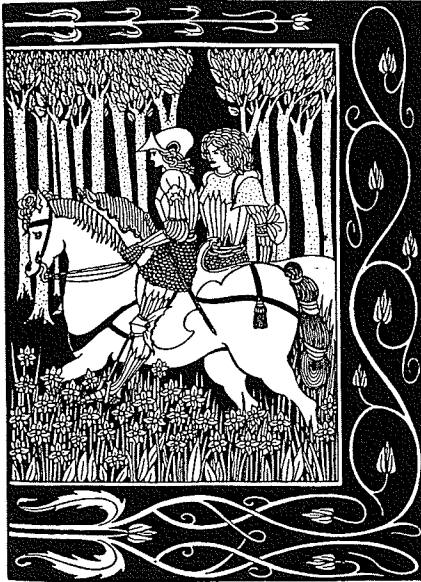


## ARTS &amp; LETTERS



*Knights of  
King Arthur,  
from a special 1893  
edition of Le Morte  
D'Arthur with English  
text and original  
engravings by Aubrey  
Beardsley.*

cavalrymen were captured and sent to bolster Roman garrisons in northern Britain. (Archeological evidence points to a flourishing, close-knit Sarmatian community near the town of Ribchester.) Along with heavy armor, heraldic devices, and advanced cavalry techniques, these warlike Asians may also have transplanted the seeds of the Arthurian legends.

A last coincidence: The Roman commander of the Sarmatians in Britain was named Artorius.

### *Poetry for the People*

"The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry"  
by Christopher Clausen, in *The Virginia  
Quarterly Review* (Winter 1978), Univer-  
sity of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.  
22903.

During the era of "high modernism" (1920–1960), traditional notions of form and function in Anglo-American poetry became passé. Meter, for example, was abandoned in favor of often obscure prose rhythms, prompting Robert Frost to say that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. Meanwhile, notes Clausen, a professor of English at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, fewer original works of poetry were published and poetry declined as a major cultural force. The sad result: Poets very nearly became their own sole audience.

The new modernist ideal held that contemporary human experience was so unique that it could only be described in radically new ways.

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Poetry became, as T. S. Eliot said in 1921, "more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect." It repelled those who felt poetry must tell them something about life in words that stuck in the mind. And the "burdens of realism," Clausen contends, left the modernists of the 1960s with little sense of confidence or purpose.

But the poets are not entirely to blame, Clausen adds. The mass media have made such a mockery of lyric verse that traditional symbols of love, nature, and freedom have given way to toothpaste, Geritol, and political rhetoric. In this maudlin climate, it is not surprising that Rod McKuen becomes, according to his publisher, "the most widely read poet of all time" and singers John Denver and Bob Dylan are regarded by undergraduates (and some teachers) as our most important poets.

Readers' desires for clarity and memorable language cannot be dismissed as escapism or bad taste, Clausen concludes. On the contrary, this preference may simply indicate a desire for poetry that transcends the ills of modern life. Poetry must "reflect the complexity of [the poet's] thinking," as William Carlos Williams said late in his life, but it "should be brought into the world where we live and not be so recon-dite, so removed from the people."

### *Veils and Vaudeville*

"Salomé Where She Danced" by Elizabeth Kendall, in *Ballet Review* (Winter 1977-78), P.O. Box 11305, Church Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10249.

Artistic dancing was slow to win acceptance from American audiences, thanks to generations of Puritan stodginess. When it finally caught on in the early 1900s, dance, as a dramatic language, provoked far more scandal than vaudeville chorus lines or "the naughty girls in tights and flounces" who danced ballet.

The breakthrough came, says free-lance writer Kendall, when the Metropolitan Opera mounted Richard Strauss's *Salomé* on Jan. 22, 1907. The sight of prima ballerina Bianca Froelich shedding seven veils and fondling the severed head of John the Baptist was too much for the Met's financial backers—J. P. Morgan, W. K. Vanderbilt, and August Belmont. They ordered *Salomé* withdrawn from the repertoire and thereby sparked intense debate in the press. Mlle. Froelich promptly transferred her *Salomé* to the vaudeville stage and Florenz Ziegfeld soon served up another version in the *Follies* of 1907.

Only the perseverance of Gertrude Hoffman, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis convinced U.S. audiences to accept the dance as painting and music in motion. When St. Denis returned in 1909 from triumphal performances of her ballet, *Radha*, in London and Berlin, she set out to combine *Salomé* with Far Eastern drama and "sparked imaginations already sensitized to a whole range of exotic phenomena." Duncan invented the dance movements, Kendall writes, and "St. Denis invented the costumes."