BOOK REVIEW
‘King Arthur’ retelling both modern and faithful

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THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR:
The Immortal Legend

By Thomas Malory

A Retelling by Peter Ackroyd

Viking, 316 pp., $26.95

Sir Thomas Malory’s compilation of tales about King Arthur and his knights was published in 1485 as “Le Morte d’Arthur.” Never out of print since then, the book has been the principal source for dozens of Arthurian writers, including Alfred Lord Tennyson (“Idylls of the King”) and John Steinbeck (“The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights”).

With “The Death of King Arthur,” Peter Ackroyd provides a 21st-century adaptation of Malory’s stories about a monarch who may never have existed, Excalibur (his sword), and the court of Camelot; the magic of Merlin and Morgan Le Fay; Tristram and Isolde; Sir Galahad’s search for the Holy Grail; the unrequited love of Lancelot and Guinevere; and the mendacious Mordred, Arthur’s son.

Ackroyd brings superb credentials to the task. A former literary editor of the Spectator, he is a novelist, poet, and author of numerous biographies, including lives of Charles Dickens and Shakespeare. He also has retold Geoffrey Chaucer’s classic, “The Canterbury Tales.”

Elegant, economical, and mordantly witty, Ackroyd’s prose captures the creeds of chivalry, Christianity, and courtly love, the rituals of combat, and the “wistfulness, combined with a dour sense of fate” that suffuse Malory’s narrative. While Arthur is abroad, Ackroyd writes, Mordred seizes the throne, promising the people peace and prosperity. They believe him because the “English are forever unstable and untrue, seeking novelty in new guises. Nothing satisfies us for long.”

Although he has sired Sir Galahad, Ackroyd’s Lancelot du Lake is a laconic Lone Ranger. Returning to Camelot one day, Lancelot encounters a young woman. “[W]here in this land will I
find adventures?’” he asks. “‘They are closer than you think, sir. Are you a valiant knight?’ ‘Why else would I be here?’”

Vanquishing Sir Peris of the Savage Forest, who has threatened to rape the young woman, Lancelot prepares to take his leave: “Is there anything else I can do for you, madam?” Noting that he loves Guinevere, Arthur’s wife, she advises him to marry someone else. “A good knight must be chaste and virtuous,” Lancelot replies. “If I lay with a woman I would lose half my strength… . I would rather be unwed than unhappy.”

Lancelot is, of course, a hopeless romantic - and Ackroyd, on occasion, gently pokes fun at men like him. “Every knight thinks his own lady is the fairest,” Sir Lamorak reminds his friend. “That is human nature.”

Such gentle cynicism, sprinkled throughout, hints at the upheavals of change and loss percolating just below the surface. In the court of Camelot, Ackroyd’s narrator notes, a man and a woman could keep company and remain faithful to one another for seven years “without any hint of licentiousness.” But “in these sad days,” he adds, without specifying the era to which he is referring, “no man can love for seven nights without wanting his way with the woman,” and, inevitably, the ardor is “soon hot, and sooner cold. Summer gives way unseasonably to winter.”

At the end of “The Death of King Arthur,” Ackroyd plays it straight, hoping, perhaps, that the themes of stoic resignation and Christian faith will resonate, albeit in different ways, with his readers. Taking responsibility for the ruin of knights and kings, Lancelot renounces the pleasures of the world, choosing a solitary existence of prayer, devotion, and service to God. He dies with a smile on his face, “as if he had been surprised by joy.” And when the body of the man who had no “match in might and mercy” lay in state, “[t]here was deep wailing, out of measure.”

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