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An Analysis of Select Adaptations of the Legend of King Arthur: The Fact behind Fictionalized Biographies

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Abstract

Arthurian legends, being the source of inspiration for writers for many centuries, have very much been overlooked and taken only for their literary meaning. Starting from historian Geoffrey of Monmouth to the contemporary playwright Howard Brenton, writers have turned to King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table to colour their pages. These writers either praise or satirize the semi legendary King but have failed to grope further into the truth. Metahistory goes beyond the legend and reveals a world of torture chambers, dungeons, feudalism, tyranny, oppression and religious domination – all controlled by Arthur himself. This paper aims to analyse and present some differences in each version of the tale and also reveal the truth behind the glory of Camelot.

Keywords

Arthur; Round Table; Geoffrey of Monmouth; Sir Thomas Malory; Holy Grail.

Being tales of heroism and hero worship, the significance and truth behind legends have either been forgotten or neglected for centuries. These legends are fictionalized biographies of real people or an incognito report on tyrants and aristocrats. The historical plays of Shakespeare are good examples of fictionalized biographies. So are the fiction of Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott. Contemporary novelist and Booker Prize winner Hilary Mantel has revealed the truth about Anne Boleyn in her historical Tudor series which are actually compelling biographies. Fictionalized biographies are fictionalized for a reason. They do not move away from truth. In fact, they are closer to truth and hence the fictionalization. This paper researches into the origins and interpretations of Arthurian legends. It also expounds the truth behind the golden ages of medievalism.

The legend of King Arthur has offered abundant material for different versions. Everyone is fascinated by the King and his Knights of the Round Table. The earliest versions were the French poems by twelfth century troubadour Chrétien de Troyes. These poems, imbued with the ideals of chivalry and courtly love, include *Percival, or the Story of the Grail*, the earliest literary version of the legend of the Holy Grail; *Erec and Enide*; and *Lancelot, or the Knight of the Cart*, in which Arthur's favorite knight and rival in love is introduced. He was the pioneer of the medieval romance which became popular and was later revived after the Romantic Movement. Sir Thomas Malory used this as a source for his *Le Morte Darthur* ("The Death of Arthur"; 1469-1470). Malory also made good use of *Mabinogion*, a collection of Welsh prose tales composed between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The collection concludes with a group of three Arthurian romances.

Ever since Malory produced a handbook on Arthur, the popularity for the hero increased. Almost all writers of Europe were influenced by him. Chaucer's tale of the wife of Bath is set at the time of King Arthur. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) is woven around the adventures of Prince Arthur. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's quest for pure English ended with Arthur's quest in *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885). American novelist Mark Twain satirizes medievalism in his humorous *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). T. H. White brought Arthur back to life in his *The Once and Future King* series (1938-1977). T. S. Eliot has extensively drawn his *The Waste Land* (1922) on the Grail legends. American writer Marion Zimmer Bradley, in *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), explores the Arthurian world from women's point of view.

The Welsh historian Nennius first mentioned Arthur by name in the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum* ("History of the Britons"), but a full account of his life did not appear until about 300 years later, in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain"; 1136) by Welsh writer Geoffrey of Monmouth. The sixth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh books, of the twelve constituting the work, contain the first extensive collection of tales dealing with King Arthur that afterward formed the basis for the Arthurian legend. According to this account, Arthur descended from Brutus, the son of Aeneas who was the founder of Rome. Monmouth's history presents Arthur as Anglo-Norman:

This king, said to rule before the heathen Saxons invaded and destroyed this world, resembles Anglo-Norman kings more than he does Anglo-Saxon ones, and thus his story provides a deeper lineage for the style of Norman culture in England than more obvious histories could offer (Galloway 25).

In Chapter 5 of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Arthur is the grandson of Emperor Constantine – "the king had afterwards three sons, Constans, Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon". Merlin prophesies in the second part that a nest with three eggs shall bring forth "a fox, a wolf and a bear"

referring to Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot. Uther's adventure with Igraine in Book I, chapter I of *Morte Darthur* is directly from Part II, Chapter 19 of *The History*. Geoffrey of Monmouth believed he was real. The same belief took on Layamon when he wrote *Brut*, the first national epic in English. Twelfth century monks believed that Arthur and Guinevere were buried in Glastonbury Abbey. They even believed that Arthur died in the Battle of Camlan, slain by his illegitimate son Mordred.

The underlying plot is the same in all versions – King Arthur rules over Camelot, he marries Guinevere and founds the Round Table with a hundred and fifty knights. The search for the Sangreal (“Holy Grail”) is also found in all versions. The adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot is another common feature. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, published by William Caxton in 1485, is the only book that is a bildungsroman of Arthur. There is a moment when Arthur pulls out a sword from a stone which only the King can do. When Arthur does it, the nobles cannot believe their eyes: “We will have Arthur unto our King, we will put him no more in delay...” (Malory 9).

The modern version of T. H. White splits the whole story into different books. Tennyson's *Idyll* avoids the childhood of Arthur and begins directly with his ascension and marriage. Spenser's Arthur is more of a travelling hero. In Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, he appears in Cantos 7, 8 and 9. He rescues the Red Cross Knight from the giant Orgoglio. Spenser's Arthur was brought up by Old Timon. He says, “Unto Old Timon he me brought bylive” (3.28). Other versions believe that Arthur was brought up by Sir Kay. Twain's Arthur is a war-mongering idiot: “but one of the unhandsomest and most commonplace and unattractive” (211). Arthur's sword is Excalibur got from the Lady of the Lake: “Then he drew his sword Excalibur, but it was so bright in his enemies' eyes, that it gave light like thirty torches” (12) and later “...Sir Arthur took it up by the handles, and took it with him, and the arm and the hand went under the water” (39). The symbols of fire and water while receiving the sword are

referred to by T. S. Eliot in “Death by Water” and “Fire Sermon” in *The Waste Land* (1922). In Spenser’s version, the sword is named “Morddure” (II.VIII.20) and it was specially made by Merlin. Spenser draws on directly from Monmouth’s version. The sword is the formist symbol of anarchy. Formist accounts are “the essence of innumerable biographies” (White 14). The ideological implication of formism is anarchy – the abolishment of the present society for a new world. Arthur tries to establish a new order by refusing to pay tribute to the Roman Emperor Lucius (from whom he descended) and announces war. But formism repeats and rebounds on itself and is only complete after the death of the tyrant. Only after Arthur’s death, the sword can be returned to the lake; the implication being that tyranny will rise no matter who the ruler is. That is why Malory’s account ends with Britain waiting for Arthur again.

Tennyson’s *Idylls* seems a celebration of chivalry than anything else. In part 2, “Gareth and Lynette”, the knight works as a scullion in the kitchen. One fine day, he gets a quest to rescue the fair Lyonores when her sister, Lynette comes to Arthur’s court. He goes to Castle Perilous and rescues her. All the while, Lynette has been reproaching him for being a scullion. But she understands his gallantry and they get married: “And he that told the tale in older times/Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors,/But he, that told it later, says Lynette” (II). Tennyson has borrowed this tale from Book 7 of *Morte Darthur*. There, Sir Gareth of Orkney marries the captive Dame Lionesse: “And upon Michaelmas Day the Bishop of Canterbury made the wedding betwixt Sir Gareth and the Lady Lionesse with great solemnity” (236). Victorian tradition is so very different from the Middle Ages. The woman who accompanies is given more importance than a stranger in a castle. But medieval Code of Chivalry demanded that the knight marry whomever he had rescued.

The edition of Malory reports that Tristram was stabbed by Mark while singing for Isoud: “how shamefully the false traitor King Mark slew him as he

sat harping afore his lady La Beale Isoud, with a grounden glaive he thrust him in behind to the heart” (751). Also, King Arthur condemns the queen to be burnt at the stake for adultery and Lancelot rescues her. Tennyson’s *Idylls* remarks that King Mark of Cornwall split his skull while placing a ruby necklace on Isolde’s neck. And Guinevere runs to the Abbey of Almesbury and becomes a nun. And all editions expose and condemn adultery. Hence, Monmouth’s symbol of the wolf while referring to Guinevere. Dante spots a she-wolf (symbol of avarice) at the entrance to hell – “she had already brought despair to many” (I.49). When it comes to the Holy Grail, there are plenty of variations. Malory writes that Lancelot is the one who came closest to finding it behind a chamber. However, a priest orders him not to enter and Lancelot is thrown into a death-like sleep for twenty-four days. Tennyson’s Lancelot has a vision of it at the end of a winding stair – the winding stair being common in Victorian architecture and the symbol that connects the soul to God. In Tennyson’s poem, Avalon is the name of a church where the dying Arthur is taken. But Malory reports that Morgan le Fay comes with the ladies on a barge and takes Arthur to the Island of Avalon, where he is buried.

The whole legend is satirized by Twain. Hank Morgan, the nineteenth century American engineer who time travels to sixth century England, thinks that the magnificent Camelot is the “...name of the asylum, likely” (14). The Round Table is compared to a “circus ring” (20) where many men sat gnawing bones and drinking their heads off. Merlin is a fraud with “unsteady legs...watery eyes” (25). Merlin’s report on Arthur finding the Excalibur is a complete “lie” (29). Medieval women were not delicate. They loved bloodshed:

Those banks of beautiful ladies, shining in their barbaric splendors, would see a knight sprawl from his horse in the lists with a lance-shaft the thickness of your ankle clean through him and the blood spouting, and instead of fainting they would clap their hands and crowd each other for a better view... (61-62).

The same appears in Chapter 7 of *Ivanhoe* too: "...the ladies, who in a greater proportion than the men themselves, thronged to witness a sport, which one would have thought too dangerous to afford their sex much pleasure" (Scott 87). The armour worn by the knights was nothing splendid and shiny. It was "hot" and "itchy" (Twain 82-83). Morgan was not a terrible woman. She loved killing and bloodshed but she was a good housekeeper. Guinevere was absolutely "lazy" (202). The Church had complete authority over everything. At the time of the small pox, they took away grain, money and the lands of people. They left the peasants to starve in their homes and excommunicated all who helped them. The following is a scene from chapter 29 where Arthur tries to help a peasant woman:

"Have mercy!" she pleaded. "All is taken, nothing is left."

"I have not come to take anything, poor woman."

"You are not a priest?" (225)

Later, the same woman says, "I tell you the place is under the Church's ban". The Middle Ages were the darkest and worst periods one could imagine in history. Superstition was something that White calls the 'rationality of men' then. Such a society "regulated human conflict by force and sustained its authority by the aid of religion" (63). There was poor sanitation and no hygiene at all. The Oxford History of Medieval Europe comments that people suffered from dry eyes, conjunctivitis, lesions and a thousand infections that spread from chamber pots being thrown out into the streets. This is why Merlin had watery eyes. Famine, plague, accidents, fire and violence killed half of the population. People had to live in fear of God, the Church, the King and the Lords. The dungeons were the most feared objects. Peasants were thrown into dungeons and forgotten for years. Twain's hero finds himself in the dungeons of Morgan's castle: "These were down under the castle's foundations, and mainly were small cells hollowed out of the living rock. Some of these cells had no light at all. In one of them was a woman, in foul rags...her dirt-caked fingers

locked in her lap” (129). There were other prisoners who looked old but were young. Some cells had old skeletons in chains. Some had prisoners without chains – “Chains ceased to be needed after a spirit had gone out of a prisoner” (130). In *Morte Darthur*, any knight on a quest must either set prisoners free or face the dungeon himself. And these were not as glorious as Malory says they were.

After all his achievements, there was no glory in Arthur himself. Women were beheaded right before his eyes and he never bothers. Women had no rights to voice themselves. Arthur loved to see knights getting killed in tournaments. He loved hunting for pleasure and drinking. In the eyes of a modern man – like Hank Morgan – Arthur is a pleasure-seeking war-mongering man. In *Morte Darthur*, a lady from Avelion comes with a sword around her waist. She says, “...for I may not be delivered of this sword but by a knight, but he must be a passing good man of his hands and deeds, and without villainy or treachery, and without treason” (42). “Then Arthur took the sword by the sheath and by the girdle and pulled at it eagerly, but the sword would not out” (43). None of the knights are pure enough to find the Grail. Percivale, Lancelot and Galahad get visions of it but die before finding it. Malory seems to celebrate Arthur in his book but he clearly points out the demerits of feudalism and manorialism. The first thing that Arthur did after he became King was to get tax from the Saxons and refuse to pay the same to the Romans – “the Saxons offered to leave all their gold and silver behind them. They also promised they would pay him tribute from Germany, and leave hostages with them...” (Monmouth VI. III).

There may have been many versions with different Arthurs but all of them intrinsically reveal that he was a tyrant, not unlike Nero or Hitler. Howard Brenton’s play *The Romans in Britain* (1980) produces a striking modern character sketch of Arthur in a dialogue between the Cook and Corda –

His sister murdered his father. His wife was unfaithful. He died by the treachery of his best friend. And when he was dead, the King who never was and the Government that never was – were mourned. And remembered. Bitterly. And thought of as a golden age, lost and yet to come (qtd. in. Carter and McRae 427).

The Once and Future King has indeed been reborn and reinstated countless times as merciless rulers in history.

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