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"What Camelot Means": Women and LGBTQ+ Authors Paving the Way for a More Inclusive Arthuriana through Young Adult Literature

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**“WHAT CAMELOT MEANS”: WOMEN AND LGBTQ+ AUTHORS PAVING THE
WAY FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE ARTHURIANA THROUGH YOUNG ADULT
LITERATURE**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Jeddie Mae Bristow

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

Arthurian literature has long been regarded as the domain of “dead white men,” dominated by Thomas Malory and Lord Alfred Tennyson. However, since medieval times, women have also been producing Arthurian literature that not only treats the women characters of the story more equitably, but makes social commentary on how the marginalized of their societies are treated. More recently, women and LGBTQ+ authors (basically, authors who are *not* cisgender white men) have answered the call for more diverse Young Adult literature with an Arthuriana that has a place for all, both creating a more diverse and equitable Camelot and giving its marginalized characters, especially young women, the power to change their societies for the better. These women and LGBTQ+ authors of YA Literature are the driving force behind not only a more diverse and accepting Camelot, but a more equitable Arthuriana for all readers and scholars.

KEYWORDS: Arthuriana, young adult literature, women, Camelot, feminism, diversity, inclusion

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addition to my amazing Readers and the English Department faculty at MSU, I would like to thank the following people for their support during the course of my graduate studies: Wendy Bristow, Eden Marrs, Siobhan Mulligan, Abigail Renshouse, Hanna Ward, and Mark Webb for providing support and encouragement through the whole thesis-writing process; Alice Kugler for making room in her life to accommodate me and my education and career goals; and my parents Richard and Alice Bristow, who are thrilled to have another Master's Degree in the family.

I dedicate this thesis to Edward and Richard Bristow, who took me to see *Quest for Camelot* when I was six years old and never once told me I couldn't be a knight if I wanted.

This is all their fault.

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INTRODUCTION

But Mother, I don't want a new dress! I want to save Camelot! If you'd just let me, I know I could find Excalibur all on my own! – Kayley, from *Quest for Camelot* (1998)

Kayley, the protagonist of Warner Brothers' 1998 animated film *Quest for Camelot*, is a spunky young woman who dreams of becoming a knight of Camelot, like her father, the deceased Sir Lionel. Her mother, Lady Juliana, is concerned with her safety, but instead of lingering on the fact that Kayley is a "young girl," her mother emphasizes that King Arthur's knights will find the missing Excalibur "and they'll do it by working together." When Kayley expresses her frustration with being stuck working on the family farm ("Where's the glory in that?") her mother reproves her: "One day you will learn what Camelot means" (*Quest for Camelot*).

Throughout the film, as she does in fact find the missing sword and save Camelot from the power-hungry Sir Ruber, Kayley (and the audience) learns that the "meaning" of Camelot – its strength and solidity as a kingdom – come from cooperation, shared responsibility, and even friendship. Kayley's companions include a two-headed dragon who cannot fly or breathe fire until the heads learn to work together. A handsome hermit named Garrett, who has been an outcast since being struck blind in an accident as a young stable boy at Camelot, reluctantly agrees to help Kayley, and his senses and knowledge of Camelot prove invaluable to rescuing the endangered Arthur. When an injured, despondent Arthur collapses making his own attempt to go after Excalibur, Merlin admonishes, "You must rely on the courage of your people" (*Quest for Camelot*). The Camelot of this film is built on collaboration and the merit of work,¹ as opposed

¹ There is even a redemption arc for a rooster, given preternatural intelligence by Sir Ruber in order to spy on his enemies. The rooster ultimately helps to save Camelot as well.

to conquest and warfare – Kayley never anticipates that being a woman will prevent her from being a knight,² and despite his humble origins as a stable boy, Garrett only gives up on his dream of knighthood after an accident blinds him. Ultimately, after the quest to reunite Excalibur with King Arthur and save the kingdom, both do become knights, but Kayley and Garrett also cement the strength of their own bond by getting married. During the ceremony, Arthur thanks both for the reminder that the strength of Camelot comes “not from its king, but from its people.”

This idealized world, Lady Juliana’s “what Camelot means,” is clearly designed to teach its young audience the important values of friendship and working together toward a common goal. However, it also envisions a Camelot where gender, economic background, and disability are no hindrance to achieving one’s dreams of knighthood, and knighthood itself means protecting and preserving these egalitarian ideals. This revision of the Camelot mythos is no new phenomenon: stories of King Arthur have been used to comment on contemporary social issues for centuries.³ Within the last couple of decades, though, there has been an uptick in contemporary retellings of Arthurian legend by women and LGBTQ+ authors who use “what Camelot means” to wrestle with social issues such as feminism, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and racial and ethnic diversity. In particular, many of these retellings are published under the Young Adult (YA) literature category, aimed at audiences of teens and students. That these retellings are YA is no accident; Steven Wolk writes of the value of YA literature in the high school classroom:

...young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because we can situate this content in the wonderful stories of good books. And within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as they are in endless civic issues. (667)

² It is important to note, however, that there are no other female knights in the film.

³ This will be explored in more detail in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

In other words, YA fiction gives teens and young adults a safe space to wrestle with issues that affect their societies and lives, while also allowing them to see the implications of these issues from an outside perspective. For example, in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) series, readers can see and experience a society dominated by a government-controlled media that focuses on flash and style while ignoring deeper societal issues, without having to actually live in the dystopian world in which the story takes place. This prior, safer, experience can equip students to face the same possibilities in their real lives, giving them language with which to participate in the grander conversation when, perhaps, their own government attempts to control media.

In the relatively new phenomenon of YA Literature, women and LGBTQ+ authors have found a unique medium in which to wrestle with contemporary issues and, perhaps more importantly, to have teens and young adults, who stand to inherit the society which they critically examine, wrestle with these issues in a safe, fictional space. Building on the historical precedent of using reinterpretations of Arthurian legend to comment on social issues, contemporary Arthurian YA Literature stands to be a significant force for feminism, inclusion, and diversity in literature and society as a whole. While cisgender men have written literature for this social change, and have been writing Arthurian literature as well, it is women and LGBTQ+ authors, particularly within the last decade, who stand out in these retellings of the Arthur story for their focus on the women characters and their relationships to each other, their inclusion of characters of different sexualities and abilities, and their emphasis on diversity and equity among characters of varying backgrounds. These new revisions of the Arthur story not only stand as powerful examples of YA literature for social change, but also take their place in a long tradition of using Camelot to comment on contemporary society. These revisions declare that the stories of King

Arthur and his world are for all who would claim and enjoy them, instead of only “belonging” to writers of a certain background.

This thesis explores YA retellings of Arthurian literature by women and LGBTQ+ authors, discussing how these authors use the medium to comment on social justice issues contemporary to the works’ publication, especially issues related to the treatment of historically marginalized groups. In the first chapter, I will examine the historical precedent for using Arthurian literature to promote or criticize social justice issues in the medieval, Romantic, and Victorian periods. If we think of the Camelot mythos as a model for society, where many men wrote in order to preserve the social order they idealized through King Arthur, we understand that women writers used the guise of Arthurian literature to envision a more progressive society: a model of what their society *could be* rather than what it *was*. They make extensive commentary on not only the treatment of women in society, but also the treatment of the poor by the wealthy.

In Chapter 2, I will explore Arthurian literature by women as it reflects Third-Wave Feminism of the late 1900s and early 2000s, touching on Marion Zimmer Bradley’s groundbreaking *Mists of Avalon* (1982) and moving to YA retellings by women who followed in her footsteps in the first decade of the 2000s. Finally, Chapter 3 will focus on the Arthurian YA Literature of 2010 to 2020, in which this theme of social justice appears most fully formed. In these chapters, I will examine the most prominent social issues that appear in Arthurian literature written by women and LGBTQ+ authors during the time period. The thesis as a whole traces a shift in the social justice issues addressed by the Arthurian revisions. Women writers working in the late 1900s underscored the damage done to women (and men) in a male-dominated society, while for authors from the early 2000s the outlook is more hopeful: they imagine opportunities for girls to step into more powerful roles within the legend. In the decade between 2010 and

2020, Camelot finally becomes a place where all, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, and ability, are welcome and empowered.

As anyone who studies retellings of Arthur can attest, there are a myriad of texts to choose from in a project like this one. I selected my texts based on authorship and when they were published, focusing on authors who were either women or gender nonconforming, especially as they have dominated Arthurian retellings in the past decade. While I know there are many texts published by independent, unagented authors that would fit into my research, I have chosen not to include works that have been independently published, as opposed to those put forth by a major publishing house, because I want to focus on books with a wider readership, thus increasing their societal impact. I also focus on novels marketed towards teens and young adults, the YA genre, because it is YA novels that dominate pop culture,⁴ and it is YA that is the driving force behind more diversity and inclusion in literature and publishing, at least in the past few decades.

⁴ According to a 2015 study, Children's and YA Literature represented a \$677.1 million industry (McNeill), while one-fourth of the *Forbes* top paid authors for 2015 were YA writers, whose success largely hinged on movie productions of their books (Robehmed).

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS FOR TREATMENT OF THE MARGINALIZED IN HISTORIC ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

Before delving into contemporary Arthurian literature, establishing the historical precedents set by early versions of the story by men will illuminate the changes made by later women and LGBTQ+ writers. Though there is no “original” Arthurian canon, popular texts such as the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Thomas Malory, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson often serve as the basis of contemporary Arthurian knowledge. Whether an author intends it or not, literature is always a reflection of the society in which the author exists, and often legends are used to comment on that society, while letting the author write a story or poem, instead of a political essay. In her book *Women Writers and Nineteenth Century Medievalism*, Clare Broome Saunders goes so far as to argue that women medievalist scholars, poets, and fiction writers in the nineteenth century experienced the genre of Arthuriana differently than men, and were able to make commentary on their own social predicaments through the veil of medievalism. The same is true for medieval women’s versions of the Arthur legend, though the writers and sources are fewer.

The featured, named women of Arthur’s stories typically fall into one of two categories: arcane magic users or enchantresses such as Morgan la Fey, and mundane non-magic users such as Guinevere. All the women characters discussed here belong to some level of nobility, whether they are queens themselves, daughters of kings, daughters of lords, or simply hold some position at court. This exclusion is characteristic of medieval romances, where “noble birth is integral to success, and there is no interest in the lives of other classes” (Larrington 2); the socioeconomic status of these women does not tend to change until writers begin retelling their stories in the

twenty-first century. These women, and indeed the majority of Arthurian characters, are also largely presumed to be straight and white by writers and readers until the twenty-first century. These socioeconomic, sexual orientation, and racial distinctions are important because they reflect the power and values of the storyteller and the society which they inhabit. The socioeconomic, sexualities, and racial groups that are *missing* speak as loudly as those represented to the values of the storyteller.

Section 1: Arcane Women

The portrayal of women in medieval literature is often unflattering, if not downright unpleasant. In her book *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, Carolyne Larrington pays special attention to the ways the magic-using women of Arthuriana are portrayed, since “as early as the second and third centuries, the theologian Tertullian declared that demons were the source of all magical knowledge in women” (10). As a result of the supposed demonic source of magic, the women who used magic, such as Morgan la Fey, tend to function as villains in the story. In a description of Morgan from twelfth century German poet Hartmann, her magic is directly associated with being “greatly in defiance of God” and that “the Devil was her companion” (Hartmann). In a society where the power structure was dominated by men, the warning against women reaching for their own power, magical or otherwise, is clear: the punishment for using magic often included losing one’s desirability to men. Larrington points out a story from the *Prophesies de Merlin*, a text from the 1270s, in which Morgan is forced to remove her clothes in a magic contest between herself and the “Dame d’Avalon.” It is revealed that Morgan’s use of magic has caused “sagging breasts and the skin of her belly drooping to the ground” (Larrington 24). This shames Morgan, but it is worth noting that sagging breasts and belly are perfectly natural signs

of women aging – the punishment for using magic has become a caricature of the natural aging process in women.

Morgan la Fey is not the only Arthurian, magic-using woman to have been vilified by medieval writers; Nimue, a student of Merlin, is also disparaged for her role in the man's downfall. While Merlin suffers little to no divine consequence for his magic use, especially in comparison to those suffered by Morgan la Fey, his position of power over Nimue gives him opportunity to abuse her. According to Malory, "...Merlin would let her have no rest, but always he would be with her" (99) and "...always Merlin lay about the lady to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him...for she was afeard of him because he was a devil's son" (100). Nimue stays with Merlin in order to gain power that he can give her, but it seems to be at a terrible cost to herself. Finally, she seals Merlin into a tomb of stone, where he dies, and Nimue becomes the villain for taking Arthur's advisor and source of masculine-approved magic from him. Malory may be making her out to be manipulative and power-hungry, a woman who turned to violence as soon as power was granted to her, but how many victims of sexual harassment and assault would feel justified, even vindicated, by imprisoning their abusers?

Section 2: Mundane Women

Women who do not use magic in the Arthurian universe, while not vilified in the same way as their counterparts who grasp at supernatural power beyond their assigned roles, are still scrutinized through an often unflattering lens in their own struggles for and against the powers of their world. Their notoriety is often most closely tied with their relationships to the men in their worlds, instead of any power or accomplishment they might have achieved on their own. Queen Guinevere is most famous for her marriage to Arthur, but also for her role in the fall of his

kingdom, as her name is linked in scandal most infamously to Sir Lancelot's and Sir Mordred's. Elaine of Astolat, the Lady of Shalott, is also best known for her connection to Sir Lancelot, who is also the source of her destruction. These two women, lacking supernatural abilities, hold even less power in historical versions of their stories than the aforementioned enchantresses. In the hierarchy of medieval romance, these characters are somewhere near the bottom.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, while dedicating only two sentences to Guinevere's role in the fall of Arthur's kingdom compared to the paragraphs describing the battle, paints a picture of a queen that is as guilty as Mordred, the king's nephew. In *The History of the Kings of Britain*, he writes that, when Mordred seizes the crown while Arthur is away, Guinevere has "broken the vows of her earlier marriage" in order to "live adulterously" with him (257). Monmouth, of course, gives the reader no clue as to whether this Mordred's relations to Guinevere were consensual or not; he only records the results. Guinevere here is treated less like a person in her own right than simply a piece of Arthur's domain; the seizing of Arthur's queen along with his crown is a double insult to Arthur, and doubly cements Mordred's newfound power. Then, when the tide of battle turns against Mordred, she flees to a nunnery and takes vows, "promising to lead a chaste life" (259). Such chastity and entering a life of service to the church speaks of redemption, atoning for sins that have caused her to "despair." Arthur seems to have trusted her enough to give her responsibility to watch over the kingdom with Mordred while he is gone (238), so she may feel some responsibility for both his and Mordred's ultimate downfalls. But the church might also bring her peace in another sense: it is one of few places in Guinevere's world where she is free from men trying to marry her for their own gain.

In Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, published 1485, young Arthur is warned against marrying Guinevere from the start by Merlin: "[he] warned the king covertly that Guenever was

not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again” (78). Arthur praises Guinevere as “valiant” and “fair,” but he spends more time telling Merlin about the “Table Round” in Leodegrance’s possession, which formerly belonged to Arthur’s father Uther. When Arthur marries Guinevere despite Merlin’s warning, the famous Round Table is sent along as a dowry, along with a hundred knights. This raises the question: how much of Arthur’s motivation in marrying Guinevere was the desire to win back his father’s famous Round Table? Alternatively, did Leodegrance only offer the Round Table to Arthur in exchange for the advantageous marriage for his daughter? Leodegrance even acknowledges that the gift of the Table will please Arthur more than land, and the Table means that he will not have to give up any of his own land to Arthur (79). Malory does not answer these questions, but Merlin’s warning makes it clear from the beginning that he considers Guinevere to be detrimental to Arthur’s kingdom.

In Malory’s work, which includes the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the queen is also treated like a chess piece in the game of power between Arthur, Lancelot, and Mordred. This time, the discovery of her affair with Lancelot prompts Arthur to attempt to burn the queen alive (839). When she is rescued by Lancelot, Lancelot fights and kills several of Arthur’s knights, including Sirs Gaheris and Gareth, two of Mordred’s brothers, although Malory does specify that the deaths of these two knights was accidental (840). King Arthur takes this as a reason to go to war against Lancelot, who does return Guinevere to her husband by order of the Pope, though this does not stop the fighting (853). Then, left in charge in Arthur’s absence, Mordred fools the kingdom into thinking that Arthur has died, making him king, and attempts to marry her in order to solidify his claim to power. She is clever enough to deceive and escape him, and locks herself and her ladies in the Tower of London (871), but then Malory does not

mention her again until the battles between Arthur, Lancelot, and Mordred are all over, Arthur and Mordred both dead, and she emerges from the Tower in order to enter a nunnery with her ladies (884). Malory makes sure to mention that “great penance she took, as ever did sinful lady in this land,” indicating that Guinevere felt great responsibility for the violence that had ravaged the kingdom. Still, it is difficult to summarize Guinevere’s role in the Fall of Arthur’s kingdom as put forth by Malory, as her “role” is mostly that she is passed around between powerful men like a trophy to be won. She is a flawed character, but perhaps does not deserve the weight of Arthur’s wars on her shoulders.

Malory also sets a precedent for Guinevere to be a foil set against other women in the Arthurian story, such as Elaine of Astolat, a trope which continues into early twenty-first century literature.⁵ It can be argued that in the original, medieval versions of Elaine’s story, the character is used only to further and expose an important plot point: that Lancelot cannot love Elaine because he is in love with Guinevere, a fact that will eventually tear Arthur’s kingdom apart. Malory also sets up Elaine’s virtue as a contrast to the flaws of Guinevere, who is jealous and “wrathful” when she learns of the story of Lancelot and Elaine. Elaine’s death serves to foreshadow the death and destruction that this affair will ultimately bring to Arthur’s kingdom. In both the Italian and French texts where she makes her first appearances, Elaine is not even given a name, called only by her father’s barony and remembered only for dying for lack of Lancelot’s love. It is Thomas Malory who gives Elaine her first name and develops her as a character (Castleberry).

Despite Malory’s penchant for going out of his way to describe Lancelot in a positive light even when the knight’s actions might be less than chivalrous, he is the first medieval author to develop Elaine as a character rather than a plot point on the way to exposing Lancelot’s affair

⁵ This will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

with the queen, and the first to give her a first name. For him, Elaine represents the ideal, faithful medieval woman. When Lancelot encounters Astolat, he is in disguise, as he does not want to be seen competing in a tournament against Arthur. Elaine, who falls for Lancelot at first sight, entreats him to wear her favor in his competition. He initially refuses, as he wears no woman's favor into tournaments (perhaps because he cannot wear the favor of the queen without exposing their connection?) but then realizes that he could use Elaine's favor as part of his disguise (765). Gawaine later tells Elaine that the wearing of her favor is more than Lancelot has ever done for any woman (775), which inspires Elaine to ride out to rescue and heal the injured Lancelot, whom Gawaine seeks. However, Guinevere also discovers that Lancelot has worn another woman's favor to battle, now that his secret is out, and Malory notes that "she was nigh out of her mind for wrath" (776). Malory expounds on Elaine's virtues as she tends to the wounded Lancelot (having taken on the quest set on Gawaine by Arthur): she is "passing fair" and "well taught," as well as mentioning she "did ever her diligent labor night and day... there was never child nor wife more meeker to her father and husband than was the Fair Maiden of Astolat" (780), a description that sets her up as a contrast to flawed Guinevere, as the queen is apparently "ofttimes displeased" with Lancelot, and in this episode she claims "I am right sorry an he shall have his life" (782). Here Elaine serves to exemplify the medieval role for women, faithful and kind where Guinevere is neither, and yet she still suffers. When she dies for lack of Lancelot's love, Elaine praises him as a "peerless" man in the letter she leaves in her boat for all of Camelot to read.

In fact, the story of Elaine of Astolat also serves to exemplify the Victorian social expectations for women in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which remains a well-known source for Arthurian legend. Tennyson wrote the poem "Lancelot and Elaine" in the last half of the 19th

century, which means Elaine is held to Victorian English societal standards. The poem, originally titled only “Elaine” before the poet added Lancelot to the beginning in a revision, clearly uses Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* as a source text, as the poem closely follows the events of Malory’s version of the story. Tennyson follows Malory’s example of going out of his way to paint Lancelot in a positive light, despite his actions, while condemning their women characters. In both Malory’s text and Tennyson’s, the women are reminiscent of JM Barrie’s fairies from *Peter Pan*: “Fairies have to be one thing or the other, because being so small they unfortunately have room for one feeling only at a time” (63). Both Guinevere and Elaine are ruled by their emotions, and from the very first stanza of Tennyson’s poem, Elaine is described using a variety of words that emphasize her Victorian virtues: she is “Elaine the fair” (line 1), and “the lily maid” (line 2), a title that evokes biblical images of pallor and purity. Later, “she who held her eyes upon the ground” (line 231) in a clear image of modesty as her brothers and father introduce her to Lancelot. Tennyson portrays this young (half the age of Lancelot) and beautiful woman as living in a “fantasy” (line 396) while Lancelot’s shield is left in her care, even though she does not know his name until much later in the poem.

Tennyson gives more of a background for Elaine’s family than does Malory, in order to further set Elaine apart from her peers: while Malory does not tell the reader anything about the Astolat family before Lancelot encounters them, Tennyson writes that the family has had to flee their home before, about ten years before the events of the poem, when Elaine would have been very young (lines 275-278). Since then, the family has lived “apart” and isolated from Arthur’s court (line 283), as evidenced by the fact that they do not recognize Lancelot as they ask him for news of the kingdom. This implies that Tennyson’s Elaine is very isolated; perhaps the only important men in her life are related to her and, with no baroness in evidence, she has been raised

without a mother figure. All of these conditions make her vulnerable, and further lift her pedestal of purity in contrast to the worldly Guinevere. If Tennyson is using Malory as source material, he is going out of his way to separate Elaine from Guinevere. Tennyson draws the same marked contrast between the more virtuous Elaine and the adulterous Queen Guinevere as does Malory: Tennyson's Guinevere is ruled by jealousy, tossing a set of diamonds into a river in a fit of rage over the disguised Lancelot wearing another woman's favor in a joust (lines 1226-1228). But Elaine does not escape Tennyson's Victorian sensibilities either.

In her book *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Stephanie Barczewski draws the connection between the Victorian belief that "domestic peace and harmony translated directly into national security and prosperity" (171) and Tennyson's portrayal of women in his Victorian poetry. "Lancelot and Elaine" was written during the first incarnation of Tennyson's *Idylls*, in the late 1850s, against a backdrop of the Crimean War, the debate of women's power of divorce in parliament, and Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House" poem. While Tennyson speaks at length about Elaine's purity and virtue, he also clearly draws attention to her non-domestic behavior: she leaves her home to nurse Lancelot's battle wound, much like Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War. When her father tries to stop her, she says, "Father, you call me wilful, and the fault/Is yours who let me have my will" (lines 745-746). It is also Elaine who makes romantic advances towards Lancelot, not the other way around, when he refuses her even offering to be his lover outside of marriage: "I care not to be wife,/But to be with you still, to see your face,/To serve you, and to follow you thro' the world" (lines 932-934). Tennyson acknowledges Elaine's supposed virtue, and upon her death he describes the trappings of the boat that will carry her body in great detail, which may indicate that she deserves queenly raiment more than Guinevere, who throws out the valuable diamonds

in a storm of anger. However, Elaine still stands as a cautionary tale for young women: even if Elaine was virtuous, she still stepped out of her place, and paid for it with her life.

Section 3: Revisions by Women Writers

It is less the medieval scene that suppressed the role of women in Old French, than modern canon formation which has devalued their importance in creating a literature of dialectical dissonances within medieval culture. – Stephen J. Nichols, from “Medieval Women Writers: Aisthesis and the Powers of Marginality.”

Stephen J. Nichols draws attention to dichotomy that has existed since the Middle Ages, and that, one could argue, continued to exist throughout the Romantic and Victorian eras (and to, perhaps, to today): women, though historically marginalized, “managed to effect changes in cultural perspective by their peculiar double relationship to literary production: active – as readers and writers – and passive – as patrons and poetic theme” (77). Women writers who take on Arthurian literature, challenging the stereotypes and roles for women within this particular canon, also managed to use the stories to comment on their own allotments in society. They also often show more sympathy to women characters than their male counterparts, paving the way for their contemporaries to find allies where previously they existed as villains.

Marie de France deals extensively with the relationships of men and women in the “courtly love” genre in her *Lays*, and in particular makes a complex, well-educated criticism of both the genre as a whole and the society in which it existed in the twelfth century. “The Lay of Gugemar” contains a “happily ever after” wherein a young adulterous queen (not Guinevere) is rescued and lives the rest of her life with the knight Gugemar who is much younger than her husband. K. Sarah-Jane Murray uses the term *mal mariée* to describe this sort of suffering

heroine, who is trapped in a loveless marriage. Marie's heroine here might have found a kindred spirit in Guinevere, who was trapped in a marriage with a man she did not love, possibly married to him only because her father offered him a Table. This sort of marriage is one that Marie de France deals with extensively in her work: "Many of Marie's poems, especially *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, critique the uncharitable and unchristian marriages in which the female protagonists are trapped, ultimately vindicating the lovers and sanctioning the extramarital affair" (Murray 15).

Yet Marie de France also does her share of critiquing extramarital affairs, as in "The Lay of the Nightingale." In this poem, the love affair between a married woman and her husband's friend and neighbor ends with the death of an innocent bird, and with all three involved characters the worse off for it. The difference between the message of "Nightingale" and "Gugemar." As Murray points out, the characters of "Nightingale" are all engaged in selfish, self-serving love: the wife seeking an emotional affair with her neighbor with no evidence that her husband is bad, the neighbor who pursues an adulterous affair with his friend's wife, despite the biblical Commandment to the contrary (which Marie alludes to in the text), and the husband becomes so wrathful at the thought of his wife's infidelity that he brutally murders the innocent bird which his wife blamed for her sleeplessness (15). Viewed through this argument, that all three of these characters are ultimately responsible for the death of the bird, one might construe that all three of the characters involved in the Arthurian love affair are equally responsible for the fall of Arthur's kingdom: Guinevere for seeking an affair with Lancelot, Lancelot for pursuing (and consummating, unlike the characters in "Nightingale") an affair with his friend's wife, and Arthur, for his violent response to Lancelot that, according to Malory, left his kingdom vulnerable to usurpers. What is important to note, however, is that although she still condemns

the affair, Marie places the blame for its consequences on the men as well as the woman involved.

Women in the Romantic and Victorian periods continued in Marie de France's footsteps as they rewrote the women of Arthurian literature in order to comment on the inequities of their own societies. In *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Adaptation Studies*, Yvonne Griggs breaks down three main types of adaptive work: the "classical treatment," where an adaptation seeks to remain as faithful to the source material as possible, "re-visioning," which makes changes to the source text's "thematic and ideological preoccupations," and "radical rethink," where there is a definitive move away from the source text (11). In Romantic and Victorian England, a re-discovery of Arthurian texts and interest in national identity prompted by colonialism and war led to a surge of "re-vision" adaptations of Arthurian legends. That is, there were changes made to the legends in order to call attention to and comment on societal conditions, in particular the role of women. Women poets during the Romantic period were at the forefront of this commentary, using characters like Guinevere and Elaine of Astolat to point out the ill treatment of the marginalized decades before Tennyson published his *Idylls*. In fact, Katie Garner argues, women Romantic writers "helped to create a reading public ready for Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*" (262). One could argue that Tennyson owes much of his acclaim for the *Idylls* to the very women who wrote in the ladies' annuals that he despised.⁶

One important aspect of the "re-vision" texts by women Romantic writers is those women's relative distance from the text in comparison to largely male medieval scholars at the time. Saunders goes so far as to argue that women medievalist scholars, poets, and authors in the 19th century experienced the genre revival differently than men and were able to make

⁶ Both Wordsworth and Tennyson disdained these publications as "trash" and "vapid" for their light material, but both men also published works in similar annuals (Garner 221).

commentary on their own social predicaments through the veil of medievalism. This difference often came from lack of access to the medieval texts, whether by gatekeeping male scholars or by lack of education required for translation. Garner notes, “Women writers were doubly distanced from Arthurian romance, but it is from this vantage point that a new perspective on the legend comes into being” (174).

There were a few glimmers of sympathy for women from male writers: William Morris, a prolific writer of Arthurian literature during the nineteenth century, published a *Defence of Guenevere* (1858) that was lauded by women (Saunders 145). She was trapped in a loveless marriage and seemed to have little power to change her own circumstances, perhaps tortured by idleness and boredom. Writers like Tennyson, on the other hand, portrayed Guinevere in a negative light, perhaps driven by her adulterous affair with Lancelot, which many thought catalyzed the fall of Arthur’s kingdom. Still, while some writers were sympathetic to Guinevere and her plight, her actions flew in the face of Romantic and Victorian sensibilities. Elaine of Astolat, on the other hand, becomes the crux of her own subtle dichotomy by her supposed virtue. Saunders notes that Elaine was a more “acceptable” subject for illustration and painting in the Romantic and Victorian Eras, as her story would not “corrupt” the women who looked upon her countenance in the drawing room (121). She was a popular character for women to write about, beginning with Louisa Stuart Costello in 1829 and she remained a popular character until the 1920s. This dichotomy of worldly Guinevere vs “pure” Elaine exemplifies the differences in how men and women wrote re-visions of Arthurian legend to fit their own ideals of society.

Louisa Stuart Costello’s 1829 poem “The Funeral Boat,” follows Elaine from her instructions as to what to do with her body when she was dead until her silent boat makes its way to Camelot. This is one of the first recorded publication of Arthurian literature written by a

woman in a literary annual (Garner 221). Notably, Costello lays the blame for Elaine's death squarely at Lancelot's feet. The poet paints the knight as a womanizer, describing the "store he had of gentle words/To charm a lady's ear" (lines 88-89) and giving him a ribald song he sings to blushing ladies that begins, "My sword is rustling in its sheath" (line 104), and continues, "My only enemy is love!" (line 111). Her poem ends with Lancelot admitting his guilt and sentencing himself to "Twelve moons my penitence shall see...For her dear sake who died for me" (lines 190, 192). Also interestingly, in Costello's poem Queen Guinevere is not portrayed negatively; instead, the queen chastises Lancelot and sheds tears for the dead woman in the boat. There is also no evidence in Costello's poem that the Queen and Lancelot are lovers, unlike other versions of the story. This gives the queen the freedom to sympathize for the plight of the dead woman: "Sir Launcelot/How fond a heart thy vows betray'd/Vows, lightly made, and soon forgot!" (lines 154-156). Saunders labels this poem as "proto-feminist" (125) in nature, based on Costello's assignation of blame for Elaine's death on Lancelot. Her Guinevere, also, stands as an ally to Elaine's victimhood, instead of Lancelot's jealous lover.

Letitia Elizabeth Landon is another notable woman writer who tackled Elaine's narrative in her poem "A Legend of Tintagel Castle." She would probably have been familiar with Costello's work, as the two poets frequently published in the same volumes (Saunders 126). Like Costello, Landon's work could be described as "proto-feminist" and she frequently used her "love" poetry to comment on the violence of the Napoleonic Wars (47). "Tintagel Castle" also pushes the limits of 19th century sensibilities, as it clearly describes Lancelot abandoning Elaine after a sexual encounter. She is not named in Landon's poem, but we know the character when, at the end of the poem, her body floats down the river to Camelot in a boat pulled by two swans. In Landon's poem, Elaine is a "wood nymph" who leads Lancelot to an "odorous cave" (line 25)

where the two stay and “might have been happy” (line 29) if not for “the sound of the trumpet” (line 33) which leads Lancelot back to the war, the male world, and the queen. The woman is left “as aye woman will be,/Who trusts her whole being, oh, false love, to thee” (lines 35-36). What was life like for a woman in 1833 who was abandoned by a man, especially a woman who was no longer a virgin? This poem highlights the cost of love for women, as well as the double standard set by Landon’s society: Lancelot’s sexual freedom to love and leave while the woman pines and later dies, alone. “Tintagel Castle” ends with Lancelot weeping with regret, and with a comment from the poet: “Too late we awake to regret—but what tears/Can bring back the waste to our hearts and our years!” (lines 59-60).

Despite Tennyson, women still continued to fight for the women characters of Arthur. In the late 1800s, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote a short story titled “The Lady of Shalott” in which the titular character is an invalid living in London squalor. It is a Dickensian commentary on the ills of society, which ends with the “Lady’s” death not from unrequited love, but because medical help cannot reach her in time after a traumatic event: the breaking of the mirror which is the only way the bedridden “Lady” can see anything of the outside world. But the damage from writers like Tennyson portraying the women of Arthur so negatively endured: in the early 1900s, even women writers disparaged characters like Elaine, painting her as silly and naive. In 1908, LM Montgomery wrote a humorous episode in *Anne of Green Gables* with Anne Shirley swearing off the word “romantic” after her misadventure in reenacting Elaine’s narrative, which ended with her sinking into a river, clinging to a bridge until help reached her. In 1921, Aline Kilmer published a poem called “For All Ladies of Shalott” that seems to chastise the “Lady” of Tennyson’s poem. Elaine does not even escape this negative reputation in the 2000s, despite the main character of Meg Cabot’s 2006 novel *Avalon High* explicitly being named after her, which

will be discussed in later chapters of this work. Since Elaine was not a “strong” woman and had been painted as a Victorian ideal, she faded in popularity and from Arthurian literature by women.

CHAPTER 2: LATE 1900s AND EARLY 2000s ARTHURIAN LITERATURE BY WOMEN

In the latter half of the 20th century, the literary world saw a surge in genre fiction as it was progressively taken more seriously, thanks to renewed interest in works by authors such as JRR Tolkien and Terry Pratchett. Science fiction and fantasy in particular, often lumped together in genre fiction discussions, saw a rise in popularity on screen as well as in print. As is typical of fiction, these works tend to be reflective of the worldview of the authors, whether for good (as in Pratchett's tackling of social justice issues in his *Discworld* series) or ill (as in imperialist overtones in science fiction discussed in Aaron Santesso's article "Fascism and Science Fiction"). Women writers of genre fiction, including genre fiction for Young Adults, rose in popularity as well, such as Ursula K. LeGuin and Anne McCaffrey. And women were commenting on social issues reflective of their views and societies as well, a trend most notably exemplified by Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1982 *The Mists of Avalon*. Along with this rise of genre fiction, Arthurian fiction beyond reprints of Malory and *The Boy's King Arthur* began to appear on shelves.⁷ One immensely significant work in this genre is *The Mists of Avalon*. In fact, Roberta Davidson credits *The Mists of Avalon* for a growing trend of Arthurian fiction written by women to be told by a woman's voice, rather than the men's (7). Although it could not be categorized as Young Adult fiction, I include the novel here because of its importance in the history of contemporary adaptations of the Arthurian tradition.

⁷ Anne McCaffrey also released Arthurian fiction at this time, though her book *Black Horses for the King* does not feature the women of the Arthurian legend, and instead focuses on the advent of shoeing warhorses in Arthur's kingdom. Therefore, I have not elected to include it here.

Section 1: *The Mists of Avalon*

The Mists of Avalon, in addition to sparking a wave of Arthurian fiction written by women in the 20th century and beyond, also reflects values emerging in culture from Second-Wave Feminism in the latter half of the 20th century, in particular dealing with women's social positions. The book examines a world where power structures are in the process of shifting from women to men, as Second-Wave Feminism assumed that in "societies that divide the sexes into binarized cultural, economic, or political spheres, women are less valued than men" (*Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender* 540). The narrative tells a story of women mourning that loss of power, in the case of Viviane, or who are psychologically weakened by internalized misogyny, as in the case of Gwenhwyfar. However, it also inherits the trait of "normative" Second-Wave Feminism in that its characters suffer from profound individualism: each woman fights her own battle, alone, and often to the detriment of the others. The novel also ignores the plight of other marginalized groups, in that there is little or no discussion of characters of color or even featured characters that are from lower social strata. It is the ignoring of these societal issues, which are tied to women's rights, that dishonors the women of color leaders of the Second-Wave movement, present since the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1966 (Thompson 338).

While this book is pivotal in the formation of Arthurian literature by women, it is also important to keep in mind the problematic nature of the author. Bradley's daughter, Moira Greyland, accuses her of abuse, and of facilitating her husband, Walter Green, sexually abusing other children (Flood). In an article for the *Washington Post*, Alyssa Rosenberg draws a connection between a 1998 deposition by Bradley, where the author appears to "reject any element of coercion" in a sexual encounter between a very young teenager and an adult, and an

incident from *Mists of Avalon* in which a Beltane ritual, observed by her protagonist Morgaine, involves a “little blue-painted girl” being raped by a much older man, and is described as an “irresistible force of nature” (Bradley 178). The impact of *Mists of Avalon* on Arthurian literature is undeniable, but the book created its own problematic heritage and has been rejected by contemporary readers.

Written between Second- and Third-Wave feminism, Bradley’s book turns the Arthurian legend around to focus on the women of the story: Arthur’s mother Ygraine, The Lady of the Lake Viviane, Queen Gwenhwyfar, conniving Morgause (in this case sister to both Ygraine and Viviane), but most especially Morgaine, Arthur’s sister and mother to Mordred. Though the women never take up arms or go to battle, Bradley’s narrative puts their struggles at the center of the Arthurian legend, instead of the battles and politics of the men involved in the story. For instance, it is Viviane who makes the plot to connect Ygraine and Uther, aided by Merlin, and also Viviane who places Morgaine at the center of a ritual that ends with her ceremonially having sex with Arthur, which ultimately produces Mordred. Then, it is Morgaine’s choices that lead to Mordred growing up under power-hungry Morgause’s influence, and Morgaine who observes and records the shifting power structures as Viviane’s influence with Arthur wanes. Finally, Gwenhwyfar, wracked with guilt over her inability to have children and growing feelings for Lancelot, convinces Arthur to leave behind the druidic religion in favor of Christianity, resulting both in the abandonment of Camelot by the druidic Goddess *and* the famous quest for the Holy Grail.

Spinning the Arthurian legend to be centered on the women of the story is no accident; Bradley’s narrative focuses on the shift from the Goddess, priestess-centered druidic religion of ancient England to the God, priest-centered Catholic religion, citing the damage that the shift

inflicts on the fragile kingdom as it is beset by threats both external (i.e., invading Saxons) and internal.⁸ Perhaps one of the most significant questions that Bradley asks through her book is whether a male-dominated, women-subordinated culture is truly what is best for society, as it had been prevalent in the Western world for centuries. This “flipping the script,” envisioning the shift from a matriarchal society to the patriarchy more recognizable to contemporary readers, to critically examine the power structures of her society exemplifies the Third-Wave feminism movement, which would begin in the decade following the publication of *The Mists of Avalon*.

Bradley does use the world of Arthur to make hefty commentary on the role of women in society, like so many women writers before and after her, and it does not stop with the question of male-centric versus female-centric religion. Morgaine is a few years older than Arthur, and she is seven years old when her mother gives over toddler Arthur to his sister as primary caregiver, so that Ygraine can spend her time with her husband Uther rather than with her children, in whom he has little interest (beyond Arthur being his heir) (Bradley 110). Clearly this is far too great a responsibility to give to a young girl, and Diana L. Paxson poses the possibility that this may have come from Bradley’s own experience raising her younger siblings when she was an adolescent (Paxson 110). But Bradley is by no means alone – older siblings (particularly sisters) taking on parental responsibilities for younger siblings continues to be an issue, so much that in the past twenty years there have been articles in *Time*, *NPR*, and *Psychology Today* about the challenges and detriments of such situations. According to a 2013 study, adult sibling caregivers are the third largest relative caregiver group of children not living with their parents in the United States (Denby & Ayala 193), and that does not consider older siblings taking on raising their siblings when still living with a neglectful parent, as in Morgaine and Arthur’s case.

⁸ Author Linda Windsor, in her *Brides of Alba* series, chronicles the same shift, also centered on female characters (though not the most familiar Arthurian women). However, in her books, the shift in religion (to Celtic Christianity, not necessarily Catholicism) is ultimately for good.

In the context of *The Mists of Avalon*, this one situation alone destroys the child Morgaine's faith in her mother, distorts Morgaine's relationships with other women in her life, makes her unwilling to ask for help when she needs it, and twists her relationship with Arthur. Since these events have far-reaching consequences, affecting the history of Britain as a whole and not just Morgaine personally, Bradley's message on the inequity and folly of young girls raising young siblings is clear.

However, Bradley does not give a satisfying answer to her question of whether a society dominated by women would be more effective or equitable than one dominated by men, as the religion of the Goddess and the conflicts between the women of her story lead to the same sort of bloodshed that they initially want to prevent: Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar are pitted against each other, both for Lancelot's affections and for Arthur's; Ygraine is scorned by her sisters for choosing a life in a nunnery after the death of Uther, isolating (protecting?) herself from the turmoil at court; Morgause is seen as the power-hungry force that drives Mordred to betray his father, as well as scheming against both Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar so that her own son might sit on the throne; Viviane connives and moves people, including Morgaine and Arthur, like pieces on a chess board, using her position as High Priestess and "voice of the Goddess" to justify her actions when the people involved are hurt. The Goddess herself seems to care little that Morgaine and Arthur were driven to an accidental incestuous relationship. Thus, while Bradley's book gives more "screen time" to the women of the story and builds sympathy for the much-vilified Morgan la Fey in Morgaine, *The Mists of Avalon* does not provide much else in the way of empowering and reconciling the marginalized characters of the story to each other. The impact of *The Mists of Avalon* is heavy, as far as women becoming major players in the story of Arthur, and the novel influenced many of the newer authors that will be mentioned later in this

work; however, by pitting women against each other, Bradley creates a world where women must fight not only men but each other in order to gain power.

Bradley's Camelot is not idealized, and it is less a model for society than it is a place where society's ills against women are exposed and forgiven after much strife. It is also important to realize that Bradley herself propagated abuses against her own daughter and acknowledge that her legacy is stained from her own ills. Following *The Mists of Avalon*, however, women's retellings of the King Arthur legend begin to regain their idealized form: either as a conservative remembrance of fictitious "good old days" or as a progressive glimpse into what a more equitable society could be. In the 2000s, as Arthurian YA literature by women (and men) takes flight, this idealized Camelot takes fuller form as a place where women might be welcome in all capacities, though it will still be some time before marginalized groups such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ community are welcomed in.

Section 2: The Early 2000s

The reason I shift here to focus more exclusively on YA literature is that in the early 2000s, many of the Arthurian adaptations were written for young adults. The overarching theme of popular YA literature was that adults had messed up the world, and it was up to young people, teenagers, to fix it. In *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Karen Coats writes that early twenty-first century YA literature wrestles with "anxieties over new technologies, invasive and authoritarian political structures, and environmental devastation" while positing the hope that young people "can succeed and prosper where adults fail" (33). Indeed, this is evident in Arthurian YA literature from the early 2000s onward, as the teenage women characters attempt to remedy the ills that adult society has inflicted on them and their

peers and perhaps save the world in the process. Still, there is a difference in the feminist framework of the works from the decade between 2000-2010 and the works that appear post-2010, as Third-Wave Feminism grew in cultural acceptance. This section of the thesis will highlight the steps taken by authors of Arthurian YA literature in the early 2000s, such as giving their young women characters more agency and power in the overarching narrative, and the steps that they still *needed* to take, which more contemporary writers built on later.

Before discussing Arthurian literature from the early 2000s, I want to clarify the term “Third-Wave Feminism,” as it relates to the feminism that the authors and characters in this literature emulate. In her article “What Is Third-Wave Feminism?” R. Claire Snyder acknowledges that a definition is difficult, as even a definition seems to work against the movement (177), but she ultimately emphasizes that the “Third Wave” reclaims “girlie” culture and pushes for recognition of individual identity (179). This movement seeks to be more inclusive of “identities that previously may have been seen to clash with feminism” (180) as well as allows for inclusion of those who identify as both male *and* female, or neither (175). In short, this is a feminism for all, which not only advocates for equity but allows women to choose for themselves what feminism means.

In the wake of Third-Wave Feminism, the early 2000s saw a rise in “Girl Power” messages in merchandise and media directed towards children and teens (*Britannica*), but one trend that emerged seemed to empower only one “type” of girl. Movies such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *A Cinderella Story* (2004) exemplify this: they often featured some type of “outsider” girl (maybe she was poor at a rich-kid school, or bookish instead of popular, or came from living internationally to a US public school) pitted against some type of “popular” girl (most often blond and a cheerleader), often in competition for status or the

romantic attentions of a male lead. This trope was not limited to the “high school teen movie” genre; characters such as Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series showed the value of book smarts and a “bossy” attitude, validating many young girls along the way, but she also disdains the girls of Hogwarts and her world that are pretty and popular, such as Cho Chang and Fleur Delacour. While this “not like other girls” trope tried to empower girls who felt like they were outsiders because of their appearance or preference for books, it in fact perpetuated internalized misogyny and gender stereotypes. Sian Ferguson writes for *Everyday Feminism*: “When we proudly exclaim that we’re different from ‘other girls,’ we imply that those ‘other girls’ are inferior in some ways. Differentiating yourself from a group, and saying, ‘Hold up! I’m not with them!’ implies that being a part of that group is a bad thing” (3).

The “not like other girls” trope was prevalent in the YA Arthurian literature of the early 2000s as well, as writers trying to empower girls and appeal to “outsiders” echoed the tropes of popular media. Consequently, these books also often replicate the negative consequences of pitting girls against each other: “Characteristics that are traditionally seen as feminine are devalued and seen as subordinate because of it”⁹ (Brennan 9), and girls begin to see other girls as competitors for male attention rather than allies against oppressive circumstances (Adichie). Other scholars have examined this trope in Arthurian literature published before 2010 as well. After a study of seventy-two contemporary works of Arthurian literature by women, Roberta Davidson wrote of her findings:

When Guenevere is bad, she is presented as over-sexed and selfish, sometimes scheming, and always clearly unworthy of Arthur, who is more ‘truly’ in love with the protagonist. She is usually blonde. When the ‘Morgan’ figure is bad, she is over-sexed, selfish, inevitably scheming, and out to use or destroy Arthur. (13)

⁹ One popular trope is the rejection of “feminine” arts like spinning, weaving, and sewing, without acknowledging that without such arts, every character would have to save the world without wearing clothes!

Such portrayals of the women characters of Arthuriana are perhaps less far removed from their medieval stereotypes than their authors would like; they are also reminiscent of Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar being pitted against each other for Lancelot's affections in *The Mists of Avalon*. Still, it is worth examining these feminist revisions of the story in light of the era in which they were written, and because they serve to bridge the gap between the late twentieth century and the Arthurian literature by women of the past decade.

Meg Cabot's 2005 novel *Avalon High*¹⁰ remakes the world of Arthur in a contemporary (mid-2000s) high school.¹¹ The book follows Ellie, who is explicitly named after Elaine of Astolat by her medievalist professor parents, as she transitions into a new high school and ends up unwittingly re-enacting the legend of Arthur, though she is familiar enough with the story that she is aware of her assumed role in it. Throughout, Cabot sets Ellie up to work against both the Guinevere character, Jennifer, and her own namesake: "why did they have to name me after someone so pathetic?" (133).

The story sets Ellie up to replicate the Arthurian narrative in an early twenty-first century high school: almost as soon as Ellie starts at her new school, she is attracted to football player A. William Wagner (A for Arthur, though he is known throughout the book as "Will"), who is unfortunately dating blonde cheerleader Jennifer, who seems to be more attached to Will's best friend Lance (also a football player) than is strictly appropriate. *Avalon High* envisions a world in which the Arthur legend is re-enacted every generation or so, with whoever is in the role of Arthur moving on to be one of the greatest leaders in the world, provided he survives the ordeal. The Merlin character, English teacher Mr. Morton, is also aware of the story, and, presuming Ellie to be the Elaine that tragically falls in love with Lancelot, sets Ellie and Lance to work on a

¹⁰ Cabot is also the author of the book on which the aforementioned *The Princess Diaries* film is based.

¹¹ It is worth noting that *The Mists of Avalon* is listed in "Want to learn more?" section at back of book, along with *Le Morte d'Arthur* and TH White's *The Once and Future King*.

project together (as shocking as it is that he might support the tragedy of Elaine), in hopes that she will distract him from Jennifer. This move is reminiscent of the character of Elaine of Astolat being used in historical texts to expose the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, at least to the reader if not yet to Arthur. Events are set in motion that end with the Mordred character, Will's stepbrother Marco, indeed threatening Will's life in a fit of jealousy after *he* exposes Jennifer's cheating on Will with Lance, and throughout the story Ellie is concerned with the real possibility that she, too, will die, as did her namesake. At the end, Ellie discovers that she is not, in fact, the Elaine of Astolat in the story but instead the Lady of the Lake:¹² she is powerful enough to help save Will, more integral to the story than she originally thought, and who ultimately "brought him home" (288), as her family takes him in after his father kicks him out of his house. Unfortunately, this means that Ellie never thinks of her namesake Elaine as anything other than pathetic, as she has transcended her namesake to become the Lady of the Lake, and Ellie never really reconciles with Jennifer.

Cabot *does* make plenty of social commentary in *Avalon High*, though she makes it more through Will than Ellie, as a way to show the audience the possibility of Arthur existing as someone who wants to build a more ideal world. In a world just a few years post-9/11, Cabot (through Will) reacts against the rise of militarism and nationalism prevalent in predominantly white, privileged communities. For example, Will reacts against the racism of an older couple, chastising them after they tell a different group of teenagers to "go back to their country," evidently judging by the color of the teens' skin and the subpar quality of their boat. From his own boat,¹³ Will tells the couple "...unless you're Native American, I don't think you can go

¹² In 2010, *Avalon High* was adapted into a Disney Channel Original Movie, in which Ellie is called Allie and *she* is the Arthur character, while Mr. Morton is the Mordred character. This is one of few instances where the girl protagonist is representative of Arthur, which will be addressed more later.

¹³ Incidentally named *The Pride Winn*.

around telling people to go back to their country” (140). This incident also cements his image as a gifted leader and speaker for Ellie, and increases her admiration for him.

Additionally, Cabot critiques traditional masculinity through Will’s struggles against the expectations of his father, a successful military man and instructor at the local Naval Academy, a nod to the “warlord” reputation of Uther Pendragon. “I’m not so sure I want to go into the military, you know? Visit new places. Meet new people. And kill them,” he half-jokes with Ellie when they discuss his plans for after high school, as his father wants him to follow his footsteps to Naval Academy (70). Later, in a more serious moment, Will declares “...bending an enemy’s will through military force is the absolute *last* way a nation ought to go about solving their problems” (170). This sentiment, expressed in a post-9/11 United States embroiled in the Iraq War, is remarkable of Cabot, especially as the speaker is meant to be one of the world’s great leaders when he is an adult. It also illustrates how far the character of Arthur has developed, from the warlord who conquered most of Europe in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s text to the wise ruler after Merlin’s lessons about Right being more important than Might in TH White’s *The Once and Future King*. He is becoming more of the ideal leader in Cabot’s work, despite Ellie being caught in a detrimental “not like other girls” trope. In fact, it seems that Cabot’s text almost exists to critique masculinity through Will, rather than the idea of femininity through Ellie.

While more progressive versions of the story existed in this period, some adaptations leaned back into more conservative retellings. *Sword of the Rightful King* by Jane Yolen continues wrestling with a male Arthur being an ideal leader, but Yolen also explores leadership as a partnership between complimentary equals, working to de-emphasize that a good leader is “destined” instead of built. This book is more traditional than *Avalon High*, in that it takes place

in Dark Ages Britain, and most of the characters inhabit their traditional roles in the familiar story (and name spellings). This text sets up a dichotomy of two women working against each other: Morgause uses her magic power throughout to oppose Arthur in favor of her own son Gawaine being on the throne, and Gwenhwyvar, one of the main protagonists, takes a leading role in protecting Arthur, though she is only able to provide this protection while disguised as a boy called “Gawen.” While the two women barely cross paths and do not consciously work one against the other, it is still unfortunate that Gwenhwyvar must disguise her femininity in order to be truly important to Arthur and the nation of Britain as it makes up its mind about his kingship. The book also pits the magic-using woman, Morgause, against Arthur’s kingdom, reinforcing the “evil” stereotype of the Arcane women of Arthur.

The book opens with Morgause, who is at once a former student of Merlinnus, the daughter of Ygraine, and the Queen of Orkney (mother to Gawaine, Agravaine, Gareth, Gaheris, and Medraut), making plans in a tower in her castle. Using “spiteful magicks” to try to establish Gawaine as king instead of Arthur (3), she is established as conniving and power-hungry from the beginning. In addition to magic, she attempts to sow unrest in Arthur’s Camelot by indirectly attacking his legitimacy as High King, not knowing that he is Uther’s son¹⁴ (12). Merlinnus gives us a view of Arthur as a brand-new king: he is twenty-two and struggling with the day-to-day tasks of running a country, including lacking the patience and reading skill to read *any* important papers. Education is fading in this Britain, as Merlinnus laments “It’s just that so few have the ability to read any more. There’s the pity. Or those who *can* read, don’t. Like Arthur” (78). But Merlinnus does have hope for the kingdom under Arthur, who, though young, is already portrayed as on his way to becoming an ideal ruler:

¹⁴ Though Merlinnus knows this (74).

...he works hard. He loves the people. He weeps for the impoverished. Cares for the needy. He longs to right wrongs. Already he is a good king. He could make a great one in time...if he shows an ounce of it [vision], they will all follow him to the ends of Britain, no matter his parentage. (75)

In this passage, we see how Yolen wants to portray a good ruler or leader: they must care for “the people,” and especially the less fortunate. She, through Merlinnus, also works to show that parentage should not matter in whether someone is a good leader or not, taking a sharp left turn from the idea that Arthur is the rightful king because of who his father is. Of course, the audience (and Merlinnus) know that Arthur *is* Uther Pendragon’s son, but Merlinnus conceals that fact from all other characters in this book and emphasizes that Arthur’s *heart* is what qualifies him to rule. Still, he needs some way to prove without doubt to the people of this Britain, and all possible supporters of Morgause’s usurpation of the throne for Gawaine, that Arthur is the right king, so Merlinnus conceives of the legendary Sword in the Stone.

As a complimentary partner in leadership for Arthur, Yolen introduces “Gawen,” who enters the story as a young runaway bent on becoming a knight. However, he is a smallish boy, not built for combat, and Merlinnus immediately notices that he is educated. So instead of training to become a knight, Gawen becomes an assistant to Merlinnus, both in the creation of the sword but also as an advisor to Arthur: “He [Gawen] was attentive, smart, careful, observant, and able to speak to the mighty and the small. He was also, it seemed, becoming a favorite of the king’s, for he made Arthur smile” (211). Here Yolen also names qualities of a good ruler in Gawen, as well as creates a complimentary character to Arthur; Gawen is intelligent and educated enough to handle paper matters that Arthur cannot or will not, and (the audience finds later when Gawen is revealed as Gwenhwyvar) is skilled at running a household (342).

Sword of the Rightful King gives readers a behind-the-curtain glimpse at one of the most famous of Arthurian legends: Arthur pulling the Sword from the Stone. However, in Yolen's book, Merlinus crafts the famous sword, placing it in such a way that only Arthur can pull it free, and hides it in a cave for a shepherd to find. In fairness, Arthur does give others the chance to pull it from the stone to prove themselves. Few do publicly, which shows the faith that Arthur's people have in him already, though Gawen notices fingerprints on the sword in the mornings from those who have tried to pull it by night, where no one can see. But Yolen gives the story another twist: *Gwenhwyvar* pulls the sword from the stone first, by greasing it with butter, then replacing it with another when she cannot get the first back in straight (337). This is only revealed to Arthur and Merlinus at the very end of the book, as it would challenge Arthur's rulership, but it also gives *Gwenhwyvar* a chance to prove that she is worthy enough to rule as well, and once it is revealed that she is a woman of twenty-one instead of adolescent Gawen, Arthur immediately offers marriage, thrilled to have someone so qualified by his side (341).

In this novel, *Gwenhwyvar* gets to make more of her own social commentary on the role of women in her world, despite the limitation of having to disguise her femininity. While the rest of the kingdom is focused on finding a beautiful May Queen for Arthur to marry, Gawen asks, "Are they intelligent? Do they have skills? Can they converse on matters other than embroidery?" to which a fellow page responds "Does it matter?" (272). Additionally, Arthur considers her one of his chief advisors, even after it is revealed that she is a woman (342). Still, *Gwenhwyvar* accomplishes her most important work in this novel disguised as a boy, which may unwittingly put a damper on any feminist message that Yolen may be trying to portray. Unfortunately, being disguised as a boy sets *Gwenhwyvar* apart from the other women at court in such a way that she falls into the "not like other girls" trope.

The trope of having a woman disguised as a man in order to go on adventures is a fairly common one. Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* books (published between 1983 and 1988), Edith Pattou's *Hero's Song* (1991), and the Disney movie *Mulan* (1998) all include examples of women having to disguise themselves as men to either prove that they can follow a man's profession as knights, adventurers, or soldiers, or simply to protect themselves. They are usually revealed as women when either they have proven their worthiness such that they are allowed to exist as women in the profession (as in *Song of the Lioness*) or are unwittingly revealed by an injury or accident (as in *Hero's Song* and *Mulan*). While these narratives can show their young readers or viewers in their audience that girls are just as capable as boys at combat and military prowess, the trope can also lead to devaluing traditionally "feminine" features and activities. These women are heroes because they have left the traditionally feminine behind and gone on to become something "more" than their peers. It can also be incredibly damaging to their relationships with others. Out of the three titles listed here, all of the women protagonists lack close female friendships, even after their reveal of themselves, instead bonding more closely with the men in their lives. The same thing happens to Gwenhwyvar in Yolen's text; while she knows how to communicate with Arthur as a fellow young man, she does not know how to communicate with him as a woman to a man (346), which (along with the glimpse of Lancelot's distress at their wedding) serves to hint at the rocky times to come in the marriage. The fact that these women must disguise themselves as men to prove themselves serves as a branch of the "not like other girls" trope, and while the creators may be trying to prove that women should not *have* to disguise themselves to prove their worth, it can reinforce internalized misogyny as girls read Gwenhwyvar being most useful to Arthur while she is disguised as a boy.

Bridging the gap between the still-problematic re-visions of Arthur by women of the early 2000s and the more equitable literature of the 2010s, *The Book of Mordred* by Vivian Vande Velde is a remarkable example of YA Arthurian literature for multiple reasons, chief of which is that it digs deeply into the character and motivations of Mordred, who is so often the villain of the Arthur narrative. Similar to *The Mists of Avalon*, it is told from the points of view of the women closest to Mordred, each in their own section: Alayna, her daughter Kiera (both inventions of Vande Velde), and Nimue between them. The title is a clear hearkening back to Thomas Malory; there is a fictional epigraph at the beginning which is a letter from a monk describing a conversation with Malory, where he asks why Malory has not included more of Mordred's works in his text: "Even if we didn't have the documentation for it, we'd know that he must have had a reputation as a fair and honest knight, or the others would never have chosen him above Arthur" and later "you don't expect that by ignoring Sir Mordred's more noble endeavors you can make people forget they ever occurred?" (Vande Velde 1). So Vande Velde prepares the reader for a story more sympathetic to Mordred, and perhaps even for a Mordred they do not really know or understand.

The book is split into three sections, one for each of the leading women to have her point of view told. The first section concerns Alayna, a young mother of twenty whose five-year-old daughter Kiera has been kidnapped by an evil wizard. Her home destroyed, she goes to Camelot to seek aid from Arthur's knights to rescue her daughter, but she only succeeds in enlisting her own brother Galen and Sir Mordred, who at this point is in his late teens. The second section follows Nimue, a young woman avoiding Camelot as she has been blamed for Merlin's disappearance. She goes undercover to try to solve a case where local peasant women have been disappearing, despairing of help from Camelot. Mordred makes an appearance in this section,

too, as part of what modern readers would recognize as a sting operation, to foil the plans of a noble named Bayard, connected to the evil wizard from the first part of the book. The third, and by far the longest, section is told from Kiera's perspective, as she is now fourteen and serving as one of Guinevere's maids in the months leading up to the fall of Arthur's kingdom. These three women and Mordred take center stage of the book, with characters like Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot shown as the "old guard," as it were – older adults¹⁵ – who cling to traditions that the younger characters can tell are harmful.

In fact, much of what separates this book from other Arthurian works is its criticism of the notion of chivalry as it relates to ideals of masculinity, along with its social commentary. Instead of Mordred being a conniving villain bent on revenge or his father's destruction, he is a force for social change in a court which resists change, while the common people and younger knights support him. Even when we first meet him at eighteen or nineteen years old, as he discusses strategies for rescuing Alayna's daughter with her brother Sir Galen, he points out the shortcomings of chivalry as Sir Galen insists that sneaking into the castle like "thieves" is not honorable: "Someone who steals a child is a thief ... Does one meet a thief's stealth with chivalry?" (47). And Mordred is not alone pointing out the flaws in chivalric code. As Alayna makes her way towards Camelot, dirty and disheveled after the kidnapping of her child and the burning of her home, she notes why she is not receiving the assistance she needs from the knights on the road: "Knights pledged to help ladies. Nobody expected them to waste their time running errands or settling quarrels for peasant women" (18). This exploration into the shortcomings of chivalric code leads all the characters, but especially Mordred and those closest to him, into the main conflicts of the story.

¹⁵ Nimue notes that Lancelot "had earned his reputation as Arthur's best knight almost a quarter century ago" (174), before any of the main characters of the book were born, which establishes a generational divide between Mordred and his friends and Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot.

Nimue also makes commentary on the status of women in her world as she prepares to make a rescue of missing peasant women, and perhaps most accurately sums up the treatment of women in Arthurian literature during this decade; things are better than they have been, but there is still room for improvement. Even as she hides from Camelot, loving Merlin and having followed his own orders to seal him away but knowing that many at court hate her for it, she notes that the lives of women have somewhat improved during Arthur's reign:

...there had been times that groups of mercenaries or knights could settle on abducting a town's maidens as an afternoon's diversion. But since before Nimue's birth, Arthur had declared that the peasants were *not* to be considered fair game, and she couldn't imagine anyone crossing his code lightly. (107)

However, like Alayna, Nimue is also acutely aware of the limitations of some knights' willingness to serve women, because "...if their sense of chivalry depended on her being attractive, she was lost, for she didn't have the energy to spare" (126). She encounters Mordred with a group of knights, including Sir Lancelot, later in her scheme to rescue the missing peasant women, and immediately notices Mordred's conflict of interest with Lancelot as they fight the nobleman responsible for the kidnappings of the peasant women (and also the kidnapping of Kiera in the previous section). When the beaten nobleman, Bayard, surrenders to the knights, Mordred wants to dispatch him anyway for his crimes, while Lancelot insists that mercy be shown. Mordred calls Lancelot's code of conduct "old fashioned," to which Lancelot responds, "the old way was to look out only for yourself, and if your neighbor had something you wanted and if he wasn't strong enough to keep it from you—well, rotten luck, neighbor. You want to go back to anarchy?" (181).

It is a moral quandary for both the knights and the audience. On the one hand, mercy shown by the strong for the one who has proven weaker than his opponents seems honorable enough. On the other hand, who then shall demand justice for the upset lives of the kidnapped peasant women, who are in some cases rejected by their community for fear that their kidnappers have been with them “indecently”? In this way, Vande Velde highlights that justice for the victims may make the older generation uncomfortable, and she underscores that Mordred has the right of this particular argument: Bayard continues to be a source of conflict for the rest of the novel, even cozying up to Alayna to try to take advantage of Kiera. Mordred could not have known what would transpire, but he knew enough of Bayard’s character to be wary, and the situation emphasizes that perhaps Bayard should have been brought to justice when they had the chance.

Kiera, Alayna’s daughter, gives the audience a front row seat to the downfall of Camelot, as seen by a young woman. Years have passed since her kidnapping brought Mordred into her and her mother’s life, and Kiera is now fourteen years old, which puts both Alayna and Mordred in their late twenties. Kiera is an astute girl and has a position as one of Guinevere’s maids, which (along with her connection to Mordred) puts her in a unique place to observe the fall of Arthur’s kingdom. She has also found connection with Nimue, who has returned to court and begins to teach Kiera how to master her budding prophetic ability, though her relationship with Nimue is somewhat strained, as she views Nimue as a possible romantic rival for Alayna in Mordred’s affections (204). Kiera sees firsthand the consequences of the conflict that exists between Mordred and the older denizens of Camelot, as his frustration with Arthur’s ways and his concern for the growing threat of Saxon invaders brings Camelot to a boiling point.

The fact that she is fourteen, instead of in her twenties like Alayna and Nimue when their stories were told, also gives Kiera a unique perspective as she observes the relationships between the older men and women in her life. Unlike the older two narrators, Kiera does not have a love interest at all, male or otherwise, and it is not something she is interested in pursuing, which is rare enough in YA literature to be worth noting. At fourteen, Kiera is just at the cusp between girlhood and womanhood, old enough to understand the court gossip about Mordred and her mother, and Mordred and Nimue, and Guinevere and Lancelot, but young enough that she wonders “Always men and women and beds ... Surely there was more to growing up than that” (211).

Even as Vande Velde invites her audience to re-examine their preconceived notions of Mordred, she also uses Kiera’s natural kindness and, as an outcast due to her abilities, her innate sympathy for the characters of the story who are traditionally cast out. The author does not force her women characters to choose between being traditionally feminine and being strong in their own right: Alayna has trained with her brother before he became a knight, and is competent in combat and an astute strategist (39) while she is also a young mother who laments that she is not as competent a cook as she would like for her child (5). When she meets the queen in her quest to obtain aid at Camelot, the queen is in the midst of embroidering with her maids, a traditionally womanly art (25), and Alayna instantly feels kinship with the queen, or at least feels that the queen will understand her plight better than the men of Camelot (32).

Guinevere, in particular, receives a more sympathetic treatment at the hand of Vande Velde than she does in many interpretations of her tale. From her introduction during Alayna’s narration of the tale, she retains her dignity throughout, even in the midst of her very public scandal with Lancelot. She is also very brave, placing herself between her maids and the knights

that invade her chambers to catch her and Lancelot together “before anyone had a chance to think that she was the one who most needed protecting” (219). When she is to be publicly burned at the stake for treason, Guinevere does not try to run, or scream, or protest, but only dries her tears before she is accompanied to the stake only by Kiera and Gaheris (228). Of course, it is Lancelot’s dramatic rescue of Guinevere from execution, killing knights in the process, that prompts Arthur to leave Camelot to go to war against Lancelot, leaving Mordred in charge, acknowledged as his son, to fight the approaching Saxons.

Interestingly, even as the author re-examines the characters of Mordred, Nimue, and Guinevere, she relies on the audience’s preconceived interpretations of other more famous women characters such as the Lady of the Lake and Morgan la Fey, as both of these enchantresses do not enter the book until the last fifty pages but still play significant roles in the final battle between Arthur’s and Mordred’s forces. There is not enough time in the narrative to develop them fully as characters, so they remain in their traditional roles: the Lady of the Lake is Good, while Morgan la Fey is Bad, though both try to manipulate the events of the book for their own reasons. Morgan, though ostensibly working with Mordred, causes peace negotiations to end in violence (312), sparking the bloody battle that ends Arthur’s kingdom. Then, when the Lady of the Lake offers passage to Avalon for Arthur and Mordred for healing after they have dealt each other mortal blows, Morgan recalls the Lady’s own offer to take her to Avalon, claiming space in the boat, meaning one of the men will have to stay behind to die. The Lady cannot refuse her (336), and so Mordred stays behind.

Still, Vande Velde’s book ends more happily than one might expect from a book about Mordred. Though Morgan’s greed spurred her into claiming space on the boat to Avalon, there is an implication that Avalon may change her heart (335). And though Mordred does not follow

Arthur to Avalon to be healed, Nimue is able to reach him and heal his own wound in time, leaving him alive, without a kingdom rule, perhaps, but with a second chance at life and happiness (341). Mordred and Alayna are able to declare their love for one another, and possibly live together as a family with Kiera. But the Lady of the Lake has made an offer to Kiera, too: she can go to Avalon and learn to grow her own magical power, away from those who would try to take advantage of her or hurt her for being different. The book ends with Kiera sailing to Avalon without her mother and without Mordred, who has looked out for her for most of her life as a father would (342). Arthur's kingdom is left as Hamlet's Denmark – vulnerable to invaders as its internal power struggles have left vacuums in their wake, but Mordred, Alayna, and their family are finally at peace.

While Vande Velde's interpretation of Arthurian legend does much work in progressing women's roles in the story, it is evident that her main goal is to redeem Mordred and give some reconciliation at the end of this family feud. Much of the book, including two of the narrators, are creations of Vande Velde, but the author makes notes at the back of the book about what she drew from Malory for her telling of the fall of Arthur's kingdom, which mostly comes through Kiera's eyes. She emphasizes that Arthur and Mordred were both hoping for peace at the end, and that the reason there was bloodshed at the peace negotiations was because of a knight drawing his sword on a snake that had bit him (Malory 878). However, Vande Velde places Morgan la Fey at this final battle, who introduced her pet snake "Buttercup" to Kiera the day before the battle, and Kiera sees that it is *this* snake that causes the violence at the negotiations (312). Thus, Mordred is absolved of some guilt in the reader's eyes, and his is able to make some sort of peace with his remaining family.

Avalon High, *Sword of the Rightful King*, and *The Book of Mordred* are all significant in their steps forward for women in Arthurian literature, as well as their commentary on societal issues of the early 2000s. They build on the foundation laid by *Mists of Avalon* by featuring the women of Arthuriana as protagonists, and by giving them more agency and power in their own stories. However, *Avalon High* and *Sword of the Rightful King* both fall into the problematic “not like other girls” trope, and in all three books the characters with the most political and social power continue to be the men, whether Arthur or Mordred. These three books also do not explicitly include characters of color,¹⁶ LGBTQ+ characters, or characters with disabilities, leaving an unfortunate lack of diversity in their feminism. Still, Cabot, Yolen, and Vande Velde use their feminist retellings to pass an important baton to the authors of the 2010s and beyond, where a more diverse Camelot is more fully realized.

¹⁶ Although Chris Tavarez, a Black actor, plays Lance in the Disney Channel movie based on *Avalon High*, the character is described as “blond” with a “golden brow” in the book (49), so this appears to be a casting choice made by filmmakers, not author Meg Cabot.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY YA ARTHURIAN LITERATURE, 2010 AND BEYOND

Social justice movements of the 2010's pushed for more diverse representations in literature, music, and film, in order to build a more equitable world for marginalized groups such as women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. Hashtags such as #MeToo¹⁷ and #BlackLivesMatter¹⁸ used viral fame on the internet to expose longstanding injustices, forcing the world to acknowledge inequities that went ignored and unpunished. More diverse representation in media emerged as a possible solution to these injustices, especially in regard to the racial disparity in literature as a whole, as well as in literature for young people. Again, the internet provides a platform for exposing inequalities in the world of literature: in both 2015 and 2018, infographics were released by illustrator David Hyuck and library instructor Sarah Park Dahlen which showed the disparity of racial representation in children's books, which is often indicative of representation in Young Adult literature as well. Predictably, the majority of lead characters in children's books proved to be white (50% of the books published in 2018), while the next largest representative group was that of animals or animated objects (27%), with children of color making up only 23% of lead characters in children's books (Hyuck). In the graphic, children (and animals) are shown looking into mirrors sized proportionally to their representation, to depict the readers seeing themselves and their experiences (or not) reflected in

¹⁷ The movement, starting with the exposure of Harvey Weinstein in October of 2017, created a "norms cascade" of women and a few men bravely sharing their stories of sexual abuse alongside the viral hashtag (Salam). The movement brought to light the rampant abuse that still exists in 2018, and redoubled efforts to bring perpetrators of abuse to justice.

¹⁸ The #BlackLivesMatter (or #BLM) movement began in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, by George Zimmerman, but seeks to draw attention to a centuries-long history issue of racial violence in the United States (Lebron xi).

books. Graphics such as this one, as well as viral hashtags, expose the need for better treatment of marginalized groups even in this second decade of the 21st century.

This drive for better representation extends into Arthurian media as well, especially in film. BBC's *Merlin* series, which features Merlin and Arthur both in their late teens, straddled the decade divide, running from 2008 to 2012, and famously cast a Black woman, Angel Coulby, as Guinevere (called "Gwen"), although her character was rewritten so that Gwen was the daughter of a blacksmith, rather than a king. Sinqua Walls and Elliot Knight, both men of color, portrayed Lancelot and Merlin respectively on the ABC series *Once Upon a Time* between 2012 and 2016. Dev Patel, who is of Indian heritage, plays Gawain in the movie *The Green Knight*,¹⁹ based on the poem. While there was backlash for these casting choices being "unrealistic" and "not historically accurate," there was as much, if not more, support for a more diverse Camelot than Western audiences are accustomed to seeing. Kris Swank, in fact, points out that both critics and defenders of racially diverse casting in Arthurian film forget that "an all-white Camelot is, itself, a fiction of the modern age. The presence of Africans in early Britain and continental Europe is attested in both archeological and historical records" (Swank). Therefore, in the quest to make Arthurian legend more accessible and diverse, perhaps it is becoming slightly more historically accurate, in a roundabout way.

Unfortunately, the push for a more diverse Arthurian legend in film seems to extend only to racially marginalized groups. There is still a lack of LGBTQ+ representation in film as a whole, not to mention those of the Arthurian variety. Additionally, while women feature more prominently in recent adaptations, there is still a disparity in which sex holds the most power in the story, which is perhaps difficult to disentangle from a legend that has been controlled by dead

¹⁹ This film was originally scheduled for release in spring of 2020 but has since been rescheduled for July of 2021.

white men for centuries. For example, in BBC's *Merlin*, young Merlin and Arthur are the protagonists of the series, while Nimue and Morgana continue in their centuries-old roles as antagonists, fighting for the right to be able to use their magical power and attempting to murder Arthur and Merlin a few times along the way. It is in YA literature that these paradigms begin to shift most noticeably, as historically marginalized authors work to create a Camelot where *all* are welcome and equal.

Authors of YA Arthurian literature, women and LGBTQ+ authors in particular, reflect this drive for creating a more inclusive, welcoming society and commenting on social injustices that exist today by re-creating Camelot as a place of ideals, where readers of any group can look to find themselves in positions of power, facing adversity and winning. This dedication to “what Camelot means,” where authors re-imagine Arthurian literature to envision what a more ideal world could be, is shown by the uptick of YA Arthurian literature in the 2010s, published by marginalized authors, that are what Yvonne Griggs refers to as “radical rethink” adaptations, rather than “classics” or “re-visions” (11). While these books provide contemporary social commentary, they also invite readers, especially those marginalized readers who may have felt excluded by or from the King Arthur legend, to imagine Camelot in their own image.

The Guinevere Deception by Kiersten White, published in 2019, is a distinctive example of this shift in Arthurian literature in a number of ways. It touches on many issues that shape the decade in which it was written, in addition to addressing some problematic tropes that emerged in YA literature in the decades before it. Specifically, the book wrestles with issues of consent and power imbalance in relationships, with allusions to the #MeToo movement. White also turns the “not like other girls” trope on its head and builds healthy relationships between the women in the story regardless of their perceived femininity or background. The first line of the book,

“There was nothing in the world as magical and terrifying as a girl on the cusp of womanhood” (1), immediately lets the reader know that this will be a story about a powerful girl, and that girls “on the cusp of womanhood” possess their own power, which the reader would do well to remember.

The protagonist is called Guinevere, but the reader is immediately alerted to the fact that this is not *the* Guinevere. The daughter of Leodegrance has died and been replaced by a purported daughter of Merlin, who takes Guinevere’s place to wed Arthur in order to be close to him (30). Her job is to protect Arthur, much as his knights do (83), but she does so without physical armor and weapons. Instead, the impostor Guinevere’s²⁰ job is to magically protect Arthur, though she must do so very subtly, as magic has been banned from Camelot (hence Merlin’s own absence). One of the hallmarks of the books is that Arthur continuously treats her as an equal with himself, even bringing her to a tense peace meeting between tenuous allies, recognizing both the wisdom she brings to the table and her own ability to take care of herself: “she herself was not considered something to be risked - she was a strength, not a weakness” (159).

The beginning of White’s novel seems familiar: Guinevere is clearly “not like other girls” in that she is both a magic-user and an outsider to Camelot. She is also only secretly nobility, having been raised in Merlin’s cottage away from court. At the beginning of the novel, her relationships with the other women at court are uneasy, and she is clumsy in her attempts to blend in (27). One lady in particular, Dindrane, is set up as a possible romantic rival to Guinevere for Arthur’s affections, though she is significantly older than both Arthur and Guinevere (116). However, instead of plunging into the rivalry between the two women, White

²⁰ Her true name is never revealed throughout the book, and so she is only referred to as “Guinevere.”

turns Guinevere's relationships with other women, and femininity itself, into strengths that ultimately give her the power to accomplish her goals.

First, there is no disdain of the traditionally "feminine" occupation of working with needle and thread. Guinevere literally works magic with threads, both of fiber and of iron, to weave protection and spying spells into the walls of Camelot, alert for threats that may not alarm a human guard (195). In fact, the majority of magic-users in the book are women, although most of them work in secret, as magic has been banned from Camelot. Merlin and Mordred, here described as Arthur's nephew, are the only male users of magic on-page. However, women are more persecuted for practicing magic than men, which echoes the sentiments towards magic-users in the medieval versions of the tale.

While Guinevere's potential romantic relationship with Arthur is, of course, central to the narrative (and the source of much court gossip), her relationships with other women in the story empower her more than her relationships to men after she assumes her role as queen. Her handmaid Brangien (formerly handmaid to Isolde, of Tristan and Isolde infamy) helps her navigate nearly all aspects of life, from how to dress to send various messages at court (48) to how to handle getting her first period (117), as Guinevere has no idea of what is happening to her when it occurs.²¹ It is remarkable that mention of the menstrual cycle occurs at all, since menstruation is largely absent from YA literature, and indeed literature as a whole – in fact, the only other text to mention it that I have included is *The Mists of Avalon*, which is a solidly adult-fiction book, and the phenomenon is only discussed, and does not happen on-page. Yash Kesanakurthy laments not seeing more periods in fiction as a teen – "...if I had my period the rest

²¹ The fact that Guinevere has no idea what is happening to her body the first time she menstruates, along with her memories of growing up with Merlin and no mother, plus an episode where she reveals that she is unaware that children's missing teeth will grow back, serve as clues to the audience that she is not quite human, which is explored in more depth in the second book.

of my life was on pause. It didn't make sense to me that not even a single character I read did not feel the same way" – but also asks an important question: What does a girl in YA fiction, busy saving the world, do when she gets her period? (Kesanakurthy). Largely, audiences do not know, because it is not discussed. White's mentioning the normal bodily function serves both to normalize the phenomenon and elicit sympathy for Guinevere: someone has done her a grave disservice by not educating her about her own body.

Guinevere continues to break the mold in her story by pursuing a friendship with Dindrane, who is introduced as a romantic rival for Arthur. As Brangien guides her through her queenly duties now that she is married, Guinevere makes visits to the other court ladies, and learns that Dindrane (younger sister to Sir Percival) is in fact oppressed in her own house by her brother's young wife and, as an unmarried woman of twenty-eight, is as much of a social outsider as Guinevere herself; to make matters worse, Dindrane does not have the queenship to bolster her position. While Dindrane is initially hostile to Guinevere behind a veneer of politeness, Guinevere opts to meet Dindrane's hostility with kindness and an interest in Dindrane's extremely thorough knowledge of court gossip. Thus, instead of acting as rivals, the two women support and raise each other up, Guinevere providing social position and power that Dindrane lacks, and Dindrane providing Guinevere with information and guidance as to how to handle delicate social situations. The woman who could have been a foe instead becomes a "fearsome friend" (220).

The last of Guinevere's most significant female friendships is the one that differs most from a traditional retelling of the Arthur legend. A mystery fighter aspiring to be a knight is revealed midway through the book to be a woman named Lancelot, who rescues Guinevere from a wild boar when she becomes separated from a royal hunting party. Lancelot is a skilled fighter

who proves her prowess while in disguise, earning the right to be a knight (58) and is later appointed to be Guinevere's personal guard, so that Arthur does not have to choose between protecting Camelot and protecting Guinevere (334). Most remarkably, White does not eliminate the possibility of a romantic connection between Guinevere and this female Lancelot. In fact, when reminiscing how they met in *The Camelot Betrayal*, Guinevere tells Lancelot, "The first time we clasped hands, it felt right" (251). It is an interesting twist to the tale: such a romantic connection would not exactly threaten Arthur's rule, since the two women could not reproduce, but it *might* threaten his heart as he and Guinevere slowly fall for each other. The connection between Guinevere and Lancelot is explored more thoroughly in the second book in the series, *The Camelot Betrayal*, though it does not seem that Guinevere has romantic feelings for Lancelot, despite the connection and possibility.

Of course, White also makes some commentary through her portrayal of Arthur, especially as he strives to be a good ruler. Though he is young, eighteen to Guinevere's seventeen, Arthur is already remarkable. Camelot has its problems, and the blanket banning of magic because of its association with Arthur's enemy the Dark Queen carries its own inequities, but it is evident from the start that Arthur is building a more equal and just society than his father Uther did in his lifetime. This striving for equality is especially evident in the combat trials for knighthood – anyone has the chance to become one of his knights, provided they pass a tournament-like series of combat trials, working up to battling Arthur himself (53). These trials are how Lancelot is able to become a knight, revealing her womanhood only after she has proved herself against the king.

As Guinevere gets to know Arthur, she continually observes his selfless attitude, contrasting it with leaders of the past as perhaps White asks her readers to contrast it with their

own leaders. Arthur considers himself a steward of the land, a caretaker rather than a lord (255). He builds Camelot as a place “where humans could grow and learn and live as they should” (108) and holds its people and needs as more important than himself (114), recognizing the need for personal sacrifice on his part if it means protecting his people: “You see all men as your responsibility,” Guinevere observes. “You cannot deny anyone who needs your help” (156). It is a quality that endears Arthur to the reader, not to mention Guinevere, whose feelings for him slowly build as the novel progresses.

As in many YA novels, White builds in a love triangle for Guinevere, in the form of Arthur and his nephew, Mordred, who is one year older. However, the choice between the two men is more complex than Guinevere’s own feelings; it is representative of the struggles present in Guinevere’s world, between chaos in Mordred and order in Arthur. Even as Mordred serves Guinevere (though, admittedly, ultimately serving himself and his own purposes), he provides contrast to Arthur’s selflessness. As his relationship with the queen grows, he tempts her to think only of herself, losing sight of the purpose for which she came to Camelot (284). For Mordred, the appeal of the return of magic and the Dark Queen is that “In nature, only power mattered” (321) and whoever does not have power is consumed, as a forest has consumed a village in the beginning of the book. Arthur, on the other hand, stands for an order that protects the weak from the strong, where power only matters if it is used for good. He uses his position to create a world in which “mankind might thrive” (34). Ultimately, Guinevere chooses order, and Arthur, and acknowledges that, while her feelings for Arthur are different than those for Mordred, these more mature feelings may lead to a longer-lasting love: “It was not the spark and flame of Mordred’s touch ... It was older, and stronger, like the mountain of Camelot. It was worth building on ... they would have to grow into each other to discover why they might be together” (333).

It is also remarkable that the men in White's book are universally painted as unpleasant if not downright evil if they disparage women at all. Sirs Ector and Kay, who raised Arthur when he was a child, both appraise Guinevere as they would an animal, commenting on her height (94) and the size of her breasts (98) even as they tell her about Arthur's birth and childhood. The other characters regard them as pathetic, eking out a meager living as swords-for-hire, and Mordred offers to help Guinevere politely escape from them when she is under social obligation to spend time with them (95). Arthur later apologizes for her having to encounter them at all (100). It seems that Ector and Kay have become Arthur's embarrassing, problematic relatives that society demands must be tolerated at holiday gatherings.

Sir Maleagent is another man that gives Guinevere trouble, and rather more of it than Ector and Kay. He is an enemy of Arthur, banished from Camelot, grabbing for power in order to stand against Arthur, and, particularly unfortunately for Guinevere, the brother of Arthur's first love, Elaine. When Maleagent shows up to tense peace talks with the Picts, he also refers to Guinevere as if she were an animal, while making a backhanded comment about Arthur: "Arthur, you brought a pet. Younger than I remember you liking them" (168). Further, he allows White to make commentary on the #MeToo movement through his relationship to Arthur: in Arthur's kingdom, the punishment for rape is execution, and Arthur reveals to Guinevere that the reason Maleagent has been banished from Camelot was a rape accusation. Arthur laments that he did not execute Maleagent, but his own laws required proof of the rape in witness accounts and, unfortunately, "Maleagent was so feared, no one would offer any. It was two peasant girls' word against a knight of the king" (255). This allusion to women's word against that of a more powerful man is a familiar refrain to anyone familiar with the origins of #MeToo, which began as an attempt to bring men to justice who abuse their power over women to sexually harass them,

and even Arthur is aware that there is a failing in this system. Not only has Maleagent not paid for his crimes, he has also amassed more power for himself since his banishment, enough to challenge Arthur.

Another allusion to the #MeToo movement and comment on the danger women face from more-powerful men comes from the story of Igraine and Uther, and the conception of Arthur. The story perpetuated in White's *Camelot* is that Uther, by all regarded as a ruthless tyrant, enlisted the help of a nameless "dark sorcerer" to deceive Igraine into sleeping with him, disguised as her husband. It is Mordred who reveals to Guinevere that the "sorcerer" was Merlin, delivering a shock to the girl raised as Merlin's daughter. Guinevere is forced to wrestle with this deception, both of Igraine and herself at the hands of Merlin, even as her own power grows, but she remains firm in her assertion: "Taking the free will of another creature was a violent act, and violence always left pain in its wake" (241). While *The Guinevere Deception* does not use the word "rape," this is one of few Arthurian books where the deception of Igraine by Uther is acknowledged as violence, as sex under false pretenses cannot be consensual,²² and the characters who know of it are appropriately horrified.

White also works to create a more diverse Camelot, both in terms of race and sexuality, carefully acknowledging the differences in the characters without letting the characters be defined by their race or sexuality. Sir Tristan, one of the first knights that Guinevere encounters, is described as having "black hair cut close to his head like Arthur's, though his was coiled in tight curls. His skin was deep brown" (28), thus clearly identifying him as a person of color. This does not hinder his career as a knight in the least, and he remains in Guinevere's inner circle of friends. In fact, in *The Camelot Betrayal*, a young Saxon woman named Hild seems to find

²² It is worth noting that the encounter of Uther and Igraine in *The Mists of Avalon* is consensual in that Igraine knows that the disguised man is Uther the whole time, and only their household thinks he is her husband Gorlois.

Tristan quite attractive, a sentiment which Guinevere acknowledges with amusement (125). The sequel gives the reader more information about each character's background, after the reader has had a chance to get to know them as people in the first book. In book two, it is revealed that Tristan's family had been brought by the Romans, and then settled. Brangien, Guinevere's maid, takes after her father, who "walked across the world from the farthest east of it to make his fortune" (121). In this way, White brings the reader to both a more diverse and perhaps more historically accurate Camelot, where one's background does not necessarily determine social status.

While the LGBTQ+ characters do tend to hide their sexualities in White's books, it is rarely out of fear of persecution. Brangien, is the one who is in love with Isolde, not Tristan, which is hinted when Brangien declares she could do without men entirely, except for Arthur and Tristan (99), but is made clear when Guinevere catches her and Tristan trying to use magic to contact Isolde. Brangien hides her love of Isolde because this love got her and Tristan banished from Mark's court, and, if revealed, puts Isolde in danger from her jealous husband (194). Additionally, Lancelot reveals herself to the audience as a queer character in the language that she uses when describing to Guinevere why she disguises herself as a man. While Lancelot is referred to with the pronouns "she" and "her" after her reveal as a woman, she laments that it is her body which holds her back from her dream of knighthood (250); she tells Guinevere later that women's clothing is "a lie" (308). This language is reminiscent of the dysphoria experienced by transgender and nonbinary individuals, who often report feeling as if expressing their "biological" gender is a lie. Guinevere herself, the main character of the story, is bisexual, as confirmed by White on Twitter.²³ It is true that Guinevere is very attracted to Arthur and Mordred, and that her attraction to women is only hinted at in the powerful connection she shares

²³ "It's definitely a process of discovery for her, but Guin is bi" (@kierstenwhitenews).

with Lancelot. Still, White's tweets confirm that Guinevere's sexuality is "a process of discovery" (@kierstenwhitenevents) and may be explored further in future books.

Perhaps the most significant recent overhaul of the Arthurian legend occurs in the book *Once & Future* by Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy. The biggest advantage that this book has in terms of whether it is faithful to the "original" legends or not is that it is Science Fiction instead of Fantasy. That is, magic does exist, but the book takes place far enough in the future that the societal expectations present in the mythology of Arthur, as well as the marginalization of people based on gender, sexuality, and race, are completely absent. The lead character, Ari, is a reincarnation of Arthur (the forty-second reincarnation, to be precise), and most of her friends also fulfill roles from the original mythology, though Merlin is the original Merlin, who has aged backwards to be a boy of about seventeen. The premise is familiar, similar to that of *Avalon High*, except that the story is far enough in the future that much of it takes place on spaceships and alien planets, as "Old Earth" has been evacuated. As part of the Sci-Fi narrative, *Once & Future* also wrestles with the issues of imperialism as humanity has expanded and claimed homes on several planets, competing for resources like Oxygen and water. This imperialism, an echo of familiar Western imperialism, turns out to be to the detriment of even this futuristic society.

From the start, the authors establish that this story is a shake-up from familiar society. While Ari, an orphan, is exploring a Medieval Earth exhibit with her adoptive brother Kay, Ari observes that "chivalry gave birth to toxic masculinity, which caused Old Earth a few millennia of bullshit patriarchy" (2). Ari and Kay are scraping an existence as best they can on their own after the mysterious disappearance of Kay's moms, who raised Ari after finding her orphaned at age six. While hiding in the medieval exhibit, Ari accidentally draws a sword which turns out to

be *the* sword, signifying her role as the new Arthur and waking Merlin from his magical slumber. Out of all the texts reviewed here, this is one of very few where the role of Arthur is manifested in a woman, and somehow Ari is the first iteration of Arthur in forty-two incarnations that is a woman in this world as well.

Ari and Kay live in a world where there are three words to describe gender: male, female, and fluid, which seems to encompass everything in between. Ari's childhood friend Lamarack ("Lam" for short) is a fluid who uses they/them pronouns, and it is meeting Lam that introduces Merlin (and the audience) to the fact that variances in gender and sexuality are so accepted in current society that they often are not labeled at all. Upon misgendering Lam, Merlin apologizes and explains "Oh, apologies...I, um, come from a society with a history of gender assumptions based on physical markers, aesthetics...et cetera." To which Ari responds merely, "Ew" (43). In fact, when Merlin uses the word "homophobia" to describe the past, Ari does not even recognize the word or know what it means (347). Merlin has been slumbering in the magic cave where he is sealed after each Arthur incarnation dies or is killed, and it takes him some time to adjust, aging backwards along the way so that now he is a boy of around seventeen years old. He serves as the audience's connection to the time in which the book was written, as he must shift his "old-fashioned" ideas of what is accepted to fit this futuristic society.

Capetta and McCarthy also make a point to redeem the woman characters of Arthuriana that have been most vilified in its iterations throughout history. Morgana, sister to the original Arthur, is at first introduced as a foil to Merlin – it is she who plants Excalibur for each Arthur to find, and discourages Merlin by pointing out the seemingly eternal flaws of mankind, as she has watched and existed alongside him since the Arthur cycles began (36). She also reveals the secret that Merlin has kept from Ari as she attempts to gain Ari's trust: the rape of Igraine by Uther to

create the first Arthur (210). In fact, this is one of few texts to explicitly label what happened to Igraine as “rape,” emphasizing the lack of consent in such deception, touching on the #MeToo movement. However, this revelation is a turning point in the character development of Morgana. Ari is able to listen and be angry on behalf of Igraine and Morgana, later confronting Merlin about his part in it. Morgana is able to provide important training and guidance for Ari as well as Merlin, including leading her to her family home on the deserted Ketch (223). At the last, Morgana sacrifices herself so that Ari and her friends can make a last-ditch stand against Mercer, finally an ally to Arthur (349).

While it is unfortunate that Morgana’s redemption must end in her death, Gweneviere’s redemption arc does not. From the start, she is a powerful woman in her own right, the very real queen of a planet despite being a teenager, to the point where Ari receives diplomatic immunity from the law because she is Gwen’s wife (87). Gwen is a strong queen, intent on preserving her planet from the Mercer Corporation’s influence (86) and has worked her way up to her position from nothing: her parents abandoned her on Lionel when she was still a child (333). While Ari and Gwen’s marriage begins as a way for both of them to gain power – Ari needing diplomatic immunity while Gwen needs a protector from the Mercer politics hounding her for her influence – there are real feelings between them, and Ari’s heart is broken by Gwen’s apparent betrayal upon finding that Gwen is pregnant after a year believing Ari to be dead (281). Yet the young women are able to work towards a love that is remarkably mature for a YA novel. They are reconciled, able to share each other’s strength against their common enemy and heal each other’s hurts. As they make their stand against the Mercer Corporation, Ari reflects that “Every kiss with Gwen left Ari new” (313), and Ari claims the baby as hers as well, “the heir to Lionel and

Ketch” (341). Thus, Gweneviere is not left the villain of the story, or at fault for Arthur’s fall. She and Ari instead continue as equals and partners in their marriage.

Along with gender norms, labels for sexuality have all but disappeared as well, aside from “ace” (short for asexual) to describe someone who is not interested in sex. Otherwise, the characters romantically pursue whoever they want without labeling themselves. Kay’s moms, who raised him and Ari on their own spaceship, are referred to as “Mom” and “Captain Mom” (6). Ari, through a tournament on the Renaissance-Festival themed planet Lionel, weds her childhood friend Gweneviere (or “Gwen”) despite Merlin’s warning, and the two young women consummate their marriage in zero-gravity aboard Kay’s ship in order for it be considered legal (102). Later, when she believes Ari to be dead, Gwen also sleeps with Kay (240), who gets her pregnant. This is how she fulfills Merlin’s dire warning of infidelity, though she is unconscious of any wrongdoing. Merlin, too, finds himself attracted to Lam’s brother Val, short for Percival, though he is so used to being forced to hide his sexuality that it takes him nearly the entire book to work up the courage to kiss Val (330).

Racial distinctions have all but disappeared in the world of *Once & Future*, but the authors make sure to alert the audience of the diverse cast of characters. Lam and their brother Val are both described as having dark skin, and Lam wears their hair in dreadlocks (37). Lam is also missing a hand (42), a unique inclusion of a disabled person as a hero in YA fiction. Val, who serves as Queen Gweneviere’s advisor, makes the point to Merlin as the wizard wrestles with the false Renaissance Festival atmosphere on the planet Lionel, “We’re only as period appropriate as we want to be ... not many queens in medieval Europe had black advisors, but that’s no excuse to keep doing things the same old shitty way, now, is it?” (68). Gweneviere herself is of “mixed Asian and European heritage” Merlin observes (66), leaving Kay and Merlin

himself as the only lead characters who are not people of color. The only character who experiences racial profiling is Ari herself, whose people (“the Arabs,” Merlin explains) have been destroyed by the corrupt Mercer Corporation, and so she stands out as a possible enemy to Mercer (35). Ari’s people, who inhabited the planet Ketch, were among the first to leave Earth when it became clear that it was no longer inhabitable, which put them outside the reach of Mercer for many years. This meant they were able to hold on to their language and culture far longer than anyone else in the galaxy, which the corporation came to see as a threat. The authors make clear in their “Acknowledgements” section that Ari’s experience is directly inspired by McCarthy’s family experience as Lebanese immigrants and refugees.

In fact, with discrimination for any reason largely gone from the galaxy, the villain in *Once & Future* is clearly the concept of White Capitalism, embodied in the corrupt Mercer Corporation. From the beginning of the book, when Ari is hiding among a medieval “Old Earth” exhibit, Mercer is established as *the* power in her universe: “Mercer had become more than just a greedy corporation with a monopoly on goods and services for the entire galaxy – they *were* the galaxy. They controlled everything from people’s food to healthcare to the freaking government” (6). Mercer has even renamed English after itself. Ari’s culture, Ketch, is the only one to have held onto its language (62), which is why it was wiped out, and why the Administrator, the embodiment of Mercer pursuing Ari and her friends, views her as a threat.

Most interestingly, instead of the “evil” force being expressed as Dark while the “good” forces are Light, Capetta and McCarthy flip the familiar stereotype, bathing Mercer in Whiteness while its lead characters are people of color. The Administrator’s skin is “as white as if he had been grown in a tank of bleach” (122) and, in a threat to Ari over a game of chess, he claims “We’re the white team. The good guys” (125). The corporation is brutal in its attempt to control

the galaxy, employing strategies from wiping out the inhabitants of the planet Ketch to withholding water from the desert planet of Lionel in an attempt to pressure Gwen into giving up her power there. As the narrator explains, “Mercer owned the universe, but it was more than that. Mercer made the truth irrelevant. As long as they were in control, atrocity would always be excused in the name of convenience and greed” (320). This commentary on the destruction of others by the wealthy hearkens to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s estimation of the irresponsibility of Daisy and Tom in *The Great Gatsby* but goes further. Mercer does not “smash up things and creatures” and then retreat to “their vast carelessness” in order to “let other people clean up the mess they had made” (Fitzgerald 161). Mercer, and capitalism, represent a *systemic* effort to suppress and destroy those it deems marginal. Mercer has become a governing body in the galaxy and preserves and expands their rule by purposely extinguishing any who would resist.

In fact, the characters’ interactions with Mercer offer an extraordinary commentary on the goals of the “original” Arthur, the goals which Merlin still upholds as he supports Ari. Supposedly, the purpose of Arthur’s reincarnations is to “unite humankind under one banner,” which Nin, the Lady of the Lake and Merlin’s true foil, points out “That sounds like imperialism, doesn’t it? ... Doesn’t this Mercer Corporation want to unite everyone, too?” (300). Indeed, this irony hearkens to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Arthur, who conquered most of Europe and yet claimed “Nothing that is acquired by force and violence can ever be held legally by anyone” (232). The characters of *Once & Future* must wrestle with this question of what it means for people to be united without being oppressed or conquered, but Kay’s Mom sums up the difference between Mercer’s imperialism and Ari’s quest for a unified galaxy when she says, “too many people believe that difference is the enemy of unity” (Capetta and McCarthy 130).

Out of all the texts included here, these authors are perhaps the most overt about their “radical rethink” of Arthurian legend. There is a moment when Merlin, forced to shed his ever-present robes, reflects, “this was the last of him – the final vestige of the Merlin from the old stories” (163). Later, Gwen explains the historical inaccuracies on the planet Lionel by saying, “we have the chance to revise the more backward aspects of the culture,” meaning the pseudo-medieval and Renaissance atmosphere of the planet (175). The characters’ struggles in the book seem to be directly inspired by the struggles of the marginalized between 2010 and 2020. In addition to emulating the story of McCarthy’s Lebanese family, the two authors both identify as LGBTQ+, McCarthy using they/them pronouns and Capetta claiming *all* pronouns. In their “Acknowledgements,” they include “a shout-out to Gweneviere for surviving centuries of patriarchy, slut-shaming, and way too many spellings of her name.” They also thank TH White, calling *The Once and Future King* (which their title clearly emulates) a piece of “resistance literature.” They pay homage to TH White in their text as well, Merlin telling Morgana that he raised the original Arthur “To prove that might does not equal right. To show the world that alliance is more powerful than violence” (266). Capetta and McCarthy carve themselves and their marginalized readers a place in the legend and study of Arthuriana, as well as a place in YA literature.

Tracy Deonn’s *Legendborn* (2020), is not so much a retelling of Arthurian literature as it is a *claiming* of heritage and history. The book follows Bree Matthews, a sixteen-year-old Black girl who leaves home for an Early College Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill only a few months after the unexpected death of her mother. Once there, she discovers a secret society known as the Order of the Round Table, made up of descendants of King Arthur and thirteen of his Knights of the Round Table. The direct descendants are known as the

Legendborn, and in times of crisis may be possessed by the spirit of their Knight, who bestows upon them supernatural powers at a terrible cost: once Called, these Legendborn (now known as Scions) will not live much past the age of thirty-five. Such is the sacrifice made for power.

In this text, the original legends of Arthur exist only as a cover for the foundation of the Order. Ostensibly, the organization and its supporters exist in order to fight demons which are attracted to negative feeling in the world (in this case a contemporary United States). Indeed, Bree discovers the Order because she sees two of its members fighting a demon on her first night at UNC. One of them, a magic-wielder known as a Merlin, wipes her memory of the event, but something about Bree makes her able to shake off the spell, which brings the demon-fighting memory back to her. It *also* causes her to remember something else that had been previously wiped from her mind: there was a Merlin at the hospital where her mother died, instigating Bree's distrust of and interest in the Order. However, the Order has predictably transformed into an "old money and good ol' boys" (48) club made up of wealthy white families. In fact, Nick Davis, the Legendborn who stands to inherit Arthur's position, has left the organization, protesting its medieval and exclusive power structures. Bree, convinced that the Order had something to do with the death of her mother, convinces him to rejoin to investigate with her.

Despite being an outsider, Bree is allowed to join the Order as a Page, one of a handful competing for Squire positions for the Legendborn who are currently without. If the Legendborn is chosen by their Arthurian ancestor to receive their power, the Squire also shares in that power, and the two are bonded for life. Most of the other Pages come from wealthy families with connections to the Order, though not directly descended from one of the lines – Bree is the only total outsider, and the only Black Page in the competition. Still, she is not the only Page who seeks to cause waves of change within the organization: Greer, a nonbinary person who uses

they/them pronouns, is also in the competition, and the two bond over their extra challenges as the marginalized of the group, though Greer is white and comes from a vassal family.

From the very beginning of the book, Deonn builds honesty and an unfortunate verisimilitude into Bree's experience as a Black girl in the South. When Bree is caught off campus on her first night, off-limits for Early College students, she is brought back to her dorm in the back of a police car, which is more of a scare for her than it is for her friend: "I don't know if there's a single Black person in this country who can say with 100 percent confidence that they feel safe with police. Not after the past few years. Probably not ever" (29). While Deonn's book would have been in final revision and preparations for publication during the summer 2020 protests sparked by the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police, the prevalent violence by police against people of color has been thrown into sharp relief in the past few years, as videos can be taken and shared on social media in hopes of provoking outrage and accountability.

Bree also experiences a series of microaggressions throughout the book, escalating to further acts of violence as the higher-ranking members of the Order begin to see her as a threat. When she faces the dean of the EC program as consequence for her off-campus adventure, she finds that the police officer that brought her back has told the dean that Bree "got an attitude" with him, while Bree (and readers) know that she actually "barely said a word to him" (37). Another Order member's mother mistakes Bree for a servant, handing her an umbrella to dry (181). Later, one of the other Pages that Bree competes against blames "affirmative action bullshit" for Bree's entrance into the Order (184). Even those allies she does find in the Order, Greer and another Page named Felicity, touch her hair without permission as they make plans for a cotillion-like ceremony, commenting on her curls. Bree corrects them instantly: when Felicity

apologizes and says “I didn’t realize…” Bree responds, “Well, now you do” (248). The incident further cements how those who do not grow up experiencing racism can be ignorant of their own racist tendencies, despite their best intentions.

Despite supposedly being founded on codes of Arthurian chivalry, the more sinister reality that racism and hatred can hide beneath a veneer of “Southern hospitality” is most evident in Nick’s father, Martin Davis (referred to as Lord Davis within the Order, as his position as Arthur’s descendent gives him patriarchal authority over it). When he first meets Bree, in the company of Nick, he asks “And who is this lovely lady?” as he helps her up from where she has fallen. Then, when Nick reveals that he has rejoined the Order with Bree as his Page, Davis tells Bree that he is in her debt for Nick’s “change of heart” (105). Despite his niceties, Davis is the ultimate threat to the Order and the world at large, using dark magic to allow demons into the world in order to hasten an apocalypse that will force his son Nick to take on the mantle of Arthur, solidifying his family’s eternal position of power. His manufactured war puts his own son at high risk: if Nick is killed while using Arthur’s power, it ends *all* of the Lines of Arthur, and the Order as a whole (425). While he claims to be working for the Order’s good, Bree’s investigation has put a hitch in his plans. Late in the book, he goes so far as to kidnap her to pressure her away from the Order and his son, revealing that he never intended to allow Bree to continue her connection with his son: she is a young woman *and* Black, “two faults” within the Order that must be “corrected” (424). Davis tells Bree that he believes “the world is a great chain of being, and everyone has their place” and that, as far as he is concerned, everyone else’s place is under subjugation of a king; specifically, the king’s bloodline from which he and Nick are descended (425).

As Bree learns of the existence of the magic (referred to as “aether”) that keeps the Order together and powers the Merlins and Legendborn for combat against demons, Deonn also weaves in a tradition of magic stemming from enslaved Africans, referred to as “hoodoo” or “conjure” (“Author’s Note”), although Deonn sticks to the term “Rootwork” for her text. Root magic is a form of power that is borrowed from ancestors, introduced to Bree by counselor Dr. Hartwood, to whom Bree is referred as she continues to struggle with her grief over her mother. While the similarity between Root and the ancestor magic that the Order practices is immediately obvious to Bree, Dr. Hartwood makes an important distinction: Root magic is borrowed, with permission, from ancestors, and as such can be slightly unpredictable: “Our people – Rootcrafters – borrow root temporarily, because we believe that energy is not for us to own” (223). Meanwhile, Dr. Hartwood labels the members of the Order as “Bloodcrafters,” practitioners who steal power and “bind it to their bodies for generations and generations” (233), making the connection that the demons the Order faces feed on the very negative energy that colonizers brought to the lands they stole, including what later became the United States. Such violent magic has a horrific price: every practitioner is guaranteed a short life, echoing the short lifespans of the Scions of the Order who have been Called by King Arthur’s knights.

Deonn’s strongest statement of claiming the Arthurian legend for all comes through in the mixing of this Rootcraft with Bloodcraft in Bree: in the final moments of the book, during the battle that prompts Arthur to come through his Scion and take charge of the Order, it is revealed that *Bree* is the Scion of Arthur, while Nick is really the Scion of Lancelot. With Dr. Hartwood’s help, Bree is able to connect with her ancestors through Rootcraft, searching for the answers to her mother’s untimely death and her own ability to resist the magic of the Order. She is put into contact with Vera, an enslaved woman in the antebellum South, whose master, Samuel Davis,

rapes and impregnates her before he and his wife are able to have a child. Knowing that this child will be the Scion of Arthur as his firstborn descendent, he sets about hunting Vera down in order to kill both her and the child, to keep his Bloodline pure. In desperation after her escape, Vera makes a Bloodcraft Oath with her ancestors, at the price that the power she receives will only exist in one daughter at a time. Vera later dies in childbirth, unable to pass the secret of her power to her daughter (468). Through Vera's eyes, Bree also learns that Samuel Davis, supposedly Nick's ancestor, is not actually related to Nick at all: Vera witnessed Samuel's wife having an affair with the Scion of Lancelot, Paul Reynolds, which means that Nick and his father are actually descendants of Lancelot, while Bree's maternal family has carried the Bloodline of Arthur for almost two centuries in secret.²⁴

But being Called by Arthur, sharing his power, is not the end of Bree's problems. Despite her protests, Arthur orders the other Scions to pay her – and himself – homage, all kneeling to Bree after battle (477). Arthur also takes control of her body to fight against the demons, which is helpful in the moment, but reinforces the lack of choice that Bree and her ancestors have had. Still, there is a strength that Bree inherits: along with Arthur, she is possessed by her ancestor Vera herself, whose power keeps even that of Arthur contained until Bree is ready to use his strength (488). Bree's power of Rootcraft, inherited from her mother, means that her connection to Arthur is stronger than any Scion's connection has been before, allowing Arthur to speak through her. Even this does not prevent her from experiencing racism, however. By all rights, she is the king, and the head of authority in the Order, but Victoria, the Scion of Tristan, refuses to acknowledge her, labeling Bree's Calling "an accident" (483).

²⁴ Sarah, one of Bree's friends within the Order, makes the connection between the Davis family history and Guinevere's affair with Lancelot (482).

In her book, Deonn explicitly creates a place in the remnants of Camelot for the marginalized, where the denizens of Camelot treat them as equals even if the higher-ups in the Order do not. Greer is never questioned for their use of they/them pronouns, and the sacred induction ceremonial vows are easily made gender-neutral for them (414). Selwyn, the Merlin, reluctantly admits that he is in love with Nick, and his reluctance stems more from his embarrassment at showing a weakness to Bree than from his attraction to another man (355). Bree casually remarks that another girl is her friend, Alice's, type (19). Bree also observes that one of her combat trainers, a woman named Gillian, uses a prosthesis on her left leg, which could be a result of an injury or something she has always used (309). This mention is one of very few about disability in the texts I have used here, let alone where one does not hinder a character's career or social status. And, of course, there is no questioning that the spiritual Knights of the Round Table Call on their female descendants: the eldest heir in the line – not the sex of the descendant – matters, despite historic attempts by the Order to make female heirs “disappear” in favor of males (136). For Deonn, “what Camelot means” is a society moving towards equity, acknowledging and working to fix past mistakes, and actively empowering those who society has pushed down.

White, Capetta, McCarthy, and Deonn build on a rich tradition of women and nonbinary writers who have revised the Arthurian myths before them, a tradition which extends centuries. They have not only worked to make the myths more inclusive, welcoming all to Camelot regardless of gender, sexuality, race, or ability, but have also intentionally addressed the problematic elements in the re-visions that have come before. Thus, “what Camelot means” includes conscious reparation for past wrongs, an acknowledgement that the work is not over, but also the hope that society can be made better for all.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the world of King Arthur, from Geoffrey of Monmouth's warlord Arthur to Capetta and McCarthy's Ari, into a world where all, particularly previously marginalized groups, are welcome and share power, is largely driven by women and nonbinary writers. Of course, not every YA book concerning Arthur published in recent years has been by a woman or LGBTQ+ author: *Cursed* by Thomas Wheeler, published in 2019 following its Netflix²⁵ adaptation, features a young Nimue taking care of the sword that will later become known as Excalibur as she seeks a king to wield it, not knowing that the sword has chosen *her* to be its wielder. But these texts written by women and LGBTQ+ authors, writing for Young Adults, not only empower their women characters the most, but also use this ideal of Camelot to comment on their own society and imagine what a more inclusive society *could be*. They find power within that inclusion.

These more contemporary retellings have intentionally addressed, and tried to remedy, the problematic tropes of Arthurian literature of the past. Davidson, who studied Arthurian retellings by women prior to 2010, is rightly concerned about the toxic relationships between the women of Arthur as they compete with each other for the men's affections, but her study was published in 2012. The relationships between women in Arthurian literature have vastly improved in the works of White, Capetta and McCarthy, and Deonn, even as these authors also make great strides in inclusion and representation of other marginalized groups in their fiction. In the words of Davidson, all of these authors "look back upon, honor, and relocate older women's

²⁵ Of course, the fact that *Cursed* is the only Arthurian retelling published in the past decade to receive a screen adaptation is *probably* due to the fact that Thomas Wheeler already writes for shows appearing on prime-time cable and has connections in the show-development world, and *not* because it is the only YA Arthurian retelling recently written by a cisgender white man, but it is worth noting. I'm not bitter.

narratives into our own present” (15) even as they work to improve the world of Arthur for not only women, but also the LGBTQ+ community and people of color.

Still, this fiction is also a reminder of how much work is still to be done. As limited as my own search for material was, it is telling that Arthurian YA books that prominently featured LGBTQ+ characters and characters of color were not to be found until the 2010s, and only one of the books here was written by a woman of color. It is unclear whether this is because authors of color are not writing Arthurian literature at all, or whether authors of color are unable to publish their retellings. In 2020, Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek published a study which examined the ratio of how many books published by the “Big Four” publishing houses (Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, and MacMillan) were written by white authors versus authors of color between 1950 and 2018. The results are unfortunately predictable: in 2018, only 11% of books published were by authors of color, while the remaining 89% were by white authors. This disparity means that even if more authors of color are writing Arthurian literature, their voices may not be heard at all, as there seems to be “a correlation between the number of people of color who work in publishing and the number of books that are published by authors of color” and, according to So and Wezerek, about 85% of the people who acquire and edit books are white (So and Wezerek).

In true 2010s fashion, the inspiration behind the study published by So and Wezerek was a viral hashtag passed around authors of Twitter: #PublishingPaidMe. Authors were invited to share how much they were paid in advances for their work, and it soon became clear that the differences between advances for white authors and authors of color were staggering. In one tweet, Mandy Len Catron pointed out that she, “a totally unknown white woman with one viral article” (@lenmandy) got paid more for her debut novel than Roxane Gay, an established author

of color, received for her *highest* advance. While it is refreshing to see white authors acknowledging their own privilege and calling for change, the odds are doubly stacked against an author of color publishing Arthurian fiction, or fiction at all, both as to if they will get published at all in a white-skewed field, and whether they will be paid fairly for their work.

It is notable, too, that women and nonbinary individuals are using the mythos of Arthur and an idealized Camelot to both comment on current society and advocate for change. I chose not to include contemporary Arthurian literature by cisgender men in my in-depth study, but they are present: Bernard Cornwell wrote his Arthurian series at the same time Marion Zimmer Bradley was continuing the *Mists of Avalon* series; TA Barron wrote a series of YA novels about the teenage years of Merlin in the 2000s; and, of course, Thomas Wheeler's *Cursed* appeared in 2019 alongside its Netflix adaptation. What separates contemporary Arthurian literature by cisgender men from that of women and LGBTQ+ authors is illustrated by Bernard Cornwell himself, in an interview from 2007:

I think that's what happened with Arthur: he becomes the Golden Age. What was probably a very thuggish warlord is eventually turned into this hyper-muscular Christian whom Tennyson wrote about: an all-round nice guy ... But to me that is what gives the Matter of Britain its legs: it's that it is maybe the story of the Golden Age: Camelot.

While Cornwell's idea of Arthur as representative of a "Golden Age" differs markedly from the conflict faced by the women in Bradley's novel, who were often at the mercy of men and other forces shifting them around for political power, it seems that his attitude as to why the legends have endured the way that they do still permeates culture. However, contemporary women and nonbinary authors seem to leave the idea of a "Golden Age" behind in pursuit of an idealized

Camelot that shows the world as it could be. Instead of looking back to the past, lamenting the loss of a world that once was, they use Camelot to look forward to a more ideal future.

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