

The Millennium King Arthur:

**The Commodification of the
Arthurian Legend in the 20th Century**

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**This thesis is submitted in September 2008
for the Degree of Master of Philosophy
The Australian National University**

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby certify that the content of this thesis is my own work and that all sources used in its preparation have been acknowledged.

Signature.....

Date

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents who would be astonished and delighted at this unusual undertaking by their son.

Acknowledgements

The author particularly acknowledges the stimulation and encouragement of his supervisor, Dr. Rachel Bloul.

The thesis could not have been written without access to the superb facilities and staff of the Australian National University.

In addition, the warm encouragement of many friends has been appreciated.

Finally, my patient wife has been generously supportive throughout the drafting.

Abstract

The prophesy that King Arthur will return has come true. This legendary icon of Western civilization lives again in the popular culture novels of contemporary and futuristic literature. While the king's personality has changed little since Malory, the monarch is now often found as a superhero in new world settings: he has become a Celtic space traveller among the stars, a modern politician fighting corruption, a WWII fighter pilot, a battler of aliens, and even returns as a teenage boy.

Wherever he goes, King Arthur encounters a variety of personalised evil opponents from his medieval past as well as futuristic aliens and monsters. The authors and publishers of Arthurian popular culture have commodified the Arthurian legend, turning the king into an Americanised romantic superhero who overcomes his opponents but mostly fails to meet the reality of modern socio-economic challenges.

The king has a limited understanding of what constitutes evil in the modern world so that despite his worthy character as a role model, his grasp of action required to overcome injustice constitutes a major shortcoming. The reasons for this are sought among the authors and publishers that produced these novels, and among the literary critics and the sociological literature focusing on the linkages between literature and society.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Authorship.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Core Legend.....	1
Popularity, Persistence and Evolution of the Legend.....	4
Methodology.....	6
Chapter 1. King Arthur, Literature and Society.....	15
Chapter 2. King Arthur Returns To Contemporary, Future, and Other Worlds.....	24
Chapter 3. King Arthur Arrives In The Contemporary World.....	35
Chapter 4. King Arthur Emerges In Future and Fantasy Worlds.....	75
Chapter 5. Other Arthuriana.....	113
Chapter 6. The Identity, Character & Role of King Arthur :.....	121
Chapter 7. King Arthur in Popular Culture.....	127
Chapter 8. Women In The Worlds Of King Arthur.....	136
Chapter 9. Authors and Publishers.....	141
Chapter 10. Values and The Americanisation of King Arthur.....	154
Chapter 11. King Arthur As Hero And Superhero.....	158
Chapter 12. King Arthur Confronts Evil – Or Does He?.....	167
Chapter 13. Summary and Conclusions.....	178
Grailpower.....	196
Bibliography.....	197

Introduction

King Arthur has left Avalon, is alive and is among us now. Future worlds and lands of fantasy will all witness the return of the king as prophesied. This thesis reviews Arthur's current and future literary reincarnations and asks how he has weathered the centuries since he first came to our attention. The complexity and variety of stories surrounding Arthur's legend cannot possibly be captured in a brief summary, yet an outline of the major elements of the legend is necessary prior to discussing current versions.

Core Legend

The legendary King Arthur was conceived in a plot engineered by the wizard Merlin whose price demanded the child be given to him for adoption. This was the beginning of a long relationship with Merlin as Arthur's protector and advisor. The young Arthur first proved his status as King by withdrawing his famous sword Excalibur from an anvil embedded in a large boulder, a sword later claimed from the Lady of the Lake and ultimately returned to her as Arthur lay dying.

A major threat to Arthur arose when the enchantress Morgan, his half-sister, seduced him with the resulting birth of their illegitimate son, Mordred. Merlin had warned Arthur that if Mordred lived he would become the king's mortal nemesis. Nine months later, Arthur's response was the premeditated mass murder of all newborn males in his realm by putting them out to sea. Only Mordred survived. The sin and guilt of incest and infanticide haunted King Arthur ever after.

A second threat to Arthur's early reign was the intense rivalry among competing petty monarchs who challenged Arthur's hegemony. After

many bloody battles, Arthur defeated his rivals, subdued the invading Saxons and became the first overall king of a unified Britain. When Arthur married Guenevere, her father gave him a Round Table and 100 knights but she gave the king no heir.

During a temporary peace in the conflict with the Saxons, the castle Camelot was built on a hill overlooking the Isle of Apples. Peace was never long lasting, and in some versions of the story, King Arthur went to war against the armies of Europe, defeated them and was crowned Emperor of Rome. Adding to the complexity of the plot, Queen Guenevere became romantically involved with Sir Lancelot du Lac, her favourite knight who was loved by Arthur as well. This tragic relationship with strong political overtones was never resolved. King Arthur could never escape the Queen's infidelity with Lancelot, a situation endlessly embellished by numerous authors and scholars. The Knights of the Round Table, also concerned over the lack of an heir to the throne, urged Arthur to discipline or abandon Guenevere. They were sent on quests to discover the miraculous Holy Grail. The discoverer turned out to be Lancelot's son, Galahad, from his marriage with Elaine.

When King Arthur was away on the invasion of France, Mordred seized the throne of Britain and would have forced Guenevere to be his queen had she not escaped. Hearing of this, the king returned from abroad to battle Mordred's forces. In hand-to-hand combat Mordred was killed by his father who himself was mortally wounded by Mordred. After Excalibur was returned to the lake of its origin, four Queens took Arthur by boat to the fabled land of Avalon. According to some chroniclers, Arthur was not killed, but will return again in time of need.

Hic iacet Arthurus Rex quondam Resque futurus

The death of Arthur ended the tragedy of Camelot. Without a strong leader with vision and armies to combat the continued invasions of Saxons, the realm fell into tatters. Guinevere went into a convent where she died, while Lancelot became a hermit and, according to some accounts, went mad.

It will be clear from even this brief summary that the character of King Arthur was a revered leader of men who excelled on the battlefield in numerous British and European campaigns. His vision of a unified Britain free of foreign invaders, his success in bringing this about however temporarily, and the magic of Camelot are all elements that have surrounded this heroic figure for generations. In the core legend King Arthur does not doubt his identity or role at court or on the battlefield. Whether or not King Arthur was a mythic warrior presiding over a utopian Camelot, or a failed indecisive King whose inevitable downfall was brought about by the sin of incest and infanticide is still being debated. Regardless of the 'truth' in the matter, the legend survives to be examined and re-examined by scholars in several disciplines.

There are a number of significant issues appearing in contemporary reconstructions of the legend that are quite different from the core legend and which deserve brief mention. The major challenges confronting the king previously mainly arose in the form of rival kings, invading Saxons, the political instability and grief caused by the love affair between Guenevere and Lancelot. Note that these very real threats are human as opposed to the decidedly evil Morgan and Mordred together with non-human beings such as demons or aliens. The confrontation Arthur has with these opponents is not structured in terms of good versus evil as is often the case in later reconstructions. Finally, the Arthurian legend is based on a mythical reformulation of the Middle Ages with associated trappings of the court, Christian values and those of heroism, loyalty,

honour and chivalry. The early Arthurian has a more complex social context embracing the action than is given by contemporary authors.

Popularity, Persistence and Evolution of the Legend

There has been an enormous increase in the popularity of Arthurian fiction in the post-war period, especially since the 1980s. (See Raymond H. Thompson's Introduction to *The Return From Avalon*, 1985.) The focus of this thesis is on this limited period of about 25 years only. During this time, new versions of the Arthurian have grown to meet the burgeoning demand for science fiction and particularly for fantasy. The current popularity of the legendary monarch is beyond dispute as he can be found in film, television productions, popular literature and even musical comedy. How do we account for this popularity when the king must compete with all manner of comparable heroes and superheroes such as The Phantom, Superman, Batman, Spiderman as well as larger than life characters in westerns, detective fiction, space opera and others? There is something about the Arthurian legend, drawn mainly from the Middle Ages, that resonates deep within us as it reflects universal themes of good vs. evil, heroism, honour, love, loyalty, shame and betrayal.

The popularity of the Arthurian legend also results from the stature and character of the mythical figure that King Arthur has occupied in literature and public perception. The King of all Britain has been regarded as an ideal military leader and ruler over a nearly utopian society symbolized in the court of Camelot. It was Nennius who was responsible for shaping King Arthur as the patriotic British Christian warrior, the victor in the battle of Badon, and the defender of his nation. The circumstances surrounding Arthur's 'death' adds to the mystery that includes belief in a secular saviour who will return in a time of need, a common feature in several reconstructions of the legend.

The impact of the Arthurian legend on the British public particularly and on Western literature cannot be exaggerated. Elizabeth Jenkins puts it well when she writes:

The development of the myth, the pertinacity with which people have held to it, been eager to repeat and add to it, and see in it a reflection of their own interests and needs is like nothing else in our history (Jenkins, 1975: 214).

Archaeological and historical studies do not reveal the existence of a 5th or 6th century king known as King Arthur at the time he was thought to exist. The familiar legend of Arthur is actually based on a variety of literary productions from British and French sources in the Middle Ages. The earliest significant source in the development of the legend appeared from the pen of Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century. It was Geoffrey, in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, who first introduced the characters of Merlin, Guenevere and Mordred for example. The best-known Arthurian saga however is that of Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, published in 1485. Malory combined the English chronicle tradition with French romances that introduced the character of Lancelot du Lac for the first time and established the tragic love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere. There is no monolithic, integrated agreed-upon version of the legend, but rather a multiplicity of tales producing a variety of Arthurs and interpretations of his character. These recreations are still proceeding, with some taking the form of historical fiction and others ranging from modern fiction to the genres of science fiction and fantasy.

The writing of Arthurian fiction goes well beyond mere entertainment, however. Hoffman and Carley, contributors to *Culture and the King*, see the legend as being used to reconfirm a culture's self-perception and even help to bring about shifts in self-perception (See Shichtman and Carley, 1994:7). Stephen Knight's *Arthurian Literature and Society* (1983) has demonstrated how the Arthuriad has been structured by shifting social

conditions and used to promote particular political purposes. Certainly the cultural values at the time of writing are reflected in reformulations through the centuries, varying with the origin of the authors, their motives and biases. Academia is full of Arthurian scholars in many disciplines who have helped keep the legend alive and demonstrated the social and political functions of the Arthurian legend. Steven Knight, for example, has made us aware of the need to examine the ruling forces in each period of Arthuriana to see how the cultural support-system of the time related to different forms of authority in power in current versions of the legend.

Methodology

The image of King Arthur in most of these novels departs dramatically from the legendary image, and also from expectations of what a contemporary Arthur might be like. The reasons for this will be found in the pages that follow. Briefly, the stature of King Arthur has degenerated as he becomes absorbed into popular culture. The authors and publishers of mass-marketed modern Arthuriana have provided the monarch with only a simplified, commodified version of the legend.

One would hope that a modern King Arthur would offer the vision of a better future embracing the values of his past and those of Camelot. None of this happens. Instead we are offered a caricature of the former king whose main concern is thwarting evil demons, some of whom have returned as villainous criminals. Significant real threats to society are largely unrecognised or ignored. In addition, our image of the 'traditional' King Arthur includes his leadership of a band of knights, whereas in this and future worlds the Round Table stalwarts have largely disappeared, as has any evidence of real leadership despite a few exceptions.

Have we given up on King Arthur and his ability to ‘hold back the Darkness’? What accounts for this debasement of one of Western civilization’s most enduring icons and what meaning can the king have for us today? The following pages will show what has happened to the king and suggest the reasons for it.

A search was undertaken to identify all popular mass-marketed novels and related material of the last 25 years that featured King Arthur. The search was restricted to post-World War II Arthurian literature. There are several reasons for imposing this limitation. The first was to bring up to date several aspects of the Arthurian literature review by Raymond Thompson in his book, *The Return From Avalon* published in 1985, and to avoid any duplication with this book. Thomson’s publication included Arthurian literature with broad settings in the Dark Ages, High Middle Ages, contemporary society, science fiction and fantasy together with coverage of the entire Arthurian legend and details on its many characters.

The type of novels in the present thesis are more restricted and focused than those in Thompson’s book, not only in terms of the time settings of the novels but also in type of content. The novels in this thesis date from the cut-off of Thomson’s book, about 1979, and are focused entirely on novels with contemporary, future and otherworld settings. No ancient or historical romances are included.

The public has a fascination with variations on the Arthurian legend that take place in the Dark and Middle Ages, so in response some authors enjoy writing recreations of the legend based on the cultural differences found there. On the other hand, there is a price to pay. There are lessons to be learned from an analysis of a contemporary and/or future Arthur faced with issues within our own society and in future worlds. There are

also revelations to be found in the influence of contemporary and future societies on the character and role of the past monarch. Among these are sociological themes dealing with leadership, current threats to society, and the role of women and the mass marketing of King Arthur as he enters the cultural field of popular culture.

For the above reasons, novels set in the ancient past are not included among the novels selected and the summary reviews of the novels selected emphasize features relevant to a sociological analysis so they are necessarily brief. The present concern is mainly concentrated on the development of the central iconic figure of King Arthur himself in order to show how the king adapts to new cultures far different from his ancient past, the evolution of Arthur's character, his motives, relationships and confrontation new types of challenges.

The selected novels fall into three broad groups: 1) those located in our own, contemporary society which were expected to demonstrate how King Arthur faced familiar challenges to our own world; 2) those with the action set in the future, expected to reveal significantly different societies than those found in the 20th century and to show how this impacts on the character of King Arthur and 3) science fiction, science fantasy or fantasy novels that can be described as science fiction, fantasy or science-fantasy revealing a context of unbounded imagination and innovation.

In addition to avoiding duplication with Raymond Thompson, the thesis is designed to project a sociological enquiry into this and future worlds expected to reflect concerns we experience in our own society. From this gleaning of the literature, we may come to entirely different conclusions from Thompson and others.

Contemporary, science fiction and fantasy Arthuriana is in itself a new genre within the field of cultural production and the mass-marketing of literature with its associated vested interests. This is an important feature arising from the data base of 23 Arthurian novels and a further reason for selecting a contemporary approach.

Textual analysis is not applied to a single text in this thesis but rather to the entire group of texts. The approach is more sociological than literary and the interpretation of these texts is of two types: 1) a comparison of themes among the 23 novels selected, and 2) a comparison of the Arthurian legend in historical accounts, with Arthurian literature in the latter half of the 20th century. The issue of historical context is particularly important in terms of cultural production and readership.

It will be seen by this approach and consistent with the application of textual analysis, there is no single text that can be said to be more accurate than any other, nor are claims of 'quality' relevant since all novels considered are equal entries into the data base. It should also be clear that the methodology used does not lend itself to semiotics.

Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, published in 1485 by William Caxton, was a major publishing event in England at the time. This was a very early publication in the English language and proved to be very popular. Caxton was active in translating and publishing a wide range of books aimed at what A.R. Myers writes was Caxton's conservative public (p.250). *Le Morte D'Arthur* was England's first work in poetic prose and became established as a living classic to the present day.

Myers also tells us that Malory's stories were superior to the general mediocrity of English literature in the late fifteenth century, apparently intended for a popular audience (252). It is seen here that even in the early

years of English publishing there were two markets for books just as there are today. Today however both cultural production for the mass media and consumers of the media are enormously different when compared with the late 15th century when media culture was less pervasive. This is a subject that will be taken up in following pages.

The libraries of the Australian National Library, The Australian National University, and the Australian Capital Territory were canvassed in the search for material. In addition, local and international booksellers were contacted and many of the books identified were purchased together with several significant reference works and materials. Journal articles and other leads were found on the Internet that contains an academic website called Arthuriana, and an Internet discussion group entitled Arthurnet. The assistance of interested friends and academics also played a part.

The search for material produced 23 novels that met the criteria, most of them mass-marketed paperbacks from the mid-1980s. Each of these books is summarized in the following chapters. There cannot be a strict dividing line when it comes to science fiction, science fantasy and pure fantasy. Unfortunately very little hard-core science fiction featuring King Arthur has been produced. The focus of the analysis is on the character and role of King Arthur himself and does not attempt to assess the recapitulation of the entire legend. Finally, no novel (with one exception) is included in which a proxy for King Arthur is the major character.

The group of 23 books cannot claim to be exhaustive but they do comprise all mass marketed novels available from the sources mentioned, and are representative of the current crop of Arthuriana in these categories. These books vary enormously in terms of literary 'quality' but assessment of 'quality' is not a major objective. Most, if not all the books qualify as adult fiction. Limitations of space prevent inclusion of detailed

comments or reviews from academics or literary critics, but readers interested in pursuing the subject further are encouraged to consult the bibliography.

Literary scholars may dismiss this body of mass-marketed literature on the grounds that these paperbacks lack substance or deviate too far from serious Arthuriana. The approach taken in this thesis is that these novels constitute a legitimate body of sociological data that has significance as we examine the relationship of this type of literature to our society today. In particular, it shows how the alteration of the Arthurian legend meets popular demand for action-oriented stories. Finally, this literature embodies values that are linked to the economic and social status quo insofar as these examples of popular culture are a reflection of social demand as well as instruments in the creation of that demand and the perpetuation of the social values they contain.

As sociological wealth has been found in past transformations of the Arthurian legend, so it is now as Arthur returns today, in the future, and in fairyland. It must be stressed that these 23 novels constitute the primary data and source material on which the thesis is based. Twentieth-century Arthurian novels offer a body of work within cultural production, being part of the study of literature and society. As in the case of any literary production according to cultural studies, these novels contribute to the social meanings of literature and its relationship to cultural consumption, social control and power among other things. It is quite clear for example that this secular, individualized and commodified Arthur is indirectly associated with contemporary Western capitalist values and dominant political themes.

The thesis is divided into two main sections. It begins with summaries of the novels under consideration. This is followed by analysis and

conclusions of the major themes. Analysis is not applied to each book separately but to the group as a whole for comparisons of significant themes and issues. Current sociological theory leads to a better understanding of the underlying meaning and significance of these examples of contemporary popular culture.

It is the position of the writer that sociological research and analysis can and should be both empirical and politically engaged. By empirical is meant that conclusions and hypotheses arise from observable data and politically engaged means that conclusions are related to issues or problems of significance to contemporary society. While it may appear on the surface as a frivolous undertaking by the author, the thesis addresses issues of communication and reality that are central to contemporary society. This orientation helps to explain the somewhat deviant assessment of the role and legacy of King Arthur.

This thesis aims at answering a number of questions raised by the gleaming of modern Arthuriana.

- How is the Arthurian legend transformed in contemporary novels?
- How successfully does King Arthur adapt to societies in the future and in fantasyland?
- What identity or identities does King Arthur assume and how are these different from his past?
- What are the effects of the commodification of Arthur and the legend at the hands of authors and publishers who dominate the mass market? What is the impact of public expectations, a reading public used to romantic superheroes in graphic novels or acting out witless arcade-games?
- How do contemporary Arthurian novels reflect current society and social concerns, particularly social evil?

- Modern Arthurian novels are exclusively found within mass-marketed popular culture. How does this affect the legend and Arthur himself?
- Who are the authors and publishers of Arthurian novels and how do they affect the legend?
- What is the sociological significance of contemporary Arthurian novels and what political values are embodied in them? What values are knowingly or unknowingly promoted by the authors of these novels?
- Who are the women in King Arthur's life and what influence do they have on his behaviour?
- What meaning does King Arthur have for us today? If the image of King Arthur differs significantly from his image in the past, what accounts for the changes in this icon of Western culture?
- What are the effects of the commodification of the legend at the hands of authors and publishers who dominate the mass-market? What is the impact of the expectations of the public used to romantic superheroes in action-oriented films, computer and arcade games?

These questions arose in part at the outset of the research but they were modified as the work progressed as it became apparent that both the legend and character of King Arthur had undergone substantial transformations. Of course one would expect that a modern Arthurian monarch would not mimic his past character entirely, yet what has happened in the evolution of King Arthur is much more basic. This can be seen in the similarities among the novels reviewed. Considering his past characterizations, it would be expected that in returning, Arthur would necessarily accept challenges or threats within contemporary society that produce stress or disequilibrium of the social fabric.

Why does the image of King Arthur in most of these novels depart so dramatically from the image of the past and also from expectations of what a contemporary Arthur might be like? There are several answers to this in the pages that follow. Briefly, the stature of King Arthur has degenerated as he becomes absorbed into popular culture. The authors and publishers of mass-marketed modern Arthuriana have provided the king with only a simplified, version of the legend. The genre of literature termed 'sword and sorcery' describes what has become of the classic myth. This transformation of the iconic monarch of Camelot says much about the role of the media in the production of images in our society.

Chapter 1 will take up the legend of King Arthur in contemporary literature and its relationship to our society.