“King Arthur and King Cornwall:” Resurrecting an Arthurian Ballad
Allen Duggar, from Dr. Myra Seaman’s ENGL 300

What is a Ballad?

Ballads are long narrative poems set to music which often recount heroic and romantic tales, such as this one which centers around King Arthur and his knights. They were initially circulated orally, but they were also heavily circulated on broadsides after the advent of the printing press.

The Percy Folio

King Arthur and King Cornwall survives in the Percy Folio, a seventeenth century collection of poems. Unfortunately, many of the pages were torn out to be used as tender to start fires. It was also used as an important source by James Francis Child in his collection of ballads from the British Isles. “King Arthur and King Cornwall” is Child Ballad 30.

King Arthur and King Cornwall

This ballad starts with Arthur bragging about how powerful he and his knights are. Guinevere puts him in his place by saying that another king is greater than he. The Round Table Knights then head off to Cornwall where they find the monarch that Guinevere told them about. The knights conceal themselves as pilgrims, but after King Cornwall insults Arthur and the Round Table, they cut off his head to defend their honor.

How I Reinterpreted this Ballad

I did not try to reconstruct this ballad as it might have been performed in the sixteenth century. Instead, I cut it down to the essentials of its plot and then fit it into a framework of American folk music. I composed a round for the recorder to evoke medieval and renaissance music, but I used an autoharp and alternate bass picking guitar style which are from folk repertoire.

Unique features of this Version

I composed a round for the recorder to evoke medieval and renaissance music, but I used an autoharp and alternate bass picking guitar style which are from American folk repertoire. I didn’t have access to period instruments or much information about reconstructed performance practices, so I decided to make it my own rather than pay deference to its original sound.

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