

The Once and Future Story: Arthurian Mythology as an Emblem for Western Ideals

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Abstract

This article analyses three key texts in Arthurian literature to illustrate the changes the myth has undergone from its popularisation in the twelfth century to its rediscovery in the nineteenth century. It compares Geoffrey of Monmouth's unfounded insistence on historical accuracy with Chrétien de Troyes' focus on interiority and male–female dynamics before making a leap in time to explore Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and its anxieties concerning gendered power dynamics and material culture. The paper draws on these comparisons to demonstrate the malleable nature of the Arthurian myth, as well as its status as both a reflection of Western values and a focus point for the authors' priorities within their own environments and cultures. This is achieved through a focus on social commentary and the creation of a plethora of characters and symbols that will become rooted in the European psyche.

Keywords: Arthurian literature, Arthurian myth and national identity, Evolution of Arthurian mythology, Chrétien de Troyes and chivalry, Alfred Tennyson and Victorian Medievalism

From the Sword in the Stone to the Holy Grail or the figure of Merlin, the Arthurian legend has played an important role in the collective Western imagination. While there is no factual basis for the existence of an Arthur exactly as he is portrayed in most literature, the myth itself¹ has remained present from its first conceptions in the early medieval Latin historical texts to contemporary re-imaginings. However, through its many retellings, it has obtained a shifting and malleable nature, which many artists have found valuable to illustrate and propagate their respective society's moral and cultural values. This shifting collection of European

moral priorities, cultural expectations and historical biases concerning, for example, gender dynamics or the importance of individual desires – these signifiers mentioned earlier – will be referred here to as the ‘Western psyche’. Three examples of this phenomenon reside in medieval scholar Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, French poet Chrétien de Troyes’ Arthurian romances, and Victorian poet Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Through an analysis of the way their different styles and themes interact with their culture’s preoccupations, it becomes clear that the Arthurian legend functions less as a unique, defined story and more as a focus through which the authors reflect the evolution in cultural and moral priorities in European society. In this case, it illustrates the shift from a historical figure to a more narrative and individual ideal of courtly love, which is then repurposed in the Victorian age as an examination of the anxieties surrounding the shifting political and cultural landscape. I will first demonstrate Monmouth’s role in precipitating the Arthurian myth to the forefront of a brand-new national identity. Then I will analyse Chrétien de Troyes’ contribution to this process through shifting the focus to a more introspective version of the myth, which establishes a collective emotional connection to the Arthurian legend. Finally, I will explore Tennyson’s reprise of the Arthurian tradition as a symbol, or symptom, of a nostalgia for a non-existent, idealised collective past and a tool for Victorians to come to terms with their own present. Through these three case studies, I will show that the mythology surrounding Arthur and the Round Table has been shaped by Western philosophies and moral priorities while contributing to shape these same societies’ values, thus proving its status as a myth.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the creation of a national identity

Geoffrey of Monmouth’s 1136 text *History of the Kings of Britain* transformed the figure of Arthur from a few mentions in Latin chronicles, such as Nennius’s or Gildas’s texts (Wilhelm, 1984: 5–7), to a key emblem of British reunification. Monmouth’s goal is to present a coherent history that portrays a common and proud ancestry before the invasion of the Saxons. The text prides itself in its historical emphasis, as shown by Monmouth’s dedication which assures us the work is a translation of ‘a certain very ancient book written in the British language’ – a source that historians have emitted many hypotheses for, all of which

are unverified – paired up with the author’s ‘own expressions’ and ‘own homely style’ (Monmouth 1966: 51). Arthur’s story is indeed narrated through a historical lens. Originally written in Latin,^[2] the *History* is built using a **paratactic** style through a series of important events, such as battles or alliances, all connected by chronological conjunctions such as ‘then’ (164), ‘as soon as’ (218) or ‘in the end’ (256). These links bring focus onto the events themselves, rather than the characters beyond their actions. There is very little commentary about the causality of events, and practically none about the characters’ personal motivations or the author’s own moral conclusions. Even though the details are often fabricated, the language used is factual, with precise accounts of the players (such as the long list of actors in the battle between Arthur and Lucius Hiberius at the beginning of Book 10) and locations (such as the ‘river Humber’ (212) or ‘Caledon Wood’ (215)). This serves to anchor the account into history, or Monmouth’s version of History, and ascribes a factual, unbiased tone to his work. In doing so, he moves the figure of Arthur from a nebulous folkloric presence to a tangible hero in the British imagination.

The historical emphasis serves to sway the Arthurian legacy away from traditional folklore and into a more ‘acceptable’ or scholarly aspect of the British past. The effect of this was the creation of a political past that many factions could subscribe to. As Alan MacColl states:

The English quickly adopted Geoffrey’s account as the first part of their own national history, and it was not long before the Welsh followed suit. Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, both the English and the Welsh made the idea of an ancient British heritage the historical cornerstone of their national identity. (MacColl, 2006: 249)

The period of literary uncertainty that preceded Monmouth’s time, with few written vestiges, emphasises this need for a national history for factions to rally behind.

This need for a glorious Briton past is also shown through the depiction of the figure of Arthur. In the *History*, Arthur is first and foremost a military hero. The praise of his character comes from his prowess as a tactician and warrior. In a glorious description of one of Arthur’s first battles (in ‘Arthur of Britain’), Monmouth tells us:

He drew his sword Caliburn [...] and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy. Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow. He did not slacken his onslaught until he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men.

(Monmouth 1966: 217)

While Monmouth's style still resembles a historical account, this description of Arthur comes close to that of an epic hero. Hyperboles and absolute terms abound, and the supernatural undertones of the extract through the calling upon God suggests Arthur's character holds an aspect that goes beyond a human king of the past. The apotheosis of Arthur's reign in the *History* comes when he is crowned as emperor of Rome after his victory over Lucius. This expansionist ideal of British conquest is the mythical aspect that Monmouth emphasises through Arthur's constant victories. The image of Arthur-as-Britain as a conquering force establishes the mythical aspect of the tale, as it builds the foundations of a national identity through collective imagination. The extract also features Arthur's sword Excalibur (here 'Caliburn'), a well-known object that has taken a significant place in the modern conception of the legend. The fact that the sword is the first legendary object that appears in this Arthurian tale tells us much about the primarily military purpose of its beginnings. Monmouth inscribes himself into a tradition of epic heroes while adapting these traditions for a British audience.

Finally, Monmouth does not forget to invoke God in his description. In many other instances, he attributes Arthur's victories to the grace of God, establishing him not only as a champion of Britain but also as an emblem of the Christian faith, expanding its influence through all of Western Europe. Thus, as Ad Putter concludes, 'Arthur is above all a conquering hero, and the story of his rule is one of continual territorial expansion ... The values that Geoffrey's Arthur embodies are primarily martial ones: pious patriotism, bravery, generosity' (Putter, 2009: 41). Signifiers such as the sword, or the hyperbolic language, go hand-in-hand with the historical tone to shape a collective figurehead of British values of military prowess and Christianity. Through Monmouth, Arthur becomes a myth, an iconic emblem representing more than an individual, thus unifying a country's collective consciousness.

However, or perhaps because of this, the subject of Arthur's death itself is treated with surprisingly little detail. After extensively describing the final battle of Camlann, naming every casualty on either side, Monmouth concludes Arthur's story by stating: 'Arthur himself, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to. He handed the crown of Britain to his cousin Constantine' (Monmouth, 1966: 261). While his wounds are mortal, there is no explicit mention of Arthur's death. Arthur's death is shrouded in mystery, left for the reader to interpret its significance. Even if Monmouth's audiences would not interpret the passage as a statement of Arthur's immortality (Putter, 2009: 41), this still serves to further elevate the character into an emblem, a mythical figure. In the end, Arthur's death is inconsequential to his story – instead, his existence is remembered; he lives on through Monmouth's work, and through his place in Britain's consciousness.

In this context, one of the *History's* passages stands out as a mysterious addition. Monmouth interrupts his account of Vortigern (one of the kings preceding Arthur) to introduce the character of Merlin, and proceeds to transcribe an entire chapter-full of his prophecies. These prophecies are opaque, deliberately overzealous with metaphors and obscure symbolism: 'the Boar shall come the Ram of the Castle of Venus, with golden horns and a beard of silver [...] in the days of the Ram there shall be peace' (Monmouth, 1966: 176). This whole section is based on images that are signposted as metaphors, but leave us at a loss to determine an objective interpretation. Committed to his role of historian, Monmouth does not comment on these prophecies, leaving the reader to interpret. Putter informs us that 'Geoffrey planted in the midst of Merlin's prophecies several that obviously tally with historical events, thus creating the impression that others will be fulfilled in future' (Putter, 2009: 39). Scholars used Merlin's metaphors for various purposes, whether to stoke Welsh ambitions of power (MacColl, 2006: 251) or to frame Arthur's possible return as a mythical Messiah-like figure (Thorpe, 1966: 22). In the words of Kimberly Bell, 'Merlin becomes a shaper of history himself, whose prophetic text mirrors Geoffrey's own historical narrative' (Bell, 2000: 14). Through our interpretation, Merlin transforms history into an active task; he 'breaks the illusion of narrative (and historical) linearity and forces readers to participate actively in the construction of the text rather than passively receive information given to them' (Bell, 2000: 18). Monmouth

thus uses the pagan figure of Merlin in his Christian history to create an impression of a predestined future on top of a glorified, united past for Britain. The reader becomes directly involved not only in the act of history – and myth-making – but also in their own perception of their future. The role of Merlin, just like Arthur's ambiguous death, serves to further inscribe the Arthurian myth into a legendary story, one that claims to be predominantly historical and political while also shrouding it in an aura of unexplained, supernatural and, therefore, inherently fascinating mystery.

Chrétien de Troyes' romances and the individualisation of chivalry

Following Monmouth's depiction of Arthur as a martial hero and ultimate unifier of Britain, the twelfth century starts shaping cultural notions of an idealised noble behaviour in literature. While maintaining the ideals of martial prowess and chivalric valour, the developing romance genre transforms Monmouth's *History* into a framing narrative through which various individuals are placed in the forefront. Chrétien de Troyes's works – notably his two romances, 'The Knight with the Lion' and 'The Knight of the Cart' – exemplify the genre's new focus on personal integrity and interiority. Chrétien employs various narrative devices in order to stoke the audience's interest. For example, 'The Knight with the Lion' begins with a member of Arthur's entourage telling a story of his adventures; this prompts Yvain, the protagonist, to avenge him, thus propelling his own story. This framing device achieves two purposes: building a coherent, interlinking structure and creating a subjective point of view that allows for a more personal relationship with the characters.

Through the framing device, Chrétien gives the story a structured plotline, which results in a loss of the 'authentic' history-telling style, and a rise in a stylised form of narration. As William Kibler points out, Chrétien was influenced by the French *chansons de geste*, which were not meant to be read but to be performed and widely distributed in oral form (Kibler, 2004: 3). He followed a tradition of epic poetry that presupposed an aesthetic of storytelling, which is identified by Carol Chase: '[Chrétien's] works are constructed following a pattern incorporating a crisis and a quest: they can all be divided into "before" and "after", with the crisis as the dividing line' (Chase, 1984: 301). The structure allows for a smooth and enjoyable rhythm while also emphasising the key themes of his story (for example,

this before-crisis-after structure strengthens the weight of Yvain's redemption in 'The Knight with The Lion'). Because of his adherence to the tradition of the [chanson de geste](#), Chrétien frees himself of Monmouth's historical priorities and allows Arthurian literature to move towards a more narrative and stylised direction.

The second effect of the framing device in 'The Knight with the Lion' is its focus on a singular, subjective experience rather than a direct transcription of events by the narrator. We are introduced to the main features of the story (the enchanted fountain and its protecting knight) through a secondary source, told through Calogrenant's first-person perspective. Chrétien's works often prioritise their protagonists' 'inner lives', their psychological journeys, over an impartial, events-based point of view. In many instances, the knights go through a kind of psychomachia, where they deliberate in profound detail over a particular choice, studying the advantages and the negative impacts of their potential actions. For example, in Lancelot's story 'The Knight with the Cart' (which I will study using Kibler's translation), the protagonist must choose between showing mercy on an enemy he just vanquished or complying to a maiden's request to have him killed. Chrétien frames this through an inner monologue featuring a confrontation between the personifications of Generosity and Compassion:

Generosity and Compassion demand that he satisfy them both, for he is both generous and merciful. Yet if the girl carries off the head, Compassion will have been vanquished and put to death, and if she must leave without it, Generosity will have been routed. Compassion and Generosity hold him doubly imprisoned.

(De Troyes, 2004: 242)

Chrétien plunges into Lancelot's mind in order to show us the dilemma he is going through. Qualities that define the period's ideal of chivalry are given human form, a technique that both highlights this focus on interiority and, on a meta-textual level, embodies the author's urge to ascribe a personality to previously one-dimensional characters – even disembodied concepts are attributed an individuality. This person-within-a-person narration technique brings complexity and nuance to the characters as well as emphasising focus on the struggles within.

For this same reason of individuality, Chrétien seems to pay a close attention to names and the power they hold – the knights have to gain the right to be referred to by their real names through various chivalric actions. For example, Lancelot's name is only spoken in the text by Guinevere after he has proven his worth in the tournament. Names mean not only recognition of their existence but also acceptance of their status as complex characters within the legend of King Arthur. Chrétien de Troyes is responsible for the creation of many iconic features of the Arthurian myth – he created Lancelot and his affair with Guinevere, as well as the story of Percival and the apparition of the Holy Grail, which would later play a highly prominent part of medieval Christian retellings of the legend. This attention to individuality and interiority therefore served to create a plethora of various personalities within Arthur's court, adding to the complexity and appeal of the genre. Adding an individuality to the names serves to cement them in the collective imagination, allowing for a more personal connection between the myth and the individuals that retell it, as well as the society that receives it.

Finally, medieval Arthurian romances bring a new aspect to the relationship between chivalry and gender dynamics. Alongside the knight's preoccupation with military prowess, a new ideal of courtly love takes a predominant role in the chivalric code. In Chrétien's works, this love takes precedence over any and all action, to the extent where the traditional knightly values – the virtues of honour and reputation established by Monmouth – are challenged by the protagonists' duties towards courtly love. While we have already discussed the use of personification earlier, it is worth noting the extreme language used in this passage of 'The Knight with the Lion' regarding Yvain's sudden love for the lady Laudine:

He who refuses to welcome Love eagerly as soon as she draws near to him commits a felony and treason; and I say [...] that such a person does not deserve any happiness [...] I must not bear her any hatred if I do not want to betray Love. I must love whomever Love chooses.
(De Troyes, 2004: 312)

Yvain's submission to the capitalised Love is absolute and unequivocal, and his commitment is rewarded by the narrative at the end of his journey. In this passage, Love is associated with feudal and legal language related to the knight's duties towards his lord: 'felony', 'treason', and 'betray' would

all be recognised by a contemporary audience as capital offences in a system based on trust and delegation of power. To place this value on Love is to give it the same political and societal status. The language used in the extract is not restricted to Yvain either – the general expressions ‘he who refuses’ and ‘such a person’ leave no room for Love to be negotiated with by anyone. This could be the result of specific influences that Chrétien was submitted to due to his audience. Indeed, the poet was under the sponsorship of the countess Marie of Champagne, whose court played an important part in the establishment of the ideals of courtly love (Michener, 1970: 355). This influence is an explanation for why Chrétien placed a particular emphasis on the knights’ submission to Love. This new influence that women had over Arthurian literature resulted in a shift in gender dynamics. While Monmouth’s *Historia* only mentions women offhandedly, as either wives or mothers, Chrétien’s works constantly place them at the forefront of the protagonists’ priorities, often in direct conflict with the ‘traditional’ expectations of chivalry.

The most striking example of this is the problem of Lancelot’s adulterous relationship with Queen Guinevere, which Chrétien de Troyes is the first Arthurian author to write about. This key aspect of the Arthurian legend has later been used as a morality piece, especially by late medieval texts – for many, Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair directly causes the fall of the Round Table. However, Chrétien’s ‘The Knight of the Cart’ implies no such interpretation from the story. On the contrary, as Pamela Raabe argues:

We are not asked to believe that Lancelot fails to achieve spiritual perfection because of his sin, as in the thirteenth-century prose *Queste del Saint Graal*, or even that Lancelot achieves perfection despite his sin; but that he is like a saint and martyr precisely because of his illicit love.
(Raabe, 1987: 259)

Narratively, Lancelot is rewarded for choosing Guinevere over his knightly reputation. The language used to describe their love is not only positive, it is almost divine in nature. Lancelot’s quest for Guinevere is closely intertwined with the Christian quest for holiness, as shown through the graveyard episode where Lancelot goes through a journey similar in structure to Christ’s Harrowing of Hell in order to pursue his journey towards the queen. By portraying his protagonist’s motivations of Love in

the same light as Christ's unifying Love of humanity, Chrétien suggests the human act of love comes from God, and therefore transcends earthly concerns. Raabe adds: 'divine faith and profane love are somehow paradoxically united in Lancelot, so that Amors is the ultimate perfection of faith' (1987: 264). Therefore, Chrétien's ideal of chivalry views love as the ultimate drive for human salvation. He transforms Monmouth's portrayal of a unified political and military system into an exploration of the psychological effect of love and morality on an individual. Through him, Arthur's collective story becomes more fragmented and complex, as well as interacting with a broader, more international audience than the *Historia* would have been intended for. Chrétien de Troyes' contribution to the Arthurian myth served to settle the legend as a rich universe through which to present more individual stories, tailored to the writer's particular audience.

Lord Alfred Tennyson and the fading Camelot

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes contributed greatly to the popularisation of the Arthurian myth, and their influence led to a great number of retellings and additions to the legend. However, interest in King Arthur dwindled down after the fifteenth century – partly due to scholars' newfound scepticism regarding Arthur's historical veracity, and partly due to a renewed interest in classical literature of the Antiquity (Gossedge and Knight, 2009: 103). It was not until the nineteenth century that the Arthurian myth was properly revisited by writers and artists, influenced by the period's fascination with [medievalism](#). Perhaps due to the shifting social structure of the Industrial Revolution, there was a cultural pull towards the medieval and its feudal systems of nobility. 'Ideas of ancient beauty, antiquity and mystery', explains Julie Pridmore, were romanticised by authors such as Tennyson or Walter Scott, 'inciting a wholly new interest in the past, and in the customs and manners and personalities of ages remote from the civilised present' (Pridmore, 2000: 89). When writing *Idylls of the King* between 1859 and 1873, Tennyson was influenced by this idealised version of the Middle Ages and was attracted to the figure of medieval Britain as a glorious land. Thus, Tennyson's presentation of the Arthurian setting helps to pinpoint his contribution to the legend.

This mythical Camelot translates into a highly symbolic language, with clear motifs of savagery against civilisation instead of precise locations or accurate descriptions. Arthurian Britain is described with surreal and mystical imagery: 'the land of Cameliard was waste / Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein' (Tennyson, 1996: 21). The surroundings shift depending on the poem's tone, from a field of flowers for Arthur and Guinevere's wedding (33) to a 'tempest' at Arthur's passing (302). Much like Camelot disappears before Gareth in the poem 'Gareth and Lynette', shrouded in 'the silver-misty morn' (41), Tennyson's setting is elusive and draped in vague but atmospheric language. Avalon, the mystical land where Arthur is brought, receives the same treatment. As Inga Bryden points out:

Tennyson's Avalon is associated with the features, recognizable to contemporary readers, of an idealized, rural landscape: meadows, orchard-lawns, bowery hollows. Such a place, bound up with national identity ... is both actual and mythical: shaped in earthly terms, it also signifies an already disappearing English landscape. (Bryden, 2020: 14)

This depiction of Avalon contributes to Tennyson's Britain's status as an imaginary, idealised dreamland rather than a historical setting, confirming this Victorian picture of the Arthurian land as a static ideal that is pasted on the medieval period as a distant appealing past, much in the same way as Geoffrey of Monmouth used Arthur as a political figure for British national pride.

This political facet to Victorian medievalism is articulated in various ways in Tennyson's *Idylls*. While the poems' setting is idealised and mesmerising, there is a theme of corruption and decay running through the work, as well as light fading into darkness. The ideals of chivalry, trust and 'social unity' romanticised by the Victorians (Bryden, 2020: 662) are visibly crumbling, culminating in the eventual fall of the Round Table and the death of Arthur. The recurring motif of the tension between spiritual virtue and bodily desire illustrates Tennyson's growing anxieties over the shifting cultural landscape of his society. The nineteenth-century individual was plunged in an increasingly material culture, and objects held a prevalent role in everyday life. Even the medievalism trend discussed earlier was submitted to this: Bryden mentions an 'ambivalence

(or rather, fascination and anxiety) towards objects and material culture' (Bryden, 2020: 655) as well as 'desire to market an authentic version of the medieval/Arthurian object' (656). This shift into materiality could explain the anxieties that seep into the *Idylls*. While the explicit criticisms of Arthur's court are made by the antagonists Tristram and Vivien, they still manage to sow doubts into the reader's mind regarding the Round Table that 'blinds [it]self' (Tennyson, 1996: 162) for fear of finding something beneath the society's appearances of virtue. Moreover, in the poem 'Guinevere', Tennyson articulates Guinevere's betrayal, the main conflict that precipitates the fall of Camelot, as a conflict between flesh and spirituality. Arthur states, 'I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh / And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd; and mine own flesh / Here looking down on thine polluted' (283), as if Guinevere were made of a corrupting matter different to Arthur. The last lines in the *Idylls* refer to 'The darkness of that battle in the West, / Where all of high and holy dies away' (302), and the final battle of Camlan is related through nightmarish, almost hell-like descriptors. This obsession with flesh and the abandonment of 'higher' thought links back to Victorian anxieties over materialism – there is a notion in Tennyson that modern changes corrupt what were once chivalric virtues, and now only seem to have value as objects to fawn over. This work, therefore, presents an ambiguous duality between the idealisation of Camelot's setting as a celebration of the past, and the slow changes that pervade Arthur's court as an exploration of contemporary material culture.

Another nineteenth-century anxiety exemplified by the *Idylls of the King* is formed around the place and meaning of masculinity in Victorian Britain. Tennyson seems to reject Chrétien de Troyes' emphasis on the superiority of Love as the ultimate chivalric ideal. Instead, he replaces it with a more traditionally masculine view of knightly morality. Lancelot and Tristram – the two members of Arthur's court most associated with the service of women and their amorous adventures – are presented in a more passive light, if not as downright antagonists. Lancelot is associated with flower imagery through the poems, and Tennyson is more concerned about his adultery than his military prowess – the latter of which is mentioned in 'Lancelot and Elaine' but never explicitly narrated. Tristram has no respect for fundamental ideals of trust or feudal vows, and has eyes only for Isolt, to the point where he neglects his chivalric duties. Arthur, on the other hand, is referred to as 'guileless' (Tennyson, 1996: 270) and a 'stainless gentleman' (163). There is a long and extensive description of

Excalibur's importance – much like in Monmouth, the sword is a prevalent marker of the King's identity. This relates to Pridmore's view of the Victorian interest in soldier-heroes. In her words, 'the attention given to individual heroes was a reflection of the Victorian concern with "great men", a worship of self-discipline in myth if not necessarily in reality and the production of biographies of recent heroes' (Pridmore, 2000: 98). This anxiety over the meaning of manliness in Victorian England shows that – in the same way that British medievalism was a way to escape from the growing changes in nineteenth-century culture – Tennyson's portrayal of Arthur betrays a desire to move back to the 'roots' of British masculinity.

In parallel to Tennyson's anxieties over the loss of male identity, the *Idylls* also deal with the shifting nature of gender dynamics. The role of women in the poems is peculiar and ambiguous, especially the poet's treatment of Vivien, previously Neneve in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Tennyson's main fifteenth-century source. Indeed, while the original text portrays Neneve as a young maiden unjustly pursued by Merlin, Vivien holds a much more threatening position of power. Her motivations are not self-defence, but rather vengeance and ambition. She infiltrates Arthur's court, spreading false rumours and attempting to seduce Arthur, then Merlin, in order to achieve her goals. She is at times manipulative and lewd, a 'harlot' (Tennyson, 1996: 167) using her serpentine body as a way to win Merlin's trust: 'There while she sat, half-falling from his knees, / Half-nestles at his heart' (166). At other times, she is wrathful and brutally honest, calling out the Round Table's hypocrisy: 'They bound to holy vows of chastity! / Were I not woman, I could tell a tale [...] Not one of all the drove should touch me: swine!' (160). This strange dichotomy between the powerful, influential female and the wily, sexualised witch parallels Victorian instability regarding the role of women, especially when put in relation to the shifting version of British masculinity. Following Wollstonecraft's example, nineteenth-century women were more and more present in the public world, with figures like Anna Jameson 'rethinking the roles of women in society and the nation' (Peterson, 2009: 39). In this way, the women's emancipation signified a blurring of the lines, which Tennyson's Vivien represents through her ambiguity and double nature. By its nature as an epic account of knightly prowess, the private sphere – conflated with medieval women's power – is often neglected by Arthurian writers. However, Vivien challenges this by stepping into Merlin's sphere of power and gaining political power in

Arthur's court. Vivien therefore represents, as Linda Peterson suggests, 'the extension of domestic life into the social community and the nation at large' (Peterson, 2009: 40). The result is a threateningly powerful woman whose influence is dangerous to men's place in society.

Thus, Tennyson reinvents characters and settings that were well-rooted in his culture's imagination and uses their pre-conceived connotations, while also subverting them to explore themes of societal change, such as growing materialism and questioned gender roles. In shifting the myth to his vision, the author finds a way to grapple with his society's own shifting vision of British ideals. By creating a comfortable distance from both the 'historical' Middle Ages and his own period, Tennyson uses the Arthurian legend as a filter through which he can explore the unstable culture he is experiencing.

Through the study of these three extremely influential pieces of Arthurian literature, it is clear that the myth of King Arthur is used by different authors to express the values and sentiments of their own environment. While Monmouth's *History* aims to rally Britain behind a common glorified past, Chrétien de Troyes' romances represent the twelfth-century ideals of courtly love and internal morality. Seven centuries later, Tennyson uses Arthur to reconnect with British medievalism and explore Victorian gender dynamics. The texts constantly interact with each other, drawing on common features such as Excalibur or Lancelot to highlight different priorities in their stories. Unlike the famous sword, the Arthurian legend is not set in stone; it is a constantly shifting and reinterpreted source that, while having been separated from 'true' history, still attracts scholars as a funnel through which to analyse the authors' contexts and cultural anxieties. Because of this, King Arthur finds his place among mythical studies as a powerful emblem that resides in the collective mind throughout European history

Notes

[1] Here I use the definition of a myth as the societal phenomenon through which popular folkloric images are used as signifiers to communicate political or cultural meaning.

[2] However, in this article, I will use Lewis Thorpe's translation and the Penguin edition of the text: Of Monmouth, G. (1966), *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe, London: Penguin.

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Glossary

Chanson de geste: A long, narrative, sung poem celebrating the feats, the 'gesta', of medieval heroes. The genre was popularised in France during the twelfth century, mainly by minstrels and jugglers.

Courtly love: A medieval ideal designating a form of loving based on courtesy, respect and honesty. The trope is usually accompanied by highly stylised verse, stemming from the poetry of the French *troubadours*, the composers that performed mainly between the twelfth and the fourteenth century.

Medievalism: An artistic, literary or cultural movement taking inspiration from elements of the Medieval period. The phenomenon usually presents an idealised version of the era.

Paratactic: Said of a style using parataxis, or the juxtaposition of clauses without any subordinative conjunctions.

Romance: A Medieval genre of prose or verse narratives, usually depicting the adventures of chivalric wandering knights. The genre is vast and contains many variations, taking inspiration from the *chansons de geste*, the *troubadours'* lyric poetry or, in some instances, even the burlesque.

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