

The 2021 James Randall Leader Essay Prize

As always, assessing articles for the Leader Prize is a tough but rewarding task: tough because there are always several candidates for the winner and rewarding because it is gratifying to see how strong is the field of Arthurian Studies. For the 2021 year, for instance, the Committee examined articles from over half-a-dozen journals and really enjoyed excellent studies of German, French, and Latin Arthuriana, as well as studies of Palomydes. Despite the strength of the year's overall publications and venues, the Committee's clear winner was **Louis J. Boyle's** "'Truth as They Heard": *Fama* in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,' published in *Arthuriana* 31.1 (Spring 2021).

Boyle's outstanding argument is that collective talk in Malory's *Morte*, including gossip, highlights the prominence of certain groups and certain truths; furthermore, public talk both highlights and reinforces the public reputation of the person being discussed. This is true whether what is said reflects 'eye-witness reports' or 'unsubstantiated rumor'. Similarly, *fama* is representative of, and helps to inform, the complete character and does so for both male and female characters and good and bad reputations; the more frequently discussed concept of *worshyp* is more restrictive, being both entirely laudatory and generally confined to male prowess and male honour. Within these carefully articulated distinctions, Boyle elucidates how talk – whether good or ill – has power, including in how it helps create 'social collectives'. Talk's power is also cumulative.

One of the great strengths of Boyle's argument is its subtlety: for Boyle, name, *fama* and *worshyp* overlap in the *Morte* and readers are invited to participate in these negotiations. Yet Boyle's argument itself overlaps with a host of crucial issues in interpreting the *Morte*, including questions of heroism and villainy, love and prowess, and the negotiation and interaction of public and private in *Morte Darthur*. For the care and clarity of his argument, and for the ways in which he elucidates how variegated is *fama* in the *Morte*, the Committee is pleased to award the 2021 Leader Prize to Louis J. Boyle.