child, thou hast sinned” (71). These words recall the previously established connection between motherhood and the divine, reinforcing the message that wifely obedience should never supersede maternal responsibility. Yet, while they confirm Gwenelda’s culpability, they also apportion the blame between the women. The abbess is, after all, the one responsible for her charge being “ill taught,” a point she notes when she describes Gwenelda as “less blameful” than she is (71). In this moment, nurture becomes more important than nature, and the importance of the traditional family unit as the site of knowledge transfer becomes clear. Women without the experience of wifehood and motherhood, as one assumes the abbess must be, are ill-suited as guides in these roles. A girl will best learn how to be a good mother or wife, and how to balance the conflicting responsibilities of these roles, from another woman with these life experiences, typically her own mother.

Gwenelda makes her confession to a holy man and is given, as penance, instruction “to go on foot, bareheaded” into the forest and “to tend night and day a sick knight who dies a slow death in the lazaret-house, . . . who speaks never a human word, but only howls piteously like a wild beast” (71–72). This knight, who wears a visor over his face, lets out a “dismal groan” (72–73) at the sight of his nurse; Gwenelda seeks strength in prayer and continues to minister to him. At midnight, the patient rises, leading his carer into the forest and then into the vaults below the chapel of her late father’s castle. Terrified by the “possessed knight” (75), Gwenelda flees in order to ensure her children are secure with the abbess, but returns shortly, determined to see through her penance. In her absence, the knight has thrown open her father’s coffin, and, when Gwenelda shrieks, he makes a hacking motion with his sword arm as if to attack her father’s corpse. When Gwenelda grabs the knight, attempting to stop this attack, “with unnatural strength, he wound his arm around her” (77). Just as she thinks all hope is lost, her husband’s old hound bounds into
the vault. Thinking Bruno near, Gwenelda cries “lord and love, help me! Beloved of my soul,—dearer than life,—precious as heaven,—come to my rescue!” (77). The knight releases her immediately, and, as he raises his visor, “the stern mad passion in his eyes grew calm” (78).

Readers soon learn that the knight is, of course, Gwenelda’s exiled husband, rendered mad by his grief and remorse for his former actions. Husband and wife, then, suffer for their sins, but they also find redemption through love. A happy ending is finally achieved, but only after reparations are made by both the husband who cruelly tests his wife and the mother who fails her children. As Percival concludes his tale, Arthur confirms that Bruno permanently reformed his ways. “I recall having heard of a pilgrim of the name of Sir Bruno,” he says, “who had once been a man of a stern life, but had afterwards become noted for sundry acts of grace” (79). The knight’s rehabilitation fits the pattern of the larger text: it echoes the change wrought in Uther by Igerma’s love and foreshadows the story of King Mark’s transformation.

Hervey, then, rehabilitates the most disreputable figures of the Arthurian world—Uther, Mark, and, incredibly, Bruno, the latter of whom appears frequently in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. A renowned enemy of Arthur’s court, Bruno the Pitiless (Breunys Saunz Pyté) is identified by epithets that highlight his reprehensible nature, especially his mistreatment of women—whom he widows, abuses, and murders—and his fellow knights—whom he likewise frequently deceives and kills. Launcelot, for instance, calls him “false knyght” and “destroyer of ladies and damesels” (9.36.3), while the narrator refers to him as “the most myschevuste knyght lyvynge” (10.1.11). His introduction in Hervey’s poem even recalls his medieval reputation: the narrator tells readers that Bruno “made gracious womanhood his sport” (line 7) and later describes him as “a wild savage” (68).

The selection and rehabilitation of these knights, like much else in *Feasts*, is not haphazard; it has purpose. First, Hervey’s redemption of knights known specifically for their questionable or outright negative interactions with women strengthens the volume’s message concerning the mistreatment of women. Specifically, she criticizes the irreconcilable expectations of the social roles assigned to women and the patriarchal systems that impose these roles. By intertwining these episodes with a reimagined Griselda story, Hervey foregrounds women’s voices, experiences, and knowledge, offering a counter-narrative to her literary antecedents. Second, these examples augment Hervey’s related articulation of what constitutes both good leadership and appropriate, masculine behavior. Christian qualities such as compassion and kindness are imagined as natural and positive qualities for both masculine and feminine figures. Arthur’s treatment of his subjects, evidenced especially through his treatment of Mark and its contrast to Uther’s treatment of Bruno, likewise confirms the importance of these qualities in a just society.

Overall, then, through her medievalism, Hervey delivers a layered social commentary, highlighting, as Broome Saunders would put it, the “past errors in the present age” (6). Her integration of Chaucerian content and medieval narrative techniques—the story-telling frame, interlacement, and the reinvention Griselda—complements her wider strategy for reinventing the Arthurian world. She reconciles uncomfortable facets of the myth either by removing them (as with Arthur’s origins
and the King Mark story cluster) or by addressing and problematizing them (as with Gwenelda and Bruno). Ultimately, these elements are incorporated into a redemptive storyline that rehabilitates Arthur himself.

WORKS CITED


Hervey, Mrs. T. K. [Eleanora Louisa] King Arthur’s Court; or, The Feasts of Camelot: with the Tales that Were Told There. Bell and Daldy, 1863.


Knowles, James T. The Story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Griffith and Farran, 1862.


Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson. *Tennyson’s Idylls of the King*: The Coming of Arthur; Gareth and Lynette; Lancelot and Elaine; Guinevere; The Passing of Arthur. Edited by William Dodge Lewis, Charles E. Merrill, 1911.


FURTHER READING


NOTES

1 Her poems appear in volumes edited by Charles Mackay, for instance, alongside works by Alfred Tennyson, Charles Dickens, Eliza Cook, Walter Scott, John Milton, and others. See *The Book of English Songs from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (1851) and *The Illustrated Book of English Songs: From the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (1860?). Early in her career, Hervey published as Eleanora Louisa (or E. L.) Montagu, then under her married name, Mrs. T. K. Hervey; in later years, she often combined these practices and published as E. L. Hervey.

2 Hervey adapts, for instance, two of the most well-known medieval narratives to address these themes—the Old English epic *Beowulf* and the tale of patient Griselda. Both narratives are innovative reworkings of medieval and non-medieval source texts. See Ward, “The Adaptational Character” and “Giving Voice to Griselda.”
3 See, for instance, Broome Saunders; Garner, Romantic Women Writers; Blanton's chapter in this volume.

4 These same excerpts are also included in Alan Lupack's anthology Modern Arthurian Literature (1992).

5 Both volumes include sections of “Sir Tristram’s Tale of Mad King Mark” (1.3), “Queen Isond’s Tale of the One Good Deed” (2.11), and “The Boy Alisaunder’s Tale of the Forgiving Heart” (2.12).

6 The book’s spine has the short title King Arthur’s Court; however, at some point in my research on Hervey I began to use the abbreviations The Feasts of Camelot and Feasts in my work because the volume is listed in the British Library’s catalogue under its subtitle. I have maintained this convention here because this title evokes the setting and motif that I discuss.

7 Hervey’s decision to adapt the Arthurian myth was likely influenced by the recent publication of what is considered the first adaptation of Malory for children, James T. Knowles’s The Story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table (1862). The longevity and influence of Malory’s text—alongside that of Tennyson’s Idylls—in children’s literature is well-trodden ground. See, for instance, Lynch; Barbara Tepa Lupack; McCausland.

8 Lynch notes, “there are numerous nineteenth-century versions mixing Malory with tales from the Mabinogion or Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Boron, Icelandic sagas, The High History of the Holy Grail, and Spenser” (12). He also suggests that “female characters became far more important than in the original, which is not to suggest that they were empowered beyond traditional gender roles” (14). Garner explores similar practices of blending Malory with other medieval sources in a series published in the magazine Monthly Packet. See “More than a ‘Book for Boys?’” 46.


10 In his famous essay On Fairy Stories, Tolkien writes, “the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty” (44–45).

11 Here, my use of the word “haphazard” is inspired by Eugène Vinaver’s critique of negative interpretations of medieval Arthuriana: “If the Arthurian cycle has so often been mistaken for a collection of tales haphazardly put together, it is because its mechanism is hidden behind the extraordinary complexities of the text” (81).

12 In contrast, “Malory never gained Chaucer’s adult and honorary modern status in the early days of ‘English Literature’” (Lynch 15).

13 As Carol J. Chase notes, the word itself originally “described an ornament or an object composed of interlaced motifs” (“À l’origine le mot décrit un ornement ou un objet composé de motifs entrelacés”; 228, my translation). Chase identifies the key critics responsible for the evolution of the field or study of interlacement as Eugène Vinaver, Rosemond Tuve, William Ryding, and Amelia Ann Rutledge.

14 One such example is “Sir Dragonet the Fool’s Tale of a Purfled Mantle,” which reimagines a well-known tale about a king who demands that Arthur contribute to his cloak of beards. This is the story of Roye(n)s (Ryens or Ryons), King of North Wales and of Ireland, who has a cloak made from the beards of those kings he conquers; he demands that Arthur contribute his own beard to this cloak. See Le Morte Darthur (1.25.15–24).

15 This sequence demonstrates perfectly McCausland’s point that “appropriations of Arthur” attempt to define “ideals and structures,” including “the relationship between shame, punishment and penance” (5).
16 I say “somewhat” consolatory because Chaucer’s Envoy especially problematizes the tale’s ending. For discussions of the Envoy’s role in the Clerk’s Tale, see, for instance, Bryan or Chickering.

17 Given the clarity and narrative skill with which Hervey reinvents the Griselda story, it is perhaps regrettable that, from a modern perspective, she ultimately contains the potential subversiveness of her adaptation. Yet, despite the reestablishment of this nuclear family under Bruno’s newly benign patriarchal rule, Gwenelda’s critiques, once spoken, cannot be unsaid; their message resonates beyond the story’s ending.