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## The Evolution of The Legend of King Arthur

Krista Dayle Staropoli

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# **The Evolution of The Legend of King Arthur**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
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### **Abstract:**

In all versions of Arthurian legend, the content, while encompassing adventure, magic and politics, is mainly focused on the nature of human relationships. These relationships are nearly always complex and emotional, intended to elicit certain reactions from the audience. The reactions to Arthurian legend depend on the relationship being explored; for example, when explaining a story about knighthood, the author hopes to impress upon the audience the importance and admiration of chivalry, duty and honor. Whereas, when explaining a story about the love triangle of Guinevere, Arthur and Lancelot, the intent is not only to tell a captivating and enthralling love story, but also to show the pitfalls of lust and the loss of honor.

Although Arthurian motifs have changed dramatically throughout history, as societal norms and political ideologies have evolved, Arthurian motifs have been applied to all ages. When Arthurian stories were first developed, they were not intended for just men, women or children, but for a mixed audience, which still holds true today. Arthurian motifs, regardless of their focus, have survived and will continue to survive because of the nostalgia their audience feels for them. When considering Arthurian motifs, the audience is reminded of magic, excitement, love, friendship and civic duty. All of which are pleasant concepts to be reminded.

The chameleon-like aspect of Arthurian work can be revealed, which also explains how it has been able to stay alive and will likely remain alive for quite some time, through the close analysis of authentic Arthurian narratives that range from the eleventh to the twenty-first century and have appeared in academic journals, novels, television programs and films.

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## Executive Summary

Arthurian legend encompasses all variations and formats -- including short stories, novels, poems, plays, films and television shows -- of the story of King Arthur, his court and the utopian city of Camelot. Because Arthurian literature has circulated since the 11th century, it has experienced a multitude of variations. Throughout history, certain Arthurian texts have emerged and become very popular, making the story a basis for social context and ideologies.

Most often when certain Arthurian texts are well received, it is not due to the content, but to the social and political implications. This trend emerged several times throughout history, but most notably in the twelfth, fifteenth, eighteenth and twenty-first centuries.

In the twelfth century this trend can be seen through authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes and Marie de France. Although the authors wrote in close succession, each one emphasized different, but relatable social ideologies that either reflected the wishes of the monarchy or of the people. For example, Geoffrey was responsible for solidifying King Arthur as a legend by creating the story of his birth and marking it as part of political English history. While de Troyes wrote about the social struggle between how one is expected to act in society and what his or her secret desires might be, de France reinforced de Troy's social norms, but provided more realistic insight into the conduct of men and women at that time.

Later in the fifteenth century the most notable author was Malory, who was less concerned with social constructs and more concerned with political

implications of the time. Although all authors who have written about the Arthurian legend, with the exception of the American writers, have an enormous respect for the English monarchy, Malory was the first to imply concerns regarding the monarchy, particularly during King Henry IV's reign.

Next were the writings of Lord Alfred Tennyson, who wrote in early Victorian England, and T.H. White, who wrote towards the end of the same period. Albeit a brief moment in history, the Victorian era was a time of huge social development; therefore, the authors' renditions of Arthurian literature are vastly different. In his writing, Tennyson struggled between wanting to respect the English monarchy and working with newly forming Victorian social constructs, which were rapidly changing. To avoid social disapproval or the rejection of his work, the only strong stand Tennyson made in his perspective of Arthurian legend was in support of the English kingdom. By the time White wrote about this subject, the social constructs Tennyson struggled with were already well in place.

In Victorian England, homosocial worlds developed in which males associated with other males and females with other females until people were ready to be wed. It was during this era that the honeymoon developed as a way to break down the social barriers and mysteriousness between the two sexes. In his lifetime, White never had much female interaction, except with his mother, whom he claimed was a cruel, terrible woman. His lack of understanding women may help explain why White's work helped solidify the change in chivalry from its emphasis on romantic love to its new concentration on manly friendship.

Around the same time White was writing in England, Mark Twain wrote *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* in the United States. Twain was primarily concerned with the foolishness of nobility and royalty and aimed to establish democracy as the most reliable political system. Twain's work focused on the importance of being quick-witted, as well as independence and justice. In fact, Twain's motifs became so appreciated by American audiences that they later appeared in other American Arthurian works as well.

Shortly after Twain's time, film versions of the Arthurian legend came into circulation and became even more prevalent than Arthurian literature, which incidentally remained quite popular. In 1968, during the second wave of the American feminist movement, the movie *Camelot* emerged. Although many great steps toward equality had been taken by this time -- including the Civil Rights Act, which prevented employers from discriminating on the basis of race or sex -- social discrimination was still widespread. In the film, social inequality can be seen through the character of Guinevere. While the character exhibits moments of strength and independence, there are even more times when she appears capricious, childish and dramatic. The mixed signals exhibited by the character prove that although social progression was happening, it was still not complete.

Since that time, the sexual revolution, which in many ways includes the feminist movement, has become a part of American culture. Arthurian literature and film reflect American attitude, which has helped them flourish in the United States. Here a great sense of nostalgia accompanies the Arthurian narrative, but by incorporating modern American ideals, it is able to remain interesting and

relevant. In other words, the American version of the Arthurian story embraces the nostalgic, adventurous and honorable aspects of the legend, but also develops modern, relatable forward-thinking ones. These concepts can most clearly be seen in J.K. Rowling's famous Harry Potter series. Directly referencing traditional elements in stories written by twelfth-century Marie de France, Rowling creates a world in which old characters maintain their magical intrigue but become hybrid characters that incorporate both traditional and modern aspects, making them more relatable to current society.

As film becomes more prevalent than literature in the United States, and many other places around the globe, Arthurian narratives grow more popular, and because literature does not lend itself to immediate falsification, television and film become the selected methods for telling the tales. Regardless of whether the Arthurian legend appears in the form of television, film or literature, the ideas circulating within the work will vary depending on the day and age.



## **PART ONE: History and The First Wave of Arthurian Legend**

Arthurian literature has been circulating since the eighth century, which means there have been many differences in themes, beginnings and endings and many variations of heroes and villains. From the eighth century to modern day, certain Arthurian themes have become very popular, making them the basis for social context and ideologies, which is reflected in the widely-received work of the first wave of Arthurian writers, such as Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Malory. Analysis of their texts suggests that when certain Arthurian motifs are well received it is most likely due to the social and political implications in the content, not the content itself.

The earliest record of Arthur “belongs to a period some three hundred years later than the Battle [of Mount Badon],” written about in the eighth century by the Welsh chronicler Nennius. In his historical account, the Arthur, who is the story’s hero, kills hundreds of his enemies. Saxons, played an intricate, leading part in the battle (Bruce 319). Nennius’s work depicts Arthur as “a leader of the Britons in their wars with the Saxon invaders,” but not necessarily as a king. He “fought in company with the kings of Briton, but he himself was the leader in the wars” (Bruce, 319). This tale is what initially established Arthur as a strong person (or character) in history (or in fantasy).

While Nennius’s version of the Arthurian legend was spread by word of mouth and sparked the notion of Arthur as a brave, albeit, violent leader, it is argued that “the great importance...of Arthur in the literature of Europe begins unquestionably with Geoffrey, whose ‘*Historia Regum Britanniae*’ appeared in

1138” (Bruce, 321). Arthur’s story begins in Geoffrey’s eighth book when he explains the birth of King Arthur, which up until then had been somewhat of a mystery. Merlin, whose prophecies and magic were the work of Geoffrey’s seventh book, helps Uther Pendragon assume the form of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, to have access to the Duke’s wife in the castle of Tintage. It is here that Uther Pendragon and Gorlois’ wife beget Arthur. Geoffrey’s account solidified the oral traditions and legends of Arthur that had been circulating among the Celtic nations, giving “enormous popularity to the Arthurian legend” (Bruce, 321).

Monm’s influence in the solidification of Arthur’s history was reinforced by Barber in the introduction of Oxford World’s Classic, *Parzival and Titirel*. Barber claims that “much of the credit for the creation of the figure of Arthur must go to Geoffrey, probably of Welsh blood, but trained in the courts of the Norman kings and the schools of Paris, who produced his History of the Kings of Britain around 1135” (Barber, vi). It is important to note that Geoffrey is not only responsible for the creation or solidification of any old English tale, but rather for a tale that unquestionably shaped the “history of the British people which created an empire to rival those of Rome and of Charlemagne, in which Arthur almost conquers Rome (Barber, vii).” Because Geoffrey perpetuated the tales of King Arthur, England developed a well respected, or arguably, *legendary* history, by which other nations were either intimidated or attempted to emulate. As England tried to establish a reputable history and perpetuate a strong sense of nationalism, Geoffrey’s work was “incorporated into historical chronicles, where it filled in

awkward blanks in the past,” so the history as a whole may be more respected (Barber, vii).

After Geoffrey wrote about Arthur, subsequent Arthurian narratives did not consist of King Arthur as the main character. Not until Chretien was “King Arthur himself...a mere figurehead and...the hero of the story...some knight at his court” (Bruce, 325). The stories become much less about how well King Arthur ruled and how he came to be king, and much more about the social constructs that surrounded the people who sat at his table. In the twelfth century, the idea of chivalry encompassed much more than holding doors for women and saying please and thank you. Twelfth century chivalry, as described in King Arthur’s court, consisted of a knightly code in which one’s delicate honor and worthiness was valued above almost all else. Loyalty, cunning and bravery were deemed appropriate qualities in King Arthur’s knights, and the court would not graciously accept those who were lacking them. Arthurian romances were the “literary expression of the institution of chivalry... answering to changes that were going on in the development of the society of the twelfth century” (Bruce, 326). This transition in the literature is supported by the fact that the twelfth century experienced “growing refinement of manners ... and the advance of women towards the position they hold in modern times” (Bruce 326). Until Chretien’s narratives, “the stories in those earlier forms were too fixed by tradition for even the medieval imagination to transmute them as freely as the new spirit required, and so the romance of chivalry does not attain its full flower until the poets have possessed themselves of the infinitely flexible legend of King

Arthur” (Bruce 327). It was through Chretien’s work that chivalric social norms were incorporated into Arthurian legend, which can be proven through the work of Chaucer. Chaucer, who wrote after Chretien, authored *The Canterbury Tales*, in which the iconic character the Wife of Bath tells a story of the Arthurian court.

The world the wife of Bath describes

is spoken of with respect, is fulfilled of fairye’ (859) and of ‘joly women (860). It is a world in which pleasure and women are not opposed to truth or honor, but are rather their inseparable companions or even embodiments... Reality shifts over time and space, and what can seem the very touchstone of reality in one context will seem an elaborate dream in another. (Beidler, 217)

Among the progressions that had been made was the idea of “courtly love,” which today can somewhat be paralleled with what is commonly known as romantic love. A romantic code, although today described as “half-serious, half jesting,” emerged from the twelfth century, as a guideline for the rules of love (Bruce, 327). Written by Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love* describes the attitudes that are not necessarily reflective of the behaviors of that time, but very well could have been and were certainly encouraged. It is important to note that it has been speculated that these rules applied to a precious subset of the culture – the rich and courtly class of people -- and did not extend across all classes (Lecture, ETS 360). Capellanus creates thirty-one rules for this kind of refined, courtly love, which include: “He who is not jealous can not love”; “No one can be bound by two loves”; “Love is always growing or diminishing”; “It is

not proper to love one whom one would be ashamed to marry”; “Love rarely lasts when it is revealed”; “Every lover turns pale in the presence of his beloved”; “Moral integrity alone makes one worthy of love”; “If love diminishes, it quickly leaves and rarely revives”; “A lover is always fearful” and “True jealousy always increases the effects of love.” These concepts, which are now considered extremely dramatic and, therefore, slightly comical, have been acknowledged to still have bits of truth behind them. Created during the twelfth century, any behavior in Arthurian tales that aligned with these rules was considered the behavior of one in love, and any behavior that defied the rules was considered strange or scandalous.

In Chretien’s work, these rules play out through the conflict between the private claims and the social claims in almost every story; for example, personal passion was in tension with public status and expectations. This motif is the main focus of the tale of Erec and Enide, which is

the story of a knight who marries a beautiful girl of noble birth, whose family, however, has been impoverished. He marries her and takes her to Arthur’s court where she captivates all hearts. The knight is recognized as the best at court and having nothing higher to aspire to in arms, he becomes self-indulgent and uxorious and gives up his former life of activity. His wife laments bitterly that she should be the cause of the decline of her husband’s glory. She is finally overheard one day by her husband, who becomes exceedingly angry with her, but the incident has the result, at least, of arousing him from his inactivity and making him go

forth in search of adventures again. The knight compels his wife to go along with him, and on his journeys treats her very rudely, but in the end her patience under his maltreatment and a proof of her fidelity in one adventure especially change his disposition towards her and she is restored to his affection. (Bruce, 325).

Abiding by many of Capellanus's rules, Eric and Enide's love is not static. They are not bound by two loves, and their love faltered when they were married (exposing their love). But in the end, Erec and Enide are restored to each other and their relationship (a rare example). Although the story begins with Erec and Enide attempting to live happily ever after, it was not within the cultural and social norms of the time for Chretien to write a happy story about a happy couple. Instead, the characters had to experience adventure and distress, *ending* with Erec and Enide's second attempt to live happily ever after, but more likely a successful one since it is the end of the narrative.

The tension between what is expected of those at court and what those at court desire is seen again in Cligés, another of Chretien's tales. More commonly known today as the story of Tristan and Iseult of Pictish, the narrative is of the knight Cliges, who falls in love with his uncle's wife. Together the couple represents "[a] new pair of lovers not to be governed merely by the wild impulses of passion as in the primitive story [of Guinevere and Lancelot], but by the artificial rules of the amour courtois," which emerged in the twelfth century (Bruce 330). The story brings into question the concepts of lineage and nobility. Is one's character a result of lineage as an essential quality, or is it something that

one can acquire through the culture around him? The contrast between the essentialist and social constructionist arguments, just described, is incompatible, and this tension is what provides the narrative's main conflict. Chretien, as an individual writer, is a thoughtful responder to these kinds of norms. Chretien, aware of his stories' social influences, emphasizes the importance of establishing honor despite one's passions. Chretien exposes the negative but sought after effects of passionate love, which is underscored when the heroine in *Cligés* reflects on her thoughts:

The disease from which I suffer is different from any other, for, to speak the truth, it pleases me at the same time that it grieves me, and thus I find myself delighting in what is my disease. And if that which pleases can be accounted an evil, my harm is what I desire and my grief is my health. I do not know then of what I have to complain, for I do not know anything from which evil comes to me unless it be from my own desire. But though "it is my desire, it is yet an evil. Still so much pleasure I have from my desire that it makes grief sweet and so much joy I have in my harm that it makes my sickness sweet also. (Bruce, 329)

Through this tale, Chretien was able to expose the pitfalls of passionate love among his readers, not encourage it. Chretien was uncomfortable with the typical story of Lancelot and Guinevere, as their actions typically lay outside the bounds of his well-constructed moral code. In fact, Chretien only wrote *Knight of the Cart*, the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, at Marie de Champagne's request.

The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were also graced with the work of Marie de France. Although she was not as interested with the conflict between innate passion and structured civilization as Chretien, de France reinforces the cultural norms that Chretien prescribes. The tales used in this essay were translated from Latin found “in a thirteenth-century manuscript in the British Library (Harley, 978)” (Busby). Although de France primarily writes medieval literature, her most Arthurian piece is *Lanval*, which is a story of a “very noble young man,” who “because of his valour, generosity, beauty and prowess, many were envious of him. There were those who pretended to hold him in esteem, but who would not have uttered a single regret if misfortune had befallen him” (Marie de France, Loc. 1108). While many people have argued that there was a huge progression in medieval manners with the emergence of chivalry, de France’s text offers an alternative glimpse of how people in society may have treated each other. De France does not describe jealousy and ill-will as shameful, but rather as natural and relatable.

Lanval then meets a mysterious woman who solves all of his financial problems, and together they fall deeply in love. She begs him not to reveal their love to anyone, with no other explanation than “I shall tell you the long and short of it: you would lose me forever if this love were to become known.” Her wish falls in line with the thirty-one rules Capanelus prescribed in the twelfth century (Marie de France, Loc. 1142). This secrecy keeps the story interesting and scandalous; however, because of the rules set in place there is no real explanation (or desire to have one) as to why the secrecy must exist. It is expected.



Throughout de France's work lays, but particularly in *Lanval*, an emphasis on luxury and generosity. Most curiously, there is a kind of blunt selfishness, which we would now deem inappropriate. This behavior is representative of what social constructs were like during this time.

Although it is not explicitly stated that it is Guinevere, the "King's wife" approaches Lanval and tells him she loves him and wants to be with him. Lanval, a noble person, is appalled by the Queen's behavior.

"Lady," he said, "leave me be! I have no desire to love you, for I have long served the king and do not want to betray my faith. Neither you nor your love will ever lead me to wrong my lord!" The queen became angry and distressed, and spoke unwisely: "Lanval," she said, "I well-believe that you do not like this kind of pleasure. I have been told often enough that you have no desire for women. You have well-trained young men and enjoy yourself with them. Base coward, wicked recreant, my lord is extremely unfortunate to have suffered you near him." (Marie de France, Loc. 1166)

Through this dialogue, the audience is able to get an understanding of how the twelfth and thirteenth century audiences likely viewed both women and people in power. Despite the Queen being unquestionably and morally wrong, she complains to the King that "Lanval had shamed her. He had requested her love and because she had refused him, had insulted and deeply humiliated her. He had boasted of a beloved who was so well bred, noble and proud that her chambermaid, the poorest servant she had, was worthier than the queen" (Marie

de France, Loc. 1166). It is interesting to note how easily duped the King is by the Queen's dishonest story and, moreover, how the members of the court were "all very sad on [Lanval's] account and...there were a hundred who would have done all in their power to have him released without a trial because he had been wrongly accused." But none of them attempted to help him in any way. One might potentially argue that de France is negatively commenting on the King's intellectual capabilities or clarity of judgment; however, it is unlikely that in the twelfth or thirteenth century any author would willingly write something undesirable about royalty (fictional or not). Instead, the work stresses the enormous respect people had for the throne, despite the fact that they may have at times disagreed with it.

Like many others, "Benson contends that aristocratic life in the late Middle Ages became more like romance and romance became more realistic. The ideals of chivalry and of courtly love may have been literary inventions in the twelfth century, but in the fifteenth they became a code of life (p. 141)" (Murrin, 71). Instead of viewing chivalry and courtly love as standards people should strive, yet fail, to achieve, in the fifteenth century Malory "saw chivalry, not as a dream of perfection, but as a mode of life" (Murrin, 71).

Similarly to how the Arthurian literature in the twelfth century reflected how people were concerned with social conduct, "Fifteenth-century chronicles reflected the effects of political tension during the last decade of Henry VI's reign and the beginning of Edward IV's rule, and the climate of anxiety that Malory's fifteenth-century readers lived with" (Radulescu, 36). The main difference

between the two centuries is that in the twelfth century, readers were primarily confused over social conduct; whereby, Arthurian literature proved to be a source from which to learn. In the fifteenth century, readers were less confused over social etiquette and more concerned with their present political system. It has been argued that “Malory...was indeed, sensitive to the political issues of his day; however, his work reflects anxieties over the contradictions present within Arthur’s political system (which would have reminded fifteenth-century readers to contemporary politics), rather than presenting an ideal to be imitated or admired” (Radulescu, 37).

During the fifteenth century, there were concerns about the King’s ability to do his job well--to enforce justice, reward good deeds, maintain integrity and preserve and protect the country. Malory was able to subtly weave these ideas into his writing. For example Arthur, unaware that his father is king, is able to pull a sword out of a stone, fulfilling Merlin’s prophecy and claiming his right to the throne. This ascent is very controversial. English barons refused to accept him due to the mysteriousness and obscurity of Arthur’s origins, and it is not until the “commoners cry out” that the barons are made “to accept him as king” (Radulescu, 38). The uncertainty of divine right and speculation among the barons lends itself to the idea that perhaps Arthur would *not* be able to rule well as a king, reinforcing the fear that the king may not be capable of doing what is expected. Arthur’s kingship is drawn into further question, since “the nature of good kingship includes the king’s cooperation with his barons, who, in their turn, are expected to advise him as best they can... [yet] an important element in the

Arthurian story is Merlin, who is conspicuous as the king's chief advisor" (Radulescu, 39).

Despite the tension in the court, King Arthur and his people are still viewed as nationalists. Being "'noble people' (1.205.25-26); they become one with 'oure noble knyghtes of mery Ingelonde' (209.10), and 'the brymmyst men that evir we saw in felde' (1.209.15). Malory identifies with the national cause of Arthur and his knights, and "to fifteenth-century readers this engagement with the national cause would have had a great appeal" (Radulescu, 43). This concept relates to the national consciousness, which was extremely important to the political community at this time, as the general public viewed France and Scotland as traitors and threats.

It is not until the end of Malory's tale that he proves King Arthur's inability to act like a quality king. At this time, rumors of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair circulate, and Gawain tries to counsel King Arthur. "My lorde Arthure, I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty, but that ye wolde put hit in respite, thys jougemenete of my lady the quene, for many causis" (3.1174.31-33). However, Arthur blatantly ignores Gawain's warning. He says, "'Make you redy, I pray you... to brynge my quene to the fyre and there to have her jougement'" (1176.13-15). "This quick and tyrannical response" is in stark contrast with the typical King that is supposed to listen to his counsel and be collected and intelligent (Radulescu, 43). Because King Arthur's kingdom needed to fall to find a place in England's glorified history, it cannot be presumed that Malory is commenting on the quality of the fifteenth century King of England; rather,

Malory slightly shifts the focus from chivalric romances to political interests, which indicates his audience's interests. Malory's emphasis on the political realm is significant, but mainly because it underscores the social aspect of civilization, which is reflected in the Round Table. Malory is the first to establish the Round Table as

the epitome of civilization, that its ideal and magical qualities simply compel harmony among different nations since Arthur's knights come from diverse origins, territories, and countries... Wherever they come from and whatever their beliefs and allegiances, all members of the Round Table are converted to the chivalric principles and Christian beliefs of King Arthur's fellowship. (Radulescu, 44; 332-333)

By exploring the first wave of Arthurian narratives, it is clear there is a body of literature supplying raw material to create a full and coherent story behind King Arthur. No longer are there bits and pieces of Arthurian legend woven into greater tales, but rather several variations of legitimate stories.

## **PART TWO: The Second Wave of Arthurian Legend**

The Victorian age is usually denoted by the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 through her death in 1901. Like many other eras characterized as times of peace and prosperity and strong nationalist sentiment, the Victorian age saw many social and cultural changes, all of which had a huge impact on Arthurian works created at this time. Therefore, it is important to understand the context in which these texts were written.

The Victorian era was a period in which young males spent their childhood and education amongst other males before marriage. Women, too, were kept at home and in the company of other women before they assumed their roles as wives and mothers. (That is, if they were fortunate enough to avoid the social disgrace of becoming spinsters). This sexual isolation created a "homosocial world," in which women and men encountered minimal interaction with each other, which led to a sense of mystery about the other sex and awkwardness between men and women. It was not until a couple was married and on their honeymoon that the barrier between the sexes was broken. In fact, the concept of a honeymoon developed during Victorian times to encourage conjugal relations between a wife and husband and to shift their affections from birth family to spouse.

The emergence of the honeymoon supports the notion that unions between men and women were intended to be more than just sensible economic decisions. Marriage was supposed to be a socially and morally fulfilling relationship as well.

It reasonably follows then that the Victorian era was also a time in which the *family*

ceased to be an institution for the transmission of a name and an estate – it assumed a moral and spiritual function, it molded bodies and souls. The care expended on children inspired new feelings, a new emotional attitude, to which the iconography of the seventeenth century gave a brilliant and insistent expression: the modern concept of the family. (Philippe Aries)

After the honeymoon phase, men and women produced children. The family was reconstituted around the parents' care of their children and their affections towards them; whereby, children took their place as the nucleus of the family. Before the Victorian era, the family was largely a loose grouping of individuals. Before the late 1800s, one of the main reasons for a family unit, particularly an aristocratic one, was to provide a way to retain a family estate or financial commitment. During Victorian times, however, a new focus developed when children became the preoccupation of the family; hence, the modern concept of family was established.

Analyzing the past emphasizes the fact that bonds between a parent and a child are not innate, but historical. Prior to the emergence of the modern family, infant mortality rates were so high that mothers often did not bond with their children because of the emotional pain they would likely experience when their progeny passed away. Due to the improvements in sanitation and medicine during the Victorian period, infant mortality rates decreased, enabling parents (mothers specifically) to form stronger bonds with their children.

The newfound appreciation of children led to the concept of parenting. A Christian evangelical movement was widespread in England during the late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century. During this period John Wesley, founder of Methodism, aimed to reinvigorate the Church of England. Wesley gave over 40,000 sermons, and his views on children, childhood and parenting influenced many people. Wesley claimed that God is to humanity as the physician is to the patient. The self, at birth, is born into sickness. Wesley believed each child is born into sickness and depending on the parenting of a child, his sickness can either be eradicated or worsened. The sicknesses Wesley described include a “self love”; a love for the pleasures of the world; a natural tendency to deviate from the truth and to act in ways that are contrary to justice and pride; and above all else, the tendency to be willful. Wesley emphasized that the purpose of parenting is to break the child’s will. This strategy supposedly helps the child learn to submit to his parents; therefore, when he needs to submit to God, he will not be too proud to do so. Wesley believed that breaking the child’s will eradicates the illness and restores life to its proper state, which is a life devoted to God.

One of the social repercussions produced by Wesley’s doctrine was a lack of fondness from parent to child. If parents showed their child fondness, they were indulging them, nurturing fatal diseases and cultivating their self will, all of which would assign them to eternal damnation. Fondness, Wesley argued, is actually a form of hate; whereas, love is the disciplining and strenuous effort needed to break the child’s will to eliminate the illness.



In tandem with parenting, both men and women had separate roles within the family. Men had the pressure of going out into the world to work and pursue a profession, by which they would be able to provide for their families; whereas, women were to care for the children and the home. During the Victorian era, women's work evolved from activities women did to keep busy to an exercise that needed to be learned, studied and practiced. Women were expected to "promote the happiness of those around them" (31), be "the guardians of the comfort of home" (35) and provide family comfort and social enjoyment (Ellis). Women had a social responsibility that carried strong moral weight. They were expected to anticipate future events, be prompt in their actions and put family before self. Moreover, they were supposed to love their familial responsibilities. Ruskin's *Sesame and Lillies of Queens Gardens*, which describes the roles of men and women, highlights the respect women gained. Men were associated with adventure, war, danger and temptation, while women were linked with ruling and deciding what should be deemed correct or incorrect. More specifically, men were connected with defense, maintenance and progress; whereas, women were associated with order, beauty and comfort. Ruskin's text exemplified how difficult it would be for people to think about women as inferior to men. Instead, they became looked at as equal in different ways, complementing each other with their distinct and special responsibilities.

On the other hand, men and women were not equal in all senses. While Ellis, author of "The Wives of England," acknowledged women's intelligence and understanding of the world, she also urged them to be modest and somewhat

self-sacrificial. For example, she explained that women who claim their rights as citizens lose the feminine charm that makes them interesting, thereby, destroying the comfort of the home that they are expected to maintain. Still, she claimed women should not be *completely* self-sacrificial, as resentment also leads to a disruption in the happiness in the home. Ellis suggested that when creating happiness within the home, women should give up things they completely despise doing since they should truly *enjoy* their tasks. Moreover, she added that husbands will likely not notice if one or two tasks are incomplete nor done at all. The fine line women of this time were expected to walk led to a new opportunity for reinterpreting their roles.

It is important to note that these social, cultural and religious changes did not develop overnight. There was a period of transformation at the beginning of the Victorian era in which mixed ideals were circulating. This kind of contradiction can be seen in the works of Alfred Tennyson, who wrote *Idylls the King* at the beginning of the nineteenth century. A sentimentalist, Tennyson always dealt with important issues from a distance and did not write about what his characters did, but how they felt about doing them. This flowery obscurity ensured that Tennyson never went against the grain of accepted thought. Popular with the Queen and the poet laureate, Tennyson was notorious for perpetuating the nationalistic sentiment and character Britain had begun creating for itself.

In Tennyson's Arthurian work, "[t]he kingdom is held together not through parliamentary institutions... but through the moral sense of the knights as individuals who recognize Arthur as their hero and leader," which encouraged

the general public's respect and loyalty for the government (Sypher, 102). Moreover, "[t]aken simply as political comments on the issues of military preparedness and the French threat, Tennyson's poems appear as the disproportionate raving of a party-hack, or a rampant journalist, or a furious xenophobe," but it is important to note that the nationalistic stance is the only one he is openly willing to take (Sypher, 106). Tennyson perpetuated the idea that with a "warlike temper England can recover the virtues of the idealized past...memorialized" in his work (Sypher, 106).

Aside from being recognized as a nationalist, Tennyson has sometimes been interpreted as a "critic of Victorian society, whose 'alien vision' lies not far below the surface of his conventional expressions of agreement with the dominant opinions of the day," and he has been seen as

a representative Victorian: who praised revolution abroad, but not at home; who desired change, but not too fast; who believed in the virtues of the British people and the excellence of the British Constitution; was confident that contemporary evils would one day be righted; and hoped that the nations of the world would unite in friendship as they grew to resemble England. (Sypher, 101-102)

Although an undeniable nationalist, Tennyson's other beliefs were expressed through his somewhat contradictory work and, therefore, not completely known. Due to the changing times, this obscurity was not considered peculiar. In fact, Tennyson claimed, "Camelot [in his own writing] is 'everywhere symbolic of the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and of the spiritual development

of man,” which very much aligns with the direction in which his work was developing (Sypher 102).

Although times were changing, Arthurian literature was once again seen as a malleable substance authors could shape. Similar to the authors before him, Tennyson wrote about issues that could “be read as ‘a discussion of problems which are both contemporary and perennial’” (H. Tennyson 2:126-27), likely in an effort to draw in current readers and keep them interested in the distant past he describes (Gilbert, 845). Since both “The Coming of Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur,” are “certainly about the decline of a community from an original ideal state, about the corruption and nihilism that overtake a once whole and healthy social order,” it follows that nationalistic England would popularize both works (Gilbert, 864).

More parallels between the past and the Victorian era can be seen in Tennyson’s “The Coming of Arthur,” as some characters leave their every day lives to search “vainly for the spiritual certainty offered by visions of the Holy Grail. Their counterparts in the Victorian period are the followers of the Oxford Movement,” a movement for the renewal of Roman Catholic in disapproval of the Protestant tendencies of the Church of England (Sypher, 103). Other characters, “like Tristram or Vivien, seek only their own pleasure. Their counterparts are the utilitarians and Mammonists, for whom material well-being is the principal goal of human endeavor” (Sypher, 103). Tennyson’s development of these characters in tandem with the current political, religious and social movements of the time, shaped the public perception of the people who partook in those movements. For

example, Tristram and Vivien both make selfish decisions, which lead to their own demise. Tristram has a lack of self-control and an overwhelming passion, and Vivien is malicious and mischievous. Both Tristram and Vivien's traits are characteristics which would have been frowned upon by the Victorian reader. Despite the audience's response, Tennyson avoids taking *too* obvious a stance on religious or social issues, as seen "in *Idylls of the King* [in which there] is a strange mixture of Christian and pagan, comic and tragic" (Sypher, 104). In this sense, his mixed messages protect him from being too closely associated with any definitive perspective.

Nor did Tennyson have a clear position on femininity either. At first glance, Tennyson seems to take a serious stance on women's rights and the sexuality of women. In 1895, he published "[t]he four idylls... 'Vivien,' 'Guinevere,' 'Enid,' and 'Elaine' ... [which] focus on the polar extremes of feminine purity and carnality" (Gilbert, 864). Gilbert argues, "[T]he author may have altered his plans for the book in the following years, his emphasis on the corrosiveness of female sexuality never changed" (864). This was a concept extremely foreign to early Victorian England. As discussed earlier, living in homosocial spheres prevented the two sexes from understanding sexuality prior to the honeymoon. While "many of the earliest of these readers of the *Idylls* deplored the change, noting in it disquieting evidence of the growing domestication and even feminization of the age," due to the changes in the roles of Victorian women, the modification in their literary characters was inevitable (Gilbert, 863).

Some time after Tennyson came T.H. White, who has been considered by

many to have accomplished the last successful adaptation of Malory's original work. As did all other authors of Arthurian literature, White drew from modern day issues and concerns; however, he also drew on his own personal experiences. Always having had an extremely tumultuous relationship with his mother, "White used his own experiences of childhood, both positive and negative, the latter evidenced particularly in his portrayal of women" (Worthington, 98). Because the Victorian era was obsessed with maintaining the separation of sexes, White was able to "explore his ambivalent feelings toward his mother and women generally, and to some extent project his own homoerotic and sadistic tendencies into the narrative" (Worthington, 98).

As explained earlier, the masculine sphere revered strength, defense and progress. Until marriage (and for many even for some time afterward), men were unaware of what the female sphere included. Victorian homosocialism came to exist in part due to the reconstruction of the Arthurian material that came out of the romances. Although women were beginning to grow into this new role of respected caretakers and guardians of family happiness, they were still in a position that was extremely inferior to that of the men by men. This concept is reflected in the decisions made by Victorian women to repress their desire to share their political views and evidenced by Ellis's advice to give up little household tasks that they detested, since they would likely go unnoticed by men. The attitude toward women, especially before marriage, was slightly more ambivalent. Due to the ambivalence and mystery that surrounded women at this time, there was a shift from chivalry being about courtly love to chivalry being

more about the way men interact with each other. It is because of this change that White was able to create his Arthurian world to “embody a masculine domain, where women are figured as either incidental or disruptive” (Worthington, 98).

With chivalry reconstructed as exchanges between men, White, in *The Sword in the Stone*, creates “the world of Arthur’s childhood as almost exclusively masculine: the absence of women appears to guarantee the stability and happiness of the Wart’s early life” (Worthington, 99). While this concept may seem somewhat extreme, it is important to remember White’s strained relationship with his mother, which has been confirmed to have affected his attitude toward women and in his writing of Arthurian literature. White’s depiction of children, however, is less reflective of his life and more reflective of the times, which is shown in his description of Arthur Pendragon’s childhood. Prior to White’s account, Arthur’s younger years had been minimally addressed. In *The Sword in the Stone* (which has been developed into a popular Disney classic), “the absence of sexuality are [sic] proper to a children’s story... sexuality, specifically female sexuality, would be disruptive, threatening the stability apparently offered by the masculine world created by White” (Worthington, 102). White’s childhood issues resurface when Wart’s (Arthur’s) governess is quickly eliminated from the storyline. Her absence allowed the author to maintain the masculine domain he created, “which posits as essential to an idyllic childhood, and secondly it creates a textual space for the introduction of Merlyn as the Wart’s tutor” (Worthington, 100). “[S]trongly reminiscent of an English public school” (Worthington, 100), White’s strictly masculine educational

setting would have provided the narrative with a sense of reality for its Victorian audience. The masculine world encompassing Arthur's childhood is established as hyper masculine when Arthur draws the "[s]word from the stone [which] is an acquisition of symbolic phallic power, enabling Arthur to take his rightful place in the patriarchal hierarchy of men" (Worthington, 102).

Through Arthur's achievement, White not so subtly suggested that being masculine is associated with strength, moral truth and "goodness," ideas further explored by the Round Table, which is comprised of knights who experience great success and who uphold their motto "right over might." This chivalric invention allows the knights to use force (or might) "in the pursuance of Right. This seems to offer both stability and an outlet for aggression, a homosocial refuge from the dangerous and irrational femininity represented by Morgause," Arthur's half-sister (Worthington, 102). It should come as no surprise that White placed the entirety of blame for the Round Table's failings on women, who throughout his work had been consistently portrayed as weak and deceitful. Although every fairytale needs a villain, White has been accused "underneath the comedic and farcical depiction of Morgause [of] an edge of misogynistic bitterness" (Worthington, 102). It makes sense then that in each of Wart's excursions with Merlin, "masculinity is valorized and privileged, albeit through a screen of schoolboy humor appropriate to the public school atmosphere of his education. Where women are encountered, they are marginalized, masculinized or demonized" (Worthington, 101). When women are appreciated in White's stories, it is due to their masculine skills or boyish attributes, which can be seen through



the depiction of Maid Marian as a tomboy.

Men are described as morally good and strong; whereas, women are seen as evil and manipulative. This contrast can best be seen through evil Madame Mim and Merlyn's magical battle. Their battle represents one

[b]etween masculine reason and feminine guile, where Merlyn's victory is a triumph for a phallogocentric rationality: he subverts the rules of wizardly dueling by refusing to make the proper and reciprocal response to Mim's various shape-changes. Instead, he uses the medical knowledge gained in his backwardly-lived life and, in 'a master stroke... turned himself successively into the microbes, not yet discovered, of hiccoughs (sic), scarlet fever, mumps, whooping cough, measles and heat spots' (SS 96), from which combination Madame Mim immediately expires. The world of White's narrative is only safe for the boys when women are absent. (Worthington, 101)

Despite the fact that they wrote during the same era, Tennyson and White share vastly different views, and yet both "Tennyson and White depict the wastes of England before Arthur's accession to the throne as wild, people by outlaws and infested by wolves, cut lose from the civilized traditions embodied by the eagles of the legions." Both authors see Arthur as a King who "supplants the old, bloody tradition of Fort Maybe with chivalric justice" (Bruce, 325).

### **PART THREE: Nobility and King Arthur in the USA**

Aristocracy, a concept in British Arthurian literature and prevalent during medieval times, is associated with a “desire for, or the picturing of, a harmonious nobility which expresses itself by moral, intellectual, aesthetic and social distinctiveness, and in that division of mankind known as class consciousness” (Mendal, 197).

Oscar Mendal insults American intellectuals, believing them to be living in a state of “amiable schizophrenia,” struggling between thinking they are not “any better than the next fellow” and wanting what is best for them (203). He draws attention to the societal demands of earning a paycheck and doing what is expected, but claims that people hypocritically and very secretly wish to do what is “noble.” He uses examples of writers creating scenarios and scripts, which artists despise at cocktail parties; creating art on salary, so artists can afford enough money to *really* paint; or building a “lavender ranch-type house, ridiculing their customers under their breaths.” He points out how hypocritically shameful Americans feel when doing what people believe is noble. Mendal claims “that which is noble in them they despair of practicing, or else they practice it in seclusion, ‘after hours,’ when no one is looking” (203).

This concept becomes evident through a contrast between the acceptance of King Arthur with his English counter-part Robin Hood. While “Arthur was largely the property of the Roman aristocracy; the common folk had their own hero in Robin Hood” (Morsberger, 75). It has been suggested that Robin Hood existed in the 1200s as nothing more than a run-of-the-mill thief, but throughout

the years people have popularized the belief that “Robin Hood was a patriotic outlawed nobleman who flourished during the reign of Richard I and helped the Lion Heart to regain his sovereignty, usurped by his wicked brother John during the Third Crusade” (Morsberger, 75).

Although equally important to the British Empire, Robin Hood and King Arthur were often at odds with one another. While the “Arthurian legend was useful to pro-imperial advocates, who used it as a means to promote the ideals of heroic and civilizing people bringing the blessings of English civilization of the world... Robin Hood represented an inward looking, anti-imperial strain” (Barczeqwski, 329). In comparison to King Arthur, the charismatic, witty and brave Robin Hood has more completely and more quickly resonated with American audiences, which may be due to his extremely democratic nature, which is represented by his ability to interact with the King and his knights, while simultaneously fighting as an equal with those below him, and his sharp intellect and resourcefulness as a patriot (Morsberger, 85). While both characters are staples of English literature and legend, to American audiences King Arthur’s reputation for being child-like (or *childish*), just and generous falls short of Robin Hood’s daring adventures.

More relatable to the American people, “the Robin Hood legend... served not only patriotic purposes but also those of working class and dissenting groups. As working-class radicalism and reform became more important, the story became more prominent (Barcqeqski, 328). Nevertheless, Arthurian literature held its place with American audiences as it has been and is still today one of the

last outlets for people to enjoy a truly unbelievable, magical experience. That being said, Americans rarely dream for the sake of dreaming. Instead, they dream of progress and efficiency or other goals they eventually hope to achieve.

Therefore, Arthurian literature in the United States became less about chivalrous love and knighthood and more about magic, beauty, deception and fate. While these stories have always suggested certain morals and ideologies, they have been modified into narratives with which American audiences can more easily relate.

Those nostalgic for medieval manners and customs hope for “a new Chretien de Troyes, a new Spenser, a new Racine, a new Tolstoy to ...reveal aspects of nobility to the commonest among men,” but they are blind to the fact that nobility in America has morphed into something almost unrecognizable and will not return to its previous state in the foreseeable future (Mendal). Nobility in England has always been associated with being properly bred and educated; however, “nobility” in America is more about being resourceful, caring deeply about justice, being ambitious and having a strong work ethic. To Americans, “nobility” does not mean being “noble,” instead it means being American.

It is interesting to consider that “stories of kings, knights and noble people should, it seems, be at odds with the democratic ideals that Americans espouse,” and yet Arthurian literature has flourished in the United States (Lupack).

Adjusting to the time and audience, however, it is obvious that American and British renditions are dissimilar in many various ways. First, different authors treat the character of Arthur differently. “[F]or the American writer, there is no sense that Arthur is ‘one of us’” (Laird, Lupack). Furthermore, in American

literature there is a strong emphasis on the round table, as it is the “closest thing the middle-ages has to an “egalitarian society” (Young, Lupack). This theory proves to be true, not just because it institutes the idea of democracy, but because “obtaining a seat at the round table was based on ability, not just noble birth” (Young, Lupack). Some might even argue that Arthurian legend holds American appeal because Americans are uniquely attracted to British political history, which is based on a belief that “Americans can view British history as Christians view the Old Testament” (Othan, Lupack). In America, King Arthur, Camelot and the Arthurian court have become an icon for chivalry, justice and stability. They “reinforce that a band of good men and women can overcome oppression and establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty” (Lupack). More specifically, there is an emphasis to do away with nobility and to uplift meritocracy, class equality and justice. American Arthurian literature undoubtedly reinforces the idea that “Arthur’s longevity is directly related to his unique ability to span the ages and suit the societal needs of the times. A chameleon. Arthur’s problems try to appeal to the common human psyche above and beyond cultural/societal differences related to the time of publication” (Lupack, Krakowka).

These new traits, particularly the lack of desire to accept nobility, can be seen in Mark Twain’s Arthurian novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Written in the late 1800s, the story is about a hot-blooded, but practical Connecticut blue-collar worker who loses consciousness during an altercation

with another workman. When he wakes up, he finds himself in Medieval England during King Arthur's reign. Through this novel, Twain attempts to "redeem history, to show the triumph of democratic ideals and technological expertise over chivalric assumptions that were tautological and self-confirming" (Clark, 234).

After the main character (and narrator) rises to power, he is given a title. "[He] didn't want any noble title but [he'll] admit [he] was pleased when they just started to call [him], 'the boss'" (Twain). Twain's love for the American, democratic system continues when the narrator says of his new title

[The boss] stands for something – not like baron or duke or earl; and it was given to me by the people themselves! When I looked around the country, oh, it made my blood boil to see good, simple, hard working folks bow down to every half-wit noble. And I felt like leading a revolution! But...erm.. we Yankees are practical, too, and I knew I couldn't change things too fast. (Twain)

In this instance, Twain indirectly claims that nobility is doled out arbitrarily and not through any kind of justified system. Moreover, Twain chooses to emphasize that the noble system not only raises random, undeserving men to power, but also simultaneously pushes down "hard working folks." The main character does not ignore the knights altogether, however, because he has "a scheme to make them useful." The narrator, in fact, convinces the knights to sell "Parsimon's soap," "Peterson's Profolatic toothbrush," and "Majestic brand stove polish" (but only after acknowledging that stoves do not yet exist). In this moment, Twain

solidifies the nobles as a demographic that can be easily duped. They are naïve and unworthy of their superior title.

Twain goes a step further by not only criticizing nobility, but medieval fantasy in general, when the main character finds himself listening to Merlin tell “that same old weary tale that he hath told a thousand times in the same words” (Clark, 70). Only moments later the narrator comments on Merlin’s lack of authenticity as an audience. He claims, “Merlin reliably puts his audience asleep with his familiar ‘quaint lie,’ and the court thereafter commends stories that share a predictable structure – ‘a tale of the usual pattern’” (135). Commenting on medieval Arthurian history in this way, Twain implies that noble British history, comparable to that of Charlemagne and Ancient Rome, is in reality boring, repetitive, mundane and lacking in real substance.

In contrast to traditional nobility, American nobility is what is valued in this piece. The narrator’s American morale can first be seen when he makes Clarence, the boy who helped him devise plans to reach his position of power, his assistant, and together they “set up schools and factories and newspapers. Along with...military and naval academies, recruiting the smartest young fellows...regardless of class” (Twain). In this moment, the main character’s detestation of nobility and his patriotic inclination combine into a single feeling.

Throughout the novel, patriotism is a staple of King Arthur’s court. From the moment the main character discovers he is to be burned at the stake, he exclaims, “Now just a minute! I ’m a Yankee from Connecticut and I’ve got certain rights!” It is interesting to note that if he were truly a civilian in King

Arthur's court before the development of the round table, democracy and the rights to which he refers did not exist. By drawing attention to them, however, Twain aims to prove American democracy to be above that of any other political system.

It could be suggested that Twain continues to argue for the democratic system not on a political level, but on a social one. When finding a man who is sentenced to death for not admitting to stealing, the man asks the main character if he "should confess [become a prisoner] and leave [his] wife and little one without bread and shelter all their lives?" This question raises an interesting paradox, since prisoners and their families would be stripped of their land and valuables; whereas, men sentenced to death would keep their dignity. It is not until the prisoner claims that "surely a man would rather die 1000 deaths than have his loved ones die of hunger and want," that the main character offers a proposition. Struck by the bravery, loyalty and stereotypical American stubborn nature of the prisoner, the main character offers him a job in his factory, where "the most important product [they] turn out is independent men." Perhaps more American now than in the 1880s when Mark Twain wrote this work, the main character can be seen as (perhaps too?) proud and successful when he claims that after "years of peace and progress and hard work... at last I felt it safe to take my first vacation." Since an unyielding work ethic was valued above nearly anything else during Twain's time, it is no surprise that during his vacation King Arthur's court falls. Although he claims to have "defeated tradition and tyranny," the kingdom meets its demise.



Prior to the crumbling of the court, Twain ensures that the American Dream and all that it entails is mentioned and appreciated. The main character epitomizes the American Dream and the quintessential American character, since he began his journey as a slave and ended up being the king's right-hand man "clothed with all power and authority and his seat is upon the highest step on the throne." Whether the main character is attempting to find his way out of a bind, create a marketing scheme, rescue a damsel from distress or expose Merlin as a "faker," he relies heavily on his wit and practicality to reach his goals.

Through Twain's novel it becomes clear, however, that the American Dream is designated for men only. Although Twain gives credibility to the old mantra "boys will be boys," as evidenced when the main character complains that "no matter what age you live in boys just don't have respect for anything or anybody," Twain also gives enough praise to reasonable men (mostly the main character) that it is clear he believes men to be the superior sex. This predisposition is most clearly seen when Sandy claims there is a castle where several princesses are locked away and prevented from leaving because of violent ogres. When Mr. Boss is coerced into saving these princesses, he sees nothing but a pigsty. While Sandy suggests that the castle may have been enchanted, the thought is dismissed as a crazy one. Mr. Boss pitifully remarks that "it is enchanted if [she] says so... you've heard so many stories about castles and monsters and ogres... its no wonder if you have hallucinations." Twain's bias is not fully seen, however, until Mr. Boss describes how he married Sandy to make his happiness complete: "Sandy was as fine and as smart a girl as you'd want to

meet. Even if you (Sandy) couldn't understand much when I talked about democracy and freedom and the jury system and the secret ballot. But anyhow, her heart was in the right place." This extremely popular notion of women being both crazy and incapable of understanding politics in the United States was quite a strong one, until it eventually bumped up against the Women's Rights Movement.

## **PART FOUR: The Third Wave of Arthurian Legend**

The first wave of the Women's Rights movement in the United States began in 1848 with the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, where the Declaration of Sentiments was signed by multiple attendees. The document listed American women's complaints and proposed resolutions for equal treatment under the law and voting rights for women. Throughout the 1800s, the focus was on political rights for women, which was largely pushed by the American Woman Suffrage Association, established by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, organized by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell. Although the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, granting women the right to vote, was not passed until August 1920, prior to that time many other political milestones were reached. In 1896 the National Association of Colored Women was formed, in 1903 the National Women's Trade Union League was created "to advocate for improved wages and working conditions for women" and in 1916 Margaret Sanger established, and was arrested, for opening the first American birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York.

While minor progress was made throughout the 1900s, the second wave of the Women's Right Movement did not occur until the 1960s. It is during this time that the focus shifted from political rights to civil rights. Notably, in 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which focuses on the frustration and unhappiness of middle-class women who were forced into the narrow role of housewives by American society. In part because of this text, in 1964 The Civil

Rights Act prohibited the discrimination in employment based on race and sex. Although this act was in place, there was still considerable discrimination toward women as they fought for their equal civil role in society.

During this time, the musical *Camelot* (1968) was created and deemed one of the first films to encompass many of the details surrounding King Arthur's story. In the first musical number, King Arthur describes his terror of pursuing women. He deems this fear to be a ridiculous one, as he has slain dragons and fought battles, both of which are of a much more dangerous caliber than mere women. His fear, however, not only humbles his masculine character and makes him more relatable to the modern American male audience, but also simultaneously empowers women, by implying that they can be more fearful and create more danger and harm than dragons or battles. Whether this power is of a good or evil nature is yet to be determined. Almost immediately after this scene, the audience sees a beautiful Guinevere being carried throughout the forest. After Guinevere amiably comments on the ruggedness of the woodland, her maid reminds her that "this forest is crawling with outlaws and briggans." But the queen replies fearlessly, with obvious disregard for her place in society, that it would be "marvelous" to meet one of them. She continues to take her maid by surprise when she notes that the woods in which they find themselves is the most ferocious, savage, terrifying forest she has ever seen and "she simply adores it."

In line with the modern grievances of the time, Guinevere feels confined by the societal role she is forced to play and sneaks away to go on an adventure in the woods alone. Men in Arthurian works are typically the only characters to go

on adventures, so *this* Guinevere is portrayed with more gumption and given more credibility than many other Guineveres before her. This Guinevere is solidified as a radical character when she goes into the forest and prays.

Saint Genevieve...you know how faithful and devout I am. You must admit, I've always been a lamb... but I won't obey you anymore, you've gone a bit too far. I won't be bid and bargained for like beads at a bazaar. I've run away, eluded them and fled, and from now on I intend to pray to someone else instead.... Where were you when my youth was sold?

Although Guinevere's character is immediately established as a proud, independent and progressive woman, other aspects of her character are capitalized on in a way that nearly mocks her open desire to be so radical. This critique of her character can be seen when she runs into a stranger in the forest and dramatically tries to call for help. When the stranger, who the audience knows is King Arthur, assures her he will not do her any harm, she is annoyed and petulantly scolds, "How dare you insult me in this fashion! Do my looks repel you?" This retort implies that she is sincerely hurt and angered that a stranger would not choose to harm her, which is an interesting comment on 1960s rape culture, particularly since women were fighting for civil and social equality. Specifically this scene alludes to the ongoing "no means no" campaign that is intended to draw awareness to what women say and want they actually want in sexual relationships. Although progress in this area has been made, currently this crusade is still not taken as seriously as its advocates would hope, as noted by the common "joke" that circulates where "no means yes."

Guinevere's inferiority is seen on the grandest level in the perfect village of Camelot, where there's "simply not a more congenial spot for happily ever aftering," a belief that is doomed because of her actions. Similar to the behavior of Twain's main character, the musical's version of Camelot tries to fight tradition and evil with justice and practicality; however, in this rendition Camelot falls as a direct result of Guinevere's promiscuous, capricious and shamelessly mischievous attitude and not just the mere fact that she is a woman.

It is during the lusty month of May that the audience sees Guinevere's female promiscuity and capriciousness, which suggests women are incapable of being trusted, respected or loyal. In a musical number, Guinevere gladly sings that May is "that lovely month when everyone goes blissfully astray... When tons of little wicked thoughts merrily appear... those dreary vows that everyone makes everyone breaks. Everyone makes divine mistakes in the lusty month of May!" While there is a thrilling aura that surrounds Guinevere, the modern audience could argue that her attitude sets back the kind of respect for which women have been fighting.

As Guinevere's loyalty and self-control are called into question, so is her intelligence. Throughout the film there are many mixed comments on her intellect, leaving the audience to wonder where she truly stands. Although the King attempts to depict her as an honorable person, when he tells Lancelot he wishes to share his political plans with Guinevere, Lancelot reacts in a condescending manner toward her by replying, "Well, won't *she* find it tedious?" Guinevere's disgusted reaction to his comment possibly suggests that women of

the late 60's were also annoyed by the societal implication that they were not suitable for politics or heavy conversation. Lancelot, despite the King's efforts, is portrayed as a fanatic. While all fanatics can be annoying, eventually the audience cannot help but pity Lancelot, who as a stranger to England has trouble adjusting to his new surroundings. Although it was Guinevere who was most repulsed by him, it is she who ends up falling in love with him. Guinevere's intelligence is discussed once again when King Arthur says, "Merlyn told me once: Never be too disturbed if you don't understand what a woman is thinking. They don't do it often." On the surface, this statement could be directly interpreted to mean that women often do not think and, therefore, are not worthy of understanding. Since at this point, however, Guinevere is hiding her infidelities from King Arthur, it could be suggested that his demise (as a result of his blindness) was a repercussion of his undermining the intelligence of women.

Prior to the kingdom's downfall, the proud American attitude that is displayed in Twain's version of the Arthurian legend is seen once again in *Camelot* when King Arthur ponders, "Suppose we create a new order of chivalry, in which might is only used for right... to improve instead of to destroy... To lay down their arms and come and join us... Debate, make laws, and plan improvements... Not might is right, but might for right." The twist in *Camelot*, though, is that Arthur speaks these sentiments to his wife Queen Guinevere, instead of a male squire or male comrade. By including Guinevere in this conversation, he implies not only that she is intelligent enough to understand its significance, but even capable of contributing to it. This nod towards women's

intellect is quite compelling, particularly when compared to how women were portrayed in Twain's work. It is important to note that King Arthur is the only character to support the intelligence of Guinevere. Interestingly, he is also the only character to be caught up in idealizations of what the world *could* be, up until the real world catches up to him and his kingdom is destroyed. Another side of American attitude is exposed when Lancelot, a French knight, is excluded from society after conceitedly claiming he is "invincible, unwinceable, brave and able to do ten impossible things before lunch." Aside from the actor's really horrible French accent, the other characters choose to disassociate with him because of his pompous, "noble" demeanor.



## **PART FIVE: Modern Day**

Since the 1960s, the progression of women in American society has seen significant growth. Because of America's notorious inclusion and fight for equality, it could be argued that the reason American culture and attitude has been so supportive of women's rights is that they are now closely associated. By implementing the modern American attitude, authors of Arthurian literature have helped proliferate the Arthurian legend in the United States. In today's popular American Arthurian fiction, writers create female characters that "do not exist simply to inspire knightly lovers to deeds of prowess; they administer kingdoms, seek out adventure, risk danger, and pursue quests" (Howey, 24). Moreover, as White began with his children stories, the primary focus has shifted to another time, another world, and another place. This idea holds true especially in America where the content is even more distant than it is in England. A very strong sense of nostalgia accompanies recent American Arthurian works in a way that portrays Arthur's kingdom not as fantasy, but as lost innocence. This utopian, now out-of-reach society, provides the modern reader or viewer with accepted morals and attitudes that circulated when the world was prosperous. Arthur's utopian society has undergone many changes. It was originally regarded as a place to nurture chivalric love, in order to impress upon respectable men the honor of being worthy of the most noble women. Next, Arthur's world developed into a patriarchy, in which men developed strong bonds with other men and fought to protect their country. Later, Arthurian society made a slight turn in that it believed the best way to protect the country was through peaceful debates,

democracy and selflessness. Currently, Arthur's utopia is now a society that protects and supports equal opportunity (between all genders, races, and religions), democratic thought and above all justice.

Because of the nostalgic sense that accompanies Arthurian work, it has reached a point at which this material has become suitable for children as both a form of entertainment and a guide of moral virtues. As the stories have developed over the years and because "the Arthurian dream inhabits our childhood and the enjoyments we produce for our children," Arthurian literature has become entirely associated with fiction rather than anything factual.

Most notably is the English work of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, which was much better received in the United States than in England. In a similar way to those authors who came before her, Rowling has altered her Arthurian world to suit her audience; however, no one before Rowling had successfully morphed the real 21<sup>st</sup> century world with Arthur's magical wizarding world. On the surface, it may seem that Rowling's world is too far removed from that of King Arthur's and that it is more "medieval" than it is "Arthurian"; on the other hand, while the world Rowling creates may not be directly Arthurian, it is extremely reminiscent of Arthurian tales. There are hundreds of instances that support this claim, ranging from the existence of Harry's invisibility cloak, which hides him like the magic ring Lunette gives Ygvain in Chretien de Troye's *Le Chevalier Au Lion*, to the "marvelous tents of medieval romance," which are similar to the ones described in Marie de France's *Lanval* (Lorenz). Additional, specific examples include:

Marie de France's lay "Milun," [which] centers on a messenger bird, like the owls that bring mail to Harry and his friends. Guigemar, in the lay of that name, [who] meets a snow-white deer like the white stag from that Harry's father takes on to help him in Azkaban. [And] Werewolves that presage Professor Lupin appear in Marie's "Bisclavaret." (Lorenz)

Aside from the specific instances, however, there are the strong themes of secrecy and deception; activities, such as tournaments and single combat; extravagant social feasts; and particularly, with regard to the American audience, acting not out of individual concern or for the hope of individual merit, but rather working toward collective goals with loyal companions.

Needless to say, because the content has changed so dramatically over the years, "we find in a number of Rowling's characters not a simple reworking of the well-known heroes of [Arthurian] romance, but a protean melding of different characters to form a new, hybrid one," such as Hermione (Lorenz, 61). The progression of women in society can be seen especially through Hermione, who "plays a much larger role than that usually assigned in romances... Hermione resembles rather wise, active, clever women of Chretien romances" in a positive, forward-thinking way (Lorenz, 60).

Arthurian literature is still being developed today, yet it is much less common than film. Even in the case of Harry Potter, while it was wildly popular literature, it was much more widespread in film form. Today, "writers critique our culture by re-envisioning three common elements of the legend: traditional

symbols of power, definitions of the heroic, and binary oppositions between good and evil” (Howey, 11). Similar to its film versions, Arthurian legend “adds other dimensions: on the one hand, readers approach the story with expectations about what should constitute an Arthurian story; on the other hand, these very expectations can be played upon to emphasize” cultural concerns of that time (Howey, 24). Besides the general trend of leisure reading becoming less prevalent than television or film viewing, in terms of Arthurian literature specifically “[o]ur ideas about the distant past are perhaps more vulnerable to the lure of cinema because there is no immediate access to falsification” (Haydock, Loc. 82). Focusing on issues such as gender, racial and class equality, as “the medieval serves to screen specific modern anxieties,” filmmakers must struggle when choosing between the authenticity of the Arthurian story (which as we now see is difficult to decipher even when attempting to be completely factual), and, on the other hand, the need to “[correspond] at least in major respects to the audiences’ understanding” of current concepts (Haydock, Loc. 995; Lacy, 76). Regardless of whether Arthurian legend is in cinematic or literary form, “the general population includes a remarkable number of people, either knowledgeable aficionados or romantics nostalgic for a presumably glorious past, who are eternally fascinated with King Arthur,” and this trend will likely continue for many years to come (Lacy, 82).

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## Appendix A: King Arthur: Immigrating and Assimilating

With hundreds of films being produced in America each year, producers must constantly find new ways to captivate audiences; however, there are only so many topics that peek the interest of American minds. Instead of creating innovative stories each year, producers are forced to reuse certain themes and elements that have proven to be successful with audiences in the past. While times have changed dramatically from when Arthurian literature was first replicated in America in the late 1800s to how life in America is today, certain themes of Arthurian literature have played remarkably consistent roles in American entertainment.

This phenomenon is simple to understand. When Arthurian stories were first produced in America, they were altered to particularly entertain an American audience (Clifton). American writers of Arthurian literature, valorizing principles they believed American children ought to grow up knowing and that American societies should proudly endorse, accomplished this. Furthermore, after the destruction of the Civil War, America was still in the process of creating a new Democratic identity (Clifton). In part because of the failure to reconstruct after the war, stories of the mythical and prosperous Camelot were used to distract from the current state of affairs and also offer a beacon of hope for America's future.

What made Arthurian literature appropriate stories for reinterpretation is that children and adults alike could enjoy them. The story of King Arthur can be seen either as a "moral tale about piety outwitting devilry (the adult view) or as a transgressive fantasy of infantile empowerment (the child's view)" (Fox-



Friedman). Children tend to favor dialogue and incident; whereas, adults typically appreciate description and introspection – all of which can be found in abundance in Arthurian literature (Clifton).

Howard Pyle published the first volume of American Arthurian series for children in *St. Nicolas*, in November of 1902 to October 1903 (Fox-Friedman). In his reformulations, based on Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Pyle capitalized on American virtues by portraying them as important truths that existed as early as medieval times. He simultaneously dismissed other Arthurian themes by not mentioning them at all (Fox-Friedman). While many things were changing in this time, it was still popular belief in the early 1900s that

from the earliest ages, manliness and self-reliance have ever been the chief ground work of character, and in this respect, the boy of the nineteenth century in no way differs from his brother of the second or of the ninth. To bravely front danger, difficulty, or death, if need be, for principle or right, is as commendable as a heroic in the boy brought up amid the surging and restless life of New York or London today, as in the lad who trod the narrow streets of Jerusalem, or Rouen, or Florence, or old Rome centuries ago. (Brooks)

An example of this is when, at the end of Pyle's reinterpretation of a story of Sir Gawain, he tells the reader "it needs not that a man shall wear armour for to be a true knight, but only that he shall do his best endeavor with all patience and humility as it has been ordained for him to do'" (380, Pyle; Fox-Friedman). Pyle's work resulted in the formation of various boys' organizations in America, such as

*The Knights of King Arthur*, whose purpose was to “promote the Arthurian virtues of ‘chivalry, courtesy, deference to womanhood, recognition of the noblesse oblige, and Christian daring’” (65, Pyle, Fox-Friedman). Other organizations that were formed as a result of Pyle’s work include: *The General Alliance of Workers With Boys* and later Baden-Powell’s Boy Scout movement. These organizations -- intended to create a foundation for a progressive, moral life -- prove that themes in Arthurian literature had leaked into what has come to be a defining part of American culture. Furthermore, these developments solidified the notion that “Pyle’s representations of the strong and fearless champions of the Round Table became moral beacons for boys, as the decidedly undemocratic world of King Arthur came to guide the ideology of American moral weight to the twentieth century” (Fox-Friedman).

Similarly to the turn of the century, the 1960s were also a defining cultural time in America. From the Civil Rights Movement to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave of Feminism, the 1960s were a time of social and political upheaval. In an effort to restore some semblance of calm and order, the media sought to re-establish the ideals that Arthurian literature had made important in the early 1900s, which can be seen in Walt Disney’s *The Sword In The Stone*, produced in 1963. After the success of Pyle’s work, and of Arthurian literature in general, it was evident that children could be easily entertained by Arthurian ideas. The two main characters, Merlin and Arthur, both exhibit qualities that children would find appealing: Merlin shows he is capable of transforming into a variety of animals or creatures, giving him instant access to a multitude of different abilities. As an elderly man, Merlin

proves that one does not need to be big and physically strong to be wise or witty that mental strength can be stronger than physical strength. Perhaps most importantly, Merlin is *magical*, which appeals to the joy of accomplishing the impossible and encouraging wild imaginations – two things children thoroughly enjoy (Fox-Friedman). Arthur, on the other hand, is an underdog, dismissed and ridiculed for being too young and too naïve; however, in part because of his strong moral character, he ends up being a powerful and respected person in society.

Focusing on the Arthurian representations of gender, language, self-reliance, bravery and chivalry, Disney successfully markets the importance of these concepts to young children. The opening scene of the film begins with a very old book telling the story in song of England's history. The font is majestic and bold, the paintings are extravagantly detailed, and the edges of the pages are tattered. This image parallels Pyle's idea, mentioned earlier, about the story having authoritative qualities, subtly encouraging those hearing it to listen and agree with it.

Shortly after Arthur and Merlin meet, Merlin provides Arthur with the following advice: "Don't you get any foolish ideas that magic will solve all your problems, because it won't! ...Everybody's got problems, the world is full of problems." This idea speaks to the well-known aspect of self-reliance in American character. The mentioning of perpetual problems in the world, on the other hand, speaks to the time frame in which this film was released. This small, but effective, segment was intended to mold the minds of impressionable

children, reminding them that while things may be difficult, they must rely on themselves for improvement.

This concept is reinforced only a few scenes later when Merlin and Arthur are swimming as fish. In a fun and friendly tune, Merlin tells Arthur to “set your sights upon the heights. Don’t be a mediocrity. Don’t just wait and trust to fate and say ‘that’s how it’s meant to be.’ It’s up to you how far you go. If you don’t try, you’ll never know. And, so my lad, as I’ve explained, nothing ventured - nothing gained.” This lyrical advice proves to be even more interesting than the last. Not only does this advice reflect the same idea of self-reliance, but it also encourages bravery and persistence. Furthermore, it is a clear example of how America has selected certain qualities of Arthurian literature on which to capitalize, while completely refuting others, as fate has typically been an a determining factor in how many original Arthurian stories play out.

The importance of bravery and of wit is seen shortly after this song when a crocodile attacks Arthur and Merlin tells Arthur to be wise in his escape. It is also seen when Merlin faces Mad Madame Mim in a duel, despite her evil reputation for being sneaky and deceitful and despite Arthur and Archimedes’ advice not to fight with her. Chivalry and honor are seen in this same scene when Merlin duels Mim and continues to fight in accordance with the rules they agreed to prior to the contest, even though Mim is, as often as possible, cheating. Eventually Merlin outwits Mim by becoming a germ that makes her terribly ill. In the end, in spite of Mim’s horrible behavior, Merlin is still chivalrous enough to nurse her back to health. Last, chivalry is seen again when Merlin and Arthur are squirrels in the

forest where two female squirrels are flirting with them. Both courteous and chivalrous, they politely refuse the female squirrels' advances.

Both Pyle and Disney understood that “Material progress and an individual’s moral progress [have] become the essential equation necessary for the development of the proper American,” and both have capitalized on it in their work (Fox-Friedman). In other words, working diligently toward success while keeping morality in mind is what they have, through their work, influenced American children to do. However, as these ideals are what most Americans value, they are replicated in a variety of entertainment today.