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The Art (and Heart) of *Arthurian Things*: A Craft Essay

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There are, perhaps, scholars out there who write creatively without dipping into their scholarly storehouse for inspiration, who are able to separate entirely their academic and belletristic sensibilities, but I am not one of them. In many ways my creative work is translation and adaptation of my academic research and interests for a general public readership—not always, of course, and not every work, but enough that I feel confident claiming that they are synergistic and I could not succeed at one without the other; nor would I actually want to.

Writing is writing. Each act of writing, academic or poetic in nature, derives from a desire to explore a question or concern I am wrestling with. As a writer, whether I am developing an academic article, working on a series of poems, or putting together a short story, my underlying goal is always the same: to communicate something I've been thinking about to someone who is not in my head thinking with me. Writing is how I make sense of the world and my place within it to myself, and sometimes a means of conveying some of that understanding to an audience.

All writing is serious writing, and all writing is serious work. As Stephen King urges in his wonderful book *On Writing*, "you must not come lightly to the blank page."[1] I know some academics who believe that scholarly writing is serious and that creative writing is somehow frivolous, a waste of precious research time, self-indulgent, and a distraction, but they couldn't be more wrong. Some of the most intense intellectual work I do is the work of distilling thoughts into a poem, or writing a scene to garner an emotional response—let's say laughter, or tears, or a racing heart—from a reader. There's nothing easy about it.

Scholarly writing is the patchwork quilt work of academia; comprised of multiple individual components stitched together—this theory, these secondary sources, that set of primary texts, those quoted passages—the goal is to render that stitching as seamless as possible. Creative writing is also a patchwork, always pulling on a variety of threads—from real-life experiences, from other texts, from various media, from dreams and memories, and from things made up in the mind—to weave a poem or story. The goal is still a seamless, coherent, pleasing whole.

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[1] Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 106.

In many ways, I wrestle far more with my creative work than I do with my scholarly, research-based arguments. This is because the academic article is a genre with a clear and agreed-upon format: Introduction, argument, literature review, data and analysis, conclusion. Every creative text, on the other hand, must be approached as a brand-new form; while you can draw on your prior reading and writing experiences for inspiration, you have to learn how to write *this* poem, or *this* story. One of the delights of creative writing is how it stretches the mind.

This intellectual work of writing creatively has also been important for my development as a scholarly writer. We often hear that scholarly writing is dry, dense, overly complicated, and difficult to read. Learning to advance a short story engagingly from beginning to end has sharpened my skill in advancing a scholarly argument through the pages of an article so the reader can more easily follow it. Learning to bring an idea to life in a line of poetry through imagery has attuned me to rhythm, precision, and impact in my choices at the word-level.

And of course, my academic work, and especially my research, has been important for my development as a creative writer. The lines of inquiry I pursue in my scholarship—identity and community, violence, gender, magic and the supernatural, the movement of story-types from one culture and time period to another, translation and adaptation of characters, myths, folktales, and plots—primarily examined through the literatures and cultures of the premodern British Isles and North Atlantic world, are the same concerns I engage with in my belletristic endeavors.

It is not intentional, or at least not through some conscious decision on my part, that my creative writing forms a through line for my scholarly research; I think, in the end, it must simply be that my research stems from the things that are foundationally interesting to and absorbing for me, and those are of course the same deep wells that I draw from as a poet and writer of fiction. This is why I categorically reject the idea of "identity scholarship." All scholarship is identity scholarship, if by this phrase we mean that scholarship is personally meaningful and stems from the self.

No one writes about things that don't interest them, not as scholars and not creatively, and for too long academics have operated under an illusion that "real" academic writing is "objective," free of personal bias. I call shenanigans. This is important in understanding my writing, but also for the larger stakes of the place of women, LGBTQIA2S+, BIPOC in academia. If as a woman scholar I write about women, or a black scholar writes about race, somehow it is diminished because it's subjective; but white men can write about knights and Crusades and it's objective? I dissent.

But, objectively, I do recognize that some of the things I think about texts I read are not provable or supportable with evidence, and those sorts of observations do not belong in my scholarly articles. Likewise, I realize that when I am reading a text and a series of vivid images appear in my head, those cinematic scenes don't belong in my scholarly writing, either. And sometimes when I follow a thought into my mind and chase it down, the result in no way resembles scholarship, but is no less interesting to me. These are the starting points for my creative writing.

Arthurian Things: A Collection of Poems engages one of the most enduring subjects of my academic inquiry and interest, the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. This subject also happens to be one of which I am inordinately fond on a less scholarly level; we might, in today's parlance, deem it one of my fandoms. The poems in this collection are petri dishes of research, theory, popular culture, medievalism, sentiment, politics, and the ideas that preoccupy me. The results are poems that beckon with multiple entry points.

I have mentally devoured every Arthurian text I have come across, medieval to modern, since childhood. It would be impossible and absurd to claim my poems are not informed by those many other texts: by what I have found attractive and delightful in them, what I have found perplexing and troubling in them, what I have found frustrating and aggravating in them, what I have found to be missing within them. If it resonated, it's made its way in there. Readers similarly familiar with the Arthurian corpus can locate my influences throughout this book.

Most of the figures and objects readers expect in the Arthurian legend are present and accounted for—Excalibur, the Round Table, Sir Gawain's shield; King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, Sirs Lancelot, Gawain, Palomedes, Gareth, Kay, Bors, Mark, Tristan, Balin, Balan, and Pellinore; Merlin, Isolde, and Morgan le Fay—but besides the final sonnet cycle few of the poems do more than mention them in passing; they are about the world and its issues, more so than its people. My intent was to decenter and destabilize the central narratives, making room for other views and perspectives.

This book is also the product of some of the critical theories I have worked with, which deeply if (I hope) unobtrusively inform it overall. Ad Putter's "Finding Time for Romance"[2] locates two, multiple-year temporal lacunae in King Arthur's reign and argues these are where the romances develop; though not explicitly stated, my work was envisioned from the start as unfolding within those between-the-worlds spaces, which is where I imagine all non-chronicle Arthurian texts taking place regardless of when or where they were written: the timeless land of Camelot.

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[2] Ad Putter, "Finding Time for Romance: Mediaeval Arthurian Literary History," *Medium Aevum* 63, no. 1 (1994): 1-16. DOI:10.2307/43629612.

The idea of treason as a vertical and horizontal affair in which no one is certain who is at the heart of a given act of betrayal, examined at length in Megan Leitch's *Romancing Treason,*[3] undergirds all of my writing dealing with treason and betrayal, especially concerning the scenes of Guinevere's feast and of the betrayal of the lovers, which find their way into a number of the poems. The twinned idea of secrecy at the heart of so many medieval Arthurian texts, especially those concerning Guinevere, like the "Lanval" tales, is also woven throughout the collection.

To my great chagrin, I had not heard of Kathleen Coyne Kelly's brilliant object-oriented ontological article "Arthurian Things"[4] while I was writing this book (an omission I have since rectified!) but the original idea for this collection—fracturing the legend into the points-of-view of various objects and animals inhabiting the same world but typically neither noticed nor given agency—stems from the blending of theories of nonhuman agents and agencies: objects, animal studies, the Anthropocene, monster studies. At their heart, these poems are "theory at play."

One of the poems that deals both playfully and pointedly with this idea of giving attention and agency to things ordinarily not associated readily with, or thought about in considering, the Arthurian legend is "Arthurian Flies Request Unionization":

Arthurian Flies Request Unionization

We are the cast of thousands—
Nameless, faceless, unidentified, unremarked, unwritten—
Yet in every Camelot scene.

We are on the battlefields.
We are on the jousting fields.
We are in the stables.
We are in the woods.
We are by the waters.
We are in the meadows.
We are in the sculleries; and yes,
We hum in all the halls and bedchambers.

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[3] Megan Leitch, *Romancing Treason* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015).
[4] Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "Arthurian Things," *Arthuriana* 25 no. 4 (Winter 2015): 94-107. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44697442.

There is no place in the world where we are not.
We are so present that we are invisible to you,
Not-there on every page and in every image,
And here are just a few examples of our work:

[1]

We fly around the horses on hot days
Allowing them to toss their heads at us
You *ooh* and *aah* at their majestic beauty
The lush fullness of their *swish-swish* tails:
You ignore our presence.

[2]

We buzz throughout the battles
Overlooked and underheard
As the steel swords clang and
The men cry out in rage, pain, fear, death:
You ignore our presence.

[3]

We enter the hall through the same window
As the sparrow you can’t help but remark on
As a knight raises his glass for a toast one of us
Alights on the rim, is impatiently swiped away:
You ignore our presence.

[4]

We fly into the mouth of a mounted knight mid-charge
Causing him to gasp and choke, heightening
The drama of a jousting scene as you wonder
Will he fall from his steed and forfeit?
You ignore our presence.

[5]

We enter bedchambers before dark
wafting in through the open windows
Alighting on the bedframes; we might spy
Might fly back to share what we've seen—
But you ignore our presence.

We are swatted at by knights.
We are waved off by ladies.
We are blown at by horses.
We are slapped at by maids.
We are batted at by cats.
We are stabbed at by daggers.
We are flicked at by whips.
We are flattened by books.

And do you ever stop to notice?
Do you ever think: *what about the flies*?
Admit it: No, you do not.
You've never wondered about Arthurian flies.
We're just there. Like all the other things
Without names or specific roles. Window dressing
(especially after being smacked dead on a window.)

Look—
We're not asking for a spot at the Table
Or for a Round Table of our own.
We know we're not kings or knights
Or damsels-in-distress, or even
Fancy weapons or magical objects.
We're aware that in the grand scheme
We hardly factor, and we accept that.
But just about everyone around here
Gets to be seen at least once—
the kings and knights get names,
the swords and horses get names,
The castles and lakes get names,
Even the woods get names,
And most of the ladies as well.

Is it really that much to ask,
To see and name a fly or two,
Maybe even give one a story?

It's a thankless and dangerous job,
Being a fly in King Arthur's court.
And we're tired of the silent treatment.
It's about time we had our due.

Here are our demands: a union
That fights for our rights.
We want names and lines.
We want a featured scene, and
Eventually, a series of our own
In this medieval multiverse.

Many of the preoccupations of the modern world, or at least of myself within the modern world, infuse the collection, and it is undeniably political at its core; but then, so is the Arthurian legend overall. In particular, a number of the poems meditate on the damage that toxic masculinity performs on an individual, a couple, a community, and a society, and on the continued influence of misogyny on how women are perceived in a patriarchal society; written at the height of the initial #metoo movement, these poems stare unflinchingly at these issues, a call to witness.

Meditations on toxic masculinity can be seen, for example, in "The Questing Beast Joins #Me Too"; "The Pigeon on the Parapet"; and "Isolde":

The Questing Beast Joins #MeToo

Sir Pellinore has been chasing me for years.

Sure, it's a dashing tale of adventure, and of course
You've always rooted for him to catch his beast.

Have you never wondered what *I* thought of it all?

If I wanted to be pursued, if I was asking for it
Don't you think I'd have let him catch me by now?

I am not flattered and he is not dedicated.

He’s just another man who refuses to believe
Everything and everyone won’t simply be his.

His passion is my torment, and let me also add:

There are a lot of beasts and beings in these tales
With the same problem—these “men being men.”

Just because he’s a knight doesn’t make it all right.

The Pigeon on the Parapet

From up here Arthur’s knights look fine:
Noble, chivalrous, ready to wage battle
with his enemies, keep his name burnished
in the books you so love to read, put their
bodies on the line again (armor’s grand
until you find yourself in hand-to-hand
combat, falling in mud, in blood
slipping on somebody else’s insides,
drowning in a puddle on a field
where you were knocked over face-first
by a horse, piled three and four men deep.)
Yes, from this bird’s-eye view
Arthur’s knights are bright in the sun,
their chainmail shines untested, untried.
You can’t see them shaking with fear.
You can’t hear them begging their ladies
for *just one kiss, just one*
as they march off once more into
someone else’s pride-driven war.

Isolde

I am a woman caught between two men,
and well I know the blame’s assigned to me,
despite that I’m as much victim as them,
trapped once by magic; twice by king’s decree.
Yet, outside eyes will see me as the bane

of knight and king, alike, source of their woes,
and call me slut, and whore, and things profane,
paint me as deadlier than their true foes.
To such as think that way, I would request
you ask yourself how feeble Tristan is,
and whether you are so keen to suggest
that King Mark could be done in with a kiss?
How fragile masculinity can be,
when men judge men through such misogyny.

As well, the poems engage with power structures, social status, and agency; with economic, legal, and employment concerns; and with the Big Bad Wall and attendant reverberations through concerns of violence, colonialism, immigration, and "who belongs," none of which will be unexpected by people deeply familiar with the Arthurian tradition, since these issues are at the heart of most Arthurian narratives. As Arthurian scholars often point out, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* ("the more things change, the more they remain the same"): the enduring popularity of the legend is rooted in its continued relevance.[5]

A favorite of mine from this category is, "The Throne's Thoughts":

The Throne's Thoughts

Men court me and what I represent;
go to great lengths to establish my importance, and hence
their importance when they are seated upon me.

Perverse to take pride in something so fleeting and untenable.
Perverse to believe in my permanence, when I am man-made
and thus, inherently destructible.

These poems are acts of medievalism. Where some, such as "The Poisoned Apple's Unrecorded Testimony," are based explicitly on medieval narratives, others, such as the "Wishing Well Dishes" and "The Wishing Well Wishes" derive more from folkloric and fairytale origins, while still others are more generally "medieval." Readers who are very familiar with Arthuriana as a field of study will readily recognize which poems are informed by medieval literature and culture, which, more so by nineteenth- and twentieth-century adaptations, and which, simply imagined, although it is not necessary to have this knowledge in order to enjoy the poems (and I've included supplemental reading notes for anyone who wishes to learn more.)

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[5] See for, example, Raluca Radulescu's article "How King Arthur Became One of the Most Pervasive Legends of All Time," *The Conversation*, 2 February 2017, https://theconversation.com/how-king-arthur-became-one-of-the-most-pervasive-legends-of-all-time-71126; and Danièle Cybulskie's "A Man For All Centuries: The Changing Myth of King Arthur," *Medievalists.net*, May 2019, https://www.medievalists.net/2019/05/changing-myth-king-arthur/.

The Poisoned Apple's Unrecorded Testimony

Oh sure, at the Queen's gone-deadly feast
everyone falls to pieces over Sir Patryse—
Help! Help! He's been poisoned! He's dead!
It's all Guinevere's fault, let's have her head!

First of all, let's recall, that I am a victim, too—
Not only poisoned, but bitten into, and left to
roll to a lonely spot beneath the table, where
no one remembers or cares that I am even there.

If anyone bothered to pick me up, to ask me
what I saw, I could have cleared things easily.
Why of course Guinevere did not do it, I'd say,
'Twas Sir Pyonell did the deed, and by the way

He spoke a monologue all the while, as he
contrived to create a dread weapon of me,
muttering and trying not to make a clatter,
and here's what he had to say about the matter:

Sir Gawain is known to love fruit of all kinds.
When he reaches for this basket he'll find
this lovely apple irresistible, he'll take it, eat,
and thus by my poison be swept off his feet!

Not love, but hate, will fuel this feet-sweeping.
and all his kinsmen will find themselves weeping,
and that's justice for my kinsman Lamorak
whom Gawain killed; it's thus I'll pay him back!

And there you have it, that's what occurred
the idea 'twas Guinevere's doing is absurd!
But you'll never know, having left me to rot

Poisoned, bitten, dropped and forgot, in Camelot.

The Wishing Well Wishes

Just once, I wish one of those knights
or ladies, or their servants, or, really
anyone from Camelot, that
kingdom high upon the hill
(Where supposedly everything and
everyone is perfect and without peer
and yet so many flee to my side
asking for all they can't buy or sell)
Would come to visit *me,* just to see
a well-crafted well, instead of begging
for things we all know I can't give.

The Wishing Well Dishes

They might surprise you, the wishes they make.
I mean, not all of them are unexpected—
Pellinore always wishes to catch his questing beast
And Guinevere of course comes twice a month
Tossing her pennies in hopes this time, they'll take
And Lancelot will be hers without treason.
But Lancelot, ah, he does not wish for Guinevere
But for Arthur's forgiveness, and also
The chance to return home and not in disgrace
To watch the sun set across the lake beside
His ancestral home once more.
Palamedes has asked variously for glory
And a new steed, and a better room
(Apparently they put him up in the high North Tower
And it's chilly and damp and he's last on the servants'
Progress to light the evening fires in this cold clime.)
Gareth often wishes for a room of his own
Because Gaheris snores and Gawain is loud
When he comes roaring in at drunk o'clock.
Gawain came once, and wished on a ha'penny
For a parrot that can talk, like the one he saw
Once long ago as a child, before knighthood

Stripped him of the ability to enjoy such wonders.
Some knights wish for wealth, some for women
Some wish for a dog, or a falcon, or a kitten
Some wish for better arms, some for better skills
Some for nicer clothing, some for fewer drills
Other knights wish for trifles, really—
And Arthur their king?
Arthur sits beside me, alone and pensive
Queries whether I or any other thing can know
The hardships of mortal men who reign
Bemoans the treacheries all around him
Laments the inevitable imminent failures
Of the great experiment he's sought to perform—
And wishes he had never been born.

In terms of ideas the overall collection (I hope, self-evidently) is a meditation on adaptation, on how writers shape and form material into narratives, and how media and popular culture shape and form our reception of stories and figures. Here, Chaucer's description of Rumor from "The House of Fame" is helpful.[6] At its heart the Arthurian legend is concerned with the creation, development, and management of identity; every knight, as fellow Arthurian scholar Chris Jensen recently pointed out to me, suffers Imposter Syndrome en route to his "brand" at the hand of writers and audience, alike.

The poem "Turning Leaf" engages in a brief meditation on these ideas:

Turning Leaf

Breaking from my branch I flutter
Turning over and over, blown to and fro
Visible from every angle and ever kaleidescopic
Like a knight's reputation, in the
Hands of poets.

Importantly, above and beyond the theories, the research, the politics, the social concerns, and the medievalism informing this collection, these are also poems intended to be read and enjoyed simply as poetry. They are by turn playful, humorous, pointed, and meditative; I employ a range of forms and styles, some readily associable with Arthuriana—for example couplets, such as we find in Marie de France's *lais*—and some that are not at all Arthurian in any traditional sense, such as the limerick. And there is a cat who weaves in and out of the poems merely because—I like cats.

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[6] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The House of Fame," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, third edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 347-373.

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