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"Arthur? Arthur? Arthur?" – Where Exactly Is the Cinematic Arthur to Be Found?

KEVIN J. HARTY

For Norris J. Lacy, with thanks.

In the closing scene of John Boorman's *Excalibur*, Perceval, at Arthur's command, rides forth from the apocalyptic battlefield to cast the eponymous sword upon the waters. When he returns to that battlefield, he frantically calls out, "Arthur? Arthur? Arthur?" Anyone who has studied what I have elsewhere termed "cinema Arthuriana"¹ may also wonder what has become of Arthur. While there have been more than one hundred films more or less indebted to the Arthurian tradition, there is a great difference between the quantity and the quality of these films. It could be said that the cinematic tradition of Arthur has produced few noteworthy films, and arguably no films that are truly important in the history of cinema.

To be sure, there have been any number of important classic films set in the Middle Ages: Fritz Lang's epic two-part *Nibelungenlied*, Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring*, and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*. Students of the Arthurian tradition clearly have their favorite films, but, even allowing for Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le gallois*, Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du lac*, Boorman's *Excalibur*, and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal*, it is hard to find Arthurian films of the caliber of those directed by Lang, Dreyer, and the others I previously mentioned.²

The most popular source for screen adaptations of the Arthuriad remains Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*, although here quantity and quality again do not go hand in hand. As Elizabeth S. Sklar (97–108) and Barbara Tepas Lupack (167–9) point out in separate publications, filmmakers have repeatedly turned Twain's

¹ I initially used the term for the title of the first published collection of essays on Arthurian cinema. See Harty, ed. *Cinema Arthuriana*. Subsequent comprehensive discussions of Arthurian cinema include Harty, ed., *King Arthur on Film*; Lupack and Harty, eds.; Lupack and Lupack; and Olton.

² For full discussions of cinematic treatments of the medieval, see the special issue of *Les Cahiers de la cinémathèque*; the double issue of *Film and History*; Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages*; and the special issue of *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*.

satiric response to his own age into juvenilia at best or pabulum at worst. As a result, any relationship between the putative source and the film is at times little more than titular or incidental. For instance, in the latest screen version of Twain, Roger Young's 1998 *A Knight in Camelot* made for television by Disney, the screenwriters transform Hank Morgan into Dr. Vivien Morgan, a fast-talking physicist from West Cornwall, Connecticut – played by Whoopi Goldberg complete with dreadlocks, no less.

Given the great literary influence, the length, the scope, and, most importantly, the rich tapestry of incidents and abundant dramatis personae of *Le Morte Darthur*, Sir Thomas Malory's great work would seem a natural source for film adaptations of the Arthurian legend. There is in Malory a kind of epic sweep akin to what screen – and now television – audiences have continued to find popular. But sadly, frustratingly, and, perhaps ultimately, annoyingly, when Malory is cited as source for a screenplay, we are often left to imagine whether that source is "reel" or imagined.

Cinematic interest in Malory dates back at least to 1910, when the Italian director Giuseppe de Liguoro made *Il Re Artù e i cavalieri della tavola rotonda* for Milano Films. The film was subsequently released in Great Britain by New Agency Films under the title *King Arthur; or, The Knights of the Round Table*. While the film itself seems not to have survived, trade notes about the film published when it was released record that it was lavishly produced, that it featured a cast of almost one hundred actors, and that its source was Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

No subsequent attempt to base a film upon Malory was undertaken for more than forty years. In 1953, MGM released its first production in CinemaScope, Richard Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table*. According to the unpaginated souvenir book published to coincide with the film's release (*Knights of the Round Table*, 1954), MGM clearly saw the film as "a tale of daring romance and breathtaking adventure set against a panoply of life in sixth century England, where daily hazards – as well as lovely ladies – challenged the intrepid members of King Arthur's knights." And further, the

photoplay revolves around the loves and exploits of King Arthur, Lancelot, Percival, Gawaine and the other famed knights who helped preserve England and created a legend that has been preserved through the centuries. The film's gripping sequences of battle and conquest and courtship were balanced with novel sequences of jousting, falcon hunting and other highlights of life in those hardy and violent days.

Finally, MGM claimed that, in creating their screenplay, Talbot Jennings, Jan Lustig, and Noel Langley "based their script on Malory's studious work."

In a piece of journalistic fluff published in the *New York Times*, Howard Dietz, MGM's chief of publicity, tried to stir up further interest in the film by distinguishing between Malory and his work; writers are after all, Dietz claims, "a strange lot to meet in the flesh." The *Morte* is, Dietz continues, "the bible of chivalry and knightly courtesy." Malory himself was (in a nice bit of

alliteration) a triple threat – "rogue," "robber," "rapist" – and were he to have shown up on the film's production set he "might [well] have made off with the Round Table [itself]" (Dietz 2, 5). However, MGM's own plot summary of the film (contained in the film's souvenir booklet) clearly shows little debt to anything recognizably Malorian.

The initial critical reception of the film was mixed, but clearly favored the medium over the message. Critics argued that the film was "an extraordinarily handsome early medieval pageant" (Walsh 407), that it "was a mighty handsome [*handsome* seems to be the operative critical word] film" (Hartung, Rev. of *Knights* 427), and that it "was a masterpiece of movie making that will take its place among the gallery of the best" (Priore 6). But there was an equally strong critical brief against the film. After defeating Modred, Lancelot finds himself trapped in a pit of quicksand from which he is rescued by his horse (à la Tom Mix and his trusted Tony), in a scene that is in keeping with other elements of the film. In the much-touted action sequences, for which CinemaScope is a natural match, the performances are, as Bosley Crowther notes, on the level of "Sir Lancelot went thataway" and "the rest of you knights follow me" (17). At best, *Knights of the Round Table* presents a *Classics Illustrated* version of the legend of Arthur in general and of Malory in particular in which the good guys wear white armor and the bad guys wear black.³

Ten years later, studio publicity – in this case from Britain's Rank Films – again maintained that Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* was the source for another epic film, *Lancelot and Guinevere*, also released as *The Sword of Lancelot*. Produced and directed by Cornel Wilde who also starred as Lancelot, the film, according to the studio, was "the realization of a dream. As a boy [Wilde] had read the 'Mort d'Arthur' of Sir Thomas Malory, and the story of Lancelot and Guinevere was one that had always stayed vividly in his mind" (*Lancelot and Guinevere* [Publicity Materials], unpaginated). Other information distributed by Rank about the film repeatedly claimed Malory as a source for the film (*Lancelot and Guinevere* [Press Information], unpaginated), a point further emphasized by many critics when they reviewed *Lancelot and Guinevere*. But again, we may wonder which version of Malory the film's screenwriters had in mind.

Lancelot and Guinevere is notable as a film for several reasons, both bad – Wilde's terrible and increasingly annoying French accent – and good – the unflinching treatment of the adultery between the title characters – but there is not much Malory here. As with Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table*, the reviews suggest a mixed critical reception for the film. A number of critics noted the film's "epic scale."⁴ Others found it a "surprisingly level-headed, limber and even literate go at" Malory (Howard Thompson 49), to be commended for its treatment of its source, combining "lush background, capable portrayals, and a heavy dose of derring-do" that clearly signal a source in Malory rather than in Tennyson (Rev. of *Lancelot*, *Sign* 50).

³ For further comment on *Knights* as a *Classics Illustrated* version of Malory, see Ian Johnson's review of the film when it was reissued in 1963 (37).

⁴ For a list of reviews of *Lancelot*, see Harty, ed., *King Arthur on Film* (259).

Indeed, the film's two most notable features are its treatment of the affair between Queen and Knight with what one critic calls "little shilly-shallying" (Hartung, Rev. of *Lancelot* 539) and its brisk jousts and battle scenes. But still the film falls flat – in 2000, a correspondent on ArthurNet dismissed the film, perhaps a bit unfairly, as simply a "vanity piece" for and by Wilde. The film's two strengths – the adultery and the battles – are nonetheless hard to ignore. While medieval battle is clearly not what we see on the screen, here the battles are less like Western chases and shoot 'em ups than in Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table*. And the treatment of the adultery does suggest in some ways that Arthurian film had by 1963 grown up about such matters. The only problem with the film's treatment of the love triangle is that it is too clearly isosceles rather than equilateral. In Wilde's film, Lancelot is clearly a generation junior to Arthur, and Guinevere is just as clearly several years younger than her knight champion.⁵

In *Lancelot and Guinevere*, the age disparity suggests that the robust Lancelot, not the aged Arthur, deserves the hand of the fair young Guinevere in marriage, but despite its mature handling of the adultery – and the claim of several critics that this Lancelot and this Guinevere clearly deserve each other – the film bows to a 1960s' code of sin and punishment. Even after Arthur has been killed, Lancelot loses Guinevere to God, divine love proving triumphant in the end over human desire. Such an ending is at the very least totally unMalorian to anyone who agrees with Eugène Vinaver's oft-repeated contention that Malory systematically secularizes materials after he borrows them from his sources. At best, Guinevere's taking the veil is in keeping with (what we would now consider sexist) demands as late as the 1960s that fallen women make a cinematic act of contrition or be punished, usually by death, for their sins – think of the fate of Elizabeth Taylor's character in the 1960 film *Butterfield 8*.

In 1981, Malory would again be claimed as a source for a film, John Boorman's *Excalibur*. According to Boorman, the first trap to avoid when attempting a film about the legend of the once and future king is worrying

about when or whether Arthur existed. The stories that inspire us were really fifteenth-century works by Thomas Malory . . . looking back nostalgically on the twelfth. . . . Malory was really the first hack writer. . . . When Caxton built his printing press, he asked poor old Malory to write something, and he obliged by putting together all the stories he knew.

And "I was determined," Boorman continues, "to tell the whole story of the *Morte D'Arthur*" (Kennedy 33).

⁵ An even more lopsided triangle occurs in Jerry Zucker's more recent *First Knight* where Sean Connery's Arthur is a full generation older than Richard Gere's Lancelot, who is a full generation older than Julia Ormond's Guinevere.

In the medieval tradition, Arthurian characters never seem to age. Given the length and complexity of Malory's narrative, for instance, the principal characters must age considerably, though the text offers no clues to their chronological ages at any point.

In the Fall of 1997, I queried ArthurNet about citations of or references to chronological ages in medieval works about Arthur. Among the responses I received was one from Norris J. Lacy pointing out that in the French *Mort Artu* Guinevere is fifty years old at the beginning of the text, and that Arthur was ninety-two and Gauvain seventy-six at its conclusion.

Critics, not to mention Arthurian scholars, have not always been kind in their response to Boorman's comments, nor to his film. For some, *Excalibur* at best faintly echoes Malory, and Boorman ends up with less distance and perspective on his subject than his putative source does. *Excalibur* may be a quality comic book, but it still remains a comic book, peopled with figures whose hairstyles are more pre-Raphaelite than medieval.

Malory, we know, condensed, conflated, and commented on his sources. Boorman's first misstep lies in his determination to retell all of Malory, somehow to condense the more than 800 pages of dense prose of his source into 140 minutes of Technicolor epic. In Boorman's Arthuriad, Merlin and the Grail are two competing threads that bind the narrative links together. Merlin represents the old; the Grail, something new – though clearly not something wholly Christian in any traditional sense, despite the film's Merlin's comment that the Christian God is driving out the pagan pantheon.

It is hard to see how Boorman's film could be a genuine reworking of Malory. Boorman's Arthur may be Grail King, but his Grail is stripped of any real Christian associations. In a striking note of discontinuity, *Excalibur* does not even bear out Merlin's neat formula that pagan gives way to Christian. In a film where the king and the land are one – which is the film's Perceval's post-quest message to his ailing lord – the Grail is the central symbol in a murkily defined pagan fertility ritual. As Martin B. Shichtman demonstrates in some detail, Boorman's vision of the Grail owes more to Jessie Weston than it does to Malory (35–48). The central character in the film is Merlin, not Arthur, and the magician links the past and the future. Events in the film revolve around a trinity of women – Igrayne, Guinevere, and Morgana – and their complex relations with Arthur, Lancelot, and Merlin.

By using Weston rather than Malory, Boorman can simplify and condense the Grail story while at the same time believing – wrongly, I would suggest – that he is approximating the original rites. Boorman may think that he can make the Arthurian story more accessible to contemporary audiences unfamiliar with the complexities of a Christian Grail myth. But the result is an attained Grail – foreign in its conception to that in Malory – that proves ineffectual. Arthur and his knights rally briefly to defeat the forces of Mordred. In an appropriately (or, depending upon your point of view, forced) medieval note, Arthur and his knights ride to what turns out to be their final battle accompanied by the Orff orchestration of "O fortuna" from *Carmina Burana*, but victory proves illusive. Arthur kills Mordred, but Mordred also, it would seem, kills Arthur. A wearied, bloodied, and confused Perceval is the sole survivor of the world of Camelot as the king's body accompanied by three women is borne out to sea into a setting sun – we have the once, but we seem to have lost the future.

More recent attempts to retell the legend of the once and future king have tended to stray even further from any recognizably medieval sources. Indeed for Jerry Zucker's 1995 *First Knight*, studio publicity materials boasted of the fact that the film's writers consciously broke with past, more traditional retellings of the story to make an Arthuriad for the post-*Iron John* 1990s, and Steve Barron's

1998 made-for-television mini-series *Merlin* approached the story of Arthur in an even more novel way: it basically excludes him from four hours of televised narrative.

Should students of the Arthurian legend then despair that the once and future king has been badly translated to the screen or lament that they have yet to see a work so clearly cinematic in its scope become the source for a serious retelling of the Arthuriad?

The spirit of the legend of the once and future king does inform several films, depending upon what we think that spirit may be, though they may not be the films we would most readily associate with the legend of Arthur. For instance, noted horror and slasher film director George Romero's 1981 film *Knightriders* suggests a clear fit between somewhat radical contemporary American values and the Arthurian ideal.⁶ The film examines that ideal as it is practiced by an itinerant group of motorcycle stunt riders who travel from county fair to county fair, *Knightriders* presents the usual cast of Arthurian characters, although Morgan here is a man – clearly a conflation of Morgan le Fay and Mordred – along with a Friar Tuck from the legend of Robin Hood, a Pippin from the legend of Charlemagne, and an assortment of stock heavies and bad guys.

Romero's surface debt is to the film Western by way of its subgenre, the biker movie, but *Knightriders*' deeper debt is, as Romero indicated in an interview, to the long tradition that sees Arthur as once and future king: "The motorcycle culture seemed to fit the Arthurian story. The bikers are a romanticized image, at least in this country. They have their own culture and attitude of this is us, and the rest of the world is you. That made sense on a pure story level, and as allegory" (Burke-Block 25). In the final analysis, *Knightriders* presents a utopian quest, a meditation on the possibility of recreating the Arthurian ideal in a troubled and fractured society, in this case contemporary America. Romero's central concern in all his films, horror and not, has always been with the direction and dilemma of civilization. In *Knightriders*, as Martin Sutton notes, Romero

proposes an "optimistic" vision by invoking the rigorous morality, the Edenic virtues of Camelot. The hype of the media, the corruption of the law, the material overindulgence of the average citizen is contrasted with the selfless dreams and organic social structure of the Arthurian legend. (38)

The Arthurian past, real or imagined, becomes in *Knightriders* a vehicle for better understanding contemporary realities, political and otherwise. Billy's Camelot is all inclusive and nonjudgmental – there is a black Merlin and a woman knight – in ways contemporary society can only try to be.

The Arthurian myth is also central to the plot of M. Night Shyamalan's *The*

⁶ Romero is better known for *The Night of the Living Dead* series. Unluckily, *Knightriders* was released within days of Boorman's *Excalibur*, and to a much more limited audience to boot. Not unexpectedly, the film was lost in the shuffle. *Knightriders* is by no means a perfect film; it is, with a running time of 145 minutes, five minutes longer than *Excalibur*, and, therefore, much too long.



King Billy (Ed Harris) and Linet, his queen (Amy Ingersoll), in George Romero's 1981 film *Knightriders*. (Still courtesy of MGM/UA Entertainment Co.)

Sixth Sense, the much-acclaimed sleeper of 1999. The film advances the trope familiar enough from such different films as *Equus*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Agnes of God* of having a doctor as much in need of healing as his or her patient. The impasse central to the film's plot between the boy Cole and his psychiatrist Malcolm is finally broken when Cole confides his full secret to the psychiatrist: he sees dead people who do not know they are dead. The boy asks Malcolm (whom we will eventually learn is himself dead) to help him no longer be afraid. Cole in turn elicits from Malcolm the confession that he is feeling estranged from his wife, that he too is unhappy.

Having confronted his fear, Cole seems changed and finds himself cast in the central role of a school play. Actually, this is the second school play staged in the film. The first stars a pompous and over-acting classmate, Tommy Tammisimo, as a Doctor Dolittle-like character who talks to the animals. Cole has only a bit part in this first play. The second play is, however, the story of the sword in the stone, and here Cole is cast in the central role, while, in a nice touch, Tommy plays the village idiot. As a narrator solemnly intones "only the pure of heart can take the sword from the stone," Cole as the boy Arthur easily pulls Excalibur free. Cole is cheered by his classmates who carry him on their shoulders in triumph. Malcolm and the other members of the audience join in the acclamation for what is clearly now a reborn Cole.

Cole and Malcolm then meet for their last session, in front of a faux medieval stained glass window. As Cole waves Excalibur in the air, he tells Malcolm to talk to his wife when she is asleep so that she can listen to him "without hearing." Patient and doctor have clearly switched roles here. Cole as Arthur has healed himself and will soon heal others, including his mother who has her own unresolved issues with her dead mother.

The Sixth Sense, a film that on its surface seems far removed from the world of Camelot, nonetheless marks an Arthurian return. The boy Arthur returns, here as Cole Sear – whose surname surely cannot be accidental – to heal himself, to heal his mother, and, most importantly, to heal Malcolm Crowe, a man who thinks it is his responsibility to heal Cole. As a "see-r," Cole finds himself cast both in the role of Merlin and in that of the boy Arthur, though at first he seems much less than he turns out to be – a trope readily found in any number of earlier versions of Arthur's childhood. He also has a connection to the once and future since Cole helps the dead, haunted by their pasts, and he uses his ability to communicate with the past to lay out the future for himself, for his mother, and even for Malcolm, who initially also serves as a kind of Merlin figure, a supernatural guide, it turns out, who helps Cole to understand the unique role he is called upon to play.

Perhaps in our search for a cinematic translation of the Arthurian myth, we have been looking in all the wrong places. We may never get a definitive screen version of the Arthuriad set in medieval (or modern) times. But films such as *The Sixth Sense* surprise and tease us – they attest to the continuing viability of the Arthurian legend, especially in terms of its ability to heal. Arthur is indeed once and future king who returns on the page, on the screen, or in other ways, when needed, in various guises to help those in need of his help. As Raymond H. Thompson has noted: "the need for Arthur to ride yet again against the eternal foe is as eternal as the human failings that foment strife, and as long as we continue to yearn for a better world, so will Arthur's return be assured" (11). In *The Sixth Sense*, a frightened eight-year-old with a symbolic surname becomes the boy Arthur, wise beyond his years, bringing healing to himself and to those around him.

In *The Sixth Sense*, the debt to the Arthurian myth comes as a surprise. The figure of boy as healer can be found in another recent Arthurian film, the Disney Channel's 1995 *Four Diamonds*, but here the debt to Arthurian tradition is more obvious. The central character, Chris Millard, writes himself into an Arthurian tale in order to cope with terminal cancer:

There are many famous tales of King Arthur's most illustrious Round Table members such as the renowned Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad. But one gallant knight was incredibly forgotten by the litterateurs that engaged themselves with these noble characters. He was Sir Millard, the worthy bearer of the magnificent Diamonus Quadrus.

This account of Sir Millard's adventures was discovered in an old Welsh castle by myself when exploring the ancient ruins. It is the story of a young squire leaving his duties to find and prove his knighthood by some miraculous accomplishment.



Cole (Haley Joel Osment) as the boy Arthur in his school play in M. Night Shyamalan's 1999 film *The Sixth Sense*. (Still courtesy of Buena Vista Pictures Distribution)

Thus begins Chris Millard's "The Four Diamonds," a short story offering a remarkable retelling and recreation of the Arthurian myth firmly grounded in the theme of the return to Camelot.⁷ Chris Millard died at age fourteen in 1972 after a three-year battle with a rare form of cancer, now largely curable. His short story, "The Four Diamonds," uses the Arthurian myth and the renewal that a return to Camelot has traditionally promised to fight against the cancer spreading in his body. Subsequently, the story became the basis for the Disney made-for-cable-television film.

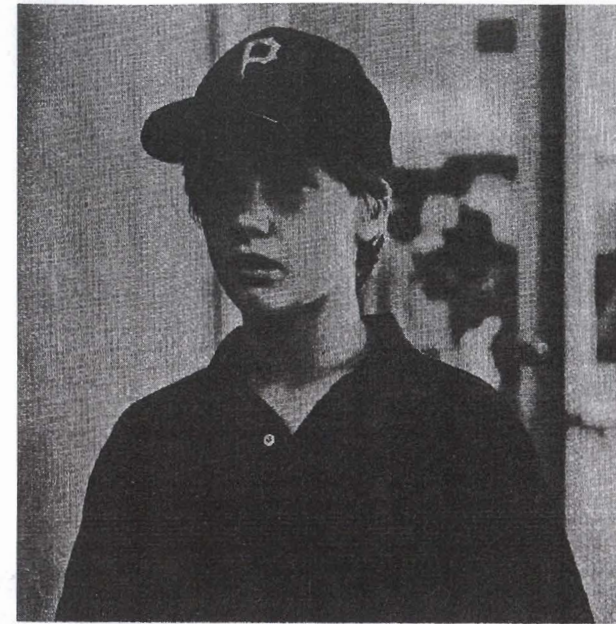
That Disney film tells two stories: the allegorical fantasy based on Arthurian legends that Chris writes to distract himself from his disease and his own life story. "The Four Diamonds" does not, of course, depict the actual return of Arthur. Rather, it tells the tale of a thirteen-year-old boy who, when faced with the pain and uncertainty of a diagnosis of terminal cancer, finds in one of Western civilization's most resilient myths the courage to confront what lies ahead of him.

After Chris's death, his life has continued to have a legacy. Originally, Chris's parents set up the Four Diamonds Fund whose primary purpose is to assist children with cancer and their families in meeting the financial and emotional burdens that care and treatment require. Taken together, the original short story, the foundation, and the film present a unique example of the theme of the Arthurian return. Chris Millard himself provides an example of the continuing viability of the legend of the return to Camelot when, in his short story, he links his waning life to that legend by becoming a knight of the Round Table.

Of course, Chris could not have imagined that he would share his tale with so wide an audience; his short story was originally only a classroom exercise that also provided a much-needed form of therapy. But, just as the Arthurian legacy returns and has meaning in Chris's life, so his life returns in the short story, and the inspiration of Chris's life continues to return in the good work done by the foundation. The Arthurian legacy, Chris's life, his short story, and the foundation all return yet again in the film. Writing oneself into the stuff of legend is a fascinating way of understanding one's life as well as extending it. And in the case of Chris Millard, the returns involved in such an endeavor are manifold.

A third film true to the spirit of the Arthuriad is Peter Chelsom's 1997 *The Mighty*, based on Rodman Philbrick's novel for young readers, *Freak the Mighty*. Novel and film pair an unlikely duo, Maxwell Kane, a teenage boy who seems as stupid as he is big in stature, with Kevin Dillon (Freak), his exact opposite – a teenage boy, reduced to dwarfism by a degenerative disease, who seems too intelligent for his own good. In a film that is more clearly Arthurian than its literary source, the two teenagers set out in contemporary Cincinnati to right wrongs in celebration of their understanding of the Arthurian ideal as found in Sir James Knowles's *King Arthur and His Knights*.

⁷ The text of the short story from which I quote is published with illustrations by S. Arthur Shoemaker in an unpaginated pamphlet by The Four Diamonds Fund (Hershey, PA, 1973; subsequent editions 1976, 1980, 1983, and 1988). For a more detailed discussion of the film, see Harty, "The Return to Camelot" (189–98).



Thomas Guiry as Christopher Mallard (top) and Sir Millard (bottom) in Peter Werner's 1995 telefilm *Four Diamonds*. (Stills courtesy of The Disney Channel)

In the original novel, the Arthurian materials occur mainly early in the narrative and focus as much on Freak's mother as they do on the adventures of the two teenage boys:

"So, how come you call your mom 'Fair Gwen of Air,' is that a nickname?" . . .

"My mom's name is Gwen, so sometimes I call her Fair Guinevere or the Fair Gwen. . . . Arthur was this wimpy little kid, an orphan . . . and the Fair Guinevere is this pretty girl who becomes his queen." (Philbrick 16-17)

In the film, the Arthurian parallels occur throughout as intercuts of knights in shining armor appear on screen (invisible to all but Max, Kevin, and the film's audience) in key adventure scenes involving the two boys. The film, like the novel, is told by Max as a flashback based on his diary of his friendship with Freak; the diary in the film is, however, more clearly indebted to Knowles than it is in the novel. By the end of the film, Max becomes a contemporary reincarnation of a character familiar enough from the medieval Arthuriad – a Perceval-like wise fool. And the film makes a final nod to the Arthuriad not found in the novel. The last frames show what is supposedly a copy of Knowles's *King Arthur and His Knights* lying at the bottom of a lake or river as the camera moves in for a close-up of the book's last page. The screen shows a woodcut of a sailing ship with a bird-like prow preceded by the following paragraph:

Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead; yet he shall come again, that there is written this verse upon his tomb which lies at the bottom of the lake "Here lies King Arthur, Once and Future King."

But while several editions of Knowles I consulted clearly contain the woodcut, none contains the paragraph – which is familiar enough in its assertion as a truism of the Arthuriad, even if its exact source as quoted in the film is unclear.⁸

In the preface to her collection of essays on the modern return of King Arthur, Debra N. Mancoff notes that the Arthurian legend "closes with a promise: on a distant day, when his country calls, the king will return" (ix). The myth of Arthur as once and future king has held the Western imagination for more than a millennium. With each retelling, Arthur does indeed return, but the many returns of Arthur have also transformed the myth surrounding that return. The myth continues to evolve, and each age remakes Arthur in its own image to meet its own needs.

Both consciously and unconsciously, film has risen to the challenge of reinventing the Arthuriad. Perhaps we will have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that we will not have a definitive screen version of the legend of the once and future king. However, more than many other films supposedly indebted to

⁸ I am grateful to a number of correspondents on ArthuriNet, especially Dan Nastali, who checked their copies of Knowles to see if any edition contained this final paragraph: none did. See, for instance, the Children's Classics edition of Knowles reprinted in 1986 from an edition first published in 1923 (383).



Max (Elden Henson) carrying Kevin (Kieran Culkin) in Peter Chelsom's 1998 film *The Mighty*. (Still courtesy of Miramax Films. Photo: Kerry Hayes)

the Arthurian legend, *Knightriders*, *The Four Diamonds*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *The Mighty* largely succeed in capturing the spirit of that legend, a spirit which P. J. C. Field has argued is readily to be found in "the greatest creation in English of a romance world, a world that was not but which might have been, parallel to ours and inviting comparison with it" (297).

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ARTHURIAN STUDIES

ISSN 0261-9814

GENERAL EDITOR: NORRIS LACY

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN ARTHURIAN STUDIES

Edited by
Alan Lupack

PK
328
.N49
2002

D. S. BREWER

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First published 2002
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 0 85991 642 1

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
PO Box 41026, Rochester, NY 14604-4126, USA
website: www.boydell.co.uk

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
New directions in Arthurian studies / edited by Alan Lupack.
p. cm.

Based on papers originally presented at the Camelot 2000 Conference held at the University of Rochester.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-85991-642-1 (alk. paper)

1. English literature - Middle English, 1100-1500 - History and criticism.
2. Arthurian romances - Adaptations - History and criticism. 3. Arthurian romances - History and criticism. 4. English literature - History and criticism.
5. Romances, English - History and criticism. 6. Arthur, King - In motion pictures.

PR328 .N49 2002

820.9'351-dc21

2002004132

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset by Joshua Associates Ltd, Oxford
Printed in Great Britain by
St Edmundsbury Press Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Contents

Preface	vii
<i>Alan Lupack</i>	
Arthurian Research in a New Century: Prospects and Projects	1
<i>Norris J. Lacy</i>	
Malory and His Audience	21
<i>P. J. C. Field</i>	
The Paradoxes of Honour in Malory	33
<i>Derek Brewer</i>	
"Hic est Artur": Reading Latin and Reading Arthur	49
<i>Siân Echard</i>	
Judging Camelot: Changing Critical Perspectives in <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>	69
<i>Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman</i>	
Tennyson's Guinevere and Her <i>Idylls of the King</i>	83
<i>David Staines</i>	
Darkness over Camelot: Enemies of the Arthurian Dream	97
<i>Raymond H. Thompson</i>	
King Arthur and Black American Popular Culture	105
<i>Barbara Tapa Lupack</i>	
The Project of Arthurian Studies: Quondam et Futurus	123
<i>Bonnie Wheeler</i>	
"Arthur? Arthur? Arthur?" - Where Exactly Is the Cinematic Arthur to Be Found?	135
<i>Kevin J. Harty</i>	
Merlin in the Twenty-First Century	149
<i>Peter H. Goodrich</i>	
Index	163