The Origin of Arthurian Legends and the Researches Conducted

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Abstract

The article is depicted to show the origin of Arthurian legends, main writers who has contributed to the development of this legend.

Keywords: tales, motif, monarchy, equality, feminist, justice, Victorian era, social ideologies.

Despite including elements of magic, politics, and adventure, the major theme of all Arthurian legends is the nature of interpersonal relationships. These connections are virtually always intricate and emotional, and they are made to evoke particular responses from the viewer. The responses to Arthurian legends depend on the relationship that is being investigated; for instance, while discussing a narrative about knighthood, the author wishes to impress upon the audience the value and admiration of chivalry, duty, and honor. In contrast, when portraying the story of Guinevere, Arthur, and Lancelot's love triangle, the intention is to not only present a riveting and engaging love story but also to highlight the dangers of desire and the degradation of honor.

Arthurian motifs have been used throughout history, despite the fact that they have changed significantly throughout the centuries along with society conventions and political views. The original Arthurian tales were written for a diverse audience, not only men, women, or children, and this is still true today. Regardless of its subject matter, Arthurian motifs have endured and will endure due of the nostalgia their audience has for them. The spectator is reminded of enchantment, adventure, love, friendship, and civic responsibility when thinking about Arthurian elements[1].

This trend emerged several times throughout history, but most notably in the twelfth, fifteenth, eighteenth and twenty-first centuries.

Since the eighth century, there have been various changes in themes, beginnings, and endings, as well as many different heroes and antagonists, making Arthurian literature very diverse. The widely read works of the first generation of Arthurian authors, including Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Malory, reflect the fact that certain Arthurian themes have become very popular from the eighth century to the present day, serving as the foundation for social context and ideologies. According to a study of their texts, the social and political undertones of key Arthurian motifs, rather than the themes themselves, are most likely what make them popular.

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[1] Barczeqski, George. "Review: Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 33.2 (2001): 328-30. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 May 2014.p-4
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/4053409?ref=searchgateway:1fecfcf7230ec6e483128d10bf87b2f0>.

The earliest record of Arthur "belongs to a period some three hundred years later than the Battle [of Mount Badon]," written about in the eighth century by the Welsh chronicler Nennius. In his historical account, the Arthur, who is the story's hero, kills hundreds of his enemies. Saxons, played an intricate, leading part in the battle[2]. Nennius's work depicts Arthur as "a leader of the Britons in their wars with the Saxon invaders," but not necessarily as a king. He "fought in company with the kings of Briton, but he himself was the leader in the wars". This tale is what initially established Arthur as a strong person (or character) in history (or in fantasy).

While Nennius's version of the Arthurian legend was spread by word of mouth and sparked the notion of Arthur as a brave, albeit, violent leader, it is argued that "the great importance…of Arthur in the literature of Europe begins unquestionably with Geoffrey, whose 'Historia Regum Britanniae' appeared in 1138"[3]. Arthur's story begins in Geoffrey's eighth book when he explains the birth of King Arthur, which up until then had been somewhat of a mystery. Merlin, whose prophecies and magic were the work of Geoffrey's seventh book, helps Uther Pendragon assume the form of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, to have access to the Duke's wife in the castle of Tintage. It is here that Uther Pendragon and Gorlois' wife beget Arthur. Geoffrey's account solidified the oral traditions and legends of Arthur that had been circulating among the Celtic nations, giving "enormous popularity to the Arthurian legend"[4].

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

Later in the fifteenth century the most notable author was Malory, who was less concerned with social constructs and more concerned with political implications of the time. Although all authors who have written about the Arthurian legend, with the exception of the American writers, have an enormous respect for the English monarchy, Malory was the first to imply concerns regarding the monarchy, particularly during King Henry IV's reign.). The main difference between the two centuries is that in the twelfth century, readers were primarily confused over social conduct; whereby, Arthurian literature proved to be a source from which to learn. In the fifteenth century, readers were less confused over social etiquette and more concerned with their present political system. It has been argued that "Malory…was indeed, sensitive to the political issues of his day; however, his work reflects anxieties over the contradictions present within Arthur's political system (which would have reminded fifteenth-century readers to contemporary politics), rather than presenting an ideal to be imitated or admired"[5] (Radulescu, 37).

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

Next were the writings of Lord Alfred Tennyson, who wrote in early Victorian England, and T.H. White, who wrote towards the end of the same period. Albeit a brief moment in history, the

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[2] Bruce, J. Douglas. "The Development of Arthurian Romance in Mediæval France." *The Sewanee Review* 13.3 (1905): 319-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 May 2014.p-319

[3] Bruce, J. Douglas. "The Development of Arthurian Romance in Mediæval France." *The Sewanee Review* 13.3 (1905): 319-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 May 2014.p-321

[4] Bruce, J. Douglas. "The Development of Arthurian Romance in Mediæval France." *The Sewanee Review* 13.3 (1905): 319-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 May 2014.p-321

[5] Radulescu, Raluca. "Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas." *Arthuriana* 13.3 (2003): 33-61. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 May 2014.p-37 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870541>.

Victorian era was a time of huge social development; therefore, the authors' renditions of Arthurian literature are vastly different. In his writing, Tennyson struggled between wanting to respect the English monarchy and working with newly forming Victorian social constructs, which were rapidly changing. To avoid social disapproval or the rejection of his work, the only strong stand Tennyson made in his perspective of Arthurian legend was in support of the English kingdom. By the time White wrote about this subject, the social constructs Tennyson struggled with were already well in place. In Tennyson's Arthurian work, "the kingdom is held together not through parliamentary institutions… but through the moral sense of the knights as individuals who recognize Arthur as their hero and leader," which encouraged the general public's respect and loyalty for the government[6]. Moreover, Tennyson perpetuated the idea that with a "warlike temper England can recover the virtues of the idealized past…memorialized" in his work[7].

Around the same time White was writing in England, Mark Twain wrote A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court in the United States. Twain was primarily concerned with the foolishness of nobility and royalty and aimed to establish democracy as the most reliable political system[8]. Twain's work focused on the importance of being quick-witted, as well as independence and justice. In fact, Twain's motifs became so appreciated by American audiences that they later appeared in other American Arthurian works as well. Twain goes a step further by not only criticizing nobility, but medieval fantasy in general, when the main character finds himself listening to Merlin tell "that same old weary tale that he hath told a thousand times in the same words". Only moments later the narrator comments on Merlin's lack of authenticity as an audience. He claims, "Merlin reliably puts his audience asleep with his familiar 'quaint lie,' and the court thereafter commends stories that share a predictable structure – 'a tale of the usual pattern". Commenting on medieval Arthurian history in this way, Twain implies that noble British history, comparable to that of Charlemagne and Ancient Rome, is in reality boring, repetitive, mundane and lacking in real substance.

Shortly after Twain's time, film versions of the Arthurian legend came into circulation and became even more prevalent than Arthurian literature, which incidentally remained quite popular. In 1968, during the second wave of the American feminist movement, the movie Camelot emerged. Although many great steps toward equality had been taken by this time including the Civil Rights Act, which prevented employers from discriminating on the basis of race or sex-social discrimination was still widespread. In the film, social inequality can be seen through the character of Guinevere. While the character exhibits moments of strength and independence, there are even more times when she appears capricious, childish and dramatic.

Since that time, the sexual revolution, which in many ways includes the feminist movement, has become a part of American culture. Arthurian literature and film reflect American attitude, which has helped them flourish in the United States. Here a great sense of nostalgia accompanies the Arthurian narrative, but by incorporating modern American ideals, it is able to remain interesting and relevant. In other words, the American version of the Arthurian story embraces the nostalgic, adventurous and honorable aspects of the legend, but also develops modern, relatable forward-thinking ones.

Today, "writers critique our culture by re-envisioning three common elements of the legend: traditional symbols of power, definitions of the heroic, and binary oppositions between good and evil"[9]. Similar to its film versions, Arthurian legend "adds other dimensions: on the one hand,

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[6] Sypher, F. H. "Politics in the Poetry of Tennyson." *Victorian Poetry* 14.2 (1976): 101-12. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 May 2014. p-102 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002376>.

[7] Sypher, F. H. "Politics in the Poetry of Tennyson." *Victorian Poetry* 14.2 (1976): 101-12. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 May 2014. p-106 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002376>.

[8] Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. New York: National Broadcasting, 1949. Audio Book.

[9] Howey, Ann F. "Queens, Ladies and Saints: Arthurian Women in Contemporary Short Fiction." *Arthuriana* 9.1, SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE ON MODERN AND POST-MODERN ARTHURIAN LITERATURE AND

readers approach the story with expectations about what should constitute an Arthurian story; on the other hand, these very expectations can be played upon to emphasize" cultural concerns of that time[10] (Howey, 24). Regardless of whether Arthurian legend is in cinematic or literary form, "the general population includes a remarkable number of people, either knowledgeable aficionados or romantics nostalgic for a presumably glorious past, who are eternally fascinated with King Arthur," and this trend will likely continue for many years to come[11].

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