

## Reshaping the Arthurian Legend for Modern Audiences: *Avalon High* and *Cursed*

Adaptations of older works need to appeal to contemporary audiences, otherwise they will not find success. In the case of Arthurian literature, it has been adapted and adjusted to fit various contexts for centuries. Disney Channel's film *Avalon High*<sup>1</sup> and Netflix's series *Cursed*<sup>2</sup> are two modern adaptations that tackle that exact issue. In reference to other recent adaptations, Ann F. Howey discusses the concept of 'map[ping] legendary narratives developed in the medieval period onto a much later phenomenon: the teenager.'<sup>3</sup> Although Howey was not writing about *AH* and *Cursed*, her point applies to these examples. The stories of *AH*'s Allie Pennington and *Cursed*'s Nimue are ones of adolescents finding their place in the world, told with focuses on women, fantasy, and parent-child relationships.

Allie and Nimue are the protagonists. Melissa Ridley Elmes identifies 'a contemporary audience's desire for strong female characters' in her essay on Arthurian episodes.<sup>4</sup> Each of these characters fulfils that desire in her own way. Allie's first scenes tell the audience that she is accustomed to being the new girl at school, knowledgeable in her parents' area of study – which is conveniently Arthurian times – and an athlete. As the plot develops, she has the potential to be drawn into a love triangle, but she rises above the drama. When she and Miles discover that Arthur has been reincarnated, she defaults to the position that it must be Will, the football star.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Gillard, dir., *Avalon High* (Disney/ABC Domestic Television, 2010). Henceforth referred to as *AH*.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wheeler, William Wheeler, Leila Gerstein, Janet Lin, Rachel Shukert, and Robbie Thompson, writers, Jon East, Daniel Nettheim, Zetna Fuentes, and Sarah O'Gorman, dir., *Cursed*, series 1 (Netflix, 2020). Henceforth referred to as *Cursed*.

<sup>3</sup> Ann F. Howey, 'Arthur and Adaptation', *Arthuriana* 25.4 (2015), 36-50 (37)

<sup>4</sup> Melissa Ridley Elmes, 'Episodic Arthur: *Merlin*, *Camelot* and the Visual Modernization of the Medieval Literary Romance Tradition', in *Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays*, ed. by Meriem Pagès and Karolyn Kinane (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2015), pp. 99-121 (107)

However, the twist is that Allie herself is Arthur. Mr Moore, the reincarnation of Mordred, is exasperated, saying, ‘I thought maybe you could be the Lady of the Lake. Maybe. But [...] King Arthur can’t be a girl!’ (*AH*, 1:19:50). By expressing his prejudice, he forces the viewer to examine their own. Will is set up to be the obvious Arthur character, and the other characters and some audience members alike expect a man, which is why this moment comes as a surprise. Also, the revelation is unusual because Arthur is not the main character in most Arthuriana. There are other female characters in the film, most notably Jen and Allie’s mom, but they are unfortunately not as dynamic. Allie, though a reincarnation of a legendary man, grows into a powerful woman. Her story is that of Arthur, but she has to discover her version of it.

Nimue, on the other hand, has to carve a place of power for herself. In the opening scene, text displayed across the landscape explains ‘a story lost to the mists of time, of The Sword of Power and the young woman who wielded it. They called her a demon. Sorceress. Savior’ (*Cursed*, Ep. 1: ‘Nimue’, 0:10).<sup>5</sup> She is of the Sky Folk, meaning she is Fey rather than Man-Blood. She grows up an outcast, with her father and village mistreating her daily, and the Church’s paladins crusading to eliminate the Fey Folk. When her dying mother tasks her with carrying the sword to Merlin, she does not seize the opportunity to wield that power. Nimue undergoes difficult journeys, painful losses, and bonding moments, particularly with Morgana, Arthur’s lesbian sister, and Kaze, a Fey warrior who pushes her to lead. Only then does Nimue decide to channel her suffering and rise to the occasion: ‘I will be your shield. [...] I will be your sword. [...] I claim it as the sword of the First Queen’ (*Cursed*, Ep. 7: ‘Bring Us In Good Ale’, 50:45). She, like Allie, narrowly escapes a love triangle, instead choosing to quest with other women. Arthur is a middle-class Man-Blood who helps her in her quest and is her love interest,

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<sup>5</sup> The sword receives multiple names in the series, but Excalibur is not one of them.

but it always remains her story. Gawain, the Green Knight, although suggested as another love interest, has a brotherly relationship with her, and he believes in her ability to lead the Fey to a better existence. Two other women's experiences in *Cursed* stand out as conflicts of gender and power. Lady Lunete, Uther's mother, is imprisoned in the castle, and only after many years admits the truth to him: 'I was never meant to raise children. You see, I was meant to rule' (*Cursed*, Ep. 8: 'The Fey Queen', 8:13). Yet, she never had the chance because of her gender. On the side of the antagonists is Iris, a younger girl who desperately wants to be a Red Paladin. She spends the series trying to take down Nimue and prove that she deserves a seat at the men's table. She gets the penultimate scene of the finale, in which the pope makes her one of the Trinity Guard, the highest-ranking paladins there are. She is still an antagonist for her deeds, but she worked hard to overcome misogyny and reach her goal. Both the film and series contain multiple complex characters, but Allie and Nimue are never drowned out by the others.

Fantasy is an important element in these stories of strong women. *AH* is set in the modern day at what appears to be an average American high school. However, details like Miles's visions, Allie's memories of a pseudo-medieval period, and the transportation from a school theatre to a beach battlefield make the setting something other than realistic. Jan Shaw explores 'fantasy as a discourse of repressed desires vicariously fulfilled.'<sup>6</sup> This is written in reference to feminine power in *The Mists of Avalon*, but it applies to more than that. By the end of *AH*, the jock is no longer the most important person on campus; the nerd is a powerful magician; the teacher is the cruel enemy; the bully stepbrother is a hero; and the perpetually displaced girl is the embodiment of a legend. *AH* plays with stereotypical categories and uses small bits of magic

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Shaw, 'Feminism and the Fantasy Tradition: *The Mists of Avalon*', in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009), pp. 464-478 (464)

to ease the audience into the greatest revelation: reincarnation is real and happening right now.

The prop sword becoming Excalibur in Allie's hands is tangible evidence that she has found who she is meant to be. In *AH*, fantasy is a vehicle for the film's message of identity.

Fantasy pervades *Cursed* in a much deeper way from the start. Nimue has a connection with the Hidden, whispers that inhabit and control the land. She can use magic, but there are no defined rules or spells. Once she learns that Merlin is her father, the fact that she has more power than other Fey makes sense and explains why she never quite belonged. Shaw also writes that the genre 'provides a rich space for the working through of cultural repressions.'<sup>7</sup> Fantasy allows exploration of topics like prejudice and unfounded hatred without modern labels. Father Carden, leader of the Red Paladins, preaches that 'We must [...] pull the weeds. The weeds are the demons, and we must expel them from his garden' (*Cursed*, Ep. 1: 'Nimue', 11:30). They are driving all Fey Folk out of the land and to their deaths in the name of God and the Holy Roman Emperor. The dominant power is trying to eliminate everything unlike them. Some Fey, including Sky and Ash Folk, can 'pass' for Man-Blood, which adds another layer of complexity to the situation. The Weeping Monk is the paladins' strongest weapon against the Fey because he himself is Fey. He was conditioned to turn against his own kind, and it takes him the entire series to find himself again and reveal that he is Lancelot. The pseudo-medieval setting with fantastical elements allows the audience to connect with Nimue's pursuit of her identity. Viewers do not have to identify as Fey to identify with some struggle that the characters face, whether it is acceptance on a personal or societal scale. In some ways, *Cursed*'s commitment to fantasy makes it more relatable than *AH*'s realism.

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<sup>7</sup> Shaw, 'Feminism and the Fantasy Tradition', p. 467

Parent-child relationships shape Allie, Nimue, and other characters in these narratives. Older Arthuriana focuses on the individual, not the family. However, since these stories focus on the age of adolescence, parents' presence or absence plays an important role. In *AH*, Allie's parents study the medieval period, so she is constantly surrounded by it. While she rolls her eyes at first, it ultimately is the reason she discovers who she and her friends are. She and Miles turn to them for help with their school project, which gives Allie insight into her parents and herself. Marco, who appears to be Mordred for most of the story, is actually a hero. He protects Will because his father was in the Order of the Bear, and he swore to continue the saving mission. Those are the only parents present in the film, physically or emotionally, but they are important to the development of the teenagers.

Nimue is defined by her parents, whether she follows or rebels against them. Her supposed father, Jonah, abandons her at a young age for being who she is. Her mother, as she dies, hands her the sword and gives her a quest. She feels obligated to fulfil her mother's wish, and this journey leads her to her real father, Merlin. Her identity is inescapably complex, which she turns into a strength. The paladins nickname her the Wolf-Blood Witch to scare humans, but she and the Fey take that and make it powerful. Arthur is also defined by his parents. His father, Sir Tor, dies, leaving him and Morgana with debts. Tor's last words are 'Bring back our honour' (*Cursed*, Ep. 3: 'Alone', 1:23). Arthur takes this trauma to heart and spends his life trying to find honour. Though these characters are slightly older than Allie and her friends, they are in the same life stage of finding themselves, which they do with the help of their parents.

*AH* and *Cursed* play with the audience's expectations of recognisable characters. As Howey writes, the purpose 'of the adaptation is not its fidelity to one source or tradition, but

rather its ability to replicate key features of a tradition in the context of a different environment.’<sup>8</sup>

For *AH*, the more traditional Arthurian backdrop provides a quick segue from realism into fantasy because most people will know the main players. Simple lore works best for its young audience. Allie’s is a tale of finding your identity as it has been laid out for you and realising that ‘Sometimes being different is what makes us great’ (*AH*, 49:12). She develops into a strong young woman ready to take on the future. Nimue’s tale is more complex, as it is made for an older audience. Nothing is simple for her, including the use of Arthurian characters. Their relationships and positions in life are unlike older material, which gives the series room to explore. Embracing her identity saves the Fey but costs her everything.<sup>9</sup> In these ways, the Arthurian legend has been reshaped for modern audiences into coming-of-age stories during a time when finding your purpose is more complicated than questing and being part of the court. These young women have to go on their own journeys to find themselves, with the help of magic and other people.

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<sup>8</sup> Howey, ‘Arthur and Adaptation’, 45

<sup>9</sup> It is not made explicit whether she dies.

### Primary Works

Gillard, S., dir., *Avalon High* (Disney/ABC Domestic Television, 2010)

Wheeler, T., William Wheeler, Leila Gerstein, Janet Lin, Rachel Shukert, and Robbie Thompson, writers, Jon East, Daniel Nettheim, Zetna Fuentes, and Sarah O’Gorman, dir., *Cursed*, series 1 (Netflix, 2020)

### Secondary Works

Elmes, M.R., ‘Episodic Arthur: *Merlin*, *Camelot* and the Visual Modernization of the Medieval Literary Romance Tradition’, in *Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays*, ed. by Meriem Pagès and Karolyn Kinane (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2015), pp. 99-121

Howey, A.F., ‘Arthur and Adaptation’, *Arthuriana* 25.4 (2015), 36-50

Shaw, J., ‘Feminism and the Fantasy Tradition: *The Mists of Avalon*’, in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009), pp. 464-478