

The Arthurian Legend on the small screen

Starz' Camelot and BBC's Merlin

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Like King Arthur, I have been on a hero's journey. I ventured forth into the unknown world of academia to prove my worth, and have returned, tired but triumphant, with the boon of new wisdom. Campbell knew that every hero needs a wise old mentor to help them on their way, and I have been fortunate enough to have just such a man with me on my journey. I want to thank Einar Bjorvand for his good advice, his kind critique, his endless patience with my recurring grammatical errors, and the gift of several useful books. I could not have finished this thesis without him.

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0.0 Introduction

The story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table has endured for a thousand years. It has been told and retold countless times, in novel form, as poetry, on stage, and on screen. Its lasting appeal can be attributed both to its timeless fairy tale motifs, and to its ability to reshape itself to the tastes and needs of its evolving audience.

When Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote *Idylls of the King* in the mid-nineteenth century, he was addressing Victorian society's fears about the newly revealed nature of man. T. H. White's five-novel series *The Once and Future King* is a treatise on the politics of war, very much relevant in the mid-twentieth century, and a few decades later, Marion Zimmer Bradley made feminism a theme of her novel, *The Mists of Avalon*, and yet all three of these tell essentially the same story.

These are all literary examples, however, and today, while Arthurian novels are certainly still being written, they seem to be largely relegated to the Science-fiction & Fantasy shelf of your local bookshop, with its accompanying narrow market. Instead, it has fallen to Hollywood to keep King Arthur in the minds of the masses, and the results are many and varied. It is not the triumphs and failures of the big screen, though, but those of its little brother that this thesis is interested in, because in recent years there have been no less than two serious takes on the legend made for TV, BBC's *Merlin* (2008) and Starz' *Camelot* (2011).

Merlin began as a light-hearted family affair, but grew predictably darker over the course of five seasons, culminating in the battle of Camlann, and the death of King Arthur. The series was created by Shine, an independent producer, for the BBC, who wanted a family show in the vein of *Doctor Who* and *Robin Hood* (2006). It was to be a "three generation" TV show, meaning it could be watched by children, parents and grandparents, and naturally that meant it had to be family friendly (Deans: "BBC seeks magic touch").

Four men are credited as the creators of *Merlin*: Julian Murphy and Johnny Capps, who also were executive producers, and Jake Michie and Julian Jones, who wrote more than half of the show's episodes between them. Murphy and Capps went on to create *Atlantis* (2013), a show similar in tone to *Merlin*, but *Merlin* is their biggest success so far.

And a success it may rightly be called. From its premiere in September 2008 until it ended in December 2012, the show aired on Saturday evenings on BBC1, the flagship channel of the BBC. The prime time slot and the widely broadcasted channel probably contributed to its success, but it did have to fight for its audience, seeing that it aired at the same time as *The*

X Factor on rival channel ITV (Millar: “X Factor, Merlin”). So *Merlin*’s average of 5 to 7 million viewers every night was impressive (Golder: “Merlin series three”). The show also became very popular outside Great Britain. It was sold to 183 territories worldwide, “making it one of the most successful exports in TV history” (Grant: “Hit or Myth”).

Not everyone was positive in the beginning, though. Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* was not impressed by the premiere of “The Dragon’s Call” on NBC: “It takes the stuff of legend and imagination and makes it dry and commonplace. You look forward not to the next exciting chapter, but for the whole enterprise to go ‘poof’ and disappear” (Shales: “Tom Shales’ TV Preview”). The reviewers of *The Guardian* were also initially unimpressed, citing the “awful dialogue” and the lack of innovation in the show (Martin: “It make take a magician”). However, by season three they had warmed to the series, which seemed to be the general trend (Heritage: “Merlin has been cancelled”). *SFX Magazine* was one of the few that were positive from the beginning, and they remained enamoured of the show until the very end (Bradley: “Merlin 5.13”).

Camelot, in contrast, presented itself from the beginning as an adaptation for adults, full of politics, sex and violence. Although it did not last beyond its first season, it did manage to tell the story of the rise of Arthur, the adulterous affair of Guinevere, and the conception of Mordred. *Camelot* was created by Chris Chibnall and Michael Hirst for cable channel Starz, and it premièred in February 2011 with 1.3 million viewers, which was Starz best for a debut to that date (Yeoman: “Starz elects not to renew”). Chibnall and Hirst also wrote the series, along with others (“Camelot (2011)”: *IMDB*). Hirst had previous experience from *The Tudors*, another adult costume drama.

The reviews were mixed. Many gave credit to Joseph Fiennes and Eva Green, the biggest stars of the cast, for their performances and their chemistry, but Jamie Campbell Bower’s Arthur was judged less of a success, though acknowledgements were made that he might just need some time to allow the character to grow (Crider: “‘Camelot’ Series Premiere”; Goodman: “Camelot: TV review”; Hale: “Like, O.K.”).

The series was cancelled after only one season. Possible reasons include conflicting cast schedules, poor ratings, and superior competition from HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (Hibberd: “Starz cancels Camelot”; Yeoman: “Starz elects not to renew”).

Why have I chosen to write a thesis on these two shows, and what do I aim to discover or prove? First of all, *Camelot* and *Merlin* are perfectly suited for a contrast/comparison analysis. They aired at the same time, are both live-action, serious takes on the Arthurian legend, and yet their profiles are almost completely opposite, *Merlin* being a colourful,

humorous show made for a young audience, and *Camelot* being a gritty, sexy take on the same story. Secondly, practically no attention has come their way from the field of Arthurian studies, despite there being considerable activity in the field. In general, the Arthurian legend on the small screen has been mostly neglected academically, though there are plenty of scholarly works that deal with Arthurian cinema. There seems to be a prevailing idea that TV shows by nature have less artistic merit than films, which again have less artistic merit, less weight, than literature (Bjorvand: slide 2), but this is simply not true, as anyone who has ever seen a bad film or read a bad book may easily testify.

Merlin is the longest Arthurian adaptation ever put to screen, and *Camelot* is the fourth or fifth longest. That alone would make them noteworthy, but in addition, they are almost alone in their genre. There are no real small screen Arthurian adaptations like them. There is the French comedy *Kaamelot* from 2004, which has a good reputation but is fairly unknown because it was not released outside France and Canada, and there is *The Adventures of Sir Galahad* (1949) and *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* (1956), neither one of which is very well known, and both of which are very much informed by their time. Technically, the screen version of *The Mists of Avalon*, made in 2001 and directed by Uli Edel, is a TV miniseries, and so is Steve Barron's *Merlin* from 1998, and both of these are well-known. However, I almost count them more as lengthy films because they are constructed in the same way films are. They are not episodic. There exist a handful of animated adaptations as well, but being made for small children, or for fans of Japanese animation, they too do not have the widespread audience of *Merlin* and *Camelot*. *Merlin* and *Camelot* are well-known, mainstream, episodic TV shows that are guaranteed to influence the future of the Arthurian legend in the mind of the general public. Scholars interested in Arthuriana cannot afford to ignore them.

My intention with this thesis is to examine the idea that *Merlin* and *Camelot* are worth paying academic attention to, and to prove my hypothesis I have chosen two books, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell and *Remaking the Middle Ages* by Andrew B. R. Elliott, and will be applying the theories presented in these books to the two TV shows.

In the first chapter, I will introduce the shows and try to place them within the Arthurian tradition. To do so I will begin with a brief history of the legend, and a summary of what the story of King Arthur looks like in the minds of the general public today, in order that I may then look at the significant changes *Merlin* and *Camelot* have made to that story, and how those changes affect the themes of the shows. Having done so, I will hopefully be able to say something about how the shows make themselves relevant to their modern audiences.

In the shorter, second chapter, I will use Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory to examine the consequences of portraying Merlin and Arthur as the same age, both young men, in *Merlin*, and see if the theory can be applied to *Camelot's* single season, and how the show uses the theory to reinforce its themes.

Finally, in the third chapter, I will make use of Andrew B.R. Elliott's *Remaking the Middle Ages* to explore the ways in which *Camelot* and *Merlin* present their takes on the legendary Middle Ages. While Elliott's theory concerns only the big screen, there is no doubt that the same visual and narrative cues are used by the small screen, though with some significant differences that I will discuss as they became relevant.

As BBC's *Merlin* is not only substantially longer than Starz' *Camelot*, but also told a complete story, while *Camelot* only lasted through its own beginning, there will, in this thesis, be a natural emphasis on the former show. There is simply more to say about *Merlin*. All the episodes references can be found in the DVD collections listed under primary sources in the bibliography.

A quick note on names may be called for. There exists a variety of spellings for almost every important Arthurian name. Malory alone used several different spellings within his own work, simply because consistency was not so much of an issue in his day. Other names have evolved, such as Ygerna turning into Igraine, but not every name has settled into a single form, so while for instance Merlin is no longer written as Merlyon, some modern authors still choose to use Merlyn. I will only be using differing spellings where they occur in *Camelot* and *Merlin*. An example is the legendary Sir Gawain, who is Gawain in *Camelot* and Gwaine in *Merlin*, but for all mentions of the character that are not strictly referring to his appearance in either of the two shows, I will use the most prevalent spelling. So I will use Morgan Le Fay when speaking of the legendary sorceress, as long as I am not referring to either Morgan of *Camelot* or Morgana of *Merlin*, in which case I will name them accordingly. This will hopefully help in keeping the characters and the shows apart.

Chapter 1

1.1 A brief history of the Arthurian legend

What exactly is the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table? How does it begin and how does it end? Who are the characters and what are their relationships? These questions are more difficult to answer than they might seem, because the Arthurian legend grew into being over the course of several centuries, built upon and collected by many different authors, and the Arthurian tradition continues to grow and change even today. There is no single definitive story.

The historical origins of King Arthur are hotly debated by archaeologists, scholars and historians, but luckily the man's literary origins are much easier to trace. King Arthur began merely as a mentioned name, and it was not the name of a king, only a hero. Arthur the warrior is mentioned in the late 6th and early 7th century by several sources, and Nennius the monk attributes to Arthur twelve victories over the Saxons in his *Historia Brittonum* (Shepherd xvii). Nennius became a source for Geoffrey of Monmouth, who gives us the first King Arthur in his very popular *History of the Kings of Britain*, believed to have been written in 1136. Geoffrey's work is precisely what the title implies, except that his historical account was of course not very historical at all. His kings, numbering almost a hundred, wrestle with monsters, slay hundreds of foes singlehandedly, frequently conquer Norway and Denmark, and even sack Rome on one memorable occasion. The rules of scholarly writing were different in the twelfth century, and even though Geoffrey garnered criticism even from his contemporaries, his book was still extremely popular. He wanted to celebrate the might of the British, and none of his kings did it better than Arthur. It was for his Arthur that Geoffrey became, and stayed, famous, and yet this Arthur bears little resemblance to the iconic king that lingers in the public consciousness today. There is no Camelot, no code of chivalry, and no knights jousting for the honour of fair maidens in conical hats. Geoffrey's King Arthur marries Guinevere, goes to war against Rome, kills an evil giant, is mortally wounded trying to reclaim his kingdom from his treacherous nephew Mordred, and is finally taken to the isle of Avalon from where he will one day return. The most extraordinary thing about Geoffrey's Arthur is his conception, because it was Geoffrey who wrote the story of Uther and Igraine, and their union made possible by the tricks of Merlin. Along with making Arthur a king, Geoffrey is credited with the creation of the Merlin we know today, by combining the boy Ambrosius Aurelianus from the works of Nennius, and the prophet Myrddin of Celtic legends

(Lupack 331). Geoffrey's Merlin is a young man of mysterious ancestry, possessed of many arts and powers, not least among them a prophetic spirit that he uses to predict the future of Britain. Geoffrey has Merlin help Uther disguise himself in order to enter the bedchamber of the married Igraine, and the union between the two produces Arthur. Merlin does not, however, go on to become Arthur's advisor, the role he is famous for in modern times, but Geoffrey had laid the groundwork, and many poets and authors were inspired by his *History*.

The French in particular fell in love with Geoffrey's Arthur, a bit ironically. Chrétien de Troyis is perhaps the most important of the writers that expanded and shaped the legend between Geoffrey's *History* and Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Chrétien introduced Lancelot into the tradition, as well as the motif of the quest for the Holy Grail, and his Camelot was more romantic than Geoffrey's, with the pious, chivalrous knights and their lady-loves that modern audiences are more familiar with. The legend was expanded, the story retold over and over by a plethora of writers, in verse form and in prose, and finally, in 1469, Thomas Malory began working on the book that would join all the different stories into one. He published *Le Morte D'Arthur* in 1470, and if any work can be said to contain *the* story of King Arthur and his knights, this is it (Shepherd xviii - xix).

Malory's book continues to be the weightiest of them all, but between then and now there are many noteworthy entries in the Arthurian tradition. What changed was that after Malory, not much was written that did not somehow build on what he and his predecessors had done. The new authors were not writing the Arthurian legend so much as they were writing within the Arthurian tradition. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote a verse epic called *The Idylls of the King* over the course of the second half of the 19th century, Wagner wrote an opera about Sir Percival, and there were others, famous both then and now, but perhaps the biggest game changer after Malory was T. H. White and his five-book series *The Once and Future King*, published between 1938 and 1971.

White sticks fairly close to Malory for the plot, but adds a wealth of details, and the tone of his story is very different from Malory, being sometimes gently mocking, other times celebrating, and often sad. Some parts, such as Arthur's education by Merlin, are entirely White's, and he keeps the focus on Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot on the one hand, and the Orkney brothers on the other, including Gawain and Mordred. The series is in part a dry political thesis that to a 21st-century audience will already seem outdated. It is also a story about ordinary human beings living in a legend that is larger than themselves, and that part is profoundly moving both on the grand scale and on the small. White elegantly brings the national and personal tragedy together in the last scene of the fourth book, where an aged

Arthur sits in his tent, waiting for dawn and the call to battle, and trying to figure out what it all amounted to in the end. He passes on his legacy of right over might to a young squire, sends the boy off to safety, and walks into his final battle with a peaceful heart.

But White's series could easily have been just another entry in the Arthurian tradition, had it not been adopted, and adapted, by the medium that by then had entered the tradition to stay, that of the film. Disney had finished *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* and was looking for a subject for their next animated film, and they chose the first book in White's series. *The Sword in the Stone* was released in 1963, and because of the popularity of Disney, generation after generation were and still are introduced to King Arthur and Merlin by what is essentially White's vision of them. Three years earlier, Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner had adapted *The Candle in the Wind*, the fourth book in the series, into a musical, and in 1967 it was made into a film starring Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave as King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. The musical focused heavily on the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, but kept White's ideas of might vs right.

Back on the literary side of things, the next author to stand out was a woman, Marion Zimmer Bradley. Her *The Mists of Avalon* focused on the largely neglected women of the Arthurian legend, making them principle players in the rise and fall of Camelot. She also portrayed a strong tension between the old Pagans and the emerging Christians.

New books about King Arthur are published every single year, and there are many authors that are both critically acclaimed and beloved by fans of Arthuriana, but though they all have their own take on the legend and the legendary characters, only a very few leave an impression that lasts, or that spreads beyond the inner circle of fans. White did it and Bradley did it, and on the big screen, in addition to the films mentioned above, Monty Python and John Boorman are still famous for their *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Excalibur* (1981) respectively. These are the works that, for now, are important to this thesis, and from these works I will try to outline what the general public usually know or think they know about the story of King Arthur. There might not be a single version of the Arthurian Legend, but a summary of the most famous parts will still be useful to us. Since, as has been previously pointed out, TV and cinema have taken over the task of teaching the general public about King Arthur, the summary will focus mostly on those aspects of the story which usually make it on to the screen.

King Uther of Britain is in love with Igraine, wife of the Duke of Cornwall. Uther goes to war against the Duke in order to win Igraine. Merlin, knowing that from the union of Uther and Igraine will be born the greatest King Britain has ever seen, agrees to help Uther by

magically disguising him as the Duke to get him past the guards and into Igraine's chamber. Igraine and Uther spend the night together, Uther wins the war and takes Igraine as his Queen, and nine months later Arthur is born. This story can be traced all the way back to Geoffrey, and also appears in Malory, giving it a great deal of weight. Malory also tells that Arthur was fostered away from the court by one Sir Ector, and grew up thinking he was Ector's son, until the day he pulls the sword out of the stone. White's first book is dedicated to this time in Arthur's life, and the Disney adaptation ends with the drawing of the sword, and Arthur's crowning, so this is another aspect quite well engrained in the public consciousness. That Arthur marries Guinevere and gathers the Knights of the Round Table is perhaps the one thing anyone can tell you about King Arthur, though the war with Rome has mostly been lost in favour of the more timeless fairy-tale motifs, and the national struggles have taken precedence over the international, so the Saxons have stayed, but the Romans have gone. Lancelot's affair with Guinevere is prominent in a lot of films, some, like *First Knight* (1995), *Camelot* (1967) and *Sword of Lancelot* (1963), focus exclusively on the love-triangle, and those that tell the full of story of the fall of Camelot can hardly do so without the famous affair. The Holy Grail is well known for being sought after by King Arthur's knights, but the details of the quest vary much from version to version, and the whole episode has often been left out, especially as the intended audience became more secular.

Arthur's death, like his birth, has remained pretty much intact since Geoffrey. He is given a mortal wound fighting Mordred in a war over the kingdom, but he kills Mordred in turn. Frequently they meet at Camlann, and Arthur is always taken away to Avalon to await a time when Britain needs him, at which time he will return. The sword he drew from the stone is known to be returned to the Lady of the Lake, and the image of her elegant arm rising out of the water, holding the sword, is famous and frequently replicated. However, the sword itself, Excalibur, has changed over the years, notably it has gone from being two different swords to only one. In *Morte*, Arthur first draws a sword from the stone and anvil in which it is stuck, but when that later breaks, he is gifted a magical sword and scabbard by the Lady of the Lake. Over time, the two swords have merged into one, and the scabbard, with its magical protective properties, has disappeared out of modern retellings. The character of Mordred has also changed, or more specifically, his origins have. According to Geoffrey he was Arthur's nephew, the son of Arthur's sister Anna. By Malory's time, Anna has been replaced by Igraine's three daughters with the Duke of Cornwall, Elaine, Morgause and Morgan Le Fay. Morgause marries Lot of Orkney and gives birth to Gawain, Agravaine, Gareth and Gaheris. Then she goes to Camelot, meets Arthur, and either seduces him or falls for him depending on

the source, and together they beget Mordred, who then becomes both nephew and son to Arthur. This is obviously a rather important shift, as it introduces a theme of sin previously absent. Arthur is usually unaware that he is sleeping with his sister, either because he has never met her or because she enchants him, but in *Morte* the sin of incest still makes God angry with the King, and this is the beginning of the fall of Camelot. Mordred grows up hating his father, and is instrumental in exposing the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, which is what makes the fellowship of the Round Table fall apart. Once again, since T. H. White kept all this in his series, and so the musical also kept it, it has not entirely disappeared from modern retellings, however, one major change has taken place that is more well-known than the story as told by Malory. At some point, Morgan Le Fay eclipsed her sister Morgause in fame, and became the mother of Mordred. In fact, Mordred has not once been the son of Morgause on film or on TV. The closest is the filmic adaptation of *The Mists of Avalon*, wherein Morgan Le Fay (there Morgaine) is the birth mother, but her aunt Morgause nurtures the child from infancy and makes him the man he is in adulthood. In literature also, a shift in focus has been made from the one sister to the other, but since literature is not dependent on the simplification and compression that movies are, the change has not been so total. Another major change to happen to these half-sisters of Arthur is that they have gone from being ambitious but morally complex characters in Malory, to being villains. This trend was challenged by Bradley in *Mists*, and a number of contemporary authors, mostly female, are working on restoring the depth to these characters, but to the general public, Morgan Le Fay is the name of an evil, seductive sorceress, and Morgause is completely unknown.

Authors of Arthurian literature have always changed the story, the characters and the themes to suit their purposes. The legend has been used in politics, philosophy and entertainment, and has proven itself both versatile and timeless enough that it can engage and move generation after generation.

The rest of this chapter will explore the place of *Merlin* and *Camelot* in the Arthurian tradition, in what ways they challenge what the general public know of the story of King Arthur, and how they struggle to make themselves relevant to a modern audience.

In the section about *Merlin*, I will address the various areas of the story that are somehow unique to *Merlin*, or that are greatly impacted by *Merlin's* main plot conflict: King Uther's banishment of magic from the land. First I will discuss the similarities between Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin and Colin Morgan's Merlin. Then I will look at the love triangle of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot and how *Merlin* has chosen to portray it. Finally, I

will discuss Morgana as a character and a villain, and how she provides a cautionary tale for Merlin.

Then I will move on to *Camelot*, following the same pattern of looking at the premise, the changes made to the story, and how they make *Camelot* different from what has come before. This time I will begin with the Morgan Le Fay-character, here Morgan Pendragon, and explore how she and Arthur are compared and contrasted within the show, as well as how the show has chosen to radically change the plot of the love triangle, and what consequences that has on the themes of the story. Finally, I will discuss at *Camelot's* feminist agenda, and how it is undermined by the show's adult profile.

1.2 BBC's *Merlin*

Merlin's premise can be summed up as follows: As a young man, the sorcerer Merlin comes to Camelot and meets Prince Arthur. Together they move towards fulfilling their legendary destiny, while struggling to overcome the obstacles in their way, the greatest of which is the outlawing of magic in Camelot.

Merlin makes many changes to the commonly known elements of the Arthurian legend, but some of them in particular make the show stand out from the tradition that precedes it. Arthur and Merlin are both young men, of the same age, magic is banned from the land under pain of death, meaning Merlin must keep his talents secret, and Morgana is Arthur's half-sister through Uther, not through Igraine.

1.2.1 The boy wizard: Merlin in *History* and *Merlin*

There have been several literary works dealing with the early years of Merlin. T. A. Barron and Mary Stewart are notable authors who have each dedicated a series of books to the young Merlin. Barron published his five books between 1996 and 2000, while Stewart's trilogy was written and published in the 1970s. Also from the 70s were Robert Nye's *Merlin*, and Michael De Angelo's *Cyr Myrddin: The Coming of Age of Merlin*, the first of which follows the wizard from birth to end, while the other deals with his education as a wizard and a legend. However, the very first boy Merlin appeared centuries before all of the above. In fact, the first time readers met the young wizard, was the first time he appeared on the page at all.

Geoffrey of Monmouth lay much of the groundwork of the Arthurian legend with his three literary works, *Prophetiae Merlini*, *Historiae Regum Britanniae*, and *Vita Merlini*. The

second of these, written in the 1130s, was the first to link the character of Merlin to King Arthur, though the two do not actually meet within the text. Instead, Merlin is around to deal with the generation prior to Arthur: Uther Pendragon, his brother Aurelius, and the man who briefly took the throne of Britain from them, Vortigern.

Interestingly, Geoffrey of Monmouth features as a regular character on *Merlin*. He is King Uther's court genealogist, and keeps a vast library where Merlin frequently goes to find a solution to the conflict of the episode. He also officiates at weddings, and is the one to crown Arthur after Uther's death. The idea seems to be that he will write the legend after having witnessed it first-hand, though it would have been a story vastly different from the book the real Geoffrey wrote. Regardless, it is clear that the creators of *Merlin* had some kind of knowledge of the real Geoffrey of Monmouth, and wanted to signal their knowledge to the audience. In the absence of a single source text, several "hypotexts" can be identified as having influenced the "hypertext", here *Merlin*, and Geoffrey's *History* is likely one of them (Bjorvand: slide 8).

While the presence of a Geoffrey in *Merlin* is not proof enough of any intent on the writers' part to base their show on his works, a comparison between certain scenes in *The History* and *Merlin* actually yields some interesting results. Geoffrey's highly fictionalised history covers hundreds of years and deals with almost one hundred different kings, but even in this large character roster, Merlin is the most intriguing of them all, and though he only figures in the story for a short time, he is given more depth than even King Arthur, who is the character that Geoffrey spends the most time on. The kings are mostly defined by whether they are kind or cruel to their people; beyond that, they are all incredibly strong and unmatched for bravery. The good ones are pious and generous, the bad ones greedy pagans. Arthur himself does not so much resemble the romantic knight-king he will become, but is more of a conqueror. Merlin, on the other hand, is a wild-card, and it is remarkable just how much we get to know about him in the few scenes in which he appears. Merlin does not behave like anyone else in the book. His story begins with King Vortigern, who is under threat from the Saxons, and wants to build himself a stronghold where he can be safe, but every morning, the previous day's labour lies in ruin on the hillside. Vortigern's magicians tell him that the solution is to find a "lad without a father" (Geoffrey:167), and sprinkle his blood on the rocks to keep the tower standing. Merlin proves to be the lad in question, but he takes the news of his own impending death with extraordinary calm. He tells Vortigern that his magicians have been lying to him, and explains that the true reason for the tower's instability is that there is a lake beneath the hill, and that two dragons lie sleeping there.

Vortigern is amazed by Merlin's courage, not to mention his supernatural powers of sight, as his explanation turns out to be true.

Vortigern is later killed when Uther and Aurelius invade Britain to reclaim the throne. Merlin serves as an advisor to both the new kings, and continues to be effortlessly powerful, moving the Giant's ring from Ireland to Stonehenge, and accurately predicting the death of Aurelius from a comet that appears in the sky one night, but what is most fascinating about him continues to be the sheer force of personality he exhibits. He is constantly bold and outspoken; when Merlin suggests to King Aurelius that they should move the Giant's Ring, Aurelius laughs at the outrageous suggestion. "Try not to laugh in a foolish way, Your Majesty," Merlin replies, casually insulting the King of Britain (Geoffrey:196). Uther comes with Merlin to Ireland to dismantle the ring, and Merlin stands back, watches and laughs as Uther and his men all try and fail to shift the huge stones. When it is Merlin's turn, he easily succeeds where the others have failed, and it is clear that he only gave them a turn in order to amuse himself with their ineptitude. Merlin is playful, cheeky and brave, but he is also deeply sensitive. Twice in the narrative he delivers prophecies, and each time he weeps while he describes the bloodshed and devastation awaiting the people of Britain.

Now turning to *Merlin*, what three traits does Colin Morgan's Merlin display in the very first episode of the show? Bravery, sensitivity and cheek. Not only that, but his first meeting with Arthur echoes his introductory scene in *History*. In Geoffrey's book, Vortigern's men find Merlin playing with other boys in the street of his hometown, and the soldiers are alerted to Merlin's significance when he gets into a fight with one of the other boys, one Dinabutus, who puts Merlin down in the following way: "Why do you try to compete with me, fathead? How can we two be equal? I myself am of royal blood on both sides of my family. As for you, nobody knows who you are, for you never had a father!" (Geoffrey:167). Geoffrey does not give us Merlin's reply, but the scene is nonetheless easy to interpret. Merlin is probably doing well in whatever game they are playing, and Dinabutus, frustrated that he is being outdone by someone he considers an inferior, tries to put Merlin down verbally. His words are those of a sore loser, not a triumphant winner.

In *Merlin*, the young wizard has barely arrived in Camelot before he gets himself into trouble with his own bully of royal blood. He comes across a scene in a town square, where a group of young men are tormenting a servant. Merlin proves his bravery first of all by intervening in their game, telling the bullies to stop. However, unlike Dinabutus, the leader of this group of boys is very much Merlin's physical superior, and since Merlin cannot use his magic for the threat of being caught, their scuffle lasts a total of one punch, thrown by Merlin

and intercepted by his opponent. Merlin, now pinned, learns to his chagrin that the bully is Arthur, son of the King. So their first meeting ends with Merlin being sent to the dungeon, but even so, he cannot help rising to the bait later, when Arthur taunts him a second time. Even knowing that Arthur can command his return to prison, Merlin chooses to stand up to him. “Look, I’ve told you you’re an ass, I just didn’t realise you were a royal one,” he says, making Arthur laugh. In the next scene, Merlin is berated by his mentor and guardian, Gaius, for getting in trouble again, and for using his magic so frivolously, but Merlin counters that his magic is the only thing that makes him special, and that if he cannot use it he might as well die. A little dramatic perhaps, but the signs of a sensitive personality nonetheless, and his easily triggered, deeply emotional nature will stand in contrast to Arthur’s machismo for the rest of the series. *Merlin*’s Merlin is very similar to the Merlin of *The History*.

Fate conspires to make Merlin Arthur’s manservant, and once thrown together it does not take long for the two hotheads to form a strong friendship, but in the absence of further mace fights, what else can provide the conflict for the next five seasons? The answer is Uther Pendragon and his vendetta against magic. Twenty years before the events of the opening episode, “The Dragon’s Call”, King Uther and Queen Igraine ruled over a Camelot where magic flourished. When the couple failed to conceive an heir, they turned to High Priestess Nimueh and asked for her help. She warned them that she could not create a life without taking a life in return, but the couple wanted it done anyway. Nine months later, Arthur was born, and Queen Igraine died in childbirth. Even though Nimueh had had no control over what life would be taken in payment for the child, Uther blamed her for the death of his wife, and blinded by grief, he banned magic from the land, ordering the execution of any man, woman and even child found guilty of practicing or associating with magic. The next few years is referred to in the show as The Great Purge. By the time Merlin arrives in Camelot, peace reigns, but Uther’s fervour has not cooled, and the first thing Merlin witnesses upon entering the city is a young man being executed for sorcery. No matter how close Arthur and Merlin become, Merlin does not dare to tell Arthur about his talent, because Arthur is Uther’s son, and brought up in his father’s beliefs. This keeps them apart even after they have forged a powerful bond of friendship between them.

Though Colin Morgan’s Merlin is young, he does his best to take up his traditional role as Arthur’s advisor and guide. According to the Great Dragon, it is Merlin’s job to make Arthur a good king, and Arthur is going to need all the help he can get, for as he proves in the first episode, when Merlin first meets him he is little more than an arrogant bully. This is due to the events of twenty years earlier, and the banishment of magic. Arthur’s only redeeming

moment in the “The Dragon’s Call” is when he spares Merlin from a new trip to the dungeons after their second confrontation, instead giving him points for bravery. Arthur’s amusement and even delight at Merlin’s disrespectful behaviour suggests that maybe Arthur is not happy with the status quo, and would appreciate having someone stand up to him when he does something wrong. The second episode, “Valiant”, goes further in revealing that there is a great deal more to Arthur’s character than what seems at first, and that a lot of his behaviour in the first episode is a defence mechanism he has developed to deal with the pressure of his role as Prince. As Merlin quickly discovers in his new role as Arthur’s manservant, the Prince has a lot of duties and expectations to live up to. As Merlin prepares Arthur for the tournament that is the focus of the episode, he can tell that Arthur is nervous, but Arthur vehemently denies it, clearly considering the emotion a weakness. This attitude is explained when King Uther later welcomes the competing knights to Camelot. “It is in combat that we learn a knight's true nature, whether he is indeed a warrior or a coward,” the King proclaims. There is nothing in-between for him, only winners and losers. Before leaving to take his seat in the stands, he claps Arthur on the shoulder and says, “I trust you will make me proud,” in a voice that makes it clear that there will be consequences should Arthur fail.

Merlin’s King Uther is a hard man, whose perception of the world has grown increasingly black and white over the past twenty years. Under the watchful eyes of this overbearing father, Arthur has grown into a man whose heart is locked away behind a shield personality that is shallow, arrogant and overly concerned with machismo. He has been taught that showing emotion and asking for help are signs of weakness, and that he must be the best, or he is nothing. “Valiant” illustrates this well, showing us Uther’s expectations and the emphasis he puts on winning, and how Arthur can be a very different man when he is on his own. When Merlin tells Arthur that one of the other knights is using lethal magic to cheat in the tournament, Arthur believes Merlin, even though tradition dictates that the word of a servant means nothing against that of a knight.

The characterisation of Arthur set down by “Valiant” remains throughout the show as a problem that must be gradually solved. Even when Uther dies three seasons later, Arthur continues to live in his shadow. In season four, Morgana and her ally Agravaine use this to their advantage, goading Arthur into a war with Queen Annis of Caerleon by making Arthur act as his father would have done, rather than follow his own instinct. Arthur is still too preoccupied with being the man his father wanted him to be to realise that he is making the wrong choices, and once again Merlin’s advice goes unheard, as the voice of the past rings loud in Arthur’s ears. Though by the end of the episode, Arthur has a change of heart and

manages to forge an alliance with Caerleon (“His Father’s Son”). Arthur is unable to completely free himself of his father’s ghost until he gets a chance to do so literally, in the third episode of the fifth season.

How then, is Merlin supposed to change Arthur? Mostly by being honest with him, which is ironic considering the fundamental lie that their relationship is based on. As we see in the first episode, Merlin is willing to stand up to Arthur when no one else dares. He is never afraid to tell Arthur when he is being “a prat”. Merlin’s other great contribution is something as simple and powerful as friendship. In the finale of season four, “The Sword in the Stone Part 2”, Arthur has a rare moment of vulnerability: “... you’re the only friend I have and I couldn’t bear to lose you,” he confesses, though he closes up again quickly when Merlin tries to linger in the moment. It is Arthur’s actions more than his words that reveal how he changes over the seasons.

1.2.2 The love triangle in *Merlin*: Lancelot and Guinevere

The banishment of magic provides most of the conflict of the show, with only a few exceptions, usually having to do with might and right. What makes one worthy of knighthood (Merlin: “Lancelot”)? What is nobility (Merlin: “Gwaine”)? What does it mean to be a good king? Usually this is a lesson Arthur is meant to learn to enable him to rule Camelot. As portrayed traditionally, the love-triangle of Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur would also be an exception, but in *Merlin* it is not.

It was Chrétien de Troyes who wrote Sir Lancelot into the Arthurian legend, and the knight has changed little since then. He is still considered the greatest of all of Arthur’s knights, and he is still most famous for his love affair with Queen Guinevere. The majority of entries in the Arthurian tradition deal with the love affair, though the motivations of the characters change subtly from telling to telling, as does the level of vilification of the three principle characters involved. *First Knight* (1995) portrays Arthur and Guinevere’s marriage as politically motivated, and Lancelot as a better match for Guinevere than the fatherly, Middle-Aged Arthur. It also boils the affair down to a single kiss, and though Lancelot and Guinevere are charged with treason, the film ends with King Arthur blessing their relationship on his own death bed. The musical “Camelot” focuses exclusively on the affair and how it brought about the end of Camelot’s golden age, but it keeps the deeply flawed, relatable humanity of the three characters as portrayed in T. H. White’s text, leaving the audience sympathetic to them all. In Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*, Guinevere believes her childlessness to be a punishment from God because of her affair with Lancelot, while Arthur

believes himself to be infertile, and their solution of bringing Lancelot in for a threesome makes everything worse. There are, in short, many ways of telling the story.

Neither *Merlin* nor *Camelot* portrays the affair as it is traditionally portrayed, and between them they have some similarities, and at least one striking difference. In *Merlin*, Arthur and Guinevere's romance does not begin until the second season.

The first episode, "The Curse of Cornelius Sigan", shows us how their perceptions of each other are changing; Guinevere saves Arthur's life during an attack, and Arthur is clearly impressed with her. When she pushes him out of the way of a charging attacker and lands on top of him in an innocently suggestive position, the audience understands that Guinevere's initial crush on Merlin is over, and that her burgeoning love for Arthur will be the new focus. In the second episode, tellingly named "The Once and Future Queen", Arthur hides out at Guinevere's house for a few days, and it proves to be quite an experience for them both. Arthur, used to a life of royalty, behaves thoughtlessly entitled and inconsiderate, taking Guinevere's bed without realising that she will have to sleep on the floor, expressing disappointment at the standards of her house, and not lifting a finger to help her even though she is housing him to her own inconvenience. In the second act of the episode, Guinevere's temper boils over and she gives Arthur an earful, and to his credit he spends the rest of the episode trying to better his ways. The romantic beginning of the legendary King and Queen of Camelot is portrayed realistically, showing both how their relationship needs work, and how it *will* work, because Arthur, while flawed, is capable of listening and changing. If it seems strange that all the faults and flaws are being placed on Arthur's shoulders here, that is because he is the only one who is flawed. Guinevere as portrayed in *Merlin* is very nearly a perfect person. She is endlessly kind, patient and generous, practical, intelligent and merciful. This characterisation becomes especially important when the time comes for her affair with Lancelot to happen.

Lancelot and Guinevere's romance begins already in the fifth episode of the first season, when Lancelot is introduced. Lancelot is a rather unique character in *Merlin*. The writers made the decision to have him weave in and out of the narrative, disappearing for long periods at the time, so that he ultimately takes part in only six out of sixty-five episodes. In his introductory episode, he tells Merlin that "[e]ver since I was a child I've dreamed of coming here. It's my life's ambition to join the knights of Camelot" ("Lancelot"). That is a rather lofty ambition for a peasant, but he is full of admiration for the knights and seems to be trying to live his life according to their ideal.

Lancelot's first meeting with Guinevere nicely illustrates his obsession with the knightly ideal, as well as how he seems almost to be living in a slightly different reality from the other characters. Merlin has asked Gwen to help make a surcoat for Lancelot, and it is clear right away that they like each other. Despite Gwen being a seamstress, and despite her plain clothes and her plain home, Lancelot calls her "my lady". She corrects him, but he does not really listen, and when she holds out her hand for him to shake before leaving, he kisses it instead. So not only does he ignore the obvious signs in order to see the world through the lens of his ideal, but when the world tries to correct him, he insists on sticking to his interpretation. Contrast this with Arthur, who also learns to treat Guinevere with love and respect, but who never pretends that she is something other than she is. On the other hand, it is Arthur who eventually *makes* Guinevere not just a lady but a queen, when he marries her.

And Lancelot's idealism is undermined by his actions. Persuaded by Merlin, he agrees to pretend to be a nobleman in order to qualify for the knighthood trials, and though the moral of the episode is that a man must be judged on his own merits rather than the circumstances of his birth, and Lancelot's merits are ultimately what gets him through the trials, his first taste of his dream nonetheless begins with a lie. Not only that, but he also cheats, by his own initiative this time, on his final test where he must hold his own in a fight against Arthur himself. Lancelot pretends to have been knocked out so that he can deliver a surprise attack when Arthur lowers his guard. Arthur accepts the victory, showing that he cares more about resourcefulness than strict morality, but even though it is accepted, the trick nonetheless undermines Lancelot; though he strives to live up to an ideal, he is ultimately just a man. As it happens, that is precisely the traditional theme of the Lancelot-character, especially in T. H. White's books.

Lancelot is a knight of Camelot for all of a day before his lie is discovered and he is disgraced, and though he manages to prove himself before the end, he ultimately decides to leave Camelot to start again, hoping one day to return and be worthy of a second chance, but when we meet him again, in season two's "Lancelot and Guinevere", he has become little more than a mercenary, earning a living by fighting for the entertainment of a Mercian war lord. Guinevere reminds him of his ideals, putting him back on the right path, but not only does he fail to rescue her from the war lord, he even fails to die heroically for her, because Arthur comes in to save them both. From a feminist perspective, he commits another error in the same episode, leaving Camelot once again when he discovers that both he and Arthur are in love with Guinevere. Rather than letting Guinevere choose, he takes away her agency by leaving, martyring himself.

Lancelot is the only character who figures out all by himself that Merlin has magic, and this might be one of the reasons why he must be written out of the story over and over. Unlike Merlin's other allies in the know, Lancelot is in a perfect position to act as Merlin's accomplice, especially after he becomes a knight again in season four. Merlin spends every single episode battling evil behind Arthur's back, and if there is one thing he could use, it is a wingman, someone to keep Arthur's attention diverted while Merlin mutters his spells. Lancelot proves himself capable of doing just that in "The Coming of Arthur part 2", when Arthur and the knights lay plans to take the kingdom back from Morgana and her immortal army. Merlin desperately needs an excuse to get out from underneath Arthur's watchful gaze so that he can take care of the spell that keeps Morgana's troops undefeatable, and Lancelot, aware of this, comes to Merlin's aid by suggesting that he and Merlin take on a side-mission together, away from the others. Arthur suspects nothing. For Merlin, having a friend to confide in, someone to aid him in his secrecy, is a great relief, but unfortunately, Lancelot makes things a little too easy, and so for the sake of keeping up suspense and tension, the writers never allow him to stay on the scene for long.

Back to the romance between Lancelot and Guinevere, the tone of their relationship is an important contrast to that of Arthur and Gwen. In their first speaking scene in "Lancelot and Guinevere", their dialogue is notably "chivalrous" compared to what we are used to so far from the characters of this show. They are speaking through the bars in the window of Guinevere's cell, their fingers touching but the rest of them separated.

Lancelot: I will not allow you to die here.

Guinevere: What about you?

Lancelot: I have little to live for.

Guinevere: Do not say that.

Lancelot: It's the truth. For all my words, for all that I believed, I have come to nothing.

Guinevere: You are everything that is right with this world.

Lancelot: I did not know you felt that way.

Guinevere: I didn't even know I could feel this way about someone.

Lancelot: Then you have given me a reason to live.

(Merlin: "Lancelot and Guinevere")

Later, as they are escaping, Lancelot urges Guinevere to run while he stays behind to slow down their pursuers. Guinevere refuses at first. Lancelot says “I would die for you a hundred times over. Live for me, or everything that I am has been for nothing” and Guinevere reluctantly gives in, allowing herself to be the damsel and him her knight in shining armour. They share their first kiss, and before she runs away, Guinevere promises that “[a]s long as I live, my feelings for you will never fade.” While she has known Arthur for many years, but only recently began to like let alone fall for him, here the usually down-to-earth Gwen is declaring her eternal love for a man she has known for perhaps a couple weeks in total. Their relationship echoes that of the ideal, courtly love portrayed in far older versions of the Arthurian legend.

Interestingly, both *Camelot* and *Merlin* have the affair take place before a marriage, and then kill off Lancelot (Leontes in *Camelot*), which means in both cases, Arthur and Guinevere can get back together *after* the affair has taken place. Traditionally, as written by Malory, White and Bradley, and portrayed in for instance *Excalibur*, and *Merlin* (1998), the affair begins after Guinevere is made Queen, and builds slowly over a period of many years.

The change made to the affair in *Merlin* and *Camelot* is most important for making the treason less important than the personal betrayal. Of course, in *Camelot*, there is no treason involved at all, as Arthur is the guilty man, not Leontes, but nonetheless, though the discovery of the affair almost causes the dissolution of Arthur’s knights, the focus is on Arthur’s moral fault, and Guinevere’s lack of honesty with her fiancée and then husband. The lovers went behind Leontes’ back; that is the crime. In *Merlin*, a knight of Camelot kissing the fiancée of the King is considered treason, but a less severe one than if a knight of Camelot had conducted an affair with the Queen. Arthur does not sentence Gwen to death, but banishes her instead. This is in keeping with the family-friendly nature of the show, and with Arthur’s merciful character. There is no threat to Camelot itself in the affair, because Gwen is not yet Queen, and because Lancelot is not portrayed as so admired by his fellow knights that they lose their spirit when he proves himself flawed.

In *The Candle in the Wind*, T. H. White has an interesting observation to make about the shift that has occurred.

Lancelot and Guenvere were sitting at the solar window. An observer of the present day, who knew the Arthurian legend only from Tennyson and people of that sort, would have been startled to see that the famous lovers were past their prime. We, who have learned to base out interpretation of love on the conventional boy-and-girl

romance of Romeo and Juliet, would be amazed if we could step back into the Middle Ages – when the poet of chivalry could write about Man that he had ‘en cuel un dieu, par terre une déesse.’ Lovers were not recruited then among the juveniles and adolescents: they were seasoned people, who knew what they were about. In those days people loved each other for their lives, without the conveniences of the divorce court and the psychiatrist. They had a God in heaven and a goddess on earth – and, since people who devote themselves to goddesses must exercise some caution about the ones to whom they are devoted, they neither chose them by the passing standards of the flesh alone, nor abandoned it lightly when the bruckle thing began to fail.

(T. H. White: *The Once and Future King*, 574)

Camelot plays this modern trope fairly straightforwardly, with Arthur and Guinevere falling hard for each other after having only known each other for a few days. Leontes and Guinevere are childhood friends, and Guinevere’s new infatuation with Arthur causes her to question whether Leontes is “the one” for her after all (*Camelot*: “Guinevere”). The affair bears all the marks of young love; it springs up suddenly, the lovers lack control over their emotions and actions, and their choices are selfish and impulsive. Arthur should have been a better man than to ask Guinevere to meet him alone in a cave on the beach on her wedding day, and Guinevere should have known better than to show up. While somewhat redeemed by the strictness of their society, as well as a prophetic dream of Arthur’s that suggests their love might come from sources beyond their control, the affair is still very much in the vein of Romeo and Juliet.

In contrast, *Merlin*’s love-triangle is all about restraint. Lancelot chooses to leave rather than pursue Guinevere when he finds out that Arthur is also in love with her. Arthur on his side does not expect Guinevere to wait the years it will take for Arthur to become king before they can be together, but Guinevere does wait, and when Lancelot comes back she still holds to Arthur, giving neither man any reason to think that she intends to change her mind. There is no indication that Lancelot has tried to court her in the year that has passed off-screen between the end of season three and the beginning of season four, and though he is clearly still in love with her, he behaves with proper distance and respect when they interact. In the end, magic has to be employed to force Lancelot and Gwen to cheat on Arthur. The weakness of character necessary for the two of them to betray their friend and King has not been written into their personalities.

Merlin chooses a perplexing portrayal of Gwen and Lancelot's guilt, though. Morgana has had visions in the past of Guinevere as Queen, and is desperate to prevent them from coming true. To disrupt the impending marriage between Gwen and Arthur, Morgana uses powerful magic to bring Lancelot back from the dead. He does not come back fully himself, but more like a shell, and he is completely obedient to Morgana. Traditionally, Lancelot feels conflicted over his affair with Guinevere, because he is not only committing treason by being with her, but also betraying his friend, Arthur. In *Merlin*, the issue is eliminated because Lancelot is not himself. Similarly, Guinevere does not voluntarily submit to her feelings for Lancelot when he returns to Camelot, but is enchanted by a bracelet he gives her. Their mutual, magic attraction culminates in a single kiss on the night before the wedding, which Lancelot makes sure that Arthur sees. Arthur attacks Lancelot in a rage.

It is made clear that, had they not been both under the influence of magic, they would not have betrayed Arthur, being both too strong-willed and loyal for that. However, while the audience knows that they are both innocent, the characters are unaware. Merlin and Gaius uncover Lancelot's true nature, but it is unclear whether they ever told Arthur, and neither they, nor Guinevere herself, are ever made aware of the enchanted nature of the bracelet, which Guinevere throws away after the crime has been committed. Why this duality? Why assure the audience of the innocence of the characters, only to tell the rest of the story as if they were guilty?

Perhaps the writers wrote themselves into a corner. By making Lancelot leave first in season one and then again in season two, they did not give his and Guinevere's feelings time to develop into something powerful enough that they would plausibly give in to them. Meanwhile, Arthur and Guinevere see each other all the time. Though Lancelot stays in Camelot for a year between the end of season three and the beginning of season four, it is clear by Guinevere's treatment of him in season four that his chance has passed, and by his own comments to Merlin it is clear that he has accepted her choice. When the dead rise to haunt Camelot in the two-part episode "The Darkest Hour", Arthur and the knights ride out to find and close the portal through which the ghosts are coming. Before they leave, Guinevere asks Lancelot to promise her to take care of Arthur. It culminates with Lancelot sacrificing himself to close the portal, and it is clear that he does it for Guinevere, to keep his promise. The clue comes from another conversation between him and Merlin earlier in the same episode.

Lancelot: When we get to the Isle of the Blessed, do you really intend to sacrifice yourself?

Merlin: What do you want me to say?

Lancelot: I look at you and I wonder about myself. Would I knowingly give up my life for something?

Merlin: You have to have a reason. Something you care about. Something that's more important than anything.

(*Merlin*: “The Darkest Hour part 2”)

Lancelot ponders this, and seems to come to the decision that Guinevere is his most important thing, and that her happiness with Arthur is worth dying for. This extreme devotion to Guinevere is in-character for the traditional Lancelot, but it is not enough in *Merlin* to cause the affair to happen.

The question is whether the writers should have written the situation that way or not. Would it have been better if Gwen’s relationship with Lancelot had been a bit more passionate, and she a bit more flawed? It would perhaps have made the drama more human. In *Merlin*, even the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere is ultimately a part of the conflict with magic, and because the magic conflict provides a constant threat to Camelot and to Arthur, it is not necessary for Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair to be as devastating as it frequently is in the legend. It would probably have made for even more compelling viewing, though. Not that Lancelot’s second death and Guinevere’s banishment are not compelling, and of course the drama continues as, in the wake of the affair, Arthur must decide whether or not to forgive Guinevere and offer her marriage a second time. The drama is only slightly marred by the audience’s knowledge that Gwen is absolutely worthy of a second chance, seeing as she was never guilty in the first place. But in the end, *Merlin*’s take on the love-triangle at least gives Guinevere a chance to shine that she is rarely given. Some authors, like Bradley, are not very fond of her, or even outright condemn her for her adulterous actions, but in *Merlin*, Guinevere proves herself to be a superior Queen: intelligent, merciful and strong, so that when Arthur dies and the full weight of responsibility is left to her, the audience has no fear that she will falter under the burden.

1.2.3 Equals and opposites: Morgana, Merlin, Arthur and Guinevere

Recurring antagonists Morgana, Morgause, Nimueh and Mordred are all in conflict with Uther (and later Arthur) over his policy on magic, and most of the single-episode villains

either use magic to achieve their evil ends, like the cheating knight in “Valiant”, or want some manner of revenge for the injustices of the past. When Morgana, discovers that she is a seer and a sorceress, her terror of Uther finding out drives her further and further into hatred and paranoia, until she snaps and turns on Uther and Arthur both. This is where the third of the great changes come in, that Morgana is Uther’s daughter with Vivienne, rather than a child of Gorlois, Vivienne’s husband. Gorlois died in war when Uther failed to send him the reinforcements the King had promised, and Morgana already resents Uther for that as well as for his harsh policies against magic, but when she finds out that Uther had an affair with Vivienne, and that for Arthur’s sake he means never to reveal it to Morgana, she loses what little affection she has for her guardian, believing him to care more about his reputation than he does about her (*Merlin*: “The Crystal Cave”). In Malory, Morgan Le Fay is the daughter of Igraine with Gorlois, and thereby Arthur’s maternal half-sister, without claim to the throne of Camelot. In *Merlin*, she is a royal heir, a Pendragon, provided she can get rid of Arthur. This informs much of her motivation through seasons three, four and five.

At first, her intention seems to be to rule Camelot in order to restore the rights of the magical community, ending their oppression, but as Arthur and Merlin thwart her over and over, she loses sight of her original goal and becomes more interested in revenge. Ironically, this ability to become blindly obsessed with a single cause and lose sight of the bigger picture is probably a trait inherited from Uther. This is even pointed out in the show, by Queen Annis, whom Morgana tries to goad into going to war against Camelot. “You came to me in the name of Gorlois,” Annis says when Morgana berates her for being weak. “But I fear you're more like Uther than you realise” (“His Father’s Son”). By making Morgana the child of Uther, *Merlin* creates for itself a recurring villain.

Merlin has an overarching plot, but most of the episodes also feature a unique conflict that must be solved within the forty-five minute runtime. This is typical of TV series. A medical drama will have new patients each episode, a procedural drama will have a new crime, even sitcoms frequently bring something external in to interact with the recurring characters, and in all these cases the external force will unleash an internal equivalent, a reaction in the main characters that causes them and their relationships to change, for good or for ill. In *Merlin*, and in many shows set in the fantasy genre, there will be a weekly villain or monster to overcome, or a new quest to go on. Some of the villains appear and disappear in the same episode, while others are recurring, and Morgana is the chief of the recurring kind.

In *Merlin*, Morgana functions as a cautionary tale for the titular hero. She is what he could become if he makes the wrong choices. Juxtaposing Merlin and Morgan Le Fay is not

unusual among the modern entries of the Arthurian tradition, especially as the other sorceresses of the narrative, like Morgause and Nimueh, disappeared, and Merlin and Morgan remained as the two central magic users, one building Camelot's future, the other seeking its destruction. There is another category of fiction that is even more prominent in setting up these characters as opposites, though. Since these are characters out of a legend, and do not strictly belong to any author, they are frequently appropriated and used in other stories. In *Doctor Who*, the seventh doctor once faced Morgan Le Fay and Mordred, and he himself played the role of Merlin (*Doctor Who*: "Battlefield"). Superman and Batman have also faced down Morgan Le Fay in the animated Justice League series (*Justice League*: "A Knight of Shadows"); Merlin and Morgan appeared as members of an alien race on *Stargate SG-1*, and they have even been released as Barbie dolls together. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (2010) pitches a descendant of Merlin against Morgan Le Fay, with the help of Merlin's former apprentices. These stories, none of them strictly Arthurian, but borrowing characters out of the legend to suggest that maybe Camelot was once a reality, or a legend come to us from a different planet or dimension, are plentiful, and make sure that the broad strokes of the story will not be forgotten.

Going back to *Merlin*, the first thing the audience will notice is that the sorcerer and the sorceress are startlingly similar in looks, with their black hair, pale skin, prominent cheekbones and blue eyes. Mordred also shares these traits with them, which functions as a suggestion that he could be a "child" of either one, but since Merlin chooses to drive him away with jealousy and suspicion, it is Morgana's side that he eventually goes. I will come back to Mordred below.

Morgana is not a villain from the start, but develops into the role slowly. When we first meet her she is King Uther's ward, and from the first episode, she and Merlin show their similarities. Morgana's first speaking scene displays two important characteristics in her; she is very emphatic, and she has a penchant for dramatic behaviour. King Uther finds her lingering by the window through which she watched as the young sorcerer was executed.

Uther: What is this? Why are you not joining us at the feast?

Morgana: I just don't think chopping someone's head off is cause for a celebration. That poor mother.

Uther: It was simple justice for what he'd done.

Morgana: To whom? He practiced some magic, he didn't hurt anyone.

Uther: You were not around twenty years ago, you have no idea what it was like.

Morgana: How long are you going to keep punishing people for what happened then?

Uther: Until they realise there is no room for magic in my kingdom! You will be with me when I greet Lady Helen.

Morgana: I told you! I want no part in these celebrations!

Uther: I'm your guardian! I expect you to do as I ask. If you show me no respect at least respect our finest singer.

Morgana: You know, the more brutal you are, the more enemies you will create!

(Merlin: "The Dragon's Call")

When the axe fell earlier, Morgana looked away, visibly disturbed. Unlike Arthur, who accepts his father's will on the matter of sorcery, Morgana not only argues with Uther about his policies, but makes a demonstration of her dissent by refusing to come to the feast. She stands up for the weak when they are oppressed, and this particular passion of hers is echoed by Merlin only a couple of scenes later, when he stands up to Arthur to save the servant boy the Prince is bullying. Morgana's final line to Uther is a defining statement of the show, but it also foreshadows her eventual rise to power and conversion to the dark side. She is to be Uther's greatest enemy, and the more brutally he treats her, the further he will push her towards that role. Uther is also Merlin's greatest enemy, but Merlin knows that change will come once Arthur takes the throne, having been promised as much by the Great Dragon, and he can therefore find it in himself to wait and endure. Morgana has no such assurances, and so elects to fight in the here and now.

In the fourth episode, it is Morgana who encourages Arthur to ride out and find the plant that will cure Merlin of poison, after Uther has declared it is too dangerous and that Arthur must let Merlin die. In the seventh episode, when Morgana's dreams warn her that Arthur is in danger, she does everything she can to keep her visions from coming true. Despite her and Arthur's often acerbic relationship, they are shown to care deeply for each other. In this way also Morgana is similar to Merlin, in that his relationship with Arthur is also one where casual insults cover a true friendship.

In the eighth episode, Morgana, Gwen, Arthur and Merlin conceal Mordred, a druid child, from Uther's wrath, and they risk their lives to get the boy out of Camelot and back to

his own people. This time it is Merlin who brings the wounded boy to Morgana to beg for her help, and it is she who from then on drives the others to do whatever they can to save him. Gwen and Arthur have a strong sense of right and wrong, but they are more level-headed: not so quick to leap into danger, commanded by their passions. This difference is a source of tension between Morgana and Arthur in particular. When Guinevere is accused of sorcery in the third episode, Morgana and Arthur display their differences when they both approaching King Uther to try to convince him that he has judged wrong. Morgana quickly loses her temper when her arguments fall on deaf ears, and insults the King, while Arthur tries a more measured approach before eventually backing off. Arthur is much further under his father's heel, with the weight of expectation on his shoulders, and while he will make a stand for what is right, he is too quick to give up. Morgana on the other hand is perhaps too quick to lose her temper, which, as illustrated earlier, makes her very much like Uther.

In "The Nightmare Begins", third episode of the second season, Morgana's powers manifest themselves properly for the first time, and her downward spiral begins. The episode is also a crossroad for Merlin, who ultimately decides not to tell her about his own magic, and though he tries to help her in other ways, the episode ends in disaster, with the rift between Uther and Morgana wider than ever.

Though the question "what if" is one we can never answer, it is still interesting to speculate what would have happened if Merlin had let Morgana in on his secret. Had she been told of Arthur and Merlin's destiny to unite Albion and bring back magic to the land, would things have turned out differently? Evidence suggests not. Every single prophecy and vision presented in *Merlin* comes true, and the Great Dragon warns Merlin that both Mordred and Morgana, no matter how innocent they are now, will eventually become enemies of Camelot. In addition, Morgana's nature suggests she would have become impatient with waiting for a better time to arrive. Merlin waits for ten years, would Morgana have done the same? Her personality suggests not, as already in the eleventh episode of season one, before she discovered her magic, she was ready to help in an assassination plot against Uther, though she backed out at the last moment. At this point she has watched Uther sentence and have executed innocent people, in this particular episode it is Guinevere's father, and she has herself spent time chained up in the dungeons for speaking her mind about it to Uther. Having seen what the King is willing to do to her for such a small infraction, Morgana has no hope that he will forgive her or spare her for her magic, and so she has only one path that she can go down. "Every day I must look Uther in the eye knowing that if he were to discover who I really am, he'd have me killed," she says in "The Witch's Quickening".

When she later discovers that Uther is her biological father, and that he never intended for her to find out, it is the last straw. With the help of her maternal half-sister Morgause, she invades Camelot and takes the throne. She imprisons Uther in the dungeon, and confronts him there. "...I want you to suffer as I suffered. To know what it's like to be alone and afraid. To be disgusted with who and what you are" ("The Coming of Arthur part 2"). Again the comparison is drawn to Merlin, who through the positive reinforcement of Gaius, the dragon, and his mother, never suffered that kind of fear and doubt for long. In the first episode, after his second confrontation with Arthur, Merlin expresses his fear to Gaius. "I'm not a monster, am I?" he asks, and Gaius immediately reassures him. Morgana did not have anyone to ask.

Over and over, her survival demands that she apologize to Uther for speaking up against injustice, to grovel for his forgiveness and thank him afterwards. Having to humiliate herself this way, and living in constant fear just because of who she is, it is no wonder that Morgana's heart eventually hardens.

Arthur, Guinevere, Merlin and Morgana are the four characters around which the plot of *Merlin* revolves, and the four of them display an interesting symmetry. Merlin and Morgana are easily overwhelmed by their own emotions and frequently leap into action without thinking it through first. Back in the third episode, the sorcery Guinevere is accused of doing was actually done by Merlin, who used a spell to cure Gwen's father of a deadly plague. He was only trying to help, but he forgot to consider the consequences; when Gwen's father miraculously survives the plague that has killed so many others, his daughter is immediately suspected of witchcraft.

Arthur and Guinevere provide balance to Merlin and Morgana. They are down-to-earth, and tend to act more slowly and carefully than the other two, though they both have a very strong sense of right and wrong. Though the Great Dragon described Morgana to Merlin as "... the darkness to your light, the hatred to your love" (*Merlin*: "The Tears of Uther Pendragon"), it is not Merlin who is Morgana's true opposite: Guinevere is. They start out as lady and lady's maid, one high and one low, only to switch when Guinevere becomes Queen while Morgana becomes a hunted outcast. They both grow into positions of power, but act very differently in them, making them easy to compare, but the best comparison between them comes from looking at their role as villains. In the fifth season, in the episode called "The Dark Tower", Morgana kidnaps Queen Guinevere and locks her away in a tower, where cruel visions drive her slowly mad. By the time she is rescued, Morgana has effectively enchanted her into obedience. Guinevere spends the next two episodes trying to kill Arthur, and only Merlin and Gaius know what is going on. This mirrors the situation in season three,

when only they know that Morgana has become dark and full of hate, and just as she works in secret to kill Uther and Arthur, they must work secretly to stop her. The same situation happens again now, but Guinevere turns out to be an even more dangerous foe, as she even manages to get Merlin blamed for one of her own attempts at Arthur's life.

When Morgana turned to the dark side in season three, the change was easy to spot because she has a habit of smiling evilly to herself when she thinks no one is looking. This is in line with her dramatic, temperamental personality. Guinevere, on the other hand, goes about her scheming as calmly and practically as she went about her duties as a servant. In most scenes she could easily have been her old self, and it is up to the audience to keep in mind that she is under a spell.

The juxtaposition of Merlin and Morgana allow the writers to subtly explore the possibility of Merlin becoming corrupted. Morgana's descent into villainy is a story of frustrated desires, of hopelessness and desperation, and for Merlin, the fifth season puts him through the same journey, as he works desperately to keep Arthur from meeting his doom at Camlann. Merlin's devotion to Arthur has only grown stronger since season one, and when he has a vision of Mordred killing Arthur, keeping the King alive becomes an obsession. A scene later in the same episode illustrates how the fear of losing Arthur is changing him. Morgana has kidnapped a number of Arthur's knights, and on their way to rescue them, Arthur and Merlin get separated from the rest of their party. They are all alone, without horses or provisions, but Arthur insists on continuing onwards towards Morgana's tower. Merlin, on the other hand, is demanding that Arthur turn back. At first, Merlin's argument that it is madness for the two of them to face Morgana alone seems well-founded, for although Merlin could probably get them safely through the ordeal with his magic, he is still aiming to keep it a secret. However, it soon becomes apparent that Merlin is not the one in the right here. It comes to a head as the two bed down under a tree for the night, and Merlin tries one more time to convince Arthur to go back to Camelot. "Arthur, without you, Camelot is nothing. All that we've worked so hard to create, everything will be gone." ("Arthur's Bane part 1"). While the words are inspiring, they also seem a little off. Yes, Camelot's strength and goodness comes in a large part from Arthur's rule, but Queen Guinevere is absolutely his equal, and the Knights of the Round Table are honourable, noble men. Merlin is perhaps not describing reality so much as his own vision of it. Merlin's life revolves around Arthur, and so he imagines that all of Camelot must do the same. Not to mention that turning back would mean leaving Sir Gwaine, Sir Percival and other knights, personal friends of Merlin, in Morgana's clutches. Merlin is willing to sacrifice them to keep Arthur safe.

It is up to Arthur to remind Merlin of the perspective he has lost: “Look, no matter what adversity we face, we stand for what is right. To betray our beliefs, Merlin, that is what would destroy everything we've strived for. I swear I'm going to rescue my men... or die trying.” Arthur knows that it is not himself personally, but the belief-system that he has implemented, that is most important.

For the audience it is a shock to see our hero protagonist so blatantly mistake what is the right thing to do. Like Morgana before him, Merlin is beginning to lose perspective, willing to do the wrong thing to accomplish his goal.

On the other hand, Merlin has good reason to be growing frantic. The vision he had is made more immediate when Mordred shows up the next day, and for the rest of the season, Merlin will have to struggle with the dilemma of innocence and guilt; can Merlin kill Mordred to prevent him from one day killing Arthur? Merlin has lived with this dilemma once before, in season three's “The Crystal Cave”. Having seen a vision of Morgana killing Uther, Merlin begins dogging her steps around Camelot, and ends up accidentally causing her to fall down a staircase and injure her head. Now Morgana is dying, and Merlin must choose whether to heal her or let her die. He chooses to heal her, and must afterwards live in the knowledge that all the trouble she causes from then on, all the lives she takes, are on his conscience too. In season five, Mordred throws himself in front of a spear that was meant for Arthur, and once again it is only Merlin who has the power to heal him, but this time, although Mordred is far more innocent than Morgana was in season three, Merlin refuses to help him, knowing that if he lets Mordred die, Arthur will be safe. Gaius is surprised at Merlin's ruthlessness, and questions him about it.

Gaius: What happened to the young boy who came into my chambers just a few years ago?

Merlin: He grew up. And he learned the meaning of duty.

(Merlin: “The Disir”)

This echoes an earlier moment between Arthur and Morgana, as they confront each other at the end of Arthur's quest to save his knights:

Arthur: What happened to you, Morgana? As a child, you were so kind, so compassionate.

Morgana: I grew up.

(Merlin: “Arthur’s Bane part 2”)

By season five, both Merlin and Morgana are finding themselves crossing lines they never would have in the past. Their passion has turned to obsession, their idealism to bitterness. Morgana has lost all her friends and accomplished none of her goals, and Merlin is still living a lie ten years after he first came to Camelot. Uther has been dead for at least three years, but though Arthur has made peace with some of his neighbours and is treating both the druid people and magic with more nuance and mercy than before, the destiny promised to Merlin by the dragon has yet to come true. Albion is not united and magic is not free, and now it seems Arthur is destined to die without ever fulfilling his potential. Merlin and Morgana have reasons to be bitter. Happily, Merlin never actually tips the scale like Morgana did. Refusing to heal Mordred is his greatest intentional act of evil, if it can even be called that. Whether non-action also constitutes action is a philosophical debate for another thesis. Regardless, the audience remain on Merlin’s side, because he suffers so much for his choice. His refusal to help Mordred even involves giving up the best chance he has ever had of convincing Arthur to re-evaluate his stance on magic. If Arthur accepts magic, Mordred will be healed of his wound, and so Merlin tells Arthur that “there can be no place for magic in Camelot” (“The Disir”).

Merlin does have a rather close brush with corruption, but a scene in the first part of the final finale reassures the audience that his core of goodness has not been touched. Waking in the Crystal Cave, where he has gone to restore his lost magic powers, Merlin tries a spell to see if he has recovered. Rather than trying the most obvious thing and blasting away the stones covering the entrance, Merlin gets creative. He cups his hands together, speaks some magic words, and when he opens his hands, a butterfly rises up and flutters away, Merlin watching it go with a delighted smile. There is something inherently good in the spell, not only in that he chooses a spell of creation rather than one of destruction, but because the butterfly is a symbol of freedom and innocence.

However, his final triumph over his own dark side is completed with a stroke of destruction. Morgana was once promised that Emrys, that being Merlin’s name in the magical community, was her “destiny and [her] doom”, and so he proves to be. In their final confrontation, he stabs her with Excalibur, killing her at last. The tone of the finale is not one

of triumph at all, in fact *Merlin* ends in devastating tragedy. Of course, part of the Arthurian legend's enduring appeal comes from the tragedy. There is something sweet about the melancholy of it all; the fall of such a great kingdom, the failure of good people to hold back evil destinies, and also something sweet in the hopeful promise that one day the great King will return to lead his people once again, and atone for his failure. *Merlin* surprised its audience by being brave enough to end with Arthur's death at Camlann. It does more than that though, something that hurts far more for the audience to watch than the death of Arthur, Gwaine, Mordred and Morgana. It leaves Merlin behind.

And after Arthur died, Merlin didn't even get to walk away. He didn't get to move on. Because the dragon's final words, while meant to bring him hope, basically thwarted any hope of closure for Merlin.

He knew that one day Arthur would return, which meant that whatever else he did, he always had to keep on waiting – seemingly forever, as the flash forward indicated. The writers practically left their main character in a state of suspense, in a torturous purgatory, where he could never find true peace because his watch had not yet ended.

And if our main character – our window into the universe of the series – never got to move on, then how can we be expected to?

(Gocobachi and Wilken: “‘Merlin’ retrospective”)

The dragon's final words is a promise to Merlin that when Albion needs him, Arthur will return, and so the final scene in the series shows us Merlin as an old man walking past the lake of Avalon in our modern day. A millennium later, and he is still waiting for Arthur.

So the audience were left weeping and bereft, as well as asking themselves one important question. Why was the unification of Albion, and the return of magic to Camelot, left out? Those are the two things that Merlin, and the audience, were promised from the beginning, so why did neither thing happen within Arthur's lifetime? There might be an answer to that.

Merlin's relationship to its source material is a deliberate one. It may play fast and loose with most of the details, but it also plays with what it knows the audience will be expecting to happen. In an early episode, Merlin asks Gwen who she would rather choose out of Arthur and Lancelot, and she says she cannot imagine that anyone would want to marry Arthur (*Merlin*: “Lancelot”). In “The Beginning of the End”, Arthur, Merlin, Gwen and

Morgana spend the episode desperately trying to save the druid child from Uther, but the name of the episode becomes suddenly significant at the very end, when Arthur watches the boy walk away with his druid guardians, and calls after him to ask for his name. The boy is Mordred. Any viewer with rudimentary knowledge of the legend will know that the boy will grow up to be Arthur's bane, and will suddenly feel a lot less relieved that the four protagonists succeeded in their mission.

Merlin signals its awareness of the audience's expectations through prophecies and visions. In the very first episode, the Great Dragon tells Merlin that he and Arthur will one day unite Albion and rule together over a brighter future. Later, he warns Merlin about Mordred and about Morgana, though this is long before either one of them turns against either Merlin or Arthur. Morgana has prophetic dreams, in particular one about Guinevere becoming Queen, and in the opening of season five, Merlin is shown a vision of Arthur dying at Camlann. All these legend-specific prophecies serve as teasers for the audience, promising them great drama to come, but they also drive the plot, as the characters in the know race to keep their worst fears from coming true. Interestingly, they are never successful. Every single prophecy made in *Merlin* comes true, sometimes precisely because someone tried to prevent it. Every single prophecy except the one. Why does every other thing happen, but not Merlin and Arthur's great destiny? After the finale, many viewers would have it down to poor writing, or that the show was cut short too early. On the other hand, we were warned, back in "The Beginning of the End." The dragon tells Merlin to stop protecting the druid child. "If the boy lives, you cannot fulfill your destiny," he says, and that is exactly what happens; Mordred survives, and there is no united Albion. Unless, the audience will allow for it to happen posthumously for Arthur. It can be argued that the unification was never meant to be military, but rather one of alliances, inspiration and emulation. Camelot has, after all, had three years of peace under Arthur's rule, he has made friends amongst his neighbours, and he leaves the throne to a Queen who is his equal in virtues, and who commands a powerful army comprised of knights living by a code of chivalry. The dragon's claim to Merlin that "your story will live long in the minds of men" also supports this idea, as it is another way for Arthur's ideals to be kept alive.

Merlin is a show full of half-formed thoughts. When Mordred reappears as an adult in season five, it is Merlin who speaks the man's name, while it is never made clear whether or not Arthur remembers him as the druid boy he once saved. In fact, it is never made clear whether Arthur knows that Mordred is a druid at all, which is a pretty important question. Or

it would have been, if Arthur's promise at the end of season four to treat the druids with respect from now on had been addressed at all in season five.

Mordred, on his side, turns from Arthur to Morgana when his girlfriend Kara is executed for having tried to assassinate Arthur, and while the audience understands Mordred's grief, his turn to the dark side is a little abrupt, especially after his near-worship of Arthur up until then, and his expressed understanding of how wrong Morgana has turned out because of her own hatred. Again, the show fails to spell out the things that need to be spelled out.

Then there's the conundrum of "the Once and Future King". The phrase is first used by the dragon when he tells Merlin about the destiny the young sorcerer shares with Arthur, but why does not Merlin ask the dragon what it means? The audience will be familiar with the phrase, sure, but Merlin has no reason to understand it. Even more perplexing, Merlin later uses the same phrase when trying to bolster Arthur's confidence, and why does not Arthur ask Merlin what it means ("The Hunter's Heart")? He definitely should not understand it, and moreover he ought to wonder where his manservant got the phrase from.

Perhaps this is simply down to poor writing, or writers who expect the audience to fill in the gaps with their Arthurian knowledge (They do that successfully elsewhere after all). However, while any good text ought to leave space for the audience to fill in with their interpretation, there is a difference between deliberately withheld information and half-completed ideas that disappear into nothingness, and unfortunately, Merlin is full of the latter.

Why does Aithusa, the baby dragon that Merlin helps to hatch in the episode bearing the dragon's name, choose to ally itself with Morgana? Why did not Kilgharrah, the Great Dragon, look after and rear it, when the two of them are the only dragons left in existence? Why did the writers have Kilgharrah say that the little dragon boded well for Arthur and Merlin's shared destiny, and for Albion, when it did no such thing?

Merlin is a show that had a lot of potential that it left unfilled. It went a long way, but could have gone much, much longer. Most of the characters, the knights especially, remain lovable but underdeveloped, while in each episode, Arthur and Merlin run through the same circle of will-they-won't-they around Merlin's magic.

Despite this, the show is not bad. It is, in fact, very good. It has a lot of charm, plenty of great humour, moments of heart-breaking drama, and great acting. It is memorable and quotable. The tragedy is that it could have been so much more.

1.3 Starz' *Camelot*

1.3.1 Idealism versus flawed humanity: Morgan, Arthur, and the love triangle

Camelot's premise is more immediately familiar than *Merlin*'s. Newly crowned King Arthur Pendragon must unite a Britain ravaged by violence and ignorance. To help him he has the sorcerer Merlin, and his loyal knights, but opposing him is his half-sister, the sorceress Morgan, who is determined to take the throne from him. More familiar, yes, but *Camelot* too has made changes that make the show different from what has come before. For one thing, Morgan is, like her counterpart in *Merlin*, Arthur's half-sister through Uther rather than Igraine. While we saw the same change made in *Merlin*, it has arguably an even bigger impact on the story of *Camelot*, as it is likely that *Merlin*'s Morgana would have found a different excuse to oppose Arthur even if there was no secret heritage to fuel her rage and sense of entitlement. In *Camelot* however, Morgan sees the throne as payment for her suffering at Uther's hands. When Uther fell in love with Igraine, he had Morgan's mother murdered to make room for a new Queen, and Morgan herself was sent off to live in a nunnery, where she grew up hating her father. When she returns to Pendragon castle after many years, Uther rejects her, and so she kills him and claims the throne. Merlin thwarts her by bringing Arthur out of obscurity, along with a signed document from Uther naming Arthur as the rightful heir. Naturally, Morgan feels as if what is rightfully hers has been stolen from her. In *Merlin*, Arthur is still the rightful heir, since Morgana is the product of an affair, while in *Camelot*, Arthur is the son of the woman that Morgan's mother was killed to make way for, so Morgan has every reason to feel cheated. *Camelot* also uses this new connection between Morgan and Arthur to make a thematic point about the strength and weaknesses of the two characters, which I will elaborate on below.

The other game-changing difference that *Camelot* makes is that in the love-triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot (here Leontes), Arthur is the other man. Leontes and Guinevere marry in the third episode, but on her wedding day, Guinevere sleeps with Arthur. This is a fundamental change to the traditional plot, but it was not done carelessly, because it is in keeping with the traditional theme of the story of King Arthur.

One major aspect of the Arthurian legend is the theme of Camelot as an impossible ideal. The knights are supposed to be paragons of virtue, but their own humanity keeps getting in their way. This is best illustrated through Lancelot, who is the greatest of the Knights of the Round Table, undefeated in battle, but who finds himself succumbing to his love for Guinevere, no matter how hard he tries to be pious to God and loyal to his King, and his

efforts and failings ultimately contribute to the downfall of Camelot. The only knight who succeeds in fulfilling the ideal is Galahad, Lancelot's son, and that is possible only because he completely divorces himself from the world; once he has found the Holy Grail, he is quickly taken to Heaven, as there is nothing left for him on Earth, and he has no desire or reason to stay. The ideal knight cannot exist, and so he must either fall, like Lancelot, or leave, like Galahad. Similarly, on a larger scale, Camelot cannot exist for long, not in our imperfect world. "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot," sings Richard Harris' Arthur in "Camelot" the musical, and "one brief moment" was all Camelot could ever have.

Making Arthur the adulterer in the love triangle, while a change to the traditionally accepted legend, is perfectly in line with this theme, because in this case Arthur's weakness is the indirect cause of Mordred's conception. Traditionally, Arthur does not know that he is committing incest when he lays with Morgause, and so while God may judge him for the sin, the audience, especially the modern, secular audience, do not. In *Camelot*, Morgan comes to Arthur disguised as Guinevere, and if Arthur had been a morally stronger man he would have turned her away. At this point in the story, Leontes is dead and has asked Arthur to "treasure" Guinevere, but she is still a widow in mourning and it is far too early for the two of them to continue their relationship. Nonetheless he lets her in when she appears on his doorstep. The audience are only told after the deed is done that this Guinevere is actually Morgan, and so they have been given plenty of time to judge Arthur purely for the act of letting Guinevere in. That he is fooled by sorcery seems less important; it does not matter because the audience knows he would have made the same choice regardless of whether it was really Guinevere who came to him or not. That Mordred is born not because Arthur is enchanted, but because he is too morally weak to resist his own desires, creates a tangible link between Arthur's imperfect humanity and the fall of Camelot. The ideal kingdom he is trying to build will literally be brought down by his own uncontrolled libido. In stories where Morgause is the instigator of the affair, the guilt lies with her, and with Uther, who raped Morgause's mother and thus caused the daughter to resent Arthur in the first place, while Arthur is only guilty of what comes after, as in *Morte*, the order to round up and set adrift in a ship all the infants that are candidates for his bastard child. Mordred, the child, becomes the instrument of Arthur's downfall, but Mordred himself uses Lancelot and Guinevere as his tools. In *Camelot*, however, Mordred's tool would, presumably, have been the very crime that conceived him. Of course, we can only speculate as to what would have happened in the second season and beyond.

So the plot has changed, but the theme remains the same. For Malory's readers, Arthur's downfall carried with it a message of religious sin, but for a modern, secular audience, this would not resonate as deeply as the story of a man who tries to be good, but ends up giving in to temptation. Changing the plot was a good way for *Camelot* to reinvent itself for a modern audience.

In addition, this weakness in Arthur creates a second motif of humanity's helplessness; Arthur would never have succeeded in building a new Camelot, because despite having been removed from Uther's influence at birth, he is nonetheless his father's son. Merlin says himself that people are the weak link of his own grand plan (*Camelot*: "Justice"), and as it turns out, the person who is the linchpin of his plan will also be the weak link that brings it down. Arthur's crime is the same as Uther's; he desires another man's wife, and rather than restrain himself, he hunts her down and takes what he wants. That Guinevere is somewhat more of an accomplice than Igraine was, and that Arthur at least does not go to war in order to win her, only partially redeems him in comparison to his father.

Through this inherited weakness, Arthur and Morgan also become more alike. Making Arthur guilty of betraying the kind, honourable Leontes does make the King less sympathetic in the viewers' eyes, but it also serves to increase our sympathy for Morgan. Though her tragic childhood is hinted at in the opening of the show, her murder of Uther marks her as a villain in the viewers' eyes, and so in future she will be judged as a villain. Arthur on the other hand is marked as the hero, and these designated roles inform the way we judge their actions. Arthur is given leniency in his affair with Guinevere, because he is a man on a noble mission. The viewer is likely to blame Uther for Arthur's uncontrolled appetite, to see it as a father passing his sins on to the son. However, *Camelot* uses our patterns of judgement against us; by focusing on the similarities between Arthur and Morgan, they introduce the viewers to the idea of judging them similarly. As we shift blame away from Arthur over to Uther, we are likely to begin doing the same for Morgan.

The show encourages the viewers to make this kind of transfer of blame and absolution by setting up several episodes as parallel stories of Arthur and Morgan. Most notable of these is the fifth episode, "Justice", in which Arthur presides over his first trial, in an effort to bring a new type of law and justice to the land, while Morgan rallies local merchants against Arthur, using lies and manipulation. The camera cuts back and forth between the two as they each speak to a crowd of people, and in these cuts, their differences and similarities are on full display. Both brother and sister are dressed in black, both display great rhetorical skill and an ability to win the crowd, and both prove themselves capable of

thinking in a way that other people do not. They are visionaries, but their visions are very different; both claim to be sympathetic to the suffering of the commoners, but only Arthur genuinely is, while Morgan will say anything to gain followers. Arthur wants to set up a system of judgement where the cause of the crime is important in order to determine guilt and punishment, and this baffles his knights, who think a murder is always a murder and the murderer should always hang. Morgan on the other hand uses the promise of bloody revenge to lure the offended and frightened merchants to her side, and not one of them recognises how grossly she is manipulating them. *Camelot* has a protagonist/antagonist pair dominating the plot, and by making Arthur's flaws more marked, and Morgan's childhood more tragic, they give the pair greater depth and complexity. The viewer is cheering for both the hero and the villain, feels sympathy towards them both, and judges them both for their crimes. This forces the viewers to examine their own reactions, for instance when Morgan brutally kills an innocent man in order to keep him from revealing her scheme, and the viewers find themselves feeling relieved that she is safe rather than appalled at what she has done. *Camelot* may come across at times as merely a shallow spectacle of sex and drama, but it is much cleverer than that.

However, there is a reason why Arthur is the hero and Morgan the villain. "The past doesn't matter," Merlin says to Arthur in the first episode, when the boy wants to know more about how he was born. "Define yourself in the present, and you might rule in the future". The ability to move forward marks the difference between the two siblings. Under Merlin's guidance, Arthur will fight for the throne in order to create a brighter future. Morgan, on the other hand, wants the throne as recompense for her ordeals, as a symbol of how she has triumphed over those who hurt her in the past. The viewer is justified in wondering what she intends to do with the country once she is Queen, and she is even called out on this topic by her own mentor, Sybil. "As usual, you haven't thought far enough ahead," she says in "Justice", pointing out that Morgan has no plan beyond killing Arthur, and that "... without allies, and friends, the throne will be taken from you before you even sit in it".

In the fourth episode, Sybil has Morgan literally eating out of her hand, and despite Morgan's continued assertions that she does not need the nun, this scene is representative of the relationship they will have for the next few episodes, at least until the finale. Morgan's underlying motivation seems to be a desperate need to prove herself strong, to the father who rejected her, and subsequently to every other authority figure in her life, including Merlin, King Lot, and Sybil. While she has grown into a woman and a powerful sorceress, she is unable to move on from the child that lost her mother and was sent away by her father. She

even kills her father while transformed into her younger self. The transformation is meant as a disguise, but it also functions as an overt symbol of her mental state.

Morgan continues to insist on the need for women to stick together, and yet when her magic-sickness comes upon her she refuses help, both from her trusted servant Vivian, and from Sybil. When Sybil appears in Camelot, Morgan reacts with near panic, shouting for her guards to remove the nun from the castle courtyard. Considering how loyal and helpful Sybil turns out to be, this initial reaction might seem puzzling in retrospect, but can perhaps be explained by Morgan's terror of losing authority, of being made inferior to someone else; since Sybil was once Morgan's teacher, she holds natural authority over her pupil, and this is what Morgan fears. This would also account for Morgan's continued assertions of independence despite how much Sybil has helped her and how much Morgan clearly benefits from her advice. In fact, Morgan comes across mostly like a sullen teenager rebelling against a parent, and Sybil, in turn, acts like a sort of parent, brushing Morgan's hair, dressing her up, subtly taking over but always working for Morgan's benefit, and in the end, Sybil even dies for her.

"Do you think it's possible to rise above your beginnings? To be better than your blood?" Morgan asks Igraine (*Camelot*: "The Long Night"), and while she is clearly being manipulative, trying to earn Igraine's trust, it is nonetheless a central question to the series.

In trying to rise above Uther's weaknesses, Arthur has been given much help by his foster father, Sir Ector. Once again, *Camelot* has gone back to Malory, who has Merlin place Arthur in the care of Sir Ector and his wife, leaving Arthur to grow up in a more humble home, though nowhere does Malory explain why. The logical explanation has been pointed out by others, that a humble upbringing is better in fostering a certain kind of hero, as both Harry Potter and Luke Skywalker can attest to. In addition, a great deal of emphasis is put on *Camelot's* Ector's wisdom and his love of books, which T. H. White would no doubt approve of. In a flashback scene from episode six he is shown reading Euripides, one of the great Athenian playwrights, to his sons, and when the boys prepare to set out with Merlin in the first episode, Ector reminds them to use their heads in conjunction with their hearts when making decisions (*Camelot*: "Homecoming"). Through the series, the boys will sometimes quote other great writers, such as Cicero and Aristotle, but the true strength of Ector's education lies not in the number of books read, but in having taught the boys to think critically. Arthur in particular has benefitted in such a way as to make him a new kind of man in his society. This is clear in "Justice", when everyone but he seems to take it as a given that an eye for an eye is the right way to deal with crime. Arthur sets up a court system where the

punishment fits the crime and the crime is judged by its motive, and he hopes to implement this throughout the land. This is another difference between him and his sister; Morgan fights fire with fire, trying to win power in order to destroy others who have power, while Arthur is trying to put the fire out, to change his people's way of thinking in a fundamental way.

Much like *Merlin's* Morgana, Morgan once had the potential to be a great force for good, but maltreatment and loneliness have turned her heart into a dark place. Merlin laments this in "The Long Night" when Igraine asks him if he believes that Morgan truly has changed for the better. "I'd love to," he answers. "She'd make our endeavour so much stronger."

1.3.2 Feminism in *Camelot*

Over the years, the role of women in the Arthurian legend has been both examined and expanded, in line with the growth of gender equality and feminism. On the other hand, it is not so straightforward as saying that in the past the women of the Arthurian legend were damsels who needed saving by strong knights, while today they have achieved strength and agency of their own. In her essay "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory", Geraldine Heng points out that the plot of the second half of *Morte* is in many ways controlled by women, as the focus turns from war to questing (Heng: 835-849). Lancelot, the greatest knight of them all, fights injustice in the name of Queen Guinevere, Merlin is quickly dispatched by the female sorceresses who then take over the magical scene, and in the end, the barge that carries Arthur away to Avalon is full of women. While today, the women of Camelot struggle for equality in a patriarchal system, back then they worked behind the system to control it.

Even so, Camelot remains a man's world, and *Camelot* continues in the tradition exemplified by *The Mists of Avalon*, of presenting the plight of females in the Arthurian legend. In *Mists*, Marion Zimmer Bradley presents a Britain torn between the old matriarchal religion of the Goddess, and the new patriarchal religion, Christianity. Morgaine, Morgan Le Fay, is the protagonist who watches as her fellow priestesses' desperate plan to unite the two religions in peace under King Arthur both fails and succeeds in tragedy. Prominent in that story are Vivienne, the High Priestess, and her sisters Morgause and Igraine, the latter of whom is mother to Morgaine.

Like *Mists*, which is likely one of *Camelot's* hypotexts, *Camelot* is unflinching in its portrayal of women's suffering. In the very first scene, Morgan is struck to the ground by her father for speaking disrespectfully to him. Her brief alliance with Lot is also presented as a tightrope walk for her, in that she has nothing but her body and her mind to keep him in line

with, and he uses both rape and violence as a means to control her in turn. Igraine was married to Uther after he went to war against and slaughtered her first husband, and yet she declares herself lucky that Uther wanted her, because she knows her fate could have been much worse as the widow of Uther's conquered enemy. In episode five, she reveals to Merlin that she used to have dreams of a husband who would treat her as an equal, but she has not found one. That same episode, "Justice", revolves around a village where the head man reserves the right to take the virginity of all the girls in the village, the moment they come of age. When one girl's father fights back, the whole village rises up against him, and King Arthur has to interfere. Rape is referenced or attempted in nearly every episode. This Britain is full of violence, and feels threatening to everyone, but none so much as the women.

The six most prominent female characters of *Camelot* are ordered into two symmetrically positioned triangles. On the topmost point of each we find Sybil and Igraine, directly below them is Morgan and Guinevere, and branching off to the side of each is Vivien and Bridget. Morgan and Guinevere are the most important, the protagonists, while the other women are defined by how they relate to these two. Sybil and Igraine are their mentors, just like Merlin is to Arthur, while Vivien and Bridget have supporting roles as contrasts and confidantes.

Even Starz themselves, in one of their promotional videos, this one presenting the women of *Camelot*, show first Vivien and Bridget together in the frame, then Sybil and Igraine, and finally Morgan and Guinevere, the three points in the triangles, before placing them, separated three and three into their correct triangles, under their geographical heading, the women of Pendragon castle and the women of Camelot castle (Starz: "The Women of Camelot"). It is clear that the producers are aware of the symmetry.

The clear symmetry invites comparison. The two mentors, Sybil and Igraine, are neither one working with willing charges, but where Sybil is somehow ruthlessly effective in her job, Igraine's success is more questionable. Her subtle reaching out to Guinevere to warn her of the consequences of giving in to her attraction for Arthur is met with fear, and when she approaches Arthur about it he reacts with anger. Igraine tried and failed to mentor Morgan before, and her attempts with Guinevere are hesitant. With Morgan she was incompatible, as Morgan hates her for having failed to fight back against the patriarchy that Morgan is furiously opposing. Igraine has been broken by the system that forced her into two unequal marriages. Being broken, she cannot therefore help Morgan in her fight, but since Igraine also regrets having broken, she cannot genuinely ask Morgan to stop fighting either. With Guinevere on the other hand, Igraine has a new chance, and since Guinevere has neither fully

conformed nor placed herself in opposition to the patriarchy, Igraine can relate to her and give her advice, having once had the same dreams of freedom, and now having settled into the same mostly-conformed position. However, even with Guinevere, Igraine seems mostly to be the forced spokesperson of the patriarchy. In “Guinevere”, Igraine asks her young charge whether she loves her fiancée, and Guinevere replies that she hardly knows what love means. Igraine comforts her by telling her that with a little luck she will fall in love with her husband some day. “And if you don’t, before you know it he’ll give you children and then you’ll love them.” The look on Guinevere’s face suggests that this prospect is not very comforting, and Igraine’s smile is also resigned.

Quickly summarised, and probably oversimplified, Morgan is actively fighting the system, Igraine has been broken by the system, Guinevere is a little behind the other two women and has not come down on either side yet, still struggling to find her place, while Bridget is the character who enjoys her place the system. In “The Long Night”, Morgan fakes an incoming siege of castle Pendragon while Arthur and most of his court is attending a feast there. The men prepare for battle while Morgan watches over them. Igraine, Guinevere and Bridget are all there, and the two young girls attend archery practice with the men. The archers are lined up with Bridget and Kay closest to the camera, and Bridget is struggling to draw her bow. “Here was me thinking – Go to a feast, have a dance, meet a man, a decent one with manners. Now look at me; I’ve even got to save myself from a fate worse than death.” Her tutor, Kay, promises to look after her, and as he says it the camera draws back to reveal Guinevere standing quite alone, calmly drawing her bow and shooting an arrow straight into the target. The message is clear; unlike Bridget, Guinevere neither needs nor wants anyone to take care of her. Arthur and Leontes observe the training, and Arthur comments on Guinevere’s skill. “Well, we’re not hunting rabbits,” says Leontes, not liking the idea of his wife fighting. Guinevere, having heard them, turns and replies. “No: [we’re fighting] men, and they’re bigger and slower.” She is clearly frustrated with her husband and the boundaries he wants to set for her. Earlier, at the council table, Guinevere demanded that the women be allowed to fight, and Leontes spoke against it: “The battlements is no place for women.” Guinevere scoffed. “I am not hiding indoors, waiting to be raped. I’d rather die with a sword in my hand.” In this case, Arthur agrees with Guinevere, showing himself more progressive in his thinking than the traditional Leontes, and perhaps subtly suggesting that Arthur is the better match for Guinevere.

Sybil and Vivien exist in the system but do not obviously clash with it the way the other women do. When we first meet Vivien she is dirty and wearing a plain dress, and it

becomes clear from her conversation with Morgan that she did not like her former master, Uther, very much. Morgan elevates her, and Vivien's role from then on is to act as confidante, messenger and concerned nurse maid to her new mistress. In addition, Vivien is the audience proxy within Castle Pendragon, watching with growing concern as Morgan and Sybil grow increasingly ruthless on their way to the throne. It culminates when Morgan kidnaps Igraine and imprisons her. Vivien, who has stayed silent but clearly did not agree with the plan, catches Igraine trying to escape, but chooses to turn her back and look the other way, letting Igraine go. Presumably, season two would have escalated the strain between Vivien's loyalty to Morgan, and her own sense of morality, but in season one there is no real climax to her character journey, only the hint that she will not be along for the whole ride.

Sybil is partly removed from the system because she is a nun. For one thing this means she is not sexualised like the other women in the eyes of the men of the show, or the audience watching, and this keeps her safe. Her intelligence allows her to manipulate the people around her, and though she is not in personal conflict with the patriarchy, she does seem to dislike how hard women have to fight for power within it. "Men. Even the clever ones think that armies decide everything," she says to Morgan ("The Long Night").

But *Camelot's* social critique and feminist stance is undermined in two ways. First of all, *Camelot* is a show full of female nudity and explicit sex scenes. In ten episodes, there are no fewer than eight sex scenes, and many more scenes with suggested or aborted sexual acts, and women in various states of undress. Using nudity and sex to draw an audience is nothing new, nor is it inherently bad. *True Blood* and *Game of Thrones* are examples of two current shows that use the same means, and since they air on HBO, they have the opportunity to be even more explicit than *Camelot*. *Camelot* is not even the first to depict the Arthurian legend in this way. In literature there is Robert Nye's *Merlin* (1979), a book that gleefully mixes the erotic, the blasphemous and the disgusting to create a very different take on Merlin's life and the legend. On screen, we find *Excalibur*, John Boorman's celebrated film from 1981. Boorman brings lust to the forefront as the uncontrollable force responsible for tearing Camelot apart. Here, as in *Camelot*, there are scenes of women dancing provocatively and a great deal of nudity and more or less implied sex that, together with the high amount of gore, earned the movie an R-rating. Out of these, however, only *Camelot* seems to want to say something about the position of women in the Arthurian legend, and in this case the explicit sexuality harms more than it helps, because rather than be an extension of the social commentary, it is merely there to titillate viewers. There is very little left of the various women's characterisations, or the peculiarities of their relationships to the men they bed, in

the scenes depicting the bedding. These scenes are clearly added for the male audience, for though there is also some male nudity, mostly from the waist up, it is scarcer by far, and not so much the focus of the camera. It is hard to project a feminist message when the camera is patriarchal in its focus.

The other undermining factor is that the most powerful feminist force in the series, the alliance of Morgan, Sybil and Vivien, is the group that serves as the series' antagonist. Once Morgan's alliance with Lot crashes and burns, she forswears the aid of men. "I tried an alliance with a man, but he was wrong. Men are not my way to this. I'll find another way to take [the crown]" ("The Sword and the Crown"). She appoints Vivien, a slave, as her right-hand woman and tells her to go through the staff and keep only the ones she trusts. "This castle needs new air. More women would be good," Morgan says, and when Arthur and Merlin visit Pendragon castle for the first time, they find it transformed into a feminine stronghold. Not to say that there are no men, or that there are now female soldiers or anything such, but the place is clean, uniformly decorated in red, and there are more women servants, well-dressed and well-taught, clearly favoured by Morgan. The addition of Sybil completes the picture, but though the place itself is a positive image of strong femininity in a patriarchal world, it is also the show's stronghold of evil.

1.4 Conclusion

When a book becomes a classic, critics are fond of using the words "eternally relevant" to explain it. Though I place the words in quotation marks, I do not believe them to always be untrue. The most basic nature of the human being has not changed since we were cave-dwellers, and so a story dealing with that nature, for instance as a primal force interfering with our life in a more modern society, can resonate with readers that live centuries apart. Is the lasting appeal of the Arthurian legend down to an eternal relevance? Do readers of Malory find that the story of Balin and Balan's fratricide resonates with them personally? What of Arthur's having to sentence his wife to death for treason? Probably not, but the Arthurian legend is fortunate in that it can continually reinvent itself within the framework of its traditional plot.

From faux-historical account, to romance, to feminist social critique, humour or plain action, the story has been used to convey a whole range of messages, meanings and moods. Within that tradition, *Merlin* and *Camelot* exist to entertain first and foremost. *Merlin* wanted to enchant its all-family audience with the power of magic and friendship, while *Camelot*

reached out to an older audience to give them something sexy, bloody and political. However, both shows had hidden depths, which will also be explored further in the rest of this thesis. Both shows do things differently than what has been done before. *Camelot* uses a gritty backdrop of a brutal, backwards Britain to focus on the struggle between human weakness and human aspirations. *Merlin* began as a light romp through a timeless Albion, but was soon dealing with strong issues of loyalty, loss, love and destiny. While only *Merlin* lasted, both shows will hopefully be remembered in future as worthy entries into the Arthurian tradition.

Chapter 2

2.1 An introduction to Joseph Campbell's monomyth

In 1949, Joseph Campbell published a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which would go on to become one of the most influential books on mythology and storytelling of the 20th century. In his book, he reduces the plots of the many myths and legends, fairy tales and literary works of human history down to a single plot, called the hero's journey or the monomyth, to show us how mankind has, across continents and centuries, shared a common set of archetypes with which we have created both our great religions and our bedtime stories. The theory gained mainstream popularity when George Lucas cited it as his source material for the original Star Wars trilogy, and it is in Hollywood that it makes its home today, with the modern mythmakers. The hero's journey goes, in Campbell's own words, like this:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his common-day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again – if the powers have remained unfriendly to him – his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).

(Campbell:211)

A common way to illustrate the journey is to use a circle (the “mythological round” mentioned above), such as this one, used by Campbell himself (210):



The theory is not without detractors, and not without flaws. For one thing, it presents women as objects to be won and men as the heroes that conquer them. It is also certainly not always applicable, or followed to the letter. However, it does present some arguably recognizable patterns in storytelling, and whether it is true of the past or not, the theory has certainly become sufficiently familiar to the average movie-goer, reader and TV-viewer, to inform in part their expectations of the stories they consume.

Hans Robert Jauss’ theory of the horizon of expectation postulates that when a reader meets a text, here taken to mean any form of communication, the reader interprets it based on a background that consists of all his or her previous experience (Baldick: “Horizon of expectation”). The reader has certain expectations of the text, and as the text either validates or defies them, the reader will discard, modify and recreate his or her expectations to include their new knowledge. If the text is long, for instance a book, this process will continue throughout the reading experience. This forms what is called a hermeneutic circle, a circle of interpretation (Baldick: “Hermeneutic circle”).

Jauss uses the theory to argue that each reading experience is unique, not just from reader to reader, but also from reading to reading, because every reader has a unique horizon of expectation. If this was the case, then no text would ever be interpreted the same, but while literary theorists, reviewers and audiences argue often and with gusto about the meaning of a

certain text, they also frequently agree. This disagrees with Jaus's theory, but can be solved by turning to Stanley Fish and his "interpretive communities". According to Fish, every reader belongs to many different groups with which he or she shares a common "language", or horizon if you will. An example can be the students of a literature class that have been taught by their teacher to read texts a certain way, but it also applies in broader terms, such as that Western and Eastern readers might interpret a text differently based on their cultural heritage, or that women might read a text differently than men (Fish: 1980).

Either because the hero's journey truly is a story that mankind has always instinctively known, or because, post-publication, Campbell's theory has become so well-known and frequently used by writers of popular culture, Campbell's hero's journey is part of the horizon of most cultural consumers today. Regardless of critique, it is useful and interesting to examine how *Merlin* and *Camelot* adhere to or defy the hero's journey, because it is a comparison that the viewer will almost certainly be doing, consciously or unconsciously, while they watch.

2.1.1 Campbell and *Le Morte D'Arthur*

To become more familiar with Campbell's theory, and in order to establish a base to which the TV shows can be compared and contrasted, it is useful to examine how an older version of the Arthurian legend relates itself to the hero's journey. Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is not so old that Campbell used it in his book, but it still predates his work by several centuries, and it is, as previously stated, considered one of the weightier versions of the legend.

Morte is comprised of several stories, organised into eight "books". The rise and fall of Arthur provides a sort of framework that takes up the first two books, as well as the last one. In the intermediate books, he is a background figure, while the Knights of the Round Table take over as protagonists. Malory tells the story of Lancelot, Tristan, Gareth, Balin and Balan, and of Galahad, and each story furthers the themes of the whole, as well as bringing Camelot one step closer to its destruction. When comparing this work to Campbell, I have chosen to focus on King Arthur as the hero, for while the other protagonists have their own hero's journeys, they do not relate as strongly to either *Camelot* or *Merlin*.

The first stage is the Call to Adventure, summarised by Campbell in the following way: "The mythological hero, setting forth from his common-day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure." (Campbell:211).

In *Morte*, the Call is the sword in the stone, waiting to be pulled out by the "rightwys Kyng borne of all Englonde" (Malory:08). Young Arthur, seeking a sword for his brother, Sir

Kay, retrieves the sword without being conscious of the significance of the act, but the significance is not lost on those around him, and they soon reveal the truth of his parentage to him. After some initial reluctance, Arthur accepts the crown. However, he has not yet crossed the threshold, only arrived at it. The other world is within his reach, but first he must defeat the guardian of the threshold. Campbell describes it as "...a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark ..., or be slain by the opponent and descend in death." (211). The shadow presence in *Morte* is the many kings, lord and barons who refuse to accept Arthur as rightful king. Three times they attempt to stop his ascension, first by putting off the coronation thrice, so that Arthur must pull the sword from the stone again and again, and then twice more by waging war on him. Arthur endures these trials, and wins them by the means of "helpers", first the people, who demand the coronation is not delayed any more, and then Merlin, who advises him on how to win the two great battles.

All through the journey-cycle, the hero will be given aid by "helpers". These are usually creatures belonging to the world beyond the threshold, which can help the hero navigate and overcome the obstacles that will face him in that world. The chief and most important "helper" for King Arthur is the wizard Merlin, not just in *Morte*, but in most versions of the legend. More than just an advisor, the wizard is also frequently responsible for Arthur's birth, as in Malory, where he perceives that the union between Uther and Igraine will bring about the greatest king Britain has ever seen. Merlin is the one who demands that Arthur be fostered by Sir Ector, away from Uther's court, and it is Merlin who, it is implied, arranges for the sword in the stone to appear in London. "... the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass." (Campbell:57). The "amulets" in this case consist of good advice, and of Arthur's two magical swords.

The conclusion of the childhood cycle is the return or recognition of the hero, when, after the long period of obscurity, his true character is revealed. This event may precipitate a considerable crisis; for it amounts to an emergence of powers hitherto excluded from human life. Earlier patterns break to fragments or dissolve; disaster greets the eye. Yet after a moment of apparent havoc, the creative value of the new factor comes to view, and the world takes shape again in unsuspected glory.

(Campbell:282)

The revelation that the new King is little more than a boy, and seemingly of no royal blood, causes an uproar amongst the lords and barons of the realm, and for a while there is war and chaos, however, once Merlin shows up to settle the strife and explain that Arthur is Uther's son, Camelot can rise to yet unachieved heights under the rule of the new king. Most versions of the Arthurian legend work very well with the beginning of Campbell's cycle. Arthur is called to adventure, and with the aid of Merlin, he creates a Camelot that is a beacon of light and hope in the world.

Once the opposing kings have been defeated and Arthur's rule established, we enter the second quarter of the cycle, where the hero faces a number of increasingly difficult tests. "Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him ..., some of which give magical aid" (Campbell:211). In Book II, Arthur faces war with the Romans, who are demanding that Britain pay tribute to them, something Arthur refuses to do. Instead, he goes to war against Rome, and wins a great victory. Along the way, he also defeats a giant who is terrorising the island of Mont St. Michel. When Arthur returns home, however, the knights take over most of the fighting, while Arthur watches over them from the throne.

Campbell's final crisis, triumph and return are difficult to identify in *Morte*, partly because, being episodic, the book contains several hero's journeys, and partly because Arthur's journey ends in tragedy. Arguably, the final crisis is the discovery of the affair between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, because this forces Arthur to face his greatest trial, the decision of whether to kill his wife and go to war against his best friend, or refuse to uphold his own law in this matter and thereby destroy the civilisation he has fought so hard to build. As a final crisis this poses a problem because Arthur does not really triumph, and there is no boon to be had in the end; the affair causes Camelot's destruction. However, Campbell does list apotheosis, the divinisation of the hero, as a possible triumph, and Arthur does, upon his death, become a legendary figure, taken away to Avalon to await Britain's hour of greatest need, at which time he will return. In this case, the boon will be the eventually return of Arthur, and with him a return to the glory days of Camelot.

2.2 Campbell and *Camelot*

The hero's journey is meant to be told as a single story, which means the episodic nature of the TV show will necessitate some modification of the theory. However, there is a precedence for this, and Campbell addresses it himself:

The changes run on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the *Odyssey*). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes.

(Campbell:212)

Merlin especially can be said to tell a small hero's journey within almost every episode, while *Camelot's* episodes, focusing more heavily on an overarching story, deal with Arthur's trials on the road to the supreme ordeal.

Camelot follows Malory quite closely for its backstory, and we catch up with Arthur living a carefree life as Sir Ector's son. Then Merlin comes to provide a quite literal "call to adventure". He tells Arthur of his true parentage, and challenges him to claim the throne. This is more in keeping with the modern version of Campbell's cycle, which we find, not in religion and legend, but within the novels of the fantasy genre. Here, the supernatural aid is almost always a wizard, or a wizard-equivalent, and rather than the random, unmotivated encounters found in religion and legend, he usually has a more personal stake in the adventure. Compare the Norwegian fairy tale motif of the old crone with her nose stuck in a stump, who appears randomly in the hero's path and will give him aid if he aids her first, to modern aids like Gandalf, Dumbledore, and Moiraine from *The Wheel of Time Saga*, who are all driving forces behind the destinies of their respective heroes. These three, along with Merlin in *Camelot*, do not only provide the call to adventure, but also have a hand in the hero's past, preparing the world around him that he may one day fulfil his destiny. Because Gandalf sent Bilbo Baggins on an adventure, cousin Frodo Baggins later inherited the Ring of Power, and Dumbledore, like Merlin, sent his infant hero off to live with a foster family, that he might grow up humble. They are active, where the helpers of fairy tales and myths are often randomly encountered and helpful without having a clear motive for being so.

In *Camelot*, Arthur puts a knife to Merlin's throat and tells him to take a hike ("refusal of the call"), but once he has had some time to consider it, he decides to give Merlin, and himself, a chance. Merlin conducts him to Camelot castle and introduces him to his knights, who were loyal to Uther but refused to fight for Morgan ("helpers").

In this old Roman ruin, Arthur must face the threshold guardian, King Lot. While Morgan is also an adversary from the beginning, Lot is the true obstacle for the crossing, because Morgan has yet to discover how to use her own power to achieve her ends, and is trying to use Lot instead. Lot causes the death of both Arthur's foster-parents, and this loss threatens to cripple Arthur before he can even begin his journey. However, he manages to harness his grief into strength, and after drawing the Sword of the Gods from the stone, he is crowned King. Lot is vanquished by Sir Ector right before his death, and this not only clears the way for Arthur to enter the trial-stage of his journey, but it also means he has no way of going back, because he has nothing to go back to. This takes two episodes, and from the third episode onwards, Arthur and his knights are presented with various trials as they attempt to change the country for the better. Merlin leaves to get Arthur a sword worthy of a King, Leontes and Kay struggle to recruit Gawain as a combat teacher, Arthur sits in judgement at a murder-trial, and all the while Morgan and her allies are scheming to destroy what Arthur has built. The trial stage lasts for six episodes, and then the final two present us with the supreme ordeal, but in order to examine that, it is first necessary to look at the women of Camelot again, and the stage that Campbell calls "The meeting with the Goddess". It need not be a literal Goddess, because she is "incarnate in every woman", according to Campbell (97), meaning that any and all women in a story qualify. Of the role of woman in the hero's journey, Campbell has said the following: "Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know." (97). This paints women in a rather passive light, but it goes further than that:

"The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master." (Campbell:101). She is not just passive, she is not even a person, just an object to be owned. "... if [the hero's] stature is that of world monarch, she is the world, and if he is a warrior she is fame. She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance." (Campbell:293).

Campbell's hero must conquer his father's world, and the goddess-figure is the world to be conquered. In that case, Arthur's final possession of Guinevere ought to mean he has achieved his goal, but not only is that not the case, the women of *Camelot* are not happy to play the role of "tracts of land". Igraine functions as the cautionary tale for Morgan and Guinevere, having been the conquered goddess both for Gorlois and for Uther, and having had her dreams crushed by both of them. Igraine is a mixture of victim and strong survivor. When Morgan accuses her of having stood by and done nothing when Uther sent Morgan

away as a child, Igraine answers “No queen questions her king”, a sentiment which disgusts Morgan (“Homecoming”). However, Igraine might very well be lying about her beliefs, as we discover in the final episode that Uther actually intended to have Morgan killed, and that Igraine not only questioned this, but convinced him to spare the child and send her to a nunnery instead.

Igraine also shows her spirit when she recognises the way Arthur and Guinevere look at each other, and realises that history is about to repeat itself. “Do you have any idea how much was destroyed, how many people died because [Uther] wouldn’t be denied? I will not let that happen again,” she tells Arthur (“Lady of the Lake”). What could have been represented as Uther’s heroic “abduction of the bride”, and indeed passes by without any form of criticism in Malory, is here condemned as an act of base, destructive selfishness, that not only harmed the bride, but also a great number of innocent people.

On the other hand, when Igraine works on Guinevere to pre-empt any more romantic contact between her and Arthur, she does so by giving her traditional advice: be loyal to your husband, and resist the looks of other men. This can, however, be interpreted as her working within the boundaries of her society, since Guinevere probably does not “speak the language” of the world beyond those boundaries, the one that Igraine has had her eyes opened to.

Morgan is also aware of that world, and her whole character is infused with her furious rebellion against the limitations of the role as goddess. After killing Uther, she knows that it will only be a matter of time before some warlord comes to claim the leaderless kingdom, and so she strikes first by inviting one of them, Lot, and allying herself with him, but she has no real bargaining chips, only her charisma and the legitimacy that a marriage to her would bring to Lot’s claiming of the throne. She keeps control by a thread, and eventually loses it because she cannot stay in the character of a submissive woman for long. Lot is provoked by her critique and her demands of him, and punishes her by leaving her out on the moors with the wolves for a night, uncaring whether she lives or dies (“The Sword and the Crown”). Once Lot is dead, Morgan decides that she cannot rely on a man to achieve her dreams for her, and from then on, she, Sybil and Vivian form a female alternative in the patriarchal world of medieval Britain. However, Morgan is still notably reliant on a man for her position, because without Arthur sanctifying her rule of Pendragon Castle, she would not be able to hold it for long, and indeed, in the final episode he exercises this power by stripping her of his protection, as punishment for her crimes.

Guinevere’s suffering is more complex, because she is not wholly innocent. While the demand of chastity before marriage is unfair because it only applies to women, her affair with

Arthur is still something that the modern audience will frown upon, not because she gives away some kind of sacred virginity, but because she sleeps with another man on her wedding day, and then lies to her husband afterwards. Her struggle against Campbell's goddess-role is not as pronounced as Igraine and Morgan's, because while she plays a subversive part as the bride-boon, she does so passively.

Camelot's supreme ordeal is in some ways similar to the one identified in *Morte*; in both cases, Guinevere's affair is brought to light, and Arthur discovers that because he is King, the crime cannot be solved privately, but has become a matter of state. The difference resides in the fact that while in *Morte* he is the victim of the crime, in *Camelot* he is the criminal.

A problem this thesis faces that has nothing to do with Campbell's theory is that *Camelot* ended before the hero could complete his journey; it was written as if there would be more seasons, but the show was not renewed. At best, this Arthur reached the "road of trials". However, it is also possible to look at the single season of *Camelot* as a smaller hero's journey. To provide the audience with an emotionally satisfying experience, while also making sure that they will come back for more, the creators of a TV show must maintain a careful balance between plot resolution and prolonged mystery. The often dramatic and bigger-budgeted season finale serves the dual purpose of rewarding the faithful audience, and creating excitement and anticipation for the next season. The latter is accomplished by leaving just enough unanswered questions to whet the appetite. In other words, the first season of *Camelot*, while not finishing the story of King Arthur, nonetheless provides us with a full circle, one of several that would have made up the totality of Arthur's hero's journey, thus leaving us with sufficient material to analyse.

If we view the first season as a complete entity, the supreme ordeal and test of Arthur's growth and accomplishments is the battle of Bardon pass, which takes place over the last two episodes of the series. In accordance with Campbell's circle, Arthur faces this test alone, as not only is Merlin absent, but his knights lose faith in their King when his affair with Guinevere is exposed. In order to triumph, Arthur must win the battle against his enemies, and regain the trust and respect of his friends. Arthur rises to the occasion, sending his knights away with the wounded and staying behind alone to hold off the attacking enemy. His sacrifice, and prowess in the following battle, is rewarded when his men return to aid him and the day is won.

It might appear that the boon gained from this achievement is the hand of Guinevere, given to him by a dying Leontes, but this is not necessarily true, as we shall see. It is not a

union with the Goddess-bride that he wins, but rather insight into the mind of his enemy, for it is only when he learns that the attackers were sent by his sister, Morgan, that he finally realises that she has been deceiving him this whole time. He returns to Camelot just in time to stop her from claiming his throne, and so the boon he brings to his people is freedom from the tyranny and falsehoods of Morgan, and his own new knowledge of her character. The hero, returning to the common world, has become enlightened, and can become a teacher and leader to his people.

“The boon that [the hero] brings restores the world” Campbell writes in his summary of the hero’s journey (211). Arthur’s insight into Morgan’s plot restores Camelot from the brink of a change for the worse, but his “winning” of Guinevere actually accomplishes the opposite, bringing him a step back again. After the day is won, Guinevere comes to Arthur’s bed, saying “I know it’s wrong, but I don’t think I can be alone tonight.” (“Reckoning”). Arthur puts up a token protest, but gives in quickly, quoting Leontes’ final words to him, that Arthur should treasure Guinevere. If Leontes had died still cursing their affair, then perhaps Arthur would have turned her away, and it would have been for the better, because the woman at his door is not Guinevere, but Morgan in disguise. Arthur gives in, his own lacking willpower augmented by Leontes’ blessing, and so that night he begets his own bane. There is no reason not to assume that Morgan leaves Arthur’s bed pregnant with Mordred, as the audience knows she is acting on the advice of Sybil, that “To become queen, you must give birth to a king” (“Reckoning”).

Camelot’s Arthur proceeds along the hero’s journey in the traditional way, but the show has a feminist agenda that, while somewhat undermined by its own love of the nude female body, challenges the outdated idea of women as objects to be won. The final trial Arthur faces is a dual one, with an internal and an external part. The external part, a physical battle, he wins, and he is rewarded with the renewed safety of his kingdom as well as greater wisdom, but the internal part, his moral redemption after his act of adultery, is never fully accomplished. Because Leontes’ dies, Arthur is never forced to do proper penance, and having failed, Arthur is punished, his “bride-boon” turned into a curse upon him. Presumably, this hero’s cycle would only have been one of several if the show had been allowed to run its course, eventually leading up to a final crisis wherein Arthur would have triumphed fully at last, even if it had ended in his death.

2.3 Campbell and *Merlin*

At first glance *Merlin* also seems like a typical follower of Campbell's theory. There is a prophecy about a young man who will cure the land of its flaws, the young man is initially uncertain of his own ability to fulfil that destiny, but with a little help from his friends, and with his own growing skills, he overcomes many trials until he reaches the final confrontation, where he triumphs over the dark forces that threaten his people, becoming the master of his own life. The problem? This description fits TWO characters from *Merlin*. Because *Merlin* tells two stories; one is the story of brave Prince Arthur and his bumbling but loyal manservant Merlin, the other, this one closer to the true events, is the story of the wizard Merlin and his brave, but flawed friend, Prince Arthur. This schism is caused by the conflict with magic discussed in chapter one. Merlin is a hero equal to Arthur, but because his powers are forbidden, he cannot let Arthur know. They face the same trials, and ultimately the same final crisis, but Merlin's need for secrecy frequently necessitates that he upstage an oblivious Arthur. Arthur is not meant to be a humorous foil to Merlin, or a subversion, and so this undermining of his hero status presents a problem.

Before exploring this complication further, though, I want to look at a way in which *Merlin* does fit into Campbell's theory, while also upholding the traditional themes of the Arthurian legend.

For the mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming; the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo; Holdfast, keeper of the past. From obscurity the hero emerges, but the enemy is great and conspicuous in the seat of power ... He is Holdfast not because he keeps the past but because he keeps ...

The tyrant is proud, and therein resides his doom. He is proud because he thinks of his strength as his own; thus he is in the clown role, as a mistaker of shadow for substance; it is his destiny to be tricked.

(Campbell:289)

The quote above refers to the cycle of deterioration and rebirth that the hero is part of. The hero, overthrowing the tyrant father, takes the position of power and will in time become a tyrant father himself. "Father" in this case need not mean a biological such, but just the one who came before, the power of the past, the ultimate obstacle and fount of knowledge that the

hero must conquer, vanquish and consume. However in *Merlin*, a biological father does play the role. King Uther has gone from the hero who lifted Camelot out of chaos, to the paranoid tyrant whose laws of order have become oppressive to the very people he once saved. Enter Arthur, the son, who must overthrow the father in order to redeem Camelot once again. Uther's flaw is precisely that he cannot adapt to the present. Gaius, the court physician, explains to Merlin that "people used magic for the wrong end [before Uther banned it]. It threw the natural order into chaos." ("The Dragon's Call"), which tells us that Uther did do something good for Camelot, though it came about through genocide. Camelot has enjoyed an era of peace and prosperity that means it now has time to sit down and examine itself, its past and its policies. If it did, it would discover that magic was not the problem, and genocide not the solution, and that the forces threatening the country today could be allayed by reuniting the land with the banished magic. Uther is blind to this, but Arthur, through his friendship with Merlin, has his eyes opened gradually throughout the series, as well as a feeling in his heart that there is something he needs to see. Uther is an obstacle because he teaches Arthur to close his eyes, and so he must be vanquished. Arthur himself avoids becoming part of the cycle by sacrificing his life to achieve his goal.

Compare this to *Morte's* Sir Lancelot, who is a hero with his own journey, but who plays the adversarial father to Galahad, his son. Lancelot is the greatest of the knights, but has fallen into sin through his love for Queen Guinevere, while Galahad is pure, and so in a position to judge his father. The overthrow comes in the thirteenth book, when Lancelot and Sir Percival meet a disguised Galahad in the forest, and they joust. Until this moment, Lancelot has been the undisputed, undefeated champion of the Round Table, but this time, "Sir Galahad smote hym so agayne that he bare downe horse and man"(Malory:516). Lancelot's defeat at the hands of his son marks the end of his days as "the best knight in the world", in fact the title passes from father to son in that very chapter, as a witness says of Galahad that *he* must be the one. The hero has become the dragon that must be defeated, "conspicuous in his seat of power": both the undefeated knight, and the known lover of the Queen. However, after being brought low by Galahad, Lancelot does proper, pious penance, and as a sign of his completed redemption, is allowed to perform a miracle of healing on a wounded knight, though in this too he is surpassed by his son, who does a similar deed on a larger scale (Book 17:ch 21, Book 19:ch 12). Unfortunately, Lancelot soon falls back into sin with Guinevere. Galahad on the other hand, follows *Merlin's* Arthur, dying after achieving the Holy Grail. Just to drive home again how deeply Campbell's findings are imbedded in our culture, the famous line from Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), second film in his

Batman trilogy, is a summary of precisely this endless circle: “You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain”.

Back to *Merlin*’s two heroes, though, we can illustrate the schism they create by looking at the eighth episode of season three, “The Eye of the Phoenix”, which nicely illustrates not only a hero’s journey, but how *Merlin* continually complicates that journey by presenting us with two heroes.

The story begins with Prince Arthur going on a vision-given quest to recover the trident of the Fisher King. For Arthur, the quest is ritualistic, a test he must pass to prove worthy to succeed his father to the throne. This is a typical beginning of a hero’s journey, the “call to adventure” being Arthur’s vision. Merlin’s call comes a little later, when he finds out that Morgana has gifted Arthur with a bracelet meant to bring him luck, but which she has actually enchanted to drain his life force from him. Since Arthur has already left, Merlin has to go after him.

The crossing of the first threshold comes in the form of a guarded bridge. The bridge keeper, Grettir, allows first Arthur, and later Merlin, to cross without any form of challenge, but he gives them some clues about what is to come, making him more of a helper than an adversary. He also informs the audience that this quest is not truly Arthur’s, but Merlin’s. “It’s no accident that Arthur chose this path or you chose to follow him,” he says to Merlin (“The Eye of the Phoenix”).

In this episode, Merlin takes his legendary place as Arthur’s supernatural aid, though, as usual in *Merlin*, Arthur is unaware of it. Merlin also has a helper of his own, though, in Gwaine, commonly known in the legend as Sir Gawain, the knight. Gwaine has no supernatural powers, but functions nonetheless as aid to Merlin, both with his sword and with his companionship.

One of their many trials comes in the form of wyverns, dragon-like creatures that attack anyone coming too close to the Fisher King’s castle. Arthur fends them off for a while, but eventually passes out because of the powers of the bracelet, and it is Merlin who eventually banishes them with his powers. The final trial sees the three men separated by a suddenly descending slab of stone, leaving Merlin alone in what turns out to be the resting place of the immortal, wounded Fisher King. The Fisher King explains that as long as he can neither die nor be healed of his wound, his country will remain a burning wasteland. Only Merlin can save the King, by giving him Arthur’s bracelet, taken from an unconscious Arthur earlier in the episode. In return, the Fisher King gives Merlin a vial of magical water that he promises will be of use to him later. By the time Arthur has completed his own final trial,

namely sticking his hand into a hole full of bugs to find the mechanism that opens the door, the Fisher King is dead. Arthur claims the trident triumphantly, but the moment is rendered comical to the audience because they know that the trident is just a trident, and that the real treasure is hidden in Merlin's pocket. What began as Arthur's quest to prove himself a worthy future king, has turned into a show of just how clueless he is about the world he lives in and the friends that surround him, while Merlin has saved a cursed land and brought peace to its King, not to mention thwarted Morgana's plot and gained a magical artefact in the process. It is not Merlin's intention to undermine Arthur's attempt at the hero's journey, and it is not his fault that he does so. The fault lies, as is the theme of the show, with King Uther's anti-magical policy. Arthur was brought up in the belief that magic should either be disbelieved, destroyed or scoffed at, and until he can be disabused of that notion, he will continue to appear a fool in the eyes of the knowledgeable audience, though a noble fool. Merlin, on his side, must continue to lie, and his journey too is made much more difficult because he is not free to undertake it openly.

However, the series also has more straight-forward hero's journeys, such as for instance in "Lancelot and Guinevere", when Arthur and Merlin journey to save Guinevere from her kidnapper. In this episode, Arthur is the one with a purpose, and the one with the emotional journey, while Merlin serves the role of helper. Once again he uses magic covertly to keep Arthur safe, but this time, the majority of the heroic deeds are on Arthur's shoulders, and Merlin has a more important role as observer in the love-triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, and as the one who coaxes Arthur into admitting his feelings, if not to Gwen, then at least to himself.

Having two heroes jostling for position is not inherently a problem, though. As we saw in "The Eye of the Phoenix", it frequently serves to underline one of *Merlin's* main themes, that oppression is damaging not just to the oppressed, but also to the oppressor. Not only do the oppressed lash out against Camelot, causing untold numbers of innocent casualties over the course of the series, but the oppressors are presented to the viewers as ignorant, stupid and prejudiced. King Uther takes the most damage, being the man who set it all in motion, but Arthur too, though excused in part by his upbringing, and redeemed in part by his own core of humility and courage, is frequently made out to be the fool, or even the villain in certain situations.

The audience allows it because they are waiting for what fans came to call simply "the magic reveal". The central conceit of the show is that Merlin is a sorcerer who is growing up in a society where magic is forbidden, and there is an implicit promise inherent in that

conceit, that at some point, Merlin will be discovered for who he truly is. Specifically, every new episode begins with the question “is this the day that Arthur will discover Merlin’s magic?” half-formed in the viewer’s mind. Of course the viewer accepts that the reveal will not come in the first episode, nor likely in the second or the third, since the reveal will change the nature of the show completely, however, that the reveal should not arrive until the last episode of the series was quite unexpected, and the lateness is what causes the two heroes to be a problem.

Before we look at the finale of *Merlin*, though, we must look more closely at the role that Merlin traditionally holds, that of the “supernatural aid” as Campbell coined it, popularly known as the wise, old mentor. This is a character most people are familiar with. He or she provides the call to adventure, teaches the hero the skills he will need on his journey, provides the hero with special tools, in this case a sword, that will help him, and is there to lend support and good advice until the third act, when the mentor steps aside to let the hero triumph in the supreme ordeal, though in Arthur’s case, triumph and tragedy go hand in hand. Supernatural aids are frequently old magical men, like Obi-Wan Kenobi of *Star Wars*, and Gandalf of *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is not unlikely that these two examples, and others, were inspired by Merlin.

However, *Merlin* twists the Arthurian legend out of the mould by having Merlin enter the story at a point where he is young and untested. He is given his own call to adventure by the Great Dragon (The first episode of the series is even named “The Dragon’s Call”), goes through many trials in order to accomplish his goal of freeing the land from Uther’s tyranny, and has supernatural aids of his own, not only in the dragon, but also Gaius, who gives him his book of spells, and his father Balinor, whose place Merlin must take as the last of the dragon lords. Arthur on the other hand must learn what it means to be a good king in order to fulfil his destiny of, just like Merlin, freeing the land from Uther’s tyranny.

Our two main characters go on parallel journeys, but Merlin also functions as a supernatural aid to Arthur, only he does so imperfectly because the role can only be played properly by someone who has already come full circle in their journey and thereby attained the necessary wisdom. He is also under another severe limitation, namely that he must keep his magic, and so also his knowledge, a secret from Arthur. When Merlin does give advice it is usually of the wise kind, but Arthur is always surprised, and will frequently comment on this seeming disparity in Merlin’s character (*Merlin*: “The Changeling”, “The Coming of Arthur, part 2”, “The Hunter’s Heart”).

Arthur: “Yesterday, amongst all your gibberish, you said something that, if I didn't know you, I'd be completely fooled into thinking you were...”

Merlin: “What?”

Arthur: “Wise.”

Merlin: “Nah.”

(*Merlin*: “The Coming of Arthur, part 2”)

In “Queen of Hearts”, season three, Merlin discovers a way to get around his limitation. When Guinevere is accused of having enchanted Arthur into loving her, Merlin must find a way to save her from execution. He does so by using a spell to disguise himself as an old man, and presenting himself as the sorcerer Dragoon the Great, claiming responsibility for the nonexistent enchantment placed on Arthur. Later, when Uther is mortally wounded in “The Wicked Day”, Merlin is given a chance to bring the character back, as Arthur makes the controversial decision to enlist the help of magic to cure his father. Now that he has a persona that can be open about his powers, Merlin is free to guide and advice Arthur, with only one limitation remaining; sorcery is still considered a corrupted power, and sorcerers untrustworthy, so he must step carefully. When Morgana’s interference causes Uther to die, the potential of Merlin’s disguise is ruined, as Arthur is once again convinced that magic is evil. After this, Merlin uses the disguise mostly when he needs to confront Morgana, as she too must be kept ignorant of his true identity.

The character of Dragoon is interesting because he is essentially Malory’s Merlin, Disney’s Merlin, the Merlin of the public consciousness: the old man in the long robes, with his long white hair and beard, and his gnarled staff. All that’s missing is a pointy hat. Dragoon is also a glimpse into Merlin’s future, a picture of what he will become at the height of his power and wisdom. In this way, he actually functions as his own supernatural aid, just to make everything more complicated.

It is a well-known fact that the hero must face the supreme ordeal alone, so that he can triumph by using his own accumulated strength and wisdom. The journey prepares him for this final battle, and this is where he must prove himself. No wise old wizard can hold his hand in this moment; there is a reason why Gandalf, Dumbledore, Obi Wan Kenobi, and Uncle Iroh, all disappear one way or another before act three of their respective stories, and in the Arthurian legend, Merlin frequently does leave before the end, most famously because his lover imprisons him in a cave, or in a rock or a tree, leaving Arthur to deal with Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair on his own. However, in *Merlin*, Merlin obviously cannot leave the

story, as he is its hero. But then what of Arthur? In the two-part finale of *Merlin*, Morgana and Mordred march on Camelot with an army. Morgana contrives for Merlin to lose his magic powers, and so Merlin travels to the Crystal Cave in the hope of getting them back, while Arthur marches out to meet Morgana at Camlann, where it is prophesied that he will die at Mordred's hand. For a moment, Merlin is indeed trapped in a cave, as Morgana gets there first, and ambushes him. He escapes, however, after a visit from his own supernatural aid, his father, allows him to regain his powers.

Arthur is the King defending his country, he is the hero prophesied to die, but when the battle of Camlann comes, it is won by Merlin. Arthur does a lot of the work, laying down strategies, inspiring his men, and fighting off the first wave of the attack, but it is Merlin's return that ultimately wins the day. This leaves Arthur without victory, not only because he did not win this battle, but because the TV show ends before he can unite Albion, as it has been repeatedly prophesied that he would. All he has left to do is meet Mordred on the battlefield and from him receive his mortal wound. His only victory comes as he, in the moment of defeat, surges up from his knees to deal Mordred a deadly wound in turn.

This left a lot of viewers unsatisfied. When you have two heroes jostling to face down the same supreme ordeal, one of them has to come out as a failure. However, there is an alternative interpretation to that of the two heroes fighting each other, because Merlin and Arthur are consistently described as being one. "Two sides of the same coin" says Merlin's mother ("The Moment of Truth"), and "the half cannot truly hate that which makes it whole," says the Great Dragon ("Valiant"). They can, in other words, be regarded as a single hero. The Great Dragon also informs Merlin that it will take both men to achieve the bright future that is their destiny. We might then see Arthur's battle at Camlann as futile until he is reunited with his other half, Merlin. This renders the victory theirs, not just Merlin's. This interpretation is reinforced by the imagery in the final battle. Arthur is down in a ravine, fighting enemy soldiers, and Merlin is standing high up on the cliff, watching over him. Whenever Arthur swings his sword at an enemy, Merlin extends his hand and throws that enemy to the ground. The two move and strike as one.

After the battle, Merlin finally confesses to Arthur that he is a sorcerer. For a moment, it looks like the truth will tear them apart, but the Great Dragon's words hold true, as during his final two days, Arthur learns to slowly reconcile the Merlin he knows with the newly revealed, more powerful Merlin. In Campbell's cycle, these two days serve as the return across the threshold, and the death and apotheosis of the hero, though it is a reluctant one; Merlin takes Arthur to the lake of Avalon, hoping to heal the King of his deadly wound, but

they do not make it. Arthur dies in Merlin's arms, the two halves joined in their first proper embrace shown in the series, and the King's last words to his friend is "thank you". There is an affirmation of their equality in those two words, and also in a speech Arthur makes earlier that he understands now just how much Merlin has done, both for Arthur and for Camelot.

In his chapter, "Departure of the Hero", Campbell describes precisely the fate of Merlin and Arthur. "... [The hero] sleeps only and will arise in the hour of destiny, or he is among us under another form." (307). Arthur sleeps in Avalon, awaiting the day when Britain will need him again, and meanwhile Merlin walks the Earth, disguised as an old man ("The Diamond of the Day, part 2"). He too waits for Arthur's return.

2.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, both shows appear to have flaws in the final stages of their hero's journeys. *Camelot's* Arthur passes the physical but not the moral test in the supreme ordeal, and thereby prepares his own destruction. *Merlin's* Arthur is overshadowed as a hero by Merlin, and dies before he can complete his journey. However, a deeper look into the themes of the two shows reveals that what seems at first as simple failures on the part of the heroes might be more something more complicated.

Camelot was planning for the first season to only be one part of a greater hero's journey, and can therefore allow the hero to partially fail in the final crisis, though the failure and subsequent punishment align with the themes of the Arthurian legend, as discussed in chapter one.

Merlin's Arthur achieves peace for Camelot, and a new ideal that his neighbours will strive to follow, but the promise of freedom for magic users lies unfulfilled, unless the viewer accepts that Arthur and Merlin function as a single character. The theme of *Merlin* is oppression, and how it hurts the oppressors as much as the oppressed. Arthur is unaware of having another half until the very final episode, but when he is made aware, he comes to accept it, and the viewer can infer that when Merlin returns to Camelot, though without Arthur, the reigning Queen Guinevere will grant his people freedom for their services to the country, and a new era for Albion can begin. Arthur and Merlin also achieve apotheosis, as they go on to become legends, not just to the audience, but in their own world as well. "The story we have been a part of will live long in the minds of men," says the Great Dragon ("The Diamond of the Day, part 2").

Chapter 3

3.1 An introduction to Andrew B. R. Elliott

The medieval film is a complex creature. It must satisfy both as a film and as a historical document, as for some reason it is expected of the fiction film that it should be historically accurate while also working well as a fictional narrative. This is something Andrew B. R. Elliott has taken exception to, and in 2011, he published a book called *Remaking the Middle Ages*, where he takes a stand against the critique of the historical accuracy in medieval films on the one hand, and the idea that these films should be historically accurate on the other. His mission is first to deconstruct the very idea that the Middle Ages can somehow be accurately accessed at all, either by filmmakers or writers of history books, and then to look rather at how filmmaker do go about constructing their medieval worlds, by examining the different people who populate the medieval screen and the world that is their backdrop.

This thesis does not concern itself with the historical accuracy of either *Camelot* or *Merlin*, but for the sake of arriving where we need to be, I will briefly summarise the arguments Elliott makes in chapters one and two. Elliott begins by naming three problems with making historical films. The first is that films by necessity create narratives out of history. Real life does not have a three-act structure; history has no beginning, middle and end, but history on film does. In addition, films must, again by necessity, choose which facts, characters, events and motives to keep and which to discard out of the plethora that make up our extremely complex history, and this creates a distorted version of events. The second and third problem have to do with the creation of causality both through the narrative and through the use of cinematography, soundtrack and all the other elements that make up a film, as well as the chosen approach of the filmmaker, and the independent interpretation of the audience. Again, all these things come together to create a version of history that cannot possible be objective, or “accurate”.

These are the three chief areas in which films are criticized, but as Elliott shows, all three can also be applied to written history. The author, though he should ideally be objective in his writing, must also pick and discard facts, and also choose how to present them. Not only does this, and the presence of a narrator in the text, create a narrative, but the choices the author makes will also be influenced by his context; his ideology will come through in the text whether he likes it or not. Like any other academic discipline, the study of history has been influenced by different “Schools” of thought (Elliott: 23), and this will inevitably colour

the facts, distorting history yet again. Not to mention that both films and books must be “read” before they can have meaning, and the “reader” will inevitably interpret the “text” in ways neither filmmaker nor author can predict or control.

A final argument is that when it comes to historical accuracy in film, the critics are often judging the filmmaker on something he never intended to do. Who said historical films had to be historically accurate? With the exception of documentaries, the film’s primary job is to entertain, not educate (Elliott: 25).

Elliott then presents three problems facing anyone trying to “do history” (Elliott:26). “... for every interpretation we might offer about a given historical event, the authority of that interpretation is undermined on three counts: first – the sources – that our primary sources are not to be trusted as objective ...; second – the narrative – that the existence of an alternative interpretation of that event is sufficient to place both under suspicion ...; third – the ideology – that the influence of the present has become so intertwined with our views about the past that our viewpoint can be nothing but subjective” (Elliott:28). The idea that through research we can somehow discover the “truth” about the past is easily dismissed by recalling that history is written by winners. This means, for example, that the medieval peasant is hard to recreate on screen or on the page because we know so very little about him; he neither wrote nor shaped history, and so he has become obscure to us, and his thoughts and feelings are lost in the past. This is only one of the problems that illustrate how the sources we have are not sufficient to allow us to reconstruct the past accurately. The peasant also serves as an example to explain the problem of ideology; “... modern history’s focus on the series of revolutions taking place from the eighteenth century through to the modern day perhaps inevitably causes us to perceive the feudal model as an oppressive regime, reframing the peasants’ plight in terms of a Marxist class struggle” (151). Our modern way of thinking is so different from the way they thought back then that it seems an unbridgeable gap. The medieval peasant did not think of himself as oppressed just because he lived in a lower stratum of society than the knight and the nobleman; to him, feudal society was modelled on the hierarchical order God upheld in Heaven, and so it was not only the best order of things, it was the right order of things.

Elliott’s conclusion is that if films struggle to “do history”, written history struggles with exactly the same problems, and, as stated, filmmakers are not always trying to “do history” anyway. This definitely applies to *Merlin*, though possibly not as much to *Camelot*, but more on that later.

After these two chapters, Elliott moves on to his primary interest, to discover how films do go about accessing the medieval period, and how they communicate it to the audience, for though they might not be trying for accuracy, the world they are presenting on screen must after all somehow be medieval; the audience must accept that they have been transported back into the Middle Ages. Using groundwork laid by other scholars in the field, in particular by Nickolas Haydock and Francois Amy de la Bretèque, Elliott argues for "... the existence of a medieval imaginary, in which many of the popular ideas we hold about the medieval period come to form a recognizable set of signs and ideas, coming eventually to form a reflection of the period which – though imaginary – [is] paradoxically perhaps more "real" to modern cinema audiences than the Historical equivalent" (Elliott: 206). To give an example which will be repeated later, when the movie audience is presented with an armoured and armed man on horseback, they will immediately assume that a) this man is a knight, and b) the presence of this knight must mean this movie is set in the Middle Ages, because the knight is one of the "popular ideas we hold about the medieval period". The knight has become a composite sign, made up of a combination of the three simple signs of weapon, horse and armour.

These signs Elliott separates into two different types, the icon and the paradigm. To understand the two it is necessary to take a detour into semiotics, the study of signs and communication. Elliott uses the triad of signification created by Charles Sanders Peirce, though a simplified version, which will be further simplified here. Making up the triad is "the signifier", which can be a written word, a spoken word, or another form of signing, "the referent", which is the physical, real-world object that the sign points to, and finally "the signified", which is the mental concept that connects the symbol and the object, the meaning made out of these otherwise separate entities (Chandler: "Signs"). An example will perhaps make it easier to understand. "Cat" is a signifier; it is a word that one can write down or speak. "Cat" refers to a thing that exists in the real world, a specific animal, a house pet, a creature that looks a certain way and behaves a certain way. That object is the referent, the thing being referred to. However, the symbol cannot connect to the object without interpretation. The word "cat", spoken out loud, has no meaning unless someone is there to hear and interpret the sound, recognise the word and connect it to the object. The connection between the two is a mental construct, because when someone says "cat", the listener will not think of all the existing cats in the world, but rather of the idea he has in his mind of the concept "cat".

The problem facing both scholars and filmmakers when trying to say something about the Middle Ages, is that the referent is, as we discussed above, inaccessible. “The Middle Ages” is the sign, but the object it connects to is lost in the past. What happens when one part of the triad of signifying is incomplete? Elliott’s icons and paradigms provide an answer. Paradigmatic representation “depends for its authenticity on a familiarity with the present, through which we interpret our past, and therefore uses paradigmatic associations with concepts familiar to present audiences” (33). In other words, the paradigm replaces the broken referent with a modern equivalent or semi-equivalent to try to communicate the content of the referent, sacrificing some of the accuracy of the form in order to better communicate the content. *A Knight’s Tale* is a good example of a movie that relies heavily on paradigmatic representation, linking the medieval knight to modern athletes, their prowess in tournaments making them superstars akin to footballers or tennis-champions.

Iconic recreation on the other hand “uses precisely the ’foreign-ness’ of the past in order to unfold its story, drawing, so to speak, its authority by a closer affinity to medieval sources. In this way it uses iconic associations in order to reconstruct consciously that immediate reality outside of our familiar domain” (33). Where paradigms focus on content over form, icons are form over content. Iconic recreation ignores that the referent is broken, and tries rather to communicate it anyway, through its external trappings, its imagery, so that though the audience might not get an accurate picture of what the knight is, they will still, through his iconic form, understand that he is a medieval knight, and get an approximate idea of what that means.

Iconography seems to be more popular in European medieval cinema than it is in North America, probably because Europeans have a closer relationship to its medieval past, and the icons of the Middle Ages still exist around us, in museums, in still-standing castles, and in our national history. American audiences and the North American film industry on the other hand, prefers paradigmatic representation because it is easier then to align the kings and knights of old with the preferred type of American hero. However, most films use elements of both types of signification.

However, this thesis deals with TV series that are not so much trying to reconstruct the historical Middle Ages, as they are the legendary Middle Ages of Camelot. As Elliott points out several times, movies about King Arthur frequently employ a more unspecific setting.

The construction of the period is further complicated by the consideration that ... not all filmmakers begin with the intention of creating an 'efficient and credible' Middle Ages. Films for children, especially, are prone to using such a 'fairy-tale' Middle Ages, not as a lesson in history, but instead as a vague backdrop against which to expound the moral values which tales of Arthur and Robin Hood embody in the popular imagination. (Elliott 42)

He also quotes Helmut Nickle, who says in his essay "Arms and Armor in Arthurian Films" that "given the legendary nature of the Matter of Britain, any flight of fancy concerning costume and setting could be equally well justified" (Nickle: 235).

Merlin in particular not only avoids naming a specific time period for itself, but also avoids real place names, thereby lifting itself out of history altogether. The Saxons are present and accounted for, but have become such a staple of Arthurian fiction that they seem to belong as much in Camelot's fairy world as they do in the real world. Albion is used instead of "Britain", and the countries surrounding Camelot are either made up, such as Essetir, or named after Arthurian places that historians are still uncertain of where lay, like Caerleon.

Camelot is a little trickier. Merlin wants Arthur to unite Britain, Camelot castle is said to be a Roman ruin, and the setting is a kind of dark and gritty that has always seemed more realistic than *Merlin's* Technicolor world, and therefore also invites a more serious consideration of its accuracy. However, in keeping the plot strictly concerned with the national struggle for power, ignoring the international beyond the mention of the Romans, the show creates a sort of bubble-world in which the story can play out.

The goal of this thesis is not to judge the historical accuracy of either show, an exercise Elliott has debunked as nearly impossible anyway. Rather, I will use Elliott's theory to try to say something about how *Camelot* and *Merlin* present their medieval-esque worlds, and what their choices say about the characters, the plot, and the themes. I intend to go through Elliott's book chapter by chapter. For each chapter and each subheading, I will briefly outline Elliott's observations and conclusions, before applying the theory to *Camelot* and *Merlin*. A few subject will be passed by in silence, for reasons of time constraints and lack of relevance, such as the chapters on peasants and religious characters. Elliott speaks only of filmmakers and films, and I will emulate him in order to stick as close to his theory as possible. Where the difference between the big and small screen has consequences for the results of the theory, I will discuss those consequences.

There are some overall differences between the two products that ought to be kept in mind, though. The first is the length of a TV series compared to a film, the second is the difference in budget, which is important because it limits what a TV series can do in terms of for instance big battle-sequences. However, these are not rules, and the exceptions are plentiful. *Merlin*'s budget grew as the seasons progressed, and it shows; the costumes in season five are more lavish, the CGI better, and the sets grander.

As for length, *The Mists of Avalon* (2001) is a so-called "miniseries" or "TV movie", only 183 minutes long, about the length of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which premiered the same year, and speaking of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, they are a total of nine hours all-together, and longer if you count the extended versions. That's longer than *Camelot*'s one season. For this thesis, though, it is worth it to keep the added minutes of the TV series in mind, as *Merlin* is the longest onscreen treatment of the Arthurian legend ever made, and *Camelot* is not far behind. *Merlin* tells the whole story of King Arthur's reign, and spends 1,845 minutes of screen time before Arthur even becomes King. That is thirty hours of story, or twelve two-and-a-half hour movies. So TV series can do things films cannot, as well as the other way around, and it is good to keep the difference in mind.

With that said, it is time to look at the first character in Elliott's medieval tableau: the knight, or as Elliott calls them:

3.2 Those who fight

The importance of the knight and of knighthood to the Arthurian legend cannot be overstated. As has been previously pointed out, Malory's structure shifts its focus towards the middle of the narrative away from King Arthur and over to his knights. In wartime, a King can be found on the front lines, leading his army, or at least the cinematic king is often found there, while in peace time, the King's place is on the throne, and so it is for Arthur too, so that when he has consolidated his rule and fought his war against Rome, he is left as a rather passive figure. It is up to his knights to make Britain a better place.

At this point, knighthood becomes a powerful theme, as the Knights of the Round Table grapple with the conflicting demands placed on them by God, their King, their own order of chivalry, and the ladies they court. Chief among the strugglers is Lancelot, but the stories of Tristan, Gareth, Balin and Galahad all deal with some important aspect of the theme, and together their stories contribute to the eventual fall of Camelot. For a book, especially one so loosely structured and sprawling as *Le Morte D'Arthur*, it is not a problem

that the story is made up of so many voices, but it is a problem for a film. Changing focal character is one thing, but telling separate stories that only connect to the overarching plot thematically and through a handful of recurring characters cannot be done in a single film, and it would be a huge project to pledge oneself to, a risk few filmmakers would be willing to take. But then surely the small screen is the perfect place for a faithful adaptation of Malory? The TV series is episodic in nature, does not have such rigid demands on structure, and has more time to tell a long, detailed story. It probably can be done, and in an article from 2011 Elliott wonders why it has yet to be done, but the reality is that it has not yet been done, and that TV is not the only medium that has avoided Malory's structure when retelling the legend (Elliott: "The Charms of the (Re)making").

The tendency has become to focus on King Arthur throughout, or on Merlin, or Lancelot or Morgan Le Fay, but never on all of them. They can all have important roles to play, but one or two will usually be the protagonist(s), the main focal character, and the others will be of subordinate importance to him or her.

T. H. White solved the "problem" of the change in action by having most of the questing done off screen, so to speak, and then bringing the knights back home to report their adventures to the King and Queen. Arthur cannot take part in the adventures himself, but he can hear the stories along with the reader, asking questions and making comments, and so he at least does not disappear from the narrative. The exception is Lancelot, who is the focal character of *The Ill-made Knight*, the third book in the series, and also in parts of the fourth.

The 1950s TV series *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* begins when Camelot is already well established under Arthur, so that the focus can be on the newly-arrived Sir Lancelot from beginning to end. Other series, such as *Merlin* (1998) and *The Mists of Avalon* (2001) dispense with the quests altogether, or give them a different narrative purpose. In *Merlin* (1998), Arthur rides off to search for the grail, leaving Guinevere and Lancelot without supervision and thereby opening up for their affair. The quest itself happens off-screen, as the focal character is Merlin, not Arthur.

Merlin and *Camelot* also avoid having to shift the focus. *Camelot* focuses on Arthur, and never reaches the moment of unification and peace, meaning there is always plenty of riding and sword-swinging to do, which is, after all, what makes for the best stories. *Merlin*'s situation is slightly different. The focus is on Merlin, yes, but Arthur is pretty much co-protagonist. He begins the story as Prince, when he functions as a knight under King Uther, but when he himself becomes King, he continues to ride out himself to deal with the conflict of the episode, leaving him still in focus. Whether or not this was the practice of medieval

kings is a discussion for a historian, but it does seem a little risky for a young King to always be putting himself in danger when he has no heir. On the other hand, this is hardly the first time such a thing has gone unremarked upon in a TV series. In the original run of *Star Trek*, no one onboard the U.S.S Enterprise ever seemed to find it odd that the Captain, the First Officer and the Chief Medical Officer, the three most important men on the ship, were always the first to go down to a new and possibly dangerous planet.

But while both *Merlin* and *Camelot* have King Arthur (and Merlin) as focal character, both Arthurs have knight-aspects to them, and of course they are both surrounded by knights. How then, do the shows go about recreating their medieval fighters on screen?

Elliott suggests that even in the Middle Ages, the knight was becoming romanticised in literature, in part because their roles in society were changing. From being an essential part of any army, they were being largely replaced by inventions such as the gunpowder and the longbow (57), and their elevated position in feudal society was threatened when matters of law were no longer solved in trial by sword, but in judicial trials. An emphasis on chivalry came in to help the knight's transition away from his role as sword-swinger.

Elliott lists a number of traits that are expected to be found in the ideal knight, and that have changed very little since their conception in the Middle Ages. It mostly has to do with how the knight exists to serve the people. "... [E]ven within the medieval period itself there emerged an idealized form of knighthood which retrospectively romanticised the ideal knight in the face of its imminent disappearance. This idealized form, despite the surface differences, was largely united by abstract concepts like preserving honour, respect for one's enemies and service to women ..." (58). They were, in other words, supposed to be full of mercy, generosity, selfless deeds and temperance, but how can the filmmaker communicate these abstract, largely internal aspects of the knight to a modern movie audience? The answer has been several types of paradigmatic representation, but the knight also has plenty of iconic elements to him, and these have been just as widely used, though they come with certain problems.

3.2.1 Iconic recreation of knighthood

If asked to describe the physical appearance of "a knight", most people would probably mention a full body of armour, a sword or a lance, a horse, and maybe a shield with a crest of some kind. As we saw earlier, the combination of these elements (horse/armour/arms) is enough to communicate the concept of knight, or at least the shallow physical aspect of the concept, the form rather than the content. However, these visual signs come with a number of

problems, which Elliott identifies. The horse is a symbol of wealth which would come from the knight's elevated position within the feudal hierarchy. Feudal society has a bad reputation with modern society, largely because of its rigid structure. Modern man has been brought up on the American dream, the opposite of what he thinks he knows about feudal society, where people were born into a caste, and stayed there all their lives, whether they were poor or undeservedly rich, intelligent farmers or idiot rulers. While feudal society was more complicated than that, the prejudice lives on in the mind of the modern movie audience (Elliott: 150). The knight's sword is another problematic symbol, because it stands for a violence that we do not tolerate in modern society. "To us, excluding the niche markets of extreme or hardcore violence, the notion of unchecked violence is largely repugnant, and our modern heroes must walk a very fine line between cowardice and aggression" (Elliott: 59).

Even the armour is not without its negative symbolic meaning, as a helmet with a closed visor dehumanises the knight, making him seem threatening, like the Black Knight in Monty Python's *Holy Grail*, whose intentions are impossible to deduce until he speaks.

Elliott sums up the consequences of these self-contradicting symbols as that they "risk alienating audiences, subverting characterization, or imparting an unwanted character flaw below the level of the narrative" (59). However, there are ways of dealing with the problem, and Elliott discusses a few of them. *Merlin* and *Camelot* both use icons heavily in their representation of the knight, though *Merlin* is more traditional in its imagery. *Camelot's* knights wear leather tunics rather than chain or plate armour, but the sign (horse/armour/arms) works for them too, and they face the same problem of balancing knightly aggression with knightly chivalry. I will discuss how they deal with these below, using Elliott's sub-chapters.

3.2.1.1 Taming aggression

There are many different tricks a filmmaker can use to distance their knight-heroes from the aggression and violence inherent in their profession.

One is to place the knight in opposition to an antagonist who *is* aggressively and indiscriminately violent, and in contrast to whom the hero's use of violence will come across as measured and necessary, and therefore need no justification (Elliott: 60). This is a trick that *Merlin* uses often, as in the already much-discussed second episode "Valiant", where Arthur, not yet king but very much a knight, is contrasted to Valiant, who not only cheats in the tournament, but does so by poisoning his opponents, making him both a murderer, and a cowardly such. Valiant's cowardice makes Arthur's bravery stand out all the more when the Prince decides to face Valiant in the tournament despite knowing that he is cheating.

“This trope is further reinforced by using the icon of the man + horse, too, by placing the villains on horseback which raises them above the level of the villagers, so as to emphasize their power ...” (Elliott: 60-61). This occurs in *Merlin*’s “The Moment of Truth”, where a group of bandits attack Merlin’s home village, Ealdor. The first time they appear, the bandits are all on horseback, creating the effect Elliott describes above. When they return a second time, they dismount as they search the village for valuables, and when Arthur and company ride in to save the day, the writers have Arthur dismount before throwing himself into the fray, to avoid creating the opposite effect and painting him in bad light. He does this despite the tactical advantage the high-ground of the horseback would have given him, and which he could really use, as it is him, Morgana, Guinevere and Merlin against some forty bandits. In this case, the importance of symbolism trumps the demand for realism.

However, since *Merlin* is a family show, it is not rampant aggression that is used most often to contrast the villains to the knight-heroes, but rather two other villainous traits; trickery on the one hand, and the abuse of “the small folk” on the other. Since the show’s central conflict is with magic, most of the villains use magic to get their way somehow, and always in secrecy. In “Gwaine”, two bandits use magic to disguise themselves as knights and enter another tournament in Camelot, and with enchanted swords they intend to kill Arthur. Not only are they planning to commit a murder for no other reason than having been humiliated by Arthur in a bar brawl earlier, but they are further negatively portrayed by being cruel to Merlin, who also took part in the brawl. Gwaine in this episode is shown to be a drunkard and a flirt, but he comes to Merlin’s aid when he is being abused, proving himself to embody the traits of a true knight despite some minor character flaws. When Gwaine kills the bandits in the tournament, his use of violence is excused because he is using it honestly. He uses the enchanted swords to kill, but the weapons were procured by the villains, and so it counts as a karmic death, rather than excessive violence from Gwaine’s side.

In *Camelot*, it is not so much any particular villain whose excessive violence justifies the knight-heroes’ retaliation, but rather the general brutality of the whole country. Britain is running rampant with violence, especially since King Uther died and left the country without a leader. Arthur is too young to fill his father’s shoes, and Britain is spiralling out of control. In the first episode, Arthur, Kay and Merlin come upon a massacre-site on their way to Camelot castle. There is no visible reason for the slaughter; the audience never finds out why the battle happened, who won and what they gained from it. This kind of violence is seen everywhere, in every episode. When Guinevere and Arthur meet for the first time, her initial reaction to being alone with him is to put a knife to his throat, as she is convinced he means to

rape her, or at least would seize the chance if she does not dissuade him pre-emptively. Arthur and his men represent a minority of honourable, peaceful men, trying to change the world, and because the world around them is so violent, their own violence is almost automatically justified.

However, the violence of the world infuses *all* the characters, including the heroes. In the Battle of Bardon Pass, Arthur utilises some extreme methods to stay alive, win the battle, and extract information from his prisoner. He uses traps that burn his adversaries alive or cause other messy and painful injuries, but the audience understands that it is necessary because he is one man fighting many, and the action is choreographed so that it is always clear that he is scrambling to survive. On the other hand, when he captures an enemy soldier, though he has very limited time to get any answers out of the man, the measures he employs, though kept mostly vague, are repulsive. The man is shown crying and moaning in pain, his mouth bloody like he has been punched repeatedly, and it is hard to tell whether Arthur would have gone as far as cutting out the man's eye if he had not been given answers. However, *Camelot* does not employ simple black and white morality, and Arthur is, as has been previously established, a character plagued by flaws. Camelot deliberately challenges our hero-worship of King Arthur, and of Leontes, the Lancelot-character, who confesses to Gawain that he became a religious man after killing a child. "I spent years bathed in blood. Man versus man. Felt like it had honour," he says. Then one day on the battlefield, in a killing frenzy, he kills a twelve-year-old boy, and loses his lust for battle. The knights of Camelot stand in contrast to the country, as men who want to change the world for the better, and who strive to change themselves. Leontes prays for forgiveness, Gawain wants to learn to read, Arthur wants to be worthy of the throne; their use of violence is justified in that it is the only defence against a world which would otherwise destroy their hopes of bettering themselves.

The tension between violence and goodness inherent in the knight is also used by *Camelot* to contrast the characters to each other. Elliott argues that when sword and shield are used together, as they would have been historically, they take on pure roles: one as attack, the other defence, and in a world where everyone uses both sword and shield, the man with only a sword is seen as a pure aggressor, while if the shield is removed from the medieval world altogether, the sword becomes a symbol of both qualities, as it must be used both to block and to stab (62). This is one of the reasons why so many films depict the hero and even whole armies without shields, even though reality dictates that not only was the use of shields common, but no real knights would smack their swords together the way movie audiences are

used to seeing them do, because it would ruin the blades. It looks great, though, and sounds great, which is another reason why the practice continues.

However, in a world as brutal as *Camelot's*, where shields are in use, the mere act of wielding a lonely sword is not enough to make a barbarian of a man. Two swords would do, though, as Gawain demonstrates. He is the most violent and unpredictable of the knights, and not only does he wield dual swords, he even subverts the balancing factor of his shield by having installed a blade along the bottom, transforming his defence into a covert offense. Not only is it aggressive, it is sneaky, which the bold knight should not be. In "The Long Night", Gawain fights fellow-knight Leontes. The two come to blows over Gawain wanting to leave rather than wait for a coming siege. Leontes uses sword and shield, and fights not to kill, but to stop Gawain from leaving, while Gawain uses his two swords. The contrast between the balanced Leontes and the aggressive Gawain is used to underscore that Leontes is right to try to stop him from leaving. As the fight drags out and Gawain begins to lose his temper, he is even heard loudly growling like an animal, enhancing the barbarism of his methods. The fight is broken up by Arthur, and the two men later reconcile over Leontes' story. Leontes lets Gawain know that he too is capable of blood thirst, and Gawain, with his desire to learn to read, as well as his disgust with the endless cycle of violence, is capable of being a good man (*Camelot*: "Guinevere"). *Camelot* uses the dual nature of the knight, showing how difficult it is to find balance in a world that is full of violence.

Merlin's knights used shields primarily in the early seasons. Generally, all the armour and arms used in *Merlin* changed over the seasons, mostly in the direction of simplification, and this makes it a rather big topic that should perhaps have had an essay of its own, especially to properly discuss how many of the changes are deliberately symbolic, and how much is simply done for practicality as the costume department grew more experienced, and the director saw what worked and what did not. When the shields disappear, they do so completely, leaving the sword alone to become a weapon of both offense and defence .

Elliott also mentions the physical distance that a sword gives the hero to the violence, in comparison with using his fists (for instance), which is more barbaric (62). A bow would of course increase the distance even more; the physical distance forces the camera to cut between the archer and the victim, unable to keep them both in the frame at once, and this creates an even stronger divorce between the hero and the victim. *Camelot* uses this in "The Battle of Bardon Pass", cutting between the knights and Arthur firing arrows, and the incoming attackers falling to those arrows. That there are several archers even makes it impossible to tell who is responsible for which death. The violence is further justified by

using contrast again; the antagonists are running towards the knights with limbs flailing and swords drawn, mouths open around battle cries, while the knights fire their arrows with a kind of serenity, not frantic, not yelling, just calmly placing arrow after arrow on the string. They have time for that, because the enemy is coming at them in slow motion. The contrast suggests that the antagonist group is the more aggressive one, while the knights come off as using violence out of necessity rather than bloodlust; their calm behaviour means they are in control of themselves.

Finally, the manner in which the violence is shot, the use of or lack of blood to humanise or dehumanise the casualties, and the trick of giving the antagonist a “karmic death” can all serve in making the knight seem less brutal than his profession demands. The bandits in *Merlin*’s “Gwaine” meet a karmic death, stabbed by their own enchanted swords. Death by falling off a cliff or a building is another common way to dispense with your villain, which *Merlin* uses in “The Witchfinder”, or else the villain can die of a wound struck by the hero, just not right away; time creates a distance between the hero and the death similar to what the sword does. Being a family show, *Merlin* is mostly bloodless; wounds that should have bled, or at least left a stain on the sword, do no such thing. *Merlin* even commits its most crucial deaths below camera level. Arthur and Mordred stab each other through the abdomen, just below the screen, so that the sound-effect and the actor’s movements and reactions have to tell the audience what just happened. Morgana dies in the same way, stabbed by Merlin. This serves to make death less visceral, though the sound-effects and acting can make up for it, and frequently does. *Camelot* on the other hand is very bloody, in line with both its “realism” and its adult-entertainment profile.

3.2.1.2 Earning knighthood

The idea of the knight comes with an unfortunate idea of a feudal social system, in which men are born into a rank, without social mobility. While the idea of being born great may not be entirely distasteful to the British and general European audience, many of whom still live in monarchies, in North America at least they have no great love for the feudal system (Elliott 65). To combat this, filmmakers emphasise training, service and merit in their knights, in order that the hero may appear to “earn knighthood”. “One of the most common devices used to ‘earn knighthood’ in medieval films has been a delay in narrative ...” (65), in other words giving the hero a chance to prove his worth before he becomes a knight.

On the one hand, *Merlin*’s two protagonists were both born into greatness. Arthur was not only born the heir to a kingdom, he was born into a destiny that says he will be the

greatest king Albion has ever seen, and Merlin is born with magical abilities that most men would have to study all their lives to master. This is a British show, though, and Britain is still a proud monarchy. On the other hand, both Arthur and Merlin are put through a narrative delay, and prove themselves many times over before they come into their proper positions of power. *Merlin* is heavy on the democratisation of the Middle Ages, especially with the Round Table-motif that appears several times throughout the show, and which I will return to later.

Of the five most important knights in *Merlin*, only two are of noble blood, though this has no consequences for either of them. It is mentioned that Guinevere's mother worked in Sir Leon's household, but Leon himself is never shown in his capacity as nobleman, and if he is the natural leader of the knights when Arthur is not present, it has more to do with his having been longer in service than being above them in rank. Gwaine, the other noble knight, keeps his nobility a secret. In his introductory episode, he keeps his heritage hidden even when he gets into trouble as a commoner standing up to the bandits-disguised-as-noblemen that are tormenting Merlin. "Nobility is defined by what you do, and not by who you are," Gwaine claims, upon which King Uther immediately has him banished. He would have had him executed, but Arthur manages to change the King's mind ("Gwaine").

Lancelot's introductory episode is also, as has been explored, about what it means to be a knight, and how to become worthy of the privilege. Under Uther, only noblemen may even try out for knighthood, but this will change under Arthur, who time and again finds himself fighting back to back with good, talented men of humble birth. Even the noblemen have to prove themselves though, in gruelling training and a one-on-one challenge against Arthur, the most formidable of Camelot's knights.

For most of the principle knights, as well as for Arthur as king, the narrative delay lasts for three seasons. In the finale of season three, Arthur knights Lancelot, Gwaine, Lancelot's friend Percival, and Guinevere's brother Elyan, as a reward for their faithful service to him, and so that when they storm the castle on the morning, they will do so as brothers, members of "the most noble army the world has ever known" ("The Coming of Arthur part 2"). Arthur himself is crowned a few episodes into season four.

There are no knighting ceremonies in *Camelot*, and Kay is the only important knight-character who is not already a knight when the show begins. Kay is Sir Ector's biological son, but as Arthur's adopted brother he is made marshal of the realm, in line with his traditional role in the legend. By the time he is given this position, Kay has already proven himself wise (being educated by Ector just like Arthur, but showing greater temperance than his brother),

merciful (forgiving Arthur for sleeping with his girlfriends) and ready to serve (wanting to bury the bodies of the massacre they encounter on the road in episode one).

The other principle knights, Leontes, Gawain and Brastias, have to prove themselves post-knighting, and do so along the lines that were drawn up under “Taming aggression” above. Through fighting for the right cause, protecting women and the weak, and seeking to better themselves, they prove that they are as worthy of knighthood as any of their fellow men.

The bestowal of an elevated position within a social hierarchy thus ceases to resemble a feudal system which tends to be regarded as an antiquated, retrograde system based on unfairly conferred privilege, and instead resembles more than anything else the realization of the American Dream through the hard work and determination of the self-made man, that which Aronstein and Coiner have termed the ‘Democratisation of the Middle Ages’. (Elliott: 67)

For the knights of *Camelot*, then, knighthood is not the reward for their hard work; the new world they are building under Arthur will be. For *Merlin*’s knights the trope is played straight though, especially for Lancelot, who spends his character journey striving for exactly that reward. The same emphasis on democracy and “earning” your power will reappear when we look at the medieval King.

3.2.1.3 Knighthood as an institution

Elliott begins this sub-chapter by talking about the institution of the villain and his henchmen, which is often characterised by the use of identical, identity-obscuring uniforms, such as helmets with closed visors. “[T]he Hero, who normally is also the star, not only has to ride a white horse wherever possible, but also has to wear an open-face helmet, in order to make absolutely sure that the audience gets a good look at the star’s radiant brow, while the villain is hiding his sinister countenance behind a closed visor” (Nickel:236). This trope is remarkably prevalent on film. The stormtroopers in the *Star Wars* saga is a prominent example, as are the Uruk Hai and the Haradrim from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and the henchmen of Hydra in *Captain America*. All wear helmets or other concealing headgear, and without human features they become indistinguishable and impossible to sympathise with, which helps when the hero starts killing them, because it will not feel so much like he is committing murder.

The knight-hero, by doing the opposite of this, either wearing a more open type of helmet, or taking it off altogether, makes himself easily identifiable, and gives himself an open, honest and expressive face in contrast to the faceless, dehumanised antagonists. Helmets, when worn, inevitably come off after a little while. In “Valiant”, Arthur’s helmet has a T-shaped opening that allows the audience to see his eyes, mouth and nose, while Valiant’s helmet has only two slits for the eyes, and it does indeed make him appear more threatening. When the two of them meet in the tournament, Arthur knocks Valiant’s helmet off, perhaps symbolically unmasking him, as Arthur and Merlin know he is a cheater, and the action gives Arthur an excuse to remove his own helmet, in a show of honour; he wants to fight on equal terms with his opponent. The two also pull down their mail hoods, and are shown to be sweaty, giving them another excuse for the otherwise nonsensical baring of such a vital area of the body; that they need air. *Merlin* only uses helmets for tournaments and jousts, and after “Valiant”, Arthur’s helmets are generally less open. In “Gwaine” he has only a hole for his eyes and three slits for air on one cheek, but on the other hand his opponents have even less open visors, keeping the balance right between hero and villain. Though the use of helmets is commendable considering how many films have the hero ride into battle either without a helmet (*First Knight*), or show him taking it off before entering the fray (*King Arthur*), the tournament in “Gwaine” also nicely illustrates precisely why so many medieval films avoid helmets; at one point there are two heroes and two villains fighting to the death, but it is almost impossible to tell who is who.

Camelot, portraying a different, darker Middle Ages without plate mail, does not use helmets at all, but then again the good knights are not set in opposition to any kind of army or even rival institution of evil knights. When they do battle it is against bandits, mercenaries, even villagers, and these people are made anonymous not by helmets, so much as by their brown garb, and the camera’s lack of close-ups, which bars the audience from getting a good look at them, thereby ensuring that we forget them as soon as they are dispatched by the hero.

The face-obscuring helmet serves to make the villains part of one big villainous institution, but what about the hero? How is the filmmaker supposed to show that knighthood is a good institution?

If we accept Kaeuper’s postulation that ‘belief in the *right kind of violence* carried out vigorously *by the right kind of people* is a cornerstone of [medieval chivalric] literature’ then in medieval films we can see that by adding liturgical – or at least ritual – elements to the initiation ceremony, the filmmaker has fixed the concept of

knighthood within the legitimizing aegis of the institution, which comes to represent the ‘right people’. (Elliott: 69. Elliott’s emphasis)

So the idea is that when they pledge themselves to a certain King, or to a certain form of knighthood (as in *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005)), if it is a group that works for good, then that makes the knight good also. Then it is up to each institution to prove itself good. In *Merlin*, a lot of emphasis is placed on the merits of the knights of Camelot. Not only is it difficult to become a member of this particular army, as we saw above, to further prove the goodness of this institution, there are plenty of scenes in which the knights show their loyalty to their King and their commander, Uther and Arthur, by riding out with Arthur even to certain death (“The Last Dragonlord”), or facing execution rather than renounce King Uther (“The Coming of Arthur part 2”). This means that by the time Lancelot, Gwaine, Percival and Elyan are knighted, the audience knows that despite Uther not being a good king, the Knights of Camelot are a good institution, and they are, after all, commanded by Arthur, who in contrast to Uther will be a good king.

In *Camelot*, the knights do not belong to an institution so much as they belong to Arthur. They have pledged themselves to him, and if his cause is good, then their actions will be good too. Since his cause is to rid Britain of the chaos and violence that plagues it, his court at Camelot is elevated to a beacon in society, and the knights that protect that beacon can only be good.

3.2.2 Paradigmatic representation of knighthood

“Thus, as we move through the ages, we are able to see that the ways in which filmmakers have recast the figure of the medieval knight have often been influenced by dominant models drawn from parallel genres” (Elliott: 78). Paradigmatic representation means sacrificing the accuracy of the form in order to better communicate the content. Linking the knight to a contemporary concept that has some of the appropriate connotations in the minds of the audience is another way for a filmmaker to quickly and efficiently explain the foreign concept of knighthood. Elliott’s three examples, the swashbuckler, the cowboy and the action hero, followed each other through the decades of the twentieth century.

The swashbuckler is a gentleman, he uses speed and his quick wit to outsmart and outfight his opponents, and he usually does so with a smile. Errol Flynn’s Robin Hood is a great example of this trope. The knight and the swashbuckler had their code of honour in

common, and lived their lives in the service of king, country and lady-love, protecting the poor and oppressed.

The cowboy and the knight were compatible in other ways. The character roster of the medieval story and the Western overlapped a great deal, having a sheriff/king, an antagonist, and usually some natives/barbarians (whether Saxons or Picts or others). Against this backdrop the knight could easily be compared to the lone gunman, the stranger who rides into town, the man fighting to protect civilization on the frontier. After the sprightly, laughing swashbuckling knight, the cowboy-knight was more stoic: the mysterious, silent type. Errol Flynn made his films in the thirties, forties and fifties, the cowboy took over as knightly paradigm gradually through the fifties and sixties, and in the nineties, another type of hero stepped up to provide filmmakers with a new template.

These two paradigms were ultimately to find their way into the emergent paradigm of the action hero, providing the knight with almost (but not quite) superhuman skill and a vendetta as a personal motivation, in order to present the knight as a perfect version of ourselves, who is dedicated to the service and honour which we nostalgically assign to the Middle Ages. (Elliott: 81)

The issue in this case is that all three tropes belong to the past, and though it is very likely that the knights of Camelot and Merlin have carried with them some of the traits of the pirate, the cowboy and the action hero into the 21st century, they will be hard to define.

Merlin in particular seems to rely mostly on iconic representation on the one hand, and the legacy of its famous characters on the other hand. While the women of the Arthurian legend have gone through a great change over the years, first towards black-and-white villainy, and then back again into grey morality and even heroine status, the men have remained mostly the same; King Arthur is still a good king, Lancelot and Gawain still knights of great prowess and chivalry. These men, just by bearing their famous names, already embody the tropes of the knight.

Camelot, belonging more to the dark ages and therefore not using as many of the typical trappings of the iconic medieval characters, like metal armour and surcoats, is more dependent on paradigms to reassure the audience that these men are indeed knights. And one thing these knights have in common with the cowboy-knights of the fifties is the sense that they are fighting to protect a civilisation threatened on all sides by a primitive frontier landscape. Camelot castle becomes a haven of peace and humanity in a sea of violence and

greedy opportunism. When we first encounter Gawain, who at that point is a wandering warrior without ties to family or loyalty, his clothes can either be construed to symbolise a monk's garb, or a poncho, harkening back to Clint Eastwood's famous nameless cowboy. And there are definitely shades of the American action hero in Arthur's one-man stand in the battle of Bardon Pass.

But it is, after all, common for medieval films and shows to use a mixture of paradigms and icons. Only by moving forward and then looking back can we eventually say something about the paradigms of the twenty-first century, and find out if a new kind of hero has stepped in to provide a referent for the knight.

3.3 Those who rule

Elliott narrows the object of his analysis down to the cinematic, male, English King, which is also the object of this thesis. Then he examines what can be known of the medieval king, and is left with three characteristics: the King is wise, he is the head of state, and he is one with the nation. "It is ... this threefold conception of kingship which dominates the medieval referent as we, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, go about understanding it" (Elliott: 86). And the absence of these traits defines a bad king. The challenge for a filmmaker is how to communicate these traits visually, turning them into an iconic representation of the medieval king. As neither *Merlin* nor *Camelot* use the final of the three characteristics, I will not be discussing the king being one with the nation.

3.3.1 Iconic recreation of kingship

3.3.1.1 Wisdom

"With regards to the first of these signs, wisdom, fortuitously we have inherited from a range of cultures ... a traditional association of age with sagacity" (86). Michelangelo's famous painting, "The Creation of Adam", shows God as an older man with flowing grey hair and beard. This model appears again and again, in visual arts and in literature, to connote a character possessed of great wisdom. In film, the creation of the king-trope came gradually over the years, made possible in particular by the recasting of certain actors in similar roles over and over. They brought their previous roles with them into the new, and so the audience came to take it for granted that each new role would have certain characteristics, because they had seen the actor play "the same character" before. Elliott uses Sean Connery as an example, the man who also graces the cover of *Remaking the Middle Ages*, there in his role as King

Arthur in *First Knight*. Connery has played a number of these wise-older-man roles, from William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose* (1986) to Ramirez in *Highlander* (1986), and each of these would then become hypotexts to later films like *First Knight*. There is no need to establish each character's wisdom from film to film; Connery brings those traits with him. Through the work of Connery, and the actors that he inherited the trope from, a stock-character has been built; the king has become a trope. A man with a crown on his head is a king, and if that man is middle-aged and bearded, then he is a wise king.

But in both *Merlin* and *Camelot*, King Arthur is a young man. Bradley James was cast as *Merlin's* Arthur in 2008, when he was twenty-five, and Jamie Campbell Bower was twenty-two when *Camelot* aired in 2011. Then again, both shows tell the story of Arthur in his early years, just before and right after he became King, but does that mean that these Arthurs are not and cannot be wise?

It is not that simple. Neither Arthur is immediately shown to be wise, but they are shown to have the potential to become wise, and episode by episode they grow to fulfil that potential. How then do the two shows go about showing the evolution of these young kings? Here is an instant where the TV series has an advantage over film: the combination of length and subject-matter. The subject of the small-screen is precisely the small things in life, or at least it is allowed to be. A film made for the cinema must make even narratives about small things feel grand in order to justify the money the audience spent on the ticket. A TV series on the other hand, being episodic, being made for the small screen, and having time for an expansive narrative, can spend a whole hour on teaching a young king a simple lesson in wisdom. In "The Once and Future Queen", *Merlin's* Arthur learns humility as he falls in love with Guinevere, begins to see her true worth, and listens to her wisdom. He also narrowly avoids being assassinated, but the focus of the episode is Arthur acting like a shallow idiot, being taught the error of his ways, and then proving that he has learned his lesson through an unprovoked act of humility. *Merlin* has many such episodes, many such lessons for its young king, and it has the time for them.

On the other hand, *Merlin's* Arthur also has some innate wisdom, and this is communicated to the audience in a different way, by borrowing a trick previously examined in relation to the iconographic representation of the knight: contrasting.

It is easier to portray a bad king than a good king. You could, for instance, have his first act on screen be to have someone executed and then throw a feast in celebration. That is how the audience is introduced to King Uther of *Merlin*, played by veteran actor Anthony Head. Now Uther is not a wholly unsympathetic man, but he is portrayed as a man unable to

move on from the tragedies of his past. The loss of his wife has caused a blinding hate in him that makes him see enemies everywhere. The series is full of scenes in which father and son debate the problems that face the nation, whether it is full-scale war or the guilt and innocence of a single person, and almost every time, Arthur is shown to be possessed of some virtue that Uther has lost.

In “The Mark of Nimueh”, a magical plague breaks out in Camelot. When Guinevere’s father falls ill, Merlin uses a spell to cure him, forgetting to think of the potential consequences. Gwen is quickly arrested as a witch when her father is the only one to recover from the illness. King Uther sentences her to die, hoping it will end the plague. While Uther is shown to be a man desperately trying to save his kingdom, he is also ignoring the evidence of Gwen’s innocence, like her years in Morgana’s service. Not to mention that the only magic she has been “proven” to have committed is an act of “kindness, of love” as Arthur puts it.

As Uther demands the girl be executed in the morning, Arthur tries to argue his father down. Uther says that Arthur will understand when he himself becomes king. Arthur still does not agree. “I don't know what kind of king I will be, but I do have a sense of the kind of Camelot I would wish to live in. It would be where the punishment fits the crime.” He would not sentence Guinevere based on the fact that she used magic for healing. His humility also shines through in these words, the insecurity underlying his usual arrogant veneer; he knows that being king is a monumental responsibility. Uther makes sure to punctuate the contrast between them, the blindness and cruelty of the one and the tolerance, mercy and wisdom of the other, by agreeing that the punishment should fit the crime: “She's played with fire, and sadly she must die by fire” (“The Mark of Nimueh”).

In “The Labyrinth of Gedreff”, when magical drought and famine descend on the kingdom and there is no cure in sight, Uther soon orders Arthur to stop distributing food to the people. Uther wants to preserve the meagre stores for the army, so that the kingdom can be defended. Arthur is outraged: “What's the point of defending a kingdom when the people starve to death?” He demands that Uther ask the neighbouring kingdoms for help, but Uther refuses. “As soon as they realise how weak we are, our enemies will strike against us,” the King says. “Besides I would rather starve than beg my enemies for help! What of our kingdom's reputation? Have you no pride?” Arthur readily admits that while the people starve he cannot think of pride.

In the first example above, Arthur shows himself naturally merciful, wanting to spare a human life where his father is willing to waste it. He also shows himself nuanced in his views, contrasted to his father’s dogma. In the second example, Arthur shows humility where

Uther is proud, and again they clash over the value of human life, and whether some are worth more than others. As the series progresses, though Arthur is hard-put to shake off his father's authority over him, he moves further and further towards his own way of thinking, guided by Merlin, who shares Arthur's virtuous views, while Morgana on the other hand, who stands with Arthur in many of these scenes, grows more and more like Uther, her obsession blinding her to mercy, reason and the sanctity of life.

On this topic it is significant that *Camelot* only had time to tell the beginning of a story before it was cancelled. It is likely that Bower's Arthur would have grown in wisdom as the seasons progressed, but in season one the idea of his being wise is only courted; he is still young by the end, and as discussed in chapter two, his final decision in the finale, letting Guinevere into his chambers, is not a wise one.

Merlin believes Arthur will be a different, a better king than those who came before him because he has "Uther's bloodline and Ector's education..." ("Homecoming"), but while Ector has both intelligence and wisdom himself, the question remains whether he has managed to pass both of those qualities on to his foster son.

Arthur's first scene in the series suggests not. We find the oblivious future king sprawled naked by the banks of a river, next to a girl. He intersperses his kisses with Latin, showing himself to be learned, but when the lovers are interrupted by Arthur's foster-brother Kay, the audience realises that in this case learning and wisdom have not gone hand in hand; the girl is Kay's girlfriend, which Arthur knows well, and yet that did not stop him. Trying to make his brother forgive him, Arthur claims that "Sometimes these things happen. It's like she's Cleopatra, you're Caesar and I'm Mark Anthony." (*Camelot*: "Homecoming"). Again, he is educated, and also witty, but not wise; he does not seem to understand that his actions will hurt the people he cares about. Of course, this scene is meant to foreshadow the love-triangle to come, between Arthur, Guinevere and Leontes, and there too, Arthur will not display the wisdom, or at least not the will-power, to do what is right.

However, there is some wisdom to be found in him. In "Justice", Arthur's treatment of the murder case shows him to be thinking *differently* than his fellows, in a very good way. A murder has been committed, and Arthur is determined to find out what drove the man to the act. Everyone around him tells him to let it go and focus on more important things, especially since the murderer has confessed and refuses to cooperate and explain his reasons. Only Kay is as interested as Arthur in uncovering the motive for the murder; only Kay, who has read the same philosophers that Arthur has, understands that it matters, and yet the point here is not that Arthur doggedly pursues the truth, the point is that he also understands that in order to

change the country for the better, he has to change the way people think. He has to make his knights and Guinevere understand that it matters *why* the man did what he did, not just *what* he did, and that the punishment must fit the crime. These things need to be given weight. This is Arthur's wisdom in *Camelot*, and the hope Merlin has in him: he is a different kind of king than those who came before, a different kind of man to his fellows.

In addition, the murder-trial uncovers a secret in the village where the murder took place, a tradition of institutionalised rape, which the murderer was trying to protect his daughter from. When Arthur and Guinevere finally get a confession out of Colfer, the murderer, in a private room, they demand that he go public with the information. "If you don't speak about this it will keep on happening," Guinevere says. "That is not my responsibility," Colfer replies. "Then how does anything ever change?" Arthur demands to know ("Justice"). Colfer is not a villain for being unwilling to shoulder the burden of social change; he, like so many of his fellows, is struggling just to take care of his own in this brutal, unfair society. Arthur, on the other hand, has the freedom, wealth and strength to fight for change, and the wisdom to make it happen. If only his wisdom can win over his other flaws.

3.3.1.2 King as head of feudal order

When discussing the king as the head of a state, Elliott identifies a type of establishing scene that is used frequently in medieval movies to almost physically place the king at the top of the feudal pyramid. Most frequently this type of scene will take place in a throne room or a "great hall". Elliott describes it as the following type of shot:

Beginning from a high-angle establishing shot which usually encompasses the Great Hall, we see it from either the point of view of a balcony ... or from a visitor coming in the door ... The camera frequently either tracks downwards and sweeps through the hall or makes the same transition by a series of correlated camera angles, eventually coming to rest at the king's table. The symbolism here is unmistakable, placing the king at the head of his court... (90-91)

He also adds that a low camera angle is frequently used to emphasise the king's authority, as well as his connection to God, and that the king's table is frequently raised to give the same impression.

The trope occurs several times in *Merlin*, though in the examples below the camera does not end on the king's table, but rather his throne, for the first example is Arthur's

coronation scene, and the second the scene in which Guinevere is crowned Queen. Morgana's coronation is a notable exception, though, as I will discuss below. A third example occurs outside in the forest when Arthur pulls the sword from the stone.

Arthur and Guinevere's two coronation scenes use the described low-angled tracking shot, following first Arthur and then Guinevere up the aisle towards the throne. Off to each side stand the court and the knights of Camelot. Both Arthur and Guinevere kneel before the throne, Arthur is crowned by Geoffrey, the court genealogist, and Guinevere is crowned by Arthur. When the crown is placed on Arthur's head, he is in the middle of the frame, close to the camera, while the rows of spectators stretch out behind him, all facing the camera. Arthur is placed at the head of his people, and the fact that they are all facing the same way is symbolic of his leading position. Guinevere is shot from the side when she is crowned, and her profile is framed by a stained glass window, creating an image almost like a painting, or as if she is part of the stained glass motif. There is something almost religious in it, to make up for the lack of overt religion in the show.

In both scenes, the newly crowned royalty then rises and turns to face the room, and the camera pulls back to its original low-angle shot from in the aisle, looking up at the throne(s). The thrones are elevated by a handful of steps, elevating the King and Queen.

In Arthur's scene, sunlight shines brightly through the tall windows along the wall, again creating an appropriately religious feeling, or at least a feeling of a legend in the making. The shot of recently knighted Sir Gwaine, Sir Elyan, Sir Percival and Sir Leon, in the bright-red capes of the Knights of Camelot, adds to the feeling that Bradley James' Arthur has finally become the King Arthur of the Arthurian tradition, with his knights behind him. Underscoring this is a lingering shot of Guinevere in the crowd, softly lit and wearing a light-purple dress that foreshadows the regal purple dress she will wear at her own coronation.

One other significant use of the trope occurs when Arthur pulls the sword from the stone. As when he stood up after his crowning, the camera focuses on his back as he stands facing his people, but between him and them is the sword in the stone. Arthur's first attempt to pull it out is unsuccessful, as it is Merlin who must use his magic to release the sword, and he is waiting for a sign that Arthur is daring to believe that he is the rightful owner of the sword and thereby the rightful ruler of Camelot. After focusing on Arthur's distressed face for a moment, the camera returns to its original position behind him, and for a moment the King falters before his people. All it takes is for Arthur to bow his head a little (along with the ominous soundtrack) for the well-trained audience to recognise the signs of a head of state failing in his duty. But then Arthur reassesses and tries again, changing his grip on the handle,

and closing his eyes. Once again the sunlight streaming down through the leaves creates a sense of grandeur, creating a halo around Arthur's head and glinting off the sword as it slides from the stone. His pose here and the way in which he pulls out the sword echoes the same moment in Boorman's *Excalibur*, placing *Merlin* firmly within the tradition.

Morgana's crowning in season three on the other hand is notable for not fulfilling the typical "Great Hall" establishing shot. Though the scene is introduced by a high-angled view of the room, the people flanking the aisle are enemy soldiers, and their dark uniforms create of them almost a non-entity, whereas the court at Arthur's coronation is colourful and diverse (though dominated by red). This harks back to the good/bad institutions of iconic knighthood, with good and bad being colour-coded. In contrast to Arthur and Guinevere, Morgana does not kneel before the throne, but sits on it when the crown is placed on her head, while King Uther is the one being forcibly held down in the place where Morgana should be kneeling. The focus afterwards is all on Morgana's face, she is not shown in relation to the people until a later scene on a balcony, and that is coupled with an execution. This serves to present her as a ruler who is neither sanctioned by, nor cares about the people, nor does she enter into the role of Queen with the respect and humility that she ought to have, and which Arthur and Guinevere both displayed.

Camelot also makes use of the great hall scene, in the first episode, as Arthur and Kay enter Camelot castle for the first time, guided by Merlin. Once in the castle, they enter into a huge room, overgrown with foliage. Far above, the ceiling is caved in so that the room stands open to the sky, but there is still an air of majesty about the place. Merlin calls attention to the trope about to be used by explicitly naming the room "the great hall of Camelot". The knights sworn to Arthur come walking out of various archways and doors to stand before their new king. Merlin steps off to the side, leaving Arthur standing foremost with his brother a step behind him, much like Bradley James' Arthur faced his people in the examples above. The knights swear to follow him, and Arthur promises to do what he can to justify their allegiance to him. The camera places itself behind the knights as they kneel down, and the camera lowers itself, as if it too, and the audience through it, is kneeling ("Homecoming").

However, when Arthur's coronation comes in "The Sword and the Crown", *Camelot* chooses a different way to frame the scene. Most strikingly, the throne is situated in the middle of the room, meaning the people surround it on all sides. It is elevated on a dais, but it is still a break from the trope, and the proximity of the people is heightened by the opening shot showing people milling about on the dais itself. Not only that, but as Arthur approaches the dais after his introduction by Merlin, it is shown that there are balconies running all the

way around the room, and that there are people up there, looking down. This powerful centring of Arthur is meaningful in several ways.

It places Arthur at the centre of the people, symbolically making him the centre of Britain. As the series progresses, Arthur's work to better the country is undermined by the vastness of his kingdom, and as he stands on the dais, the way he is constantly turning his back on one part of the room in order to address another part foreshadows the way he is always neglecting one part of the country in order to protect another. On the other hand, the way the people crowd him in, the way he is almost one of them by sheer physical proximity as well as the centring, gives power to his claim that he will "establish ... at Camelot, a new way of ruling, for ... the people". Unlike Morgan, who wants the throne for her own personal triumph, Arthur will be the people's king.

When next we see the dais, the throne has been replaced by two chairs, but it is not Arthur on the dais this time, it is Leontes, and he is waiting for his bride. When Guinevere comes up the aisle, she stops before the dais next to Arthur, and the camera lets her linger there for so long that it is almost impossible not to contemplate the alternative of the two of them getting married rather than Guinevere and Leontes, especially as she is wearing Arthur's wedding gift to her, a personal reminder of their brief tryst, as a necklace. But eventually she goes to stand with Leontes, and though Arthur is the one who marries them, not the priest from the coronation, the King remains on the floor below the dais, rather than climbing up to stand before the lovers. It is a very significant choice, as to an audience that will no doubt be comparing this wedding to a traditional modern Christian one, where the priest stands topmost in the church with the bride and groom before him, it jars that Arthur is standing on the wrong side, and below, the couple. This is very likely intentional, as in this moment Arthur is no noble king, but a common man full of jealousy. He has committed a crime against Leontes, and does not deserve to stand above him.

Camelot uses the classic great hall scene to characterise King Arthur in many ways, as a man of the people, as the centre of Britain, and as a man full of weaknesses.

3.3.2 Paradigmatic construction of kingship

3.3.2.1 The King as knight

Unlike the knight who had the pirate, the cowboy and the action hero to draw on when trying to explain himself to the modern audience, the king seems not to have any such ready parallels from which filmmakers can recreate him. The point of paradigmatic recreation is to sacrifice the accuracy of form to better communicate the content of the character-type in

question, but what modern character-types exists that rule as kings do? Instead, Elliott says, filmmakers have turned to their own knight-figure, and reconstructed the king in terms of the same need to prove himself worthy before attaining his power, though the reward in this case is royal rule, not knighthood. Again, paradigmatic recreation is more commonly used in North American cinema, where the interest in medieval times is as great as in Europe, but where a historical distrust of monarchs has led them towards a more democratic portrayal of their historical kings. By associating the king with the knight, they make the king a man like other men, better in degree, but not in kind, and this creates “a much closer rapprochement with his people, so that he can dine alongside them at court ... joust alongside them in peace time ... and in certain cases fight alongside them in battle” (Elliott:97), all in all making him more easily acceptable to the audience. This works well with non-religious *Merlin* and the semi-religious *Camelot*, where the king is very much human and not divinely appointed at all, and this might go some way towards explaining why both shows have such a strong element of king-as-knight despite being British productions.

After *Merlin*'s Arthur becomes king in season four, he continues to take an active part in quests, as well as throwing his sword in whenever there is a fight. His fighting prowess is still a big part of his character, and he still wears plain chainmail more often than anything else, along with the red cape, which is also what his knights wear, signifying that he is one of them.

Camelot also is in need of a knightly king because the court of Camelot is not rich and powerful in this version; it is only just starting out, has only a handful of knights to its name, must feed and house the growing number of people coming to the castle for protection and to start new lives, and even rebuild the castle itself, which is only a ruin. In other words, the King must pull up his sleeves and get to work alongside his people.

However, this paradigm does come with some problems. Elliott argues that “... if the king is young, he can fight but does not symbolize sagacity; on the other hand, however, older kings might be wise, but are no longer able to fight” (99). However, as shown in the previous section on wisdom in kings, with enough time and repetition, it is possible to teach the audience to accept that a young king can also be wise, while also using his inexperience as a driving force behind the plot, as both *Merlin* and *Camelot* does.

Elliott also compares the king-as-knight with the sheriff of the Western. “Both figures are raised up from the ranks of the cowboy to resume the responsibility of government by an overtly meritocratic process, engendering an essential tension which comes from a duty to uphold the law as it applies to all, constantly challenged by the need to enforce the law by

violent means.” The sheriff “must be capable of physical violence”, but to be a good sheriff he must not resort to violence unless it is “absolutely and unequivocally necessary” (100). For the medieval king, this means he must be even further disassociated from the enactment of violence than his knights must be, but if the king is not old enough to be wise, and yet not allowed to use the physical strength that his youth gives him, he is stuck between two useful positions, unable to connect properly to either one. Elliott shows how medieval films have fixed this problem by introducing sub-kings.

3.3.2.2 The sub-king

To help the king be both wise and strong, medieval movies have introduced two sub-kings to represent each side of the scale. Elliott names these two roles after Merlin and Lancelot, who usually enact the parts in the Arthurian legend. “The introduction of two such sub-kings symbolizing virility and wisdom allowed filmmakers to construct the notion of an ideal king as a compromise between the two extremes, incorporating elements from each in order to mark character transformation” (112). Merlin can advise Arthur, giving him wisdom, and Lancelot can fight on Arthur’s command, allowing Arthur to sit removed from the violence itself but still have the means with which to control his kingdom. An interesting note, and something to keep in mind, is the overlapping of the sub-king of wisdom with Joseph Campbell’s “supernatural aid” from chapter two.

Camelot’s Merlin absolutely fills the role of sub-king of wisdom, despite not having a beard. He is old, though, much older than he looks. In “The Sword and the Crown”, Igraine points out that Merlin has not aged a day since she saw him twenty years ago, when he came to take baby Arthur from her. Merlin deflects the question, as he will continue to do whenever someone begins to probe into his past, or into the workings of his magical powers, but there is clearly a suggestion of magic there.

It is Merlin who makes Arthur pull the sword from the stone. It is heavily implied that Merlin placed the sword there many years ago, in solid rock at the top of a waterfall, and created the story of The Sword of the Gods so that one day, it could be used to enhance Arthur’s claim to the throne in the eyes of the people. Merlin organizes Arthur’s coronation, and uses the wedding of Leontes and Guinevere to create unity and hope in the people. He is constantly pulling strings behind the scenes, or giving Arthur advice on how to behave as a king. However, there is also an almost parental element to his relationship with the boy, made more overt when he becomes romantically involved with Igraine, Arthur’s biological mother, and after she dies in the final episode of the series, a grieving Merlin decides to leave

Camelot, despite Arthur's protestations. Merlin seems to believe Arthur ready to stand on his own two feet, though, and their dialogue in their farewell-scene supports this idea. Arthur points out that Merlin began all this, the new Camelot, and so he should "stay, and ... see it through". For once, Arthur sounds like the responsible parent, while Merlin is running away from his grief. "You will be great," Merlin says before he leaves.

But despite the show seeming to want to tell the audience that Arthur is now ready to provide his own wisdom, it is highly unlikely that Merlin would not have returned in the second season, both because he is such an iconic and important character in the legend, and because Fiennes provided a lot of the star power of the show. In addition, I point again to the final scene between Arthur and Guinevere; Arthur still has some way to go before being wise enough not to need a Merlin.

On the other hand, Arthur has no clear sub-king of strength. His half-brother Kay is made Marshal of England, Arthur's right hand, and Leontes is his "champion", but neither of them enact more violence than Arthur does. In fact, the most "violent" of the knights is Gawain, who is brought in as a battle instructor, and even he is completely overshadowed by Arthur's one-man stand against the attackers of Bardon Pass in the finale. Again *Camelot* uses the imbalance between wisdom and violence to create tension; in order to make Camelot a better place, Arthur must first become a better man, and as of the end of the first season, the progress he had made was still in question.

Merlin's Merlin has two seasons in which he can act as sub-king, two seasons in which Arthur is king. However, the plot is driven by the frustrating of this expectation both in the audience and in Merlin himself. In season four, Arthur's uncle Agravaine comes in to help advise the young king through his first months as ruler, taking up position as sub-king of wisdom. When Merlin finds out that Agravaine is actually working for Morgana, a silent struggle begins behind the scenes between these two men both trying to be the sub-king of wisdom to Arthur. Merlin's problem is not just his own youth compared to Agravaine's fatherly age and experience, but also the fact that Arthur half the time thinks Merlin is a complete idiot, and so will not give his advice the same weight he gives to Agravaine's.

Though Merlin is also young, he, like Arthur has a natural disposition towards mercy, temperance and kindness. Over and over, the series shows that when Arthur listens to Merlin, it usually leads him to making the right decision.

Two parallel scenes in particular show how Arthur thrives with Merlin as his advisor. In "His Father's Son", the fifth episode of season four, Arthur and his knights capture a band of raiders from Caerleon, led by King Caerleon himself. Arthur's instinct and Merlin's advice

says to let the enemy king return home in disgrace, but Agravaine persuades Arthur that he must show his strength by executing Caerleon. Agravaine knows this would provoke a war between the two countries. His rhetoric is an effective play on Arthur's fears of not living up to his late father's expectations, arguing that Uther would not have hesitated to execute Caerleon. Arthur gives in to his own fears and Agravaine's poisonous whispers, and it would have ended in war, if Arthur had not listened to his own heart in the end and persuaded the widowed Queen to accept trial-by-combat over full-scale war. Conceding that his own wisdom was inadequate in the situation, Arthur falls back on what he is good at; combat, but the violence he uses is excused by contrasting him to his opponent, who is a giant compared to him, and whose sword is equally gigantic, as well as by making this battle Arthur's way of taking personal responsibility for his earlier mistake; the trial is to the death and so Arthur is willing to give his life that no one else will die because of his foolishness. Once victorious he proves that he does have some wisdom in him after all, by finally listening to Merlin, sparing his defeated foe, and forging a bond of friendship with the widowed Queen of Caerleon.

In season five, in "Another's Sorrow", Arthur finds himself in the same situation once more. Having defeated King Odin, Arthur must once again choose between executing his enemy or showing him mercy. This time, Merlin is the only one present to advise him, except Odin himself, who wants Arthur to "finish it" and kill him, but Arthur shows himself to have grown and learned. He listens to Merlin who tells him that an execution will not help to unite Albion, only perpetuate the cycle of violence. Having chosen his path, the right one this time, Arthur argues Odin into accepting a peace treaty, thereby ending a decade of bloodshed.

Like his twin in *Camelot*, *Merlin's* Arthur has no clear sub-king of strength. Since the rule of good drama dictates that it is more interesting to watch a man go on a quest than to hear about it afterwards, it seems that the sub-king of strength, the "Lancelot" role, is most often fulfilled in films where he is the protagonist, like in *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* or *Knights of the Round Table* and *First Knight*. When King Arthur is the protagonist, in order to avoid the problem of the audience being stuck watching him pass laws while a sub-king is riding off to exciting battle, it seems more common to use other means to distance him from violence while still having him be the one to enact it, as for instance in the example above, where Arthur, rather than choosing one of his knights to do the trial-by-combat, he does it himself. This might also explain in part, *Camelot's* lack of a sub-king of strength.

King Uther of *Merlin* fits the trope very well, because he is too young for sagacity (and notably beardless) and yet too old for fighting (he makes a couple of exceptions, like in "Excalibur", but always appears notably reduced by the experience afterwards). His sub-king

of wisdom is Gaius, the royal physician, who also acts as Campbell's "supernatural aid" to Merlin. Uther's sub-king of strength is Arthur, who carries out the King's commands. Arthur is the one who raids houses looking for hidden sorcerers, the one who leads the knights of Camelot against man-eating griffins, vengeful dragons and misunderstood werepanthers, and the one who carries the King's orders out of the throne room that they may reach whomever they are intended for.

However, in this case the two poles do not help the King achieve an ideal balance, because Uther relies too heavily on his "Lancelot", frequently dismissing the advice and experience of his "Merlin". In the fifth episode of the first season, Uther ignores Gaius when he tries to tell the King that the attacking griffin can only be vanquished by magic, instead commanding Arthur to go back out and face the beast again, though Arthur has reported that ordinary weapons have no effect on the creature (*Merlin*: "Lancelot"). This sort of situation repeats itself over and over, and frequently, Uther will afterwards admit to Gaius that he should have listened to him, and yet he never seems to learn, which again is the difference between Arthur and Uther, one can change and evolve, the other cannot.

In his conclusion on kings, Elliott says that "... we are rarely, if ever, privy to a cinematic representation of an ideal king" (112). But what good is the ideal king? Especially in protagonists, there is a need for flaws to make him or her interesting and to create conflict and drama. Both *Merlin* and *Camelot* use the flaws of their kings, contrasting it to the ideal that each king strives for. *Camelot's* Merlin works to create for his Arthur the reputation of an ideal king. "A king exists primarily as an idea," he explains to Arthur. "[If we can] persuade the people believe in the idea of you, we can make it a reality" ("The Sword and the Crown"), but in the end he is frustrated by the reality of the boy he has thrust into kingship. *Merlin's* Merlin hears over and over again how his Arthur will be the greatest king Albion has ever seen, and yet as the years go by Arthur continues to be just shy of perfection, and in the end the King, through innocent ignorance, takes part in causing his own downfall.

The two shows use their flawed kings deliberately to construct the Arthurian tragedy.

3.4 Constructing medieval worlds

To illustrate how filmmakers go about reconstructing the medieval world that their characters are to inhabit, Elliott proposes a set of "guides", split into two categories: internal and physical. The internal guides are drawn from Elliott's iconography, and just like with icons

and paradigms, any given film or TV series can make use of both internal and physical guides.

The term “guide” is appropriate because, much like a tourist guide, they are meant to help the audience navigate the film’s foreign world. A certain establishing of the setting, the time and the place, is necessary to make the audience ready to receive the plot.

Over time, hypertextuality has created a set of familiar worlds that come with certain expectations, meaning the filmmaker now has a shorthand way of making the audience familiar with the setting. Elliott’s guides are quick ways of setting up the medieval world for the viewer, to tell them whether they are in the dark Middle Ages of *The Advocate* (1993) or the romantic Middle Ages of *Camelot* (1967). This belongs to exactly the same process as that which makes the audience immediately accept Sean Connery’s Arthur as a wise, good king in *First Knight*, because they have seen Connery play similar roles before. Pavlov’s dogs are not the only creatures that can be conditioned to respond in certain ways to specific cues.

Elliott builds his arguments on the work of Amy de la Bretèque, who has written that since the medieval referent is so hard to recapture, filmmakers have tended to build on each other’s works, and the audience have come to accept this self-creating referent as “the Middle Ages”, at least on screen (Elliott: 81).

3.4.1 Internal guides

The internal guides have come into being through being constantly repeated by a long tradition of medieval films. Elliott lists five types of internal guides. The first is his own “historicons”, such as a knight on a horse or a princess in a tower, the second is a broader scene such as a royal feast or a peasant at work in the field. The second seems as if it may often contain the first. The third type takes the first and second and sets them in motion, creating something Francois Amy de la Bretèque has called “passages obligés” (See Elliott: 181), in other words the type of scenes the audience expect to see in a medieval film, like a jousting tournament, the rescuing of an imprisoned damsel, or a knighting ceremony. The fourth guide is basically the “passages obligés” again, but Elliott calls it “allusion to an intertextual model”. Basically the difference amounts to whether the filmmaker is overtly asking the audience to recall a specific scene from a different movie, or whether the use of familiar story-elements and images is more subconscious. The final type is “manner of speech”, for instance “mock-medieval” speech. Elliott lists the last three in a different order, but I have chosen to organise them in the way that makes the most sense for this thesis, as I

will only be concentrating on the first four. The fifth guide is not, as far as I can tell, in use in either *Merlin* or *Camelot* in any significant way.

Guides are necessary to help the audience find their feet, yes, but they are not only meant for introductions; they will continue to appear throughout the show, by nature of being the elements that make up the show. There are internal guides in the first episode of *Merlin*, and 64 episodes later, some of the same guides appear in the finale. The same happens in *Camelot*. I intend to begin by looking at *Merlin* and *Camelot*'s opening credits, before picking out some significant uses of the first four types of guides in each show. Then I will go on to look at physical guides.

TV shows have a unique feature in which a number of internal guides, especially historicons, can be lined up in quick succession. The opening credits of a show work as a hook for the audience, to get them excited about the coming episode. There will be music, rapidfire imagery, and frequently, the images come from scenes from the actual show. While this does not mean that the guides are then dispensed with for the rest of the show, the opening credits are important because of the volume of information they can convey in such short time. *Merlin* limits itself to a thirty-second opening, while *Camelot* spends all of one and a half minute on its introduction.

Merlin takes full advantage of its credits to tune the audience in on exactly what kind of medieval spectacle they are in for. It begins with a sword lying on the bottom of a lake before the camera rises out of the water to show Colin Morgan's Merlin with his eyes flashing gold, a sign that he is not an ordinary boy. A knight, identified as such by his full plate armour, brandishes a lance as his white horse rears beneath him, before two knights dressed in red and yellow surcoats clash together with swords and shields. A white castle appears, the image overlaid with colourful banners, there are more soldiers and knights fighting, a few quick shots of strange fanged creatures, and towards the very end a dragon flies past the screen before the title of the show appears in front of the previously shown castle. As the seasons progressed, the opening credits were refined, adding new images, as well as enhancing the old ones. The knight with the lance was for instance joined in the frame by the red and gold Pendragon banner billowing, and in the opening of season four there was an image of Guinevere and Arthur kissing, adding a promise of romance.

By the end of the credits, the viewer has been given plenty of information as to what kind of Middle Ages they are about to immerse themselves in. The knight with the lance, the colourful surcoats of the two combatants, and the castle all point towards the Middle Ages of the French poets, of Malory and White, or, for those watching the show without any prior

knowledge of Arthurian literature, a *romantic* Middle Ages. The strange creatures, the dragon, and Merlin's flashing eyes promise the magic and monsters of the fantasy genre, which has its own set of internal guides.

Camelot's opening credits are more abstract and subdued than *Merlin's*, though the music is once again fast-paced and thrilling. The dominant colours are black and red, the red usually being the slowly billowing Pendragon banner overlaid on dark images. Once again we get an early shot of a sword plunging into water, though here it is shot to look noticeably cross-like. Following this there is a wild, galloping horse, tall mountains shrouded in mist, lonely trees against bleak skies, and various scenes from the series, usually darkened or shot from far away. A stone tablet with Greek letters is shown, the word ROMAN prominent as the only word the audience will be able to read of whatever foreign language was used, and whether or not it actually means Roman, it is nonetheless consistent with the historical Britain the audience are about to be immersed in. A close-up of a horse's eye transitions into two people kissing (Arthur and Guinevere from the third episode), and then empty stone hallways overgrown with plants. Apart from the sword, which reappears several times, and the Pendragon banner, and some knights that are mostly just silhouettes of men with swords on horseback, there is little in terms of even Arthurian iconography to be found. Few of these images are specifically medieval. Even the hint of magic, a cup with a mortar in it from which smoke is slowly overflowing, is not overt enough to be called a historicon. The toned-down nature of the images is in keeping with *Camelot's* overall tone.

The differences between *Camelot* and *Merlin's* opening credits illustrate neatly all the differences between the two shows. One is bright and cheerful where the other is dark, one uses colours and clear historicons to appeal to its young audience, while the other promises to be adult and realistic with its use of heavy shadows, "artsy" images (such as a dandelion losing its seeds to the wind in slow motion), vaguely erotic images of women, and a toning down of all the more magical and mythical elements of the Arthurian legend .

As for the episodes themselves, *Merlin* is full of internal guides. The first type, the historicon, appears everywhere, from the knights and soldiers of Camelot in their various combinations of chainmail, helmets and red surcoats/capes, to the castle, the various kings, the princesses, and more. The second and third type, broader scenes of typical medieval nature, are also plentiful. There are jousts and other tournaments, crownings of various monarchs, several feasts, knighting ceremonies, and executions, all of which can be found in the first season alone, as well as returning for subsequent seasons.

Though *Camelot's* opening credits lack overt internal guides, that does not mean the rest of the show does. Historicons include kings and queens, which is an easy historicon to create because while Elliott lists several characteristics necessary to create a king, all it really takes for the audience to make the connection is a crown. Camelot castle functions as a historicon, as do Guinevere, Igraine and Morgan in their medieval dresses. As for the second and third type, they are not lacking either; there are battle scenes fought with swords and shields, there is Merlin's brief night in the stocks (though there is no vegetable-wielding crowd involved, unlike in *Merlin*), Arthur's crowning, several feasts, and even a torch-wielding mob on the rampage, just without the torches.

The fourth internal guide, "allusion to an intertextual model", is quite relevant here since *Camelot* and *Merlin* are not just shows set in the Middle Ages, they tell a story that has been told onscreen before, and so there are certain "passages obligés" that are unique to the Arthurian legend. A jousting scene will recall in the mind of the audience similar scenes from medieval films dealing with a number of different stories (or hero-cycles if you will), but the drawing of the sword from the stone, also arguably a "passage obligés", belongs to a single story, and so always involves the same characters and some of the same themes. The audience's urge to make direct comparisons between these latter scenes will therefore be stronger, meaning the filmmaker must be more aware of his own influences when he recreates the scene, and this awareness will inevitably strengthen the intertextuality of the final product.

Which Arthurian scenes in particular fall into the "obligatory" category may be discussed at some length, since the story has been told in so many different ways onscreen through the years. Some of the recurring story-elements of the legend do not necessarily lend themselves to becoming internal guides, no matter how frequently they appear onscreen. The affair of Lancelot and Guinevere for instance, is hard to place in this category because the scenes between the lovers can play out in so many different ways. Internal guides, with their tie to iconographic reconstruction, has more to do with form than content, meaning that there must be some visual similarity between the scenes for them to count as internal guides.

Two scenes that can probably be broadly agreed upon to work as internal guides, are the drawing of the sword from the stone, and the sword held aloft from the water by the Lady of the Lake. In particular, the image of the Lady of the Lake, "her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, [holding] aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water" is strikingly similar from film to film (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), though some use the iconic image when she gives the sword away and some when she takes it back. Typically, the lady herself will not be visible beyond the arm holding the sword, and the sword is most often held

with the tip pointing at the sky. In *Camelot*, the scene is subverted from its usual triumphant, magical moment, to a tragedy. A young girl named Excalibur, incensed after Merlin has caused her father's death, takes the sword her father was making for Merlin and runs away. Merlin pursues her to the edge of a lake, where she gets into a boat and rows out with the intention of throwing the sword away. He freezes the surface of the lake and follows her, desperate not to lose the extraordinarily well-crafted sword. Standing up in the boat, she loses her balance and falls in, ending up under the ice. She manages to thrust the sword up through the ice, and there comes the iconic moment. The ice on the girl's arm is even visually reminiscent of silvery samite ("Lady of the Lake"). Unfortunately, Excalibur drowns, and Merlin, broken by what he has caused to happen, takes the sword back to Arthur and makes up a story about a magical Lady of the Lake rather than admit to the gruesome reality.

Merlin repeats the image twice. As with so many other modern versions of the legend, the sword in the stone and the sword of the lake have been fused into one, unlike in *Camelot*, where they are separate swords, but the sword in the stone is an old relic that can't be used in battle. In *Merlin*, Merlin has a regular sword burnished in the fire of the Great Dragon, but circumstances force him to hide the sword where it cannot be found by anyone, and so he throws it into a lake. From there it is given back to him by the Lady of the Lake, who lifts it out of the water in iconic style ("The Coming of Arthur part 2"). In the finale of season five, Merlin throws the sword back into the lake, and a hand rises up to grasp it by the handle. In both cases, the arm is bare.

Which other adaptations might the audience recall when watching these moments? *Merlin* (1998) is one, complete with white, shimmering sleeves. When Merlin throws Excalibur back into the lake, a hand comes up, grasps the handle, turns the sword point up, and then draws it slowly under the water. *Excalibur* (1981) also uses it, again with white sleeves, and Monty Python's *Holy Grail* (1975) has the famous quote found above, a verbal rather than a visual example.

The drawing of the sword from the stone is a little different in that there is no one single image that springs to mind, beyond the requirements of a stone, a sword and a man to separate the two. Even the theme of the moment can be different. In *Merlin*, Merlin uses the drawing of the sword as a way to help Arthur reaffirm his confidence as ruler, as well as to inspire the people to believe in their King. In *Camelot*, Merlin has created a legend around the sword so that when Arthur draws it out, it will make the people believe his rule is divinely sanctioned. In both cases, it is Merlin who placed the sword in the stone in the first place, and in both cases they use the drawing as a way to help Arthur. While some versions will have

some visual similarity (both *Excalibur* and *Merlin* have Arthur draw the sword one-handed and lift the sword vertically above his head), these cases are not common enough to be as recognisable as the scene with the Lady of the Lake, but regardless of how exactly it is done, the elements of sword, stone and boy king together create an internal guide, an image that will immediately communicate to the audience that they are watching the Arthurian legend unfold.

3.4.2 Physical guides

The second type of guide is a physical one, and Elliott's two examples are time-travelling characters and written or narrated prologues. The former concerns mostly the motif in film wherein a character either travels from the Middle Ages to the modern world, or the other way around, but Elliott also lists a third type, often a Merlin, who has experienced both ages and so may comment on them both. T. H. White's Merlin, living as he does backwards in time, was able to be such a guide in Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*. The time-travelling guide exists mostly to make some sort of thematic point about our own time and our modern world, and there is no such character in either *Merlin* or *Camelot*, though Colin Morgan's Merlin is shown to still be alive in our modern time. However, this guide is still relevant for a different reason.

The temporal or spatial dislocation of the guides, more than anything else, allows the filmmaker to recreate the historical footnote, providing an intra-diegetic need for the spurious lines of dialogue which are clearly intended more to clarify the proceedings to us than to the intra-diegetic characters who would, we assume, be familiar with the 'rules' of their world. (Elliott, 200)

Spatially displaced characters, who arrive on the scene from a place far away and very different from the setting of the plot, are a staple of the fantasy genre. As Elliott points out above, they provide writers with the opportunity for naturally occurring exposition, because everything that is unfamiliar to the audience will also be unfamiliar to them. There is nothing more awkward in a script than when two characters tell each other things they both already know, but in the absence of a spatially dislocated character, this happens often.

Imagine the first book in the Harry Potter series if Harry had grown up in the magical community. How would Rowling have explained magic to her readers, or how the house-system of Hogwarts works, or who the various famous characters are, if Harry had known all of it already? There is a reason most heroes in fantasy novels grow up unaware of their

famous origins or great destinies, and all these young farm boys can of course be traced right back to King Arthur, who pulled the sword from the stone because he needed a replacement for his brother Kay, so that the significance of the act had to be explained to him by his foster-father. In *Camelot*, Bower's Arthur may be extremely well-educated, but he has never travelled, and knows little of the outside world. He is the spatially displaced character who needs to have everything explained to him. However, *Camelot* does not make use of this as heavily as *Merlin* does, although there it is Merlin himself who is the outsider entering strange, new territory, and thereby conveniently requiring all the other characters to introduce themselves.

Bower's Arthur and Colin Morgan's Merlin serve as physical guides, not through their knowledge, but through their ignorance, coming as they do, not from long ago, but from far away, and creating an intra-diegetic (an in-universe) reason for all the exposition needed to make their medieval worlds familiar to the audience. Of course they are not fool-proof, as *Merlin* demonstrates in its first episode. From atop a balcony, King Uther gives a brief history of the past twenty years in Camelot, how he created peace and drove magic from the land. The citizens of Camelot watching him from the ground really do not need the reminder, and they especially do not need him to introduce himself. "I, Uther Pendragon, have decreed that [magic is] banned on penalty of death," he expounds for the benefit of no one except Merlin and the people at home. Merlin, in this case, is just a face in the crowd and has not triggered the exposition in any way, nor does his presence make it sound less awkward, though Anthony Head sells it to the best of his ability.

As for a prologue, *Merlin* opens each episode with the same brief introduction by John Hurt. "In a land of myth and a time of magic, the destiny of a great kingdom rests on the shoulder of a young boy. His name ... Merlin". The only change to the prologue over five seasons was that from season four onwards, "young boy" was changed to "young man", reflecting how Merlin had grown. The prologue is not very specific, and yet it does prepare the audience for the kind of show they are about to see. "Myth" and "magic" say something about the level of realism that the audience may expect, and the rest of the sentence prepares them for something like Campbell's hero-cycle, especially by the use of the word "destiny".

3.5 Conclusion

Elliott's final chapter has to do with the difference between historical accuracy and authenticity. In *Remaking the Middle Ages* he has proved that historical accuracy is all but

impossible to achieve, and he concludes that when critics complain about the inaccuracy of a medieval film what they are frequently after is actually a sense of authenticity. The average moviegoer is not a historian, and will not know if the food on the King's table is historically accurate; they will happily suspend their disbelief so long as there is not a bottle of Coke standing next to the roast pig.

Are *Camelot* and *Merlin* authentic? Do they present believable medieval worlds, in which the audience can lose themselves? Certainly, both shows are authentic enough on the surface, though completely different in execution. The audience have been conditioned to accept both *Merlin's* colourful Camelot, and *Camelot's* dark Camelot, as "medieval", and this acceptance grows stronger as the shows progress and the viewers become familiar with the parameters and rules of the world in which the plot is unfolding. Once they have accepted those rules, the show need only follow its own logic to feel authentic.

Unfortunately, this is where *Merlin* gets into trouble, because it is not only the physical historical details that must be logical, plot progression and characterisation are also important to keep the cinematic illusion from rupturing, and Merlin's half-formed ideas, discussed in chapter one, often threaten to remind the audience that they are watching actors on a stage. A good example occurs in the final episode; while Arthur's death is moving, it is also perplexing, because sufficient reason is not given why he and Merlin did not simply ride to Avalon, where Arthur could have been healed, on Kilgharrah, the dragon that is at Merlin's beck and call. Instead, they take horses, and so they arrive too late.

However, despite such plot holes, Merlin survived for five seasons, and was and remains very popular, sporting a world-wide fan community that is still active a year after the finale. This is down to the show's greatest strength, the characters. The chemistry between Arthur and Merlin in particular provided a charm that kept the show together, and the audience ever willing to stretch their disbelief, so that they could join the two on further adventures.

It is a little bit harder to judge the authenticity of *Camelot*, because while *Merlin's* longevity despite flaws suggests that it must have had some kind of strength that kept the audience interested, *Camelot's* abrupt ending, and differing reviews, means I can only resort to my own opinion. Some reviewers did not believe in the actors, some did not believe in the story, and some thought the actors looked out of place. The same criticism was also levelled at *Merlin* in the beginning, but these views largely changed as the seasons passed. Perhaps they would have changed similarly for *Camelot* if that too had been allowed to go on. Nor can it be argued that it was poor authenticity that led to the cancellation, because so many

different reasons were cited to explain why it was not renewed (Yeoman: “Starz elects not to renew”). Authentic or not, it was still an intriguing show, it had good ideas and executed them well, and I for one would have welcomed a second season.

4.0 Conclusion

I set out with the intention of discovering whether *Merlin*, a family show on the BBC, and *Camelot*, an adult drama series on Starz, were worthy of the kind of academic scrutiny that Malory, Tennyson, Bradley, Boorman and Zucker, among others, have garnered for their takes on the story of King Arthur.

In chapter one, I looked at *Merlin* and *Camelot* as parts of the Arthurian tradition, examining their plots, their themes, and in what way or to what degree the two shows have reinvented the legend in order to stay relevant to an evolving audience.

Merlin has made three major changes to the commonly accepted plot of the legend; they lowered the age of the protagonists, Merlin and Arthur, they changed the origin of the central villain, Morgana, to make her an heir to the throne of Camelot, and most importantly, they changed the premise of the story by having magic banned from Albion.

These changes create new themes for the legend. The themes of *Merlin* are the evils of oppression, the inevitability of destiny, and the tension between the healing and corrupting powers of love. All three are illustrated through Merlin, Arthur and Morgana's struggle against the laws forbidding magic.

By making the protagonists young, and beginning the story before they came into their legendary roles, *Merlin* made the Arthurian legend into a coming-of-age story, easy for its young audience to relate to.

Camelot has made two big changes to the legend; once again, the Morgan Le Fay-character, here Morgan, is the biological daughter of Uther, making her feud with Arthur a more central part of the plot because they both have a legitimate claim to the throne, and the other change is that Arthur and Guinevere are the adulterers in the love-triangle rather than Lancelot and Guinevere.

The changes involve the strengthening of the traditional theme of flawed human beings trying to build an ideal world, complimented by a second theme of nature versus nurture. The tension lies in whether or not Arthur, through his education and upbringing, can learn to control the powerful virtues and vices he has inherited from his father. Contrasting him is his half-sister Morgan, who has inherited the same traits, but whose upbringing has been cruel and loveless, leaving her at the mercy of Uther's vices with no hope of control.

Camelot makes the legend more modern by giving the female characters a voice and allowing them to complain about the patriarchal world they live in. Also, by making Arthur

the adulterer, they change the theme of religious sin into one of human moral weakness, which is more easily relatable for an audience that will be more secular than the one for which Malory wrote his *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

In chapter two, I looked at how *Merlin* and *Camelot* adhere to or defy the rules of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. I considered it to be a relevant study because the popularity of the theory means the TV audience, whether aware of it or not, will have certain expectations of the shows' plots, based on what they have learned from Campbell.

Quickly summarised, Campbell argues that the many myths and stories created around the world actually conform to a single story pattern: all heroes go on the same journey. He calls it the monomyth, and in its simplest form, it requires the hero to leave his home, venture into the great unknown, win a decisive victory against an opposing force, and then return, triumphant, with some sort of reward that will redeem his home.

Camelot was unable to complete the hero's journey because it was not green-lit for a second season, however, in episodic fiction it is possible to have several smaller journeys within the overarching one, the *Odyssey* being a literary example of this, and the first season provided one such journey, which can be analysed. *Camelot* had two final trials for its hero to overcome, an external and an internal trial. The external trial, the battle of Bardon pass, Arthur won, and so he could return home and take the throne back from Morgan, but the internal trial, seeking redemption for his adultery with Guinevere, he was never quite able to complete, and in failing he seems to secure his own future destruction. This way, *Camelot* uses the hero's journey to characterise its protagonist, and to complicate the plot.

Merlin struggled with having two protagonists both trying to overcome the same trials and win the same reward, which meant that one of them, usually Arthur, was constantly being undermined by the other. However, the problem can be overcome by accepting that the two characters are actually meant to be one, a close-knit team, and the show continually encourages the audience to think this way. The reason they cannot work together until the very end is because of the conflict discussed in chapter one, the banishment of magic, and so the reason *Merlin* does not fully conform to the hero's journey actually reinforces one of the show's themes, that oppression hurts everyone; it keeps Arthur and Merlin from fulfilling their roles and their shared destiny properly.

Finally, in chapter three, I used Andrew B. R. Elliott's *Remaking the Middle Ages* to examine how *Camelot* and *Merlin* go about presenting their legendary medieval worlds to the audience.

Elliott's theory in brief is that films set in the Middle Ages base themselves on a collective "medieval imaginary", a shared idea that the general public has about the Middle Ages. To access this medieval imaginary, films use two types of signs, icons and paradigms, to communicate the nature of the various characters, scenes and places typically found in medieval-themed stories. This is in order to create not necessarily historically accurate portrayals of the Middle Ages, but rather ones that feel authentic to the audience.

Merlin relies mainly on iconic recreation, using imagery that the audience recognise, such as knights in armour, crowned kings on their thrones, jousts and feast-scenes, in order to tell the audience that they have been transported back in time. This focus on form over content is made convenient in part because *Merlin* is not set in a specific time or even a specific historical place, but rather in legendary, fairy-tale Camelot, meaning it is not so important whether the knight is wearing period-accurate armour; as long as it is recognisable as a knight's armour, the audience will be willing to suspend their disbelief.

Camelot on the other hand uses a mixture of icons and paradigms. The icons are not as strong because of *Camelot's* grittier tone, which does not allow for plate armour, damsels in towers, jousts or other more romantic icons, though there are still castles, crowned kings and even Princesses of a sort. The paradigms used are mainly those of the cowboy fighting to maintain civilisation on the wild frontier, and the 90s action hero, fighting a one-man battle against seemingly impossible odds and yet emerging victorious.

In the end, are *Camelot* and *Merlin* worth a closer look? Should they be included in the next essay collection on Arthurian screen adaptation? I think so. In fact, the small screen adaptations of the Arthurian legend deserve more attention in general. Both *Camelot* and *Merlin*, while made as entertainment more than art, and that for the "low" medium of television, still have hidden depths. They have themes that are enhanced and complicated by the plot, there is subtle symbolism, and clever plot twists that once again show how the Arthurian legend has survived for so long by constantly adapting to its new audience. Their length and popularity make them important entries in the tradition. Hopefully, within a year or two, Arthurian scholars will open their eyes to the potentials of these two TV-series, and to the TV-series in general as a great medium through which to introduce the story of King Arthur and his knights to new generations.

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