

From Courtly Love to Consent, Arthuriana and the Importance of Adaptation

The Classic Love Triangle Represented in *Le Morte Darthur*, *The Mists of Avalon* and *Once
& Future*

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Abstract

Throughout literary history there have been many iterations of the Arthurian myth. Especially since the start of the romance genre with Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la charrete* there has been a fascination with the love triangle between Lancelot, Guenevere, and Arthur. Chretien might have introduced the romance between Lancelot and Guenevere, but their romance has lived on and been reinterpreted since its first appearance. In this paper Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* will be used as the starting point to analyse two modern interpretations of the love triangle compared to the medieval version of the romance. Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy's *Once & Future* will be analysed to compare and contrast how the love triangle has evolved and changed and what influence these changes have on the legend. Adaptations of popular works are able to critique the past and critique the contemporary period, but they are also able to change the tale, address topics that weren't addressed in the original text, and subvert genre and expectations in dynamic ways. This paper will explore the malleability of the Arthurian legend and how the feminist movement, a developing social and political consciousness, and the need for stories that have been omitted or ignored are added onto the story and the love triangle between Lancelot, Guenevere and Arthur.

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I. Introduction

When we regard Thomas Malory's work as the starting point for most Arthurian adaptations it is easy to see that the story has gone through many revisions and additions in the past 600 years. With each new adaptation there are original insights and interpretations that add to the legacy of King Arthur. Lancelot and Guinevere's romance alone brings many opinions forth, every author and reader sees the matter differently. Typically the love triangle follows heteronormative conventions, but as attitudes to queer and polyamorous relations become more relaxed over time so do the interpretations of this tragic romance. The varying perspectives add to the fascination of contrasting certain representations of this romance against each other. I believe it is exactly this romance that is one of the reasons that the story of King Arthur and the knights of the round table is still relevant within popular consciousness.

Derek Pearsall has stated that the romance genre is of a purifying quality and shows an idealised version of chivalry of the Medieval period. Arthurian stories that fall in the romance genre are able to adapt to modern ideals when these older conventions become too outdated (qtd in Archibald, 139). The origins of the Arthurian saga may fall more in the heroic genre, nonetheless it has been firmly established within romance genres predominantly since the twelfth century – as was the fashion at the time (Archibald, 139; Rouse, 31).

It is to twelfth-century writers such as Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, as well as the lyrics of the troubadours and trouvères, that the rarefied medieval treatment of love may be traced—although it undoubtedly finds its origins in classical poetry, in particular that of Ovid. (Saunders, 47)

The romance genre was established in France, but the English were keen to adapt to it and even built the Arthurian romance further. The English romance is “rooted deep in folk

tradition,” and follows a familiar pattern that “functions as entertainment” (Saunders, 59).¹ Hogenbrink argues that “Medieval Arthurian romance could be considered as the intertextual genre par excellence, since the intertextual links within the Arthurian tradition are ‘more elaborate and pervasive than in most other literary forms’” (220), and it is difficult to disagree.

Hutcheon, in her in-depth analysis of adaptation theory, has stated that: “Adaptations are obviously not new to our time, however; Shakespeare transferred his culture’s stories from page to stage and made them available to a whole new audience” (2). The practise of adaptation was already often implemented in the fifteenth century when Malory wrote his *Morte Darthur*, which can be considered an adaptation too. What is particularly interesting to evaluate, however, is how these legends evolve and what elements remain, disappear, or change. “Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change” (Hutcheon, 4).² But it is this change that fascinates us particularly, the smallest detail can have enormous implications within a narrative that is as varied and complex as the Arthurian legend.

Additionally this adding to, deletion of, and exploration of Arthuriana keeps the legend actively alive: “giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise” (Hutcheon, 176). The “mutability or plasticity” of the Arthurian myth and the romance between Lancelot and Guenevere has been discussed at length. Gaps left in the narrative are seen as the reason why it is so simple to adapt because it “may be seen as an empty receptacle, waiting to be filled with whatever substance may speak to the individual and cultural moment” (Sklar qtd in Zambreno, 118). Not only does it keep the work alive, but it remains relevant as a work that is always in part a reflection of the time it is written.

¹ “Middle English romances are rooted deep in folk tradition, treating enduring motifs such as exile and return, the fair unknown, and the encounter of human and fairy. They function as entertainment, providing moments of realism, comedy.” (Saunders, 59)

² “It is repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty. As adaptation, it involves both memory and change, persistence, and variation.” (Hutcheon, 173)

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* was a product of its time – as are modern adaptations.³ Though there has been a great effort to write 'faithful' adaptations of Arthurian narratives it has become more popular in the last century to place Arthur in a different space or time, or to fill in gaps that are left in the source.⁴ Adaptation techniques have overall shifted the past few decades from "fidelity, [...] to theoriz[ing] repetition, alteration, and fragmentation" (Howey, 36). This focus on faithfulness when it comes to Arthurian fiction is theorised to have resulted from our "nearness to the Arthurian world as well as by our distance from it" that both are "sources of potential ethical anxiety" (Gilbert, 156). This faithfulness to Arthur's 'real' story is not relevant to Capetta's futuristic adaptation however, as the gaps in the text and genre leave enough space to reimagine the tale in inventive ways that discuss aspects of the past, present, and future through the literary medium.

The representation of the classic love triangle between Lancelot, Guenevere and Arthur is not always concerned with faithfulness either. Where Malory has displayed the romance as a love strictly between a man and a woman it is not surprising he did so. He had no incentive to diversify the romantic relationships as the culture was not open to relationships that fall out of the heteronormative fashion. Furthermore, Malory has left quite some aspects of the romance up to interpretation; this leaves space for contemporary writers to reimagine the implications of the romantic relationships in the legend. In the following chapters first the context of Malory's work and its interactions with medieval culture and literature concerning the love triangle will be discussed. This will be followed by an analysis of both modern interpretations; and the implications and importance of adaptation in Arthuriana will be explored in the conclusion.

³ "As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum argue, 'any particular retelling...always discloses...some aspect of the attitudes and ideologies pertaining at the cultural moment in which that retelling is produced.'" (qtd in Howey, 39)

⁴ "Despite occasional attempts by writers to tell the story of the 'historical' Arthur, the British war-leader who fought Saxon invaders, it is most often King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table who return to fictional life." (Zambreno, 117)

In the following research, the two adaptations used for analysis are quite different, but they offer contemporary snapshots of interpretation. *The Mists of Avalon* (1984) marks a turning point in Arthuriana, as the gaps concerning women's narratives in the legend are filled. *Once & Future* (2019) also inhabits a new space in the genre with its refreshing diversity and the use of the reincarnation myth to show light on problems with older adaptations. These adaptations interact with the medieval 'source' text in interesting ways but remain a reaction to the world at the time of writing as well; Bradley gave agency and a voice to the female character, and Capetta and McCarthy focused on queerness and critiquing late-stage capitalism. In agreement with Hutcheon,⁵ Atkinson remarks that:

On the other hand, adaption is also a process of purposeful adjustment and evolution of creative practices in response to external factors, including but not limited to other creative works—in other words, the process of adapting to. We explore adaptation, then, as an active practice of repetition and as a responsive process of development or evolution. (xvii)

⁵ "An adaptation can obviously be used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique." (Hutcheon, 94)

II. Courtly Love, Chivalry and Adultery in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

From a twentieth-century perspective some elements of chivalry and courtly love will seem quite alien and backwards. However, naturally, it has to be acknowledged that medieval works and stories come from a culture with notions of love and chivalry very distinct from our own. Arthurian legends are representative of the ideal knight, who is not invincible but in fact fallible, who does penance and learns from mistakes in a way that is significant within Medieval-Christian culture. Essentially the Chivalric Knight is an example of the fallible hero. Chivalry plays an important role especially in medieval romance works, a chivalrous knight is a desirable knight. Derek Pearsall states that "Romance purges life of impurities and presents chivalry in heightened and idealised form" (qtd in Archibald, 139), and this idealised form gives life to knightlihood as we know it today. Additionally, Lacan theorised that the "features of courtly love stories and the criticism of them establish their sociopsychological basis" and that this "is what gives them their enduring importance and influence" (qtd in O'Donoghue, 15). The medieval romance does not only represent a love story but additionally is an idealised fantasy of a hero that is involved in some love affair – whether it is adulterous, consensual, magical, or not – who overcomes a variety of struggles.

To be able to fully analyse and understand the love triangle between Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot from a medieval perspective, a clear definition of chivalry presented in the Middle Ages is needed:

Chivalry, as it manifests in medieval culture, is an aspirational ideology and set of behaviours primarily performed and subscribed to by male members of the medieval military elite. (Rouse, 30)

This short description of the chivalric code presents a clear reality; Knights were part of the military elite and while we often see the occupation through rose coloured glasses there is an

authoritative note to the position. Further, there are several versions of chivalric knighthood that deal with distinct differences and representations when discussing exemplary behaviour and Christian virtues. Beverly Kennedy sets forth the three great kinds of chivalric knights around the time of the construction of *Le Morte Darthur* as:

There were three ethical ideals of knighthood coexisting in the chivalric culture of Malory's England and each of them is fully represented in his work by one of Arthur's great knights. Arthur's nephew, Gawain, exemplifies the feudal ideal of Heroic Knighthood. His best knight, Lancelot, exemplifies the religious ideal of True Knighthood, however imperfectly by comparison with the successful Grail knights, and Tristram, the knight most like Arthur himself, exemplifies the late medieval courtly and secular ideal of Worshipful knighthood. (63-64)

It is quite striking – a tragic use of irony one might say – that the ‘best’ knight is also the one that betrays his liege by loving the queen, as he would never have been suspected on a basis of trust.

The different types of chivalric knights in Malory's narrative are not the most important aspect – though the awareness of these differences is key to analysing the text. More important is the “death of chivalry within the public sphere of English politics” that is shown at the conclusion of Arthur's reign (Rouse, 41); the sinful actions of several characters destabilise the pristine reputation of the court.⁶ The knights complete a myriad of chivalric acts throughout the work, but at the end most knights have lost their virtue or are dead. In *Morte Darthur* we are told that Arthur's incestuous affair gave birth to Mordred, and Lancelot's betrayal indirectly caused a rift in loyalty between the knights of the round table that in turn destabilised Arthur's

⁶ “Malory's Arthurian epic narrates not only the death of Arthur, but also what Malory sees as the death of chivalry within the public sphere of English politics. For Malory, writing perhaps in the Tower of London, chivalry has fallen into disrepute as a social institution.” (Rouse, 41)

reign because of the political implications.⁷ This aspect might also be an example of Malory's own disillusionment with the concept of chivalry as he was compiling and rewriting Arthurian legends in captivity/imprisonment.

The Chivalric code of conduct determined how knights should behave. Within Arthurian legends this code is especially relevant when it comes to how they should behave towards women, in particular women of higher standing. Married noblewomen *should* be respected, as are the husbands' claims on these women. Only true love can excuse an adulterous relationship with a married woman if the knight passes several tests of virtue, or the husband is shown to be a traitor; as is seen in Lancelot and Tristram's adventures. Forcing sexual relations is technically considered taboo in chivalric and Christian ideals as "it is part of the knight's code to refrain from forcing women to have sex with them" (Sweeney, "Lady as Temptress" 168). This sentiment is not always adhered to when it comes to the peasantry or when magic is involved.

Noticeably this rule about not forcing oneself on another only describes how knights should treat women and not how they should be treated *by* women. Many a knight within *Le Morte Darthur* is, what we would call nowadays, sexually assaulted; tricked into bed by magic without informed consent and they are sometimes even blackmailed into it. While many have seen this use of magic as an empowering aspect in the story, it does position women mainly as temptresses within the narrative. "Through magic, enchantresses have the power to exercise agency within the chivalric world" (Larrington, 307), and while it is not excusable for these fictional women to take away men's agency it might be one of the only ways they can attain agency at all in the medieval context. Oftentimes, these tricks are the lowest points of these knights' adventures. For example when Lancelot goes mad from the second encounter with lady Elaine which causes Guenevere's open rejection as she finds him in her chambers (Malory,

⁷ More in depth information on the family and relationship tree in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* can be found in Appendix 1

490-491; Book XI, ch. VIII-IX).⁸ Sexual trickery is especially villainised in later versions because of clerical influence, as chastity and virginity become a signature virtue for Grail knights as the “fairy mistresses and enchantresses” are evil from a medieval Christian perspective (Larrington, 309).⁹ The plots of these villainesses create a scenario where the knight can rise higher by making the correct choice, though the text does not seem to handle the topic of sexual trickery with much care; and thus it becomes an integral plot device within Arthurian romances. O’Donoghue perfectly encapsulates the phenomenon of courtly love and sexual sin in the medieval Arthurian romance:

This conflict between the demands of the well-ordered society and the transgressive sexual inclinations of the individual is what brings together the worlds of the political and the erotic in courtly love. (13)

Romance and sin are integral to the disruption of Arthur’s kingdom, and his eventual demise, but through Malory’s representation of these aspects of fictional medieval culture we can see how these topics are still relevant and interesting today.

Another topic that needs to be addressed before a discussion about the classic love triangle affair of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenevere can take place is the topic of adultery in the Middle Ages. The love triangle did not feature until some twelfth- and thirteenth-century romances within the French canon. While both Guenevere and Arthur are described as having extra marital affairs in some earlier Celtic versions, Lancelot was not yet a figure known for his adulterous love for the queen until Chrétien de Troyes’ *Chevalier de la charette*.¹⁰ Malory did

⁸ The full quotation: “he took such an hearty sorrow at her words that he fell down to the floor in a swoon. [...] And when Sir Launcelot awoke of his swoon, he leapt out at a bay window into garden, and there with thorns he was all to-scratched in his visage and his body; and so he ran forth he wist not wither, and was wild wood as ever was man; and so he ran two year, and never man might have grace to know him.” (491; Book XI, ch. IX)

⁹ “As romance falls more explicitly under clerical influence, emphasis on chastity and virginity is foregrounded, and the scope for fairy mistresses and enchantresses to exercise sexual autonomy and authority over men is eroded or demonized.” (Larrington, 309)

¹⁰ “This dynamic is an invention of twelfth- and thirteenth-century French romances. Arthur and Guinevere appear in earlier chronicles and in Celtic tales, but although Guinevere is represented as an adulterous wife in

not erase the problems of the affair although both characters do penance after Arthur's death in order to adhere to a Christian ideal of true love. Malory also was not intent on changing the tragic end, he was merely compiling the Arthurian tales as he interpreted them in the fifteenth-century, but modern writers and adaptations can imagine a different ending. However, Malory did rely on some of these French sources that featured the love triangle in order to compile the Arthurian legend into a 'comprehensive' narrative, and thus the varying versions of the legends from both the European continent and the British Isles were merged in *Le Morte Darthur*.

Adultery was not uncommon during the Middle Ages, though people needed to be careful about their conduct lest they wanted to be punished for their 'sin' and unlawful behaviour. Lancelot and Guenevere's love might be considered true courtly love in *Morte*, but it does need to remain secret so that neither of them experience the repercussions of an adultery charge (especially so in Guenevere's case). The queen can favour him publicly as Arthur's greatest knight, but she cannot show her passion and romantic love publicly; this love needs to remain private for them to adhere to the social standards of the time:

Yet even though the knight does great acts of chivalry for his beloved queen, his love for her must remain secret because it betrays the king. And although the queen rewards her knight with public displays of favour, her passionate love for him must remain hidden. (McCracken, 188)

Even more so, Lancelot and Guenevere's love becomes a matter of political subterfuge when Mordred accuses the queen of adultery. The knights cannot fathom a knight as great as Lancelot betraying his king in that manner and are reluctant to tell Arthur about it as they all have been helped greatly by Lancelot as well. Consequently the accusation breaks Arthur's heart when it

some of these narratives (because of her union with the traitor Mordred), it is only with Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la charrete* (*The Knight of the Cart*, from around 1177) that Guinevere is linked with Lancelot." (McCracken, 189)

turns out to be provably true; the reveal makes him susceptible to being displaced from his throne because of the subsequent power imbalance (Malory, 693-696; Book XX, ch. I-III).¹¹

Women were the unfortunate party in most cases of adultery during the Middle Ages as “most early laws looked upon adultery as simply a violation of property rights and as such were only applicable to women” (qtd in Bullough, 5). Bullough continues that women universally are condemned for adultery – more so than men – in the past and in modern context as well. This makes Guenevere’s vilification not surprising, but still disappointing. If a woman was married – and legally considered a possession of her husband – a woman would be condemned more for losing her virtue than a man for taking it. However, it does seem that in the Middle Ages there was a penile code in England that stated that adultery in case of extraneous circumstances would not be the fault of the victim:

There was an 'out,' however, since a person had to be conscious of the nature of his or her own action in order to be guilty of adultery, and in fact most of the canonists held that an element of malice was essential to the crime of adultery. Thus, sexual intercourse with a married person when accomplished by force was considered adulterous only for the party employing force. (Bullough, 10)

These exemptions do not apply to adulterous affairs where both parties are in love, and this could explain the lack of accountability for the knights that were tricked to sleep with a married woman. The only way women could show agency in Malory’s *Morte* is through magic or denying someone else agency, as this both exonerates the knights but also relieves the husband from the duty of taking revenge.

It must also not be forgotten that Christian views and rules played an enormous role in how adultery was viewed and portrayed. In some cases just looking at a woman with passion

¹¹ Additionally: “Knowledge of Guinevere’s adultery becomes the instrument of political contests between factions that compete for the king’s favour.” (McCracken, 189)

could be considered an adulterous sin (Bullough, 8).¹² This might seem severe, but it was a time where the church had more control in the secular private spaces than a secular person in the twenty-first century might expect. Adultery was not a lifetime sin, though, as penance for unlawful and unchristian acts of sex was the way of life (Bullough, 9). Penance for sin, and often times the resulting chastity vow, can be seen in Guenevere's decision to seclude herself in a convent after Arthur's death in *Le Morte Darthur*, as discussed later in this chapter.

Lancelot's position as greatest knight of the round table is a position everyone at court profits from.

Malory [...] exposes the extraordinary political, social, moral and spiritual benefits that the Arthurian community gains by Lancelot's love of the queen. Malory further idealises Lancelot himself as a rare worthy in a corrupt world. (Gilbert, 159-160)

Battles are won, quests are fulfilled, evil is defeated, and the court's reputation is held high because of Lancelot's virtue and knightly prowess. "Lancelot embodies the highest chivalric ideal as a flawed paragon of masculinity. Courageous, determined, unsurpassed in fighting skill and inspired by his passion for Guenevere" (Larrington, 300), a fact that only made him even more desirable as a knight since he was faithful to the king and queen only – he has no wife or children to focus on. Lancelot is not the favourite because he always stays at Arthur's side but because of the positive perception everyone has of him. This is all somewhat ironic, however, because the reveal of Lancelot and Guenevere's forbidden love incites the conflict that brings Arthur's reign to an end.

Initially, Lancelot denies any will to be married when asked, and this could be both "for the sake of Guenevere as well as God and there would be no inherent contradiction between the

¹² "Jesus extended the meaning of adultery to include thoughts as well as actions, by stating that 'whoever looks on a woman to lust after her already committed adultery with her in his heart.'" (Bullough, 8)

two, since his love of Guenevere is still 'vertuose' at this point" (Beverly Kennedy, 73).¹³ But because he is the ideal knight, many women desire to be his wife and lover. Sorceresses try to trick him and foil his plans several times in order to force his affections and point out that he will never be able to openly express his love for Guenevere. He is "[o]bsessively faithful to one woman, except when deceived into sexual intimacy by women's machinations" (Larrington, 300). One of these deceptions is when Brisen and Elaine work together to trick Lancelot to see Elaine as if she was Guenevere to make him sleep with her and to get her pregnant. Lancelot is absolutely distraught when this happens the first time as he feels he betrayed his lady, Guenevere.¹⁴ The second time he becomes mad to the point where he completely loses his mind and becomes a sort of wodegose; losing his humanity because of the assault and the disappointment of Guenevere when she found out he was laying with another woman who he had believed to be her (Malory, 490-491; Book XI, ch. VIII-IX).

In these trickster plots virtuous knights are tested by these women and have to show how to overcome deception and desire. Not only Lancelot is subjected to this:

It is clear that in romance terms Lancelot, Lanval, Gawain, and Dorigen each find themselves in situations where their chastity is challenged, and each must face the fact that if the situation is not correctly handled, it could lead to excommunication, isolation from court or a loved one, and potentially even death. (Sweeney, "Lady as Temptress" 166)

Lancelot might have survived the two plots to trick him into Elaine's bed, however the aftermath is disastrous. Guenevere finds out he has slept with Elaine and finds Lancelot in

¹³ "Fair damosel, said Sir Launcelot, I may not warn people to speak of me what it pleaseth them; but for to be a wedded man, I think it not; for then I must couch with her, and leave arms and tournaments, battles, and adventures; and as for to say for to take my pleasaunce with paramours, that will I refuse in principal for dread of God" (Malory, 160; Book VI, ch. X)

¹⁴ "wit ye well Sir Launcelot loveth no lady in the world but all only Queen Guenever; and therefore work ye by counsel, and I shall make him to lie with your daughter, and he shall not wit but that he lieth with Queen Guenever" says Brisen to King Pelles for Elaine's first trick (Malory, 483; Book XI, ch. II). Lancelot does not blame Elaine for the first trick, as she was not the one to use magic, however, he is "shamed" and distraught from the encounter (Malory, 484; Book XI, ch. III).

Elaine's guest-chambers in Camelot. The discovery is the beginning of the end of Lancelot's chivalric career, he disappears for two years as a wild man and when he returns the situation is never fully resolved. His specific 'sinful' disposition, where he is tricked into losing his virtue, hinders Lancelot in the quest for the holy Grail where he tries to repent for his sinful love for Guenevere in order to find the Grail. The effect these acts of 'female agency' – where the lady acts on her desire with the help of magic – have on Lancelot is one of the few moments where the moral ambiguity of this romance can be really seen.

There seems to be a higher power controlling the lovers' desire for each other and this is necessary for "moral tolerance" of the affair in the context of Medieval-Christian society (O'Donoghue, 14).¹⁵ Malory portrays here how allegations of adultery could be used as ploys for political advancement (Beverly Kennedy, 80). Whether or not Guenevere and Lancelot were physically adulterous, there is still the matter of both of them being in love romantically, which the Bible also condemns. Their romance and love is undeniable and the public accusation of adultery and treachery is enough to make people question their virtue and truth.

Contrary to popular expectations, Guenevere is quite a distinct female character within the narrative, one with a personality and not just there to advance the plot. She is shown to be a pious and dutiful queen, one that receives the knights and even supplied Arthur with his round table and most of his knights for her dowry when they marry;¹⁶ without her, he would simply not be as powerful. Therefore, she symbolically becomes the 'ideal' wife of the worshipful king that Arthur represents. They combine their strengths and create a court and kingdom so magnificent that all want to be a part of it or to rule it themselves. Guenevere is allowed the

¹⁵ "If the behavior of the transgressive lovers in this group is to be tolerated—that is, if they are not to be quite beyond the pale of moral tolerance—they have to be shown to be in the grip of some agency beyond their own volition." (O'Donoghue, 14)

¹⁶ Leodegrance: "he has lands enow, him needeth none; but I shall send him a gift shall please him much more, for I shall give him the Table Round, the which Uther Pendragon gave me, and when it is full complete, there is an hundred knights and fifty." (Malory, 67; Book III, ch. I)

precious privilege of feeling emotions – good or bad – as a woman within the narrative without being vilified or killed. Meal notes that the “adjectives which have been used to describe Malory’s [Guenevere]” by the narrator “are remarkably consistent: petulant, jealous, and capricious are all labels which have been used” (172). Additionally she cries when she thinks Lancelot has betrayed her and is shown to happily laugh along with jokes at contests.¹⁷ It is no wonder that many adaptations focus on Guenevere specifically when her characterisation is the most explicit of all the women in the work.

As most women that are prominently figured within Malory’s narrative are, more often than not, plotting to take a knight’s virtue, to betray men with magic, are the object of desire, or killed for the knights’ betterment, it is quite striking that Guenevere has this primary position. She does objectively bad and sinful things by committing adultery but in the end is presented like a saint as she repents for her mistakes in a nunnery. That she is represented so thoroughly despite her questionable actions might be in part because of the nature of her love. Guenevere’s love for Lancelot is true and long lasting “rendered exemplary, even praiseworthy, by its enduring passion and inescapable force” and not just a fleeting affection (McCracken, 190). E.D. Kennedy describes this ambiguity between sin or amorous virtue by showing that Lancelot sees her as

the 'moste nobelest Crysten quene' whom he 'never fayled. . .in ryght nor in wronge'
[...] With those words Lancelot expresses the complexity of their relationship, a
relationship marked by both virtue and sin. (38)

Unfortunately, they are just too careless to keep their affections private, as courtly love and common decency decree. Their talks and walks in public between only them two sparks enough rumours to give Mordred enough material for an accusation that Arthur has to take seriously (Beverly Kennedy, 75).

¹⁷ “In most of Malory's book Guenevere is a conventional lady of romance, imperious, jealous, and demanding, with an occasional individualizing trait such as the sense of humor.” (E.D. Kennedy, 37)

Once more, there is importance in the Christian values and the penal code that are in place within Medieval England. Medieval penal code and social rules influence their conduct and thus the virtue of Lancelot and Guenevere as characters and lovers. As a childless queen she is but “a queen consort: she is a queen because her husband is a king [...] her status depends on her husband’s favour” (McCracken, 198). If she ever were to be found in bed with another man, she would have no legal leverage and will lose social standing, possibly even her life for betraying her husband – the king – and the church. However, while she is childless, she is the sovereign that stays at court while Arthur is away at war. Guenevere is the one that receives the knights and is present to feed and praise them when they come back from quests. This could maybe make her more daring, as she still has power despite being queen consort and could thus spur her into reckless behaviour such as being open in her affections to Lancelot while her husband is away (Gaylord, 80). Guenevere’s power as the queen of Camelot could therefore be used as a justification for her careless actions in her love with Lancelot, as sinful as they may be in the Medieval-Christian culture.

After Arthur’s death Guenevere refused Mordred’s marriage proposal; instead she retires to a convent. Clearly repentant and sorrowful, she enters a whole new chapter in the development of her character in *Le Morte Darthur*. Now would be the perfect time to marry her true love as they are both free of the laws and promises that kept them separated before. The opposite is true, however. Guenevere retires to a convent to do penance for her sinful actions that caused so much pain and harm to everyone she loved. Her Christian conduct elevates her character from a helpless adulteress to a repentant saint. Meal describes that this representation of retiring to a convent after being exposed for sinful behaviour is not an isolated incident. Quite some noblewomen and women from the gentry would leave their secular life in favour for “holy chastity” (Meal, 173), and thus this occurrence is a representation of a real cultural trend.

Additionally, when Lancelot finds her at the convent, she rejects him in favour for her devotion to God. Maureen Fries describes this last action and rejection of Lancelot's offer of marriage and the rejection of the kiss as:

[It] casts her into a heroic mold, but it is a male inspired one: that of the repentant worldly woman, on the model of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and other formerly sexual females. (qtd in E.D Kennedy, 43)

Guenevere's rejection of Lancelot, her true love, situates her in a saintly light. She is still true in her love as ever but this time it is focused on the higher power of God, a true Christian ideal. Guenevere exemplifies that even people considered to be sinners can become the most virtuous later in life through their actions and their devotion to God.

In contrast with Guenevere's path after Artur's death, Lancelot becomes a hermit and turns to God when he realises that is what Guenevere has done as well. Together they demonstrate how a courtly love can turn into godly love. However, Guenevere is more steadfast in her love for God. Their turn to God does not fully justify their 'sinful' love within Malory's narrative – "these characters should be 'punished' as opposed to forgiven" immediately (Sweeney, "Divine Love" 74) – and they will do penance for an undetermined time as was the fashion within the Christian culture. At the end these two lovers are lifted from mournful sinners, overwhelmed by their inescapable love, into isolated figures repenting in the name of God so they will be forgiven in the afterlife. It is notable, however, that when Guenevere comes to pass that Lancelot does not last much longer in life either; he is experiencing not just loneliness but also "the symptoms of a lost love" and thus his love for Guenevere is shown to be deeper to him than his love for God (Sweeney, "Divine Love" 76).

Arthur's life is defined by adulterous relationships. He was conceived through one, his own son is conceived by one, and his wife ends up loving his best and most loyal knight (Beverly Kennedy, 63). His life and story simply would not *be* without it, and though it was considered sinful it is integral to the legend. Admittedly, Arthur also has a few affairs before marriage – with both his married half sisters – though he is steadfastly loyal in his marriage to Guenevere. The affairs Arthur is engaged in are deemed quite regular in context, however. “[t]he Worshipful Knight is perfectly willing to commit either fornication or adultery, so long as he stands to lose no honor thereby” (Beverly Kennedy, 67), and if no one finds out about his affair with Margawse and the child she bore from it then his reputation would stay intact.

In the *Vulgate Cycle* the story is somewhat different, here Arthur does engage in several adulterous relationships during his marriage, but these are caused by trickery and magic which as discussed before are not deemed adulterous in Arthur's court (McCracken, 190). But Arthur did engage in an incestuous affair with Morgan le Fay and an extra-marital affair with Margawse. The affair with Margawse is integral, as McCracken says; “The romance insists on the incest as the cause of the future downfall of Arthur's kingdom and as the cause of his own future death” (192). The affair with Morgan is over quickly and not deemed of much importance after Arthur marries. Arthur experiences the privilege of male knighthood by not reaping the repercussions that women experience when involved in adulterous relationships.

Arthur, while the main character of the *Le Morte Darthur*, is not the direct focus. While in the first few books we do follow the king in his battles to gain allegiances and collecting knights as the one true king, the focus quickly shifts to other knights and their adventures. The knightly adventures are noticeably much grander on a personal level. Arthur is mainly a character always looming in the background, either as a loving king or successful warrior waging war abroad; he is not “an active King” in the narrative (McCracken, 197). This inactivity can be considered his main flaw that causes the adultery charges against Lancelot and

Guenevere to explode in his face. Blinded by his love for, and his trust in his knights and queen he refuses to believe or acknowledge the claims time and time again when he is warned of Lancelot and Guenevere's affair. Initially, before he weds Guenevere he is warned by Merlin about their love and betrayal as well.¹⁸ Ashton notes that

Malory implies that Arthur was aware of the hearsay surrounding his queen and his best knight but chose not to act. He writes that the king was reluctant to hear "such a noyse" about the two, especially when he recalls his affection for a man who has done so much for him and Guinevere. (Ashton, 89)

His refusal to hear such "noyse" can be interpreted as him refusing to publicly acknowledge their affair in order to keep reputation intact. Lancelot is the greatest knight after all, and if people were to learn of his betrayal to the king the people will start to doubt Arthur's authority. Furthermore, from a nonfictional angle "[i]t was not permissible in canon or civil law for a spouse to condone adultery, and a husband who did so could be classified as a pimp" (Bullough, 11), which would not be advantageous for a king that needs to show strength publicly. Arthur's trust in Lancelot is so true that he cannot fathom that even if Guenevere would have an affair that it would be with Lancelot and that we would betray him so willingly (McCracken, 189).¹⁹

Arthur's wilful blindness creates an instable political climate, but also renders him somewhat a fool in the narrative. He is just too good to believe the people he supposedly loves most will do him the most harm, and he has to finally acknowledge this harm when Mordred is able to publicly expose it. This blindness leads to his demise, as an early dissuasion of the affair would not have toppled his entire reign as swiftly as it did.

¹⁸ "Indeed, medieval versions of the story recount a series of repeated episodes in which the love affair is revealed and then covered up again. That is, Arthur sees evidence of his queen's adultery, but he finds a way not to believe what he sees." (McCracken, 188); "But Merlin warned the king covertly that Guenevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again" (Malory, 67; Book III, ch. I).

¹⁹ "In his praise of Lancelot's loyalty Arthur does not mention his queen's honour, nor does he consider her possible guilt of the charge of adultery. From the king's perspective, it is impossible that the queen could have betrayed him with Lancelot, because Lancelot would not have betrayed the king." (McCracken, 189)

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Lacan theorised that the “features of courtly love stories and the criticism of them establish their sociopsychological basis,” and that this “is what gives them their enduring importance and influence” (qtd in O’Donoghue, 15). Lacan’s observation about the importance of courtly love can clearly be seen in the continued adaptation and analysis of Arthuriana in the past 1200 years or so. The continued interaction of readers and writers with the Arthurian legend is a testament to the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the story and its characters. Especially as the love triangle between Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot has become a staple, if not a continual focus, of the myth in the modern day.

Derek Pearsall states:

On a more practical level, one can see the attraction of the Arthurian legend as an infinitely expandable narrative portmanteau. Arthur’s court was an extremely convenient all-purpose location for stories of all kinds, and there were, surely, enough knights of the Round Table to provide protagonists for almost any story of adventure.
(25)

The Arthurian legend is simply so rich, but filled with enough empty space for reinterpretation, that every generation new versions of the story are brought forth. With the romance, the love triangle and its tribulations, and the rise and fall of the characters at Camelot’s court, *Le Morte Darthur* is an enormous source for contemporary writers to build on. As the previous analysis has shown, there is a lot of meaning that can get lost once the Medieval context for many of the conventions equipped and adapted in contemporary adaptations is ignored. However, when aware of these conventions and the culture Thomas Malory lived in as he wrote *Le Morte Darthur*, adaptations that defy these rules like Marion Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* and Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy’s *Once & Future* can be appreciated even more intimately.

III. A Fundamental Feminist Arthurian Romance: Analysis of *The Mists of Avalon* (1984) by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Arthur may be the Once and Future King, but it is our job to ensure that the women in his stories return with him.

(Cooley, 113)

The Mists of Avalon's perspective is unique in that it puts the narrative in the hands of the female characters. Interpretations and experiences come from the women in the legends instead of the questing knights and the battles they fight. Bradley manages to subvert the male dominated perspective within the Arthurian romance and adds a unique feminist perspective to it (Paxson, 118; Tobin, 1; Cooley, 6).²⁰ Elizabeth Archibald eloquently describes the plot and the changes Bradley added to her adaptation:

Marion Zimmer Bradley's influential novel *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) is subversive in its choice of a female protagonist, Morgaine, who becomes her half-brother Arthur's implacable enemy. Bradley's omission of any episode which could not have been witnessed by a female character radically changes the nature of the story and draws attention to the male literary biases of the past – in *The Mists* battles and quests can only be reported second-hand. But the conflicts of love and honour are still present, albeit transformed in the struggle of Morgaine against Arthur and also against his very pious queen, and in the conflict between the matriarchal goddess worship of Avalon and the patriarchal Christianity which supersedes it. (150)

²⁰ “Bradley 'reclaims' a story which had always been driven by the actions of the male characters ... In that regard, the book is a product of the same school of thought that in recent years has led to a re-examination of women's roles throughout history.” (Paxson, 118);

“Bradley's work, like that of other feminist medievalist authors, differs from the male tradition in that it does not raise up the past as ideal, but rather seeks to reinscribe power for female characters.” (Tobin, 1);

“The writings of these Arthurian feminists are political, in that they draw from a wide range of prominent feminist theory of the time; they apply those theories to the lived experiences of individual characters; they interact with the theories by promoting them, challenging them, and putting them in conversation with each other through the experiences of their characters; and they redistribute these theories in accessible, relatable stories that could reach much different and broader audiences than could the academy for which much of the original theory is written.” (Cooley, 6)

Another component that attracts the reader to *Mists* is its spirituality that is focused on feminine sexual freedom, though this aspect is at the expense of some of the male characters (Paxson, 110). A clear shift in perspective from the promiscuous villainess to sympathising with the women in Arthur's legend that take control of their sexuality. This movement of feminist revisions of popular works within literature started in the early 1970s, where it gained popularity during the 1980s, and still is flourishing as more works enter the public domain (Cooley, 5).²¹ It is a result of the gaps in the narrative that surround female characters, where in Bradley the gaps surround the male characters as we see everything through women's lives (Zambreno, 123). Furthermore, modern readings and perspectives influenced by "Freudian psychology as well as by Victorian puritanism" give us a new insight into sexual relationships specifically and this creates new interpretations that lend themselves to interesting adaptations (Beverly Kennedy, 78).

What is especially striking, considering modern feminist views, is that Bradley includes many of the incestual relationships that exist within Medieval Arthurian romances. And not only are they mentioned, but the entire plot revolves around several of these incestual relations.²² They are made more explicit and 'sinful' than in Malory, adding in an extra layer of Freudian familial desire (Morgaine as Arthur's pseudo-mother and lover). *Mists* does change some parts in the incestual relationships; Morgause is shifted from Mordred's mother and Arthur's sister to Arthur's aunt. Morgaine becomes Mordred's mother instead. Christianity's influence on the characters sheds an especially negative light on these relationships, while the old pagan religion is less bothered by incestual relations.

In Malory's *Morte* we learn that Arthur slept with both his half sisters. There is little talk about the motivation, and there is little clarity whether Arthur, Morgaine and Morgause

²¹ "Feminist literary criticism, which calls attention to the need for more feminist literature, is a product of the second wave feminist movement – the era of feminist consciousness 'from the post-World War II period to the end of the twentieth century'." (Gubar qtd in Cooley, 5)

²² A family tree of Bradley's characters can be found in Appendix 2.

know he is their brother – it is left implicit for the reader to determine. Bradley makes the reason behind the incestual relations explicit when Morgaine and Arthur are wed during the ceremony at Dragon Island. Everything is part of a magical ritual and all seems fine, aside from the many drugs in their system from the ritual, and Arthur says:

You were the very first. No matter how many women I may have, for all my life I will always remember you and love you and bless you. I promise you that. (Bradley, 263)

But as soon as he recognises Morgaine as his sister he exclaims “Ah, God, Mary Virgin, what have we done” (263). Their mutual love – a parental, familial, and romantic love – is not the main focus in Bradley’s narrative, but it is recurring. The reader can assume that Arthur’s love for Morgaine as his first lover really never does leave him. This unconventional love fills him with shame more and more as he is indoctrinated into the Christian church, and finally made to repent by Gwenhwyfar’s request. Additionally, Morgaine’s affections for Lancelot complicate the classic love triangle further by adding another incestual layer. They are direct cousins, and Bradley’s Lancelot’s desire for Arthur has incestual aspects as well. It is explicitly clear that Bradley elaborated the controversial love relationships that Malory only shortly mentions, and even broadened the scope of the topic of incest within the legend.

One aspect that Bradley was one of the first to deviate from Malory’s Arthurian legend is the common perspective of Lancelot’s sexuality and the reason for his love and ‘obsession’ with Gwenhwyfar. *The Mists*’ Lancelot is compared to Achilles in the text and is told he should have his own Patroclus. This comparison is significant because Bradley shows Lancelot having homosexual desire for Arthur above any other love for a woman (Bradley, 674). Additionally, Lancelot mostly desires Gwenhwyfar because she is so beautiful and is able to worship her like the virgin Mary – “[a]nd how differently he looked at her - Lancelot looked at her as if she were

the statue of the Virgin on the altar at church” (Bradley, 387) – but he also distinctively desires her because of her connection to Arthur (Noble, 291).²³

To emphasise on the beauty that makes her so worshipful, Lancelot exclaims:

You are the only lady whose beauty never fades. I begin to think God has ordered it so, that when all other women age and grow old and thick and worn, you shall be ever beautiful. (Bradley, 439)

Gwenhwyfar is described as the pinnacle of beauty, so Lancelot is able to love her despite his homosexuality. He loves Arthur and Gwenhwyfar both (but in different ways). And – as in Malory’s *Morte* – the dilemma in the love triangle is not only loving his lord’s lady, but that by loving her he betrays his most trusted and loved friend. “How he loves Arthur; this is why he is so tormented. It is not that he desires Gwenhwyfar that tortures him; it is that he loves Arthur no less,” Morgaine observes (420). His sexual desire for Arthur adds to this dilemma. Lancelot confesses “I touched Arthur-I touched him. I love her, oh, God, I love her, mistake me not, but had she not been Arthur’s wife, had it not been for - I doubt even she...” (678), he is unable to finish the sentence further because of his inner conflict. This complicates the dynamic as Lancelot has now two secret loves that he cannot express for fear of repercussions in Christian society.

Lancelot explains that he is “damned” because of these desires that do not fit in the heteropatriarchy. He deems it unnatural, and he is shown to suffer from homosexual guilt (Bradley, 679). Noble discusses Bradley’s problem with this representation of internalised homophobia:

As close as she comes, however, to giving voice to the Freudian and decidedly homophobic notion that the homosexual's “problem” with women originates in an emasculating childhood experience with his mother, Bradley chooses to have Lancelot

²³ “Bradley has seen to it that we know enough not to dissociate Lancelot's feelings for Gwenhwyfar from his feelings for Arthur.” (291)

simply confess to Morgaine that his sexual orientation has always been homosexual, even though he tried for a long time to deny the fact by flinging himself into sexual experiments with any woman who would have him. (290)

He suffers through his desires for years but often leaves Camelot's court – which is assumed to be because of his desire for the queen and not the king. In this representation, “Bradley deprives Lancelot of Arthur's friendship, not surprisingly perhaps, by making sexuality the knife which severs the cord that has long bound Lancelot and Arthur together” and this is what mostly drives the rift between the three characters (Noble, 293), instead of the romance between the Queen and Lancelot.

Furthermore, Lancelot is presented as the most handsome man ever once more, as in *Morte* every woman wants him in *Mists*. A few observations are: “His lashes were as long as a girl's. But he did not have the androgynous, boy-girl look of many boys before their beards have grown; he was like a young stag. Morgaine thought she had never seen so masculine a creature before”; “Lancelot, next to him, looked pretty as a girl”; “Lancelot had not changed from that day two years ago, only he was taller, more handsome, dressed richly in dark crimson, bearing sword and shield” (Bradley, 216; 314; 300). While his handsome exterior attracts all the women, it does present one particular problem in the primarily (Roman inspired) military society Bradley describes. His masculinity is questioned from a young age and thus he feels the need to overperform masculinity in order to not be targeted; this is reminiscent of experiences that closeted homosexual men have described as well (Bradley, 676). Lancelot's inherent femininity is alluded to have had an effect on how he presents himself as a knight. His need for acceptance and a safe position in the patriarchal hegemony is why he insists on becoming a knight, and the best one at that too.

Where in *Morte* Lancelot is subjected to several trickery plots, in *Mists* Lancelot is tricked by magic only once. Eventually he is married to Elaine, but this marriage is mainly for

Elaine's benefit. Elaine tricks Lancelot with the help of Morgaine, but her resemblance to Gwenhwyfar and his support to her father's quests influenced this connection before the spell was cast. It is a decidedly unhappy marriage however, which results in two children.

Lancelot has no alternative but to suffer his "terrible bondage" in silence. Not content to leave him suffering in silence, however, Bradley improvises on the traditional storyline of the Arthurian legend yet once more by forcing Lancelot into an unhappy marriage. (Noble, 294)

Lancelot and Elaine's marriage is sadly reminiscent of corrective rape in that Lancelot must be the man he is expected to be by sleeping with women, he has little choice or else he will lose social standing and power in the eye of other men. Noble is highly critical of Bradley's decision to marry Lancelot to Elaine, and it is an interesting addition as Lancelot does not marry in Malory's version. The Roman-Christian heteropatriarchal society Bradley's narrative takes place in has no place for deviation from the norm, as the greatest knight Lancelot feels the need to adhere to heteronormative relationships. Additionally, his relationship with Gwenhwyfar becomes less physical over the years as well:

Most telling of all, however, is Gwenhwyfar's disclosure towards the end of the novel to the effect that her relations with Lancelot over the years have seldom involved intercourse. (Noble, 289)

The madness Lancelot experiences in the *Morte* returns in *Mists*. The madness now a direct result from internalised homophobia, his unhappiness in not being able to feel like he thinks he should towards women.²⁴ This is in stark contrast with Malory's Lancelot who goes mad from Guenevere's rejection, not his suppressed sexuality. Bradley's Lancelot becomes a shell of the man he once was as a result of the continued confusion he experiences, but in the

²⁴ "The madness Lancelot experiences during his Grail quest is further testimony to the sense of disorientation which has been his life experience, for, as he tells Morgaine upon his return to Camelot, 'I think it was not the first time—there were times, during those years with Elaine, that I hardly knew what I did'." (Noble, 295)

narrative, this is not focused on as it is told by the women, and we do not see Lancelot's own narrative from his perspective. Furthermore, in *Morte* Lancelot repents through the Grail quest and by becoming a hermit after Arthur's death. But in *Mists* Lancelot's penance results in him ignoring his sexuality, by turning to God he suppresses himself once more in a manner that now does not involve women (Noble, 295).

Gwenhwyfar loves Lancelot, but her love is more representative of her choice and agency than the virtue within it. It is not that she loves Arthur less, but more so that she has a choice in loving Lancelot, whereas her marriage to Arthur is out of her control (Bradley, 381).²⁵ She does consider her connection to Lancelot to be larger and longer lasting because of her choice in the matter, reminiscent of Malory's Guenevere and Lancelot. Bradley's Gwenhwyfar is an overly pious and anxious queen, and this anxiety is greatly influenced by her inability to produce an heir. Paxson characterises her as

perhaps the least sympathetic of the group, and yet as a psychological study, her portrait is acutely drawn. Torn between her needs and her training, she tries to compensate for her feelings of guilt by going overboard in the direction of piety. As result, she exemplifies an extreme antifeminist and reactionary Christian position. (119)

Though she loves Lancelot, she is determined to be a good and pious Christian wife. For example, she explains that “[s]he had never exchanged with Lancelot one word that could not have been shouted aloud in the presence of Igraine and her father and all the bishops of Britain assembled” early in the narrative (Bradley, 394), and thus adheres to the medieval notion of keeping any secret romance in the private domain. Her inability to carry an heir results in her constant plea to Arthur to drop the old religions, and she succeeds by bringing Christianity to

²⁵ “She was not herself, there was nothing for herself, she was only some property of a High King who had not even bothered to come and see the woman they were sending along with all the horses and hear. She was another mare, a brood mare this time for the High King's stud service, hopefully to provide a royal son.” (381)

all the people of Britain. She feels immense pressure to be virtuous and queenly.²⁶ Cooley discusses how “[t]he most vital obligation of a royal dynasty is its continuation – regardless of the reason, be it name, property, or loyalty from allies and armies, bearing and raising an heir is a top priority for any kingdom. And this priority falls almost exclusively on women” (38), and Bradley represents this pressure well within *Mists*’ narrative.

So much pressure is on the king and queen that Bradley’s Arthur does not ignore Gwenhwyfar and Lancelet’s obvious love and even encourages them to sleep together. Arthur expresses his worry that Gwenhwyfar’s inability to bear children is his fault. This is a new perspective on their childlessness in the context of Arthurian romances. Malory does not explain whether Gwenhwyfar is blamed for being ‘barren’ like Bradley does in *Mists*. The pressure to conceive is considerable, especially in times of a new and tentative dynasty and it is significant that this is discussed in a work that focuses on the previously invisible female perspective.

Arthur’s insecurity results in an intense scene where all three characters are involved sexually. This three-way Beltane love ritual is both a source of great joy and great anguish of all three lovers. They are “staggering to bed ... too drunk for their feet to carry them” (Bradley, 634), and Arthur professes his love for them both, whether platonic or sexual is up to the reader. Arthur is acutely aware of their love but did not openly acknowledge it to the lovers until this moment in Bradley’s narrative. “[D]o you think I have not seen how you two look at each other?” Arthur declares (635). All three of them ashamed and drunk, the choice is left up to the pious Gwenhwyfar by the men, they are too chivalrous to take her without consent. Arthur persuades her however, by stating that “if I am here with you ... then should a child come of this, then you may swear without untruth that this child was conceived in your marriage bed” (636). This statement is what creates the freedom for the queen to consent to this three-way because Arthur’s presence would create a loophole that absolves her of some sort of guilt. The

²⁶ “Gwenhwyfar wished to be good, to keep her soul clean and her virtue whole, but also it meant much to her that people should see her virtue and think of her as a good and spotless queen” (Bradley, 475).

focus here, however, is not only Lancelot and Gwenhwyfar's love for each other – and that the reader knows that Lancelot loves Arthur just as much, though the king and queen are not fully aware of this – but also of Arthur's need for an heir, and he trusts no one better than his best knight to accomplish this task.

However, because of Gwenhwyfar's strict Christian belief she is tormented with the feeling that her inability to conceive is caused by her sinful actions. It does not matter to her in this context that she and Lancelot have explicit permission from Arthur to try for an heir – as he would be happy to name Lancelot's children his heirs – they engage in little but a kiss and conversation here and there initially. In order to let go of the social standards within the society present in *Mists*, it is not until after Gwenhwyfar is abducted and saved by Lancelot that they sleep together again, overcome by emotion in the aftermath. “God did not reward me for virtue. What makes me think he could punish me?” (Bradley, 730) she reasons with herself after her abduction and assault. Meleagant's abuse of Gwenhwyfar is the start of Lancelot and Gwenhwyfar's romance being brought into the public sphere; her trauma causes her to ignore social conventions over her need for comfort, and this causes similar trouble for Arthur's political position as in Malory's *Morte*.

Arthur's role in the love triangle is less transparent in Bradley's narrative, he is shown to be benevolent and loving towards his queen, but nonetheless is put in a difficult position. He is not able to just do as he pleases as king, despite what one might expect. “[A] High King, too, must marry as his councillors bid him” and he is thus not to follow his desires as he might have liked in favour of the political connections a marriage with Gwenhwyfar would bring (Bradley, 382). People at court know that Lancelot's and Gwenhwyfar long for each other when Arthur is away, and this situates him in the same precarious position as in the *Morte* (488). Arthur acknowledges Lancelot and Gwenhwyfar's mutual attraction at Beltane, but that does not eliminate the political implications of his best knight and wife being involved if it ever were to

be discussed publicly (365-367). Arthur tries to do what is best for the people he loves and his kingdom, but he is unable to please everyone, and this ends with him losing everything as it does in most cycles of the Arthurian saga. Bradley shows clearly that when Lancelot and Guinevere's romance is practised more openly in court Arthur loses a lot of power and respect from becoming a "cuckold" (Bradley, 733). How can he hold back the Saxons if he cannot even control his own wife? This reasoning makes sense within the Roman-Christian patriarchy *Mists* is set in, as these are considered male dominated societies historically. Bradley also shows how "a king does nothing in private" (415), how his private life directly has an effect on the power dynamics within the kingdom.

Bradley is not able to end the story happily like Malory, but that is not the purpose of a feminist adaptation like *The Mists of Avalon*. Female perspectives and female empowerment in its many forms are the focus of this work. Bradley's work can be considered the start of a new sub-genre within popular Arthuriana where female characters become the primary focus. While Bradley's interpretation of the Arthurian legends is a very empowering account of Arthur's myths it neglects to discuss the effects of forced sex from the male perspective. Arthur's feeling about the ritual with his sister Morgaine and the pressure Lancelot experiences to have sex with women despite his homosexuality are not discussed in depth. Furthermore, underage incestual sexual relations are unusually overly discussed with a questionable leniency. Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* is one of the most well-known female-focused Arthurian adaptations, yet at the same time questionable in its morality because of its representation of incestual love relationships in the novel. However, that does not negate that Bradley's adaptation fills many gaps that writers like Thomas Malory have been unable to fill, while at the same time adding gaps for male characters where they previously were not.

IV. An Intersectional Feminist Interpretation: Analysis of *Once & Future* (2019) by Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy

Haven't you noticed that nothing is the same this time?

(Capetta & McCarthy, 34)

Where *The Mists of Avalon* resembles Malory's medieval setting and timeline, *Once & Future* is entirely unique and builds on the knowledge of other adaptations/reincarnations of Arthurian romances. *O&F* is set in a far-off future, where humans have abandoned earth, and a mega corporation called Mercer dominates space and its inhabitants through a forced ultra capitalist society.²⁷ In this adaptation Arthur is female (named Ari/Ara), of Middle Eastern ethnicity, and this is the 42nd cycle in the reincarnation mythos. The reincarnation of the court is often used in adaptations as exemplified by Zambreno:

Works dealing with the rebirth of Arthur in the modern or post-modern world are perhaps the largest single category of contemporary Arthurian fiction, and the To-Be-Continued gap of the Once and Future King's story has been filled in an astonishing variety of ways ... Often he can be accompanied by a court that has been reincarnated or rediscovered intact, with all of their problematical history; or else Merlin returns first and copes with the modern world by himself. (123)

Ari is the first female Arthur, and this is extremely significant to the story as it breaks the reincarnation cycle. In this adaptation there is little focus on historical accuracy like narratives that are set in the Middle-Ages. Capetta and McCarthy do address misconceptions of the heteronormative and Eurocentric perspective that is represented in media in the sequel *Sword in the Stars*. *O&F* is once again a display of why Arthurian stories are so often adapted; simply

²⁷ "Mercer had become more than just a greedy corporation with a monopoly on good and services for the entire galaxy-they were the galaxy. They controlled everything from people's food to healthcare to the freaking government." (Capetta and McCarthy, 6); A summary of the plot of *Once & Future* can be found in Appendix 3

because they are so adaptable to so many narratives that the Legends becomes near universally applicable (Zambreno, 117).

In *O&F* Merlin becomes younger each cycle and does not resemble the stereotypical old wizard. He is described in a comical sense as he now has the body of a lanky teenager that is hard to take seriously at times. “The focus on youthful Arthurian characters is thus one way of making an old legend relevant for a new generation, by representing that generation to itself” (Howey, 38). The relevance of the change in the cycle is instrumental in this adaptation; it comments on the present where we are experiencing a surge of new intersectional feminist theory and call for queer liberation. *O&F* is explicitly diverse, which is shown in contrast of Merlin’s antiquated perspective from a binary and hegemonic society on Old Earth – though he happily adapts quickly to the change in acceptance of queerness and ethnic diversity. Gender fluidity, different sexualities and diverse ethnicities are represented in a refreshing manner by Capetta and McCarthy; without any fanfare, as if it is regular, as it should be in an ideal society. Though based on the medieval Arthurian ideals, *O&F* comments on the absurdity of some more archaic romantic ideals while still using the old story to present a more diverse story with interesting twists.

This is not the first time Arthur is presented to have reincarnated as a woman – *Avalon High* (2005) by Meg Cabot for example – but how Capetta and McCarthy introduce this notion is interesting because Ari has no prior knowledge of the Arthurian legends. Neither is she a warrior or leader yet. Gwen is introduced as a queen/ruler of a ‘safe haven’ from Mercer in her own right, who has been ruling for years in a mimicry of Medieval Earth courtly tradition. Suddenly, Gwen is the character that holds the power in this dynamic through this change. One would also think that Arthur’s difference in gender would influence the love triangle, but interestingly enough it changes few essential details that have been represented in both the medieval stories and later adaptations. The cycle has its preferred pattern, as is shown by using

metafictional literary critique within the narrative. Changes to the love triangle and romance are more to do with other factors in the plot than Ari's gender, the sapphic romance changes everything and yet nothing.

Capetta and McCarthy's Merlin is very wary of the three-way relationship between Lancelot, Gwen, and Ari, but he mistakes who represents Lancelot in this reincarnation. He is mostly worried about Ari's reaction, as the reveal of the affair tends to break Arthurs and thus often catapults him into the path causes his inevitable death.

He could only see one thing to be done: prevent them from interacting. Merlin could do that, couldn't he? He was a magician, after all. And Gweneviere breaking Arthur's heart was a repetition Merlin was most keen on avoiding. ... No devastating heartbreak. ... Of course, there had been one Arthur who had no interest in Gweneviere. And Merlin had made him weep the hardest. (Capetta & McCarthy, 59)

Another interesting addition is that Merlin is shown to have loved one of his Arthurs in a previous cycle; the heartbreak that resulted from Merlin rejecting Arthur followed the pre-determined cycle of heartbreak, but also made not only the future cycle queerer but queered Arthur's past as well. Merlin's involvement complicates the love triangle in various ways, and once even entering the romance himself despite his better judgement.

Gwen and Ari are shown to have an intense love/hate relationship initially. They were sexually and romantically involved before the events in *Once & Future* without any of the other characters knowing as they were always fighting. "Ari and Gwen never did get on well. Talk about sparring, their verbal duels were majestic in intensity" (Capetta & McCarthy, 57). Their attraction is explicitly physical, not just an elevated love like Malory presents but a fiery passionate one that results in verbal fights and sex. However, Lamorak mentions to Ari that "there was only ever one person for you. Even when you two were only known for your shouting matches" (277). Passion is high, in every sense of the word, and it is a very different

dynamic from Bradley and Malory's Arthur and Gwen who are more conservative because of social constraints (Capetta & McCarthy, 80).²⁸

Gwen is already a competent Queen of Lionel, a place where "medieval dreams come true" and where she creates an updated and modern version of a Medieval court that is diverse and not ruled by Christian or Roman conventions (52). "Gwen was always *playacting*" (80), involved with social politics and this is where the futuristic couple clash, as Ari is truthful to a fault and cannot appreciate the charade of politics. Ari says: "I've never lied to you, Gwen. Not even when you were lying to me" and is constantly wary of being lied to as she knows that Gwen is an accomplished politician and well versed in the art of embellishment (82). Ari is the representation of a figurehead that is true, honest, brave, and worthy of trust. Gwen represents the political aspect of ruling; knowing your opponent and creating strategy. They compliment each other as monarchs, and this is not too far from Malory's representation of the couple. Arthur was the figurehead men followed to war in *Morte*, but Guinevere was responsible for handling Camelot when he is at war. In *O&F* Gwen is not the character that is subjected to a marriage with Arthur, but instead it is Ari who has to marry Gwen to gain diplomatic immunity, to save her friends, and to try and barter for the lives of her and Kay's mothers (84). A very interesting role reversal, once more the marriage becomes a true "political union" (90). Instead of the expectation of children being implied to be 'forced' on Gwen, a duty expected of her, here she mentions directly she wants children, and Ari is not the one that has much of a say in this matter (90). By giving Gwen a dominant role in the narrative, Capetta and McCarthy switch the power dynamic politically between Arthur and Gweneviere.

Jordan, Gwen's best knight in Lionel, is at first considered to be the one to come between Gwen and Ari. Merlin constantly worries that she is this cycle's Lancelot, but this turns out to be faulty as Jordan confesses to being asexual (102-103). Merlin says that the one who

²⁸ "The years had done nothing to soften her fiery brown gaze or alter the way Ari's blood rushed at the sight of her. Not necessarily in a good way. Not in a bad way, either." (80)

betrays Arthur is always his most trusted which is an interesting notion, as if its all predestined in some manner for Arthur to fail. Instead of Malory and Bradley's insistence that Lancelot should be both the most trusted and greatest knight, here the focus is primarily on trust.

Ari learns through Merlin that it is usually inevitable that Gwen will betray her in some way, as this has happened in all other cycles. His warning shows the awareness that most other Arthurian adaptations follow this specific pattern up to the twenty-first century. Later in the narrative Morgana supplies her with more information about the love triangle, but Ari refuses to give into the possibility of this betrayal.

“Bullshit,” Ari said, sure of herself. “Maybe that’s how it was with Arthur and his Gweneviere, but that’s not how it is with Gwen and me.” (148)

Funnily enough, Ari does start distrusting Gwen more when Merlin talks about her “inevitable betrayal” (179), scared of them following the same pattern as Arthurs before.

However, during one of their space quests Ari ‘dies’ and this complicates matters in the not yet started love triangle. “With Arthur out of the way, Lancelot would no doubt step in and comfort the grieving Gweneviere” Merlin observes (197). It is not Jordan but Kay, Ari’s adoptive brother, who comforts Gwen as they start a sexual relationship when Ari is presumed dead. Instead of a bond that surpasses any other Capetta and McCarthy present their affair to be one of grief, as a connection to Ari after her ‘death’. “This is what Gwen and Kay did best together ever since Ari died. They pooled their grief, swimming freely in it” (238). Eventually Ari is unable to escape the hurt, the betrayal, and heartbreak when she does find out that Kay and Gwen were involved, and that Gwen is pregnant as a result. As in other adaptations the perceived betrayal drives a wedge between the three characters, even if the nature of Gwen and Kay’s relationship has shifted.

Once more this “betrayal” breaks her, despite Ari’s resolution to not be hurt by the affair when she learned of its inevitability. But because of the imminent battle against Mercer she has

little time to worry about what this means for her relationship with Gwen and her brother Kay. Kay is shown to be distraught by Ari's 'resurrection' as he is aware of how much it will hurt her that Kay and Gwen found comfort in each other while she was thought to be dead.

“How do we explain, Gwen? She'll never forgive either of us.” [...]

“I know it's a shock,” Merlin said, picking careful steps over Kay, hands outstretched as if approaching a starving dragon. “I made the same mistake. Lancelot is always the best knight. That's true enough, but maybe more important, he's the knight Arthur trusts... most of all.”

Ari's eyes moved past Merlin to Gwen, who was now over on her knees beside Kay. She pulled his miserable crying face into the softest spot on her chest, whispered in his ear, combed back his hair with those fingers that belonged to Ari.

And Ari's heart cracked. (Capetta & McCarthy, 260)

Ari is told that “they're not the kind of couple you think they are. It's more convenience and grief, and a very odd request on Gwen's side” but this assurance does not stop the hurt Ari feels and the guilt Gwen and Kay feel (278). Unexpectedly, Kay dies in the final battle against the Administrator; the love triangle is only a short-lived affair in *O&F* that does break Ari's heart but does not impact the validity of her reign and heroics as it does in *Mists* or *Morte*. Thus, the cycle is changed, the never changing disruption of the love triangle that inadvertently thrusts Arthur's reign into disarray is ended before Ari can even truly rule.

Once & Future is an interesting portrayal of the Lancelot, Gweneviere, and Arthur dynamic because it plays with the expectations the reader has about the triangle and twists them just a little into something entirely new. Further, Christian ideals are removed as this adaptation does not focus on religion; it is focused more on the destruction capitalism and materialism cause within a society. “An Arthurian text adapts the legend, but it is also an adaptation to the conventions of particular genres or media, and to the cultural milieu in which it is produced”

(Howey, 39). What does this say about our current society as the feminist context does with *Mists*? *O&F* is more concerned with the prevailing anti-capitalist sentiment in popular culture, especially within intersectional queer communities, that has been becoming more widespread despite conservative efforts to quieten these discussions. Additionally, this adaptation ignores any incestual relationships that has featured in other versions. As this is a reincarnation adaptation it is difficult to put this work in the same context as a 1980s feminist revision, but the effect of twenty-first century intersectional feminism is clear. Where *Mists* uses Lancelot as a token homosexual character that is only able to suffer through internalised homophobia, *Once & Future*'s characters do not suffer in the future for their sexual orientations or gender expression. Merlin does experience some internalised homophobia, as he is a representation of the Old Earth and old traditions, but he quickly fits into this future capitalist dystopia which is simultaneously a representation of queer liberty. Capetta and McCarthy's adaptation of the Arthurian myth creatively plays with the aspects of the Arthurian legend and discusses the recurring love triangle as it simultaneously critiques these conventions and creates a diverse and interesting new version of the myth that should not be underestimated in importance.

V. Conclusion

The Importance of Feminist Adaptation in Bradley's *Mists*

Gwenhwyfar's character in Malory's version of the Arthurian legend is quite prominent but otherwise there is a noticeable lack of women and female perspectives in *Morte*. This is not uncharacteristic in the contemporary context of the fifteenth century; however, it does leave a marvellous opportunity to fill in these female perspectives. These "windows of opportunity" were creatively used by Bradley in *The Mists of Avalon*, through the female perspective it is narrated in and how they are shown to gain power in various ways as women in a Medieval-Christian context (Zambreno, 119).²⁹ ³⁰ Paxson notes that "[i]n Bradley's hands, the story acquires the structural characteristics of a modern romance—in particular, the family saga, in which relationships mutate from one generation to the next, and secrets can be more deadly than swords" (118). Bradley was imaginatively able to fill in these gaps. Her ability to adapt the rest of the legend to these new perspectives connected Arthurian women to a feminist perspective of the 1980s; Bradley reframed women's perspectives and roles through that specific lens.

Feminist authors were among the first to fill in these gaps in women's stories, as before the main focus lay on knighthood or only a few high-profile female characters like Gwenhwyfar. Instead of focusing on the aspect of a united Britain and chivalry the focus lay with women's lives and the violence they experienced at the hand of men (Cooley, 8). There is an undeniable importance in these works of "feminist Arthuriana," as it uses the male dominated narrative to the ends of a feminist ideal, and thus "reclaims the canon" for the women that were mostly left out of this canon (Cooley, 6). Originally, "[m]any of the female characters

²⁹ "One of the aspects of *Mists of Avalon* which was initially most striking and attractive to readers is its focus on the female point of view. By telling the Arthurian legend from the perspective of its women, Bradley 'reclaims' a story which had always been driven by the actions of the male characters." (Paxson, 118)

³⁰ "Reclaiming queens from the genre of romance and imposing onto them the traits of powerful second wave female leaders, feminist Arthurian authors challenge hegemonic restrictions on appropriate gender roles and reimagine what 'empowered' femininity can look like with limited accessibility to true power." (Cooley, 19)

in the romances seem essentialized to nothing more than a sexual presence, one that functions to tempt a knight toward the path of love/sex and away from the path of honor” (Sweeney, “Lady as Temptress” 165). But as society advances in the influence of feminism, so does our view of women’s role in fiction, and our need to rectify or supplement it if we find the canon lacking. Bradley’s women take control through sexual relations, the bearing children, and spirituality (whether Christian or pagan). But these characters are far from idealised versions of Arthurian women, they are human, varied, and flawed. For example, Gwenhwyfar’s personality is decidedly changed from a great queen and Lancelot’s true lover in Malory’s *Morte* to an anxious Christian woman desperate for Lancelot’s love in *Mists*.

I can personally attest to the power this narrative inspires in young women, though the story is admittedly not without fault. By presenting complex characters, Bradley creates a more humanised view of women in Arthurian fiction instead of representing only an idealised queen or a martyr in Gwenhwyfar. The main directive with Bradley’s adaptation, however, is how through filling in these gaps present in the canon we can creatively fill in women’s roles through our modern lens and understanding of the ‘source text’; to give these characters a voice they were not allowed to have before. “Arthur may be the Once and Future King, but it is our job to ensure that the women in his stories return with him” (Cooley, 113).

Once & Future is refreshingly diverse in how queer characters are represented – how their queerness is deemed regular in the futuristic society ruled by the Mercer corporation – but Bradley does touch onto some elements in Lancelot’s narrative that could be interpreted to be queer. Bradley’s Lancelot is shown to be more in love with Arthur than with Gwenhwyfar at the onset of their relationship. It is suggested that Lance would not love her were it not for Arthur’s involvement at all. The problem with *Mists*, however, is that this perspective is not a main feature because Lancelot’s experience is a male one. Instead of Malory’s Lancelot who goes mad because of his love for Gwenhwyfar but loyalty to Arthur, Bradley’s Lancelot goes

mad over his ‘forbidden’ love for Arthur, and his inability to deal with this homosexual attraction in a male dominated and Christian society. Lancelot’s desires are forbidden in the context of rigid Christianity, and thus he must “suffer his ‘terrible bondage’ in silence” (Noble, 294). Arthur himself is in denial of his sexual love for Lancelot as well it seems, but it is hard to find out what the character truly thinks of the three-way relationship they find themselves in.

Despite this representation, and the liberation of female sexuality in *Mists*, Bradley “has done little in *The Mists of Avalon* to challenge existing cultural stereotypes and assumptions about homosexuality” (Noble, 295-296). Unfortunately, the spotlight that is shown onto the female experience in Bradley’s adaptation pushes the homosexual desires of Lancelot into the shadows, though this might also be representative of many men who had to hide themselves in a world dominated by Roman gender roles and suffocating Christianity.

Arthur’s Court Once & Future

Some Arthurian texts try to privilege one moral space over the other in nostalgia, utopianism or celebration of modernity, yet it is a feature of the discourse that such hierarchies rarely remain stable. Each distinct ‘world’ retains the potential to reflect critically on the other. Thus, even if the Arthurian scene is never fully present in the present, it is not confined to the historical past or to an isolated fantasy space.

(Gilbert, 155)

Once & Future’s use of the reincarnation myth that some connect to the Arthurian legend is not unique, but it is executed in a way that flips the tale on its head and it becomes a critique of the story and its regular tropes in return. Merlin is constantly worried about the secret love affair of Lancelot and Guinevere, as it always ends in Arthur’s destruction when he finds out.³¹ As

³¹ “‘Gwen? What does Gwen have to do with any of this?’ ‘She is part of Arthur’s story. A very important part. A rather...sad part. She will hurt you in the end, I’m afraid. So very badly’.” (Capetta and McCarthy, 148)

Ari is reincarnated as a woman, the legendary king and queen are now two women. Gwen and Ari's gender and queer love does not change the nature of the love triangle at first. Nonetheless, by changing Arthur into a woman a unique dynamic is created, and while this shift does not matter in the world of the novel, it is significant to see two powerful women at the helm of a rebellion as is represented in *O&F*. Traditionally, the Arthurian romance does not feature a queer romance, as such that makes this work an important addition to Arthuriana and queer adaptations. Especially in the context of audiences asking for more diverse representation of relationships that fall outside of the heteropatriarchy, Ari being female is a great way to bring Arthurian romance into the modern day and to a new enthusiastic audience.

In *O&F* Kay becomes Ari's Lancelot, setting in motion the inevitable tragedy that is the Arthurian love triangle. But Kay's death prevents the myth to play out as it typically does. Additionally, Ari was presumed dead when Kay and Gwen became involved and thus *O&F* changes the usual dynamic even more because usually Gweneviere and Lancelot tend to have to hide their affections in the fashion of courtly love while Arthur is still present in their lives.

Though Capetta and McCarthy's adaptation does follow some of the usual tropes, the change in space, time, and perspective makes for a unique addition to Arthuriana. Capetta and McCarthy also did not seem overly concerned with the previously discussed ideal of faithfulness to a 'historic' Arthur. Within the work there are references to other adaptations, but the work omits the incest plot and points out the negative sides of the way women, queer people and people of colour are handled in older versions and adaptations of *Le Morte Darthur*. Gwen's pregnancy with Kay's child makes an enormous wave within the narrative as well because when Ari and Gwen try to unify the galaxy their enemy Mercer demands they give up their child to the corporation in the guise of peace. Despite Ari's hurt at Kay and Gwen's relationship, she is unable to give up her brother's child and thus the next quest starts in the sequel *Sword in the Stars*. The sequel continues Arthur's legacy, but through the magic of time travel Capetta and

McCarthy are sure to subvert the roles in the love triangle, gender roles and sexuality in the context of a medieval Camelot once more.

The Significance of Literary Afterlives

Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur's love triangle is one of the most prominent romances in the western literary tradition and has been adapted and changed infinitely since its inception. The "Arthurian legend [is] continuously changing, continuously undergoing transformation to respond to social pressures" (Shichtman qtd in Noble, 11), and this can be seen in the representations of *The Mists of Avalon* and *Once & Future*. With companies like Walt Disney making immense profit from constant adaptation of their own work and well-known fairy tales based on the premise of nostalgia, some people may wonder what the value of adaptations are in the twenty-first century. However, adaptation is the life blood to a story; the only reason why some narratives are alive and how a legend like king Arthur's can be relevant centuries after its inception. Atkinson comments on the function of adaptation:

Adaptation is productive; it not only references prior texts, attitudes, practices, and media, but it also invites us to re-visit the past and to re-think the present in new ways, potentially opening space for muted or occluded voices. (Atkinson, xvii)

In itself it is astounding how we can experience the same stories multiple times with joy, but even when there are slight changes the audience remains interested. The continual enjoyment of adaptation offers endless opportunity for retelling within new contemporary contexts. Especially in the context of the Arthurian legend, there are so many facets to adapt, to fill in, to reinterpret. The options are endless. Adaptations offers the comfort of a known story, but the delight of a new spin on this well-known narrative creates an active interaction between the audience and the work. Hutcheon notes that "adaptation is how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places" (176). In this case the Arthurian romance changes

from a romance in Bradley where the female perspective is highlighted in the intention of sexual agency to the shifted romance between the two women in Capetta and McCarthy where the roles of rulership are reversed from Ari to Gwen. There are only more aspects that we can explore with the help of this old romance, not a stagnant repetition of the same old story. “The ending is not the end, but a new kind of fictional beginning—and there are always new stories to tell” even if the original was created in the Middle Ages (Zambreno, 125). After all, time is changing and so is our view on the Arthurian legend and the romance within.

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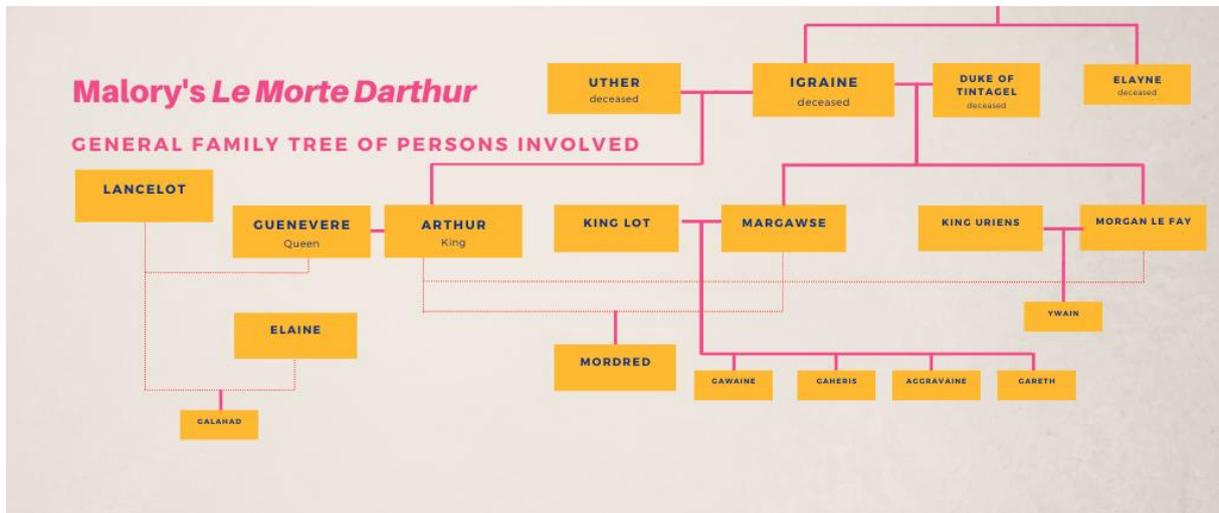
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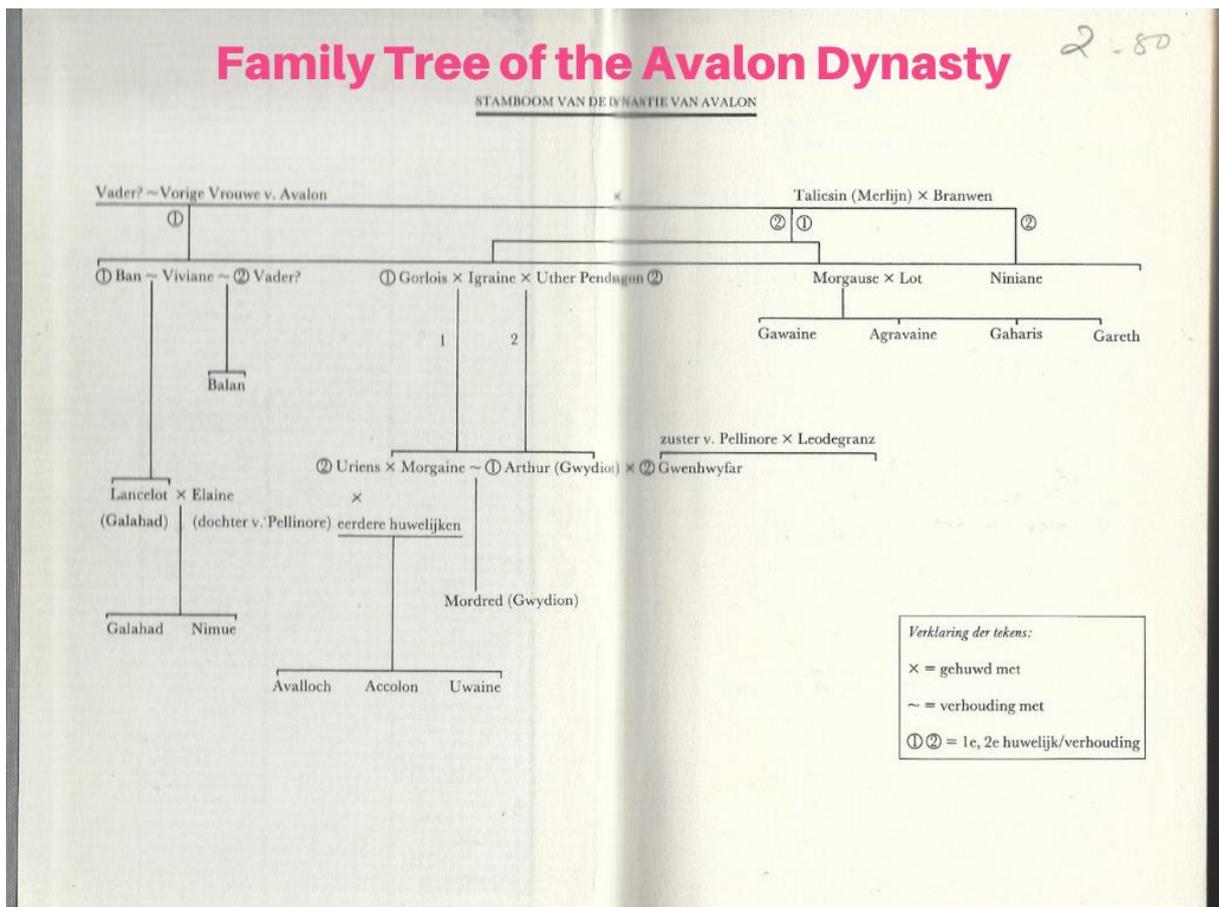
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VII. Appendixes

Appendix 1



Appendix 2



(Bradley)

Appendix 3

Once & Future Summary

The book starts with Ari (Arthur) and Kay in a mall in space to find more information on their parents, who have been taken prisoner by Mercer. Mercer is a company of enormous proportions, and its influence and tyranny can be felt throughout the entire galaxy. Mercer controls and monitors almost every part and people who do not follow their ultra capitalist rule are imprisoned or killed. Ari finds herself in a tough situation and she and Kay have to leave but Ari does manage to find Excalibur in their escape. Quickly and they fly to the moon in their ship Error to escape any notice they might have caught.

In the meantime Merlin has woken up and is ready to start the 42nd resurrection of Arthur, though he now has found himself in a body considerably younger than he expected. He has become an awkward teen in a robe and when he finds Ari on the moon. She does not believe him until Morgana threatens him and he has to use magic to help Ari hide from Mercer – Ari is a fugitive. Back on the spaceship Kay has brought along one of their friends Lam (Lamarack), and they leave for Lionel to meet with his brother Val (Percival) who has political connections.

Lionel is a small independent colony where people immerse themselves in a make belief medieval attraction park where there is jousting, knight camp, and a lot of beer because of water shortages Mercer forces on the colony. Gwen (Gweneviere) is queen of Lionel and was known by the friends prior to this moment. In order to hide from Mercer Ari accidentally gets caught up in the knight's tournament and comes to a draw with the current favourite knight Jordan. Ari's reward is a kiss, which is not the first she and Gwen have shared. In an attempt to draw out Ari from the colony Mercer threatens Lionel with withholding their water supply even further, and Gwen offers a political marriage to keep Ari safe but also to have a hand over Mercer. They marry and leave for Troy to register the marriage, but in Troy they get into trouble when the Administrator (the head of Mercer) reveals he knows more about Ari, her adoptive

mothers, and her Ketchean heritage (she is the last Ketchean left after Mercer massacred the planet when they refused to comply).

Morgana shows up once more to threaten Merlin and she punishes him by making him and Ari relive their worst memories together to show Ari how horrible Merlin can be. However, this just brings them closer together because Ari has faith in him. When they wake the group believes Ari and Kay's mothers are on a prison colony called Urite, and they devise a plan where Merlin gets arrested and sent there to find them. However, the prison population is plague ridden (despite Mercer's ability to cure them in an instant) and Merlin becomes ill. He finds Kay and Ari's parents and they escape when the group arrives on Error for the rescue.

Unexpectedly, Ari 'dies' in the battle in her friend's eyes but Morgana saved her and teleported her to Ketch where she lived a year training for battle with Morgana's and some Ketchean dragon's help. The rest of the group flies back to Lionel where Merlin has put up a magical barrier against Mercer. After a year Merlin is unable to keep the barrier up and it falls, but Gwen reveals that it is not just a theme park but also a ship and with that they fly away. With the barrier gone they finally receive the messages Ari has sent for the past year, and they realise she is alive when she tells the universe how Mercer massacred the people on Ketch unprovoked.

They reunite on the Moon and are confronted with the fact that Ari is alive while they have mourned her and have moved on with their life. Kay and Gwen have started a sexual relationship in her absence, in order to process their grief, and Gwen is now pregnant. Everyone is distraught about the situation, but there is no time as Mercer has to be confronted. But at the confrontation they are taken prisoner by Mercer. When they wake up, they find out that Mercer has decided to use the sympathy the galaxy feels towards Ari and her plight can be used in a theatrical campaign which keeps them in power. There is to be a mock shift in power, where Ari becomes the figurehead for Mercer. But when Ari refuses to give in the Administrator kills

Kay and the battle for their freedom is explosive and Ari is able to kill the Administrator; everyone but Kay makes it out alive.

They all head back to Ketch where the refugees from Lionel have also fled to. Finally settled on Ketch discussions with other nations and planets start, but Mercer has such control of the supply line not many believe they can escape their clutches without losing their access to goods needed to stay alive. Mercer offers to leave all the planets in peace if Ari and Gwen offer up their baby to them to be the next Administrator. They refuse despite the other nation's insistence they do give up their child. When presented with these two unfavourable options, they devise a way to travel to the past to get Arthur's chalice so everyone who drinks from it sees the truth about Mercer and will join them in the fight against the corporation. This is where the sequel *Sword in the Stars* starts.