

Journey Planet





Editors

Chris Garcia, Chuck Serface, James Bacon



~Table of Contents~



Page 5 Editorial by Christopher J. Garcia	King Arthur Plays Vegas: The Excalibur by Christopher J. Garcia
Page 7 Letters of Comment by Lloyd Penney	Page 38 In Time of Despair and Great Darkness by Ken Scholes
Page 12 Instant Fanzine Article: Arthur and Merlin by Christopher J. Garcia and Chuck Serface	Page 49 Camelot by Laura Frankos
Page 16 The Story of Arthur Retold by Bob Hole	Page 55 A Retro-Review: Monty Python's Spamalot by Steven H Silver
Page 19 Arthur, Alfred, and the Myth of England by Julian West	Page 58 Arthurs for Our Time: Recent Interpretations of the Legend by Chuck Serface
Page 23 Lady Charlotte and King Arthur by Cardinal Cox	Page 62 Two Cups of Blood: Dracula vs. King Arthur by Derek McCaw
Page 29 From a Certain Point of View: Merlin & Nimue by Steven H Silver	Page 64 Knights of Pendragon: The Other Arthurian Comic by Helena Nash
Page 31 Interview with Dorsey Armstrong by Christopher J. Garcia	Page 75 Tristan, Isolde, and Camelot 3000 by Christopher J. Garcia
Page 35 King Arthur in Fifteen Stamps by Bob Hole	Page 77 "It's Only a CGI Model": Arthurian Movies of the Twenty-First Century by Tony Keen
Page 36	



~Table of Contents~



Page 81

Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King*

by Neil Rest

Page 84

My Barbarian's "Morgan Le Fey" . . . but Which One?

by Christopher J. Garcia

Page 90

Editorial

By James Bacon

Cover by Vanessa Applegate

Page 1—DeepDreamGenerator Combination of King Arthur Tapestry of the Nine Worthies and Lichtenstein's *Sunrise*.

Page 4 by Matthew Appleton

Page 5—*The Death of King Arthur* by John Garrick

Page 7—Comic by Derek Carter

Page 11—Cartoon by Derek Carter

Page 15—DeepDreamGenerator— *The cover of The Boys King Arthur and the painting The Starry Night* by Van Gogh

Page 27—*Merlin* by Brittany Lindstrom

Page 28—*Mer;in & Nimue* by Edward Burne-Jones

Page 35 by Bob Hole

Page 36—Collage by Chris Garcia

Page 49—Collage by Chris Garcia

Page 57—*Grail* by Fionnuala Murphy

Page 61—Drawing by Derek Carter

Page 74—Drawing by Derek Carter

Spot Line Art from Dover Medieval Illustrations CD-ROM.

Journey Planet Logo by Sara Felix

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Arthur, King of the Britons





Editorial by Chris Garcia

The reason this issue is happening is I have a cafeteria of Arthurs in my head. I'm not an epic fantasy guy. I just don't care for the hero's journey, and they tend to eschew the whole postmodernist thing that I dig so much.

But I love King Arthur.

How could you not love at least one Arthur? There are so many. As Arthurian scholar Dorsey Armstrong says, "Every age creates the Arthur it needs," and I certainly can't argue with that. Whether it's the noble king of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the chivalric-knight king of Malory, the humorous Merlin-built King of *The Once and Future King*, or Mike Barr's brilliant re-imagining of Arthur in *Camelot 3000*, you can find one that allows you to dig in.

My Arthur? Hard to say; there are so many.

They range from gigantic blondes to ropy dirt-smearred gingers. Some are cunning, all are brave, most are short-sighted. They are everywhere, and what they mean is what makes them all interesting.

Let me start with my first Arthur: Wart. The 1963 classic *The Sword in the Stone* was almost certainly the first Arthurian-themed film I ever saw, and Wart, what Merlin called the twelve-year old Arthur, was an incredibly memorable introduction because he was a kid. The message little me took away from that cartoon was simple – even the mightiest of kings, at one point, are too big for their



britches. The film is pretty good, I'd actually say it was better than the T.H. White book it's based on. I watched it with the kids, and they didn't dig it, but I loved it. The fish scene is my fave!

Next would be one of the more interesting Arthurs, and one I would revisit more than once. John Borman's *Excalibur* gave us Nigel Terry as Arthur, and it was magnificent! It is one of the most beautifully anachronistic visions of Arthur ever filmed. Terry's Arthur isn't particularly imposing, but there is something to his raptor-like gaze, the resolve he seems to give off. If I had to guess, I'd say he was maybe 175, and he seems stiff in his armor, but he acts like it weighs nothing. He has something every Arthur needs: the ability to move beyond obvious limitations.

Next Arthur ended up being another Disney Arthur – Kenneth More in *Unidentified Flying Oddballs*. It was a staple of early Disney Channel, so when I would tune in hoping for *Donald Duck Presents* or something along those lines, I would often end up seeing it -- either that or *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*. It's a silly movie, with some very nice effects for the day. Arthur here is an old Arthur, but he's also a strong and embattled Arthur. He's a serious part in a nonserious movie, which is a great place for an Arthur.

As a musical theatre nerd, *Camelot* was always a big one for me, first with Richard Burton as Arthur, but the only time I've seen it live, it was with Robert Goulet, who was most famous for playing Lancelot, playing Arthur. He was, in fact, fabulous in the role (Pipe Down!), and I'd say he did a better job than Richard Harris did in the movie version. That Arthur is more fun-loving than most, and the story is lovely, especially with the interactions between everyone and Guinevere.

I have to mention the *Camelot 3000* Arthur. He is the most "Arthur" Arthur that ever Arthured. The story, my favorite Arthurian story, is a science-fiction masterpiece, telling the story of Arthur returned to battle for Earth. This Arthur is noble, strong, just buff enough, just cagey enough, handsome, yet rugged. When I think of Arthur, this is the Arthur I'm thinking of. *Camelot 3000* is one of my all-time favorite maxi-series, and one that really helped turn me into an Arthuroid.

There were a few Arthurs that popped up in the 1980s that are worth talking about, however briefly. *Merlin and The Sword* was a lot of fun for a TV movie, and Malcolm McDowell was another kind of ropey Arthur. The real reason to watch it is Candice Bergen as Morgan La Fey. The SNES game *King Arthur & the Knights of Justice* Arthur was incredibly noble, but at the same time, even for a video game character, kinda one-dimensional. I barely remember the BBC series *The Legend of King Arthur* but remember him seeming a bit rougher around the edges.

I will repeat – I saw Robert Goulet play King Arthur in *Camelot*. 1998 was great year.

Arthur in the 1990s and early 2000s included Sean Connery (an aged and pretty grizzled Arthur against Richard Gere's handsome, brave, kind of shallow version of Lancelot) and Clive Owen, who was dirtied up, but felt a bit too toned for the role. The thing that has happened since the effects revolution of the 1990s was that the stunning visual has largely taken the front seat in the films of Arthurs, and why not? The myth of Camelot, and the exploits of Arthur are exactly the kind of things that lend themselves to CGI. The idea of Arthur is still alive, but now it is more important that they fill an emotive presence. Great actors are getting a lot more chances at Arthur these days, which can only be a good thing. If *Excalibur* were made today, you probably wouldn't get a Nigel Terry-type, but more likely a Liam Neeson or perhaps Michael Shannon. In fact, he's the one I want to play Arthur the most.



Far more interesting than the literary Arthur to me is the hunt for the historical Arthur and the actual Camelot. I'm a historian (even if I'm not paid to be one any more . . .) and the search is so fascinating, largely because it's a series of disconnected clues that hint towards something, but there's no clear path to a reality.

My Arthur might be the mystery Arthur.

Whether you're a fantasy, science fiction, horror, historical, or whatever fan, there's an Arthur for you, and this issue is all about of them . . . or at least as many as we can cover.

In other *Journey Planet* news, we had a big year in 2020 with "Swamp Thing", "Battle," "Pen & Ink," "The Future of Policing," "Russian Space," and so many more. Our Hugo nomination, lockdowns, and so much more happened. It's the lockdown that made it possible for me to write and start painting. I've loved painting for decades, but never got to do a bunch of it, and finally found a way to get to it! I've been sending out as many as I can, so if you want one, lemme know: journeyplanet@gmail.com

Of course, I'm just now getting back into my house after our evacuation. We've spent months away from the house. The fires destroyed a lot of Big Basin State Park, which is a shame as it was incredibly beautiful. The town isn't back to normal, but it's getting there. The local Chinese restaurant is back open, even though the owner's house was destroyed. The Mexican place is open again, and it's good to see them thriving. The hotels were nice, and the county took care of us. The food they delivered was great, and I think that was the lockdown coming into play. High-end restaurants around Santa Cruz were sending us great meals. Paella!!!

2021, and how are we so far into this year already? We're doing a few issues that I really want to get out, so stay tuned, but the next one that I'll be heading up is "Tim Powers." I love Tim, and this is an issue, like the "Swamp Thing" issue, that I've wanted to do for a LONG time. He's a legend and if you've got thoughts, send them to Journeyplanet@gmail.com.





Letters of Comment

Dear *Journey Planet* Editors:

Hello to all those who worked on *Journey Planet* issues 52 and 53! Thanks for putting them up for download, and I will give it my best shot to respond in some way.

Issue 52

I admit it has been a while since I could respond to some the zines you produce, but when it comes to fountain pens, I do have at least a little to say about them. Yvonne has a small collection of them and corresponds by pen and paper with some friends a distance away. I don't have my own pens, but I have at least some experience in writing with them, with the easy touch and light pressure. Yvonne complements her fountain pens with seals and sealing wax for the letters she sends.

This pandemic killed and postponed a lot of events. One annual event we'd both go to was *Scriptus*, which was and is the annual Toronto area fountain pen gathering. Yvonne would usually leave the event with a new pen, and at least one bottle of the newest color of ink. She needed an adaptor between fountain pens and cartridges, and one of the best pen stores is here in Toronto, Laywine's. Geographically, Laywine's store and the Toronto Reference Library, where *Scriptus* is regularly held, are a short walk apart, and on those *Scriptus* days, we would go to both the event and the store. Yvonne uses some good quality Sheaffer. She has her father's old fountain pen, a Sheaffer Lifetime.

Page 17: James, is that your actual mailing address? The *Scriptus* show is often a good place to get those pens, plus good inks, papers, pen accessories, etc., but more and more, even a Staples is a decent place to start working with fountain pens. Once you've got some experience, special stores like Laywine's can help much more.

Issue 53

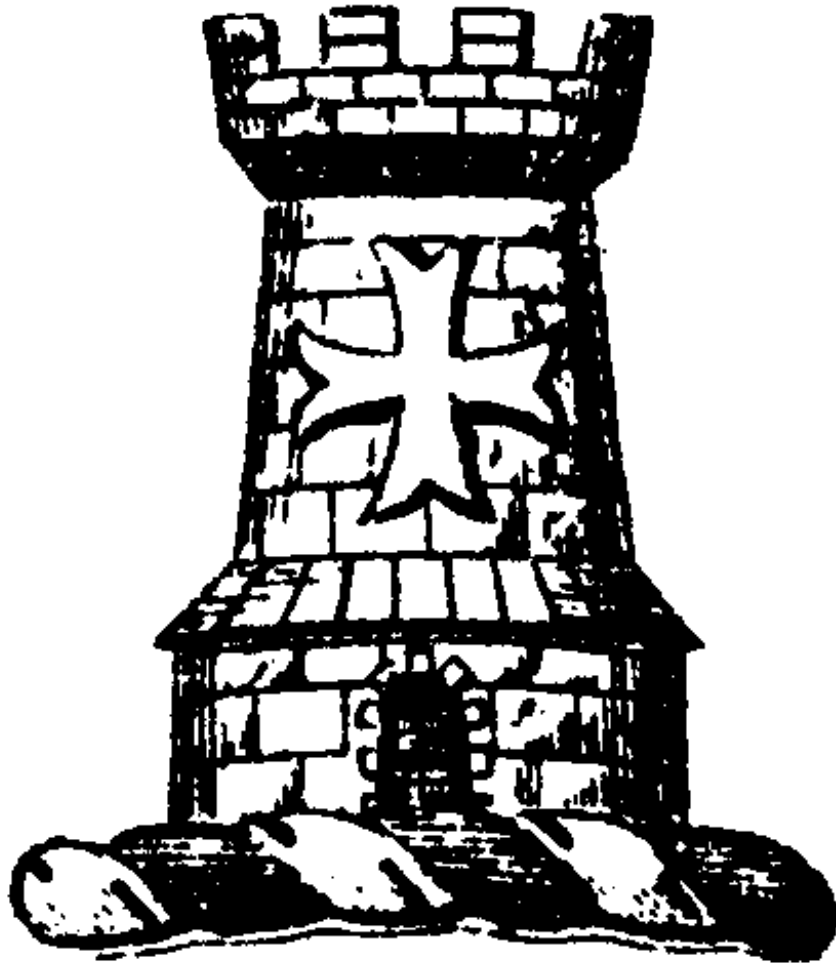
It's coincidental that this issue is about the future of policing. Here is a book I recently worked on:



No Police = Know Future: Stories of Alternative Futures of Alternative Justice, edited by James Beamon, is a truly special volume, both a visualization of the recent call to defund the police and a roadmap to navigate towards a true system of justice. Contributors include PT Mackim, Bronte Christopher Wieland, Stewart C. Baker, Holly Schofield, Jared Oliver Adams, Ira Nayman, Lettie Prell, and Anatoly Belilovsky.

Hope everyone had a great Christmas, and that 2021 has to be better than 2020, please!

Yours, Lloyd Penney



Dear Chris, James, and Sarah:

I am getting things cleaned up for the end of the year, and I have only a few fanzines left on hand to respond to, so I am padding my yearly totals of letters of comment. To help with that, here is a letter of comment on issue 54 of *Journey Planet*.

If there's anything we can all connect with, it collecting. We've all done it, we're still doing it, and we turn our homes into storage areas to display our interests. I read some years ago that collecting, and the need to collect the whole set is probably the mildest form of mental illness. Do you suffer from mental illness? No, I quite enjoy it, actually . . . well, we're a bunch of sickies, so at least we all get to do this together. It's an enjoyable craze, so let's all get crazy.

My first urge to collect came when I was about six or seven, when I discovered comic books, but my mother would toss them out, seeing I wasn't continuously reading and re-reading them. My parents didn't like comic books, but one thing I did collect at that time was British comic books, like the *Dandy*, the *Beano*, the *Hotspur* and the *Wizard*, and when I got plenty of them, I sold them to the neighborhood kids, so they also taught me about business. (Actually, my parents forced my hand on this, for I had so many of these comic books, they threatened to throw them out as well. I also discovered stamp collecting, which didn't take up as much space, but certainly took up some money. Seeing I was making some money with two paper routes, I started buying series of paperback books, like *B.C.*, *Peanuts* and *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*. I had to cash in a lot of these collections, seeing I was planning to go to university.

I did start collecting *Star Trek* books, like the Blish series, the Foster animated books, and the PhotoNovels. and if I couldn't collect them all, I started keeping track of them through regular trips to the library. Eventually, my list of *Star Trek* books made it into the regular Yellow Pages of the *Star Trek* Welcommittee. At one point, the list made up the majority of the publication, and when the STW shut down with the advent of the Web, I shut my list down. Still have all the books, though.

When Yvonne and I moved in together, we started going to library sales to build a big collection fast. At least with that, we know we will never collect the whole set, but there is some form of comfort with a room full of books. Our book collections are spread out a little bit, but our SF collection fills one whole wall of the living room.

And Chris mentions zines . . . same for me. I don't have many zines simply given to me, but nearly 40 years of writing letters like this one have given me about twenty-five Bankers Boxes full of zines. Good for me that e-zines came along; otherwise, that figure would be closer to fifty boxes.

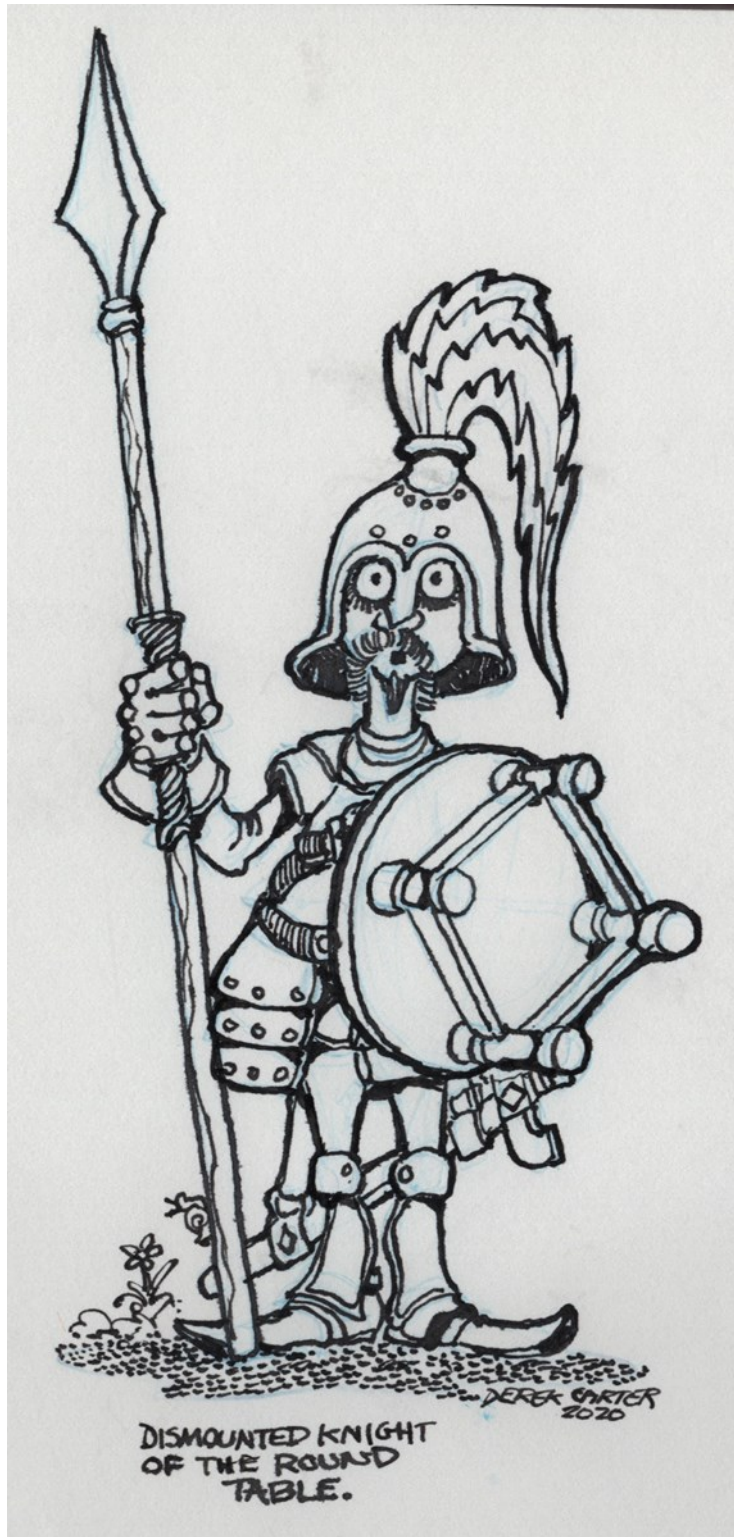
The only way to collect anything is to have a home to store everything in, and even having a home is getting more and more expensive or even unlikely for so many of us. We may have to move sometime in the next few years, so we may have to make so hard choices. We each have a collection of tacky Hawaiian-style shirts of our own, Yvonne makes more to sell, and we also have our collection of steampunk costumes. Where do they go if you are out on the street? Can you reason out getting rid of those collections without feeling deprived? Will you feel less of a fan if you have to give away your collections, or throw everything in a dumpster? Will our collectibles eventually overrun second-hand shops of the future? We have made them one of our sources of consolation in this pandemic.

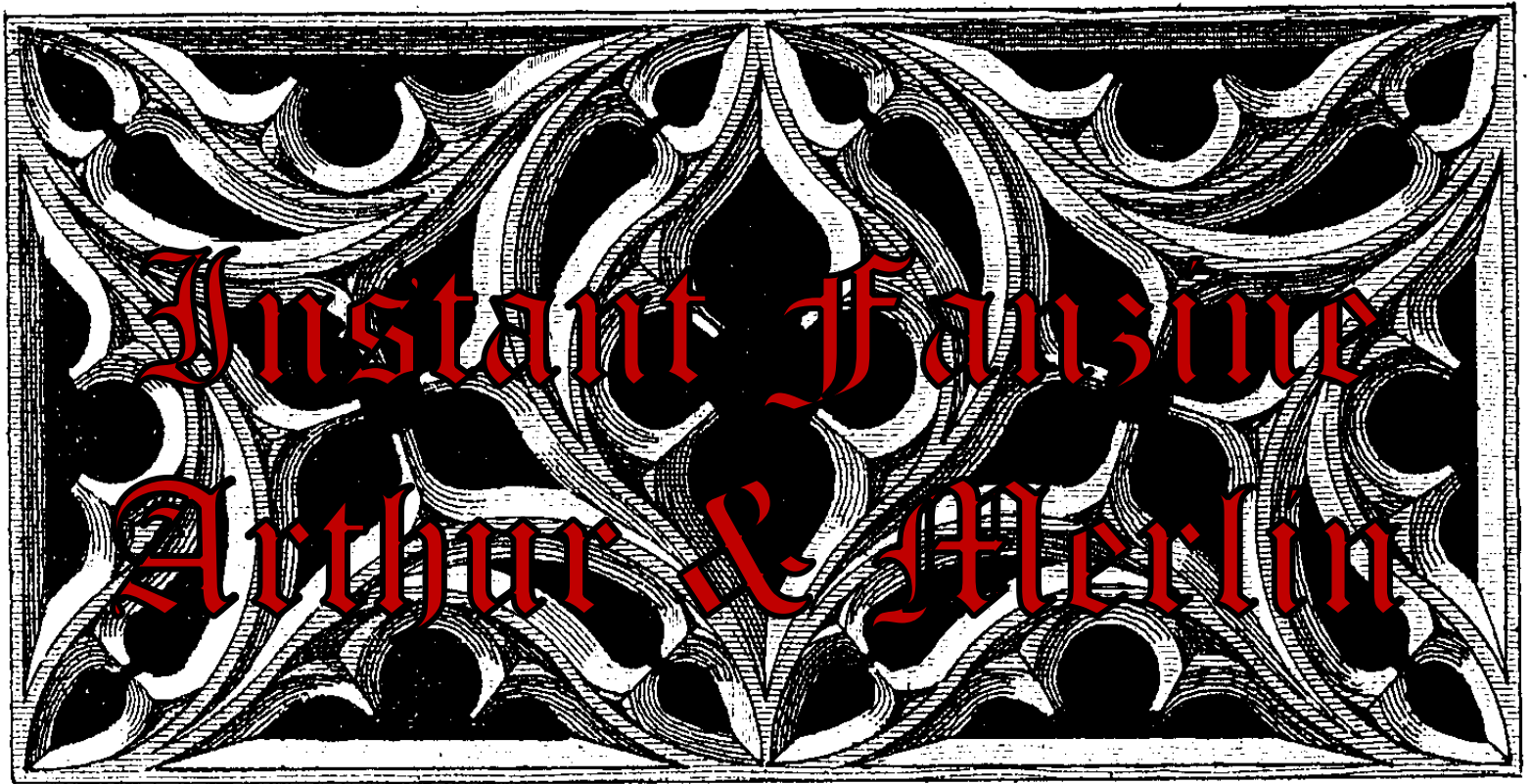
I may be preaching to the choir here, but we're all collectors, so I am not saying anything new. Yvonne and I wish all of you who have access to this e-mail a wonderful New Year's, and let's keep in touch in that far-off SFnal year of 2021.

Yours,

Lloyd Penney







On their Facebook pages, Chris and Chuck asked the following question: Which is “your” Arthur and Merlin? Which are your favorite versions? Answer as a comment below, saying as much as you’d like. We’ll then collect all answers and include them in our upcoming issue of *Journey Planet* dedicated to Arthurian Legends.

Derek Smith: From lit, film, comics, that one jar of pickles too many . . . ? All of the above?

Christopher J Garcia [replying to Derek Smith]: All if the above!

John Purcell: I would have to say “Excalibur” (1981) is my favorite film version of the Arthurian legend, mainly because it was so dark and mysterious. I think the production quality of that movie was excellent, and the cast was top notch.

After that there is a movie “King Arthur: Excalibur Rising” from 2017 that offers a very interesting take on the mythology. It’s another fun movie to watch.

And of course, the little kid in me still likes the Disneyfied version *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) just because it’s fluff. I think my favorite character in this animated movie was Mim, voiced by Martha Wentworth, and Sir Pellinore was voiced by Alan Napier, whom many of us remember as Alfred from the Batman television series of the 1960s. This is a fine, watered down bit of mindless fun.

Bob Hole: My favorite Arthur on film is Richard Harris in *Camelot*, but Richard Burton would have been marvelous to see. I love his vocals on the Broadway cast album.

My Merlin is from T.H. White. Mostly because of “Castor and Pollux, blow me to Bermuda.” That was in both the Disney film and book it’s based on.



Howard Stateman: I like the Dudley Moore *Arthur* better than the Russell Brand *Arthur*. But I like Bea Arthur best of all.

John Purcell [replying to Howard Stateman]: Pfft!

Matthew Appleton: “King Arthur” wasn’t involved — he was long dead — but my favorite Merlin was the Seventh Doctor (and my favorite Lady of the Lake was Ace) in the original *Doctor Who* episode “Battlefield.”

Craig Glassner: Without a doubt T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. I think I read it at least ten times over the years. It defined my Arthur and Merlin.

Marguerite Smith: Honestly? The first one that comes to mind is Disney's *Sword in the Stone*, so definitely some indirect influence of TH White there.

I've read and seen many versions over the years, but the ones I'd revisit or which I think did something particularly interesting include:

- Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series;
- Patricia Kennealy-Morrison's *Tales of Arthur* (and other references in her *Tales of Aeron*);
- Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* (though I haven't reread it, and I wouldn't recommend it now based purely on the author);

and Bernard Cornwell's *Warlord Trilogy*.

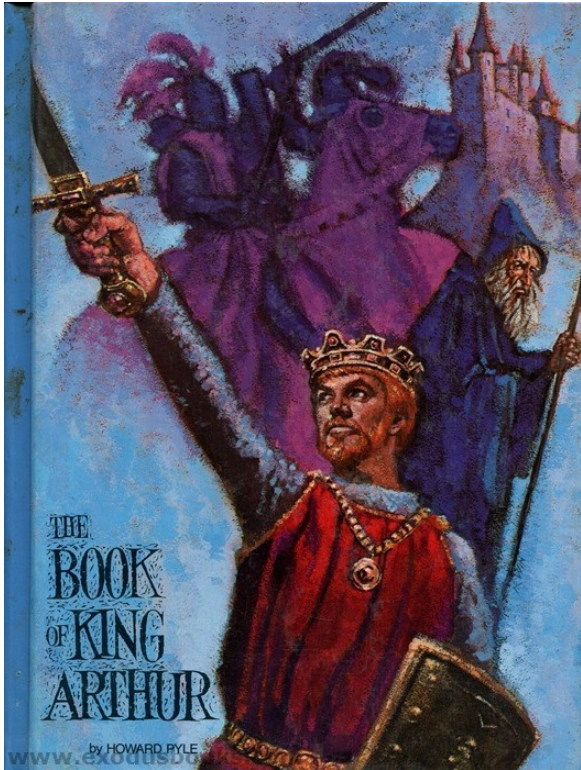
There are a few other half-remembered books and series which touched on more of the historical-fiction-Roman-Britain aspects, but if I can't remember the titles, I can't recommend them. I'd also say there are various operas and musicals which also cover the subject, but I always think of them more as interesting rather than definitive. (Except for maybe MP&tHG. Maybe.)

Kathryn Duval: My favorite Merlin was the character in Mary Stewart's *Crystal Cave*. My favorite Arthur isn't exactly Arthur. It's Urdo from *The King's Peace* by Jo Walton.

William Howard: First and foremost, my mother's book of *Classic Arthurian Legends*. She used to read them as bedtime stories every night.

David Safar: I had *The Book of King Arthur* by Howard Pyle when I was a kid, and any mention of Arthurian legend always make me think of it.



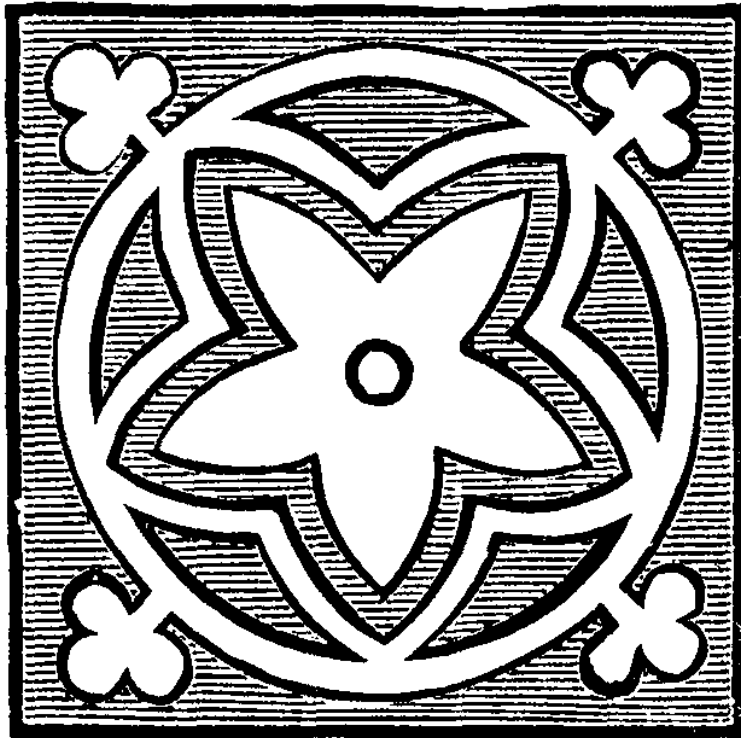


Tom Serface: I still love the play *Camelot*! It's my favorite!

Beth Vallacqua: I attempted to read *Le Morte de Arthur* a few times in college. I never finished but still enjoyed it. Kaitlyn [Beth's daughter] introduced me to the BBC series *Merlin* a few years ago. I'm re-watching it now with James [Beth's boyfriend].

Christopher J Garcia [replying to Beth Vallacqua]: Unrelated, but super fun: *Heads Will Roll* is a fun audio drama

Paula Helm Murray: *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White.





Uther Pendragon, was a legendary King of Britain during the 5th century, after the Romans left.

He met and fell in lust with Ygraine, the wife of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. In order to get her, the king laid siege to Tintagel, the Duke's castle on the coast of western Cornwall.

The king was impatient though, and contracted with the sorcerer Merlin to deliver Ygraine to him, and Merlin did.

Using his magic, Merlin disguised the king as Gorlis, who was busy on the battlefield fending off the King's forces.

The disguised King entered Tintagel, and seduced the Duchess Ygraine. At the moment he succeeded, Gorlis was killed in battle.

During Ygraine's seduction, Arthur was conceived.

With the Duke now dead, Ygraine was forced to marry the King.

In due course, when the child was born, much to his mother's horror and the despair of the King, Merlin came to take away the infant baby.

That was Merlin's price for Uther's first night with Ygraine.

Merlin took the infant Arthur to raise in secret. The boy was given to a knight, Sir Bedivere, who raised the boy alongside his own older child, Kay.

When the boy was out of infancy, Merlin returned to Bedivere's castle, and acted as tutor and teacher to the young Arthur, who Bedivere was training as a squire to Kay.

When Arthur was a teen, they attended a huge fair in the capital. King Uther had died, and the kingdom had no leader.

As part of the fair, there was to be a joust. The winner of the joust, as the supposed strongest warrior, was to become King in Uther's place.

Kay entered the joust, though he knew he had no chance of winning. But like all things, Kay had even less of a chance if he didn't enter at all.

On the morning of the joust, on the way to the jousting grounds, Kay realized his sword was forgotten in their lodgings. Arthur, as squire, was of course blamed for the oversight. He was sent back to get the sword.

Arthur had been distracted by all the sights and sounds of the great fair, and had been slacking in all his duties. The fun and food and just the general excitement kept him awake at all hours, and he was just worn out.

Half-way back to their lodgings, Arthur saw what he thought was a war memorial, or something, in the town square.

There was a sword sticking up out of a great stone.

In a hurry, Arthur thought he could borrow this sword for Kay, and maybe nobody would notice the sword was missing before he had a chance to replace it.

In his haste, did not bother to read the inscription on the stone.

Arthur smoothly drew the Sword from the Stone, and suddenly heard a great roar from the immense crowd that seemed to materialize around him. Standing next to him in front of the crowd were Bedivere and Merlin.

Arthur was extremely embarrassed at having been caught in the act by everyone, but slowly re-



alized the crowd was cheering rather than yelling at him.

It was only then that he glanced at the stone's inscription, which read:

“Whomsoever draws this sword from this stone is rightwise King of all Britain”

Arthur was duly crowned king and with the aid of Merlin became a pretty good king.

One day, the king was out wandering when he came upon a lake. The figure of a woman emerged from the lake, holding a sword, tilting the hilt toward him as an offering.

When she approached him, Arthur silently took the sword from her. Suddenly in his mind, he realized without prompting, this sword was called Excalibur.

The lady of the lake turned away, and walked back into the water.

King Arthur found his new blade was perfectly balanced for his hand, kept itself rust free, and never needed sharpening.

The Young Arthur used Excalibur to help him clean up his kingdom, running off bandits, putting down petty warlords, and just generally making crooks miserable.

He made his headquarters at a place called Camelot. A beautiful place, where it was not allowed to rain until after sundown.

Once he was established, Arthur received a visit from the Duchess of Cornwall, who also might have been the Queen of Orkney, Morgause. He did not realize she was his half-sister, the daughter of Arthur's mother Ygraine, and her first husband, Duke Gorliss.

Morgause, however, knew exactly who Arthur was, and what their relationship was, and she had planned the whole thing very carefully.

Like Arthur's father did to Ygraine, Morgause seduced Arthur. And like Ygraine, Morgause conceived, and in due course, their son Mordred was born.

Unlike Arthur, Mordred was raised to know who his father was, though Arthur was not told about his son. Mordred was also raised with a strong and enduring hatred for Arthur.

Eventually, Arthur became convinced he needed to marry in order to provide an heir for the kingdom. Mordred didn't count. He born to someone else's wife, was his father's nephew, and Arthur didn't know he existed.

Arthur was introduced to many possible brides, and after a long and disappointing string of them, he met Guinevere.

It was love at first sight for both of them, and they married and were very happy for some time.

Unfortunately as it turns out, shortly after the wedding, a knight from France sought out Arthur to serve at the King's side. That knight was Lancelot du Lac.

When Arthur and Lancelot met, it was also love at first sight. Lancelot already had loved the idea of King Arthur, but the two fell instantly in love with one another when they met, though they first tested one another's strength in a friendly fight.

With the help of Lancelot and Merlin, King Arthur formed a group of knights to help him continue to rid his kingdom of bad guys, and fight against the idea that the strongest was always the most right.

The group was set up to meet at a great round table Arthur set up. It was round so that no knight could claim precedence over any other in the order of things.



In addition to Lancelot, Arthur enlisted his foster father Bedivere, his foster brother Kay, who was by this time a knight, along with Gawain, and Galahad, and several others.

Once the kingdom was fully secure, the knights got restless. To prevent them getting too restless, Arthur set them a new task. He sent them out to the four corners of the world to look for the Holy Grail.

The grail was the cup Jesus drank from at the last supper, and in addition to being a religious icon, the cup was supposed to have miraculous powers.

The knights scattered to search for the grail, and this in turn kept them from fighting with one another at home from pure boredom.

Lancelot, though, stayed behind in Camelot at King Arthur's side.

While the king was away on one of his grail hunting trips, or maybe it was boar hunting, the two loves of Arthur's life, Guinevere and Lancelot, fell in love.

After some tortuous times for the threesome, Lancelot and Guinevere decided they loved each other slightly more than they loved Arthur, and ran away together.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the virtuous and pure Sir Galahad found the Holy Grail. But that's another story.

With Arthur's true loves having run away with each other, the king got depressed and despondent. He should have gone after them, since he was Guinevere's husband, and he must not show weakness to his people. But, if he caught them, he would have to put these people he loved to death. Committing adultery against the king was treason after all. And they both had, by now, done that.

Arthur sought the council of Merlin, who was still his closest adviser. Especially with Lancelot gone.

Arthur was so despondent that he foolishly decided to set off in pursuit of the pair, both hoping and not hoping he could catch them.

During the chase, the army of Mordred, the King's rat of a son, attacked Arthur's forces as they marched northward along a western beach. During the battle, Mordred personally attacked his own father, the king.

After a rip-roaring fight, Arthur and Mordred mortally wounded each other. What happened to Mordred's body is not recorded, and who cares anyway.

But Arthur, at the edge of life, was taken away by veiled women on a ship to an Island in the West. It is said that he was returned to health, and now just waits until such time as he is needed as the Once and Future King





Arthur, Alfred, and the Myth of England by Julian West

“King Alfred was the first Good King, with the exception of Good King Wenceslas, who though he looked 4th, really came first. (It is not known, however, what King Wenceslas was king of). Alfred ought never to be confused with King Arthur, equally memorable, but probably non-existent and therefore perhaps less important historically (unless he did exist).”

– 1066 And All That, Sellar and Yeatman

J.R.R. Tolkien was supposedly inspired to begin writing fantasy to fill a gap – the absence of a native English mythology. However, it’s unavoidable that there is an English/British myth, and it is that of King Arthur.

At the same time, there’s a historical narrative about England, and what eventually became the United Kingdom, and that’s something that begins, as a story, with King Alfred of Wessex. The primacy of the myth of Arthur, and the history of Alfred, led the authors of *1066 And All That* to point out the importance of not confusing the two kings, and then deliberately mixing them up for comic effect.

Any historical figure, particularly a ruler, has the problem of being involved in real events, and having to deal with them according to the moral views of a very different time. Given that, Alfred remains an attractive figure. While some of his successors ruled enormous empires, spanning the globe, at one stage Alfred’s realm consisted of a handful of followers hiding in a swamp. Yet of all the English kings, Alfred is the one referred to as “The Great.” Even while ruling a tiny fragment of Wessex, with the rest of the country overrun by Danish invaders, Alfred planned for a unified country of England – a land of English-speaking people.



It's notable that Alfred came to realise that achieving England would only be possible by incorporating the Danes as part of the country. He had to convert them from pagans to Christians, from Danes to English, from invaders to immigrants. This became a project carried on, with ultimate success, by him and his successors. England became a reality, to the extent that it became inconceivable that Mercia or Kent or Northumbria would ever assert their independence again. Alfred's grandson was the first King of England, and ever thereafter, there was just one country.

When we look at the various monarchs who followed Alfred, none of them compare well. Perhaps Elizabeth I comes closest to matching his intellectual strength, but the threat of the Armada was not comparable to a Danish foe occupying most of the country. So many of them were brutes and buffoons, scoundrels, and boors.

When the Victorians became obsessed with the medieval era, they chose Alfred, a figure from the so-called Dark Ages as an exemplar. The Norman or Plantagenet kings were at best, in the case of Richard I or Edward I, thuggish warlords. Alfred was someone who could be revered.

And yet it was not Alfred who became the dominant force of the imagination. It was Arthur. It was known that Alfred was a real king, and that Arthur was largely a myth. Nevertheless, Tennyson did not write epic poems about Alfred. The pre-Raphaelites did not produce series of paintings about him. It was Arthur that inspired them.

Partly this was because, in its late medieval form, the story of Arthur is such a good one, at least in the form it eventually assumed in the fifteenth century. It's awash with illicit sex – Uther assumes the form of Igraine's husband Gorlois and Arthur is conceived as Gorlois is being killed. Lancelot and Guinevere can't keep their hands of each other. Arthur has a child by his sister, who ends up destroying everything.

And the images are some of the most powerful in all literature. A sword embedded in a stone. And if that's not enough, another sword held by a single arm from the middle of a lake. A spear dripping blood. The Fisher King and the Grail. The various enchantresses and monsters, and Merlin. The combination of pagan figures with visceral Christian imagery.

The story begins with Arthur, and then develops with the adventures of the knights, and the quest for the Grail, finishing back with Arthur. The idea of Arthur being taken away to be healed, to come back and save Britain is immensely appealing.

It is an appeal that continues to this day. Every few years another Arthur film comes out, or a TV series. The best of the modern versions is John Boorman's *Excalibur*, which is not afraid to take on the mystical elements of the story. The Monty Python version has, amid the hilarity, moments of haunting beauty which give a feeling of longing, even while laughing at the absurdity of the concepts.

One reason why Alfred can't compete is that while Arthur is a British myth, Alfred is an English king, and tied to the idea of England. This is something popular among the English, but less so elsewhere. The national anthems of France, Ireland, Scotland and the USA all refer to fighting the English. It's a hard sell to make them like a king who invented the idea of England.

But Arthur is king over a vague, unspecified country. He is a symbol of an English nation – but he's also a symbol of Celtic resistance to the Anglo-Saxons. He's an important figure to the Welsh. He's almost an international figure. The fact that we know nothing definite about him is a huge advantage. It's enabled a thousand years of Arthurian fan fiction. We are closer to Malory in years than Malory was to any possible historical Arthur.

So, we have a mass of books and paintings and films about Arthur, a rock festival at Glastonbury looked down on by the Tor. Even when a writer like Bernard Cornwell writes an excellent series

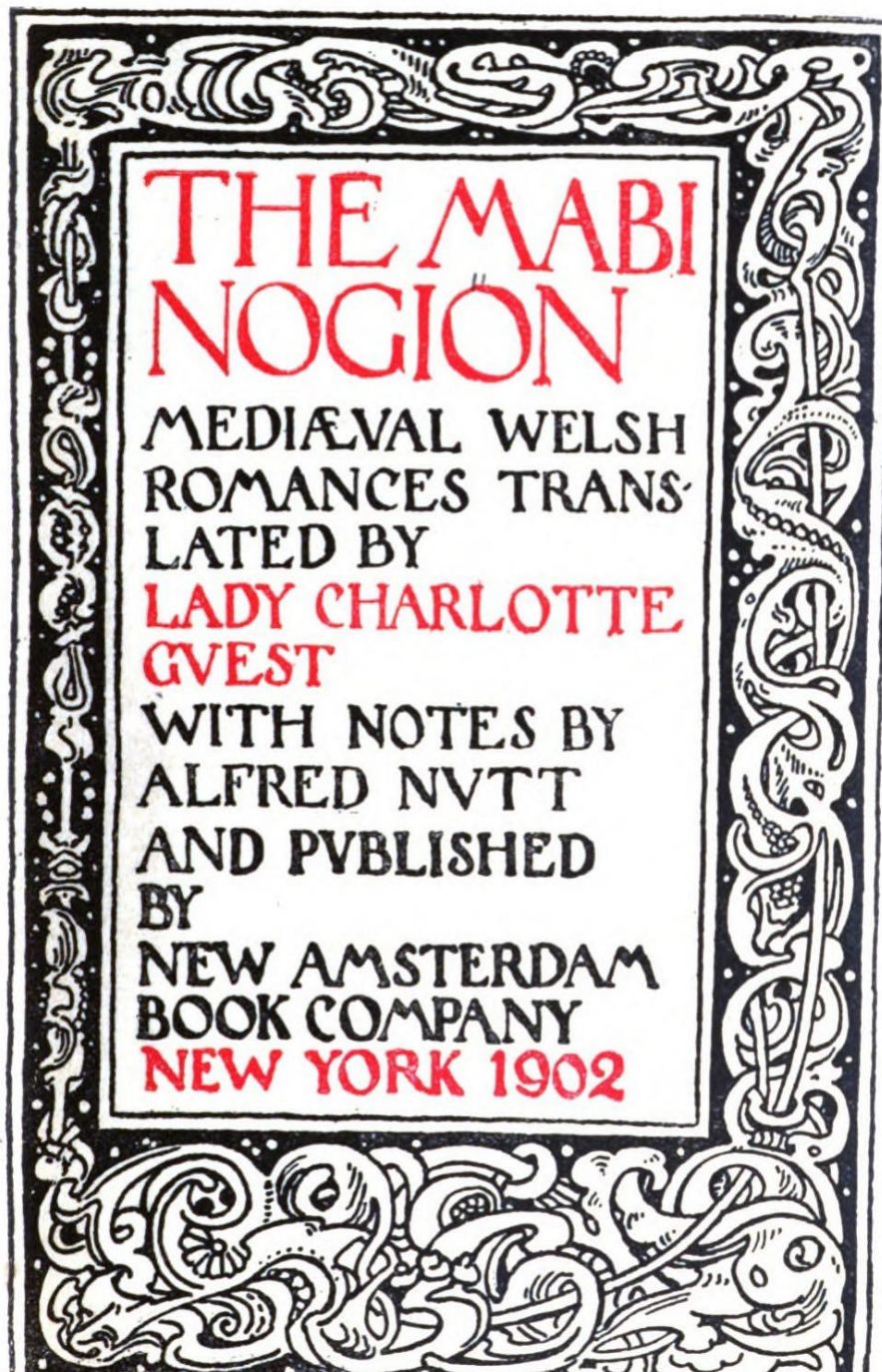


of historical novels featuring Alfred, he can't do so without writing a different series of novels about Arthur.

But Alfred, earnest, driven and still real a millennium later, is present in daily life in a very visible way. The burhs he established to resist the Vikings are now important towns across England. A direct descendant of Alfred is still a reigning monarch. English people live in a country he initiated, and if they originated elsewhere, Alfred provides a reference for their being part of an English identity.

A caveat: It should be noted that I wrote this piece having no qualifications whatsoever. I'm not a historian, or a film critic, or an expert on Arthurian literature. My only defense is that the area of discussion is so wide, that any expert will be lacking in one or other area. I can claim to be equally unqualified in all. Apologies for any errors of fact. Opinions are my own.





Lady Charlotte and King Arthur
by Cardinal Cox

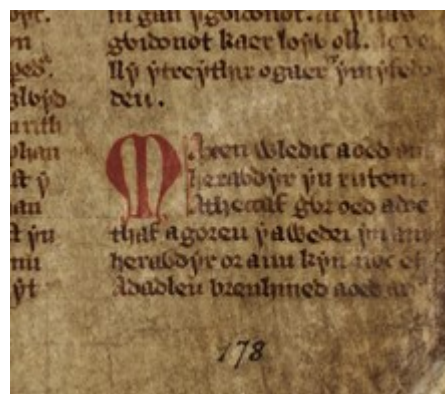


Lady

Charlotte Elizabeth Bertie was born in 1812, daughter of Albemarle Bertie, ninth Earl of Lindsey, in Uffington, just outside Stamford, Lincolnshire. Her father had not expected to become an Earl, only inheriting the title when a distant cousin died, his great great-grandfather having been the second Earl. Albemarle himself died in 1818 and his widow re-married a cousin, the Rev. Peter Pegus in 1821. Now it appears that the Reverend Pegus had some singular ideas about the education of girls (he was against it) but fortunately for the inquisitive young Lady Charlotte her two brothers were dullards and so their tutor delighted in imparting all that he could to her. Thus, she learnt French, German, Italian, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and a smattering of Persian.

At the age of twenty-one, she married (against her family's wishes) John Guest, the master of the Dowlais iron works in Glamorgan, South Wales. She embraced her new home and learned Welsh, attending and participating in eisteddfods. The fruit of this was that between 1838 and 1849 she was actively involved in the translation and publication of a collection of medieval Welsh tales collectively known as *The Mabinogion*. A second edition appeared in 1877 and an edition aimed at children in 1881.

In the meantime, she and Sir John had ten children before his death in 1852, at which point she took over the running of the largest iron works in Europe and quickly settled the local portion of a strike that paralysed the British industry. She re-married in 1855 (becoming Lady Charlotte Schreiber) and retired from the iron foundry business to become an enthusiastic collector of fans, china, and playing cards. Despite becoming blind in her later years, she was remembered for knitting hats and scarves for the cab drivers of London. She died in 1895.



Her translation of the eleven Welsh tales that she had published as *The Mabinogion* included five tales that featured the members of the court of King Arthur and it is those that I will discuss.

The oldest of the tales is “Culhwch and Olwen” and is thought to have been composed between the start of the eleventh century and the middle of the twelfth. Laws codified in the tenth century by Hywel Dda recognised three classes of bard; *cerddor* (wandering minstrels), *teuluwr* (household bards) and *pencerdd* (chief of song) and it must be from these that this tale was composed. In the middle of the eleventh century Wales was united by Gruffudd ap Llywelyn, the Prince of Gwynedd, who even invaded Saxon England and burnt Hereford. Harold Godwinson (later to die at the Battle of Hastings) led a series of raids back across the border. The Welsh nobility wanted peace though and turned on Gruffudd, sending his head as a peace offering to King Edward the Confessor. Following the invasion of England by William the Conqueror he established Marcher Lords along the border whose estates were only defined on the eastern side, on the Welsh side they had free reign. This then was the world in which “Culhwch and Olwen” was created.

The tale contains a similar amount of lawlessness, when King Cilydd's first wife dies (following a pregnancy blighted by insanity) his courtiers chose for him a new wife. However, she is already married to King Doged who is then killed, and the widow and their daughter are abducted. The Queen



contrives to have her daughter married to her new stepson Culhwch and when he refuses, she curses him so that he might only marry Olwen, the daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden. To counter this curse King Cilydd sends his son to the court of his cousin King Arthur at Cellywig in Cornwall, as there he will find heroes who can assist him.

Here in the story is a list of over two hundred warriors, their women and servants. Some like Kai and Bedwyr have stayed in the legends. Others -- like Duach, Grathach and Nerthach, the sons of Gwawrddur Kyrvach from the confines of Hell -- somehow have been lost to us. When none know where they can find the giant and his daughter, Arthur sends Culhwch, Kai, Bedwyr, and four more on a quest to find her.

Thus, the seven journey from the lands known to the lands unknown and find Culhwch's maternal aunt married to a shepherd who is Ysbaddaden's brother. The seven heroes confront the giant who reticently agrees the lad can marry his daughter (which is fated to cause his death) if he can complete a series of tasks such as sewing a field with flax or hunting the monstrous boar Twrch Trwyth or collecting the blood of a witch who lives in Hell. And every task is comprised of nestings of smaller but equally difficult lesser tasks, be they catching oxen who are transformed kings or recruiting ants to gather seeds or rescuing a prisoner that only magical talking animals might know where he is.

Arthur's retinue work together to win the princess and in the end the giant is shaved, his hair is trimmed, and then he is beheaded (shades of Gawain and the Green Knight).

Next, I shall consider the tales known collectively as the Three Welsh Romances, these are "Geraint and Enid," "Owain and the Lady of the Fountain," and "Peredur." These are either based heavily upon three of the romances written (in Old French) by Chrétien de Troyes ("Erec and Enid" – circa 1170, "Yvain, the Knight of the Lion" – between 1172 and 1181, and "Perceval, the Story of the Grail" – between 1181 and 1190), or they are both based on lost earlier versions (possibly Bretton). How might Welsh bards have encountered French romances? The Plantagenets held lands in France from Aquitaine in the southwest up through Anjou and their ancestral home of Normandy, and since William had settled the Marcher Lords against the Welsh border they had invaded west and lands they cap-



tured in that direction were not governed by English laws or taxes.

“Geraint and Enid” begins with news coming to Caerlleon that a white hart has been seen in the Forest of Dean and so a hunt is planned. Geraint and Gwenhwyvar are left behind and they meet a knight, a maiden, and a dwarf. Geraint jousts against the knight in second-hand armour and wins. He also wins the heart of Enid, daughter of a usurped Earl. They go back to Geraint’s home in Cornwall. Time passes, and Geraint becomes comfortable in his home, and his nobles gossip that he has become soft. Enid despairs at the unhappiness of his people and Geraint thinks she is unhappy with him. So, Geraint proposes to ride back to Arthur’s court and Enid must ride ahead of him and remain silent.

They encounter sundry robbers and villains, and Enid warns her husband of the various threats. So, there is little that’s more romantic than hundreds of dead knights and rediscovering their love for each other Geraint and Enid live happily ever after.

In “Owain and the Lady of the Fountain,” Arthur takes a nap, and Kynon tells a tale of a fountain in a distant wood and a knight in black velvet he had to fight there. Inspired, Owain, son of Urien of Rheged, sets out, kills the knight, and travels on to the dead knight’s castle. He is trapped on entering the castle but Luned, a maiden, saves him. Luned then sets Owain up with the widowed countess of the castle. Three years later, Arthur notices Owain hasn’t come back so he and his retinue go in search of him. They find he is now the defender of the fountain. Owain promises his wife he’ll only go back to Caerlleon for three months but instead stays for three years.

This peeves the countess of the fountain, to say the least. Owain leaves Caerlleon in disgrace and finds another widowed countess to save. Next Owain saves a lion from a snake. Then they find Luned from the castle of the fountain trapped in a cave (who he doesn’t free). Owain next has to save two sons of a neighbouring Earl from a giant. When he goes back to Luned she is about to be burnt to death. He saves her, he saves yet more maidens, and he inherits his grandfathers’ ravens.

“Peredur,” son of a dead Earl of York, was brought up in the wilderness by his mother who wanted to keep him from all things military. One day he sees three of Arthur’s knights (including Owain) who are hunting for the knight who “divided the apples in Arthur’s court”. So Peredur sets out to become a knight too, his mother directing him to Arthur’s court but giving him dubious advice (“if you’re hungry, take food if no one offers it . . . take jewels, but give them away . . . etc.”) On the way he earns the wrath of the knight of the glade and when he gets to Arthur’s court falls out with Kai. Peredur proves himself and sallies forth.



He meets the lame lord of the fishers, his mother's brother, who teaches him to fight. He also tells him to never ask the meaning of wonders. Next, he travels to another castle where another uncle tests him. Into the hall come two youths carrying a spear that spouts three streams of blood. Next come two maidens carrying a dish containing a severed head.

Peredur journeys on, fighting knights and monsters (though the Addanc might only be a beaver) and lives with the Empress of Constantinople (is this based on the memory of some Varangian mercenary?) and fights more knights and monsters and gives away wealth. Nine witches of Gloucester appear as does a self-playing set of gwyddbwyll (a game, possibly like chess, that nobody now knows how to play). During all this he's upbraided for not asking what the spear and the severed head were all about. The lad never really had a chance.

The fifth tale is "The Dream of Rhonabwy" and starts during the reign of Madog ap Maredudd, ruler of Powys who died in 1160. At one point, Madog was an ally of King Henry II when he invaded Wales as this gave him a chance to wage war upon his Welsh neighbours. Madog and his half-brother Iowerth Goch fallout and Madog sends out his men to find Iowerth and amongst them is Rhonabwy. He and his companions arrive at a manor house that is in a terrible state and Rhonabwy falls into a fever. In his dream he encounters a man who proves to be the person who was the cause of the Battle of Camlann – when Arthur wanted peace with Medrawd he twisted the words to provoke the fighting.

Then they meet Arthur, and it is further back in time, at the point where preparations are being made for the Battle of Baddon where Arthur had a famous victory over the Saxon Osla Gyllellfawr (Osla Big Knife). Before the battle though Arthur and Owain have games of gwyddbwyll. His servants approach Owain three times to say that Arthur's squires are attacking Owain's ravens. When Owain asks Arthur to call off his minions, Arthur replies to play on.

Finally, Owain grants permission for his ravens to return the fight. Three times servants of Arthur come to him to report how his squires are suffering. Three times Arthur asks Owain to call off the ravens; three times Owain says to play on. Finally, Arthur destroys the game of gwyddbwyll.

Following this internal strife, Osla comes to ask for a truce that Arthur's council commends. Then Arthur's bards sing a song so obscure that only one of his council understands it.

At this point, Rhonabwy awakes and the story ends by saying that the details of the story (relating to clothes and items of horse tack and more) are so complicated that no bard can recite it without recourse to a book.

But what were the books the scribe was referring to? The earliest collection of tales that Lady Charlotte called *The Mabinogion* are to be found in the *White Book of Rhydderch* (created around 1350), though this doesn't include "The Dream of Rhonabwy." That is to be found (with all the other stories, plus poetry and a compendium of herbal medicine and a translation into Welsh of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*) in the *Red Book of Hergest* (created between 1382 and 1410). It was the *Red Book* that Lady Charlotte used for her translation. Wales at the time of the creation of these books was a broken place.







From a Certain Point of View: Merlin and Nimue
by Steven H Silber



The Matter of Britain, which includes the stories of King Arthur, is essentially a centuries-long shared world in which new authors added their own characters at the expense of older characters, ignored the characteristics of existing characters when it served their purpose, and completely redefined the events and timelines that had gone before. In discussing any particular character, therefore, it is important to identify the version of the character under discussion.

One of the characters of the Matter of Britain goes, variously, by the name Nimue, Niviene, and Viviane, and is often associated with the Lady of the Lake. There is actually a very good reason for all these names related to the way they would have been written by scribes and are all essentially the same, although a discussion of counting minims is not within the scope of this article.

Nimue, the version of the name I plan on using, is described in Book IV, chapter 1 of *L'Morte d'Artur*, where she is introduced, “she was one of the damosels of the lake, that hight Nimue.” One of, not the Lady of the Lake, although that title may have come later after Balin slew the original Lady of the Lake and Nimue was able to take her place.

Nimue, however, as one of the “damosels,” drew Merlin’s attention and he spent as much of his time as possible with her, teaching her all sorts of magic and proclaiming his love for her. Nimue was happy to learn magical arts from Merlin, but had no romantic interest in the mage. As part of her training, she made him swear an oath to never cast an enchantment upon her. Merlin continued to press his suit on Nimue and eventually she would have no more of it. When Merlin showed her a great rock, under which was a cave, Nimue used the magic Merlin had taught her to trap him beneath the rock, leaving him there for eternity.

Nimue would go on to take Merlin’s place as a magical advisor to Arthur, but in her possible role as Lady of the Lake, she was much more distant and stand-offish than Merlin had been. Within the confines of the Merlin story, Nimue is often seen as a villain, depriving Arthur of his trusted advisor and condemning Merlin to his fate trapped in the cave.

However . . . because when dealing with the matter of Britain different authors offer up different versions, I’m going to take a look at this from a different point of view, jumping from Sir Thomas Mallory’s fifteenth century to T.H. White’s twentieth century.

In chapter three of *The Sword in the Stone*, White has Merlyn say, “But I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forwards from behind. Some people call it having a second sight.” If White’s version of Merlin is taken at his word, it means that he literally lives backwards and experiences the world from our future to our past.

For White’s Merlyn, he found himself trapped in a cave (yet other versions have him bewitched into the form of a tree, as in the nineteenth-century Edward Burne-Jones painting *The Beguiling of Merlin*). He remained trapped until suddenly, a young magic user, Nimue, freed him from the cave. Viewing the story this way, Nimue is Merlin’s savior rather than his captor. From this, vantage point, the wizard, who has no knowledge of Nimue since she is only in his future, falls in love with his rescuer. To Nimue, of course, who has been putting up with Merlin for quite some time, this unrequited love/lust has been going on for quite some time and she has worked to put an end to it.

Of course, one of the oddities that follows is that as Merlin works with Nimue, his love for her begins to abate as she demonstrates a lack of interest, although it takes time for him to get over that initial rush of affection. In the meantime, he tries to teach her magic, only to find that the more they work together, the less magic she can perform. Eventually, Merlin gives up on teaching Nimue magic and they go their own ways, Merlin forsaking his love, who clearly has no desire for him and Nimue



not yet having met the magician who would raise her from just being another “damosel” of the lake.

From Nimue’s point of view, Merlin’s consistent and unreciprocated advances are inappropriate, exhausting, and threatening. She figures out how she can best protect herself, which includes getting a powerful wizard to teach her magic and promise not to use it on her. Once she is ready, she metes out a punishment that she believes that the powers-that-be, to whom Merlin is exceedingly close, won’t provide.

From Merlin’s point of view, Nimue is his rescuer. He is smitten with puppy love which he realizes is not returned and he manages to eventually get his emotions under control. In the meantime, he works with her on her magical ability, although from his point of view, it may well be that he quickly realizes that this woman who freed him from the cave or tree is a powerful rival and he works to sap her magical strength. At some point during their relationship, he determines that he can (although he doesn’t) use magic to ensorcell her.

The story of Nimue and Merlin is only ever told from Nimue’s frame of reference. She is generally depicted as turning traitor against her mentor, Merlin, although often his inappropriate behavior is shown to be the catalyst for her actions. Considering the story from Merlin’s point of view, however, assuming that Merlin lives the way his is depicted in White’s version of the story, offers a completely different, and infinitely more complex, version of the reality of the relationship between Merlin and Nimue.





An Interview with Arthurian Scholar

Dorsey Armstrong

Given *the chance, I will always try to interview someone who is close to a theme's topic. It doesn't always work out, but at times, I do find someone who'll at least chat with me on the subject at hand.*

This time, I got the exact person I wanted.

Professor Dorsey Armstrong is undoubtedly the most awesome of all Arthurian scholars working today. For ten years, she's been the editor-in-chief of the scholarly journal Arthuriana, and if you really want to get a good view as to what King Arthur means to the world, go and check out her Great Courses lectures on King Arthur. She is incredibly engaging as a lecturer, and a writer who gets how to present material in a way that makes you forget that you're reading academic writing.

She was kind enough to chat with me twice – once for an hour of wonderful and far-ranging conversation, and the second time, when the recorder actually functioned, about her work in Arthuriana and more.

Chris Garcia: So tell me about *Arthuriana*.

Dorsey Armstrong: So *Arthuriana* is a journal that is dedicated to the study of all things having to do with King Arthur. We deal with literature, art, historical questions, archeology, modern interpretations of the legend, and we're a scholarly journal, and we publish articles on Arthur having to do with him from the inception of the Arthurian legend in the Middle Ages to all of its enactments in the pre-



sent mode.

Chris Garcia: And so this has been around for what about twenty-five years?

Dorsey Armstrong: So, in its current form, it first came into being in 1994. It was a continuation of an earlier journal called *Quondam et Futurus*, which was a continuation of a journal called *Arthurian Interpretations*. But in its present incarnation and with its present look it had, we have a deep burgundy cover with gold foil stamping. It's a really unusual look for an academic journal. So we're easy to find on the shelf if you're looking in the periodical section. We've been publishing since 1994, and I took over as editor in chief in 2009.

Chris Garcia: Has it evolved significantly while you've been doing it? Have you seen the change in it?

Dorsey Armstrong: It's evolved in the sense in that it has more and more what it was always meant to be, which is if someone has a new theory on who the historical Arthur might be, and they back it up with solid scholarly evidence, we'll publish that. Did someone write an article about a new art installation piece called the "Siege Perilous," which is in a modern art museum and is relating it to the Arthurian legend? If our readers find it worthy of circulation, we'll publish that. We've published articles on Arthurian themed music, movies, television, reinterpretations of medieval tellings of the legends, new discoveries from archives where a reference might have something that has to do in some way with the Arthurian legend or how medieval people understood, for example, say the Holy Grail. We publish all kinds of stuff, but it is a journal primarily for academics. It's an academic journal. So that means the easiest way to distinguish between academic and nonacademic I would say is there are footnotes.

Chris Garcia: Yeah, that's always a good thing. A good symbol of academic intent.

Dorsey Armstrong: That's sort of the shorthand. Is this an academic work? It has footnotes. Okay, so it's meant to be taken very seriously.

Chris Garcia: So tell me a little bit about your current research.

Dorsey Armstrong: So right now I mostly find myself facilitating the research of younger scholars. So I've worked primarily on Sir Thomas Malory in my career. I've also written some pieces on the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. And currently I'm working on a piece on Malory that has to do with zombie theory and the *Morte Arthure*. And this is because I have been trying to figure out a way to talk about the fact that Arthur is in some ways there and not there. He is the once-and-future king, right? And for a while, he disappears from the main action of the text. And I found that the best way now looking for a means, a tool that could help me excavate this aspect of Malory. And zombie theory seems to be so far working very well.

So I'm getting to read a whole new theoretical school of thought, which is fascinating. And also it's easy for me because I've long been a big fan of shows like *The Walking Dead*. And so that's my lat-



est project and I hope to have it done within a year and turn it into a substantial article. It was supposed to be this year. There's an annual lecture at the St. Louis Medieval Association Conference named in honor of some scholars by the last name of Loomis. And it's called the Loomis Lecture named after Loomis and his three wives, all of whom were also academics. His wives all died in sad and tragic ways from cancer or an accident. But they were all academics, they were all interested in the Arthurian legend. And so this lecture series is named after them. I was selected to be the speaker this year, which is a huge honor. But of course the pandemic changed all that.

So it's now been postponed until next year, which is a little bit of a relief because it gives me more time to think about this and write what I hope is a serious, scholarly article. I understand that zombies can seem like not serious scholarship and very few people can write scholarship using zombie theory and be taken seriously. And so I feel like I'm at a point in my career where I've established my bonafides enough so that I, in fact, can do this.

Chris Garcia: And I think that's actually a great way to go. I mean, when you have an often-Jesus analog like Arthur, it seems that zombie theory would fit right in. I mean, we have almost three decades of Jesus as zombie already, actually longer than that, I think it goes back to the '60s and *Dangerous Visions*. So I mean the tie-in is so great.

Dorsey Armstrong: Yeah, exactly. I mean, who is the quintessential zombie who dies and comes back? Right? Exactly. And Arthur everyone has recognized for a long time that he is a Jesus figure. And I do have to say though, I used to love it when I was teaching undergrads, Arthurian literature and their final project would always be to write a research paper and it could be on any topic they wanted related to the Arthurian legend. They just had to tell me what it was they wanted to research and write about. And I would always, every semester, get one student for whom the light bulb had just gone off and they would come up to me so excited and say, "Mrs. Armstrong, I want to write an article about Arthur as a Christ figure." And they think they're the first person to ever think of this. And I say, "That sounds like a great idea. You go do some research and let me know what you find out."



And then they return to me a week later and they say, "I went to the library and there are 5,000 articles about Arthur as a Jesus figure." And I say, "You know what? That's okay. Read those articles and try and put your own spin on the message." I said, "You shouldn't be upset that someone else had that idea before you did. It means that because you had that idea, you were thinking in the right direction. Your instincts were right." And so that usually helps. But yeah, I do love when that happens.

Chris Garcia: So now you are probably on the front lines of the main thrust of Arthurian research and where do you see it heading, what new directions do you see coming up?



Dorsey Armstrong: Well, we can always hope, for those of us who are intrigued by the origins of the legend, that more medieval manuscripts might be discovered. More texts or variants of texts that we don't know of yet. But also a lot of work will be moving toward how each age, how each culture and how each time period tends to rewrite the Arthurian story to make it relevant and important and significant for their own age.

I like to say every age writes the Arthur that they need. And so some of that will involve returning to the medieval literature and applying new theoretical approaches to it. Some of that will involve looking at modern interpretations of the legend and some of it will be sort of a mix. For example, we have a special issue forthcoming on Arthurian studies and race. And it's dedicated both to an analysis of medieval texts from the perspective of systemic racism and what applying that kind of theory can teach us, but also about experiences of Arthurian scholars in academia dealing with race issues. And so we're looking for that to come out sometime in early 2021.

Chris Garcia: Oh, excellent. Yeah, that seems like a really, really interesting sort of, not only angle to take on the legend, but on where scholarship is now. And I know it's a cliché, but I love clichés. We're at an inflection point in so many different areas.

Dorsey Armstrong: Yes.

Chris Garcia: And yeah, to see how history is impacted by that, I think is as important as how our present is impacted by that.

Dorsey Armstrong: I absolutely agree. 100%.

Chris Garcia: Yeah. Okay, one other thing I had pop into my head and I completely have lost it now, other than that. Oh, so what to you right now is the latest, greatest discovery in Arthurian that has sort of set things on fire?

Dorsey Armstrong: No, no, there's not. I mean, I'm trying to think, we did publish a short piece by Geoffrey Ashe who seems to have found a reference in a French twelfth-century text, I believe, that seems to talk about the Holy Grail. Which would be one of the earliest references to it and right now, I am looking, actually, through our archives. I'm trying to find you that article I had mentioned before and I'm not having any success and also I could find you that Geoffrey Ashe article. He's the one who wrote the book, *The Discovery of King Arthur*. That's the one who made the claim that the historical Arthur was also this real person we know who existed, who was named Riothamus and we figured out that Riothamus might have been just a title instead of an actual name.

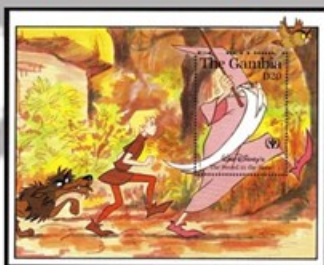
Chris Garcia: Oh, huh. Okay, now I got more reading to do.



Le Morte d'Arthur in 15 Postage Stamps, by Bob Hole



Merlin takes infant Arthur to raise in secret



Merlin acts as teacher to young Arthur, called "Wart"



Arthur draws the Sword from the Stone, becoming "Rightwise King of all Britain"



The Lady in the Lake provides Arthur with Excalibur



King Arthur finds his new sword won't cut him, holds it by blade



Arthur loves and marries Guenivere



Arthur loves Lancelot too



Arthur forms the Round Table



In addition to being nice, Round Table goal is to find the Holy Grail



Arthur meets, and sleeps with his half-sister Morgause



They have a son, Mordred, who is raised to hate Arthur



The two loves of Arthur's life, Guenivere and Lancelot, end up falling in love and running away together



Galahad finds the Holy Grail, because he is actually Holier than Thou



His true loves running away with each other gets Arthur despondent



Arthur is killed in battle by his son Mordred and is taken away to the West, to be healed until such time as he is needed as the Once and Future King





King Arthur Plays Vegas: The Excalibur

by Christopher J. Garcia

For many years, my favorite hotel in Vegas has been the Excalibur. Why? Because it is such the over-the-top representation of the ills and strengths of Las Vegas, but more because of how they play beautifully with Arthurian themes. oo

Let us start with the story of how Vegas got its Camelot.

In the 1970s, the idea of the mega-resort was actually unknown. The idea of a resort was a place like the CalNeva in Tahoe, or Caesar's Palace. They were either intimate luxury hotels that catered to high-end crowds, or they were just giant hotels. The Xanadu was going to change all that. It would have been a massive, Asian-themed resort with 1,700 rooms, a convention center, gaming, and indoor tennis courts. The idea didn't pan out, but in the 1980s, it became obvious that Vegas was going to become the next big family tourism location. In 1968, Circus Circus opened, and that was almost a mega-resort, but it wasn't until the 1980s that anyone gave us a modern Vegas mega-resort with opening of the Mirage. That was geared towards a higher-end player, but also the traveler that had an experience on their mind that didn't necessarily require gambling. That was a huge change. In the 1980s, the Excalibur was permitted, and in 1990, it opened.



Part of the new Vegas idea was to provide a family experience. The MGM Grand was being rebuilt to fill that role, and Circus Circus was in the middle of adding a theme park. Thus, the charge for families to Vegas had begun, but Excalibur was a bigger deal, really. It was a MASSIVE hotel, the largest in the world at the time of its opening, but what made it so different was the level of its theming. It wasn't merely an interior design, but an exterior conception. While buildings like the Imperial Palace had played with architectural signaling, more frequently hotels would be more hotel-shaped, but the interior would be highly-themed, like with Caesar's. This was the largest signal Vegas have ever done, and really, with the possible exception of Luxor, would ever do. It screamed "medieval castle," or at least what we who don't know better would conjure up when we heard the phrase "medieval castle." It was more based on fairy-tale castle concepts than anything. The towers and turrets were over the top in a way only Las Vegas's hot dry air can oblige. In the old days, when you crossed a drawbridge-like path into the gaming floor, you saw a figure of Merlin looking down on you.

The idea of Arthurian legend is, of course, instantly recognizable, but more importantly, it's also ultimately flexible. So long as there's some nod to the ideas of Arthur, whether a big sword-wielding monarch, a Lady in a Lake, a long-bearded Merlin (or any weird sort of hair thingy Merlin), a beautiful Guinevere, or a jester. They had all of those, played by actors, and though I seem to remember them wandering around the casino, I definitely remember them on video screens for things like the Round Table Buffet. The guy who played the jester in those videos might actually have been the "Hey, Buddy" guy from *The Hudsucker Proxy*, though I've never had that confirmed.

The smallest of markers, as inaccurate as they might be, serve big purposes. They allow an immersive experience with remarkably little investment. Yes, those towers take up a lot of space, but compared to, say, building an entire theme park, that's a small price to pay. The Tournament of Kings, which is basically *Medieval Times* with an Arthurian overlay as they have the great magician Merlin himself in there, served as an experiential centerpiece. The show, and the food, is only OK but a lot of fun, actually. But that alone provides a lot of the theming for the entire hotel.

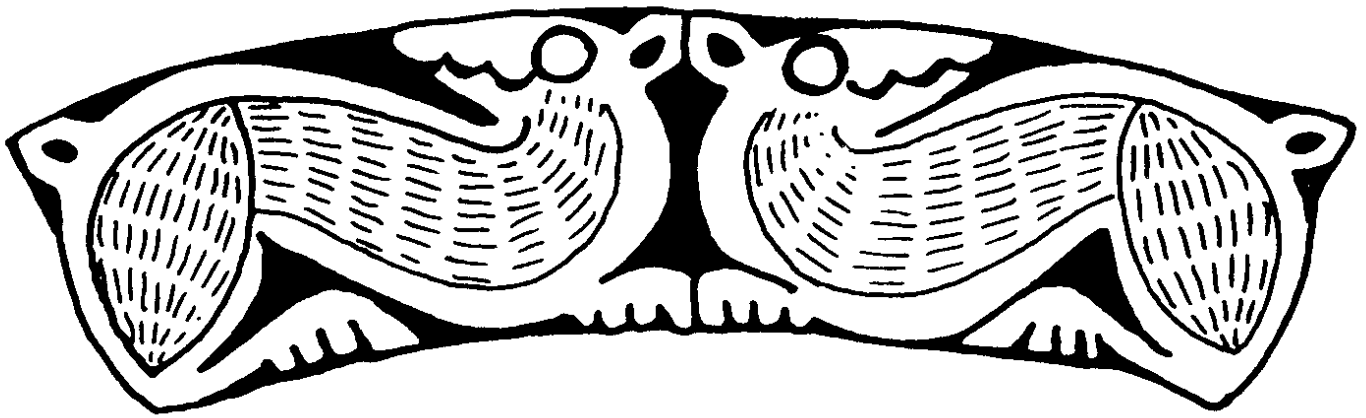
They also had a show with the beautiful Royal Lipizzaner Stallions, which ruled if you like horses.

The little touches of weirdness also make it a favorite of mine. I visited in 2000 or so, and there was the WCW Nitro Grill, where I had an incredibly over-priced steak. A wrestling-themed restaurant in an Arthurian-themed hotel seems utterly on-brand for me, no?

The wedding chapel is small and lovely, and when I was there in 2000 (or so) I remember that you could choose a Merlin-looking officiant or a Lancelot-looking dude. I was tempted to ask my girlfriend at the time to do it right then and there, but I held back . . . luckily.

The sad fact is that since about 2006, it's been toned down. Where once dozens of Arthurian-themed murals graced the walls of various public areas, now there are far more plasma screen TVs and other interactive elements. Merlin has been gone a long time, replaced by the mascot for Dick's Last Resort, a comedy club now housed where the WCW Nitro Grill had once fizzled. Even without those touches, it still has those towers, those turrets, and that sign. It still FEELS Arthurian, or at least our idea of Arthurian, and so, it remains Arthurian in impact. The way I look at it is as in the modern remark theory; it may not be close to the original, but enough seeds remain to sprout.





In Time of Despair and Great Darkness

By Ken Scholes

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My uncle, Mordecai Bach, found an old sword in the watery mud of a trench near Ypres at the end of the war. Of course, I never heard him tell of it himself. He was a taciturn, quiet man, rarely speaking outside the walls of the little First Baptist church he deaconed at about a hundred miles outside Boise City, Oklahoma.

Way my father told it, Uncle Mordecai smuggled it home and hung it on the wall of his barn with the rest of his tools until the day he converted.

Reverend Archer was a revivalist in those days and he'd pitched a mighty tent over a sawdust floor, giving testament unto the power of the Lord to save and forgive the sins of men. One particular night, sweat flying from his hair and jowls, he'd pointed a crooked finger at my uncle and cut loose with a stream of Bible like as to make your hair stand up. Something from the second chapter of Isaiah stuck true and my father's brother went down on his knees to take the Christ into his heart and vowed to give over his life unto the cross.

Proud of shoeing his own mules and doing his own ironmongery, he went home straightaway and banged that sword into what the Good Book called a plowshare, following the word of the Lord as best he knew how.

My father always told the next bit with a chuckle despite my uncle's sullen glare.

First time out to field, he ran it into a buried mountain of granite and it stuck fast, breaking the leg of his best pulling mule and becoming somewhat of a local curiosity quickly forgotten.

Every day for well on a year, he hitched mule and snapped reins with nary a budge before he gave up.

My father, less patient I reckon, only tried twice that I know of.

Of course, by the time I was old enough to cotton to those yarns, I was more interested in Amy Sue Peller and how soft her skin felt under my clumsy hands. And not long after that, the world went



to hell again despite the jam-packed little church my uncle helped to build amid the corn.

Truth is, I didn't care much about that old plow until the strangers showed up asking after it.

#

I was walking home from Piker's Creek when the fancy car pulled up alongside. I was whistling and walking slow, thinking about how warm a breast can be beneath the fingers and how a girl's hair could smell like apples and summer, when the man called out to me.

I looked to him. He was older than my uncle by a long shot, his beard white and trimmed close and his spectacles shining bright in the afternoon sun. It was the deep blue turban that assured me he had to be from back East.

"Pardon me, lad," he called out. "I'm looking for a farm."

I blinked, looked around me at the barren fields and nodded. "There are a lot of farms around here, Mister," I told him. I didn't bother to tell him that in these dark times, most were closing down and packing up.

He smiled at me and I saw that one of his teeth was bright polished gold. "Actually," he said, "I'm looking for a particular farm." Now I noticed he had three friends with him, all old, bearded men in hats to match his own. He leaned his head further out the window. "I'm looking for the Mordecai Bach farm, but I appear to have missed a turn."

I pushed my hat up on my head. "No, Sir, you ain't." I pointed my fishing rod further on down the road. "It's ahead yonder. Look for the yellow barn."

He smiled again and tossed me a silver coin that I caught from the air. "Thank you, lad. You've done us a great service."

And before I could say another word, the dust from his Ford was in my eyes and mouth and he and his friends were sputtering off down the road towards home.

When I could see again, I looked at the coin but couldn't for the life of me make heads or tails of it. I slipped it into my right pocket, the one without a hole in it, and stretched into an easy jog.

#

When I approached the house, my father and the men were on the porch talking. My uncle was nowhere to be seen but my mother was bustling about with a pitcher of lemonade and a plateful of her blue-ribbon gingersnaps.

When my father saw me coming he waved me over. "Where you been, boy?"

"Fishing," I lied, wondering what excuse Amy Sue would offer up to her own father, another of Reverend Archer's hard-handed deacons. The look on my father's face told me he knew Piker's Creek was nothing but a trickle with the drought on.

"This here's my boy, Arthur Lee."

"Yes," the blue turbaned man said, nodding. "He was kind enough to direct us to you." He nibbled politely at a cookie; I could tell his heart wasn't in it. "A very polite young man. And well-named." His companions nodded their agreement.

My father grunted; it was the closest thing to pride a hard man like Enoch Bach could offer. He looked to me. "These here Englishmen want to see Mordecai's Folly. Why don't you show them?"

"But don't be long," my mother added. "Supper's nearly on."



I don't know if it was curiosity or the potential for another fancy coin but I didn't mind the notion at all. I'd never met Englishmen before but should've guessed it by their dapper dress. I wondered if that meant the coin in my pocket -- and the others I was sure to earn shortly -- were from that far off place. "I'd be happy to show you," I said.

They put down their half-eaten cookies and quarter-drunk glasses as if of one mind and stood. "We'd be grateful for your help, young Arthur."

So we crowded into their car rumbled off into the field, out towards Piker's Creek.

The sun was low and the sky was red running to brown when we approached the abandoned plough. It stood solitary in a wide open space. The driver set the handbrake and we climbed out.

The leader looked excited. "How long has it been in the stone?" he asked.

I scratched my head. "I was little. Maybe twelve years?"

But he was already crouching beside it, bending over to look beneath the wood frame. He brushed dangling leather aside and gasped.

The others gasped, too.

"Behold," the man with the golden tooth said in a quiet voice.

But the word he said next wasn't one I'd heard before.

They gathered around the plow, testing the wheels with their shiny shoes and gently lifting at the handlebars. Their leader was mumbling to them and I leaned forward to hear him. I only caught every other sentence.

"We'll have to buy the farm," he said at one point. And at another: "We can bring the children over one at a time until the right one is found."

Then, they started speaking quickly among themselves in a language I didn't recognize at all.

Of course, none of this really registered with me. Something else had caught my eye when the wind had whipped up the jacket on one of the men who bent to examine the blade.

It sure looked like a shoulder holster.

#

Later, we all gathered around the dining room table.

When the old man smiled, his tooth glowed yellow in the lamplight. "How is the farm doing?" he asked.

My father shrugged and looked to my mother. "Not well."

My uncle Mordecai was still hidden away in his room. I could hear the canned sound of old time gospel music trickling out from under his door.

"Yes." The old man reached into his pocket, "I might have a bit of welcome news for you, Mr. Bach."

He drew out a blue gem nearly the color of his hat. He held it up to the lamplight and for just a moment, I thought I saw something bright sparking at the heart of it.

The old man waited until all eyes were on the stone. Then, he started speaking slowly.

"When I put this stone away you will recall that we reached agreement on a more-than-fair price for your land, outbuildings and -- " here he paused and cleared his throat, " -- any and all farm



equipment remaining on the premises." I glanced around the room quickly, took in my father's nod and the sudden hope on my mother's face. He saw me looking and frowned. "Tomorrow, you will receive a telegram from the Merlin Trust with the full and final terms of our offer. The day after that, my colleagues and I will return with papers to sign." He leaned in. "You will take the offer, of course, and leave for greener fields once you've packed." Then his voice dropped and sounded near to menacing. "And selling us this farm is the most important and meaningful thing you will ever do. Nothing can get in the way of it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father's smile break open as he nodded more vigorously. I'd not seen a smile like that on him in more years than I could count. In the back of the house, I heard four voices converging in harmony against a backdrop of guitar and fiddle, and I wondered how my Uncle Mordecai would feel about this sudden development considering half the farm was his, including the sword these men seemed so keen to possess.

Still, they had to know he was back there and not one of them moved to fetch him.

He put the stone away and my parents blinked.

My father spoke first. "That's an extremely generous offer given the drought that's on," he said. "What does this here Merlin Trust want with a failing corn farm?" His eyes turned hungry. "Is it oil?"

"Ah," the leader said. "No. Not oil." He looked to his friends for a silent consensus. "We believe your land may have, buried in its soil, certain historical artifacts of particular interest to the Board of Trustees."

Mother spoke up though her voice sounded far away. "Arrowheads and such?" She looked to me. "You found that arrowhead down near Piker's Creek that time, Artie."

I nodded.

The men stood up now, smoothing their jackets and slacks with their hands. Any excitement I'd seen in them out at the plough was now quietly put away, hidden behind the curtain of official business.

We walked them to the porch and we all shook hands.

After they climbed into their car and rolled out of the yard, they honked three times and their leader waved to us from the window.

I waved back but suddenly, the reality of it all was settling in. "Where will we go?" I asked.

"California," my father said without hesitation.

And all I saw when he said it was Amy Sue Peller's face, framed in her long blonde hair.

I wondered if she would write to me when I was gone.

#

I tossed and turned that night and didn't find sleep until the wee hours. The look on the old men's faces as they examined the plough and its blade, buried in the rock, kept coming back to me. And the empty-eyed stare of my parents as they watched the blue stone. And how easily they seemed to remember a negotiation that hadn't happened. And last, Amy Sue and her bright blue eyes rimmed with tears at the news that I was moving away.

My mind spun with questions I wasn't sure how or who to ask.

When the rooster crowed, I was up and getting dressed. My father was on the porch drinking



coffee that steamed into the gray morning air. He looked at me when I came out. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us," he said.

I looked at him and noticed he seemed different. The lines in his face had vanished and he smiled easily now. I wanted to sniff his coffee for whiskey but knew better than that. "Are you okay, Pa?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Never better."

"Have you talked to Uncle Mordecai yet?"

He shook his head. "I'll talk to him later. I want the telegram in my hands first."

I wanted to ask my father about the blue stone. I wanted to tell him about the shoulder holsters and the strange language they spoke. More than anything else, I wanted to tell him that I couldn't bear the notion of leaving Amy Sue in Oklahoma.

But in the end, I couldn't find any of those words. I banked them like a campfire.

Instead, I just sat with him and watched the sun come up over our barren land.

#

Later that morning, we drove into town for crates and groceries. We rode in silence, my brain wrapped around yesterday and everything that followed. When we rolled past the new library an idea struck me. "Can we stop here?"

My father slowed down but didn't stop. "We're moving in less than a week," he said. "I don't think --"

I learned a long time ago not to interrupt my parents, but now I did it anyway. "Just while you're shopping, Pa. I've never been inside. I'd like to see it before we leave."

He scowled for a moment, shrugged, and pulled the truck to the side of the street. "One hour," he said.

I nodded and scrambled out onto the sidewalk.

The library was quiet and Mrs. Derkins sat alone at her massive, ship-sized desk surrounded in paper and rubber stamps. She looked up when I walked in.

"Arthur Lee Bach," she said with a frown. "Why, I never." She'd been my Sunday School teacher out at the Baptist church for years and knew that Amy Sue Peller, there next to me in class, was the only studying I was interested in. Twice she'd taken away the notes we passed during the boring bits of Old Testament begats.

"Morning, Ma'am," I said, removing my hat. I'd heard tell of much bigger libraries in the big cities and universities but this large room was filled with more books than I'd ever seen in one place. "Is this a good place to find stuff out?" I figured it was.

She surprised me with a smile. "It's a great place to find stuff out," she said. "Well, some stuff. The Good Lord didn't intend us to know everything."

I got straight to the point. "I need to know about the Merlin Trust."

Her brows furrowed. "Merlin...like the magician?"

I'd seen a magician once though afterwards my folks had been fairly upset, considering such to be contrary unto the Lord. But I'd watched him make flowers appear and disappear for the ladies, watched him cut his assistant in half, watched him make Gus Holler bark like a dog when he heard



Dixie whistled. And of course, at the end of his show he'd pulled a rabbit from a black hat. "Merlin the magician?"

She shook her head slowly and clucked. Then, she stood and took me back into the shadowy, narrow aisles amid the smell of books and new paint.

She walked the rows methodically, pulling down a book here and there. Then, she took me to small table in the corner and placed the goodly pile on its plain wood surface.

Some of the words were hard, but most weren't beyond figuring out. I sat there and turned the pages, looking for one thing and finding another.

I read about another boy named Arthur and a sword stuck in a stone. I read about a Lady in a lake and a wizard named Merlin and a host of others that made the apostles' names look easy to pronounce. I'd never been much of a reader but those stories birthed something in me that was almost as urgent and mighty as the hope I felt every time I heard Amy Sue's voice or touched her soft skin or kissed her wet mouth.

And along with whatever that strange, brain-opening sensation was, I also started to wonder if maybe, just maybe, these stories might have as much truth in them as Joshua and Jericho and Jesus and Jonah.

I heard my father's horn outside the library and looked up at the clock on the wall. An hour had slipped past.

When I went out to the truck, two men in suits were standing by it and Pa was talking to them through the open window. Sheriff Radke stood there with them, looking disinterested in the conversation. The men looked like big city folk, uncomfortable with the notion of dusty streets and hot wind.

"We know," one of them was saying, "that some folks have been asking after you and your brother's farm. We'd like you to get in touch if they contact you."

I couldn't see my father's face, but I heard his voice. "Why would anyone ask after our farm?"

I stopped a few steps from the truck.

One of the men pushed back his hat and scratched his head. There, clear as day, beneath his armpit hung a holstered revolver. "We're not rightly sure but we'd like to ask them some questions and find out."

"Have these folks broken the law?"

"Not that we know of, Mr. Bach."

My father nodded, then glanced over and saw me standing on the sidewalk. "There's my boy now," he said. He looked back to the men. "I'll surely call if anyone turns up," he said, "but I can't imagine why they'd care about an old, dead farm."

"Much obliged," the other man said. Then they looked to the Sheriff. "Thank you for introducing us."

The Sheriff looked pleased with himself. "Happy to." He smiled at my father. "See you in church, Enoch."

My father smiled back. "See you there." Then, he looked back to me. "Come on then, Artie. We've work to do while the day's still young."

I opened the door and climbed in, moving a stack of legal-looking papers from the passenger



seat into the glove compartment. As we rumbled off homeward I stared at my dad. I wanted to ask him why he'd just lied to those men in front of Deacon Radke, but I didn't know how. Instead, I asked him who they were.

"Federal men out of Oklahoma City," he told me. "But don't concern yourself with them."

I didn't know how to tell him that they concerned me far less than his sudden, easy smile and the sudden, easy lies that hid behind it.

#

That night, Amy Sue Peller met me down at Piker's Creek. We sat on a rock there and watched the trickling water go silver as the moon rose over it.

She shifted beneath my arm and pressed herself closer to me. "I can't believe you're moving," she finally said. She hadn't cried yet, but I thought I heard her voice catch.

I squeezed her shoulders. "I surely don't want to."

"When do you leave?" I felt her hand on my thigh, her fingers picking at the denim nervously.

"Saturday," I told her. "I spent all day packing."

She sighed. "My folks have been talking about selling, too. Pa says it's going to get worse before it gets better. My uncle has an orchard up in Washington and could use the help." She pulled away and turned to face me. "What's happening to the world, Arthur Lee? It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Her eyes held me until I saw her lower lip quivering. Leaning in, I kissed her slow and long. When we finished, I held her for a minute or two until our breathing came back to normal. After that, we worked ourselves up a few more times before she disentangled herself and stood up, brushing the dust from her dress. Even in the dim light, I could see her face was flushed. "I have to get back," she said.

We walked together, holding hands, until we got to the plow there on the back of our farm. Then we kissed and she slipped away.

I wasn't ready to sneak in yet. The events of the last two days and the aching bits of me that Amy Sue brought to life had my brain stirred up, and I knew my bedroom, strewn with crates, would stifle me.

The plowshare lay like an awkward skeleton in the moonlight but I approached it as if it were a living thing. All of the words I'd read that morning came back to me and I thought about that other boy with my name and the man he became in that far off place. I put my hand to the handle and wondered about the blade that this so-called Merlin Trust thought was so all-fired important.

Then I wondered something else and gripped the wind-worn wood more firmly. Sucking in my breath, I tugged at the plowshare.

When it moved beneath my touch, I nearly fell over.

#

Clouds blocked the moon for me as I approached the house. A warm wind rose and licked the hairs that still stood up on my neck and arms.

I'd sat by the plow for a goodly time thinking about it all and wondering what it might mean. Now, as I slipped through the yard, I still wasn't sure. But I'd moved it -- three times to be sure -- and each time butter and hot knives came to mind. And wizards and kings.



I was nearly to the trellis leading to my window when I heard the voice.

"They're not who they seem to be," she said. The voice was thick as honey and prettier than a hymn.

I looked around and saw no one.

She spoke again. "It's not theirs to take."

I looked around again, my eyes settling on the well and the pump that squatted over it. My whisper sounded more scared than I wanted it to. "Hello?"

"Over here." Definitely the well. I walked over, my feet feeling suddenly heavy.

"Who's there?"

Her chuckle was warm along my spine. "You know who I am, Arthur."

And I was afraid I did. I said nothing.

"A time of despair and great darkness brews," she said. "Another war is coming and would-be kings are lining up upon the stage." She sighed and I heard sorrow in it. "How long will your kind glory in blood?"

But I didn't answer. The fear overtook me and praying under my breath, I sprinted the dozen yards or so to the house and scrambled silently up the trellis into my waiting room.

#

Angry voices woke me from the troubled sleep I finally found. I'd been dreaming about the woman in our well, only she looked a great deal like Amy Sue Peller, naked and shimmering in the dark water, pulling me down beneath the surface as hungry hands moved over me.

But now, I heard my father shouting in the yard, and I climbed into my jeans and boots, grabbing up my shirt. It was early yet -- the sky still pink -- and my mother watched nervously from the porch. My father had a sheath of papers in one hand and a yellow telegram in the other. He was waving them at my uncle.

"I don't give a good goddamn," my father said. "We need this, Mordecai. And by hell, you'll sign. It's a good price -- more than fair." My father's face was red. He was more angry than I'd seen him since he caught me painting the horse yellow eight years back.

"Mind your tongue, Enoch," Mordecai said in a quiet voice. "I'll not hear blasphemy from you. And I'll not sell my farm to these ravening wolves."

I leaned close to my mother. "How long have they been fighting?"

She shrugged. "They woke me up a bit ago. I'm not sure why your uncle is being so difficult about this. It makes perfect sense to -- "

But she stopped in mid sentence when my father flung the papers -- and then himself -- at my uncle. I moved toward them but she caught my shirt sleeve. "Let them sort this out, Arthur. If your father can't talk any sense into him, maybe he can beat it into him instead."

But I think my folks underestimated the wiry, quiet man the war and Jesus had shaped my uncle into. He moved fast, taking a fist on the jaw but easily spinning my father and dropping him with a well-placed boot behind the leg. He pushed him down into the dirt and pinned him there with a knee in his back. I could hear the snarl on the edges of his voice. "The devil's gotten into you, Enoch. You know from the Good Book that the Lord don't look kindly on brothers raising fists to each other."



My father struggled and sputtered in the dust, and I knew then that I had to do something. Setting off at a run, I flew past them and into the barren field. I took no notice of my mother shouting behind me.

#

"It's not theirs to take," the woman in the well had told me the night before, and what I'd seen that morning told me why. When I got to the plowshare, I went around to the front of it and lifted the harness, winding it around my shoulders and torso.

I tugged at it and felt the blade give way. I heard the groan of steel on rock and pulled harder, feeling the plow shift and move beneath my hand.

I broke sweat quickly, grunting with the effort as I dragged that plowshare across the open ground. I wasn't sure exactly where I was taking it, but I'd made nearly a mile before I saw the distant dust cloud rising from a car on the road. I stretched as tall as I could and when I recognized the sedan, I hunkered down and prayed they wouldn't see me.

There, in the shadow of the plow, I looked back over the furrow I'd dug into the earth and gasped.

A trail of rich, red soil -- stark as blood on the sun-baked land -- stretched back as far as I could see. It had been two years since I'd seen soil like that on our farm and now the line of it ran back behind me like a wound in the earth.

And there on the horizon, I saw a figure moving towards me, moving at an easy pace and following the trail I'd left behind me.

I don't know why I thought I could outrun him, but I tried anyway. I gathered up the harness, mindful of the welts it had raised on my back and shoulders, and planted my feet for the pulling.

I'd only gone a few yards when my uncle caught up to me. I looked up when he approached and saw his bruised jaw. I don't know what I expected him to say, but it surely wasn't what he said. I also didn't expect the low, reverential tone. "They're after the sword, aren't they?"

I tugged at the plow. "Yep," I said. "They took quite a cotton to it."

"It's not theirs to take," he said slowly and I stopped. Our eyes met.

"You've heard her, too?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Yesterday when I was at prayer and chores. Lord knows I'm no Papist but when the Mother of Christ speaks, it's right and proper to listen."

I thought about correcting him, offering up a bit of what I'd read at the library, but thought better of it. He'd think such to be nonsense at best or Satan's handiwork at worst. "What should I do?"

He scratched his head, looked at the swath of fresh, dark soil. I followed his gaze to the plow. The blade shone fiercely, contrasting nearly white against the red soil. "Years and years of trying with the mule and a boy breaks it loose all on his own. I reckon you're the one to decide what to do." He chuckled and glanced back to the furrow. "I also reckon you've already decided."

The truth is, I hadn't -- at least not that I was aware of. But as I looked around me, I realized the direction I'd chosen to pull in and could see the last bits of green scrub on the banks of Piker's Creek a half mile off, shimmering in the sun.

I remembered the books, remembered the pictures of the graceful hand and the shining sword,



thrust up from the calm surface of that long ago lake. Then, the full weight of it all settled onto me when I considered the freshly healed land.

Until now, the blade had seemed a thorn in our otherwise peaceable lives, bringing my father and uncle to blows, threatening to separate me from my girl, even bringing down the G-men from Oklahoma City with their big city shoes and their discomfort with the dust that dominated our lives these last few years. Suddenly, possibilities stretched before me, and I saw the land healed, Amy Sue Peller smiling with pride and love, cheering me on with my folks and the teeming crowd as I pulled at the plow and brought back the corn.

It's not theirs to take.

Maybe, I realized, it wasn't mine to take either. And maybe, just maybe, a hand waited for us there in the last trickling water of Piker's Creek.

I looked in the direction of the house and saw that the dust cloud was on the move again. Uncle Mordecai saw it, too. He stepped up to the front of the plow. "We'd better pull together," he said.

He wrapped leather around his hands and over his shoulder, digging his own boots into the ground beside mine. For a moment, I thought maybe it wouldn't budge, resisting any hand but my own, but as we both tugged at it, the plow bit into the earth and followed us.

Step by step, we pulled with our eyes down and our backs bent, halving the distance again before we heard the car approaching behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder and then looked at my uncle. "We have to get to the creek," I told him.

"We're not going to make it," he answered. He stood up straight and dropped the harness.

The car rumbled up to us and the doors opened. My father and the four blue-turbaned men stepped out.

"What in the hell are you up to, Arthur Lee Bach," he said. He glared at his brother, and I saw something in his eyes that frightened me.

"He's doing what needs done," Mordecai said. "If you've any sense left in you, you'll help us."

"I don't think that is advisable." The old, gold-toothed man reached calmly beneath his jacket, and I remembered the shoulder holsters. "I think I can help with this little misunderstanding."

"They have guns," I whispered, and my uncle said nothing. But he moved with that quiet speed I'd seen earlier.

The old man fell beneath him, the blue gem flying up into the air and dropping with a thud near my foot. I stooped to grab it as two of the others lunged at me, and then I tumbled over, tangled up in their arms and legs as they tackled me. I got my fingers around the stone and pulled in close to myself, feeling the fists and feet that pummeled me. We scrambled in the dirt, and I was dimly aware of my father pulling at my uncle where he wrestled with the old man.

When my uncle finally came up, he held a black pistol in his hand, and he pointed it first at my father and then at the old man. "Call off your kraut friends," he said. The anger in his voice was coiled like a sidewinder.

The old man smiled. "I can assure you that we're not -- "

The pistol cracked and the front window of the car exploded.

Eyes narrow, the old man said something in that language I hadn't recognized before. The men



holding me let go suddenly, and I crawled free, the blue gem clenched tight in my fist.

"Danke," my uncle said with a grin.

After stripping them of their pistols, we tied them up -- even my father -- with the rope we found in the trunk of their car.

"I'll wait with them," my uncle said. "You go on with what you need to do."

Their leader looked to both of us. "You're making a tremendous mistake."

I looked at him. "We already know it's not yours to take. The Lady told us."

Color drained from his face. "What Lady?"

My uncle opened his mouth to speak, but I was faster. "I think you know what Lady."

The man glowered and spat between my feet. "A new Reich arises," he said. "That blade is meant for the chosen among its princes."

"No," I said as I took up the harness again. "It's not yours to take. And it's not ours to give."

If anything further was said, I didn't listen. I put one foot in front of the other and set out for Piker's Creek.

When I reached the bank and dropped the straps, I looked over my shoulder and saw my uncle waving. Then, I looked back to the narrow creek and its wide, stone-strewn bed. I reached for the plow, put my hands upon it and paused.

I thought about the red and ready soil that stretched out behind me and how the blue in the gem in my pocket matched the blue in Amy Sue Peller's eyes. I thought about my father and his curled fists and easy lies, my uncle and his gentle gait and quiet ways. I thought about the four men in their strange hats, their so-called Merlin Trust and rising Reich.

I lifted at the handles and tipped the plow over the bank. It fell end over end, the leather straps slapping at the rocks and brush as it rolled, the wood cracking but not breaking. When it reached the bottom, the plow came to a stop, and the shining white blade buried itself into what remained of the creek.

Even though I expected it, when the hands surged up from the water to break Excalibur loose from its frame, I jumped back. The slender arms were alabaster and strong enough to splinter the hard wood as she tugged the sword free and homeward.

"Thank you, Arthur," she said.

I knew it was the last time I would ever hear that voice, but I didn't mind. And I knew there would be hell to pay back at the farm once my father calmed down and once the federals visiting from Oklahoma City were called to fetch the four strangers.

But I also knew we wouldn't be selling the farm. Ever. And I knew later that night I'd see Amy Sue Peller, and that if I could learn the trick of it, the blue gem in my pocket would make all things right and good for everyone.

And maybe someday, I thought as I turned back to where my uncle and the others hunkered down near the car, instead of pulling plows out of boulders, I'd try my hand at another kind of magic.

Maybe I'd pull rabbits from hats.

END





The Concept

Lyricist

-librettist Alan Jay Lerner and composer Frederick Loewe crafted the biggest smash hit Broadway had seen in years with *My Fair Lady* (1956). They then conquered Hollywood with *Gigi* (1958), winner of nine Oscars, including Best Picture. In the entertainment world, the question is always, “What’s next?” but topping those hits would take some doing.

They considered several projects, including adaptations of the longest-running play in Broadway history, *Life with Father*; Sherlock Holmes (see the 1965 flop *Baker Street*—not by L&L—for that one); and the film, *Father of the Bride*. Lerner then read the current best-selling novel inspired by Arthurian legends, *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. They had their material. A lot of material.

White’s novel was massive, over six hundred pages. Obviously, Lerner couldn’t cram all of that into a musical, but by *Excalibur*, he tried. And that, in a nutshell, is the trouble with what initially was called *Jenny Kiss’d Me*, and later became *Camelot*. Most of the libretto incorporates White’s final two sections, covering the relationship between Lancelot, Arthur, and Guenevere, the founding and dissolution of the Round Table, and the end of Arthur’s dream of peace. That’s a heavy load for one musical, especially since this love triangle is no ordinary one, as all three love each other deeply. From its first previews through the Broadway run, and on to the movie and subsequent revivals, *Camelot* has



been plagued by what theatre folk call “book trouble.” This is a great shame, because Fritz Loewe’s score is brilliant, and there are tasty nuggets among the chaff of Lerner’s libretto.

The original production had other woes, too, in spades. To start, Loewe wasn’t that excited about working again. He and Lerner had had a turbulent relationship almost from the start in 1943 (flop musical *What’s Up?*). Whenever they periodically broke up, Lerner found other composers to aggravate with his dilatory work habits (Kurt Weill, Burton Lane) and/or wrote screenplays. Loewe, who had had a serious heart attack in early 1958, declared, “Vun more time, Alan, und that’s it.” *Camelot* would indeed be their last original stage musical.

Development and Tryouts: Is This Show Cursed?

With Loewe on board, Lerner then reassembled the *My Fair Lady* team: Moss Hart as director, Julie Andrews and Robert Coote as Guenevere and Pellinore, Hanya Holm and Oliver Smith for choreography and set design, and even the same musical director and orchestrators. Richard Burton as Arthur paralleled the casting of Rex Harrison, as both were noted British stars of stage and screen who had never done a musical. Burton, however, could sing much better.

The noted designer Adrian had worked for three months on the costumes when he had a heart attack and died. Tony Duquette finished the work. The production had its first tryouts in Toronto, where it ran three and a half hours long, (this is from accounts in the newspapers; Lerner claims it was four and a half hours -- more likely it just seemed that long). They began cutting, revising, and condensing. Mishaps continued: Loewe had a bad bout of flu, a chorus girl got a needle in her foot, a plugging box fell and narrowly missed an electrician, the wardrobe mistress’s husband unexpectedly died. The stress caused Lerner to be hospitalized with a bleeding ulcer. On the day he was discharged, he saw who was taking the bed he was vacating: director Moss Hart, who had just had his second heart attack. Hart survived that one, but a third one a year later killed him at age 57.

Unsure when or even if Hart would return, Lerner asked Jose Ferrer if he take over as director. He declined, so Lerner decided he would do it himself, uncredited. This annoyed Loewe, who wanted a new perspective on the troubled show. Lerner continued pruning his libretto. Hanya Holm’s elaborate “Enchanted Forest” ballet, with actors in animal costumes, was cut; a solo for Lancelot was cut; several scenes of dialogue were condensed into “Guenevere,” describing the final conflict. The cast was game for the daily changes, rehearsing long hours to introduce the revisions. Lerner singled out Richard Burton’s efforts in keeping up the camaraderie of the cast.



The Toronto previews were complete sell-outs, spurred both by L&L’s reputation and by the casting of Robert Goulet, who had hosted a Canadian variety show. The changes were working, to everyone’s relief. The laughs were landing, the complicated set functioned, the audiences were happy. The tryouts and revisions continued in Boston, and even afterwards. A very late addition, written as the company traveled to New York, was “Before I Gaze At You Again.” When Lerner asked Julie Andrews if she could manage yet another new number with only two previews before opening night, she replied, “Of course, darling, but do try to get it to me the night before.”



Opening in New York and Ed Sullivan to the Rescue

And so *Camelot* came into New York in early December 1960, the most expensive show in history (allegedly over half a million; its nickname was *Costalot*), with the greatest advance sales ever to match, over three million dollars. A single *New York Times* ad early in the year alone generated \$400,000 in ticket orders. But when it opened, it was far from the smash they had hoped for. The reviews ranged from dismissive to raves, with most praise coming for the music, the design, and the performers, but with harsh words for Lerner's book. The satirical, comedic first act clashed with the somber second act in which the Round Table is torn apart—a problem that still plagues those staging the show today.

What's more, because of the delayed Broadway opening, there was no cast album yet for the Christmas sales. They sold Camelot tokens, which could be redeemed for the actual album later, but that still wasn't the same as the real thing for increasing interest in the show. (Once it was released, it dominated the charts for six weeks, and was one of the best-selling albums of 1961. Even the Kennedys in the White House had a copy.)

It looked very much like *Camelot* might close in late spring once the advance sale ran out. Then, in March, Ed Sullivan planned an entire show of Lerner and Loewe material to mark the fifth anniversary of *My Fair Lady* on Broadway. The stars of *Camelot* appeared and sang four numbers. The next day, the box office lines stretched for blocks, keeping the show running for two years, 873 performances. It might have gone longer, had the operating costs not been so high. (You can find these Ed Sullivan numbers on YouTube.)

The Tony voters, like the critics, did not shower CAMELOT with favors. It didn't even get a nomination for Best Musical; *Bye Bye Birdie* bested *Irma La Douce* and *Do Re Mi*. Richard Burton did win Best Actor, though Julie Andrews lost Best Actress to Elizabeth Seal (*Irma La Douce*). *Camelot* also won for Best Conductor, Scenic Design, and Costumes.

Warner Brothers bought the film rights in early 1961, with Lerner signed to do the screenplay. The studio decided to focus on the lavish adaptation of *My Fair Lady* first, so CAMELOT was shelved for a time. I think the eventual 1967 film, starring Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave is awful. You can judge for yourself, but don't blame me if you want those 180 turgid minutes back.

The Cast and the Original Story

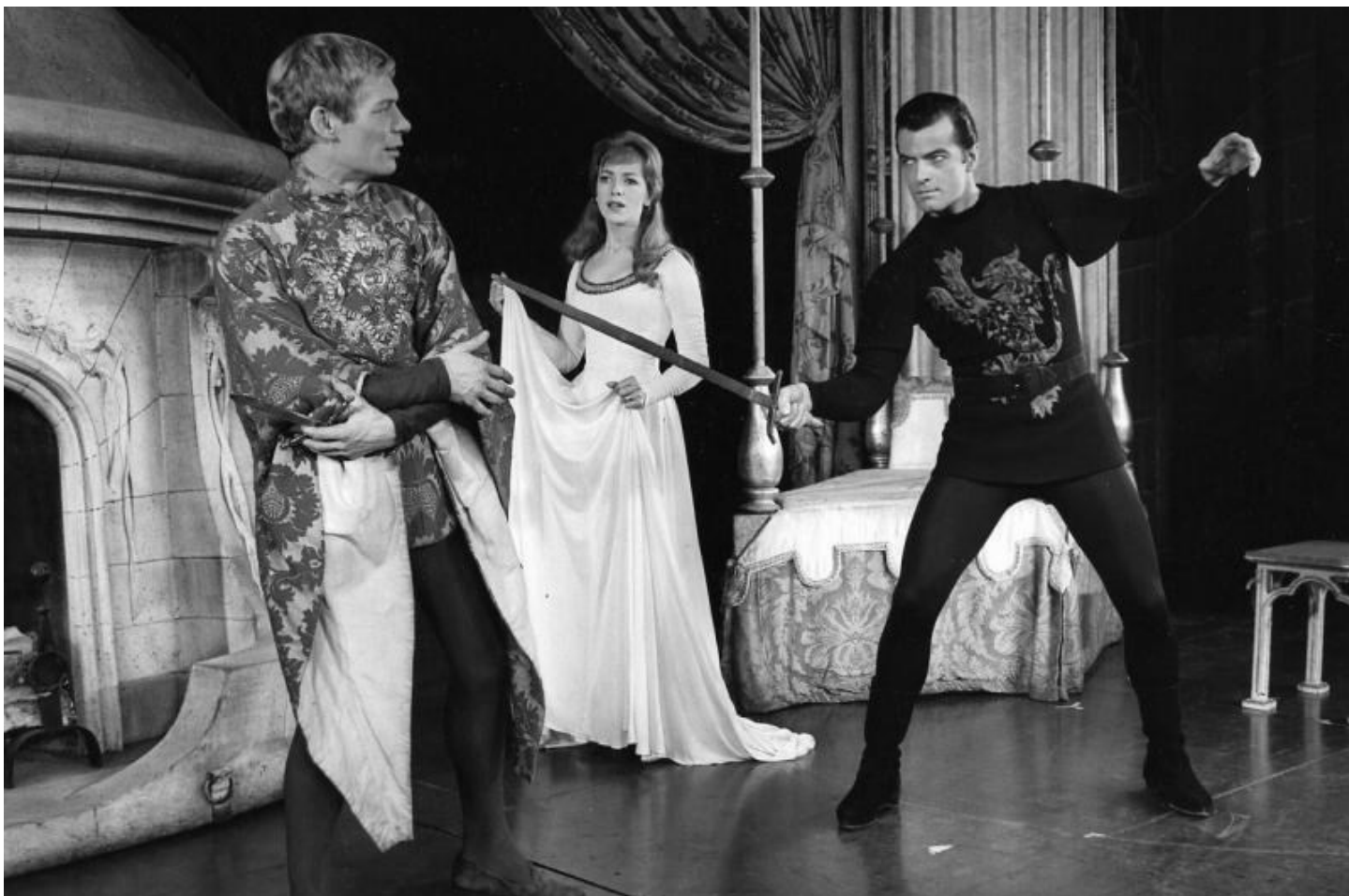
You might well think, from my complaining and from all these negative reactions to the original Broadway production, that I don't like *Camelot*. Not true! I adore the cast album, and there are moments when Alan Jay Lerner plays Merlyn with witty dialogue and sharp jests. Like magic, I'm entranced. Then the libretto starts veering between the love triangle and broad comedy (don't get me started on King Pellinore), an absurdly anachronistic democratic utopia, key action takes place offstage (necessary due to the show's length, but not good theatre), and it all turns into a hot mess.



But never mind. The score is glorious. Burton was at the height of his charisma, nailing every joke (check his anguished “Please.” and exasperated “He’s wishing he were in Scotland, fishing tonight!” in “I Wonder What the King is Doing Tonight?”), yet still conveying Arthur’s idealism and the magnetism that made him a leader of men. Andrews’ soprano is thrilling. Her Guenevere is fed up with being a pawn, yet that’s what she is. She’s been packed off to marry some king named Arthur she’s never met, so she vents her spleen to her patron saint (“The Simple Joys of Maidenhood”). She’s a bit of a bloodthirsty bitch, rhapsodizing over the prospect of knights fighting over her—which neatly foreshadows what happens. She then meets this young man, who proceeds to tell her new home is terrific (“Camelot”). She’s ready to run off with him, never mind her arranged marriage, and then she finds out this charming guy is indeed the king. Maybe this marriage will work anyway.

Then Arthur’s mentor, the magician Merlyn, get lured away by Nimue. She gets one of the most beautiful songs in the score, “Follow Me,” and she and Merlyn are never seen again. (Later productions often double Merlyn and King Pellinore.) In various Arthurian legends, Nimue is everything from the Lady of the Lake to a water nymph to an enchantress to all of the above. In *The Once and Future King*, she’s a nymph who leads Merlyn to a cave; he rather likes this holiday. Lerner uses this to bump up the dramatic tension, as Nimue steals Merlyn’s knowledge of the future. When he leaves with her, he’s fretting about whether he warned Arthur about Lancelot and Mordred. Uh, he didn’t.

It’s now five years later, and Arthur and Guenevere are happily married. Merlyn did teach the king about the value of peace, so he creates the Round Table. Word of this spreads to France, where a young knight named Lancelot hears of it. White’s Lancelot is actually the ugliest guy (“the ill-made knight”) around; his worth is all spiritual and his beauty is inside. Not so here. Robert Goulet was so handsome, Judy Garland called him “an eight by ten glossy.” But he could sing like a dream and presents himself -- so full of himself! -- in the egotistical catalogue song, “C’est Moi.”



This hunky braggart shows up at Camelot while everyone is celebrating “The Lusty Month of May.” (You can hear Lerner and Hart saying, “Shove an ensemble number here, quick!”) Lancelot wants to join the Round Table, and Arthur is thrilled. The queen and knights, not so much. We see Jenny hasn’t lost her love of blood, and she spurs three knights to go after the new guy in the jousts. This vicious little piece, “Then You May Take Me to the Fair,” actually was cut a few months after the opening as Hart and Lerner were still trying to trim the running time. But it’s on the cast album and has been restored in later revivals. I note here that the great John Cullum plays Sir Dinadan, his second of many, many Broadway roles.

Arthur, despite several years of marriage, is still trying to figure out “How to Handle a Woman,” because his queen and his BFF don’t get along. Burton nails this lovely song.

During the jousts, Lance kills Sir Lionel . . . but he’s so holy and good, he brings him back to life. It’s already clear that he loves the Queen, but his loyalty to Arthur means he hasn’t said anything. Now, bathed in an aura of saintliness, Guenevere falls for him, too. She needs time to figure out her emotions and sings the number Lerner gave Andrews just prior to opening night, “Before I Gaze at You Again.” Lance and Guenevere can’t bear to hurt Arthur, whom they both love, so he goes off questing for two years. If he’s not there, neither are tempted, right?

Lancelot returns, is officially made one of Arthur’s knights, and everyone is tip-toeing around, avoiding the issue. For the king has found out about his wife and his BFF; what’s more, his illegitimate son Mordred (the deliciously nasty Roddy McDowell) is trying to dishonor him so he can have the throne. The pot is about to boil over. Lance is still madly in love, despite being away (“If Ever I Would Leave You”); Mordred celebrates evil in “The Seven Deadly Virtues”—nearly the only truly comic bit in the second act; and Arthur and Guenevere wistfully contemplate “What Do the Simple Folk Do?” This last is designed by Guenevere to distract Arthur from his many woes. It’s one of the ones they did on the Ed Sullivan Show, and wowed the television audience into buying tickets. And yes, Burton does terrific harmony!

Mordred goes into the woods (no, not those woods) and gets evil Morgan le Fay to trap Arthur so the perfidy of Lance and Guenevere can be revealed. Their scheme works, especially as the knights are up for action. Peace is boring, they complain in “Fie on Goodness.” This is another number that Hart and Lerner cut a few months after opening, but it remains on the album and is back in later revivals. The lovers (who aren’t even doing anything except saying how much they both love Arthur) are discovered, but Lance escapes. Guenevere is sentenced to burn at the stake, but Lancelot returns to rescue her and they flee to France (“Guenevere”). Against his will, Arthur has to go to war and his Round Table is shattered. He meets secretly with them and forgives them.

Then, taking a device White used in the novel, Lerner has Arthur address a young page, Tom, just before the battle. The king sings a reprise of the title song, so the lad will grow up and keep the dream alive: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief, shining moment, that was known as Camelot.” It’s not stated in the show, but this is supposed to be Sir Thomas Malory, who compiled Arthurian legends. The show had already closed by Kennedy’s assassination, but in an interview afterwards, Jackie Kennedy said Jack loved the album, especially that last reprise.



Revivals



Camelot has had two major revivals, in 1981 with Richard Harris and Meg Bussert. Richard Burton has been in the touring production before this reached Broadway, but back issues forced him out. This version was filmed, and while it's better than the movie, it's kind of bland. Harris also took this production to London and got a cast album out of it. If you thought he sounded raspy on the movie soundtrack, he positively wheezes through this one. Until the end, when he's insanely howling at young Tom, "Run, boy! Ruuuuuuuuuun!" Avoid this.

The 1993 revival starred Robert Goulet as Arthur, and Patricia Kies as Guenevere. It got dreadful reviews. For what it's worth, I saw Goulet as Arthur in an LA Civic Light Opera production

in 1975, and frankly, my high school production was better.

PBS aired a special Live from Lincoln Center *Camelot* in 2008 with the late, great Marin Mazzie as Guenevere, Gabriel Byrne as Arthur, and opera star turned Broadway star Nathan Gunn as Lance. Mazzie and Gunn sounded great but were way too old for the role; Byrne was not only too old, and he couldn't sing or stay on pitch.

The problem of Lerner's flawed book is now compounded by the box office need of casting an established actors as the leads, especially Arthur. What *Camelot* requires are young actors in these parts, not middle aged, not . . . um, old. Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot are raw and idealistic; they're struggling with desires and intentions. They're supposed to be young, fallible. If you cast a fifty-year old guy, however well-preserved, he's going to look silly crying for his lost mentor when things go wrong. I want a *Camelot* with hot, young leads who will make mistakes because they're hot and young, and then, presumably, learn from them.

There have been further revisions to the show, trying to cut it down to the essential triangle, cutting most of the ensemble numbers. I haven't seen any, so I can't comment. This might eventually solve the legendary book problem of *Camelot*. Or not.

Until then, we can all keep playing that fabulous original cast album, and say, "Damn, that score is good!"





A Retro-Review: Monty Python's *Spamalot* by Steven H Silver

In the last week of December in 2004, I saw the pre-Broadway premiere of *Monty Python's Spamalot* at the Schubert Theatre in Chicago. At the time, I published the following review, which I've offered to Chris to reprint as it appeared then and as archived on my website at <http://www.sfsite.com/~silverag/reviews.html>. I will note that when the show moved to Broadway, two of the songs that I mention, "Burn Her" and "The Cow Song," were cut from the show. Overall the show was also shortened when it moved to Broadway.

Monty Python's Spamalot is the musical stage version of the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Although Eric Idle was the creative force behind the stage play, none of the original Pythons appear in the musical. Instead their roles are taken by a talented cadre which includes Tim Curry replacing the late Graham Chapman as King Arthur, Hank Azaria taking many of the roles initially played by John Cleese, and David Hyde Pierce in the roles of Eric Idle. Other roles from the film are played by their supporting cast, and Sara Ramirez does a wonderful job playing a variety of female roles.

Fortunately, the play does stray from the source material. In writing "Spamalot," Idle borrowed from other classic Python routines, from the opening "Fisch Schlapping Song" to the use of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," and various throw-away lines in between. These bits are generally well integrated into the play and none are particularly out of place.



The Pythons, of course, are iconic iconoclasts, and the play doesn't shirk from attacking the live musical theatre, with such songs as "The Song That Goes Like This," "The Diva's Lament," and Sir Robin's second act show-stopper "You Won't Succeed on Broadway." In addition, the actors are frequently allowed to recognize the fact that they are on stage in a play, and just as easily permitted to return to the reality of the strange world they inhabit.

Tim Curry has been cast as King Arthur, essentially the straight man in the musical and his vast talents are underused. In contrast, David Hyde Pierce does an excellent job and from his very first line draws laughs with lines which the audience will be familiar with from the film as well as new material. Hank Azaria begins the play slowly, but quickly warmed to his character, although his big number in the second act, "His Name Is Lancelot" will bring comparisons to his scene-stealing appearance as Agador in *The Birdcage*. Sara Ramirez does duty as nearly all of the female soloists and demonstrates her ability with arias, production numbers, and, in a highlight of the first act the torch song "Burn Her!"

Many of the film's memorable scenes are present, from the taunting at the French castle, to the "Knights of the Round Table" production number. The Black Knight sequence is well realized, as are the Knights Who Say "Ni." Nevertheless, the play is at its strongest when it introduces new material. This material is as funny as the old standbys, with the additional benefit of being fresh.

With the exception of Curry, all of the major cast members must handle multiple parts, and Christopher Sieber has an excellent handle of the vain Sir Dennis Galahad, a combination of two characters from the film. Steve Rosen's Bedevere is not given much to do in the course of the play, much as Bedevere didn't do much during the film. Both actors, however, handle their multiple roles with aplomb and the make-up is such that it isn't always clear which actors are playing which roles.

In adapting *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* to the stage, Idle was clearly aware that when dealing with something with such a large cult following as the film, the audience would be more than ready to join in with the familiar, and he included a couple of segments in the play which allow for audience participation. Even when audience participation was not encouraged, many of the audience members were mouthing the words in anticipation of lines which were to come.

Not all of the sequences played out well. The scene in which Lancelot (Azaria) rescues Prince Herbert (Christian Borle) from Swamp Castle runs a little long, however the payoff, a large production number, makes the time spent in the scene worthwhile. Similarly, Sara Ramirez's initial appearance as the cow in the French castle scene seems to be an unnecessary detour until the staging of "The Cow Song" redeems the set up and leads to the first act finale.

Fans of the film will enjoy the musical for the familiarity as well as the liberties taken with it and fans of silliness will also find the musical an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Given the amount of satire on Broadway which is included in the play, a familiarity with musicals will heighten the entertainment offered by the cast and the play, but *Spamalot* is a wonderful play which will leave a smile on the attendees' faces.

Cast:

Hank Azaria: Sir Lancelot, etc.

Christian Borle: Prince Herbert, etc.

Tim Curry: King Arthur

David Hyde Pierce: Sir Robin, etc.

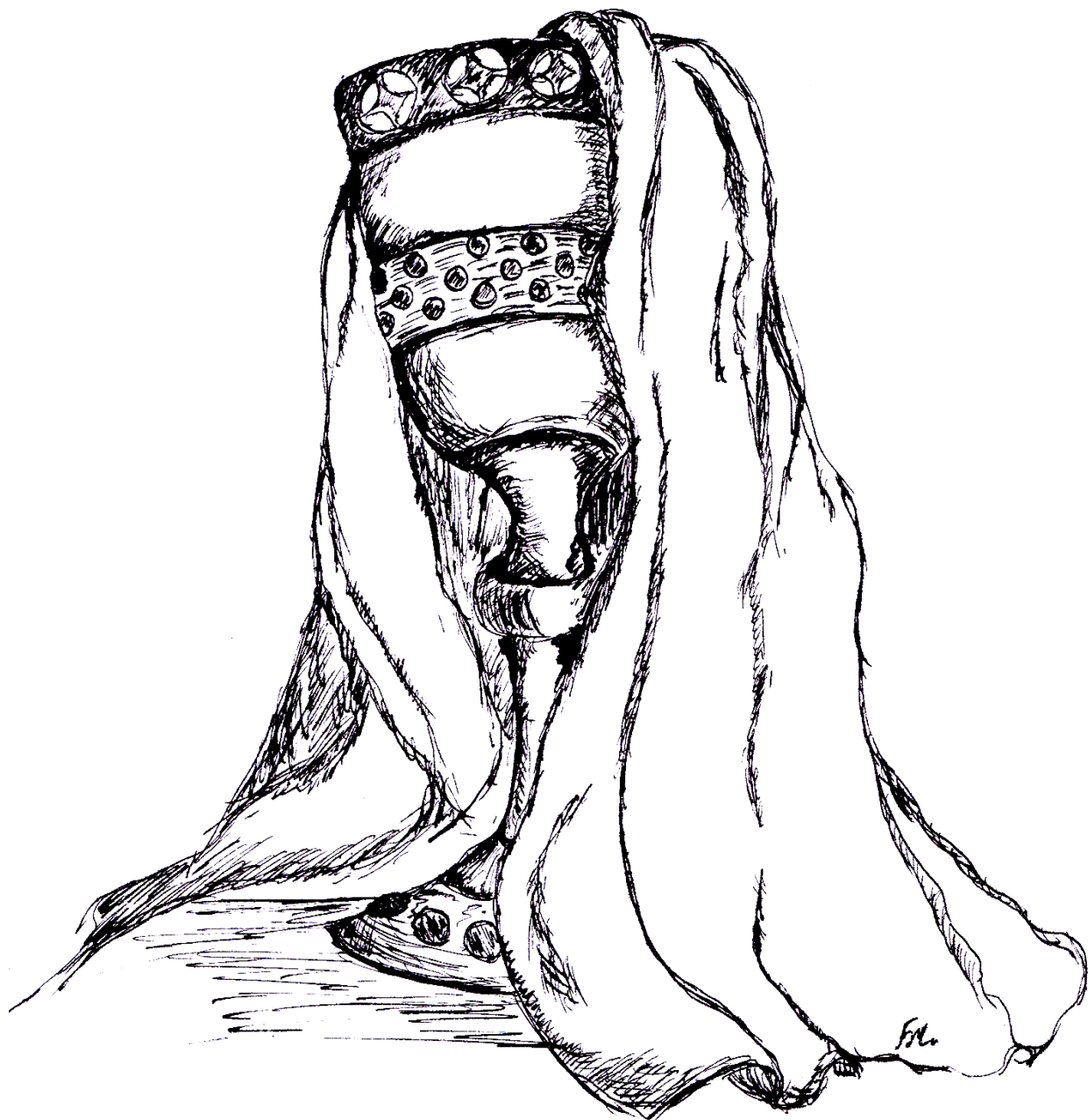
Michael McGrath: Patsy, etc.

Sara Ramirez: The Lady of the Lake, etc.

Steve Rosen: Sir Bedevere, etc.

Christopher Sieber: Sir Dennis Galahad, etc.





Arthurs for Our Time: Recent Interpretations of the Legend

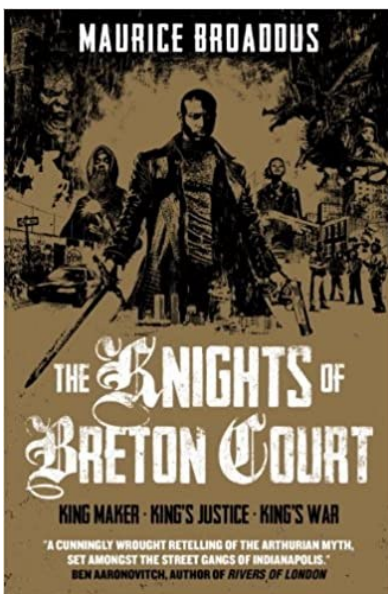
by Chuck Serface

Writers

across ages and places have created versions of Arthur that either retell his legend or depict what could happen whenever his prophesized return occurs, when and how he'll address whichever darkness is at hand. T.H. White's *Once and Future King*, for example, includes a Merlyn who lives backwards so that when he reaches the Middle Ages, he's able to refer anachronistically to World War II and Nazism, definitely relevant to British audiences during the mid-twentieth century. Decades later, Peter David penned *Knight Life*, starring a humorous Arthur, now Arthur Penn. He reappears in Manhattan, reconnects with Merlin, and then enters politics when Merlin tells him that the world needs a leader like him. White injects current (to him) history to link his British readers into Merlyn's instructions about war, giving them a medieval Arthur who models what White feels his contemporaries might need to survive Hitler, making our hero truly once and future. David, then, blends humor with politics that resonate within the zeitgeist and desires of the 1980s. That David chooses Manhattan rather than the United Kingdom for Arthur's return indicates that the story doesn't necessarily have to be a matter of Britain, because Arthur and his themes apply not only to England, but to many nations, and -- considering Mike W. Barr and Brian Bolland's *Camelot 3000* -- across worlds. You know what I mean if the terms "timeless" and "universal" pop into your mind. Both these qualities imply thematic flexibility and adaptability, just what an eternal king requires for getting the job done.

Three recent offerings have successfully stretched Arthurian themes to bold limits. One is a trilogy, another a stand-alone novel, and the final is an ongoing comic-book series. In the twenty-first century, the need for Arthur or an Arthurian figure has become quite open to wider interpretations, but (What a twist!) that need isn't always met advantageously for all concerned.

The Knights of Breton Court by Maurice Broaddus



When pitching *The Knights of Breton Court* -- a trilogy including *King Maker*, *King's Justice*, and *King's War* -- Maurice Broaddus described his idea as *Excalibur* meets *The Wire*. He states further that his pacing "has more in common with a crime novel than [with] urban fantasy." Finally, add that Broaddus drew inspiration from years working with Outreach Inc., a concern focusing on homeless teens, and you have the matter of Indianapolis, the spirit of Arthur reborn into King James White, a gang leader armed with his handgun, Caliburn. He's the son of a gang leader who surrounds himself with Lady G, Lott, Wayne, Percy, Tristan, and his advisor, Merle, to confront the evils lurking within his inner-city neighborhood, hoping to unite the disparate gangs.

The familiar tropes abound, albeit adapted to this challenged world, with Lady G and Lott following their mutual attraction and nearly ruining King, with Merle falling sway to Nine, and Percy setting out to find the "Pimp Cup." Readers will recognize the Tristan and Isolde romance through lesbians Tristan Drust and Isobel "Iz" Cornwall, Iz being a heroin addict here. And what to make of Merle, wearing a tinfoil cap, communicating with the various fay and monsters that enter the narrative, and reminding all that, yes, although cast differently



these are at base the original legends returned.

Broaddus uses the legends to explore what he terms “voiceless” issues in society, and so his characters are homeless individuals, gang members, drug addicts, or parolees. These players have dignity easily matching that of those who originally rode out of Camelot. King is the Arthur required to address what confronts this Indianapolis neighborhood. He’s not only once and future, but he’s also the present, and thus the eternal king, or at least his essence, adapts to what’s needed in the moment.

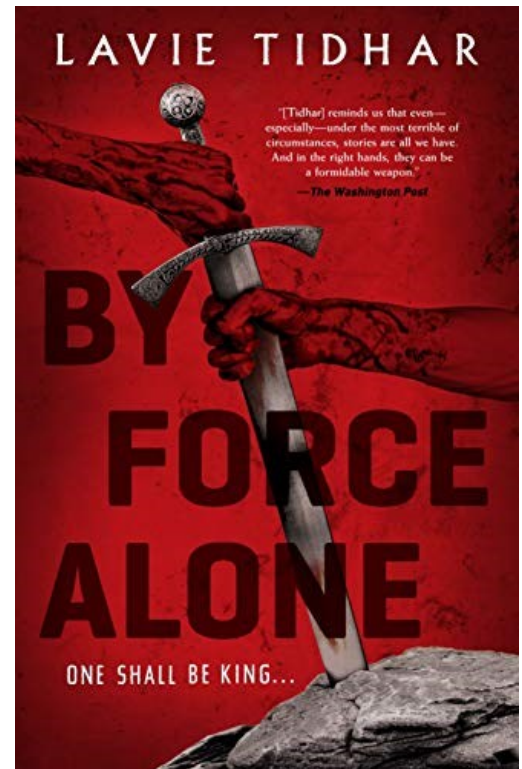
***By Force Alone* by Lavie Tidhar**

All right. So much for chivalry, because here comes Lavie Tidhar’s *By Force Alone*, an eye-popping retelling that, while set in the Middle Ages, lays out an Arthur and Camelot quite oppositional to the traditional versions to which we’re accustomed. I find this appropriate, however. T.H. White recrafted Arthur partially to reflect events of his twentieth-century moment, and so does Tidhar, I posit. Over the last fifty years, Americans have fallen in love with the mob. Literature, film, and television have romanticized this violent world. Tidhar does the opposite by subverting the original romance of chivalry, knights, and quests into an account of drug pushers, protection rackets, and the right to rule by might instead of by divine providence. In the *Washington Post*, Vivian Shaw says about this novel, “It is a vicious, beautiful, profane, and wickedly funny reimagining of the rise and fall of King Arthur, and Matthew Keeley writing for *Tor.com* opines:

Tidhar’s Arthur, like Boris Johnson with a sword and better PR, fights to keep foreigners from his island. In the novel’s post-Roman setting, these foreigners include the Angles and the Saxons. Towards the end of the novel, Merlin imagines that one day the Angles and Saxons, convinced that they’ve always been there, will make Arthur their national hero. Jingoism is self-defeating in the short term and ridiculous in the long term.

Arthur came up much like Henry Hill from *Goodfellas*, running a small gang that sells “Goblin Fruit” throughout Londinium while slowly accruing power until Merlin devises the con involving Excalibur – yes, I said con. The Lady of the Lake’s nothing more than an arms dealer, Guinevere leads an all-woman bandit crew, and Galahad runs a brothel. It’s a cynical world, but no more so than the mobster life about which Sammy “The Bull” Gravano states has caused more damage to American life than the communists we feared so much during the Cold War.

Grimly funny, the takeover scenes in *By Force Alone* read more like Don Corleone and company taking opponents to the mattresses than consolidating a nation to repel foreign invaders. Perhaps this Arthur presents the cynical truth underlying the glossy surface to show us what we need to see? The truth behind the ideal? It’s a theory.



Once & Future by Kieron Gillen, Dan Mora, and Tamra Bonvillain



I never miss purchasing titles from certain comic writers. Chip Zdarsky's *Sex Criminals*, *Jughead*, and his current run with *Daredevil* easily have won me into his camp. Greg Rucka's *Stumptown*, *Lazarus*, and *Black Magick* had me at hello. After experiencing Mark Russell's, *The Flintstones Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles* I'll never watch Hanna-Barbera cartoons the same way again. And Gail Simone and Mags Visaggio have become known for experimenting with time-honored themes in new ways. Kieron Gillen too plays beyond the edge with his *The Wicked + The Divine*, and with the title now under scrutiny, *Once & Future*. Now we say goodbye to any shred of heroism Arthur may have possessed while learning to find it elsewhere.

Ex-monster hunter Bridgette McGuire explains the situation to her grandson, Duncan:

Arthur united the Britons, beat back the invading foreigners. And then the bit people always forget about . . . he went to war with a European empire and crushed it. He's said to return in Britain's darkest hour. There was always something about the prophecy that rubbed me the wrong way. Never trust a prophecy that can be taken two ways. What do they mean by that? Well, he could return because it's Britain's darkest hour, sure, or his return could cause it.

Wait. What?

Arthur returns, but he returns undead, racist, and embracing hyper-nationalism. Indeed, it's a British white supremacy sect that initiates his return to flush the foreigners from England's sacred soil. In an interview with Comiccon.com's Olly MacNamee, Gillen admits that the rise of nationalism globally inspired him to pursue this project, and he further elaborates:



[A]bout a decade ago I was watching *The Mummy* and wondering if there was any way to do something that scratched the Indiana Jones adventure itch while side-stepping the worst of the colonialism inherent in turning the founding legends of another culture into monsters. I instantly thought “Do it with King Arthur” and the rest cascaded out quickly, but King Arthur As Mummy was the core. I did the core thinking of it, then left it on the side for a rainy day.

One day it rained, and there it was.

So as with Broaddus and Tidhar, Gillen reimagines Arthur to address certain cultural and societal issues, here being trends that permeate Britain during the Brexit age, not a nice time by the estimates of many English citizens. Gillen’s undead-mummy Arthur plays right into that, morphing the legend into fresh territory without destroying everything altogether.

But don’t despair. Bridgette and Duncan McGuire are on the scene to blast away at monsters, knights, and modern Nazis. We learn that things have been brewing for a while, actually, and although the story starts with Bridgette living in a retirement home, she’s still up to the job while training and enlightening her grandson about the strange and unfriendly situation he confronts.

Dana Mora’s artwork and Tamra Bonvillain’s colors nicely enhances Gillen’s fast-paced narrative, and what was once meant for only six issues has expanded into an ongoing series. After all, Bridgette’s only getting started, so fuck retirement and remember that old age hath yet HER honor and HER toil. Arthurian heroism isn’t dead. It’s just not where you’ve been trained to look for it.





Two Cups of Blood: Dracula vs. King Arthur

by Derek McCaw

“This is the cup of my blood; the new and everlasting covenant.”

-- Matthew, 26:28

Whether you are a Christian or not, you know the phrase. Considering that the blood was poured into the Holy Grail, central to Arthurian myth, it’s amazing that it took until 2005 for someone to pit King Arthur against another who had a covenant of blood: Dracula.

In Silent Devil Press’ graphic novel *Dracula vs. King Arthur*, Vlad Tepes isn’t yet the fearsome monster of Bram Stoker’s novel. Desperate to pull some kind of victory out of a Carpathian insurrection, Tepes stumbles into a cave where dwells Lucifer. The struggling ruler is offered the power he seeks, but in exchange he must destroy the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend, in the *time* of Arthurian legend. As one clever marketing line put it: it’s evil versus medieval.

But it wasn’t the blood connection that proved the genesis of the book. Co-creator Adam Beranek says, “the story came about when I found out both their names mean Son of the Dragon – one guided by good and the other by evil.” Beranek wrote the first draft out during breaks at work, and his sibling Christian, an epic literature buff, asked to come onboard as co-writer.

Though they came at the story focusing a little more on Dracula, King Arthur and Camelot end



up with equal time. “A lot of *Excalibur* and *Le Morte de Artur* are its inspiration,” said Adam, “(with) Dracula kind of stepping in for Mordred as the main driver of evil in the land.”

As the fledgling Lord of Vampires explores his new abilities, he creates an army of vampires to stand against Camelot. First, he forges an alliance with Morgan Le Fay, and supersedes Mordred in her heart. But vampires are of course hungry and the Beraneks along with artist Chris Moreno are unsparing in their storytelling. This isn’t a simplistic good vs. evil story, and there are moments where no one is safe.

Merlyn lurks at the edges, too, with character traits from Malory and T.H. White. He seems to know much of the future and has a scientific mind that occasionally seems more fascinated by vampire biology than saving England.

“There was always this theory floating around that Merlin was somehow living backwards through time. And of course, that he might be part-demon,” said Christian. “We took those thoughts, threw in a bit of Jack Sparrow, and what you have is more playful mad scientist with a dark sense of humor.”

It would be fair to say that artist Moreno also took inspiration from the movie musical *Camelot*, as in many panels Arthur resembles actor Richard Harris. But this is not a story that lends itself to a mostly light-hearted musical. The Beraneks tell a dark story, and Moreno’s art matches that darkness.

In the true spirit of the Arthurian legend, however, Adam commented that the idea of the Once and Future King “. . . spawns from Arthur’s ideals . . . his good lives on,” which at the time of its publication meant that there were seeds planted for more. As Christian pointed out, “. . .the economics in the comic book world are tough to work out.”

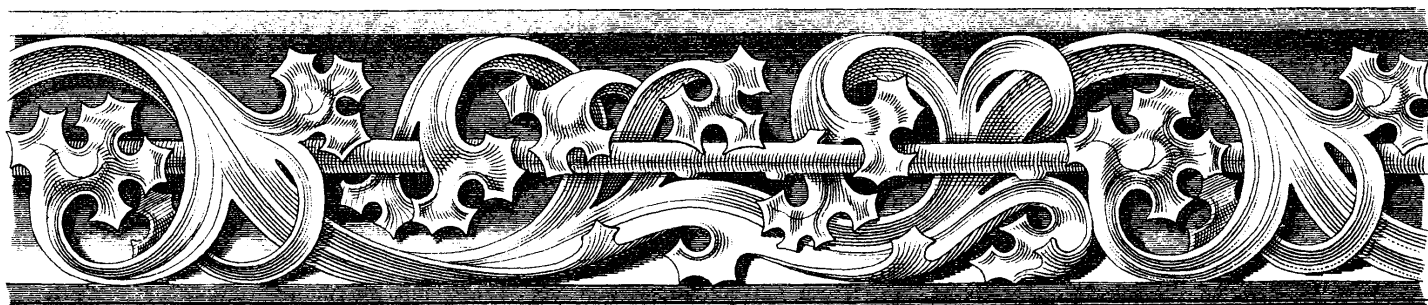
There will always be more stories with Dracula, and more with King Arthur, whether or not it’s the Beraneks who write them.

“King Arthur lives on in so many projects because people love sword and sorcery and want to relate to Arthur and his goodness but never live up to it,” Adam said, “so they root for someone like Lancelot who is more flawed like them.”

Christian agreed to a point, adding, “. . . much in a way superhero fans aspire to be Superman but gravitate to Batman’s human vulnerabilities. Sadly, there have been too many recent attempts to cash in on King Arthur and other public domain characters that fall short in capturing the spirits of these legends. It is possible they could fade in importance in time. Let’s hope another revival happens, however! It will just take talented people with resources to make it a reality.”

Long live the King, indeed.

But which king?



The NIGHTS of PENDRAGON

The Other Arthurian Comic by Helena Nash



I'd come for the superhero, but I stayed for the overweight Welsh policeman.

Knights of Pendragon is a curious rough diamond of a comic, now almost forgotten and lost among the explosion of the comics industry in the early 1990s. It's stridently ecological, literary, neo-pagan and quite unlike any other Marvel comic of the time. It came and went in less than two years, and if you weren't in the right place at the right time, you might not even know that it existed.

In this article, I'd like to tell you what *Knights of Pendragon* is about, some of its themes and high points, a little about the creative team behind it, and maybe why you might like to read.



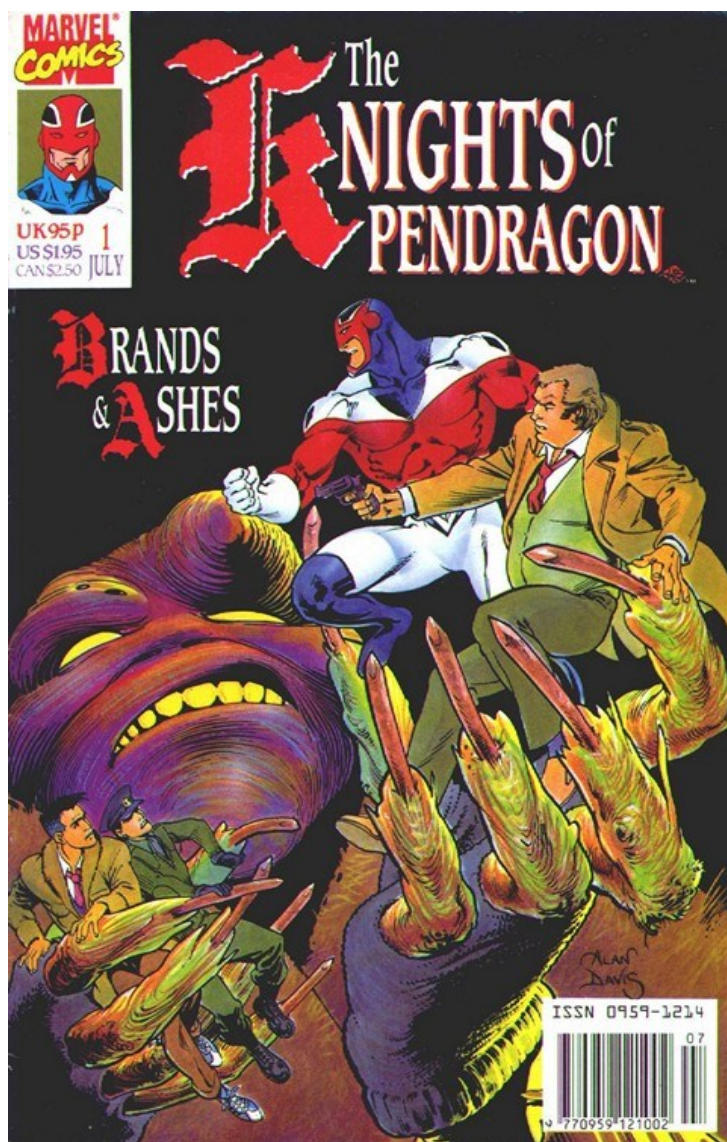
A Dream to Some . . .

First let me state my Arthurian academic credentials: none whatsoever. But three of my favorite things ever are the film *Excalibur*, the roleplaying game *Pendragon*, and the comic *Camelot 3000*. And while I love all three of them, minds immeasurably superior to mine have already written about them with great wit and knowledge. So, here's me talking about something that may have passed a lot of folks by, not least because this lesser-known British Marvel comic has never been fully reprinted, to my knowledge.

I'll be honest, I only picked up issue #1 of *Knights of Pendragon* (Marvel UK, July 1990) because of two people: Captain Britain and Alan Davis. The good captain is one of my favorite superheroes; a (sort of) homegrown Marvel superhero who is broadly to the UK what Captain America is to the United States. I'd followed his exploits from the original *Captain Britain Weekly* in the 1970s, through his guest-starring role in *Hulk Comic's* Black Knight strip, and finally into his glory days under writer Alan Moore and artist Alan Davis. For me, and many others, Alan Davis is *the* Captain Britain artist. Whether it was a cameo in an *X-Men* annual or starring in the "British X-Men" *Excalibur* (actually two Brits, a German and two Americans), if it featured Captain Britain drawn by Davis, I'd buy it. And still do, to be honest.

Knights of Pendragon #1 is eye-catching for a few reasons. First, it sports a gorgeous Alan Davis cover: Captain Britain and his allies defiantly struggling in the grip of some titanic misshapen being with twigs for fingernails and a swollen, tuberous head. Second, the entire comic is in the smaller American (6.6"x10.2") format, rather than the larger British (8"x11") format, which when I first saw it lent it proper comics street cred, and also meant that I could store it in the same cardboard boxes alongside all my US Marvel and DC comics. Thirdly, every single page is wonderfully shiny and smooth, thanks to *KOP* being printed on a special paper called scangloss, which as the inside cover states on every single issue, is "an environmentally safe paper which uses half as many trees as normal paper and a minimum amount of chlorine bleach." An environmentally friendly Captain Britain comic, you say? Take my money, please.

Except it isn't a Captain Britain comic, not really. Even though his headshot appears in the classic Marvel corner box on the cover, he is never more than a guest star throughout the series, intended to hook the likes of yours truly in with a Pavlovian response to their fan favorite. No, the real star of *Knights of Pendragon*, for its first six-issue story arc anyway, is Commander



Dai Thomas of New Scotland Yard. Dai had first appeared in the original *Captain Britain Weekly* stories as a gruff, angry, “superheroes are menaces” type, forever shaking his fist at the captain and chomping down on a fat stogie like a leftover Jack Kirby character, or a cross between J Jonah Jameson and Jack Regan from *The Sweeney*.

In the intervening years though, he’d been reinterpreted by Alan Moore, Alan Davis, writer Jamie Delano and others into a more rounded, occasionally melancholic, but still plain-talking character. Visually he’d changed too. Gone were the Kirby-esque stogie and Jimmy Olsen freckles, to be replaced by chain-smoked ciggies, a beer gut, and a double chin. He was still Welsh though; you could tell that because he said “boy bach” once per issue. But baby steps toward representation and all that.

Book One: Pendragon

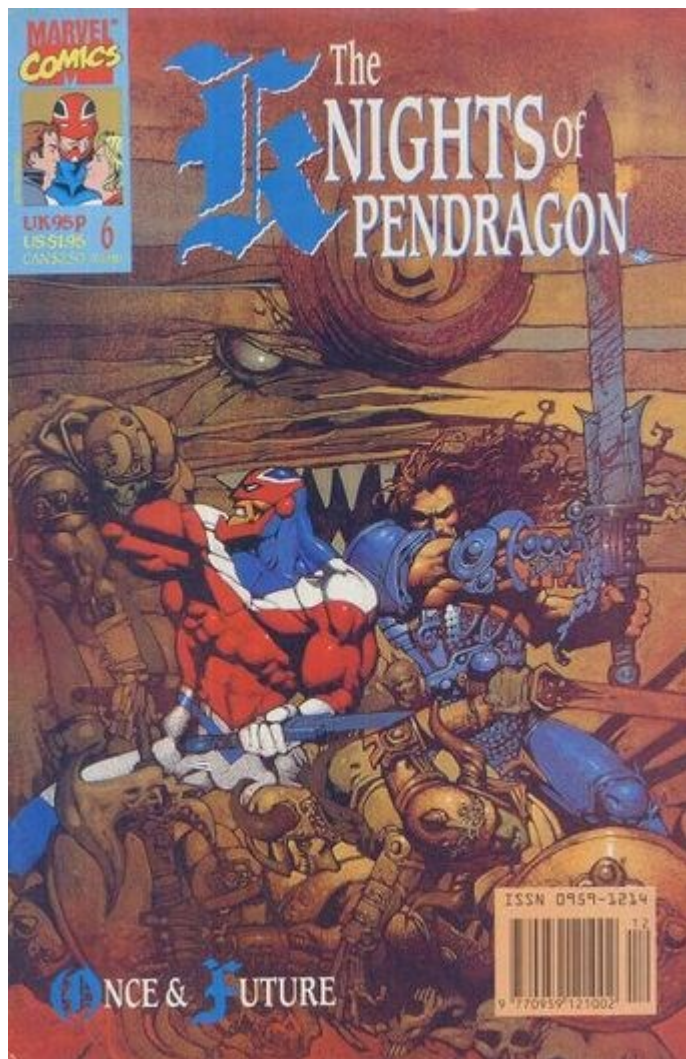
Anyway, back to *Knights of Pendragon* issue #1, in which the increasingly destabilized policeman Dai Thomas sets forth on the trail of a bizarre series of grisly murders. The victims were all involved in shady, environmentally unfriendly activities, from unscrupulous pesticide-spraying farmers in Kent, to elephant poachers in Kenya and animal smugglers in Florida and Belize. It seems that some vengeful force of nature is fighting back against the men and women who are polluting the world for profit and disposing of them in brutally ironic fashions. A force that the reader sees lurking in the corner of the page in the form of a grinning, turnip-headed scarecrow.

On top of all that, Dai himself is having trouble sleeping, plagued by dreams of blood and an Arthurian knight on a quest into dark wilderness. Is he going mad? Is he touched by the spirit of a long dead hero? Or is he in fact Gawain of legend, reborn as an overweight Welsh policeman?

Dai, accompanied by determined news reporter Kate McClellan, become embroiled in a series of clashes between the outraged force of nature and the equally bloodthirsty hired guns of the rapacious Omni Corporation, leading to a dreamlike encounter in the deep forest of Central America, where Thomas, now totally subsumed mentally and physically into Gawain, journeys through a despoiled wasteland to the mystic Green Chapel. There, he, Kate and Captain Britain confront the Green Knight, the wounded and wronged spirit of nature, who demands recompense for humanity’s crimes against him. A sacrifice is made and a knight falls.



This brings us to the end of *KOP*'s first six-issue run, capped by an evocative Simon Bisley cover (much acclaimed at that time for his muscular artwork on *2000AD*'s *Slaine* and *ABC Warriors*) featuring Captain Britain and Gawain fighting back-to-back.



Book Two: The Wounded Land

Continuing the *Knights of Pendragon* story past issue #6, with its primary main character(s) somewhat out of the picture, required the cast to be expanded. And not just expanded but empowered. After all, it is *Knights plural* of Pendragon. So, in the next storyline “The Wounded Land”, starting with issue #7, we meet author Ben Gallagher (drawn to resemble Alan Rickman circa *Die Hard*, all neat goatee and designer mullet) and are reacquainted with reporter and single mum Kate McClellan. Thrown into the mix is another established Marvel hero, albeit a minor one last seen in *Captain America* – Union Jack. All three of them have been touched by the Pendragon power and are drawn together as they uncover yet more of the Omni Corporation’s environmentally hostile activities, from London to the Orkney Islands to Spain. It becomes increasingly clear that the Knights are less like superheroes and more like the world’s antibodies, empowered by the Pendragon to fight off threats to the balance of nature.



This time the danger isn't from an aggrieved Green Knight or armed elephant poachers, it's the Bane, the black, corruptive, polluting force that is the antithesis of life and nature. Top Omni exec Grace, an ambitious career woman and sub-dom enthusiast, soon becomes a willing host to the Bane, and directs Omni's resources toward an act of massive ecological destruction, drawing Marvel's own Tony Stark and his armored identity Iron Man into the struggle.

Along the way the Pendragons are joined by an elderly public-school teacher, Peter Hunter, who fought in World War One as the costumed hero Albion (as if it weren't already confusing enough having Captain Britain and Union Jack in the story), and who is looking very sprightly indeed for a man who's over 100 years old, like a forerunner of Ben Aaronovitch's genteel establishment wizards from *Rivers of London*.

By the end of issue #12, we finally have an actual group of Knights of Pendragon. They have a common cause, (ill-defined but useful) powers, a mentor in the form of Peter Hunter, and a base of operations (albeit a converted barn in Wiltshire). Things are looking up. But it won't last.

Book Three: The Sleeping Lord

Issue #13, the opening chapter in the final storyline "The Sleeping Lord," is a bit of a pause for breath, using the device of an Arthurian tarot reading to catch up on the comic's cast for new readers. Peter Hunter matches each of the Knights with an archetype from the pack (the Grail Hermit, Guinevere, Gawain, etc). Drawn by stand-in artist Mike Collins, the most curious thing about this issue is that it seems to be one long product-placement exercise for an actual set of tarot cards – *The Arthurian Tarot*, by Caitlin and John Matthews. There's even a page-long ad for the cards and the book *Hallowquest* (Tarot Magic and the Arthurian Mysteries) before the letters page.

Then we're off and hurtling toward the Knights' greatest challenge yet. Issue #14 sees the cast splitting up across the world in search of the errant Bane-priestess Grace, as she moves to awaken the Green Knight's opposite number, the sleeping Red Lord. Along the way, the Knights meet the Black Panther (and a particularly superfluous Mr Fantastic and Invisible Woman) in Wakanda, then on to Hong Kong and Australia, further dividing their forces all the while. The Knights of Pendragon have never heard the wise RPG proverb, "Never split the party."

The artwork really hits its stride in these final chapters leading up to issue #18. Artists Gary Erskine and inker Bambos Georgiou do a great line in corrupted Bane-folk (all wide grinning maws and leering, lolling tongues), the deformed Lady of the Lake, the cyclopean, dystopian cityscape of the Spiral Tower, and sweet "John Boorman's *Excalibur*" suits of armor. It really is a pleasure to look at.

All the while, the Knights are getting picked off one at a time by the Bane's policy of divide and conquer. Several of them die (I won't say who), though that is not the end of their story. The writing really kicks into high gear in these last few issues, arguably moving too fast to appreciate the ride as things come to a (bloody) head.

It all ends climactically in issue #18, in a final all-out battle between the forces of the titanic Green Knight – soldiers and warriors from across the ages, reborn for the final battle – and the forces of the equally colossal Red Lord and its Bane possessed minions. Our heroes are joined by previous guest stars like Captain Britain, Black Panther, and Iron Man (each summoned by pre-Harry Potter messenger owls), and stand shoulder to shoulder with heroes from folklore, be they Arthurian knights or Sherwood outlaws.





There are a few neat little trope subversions in the finale. One of the main baddies doesn't die; in fact, they are shown the error of their ways and are redeemed. One of the heroes really does die, embodying the power of sacrifice and true heroism. And as for who wins the final battle? Well, it's not always about winning. And thus, *Knights of Pendragon* ends, a little abruptly perhaps, but in a very satisfying manner.

The Creators

Interestingly, *Knights of Pendragon* had two writers on every one of its 18-issue run: Dan Abnett and John Tomlinson. Abnett, who would later find fame writing *Sinister Dexter* for *2000AD* and several dozen *Warhammer* 40,000 prose books, had been writing for various *Marvel UK* properties at the time, mainly *Doctor Who Magazine* and *The Real Ghostbusters*. Tomlinson seems to have started working for *Marvel UK* at more or less the same time as Abnett in the late 1980s before, like his co-writer on *Knights of Pen-*

dragon, moving to *2000AD* in the 1990s to work on strips such as *Armored Gideon*. I've always wondered how the two of them plotted *KOP*, and how they divided up the writing duties. Was one them "eco-thrillers and politics" and the other "Middle English, poetry and horror," or was it a much more fine-grained collaboration? I can't say.

The distinctive look of *Knights of Pendragon* was defined by Scottish artist Gary Erskine, who drew seventeen of the eighteen issues, aided by Andy Lanning on inks (who would later become a regular co-writer of Dan Abnett's). A newcomer to professional comic work at the time, Erskine's art is rough, and somewhat similar to that of *Hellboy's* Mike Mignola, with double chins, long faces, and broken noses abounding on heroes and villains alike. The early issues' art is nothing to write home about, though the depictions of the lurking top-hatted scarecrow and hinted-at dismembered corpses in punnets of strawberries, are certainly evocative. And his depiction of the Green Knight, a towering, ornate, utterly uncanny presence, is truly iconic.



Later, with the addition of Bambos Georgiou on inking duties, the artwork becomes sharper, and really pings off the shiny scangloss pages. Erskine's art shines most when he's drawing the weird and inhuman, whether it's the Australian shark-monster B'ngudja, the psychotic serial killer turned mutant cyborg Dolph or the Predator-faced Red Lord in the last issues.

I can't talk about the creative team without mentioning editor Steve White. I can only imagine what sorts of battles he had to fight to produce this unusual, quiet comic at a time when every other title was strapping cybernetic arms and shoulder cannons onto their characters and introducing new and edgy antiheroes with names like "Deathblood" and "Killmachine." His responses on the *Knights of Pendragon* letters page might best be described as 'spiky', with no reader's critique was too trivial to prevent him from blasting back with both barrels.



... A Nightmare to Others

That wasn't quite the end for *Knights of Pendragon*, but I wish that it were. Some six months after issue #18, the series was relaunched as part of Marvel UK's "Genesis 1992" project. Along with new titles like *Motormouth*, *Hell's Angel*, *Digitak* and *Warheads* (drawn by KOP's own Gary Erskine), *Knights of Pendragon* Volume Two formed part of a short-lived experiment to create a raft of interlinked UK-based Marvel comics, featuring (for the most part) new, original characters.

Knights of Pendragon was reimagined as a more mainstream spandex-and-body-armor superhero team, featuring some of the original cast plus a couple of others, including a Gawain robot. Though *KOP* Volume Two was written by Abnett and Tomlinson, it was, in my opinion, too much of a step away from the original concept. It ended with issue #15 in 1993, and I prefer to ignore that it ever happened, much like *Highlander 2*. Looking back, the whole Genesis 1992



thing was none more “early 90s,” when everyone was trying desperately to create the next *X-Force*, *Deathlok* or Herne help us, *Youngblood*.

Is It Worth Reading?

The funny thing is, even though *Knights of Pendragon* starts off by using Captain Britain to lure readers in, it would have worked perfectly well without him. The core character Dai Thomas drives the plot of the first book on his own, as do Kate, Ben, Union Jack and Peter in the later books. Of those, only Dai and Jack are established Marvel characters. The cameos from the likes of Iron Man, Black Panther and half of the Fantastic Four seemed cool at the time, lending the book mainstream Marvel credibility. But to be honest they jar, drawing focus from the core characters, reminding me how at one time every Marvel comic seemed to have Wolverine guest-starring.

Mentally, I have edited *Knights of Pendragon* to strip it of most of its established Marvel characters, and I find that it still works very nicely. And I say that as a dyed in the wool spandex fan. *KOP Unplugged*, anyone?

Knights of Pendragon might lack the recognition of *Camelot 3000* and the polished art of Brian Bolland, but I think it deserves a seat at the Round Table of Arthurian fiction. Sure, the artwork starts off fairly scrappy, and the writing tries to cram in a couple too many characters in the last few issues, but these were all creators at the beginnings of their careers in comics. But it was a homegrown Marvel UK comic with a solid, unique vision, and though the time and place weren't quite right for it, it left its mark nonetheless.

Sidebar: *Camelot 3000*

The most well-known Arthurian comic to my mind is of course *Camelot 3000*. DC's first 12-issue limited series, it was written by Mike W. Barr and pencilled by Brian Bolland, coming out between 1982 and 1985. In the story, Earth in the year 3000 is under attack by aliens and losing the battle. But in the hour of our greatest need, the Once and Future King emerges from his resting place under Glastonbury Tor. Soon Arthur is joined by Merlin and reincarnations of Guinevere, Lancelot, and the other Knights of the Round Table in the battle to repel the alien invaders.

Beautifully illustrated by British artist Bolland (he reputedly took nine months to draw the final issue), every page is a visual treat, as one would expect from the person who would later draw *Batman: The Killing Joke*. There is an equally grand sweep to Barr's writing, as he melds the heightened passions of the classic Arthurian tropes (the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle, the vengeance of Morgan le Fay and Mordred, the quest for the Grail) with epic sci-fi (mutant warriors, swords and ray guns, hordes). There is a drama a-plenty, treachery, and plenty of emoting. It's fantastic stuff and well worth reading for any fan of Arthurian reinterpretations.



No summary of *Camelot 3000* would be complete without a mention of my favorite character, Sir Tristan. See, not every knight of the Round Table got reincarnated in an approximation of their original body. Tristan, originally a Tom Selleck lookalike with a truly legendary 'stache, has been re-born in the slender body of bride-to-be Amber. And Tristan is, let us say, conflicted about whole situation. Tristan's journey, from denial to desperation to wavering loyalty and finally . . . well, that would be a spoiler . . . is probably the most enduring element of the entire series. And for one awkward teenage trans comic fan, its most fondly remembered.

Sidebar: 1990 And All That

Knights of Pendragon came out at an interesting time in the world, and that's reflected in the comic's content. Germany has just reunified, but the city of Bonn that Peter Hunter visits is still the capital of the new country. The Hong Kong that Union Jack and Black Panther travel to is still a British territory for a few more years. Satellite TV is very much the shiny new thing in the UK, as reflected in Kate McClellan's Astra News. Strong career women like Kate and the villainous Grace are smashing their heads (and through) the glass ceiling. And the infamous Sinclair C5 makes an appearance of sorts in the form of Union Jack's tricked-out superbike Beryl (oddly anticipating the name of another Knight's sidekick, DC's Squire, Beryl Hutchinson). And, of course, there are mullets and yuppies.

World events aside, the period of the 1989-1990, when the comic was in development, saw a number of ecological fiction pieces published, as awareness of the greenhouse effect, deforestation and pollution reached further into the mainstream. Within that 12-month period, I read *Knights of Pendragon*, Ben Elton's eco-thriller *Stark* (Elton is quoted on the first page of *KOP* issue #1), Pat Mills' satirical *Third World War* in the comic *Crisis*, and of course Mills' Slaine in *2000AD*, later followed by the even more overtly neo-pagan *Finn*. *KOP*'s ecological themes were timely then, and even more so now.

Sidebar: Where's Arthur?

Hang on, you may ask, *I thought this was an Arthurian comic. Where's Arthur? And where's Merlin for that matter?*

Well, yes, unlike *Camelot 3000*, *Knights of Pendragon* doesn't wade in with the big names straight away. Arthur doesn't climb out of Glastonbury Tor in *KOP* #1, though he does sort of turn up in a used car dealership in East London later. In *Knights of Pendragon*, spirits of earlier heroes are archetypes and energies that touch many souls over the centuries. One character is a little bit Merlin, a little bit Herne the Hunter. Another may or may not be a little bit Lancelot. And though it may be light on Round Table recognition, *KOP* wears its literary credentials proudly, prefacing almost every chapter with quotes from *Le Morte D'Arthur*, *The Wasteland*, *Paradise Lost*, and other works by Malory, Tennyson, Yeats, Byron and more besides.

Reading List

Volume One issues #1-9 have been reprinted in the colon-tastic *Marvel: Graphic Novel Collection: Volume 212: Knights of Pendragon* from Hachette Partworks.

Sadly issues #10-18 have not been reprinted.



Issue Guide to Volume One, July 1990 – December 1991

Book One “Pendragon”

- #1 Brands & Ashes
- #2 Skin & Bone
- #3 Oil & Water
- #4 Blood & Feathers
- #5 Hope & Glory
- #6 Once & Future

Book Two “The Wounded Land”

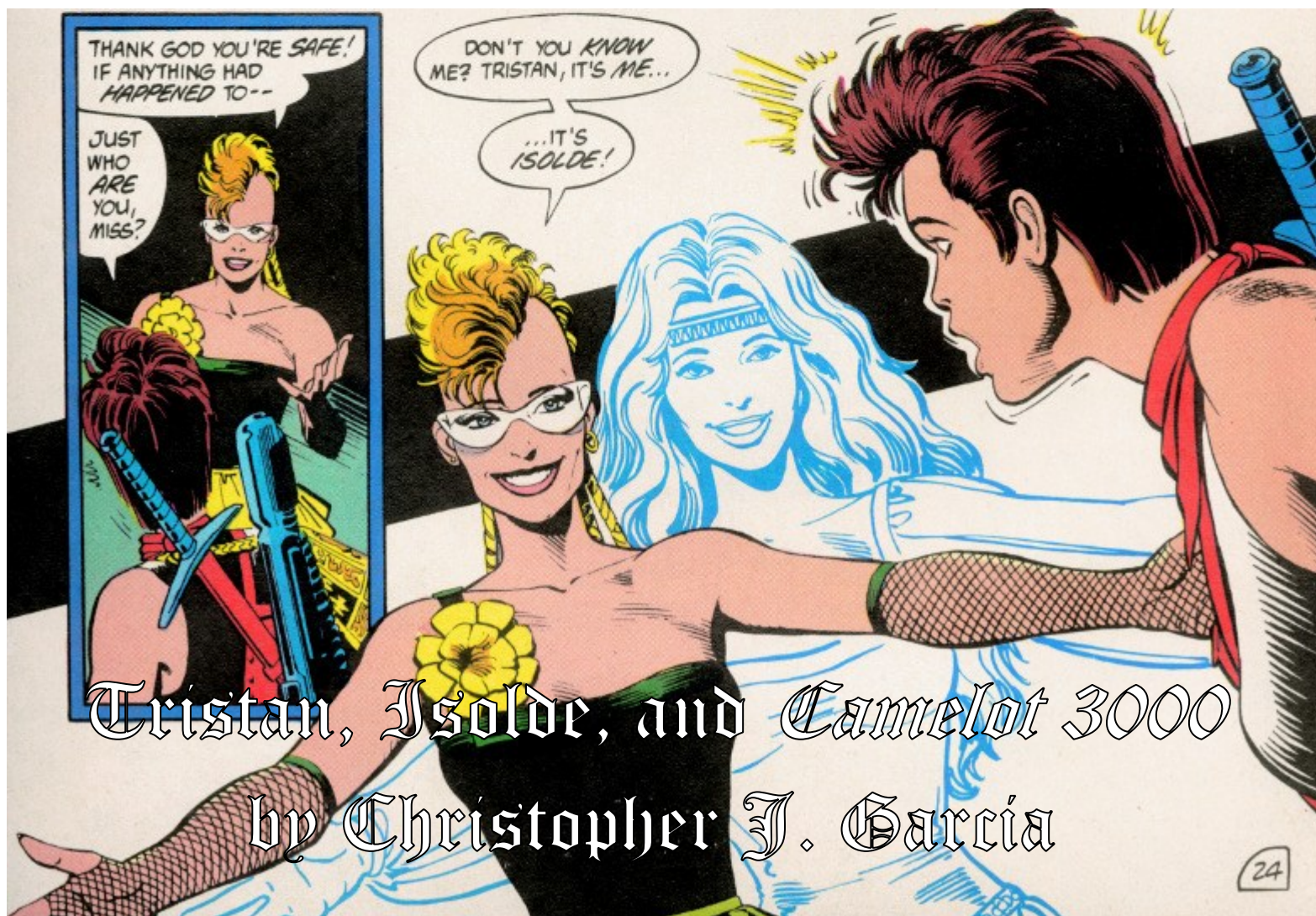
- #7 Revelations
- #8 The Only Child
- #9 Delicate Thunder
- #10 Nightfall
- #11 Midwinter
- #12 Here Be Dragons

Book Three “The Sleeping Lord”

- #13 Prydwen’s Anchor
- #14 Kiboko
- #15 The Sundering!
- #16 Hidden Agendas
- #17 Into the Valley
- #18 The Last War







Tristan, Isolde, and Camelot 3000

by Christopher J. Garcia

Both heart-breaking and beautiful -- that's the best thing that I can say about the twelfth issue of *Camelot 3000*. It is a downer, though a victory for the good guys -- sort of. The story that warms my heart the most, and breaks it harder than any other, is the way *Camelot 3000* deals with Tristan and Isolde.

Let us start with the original story, or at least as original as I can come up with because of the way it morphs and changes in both content and context. In fact, their names change as well. Tristan and Iseult, Tristram and Yseult, etc. In one of the earliest versions, Tristan is a Knight who defeats the knight Morholt, who needs more stories told, and brings Isolde (called Iseult in the early version) back so that she can marry his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. They both drink a love potion, fall eternally in love with each other, and that sets things in motion. Some say they drink it by accident, and others say that Iseult gives it to Tristan when she was supposed to give it to King Mark. This, of course, leads to all sorts of issues, including hiding their romances and getting caught, then being ordered executed, then escaping, and then coming to an understanding and moving on to other things.

It's a classic story, and it's been in the orbit of Arthuriana for centuries. Tristan became a part of the Knights of the Round Table at times, and at other times he was a lone knight, or representing his uncle, or whatnot. It's a great character, a classic character, and one that is easy to turn into various forms.



One of those forms is as a science-fiction character, and that's where *Camelot 3000* comes in.

In the 1980s, comics were changing, and *Camelot 3000* was amazingly ahead of the curve for mainstream comics. We hadn't seen the explosion in adult themes in 1982, and Mike Barr was working so much more in tune with what we'd be seeing in the 1990s with Vertigo. *Camelot 3000* was also the first significant maxi-series. The idea was that Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table were reincarnated in the year 3000 when England (and, as it turns out, Earth itself) needs them the most. Tristan is reincarnated as a woman -- a tough, powerful woman, one who is certainly worthy of being a knight in service of Arthur. Isolde is also reincarnated but is still a woman.

Gay characters in mainstream comics were incredibly rare in the early 1980s, and here, the two of them fight against their love, which has survived the reincarnation process, and while it's not the top storyline, it's there, and it's important. It's a storyline that Barr played with in a sort of rough way, a way that really spoke to how gay relationships were worked with in the late 1970s. They explore their gender roles, and there's a suicide matter, but in the end, they end up realizing that they are destined for one another.

That's the thing that gets me the most. They are lovers whose love is based on something outside of their control. They are eternally attached to one another, and it is not an attachment based on their physical selves, but on something greater than themselves. Their questioning is extreme, but also natural because the entire way through, Tristan must question her body as it is not what it once was. This is a narrative of confusion based on circumstance internal and external, but ultimately it is speaking to comics themselves. The idea that the love between the women Tristan and Isolde is forbidden is an excellent analogy for the fact that the STORY of the love of the love between the women Tristan and Isolde was forbidden to be told in a comic. They have to feel around the edges, like writers and artists did in the underground and later on the periphery of the mainstream before they can come to the fore. It's an amazing story, and while some would not find it ground-breaking, I can remember thinking this was big, huge, massive. It was an important step, and one that would transform Arthuriana forever as well. It's one of those big moments that seems bigger as a moment as it fades into the rearview.



“It’s Only a CGI Model”: Arthurian Movies of the Twenty-First Century

by Tony Keen

King

Arthur is, of course, a legendary figure with an important place in the self-identity of the British, and in particular the English. So it is hardly surprising that he appears regularly in Anglophone movies, from *Prince Valiant* (1954), through Disney’s *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), to Lerner and Lowe’s *Camelot* (1967)—both these last two movies, incidentally, based upon T.H. White’s Arthurian tetralogy *The Once and Future King* (1958). Many of these movies place Arthurian legend in a pseudo-medieval fantasy milieu, with knights in shining plate armor, and beautiful damsels requiring rescuing—a classic example of this is John Boorman’s 1981 movie *Excalibur*.



Figure 1 – Arthur (Clive Owen), in *King Arthur* (2004)

Figure 1 – Arthur (Clive Owen), in *King Arthur*

That approach is still often employed for Arthurian tales—it is the aesthetic of the BBC’s series *Merlin* (2008–2012), for instance. But there’s another approach, which is to place Arthur into what is said in some accounts to be his historical context, at the end of the Roman occupation of Britain. In a way, this goes right back to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, written in the twelfth century. In modern versions, I’ve traced it back at least as far as Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Sword at Sunset* (1963), though no doubt it goes back further. In this article, I want to look at three movies released since 2000 that do just that—*King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), and *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017).

First, *King Arthur*. Released in 2004, it is part of the tail-end of the flurry of ancient epics that followed in the wake of the success of *Gladiator*. Indeed, its screenwriter, David Franzoni, originated *Gladiator*, though little of his screenplay for that, and not much of his structure, made it to screen.

King Arthur opens with the following text:

Historians agree that the classical 15th century tale of King Arthur and his Knights rose from a real hero who lived a thousand years earlier in a period often called the Dark Ages.

Recently discovered archeological evidence sheds light on his true identity.

Obviously, both those statements are extremely contentious. Historians never agree on anything, and they certainly don’t on whether Arthur was real or not. And what is this archeological evidence? The movie declines to say, though it’s essentially a theory by Linda Malcor that Arthur’s name derives from a historical Lucius Artorius Castus, whom Malcor links to Sarmatian troops sta-



tioned in Britain, who themselves have been linked to Arthurian traditions. (All of these links are fundamentally weak and unproven, as I've argued elsewhere.)

These days, I try not to be too picky about historical errors in movies. But *King Arthur* invites the viewer to consider it as historically accurate, and therefore it is vulnerable to having it pointed out that it has delayed the Roman withdrawal from Britain by about fifty years, and that the two characters who appear in it who actually were definitely historical, Pelagius (Owen Teale) and Germanus of Auxerre (Ivano Marescotti), were also almost certainly dead by the point that they are depicted in the movie.

There is a lot of shouting in *King Arthur*. Clive Owen plays Arthur himself, and shouts a lot (Figure 1). Ray Winstone plays Bors, and shouts even more. One feels that the movie seriously missed a trick by not finding a role for Brian Blessed.

Ioan Gruffudd doesn't shout very much, but is Welsh, as Lancelot (a role that, if it were being properly historically accurate, the movie would have excised, since he's an invention of medieval French romance). Keira Knightley's Guinevere is turned into a reincarnation of Boudicca, clad in what looks a very uncomfortable series of leather straps (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Guinevere (Keira Knightley) in *King Arthur* (2004)

King Arthur was one of a number of movies to make use of Hadrian's Wall. The Wall is not usually linked to the Arthurian mythos, at least not in popular perceptions, but it is in *King Arthur* and in *The Last Legion*. (Hadrian's Wall subsequently reappears in two non-Arthurian movies, *Centurion*, 2010, and *The Eagle*, 2011.)

The movie adopts a lot of the tropes of the Western. In particular, at the center of the movie is a mission to rescue some Romans from a villa deep in the unconquered territory beyond the Wall. In reality, no Roman villas were built north of the Wall—what the movie shows us is much more like the homesteads in Indian territory that feature frequently in the movies of John Ford and others.

King Arthur is quite an anti-European movie. The main villains are either the Italian establishment that runs Rome, who betray Arthur and his knights, or the Saxons who have come to kill everyone. The Italians are represented by Marescotti's Germanus, and Ken Stott's Marius Honorius; Stott puts on an Italian accent not seen this side of a Marx Brothers movie. The Saxons are confused with Vikings—the junior leader, Cynric, is played by German actor Til Schweiger, but as his father Cerdic the movie casts Swede Stellan Skarsgård, who generally looks unhappy to be in this movie. Merlin (Stephen Dillane), leader of the "Woods" (i.e. Picts?), who is presented early in the movie as an antagonist, turns out to be on Arthur's side.



Ultimately, this movie is quite silly. Little in the plot makes much sense, and the movie gets progressively more absurd throughout its course.

If *King Arthur* wants to be a Western, *The Last Legion* (2007) wants to be *Star Wars*. Set in 460 CE (about fifteen years before the historical events it actually depicts took place), *Last Legion* is disguised Arthuriana, telling the story of the boy who will grow up to be Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, though that does not become obvi-



ous until right at the end of the movie, when the boy Arthur appears. The boy is Romulus Augustulus (Thomas Brodie-Sangster), the last western Roman emperor, who is deposed and flees with a small group of soldiers who remain loyal, led by Aurelius (Colin Firth). They are joined by a Byzantine bodyguard, Mira (Aishwarya Rai), and flee to Britain (including climbing over the Alps). The *Star Wars* element is most obvious in Ben Kingsley's white-clad and bearded Ambrosinus (Figure 3), who is part philosopher, part magician, and part wizard. It should be noted, however, that the movie hedges its bets. Though many acts of magic appear to be performed, it is often suggested that these are mere tricks. Unlike later movies set in antiquity, such as the Greek mythology movies of 2010–2014, *Last Legion* steps back from full commitment to fantasy.

The antagonists are Goths, the historical Odoacer (Peter Mullan), and the fictional Wulfilu (Kevin McKidd), who team up with the British leader Vortgyn (Harry Van Gorkum), who is based on the possibly historical figure Vortigern.

This movie too, as noted, ends up at Hadrian's Wall, though for some reason everyone approaches the Wall from outside -- i.e. the North -- despite the fact that the Romans and the pursuing Goths have all come from Europe. This movie also brings in the "lost" Ninth Legion, which also features in *Centurion* and *The Eagle*.

A big problem with *The Last Legion* is one of tone—the movie cannot make up its mind whether it is for adults or for children. Pulling it in one direction is the fact that it is based on an adult novel by Valerio Massimo Manfredi. Pulling in the other direction is the fact that the movie is centered upon a twelve-year-old boy (albeit played by a fifteen-year-old boy). This confusion is crystallized in a scene where Aurelius and Mira go to bed together, but don't take their clothes off.

In 2011, Chris Chibnall, now showrunner of *Doctor Who*, and Michael Hirst, writer of the two Cate Blanchett *Elizabeth* movies, developed a TV series for Starz called *Camelot*, which only lasted one season. It starred Jamie Campbell Bower as King Arthur, and Eva Green as Morgan Pendragon. Similar to Starz's *Spartacus* series, there was a lot of nudity in this series, but it is interesting for this article because it placed the story in a Dark Age context, but a Dark Age Britain that was dominated by the remains left behind by the Romans. This foreshadowed the third of the movies I want to talk about.

King Arthur: Legend of the Sword was the result of Warner Brothers wanting to produce more Arthur movies in the wake of *King Arthur* and failing to do so for over a decade. When they finally managed to get the ball rolling, they handed the movie to Guy Ritchie, famous for London gangster flicks such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), *Snatch* (2000), and *RocknRolla* (2008).

The GAME OF THRONES Score

I have given each of these movies a *Game of Thrones* score, based on the amount of major actors from *GoT* who appear in them (all these scores are currently provisional, as I may have missed someone). *King Arthur* has a measly *GoT* score of 2, only having the Blackfish (Clive Russell, who plays Lancelot's Sarmatian/Russian father) and Ser Alliser Thorne (Owen Teale as Pelagius). *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* also has a score of two, with Littlefinger (Aiden Gillen as "Goosefat" Bill) and Roose Bolton (Michael McElhatton as Jack's Eye), but it adds a *Merlin* score of 1 (Katie McGrath, who played Morgana in that series, plays Vortigern's ill-fated wife Elsa). The winner is *The Last Legion*, with an impressive score of 5: Alliser Thorne again (Teale here playing Vaternus), Jorah and Jeor Mormont (Iain Glen as Orestes and James Cosmo as Hrothgar), Jojen Reed (Thomas Brodie-Sangster as Romulus), and Prince Doran Martell (prime scenery-chewer Alexander Siddig as Byzantine ambassador Theodorus Andronikos).

I'd also note that the two centurions from HBO's *Rome*, Ray Stevenson and Kevin McKidd, are split between *King Arthur* and *Last Legion*—Stevenson plays Dagonet in *King Arthur*, and McKidd is





Figure 4 – Londonium in *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017)

Also, where *King Arthur* and *Last Legion* distance themselves from the fantastic, *Legend of the Sword* embraces it. Right at the beginning of the movie there are giant elephants, and magic pervades the narrative throughout. Presiding over all of this is Vortigern (Jude Law), on a mission to eat *all* the scenery.

The problem with *Legend of the Sword* is that it is the Ritchie-est of Ritchie movies, using all his tricks, from backwards and forwards jump-cutting, down to cameos from football players (in this case David Beckham as “Trigger”). What it rather does is demonstrate that these tricks, extremely effective in a modern London underworld setting, are rather less effective applied to a quasi-medieval fantasy.

These are the major Arthurian movies of the twenty-first century, but they are not the only examples. I’m still leaving out the truly quasi-medieval examples, but a number still engage with Roman Britain (though I confess I have only watched trailers of these movies). *Pendragon: Sword of His Father* (a Burns Family Studios production, directed by Chad Burns, starring Aaron Burns, Nick Burns, Marilyn Burns, Andy Burns, music by Aaron Burns and Marilyn Burns, edited by Nicholas Burns) is a Christian movie that sets its tale in 411 CE, just after the end of Roman rule. *Arthur & Merlin* (2015) makes no use of Romans but roots the story in Celtic culture. *King Arthur: Excalibur Rising* (2017) is set in 250 CE, in theory well within the period of Roman rule, though the movie doesn’t seem to acknowledge that, at least from the trailer.

I was once asked which is my favourite Arthurian movie. It remains *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975).





Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* by Neil Rest

One of the things that intrigues me the most about the whole Arthur Grail Corpus is the historical divide it straddles. Storytelling was a major entertainment, and it was as much or more performance art as literature. (Shakespeare never made up a single plot.) So recycling and recombining material is an ordinary part of "the folk process".

Then came the printing press. One of the most obvious sources of material for the printing press was all of the accumulated manuscripts all over Europe. So, suddenly it was much easier to compare different versions of the same material and a lot of previously obscure material became a lot better known. Which is why the plotting of the Arthurian . . . I use the word "corpus" . . . here is such a hodgepodge.

For Terry Gilliam to take liberties with the story in his telling is completely inside the storytelling tradition. The basic story of the Fisher King is pretty simple. The King was wounded in the thigh and did not heal (the king is the country, and the thigh is the, ahem, generative power, so the king being wounded in the thigh means the crops did not grow, etc.). Naturally, all kinds of doctors and healers were called in, they tried this and that, and the other thing, and nothing. One day a fool happened to be in the king's chamber and he asked the king is there anything you want, which was the first time anyone had asked, and the king said I'm thirsty I want a drink of water, so the fool gave him a cup of water and lo and behold the cup was the Grail and the king was healed.

The Grail exists "to heal the hearts of men", which is quoted in the movie. Gilliam's biggest departure from the classical story, aside from not having a king is that both of the primary characters in the story are heartsick. It's striking to me that we have the word "heartsick" in our culture.

One focus of the story is love. We associate courtly love with troubadours and lutes. "Troubadour" and "lute" are from Arabic, and courtly love came from the blurred boundary between



Christendom and Islam. The Sufis say that the highest human love is just a suggestion of divine love, which is reflected in courtly love and in Grail stories. I think the Grand Central scene where it's all love when she comes by is absolutely brilliant.

SPOILERS START HERE

So in the first half of the movie, Jack crashes when he provokes a massacre, and his life falls apart. Then he encounters Perry, who was the fiancé of a person killed in that massacre. And he is a much bigger mess than Jack, since his true love's head exploded in his face. So Jack feels a debt in obligation to Perry and tries all of the things that he knows to pay the debt. He tries money, he tries love and sex, and so forth and nothing, nothing makes any impression. He cannot get the redemption that he's trying to buy. (Obligatory note: "Perry" is obviously a reference to Parsifal.)

As far as I know, the Red Knight is Gilliam's invention. I was very impressed. If you want to go Freudian, it's very clearly his repressed memory of the killing. If you want to go with spirits, the red knight is from another realm, to harass Perry. It works just fine either way. The third appearance of the Red Knight is after the Chinese dinner, turning toward the climax of the movie. This time, we see its approach as Perry gets more and more crushed. He says, "Please, let me have this."

I also like the touch of having something like the red knight in a stained-glass window in the mansion.

The peak spiritual moment in the movie is after the Perry got beat up by the suburban hoods and Jack is visiting him in the hospital. He surrenders with the kind of total surrender that esoteric orders try to develop, and he says, "If I do this, and I mean if . . . it's because I want to do this for you." He has never done anything for anybody else, but that spiritual emotional intellectual exhaustion and surrender is a focus of spiritual practice.

Then comes the slapstick of actually stealing the cup -- which turns out to be a cheap dime-store nothing which is oddly in keeping with the story because no one noticed the Grail until the fool used it, but there is another event at the same time. Many esoteric traditions say that their visible benefit to the world, luck, miracles, whatever, are incidental to their real work. One metaphor is the shavings on the floor of the brass maker's shop.

The owner of the mansion had just committed suicide, and he's lying unconscious in his chair with the empty pill bottle beside him. When Jack leaves he leaves through the front door and sets off the burglar alarm. The next shot in the movie is morning in the ward in the hospital and there's a shot of the headline on the morning tabloid that someone's life was saved from an accidental overdose by a burglar alarm going off. It is often said that whoever saves a human life it is as though they had saved the entire world, and this saving of a life was incidental to the mission of stealing the fershlugginer cup.

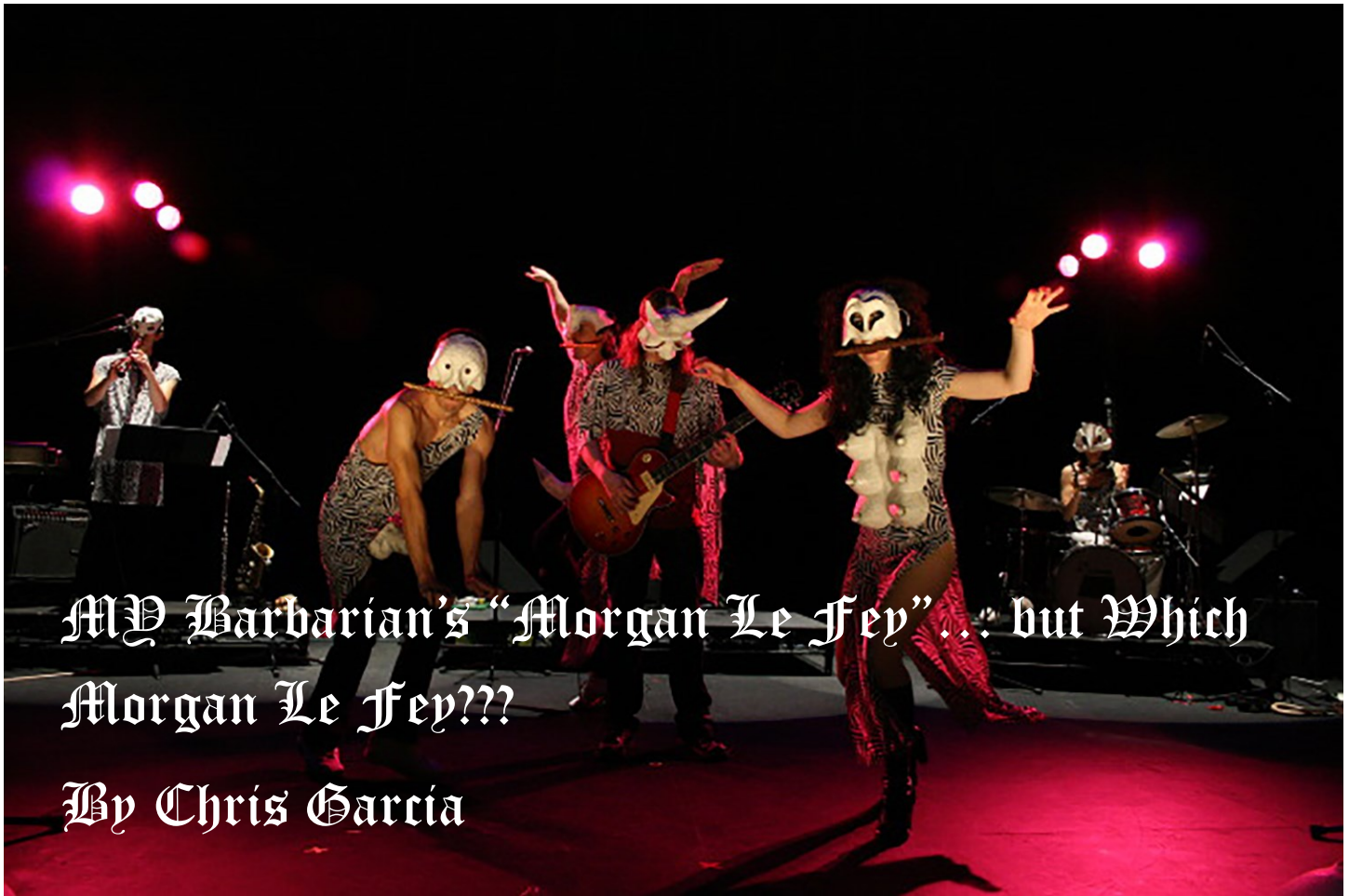
"I had this dream, Jack. I was married. I was married to this beautiful woman. And you were there too. I really miss her, Jack. Is that okay? Can I miss her now? Thank you." . . . to heal the hearts of men.

And finally, the chorus of inmates singing I Love New York! all together in unison in near harmony. The inmates who had no communication with consensus reality, under the influence of Perry and his Grail have come much closer both to each other and to planet Earth. . . . to heal the hearts of men.

I love that there's a poster for *Brazil* in the video shop.







My Barbarian's "Morgan Le Fey" ... but Which Morgan Le Fey???

By Chris Garcia

When I encounter a contemporary Arthurian work, I always try to place its origin somewhere. Is it playing off of Geoffrey of Monmouth? Is it from *Le Morte d'Arthur*? *The Alliterative Arthur*? *The Mabinogion*? Where are they getting it from?

I came across My Barbarian, an art-rocker group, when I was putting files on my new computer, and thus I rediscovered their song "Morgan Le Fey." Listening to the lovely, bubble-gum-sweet, jangle-pop tune, I had to ask myself, which Morgan are they talking about?

So, I went line by line, looking.

Here's what I found.

The fairy queen they deem me

Okay, this should be easy enough to trace, right? Who referred to Morgan as "the Fairy Queen?"

Like everything in Arthuriana, this ain't easy.

Morgan as a name is old. I should say OLDE. It's actually a form of Morgen, which is pronounced Morgen and derived from the Old Welsh (or maybe Breton, hard to tell and likely both) which means 'sea-born' (though I remember seeing it said that it mean "Born of the Sea" though that



may just be a fancier way of saying sea-born) and this appears to be older than Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, which is 1150 or so. That's when we have her names, and she's a fairy queen for sure in that one.

So, this would indicate that it's a post-Monmouth Morgan, though it's spelled differently.

Called Le Fay, the poets say my . . .

This is kinda a throw-away in my investigation. Or, at least, I thought so. The fact is it's a fact that actually speaks to the oldest, likely lost, origins of Morgan. In investigating Monmouth, pretty much every scholar thinks that he based *Vita Merlini* on some older sources, because every time you pull at a Monmouth thread, about 200 years of prior art IP comes falling out. There are a few potential goddesses and fairies mention in Celtic poetry that *might* be Morgan, but nothing concrete. It might be that any one of them is the thing that old Geoffrey picked up and ran with it like any of the Hugo winning AO3 fanfic writers.

Also, nothing I love more than a good enjambment!

. . . Name is Morgan, Cauldron of the Moon

This is actually really interesting. It seems to be referencing one of the earliest Arthur stories, a nearly incomprehensible (to me, anyway) poem called "The Spoils of Annwn." In it, Arthur and company roll into Ireland, and the basis for the story is ancient. The gist is there's a cauldron that is super important, and it's sustained by the breath of nine maidens, who are actually nine goddesses. The number nine is really important in this, because it's always associated with the idea of the moon. There's not a lot of references to Morgan: Cauldron of the Moon, but it would seem to be indicating this one, and thus it's an old version of Morgan we're hearing about.

A cloak of purple roses

This is another one I had some issues finding good stuff on. There is a lot about Morgan and a cloak, though mostly about her giving a dark enchantment to a cloak trying to murder Arthur. Purple is a color long-established within the image of Morgan, but references to Cloak of Purple Roses seem scant. There are, however, a number of paintings that seem to speak to this association, notably by Edward Burne and E.R. Hughes. They both gave a decidedly purply hue to many images of Morgan, and cloaks were pretty typical. Looking at *Vita Merlini*, Morgan is specifically a practitioner of herbal lore, or at least it is hinted as such, which I guess would made the cloak of roses fit in with that idea. "She has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body."

Fog and thorn betray thy senses

Am I right in thinking this has a lot to do with the tradition of Glastonbury? Fog is what makes Glastonbury Tor, a hill with ancient connections to both Arthurian and pre-Arthurian legends, appear to be an island, and perhaps it is the source for the idea of Avalon, the 'island' where Arthur waits, dead-alive, waiting for England's day of need to arrive. Thorn is a bit more important to the literal world. Glastonbury is supposedly the site where Joseph of Arimathea came and established Glastonbury Abbey, the ruins of which are now a massive tourist attraction. It is said that Joseph of Arimathea drove his staff into the ground and a thorn tree sprang from it. It's the lasting connection, and until not too long ago, descendants of the thorn tree were located on the property. There is a lot of fog im-



agery in Arthurian legend, and quite a bit of thorn as well, as it's seen as a magical wood (you can see that reflected in Harry Potter as well) and these are certainly two things that are attached to Morgan throughout her run.

Glinting armor fades beneath my spell

This is pretty easy to decipher. Morgan isn't a warrior; she's a sorceress. She is constantly getting the 1-up on Knights, including Arthur's bravest. She tricked Tristan, she brought down knights into her bed all the time, and she often played one-off-the-other with everyone from Arthur and Guinevere to Mordred and Tristan. The story that always gets me is how she stole Excalibur, makes a copy, passes the copy to Arthur, and the real one to her husband. This would have been the end, save for some magical shenanigans. She gave the Green Knight the ability to live after his head was removed from his body, which is the basis for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She also imprisons a bunch of Knights, and her unfaithful lover, in the Val sans Retour, the Valley of No Return. She's pretty bad ass.



Follow me

A fantasy, a fantasy

Follow me

A fantasy, a fantasy

Awaits you, awaits you, awaits you

This is what we call a chorus, but it's interesting that this is being specifically called out as a fantasy. Monmouth presented Arthur as a historical figure, though it is possible that 'histories' of the time were viewed in much the same way I view *Hollywood Babylon* as history; it is clearly playing in the field, but it is not meant to be taken as fact.

And dragons storm the fortress

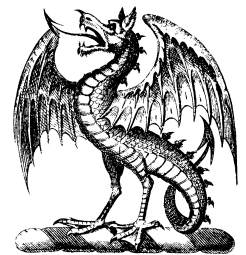
Dragons appear in Arthurian legends of old a lot less than modern re-tellings. This may be a reference to the famed Vortigern story, where Merlin dreamt of two dragons sleeping beneath a keep, which is why it would not stand. Of course, the dragons represent the Welsh and the Saxons, so the dragons storming the fortress could be actual soldiers. IN fact, with the rest of the stanza, I'd assume so.

Cornwall's pride, my father died; that

Warlord split his shield and pierced his heart

The lady Igraine, weeping

Bore a son, my golden brother;



Okay, this one is really cool. Gorlois is Morgan's father, and Igraine her mother. Igraine was also Arthur's mom. Uther Pendragon, Arthur's pops, is waging war and he manages to win because of Gorlois of Tintagel, but at the wrap-party, Arthur also falls in love with Igraine, and that leads to war. There's an attack on the castle in Cornwall, and Merlin fixes a spell to make Arthur look like Gorlois,



and then he manages to seduce Igraine, impregnating her, leading to the birth of Arthur.

Oh, and that same night, Gorlois is murdered. Go figure.

The ‘dragons’ mentioned earlier is likely in reference to the men of Uther Pendragon.

Igraine marries Uther, and that’s that. The ancient world of myth was weird. The story actually predates the naming of Morgan, as it showed up in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* about 15 years before the *Vita Merlini*.

Now I bear my brother’s son his doom

This, of course, is about Mordred. Differing versions of the story have Mordred with varying parentages, but the one that is the most popular is that Morgan seduced Arthur, bore him a son, Mordred, named him Mordred because there’s no way a Mordred wasn’t gonna be a bad dude, and that led to Arthur’s death in the battle at Camlann. This is also the start of the bifurcated nature of Morgan’s life. She wanted to bring about Arthur’s death, largely as a way to avenge her father’s murder, as she sees it, at the hands of Arthur. Then, when Arthur is mortally wounded, she takes him to Avalon to heal him. That’s a weird contrast, no?

Follow me

A fantasy, a fantasy

Follow me

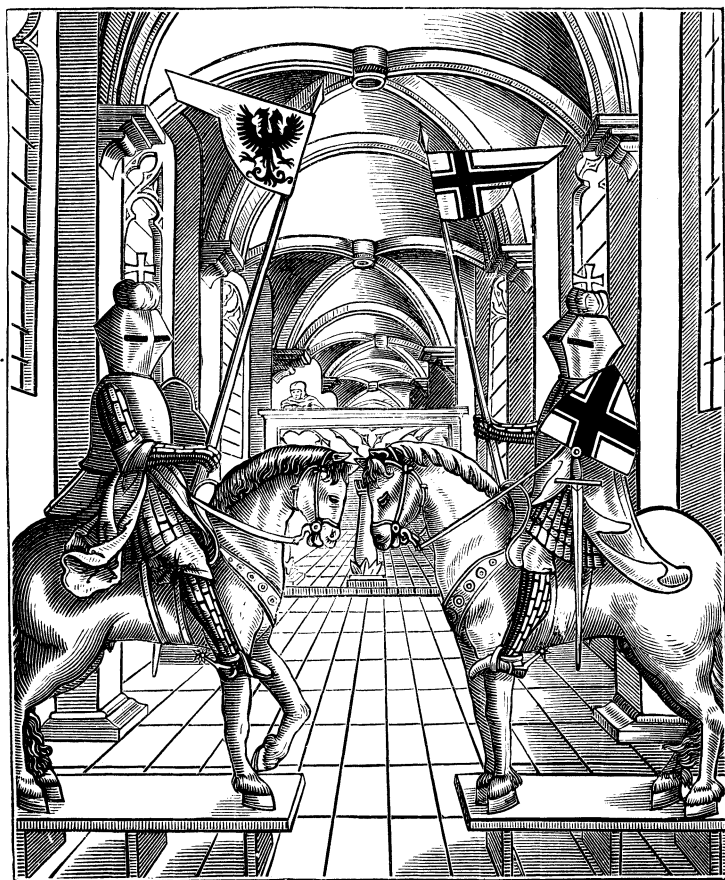
A fantasy, a fantasy

Awaits you, awaits you, awaits you

Again, this is a chorus.

Dragon cry

If the Dragon above is simply a reference to the warriors that Uther brought with him, I kinda think this is a reference to *Propheesies de Merlin*, which has a story of an epic battle between various sorceresses and a bunch of magical rings from India. The Dame d’Avalon has called the contest, and Morgan goes all le Fay and summons demons and dragons, which take the Dame into a tower on Avalon. That’d be a possibility, no? There’s also the Lancelot tale in the French *Vulgate Cycle*. Lancelot is on a rescue mission to the Val sans Retour and comes to a plank acting as a bridge. It’s protected by two small dragons, and Lance slays them. Then he kills some folks, rescues some folks, uses a magic ring, and ends up as something of a prisoner, though one who gets work-release at one point. The *Vulgate* is a difficult read for me.



Percival misled

Percival (or Parcial) is my favorite Knight after Palimedes (and in some telling, Tristan) because he's a bad ass, and far more human than most of the other knights. Morgan, in many of the poems and stories, is a trickster akin to coyote or Jabber-Jaw. In Percival's (or Parzival) quest for the Grail, he deals with deceptions that in some versions are caused by Morgan, and in others by other. He also has a thing with women that makes him act kinda dumb in some versions. It seems that this specific line is coming from a Vulgate and/or Mallory angle, which is actually fairly in contrast to most of the rest which seems to be of an earlier, Monmouth/Celtic Myth origin.

*Battle cry**Lancelot lies dead*

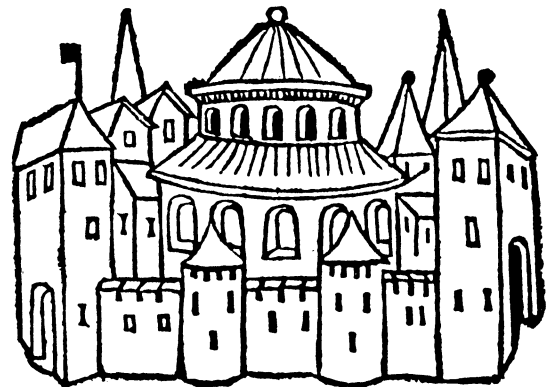
Taken as a whole, the Battle of Camlann seems to be the focus of this stanza. The Battle, in which Mordred is defeated by Arthur, who is mortally wounded, and pretty much all the major Knights die, the figurative end of the Round Table. There are other versions of the story in which Lancelot dies six weeks after his great love, Guinevere, and others in which he grows old, he grows old as a monk or a hermit. There are a lot of different ways for guys in die in these stories. The idea that Morgan would celebrate his death is strange, though in many stories there is an unrequited love thing for Morgan, and then there's Guinevere, AGAIN, always mucking things up.

*Fairy tale**Your quest has gone astray**Holy grail*

This is an interesting part. The story of Morgan is a fairy tale, at least in many tellings, because she is a fairy, after all. In America, Arthurian legend isn't a fairy tale, but instead in habits that strange world of history that certainly never happened even if the people it was based on maybe did. The fairy tale is one of tropes that we understand that teach a lesson. Arthur and his Knights used to do that, but the days when those lessons were valid, at least in whole, are long-gone. The Grail Quest is, without doubt, the most important of all the Arthurian tales (even if the Green Knight is the best-told) and it is basically a story of a quest gone all the way 'round the hill, Benny Hill-style. The variations on the Grail Quest all show key moments where Morgan, or a stand-in, play a significant role. She is the anglerfish light at times, and usually represents the darkness of attempting to achieve sex while making a pious quest. Or something like that.

We sail into the grey

This is an image that comes straight from Monmouth. The idea that Morgan takes up Arthur to heal him, takes him to the island of Avalon (or maybe the Island of Apples) and there waits until England needs him. Now, there's a lot to unpack here. Looking at it one way, she's paying the price, self-payment I guess, for having plotted 'gainst her brother. Could be, no? Another, she's simply rowing him off to finish the job. The one I like,



and hinted at nowhere that I can think of, is this idea that Morgan and Arthur are so closely tied, she has to leave the realm of the living when he does, her work here as finished as his, and her return as certain as his. When England needs one, it'll need both. That has a certain symmetry, that you need the yin if you're gonna ride the yang.

Follow me

A fantasy, a fantasy

Follow me

A fantasy, a fantasy

Awaits you, awaits you, awaits you, awaits you

Awaits you, awaits you, awaits you, awaits you

Again, this is a chorus.

So, what does this tell me?

First, it says that the folks of *My Barbarian* are hella well-read because there are some deep cuts here. There's a lot of Monmouth -- in fact, I'd say he provides a large amount of the material as a basis -- and a fair bit of Malory, though he based much of his work on Monmouth. The imagery they use in here, herbal especially, and the allusions to cloaks and such, show an understanding of the character beyond those works, but also a less important aspect being that they don't seem to rely on the more recent writings. That alone makes this more interesting than most novels based on the legends because it's not rehashing well-trod trails, but instead giving snatches of image from a long time ago, as if they've read, but see where the threads cut themselves off between tellings. That's what most Arthurian writers do, only to stitch them up again in their own image. Here, they're not telling a story; they are allowing us to catch those moments like a ghost seen out of the corner of your eye.

And also, it's just a catchy song.





Editorial

By James Bacon



Arthurian

legends have never really captured my imagination, for some unknown reason, and I think that is okay. I recall the Disney *Sword in the Stone*, but probably as a clip, since that is how I saw a lot of Disney films, as clips for cartoon programs. I know as a teenager, I first saw *Excalibur* in the 24-hour video room at Octocon in 1991, and I enjoyed it, although I admit I preferred watching it again in preparation for this zine, and enjoyed the Merlin humor and cynicism more.

I was very interested in the castles, the settings in Ireland, and I do like castles. Indeed, when I ran a convention south of Dundalk, we included a bus trip to visit Dunmahon Castle. Dunmahon is a four-story tower house, with a vaulted ground floor -- it is not at all large and now is only really the walls. It possesses unusual history in that Dunmahon Castle dates from the fifteenth century and was the scene of a massacre in the 1640s. The exact history of what happened is difficult to determine, but we have a bit of a picture. Cromwell took Dundalk but failed to take Dunmahon Castle. Two, shall we say, poets published recitals in the 1800s pertaining to the "Sack of Dunmahon Castle," and this is laid out in a wonderful article by T. G. F. Paterson in the 1947 *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* (Vol. 11, No. 3 pages 164-168). Suffice to say, we have these two artistic accounts 200 years later. The first was that Eva Fitzgerald, daughter of the castle owner, has an "intrigue" with Cromwellian officer Charles Townley and the castle fell with 250 slain. The second version has the castle under the protection of Thomas Baron Plunket, Baron Louth. Cromwellian officer Charles Townley held affection

for the daughter of the castle and subsequently took it, slaying 309. TGF Patterson goes on to assert much doubt over these stories, identifying the Garlans as the culprits, mentioning a link between the Townleys and the Garlans and noting artistic license to the poetic story of the "Sack of Dunmahon." Thomas George Farquhar Paterson knew his stuff, served in WW1, was curator of Armagh Museum, and two years ago got his own Blue Plaque.

Dunmahon was only four kilometers from the Fairways Hotel, where our convention *They Came and Shaved Us* was occurring. Yet up the road on the other side of Dundalk about seven kilometers from The Fairways was Cú Chulainn's Castle. This is actually Dún Dealgan Motte, but in its most recent incarnations, it is a very small modern affair, even smaller than the small enough Dunmahon and



in itself has a heap of fascinating history and legend. Indeed, local legend helps to increase the value of this castle, which is just a tower, because an ancient Irish *dún* is known to have stood here, and in fairness the motte like Dunmahon is raised. At this stage we get into legend, and so legend would have it that Cú Chulainn was born here, although he would have been born Sétanta and it is here that he bases himself in the legendary story, the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. Then back to history and the thinking is that Bertram III de Verdun (c.1135–1192) built a motte and bailey here in the 1100's and it was known to be a stronghold of Hugh de Lacy, 1st Earl of Ulster in 1210. It was the site of the Battle of Faughart where Edward Bruce got killed on 14th October 1318. And then it gets a bit fun. The alleged pirate Patrick Byrne started to build a house here in the 1700s, but it got damaged during the 1798 Rebellion, and a castle-styled tower was all that was left. This was known as Byrnes Folly. The house was rebuilt in 1850 by Thomas Vesey Dawson but again revolutionary war had an impact and during the War of Independence it got damaged and so, Byrnes Folly, not exactly a tourism hot spot, was gently repositioned as Cú Chulainn's Castle, and luckily for me, and as much as I would have loved the humor of it all, locals had advised on what was best to visit, and so we went to Dunmahon.

During my childhood, Cú Chulainn fascinated me. We read his story, in school and elsewhere, and then as teenagers we would study the various cycles of Irish mythology and Cú Chulainn was from the *Rúraíocht*, or Ulster cycle. I also enjoyed the Fenian Cycle, the stories told by Oisín of Finn and Co., and studied *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* for the leaving cert and thoroughly enjoyed this which was mostly because of the teacher. I found his story and the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* amazing, and of course, the country was not shy about these legends, and the statue in the GPO commemorating the 1916 rising of Cú Chulainn by Oliver Shepard was something I had seen so many times, as had many people, it being on display from 1935. The links between classic Irish mythology and revolution were strong, an Irish identity and mythological pride along with much scholarly and artistic work running parallel to the search for independence in the late 1800's and turn of the century. Celtic art of the early 1900's can be so wonderful.

As if this schooling needed some synchronicity of interest, at the same time as this, I fell into the reading of *2000AD* and the Pat Mills written *Sláine*. Now this was cracking stuff and the artwork was amazing, and it was absolutely peppered with references to the *Rúraíocht* and other legendary elements while visually beautiful, portraying incredible action. *Sláine* was heavily influenced by Cú Chulainn much of the world around *Sláine* was that of the *Rúraíocht* with commonality of characters and names, but in this separate and new story of a wandering warrior who would be king. He was able to go into a body enlarging and distorting “warp-spasm” battle frenzy, which is based on the “*ríastrad*” as described in a translation of the *Táin*. It did a wonderful thing, with Mills appreciation of the Celtic gods and understanding of the legends meant a brilliant comic. I started at the right time, with “The Horned God” storyline, when Simon Bisley was on art duties, but was very quickly able to back track to 1983 and enjoy Mick McMahon and Glenn Fabry artwork from previous stories. I stopped reading *2000AD* for a while, and perhaps no harm as by 2012 the story featured *Sláine* taking the place of Arthur, so that connection has not fully entered my consciousness, and we should move on.

Slane castle was 40 kilometers away from our convention and a very well kept and modern affair it is, but for *Excalibur* the battle scenes were filmed at Cahir Castle the river Suir is its moat, and it is in itself on an island, and quite a large and very well kept castle, dating from Norman times and built in 1142 by Conor O'Brien, Prince of Thomond. Another Tipperary structure that was used, but only as a background, was the Rock of Cashel, a monastery, but which originally was The Cashel of Kings, but the huge rock jutting up upon which it was built, was linked to St Patrick and the first castles here were that of the King of Munster up until the Norman invasion. Muirchertach Ua Briain, King of Munster donated his fortress to the Church in 1101 and not much of it remains from this time, with considerable rebuilds over the centuries.

And so you can see. As an Irish child and teenager, we had so many legends and so many fun



characters to consider, that Arthur, well, King of the Britains and all that, just did not at all interest me. And he wasn't really that interesting. Yet, that is no reason not to enjoy the film and cartoon and various comics I read that had a Arthurian connection, there is no doubt there have been fabulously derivative works, and our contributors have brilliantly and passionately captured so many sentiments, thoughts and pieces of knowledge that I have enjoyed reading and learning about.

As we enter 2021 and look at a year of Covid-19, I would urge any readers who wish to connect to do so. We have often “instant fanzine” questions, where you can write your thoughts on a subject if it interests you, and we do welcome enquiries of interest and we’re happy to share what we are doing and working on. Our next issue is going to be about *Crafting in Covid*, as we have seen many people turn to hobbies and interests, artistic and useful to fill in the spare time that we have had to endure, but making brilliance from that time. If you have started crafting or have developed or created during this time, please do get in touch at journeyplanet@gmail.com.

Indeed, feel free to get in touch if you want, we love hearing from readers, and you never know what crazy ideas we have for the future. Translations and language, Tim Powers, Vietnam and a music theme are all on the agenda. We have pushed *Watchmen*, *Warrior*, and Flann O'Brien out a bit into 2022, for sure as we worked our plans and we have a few other themes that we hope to get to this year.

To our co-editor Chuck and contributors and readers, thank you very much and at these times, we send you best wishes and hope you are well and good.

James

