



**THERE IS NO
KING ARTHUR.**



The Once and Future Mirror

The Arthurian legend is one of Western culture's most enduring stories. It has been appropriated and adapted not just to entertain, but as a vehicle for contemporary anxieties and concerns. Each era looks into the mirror of Camelot and sees a reflection of its own values, aspirations, and fears. The story of Arthur becomes the story of ourselves.



Forging a Nation: The King as Political Tool

Key Source: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136)

- Arthur transformed from a vague reference in chronicles like Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* (c. 828) into a national hero.
- Geoffrey's goal was not historical truth, but legitimizing the Norman monarchy by creating a glorious, unified British past.
- This Arthur is a conquering hero defined by pious patriotism, bravery, and territorial expansion, even taking on the Roman Empire.

The Shaper of History

Merlin



Origin: A figure from Welsh oral tradition, the wild man Myrddin Wyllt.

Geoffrey's Transformation: Becomes Arthur's counselor, a prophet whose obscure visions shape and legitimize the historical narrative. His prophecies create an impression of a predestined future for Britain.

Core Tension: Embodies the conflict between pagan magic and the new Christian order he serves.

Inventing Romance: The King's Court as an Emotional Arena



Key Source: "Chrétien de Troyes's Romances (c. 1170s)"

Key Concepts:

"Shift from Arthur as the main character to his knights (Lancelot, Perceval, Yvain)."

"Introduction of core elements: the Lancelot-Guinevere affair and the Holy Grail."

"Courtly Love: An ideal where knights perform deeds in service to a lady, whose favor is paramount. Love, not war, becomes the primary motivation."

The Queen's Command

Guinevere

A New Creation: Chrétien de Troyes, at the request of his patroness Marie de Champagne, invents the character of Guinevere as we know her and her affair with Lancelot.

The Lady's Power: In courtly love, the lady had the power. The knight was subject to her commands. Guinevere is a public figure who issues commands and judges her knight's devotion.

The Adulterous Ideal: Marie de Champagne's court held that true love could *not* exist between married people. Adultery was therefore central to the ideal of courtly love.





Codifying a Legend: The King as a Moral Compass

Key Sources: Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) & Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885).

- **Malory's Synthesis:** Stitched together many different stories into one cohesive narrative, which became the definitive English version.
- **Victorian Revival:** Tennyson remodeled Arthur to fit Victorian chivalric codes: a just leader, a stoical husband, an exponent of Christian manliness.
- **The Tragic Flaw:** The downfall of Camelot is framed as a direct consequence of personal moral failing—the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere.

Tragic Arcs: Guinevere and Merlin



Guinevere's Arc

From powerful courtly figure (Chrétien) to the cause of ruin (Malory). Tennyson solidifies her condemnation: "The children born of thee are sword and fire, / Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws."



Merlin's Arc

Becomes the definitive "wise old man with a long white beard," a mentor and teacher who created the modern wizard archetype reflected in characters like Gandalf and Dumbledore. His downfall at the hands of a woman also serves as a cautionary tale.

Shattering the Mirror: The Postmodern Myth

A New Duality:

- **Positive Adaptations:** Treat Arthur as a hero or an ideal. They use nostalgia for an escapist experience, addressing anxieties with Arthur.
- **Negative Adaptations:** Treat Arthur as reprehensible or terrifying. They use nostalgia critically, showing its dangers. Arthur is the cause of anxiety.



The Hourglass Model:

The many early tales funneled into a definitive version (Malory), from which countless modern adaptations now diverge.

The King as Superhero: A Positive Adaptation

Case Study: *Camelot 3000* (1982)

Nostalgia as Comfort: The world is in its "darkest hour" (alien invasion), and Arthur's return is met with jubilation, not anxiety about monarchical power.



Aesthetic Update, Thematic Continuation: Arthur and the knights are remade as superheroes, but the core narrative remains. The villains are aliens, a "crude form of other that we need not concern ourselves about morally."



Tristan's Subplot: Reincarnated in a woman's body, Tristan's struggle with dysphoria updates the "romantic suffering" tone for a modern context.

The King as a Curse: A Negative Adaptation



Case Study: *Hellboy: The Wild Hunt* (2008-2009)

Key Concepts

- **Rejecting Destiny:** Hellboy's core conflict is his refusal of his destiny to end the world. His Arthurian heritage is presented as a step toward that apocalypse.
- **A Discordant Past:** When Arthur himself appears in a vision, he is basked in a strange golden light, but surrounded by decay. He is an eerie, discordant figure who does not belong in the modern world.
- **The Danger of Heritage:** To claim ancestral authority is to step into a world of "complete and utter violence."

The King as a Monster: Critiquing Nostalgia



The Resurrection

The Monster

The Many Arthurs

Case Study: *Once & Future* (2019-2022)

Key Concepts

- **Weaponized Nostalgia:** The desire for Arthur's return is explicitly linked to the rhetoric of "an isolated and ethnically homogenous England."
- **The Horrors of the Past:** The resurrected Arthur is not an idealized king but a grotesque monster, the violent embodiment of the ideology that summoned him.
- **Changing Perspectives:** The things Arthur represents (conquest, colonialism, monarchy) have not changed, but they are no longer viewed as positives by the comic.

The Global Mirror: The King as a Waifu



Case Study: *Fate/stay night* (2004) & the *Fate* franchise

Key Concepts

- **Reverse Exoticisation:** The legend is used as a fetishized and mysterious "Other." Arthur is feminized, subordinated, and made an object of desire for the player.
- **Gender-Swapping and Soft Power:** One of the highest-grossing media franchises worldwide is built on a gender-swapped King Arthur, demonstrating the global reach and adaptability of the myth.
- **The Knight, Not the King:** As a "servant" sworn to her "master," Saber's role in the story is more akin to a knight than the monarch she once was, shifting the power dynamic completely.

Guinevere Reclaimed



From Victorian sinner to a reclaimed feminist hero, a warrior queen, or even a reincarnated teenager. Modern authors explore who she was before Arthur and what her true role in Camelot might have been.

Merlin Multiplied



From wise mentor to the modern wizard archetype. In the 21st century, 'Merlin' can be a title in a spy agency, the headmaster of a magic school, a young man hiding his powers, or even a villain.



'King Arthur:
Legend of the Sword' (2017)

'The Kid Who Would
Be King' (2019)

Katherine Langford
'Nimue' (2020)

'King Arthur:
Knight's Tale' (2022)

'Four Knights of
the Apocalypse'