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**RECONFIGURING ARTHUR:
THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND AS PALIMPSEST IN
GUY RITCHIE'S *KING ARTHUR:
THE LEGEND OF THE SWORD* (2017)¹**

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1 Título em língua estrangeira: "Reconfigurando Artur: a lenda arturiana como palimpsesto no filme *King Arthur: legend of the sword* (2017), de Guy Ritchie".

Abstract:The Middle Ages have been a source of interest to audiences around the world nearly since the period ended until modern times. While many themes, stories and characters have been reimagined and recreated, or, in other words, ‘palimpsested’, no other has held as much sway as King Arthur, ‘the once and future king’, around whom a constellation of equally celebrated characters aligned and remain as one of the most widely acknowledged medieval legacies in the modern world. Focusing on cinema in particular, this study aims at analysing one of the most recent film adaptations of the Arthurian legend to the big screen, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (Dir. Guy Ritchie, 2017), to understand how films and audiences engage in the process of scraping, erasing, and re-writing Arthur in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Arthurian legend. Medievalism. Palimpsest. Arthuriana. Cinema.

Resumo: A Idade Média tem sido uma fonte de interesse para o público em todo o mundo quase desde o fim do período até à contemporaneidade. Embora muitos temas, histórias e personagens tenham sido reimaginadas e recriadas, ou, por outras palavras, ‘palimpsestadas’, nenhuma outra teve tanta influência quanto a do Rei Artur, ‘o antigo e futuro rei’, em torno do qual uma variedade de personagens igualmente célebres se alinhou e continua, ainda hoje, a constituir um dos legados mais emblemáticos da Idade Média. Com foco no cinema em particular, este estudo tem como objetivo analisar uma das mais recentes adaptações cinematográficas da lenda arturiana para o grande ecrã, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (Realizador Guy Ritchie, 2017), para compreender como os filmes e o público se envolvem no processo de raspar, apagar e reescrever Artur no século XXI.

Palavras-Chave: Lenda Arturiana. Medievalismo. Palimpsesto. Arthuriana. Cinema.

MEDIEVALISM AS A PALIMPSEST OF THE MIDDLE AGES

In its original sense, a palimpsest refers to the act of erasing a text by scraping it out of the manuscript page, so the page can be reused for another document. This practice was recurrent in the Middle Ages because parchments made of lamb, calf, or goat skin were not readily available and were expensive. The word ‘palimpsest’ comes from the Greek compound word ‘παλίμψηστος’ which can be translated as ‘scraped again’, and in medieval times it indicates the act of scraping, rubbing, or even washing a text from a parchment. This process of erasing a text from a manuscript started in Antiquity and was first used on papyrus, which could be used several times in this fashion (DECLERCQ, 2007, p. 7). In the Middle Ages, documents also went through the process of erasure, or even destruction, and “[...] medieval manuscripts that have been palimpsested — their original inscription rubbed or washed away to provide a fresh writing surface [...] —” (CHAI-ELSHOLZ, 2011, p. 1) are often found. The process of recovering original ancient texts started in the nineteenth century with the use of harsh chemicals that often damaged the pages of the manuscripts. However, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Benedictine monk Raphael Kögel developed a non-destructive technique based on the use of ultraviolet illumination in photography to show the hidden script. Nowadays, better results can be obtained in the recovery of an unknown text with the development of digital imaging (DECLERCQ, 2007, p. 9-10).

The idea of scraping, erasing, and re-writing the text of a manuscript can also be applied as a concept to literature. In his seminal work *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982),

Gerard Genette states that a palimpsest is a text that has been rewritten over an earlier text, with traces of the earlier text still visible or detectable beneath the surface. His exploration constitutes an example of what Genette calls Open Structuralism, which explores the relationship between texts, and how they are rewritten and reread. In the foreword written by Gerald Prince, he states that “[r]ather than insisting on the ‘text itself’, its closure, the relations within it that make it what it is, he focuses on relations between texts, the ways they reread and rewrite one another, the ‘perpetual transfusion or transtextual perfusion’ of literature” (GENETTE, 1997, p. 4). Genette’s concept of palimpsests has been influential in literary theory, as it highlights how texts are interconnected and influenced by other texts and cultural artifacts. By viewing texts as palimpsests, literary critics and theorists can better understand the complex interplay between texts and the cultural and historical contexts in which they were produced.

In this work, Genette distinguishes between two types of palimpsests: ‘architextual’ and ‘hypertextual’. The architextual palimpsests refer to cases where a literary work explicitly refers to an earlier literary work: “The subject of poetics [...] is not the text considered in its singularity [...], but rather the architext or, if one prefers, the architextuality of the text [...]. By architextuality I mean the entire set of general transcendent categories [...] from which emerges each singular text” (GENETTE, 1997, p. 1). Thus, the architext acts as a hypotext, which is the earlier source text that serves as the basis for a new one. This new text is called hypertext because it draws on the hypotext in some way. Therefore, the hypertextual palimpsests refer to cases where an earlier text is present implicitly

or indirectly in a later text, through allusions, borrowings, or echoes. Bearing this in mind, Genette's concept of palimpsest can be used to describe literary texts that incorporate or reuse earlier texts, such as intertextual references, adaptations, or rewritings.

Accordingly, Genette identifies five types of transtextual palimpsests. The first, he names *Intertextuality* in reference to the "[...] relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say [...] the actual presence of one text within another" (GENETTE, 1997, p. 1-2). This can be done through allusions, quotes, or even plagiarism. Genette also argues that all texts are intertextual in this sense, as they are influenced by earlier texts and cultural artifacts. The second type is *Paratextuality*, which corresponds to the elements that surround a text, such as the title, preface, footnotes, and book covers. These usually show a "[...] less explicit and more distant relationship that binds the text properly speaking, taken within the totality of the literary work" (GENETTE, 1997, p. 3). Paratextual elements might also be palimpsests because they can be altered or adapted over time to reflect changes in the text or cultural context. The third type he calls *Metatextuality*, which is how a text reflects upon or comments on its own status as a text, or on the status of other texts (GENETTE, 1997, p. 4). In other words, *Metatextuality* is a form of self-reflexivity in which a text becomes aware of its own status as a constructed object and of its relationship to other texts. This can take many forms that include, for example, a critical text on another text. The fourth type he identifies is *Hypertextuality*, which corresponds to texts that are directly derived from other texts, such as adaptations or translations, but are not commentaries (GENETTE, 1997, p. 5).

Thus, it means that a second text is directly derived from a previous one. According to Genette, this can be done in two ways: the first derivation can be “[...] of the descriptive or intellectual kind, where a metatext [...] ‘speaks’ about a second text [...]”, such as Aristotle’s *Poetics* mentioning Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (1997, p. 5). The second way is when the hypertext does not mention the hypotext but it cannot exist without the former, in a process that Genette calls ‘transformation’. In this case, there is an evocation of the hypotext without a direct reference to it. An example of this is Virgil’s *Eneid* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, since both texts derive from the same hypotext, Homer’s *Odyssey*. Finally, the last type is the *Architextual* palimpsest, a generic or formal structure that underlies a text, such as the epic or the novel. This is the most abstract and implicit one because the relationship with the hypotext is,

[...] completely silent, articulated at most only by paratextual mention, which can be titular (as in *Poems*, *Essays*, *The Romance of the Rose*, etc.) or most often subtitled (as when the indication *A Novel*, or *A Story*, or *Poems* is appended to the title on the cover), but which remains in any case of a purely taxonomic nature. (GENETTE, 1997, p. 4)

In the context of Medievalism, hypertextuality is the most relevant type of palimpsest because Medievalism highlights the ways in which later texts are shaped by and transform earlier medieval texts and traditions. By engaging with and reimagining these texts, later authors create something new and original that builds on and subverts earlier works. But what is Medievalism?

According to Clare A. Simmons, the word ‘Medievalism’ was coined by John Ruskin in 1853 when describing his generation’s

enthusiasm for the Middle Ages (2014, p. 1). In fact, Medievalism originated in the Victorian period as a response to industrialization, advances in technology and population migration from the countryside to the cities, which led to the reassessment of society's traditional values. The Middle Ages emerged as an idealised period where the community was centred in the countryside and everyone shared an economic, political and social relationship with feudal characteristics (Simmons, 2011, p. 282). In this respect, Alice Chandler states that the Middle Ages appeared as a 'dream' of a specific social order to which the Victorians wanted to return and were invoked as a correction of the evils of the present. The more changes were made at a social level, the more the Middle Ages were seen as a golden age, in part historical and in part mythical (CHANDLER, 1971, p.1).

Thus, Medievalism refers to the re-imagination of the Middle Ages in later periods as a source of inspiration, nostalgia, and also as a way to reflect on contemporary issues. The concept was first discussed by Umberto Eco in his influential essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages" (1973), in which he stated that people are still somewhat enamoured with the medieval period and that popular culture is how this renewed interest is disseminated. This preference for the Middle Ages is justified by the fact that it is considered the infancy of the modern man and it is where we search for our roots. For this reason, Eco affirms that most of the medievalist revisitations go from historical fiction to fantasy and science-fiction, because they appeal to a modern audience that is still fascinated with stories from the past (ECO, 1986, p. 61-62). After Eco, Leslie Workman also started to work on Medievalism,

developing one of the most well-known academic journals on the topic, *Studies in Medievalism*. And it is precisely in its first number that Workman proposes a definition of this concept linking it to the need to revive images of the medieval past: “In terms of these things medievalism could only begin, not simply when the Middle Ages had ended, whenever that may have been, but when the Middle Ages were perceived to have been something in the past, something it was necessary to revive or desirable to imitate” (WORKMAN apud. VERDUIN, 2009, p. 9).

More recently, Tison Pugh and Jane Weisl also stated that “‘The Middle Ages’ emerges as an invention of those who came after it; its entire construction is, essentially, a fantasy”, because the medieval past can be reshaped and its imaginary is still present today (2013, p. 1). Thus, it is necessary to recognise that most people do not know about the Middle Ages through direct contact with historical sources, but through ideas and images transmitted by popular culture which are fictionalized to address the values and issues of the period in which it is being recreated. Bearing this in mind, Pugh and Weisl came up with a widely accepted definition of Medievalism:

[...] [M]edievalism refers to the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration, and in doing so, explicitly or implicitly, by comparison or by contrast, comment on the artist’s contemporary sociocultural milieu. (2013, p. 1)

Therefore, Medievalism reveals more about the period in which the Middle Ages are being recreated than about the Middle Ages itself. Furthermore, it is possible to state that the concept of

Medievalism is a fluid and flexible one that embraces a variety of interpretations of the medieval period, adapting it to new audiences.

Another important author for the discussion of Medievalism is David Matthews who claims that there are several Medievalisms depending on the representation that each work makes of the Middle Ages, and names three different types of depiction: as it was, as it could have been, and as it never was. In the first case, Matthews refers to the attempts at realistic representations of the medieval period in order to faithfully recreate it (2015, p. 37). Works like Ken Follet's *Pillars of the Earth* (1989), and Philippa Gregory's *The White Queen* (2009) are examples of this. In the second type, the medieval period is recreated through legend. In this case, the work does not attempt to be historically accurate and it usually has a more fantastical undertone. The most obvious example of this is the constant revisitation of the Arthurian legend that is typically more connected to Fantasy than to actual history. However, Matthews states that: "[s]ometimes, legend is in the eye of the beholder: there is a small industry in books about the 'real King Arthur' which for some are history, for others, the purest legendary medievalism" (2015, p. 38). It is possible to find examples of this in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1993), in Mary Stewart's *Merlin Trilogy* (1970-79), and more recently in Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* (2020). This is also true when it comes to retellings of the Arthurian legend on screen, with television series such as BBC's *Merlin* (2008-2012), Channel 4's *Camelot* (2011), and Netflix's *Cursed* (2020). Finally, the third type of Medievalism deals with the use of medieval themes and images that have a medieval appearance but are not medieval. The world of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) is

reminiscent of the medieval period in the sense that its themes and characters derive from medieval narratives, but the action takes place in a completely made-up world with its own set of rules and characteristics. This is also true for the *Star Wars* saga which has medieval narrative elements but is set in space, in a technological future (MATTHEWS, 2015, p. 38).

Accordingly, Medievalism can be viewed as a palimpsest of the medieval period in the sense that it is a layered, multi-dimensional phenomenon that reflects the ongoing interaction between different historical periods and cultural contexts. As the palimpsest is a manuscript from which the original text has been erased or obscured to be overwritten with a new one, so Medievalism is a cultural phenomenon marked by the presence of multiple layers of meaning, memory, and imagination that have been accumulated over time. In literature and the arts, medieval themes, motifs, and imagery are frequently reinterpreted and revised in different historical contexts. The medieval knight, for example, was portrayed as a symbol of chivalry, righteousness, heroism and romantic love in medieval romance, but it was also a target of satire and critique in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), a work that parodies medieval romances. In the Victorian era, the knight re-emerged as a nostalgic ideal of manhood that men sought to emulate, and medieval literature started to be celebrated as a source of national and cultural identity. An example of this is Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820), which makes use of characteristics of the medieval romance but also of elements of the gothic aesthetic. As a result, it aroused a new interest in medieval figures such as Richard Lionheart and Robin Hood. By creating a credible medieval world, Scott gave his

readers an illusion of the historical Middle Ages, instead of a fictional one (CHANDLER, 1971, p. 12). Since the majority of the public came into contact with the medieval period through fiction, works like Scott's deeply influenced people's idealized notions of the period. According to Chandler: "This literary medievalism [...] helped in its turn to build up a generally accepted sense of what the Middle Ages had been like and established the past as an imaginative entity with a life of its own" (1971, p. 18).

Therefore, Medievalism can be regarded as a palimpsest of the Middle Ages because it reveals the layered and dynamic nature of cultural memory and the ongoing process of reinterpretation and reinvention of the past. But what about the Arthurian legend itself?

THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND AS A PALIMPSEST

The Arthurian legend is comprised of a body of medieval texts, also known as the Matter of Britain, that are centred on the story of King Arthur. Arthur's historical origins are not clear but according to Pseudo-Nennius in his ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* (*History of the Britons*), Arthur was the military leader of the battle of Badon Hill (c. Sixth century), the paradigmatic battle of Arthurian myth, where the Britons defeated the Saxons. This description is repeated in the *Annales Cambriae* (*The Annals of Wales*), in the tenth century, as well as in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), written in the twelfth century, revealing that each work builds on what was written before.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's work in particular is one of the most important texts to the Arthurian legend because it adds many details that have become hallmarks of Arthur's story: his lineage as

the son of Uther Pendragon and Igraine; the presence of Excalibur as the weapon he wielded in the battle of Badon Hill; the Isle of Avalon and the character of Morgan Le Fay, both first mentioned in *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150); the battle of Camlaan where Arthur is mortally wounded by Mordred; and the creation of characters such as Merlin, Mordred and Guinevere. Thus, even in medieval texts, it is possible to ascertain that Arthurian stories were subject to processes of transformation and addition, while still inscribing themselves in an older tradition.

By the end of the twelfth century, Chrétien de Troyes expanded on these stories and wrote five Arthurian romances: *Erec et Énide* (c. 1170); *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au lion* (c. 1170); *Cligès* (1176); *Lancelot, ou Le Chevalier à la charrette* (1181); and *Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal* (1191). In these stories, he developed the character of Lancelot, as well as his affair with Guinevere; the Grail Quest; and Camelot as the name of Arthur's court. These aspects became important in the French medieval tradition, with the *Vulgate* (1210-1220) and *Post-Vulgate* (1230-1240) Cycles repeating some of these elements, while also adding more. These works focused mainly on the religious quest for the Holy Grail and on the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, with Lancelot's son, Galahad, emerging as the knight who was ultimately able to attain the Holy Grail. However, they also explored the prophecies of Merlin, the many adventures of Arthur and his knights, and how Arthur obtained Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake, in a clear modification of its source from the Isle of Avalon. Still in the French tradition, Robert de Boron's *Merlin* adds the Sword in the Stone, the symbol of Arthur's legitimacy as sovereign of the English territory, which is also replicated in the

Vulgate Cycle. Thus, we can say that the textual body of the Matter of Britain grew significantly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, demonstrating that the Arthurian legend was dynamic and subject to many changes and reinterpretations.

In the fourteenth century, the evolution of Arthurian literature seemed to return to the British Isles with seminal works being written there, such as the chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and in the fifteenth century Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485). Malory's work in particular offers a complete overview of the many traditions related to King Arthur's story, incorporating elements from the British and French traditions. What is more, as referred by Alan Lupack, Malory "[...] reshaped his originals, omitted much that was not relevant to his purpose, and even created new sections to advance his themes" (2007, p. 134).

Thus, the medieval Arthurian legend seems to be comprised of many hypertexts, although it is unclear whether there is one specific hypotext from which they all derive. What is clear is that they build on each other, adding new aspects while removing others, each of the texts heavily influenced by the cultural and social context of medieval Europe, including the chivalric code, courtly love, and Christian beliefs, as well as Arthur's Celtic origins. As the legend evolved, it was adapted to fit the changing cultural and social contexts of different eras, and the medieval sources now remain as the hypotexts of contemporary reworkings of the Arthurian legend, especially Malory's work. These literary works demonstrate a cultural memory that is flexible and subject to being rewritten and transformed, just like a palimpsest. In fact, when we talk about Arthurian literature, we are talking about

literary metaphorical palimpsests which, according to Chai-Elsholz's definition, "[...] are reinscriptions that implicitly or explicitly point to their own genealogy, whether in the title, through reuse of the names of characters in it, resemblance of plot, generic form or argument, and/or by referring to the (factual or imaginary) original or its author" (2011, p. 3).

The medieval Arthurian texts are related to each other in the sense that they layer upon each other and, therefore, may be considered palimpsests. And because the Arthurian legend offers so many possibilities of being rewritten, copied, or adapted, it is always in a "[...] process of 'becoming', not least because the possibilities of transtextuality are endless" (CHAI-ELSHOLZ, 2011, p. 3). Chai-Elsholz also writes about the process of "literary recycling" (2011, p. 4), which can be applied to the Arthurian legend as well, because every new version was not only adapted to fit new literary, cultural and historical contexts, but they also fuelled the imagination of those who would write and consume new versions of these stories. Thus, the Arthurian legend fits perfectly into what Gerald Prince called "the 'perpetual transfusion or transtextual perfusion' of literature" (GENETTE, 1997, p. 4), meaning that these texts are all rereadings and rewritten forms of each other, interconnected and influenced by one another.

This process ensured that the Arthurian legend never disappeared from the popular imagination and allowed audiences to feel a sense of nostalgia for the Middle Ages and to immerse themselves in these stories with magic, knights and quests that to this day still fascinate the masses. In the words of Higham: "Each Arthurian manifestation therefore reflects the way in which a

particular author and his or her audience thought to fashion their own conceptions of the past, so as to benefit their own positioning in the present” (2002, p. 3). Moreover, there are different versions of the same story even in medieval texts, as mentioned before. Each author adapts a text in a different way, adding or removing elements, and is faithful to their own historical and cultural context, opening the door for modern adaptations and re-workings of the legend, without concerns for historical accuracy, because “[h]ad Arthur’s position in history be clearer, the suspension of disbelief necessary to accommodate each different story line would have been more difficult” (HIGHAM, 2002, p. 8). On this point, we must note how remarkable it is that a character from whom so many have derived inspiration is also someone very little is known about as a historical figure. Although examining who the man behind the legend might have been falls outside the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that since actual, hard facts about him are so scarce Arthur has “bec[o]me an ideal blank slate on which succeeding ages [can] write their own versions of his legend” (ABERTH, 2003, p. 2).

As it is clear, the Arthurian legend is very malleable, but even medieval authors had to attest their authority by referencing more ancient texts, embedding the new work in an already established tradition. According to Jon Sherman: “Once embedded in the tradition, authors – medieval and modern – felt free to change and update these narratives, and it is perhaps this mutability that makes the legend of King Arthur as productive in the twenty-first century as it was in the twelfth and thirteenth” (2015, p. 85).

After the Middle Ages, there was a revival of medieval literature through the hands of Romanticism, Medievalism and the Gothic

Revival. The discovery and re-discovery of medieval texts that helped shape a sense of English identity and past made Medievalism one of the main characteristics of the nineteenth century and, consequently, the Middle Ages seemed to be everywhere: from the Gothic revival in architecture to the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the historical fiction of Walter Scott. The Arthurian legend was no exception to this reawakened interest and for the first time since the seventeenth century, Thomas Malory's *Le Morted' Arthur* was reprinted in 1816.

In literature, the author who most contributed to the importance of King Arthur in the Victorian period was Alfred, Lord Tennyson with *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885). In his work, Tennyson created a cycle of twelve poems that were published over almost three decades and which retell the story of King Arthur, the forbidden love between Guinevere and Lancelot, the Knights of the Round Table and the rise and fall of Camelot. However, although Tennyson was inspired by Malory and Monmouth's works, as well as by *The Mabinogion*,² he ended up adapting the Arthurian legend by adding, removing and transforming several elements in order to fit Victorian ideals and values. Tennyson's work is often considered an epic because it was created in a period during which several authors regarded the genre as a way of telling the (hi)story of a people, describing their most important moments, which in turn gave rise

² *The Mabinogion* is a collection of Celtic mythological stories from Wales that were compiled for the first time by Lady Charlotte Guest in three volumes, between 1838 and 1849. The tales narrated there are preserved in two medieval manuscripts known as *The White Book of Rhydderch* and *The Red Book of Hergest*, and they date back to a Celtic tradition of an oral nature, so their production does not coincide with the dates on which the manuscripts were registered. Included in these stories are several texts dedicated to Arthur, of which *Culhwch and Olwen* stands out for being the oldest Welsh tale in prose about Arthur.

to a common identity. Historical and mythical moments converge in these epics, perpetuated in subsequent generations, and whose power resides in the fact that people may see their true history in these narratives (TUCKER, 1991, p. 701). In fact, the nineteenth century was marked by the discovery and translation of epic works that gave the people a sense of national identity rooted in the Middle Ages. The importance of the epic genre had an impact on the literature of the time, raising questions about the way Victorian writers related to the past and this tradition:

When epic poets appeared at the turn of the nineteenth century, as they did in Britain by the dozen after decades in which the genre had slumbered, they built their massive poems on themes of cultural conflict and definition, and used the genre to mount a freshly urgent interrogation of their relation both to the national past and to the traditions of epic writing. (TUCKER, 1991, p. 701)

In *Idylls of the King* Tennyson builds an allegory of Victorian society through the Arthurian legend, in which Victorian ideals linked to chivalry converge in the figure of Arthur, and where the kingdom of Camelot ends up not succeeding due to Arthur's unrealistic view of the Knights of the Round Table and of Camelot itself. This aspect serves to criticise Victorian society that looked at the Middle Ages in an unrealistic, romanticized way, in search of implausible ideals, as they can hardly be applied to contemporary society.

Thus, Tennyson's work offers another example of how the Arthurian legend may be considered a palimpsest, by proposing a multi-layered narrative in which the author builds upon the existing

Arthurian tradition while adding his own interpretations. Moreover, characters are also reinterpreted, like Arthur himself, Guinevere, Lancelot and Gawain, and the story reflects the moral and social concerns of Victorian England. Tennyson uses the legend as a vehicle to explore themes of duty, honour, chivalry and the consequences of moral failings. What is more, his work offers a comment on contemporary political and historical issues by addressing the decline of chivalry in the face of modernity and industrialization, and thus reflecting the anxieties of his time.

Modern rewritings of the Arthurian legend, whether they be literary, cinematic or otherwise, continue this trend and in this constant rewriting of the Arthurian legend, we preserve traces of the past and keep a cultural memory alive by always reimagining and adapting it to contemporary audiences and sensibilities. The depiction of the Arthurian legend since the Middle Ages is a form of the practice of palimpsest, since it recovers an ancient story, rewrites it and, consequently, reshapes it too. The process of loss that is inherent to palimpsested manuscripts does not apply to the metaphorical palimpsest that is the Arthurian legend because it still lives on with every new reimagining and becomes a multi-layered narrative in which elements from previous versions are incorporated alongside the introduction of new elements, interpretations and themes.

‘I KNOW YOUR STORY’: KING ARTHUR & CINEMA

As noted earlier, people still seem to be enamoured with the Middle Ages, a statement that rings true once we consider the number of times the medieval period has been revisited,

reinterpreted, reenacted and reimagined. Yet, very few figures have attracted quite as much attention as Britain's 'once and future king', Arthur Pendragon. In fact, in one form or another, he can be found in nearly every century since the Welsh monk Nennius first mentions him in *Historia Brittonum*. Around him a constellation of equally celebrated characters aligned and remain popular to this day, making the Arthurian legend "perhaps the most globally recognized medieval inheritance of the post-medieval world, particularly in the region that grew out of the medieval Latin West" (COLDHAM-FUSSELL; EDLICH-MUTH; WARD, 2022, p. 1).

Spreading out from medieval chronicles to romances, the Arthurian tradition has become a rich tapestry of representations which have found expression not only in many languages but also in different media, highlighting these stories transposability while also showcasing their multi, trans and intertextual intersections across distinct modes and genres. Arthurian characters are often seen in contemporary renditions that cross temporal, geographic and generic borders and that both adapt and remake centuries-old narratives to suit present-day tastes, ideals and concerns in a seemingly never-ending hypertextual process of making the old (feel) new again. Throughout this process, Arthur, perhaps more than any other character, stands out and it is most often around him and his court that all adventures are either set or begin in.

The whys and wherefores of Arthur's enduring fame have been a source of intense debate with many suggesting that the character remains so popular because, on the one hand, he is able to embody almost any desire (HAYDOCK, 2008, p. 165) while, on the other, the fantastic tales devised around him "can adapt to almost any ideology

or cause with its universal themes, familiar story lines, enduring values, and archetypal characters and quests” (GORDON, 2021, p. 36). Therefore, the “rich resonance of the Arthurian legend arises in part out of its engagement with the enduring themes of human idealism and failure” (COLDHAM-FUSSELL; EDLICH-MUTH; WARD, 2022, p. 2) and so “the need for Arthur to ride yet again against the eternal foe is as eternal as the human failings that foment strife, and as long as we continue to yearn for a better world, so will Arthur’s return be assured” (THOMPSON, 1998, p. 11). In addition, since Arthur is also “a means to reflect about the nature and exercise of power,” he is particularly well-suited to disseminate political agendas (VARANDAS, 2014, p. 52-53), a purpose he has fulfilled since the ninth century. Finally, we believe the episodic and formulaic nature of medieval romance, which made the genre so well-liked in the Middle Ages, also plays a role in Arthur’s unique and lasting popularity, especially on screen.

The first surviving Arthurian film or, in other words, the first example of what Kevin J. Harty called cinema Arthuriana,³ which according to the author is “a form of medievalism” that attempts “to revisit or reinvent the medieval world for contemporary purposes” (HARTY, 2007, p. 7), is dated from 1904 when Thomas Edison commissioned Edwin Porter to adapt a version of Richard Wagner’s opera *Parsifal* (1882) to the screen. This first endeavour was hardly what we can call successful but merely five years later, in 1909, Albert Capellani directed *Tristan and Yseult*, a relatively well-received film, which was followed by Mario Caserini’s 1912

3 The term cinema Arthuriana was originally coined by Kevin J. Harty in 1987 in a brief filmography entitled “Cinema Arthuriana: A Filmography”.

screen version of *Parsifal* (HARTY, 2002, p. 8). While our goal is not to provide an in-depth list of all Arthurian films released in the last one hundred and twenty years,⁴ these brief references show how deeply-rooted the association between the Arthurian legend and cinema is.⁵ Furthermore, they help us understand why the episodic nature of medieval romance, so prevalent in the Arthurian corpus, has contributed to their attractiveness: the fact that stories about Arthur and his Knights can be told both in tandem within longer accounts or in shorter, relatively independent episodes means film directors and audiences can explore the imagined medieval spaces and places occupied by a myriad of characters in separate instalments. Finally, since engaging with the Arthurian myth implies engaging with a vast set of narratives and representations that extend beyond the Middle Ages, and not a single authoritative text, twenty-first century renderings have a substantial pool to draw from. Granting that multiplicity might be a drawback as much as an advantage, the fact that there are many diverse sources that can be scraped and re-written into individual pieces allows us to pick and choose storylines, themes, motifs, characters and places that suit our goals.

Notwithstanding, audiences seem to have grown used to seeing certain elements in Arthurian films, namely Arthur who remains the medieval character about whom more films have been made

4 For a comprehensive filmography of the cinematic adaptations of King Arthur released between 1904 and 2001, see Kevin J. Harty, *Cinema Arthuriana*, p. 252-301.

5 It is worth noting that the first film ever screened, a brief recording showing workers leaving the Lumière factory made by Louis and Auguste Lumière, was shown on December 28, 1895. Naturally, this means that the Arthurian myth has been a source for cinema since its very early stages and, therefore, has played a key role in the development of the seventh art.

(ABERTH, 2003, p. 1). Other characters are nearly always featured too, such as Lancelot, the embodiment of the (almost) perfect knight,⁶ but also Merlin, possibly one of the best-known magicians of all times,⁷ and Guinevere, Arthur's eternal queen who, along with Lancelot and Arthur, forms the Arthurian love triangle par excellence.⁸ The names of specific villains are frequently referred to as well: Morgan le Fay,⁹ a sorceress who is Arthur's half-sister and often the mother of his only son/nephew, Mordred, Arthur's archnemesis.¹⁰ Some themes are recurrent too, such as honour, loyalty, chivalry, courtly love, courage, but also national unity, as are magical objects like the Holy Grail or the sword Excalibur. The

6 Among others Lancelot makes an appearance in the following films: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Dir. Tay Garnett, 1949); *Camelot* (Dir. Joshua Logan, 1967); *Lancelot du Lac* (Dir. Robert Bresson, 1974); *Merlin and the Sword* (Dir. Clive Donner, 1985); *Lancelot, First Knight* (Dir. Jerry Zucker, 1995); *A Knight in Camelot* (Dir. Roger Young, 1998); *Merlin: The Return* (Dir. Paul Matthews, 2000); *The Kid Who Would Be King* (Dir. Joe Cornish, 2019).

7 In addition to Arthur, Merlin might well be one of the characters who features more often on screen. The wizard can be found in: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Dir. Tay Garnett, 1949); *The Sword in the Stone* (Dir. Wolfgang Reitherman, 1963); *Siege of the Saxons* (Dir. Nathan H. Juran, 1963); *Camelot* (Dir. Joshua Logan, 1967); *Merlin and the Sword* (Dir. Clive Donner, 1985); *A Knight in Camelot* (Dir. Roger Young, 1998); *Merlin: The Return* (Dir. Paul Matthews, 2000); *The Last Legion* (Dir. Doug Lefler, 2007); *Arthur and Merlin* (Dir. Marco van Belle, 2015); *Transformers: The Last Knight* (Dir. Michael Bay, 2017); *The Kid Who Would Be King* (Dir. Joe Cornish, 2019), to name but a few.

8 Guinevere is identified by name in the following films: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Dir. Tay Garnett, 1949); *Camelot* (Dir. Joshua Logan, 1967); *Lancelot du Lac* (Dir. Robert Bresson, 1974); *Merlin and the Sword* (Dir. Clive Donner, 1985); *Guinevere* (Dir. Jud Taylor, 1994); *Lancelot, First Knight* (Dir. Jerry Zucker, 1995); *A Knight in Camelot* (Dir. Roger Young, 1998); *Merlin: The Return* (Dir. Paul Matthews, 2000), etc.

9 Morgan le Fay's character can be identified in the following films: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Dir. Tay Garnett, 1949); *Merlin and the Sword* (Dir. Clive Donner, 1985); *Prince Valiant* (Dir. Anthony Hickox, 1997); *The Kid Who Would Be King* (Dir. Joe Cornish, 2019); *Merlin: The Return* (Dir. Paul Matthews, 2000); and others. She is also notorious for being the main character of the well-received TV series *The Mists of Avalon* (Dir. Uli Edel, 2001) based on Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1983 novel.

10 All the characters here mentioned are featured in the following films: *Knights of the Round Table* (1953, Dir. Richard Thorpe); *Excalibur* (1981, Dir. John Boorman); and *King Arthur* (2004, Dir. Antoine Fuqua), the latter excludes Mordred.

place where the action takes place is varied but Arthur's court in Camelot is repeatedly depicted or alluded to. It is in Camelot that the Round Table, another recurring object, is to be found and it is from Camelot that knights set off on their quests.

This is not to say that Arthurian films *must* include all these elements but to highlight how viewers often assume that on-screen adaptations will incorporate at least some of them. In a sense, these expectations are not different from the ones of medieval audiences who listened to romances being performed whether at courts or at gentry households and who would most likely have enjoyed the predictability of the narrative since they:

did not seek the novelty of plot, individualized character, verbal ambiguities, subtle allusions, or variation in theme and image so dear to Chaucer. [...] [Instead,] they expected to hear lyrics they already knew, performed to a memorable beat that allowed them to vocalize along with the performer. (HAHN, 2004, p. 230)

The same seems to apply to contemporary on-screen revisions. This is especially true if we consider that the last two decades have witnessed “a resurgence of the tendency for episodic and formulaic storytelling in cinema, and episodes, sequels, and prequels again became a popular form of narrative” (GORDON, 2019, p. 37). Given today's audiences' appetite for the familiar, as testified by the *Star Wars* franchise, for instance, it is clear the same applies to contemporary Arthuriana. The episodic and formulaic nature of many Arthurian romances works as an ‘adhesive paste’ holding the stories in place as their repetitiveness and predictability are no doubt a reason for their popularity. As a result, it is not surprising

that the Arthurian material we find on screen in the twenty-first century is a postmodern hypertextual palimpsest where only familiar characters, places, objects and core values remain. Audiences often feel they already know at least part of the story they are going to watch, a fact that is echoed in Guy Ritchie's 2017 film when Vortigern tells Arthur, "I know your story".

On this point, Kevin J. Harty argues that cinema Arthuriana has taken two essential forms: on the one hand, there are films that attempt to retell canonical Arthurian texts and, on the other, films that engage with what Eco called our dreams of the Middle Ages (HARTY, 2022, p. 488), which is precisely what we find in the latest cinematic instalments of the Arthurian legend. In fact, looking at *The Green Knight* (Dir. David Lowery, 2021), based on the anonymous poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it seems to fall into the first form identified by Harty, while the earlier *King Arthur: The Legend of the Sword* (Dir. Guy Ritchie, 2017) fits the second. Despite their very different reception,¹¹ both films signal audiences' incessant taste for Arthurian tales. However, it is in the 2017 retelling that contemporary viewers find a greater number of new characters, themes and "a completely new sense of place and new story" (GORDON, 2019, p. 49). According to Harty, films that actively

11 Commercialised as an epic medieval fantasy film, *The Green Knight* was acclaimed by critics for its music, cinematography and acting, especially lead man Dave Patel who plays Sir Gawain, as well as for Lowery's screenplay and direction. *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword*, on the other hand, faced mostly negative professional reviews "in newspapers and online [which] suggest that on the whole, reviewers did not find this an adequately solemn or believable Arthur" (TAYLOR, 2018, p. 47). Furthermore, despite its very different scale, Lowery's film is the most lucrative of the two as it grossed 20,022,491 US dollars in worldwide box office against a production budget of 15,000,000 US dollars whereas Ritchie's film, whose production budget was 175,000,000 US dollars, was much less profitable reaching only 139,630,336 US dollars in worldwide box office (*The Numbers*).

participate in our own fantasied ‘dream(s)’ of Arthur “willfully ‘mess up’ the Middle Ages by picking and choosing random elements from the legend of Arthur to serve their plot lines” (HARTY, 2022, p. 488). For these reasons, and given the impossibility of addressing both films, we aim to focus our attention on Guy Ritchie’s motion picture and consider: what Arthur are we dreaming of when we watch *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword*?

‘FROM NOTHING COMES A KING’: GUY RITCHIE’S *KINGARTHUR: THE LEGEND OF THE SWORD* (2017)

Released in May 2017 and directed by the well-known English filmmaker, Guy Ritchie, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword*¹² is a fantasy action-adventure film with a simple premise: to reveal one man’s journey from nothing to kingship while he fights against the oppressive forces of a corrupt system. The tagline ‘From nothing comes a king’, one of several slogans used to market the motion picture, implies the tale is a ‘rags-to-riches’ story that revolves around Arthur Pendragon (Charlie Hunman) who, after witnessing his parents’ brutal murder, is raised by prostitutes in the city of Londinium.¹³ Following a period of living in obscurity, Arthur is found by his power-hungry uncle, Vortigern (Jude Law), and must fight to reclaim his rightful place as heir to the throne of England. The narrative, however, does not begin – as it usually does not – with Arthur but with the events that take place in his childhood.

In the film’s first establishing aerial shot, audiences are made to gaze upon an unspecified location where a tall tower can be

12 A shorter version of the title, *Legend of the Sword*, will be used from this point onwards.

13 Londinium was the name given to the capital of Roman Britain (47 AD) during most of the Roman rule (43 AD to 410 AD), which makes this reference historically accurate even if the overall city structure depicted throughout the film is not.

discerned. Its top quickly ablaze, the scene cuts to a black screen where a few lines introduce the background against which the action takes place: “For centuries man & mage lived side by side in peace until the rise of the mage sorcerer Mordred. Turning his dark ambition against man, he marches on the last remaining stronghold... CAMELOT” (*Legend of the Sword*). These first few words serve to establish a familiar place, Camelot, which seems to be the last refuge of the free people of England, and a centuries-old rival, Mordred (Rob Knighton), who, albeit not Arthur’s son/nephew, retains his usual role as a villain. A series of long and medium shots interspersed with medium close-up shots show an army of knights fighting against giant elephants controlled by Mordred who also conjures balls of fire that annihilate part of Camelot’s defences.

This sequence of scenes immediately recalls Middle Earth’s Mûmakil or Oliphaunts, large creatures resembling elephants that are used in battle by the Haradrim people and feature quite prominently in Peter Jackson’s 2003 adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Return of the King* (1955). Even though the mighty beasts seem to be under a spell, an impression conveyed by a close-up shot revealing an elephant’s eye covered by an all-consuming bright fire, they serve the same purpose as the Mûmakil and confirm that Ritchie’s film is a hypertextual palimpsest where earlier texts, films and TV series are implicitly present. In this case, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* universe is clearly called upon, which entails that this motion picture is not meant to be understood as an accurate representation of the medieval period but a fantastic portrayal, a medievalism engaged with what David Matthews called the Middle Ages as it never was (2015, p. 37). What is more, in depicting Mordred as

a sort of druidic conjurer, Ritchie invokes BBC's TV series *Merlin* (2008–2012) where Mordred (Asa Butterfield/Alexander Vlahos) is a young druid with supernatural powers destined to kill Arthur Pendragon (Bradley James). That, nevertheless, is not Mordred's role in Ritchie's film where, instead, he allies with Vortigern against the latter's brother, King Uther Pendragon (Eric Bana).

The first time the king of Camelot is introduced, it is not Arthur but his father, Uther, who is depicted. Owner of the mystical sword Excalibur, Uther wields the blade to fight Mordred unaided and easily disposes of the mage sorcerer, chopping his head off. Excalibur is without a doubt instrumental to Uther's victory as it seems to give him superhuman powers which in turn allow the king to become impervious to Mordred's spells. Although the full extent of the powers bestowed upon its owner will only be revealed when Arthur is an adult and finally draws sword from stone, it is clear this is no ordinary weapon. In fact, when Sir Bedivere (Djimon Hounsou), one of Uther's loyal knights, later recounts the origin of the sword he claims that Merlin (Kamil Lemieszewski) stole Mordred's staff and used it to forge Excalibur and destroy the ancient mage tower.¹⁴ The sword is then passed to the Lady of the Lake (Jacqui Ainsley) who binds it to the Pendragon bloodline. Thus, Ritchie is drawing in part from Arthurian tradition, since Excalibur is the name conventionally given to Arthur's magical sword, the one gifted to him by the Lady of the Lake, but not the one he draws from stone.

At this point, we must recall that swords played a very important role in medieval society. As Mike Loades asserts in *Swords and Swordsmen*:

14 Presumably this is the tower audiences see in the film's first scene.

They are symbols of rank, status and authority; the weapons upon which oaths were sworn, with which allegiances were pledged and by which honours were conferred. Swords represent cultural ideas and personal attributes. They stand for justice, courage and honour. Above all, swords are personal objects. Swords tell stories. (2010, p. 140-146)

In medieval societies, swords demonstrated the power and the high status of the ones who wielded them. They were associated with authority, kingship and sovereignty, and were personal objects that were often passed on to the next of kin. Throughout much of the Middle Ages, the sword was also regarded as a symbol of the divine royalty passed onto the king and embodied by him. Moreover, because the sword is one of the sovereign's personal objects, it serves to validate his claims to the throne, stands as an outward sign of his legitimate rule and represents the earthly aspect of the sovereign's divine power, namely his regal status in the battlefield (MARQUES, 2013, p. 61).

Medieval sources identify two swords that belong to Arthur: the sword in the stone and Excalibur.¹⁵ The sword in the stone is deeply connected to the earth and symbolises the legitimacy of the king to govern it. Because Arthur is the only one who can withdraw it, the sword becomes a representation of his consecration and authority as the rightful king of England (MARQUES, 2013, p. 4). In this framework, it becomes clear that Arthur is part of the medieval insular literary tradition according to which the legitimate king is also the God-chosen monarch, the one who will bring peace and prosperity to the land and its people. Excalibur, on the other hand,

¹⁵ Over the last decades most on-screen retellings only mention one blade, that is, Excalibur, which has become a combination of the two weapons found in medieval texts.

is a weapon inherited from Celt heroes and its name seems to have been transmuted from blades found in older myths, namely *Caladbolg*, the sword wielded by Cú Chulainn, a warrior hero in the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythology, and *Caledfwlch*, Arthur's sword in early Welsh works, including the prose tale *Culhwch and Olwen* (MARQUES, 2013, p. 4). In *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey of Monmouth calls Arthur's blade *Caliburnus* while, centuries later, Thomas Malory claims that Arthur's second sword, the one he receives from the Lady of the Lake, is called Excalibur.

However, despite drawing inspiration both from medieval Arthurian sources and from previous cinema Arthuriana, the 2017 film innovates too, namely in what concerns the blade's creation and ownership with Merlin as its maker and first owner. Furthermore, the Lady of the Lake magically binds Excalibur to the Pendragon bloodline so that they alone can harness its full power. This is indeed a new take on Excalibur, which is customarily not hereditary: Mordred, for instance, often as he may be portrayed as Arthur's sole offspring, is never heir to Excalibur; yet, in *Legend of the Sword* Arthur is the sword's true inheritor because he is Uther's only child, which implies that Vortigern will be able to master Excalibur if Arthur dies. In addition, this Excalibur is the literal embodiment of Arthur's sovereignty because it is incorporated in the body of his father, Uther. Ritchie's Excalibur is also very much a sword of power but, unlike other versions, it grants its rightful proprietors' special gifts, turning them into superman figures. This feature is made evident in two specific sequences: the first takes place in 'Kung-Fu' George's (Tom Wu) medieval dojo in Londinium and the second is set in Camelot where Arthur must fight against Vortigern's soldiers

and then Vortigern himself to regain his lawful place as king and stop his uncle's evil sorcery.

After being forced to draw sword from stone, Arthur is faced with the fact that he is Uther Pendragon's lost son and heir to the throne of England. He is the "born King" (*Legend of the Sword*), the only one standing between the usurper Vortigern and his dark ambitions. However, to brothel-raised Arthur it is neither easy to accept his royal lineage nor to forsake the only life he knows as an organised crime boss. When he finally accepts there is no way to escape Vortigern, his connection to the sword awakens memories of the night of his parents' murder. His resistance towards Excalibur, voiced by the Mage (Astrid Bergès-Frisbey) who tells him, "You are resisting the sword. The sword isn't resisting you" (*Legend of the Sword*), is related to the emotional trauma caused by witnessing Igraine and Uther's gruesome death and throughout the film Arthur relives that night and repeatedly hears his father's last words, "Run, son" (*Legend of the Sword*). Even though Arthur attempts to follow his father's command, Vortigern relentlessly seeks to destroy Arthur and everything he holds dear. His uncle's evil springs Arthur into action and leads him, along with his newly formed gang, to orchestrate an assassination attempt. Their failure precedes the first aforementioned fight scene where Arthur wields Excalibur in George's dojo and the power of the sword is unleashed.

In a sequence of scenes where Ritchie resorts to a multitude of shots including long, medium and close-up shots with sharp angles from above and below at vertiginous speed, Arthur grips Excalibur with both hands and harnesses some of its power for the first time. Much like Uther had done before, Arthur is able to single-handedly

defeat Vortigern's soldiers who break into the dojo where young men train in gladiator-style conditions. The men are no strangers to Arthur and call him "boss" which serves to underscore his status as Londinium's kingpin, the head of the city's organised crime. Once Excalibur has been drawn, its power causes a blinding mist that engulfs the characters; the dizzying shots that follow mix fast and slow motion, providing different angles and perspectives. Although the whole sequence is hard to track, it is obvious that the sword has made its bearer stronger and faster than any other man. The mystical power of the Mages flows from the blade to the glowing pommel and onto Arthur who is transformed into a superman. Several medium close-up shots reveal Arthur's eyes have changed and his irises are charged with a powerful, blue-coloured life-force. The blows delivered are so formidable that they hit even the soldiers who are far up on rooftops. Finally, a 360-tracking shot shows a tired Arthur who is just as surprised at the outcomes of wielding Excalibur as the rest of his gang, except maybe Bedivere.

Despite brandishing the sword with relative success, Arthur cannot prevent the death of one of his childhood friends, Back Lack (Neil Maskell), and the capture of an ally, Rubio (Freddie Fox). The succession of losses leads Arthur to reject Excalibur which he throws into a lake only to be caught by the Lady of the Lake who, try as he might to escape, manages to pull Arthur underwater and issues a warning: "Let me show you what your uncle will do if you do not accept this sword. Only you can prevent this" (*Legend of the Sword*). At the same time Arthur hears the Lady of the Lake's forewarning, he is transported to Londinium now burned to the ground. Arthur, thus, emerges as a saviour, the

only defender of the innocent and the voiceless, which is to all intents and purposes his actual role despite the illegal activities he is involved with. Arthur is shown to stand up for the oppressed and the marginalised, like the prostitutes who raised him and that he protects. In this sense, Ritchie's *Legend of the Sword* calls upon values long associated with King Arthur and his Knights, such as integrity, honour and courage. Yet, because Arthur is given a new social and geographical place in medieval society, Ritchie also engages with very contemporary concerns too and "negotiate[s] modern anxieties about power distribution, status, identity, and social values" (TAYLOR, 2018, p. 58).

Furthermore, the scene with the Lady of the Lake is symbolically rich for it invokes the literary Arthurian tradition according to which Arthur obtains the sword from her. In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* the author recounts this moment, revealing how Arthur is led to Excalibur by Merlin:

So they rode tyll they com to a laakethe which was a fayrewatir and brode. And in the myddisArthure was ware of an arme clothed in wchyghtsamite, that helde a fayreswerde in that honed. "Lo!" saydeMerlion, "yondirys the swerde that I spoke off." So with that they saw a damsel goynge upon the laake. (2004, p. 37; emphasis added)

A staple of the Arthurian imagery, shots of the sword held above water by a female handhave been amply employed by film directors like John Boorman whose 1981 motion picture, *Excalibur*, makes special use of this image. Much like in Boorman's celebrated film, which Ritchie acknowledged he was affected by when he was very young (MURPHY, 2017), in *Legend of the Sword* Excalibur is a

sword of myth and of light, a fact stressed when, submerged, the blade is set on fire. In the beautifully shot scene, there remains little doubt about the extraordinary nature of this weapon and again we can recognise echoes of the sword's medieval background. As a palimpsest of previous versions of Excalibur, Ritchie's sword of legend is both shaped by earlier texts and serves to transform them, resulting in something new and original.

Finally, Arthur's encounter with the Lady of the Lake is a significant moment in the plot because it happens when the hero loses faith in himself and is about to give up. However, not only does the Lady provide him further motivation by showing him the length of Vortigern's evil, but she also unveils that the only way to win is to fight Vortigern "where sword meets tower" and that Arthur must "trust the Mage" (*Legend of the Sword*). This reference might be perplexing to those who first watch the film since there are in fact two towers: the first has been brought down by Merlin and was located in the Darklands, the land of the mage people where magic appears to come from, while the other is being built by Vortigern in Camelot. The towers seem to be connected and the Mage assures Arthur that "when [the second] is finished, he [Vortigern] will have the same power of Mordred" (*Legend of the Sword*). This appears to be because the two worlds are bound, they might even be mirrors, which is why Arthur must enter this dimension alone when he attempts to learn to control Excalibur and touch with the sword on the altar stone. This fast-paced sequence signals "the expected passage through nature that tests many a hero, and which introduces him to a number of nightmare-like creatures that will be all too familiar to fans of Harry Potter, most notably a very,

very large serpent” (HARTY, 2017). As pointed out by Kevin Harty in his online review of the film, Ritchie’s Darklands serve as the perfect setting to test the hero’s strength and perseverance. In a sense, the Darklands, a terrifying, extreme version of the ancient Celtic Otherworld where Avalon is said to be located,¹⁶ are a place of revelation where the hero remembers Uther’s final moments and gains greater understanding of his past and of himself.

At last, when Arthur comes face to face with his uncle, he is a changed man: he travelled to the Darklands, attempted to run from destiny – twice, spoke to the Lady the Lake and learned about the past, present and prospective future should Vortigern not be stopped. He has also found a gang composed of street-smart thugs, such as Wet Stick and Back Lack, established Arthurian characters, like Sir Bedivere and Percival, and an enchanter, the Mage. Equally important, Arthur knows that to wield Excalibur, he cannot run, he must look even, or perhaps especially, when he does not wish to, a message conveyed by the Mage who acknowledges that though everyone shies away from what causes them pain, facing it “is the difference between a man and a king” (*Legend of the Sword*). The final confrontation happens after Vortigern has killed many of Arthur’s allies, who, in Robin Hood fashion, lived hidden in caves in the forest, and kidnapped the Mage and the boy called Blue, the late Back Lack’s son. His intention is to blackmail Arthur into turning himself and Excalibur in without a fight – a plan that seems to succeed at first. Nevertheless, thanks to the Mage’s intervention in the form of two snakes, one of them of giant-sized proportions,

16 This connection is stressed by the fact that the entrance to the Darklands is on an island and so, to cross into this supernatural plane, Arthur must travel by boat, much like he does at the time of his death in Arthurian tradition.

Vortigern is caught by surprise. Transported by the Mage from the Darklands to Camelot, the colossal snake serves as decoy, destroying Vortigern's hall and devouring everyone, except for Arthur who had already been bitten and is, hence, protected against it.

In order to defeat Vortigern's numerous soldiers, the "born king" must then harness Excalibur's powers a second time in a sequence of scenes that recalls his earlier fight at 'Kung-Fu' George's dojo in Londinium. At this point, a close-up shot of Arthur's hands gripping Excalibur's hilt signals the sword's mystical energies have been called upon and so the hero once again turns into a superman. A succession of sharp angles from above and below combined with both slow and fast motion shots convey the impression that Arthur is moving too quickly for an ordinary person to track. When the camera slows down, it offers a mere glimpse of the mighty blows delivered by man and blade, who, because they are in tune, are no longer wrapped in mist. By the end of the fight scene, a full shot shows Arthur surrounded by a pile of bodies as the remaining soldiers look on and swiftly drop their swords. Vortigern, in turn, is left with no other option but to ask the monstrous syrens, reminiscent of William Shakespeare's weird sisters in *Macbeth* (c. 1603-1607), to help him defeat Arthur in the same manner they had assisted him in the past.¹⁷

In the meantime, as the battle for Camelot rages on, Arthur descends to the bottom of Vortigern's tower where, as he

17 Their help comes at a high price and only after he murders his daughter, Catia (Millie Brady), and places her corpse on the waters where the sisters live can he obtain the powers he desires. This particular scene is also evocative since the Catia's wardrobe, her long, brown hair, fair skin and parted lips as well as the position of the body bear a striking resemblance to the well-known Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia* (1865-66) by John Everett Millais.

approaches the altar stone, Excalibur begins to radiate a blue light and the inscriptions on the blade become clearer. The walls around him disappear and Arthur is transported to the Darklands where his uncle has been turned into a grotesque man-shaped fire creature. The fight between the two main antagonists is violent and both are shown to possess superhuman strength and speed, though it is Arthur who gains the upper hand by finally facing the night his father died without averting his eyes. The moment is somewhat puzzling for, after losing consciousness in the middle of the fight, Arthur is taken back in time to see himself as a small infant on the night of his parents' death. However, instead of yelling at him to escape, this time Uther tells his son he no longer needs to run or look away. As the boy Arthur opens his eyes, the adult Arthur stops Excalibur mid-air before it plunges into Uther's back; father and son look each other in the eye and with his last words Uther bequeaths Excalibur to Arthur, "The sword is yours now, son. Take it" (*Legend of the Sword*). After Arthur recovers, Excalibur shines brighter than ever, signalling that it has become one with him. Vortigern is defeated and, in death, returns to human form. Back to Camelot, Arthur clasps Excalibur's hilt, unleashing its otherworldly power and bringing down Uther's tower and his unlawful reign.

The film concludes with Arthur and his friends' knighting ceremony which is followed by his crowning. As king, Arthur becomes the embodiment of England, telling the Viking traders to whom Vortigern had promised 5,000 young boys as tribute that, "You are addressing England and all the subjects under her king's protection" (*Legend of the Sword*). This moment is especially interesting for it culminates Arthur's full transformation from criminal to sovereign,

thus delivering on the promise that “from nothing comes a king”. Although this statement might be problematic, for Arthur does not really come from nothing, he comes from royalty and enjoyed a privileged childhood until his parents’ death, he must fight to regain what was taken from him. Therefore, *Legend of the Sword* is a tale of loss and recovery, a motif often found in Middle English romance which is remarkably focused on telling stories of lost heirs and the recovery of their crowns. According to Susan Crane, the English hero’s “story typically traces the loss and recovery of his inherited lands and titles, (...) through a glorious exile, a righteous and sometimes bloody return” (1986, p. 23). The same applies to Ritchie’s Arthur whose prowess in battle, faithfulness, honour, due reward of his followers as well as firm leadership serve, as much as Excalibur, to mark him as the rightful king.

Additionally, by ‘becoming’ England, Ritchie’s Arthur is once more drawing from Boorman’s *Excalibur* where Merlin (Nicol Williamson) tells Arthur (Nigel Terry) that, “You will be the land, and the land will be you. If you fail, the land will perish. If you thrive, the land will blossom” (*Excalibur*). At his end, Boorman based himself on ancient myths about fertility rites and the worship of nature to establish the association between king and territory. In fact, critics believe that Boorman was most likely influenced by Sir James Frazer’s work, *The Golden Bough* (1890) and Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). Hence, *Legend of the Sword* clearly derives from several traditions as well as previous literary works, motion pictures and TV series. Of course, in true palimpsest fashion, the old becomes new again as the British director introduces many innovations in order to

appeal to his twenty-first century audience. According to Martha Driver and Sid Ray, “film must reinvent the Middle Ages and create the medieval hero[,] a hodgepodge of traits derived from a mixed understanding of what is medieval and of traits we value in the heroes of postmillennial Western culture” (2004, p. 6). Although the concerns at the heart of Ritchie’s narrative are very contemporary ones, including social mobility and the on-going struggle for equal opportunities (GORDON, 2021, p. 45) as well as racism, social exclusion and access to education, Arthur – that is, the main hero – serves to anchor the film’s plot.

In an interview for *IGN*, Guy Ritchie remarked that what is essential to the Arthurian legend for him is:

the ascension of Arthur. [...], it’s about what does the symbolism of the extraction of the sword mean and what is the essence of the narrative. And the essence of the narrative to me is Arthur’s in a struggle [...] so the bottom is, you know, completely subservient on the street, then in the end he ends up as a monarch. Now that’s sort of metaphorical to every man’s journey [...]. (LASSER, 2017; emphasis added)

Legend of the Sword is keenly interested in the hero’s journey, which is often the case in Arthurian tradition, but Ritchie shifts both the setting and the path the hero must thread. First, the story is set in urban Londinium where Arthur grows up in a brothel subjected to all sorts of violence. It should be noted that even though Arthur is as a rule said to have been raised outside of Uther’s court, usually by Sir Ector and his family, he is fostered in a noble household and has privileged access to an education. By displacing Arthur, from

an aristocratic setting to the streets of Londinium, Ritchie presents a completely different version of the hero who must deal with the same mundane concerns as his presumed audience. His social ascension is the story of a self-made man who starts from the bottom and works his way up to the top. In addition, in Arthur's Londinium there is a socio-cultural diversity that stands out from previous re-imaginings but is closer to the experience of anyone living in a big city today. Because he is exposed to diverse ethnicities and presumably cultures and languages as well as social classes, Ritchie's Arthur is more in tune with the needs of the people, a fact that also makes him a better king. Nevertheless, despite all these changes, by protecting the innocent and the socially marginalised while displaying honour in disreputable places, Arthur retains traits we see as heroic: he is kind to those in need and ruthless to the ones who seek to exploit them.

As a result, if every age creates the Arthur it needs, perhaps it is not surprising that Ritchie's Arthur is an ordinary man living an ordinary life until he comes into the possession of an object that turns him into a superhero-like figure. As noted elsewhere,¹⁸ Arthur's storyline in *Legend of the Sword* is an origin-story akin to that of contemporary superheroes, whose identity is not tied to any specific class and so Arthur's does not need to be either. Given that the 2017 film was meant to be a reboot,¹⁹ the first of a sequel dedicated

18 See, for instance, Taylor, 2018, p. 58-59.

19 In "Regeneration and Rebirth: Anatomy of the Franchise Reboot," William Proctor clarifies that there is a difference between a reboot and a remake, arguing that "a reboot attempts to forge a series of films, to begin a franchise anew from the ashes of an old or failed property. In other words, a remake is a reinterpretation of one film; a reboot 're-starts' a series of films that seek to disavow and render inert its predecessor's validity" (2012, p. 4).

to different Arthurian characters, it makes sense that Ritchie would choose to focus on the king around whom others will gather. It also helps explain why so many of Arthur's best-known knights and allies are absent: Lancelot, Gawain and Galahad are nowhere to be seen; Merlin is merely alluded to; Guinevere is not mentioned. Moreover, of the three knights who are in the film, Bedivere, Percival and Tristan, only the first is given more screentime whilst the latter's name is only revealed at the end. The same happens with Arthur's centuries-old nemesis: his sister Morgan le Fay does not seem to have been born in Ritchie's Arthurian world, though the Mage remains nameless throughout the whole story. Because of these notorious absences, along with the changes in setting and overall tone, *Legend of the Sword* is often seen as an unsuccessful construal of the Arthurian world. Did Ritchie's hodgepodge of sources take it too far? Can twenty-first century audiences no longer relate to a blonde blue-eyed Arthur even if he grows up in poverty? Have we grown tired of 'the once and future' king? Or could it be that the film's back-and-forth narrative structure and extremely condensed sequences make it simply too confusing and incongruent?

CONCLUSION

Overall and in addition to the sources already mentioned, according to Kevin Harty, Ritchie "is also indebted, [...], to the story of the infant Moses floating among the reeds on the Nile, the account of Hannibal and his elephants, the legend of Robin Hood, the cases of Sherlock Holmes, the martial training typically undertaken by Kung Fu masters and gladiators, [...] Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, the Viking raids on England, some of his own previous films, [...]"

(HARTY, 2017). Thus, the film is inspired by other hallmarks of cinema as well as by the Arthurian literary tradition. In this respect, Ritchie's film can be regarded as another palimpsest of the Arthurian legend because it incorporates easily recognisable Arthurian elements while reinterpreting and adapting them to a modern audience.

As we have seen, the film's plot follows the basic outline of Arthurian legend, with Arthur as the rightful king of England who must reclaim his throne from his usurping uncle Vortigern. However, it also introduces new elements and themes to appeal to modern audience's values and expectations. The film's setting is a fantastical version of medieval England, with castles, knights and sorcery, as well as a choice of wardrobe reminiscent of medieval fashion. The film's use of medieval imagery and symbolism is a clear indication of its status as a palimpsest of the Middle Ages. Yet, the film also incorporates modern elements, such as the use of special effects and the fast-paced, action-packed scenes that are hallmarks of Ritchie's film-making style.

Legend of the Sword's palimpsestic nature is further evidenced by its use of intertextuality, as it incorporates elements from other works of literature and film, making it a composite object that has many sources and evokes several other productions from different mediums. Guy Ritchie's film builds on the legacy of the Arthurian legend and adds more layers to a tale that seems inexhaustible in its adaptations. In the end, Arthur continues to fascinate modern audiences who seem interested not only in continuing a tradition that has medieval origins but also in making it their own by adding to contemporary Arthurian works modern characters, storytelling techniques and, overall, a contemporary feel.

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