

## The Magic of Medievalism: Teaching Arthuriana with *Camelot*

Modern popular culture is rife with adaptations of the Arthurian legend, some of which can be extremely useful teaching tools. The recent Starz series *Camelot*, which originally aired in April 2011 and starred Joseph Fiennes, Eva Green, and Jamie Campbell Bower, is one such example. The series opens with the death of Uther Pendragon and moves through Merlin's identification of Arthur as Uther's legitimate heir, his tutelage of the new king, and their establishment of a new political centre at the abandoned Roman fortress of Camelot. Throughout, it emphasizes the dynamic between Merlin and Arthur as the young king matures and grows into his power. As he does, he increasingly questions or defies Merlin's knowledge or advisement, and--drawing upon one of the more well known aspects of the medieval narratives--he risks the demise of his court when he ignores Merlin's advice and becomes involved with Guinevere, who, in this adaptation, marries Arthur's champion, Leontes. In the final episode, Merlin recognizes that Arthur no longer needs him and prepares to leave Camelot. Although the king protests at the news of his advisor's departure, Merlin declares, "Maybe you're stronger than me . . . and maybe that's what I didn't know." His parting words to the king are "You will be great."

The series, which ran for only one season (ten episodes), has been criticized as poor historical fiction and as a fairly loose adaptation of Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some of its plot lines are unusual, as are some of the characters, especially for viewers well-versed in Arthuriana. *Camelot* inverts, for instance, the love triangle, established in the twelfth century by Chrétien de Troyes, between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. When she first meets Arthur, Guinevere is already betrothed to Leontes, whom she marries even after losing her virginity to the king on the morning of her wedding day. Leontes himself creates confusion because his name more readily recalls a character from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* than any Arthurian knight, while several of the familiar knights of the legend--such as Brastius and Pelinore--get short-shrift. They appear briefly or serve as 'red-shirt' *Star Trek*-style extras that are killed off in battle scenes. The series also includes a considerable amount of sexualized content that may render it unsuitable for some viewers. Teachers should consider this aspect of *Camelot* in relation to their students and their desired usage before preparing lectures or viewing clips, but should not avoid it altogether, as it has several notable achievements.

*Camelot's* depiction of Merlin and Morgan is exceptional, no doubt in part to the actors in those roles (Joseph Fiennes and Eva Green, respectively). It also, despite its purported basis in Malory's text, pays tribute to the early Latin chronicles and Welsh texts that feature the possible historical antecedents of what become the Arthur and Merlin figures. Its emphasis on tribal or clan structures, localized conflicts, and non-Christian or Celtic practices similarly evokes the turbulent world of post-Roman Britain which permeates the early Arthurian narratives. Additionally, the series adapts numerous parts of the Arthurian legend in innovative ways, including Arthur's famous sword and the related sword-in-the-stone story; the chronicled battle at Mons Badonicus (Mount Badon); the antagonistic relationship between the king and his half-sister, Morgan; the related antagonistic relationship between Merlin and Morgan; the origins of the Round Table and its knights; the role of classical learning or Roman culture in Arthur's realm; and the difficulties of religious conversion and fusion. All of these topics provide students with an opportunity to study the series or specific episodes in relation to Arthurian texts and in relation to the larger fields of Arthuriana and medieval studies.

Students interested in weaponry, for instance, could read excerpts from the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *Historia regum britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain)*, both of which feature Arthur's first sword, Caliburn, or they could read excerpts from Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, which first introduced into the legend the sword-in-the-stone motif. Alongside these texts, they should examine *Camelot's* Episode 2 ("The Sword and the Crown") and Episode 4 ("Lady of the

Lake”). These episodes retell the sword stories as they simultaneously highlight Merlin’s magical abilities and his orchestration of the events that bring Arthur to power. These episodes might also be of interest to students who wish to explore the possible historical roots of the Arthur legend. They could expand their viewing to include Episode 9 (“The Battle of Bardon Pass”), and likewise expand their readings to include selections from *De Excidio et conquestu Britanniae (Concerning the Ruin of Britain)* and *Historia Brittonum (The History of the Britons)*, early texts that include accounts of a battle at Mount Baden/Baden Hill and that feature a prominent Celtic-Roman warrior.<sup>ii</sup>

*Camelot* also depicts highly gendered social structures and understandings of knowledge and power that connect with gender issues prominent in medieval Arthuriana and that provide insight to life in the Middle Ages. The major conflict or story-arc concerns the battle over succession between Arthur and his half-sister Morgan, and takes place primarily within their parallel but contrasting courts. The first court, Camelot, is the male court--peopled by Merlin, Arthur, and the warriors of the realm, including Kay and Leontes, and others such as Orpheus, Brastius, and Gawain. This is a community of brute force, albeit one increasingly shaped and tempered by classical learning and by Arthur’s desire for order and just rule. It is a community dominated by male intellect and male physical power, and although two key female figures share this space (Igraine, Arthur’s mother, and Guinevere) they fulfill more traditional domestic and maternal roles. Igraine and Guinevere care for the wounded and establish living quarters and provisions for all who inhabit Camelot. They may advise the men, but they remain subservient to them.<sup>iii</sup> The space of the court remains firmly male, and authority rests with Merlin and Arthur.

The second court, Castle Pendragon, is the female court--peopled by Morgan, who sees herself as the rightful heir to Uther’s crown, and her female advisors. After a failed alliance with Arthur’s rival, King Lot, Morgan rejects male power and the patriarchal systems which it dominates. She determines that in order to gain the throne she must employ other means, and turns instead to a community of women. In Episode 3 (“Guinevere”), she entrusts Viviane with the household and staff, telling her, “This castle needs new air. More women would be good.” Then, when the nun Sybil arrives on her doorstep, Morgan accepts her help and guidance, albeit initially with reluctance. By the close of Episode 4, Castle Pendragon is firmly established as a female centre of power, one that counters the very male space and authority of Camelot.

Students with specific interests in gender will thus find a wealth of material to examine. They could research the role or participation of women in medieval society and contrast it to the representations of women within *Camelot*, especially as the series--indeed, Arthuriana overall--pays considerably more attention to women who occupy privileged social positions. They could focus on a specific time period within the Middle Ages (early, high, or late), or they could examine the social roles available to women in relationship to class and wealth. Students could also trace the development of women in Arthurian texts, noting the shift which occurs in the twelfth century that leads to greater inclusion of and emphasis on female figures, and contrast it to the representations of women in *Camelot*. Such studies could focus on specific female characters, and easily overlap with other thematic concerns, including love, marriage, and adultery. A study of Guinevere, for example, could include texts such as Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot (The Knight of the Cart)* or Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’arthur*, both of which highlight the adulterous love triangle between the Queen, her husband, and Lancelot, and its contribution to the demise of Arthur’s rule.

A focused study of Morgan is especially fruitful for examinations of gender in relation to knowledge or magical power, as, in *Camelot*, her character is as equally well educated as Arthur and has access to the same supernatural or elemental powers as Merlin. Through Morgan and Merlin, the series presents a

dichotomous interpretation of knowledge and power, one that aligns the male use of power with the divine and renders it superior to the female use of power, which is aligned with demonic forces. Two of the most poignant displays of this gendered interpretation of magic appear in Episode 3 and Episode 6 (“Three Journeys”). Students could complement these episodes with research concerning the Celtic origins of Morgan and Merlin, or with examinations of key medieval texts such as the *Suite de Merlin* or Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* (*Life of Merlin*). Those more interested in Merlin should also include Robert de Boron’s *Prose Merlin*, which expands considerably upon the figures’ divine and demonic origins, while those more inclined to study Morgan, should also read the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which highlights the immense power of her figure. Morgan’s character provides an excellent opportunity for examinations of modern Arthuriana, as well, since numerous twentieth-century feminist retellings of her story exist, most notably Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*.

*Camelot* also draws upon thematic concerns prevalent in medieval Arthurian narratives that highlight the imperial nature of Arthur’s rule. It emphasizes the relationship between power and justice, and the role of education, specifically classical learning, within this relationship as Camelot evolves into a centralized social center, one which draws upon the Roman tribunal system and the knowledge of classical thinkers. Episode 5 (“Justice”) focuses on the classical foundations of the court when Arthur intervenes in a local village conflict. He extends his rule to the village and holds a trial at Camelot, during which he seeks counsel from both his warriors and from Guinevere. The subsequent episode reinforces the importance of classical learning, and particularly of written knowledge, when Merlin sets out to retrieve Hector’s library. He explains to the warriors travelling with him, “Books are as valuable to us as gold. . . . All human experience is here.” Students interested in the Roman or classical influences on the Arthurian legend could examine the role of education, justice, and empire in medieval narratives such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britannie* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. It would also be useful for them to research the Roman period of British history, as well as the period immediately after the Empire’s withdrawal from the Isles.

The greatest strengths of the series, though, are its self-awareness of its participation in the legend and its resultant emphasis on the process of myth-making. As scholars, educators, and viewers already familiar with Arthuriana know, the myth of Arthur, his knights, and his court is a complex web of Celtic, British, and continental threads. Stories of Arthur and his knights appear in texts, art, and architecture, and appear in place names and local myths. What matters most, however, is not the existence of an Ur-Arthur or a definitive geographical location for Camelot, but rather the ideas which they represent. This aspect of the legend is precisely why it is so mutable and why it appeals to such wide-ranging audiences. It is also, ultimately, at the heart of the Starz series, which repeatedly draws attention to its participation in the Arthurian meta-narrative. Merlin, for instance, acknowledges the importance of myth-making early in Episode 2. “A king exists primarily as an idea,” he says to Arthur and Kay, “and we persuade the people to believe in the idea of you; we can make it a reality” (“The Sword and the Crown”). Jamie Campbell Bower (Arthur), in the dvd/Blu-ray special features, even comments, “Rather than performing legend, I think that what we’re trying to do is create legend.”

Students can use the idea of myth-making as a starting point for research. They can trace how the myths of Arthur and Morgan unfold over the series, as well as the role each character’s advisor (Merlin and Sybil, respectively) plays in the construction of this myth. Other key figures that contribute to the evolution of the Arthurian legend provide opportunities for further research, such as Gawain, who has numerous literary texts dedicated to him, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. Students can also examine cultural artifacts connected to the myth.

Numerous archaeological sites have connections to Arthur, such as the Neolithic Maen Ceti (Arthur's Stone) in the northern Gower Peninsula; the famed Tintagel Castle on the Cornish coast; Glastonbury Tor, which, like Tintagel, has undergone numerous excavations dedicated to uncovering evidence of an historical Arthur; and the mysterious tympanum of the north portal at Modena Cathedral, in Italy, which features an Arthurian story-line and characters. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. Other aspects of the legend worth considering include topics such as the cloistered and courtly worlds, medieval architecture and living spaces, or the evolution of burial practices in the Middle Ages. Any such topic will provide a bridge between modern narratives such as *Camelot* and the medieval Arthurian texts and myths.

### Further Reading

Some useful starting places for research include *The Romance of Arthur*, an anthology of medieval texts edited by James J. Wilhelm, or, for post-medieval materials, *Modern Arthurian Literature*, an anthology edited by Alan Lupack. A key online resource, also edited by Lupack, is *The Camelot Project*, a database of Arthurian (medieval to modern) texts, characters, and motifs. For studies of Arthur in history or archeological pursuits, John Morris's *The Age of Arthur* is useful, as are Geoffrey Ashe's famous volumes, *The Quest for Arthur's Britain* and *Camelot and the Vision of Albion*, and, more recently, Frank D. Reno's *The Historic King Arthur*. Numerous studies focus on the Celtic origins of Arthuriana, such as Roger Sherman Loomis's *The Grail: From Celtic Myth of Christian Symbol* and Mike Dixon-Kennedy's *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends*, and volumes abound on modern Arthuriana, such as Alan Lupack and Barbara Tapa Lupack's *Illustrating Camelot* and *Arthurian Literature by Women*. Various useful companion texts exist, by publishers such as Blackwell (*A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton) or Cambridge (*The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, eds. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter), as well as academic journals such as *Arthuriana: The Journal of Arthurian Studies* and D. S. Brewer's *Arthurian Literature*. In short, materials for further studies abound and offer no end of possibilities for students interested in examining the legend at large and connections between it and the Starz series *Camelot*.

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<sup>i</sup> See, for instance, [http://tv.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/arts/television/camelot-on-starz-review.html?\\_r=0](http://tv.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/arts/television/camelot-on-starz-review.html?_r=0) and <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/camelot-tv-review-172404>.

<sup>ii</sup> *De Excidio et conquestu Britanniae* identifies this figure as Ambrosius Aurelianus, while *Historia Brittonum* identifies him as Arthur.

<sup>iii</sup> An examination of Guinevere in particular highlights the value or worth of the female in relation to her sexual status. In Episode 9, after Leontes discovers that Arthur bedded Guinevere before they were wed, he tells her, "You're not my wife. You're the King's whore." Guinevere's honour and value as a wife is inextricably linked to the purity (virginity) that she supposedly brings to her union with Leontes.