

# Brawn vs. Beauty in American Brandywine and British Pre-Raphaelite Images of Arthurian Legend

Melanie Enderle

Department of Art History, University of Washington, Seattle, USA

## Email address:

Melanie3@uw.edu

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**Abstract:** The legend of King Arthur was embraced by two distinct groups of British and American artists during the nineteenth century. This paper explores the different approaches between the American Brandywine School painters, N. C. Wyeth and his mentor Howard Pyle, and British Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman-Hunt, John Waterhouse, John Everett Millais, and William Morris. The adventurous America spirit comes through in action-filled images created by the Brandywine School painters and their focus on heroism and the brave deeds of men reflect America's unfettered enthusiasm. In contrast, the Pre-Raphaelites placed attention on the Arthurian damsels in distress, and laid emphasis on mythic heroines, confined in aesthetically pleasing settings. Embodying proper Victorian social structure, the Pre-Raphaelites deliberately promoted feminine gender expectations of passivity, whereas the Brandywine illustrators, with their emphasis on exploits of the active masculine figures, emphasized America's can-do attitude and gave little consideration to the personhood of the female characters that populated the tales of King Arthur.

**Keywords:** Cultural Comparison, Nineteenth-Century Ideals, Societal Traditions, Issues of Gender

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## 1. Introduction

From ornate illuminated medieval manuscripts to twentieth-century Walt Disney animation and Hollywood blockbuster movies, images of King Arthur and the saga surrounding his exploits have intrigued multitudes. Although the stories about Arthur have evolved and been retold by myriad individuals over hundreds of years, at its core, the legend in most versions tells a tale of honor versus disgrace, chivalry versus betrayal, and of royals, warriors, and mystics working in concert for the common good. The various interpretations of the legend reflect the times and cultures of their retelling. This paper focuses on the epic of Arthur in nineteenth and early twentieth-century art as an opportunity to explore gender issues and national identity by two divergent groups of artists: the American Brandywine School illustrators N. C. (Newell Convers) Wyeth and his mentor Howard Pyle and artists from the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others.

This study of Arthurian Revival illustrated by these two groups seeks to illuminate differences in manners and intent between the adventurous spirit and go-getting attitude of a

young, emerging America by relating medieval times to America's Progressive Era as opposed to the refined aesthetics and genteel behavior embodied in the staid traditions of British culture in the early Victorian era [1].

## 2. History of the Legend

Arthur was a warrior-king who, according to medieval histories, defended Britain against Saxon invaders in the years around 500 CE. His story is derived from folklore and literary invention and is viewed skeptically by modern historians. Possible evidence of Arthur's existence includes two mentions of his name in the sixth century. One in a Welsh poem and another in a historical record, and then again nearly three-hundred years later in a history of Britain. There are at least two separate accounts by Catholic monks written in the early 1100s at about the same time that the story traveled to France when details of courtly romance and characters familiar in modern popular culture were introduced [2]. Other

stories and illustrations by other writers and artists also emerged. While these were once considered as kinds of historical documents, they are now believed to be more fiction than fact. References to Arthur continued, then in 1485 Sir Thomas Malory more or less canonized the legend in his *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Malory emphasized chivalry and proper moral behavior and his King Arthur reigned as the ideal for the next four hundred years [3].

### 2.1. Resurgence

When Malory's work was republished in 1816, it seemed to spark the popular imagination and inspired many modern retellings including significantly, Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1842 work called *Poems*, the first of three works by Tennyson dealing with King Arthur, all published in the first fifteen years of Queen Victoria's reign [4]. Tennyson's knights are gentlemen, displaying chivalric behavior as they interact with the Ladies of the Realm who the poet features prominently. Following Tennyson's inclination, subsequent British writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis used Arthurian legend to project ideas about Englishness: relationships, religion, politics, and history. Tennyson's writing reflects the establishment values of the Victorians.

### 2.2. Interpretation Aligned with Culture

These include maintenance of social order, respect for status and class, and reinforcement of gender roles with the feminine being subservient to the masculine. The most prominent value of all was the assured insistence on white, male dominion over all subjects of the British Empire. The height of the Victorian Arthurian Revival in literature and art continued until about 1885 when it seems to have crossed the Atlantic and thrived in the American imagination well into the twentieth century.

## 3. The Pre-Raphaelites

Unconsciously embodying the chauvinism of modern British society and yet challenging its artistic traditions, a group of subversive artists banded together in 1848 as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The PRB, as they nicknamed themselves, opposed the light, feathery brushwork and overall constraints on art promoted by London's Royal Academy and introduced a new, detailed style of art making, emphasizing aesthetic beauty and gentility. For subject matter, the Pre-Raphaelites often looked to medieval literature and modern English poetry as foundation for their work. They much-admired Tennyson's adaptations of Arthurian legends and found inspiration for many of their paintings in his subjects [5]. He in turn greatly admired their work. His 1857 reissue of *Poems*, known as the *Moxon Tennyson*, features thirty woodcuts by three of the leading Pre-Raphaelites, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Millais, and William Holman Hunt.

Rather than highlight the heroic male figures that prevail in the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of his Round Table,

the PRB's focus was primarily on women and feminine concerns. In addition to their regard for the Ladies of the court, many of their works reinforce moral admonitions pertaining to proper feminine behavior. They place attention on and the roles and expectations for women in Victorian contemporary culture, often emphasizing consequences to bad behavior or the circumstances one must bear.

### 3.1. Tennyson's Influence

One example comes from Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" of a woman sequestered within a tower near Camelot. A curse confines her within the tower, forbids her to look outside its windows, and requires that she devote herself to weaving until she becomes, as Tennyson writes, "half sick of shadows." Her location, situation, and demeanor noted by scholar Elizabeth Nelson, "perfectly embodies the Victorian image of the ideal woman: virginal, embowered, spiritual and mysterious, dedicated to her womanly tasks [6]."



**Figure 1.** John William Waterhouse, "I am half sick of shadows," said The Lady of Shalott" (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*, Part II), 1915. Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 73.7 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Gift of Mrs. Philip B. Jackson, 1971. 71/18.

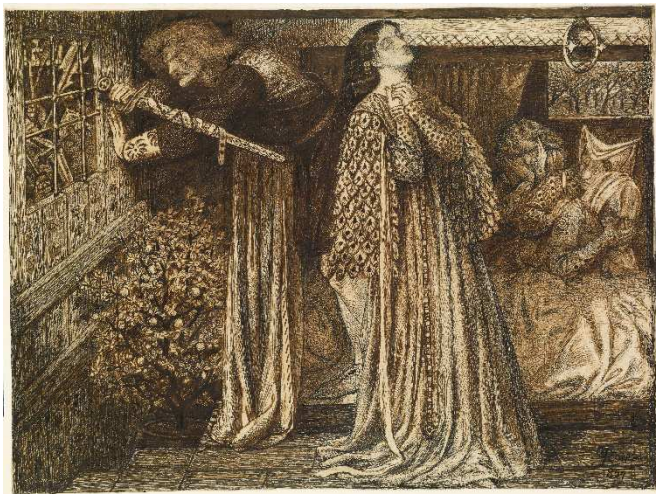
As depicted by John Waterhouse in Figure 1, the lady in the tower is secure until she breaks the strictures of the curse, activating its magic, and soon begins to suffer the consequences of her impulsive actions.

Holman Hunt depicts, in Figure 2, the moment of the protagonist's transition from passive woman, safe in the realm of her fortress. She is engaged in a menial task until she looks out her window. This simple action ignites the spell which transforms her from virginal into a beguiling, bewitched woman who loses control of her actions and emotions.





**Figure 2.** William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1857, Published in Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Poems* (London: E. Moxon, 1857). Wood engraving on paper, 3 5/16 x 3 1/16 in. (9.5 x 8 cm.). Unsigned. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston J. H. and E. A. Payne Fund.



**Figure 3.** Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1857, Published in Alfred Tennyson, *Poems* (London: E. Moxon, 1857). Wood engraving on paper, 3 5/16 x 3 1/16 in. (9.5 x 8 cm.). Unsigned. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston J. H. and E. A. Payne Fund.

In Rossetti's *The Lady of Shalott*, Figure 3, rather than selecting the poem's climactic moment of supernatural activity, Rossetti chose instead to illustrate Tennyson's last verse, after the Lady leaves her tower and her boat reaches the banks of the river below the castle.

Rossetti captures her arrival as she is met by Launcelot. The flames from candles encircling the prow of her boat illuminate her features, making her death seem pure and sanctified. Rossetti's portrayal underscores the Victorian attitude that death is the only acceptable consequence of a woman's impropriety [7]. Earning her honorable punishment, the artist shows the Lady beautiful in death, and redeemed by love.

### 3.2. Roles of Womanhood

In the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's illustrations of Arthurian chivalric scenes, women play an essential role, often prompting a man's desire to safeguard and defend the "weaker sex." And, although the Pre-Raphaelite artists' interpretations sometimes differed from each other and with Tennyson's reworking of Malory, at their Victorian patriarchal core, their worldview coalesced. They saw women as passive or possessed sexual receptors who were judged either virtuous or vile, or feeble or cunning with no middle ground and no agency to determine their own fate.

Rossetti's illustration of Tennyson's writing on Guinevere and Launcelot emphasizes sin and guilt [8]. Both saw Guinevere as a key figure, as an exemplar of beauty, whose passion and temptation drove the noble knight to betrayal. In Rossetti's 1857 illustration, *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber*, Figure 4, the illicit lovers take refuge in Guinevere's bedchamber while a group of knights congregate outside its wooden door.



**Figure 4.** Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber*, 1857, Birmingham Museum Trusts, 1904 P404.

A small window in the door offers a glimpse of a chaotic mass of soldiers who urge Launcelot to abandon Guinevere and defend himself from the charge of treason. Instead, he guards the Queen, who is cloaked in a cape of peacock feathers while her crown hangs from a nail on a beam above her bed. Her back is turned away from the action at the door, and she seems to swoon either in despair of their situation or in ecstasy at his protective valor. Her maid servants huddle nearby too emotional to offer assistance. Here again, Rossetti projects the Victorian paradigm of women as either too frail or too volatile to function without male guidance.

William Morris, another of the PRB, presents Guinevere alone in her bedchamber in a moment of contemplation, perhaps thinking about her lover, Launcelot. In his 1858 painting shown in Figure 5, Queen Guinevere stands absorbed



by her own reflection in a table mirror, while fastening a girdle belt around her waist.



**Figure 5.** William Morris, *La Belle Iseult, Queen Guinevere*, 1858, Tate Museum, Bequeathed by Miss May Morris 1939, N04999.

She seems unaware of or unconcerned by the clutter surrounding her. The rumpled bedsheets on which a sleeping dog lies, together with the cramped disorder of her setting suggests a recent sexual encounter or perhaps a sleepless night of despair, over the conflict she feels between desire for Launcelot and dedication to her husband, King Arthur. She displays traits of a flawed woman, who has deceived and destroyed her faultless husband by abandoning her vows of faithfulness to satisfy her own desires – displaying behavior acceptable for Victorian men but denied to proper women. Taking the viewer away from themselves through fantasy, the Pre-Raphaelites managed to reinforce issues contemporary for their times through the tales of King Arthur.

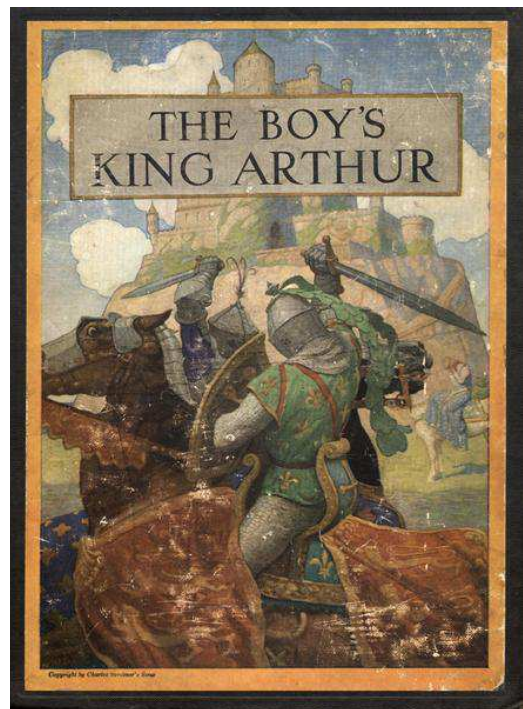
## 4. Arthurian Legend in America

American interpretations and images of Arthurian legends differ from the British artists, and are reflective of the young nation's identity, ideologies, and concerns. Following the popularity of King Arthur in England, American authors such as Mark Twain with his 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and artists such as N. C. Wyeth and Howard Pyle found inspiration in Arthurian heroes [9]. They took the legends as told by Malory, Tennyson, and others and adapted them to reflect American ideals. In this way, the medieval tales were appropriated and Americanized for didactic purposes. As historian Muriel Whitaker explains, "The Victorians had found in their medieval past patterns of heroism, aestheticism, social responsibility, artistic freedoms, and spirituality. Now for many Americans who embodied Puritan values of hard work and self-reliance, the Middle Ages were the nearest approach [sic.] to the Christian Commonwealth man has thus far achieved [10]."

Arthurian tales appealed to the very identity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American populace, which tended to equate knighthood with upright citizenship and conventions of brawn and virtue. Arthurian characters were appreciated for their tenacity and moral integrity. The British emphasis on their social rank and nobility where titles were inherited had little in common with America's belief that one could elevate oneself through hard work.

### 4.1. King Arthur in Storybooks

Especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, youth groups flourished across the United States, such as the aptly named "Knights of King Arthur" introduced in 1893 by the American minister, William Byron Forbush as a means to provide leadership and instill proper behavior in juveniles [11]. Moral guidance for America's young boys was encouraged in pamphlets on chivalrous behavior by Forbush, for instance, and through adventure stories such as Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur*, which is essentially an abridged version of Malory with contemporary spelling [12]. First published in 1880 with black-and-white illustrations by Alfred Kappes, Lanier's storybook was reissued in 1917 illustrated in color by Wyeth (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** N. C. Wyeth, *The Boy's King Arthur*, Cover, 1917.

N. C. Wyeth and Howard Pyle, founding members of the Brandywine School, were two of the greatest artists in America's Golden Era of Illustration [13]. Their dramatic creations often featured daring heroes ranging from cowboys to pirates. Unlike the British who emphasized passive feminine behavior, heroines in American pictures, when included, were overshadowed by masculine figures exuding traits of courage, adventure, and conflict. The Brandywine artists' Arthurian images are indicative of this difference.



Beginning in 1883, Pyle wrote and illustrated children's books including four volumes featuring King Arthur's realm. In his stories, Alan and Barbara Lupack assert, "Pyle created a new version of the legends, a version clearly intended for children, but one that does not patronize them (though it often preached to them) [13]." Pyle, like Wyeth was targeting a young audience and their picture book illustrations were presenting Arthurian legends for a different purpose than the British PRB artworks, which were created for adult admirers.

While the Pre-Raphaelites inspired the Americans, Pyle, in the stories he penned and illustrated, relied more on Twain's interpretations in his take on Arthurian adventures and less on Malory and Tennyson than did his British predecessors. However, his first foray into the tales was not as author, but as illustrator for the 1881 American release of Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott." Pyle's colorful, bold images mimic qualities of illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages including historiated initials and calligraphic text. One of his full-page illustrations, Figure 7, features Lancelot as he is first seen by the Lady in the tower. Extending beyond the picture frame, the gallant knight and his well-adorned mount face the reader and the damsel, commanding respect. [14]



**Figure 7.** Howard Pyle, *Lancelot*, illustration for Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, Dodd Mead & Co., 1881.

#### 4.2. American Interest on the Masculine

This kind of introduction of the hero is missing from Pre-Raphaelite illustrations. Also different in American depictions is the treatment of the Lady, who lacks frailty or a sense of sorcery. In another two of his illustrations featuring the Lady of Shalott included in Tennyson's American publication, one is a decorative page with a viewpoint from outside looking toward the building as the Lady stands at a window looking out, and the other, seen in Figure 8, is an interior scene showing the Lady's surprise as the mirror shatters and glass flies. Unlike the version by the British Holman Hunt, Pyle includes no sense of magic. He does however, as does Holman Hunt, include Lancelot riding by

the window, unaware of the curse and the events about to unfold.

We learn that suffering the curse, she leaves the tower in an effort to reach Camelot but dies in the journey.



**Figure 8.** Howard Pyle, illustration for *The Lady of Shalott*, for Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, Dodd Mead & Co., 1881.



**Figure 9.** Howard Pyle, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1881, Illustration for Tennyson's poems, NYC, Dodd Mead & Co. Publisher.



**Figure 10.** John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888, Tate Museum, London, Presented by Sir Henry Tate 1894, N01543.



While American artists feature the hero and marginalize the Lady (Figure 9), the British focus falls fully on the damsel and her distress (Figure 10).

#### 4.3. Howard Pyles' Approach

Different from his colorful Lady of Shalott illustrations, many of Pyle's renderings were black and white pen and ink drawings. These carefully detailed artworks mimic woodcut prints again harkening back to medieval art [15]. *The Lady Guinevere*, Figure 11, a drawing for Pyle's 1903 novel entitled *The Story of Arthur and His Knights*, has the Queen delicately holding a rose and turned away from the jousting knights in the far background, as Launcelot fights to defend the honor of the Queen and seeks to gain her favors. Pyle presents her as a passive embodiment of beauty, not so much to underscore her subservient position, but perhaps to help the reader better understand the spell she holds over the love-struck Launcelot.



Figure 11. Howard Pyle, *The Lady Guinevere*, from *The Story of Arthur and His Knights*, 1903 (New York: Scribner).

#### 4.4. N. C. Wyeth's Interpretations

Wyeth produces a different representation of Launcelot and Guinevere in one of his seventeen illustrations accompanying the 1917 reissue of Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur* [16]. In one illustration from the chapter titled, "Of the Death of Arthur," Wyeth has the lovers fleeing on horseback after Launcelot has slain twenty-four of King Arthur's knights to free Guinevere from imprisonment and a death sentence placed on her for adultery. Wyeth intensifies the drama by emphasizing their speed as the animal's tail and Guinevere's long hair trail behind and by allowing the figures to fill the picture plane, nearly spilling outside its borders. As his horse lunges forward, Launcelot shields the rescued Queen with his body while turning back. To emphasize the extreme danger of their situation, Wyeth shows the wide eyes of the horse and the intense stare of the figures. Launcelot exudes courageous determination; the Queen looks fearful. Their backward focus stretches well-beyond the frame of the picture, so that the viewer is left to wonder just how close are their pursuers. Like

Pyle in many of his illustrations, Wyeth presented compelling compositions of courageous activity. He was especially adept at animating the climactic scene of each chapter thereby drawing the reader into his story book illustrations. According to his grandson, Jamie Wyeth, "he wanted the paintings to leap out of the page as you read them, to grab you by the neck [17]."

The Pre-Raphaelites sought to compose aesthetically beautiful scenes that depict a particular moment in the stories they illustrated, whereas the Americans were out to tell a story with their images, to enhance the drama as they captured the reader's imagination and directed attention to key aspects of the fiction. Pyle presented realistic scenes of high drama and Wyeth painted in a psychologically tense manner, with a kind of other-worldly atmosphere, indicative of ancient legend. These tendencies are evident in Wyeth's *I am Sir Launcelot du Lake*, *King Ban's son of Benwick*, and *knight of the Round Table*, Figure 12. Wyeth's focuses on a tense lull in the action, as the two foes, Sir Launcelot and Sir Turquine face off and catch their breaths before renewing their sword battle which is destined to end in the death of one or the other.



Figure 12. N. C. Wyeth, *I am Sir Launcelot du Lake*, *King Ban's son of Benwick*, and *knight of the Round Table* from *The Boy's King Arthur* by Thomas Malory, published in 1917.

Emphasizing the power and perseverance of the warriors, Wyeth places the reader just behind Launcelot, unable to see his face, but looking directly into the weary, hate-filled countenance of his opponent. As Wyeth once remarked, "When I paint a figure on horseback, a man plowing, or a woman buffeted by the wind, I have an acute sense of the muscle strain [18]." Here, Launcelot is bloodied, his horse lies dead, and a bound, captive knight and a maiden on horseback look on from the distant background, willing a favorable outcome for Sir Launcelot whose win or loss will determine their fates. Looming over the scene is Turquine's castle, its dark, stone walls contain sixty-four of Launcelot's imprisoned comrades. Behind the foreboding fortress, a large, luminous cloud resembles an even larger castle with its own tower and ramparts, perhaps reminiscent of Camelot and a

foreshadowing of Launcelot's victory. Through fine execution, powerful expression, and dynamic composition, each of the Brandywine artists' illustrations are compelling illuminations of the subject matter that forcefully enrich and supplement the text and emphasize moral strength and bravery of the heroes.

## 5. Conclusion

The optimistic spirit of turn-of-the-twentieth-century America comes through in action-filled pictures created by painters of the Brandywine School, including N. C. Wyeth and his mentor Howard Pyle. Their numerous illustrations for books and magazines such as *Harper's*, *McClure's*, and *Scribner's* appeared in homes across America, bringing exciting accounts of pirates, bandits, cowboys, and gun fighters to life. And after the renewed interest in medieval lore sparked in part by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Wyeth and Pyle portrayed the knights of Camelot, embellishing Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century Arthurian tales of male heroism and dangerous undertakings as a vehicle to reflect America's unfettered zeitgeist and to entice their American audiences.

Although the settings, characters, and wardrobes were similar, Pre-Raphaelite Arthurian images that emphasized the plight of mythic heroines share little with their American counterparts who focused on male heroics. Underscoring the patriarchal dominance of Victorian society, the Pre-Raphaelites reinforced the gendered traditions of the feminine role; they seemed intent on the ideal of the acquiescent woman, as their female protagonists gently endured their fates or suffered the consequences of striving to improve their situations or daring to step outside of the bounds of their gender. The British Pre-Raphaelites promoted gender expectations of feminine passivity, whereas the American Brandywine illustrators, with their emphasis on exploits of the active masculine figures, hardly even considered the personhood of the female characters that populated the tales of King Arthur.

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