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The Eternal Return of a Malleable King: Reception and Re-signification of the Arthurian Myth in Contemporary Culture (19th–21st Centuries)

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The figure of King Arthur has always been shrouded in an aura of ambiguity in between the historical and the legendary, which has enabled his continued presence and constant reinvention for more than a millennium. Far from being a remnant of the medieval past, the Arthurian myth has shown an extraordinary flexibility to adapt to the discourses, formats, and symbolic needs of each era. From the warlord who allegedly fought against the Saxons in post-Roman Britain, to the messianic monarch who will return when his homeland needs him, Arthur has embodied multiple narrative, political, religious, and identity functions. This special issue aims to explore, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the survival, appropriation, and reinterpretation of the Arthurian cycle from the 19th century to the present.

The Arthurian cycle as we know it began to take shape with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136), a Latin chronicle that endowed Arthur with a genealogy, a court, a conquest epic, and an almost imperial dimension. However, even then, it already incorporated elements from an earlier Celtic oral tradition, such as the myth of the returning king or the connection to the supernatural. From Geoffrey's work onward, authors like Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Boron, and the compilers of the Vulgate Cycle developed a literary corpus that combined Christian elements, chivalric motifs, eschatological symbolism, and Celtic folklore, and which established the characters and narrative structures that would define Arthurian lore: the Holy Grail, the Round

Table, Lancelot's betrayal, Morgana's sorcery, the ambiguous figure of Merlin, and so on.

During the Middle Ages, the Arthurian cycle was widely disseminated both in verse and prose, in French, Middle English, German, and Old Norse. However, with the arrival of the Renaissance and the rise of humanism, the chivalric ideals associated with the Arthurian world were gradually displaced by a worldview centered on reason, the individual, and classical heritage. Though the myth was occasionally referenced, it was not until the 19th-century Romantic movement that a true Arthurian revival emerged, marking the beginning of its modern reception.

Authors like Lord Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold reintroduced Arthur into the literary canon with new aesthetic and ideological frameworks. Interest in the medieval past, Celtic legends, and heroic archetypes intertwined with a modern sensibility that began to question the figure of the hero, the ideal of purity, or idealism. This Romantic reinterpretation also found expression in Pre-Raphaelite painting (such as John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*), music (Wagner's operas *Lohengrin*, *Tristan and Isolde*, and *Parsifal*), and later in film, comics, and animation.

The 20th century saw an unprecedented diversification of the Arthurian cycle. In a context shaped by world wars, the rise of mass entertainment, and the expansion of audiovisual media, the Arthurian legend was transformed into humorous (Mark Twain, Monty Python), fantastic (T. H. White, Marion Zimmer Bradley), epic (*Excalibur* by John Boorman, 1981), and even futuristic forms (*Camelot 3000* by Mike W. Barr and Brian Bolland, 1982–1985). The myth was often stripped of its solemnity to explore new dimensions: the inner conflict of heroes, the marginalization of wizards, the repressed desires of ladies, or the structural violence of knighthood. Through these transformations, the Arthurian myth has served as a critical device for reflecting on power, masculinity, imperialism, spirituality, and historical memory.

Today, far from being exhausted, the Arthurian cycle continues to inspire new adaptations and reinterpretations. From video games (*Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon*, 2025) to youth series (*Cursed*, 2020),

major motion pictures (*King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* by Guy Ritchie, 2017, or *The Green Knight* by David Lowery, 2020), and feminist, queer, or decolonial reinterpretations (*Spear* by Nicola Griffith, 2022), the legend of King Arthur functions as a symbolic space where tradition and modernity converge. What values do Merlin, Guinevere, or Lancelot embody today? What role does the Grail play in postmodern spirituality? How has Camelot transformed in contemporary utopias (or dystopias)? What function does the return of the king serve in a disenchanted world?

This special issue seeks to gather academic contributions that analyze the various ways in which the Arthurian cycle has been reinterpreted, rewritten, parodied, or problematized from the 19th century to the present. We invite researchers from fields such as comparative literature, cultural studies, history, audiovisual media, art, music, philosophy, philology, theater, or video games to submit original articles that address these and other issues from a critical, theoretical, or historiographical perspective. Particularly welcome are papers that address the following lines of research:

1. Literary rewritings of the Arthurian cycle from the 19th century to the present.
2. Representations of King Arthur and the Round Table in film, television, and animation.
3. Arthurian imagery in comics, video games, and transmedia narratives.
4. Feminist, queer, or postcolonial approaches to the Matter of Britain.
5. The Grail myth and its modern re-signification.
6. The messianic return of King Arthur in historical and political contexts.
7. Reception of key characters (Merlin, Guinevere, Morgana, Perceval, Gawain, etc.).
8. Musical adaptations: opera, symphonic rock, musicals.
9. Irony, satire, and parody in the reinterpretation of the Arthurian cycle.
10. Nostalgia, medievalism, and the construction of national identities through Arthur.

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