

The Girl's King Arthur: Tales of the Women of Camelot

By Barbara Tewa Lupack, illustrated by Ian Brown. Dallas, TX: Scriptorium Press, 2010. 178 pp.

Review by R. Ward

Barbara Tewa Lupack's *The Girl's King Arthur* is a collection of original retellings of the stories of eight women of the Arthurian tradition—Guinevere, Elaine of Astolat, Elayne of Carbonek, La Belle Iseult, Dame Ragnell, Vivien, Lynette, and Morgan le Fay. The collection (which pays homage to Malory's original *The Whole Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table* in its division into eight tales) is framed by a Prologue and Epilogue, both of which are narrated by the Lady of the Lake. Each of the narratives begins in the first-person perspective of the female specific to that tale. Through its approach, the volume seeks to redress the tradition of many medieval documents and narratives in which women, in the words of Lisa M. Bitel, appear mostly "as shadows marked only by affiliation to individual men" (1). These are the stories of the women of Camelot, told by the women of Camelot. The tales are also reflective; they frequently refer back to each other, inviting comparisons between the stories that have already been told and the one about to begin. Further, the volume includes a series of black and white illustrations by Ian Brown, simple in design and evocative of the fifteenth-century woodcut illustrations often employed by William Caxton. The illustrations appear at the start of each tale and depict each tale's specific teller. Like the reflective openings, the illustrations invite comparison because they highlight the protagonist in a situation that reflects a well-known aspect of her story. Overall, the volume highlights a number of key themes, including female desire and autonomy, the clash between loyalties (especially those which arise when the desires of the heart conflict with social or political duties), and female knowledge or learning. These themes, while connected to tales of medieval women, remain relevant to modern women and girls and will resonate with female readers. As a teaching tool, the volume could be useful for both parents and educators, most effectively if tempered with some additional resources on the lives and practices of women in the late Middle Ages. As entertainment, it will appeal to both male and female readers, regardless of age, despite the suggestively gendered title.

While the Lady of the Lake declares, in her Prologue, that the stories "are not the familiar ones, of tournaments and quests" (3), most readers will not be entirely unfamiliar with the volume's contents. Most of the tales derive from the later Arthurian romance tradition rather than the earlier chronicle accounts, and depict, overall, a world in which treachery and strife are rampant among the Knights of the Round Table. The Prologue, for example, recounts Arthur's origins and rise to power, and draws heavily upon the 'sword in the stone' tradition that first surfaced in Robert de Boron's *Merlin* and was popularized in the twentieth century by T. H. White and Disney. Similarly, the first full tale - - which is also the longest tale in the volume - - focuses on the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, which was originally introduced in the twelfth century by Chrétien de Troyes and is, perhaps, the most famous aspect of the Arthurian tradition.

The book jacket describes the collection as a "nontraditional perspective" that emphasizes "female achievement" and "paint[s] an exciting new picture of the Arthurian world - - a world of magic, both black and white; of loyalties, both binding and broken; and of dreams, both frustrated and fulfilled." The stories do, indeed, emphasize the achievements of their namesakes, from the knowledge of Viven, who studies under and overpowers Merlin, to the wisdom of Lynette, who teaches Beaumains the power of mercy; they also emphasize the conflicts of desire and obligation that many medieval women experienced. In fact, this is the volume's greatest strength: it provides insight into the political and social obligations of medieval women, particularly those of the aristocratic class.

“The Tale of Guinevere” and “The Tale of La Belle Iseult” highlight how often political and social obligations conflict with the desires of the heart. Both Guinevere and Iseult must marry kings even though they love other men, Lancelot and Tristram, respectively. Their tales articulate the difficulties each woman faces as she grapples with conflicting emotions and responsibilities, and emphasize that happiness or contentment can only be achieved once she is true to herself.

Guinevere’s story also emphasizes a number of female achievements and difficulties that are often “unrecorded in official documents” (Bitel 6), especially the administrative challenges and physical isolation frequently faced by women of the noble class. During periods of war or crusade, men could be absent for extended periods, leaving their wives to manage households and estates on their own. Guinevere describes such a life, telling the reader, “When [Arthur] resumed his battles . . . my sense of solitude grew more intense. Arthur would leave for weeks or months at a time . . . yet sent no word to me concerning his welfare” (28). While the King is absent, the Queen manages his kingdom effectively, efficiently, but she is, for all her female companions, lonely. Guinevere’s frustration with this lifestyle is exacerbated by Arthur’s lack of acknowledgement, upon his return, of how well she has ministered the kingdom, and by his reluctance to seek her counsel “on any official matters of state” (29). This aspect of her story reflects the common medieval belief that women were understood as helpers rather than as equals, and the reality that they were frequently excluded from positions of power within patriarchal societies.

This belief rests upon interpretations of Genesis 2:18 (“It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a help like unto himself”) that understand God’s creation of Eve as a subordinate rather than as an equal to Adam.

The theme of female desire - - introduced in Guinevere’s narrative - - permeates the volume and is the primary focus of “The Tale of Ragnell.” This tale, which blends narrative elements of the beheading game and the loathly lady traditions (following the Middle English *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and echoing Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*), suggests that only through mutual respect can love truly blossom. Gawain’s willingness to honour his wife’s decisions - - to put her desires before his own - - releases Dame Ragnell from the enchantment placed upon her by her evil brother and allows her marriage “to be solid and lasting” (119), to become a partnership of respect and love. The link between happiness and self-empowerment is also the closing message of the volume. In the Epilogue, the Lady of the Lake tells her readers, “Take charge of your destiny: write your own legacy, and ensure that your legend endures” (171). She implores her readers to pursue their dreams, to embrace their desires - - as the women in the volume have done - - and to help shape society through the skills, knowledge, and wisdom which they possess.

The volume provides insight into the lives of medieval women beyond matrimonial duties and affairs of the heart. Several tales highlight the access to education women of the noble class frequently had, especially if they entered a cloister, as well as the types of learning commonly available to them. “The Tale of Morgan le Fay,” for instance, elucidates both the positive and negative aspects of life in the cloister, a lifestyle many medieval women experienced, often not by choice. During her time in the convent, Morgan participates in tasks typically completed by women within the secular world, such as meal preparation and tending the herb and vegetable gardens. Yet she also has access to education, to learning “in the arts and in languages, especially Latin” (156), which, she confesses, she “truly enjoyed” (156). The pleasure of learning, however, is not enough to assuage the isolation Morgan feels while living within the cloister, an isolation that parallels

Guinevere's isolation. Both women, despite their different circumstances, desire companionship and warmth in their daily activities, whether these are intellectual pursuits or the tasks associated with housewifery.

Iseult's story, like Morgan's, demonstrates connections between women and learning, and reveals how women could be revered for their knowledge, especially in the areas most frequently associated with folklore, even magic: herblore and healing. The tale has numerous, detailed passages such as the one provided by Iseult when she first encounters the wounded Tristram:

With a paste of dittany and black soap, I extracted what was left of the poison from the spear tip. With poultices of hot barley and fennel, I encountered the infection. With cabbage leaves, I dressed the cut. And with a mixture of betany and vervain, I calmed him and helped him sleep. (88)

This description reflects some basic medieval techniques in healing, especially the practice that became, ultimately, the "foundation of medieval European pharmacy" (Siraisi 141), that of utilizing compounds based on herbal medicines comprised of a limited number of ingredients. The tale also highlights the possibility that while typically excluded from the professional healing arts, many women "engaged in midwifery and healing arts without leaving any trace of their activities in written records" (27). Iseult's skills are of this latter tradition. She is not a professional physician or surgeon; rather, she is skilled local healer whose knowledge resides in herblore.

Siraisi explains that women represented "only a very small proportion of the total number of practitioners whose names are recorded" (27) and that while rare examples of famous female healers exist - - such as Trotula of Salerno or Hildegard of Bingen - - female participation in the healing profession was increasingly limited in the Middle Ages, especially after the university system established professional schools, from which women were excluded (27)

Yet the tales also emphasize the association of female healing with magic, the barriers to learning - - a pursuit more commonly linked to men - - women experienced, and the dangers women with knowledge frequently faced.

Iseult's description of her medical treatments highlights the common medieval belief "that certain herbs had a magical effectiveness" (Siraisi 149). Vervain, *verbena officinalis*, despite its lack of "therapeutic properties," had a "magical reputation" (149). Compounds abounded in which vervain was present, for it was believed to remedy a wide-range of ailments.

Siraisi writes that vervain "was variously recommended for the bite of a rabid dog, as a painkiller, as a diuretic, to bring on menstruation, to reduce fever, restore a nursing mother's milk, stop bleeding, and keep away the plague" (149).

In "The Tale of Vivien," the protagonist desires knowledge and pursues a relationship with Merlin in hopes of increasing her skills. Yet even Merlin suggests that her desire is unnatural; he tells her that she has "lofty ambitions for a woman" (129) and he thwarts her learning by limiting his instruction to only those items he deems are appropriate for a woman. While Vivien ultimately overcomes her tutor, gains knowledge, and finds happiness and freedom in her craft, it is not without a price. During her time at Camelot she becomes isolated, outcast from the other women of the court, because her desires and ambitions transgress social norms. Morgan's story similarly highlights how women with knowledge could be feared and reviled. While at Camelot, she comes

under suspicion when Guinevere receives a poisoned mantle. Arthur banishes her from the court, and she criticizes him for assuming that a woman with knowledge would use that knowledge for her own advancement or for ill-purposes. Her speech to Arthur emphasizes how quickly women with learning could be understood as witches or sorceresses, precisely because they possessed knowledge beyond that of their peers or of men.

“You assume . . . because I am an intelligent woman, schooled in languages and reading, that I am some kind of sorceress—that my learning is automatically magical in nature, and that I will somehow use that knowledge for evil purposes or for my own advancement” (161).

Knowledge of the Arthurian tradition is not necessary for one to enjoy this volume, although there are numerous instances in which the terminology might be unfamiliar to readers without a background in the Middle Ages or Arthurian literature. Fortunately, Lupack provides an extensive glossary in the back of the book to help readers with this material. The entries in the glossary range from the names of herbs that might be uncommon to readers (such as *heartsease*, “a wild pansy flower,” and *pellitory*, “an herb of the nettle family, with alternate leaves and inconspicuous flowers”) to culinary terms (such as *galentine*, “a kind of sauce for fish or fowl; also a dish made of sopped bread and spices,” and *sorengue*, “a method for preparing eel in vinegar and spices”). Lupack maintains a degree of historicity through language but does so without making the material unaccessible to a younger or less specialized audience.

Parents and educators, however, might wish to supplement the readings with contextual material on the Middle Ages. As previously mentioned, most of the volume focuses on a limited portion of medieval society - - the aristocratic class - - and in doing so presents a narrow view of the Middle Ages, especially of the lives of medieval women. This limited perspective does not illuminate the realities which many, if not most, medieval women faced. Peasant women faced lives of physical and economic hardship, and labored extensively in the fields even though such work was considered unfit and demeaning for the female gender (Skinner 207). The narratives also do not evoke the fragility of existence many women (and men) experienced in this period. As Bitel suggests, “mortality rates” and “low life expectancies” were not uncommon: “Daily survival was never a sure thing for any woman in medieval Europe, whatever her age or station” (11).

Another drawback to the volume is that the narratives frequently digress into lengthy accounts of the exploits of Arthur and his knights, ultimately drawing the reader’s attention away from the female characters. For tales that are meant to focus on “female achievement,” as the Lady of the Lake suggests, a number of the narratives ultimately revolve around the male characters. “The Tale of Lynette,” for instance, while it highlights the female protagonist’s wisdom and mercy, is still, primarily, a retelling of the tale of Beaumains, of his rough treatment at the hands of Sir Kay while at Camelot, and of his quest to free Lady Lyonors. Further, while the tales typically start from a first-person perspective, many of them quickly slide into a third-person omniscient voice that detracts from the intended focus on the female “I” of the narrative and, instead, refocuses the reader’s attention on the storylines concerning the male characters. This feature, however, has the potential to widen the readership of the volume. Although described as a text for readers “10 and up,” and thereby not specifying a gendered audience, the book’s title and intended perspective, of course, suggests that the target audience is female. The pervasive focus on male characters and their key roles in each of the narratives will no doubt appeal to all readers, male or female. Finally, as a general note, the print is quite small. For a volume clearly aimed at a younger audience, it might have been better, to aid reading, to have a slightly larger font and an increased page count.

