DE GRUYTER

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Approaches to Arthurian Studies: from Tradition to Innovation

'The history of the book is a way of thinking about how people have given material form to knowledge and stories. Knowledge and stories are intangible; it is their material forms that make them accessible across the barriers created by time and space.'[1] The Arthurian legends are perhaps the ultimate example of a set of stories that have proliferated over such varied territories (temporal, geographic and linguistic) that it is now difficult to achieve even a partial overview of the whole constellation of texts and media they have inspired.

Book and publishing histories can provide a path to explore the ways in which pieces of this puzzle fit into not only a vast body of literature and scholarship, but also the culture(s) they inhabited and influenced in their turn. Examining the materiality of different texts, and thus attempting to understand not only how those texts came to be written, but also how they were acted upon by the different agencies contained within the communications circuit (e.g. editors, printers, publishers, booksellers as well as their projected, potential and actual audiences) can bring a greater understanding of how texts operated, and continue to operate, once released into numerous historical and cultural contexts.

While material culture and reception studies form the core of much medieval scholarship of Arthurian texts, the application of these approaches to the study of post-medieval Arthurian endeavours (scholarly and non-scholarly) can generate fresh perspectives, opening up texts to reveal unique qualities, or establishing them as part of a wider pattern of work. Some of this work can and has already helped refocus scholarship on aspects of the text found, as a result, to have more influence or significance than previously realised; or it can simply bring new pleasures to the reading experience, as the tools that book history puts within reach of the researcher unwrap the mysteries of an aspect like post-medieval

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1 Leslie Howsam, "The Study of Book History", in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) p. 1.

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binding or illustration as much as the work of medievalist palaeographers and codicologists can do for medieval manuscripts.

Indeed, the study of how medieval texts were rediscovered by generations of later writers, antiquarians, artists, as well as scholars at the dawn of the modern era, can inform our critical understanding of our own approaches to these texts. In this respect, the study of notions of the figure of both the author and the editor in the post-medieval period are, as Yuri Fuwa demonstrates in her study of Caxton's editions of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, intimately linked to the earliest representations of non-Arthurian canonical authors. To this end, this article suggests that Arthurian scholarship can add significantly to our knowledge of a broader set of relationships between early printing processes and the establishment of a canon of medieval English literature as much as the other way around. It also reinforces the important idea that revivals of interest in a particular Arthurian work or author are, in most if not all post-medieval events, the product of a complex and fascinating set of factors. Beyond the scope of this particular article, the investigation opened up by Fuwa shows that the nineteenth-century surge in English-language editions and retellings of the Arthurian legends is indebted to a broader and very distinguished tradition of bibliography and scholarship, of which John Lewis's 1737 biography of Caxton, published 'to do Justice to the Memory of a Man, who, he thinks, deserved so well of his Country, in so early introducing into it an Art of such publick Use and Benefit as is that of PRINTING',[2] was just one part.

Approaching medieval Arthurian texts in any language also presupposes a critical understanding of the methodologies employed by editors – the topic of Lino Leonardi's contribution to this cluster. The debate around editing medieval texts has come to the attention of scholars across linguistic and generic boundaries in the last decades, with some vigorous arguments about the role of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theories and practices taking centre stage. While modern digital editing has enhanced access to medieval manuscripts and the texts they contain, the vexed issue of presenting texts afresh to new audiences, taking on board the challenges of both past practices and the demands of the new media in which modern editions are presented, remains. Leonardi's review of the discipline of stemmatics unravels a history of Old-French Arthurian prose romance editions that emphasises how the choices of scholarly editors

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2 John Lewis, *The Life of Mayster Wyllyam Caxton, of the Weald of Kent; the First Printer in England. In Which is Given An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Art of Pryntyng in England, During his Time, till 1493. Collected by John Lewis, Minister of Margate in Kent* (London: [s.n.], Printed in the year 1737); ESTC T40961, p. iv.

have impacted on the authoritative versions of these texts over time, and what the potential of investigating other Arthurian texts with a complex manuscript tradition might be for current and future editors and scholars. Being aware of these challenges can help illuminate the depth of meaning as well as the processes of transmission of these texts – both intricately connected to our work on Arthurian texts in contemporary scholarship.

The next contribution in this cluster turns to a different area: the history of relationships between Arthurian scholarship and popular editions and retellings, presented through a brief survey of Jessie Weston's work. Juliette Wood puts Weston's whole oeuvre into context, highlighting in particular her earlier, popular editions of Arthurian tales for children, published by the firm of David Nutt in the early years of the twentieth century. Her re-evaluation of the important place Weston has in introducing the more general reader to the Arthurian legends gives a fuller retrospective of the value of her contribution to a wider, and more accessible, route into this field.

Last in the cluster is Anastasija Ropa's contribution on the topic of a lesser-known and rarely examined edition of *Parsifal* by T. W. Rolleston (1912).[3] Here, Ropa's research, still in its early stages, discusses the relationship between text and image by showing how the illustrations, by Willy Pogány, create a dialogue for the reader between the author and the artist, offering a strong interpretive framework for that text to be read within. With this contribution the cluster highlights the potential presented by long-forgotten Arthurian treasures, publication events in their own era, whose influence in their own time (whether on textual traditions, retellings, editions, history of illustration, or other related areas and fields) awaits the attention of more extensive research.

With four contributions as different as these, the co-editors hope to suggest, once again, that when applied to the Arthurian legend and its expression in the post-medieval period, history of the book approaches can enable multi-disciplinary analyses of both texts and the artefacts they survive in, because, as Robert Darnton explains, books refuse "to be contained within the confines of a single discipline when treated as objects of study."[4] It is hoped that these contributions

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3 Ropa's research was enabled by a Visiting Research Fellowship to the Centre for Arthurian Studies at Bangor University (arthur.bangor.ac.uk) in 2016, supported by the AHRC/British Library Academic Book of the Future Project (see https://academicbookfuture.org/). Her discovery of the Rolleston in the Special Collections at Bangor University Library led to this article, which also helped the Project's aims to show how books of the past are also part of research of the present and future, and to underline the value of special collections in academic libraries.
4 Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *The Book History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 22.

will inspire further research: the International Arthurian Society already boasts a strong scholarly tradition in the areas of Arthurian book and publishing history, and as Arthurian outputs show no signs of disappearing in the digital age, we are sure the 'once and future book' will continue to provide rewarding scope for scholarly attention.