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Defining Success Within Arthurian Film Adaptations:

An Examination of Authenticity, Brotherhood, and Perception Within *Excalibur* (1981), *First Knight* (1995), and *King Arthur* (2004)

Introduction

Arthurian literature and film have a very long and rich history. Though adaptations have been around since the beginning of cinema itself, a successful adaptation contains a multitude of aspects. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, and Sir Thomas Malory are all authors of Arthurian literature and tell distinct tales. Yet, they all follow the same three guiding principles to ensure keeping Arthurian canon authentic and accurate.

Authenticity is a must within all adaptations, along with an accurate retelling of the source material. Though Arthurian films can and should deviate from the canon, the characterization and motivations must remain consistent throughout the film and the text. Secondly, the idea of Brotherhood is a must when discussing Arthurian literature and must be present within the subsequent film adaptations. Without Brotherhood, ideas of homosociality are lacking, which is a guiding motivating factor for why the Knights of the Round Table remain together. Finally, a successful adaptation must include academic critical acclaim and the audience's perception of the film. Shyon Baumann writes that "Like film festivals, academic study also bestows 'artistic worth on its object. [...] With the support of universities, the idea of film as art enjoyed greater legitimacy" (Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in

the United States, 409-410). Not only does artistic value elevate the film, but it also legitimizes Arthurian legend and mythos.

How To Define Success Within Film Adaptations

First, it is imperative to define what exactly success means within the context of analyzing Arthurian literature adaptations. Though there are many definitions of success, and ultimately, it can be very subjective, there are three simple rules to follow when defining success in Arthurian film adaptations.

The first marker is the accuracy of the adaptation. This means that the director has remained faithful to the original text, whether in the storylines, themes, or characterizations of Arthur and his Knights. This does not mean that it has to be a replication of the original text. It is important to note that although Arthurian literature is often written as historical fact, it is not based on any actual historical records. It is also essential that the director knows when to deviate from the literary canon. In Arthurian literature, it is rare that everything remains the same between authors. To remain authentic to the literature, directors of these films must remain true to the spirit of Arthurian canon, confidently introducing their own version of events. According to the article "The Reel Joan of Arc: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of the Historical Film," Robert Rosenstone elaborates on how audiences judge and analyze the value of historical films in many different ways. He states,

"Judgements are made about historical value on wildly divergent grounds — accuracy of detail, the use of original documents, appropriateness of music, the looks or apparent suitability of an actor to play someone whose body language, voice, and gestures we can never know from the historical record — all of these may be invoked as a way of praising or damning a film" (63).

While this type of analysis is substantial when dealing with real-life historical events such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, or the Iraq War, it becomes an issue when focusing on Arthurian tales. Much like adaptations of other medieval events, Arthurian literature is a dramatization of life. Authors like Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory were not writing for historical accuracy, nor were they consulting with historians to maintain the accuracy of their writing. Instead, they are pulling from a metaphorical past, a past that never truly existed but exists solely for entertainment and storytelling.

The second marker is the theme of Brotherhood within the Knights of the Round Table. Male homosociality is apparent throughout every single Arthurian text, and without a Patriarchal hierarchy, many of the tales would not have a motivating factor. Every aspect of Arthurian literature surrounds the importance of King Arthur and his ability to work with his Knights for the benefit and betterment of Camelot. There can be no individualism within the Round Table because there must be cohesion and solidarity for a singular cause. In fact, in many Arthurian tales, the Knights and Camelot eventually fail because they are no longer together for a singular cause. This is directly linked to a betrayal in the Brotherhood between King Arthur and Lancelot over Queen Guinevere.

In this Patriarchal society, the King is considered to be "the best man." King Arthur has all of the land, the power, and the prowess that a capable man should have. In Arthurian literature, this is most commonly associated with a man's ability to fight. With Arthur's power, he must reaffirm his status with the woman he marries, and she must be Arthur's equal. This relationship works because the King, the best man, deserves a woman who is the "best woman." Guinevere is known throughout Camelot for being the most beautiful, and with her, Arthur reaffirms his status to his Knights. With every other Knight, this relationship does precisely what

it is supposed to. None of the Knights of the Round Table are as capable of a fighter, and though they all pine after the Queen, none of them would dare betray the bond between themselves and King Arthur because they are aware they would not win. Lancelot completely ruins this dynamic. Unlike the other Knights, Lancelot is the best fighter in the land, easily defeating Arthur. This should make Lancelot the best man, but because his friendship with Arthur is so strong, he stands down in order to let Arthur keep the power. Unfortunately, this does not stop his infatuation with Queen Guinevere, and Lancelot and the Queen eventually betray Arthur with their adulterous relationship. This destabilization of power eventually leads to the fall of Camelot and the Knights, but the Brotherhood remains an essential part of Arthurian canon.

Finally, the third maker of success in an Arthurian tale is the artistic worth shown through academia and in film circles, as well as the audience's perception of the film. A good Arthurian adaptation will *feel* Arthurian, and it will assert itself in the canon. Critical acclaim and film analysis also benefit these films, as a desire for reevaluation and understanding helps solidify the significance of these films. In Ian Christie's chapter, "What Do We Really Know About Film Audiences?", he states that in a study about UK film audiences, half of the respondents believe that films intrinsically have artistic value, while a third of respondents believe that films are educational in nature (230). Applying this to Arthurian film adaptations, with the continued research regarding films' importance as a medium, it is essential that academics and audience members continue critiquing and analyzing the films they watch. This reaffirms that Arthurian film has artistic value, as people continue to derive meaning from it, just as they would derive meaning from the original text.

***Excalibur* (1981)**

John Boorman's 1981 film, *Excalibur*, is a fantastic illustration of Arthurian film adaptation. Based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Boorman takes the audience through the tales of Arthur and his Knights. To examine whether or not 1981's *Excalibur* is successful in its adaptation, it is crucial to go through the three markers of success. With Boorman's focus on accuracy, the film maintains a faithful connection with Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In Murray Dahm's article, "Medieval Warfare in Film: King Arthur II," Dahm discusses Boorman's attempt at capturing the Arthurian spirit in a singular film. Dahm writes,

"*Excalibur* authentically evokes the world of Arthur. [...] It embraces the myth and legend aspect of Arthur wholeheartedly and lends it an authenticity missing from other Arthurian films. It does not seek to rationalize or apologize for the myth, let alone be embarrassed by it, as some films clearly are. John Boorman spoke of 'mythical truth, not historical truth,' and he thereby avoids having to worry about any kind of real Arthur at all" (1-2).

Not only is Boorman unapologetically creating his own mythos of Arthur and the Round Table, but he also keeps true to the themes present in every Arthurian tale. There is a sense of conviction and truth throughout the film that makes the audience believe in the world that Arthur lives in. Boorman successfully adapts Malory's text to screen and also manages to insert his own personality within the tale. With vivid imagery and sexuality, Boorman is not afraid to make *Excalibur* his own, much like Malory did by rewriting Geoffrey's original tale.

Not only is Boorman's *Excalibur* successful in authentically retelling the tale of King Arthur, but it is also successful in portraying the Brotherhood between the Knights. As mentioned previously, Brotherhood is an essential aspect of the Round Table, and without it, Camelot is doomed to fail. Not only are Boorman's Knights faithful to Camelot and the King, but

Arthur himself is committed to the betterment of Camelot. Arthur realizes that without the help of his Knights, he can never win. In *Excalibur*, Boorman focuses on Arthur's pride as a man and the vanity he must let go of to be a proper King. When Arthur first encounters Lancelot, they have a brutal battle, and Arthur eventually cheats to win against Lancelot. As Lancelot lies near the river, Arthur proclaims to Merlin,

"My pride broke it. My rage broke it! This excellent Knight, who fought with fairness and grace, was meant to win. I used Excalibur to change that verdict. I've lost, for all time, the ancient sword of my fathers, whose power was meant to unite all men... not to serve the vanity of a single man. I am... nothing." (*Excalibur*, 1981).

Boorman's Arthur is capable of great insight and ability to grow, something a great King should have. Not only does Arthur realize his pride and ego are to blame for his outburst, but he also uses his power to bring Lancelot back and welcomes him to the Round Table as an equal. Arthur sees Lancelot as a brother, a force to be reckoned with, and someone who can help his cause to strengthen Camelot.

Finally, Boorman excellently proves *Excalibur's* success in academic value, as well as audience perception of the film's artistic value. Not only has *Excalibur* stood the test of time, but it remains a staple when discussing Arthurian film adaptations. *Excalibur* does what many Arthurian films fail to do: establish a mythological truth to the story being told. In Dahm's "Medieval Warfare in Film: King Arthur II," it is imperative that Arthur is a mythological figure. Audiences expect certain things from the Medieval world. While it is important to honor that, it is also essential to remain faithful to the legendary aspect of what Arthur is supposed to represent. In *Excalibur*, Arthur is a larger-than-life figure, representing a greater good for Camelot. King Arthur cannot be an individual, nor can his Knights.

John Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur* excels as an Arthurian adaptation in every aspect. Boorman remains authentic in his tale, Brotherhood remains at the forefront with Arthur, and it consistently maintains its artistic value through academic analysis and audience perception.

***First Knight* (1995)**

Jerry Zucker's 1995 film *First Knight* is a grounded Arthurian romance. The film focuses on Lancelot (Richard Gere) falling in love with Guinevere (Julia Ormond) and the subsequent fallout. Like *Excalibur*, Zucker focuses on the tension and drama between the characters and on dramatizing the tale rather than historical accuracy.

First Knight is unique in the sense that because it is not based on any specific literature, Zucker is free to write his own story for Lancelot and Guinevere. With this, the accuracy is instead focused on the characterization of Lancelot, Guinevere, and King Arthur. In some aspects, this film is very successful. For instance, the relationship between Arthur and Lancelot is very realistic. Arthur appreciates Lancelot for his abilities and courage to save Guinevere, and they have a genuine sense of camaraderie. When Arthur encounters the kiss between Guinevere and Lancelot, he is completely heartbroken. Angrily, he argues with Lancelot, saying, "I trusted you, loved you, and you betrayed me!" Lancelot: "I never meant to hurt you, my lord." King Arthur: "You leave me nothing! Nothing!" (*First Knight*, 1995). Lancelot is more than a servant to Arthur; he is a friend, and is betraying not only the King, but his brother-in-arms. In the article "Fear of Flyting: The Absence of Internal Tension in 'Sword of the Valiant' and 'First Knight,'" the authors write that

"In medieval literary accounts of the Camelot love triangle, however, narrative tension is fueled by Lancelot's dual role as not only first Knight but also first friend. In fact, there is often the hint that the friendship is so crucial to Arthur that he would turn his back on

what he knows to be true because he wishes not to sever the bond between himself and his greatest knight" (Blanch and Wasserman 19-20).

This ties into the theme of Brotherhood because, without Brotherhood, Camelot means nothing. In *First Knight*, Arthur is so dependent on his Knights that he is willing to sacrifice himself if it means Camelot will be put first. This is also notably seen in other Arthurian tales, as ideas of individualism are always the downfall of the Round Table and Camelot.

While *First Knight* successfully adapts the ideas of Brotherhood between Arthur and Lancelot, Zucker does not authentically adapt Lancelot's character to match the mythos. Though Lancelot does have an affair with Guinevere and does connect emotionally with Arthur, Zucker's Lancelot is not driven by communal goals. This Lancelot is focused on self-preservation and success. Lancelot *must* be characterized with a focus on Arthur and Guinevere instead of himself because the Patriarchal hierarchy would crumble without them. In texts like *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *The Knight of the Cart*, though Lancelot should be the "best man," he always steps aside for his love for Arthur. This homosociality is imperative to the storyline, and without it, *First Knight* deviates from Arthurian canon in a way that negatively impacts the authenticity. Blanch and Wasserman state that "No one, not even Arthur (Sean Connery), seems to notice that the very title '*First Knight*' violates the spiritual and physical functionality of the Round Table, exalting as it does one individual over the geometrically leveled band of Camelot" (Fear of Flyting, 15-16). *First Knight* could never authentically and accurately pull from Arthurian Literature with a characterization of Lancelot that ultimately does not respect Arthur's position over him.

As for audience perception and artistic worth within academia, because the film feels inauthentic to Arthurian canon, the film missed the mark with audiences and critics alike.

Though Guinevere's characterization is fascinating as it gives her more agency as a female ruler,

the film still manages to put her in a love triangle in which she has no interest. Within typical Arthurian literature, Guinevere seeks Lancelot out; he does not seek her out. Her agency and power are essential to the relationship dynamic, and this change, though it offers an intriguing difference between the literature and film, offers no real value in terms of analysis.

***King Arthur* (2004)**

Finally, in Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004), Fuqua takes a much darker approach to Arthurian literature. Though *First Knight* (1995) deviates from Arthurian canon, 2004's *King Arthur* is almost unrecognizable as an Arthurian adaptation. Aside from the characters' names and fundamental principles, Fuqua completely reinvents King Arthur to tell an entirely new story. According to Lorraine Stock's article, "Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television," she writes that, "*King Arthur* (2004) [...] departed significantly from ordinary medieval or neomedieval textual paradigms and instead reflected then-current trends in popular psychology, feminist-driven agendas, and other post-medieval cultural issues" (68). This aligns with thoughts of Arthurian literature and most medieval literature, such as Geoffrey Chaucer. Fuqua takes familiar literary canon and stories and reinvents them as his own. However, it fails in the characterization and motivations of Arthur and his Knights.

In Arthurian literature, it is essential that Arthur and his Knights fight for their own cause and for the betterment of Camelot. Though Fuqua remains accurate in Arthur's heritage as a Roman Briton fighting against the Anglo-Saxon invaders, the motivations for the literary canon and Fuqua's are intrinsically different. In the film, Lancelot and Arthur argue after Bishop Germanus has pushed Arthur to continue fighting against the native Woads and Anglo-Saxon invaders. Arthur is not a King in Fuqua's tale, but rather a captain of a legendary group of

mercenary Knights. With the Knight's lack of freedom, they are forced to fight on behalf of Rome for a country that is not their own. Though Fuqua's version is beautiful when considering his allegories to the U.S. Iraq war, the narrative falls apart when comparing it to the original Arthurian source material.

Though Fuqua is not accurate in the retelling of this Arthurian-inspired tale, the themes of Brotherhood are once again powerful throughout the film. Commonly calling each other brothers and depending on each other for their lives, Fuqua perfectly nails the homosociality apparent in Arthurian canon. Lancelot and Arthur argue, much like brothers would, over the prospect of their freedom.

"All these long years we've been together, the trials we've faced, the blood we've shed... what was it all for if not for the reward of freedom! And now, when we are so close, when it's finally within our grasp... Look at me! Does it all count for nothing?" Arthur: "You ask me that? You who know me the best of all?" Lancelot: "Then do not do this. Only certain death awaits you here. Arthur, I beg you! For our friendship's sake, I beg you!" Arthur: "You be my friend now and do not dissuade me" (*King Arthur*, 2004).

The Knights of the Round Table do not rally behind a cause they know their King believes in. The Knights are simply fighting for their freedom. Though this strengthens the bonds of their Brotherhood, it does not translate well into the overall authenticity of Arthurian ideals.

Finally, because the tale deviates so much from Arthurian literature, it is hard to derive the analysis that is so meaningful within the literature. Though the film offers a plethora of cultural analysis – including ideas of imperialization, the politics of war, and international interference – within Arthurian adaptation, *King Arthur* is simply too far removed from the source material. Audiences who are familiar with the literature or previous films such as *The*

Sword in the Stone (1963), *Excalibur* (1981), or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) will be disappointed to find a completely different characterization of Arthurian canon than one should expect.

Conclusion

Arthurian film adaptation can be tricky, but it yields incredible results for filmmakers and audiences when done right. Through the three markers of Arthurian film, one can create a meaningful and authentic tale that explores the trials and tribulations faced in Arthur's court. It is important to remember that though it is formatted as historical, Arthurian literature and canon is always a legend, a mythos. There must be a sense of comradeship and fantasy when adapting Arthurian literature because, without it, the film will never tell an authentic Arthurian tale. Rosenstone believes that though it is easy to critique what we believe to be true about historical films, it is essential that the reader/audience understand that there is no "fact" when it comes to Arthurian canon (65). It must be a dramatization, a performance, an experience that must remain true to the original spirit of the Arthurian literary tradition.

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