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## **Introduction**

When you think of the Arthurian Legend, what's the first thing that comes to mind? King Arthur and Excalibur? Merlin? Lancelot and Guinevere? What's your opinion of Arthur? Was he the greatest or were his knights greater than him? Many of these ideas have been shaped and changed over time by various authors to convey different ideas of their time. Let's dive into some of those changes and how they compare with the rest of the Arthurian legend. I argue that modern authors have added, dropped, and changed parts of the Arthurian legend for various reasons, including to push ideas and beliefs of their own time, appeal to a broader audience, be more relatable, and to revive Arthur's character.

## **Fact versus Fiction**

Let's start with how Arthur was portrayed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was one of the earliest writers of the Arthurian legend. In his work, titled *The Historia Regum Britanniae*, throughout the Arthurian sections, mentions that he obtains his information by stating:

Geoffrey of Monmouth shall be silent; but will, nevertheless, though in a mean style, briefly relate what he found in the British book above mentioned, and heard from that most learned historian, Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, concerning the wars which this renowned king, upon his return to Britain after this victory, waged against his nephew" (Geoffrey of Monmouth).

Mentioning that you obtained your information from another source and labeling that author as “most learned historian” is a tactic Geoffrey used in order to build up credibility and belief in his own text. On the surface, this push along with the fact that the text is about the history of the kings of Britian, makes it seem as if Geoffrey is pushing the idea that King Arthur was once real and historical.

Going down the timeline, Chrétien de Troyes changes the story up a bit and writes more about Arthur’s knights instead of Arthur himself, but does he also try to promote his work as something that happened in the past? At the end of his story titled, “Yvain (The Knight with the Lion),” he writes: “Thus Chrétien concludes his romance of the Knight with the Lion; for I never heard any more of it told, nor will you ever hear more of it related, unless someone chooses to make some lying addition.” (De Troyes 373). This could be seen as a sort of “copywrite” if it can be said that any change to the story would be seen as a lie. He did word his conclusion in a way that made it seem as if the story was told to him and it wasn’t his own invention, further making it seem as if the story could have been true.

We then come to Sir Thomas Malory and his text, *Le Morte D’arthur* from 1485. Malory makes many similar claims throughout his text such as “So the French book maketh mention” (Malory 523) and “For the book saith” (Malory 526). Malory claims to be writing from these sources even if he doesn’t mention what source it’s from or if they don’t even exist at all, but again, at the surface level it makes it seem as if Malory was wanting the Arthurian legend to be a true event that happened in the past, and the source to be credible even if some of his stories are clearly of his own invention such as the story of Sir Urry who must be healed by Lancelot. Jumping ahead to a much more modern text is *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White, first published in 1958. White’s text, in contrast, is filled with magical and fantastical elements that

could almost poke fun at the seriousness of the Arthurian legend. One is the addition of Robin Hood, a character written about in fairy tales but in this story he meets a young Arthur in a scene that doesn't appear in any other part of the canonical Arthurian legend. Arthur (who goes by Wart) gets a quest from him and encounters a castle made of gross food as the book writes: "They plotted over the filthy drawbridge—a butter one, with cow hairs still in it—sinking to their ankles. They shuddered at the tripe and the chitterlings. They pointed their iron knives at the soldiers made of soft, sweet, smooth cheese, and the latter shrank away" (White 111). This sounds oddly fairy tale like without much need to convince someone that it didn't happen in real life. White also bases his story around young Arthur learning how to be a king by physically turning into different animals by a sort of time traveling magician named Merlyn.

Disney's spin on White's story takes it to a whole new level with dancing kitchenware and more anachronisms such as when Merlyn comes back from the future wearing a modern-day shirt from Bermuda.

If we look at the trend of fact versus fiction as these stories have progressed, it may seem as if over time the Arthurian legend has shifted from being "maybe true" to purely a fairy tale. Although this isn't always the case, and some wanted to go with a more realistic approach with the more recent film *King Arthur* (2004) directed by Antoine Fuqua. After further looking into and comparing these different texts, Wiseman writes that:

"Authored Arthurian fiction—purposefully entertaining stories of Arthur and his court from an identified author whose creative input was recognized by the audience—has been produced since at least the mid-twelfth century. But it has been only since the late nineteenth century that authors have attempted to write Arthurian historical fiction—that

is, to use a realistic post-Roman or late antique setting, with a plausible story consistent with known history” (Wiseman).

This newer film aims to tell the Arthurian story in way that could have happened if the figure King Arthur were actually real. Looking again at the trend along the timeline of these works, it seems to follow a sort of “bowl” shape where in the beginning there was more emphasis on historical fact, then it dips into less fact and more fiction, before coming up again with more emphasis on telling a story that could have happened in our real history.

### **The Role of Religion**

Stock suggests that the film also puts itself in a sort of Christmas setting with “snow-covered roofs, streets, tournament grounds...in the bleak December snow-scape” (Stock). This shows that Disney didn’t strip away all of the Christian or religious details but sort of shifted them to a more contemporary or secular idea of Christmas that nearly every American should know of, and many celebrate. This could be seen as an attempt to broaden the audience to a genre not everyone is interested in and to other audiences who aren’t just Christian. Another reason for connecting it with the Christmas holiday could be to appeal to younger audiences because what child doesn’t like Christmas? Other religious symbolism could include having Christmas be a symbol to being gifted forgiveness from God that the people then should go out and share with the world, and then with Excalibur being like a gift to Arthur that he should not just keep for himself but do great things for the world with.

Looking back at some of the older texts, especially Geoffrey’s and Malory’s, they have a lot of Christian and religious aspects showing that being Christian will earn your success, but as time goes on, religion still plays a role but seems to have much less of a focus as a whole and

shifted to something so great that only the purest of knights can achieve it. In Chrétien and Malory, most of the knights were Christian and would commend each other to God but in Tennyson this didn't happen nearly as much, and Christianity did not feel as if it was tangled throughout the reality these characters were living in. In T.H. White's *Sword in the Stone* there is almost no religious aspect even though the legendary sword Excalibur sits in front of a church and appears to be an item from God with unworldly powers as no one can pull it out or know where it came from. The film *Excalibur* doesn't have much religious aspect either, but *King Arthur 2004* does have some with Arthur himself being the outsider and the one who is Christian with Lancelot questioning him about this because none of the other knights are Christian. This change creates an interesting dynamic by having the audience further separate Arthur from the rest of his knights by giving him this trait. The rest of the film puts Arthur high above the other knights which may be an extension of the canonical idea that being Christian, and a good king go together.

Taking away the Christian aspect which has been there since the beginning could have been something to remove or push other ideas, or it could have been to broaden the audience to a more secular modern audience. As with the film *Sword in the Stone*, Disney is a large movie company that appeals to a wide, diverse, audience and being able to attract as much interest as possible without offending people would have been high on their priorities.

Stock writes that:

“The sword is embedded not in an anvil, as in *Knights of the Round Table* and *The Sword in the Stone* (discussed presently), but in a lushly green, moss-covered boulder in the woods, guarded by a druidical-looking 'bishop' flailing holy water at the sword not from

an aspergillum, but from a sprig of mistletoe, and praying that God send a new king to his 'unworthy' people who 'suffer' while the 'land bleeds' because of their sinfulness” (Stock).

This could be used to show how the sword in the stone has been kept at least a somewhat religious event throughout most of the canonical Arthurian legend whether it happens in front of a church, Excalibur is a gift from God, or it's symbolism like someone coming like a new Jesus. Out in the wilderness flailing holy water at the sword could be a symbol relating to John the Baptist in the New Testament. In the gospels of the New Testament, John the Baptist resides in the wilderness and cries out to the people coming by that they need to repent for their sins and be baptized because someone who is greater and hope will be coming soon. This could also play into the idea of “destiny” or “fate” that seems to be a common theme running throughout the entire Arthurian legend.

The most notable example is the idea that Arthur is fated to become king by pulling out the sword, but another example of this idea of this is in Disney's *Sword in the Stone*, Merlin says “when a girl squirrel mates, it's for life” (*Sword in the Stone* 43:02). Fate has played a large role in Arthurian legend and seems to be a consistent theme among the medieval and the modern but with more of a sense of “choice” in the modern. If we relate this to nature versus nurture, in Malory there is much more emphasis on nature as knights seem to be pre-destined to being good knights like with the examples of Sir Tor and Sir Percival. No matter how strong Arthur or his knights are (Lancelot is the best knight in the world, Galahad is the purest knight in the world, and there are many other honorable mentions like Arthur himself, Tristram, Gawain) but still everything crashes down because of nothing to do with strength but with love which triumphs in Malory, Tennyson, and is the one “unsuccessful” interaction in Disney's *Sword in the Stone*. This could be seen as a balance between love and power, and Arthur had his reign and now history

must even itself out again, there can't be too much of one good thing and things must even out, so for something great to happen (Arthur's reign), a downfall of equal significance had to follow.

### **Be More Relatable to the Reader**

In modern adaptations it seems like the authors are trying to make the readers or listeners have more of a sense of seeing themselves like the characters it focuses on. Stock writes: "The cinematic adaptations...were crafted to reflect more about the cultural and socio-political milieu of the decade in which the contemporary cinematic version was made than the medieval period the films purport to depict" (Stock). This shows that modern adaptations are often used as a mirror or lens to look at modern issues and ideas that the author wants to push onto their reader. For example, in T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*, Wart is a young boy who doesn't really know where he came from and lives to serve someone, Kay, who is supposed to be greater and better at him in everything. I can imagine this with a middle school friend group with the popular kid who wants to be the center of attention being Kay and then Wart plays the nerd who helps the popular kid get the attention he wants. In the Disney movie this idea of Wart being an "underdog" and naive is emphasized even further with his scrawny character compared to the masculine brutes that Kay and Ector are. For the common boy reading or hearing these stories it may have been more likely that someone may relate and sympathize with Wart's character rather than Kay's. To some this feeling could be empowering like "I may not be a knight, but I can still be destined for greatness" which feels like great motivation to tell the younger generation as they go through school and into a college setting.

A common theme that runs through medieval Arthuriana are the issues of affairs, mercy, and violence. The Guinevere affair is one of the most iconic parts of the Arthurian legend and the

concept of chivalry and knighthood have been there from the start and are essential to the Arthurian tradition in general. While these topics form the basis for the Arthurian legend, modern adaptations seem to be focusing on a more youth focused audience from Tennyson's version as being a guide to being a good gentleman in the Victorian era to White's view of qualities and traits a young boy should learn when growing up. Williams poses the question: "Yet even here a version of the basic choice must still be made: do we want a clean or a dirty medieval 'reality'?" (Williams). The medieval appears to be "dirty" in terms of sexual behavior and violence while with Disney's *Sword in the Stone* it takes on the "clean" approach by focusing on humor, animals, and being something fun for a younger audience to enjoy.

### **The Role of Arthur**

A great contrast can be seen between the importance of King Arthur and his knights throughout the stories of the Arthurian legend. This is taken to great extremes between the stories of Chrétien and *King Arthur (2004)*. In Chrétien, King Arthur was roman but all his knights: Lancelot, Gawain, etc. were Sarmatian and portrayed as kinds of knuckleheads or partiers throughout the movie while Arthur had to lead them and was the hero of the story. As time has gone on, there seems to have been a shift in emphasis to provide more legitimacy to King Arthur's birth. In Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*, he writes "So after the death of the duke, King Uther lay with Igraine more than three hours after his death, and begot on her that night, Arthur" (Malory 5). Uther sleeps with Igraine but it mentions specifically that this happened three hours after Gorlois had been killed, meaning Arthur technically wasn't born illegitimately. Adding an element of fate with the sword in the stone of T.H. White and Disney also adds legitimacy to the throne by making it seem like fate was supposed to take him there like it was



meant to happen, and he is more deserving of the throne. In Tennyson's work, he depicts the land before Arthur's reign as being tormented by war and destruction and this sets up a scene for showing why the world needs Arthur and establishes good versus evil with Arthur being the ultimate hero.

Going back to this idea of a "bowl shape" for our trend from medieval to modern, the level of importance Arthur seems to play in these stories also seems to follow this. In the chronicles such as Geoffrey, Arthur was the focus, then Chrétien and Malory started to shift the focus more towards the knights and their issues with some scenes in Chrétien making Arthur seem like a fool, and now in the modern the focus is back on Arthur with White's *Sword in the Stone* focusing entirely on Arthur as a youth, *King Arthur (2004)* separating him from his other knights, and *Excalibur* making him seem like an extra great king. One notable change from the film *Excalibur* is the fact that Arthur doesn't mistakenly sleep with his sister and conceive Mordred like he does in Malory, but he's actually raped by his sister, no fault on Arthur. Another change is the fact that when Arthur hears that Guinevere and Lancelot may be having an affair, Arthur immediately goes out and confronts it which he doesn't do in any of the other texts. These changes elevate Arthur up on a pedestal of being the greatest king and someone to look up to.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Arthurian legend has been shaped and morphed by many great authors across nearly 1000 years. Some aspects have been dropped, some added, but it continues to be an incredible tale that inspires many to this day.

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