Arthurian Legend in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

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Series in Cinema and Culture

Vernon Press

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Cinema and Culture

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020943382

ISBN: 978-1-62273-947-9

Cover design by Vernon Press.

Cover image by MonikaP from Pixabay.

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Introduction

Arthurian legend has always been open to innovation. Who Arthur might have been inspired by is open to debate and speculation, but it is clear that if such a figure really did exist, he would not have been wearing the kind of full-body armor that most readers imagine when they think of King Arthur. The tragedy of brothers Balin and Balan or the death of Accolon, both of which involve combatants killing allies because they did not recognize the other's armor, are based on armor that rendered a knight anonymous, which would not have happened in any historic Arthur's time because armor did not obscure faces when he might have existed. We love the stories, however, because they have changed and reflected the values of the times they were written, and the great stories of other times always hold some appeal. The idea of a just and fair king who brings peace, and as the story evolves, gathers the best and most powerful fighters in the land and asks them not to abuse their power, but to protect the powerless, especially women, carries lasting appeal, as war and abuse of the powerless by the powerful appear to be part of the human condition, parts of ourselves that we wish could be controlled to make the world better. As the stories evolved, different tellers added elements that would be repeated and elaborated on.

The appeal of Arthurian legend is partly nostalgia for an imagined glorious past, but largely because Arthur represents an ideal leader, one who is fair and just, whose warriors are the best in the world and instructed to use their power to help those who are weaker or poor, and who is himself brave, skilled, and ready to put his own life at risk for the good of his people. He is defeated not by a superior enemy but because he, his wife, and his best knight are human and prone to occasionally doing what they want rather than what is right. His youthful lust fathered a would-be usurper, and those who loved him most loved each other more. Only his own men would be strong enough to defeat him. He is still a king, however, and that he is a male born to his position and answerable to no one causes tension in many of the works discussed in this volume.

This book began with a call for papers for the 2018 Northeast Modern Language Association Conference, which raised the following questions:

> How have films, television shows, games, comics, and books for all audiences and ages employed Arthurian characters, themes, motifs, and plots? How have these changes reflected shifting cultural attitudes and values? What do recent retellings and appropriations of Arthurian legend tell us about ourselves and the generations immediately

> preceding us? How have these changes reflected shifting cultural attitudes and values? What do we want and need from King Arthur and his court?

Responses to the original call introduced themes that would become more pronounced as more chapters came in, suggesting that what we appear to need from Arthur and his court, in general, is that they be less explicitly Christian and more inclusive, allowing those who are not white males born to noble families more prominence. Most of the works discussed raise questions about the use of power and what entitles one to that power. This was a simpler question when society accepted that God made people kings because God wanted them to have power than it is in today's more democratic, egalitarian world. Some challenge the gender roles of traditional Arthurian literature. Some try to adapt or reject the values in this inherently Christian genre.

Does this mean that all new Arthurian works in the twentieth and twenty-first century express anxiety about gender, social class, and the divine right of kings? No, but it does suggest that such works attracted the attention of a small number of critics in the three years leading to 2020.

As many of the chapters encompass multiple themes, the structure of this volume is very loosely based on themes that stand out in each chapter, beginning with those that challenge gender assumptions and may be more socially inclusive, moving toward those questioning the proper use of power and by what authority the powerful rule, and ending with discussions of two works that try to adapt to our more secular world.

In "*Kids and Kings:* Postmodern Nostalgia and Youthful Arthurian Cinematic Retellings," Sarah Gordon places the concept of postmodern nostalgia developed by Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon in the current evolution of Arthurian film aimed at a juvenile audience. In-depth discussions of Disney's *Avalon High* (2010) and director Joe Cornish's *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) explore how these films combine anachronism and history with updated social values and political concerns to argue that recapturing a lost, yet fictional, better past is a central preoccupation of juvenile Arthurian film. Both films involve racially diverse casts and challenge gender roles by making traditionally male characters female. Gordon notes that, as part of the Disney company's move to include stronger female characters, *Avalon High* has King Arthur reincarnated as a teenaged girl and that the film offers encouragement to study the texts of the past and to look for lessons in the past that may be useful in the present. As high school students unite to save the world from reversion to darker ages of the past in *Avalon High,* younger children unite to fight bullies and work to resolve the conflicts of a politically and socially divided world in *The Kid Who Would Be King.*

As Sarah Gordon's chapter discusses how two recent films encourage new audiences to become familiar with Arthurian legend, Carl Sell's "*Camelot 3000* and *Dracula vs. King Arthur*: The Uses of Limited-Run Comics as Updates of the Arthurian Legend for Contemporary Readers" shows how comic books can do the same. Predating *Avalon High* by twenty-five years and perhaps an inspiration for its gender and race changes, *Camelot 3000* involves a reincarnated Arthur with reincarnations of his knights, and also includes racial diversity and a gender-bending plotline, which if fairly common in the 2000s, was not in 1985. The reincarnated Tristan finds himself in a female body while still identifying as male and still loving the also-female Isolde. Sell finds the conclusion of Tristan's story unsatisfying but remarkable for its time and likely to inspire interest in new readers. Sell also explores problematic issues of the male gaze in *Dracula vs. King Arthur,* a fairly traditional good versus evil story with Arthur representing God and Dracula serving the devil, noting that the hyper-sexualized female characters that feature in the comic are common in the genre and while the genre itself would benefit from including more readers, comics are very popular and likely to bring King Arthur to readers who might not encounter him otherwise.

In "The Fate of Artoria: Contextually Exploring Gender, Narrative, and Conflict in *Fate/Zero,*" Tracey Thomas introduces us to another version of King Arthur, who is reincarnated as a female. Thomas comments on the uses of and alterations to grail legend in *Fate/Zero,* an anime created by Gen Urobuchi. Thomas notes that Artoria is an example of "female masculinity" found in characters in branches of manga aimed at young, female readers and that her gender is less important than the virtues she shares with the traditional Arthur. Artoria is the servant of the master who summoned her, however, rather than a king in her own right, and other characters both challenge her effectiveness as a king and sexualize her, but Thomas finds that Artoria is "an example to challenge … preconceived notions of gender roles." The quest for the Holy Grail becomes a war over who will have wishes granted by the Grail, which is no longer a symbol of God's grace but corrupted and potentially malign. As a representative of Arthurian chivalry, Artoria does not achieve this corrupted Grail but remains true to her Arthurian values.

While John Steinbeck did not make Arthur female as *in Avalon High* and *Fate/Zero,* in his translation of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, by adding personalities to some of Malory's female characters, he did turn a relatively minor character, the oldest woman in the triple quest of Gawain, Ewain and Marhalt, into a woman who might identify as transgender in today's parlance. In "Gender and Class in John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights,"* I trace changes John Steinbeck made to what started out as a faithful translation of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* finding increasing differences in the portrayals of

women and challenges to assumptions about class and birth in Steinbeck's source, and concluding that discomfort with Malory's attitudes toward class and gender may have kept Steinbeck from finishing the work. This chapter analyzes the expanded roles of women in Steinbeck's translation and places them in the context of other Steinbeck works, then explores class issues and how the idea of kings and nobles born to their positions is incompatible with Steinbeck's other writings.

While the world of Harry Potter is more egalitarian than Malory's world in that wizards do not need to be born into wizarding families and women both have power and hold some high-ranking jobs, J. K. Rowling does not challenge gender roles to the extent of most of the works discussed previously. In *Morte D'Arthur* and Steinbeck's re-writing of it, Morgan le Fay is very much her own woman. Her evil deeds are in her own interests. In contrast, Bellatrix Lestrange, her closest counterpart in the Potter books, is subservient to Lord Voldemort rather than an independent agent. While the women are capable in battle, for the most part, men battle men and women battle women, and except for the magic, Molly Weasley is a fairly traditional housewife and mother. With the possible exception of the chapter on Iris Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels,* the works discussed in the chapters of the book that follow my Steinbeck discussion also more or less maintain fairly traditional gender roles.

Noting that the appeal of King Arthur's story relies on an imagined medieval past—that postmodern nostalgia Gordon writes of—and Arthur as a wise and successful king who in some ways doesn't act like a king because he asks counsel of his knights and therefore seems more democratic, Zainah Usman's "A Kid Wizard in King Arthur's Court" shows parallels between J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and Arthurian legend, especially T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. Among other comparisons, Usman notes that Arthur and Harry both live in castles, begin in ignorance of their true identities, have similar relationships to helpers and magical objects, assemble allies, and place right action over the use of power for personal glory.

While, as Usman argues, Harry Potter learns to develop and master his power but has the instinctive goodness we expect of a chivalrous Arthurian figure, in "Chivalry and Ambition in Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King,"* I argue that the film's protagonist Jack Lucas (Jeff Bridges) misuses power because he lacks instinctive goodness, or at least sees it as incompatible with ambition and financial success. Created by screenwriter Richard LaGravenese to challenge attitudes toward wealth and success of the 1980s, I note that Jack's behavior for most of the film is similar to—though a bit less evil than—the evil Sir Damas from Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. Jack only values people he can use and behaves as if he owes them nothing in return, discarding them when they are no longer useful as if they were human garbage. While that is significantly better than

throwing them into a dungeon where many die, as Sir Damas does, I note that when Parry (Robin Williams) assumes the role of a knight errant after his wife's death, it may be that on some level, he recognizes the cause of his wife's death as the lack of chivalry in Jack's behavior. He guides Jack on a quest that he will not let end until Jack provides evidence that he can be brave and put the needs of others before his own—in short, that Jack has learned the lessons of chivalry: that the wealthy and powerful should treat the poor and powerless responsibly and with compassion; and that all people, especially the powerless, are worthy of care and protection. In this, the film echoes the messages valuing chivalry Gordon finds in *The Kid Who Would Be King* and Thomas finds in *Fate/Zero*.

By making Jack Lucas an American and a commoner, albeit a wealthy and snobbish one at the beginning of the film, Gilliam and LaGravenese avoid questions of how the noble King Arthur can also represent the democracy symbolized by the Round Table to viewers from an era when absolute monarchs are the exception rather than the rule. The films discussed in Adrienne Major's "Democratic Dreams and Arthur, King" and Erin Mullally's "Killing Arthur: Revising the Perceval Myth in *Kingsman: The Secret Service*" all raise questions of what such a king might look like, and in some cases reflect the same concerns about inherited nobility as Steinbeck.

Major analyzes four Arthurian films that reflect and sometimes predict the political moods of the time and which all show some anxiety over the use of power and the idea of a king who touts democratic ideals. Major finds that John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur* reflects anxious masculinity that needs the protection of armor and sword at all times in response to real-world economic woes and the rise of powerful women like Margaret Thatcher and, ironically, Phyllis Schlafly. Jerry Zucker's 1995 *First Knight* involves a Round Table that is supposed to be inclusive and democratic, but which is exclusive and at which the king has the only real voice. The film also raises questions about what gives one country the right to invade another, a concern that would be reflected in the Gulf War. Connecting Antoine Fuqua's 2004 *King Arthur* to ideas about freedom inspired by the 9/11 attacks, Major observes that the film's ironic conclusion indicates that the true path to freedom might be to find the right king. Major concludes her discussion with Guy Ritchie's 2017 *King Arthur, Legend of the Sword*.

As Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* indicated some authorial anxiety about the need for Arthurian knights to be of noble birth, and the Harry Potter series differentiates between the "good" wizards from old families, who accept muggles and the muggle-born and the snobbish old families that don't, Guy Ritchie responds to the challenge of making the boy born to be king more appealing to democratic audiences by making him a nobly-born orphan raised by prostitutes. In 2017's *King Arthur, Legend of the*

Sword, the first indications that Arthur deserves to lead are demonstrated by his street smarts and sometimes less-than-noble tactics. Major concludes that this film "is scarily prescient—the grifter king who wins his money through petty extortion, and his power through appealing to the masses while being supported by the old aristocracy against an established yet corrupt political system has something to say about how and why Donald Trump continues to dominate US politics."

Erin Mullally's "Killing Arthur: Revising the Perceval Myth in *Kingsman: The Secret Service*" also explores conflicting messages about class while tracing similarities between Eggsy of *Kingsman* and Chrétien's Perceval. Like Perceval, Eggsy is the son of a dead military man kept from following in his father's footsteps by a mother who is afraid he too will be killed, but unlike Perceval, Eggsy is not a child of nobility. He, like Ritchie's Arthur, is a street kid whose past actions may not meet standards all would consider honorable. Given the opportunity to take on the clothes and the role of a gentleman warrior, Eggsy encounters support and discouragement from some surprising sources, his biggest challenges coming not from those born to the elite, but from self-made men, including the Arthur of the Kingsmen organization, who reveals himself both a traitor and, despite his pretensions, a Cockney. As Mullally points out, this film raises questions about class and who deserves the right to lead and why hinted at in films covered by Major's chapter and about the trappings of success like the ones Jack values in *The Fisher King*.

As Arthur is corrupted by power and therefore must die in *Kingsman*, my chapter, "The Death of the Fisher King in Iris Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels*," explores how Iris Murdoch's version of the Fisher King is also corrupt, abusing both the traditions of masculine power and religion. This chapter shows how Murdoch, an atheist concerned with sustaining morality without God, uses the Fisher King myth of Arthurian legend ironically. While the Fisher King, keeper of the Holy Grail, is traditionally a figure of redemption and rebirth, Murdoch's Carel Fisher and the corrupted church he represents must be destroyed to heal the land and its people, not restored to health. Carel Fisher represents abuse of power from which those under it must, and do, escape.

Leah Hamilton's "When Arthurian Heroes Fall: Adapting Moral Failure and Christian Redemption in the BBC's *Merlin*" also reflects changing attitudes toward religion. Although not explicitly atheist with its frequent references to the "old religion," the *Merlin* television series attempts to replace Christian views of character redemption in a secular world. Hamilton finds that the show assumes its audience is apparently harder to please than the Christian God. Penitence is harder to define, and the show uses three strategies to avoid other problems the lack of Christianity creates, **"**omission, excusing, and dramatic humility." Through these strategies, the characters' stories change to supposedly

make them more acceptable. Examples include that Merlin's father is not a demon and Uther Pendragon is adulterous but not a rapist. Hamilton explores the ways the characters attempt to make up for their failings and earn forgiveness, ultimately concluding that "perhaps without any form of universally accepted path to redemption and restoration, even extreme forms of humility and penitence may be insufficient to achieve restoration," but suggesting that *Merlin's* example may contribute to the exploration of new paths as Arthurian legend adapts to our time.

Together, these chapters suggest that while it can be difficult to imagine what a perfect ruler in a fair and just world might look like in the more secular, more inclusive world of today, Arthurian legend still provides inspiration to consider those issues or to imagine ourselves as part of some imagined, better past.

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