

and, therefore, no conflict between friendship and martial obligations. All the surviving Sarmatians are simply cast as ladies' men, at least by their words if not by their deeds. Stephen Dillane's Merlin is no magician, but the screen Merlin as magician has long been reduced to caricature, so any change in his characterization represents a step forward. Bors is the film's most original knightly character, though as played by Ray Winstone he seems an odd-hybrid of Curley Howard of Three Stooges' fame and a stock character from the World Wrestling Federation. Keira Knightley's (to quote the film's own publicity) 'kick-ass' Guinevere is a definite improvement over previous screen Guineveres and not totally outside the realm of the possible. First-century Roman Britain had given birth to Boudicca, a warrior queen, but the final scene in the film lacks the courage of its gender-transforming convictions. For her wedding to Arthur, Guinevere peels off her tattoos, war paint, and bodice and surrenders to gender stereotype by donning a traditional white dress and a veil. Knightley had previously honed her archery skills as Robin Hood's daughter in *Princess of Thieves* in which she also ends up switching from male to female clothing for the film's concluding wedding sequence.

Clive Owen's Arthur seems more a hero for our time than some of his cinematic predecessors were for theirs. He broods especially well. (In a nice twist, Owen has been mentioned as the next James Bond; Sean Connery, the original Bond, was of course Arthur in *First Knight*.) But there is, in the final analysis, nothing particularly Arthurian about Fuqua's film. Change the main characters' names, and *King Arthur* becomes just another sword-and-sandal-(and bodice) 'B' costume picture. If *King Arthur* bears comparison to any other Arthurian film, it (by accident, doubtlessly) echoes George Romero's biker film *Knightriders*—itself hardly a film without flaws, but one that, despite its flaws, does manage to be much more genuine and original in invoking the real promise that the legend of the once and future king has continued to hold for generation after generation.

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King Arthur directed by Antoine Fuqua from a screenplay by David Franzoni. A Buena Vista release of a Touchstone Pictures/Jerry Bruckheimer Films Presentation, 2004.

Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* borrows from Russian, Japanese, and American films but not from Arthurian films. It deliberately distances itself from the knights-in-shining-armor, damsel-in-distress extravaganzas typical of earlier Arthurian cinema and from the high Middle Ages setting of most earlier attempts to bring Arthur to the screen. It tries instead to present the 'historical' Arthur. Thus it is set in the fifth century at a time when the Romans are withdrawing from Britain. Hadrian's Wall has been a defense against the Picts, called 'Woads' by the Romans and Celts who battle them.

An Arthurian film that opens with a script proclaiming that 'historians agree ...' is bound to cause controversy. Few historians agree on anything about Arthur, certainly

not his identity, of which the script speaks. Even his existence is a matter of debate. The film makes use of the Sarmatian connection to the Arthurian legends outlined in the book *From Scythia to Camelot* (1994) by C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor, which posits that Arthur's knights are Sarmatians impressed into service in the Roman army because of their skill as horsemen. They serve under Arthur, a Romano-British descendant of the second-century Lucius Artorius Castus. Believing that they have fulfilled their obligation to Rome, they learn that they must undertake one last mission, the rescue of a boy who is a favorite of the Pope from a villa north of the wall.

The mission is complicated and made all the more dangerous by the invasion of the Saxons in the north. (Would historians agree that this is the way the Anglo-Saxons first entered Britain?). In fact, the Woads who might have slaughtered Arthur and his knights allow them to live and the Saxons become the enemy. The delightfully villainous Saxon leader Cerdic (Stellan Skarsgård), one of the best characters in the film, is willing to sacrifice some of his own men to learn about his enemy's strategy; when his son defies him, he threatens him; he saves a British woman from rape only to order her killed immediately after; and when he meets Arthur for the first time, he is glad to have found a man worthy of killing. Arthur's first rather than culminating battle with the Saxons is at Mt. Badon, located conveniently near Hadrian's Wall, which becomes a sturdy prop in support of the film's claim of historicity.

No, we do not have here the Arthur of history, if such a person ever existed. Nor do we have the Arthur of legend, despite the presence of Merlin, Guinevere, Galahad, Bors, Gawain, and others. Merlin appears as a leader of the Picts and not as a wizard or a prophet. Guinevere, like Merlin, has been de-romanticized. As part of the updating of the story that inevitably happens in a reworking of the tale of Arthur—that has happened in the works produced by Chrétien and Malory and Tennyson and White and many others—she is presented as a strong woman, a warrior, a leader, an opponent of Roman imperialism and intolerance. Galahad and Bors are battle-scarred knights and not questers for the Grail. Bors, who is represented by a white bull with one spot in Malory because he made love to a woman only once, is very different in the film. He has more bastards than he can name and is a hard-drinking and hard-fighting fellow who owes nothing but his name to Arthurian tradition. And there is no Grail. There is only the cruel Christianity of the Romans which seeks to torture people to salvation and kills those like Pelagius who oppose its teachings. (The screenwriter must be commended for knowing who Pelagius is and the editors for not leaving references to him on the cutting-room floor.) Gawain is fairly nondescript, a good fighter like all of Arthur's small band of knights but neither the epitome of virtue and valor that he is in numerous French, English, and Dutch medieval romances nor the sometimes conflicted knight from Malory who is torn between knightly and familial honor.

The historical setting also means that this film employs none of the usual courtly love motifs. Tristan is one of Arthur's knights, but there is no Isolt. Only one mildly voyeuristic scene and a couple of furtive glances remind a viewer of the typical relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere; but no relationship develops and the plot evolves in such a way that no possibility exists of an affair between them after Guinevere's marriage to Arthur.

Though the film gives us neither *the* truth about Arthur nor a reinterpretation of the story popularized in medieval romance, it is entertaining and has several virtues. It has good supporting characters such as Cerdic and Bors. The battle scene on the ice, derivative from *Alexander Nevsky* though it may be, is exciting and visually interesting.

And, despite the great liberties the film takes with both the chronicle and the romance traditions, there is something recognizably and traditionally Arthurian in it. A recurring element in Arthurian literature is the code by which Arthur and his knights live. The code may vary from work to work and age to age. In many medieval romances, Arthur's knights generally follow, or attempt to follow, codes of love and chivalry. Malory's knights develop a code based on the practical experiences and mistakes of a trio of questers—to avoid various types of evil deeds, to grant mercy, and to respect and aid ladies. Tennyson's Arthur has his knights swear to an impossibly noble code, such vows that it 'is a shame / A man should not be bound by, yet the which / No man can keep.' T.H. White's Arthur insists that might be used for right. The sense of devotion to a code of honor, of using the power of the king and his great knights not for personal aggrandizement but to defend the poor and the weak, to promote justice is what led John Steinbeck to declare that his sense of right and wrong and his feeling for the oppressor against the oppressed derived from a children's version of Malory that he read as a boy.

Fuqua's Arthur epitomizes an idealism that transcends his personal power or reputation. He believes that 'deeds are meaningless unless they serve some higher purpose.' Though he is a Christian and a loyal Roman, he is willing to oppose church and state to rescue Picts who are being tortured. He refuses to leave behind the peasants working on a Roman estate, even though they slow his men and force a battle with a much larger band of Saxons. And rather than retreating to Rome, he is convinced by Guinevere that his higher purpose is to join forces with the Picts who are fighting for their homeland against the invading Saxons, and his knights remain with him because of their loyalty to Arthur and what he represents. In an interview for *20/20*, Fuqua said of his Arthur: 'Anybody could become King Arthur. That's what's great about a great hero . . . that he's in you and if it's a righteous cause and you fight, then your name should ring on forever.' This notion that any man can become an Arthur puts Fuqua clearly in the tradition of American Arthurian literature and film, in which knighthood and kingship are often democratized.

King Arthur does not end tragically as a summary of the new workings of Britain's story. The final battle of the film is the victory of Mordred and does not take the form of the inevitable triumph of the invaders. The film ends instead on a romantic marriage of Shakespearean comedies; a concluding wedding depicts harmony and order. The marriage of Arthur and Guinevere is a symbol of the union not only of the Britons with the new-native Romano-Celts (not to mention the few remaining Saracens who follow Arthur) but also as a union of all those who oppose oppression and injustice and who fight for a higher cause.

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King Arthur does not end tragically, as so many of the reworkings of Arthur's story do. The final battle of the film is the victory at Mt. Badon and does not look to the future, inevitable triumph of the invaders. The film ends instead on a comic note; as in many of Shakespeare's comedies, a concluding wedding depicts harmony and order. The marriage of Arthur and Guinevere is a symbol of the union not only of the Picts and the now-native Romano-Celts (not to mention the few remaining Sarmatians who follow Arthur) but also as a union of all those who oppose oppression and imperialism, and who fight for a higher cause.

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