King Arthur as a Fictional and Historical Character

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Bachelor's Thesis

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IZJAVA

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the legends about King Arthur and his historical and literary character which changed through time in line with social and political changes that influenced the writers' imagination. As a result, stories and legends about him differ based on the time in which they originated. The figure of the perfect king has long existed in Arthur. He embodies all the characteristics of a legendary leader: bravery, strength, agility, and stealth. A great number of literary texts (primarily medieval romances) explore his adventures with the Knights of the Round Table. This paper will analyse Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1469-70) because, if there is one text that stands as a connection to all later Arthurian romances, it is the work of Sir Thomas Malory. Geoffrey Bryce Elliott's dissertation "The Establishment of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* as the Standard Text of English-Language Arthurian Legend," establishes the supremacy of Malory's work over other English texts contributing to the legend of King Arthur, calling it an "ur-text of English-language Arthurian legend" (1). Important research has been conducted in an attempt to discover the nature of the real Arthur, as opposed to the one from legends. Two of these works will be very significant for the thesis: Geoffrey Ashe's "The Origins of the Arthurian Legend" discusses the beginnings of Arthurian legends and first written texts on the subject, and Mark Allen's "The Image of Arthur and the Idea of King," which tends to present the person behind the great name, even though it is still unclear whether that person existed. Because of the imaginative representations of King Arthur as an absolute hero, the Arthurian legend remains one of the most interesting narratives, appealing both to audiences and scholars with its timeless allure.

Keywords: King Arthur, legend, knights, *Le Morte d'Arthur.*

Contents

Introduction

King Arthur is one of the most popular British kings in all history, and yet, there is no certainty of his existence:

> To the question "Did Arthur exist?" a straight yes-or-no answer cannot be given. More is involved here than historical doubt. With, say, Robin Hood, the straight answer is likewise excluded, but solely by insufficiency of data. A new find might some day make it possible. With Arthur the difficulty cuts deeper. For any ordinary inquirer, the answer "yes" implies the reality of the Arthur of romance, the idealized medieval monarch, at the centre of a sort of montage that includes Guinevere and Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table. Since Arthur in that sense is a literary creation and didn't exist, the answer "yes" is wrong. But the answer "no" is also wrong. It implies that Arthur is fictitious as Don Quixote is fictitious, that he has no factual basis at all. (Ashe 1)

The tales about him have been changing through time along with different political changes, and the stories of Arthur include many different characters that match the taste of the period, so the story of King Arthur evolved from a heroic tale of a king who defeated the barbarians to a glorious legend with many fantastical elements such as dragons, wizards, witches, unicorns, elves and more. The themes discussed in these later texts were typical medieval topics such as chivalry, courtly love, the search for the Holy Grail, heroism and magic.

This thesis aims to analyse King Arthur as a literary and historic figure in order to understand the evolution of legends about him, tracing their development from historical events into the complex and enduring stories rich in myth and magic. The first chapter begins with the history of Arthur as a warrior, leader, and a king. This, ostensibly historical, Arthur is not the same as the literary one, so it is important to understand how all the legends and stories came to be. The second chapter deals with the character that has become an extraordinary hero, part of many adventures full of imaginary creatures and magic. There are many versions of the Arthurian legend, and many of its characters take different shapes and roles; there are his knights such as Sir Agravain, Sir Pellinore, Sir Bedivere, Sir Gawain, and other warriors, his half-sister Morgan le Fay, his son and nephew Mordred (Arthur allegedly fathered him in an illegitimate

and incestuous relationship with Morgan), where only Arthur remains a recurring and cohesive figure. Arthur's noble knights keep close to Arthur on their many quests. The search for the Holy Grail is one of the most famous Arthurian quests. This element is related to Christianity, of which Arthur is the representative.

The last chapter of this thesis analyses the fantastical elements in the medieval (chivalric) romance by Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur.* This work has served as a standard text to many scholars and tutors, (not to mention authors) because of its power to influence and teach many minds (Elliott 30). Fantastical elements that Malory used, such as the Search for the Holy Grail, the Sword in the Stone, and other magical and supernatural elements were taken by Malory from folk tales and other legends and myths. Malory's romance remains one of the most influential literary sources about Arthur and his quests, inspiring various contemporary adaptations, such as T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Arthurian trilogy*, Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex*, Sanders Anne Laubenthal's *Excalibur*, and others.

1. Historical Figure

The question of Arthur's existence cannot yet be fully answered due to the lack of historical accuracy, and the ambiguity of literary texts, as well as physical proof. Historians still hope to find answers, as does this thesis. The aim is to connect historical truths in a way that would adequately explain the possible existence of the King. Mark Allen wrote an article titled "The Image of Arthur and the Idea of King" in which he clearly states that if there was a real person named Arthur, he was not the king that contemporary audience would recognise him to have been (1). Allegedly, he was a leader of the British people in the fifth or sixth century; he defended the land against the invasions of the barbarian Saxons. He led successful defensive raids but not at all as glorious as the ones that Arthur of literature led, and he certainly did not live as lavishly as his medieval fictional version: "There were no castles, no jousts, and no plate armour. Roman short-swords, tribal raids, and hand-to-hand combat on foot were the style of the day, a style inconsistent with our connotations of 'king'" (Allen 2). With that said, Allen also suggests that the meaning of the word "king" did not carry the same meaning then as it does today (the word itself did not exist until the twelfth century when Geoffrey of Monmouth writes

his *Historia Regum Britanniae).* One of the names that Arthur would have been called in his time is "rex," which means something similar to the word "regal" and refers to royal people of that time. In the ninth century, a monk called Nennius called Arthur the leader of battles, "dux bellorum" (2), which is enough to understand Arthur's superiority as a warrior, rather than just a ruler. Ashe explains that Arthur's is the time of the post-Roman Britain, a period during which names of Roman origin still persist. Consequently, the Roman name Artorius, in Welsh became the name that is now known throughout all texts – Arthur. After Roman influence began to fade, records indicate that quite a few persons named Arthur were found across Britain, and it is believed that they were named after the famous warrior and hero: "alive or invented earlier, with a long enough interval to carry his bardic fame beyond his own people" (Ashe 6).

When it comes to Arthur's kingdom, there are three places that are considered to be potential locations of the famous Camelot. According to Geoffrey Ashe, they are: Tintagel, Glastonbury Abbey, and Cadbury Castle (5). Situated on the coast of the Cornish sea, Tintagel was long believed to be the birthplace of Arthur, although, according to Mary Williams, this is impossible since it was not built until after 1140 by the Earl of Cornwall (77). Glastonbury Abbey is believed to be King Arthur's burial place. There is also the Cadbury Castle in Somerset, on "the most plausible hill in Britain" (Ashe 5), which is older than the previous two and was connected to Arthur's Camelot in 1542 by John Leland (Evans 227). What makes historians take these three places in account are the numerous traditions and descriptions associated with Arthur's court, even though there is no physical evidence for any of this.

Ashe claims that, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthurian adventure begins to unfold at the break of the Roman rule over Britain. Everything starts with the usurper Vortigern, who takes the throne and welcomes the Saxons to Britain, after which they start to ravage the country. Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, tried to keep the Saxons under control, but failed. Arthur is then prophesised to save Britain. Born at Tintagel, he ascended the throne very young, became a great leader and managed to defeat the barbarians (Saxons, Picts and Scots). Arthur married Guinevere, who was later forced to live in adultery with Mordred, who turned out to be a traitor when he took Arthur's throne and made himself king while Arthur was on one of his conquests. Arthur and Mordred were both mortally wounded at the river Camel, after which Arthur was taken to the Isle of Avalon to be healed (9).

During his reign, it is said that Arthur conquered large parts of Gaul (present-day France, parts of Belgium, western Germany, and northern Italy). This information is found in the work of a historian called Jordanes, who writes that "the King of the Britons crossed to Gaul with 12,000 troops" (qtd. in Ashe 13) for an alliance against the Visigoths. In the second half of the fifth century, the Roman emperor sent his troops to Gaul, which was occupied by the barbarians, but Gaul's imperial prefect Arvandus had made a deal with Visigoths to defeat the Britons and the battle was finished before the Roman help arrived. The British king was not heard of after that. According to Ashe, the proof that these events have in fact happened exists in a letter to the (Roman) king from Sidonius Apollinaris (14).

It is well-known that Geoffrey of Monmouth has not always been true to the accuracy of the events in his work, as "he altered the nature of the war for Arthur's greater glory" (Ashe 14), as well as the glory of Britain. Thus, this work hopes to find answers elsewhere. According to Ashe, there is one historical name that draws a connection to Arthur. The name of Riothamus, a military leader from the fifth century, whose name translates "king-most," meaning the "supreme king." Still, it remains unclear whether "Riothamus" was really a name or a honorific, and whether Geoffrey of Monmouth used this leader for his story about Arthur: "'Riothamus' is likely to have been assumed rather than baptismal, in which case he was indeed called something else as well, and there was no obstacle to the notion that this was Arthur" (Ashe 15).

Ashe mentions a priest in Britain named William who, in 1019, wrote a "life" of St Gwyddno, one of the Welsh clerics who took part in the British colonisation of Armorica (a region in Gaul). This legend, although the saint has no connections to Arthur, has a prologue about the British migration, in which Arthur is mentioned. Here William cites an unknown *History of Britain*, suggesting that Arthur took the throne immediately after Vortigern's death, which is believed to be around the year 450. Arthur's battles in Britain and Gaul are driven by the Saxon enemies, who were there in the 460s, and they, in fact, were in conflict with the Britons settled north of them near the Loire. They were beaten in a battle around the year 469 near Angers. Through that time, the Britons formed an alliance with the Romans and Franks, and there are reasons to believe that Riothamus was involved in the activities. He was certainly active in Gaul around the same date that is suggested for Arthur. William's prologue (Goeznovius) calls Arthur "King of the Britons," a title given to Riothamus (qtd. in Ashe 16). The parallel can be drawn with Nennius' uknown battle named "Agned," as historians explained it as a shortened

version for Andegavum, meaning Angers. Ashe claims that many authors and chroniclers have accepted Riothamus as the source for the character of Arthur, rather than Geoffrey's version (19). If he was really the one who disappeared in Gaul, that fact would be easy to connect with the King of the Britons whose fate was unknown. Although it may be that he (or they) disappeared from history only because of the lack of information, and that the Britons at the time knew what happened to their king after the battle. In fact, Ashe claims that if the theory about Riothamus is eliminated, there is no proof that Arthur existed at all (20). However, as Ashe concluded, even if Arthur and Riothamus were the same person, there is no possibility that they participated in all the events and battles attributed to their person (20). Therefore, the temporary conclusion to the question of Arthur, and many other ancient and medieval heroes whose lives have been preserved in legends and stories, is that fact and fiction blend with no real possibility so far to determine what is accurate and what not. The paper therefore turns to literary depictions of Arthur based on texts that have been preserved until today.

2. Literary Figure

The Arthur of literature is a king who crosses the lines of historical facts and takes refuge in stories. He is surrounded by stories of imaginary characters and adventures that only the greatest storytellers are able to create. As Allen firmly states, the main part of Arthur is his kingship and everything that it encompasses, along with power and the mighty court. Yet, when enough Arthurian literature is examined, it becomes clear that Arthur's kingship does not exist in him alone. It has been built around him through the years out of stories and myths. Members of his court have embodied the traits associated with his kingship as well, such as love and religion, which is recognised in his wife Guinevere, strength and bravery in his knights, and intelligence in warlock Merlin. As a king, Arthur is seen as the epitome of all of these traits (1). As previously mentioned, a monk called Nennius was the first person to mention Arthur in text (Allen 2). He presented him as a great warrior who led battles, and referred to him as "cyning," a term that cannot be translated into modern version of English language, since people then did not have the same notion of kings as people do in modern times (Allen 2). If he existed, Arthur was a much simpler warrior than the one that is known to us through literature. That version of Arthur grew with each new century into a more substantial character and his story was reshaped by

various traditions and legends. “These are traditions – literary and maybe even historical ones – that later accrued to the figure of Arthur, but such traditions can hardly be applied to the Arthur of history or to Nennius’s Arthur” (Allen 3). Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History* represents the starting point for the legends about Arthur. His future popularity and features of kingship were mostly based on what is said in the *History of the Kings of Britain*, although, there is one other author who set the example of storytelling in the Arthurian world. Sir Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte d’Arthur* with the thought of Geoffrey of Monmouth, but many other sources as well, and thus created a new world of Arthurian legends (Elliott 1).

The conditions of Arthur’s birth at Tintagel and the treachery that happened to his mother Igraine at the hands of Uther were first written down by Geoffrey. He combined these elements with his work *Prophecies of Merlin* in which he writes about Arthur’s and Britain’s future. It is very likely that Monmouth relies on Celtic tradition in representing Arthur as a godly leader and hero moved by a special force superior to humans:

> Geoffrey depicts Arthur as the saviour of the British people (Red Dragon), predicting his success over the Anglo-Saxons (White Dragon) and his hegemony in the British isles (islands of the ocean) and on the Continent (forests of Gaul). He is Britain’s greatest king in Geoffrey’s presentation because his right and ability to rule derive from mysterious forces beyond the ken of ordinary men. (Allen 5)

However, Geoffrey is the first to write about Arthur’s unclear death. In his text it is suggested that he was mortally wounded and then taken to Avalon to be healed there by its special healing properties. He leaves the case of Arthur’s death unresolved, which in turn leaves the ground open for alternative endings, such as “mysterious women on barges and swords caught by arms rising from lakes, extensions of Arthur’s mysterious fitness as a king” (Allen 6). Not one tale leaves Arthur to die in peace because he is imagined as always waiting to be summoned again when Britain needs him, which is why in the contemporary adaptations of the myth by Terence Hanbury White he is given the title the “Once and Future King.” When Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte d’Arthur*, which is taken to be the standard text of English-language Arthurian legends (Elliott 1-3), stories about Arthur had already lost some of the elements that Merlin has prophesied, and Arthur proved his right to rule by being an extraordinary knight and with that the legends of the sword started to appear next to his name. The notion of kingship at

the time was connected with the belief of Christian divinity, but Malory combines secular and divine signs in a wider sense so that Arthur's kingship "carries with it something less specific and more pervasive than divine selection" (Allen 5). The notion of a king that is familiar today has grown broader than it was in the Middle Ages, and it is not necessarily tied to Christianity as it was then, when kings were anointed by the Church (Allen 5).

2.1. The King and the Knights of the Round Table

This chapter introduces one of the most important characters in Arthurian romance. Arthur's knights are his closest companions and participate in most adventures and quests. All the brave and successful knights gathered at Arthur's court, where they were recognised by their king and where they gained their popularity. Arthur is often described as a just and merciful ruler, loved by his people. He is a great warrior who protects his kingdom well. Camelot is the symbol of Arthur's reign, a prosperous city where its people live safely protected by their king and his knights: "Even today, centuries after the composition of the King Arthur stories, most people know that Arthur ruled a kingdom governed by justice and chivalry, where the people lived in safety because of their strong king and his mighty Round Table" (Bedwell 3). In the stories, the tradition of romance rarely touches Arthur himself, but rather his knights, who are the ones carrying most of the narrative. The King is not the one who performs brave deeds because he has others to do them instead: "In the romance tradition, Arthur would not join a feast until someone reported or provoked high adventure, and it is in the context of such feasts that Lancelot is prompted to save Guinevere, Perceval demands his knighthood, and, with the irony of a slightly later age, Gawain faces the horrible but grand Green Knight" (Allen 7).

In fact, as Williams states, there are instances in which the King even appears passive (79). For instance, when Arthur's Queen is being insulted by the Red Knight who throws the contents of his goblet at her, he only sits at the table and waits for one of his knights to avenge the insult. He also lets Guinevere to be taken away by Meleagant after which Sir Kay is the one who goes to rescue her. However, in the original form of the story about abduction (told by Caradoc of Llancarfan) Arthur searched for her for a year before he found her (Williams 79-80). In one of the tales, Arthur killed the Black Witch, daughter of the White Witch from the Head of the Valley of Grief in the highlands of Hell, whose blood was needed to trim the beard of

Yspaddaden on his wedding day. However, his party believed that it was not fitting for a king to do such a thing (Williams 82).

Richard Kaeuper describes many deeds done by Arthur's knights (oftentimes including violence), but portrays them as skilled and competent in battle, ready to achieve what is required for Arthur's glory:

> We need to remember that all of this violence was effected by a knight's own skilled hands; chivalry was not simply a species of officership distanced from the bloody work with swords and spears. Summing up hundreds of years of this tradition, Sir Thomas Malory, writing his Morte Darthur in the late fifteenth century, refers time and again to the wondrous work done by his knights' hands, firmly gripping their weapons. (Kaeuper 100)

The knights were chosen by Arthur's close and distant relations, and some of the most famous are: Sir Agravain, Sir Pellinore, Sir Bedivere, and Sir Kay. Important to mention are also Sir Gawain, Sir Percival, Sir Tristan, and Sir Lancelot who are chosen to be protagonists of their own heroic tales: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," "Perceval, the Story of the Grail" and "Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart" by Chrétien de Troyes, and there are various versions of the story of "Tristan and Isolde."

Knights from the court have individual impressive descriptions and characteristics; each with very unique traits, they play a significant role in the stories. One of the most prominent and important knights is Lancelot, or Lancelot du Lac. He was the son of King Ban of Benwick and Queen Elaine. He is known to be the greatest swordsman and fighter among the Knights of the Round Table, especially known for his modesty and chivalry, as well as intelligence and charm ("Sir Lancelot"). Lancelot is well-known for his unparalleled skill in combat, often portrayed as the best warrior among the knights: "Faithfully, said Sir Turquine, his name is Sir Launcelot du Lake, for he slew my brother, Sir Carados, at the dolorous tower, that was one of the best knights alive; and therefore him I except of all knights, for may I once meet him, the one of us shall make an end of other, I make avow" (Malory 157). Lancelot symbolises knightly perfection and the capacity for greatness as well as imperfection evident in his love affair with Guinevere: "he worships the queen, we are told, with more ardor than he does any holy relic" (qtd. in Gaunt 53).

Sir Kay is Sir Ector's son and Arthur's foster brother. He is presented as an exceptionally tall and fierce warrior, and, according to legends, he has supernatural powers ("Sir Kay").

Williams further describes: “Kei could breathe nine nights and nine days under water, could exist nine nights and nine days without sleep. A valuable man was Kei. When it pleased him he became as tall as the loftiest tree in the forest. When it rained hardest all that he bore in his hand remained dry for a palm's breadth above and below, so great was his natural heat: it would light a fire for his comrades when they suffered most from the cold” (81).

Sir Bedivere was present at the “Last Battle” at Camlann when Arthur was wounded and taken to Avalon (“Sir Bedivere”); Arthur gave him Excalibur with the command to throw it into the Lake, where the hand of the Lady of the Lake rose to catch it and take it back under the water (Malory 736). Some tales describe Sir Bedivere as the most handsome man in the world, and he is said to be Arthur’s most loyal companion and supporter until the end of his life. His distinctive ability was speed: “Bedwyr (Sir Bedivere) was a swift runner: his spear made one wound when inserted, but nine when drawn out” (Williams 81).

Sir Galahad is the son of Sir Percival and a lady Elaine (“Sir Galahad”). He is famous for his purity and divine favour, as he is one of the three knights that were chosen to undertake the quest for the Holy Grail: “Galahad maintains an unparalleled display of Christian virtue within the Arthurian chivalric community and consequently achieves a friendship with Christ” (Sévère 53). Sévère describes him as the “ideal candidate for achieving the Grail and spiritual friendship” (54), recounting him completing with ease the tests set up for the knights before being admitted into the fellowship of the Grail.

Sir Gawain is often referred to as one of the greatest knights of the Round Table, along with Sir Lancelot (“Sir Gawain”). However, he is often presented as being overshadowed by Lancelot or Percival. He possesses valour and commitment to knightly ideals. Thomas Hahn calls him a “traditional champion” rather than a popular hero. In earliest stories Gawain was loved as the great defender of the king and was associated with heroes of exceptional strength (218). Although his role in the Quest for the Holy Grail is significant, it is marked by his failure to achieve the Grail, which is attributed to his imperfections and lack of spiritual purity (compared to knights like Galahad). “Malory tells us that on the Grail quest Gawain heard more about his sins (especially his heedless killings) from a hermit-confessor than he wanted, and so hurried off, using the excuse that his companion, Sir Ector, was waiting for him” (Kaeuper 105).

2.2. The Sword of Arthur

There is one significant legend to tell in relation to Arthur and that is the legend of Arthur's sword, Excalibur. Excalibur is one of the most famous swords in history, and very often magical properties are also ascribed to it. According to Joshua Mark, Geoffrey of Monmouth writes about the sword, calling it Caliburn (its Latinised name, also Caliburnus), and its being forged on the Isle of Avalon, although it did not play a particular role in his version of Arthur's legend. Geoffrey probably took inspiration from an Irish legend about a sword called Caladbolg ("Excalibur"). There are a lot of versions of how the sword came into Arthur's possession, one of the most famous being the one told in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur.* He names the sword Excalibur, saying the meaning of it is "cut-steel" (46). Excalibur eventually becomes associated with the "Sword in the Stone," and in some sources the two are believed to be one and the same.

According to Mark, the first person to write about the "Sword in the Stone" is Robert de Boron in his French poem "Merlin" in the twelfth century ("Excalibur"), where he writes that the sword stands in an anvil, although it is later changed to stone. According to *New World Encyclopedia*, the *Vulgate Cycle* presents the Sword in the Stone as a different blade than Excalibur, and this version is also taken by Malory and the majority of other Arthurian writers ("Excalibur"). It is made obvious that the Sword in the Stone and Excalibur are not the same when the Sword from the Stone gets broken. Merlin then takes Arthur to the Lady of the Lake, who gives Arthur a special magical sword. This version of the story comes from French Arthurian literature, a work called *Suite du Merlin*, from the thirteenth century, which Malory also took for his English version. The Lady of the Lake rises from the lake and provides Arthur with the sword she calls Excalibur after he broke his sword in a fight with King Pellinore. When Arthur lays dying and Sir Bedivere throws Excalibur into the lake, Arthur asks him what he saw, and the answer is a hand rising from the water and catching the sword, taking it back under the water with itself (Malory 738).

3. Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*

According to Stephanie L. Budin, Sir Thomas Malory's book was one of the first books to be published by William Caxton via Johannes Gutenberg's printing press in 1485. Malory wrote this work while he was in prison, and it is evident that there he had access to an excellent library (7-17). Sir Thomas Malory was born in 1416 in a noble family from Warwickshire and was noted as a member of the Parliament in 1445. He is said to have been an "honourable and gallant member" (Field 104). As stated by Budin, after some time a change of character is detected followed by a number of crimes committed after the year 1450: a murder attempt on the Duke of Buckingham, burglary of the Coombe Abbey, theft, vandalism, extortion, even rape. He was arrested and imprisoned in 1452. After several turbulent years in prison and changing custodies, he was finally liberated in 1460 but imprisoned again in 1468 (17). He wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* during his second imprisonment. Field believes he wrote it with his own interpretation while the historical and political events of the time may have influenced the events of the story to a minor extent (123). Malory was pardoned again in 1470 and died as a wealthy man in 1471. As Lexton confirms, William Caxton intentionally sold the work as a history of the great King Arthur (173).

Roberta L. Krueger explains that chivalric romance as a genre presents the splendour and culture of medieval courts and households across Europe, while the narrative can often serve as a representation of the reality of those times (1). Romance is often used as a tool to represent society from the author's perspective: "Romances of all national origins are remarkable for their authors' capacity to remake their shared stories anew in different contexts and to reposition their ethical systems as they respond to particular audiences, in distinct geographic locations and social contexts – often with a critical perspective that calls social ideals or practices into question" (Krueger 1).

Budin reminds the reader that the original *Le Morte* had only eight chapters: "The Tale of King Arthur", "The Tale of King Arthur and Emperor Lucius", "The Tale of Sir Lancelot du Lake", "The Tale of Sir Gareth", "The Book of Sir Tristram of Lyonesse", "The Tale of the Sangreal", "The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere", and "Le Morte d'Arthur" (18). Malory named the book *The Whole Book of King Arthur and His Noble Knights of the Round Table,* but William Caxton later shortened it and gave it the name of the final chapter. It seems

that Caxton believed that the medieval reading public had a short attention span, since he divided the book into 507 chapters in twenty-one books.

The work of Sir Thomas Malory is considered to be one of the most important works of Arthurian literature, as Elliott calls it the centre to which all others are connected (1). In addition to its significance, this thesis analyses *Le Morte d'Arthur* also because of its profound storytelling and depiction of characters. Among many of Elliott's arguments about the exceptionality of *Le Morte,* the element that influenced the critics to accept the work as canon is in the accessibility to the public with the modern and easily understandable language, as well as the skilful synthesis and creation of literary excellence (6).

3.1. Fantastical Elements in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*

According to Allen, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought romance to its peak, and he argues that this cannot be a coincidence since people were influenced by the prolific Arthurian literature combined with the tradition of romance (7). Medieval romance developed in the mid-twelfth century, during the time of the feudal system when the concept of knighthood was an integral part of European society. The stories functioned as entertainment as well as a means of promoting and idealising the knightly code of conduct (Krueger 1-5). Arthurian romances were also a popular subject of French romances, which had an important role in the development of medieval European literature. While Arthurian romance did not originate in French literature, many of the Arthurian elements were formed there: the Round Table, Lancelot and Guinevere's love story, and the quest for the Holy Grail (Lacy 167*).* Malory also took these elements for his *Le Morte.* Although Malory consulted various sources to create *Le Morte d'Arthur,* the work is his own interpretation and creation of those sources: "He often works from two or more sources to construct his own account of events, and he never hesitates to alter or simply suppress material that does not accord with his vision. He thus redefines character, event, and the tone of the work as a whole" (Lacy 179). As Riddy explains, it is uncommon for a work about King Arthur to encompass his whole life, from his conception to his death. Most other chronicles that mention Arthur do not give a complete story of his life as a whole (248).

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the fantastical elements presented in Malory's book, since, as Elliott explains, his way of connecting parts of different origin is the one which most of

the later authors took for their own versions of the Arthurian legend (1). Such elements are: the magical sword Excalibur and its scabbard, the Sword in the Stone, characters like Merlin and Morgan le Fay, and the Lady of the Lake, who hold great significance to the storyline with their magical powers.

The book begins with Uther's wish to lay with Igraine, the duke of Cornwall's wife, and the events that lead to Uther's and Merlin's deception by using magic and the creation of a child by Uther and Igraine. Arthur is born with the help of magic, which alters the course of future events for him as a future king of Britain. Due to his ability to see the future, Merlin learned of Arthur's destiny and had taken him to grow up away from the court. The element of the incredible Sword in the Stone holds integral significance to Arthur's life: he is the One who pulls the sword out of the stone, while no other man succeeds. As a boy, Arthur becomes King and proves himself to be the exceptional leader that Britain needs. The purpose of the Sword in the Stone serves to secure the throne for Arthur, and after that it breaks. Since Arthur needs a sword, Merlin takes him to see the Lady of the Lake: "With that they saw a damsel going upon the lake. 'What damosel is that?' said Arthur. 'That is the Lady of the Lake,' said Merlin; 'and within that lake is a rock, and therein is as fair a place as any on earth, and richly beseen; and this damosel will come to you anon, and then speak ye fair to her that she will give you that sword'" (Malory 36-37).

The peculiarity of the encounter is that Arthur took the sword from a hand that held it sticking out of the water, and after that the hand and the arm went back under the water. This sword is later named by the Lady "Excalibur." The sword is described in many legends as mighty and the best sword to ever exist, but, according to Merlin, it is not Excalibur that is so extraordinary but its scabbard: "Whether liketh you better, said Merlin, the sword or the scabbard? Me liketh better the sword, said Arthur. Ye are more unwise, said Merlin, for the scabbard is worth ten of the swords, for whiles ye have the scabbard upon you, ye shall never lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded; therefore keep well the scabbard always with you" (Malory 37). The importance of the scabbard becomes more evident later in the story when Arthur's sister, Morgan le Fay, steals the scabbard in hope of defeating Arthur by giving him a false sword for his battle with Accolon (whom Arthur manages to kill even after his sword breaks). After her defeat, Morgan takes the magical scabbard and throws it into a lake, the event

which can later be described as a cause for Arthur's doom in his final battle with Mordred (Malory 102).

Conclusion

King Arthur is a character created both from history and fiction and is one of the most enduring figures in British literature. Arthur acquires the throne very young, and soon after becomes one of the greatest warriors of the land. This warrior develops into a hero written and spoken about in all later ages.

The purpose of the research was to explore how much of the literary details ascribed to the story of Arthur were real, and to what extent history and fiction merged and created a tale rich in adventure, myth, and magic. Many aspects of the Arthurian legend probably have roots in historical events and persons. Still, records confirm that the elements that created the figure of Arthur that is known today have been taken from folk tales and produced by writers. This paper aimed to discover the potential truth behind the various components of the legend and hoped to understand how scholars have traced and interpreted different links over time. By analysing the work of Sir Thomas Malory, it becomes clear how fantastical elements became interwoven with historical aspects.

The legend is deeply rooted in medieval romance and myth, as well as traditional tales, it has been retold through centuries, evolving with each new version to reflect the values and social difficulties of different eras. In medieval times, Arthurian stories were told specifically to imagine life at court and courtly love, as the public was entertained by the stories of knights and their quests. In particular, Sir Thomas Malory's romance remains one of the best-told versions of the Arthurian legend. Contemporary times have adapted the legend into modern art and literature, as well as in film, which demonstrates the stories' eternal influence.

Arthur represents the idealised warrior whose figure embodies bravery, honour, justice, and kingship. He stands as a symbol of leadership and morality, often described as the perfect ruler. This representation has allowed the Arthurian legend to continue as a powerful tale that the public will always appreciate regardless of the historical inaccuracies.

To conclude, this paper shows the development of Arthur's character, its historical link with the much more prolific fantastical literature. This research focuses on the evolution of the

Arthurian legend from its possible historical origins and the many literary additions, and the formation of a narrative which blends fiction and fact. The legend of King Arthur remains a popular narrative that continues to evolve, thus exhibiting the universal human interest for heroic tales full of magic and adventure.

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