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Eleanor M. Farrell
Independent Scholar

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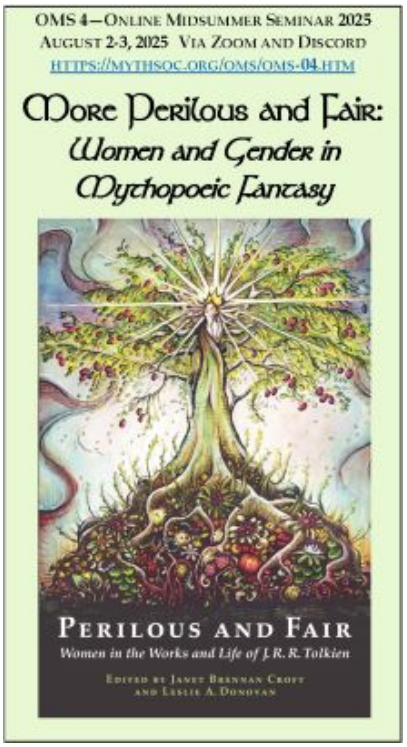

King Arthur 'Lite': Dilution of Mythic Elements in Arthurian Film

Abstract

Concentrates on films and television that use elements of the Arthurian legends, rather than retellings of the main story.

Additional Keywords

Arthurian myth—Film and television

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Eleanor M. Farrell

THE legend of King Arthur, as it exists today, is enormously complex. Themes, characters, and individual episodes have been incorporated from such sources as the early Welsh triads, the medieval British 'history' of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes' courtly romances and the spiritual quest epics of Wolfram von Eschenbach, up to the compilations of Thomas Malory, Alfred Tennyson, and their literary successors until the present time. Each new version has chosen selected elements of the story and added to them to make the tale relevant to a new audience—a trait that is continued today by a twentieth-century genre of storytelling, film.

Movies about King Arthur and his knights have been made since the creation of the cinematic media. Filmmakers have generally chosen to focus on a specific aspect of the Arthurian legends, such as the quest for the Holy Grail, the tragic love story of Tristan and Isolde, the adventures of Sir Gawain with the Green Knight, or (and most often) the love triangle of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere. Since the publication of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* in 1485, incorporating elements from the French romances and the European Grail material into the Arthurian corpus, the romance between Arthur's Queen and his best knight has remained one of the central themes of Arthurian legend, along with the quest by the knights of the Round Table for the Holy Grail and the incest between the young Arthur and his half-sister Morgause, which results in the birth of Mordred and the destruction of the Round Table and Camelot.

There are a handful of movies that stand out as efforts to do justice to the Arthurian themes and mythos. Although no two devotees will agree on which these are, Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*, John Boorman's *Excalibur*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* are highly considered by many fans and scholars. Rather than discuss films such as these, whose aims (whatever their success) are specific retellings of the legends surrounding Arthur and his knights, this paper concentrates on films, particularly recent ones, that use the tales in different ways.

In addition to retelling the major events of Arthurian legend, the setting of King Arthur's court is often used by filmmakers to set the scene or tone for a secondary plot. Two examples of this usage are *The Black Knight* and *Prince Valiant* (both released in 1954, with a new version of *Prince Valiant* in 1997). *The Black Knight* is essentially a medieval Western, with the blacksmith John (played by Alan Ladd, quintessential hero of the Western genre) thwarting a plot by Palamides and his Saracens, assisted by King Mark of Cornwall, to take over Arthur's kingdom. John, a commoner, thus raises himself to the rank of knight and hero, and can marry Linet, the daughter of Lord Yeonil, whom he loves. In *Prince Valiant*, the title character, hero of a long-running comic strip by Hal Foster and portrayed here by Robert Wagner, is an exiled Viking who finds refuge in King Arthur's court. Valiant protects Camelot from invasion by conquering the evil knight Sir Brack, while befriending Sir Gawain and winning the hand of the princess Aleta. Both movies introduce characters and incidents unfamiliar to any Arthurian scholar, but the central hub in both of these films is the court of Camelot, serving as a standard of order, chivalry, and justice. Arthur, his Queen, and his knights are present, but usually have a minor, if any, role in the central conflict. The plot of the more recent *Prince Valiant* includes the theft of Arthur's sword Excalibur by Morgan Le Fay, a common Arthurian element. As in the 1954 film, however, Valiant, rather than the usual cadre of Round Table knights, is the hero.

Films based on Mark Twain's 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, also use the Arthurian setting in a similar fashion, although Twain's story is more complex than a mere tale of adventure. In each of the many filmed versions of this story, all is not well in Camelot when the American from the future makes his (or her) arrival. The court is corrupt, Arthur impotent, and a bit of Yankee ingenuity is needed to set things right. Twain's book and the films based on it, however well they succeed, are comedies, and poke fun at the inanities of culture, past and future. The juxtaposition of a 'modern' man in the medieval Arthurian world is the crux of the story. In several recent versions, the savior of Camelot uses modern technological gadgets, such as a portable compact disc player or a mountain bike, to foil the villains (whatever their incarnation).

Twain based his novel on Malory, but made changes in the plot to suit his own purposes. In turn, each of the films based on Twain's novel have made further modifications. In *A Kid in King Arthur's Court* (1995), Merlin arranges

Calvin's trip through time and advises the youth of the kingdom's need for him, but the wizard only appears in a well, and is no longer physically present in Camelot. King Arthur, old and saddened by the death of his wife Guinevere, has lost interest in ruling his kingdom, which enables Lord Belasco to become powerful, oppressing the common people and demanding the hand of Arthur's oldest daughter in marriage. (The king here has two daughters, Sara and Katie.) Before Calvin's arrival, the people of the kingdom have only the mysterious Black Knight as their protector and provider. In a particularly '90s 'equal opportunities' twist, the Black Knight is finally revealed to be Arthur's daughter Sara, who is in love with Kane, an untitled sword and horse master. *A Kid in King Arthur's Court* actually has more in common with *The Black Knight* than with the themes of Twain's novel, although the general plot of *Connecticut Yankee* is followed. Two other new television films based on Twain's novel introduce African-Americans to Camelot: the 1989 TV movie *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* brings a young girl (Keshia Knight-Pulliam) to Arthur's realm to teach Guinevere and her ladies in waiting martial arts techniques, while Whoopi Goldberg's visit as physicist Dr. Vivian Morgan (*A Knight in Camelot*, 1999, also for television), orchestrated by Merlin, introduces the steam engine but more importantly steers Arthur in the right direction to ensure the establishment of Camelot's virtues for future society.

Going a step further, several recent films have taken Arthurian elements out of context and used them to enhance plots that may be only marginally related to the Arthurian themes. In the 1989 film, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy and his father, Professor Henry Jones, Senior, search for the Holy Grail, which has been the elder Jones's lifelong quest. The plot centers on the presumed ability of the Grail to give everlasting life, and since the story is set in 1938, Indy and his friends must prevent the Nazis from obtaining the sacred cup. Despite the serial-adventure setting, the film incorporates many historical references to the Grail, its origin, history, and status as an object of quest throughout the centuries, as well as adding some original history. In the film, the Grail, which had been lost for over a century, was rediscovered by three knights of the First Crusade; one of these is chosen to become the Grail's guardian until another knight comes to release him from his task. The riddles involved in reaching the Grail reflect those in the medieval literature: penitence, knowledge, and faith are all required by Indy before he can achieve his quest. The Grail's identification in the film with the chalice of the Last Supper adds

a layer of spirituality to what is essentially a movie adventure series. If only Professor Jones the elder, who had spent his entire life in search of the Grail, had remained to become the new Grail Knight, this would indeed be a classic Arthurian film!

Director Terry Gilliam, no stranger to medieval studies and, specifically, Arthurian material (having been involved in writing and directing the remarkably faithful-to-sources—despite the presence of the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch—*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), also tackles the Grail theme in his 1991 film, *The Fisher King*. Here the protagonist Jack Lucas, a popular radio talk show host, has lost his job and self-respect by carelessly initiating a tragic shooting by one of his show's callers. He is befriended by a homeless man who calls himself Perry (an obvious reference to Percival, the perfect fool who becomes the Grail Knight of medieval legend) and claims to be searching for the Holy Grail. Although the vagrant appears crazy, he is in fact tormented by the death of his wife, who was killed by the talk show caller. Gilliam personifies Perry's fears as a huge and threatening Red Knight, whom only Perry can see. *The Fisher King* is a story of loss and redemption, with the use of the Grail an intriguing symbol of spiritual growth and the achievement of personal peace.

Two other films are worth noting here for their use of Arthurian elements. The 1996 medieval adventure *Dragonheart* is set in the tenth century, presumably after the reign of King Arthur. Bowen, the main character (played by Dennis Quaid), is a wandering knight who left his place at court because the young king he served, Einon, abandoned the code of honor that Bowen had sworn to follow. Bowen now makes his living as a mercenary dragon-slayer, but is recognized by the last remaining dragon, Draco (whose voice is supplied by Sean Connery) as a man of honor; the two characters eventually join forces and Draco helps Bowen to regain his former ideals. The behavior of the protagonist here is influenced by the Round Table and the code of chivalry passed down by its knights. *Dragonheart* is not a particularly sophisticated film, otherwise; it has some good 'state of the art' special effects and a surprising amount of humor, but is basically an adventure story and 'buddy film' [with the knight, Bowen, and the dragon, Draco, starting as enemies and becoming fast friends by the film's end, of course]. No other mention or use of the Arthurian legends is made; the audience is presumed to be familiar enough with the code and conduct of King Arthur's knights to understand the motivation of the film's characters, which is a nice compliment to the viewer.

In contrast, the filmmakers of the 1993 film *Merlin* (also known as *October 32nd*) appeared to have taken several Arthurian elements and tossed them into a blender to concoct their amazingly illogical plot. A young reporter from Los Angeles, Christy Lake, is sent to a mining town in the mountains on assignment. There she learns that she is, in fact, the reincarnated Crystal of the Lake, daughter of Merlin and defender of the Sword of Power (made by Beltane the Smith). The sword was buried in a local mine a hundred years earlier, by another Crystal, but with the approach of October 32nd (which happens once every hundred years), the evil Pendragon, son of Mordred, has come to seek and steal the sword. (One presumes that his object, of course, is to take over the world.) Assistance to Christy and her protector John Pope (who is also periodically reincarnated but has been killed in every past confrontation with Pendragon) is provided by Lung Tao, an old Chinese man (inscrutably played by James Hong) who has been a pal of Merlin's over the centuries. Merlin himself only appears just before the final climactic battle, and seems to have been hibernating in a cave inside the mine (how he and the sword got to California in the first place is never explained). There is, incidentally, no mention at all of King Arthur.

While *Dragonheart* makes no pretense of being a retelling of the story of King Arthur, and *Merlin* is a curious but minor addition to eclectic film Arthuriana, there is another recent movie that bears closer study in its use of Arthurian elements: *First Knight*. A big budget, big cast (with Sean Connery as Arthur, Richard Gere portraying Lancelot, and Julia Ormond as Guinevere) production directed by Jerry Zucker, this 1995 film concentrates on the love triangle between Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere. However, rather than choosing selected elements of the legend and retelling them within the tapestry of Arthurian legend, as did the makers of *Knights of the Round Table* (1954), *Sword of Lancelot* (1963), *Camelot* (1967), *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), or *Excalibur* (1981), all of which deal with the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere and its effects on the Arthurian court, the creators of *First Knight* seem to have decided to use the Arthurian setting solely for its familiarity to viewers, removing most of the elements that make this tragic love story part of the mythos of King Arthur.

Guinevere, Queen of Leonesse, determines to wed King Arthur because her land needs protection from brigands led by a renegade knight, Malagant. Guinevere and Arthur have met, and are fond of each other, although the king is much older than his intended bride. On the journey to Camelot, Guinevere's

entourage is attacked, and she is rescued by Lancelot, a wandering mercenary. Although the two are attracted to each other, Guinevere chooses to go on to Camelot and marry King Arthur. Lancelot, too, goes to Camelot, and becomes a Knight of the Round Table after (again) rescuing Guinevere from Malagant. Finally, after Leonesse is attacked and Arthur and his knights fight successfully to defend Guinevere's people, Lancelot—in love with Guinevere but unable to have her and unwilling to destroy the ideals of Camelot—determines to leave. Arthur interrupts Guinevere and Lancelot in a parting (and essentially first) kiss, and has them put on trial for treason. During the trial, Malagant attacks Camelot. Arthur is mortally wounded, after which Lancelot kills Malagant, whose forces are routed. Dying, Arthur bequeaths Camelot to Lancelot and Guinevere, and his body is placed in a boat and set afire in a Viking burial.

In addition to the obvious inconsistencies—Lancelot's demotion from the son of a king to vagabond swordsman, no adultery, a happy ending, and no chance for a Burnt Arthur to return again—there are other missing elements at Camelot. There is no Merlin, no Morgan Le Fay, no Mordred. Arthur, a king wise enough to use his power for the good of all his people, is overcome with jealousy when he finds Lancelot and Guinevere together. Since, in fact, there has been no adultery, his accusation of treason—over the objections of the other knights—seems to be a blatant overreaction. In terms of the plot, it is Arthur's insistence on a public trial that allows Malagant to attack Camelot, but this action also subverts the ideals of justice that Arthur has propounded as king. The villain, Malagant, is a former knight of the Round Table who despises Arthur's 'might for right' code of conduct and wants the kingdom for himself—not Arthur's bastard son who might be thought to have a right to the throne. The knights of the Table Round—twelve of them!—are generically clad in Camelot colors, prone to arguing about Lancelot's right to become a knight because of his lack of position, and more or less nameless. (They are given names in the film credits, but only Agravaine—hardly one of Arthur's more illustrious knights—has more than a few lines of dialogue.) With the absence of the Grail Quest and the magic of Merlin and Morgan Le Fay, Camelot loses much of its numinous quality. *First Knight* could just have easily been written as an independent medieval love story, such as the (aesthetically if not financially) successful *Ladyhawke* (1985), or even the 1965 Charlton Heston vehicle, *The War Lord*. It is easy to conclude that the filmmakers' use of the Arthurian

characters stems more from laziness than from a desire to bring a fresh approach to a perennially favorite component of the tragic tale of King Arthur.

Equally mytho-challenged is *Quest for Camelot*, a 1998 Warner Brothers animated feature ostensibly based on Vera Chapman's novel, *The King's Damosel.* Any similarities to the book—or for that matter, to the Arthurian legend in general—are completely coincidental. Obviously made to compete with the recent Disney films featuring young women protagonists, the story centers around Kayley, whose father Sir Lionel is killed defending Arthur during the theft of Excalibur by the evil knight Ruber. The rest of the Round Table knights, Merlin, and the King are all incapable of restoring the sword to Camelot. Kayley, helped by a blind hermit, Garrett (once a stable boy in the royal castle), his falcon, and an annoying two-headed dragon, therefore takes on the quest (note that it is not Camelot that is missing; perhaps the knights were confused by the title). Most bewildering: the three-ringed symbol of Arthur's knights bears an uncanny resemblence to the Ballantine beer logo. Oh yes, there are songs.

By far the most important new piece of celluloid Arthuriana is the 1999 NBC miniseries, *Merlin.* Network television has evidently decided it is time to tackle the fantasy classics, possibly because new techniques in computer effects allow easier filming of visual spectacle. At any rate, *Merlin* was wildly popular with audiences, and even handled some parts of the Arthurian legend competently. The concentration on Merlin's story (rather than Arthur's) allows inclusion of the powerful episode of Vortigern's falling tower and Merlin's prophecy of the red dragon vanquishing the white. Few films bother to include the character of Elaine; here, although a minor character, she is at least present and allowed her Tennysonian death scene.

Many elements of Arthur's story do get over-conflated in the process. Arthur himself goes questing for the grail, attended by Gawain (the only named knight besides Lancelot) and the other knights; Merlin brings Lancelot to Camelot to guard the kingdom in Arthur's absence; Merlin returns Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake (who has a great fish necklace!) on Arthur's death. [While Merlin is tossing the blade, Arthur's body is rolling down a hill: so much for the barge to Avalon with its queenly attendants!] On the other hand, the writers could not seem to find enough villains within the traditions, so they introduced Queen Mab as the chief mover and shaker: she creates Merlin to restore the Old Ways and save her people (ie, Faerie, one presumes) and later attempts to destroy his

world when he refuses her demands. Nimue, whose characterization can be quite nebulous in the source material, is here relegated to the role of long-suffering girlfriend (hence the happy ending). Both Mab and the other villainess, Morgan le Fay (who calls herself by this title as a child!), have irritating speech impediments and extremely bad coiffures.

Pieces of the Arthurian legend have been showing up in recent television series, sometimes suitably but more often just baffling. Back in the mid-1980s, *Robin of Sherwood* included one episode ("The Inheritance") where Robin is summoned by an old man in a neglected castle, guardian of a treasure ("nothing more precious in England"), who asks the outlaw to succeed him. The treasure is the Round Table, the guardian a descendant of Agravaine. [Here he is again! Why Agravaine??] Arthur makes an appearance at the end to confirm the choice of successor—Agravaine's daughter Isadora, whose service to her father and his trust makes her a more fitting guardian than Robin.

More recently, snippets of Arthurian myth have surfaced in other TV shows. (I'll spare you details of the children's animated Saturday morning horrors, *Princess Gwenevere and the Jewel Riders* and *King Arthur and the Knights of Justice*, except to say that the former is about a bunch of giggly teenagers and their flying unicorns, and the latter a football team sent back in time to fight evil.)

The writers for *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* have obviously gotten bored of late with ancient Greece (even the anachronistic ancient Greece of New Zealand), so Herc has gotten to hobnob with his fellow godlings Zarathustra, Gilgamesh, the Norse gang, the Celtic crowd, etc. For the Arthurian adventure, "Once Upon a Future King," Merlin sends a churlish Arthur back in time to learn manners, and ethics, from Hercules. The real villain is Mab, who's been tutoring the future king of Britain in evil ways. Of course Herc (with the help of his gal pal Morrigan from Ireland) straightens Arthur out and sends him back, er, forward, to reign as we remember him.

Xena: Warrior Princess's take is much more subtle. In the episode "Gabrielle's Hope," Gabrielle and Xena take refuge in a British castle, which is manned by a small group of knights pledged to defend the helpless. Gabby asks about a sword stuck in a rock inside the keep, and is told that the group's last king before the Romans came put it there, and tradition held that some day a warrior who could pull out the sword would appear to lead them. A bit later, while the knights are discussing strategy, Xena strolls in, pulls the weapon from the stone, says "Nice blade" and sticks it back in again.

Babylon 5's creator, J. Michael Straczynski, is obviously intrigued with Arthuriana, and *B5* mythology shows some resonance with the Arthurian mythos. Two particular episodes of the series deal directly with elements of the legend. In "Grail," a man (played by David Warner, who pops up quite frequently in Arthurian films) who has spent his life looking for the grail finds a successor to his quest while visiting the station. The other, "A Late Delivery from Avalon," stars Michael York as a man who thinks he is King Arthur, and whose journey to Babylon 5 is a quest for peace from actions in his past. He fulfills this by returning the sword Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake—here identified with Delenn, who is herself a figure of power. The strength of the story lies in the timeless familiarity of the Arthurian legend and the roles of its characters. The spinoff series *Crusade* not only uses "Excalibur" as the name of the starship (used by the protagonists to search for a cure to the plague devastating Earth) but paraphrases the traditional grail question ("Whom does the Grail serve?" becomes "Who do you serve?") into the show's weekly introduction. In addition, one of the characters is a techno-mage, a Merlin-esque figure. The episode plots themselves, however, are not specifically relevant to the Arthurian legend.

To conclude, the widespread knowledge of the elements of Arthurian myth in Western culture is understandably used by storytellers of all genres, both in retelling the tales of King Arthur and his knights, and in showing the universal appeal and relevance of these themes to our own lives. A good film treatment can present the familiar themes of love, loyalty, spirituality, and honor in a fresh way, either within the context of the Arthurian universe or by transplanting the symbols and themes to another time or place. Unfortunately, in many films (as we see here), the Arthurian myth is merely used as a 'short cut' to grab an audience without putting any originality into the development of mood, theme, or even plot. When this is the case, the draft to be quaffed is thin indeed.

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