

Nicole Dentzien

# The Openness of Myth

The Arthurian Tradition  
in the Middle Ages and Today



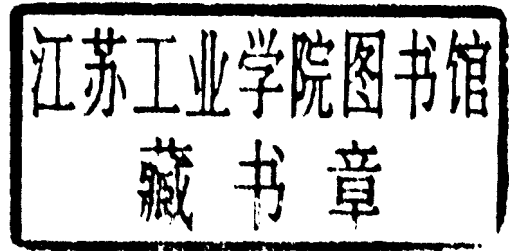
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The Arthurian Tradition in the Middle Ages and Today



Königshausen & Neumann

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You get even the most extraordinary unlikely people meddling with it – Aubrey Beardsley and your friend Don Quixote for instance. A man who copied out the Morte D'Arthur in Morse code would still be a major literary figure. It is the theme which makes it so.

T. H. White



To Gerda Dentzien



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Kiel, November 2002

### **A Note on Names**

The orthography of the names of the Arthurian characters in this study depends on their orthography in the works cited. Thus several different spellings of the same name can be found on the same page or even in the same sentence. For Malory, who has no standard spelling, I have generally chosen a simple form (Arthur, Guenevere, Launcelot, Gawain, Kay, etc.).

## Introduction

*Knowest thou aught of Arthur's birth?*

Alfred Lord Tennyson<sup>1</sup>

Arthuriana is one of the most remarkable phenomena of Western literature. Since their first appearance – either in *Y Gododdin* in the early seventh century, in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* in the first half of the ninth century or, as some would have it, in Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* around 540 AD (and probably even before that) – the tales of Arthur's exploits and conflicts have again and again enthralled the readers and listeners of our hemisphere.

Nowadays, Arthur seems to be everywhere. There are, especially in the English-speaking world, Arthurian brand names, Arthurian games, Arthurian music, Arthurian films, Arthurian works of art, Arthurian allusions in politics, sports, and social events, Arthurian figurines (e.g. Ken and Barbie), Arthurian gadgets from key chains to condoms, Arthurian clubs, Arthurian societies, and Arthurian websites. Boats, collector's items, estates, pets, motors, vehicles, food products, flowers, appliances, and children are given Arthurian names. And a vast amount of ink has been spilled on behalf of the immortal king.

Arthur's astonishing longevity and the even more astonishing growth of his attraction since the middle of the nineteenth century have been a source of wonder to the world's Arthurian "community." Of the numerous reasons for the continuous interest, many are evasive. Those authors, reviewers, and scholars who have dealt with the subject often differ in their approaches and opinions.

Scholars tend to be careful to point out that one reason alone cannot explain the phenomenon. Alan Lupack, in an article on contemporary Arthurian novelists, owns that his "attempts to understand and explain this fascination ... have never been totally satisfactory,"<sup>2</sup> while Raymond Thompson, in his study *The Return from Avalon*, calls the appeal "that most joyous mystery."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, reviewers and novelists, being unconstrained by academic inhibitions, freely list their theories. James Atlas, in a *Times* review of Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex*, simply declares that "[t]he legends of Arthur are a natural subject for novelists,"<sup>4</sup> a statement that, from a scholarly point of view, requires as much explanation as the original question.

Some contemporary authors feel that part of the enchantment is due to the psychological or archetypal aspects of the legend.<sup>5</sup> Others, like Joy Chant perceive the reason on a more emotional than psychological level:

It [the Arthurian legend] has this marvellous (sic) tragic dimension to it because from the very beginning the destruction is implicit, the seeds of Camlann are

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. (Cambridge: Riverside, 1898), 101.

<sup>2</sup> Alan C. Lupack, "Modern Arthurian Novelists on the Arthurian Legend" in *Studies in Medievalism*. (vol. II, no.4, Fall 1983), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Thompson, *The Return From Avalon*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 7.

<sup>4</sup> James Atlas, "Chivalry is Dead," *Time* (September 25, 1978), E8.

<sup>5</sup> Lupack, "Modern Arthurian Novelists on the Arthurian Legend," 82f.

sown. This provides a sense of inevitability ... Arthur is a Celt, the hero of a people who were beaten in the end, and those who first told the story knew that the happy ending can't last forever, that the brightness and magnificence are only an interlude. This knowledge gives the story a much deeper emotional resonance than most others possess.<sup>6</sup>

Various writers attempt to approach the question by comparing the Arthurian legend to other myths<sup>7</sup> of Western culture. Thus several twentieth-century novelists argue for a certain cultural closeness of the tale of Arthur as opposed to the story of Aeneas. As Gillian Bradshaw puts it: "[The Arthurian Legend is] more accessible to the modern consciousness than are the Greek myths in their prettified Romantic versions."<sup>8</sup>

Nicole St. John agrees, claiming that "... it is as if the Celts took the mythic insights of Eastern metaphysics and converted them into forms and language which 'spoke to the condition' of the Western mind."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to that, Arthur's stamina is due to his almost messianic nature. Especially his hoped-for return in Britain's darkest hour makes him a savior-figure<sup>10</sup> par excellence, a trait that has been extended far beyond the reaches of the British Isles.

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Thompson: "Interviews with Arthurian Authors" in *The Camelot Project* ([www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/intervws/chant.htm](http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/intervws/chant.htm))

<sup>7</sup> The word "myth" is a term that gives rise to great misunderstandings among both scholars and amateurs. Over the centuries it has developed a number of meanings, some of which are diametrically opposed to one another. All of them, however, are accepted and correct in their own way. William G. Doty provides a functional definition of myth which he summarizes as follows: "A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important, (3) imaginal, (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, (7) emotional conviction and participation, (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind's roles and relative statuses within it. Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes (mythic units) having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy" (William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000, 33-34). According to Donna Rosenberg, a myth is a sacred story from the past. It either explains the origin of the world and of (human) life, or it expresses its culture's ethical terms. Myths are concerned with the relationship between the divine and human beings. Although originally religious, myths are often the earliest form of history. Legends, on the other hand, are stories originating in the past about a person, place, or event that was, or is thought to have been, historical. They are associated with an era or country or place in history. (Cf. Donna Rosenberg, *Folklore, Myths, and Legends: A World Perspective* (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing, 1996)).

Since, in my opinion, the borderline between the categories is not quite fixed; since the "Dark Ages" are a time of which we know as little as of the so-called pre-historical times; since it has been pointed out (e. g. by Jessie Weston) that certain Arthurian characters are probably of divine origin; and since, after all, Troy was found and proven to be historical, whereas there are great doubts about Arthur's Glastonbury grave, the terms "legend," "myth," etc. are used interchangeably in this study.

<sup>8</sup> Lupack, "Modern Arthurian Novelists on the Arthurian Legend," 83.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Trying to explain the relevance of the legend in our time – a relevance to which the hundreds of Arthurian works written during the last decades bear witness – novelists have also contended that the Arthurian scenario reflects the loss of religious beliefs as well as the divisions in our society and the potential ruin of our civilization.<sup>11</sup>

Related to the lack of spiritual security is the search for alternative belief systems. As we know little about the Celtic religion, it is bendable in every direction, be it matriarchal, nature-bound, shamanic, or simply enigmatic. Thus it offers a convenient route to the longed-for spirituality. The “Celtomania” observable in recent years has been brought into connection with Arthur and has led to an increase of esoteric works centering on the king.

The one explanation that is cited more often than any of these is the fascination with the story itself. Those having contributed to the literary tradition of the Arthurian legend feel that its continuous appeal is due to the timelessness of its material: a material so rich and many-faceted that it contains “something for everyone.” This feeling can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In 1485, Caxton, in his Preface to Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, writes:

Humbly besechyng al noble lordes and ladyes, wyth al other estates of what estate or degree they been of, that shal see and rede in this sayd book and werke, that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce and to folowe the same, wherin they shalle fynde many ioyous and playsaunt hystories and noble and renommed actes of humanyte, gentylnesse, and chualryes. For herein may be seen noble chualrye, curtosye, humanyte, frendlynnesse, hardynesse, loue, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne... And for to passe the tyme thys *book* shal be plesaunte to rede in.<sup>12</sup>

Almost exactly five hundred years later, modern Arthurian authors like Catherine Christian, Walker Percy and Sanders Anne Laubenthal give similar reasons for choosing the legend as the backbone of their novels.<sup>13</sup> Catherine Christian argues:

... Consider – it has fast action from start to finish. Brilliant Characterization – which of us would not recognize every one of the principal figures on sight? Sex – the eternal triangle of husband, wife, and husband’s best friend in Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot. The “crime passionelle” of Tristram, Iseult & jealous Mark. The tear-jerking romance of innocence betrayed in Lancelot and Elaine of Astolat. Violence is there in good measure, with enough rapes, murders, fatal

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<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare, in *Henry V*, has Nell Quickly mention Arthur in connection with Falstaff’s death as a Jesus-like figure, thus proving he was ever-present in folklore: “Nay, sure, he’s not in hell: he’s in Arthur’s bosom, if ever a man went to Arthur’s bosom. A’ made a finer end and went away an it had been any christom child; [...]” William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. C.H. Herford, vol. VII (London: Macmillan, 1904), 47.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lupack, “Modern Arthurian Novelists on the Arthurian Legend,” 86ff.

<sup>12</sup> James W. Spisak (ed.), *Caxton’s Malory, A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte D’Arthur*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983) 2f. In Caxton’s case, “al noble lordes and ladyes, wyth al other estates of what estate or degree they been of” refers to the *literate* social classes: the nobility, the clergy and the rising merchant class.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lupack, “Modern Arthurian Novelists on the Arthurian Legend.”

accidents, & battle scenes to ensure any town council banning a screen version for the under fourteens. An unresolved Mystery in the Graal sequence. A cunningly introduced hint of Science Fiction, with a hero to rival Dr. Who in Merlin & his magic, & even the children catered for with a fairy ballet of water-nymphs and the funny story of the adorable "questing beast." Moreover, the tale ends with an unexpected twist ... , leaving the reader with the hint of a sequel in the Once & Future King.<sup>14</sup>

Although Christian stresses the sex-and-violence-aspect in more blatant terms, the same concepts are included in Caxton's more careful phrasing of "loue, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne."

Maureen Fries, in an article on the Arthurian works of T.H. White and Mary Stewart, lists "[t]he obscure prophecies of Merlin; the profusion of otherworldly characters" as well as "the unorthodox sexual relations, including semi-miraculous conceptions," "incest or attempted incest, and – statistically – more rapes than [in] any other branch of medieval literature"<sup>15</sup> and goes on to describe the difficulties contemporary writers encounter. All these arguments are part of the conglomerate of reasons that form the answer to the question of Arthur's popularity.

Examining the ways in which the legend has survived and in which the material is brought up-to-date, this study aims to add a more generalized explanation of the mystery of Arthur's appeal.

There is one thing that Arthuriana and all other great myths have in common: they share what is often described as "timelessness" or "universality." The legends of world literature have an undying appeal, a core that remains untouched by the death of languages and cultures. As C. G. Jung has demonstrated, we re-encounter a number of archetypes that seem to correspond with our deep-seated human beliefs and needs. Since these primeval traits are apparently unchangeable, myths are relevant to all at all times because they are adaptable to each new emerging generation.

The logical conclusion from this timelessness and universality would be that every – or at least every well-known – myth should also be equally popular at all times. Yet certain stories catch the fancy of certain generations more than others do. Looking at literary history, it can be observed that all myths, be it the Atrides stories, the legend of the Nibelungs, the Roland saga, Arthuriana, or any other of the great tales, have experienced changes in popularity. In the Middle Ages, although certain classical Greek myths were adapted (e.g. *Troilus and Criseyde*), they were not a center of interest as a rule. They were the stories of a non-Christian past of a country that now practiced a "strange" kind of Christianity and therefore had to be treated with caution. Arthurian lore, the Charlemagne/Roland stories, and Vergil's *Aeneid* – *The Matter of Britain*, *The Matter of France*, and *The Matter of Rome* – constituted the literary triumvirate of the Middle Ages which, together with various religious (e.g. Saints' Lives) and heroic (e.g. Robin Hood) stories, found a wider distribution.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>15</sup> Maureen Fries, "The Rationalization of the Arthurian 'Matter' in T. H. White and Mary Stewart" in *Philological Quarterly* (vol. 56, 1977) 258f.

Every myth has times in which it speaks particularly strongly to the spirit of the era. The Renaissance, for example, with its newly found independence from catholic restrictive thought, its widening horizon after the discovery of America, and its yearning for clarity, returned to the classical subjects, as did, *nomen est omen*, the Neo-Classicists. The Nibelungs were revived in Germany during the German nationalist movement in the nineteenth century, and also during the Third Reich. And the Arthurian stories, after their initial bloom in the Middle Ages, retreated to the background for a long time (due to a large extent to the uncertain historicity of the king) before they found new interest in the Romantic period, an interest that has grown ever since. One day the Arthurian legends, so fashionable in our time, will no doubt be supplanted in popular culture by one or several other myths that capture the fancy of a new era, until the British king returns yet again when his time comes.

I suggest that all great myths share not only universal traits but also what I call openness: a four-fold openness divided into cultural, historical, text-inherent, and inter-textual aspects that function as a space for creativity. Both the *cultural* and the *historical openness* are underlying factors that explain the basic conditions required to keep a legend alive. The *cultural* aspect addresses those circumstances that influence the appeal of the legend, like language preferences, contemporary parallels, and religious, civilizational, social, or political preeminence or changes. The *historical* factor concerns the extent of artistic freedom that comes with the inability to verify some (or all) of the stories' elements and characters. These two aspects find expression in the *text-inherent* and the *inter-textual* openness which refer to the works themselves. The *text-inherent* aspect relates to the gaps and windows in a single text that allow for a range of additions and interpretations. The *inter-textual* factor is occupied with the flexibility caused by the author's choice between elements provided by a large number of often dramatically different renditions.

I furthermore suggest that these aspects are variables. The cultural openness of a legend shifts according to the status of the culture(s) that brought it forth, or the culture(s) that promote(s) it. The historical openness changes if new literary or archaeological evidence is unearthed or rediscovered, or if manuscripts or landmarks are lost or destroyed. The loss or discovery of manuscripts or their incompatibility with a certain time or culture also affect the text-inherent and the inter-textual malleability by widening or diminishing a myth's scope of adaptable elements. This explains the growth or decrease of a certain legend's appeal in certain areas at certain times.

Applying the theory of a four-fold openness of myth and its variability to the Arthurian legend, this study strives to answer the question of Arthur's popularity in recent times. In this context, several aspects are to be considered. One can, for example, observe that the stories about King Arthur gain popularity especially in times of confusion, be it through war, oppression, social reforms, or political turmoil. The texts of the Middle Ages, be it Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Chrétien du Troyes' or the German romances, were all produced in times of strife. In the nineteenth century Tennyson and his contemporaries likewise wrote in the face of enormous social and ethical changes. After Enlightenment and its vision of a world governed by reason had failed, medieval romantic no-



tions were regarded once more as an alternative way to master life. Our own age, which abounds with war, political, philosophical, and religious confusion, has once again triggered the production of a large amount of Arthuriana. Arthur's character apparently corresponds to the human need for heroism and direction.<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect is that of language preeminence. In the Middle Ages, Latin, and later French, were the languages of choice for the educated classes in large parts of Europe. The earlier Arthurian texts like Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*<sup>17</sup> or the extremely popular *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth as well as several romances (i.e. the twelfth or thirteenth century *De Ortu Waluuanii Nepotis Arturi*) were written in Latin, and the first widely read romances like Chrétien de Troyes', or Robert de Boron's religious tales were written in French. This and the power of the Plantagenets, who were through Maud descended from William the Conqueror and held not only England but large parts of Europe, helped to spread the legends even before they were rendered in English and other folk languages. The aspect of language was at that time equally important for the Roland saga and the Aeneid, both of which could claim similar popularity. The Saga of the Nibelungs (which is also part of both versions of the Old Norse *Edda*), on the other hand, seems to have been known to all Germanic nations,<sup>18</sup> but there is no trace of an adaptation in non-Germanic countries.

In the nineteenth century, at the beginning of the Arthurian revival, England was at the peak of her power, being mistress of a Commonwealth that was many times larger than the mother country. In those areas (as well as in the colonies England had already lost) English had been introduced as an official language. This was its first step toward becoming the *lingua franca* that it is today. Being an English hero,<sup>19</sup> Arthur found his way to far-off shores, especially through Tennyson's epic poems.<sup>20</sup> Today, with English as the world language and America, a nation that has adopted Arthur,<sup>21</sup> as the prevalent Western culture, Arthur is extremely popular in many countries. The same, by the way, is true for Robin Hood, who like Arthur has evolved into a hero of

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur. The Dream of a Golden Age* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), esp. 9-12.

<sup>17</sup> Only some of the Welsh texts were written earlier.

<sup>18</sup> *Das Nibelungenlied*. Nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch. Herausgegeben von Helmut de Boer (22Mannheim: F. A. Brockhaus, 1988), xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> This is actually quite paradoxical: the original Arthur, if he existed, was neither Anglo-Saxon nor Norman, but a Celtic hero who fought against the Angles (English).

<sup>20</sup> There is, for example, an incident in the Canadian children's book *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) where the heroine (unsuccessfully) imitates the Lady of Shalott who is called 'Elaine' by her friends. This means that the author knew more than just "The Lady of Shalott" since that poem does not mention the lady's name. It also means that schoolchildren at the heroine's age (and the readers) were expected to understand the reference. Cf. Lucy M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (New York et. al: Bantam, 1987), 220-228.

<sup>21</sup> Reasons for this adoption will be discussed later.