The Once Factual and Future Fictional King:

Historical Retellings as Reflections of Cultural Zeitgeists

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Table of Contents

A note on the title: The phrase "The Once and Future King" most famously references the title of T. H. White's retelling of the King Arthur legends. Its origins, however, lie in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* as the phrase inscribed on Arthur's tombstone: *Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus*.[1]

[1] See Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur, or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, translated by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), 689.

Introduction

> "I started to imagine a story that could explain the pattern of loss in my family, which led me to ask: 'Whose lives and losses get memorialized and whose get forgotten?' For most Black Americans, this question is fraught due to the impact of enslavement and the loss of family history, names, stories. That's where King Arthur showed up. To me, there was a natural connection from my question about real lives that we don't know about to this fifteen hundred year old idea about a man who may or may not have existed, but whose life and death are considered epic and legendary."[2]
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> —Tracy Deonn, 23 March 2021

In 2007, while sitting in the Atlanta airport, Tracy Deonn opened her laptop and wrote a scene about a young girl talking to the receptionist of her residence hall, trying to get into her dorm room. This scene would eventually become *Legendborn*, the first novel of The Legendborn Cycle trilogy, a young adult contemporary-fantasy. The novel follows Bree Matthews, a sixteen-year-old Black girl attending an Early College program for advanced students at UNC-Chapel Hill. Her first night on campus, Bree encounters the "Legendborn," a secret society comprised of the heirs to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Bree uncovers connections between the Legendborn and her mother's death, and spends the rest of the novel investigating their secret society, managing her burgeoning magical abilities, and navigating the systemic and institutional racism at UNC. Published on September 15, 2020, *Legendborn* became one of many Arthurian retellings of the twenty-first century, and one of a growing tradition of adaptations that feature characters of color, written by women and authors of color.

When Deonn started *Legendborn*, King Arthur had no place in the story. In her words, "Arthur came along for the ride…It's not about King Arthur; it's about Bree."[3] After her mother died, Deonn "learned I was in the third consecutive generation of daughters who lost their

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[2] Tracy Deonn, "FAQ: What inspired you to write Legendborn?," (Tracy Deonn, 2020), https://www.tracydeonn.com/faq

[3] Tracy Deonn, "*Legendborn* Virtual Tour: Tracy Deonn in Conversation" interviewed by Daniel José Older, Brain Lair Books YouTube, 12 May, 2021, 26:13.

mothers at a young age" and though she wanted to "compare notes" with her female relatives, she realized, "that's not how my story works. Instead, I wrote my own explanation."[4] Bree's story began as a way for Deonn to sort through her own grief, to investigate the lost history in her family. Arthuriana wound its way into *Legendborn* because of its fifteen-hundred-year-long history, because of the narrative possibility centuries of retold stories offered Deonn.

Deonn drew on a range of sources to craft *Legendborn,* including texts by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory, which she mentioned by name in the novel. In *The History of the Kings of Britain,* Geoffrey of Monmouth recorded the lineages of Britain's rulers, from the descendants of warriors leaving Troy and establishing a foothold on the island to the seventh-century kings who practiced cannibalism as they faced Anglo-Saxon enemies. He wrote the text in Latin and finished the book between 1136 and 1138. Geoffrey dedicated roughly three of the twelve total chapters to Arthur and his father. Iconic characters like Morgan, Lancelot, and the Knights of the Round Table do not appear in this foundational version of the Arthurian legend.

The History follows the chronicle format, a style which lists events one after the other. Of medieval historiography, Helen Fulton wrote, "[it] can be summarized as the juxtaposition of events paratactically, without causative links; the lack of a sense of anachronism; and a disregard for evidence…" all features which historians today generally consider bad practice.[5] Rather than condemn these stylistic differences, Fulton asserted that "they simply reveal a different set of priorities and ideologies, an alternative epistemology" which result from "the standard practice of keeping historical records in the form of year-by-year chronicles and annals."[6] Geoffrey's *History* presents information in this way, moving swiftly through descriptions of each king with

[4] Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn*, (Manhattan, NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2022), 495.
[5] Helen Fulton, "History and Myth: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnum Britanniae*" in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, edited by Helen Fulton, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 47.
[6] Fulton, "History and Myth," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Fulton, 47.

episodes of war and relational conflicts interspersed. The story Geoffrey wrote of Arthur's life, though it depicted his marriage to Guinevere, his many successes in battle, and administration of his kingdom, thus exists as a brief record rather than a narrative account. Absent from the *History* are the characters' interior thoughts or reflections on the events at hand, told in their own voiced narration. Geoffrey acted as the narrator, occasionally communicating information about his characters' feelings, but he did not let his characters speak for themselves like an author might in a literary story. This style rendered the text historical, even though the people and events it contained were invented.

Thomas Malory, on the other hand, dedicated two volumes, over seven hundred pages, to the life of Arthur and his Knights. *Le Morte d'Arthur,* literary rather than a purportedly historical account, dramatized the events of Arthur's life, provided more insight to his thoughts and emotions, and imparted moral messages. Arthur became a fuller character in Malory's *Morte,* and his adventures and exploits addressed a wider range of issues. His text, which he finished sometime between 1469 and 1470, was printed in Middle English. Though Malory wrote within the generic confines of chivalric literature and chronicle traditions and focused on the aristocracy, Andrew Lynch noted that the interests of the gentry featured prominently. The *Morte* covered topics "from religious observance, battles, tournaments, and love to marriage, genealogy and inheritance, law, hunting, land management, and table manners" and served a multitude of purposes, such as "a history of Britain's greatest era, a study of great kingship, a record of notable deeds of arms, a model of good conduct and deportment, a story of faithful love, and a work that inculcated religious piety."[7] Malory developed Arthur's personality in the *Morte,*

[7] Andrew Lynch, "Malory's Morte *Darthur* and History" in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, edited by Helen Fulton, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 303.

compared to his character is Geoffrey's *History*. The benefit of a literary chronicle, rather than a historical one, was the freedom for Malory to explore beyond the main events of Arthur's life (his conception, coronation, marriage, and war with Rome). In addition to Arthur's story, Malory wrote sections about the quest for the Holy Grail; the knights Lancelot, Tristan, Gawain, and others; and he assigned prominent roles to women such as Queen Guinevere and Morgan le Fey.

The Arthurian texts written by Geoffrey and Malory differed in part because the generic styles of historical chronicle and literary chronicle had different tenets. Arthuriana as Deonn wrote it conformed to the expectations of a twenty-first-century young adult audience of contemporary fantasy. However, the historical context of each author shaped their writing alongside the requirements of genre. Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn each wrote about Arthur (if not also Guinevere, Merlin, Morgan, and the Knights of the Round Table) in three different centuries with three different political interests, relationships to history, and purposes. Arthur's identity changed from that of a living, historical figure (albeit a legendary one) to an invention of authorial imagination, and his story endured through civil wars, printing revolutions, and the invention of television. This particular narrative has proven to be malleable and enduring and has garnered interest from a diversity of authors. What qualities of the Arthurian legend have attracted authors in various genres to retell it since Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote the first account of the British warrior king, nine hundred years ago? What does Arthur's dual identity as historical fact and historical fiction reveal about the relationship between historiography and storytelling—and can fiction bring knowledge of the past to light in ways that precise historical writing cannot?

This thesis analyzes the historical, political, and cultural contexts that influenced Geoffrey of Monmouth, Sir Thomas Malory, and Tracy Deonn when they wrote their respective

texts on King Arthur. The relationship between an author and the time period when they write is reciprocal: a particular event can influence their writing just as an author can shape the depiction of that event in their record. Therefore, in addition to considering how history influenced what the authors wrote about Arthur, I investigate how each text represents and reflects the time when it was written—the twelfth century for *The History of the Kings of Britain*, the fifteenth for *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and the twenty-first for *Legendborn.* The emergence of new genres, changing audiences (and an author's shifting awareness of their audience), and evolving definitions of history impacted the way Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn wrote their Arthurian narratives; I aim to discover how the zeitgeist of different time periods affected the portrayal of the same characters and plotlines.

This thesis considers three primary texts, which represent Arthurian stories from different historical periods: *The History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the first text to compile disparate stories about Arthur into a single narrative; *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, perhaps the most well-known adaptation and one that combined various French stories about the Round Table into a cohesive chronicle; and *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn, a modern retelling that centered the experiences of a Black girl within the Arthurian tradition. I use both Michael A. Faletra's and Lewis Thorpe's translations of Geoffrey's *History*. Faletra contextualized *The History of the Kings of Britain* with events from Geoffrey's lifetime, in both his introduction and translation style, and he drew attention to Geoffrey's role in developing a colonialist history which framed the Welsh as "barbaric descendants of the ancient Britons, now

stripped of their right to sovereignty."[8] Thorpe questioned the nature of history as it related to Geoffrey's text and, like Faletra, situated the text in relation to Geoffrey's life.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was not the only influential figure to allege the historicity of Arthur. Malory's contemporary, William Caxton, credited with first introducing the printing press to England, published a collection of historical records titled *The Cronycles of England*. He included Arthur in his lineage of kings.[9] Both Caxton and Geoffrey presented their works as historical texts, which indicates one Oxford-educated scholar and England's premiere printer asserted that Arthur lived and ruled Britain (or at least wrote histories that supported this idea). A few years later, Caxton published Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, one of the best-known works of Arthuriana. While it is less clear if Malory believed Arthur was a historical person and intended to publish a true account of his life or was writing a purely fictional work (as *Le Morte d'Arthur* was literature rather than a historical chronicle), Arthur's historicity had yet to be fully debunked. He was included in historical works in the three hundred years between the publication of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1138) and when Malory's publication of *Le Morte d'Arthur* (c. 1485). Even in the late-sixteenth century, Raphael Holinshed wrote a series of chronicles on the history of England which included Arthur in the lineage of kings.[10]

Polydore Vergil, the court historian of King Henry VII and Italian Renaissance scholar of the mid-sixteenth century, fully debunked Arthur. During the Tudor period, English writers

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[8] Michael Faletra, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's The History of the Kings of Britain," (Weebly, 2008), https://michaelfaletra.weebly.com/the-history-of-the-kings-of-britain.html. Accessed 4 October 2022. See also Faletra's *Introduciton* his translation of Geoffrey.

[9] William Caxton, *The Cronycles of England*, (London: William Caxton, 8 October 1482), accessed via Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011.

[10] See Raphael Holinshed, "Chronicles 1 (of 6): The Historie of England, Book 5 (of 8)." Project Gutenberg. Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, August 20, 2005.
Holinshed's *Chronicle* is most famous for being Shakespeare's source for his historical plays.

"found the medieval construct progressively more difficult to accept" as Geoffrey's *History* failed to meet the burden of proof applied to purportedly historical works.[11] Political unrest under the Stuarts accelerated this process, such that "the dominant English historical enterprise changed dramatically, [and] Arthur's political utility dissipated and he became both discredited historically and a marginalized figure in English history."[12] Arthur served a political function, from Geoffrey to Malory, but it ran its course and he was thus displaced from the historical record. Despite Geoffrey Ashe's conclusion that *The History of the Kings of Britain* is "more or less historical, and based fairly on recognized records,"[13] the mix of historical and fictional elements, especially in the Arthurian section, did not survive the skepticism of the Renaissance and beyond.

These historical chronicles all raise the question of what *counts* as history. It is difficult to know if Geoffrey, Caxton, Malory, and Holinshed wrote their texts with the primary intention to provide a faithful account of the past for the acquisition of historical knowledge or for literary, entertainment purposes. The approach to writing about the past in Geoffrey of Monmouth's time—and even in Malory's—was not what it is today. Histories were often written for the purpose of moral instruction. The line between myth and fact blurred; authors wrote for the sake of a narrative rather than complete accuracy. Medieval historians located reality in "an invisible realm of spirit" and thus used literary devices like allusions, allegory, and tropes to represent events within the context of the invisible.[14] The current theories on history, how it is told, and its purpose stem from Leopold von Ranke's influential text, *Geschichten der romanischen und*

[11] N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 270.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Geoffrey Ashe, "'A Certain Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History," *Speculum* 56, no. 2 (1981), 318.
[14] Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, 18.

germanischen. However, Ranke did not reset history in an instant.[15] The concept of history evolved through the centuries, beginning—in the case of Arthuriana—when Renaissance scholars rejected King Arthur as a true historical figure and ceased including the stories about him in written histories. Though there was no single moment when scholars determined Arthur was a legend, not a fact of history, they questioned his veracity throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this way, Caxton and Holinshed could include Arthur in their historical works at nearly the same time Malory wrote of Arthur in prose fiction.

Historiography produces written narratives about the past and interrogates how historians write about the past. Thus, while history—the events that have occurred previous to our current moment—remains the same, the narratives *of* history—the historiographies—evolve and change. With each retelling, historians construct a particular narrative of past events; they include and omit specific details and perspectives to serve a particular purpose. Though they are constrained by their discipline to follow the evidence in primary source documents in a way that literary authors are not, both share the need to read between the lines and interpret the past based on the vision and narrative they use to connect events and retell the past. The act of composing an account of a historical event, based on all the evidence available, is still an act of writing. The historian writes a narrative in much the same way an author does.

I use Hayden White's theory of emplotment to understand the techniques all three authors used to write their Arthurian stories, their own version of a particular history. White defined emplotment as "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures," a process used to transform chronicles into stories, which, when done

[15] J.D. Braw, "Vision as Revision: Ranke and the Beginning of Modern History," *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007): 45–60.

successfully, helps "histories gain part of their explanatory effect."[16] He called this "a literary…fiction-making, operation…that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge."[17] Geoffrey's text most of all blurred the line between history and fiction, but Malory and Deonn both incorporated dates and details of setting that lent their works historical authenticity. They straddled genres. Thus, it is not only useful but essential to read their works through a historical lens that accounts for literary conventions, as White's does.

Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman employed a similar understanding of historical truth in their investigation of Arthur. They wrote, "The raw data that we call evidence in history must always be shaped into a narrative, and that narrative will always exist in tension with the 'facts'" and that the historian's challenge is to identify the interplay between fact and fiction.[18] Further, they situated their approach in the context of medieval historiography:

> Historical events come into being already fully textualized, their cultural meanings already the subject of disputation, struggle, and conflict. After all, history comes to us largely through documents; we almost never have access to the events themselves. (This point is, if anything, more obviously true when we are studying medieval history.) The events of the past are always already bound up in textuality, in the struggle among competing discourses to define the meaning of events...[19]

This theory, alongside White's, guides my analysis of Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn. Thorpe himself questioned all historians if they truly understood what "historical fact" meant in the context of Geoffrey's work and pushed to read *The History of the Kings of Britain* as a prose-epic to better understand its relationship to history.[20] I seek to understand how the paradoxical

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[16] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." *Clio* 3, no. 3 (Jun 01, 1974), 280
[17] White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," 283.
[18] Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 11.
[19] Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, 12.
[20] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe, (London, England: Penguin Book, 1996), 28.

and evolving nature of history impacted the Arthurian texts Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn produced, and to what to extent their texts reflect shifting attitudes.

Deonn's book did not receive the same scrutiny and criticism of historical authenticity. The story was advertised as a contemporary-fantasy—its goal was not to represent what really happened to a Bree Matthews because she was a work of fiction. However, it is an exemplar of an author utilizing a historically-inspired fiction used for socio-political commentary. *Legendborn* proves how contextual analysis of Arthurian stories can aid in the writing of more inclusive historical sources and historically-inspired fictions. Published in 2020, *Legendborn* entered the world in the wake of COVID-19, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, and the actions of far-right groups to restrict access to healthcare for women and trans children. The story addresses racism, sexism, and colonialism rather than courtly values, table manners, or land management. Conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion have moved to the forefront of the national consciousness and remained there since Deonn released *Legendborn*. The publishing world also responded, with non-profit organizations like We Need Diverse Books calling for structural changes in publishing houses to support marginalized authors. Scholars and historians published or re-released historical accounts that reframed Eurocentric narratives and centered Black Americans, like Pulitzer Prize winner Nikole Hannah-Jones'[21] *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*[22] and Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped (For Kids)*.

[21] Like Deonn, Hannah-Jones is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill. UNC denied Hannah-Jones tenure in 2021, and she left the university to join Howard University's School of Journalism. For more, see Helen Young and Kavita Mudan Finn, *Global Medievalism: An Introduction*, Elements in the Global Middle Ages, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 51-52.

[22] According to its summary in the New York Times Magazine, the initiative "aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative." In addition to Hannah-Jones' articles, *The 1619 project* also includes work from Anne Bailey and Kevin Kruse, SUNY and Princeton historians, respectively, lawyers, and sociologists.

The secondary sources for this paper include introductory anthologies, historical examinations of Arthur, and adjacent analyses from feminist and critical race studies. Helen Fulton's *A Companion to Arthurian Literature* provides a chronological overview of the adaptations and reiterations of Arthur stories, including an analysis of the feminist historical fiction, *Mists of Avalon*.[23] This anthology, and others, are part of the branch of Arthurian scholarship concerned with cataloguing change over time. They are guides through the expansive quagmire of Arthuriana in all its forms.

Moving beyond anthologies, scholars have also questioned what genre the Arthurian stories belong to—legend or history—and how choosing one categorization affects the reading of Arthurian and British history. Two books, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* by N. J. Higham and *King Arthur and the Myth of History* by Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman, investigated Arthur's existence as myth, fact, and fiction over time and how different reiterations reflect cultural zeitgeists. Higham concluded, "What prevails throughout, however, is the potency of contemporary political and cultural values and the ways in which different histories were constructed to serve those values…"[24] Finke and Shichtman asserted, "that pseudohistories can, and should, be read as historical documents that enable the historiographer to explore the social and political agendas of the cultures that produce them" and that "the Arthurian pseudohistories of the Middle Ages were authorized as history because they could contain and advance culturally useful agendas."[25] While Fulton's anthology related to Arthurian literature and its interpretation throughout time, these books made specific inquiry in the field of history. Specifically, they identified the value of reading early works of Arthuriana, like Geoffrey's

[23] Helen Fulton, *A Companion to Arthurian Literature* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
[24] N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 264-265.
[25] Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 215 and 220.

History, and demonstrated how Arthurian texts are intertwined with their current political moment.

Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter and *The Myth of Morgan La Fey* have a more focused scope, utilizing a single critical lens for a specific character. Jill Herbert and Kristina Pérez both conducted a feminist analysis, investigating Morgan Le Fay's inclusion and absence in various retellings and extracting what her depictions reveal about gender roles throughout time.[26] Pérez wrote, "Despite being relegated to the edge of the narrative structure, Morgan la Fey remains an uncontrollable, powerful female figure—both Mother and Lover—who actually holds the entire Arthurian tradition together."[27] Of Morgana's multifaceted nature, Herbert concluded, "Authors and scholars from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century have used Morgan's fluidity to explore concepts of femininity, monstrousness, resistance, identity, and the meaning of change itself. Her myriad forms provide an opportunity to comment on contemporary social expectations…"[28] These analyses were literary in nature, considering Morgan's characterization and symbolism in Arthurian stories. While they addressed some elements of history to contextualize various Arthurian works, they viewed Morgan more as a narrative device.

Various interviews, podcasts, and articles by Deonn offer crucial insight to her research process, purpose, and understanding of *Legendborn* in relationship to history. "Restorying Arthurian Legend: Space, Place and Time in *Once & Future* and *Legendborn*" by Elizabeth Elliot examined inclusion and diversity in modern Arthur retellings. This type of analysis is vital to my theoretical approach and the future of historical Arthurian scholarship. In order to understand the implications of Arthuriana's dual existence as myth and history, I must explore

[26] Jill M Hebert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and Kristina Pérez, *The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[27] Pérez, *The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, 14.
[28] Herbert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, 153.

the power historical records have over the national consciousness in terms of diversity and inclusion.

A recent publication combined the chronological compilation style used by Fulton with the inclusion-oriented approach of the above scholars. *Global Medievalism: An Introduction* by Helen Young and Kavita Mudan Finn challenged the Eurocentric depictions of western popular medievalism and seeks instead to illustrate how the Middle Ages should be presented based on global historical accounts.[29] The concept of the Middle Ages is based on the touchstone between Rome and modernity—it's a Eurocentric concept that functions in a specific geographic region. It is not a modifier one can apply to the same era of Chinese history. Young and Funn sought to recontexualize the medieval by conducting a mobile study of Eurasia during the "medieval" period. It is a new type of anthology, one that responds to the modern and pressing call for more world histories in academia and diverse novels inspired by said histories.

My approach synthesizes historical accounts of Arthur, retellings of Arthurian legends throughout time, and the historical context of each retelling to understand what each story reveals about the values of that time period (based on the authors' writings of particular characters and themes). Further, I investigate what those details reveal about historical accounts and historically-inspired stories today. While previous scholars have studied Arthur in a primarily historical or primarily literary discipline, I analyze his character with a hybrid lens, based on the theories put forth by White, Finke, and Shichtman. My analysis unites these historical-literary projects to divine not only the political, social, and cultural structures each author sought to uphold with their writings, but also to demonstrate how the confluence of myth and history from the beginning of Arthuriana to today proves the subjectivity and malleability of

[29] Helen Young and Kavita Mudan Finn, *Global Medievalism: An Introduction*, Elements in the Global Middle Ages, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

historical accounts, the nature of which is determined by the biases of the author. Within a historical study, I apply a literary approach, developed by historians, to three quasi-historical works to determine how each represents the time period in which it was written and thus understand its impact on historiography.

The following three chapters analyze *The History of the Kings of Britain*, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and *Legendborn*, respectively. In each text, I examine instances of colonialism, the societal position of women, and the presence of the supernatural to gain an understanding of the twelfth, fifteenth, and twenty-first centuries. I also take the opposite approach and inquire how each author incorporated colonialism, gender roles, and the supernatural in their work as a reflection of their time period. By examining the stories of King Arthur with a historical lens that accounts for the literary aspects of historiography, I reveal how the contemporary circumstances of Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn affected their writing of the same core story. John Steinbeck, in an appendix to *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, his adaptation of Malory's work, wrote, "So many scholars have spent so much time trying to establish whether Arthur existed at all that they have lost track of the single truth that he exists over and over again."[30] Rather than attempt to prove Arthur's existence, as historians and archeologists have done, I analyze the ways in which Arthur existed for different groups of people in different time periods. He is the once and future king, after all. Arthur exemplifies the process of historical facts becoming historical fictions. It is precisely the paradox of his identity that gave Arthurian stories the elasticity to survive for fifteen hundred years, which the following comparison and historical contextualization shows.

[30] John Steinbeck, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, based on the work of Sir Thomas Malory, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976).

Chapter One: Historicizing a King

Geoffrey hailed from Monmouthshire, an area on the border of British and Welsh lands. He was born between 1090 and 1105, roughly thirty years after The Battle of Hastings; he grew up and wrote his works contemporaneously to the Normans solidifying their rule of Britain. The Normans displaced the previous Anglo-Saxon rulers, who themselves had pushed out the Celtic Britons inhabiting the land before.[31] Though these people were all what we would today consider "white," they were ethnically diverse, with a long history of conflict and intermingling. Ancient Britons—also called the Celts—migrated from Europe and conquered parts of Britain and the people living there. The Romans captured Britain in 43 CE and brought it into their empire, but after the Roman army withdrew, around 410 CE, the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons took over. It was these groups of people who fought the Vikings raiders and eventually lost to William the Conqueror of Normandy. The Britons who survived centuries of incursions and escaped assimilation became the Welsh and Cornish—Wales, where the stories of King Arthur originated, and Cornwall, home of Tintagel Castle where Arthur was conceived.[32] Geoffrey of Monmouth lived and wrote during a time of political upheaval and ethnic collision. He himself was a Breton—an ethnic group similar to the Welsh and descendents of the Britons—and, as Faletra noted, he might "have felt that he occupied a precarious position in the context of Anglo-Norman colonial ambitions in Wales, retaining a certain degree of sympathy for his fellow Celts in the face of Norman encroachments on their territory."[33] One must read *The History of the Kings of Britain*, therefore, with an understanding of the ethnic conflicts Geoffrey covered in his work, not to mention the civil war that broke out during his lifetime.

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[31] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Michael A. Faletra. (Canada: Broadview Press, 2007), 9.
[32] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 9.
[33] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 11.

Through *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey solidified the character of King Arthur, but he was far from the first to write about him. The credit of Arthur's invention belongs to numerous sources, some named and some anonymous, from the sixth century onward. An assortment of oral tales originated from Wales, which were collected by scribes and recorded. As an oral tradition, Arthur's early character evolved each time bards and minstrels told his story—he became whatever his teller required him to be. It is impossible to pinpoint *the* original Arthur, but the earliest stories that mention him or were later incorporated into Arthurian texts were British. One of the first texts to mention Arthur was the *Historia Brittonum* (*History of Britain*). Historians have dubbed the author "pseudo-Nennius" and date the text to 829 or 830 AD.[34] In it, Arthur fought twelve battles, including one on the hill at Badon, where he single-handedly slew 940 enemies.[35] The *Annales Cambriae* (*Welsh Annals*), another text compiled in the mid-tenth century, included information about Arthur's battles against Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century; the information may have been compiled from earlier oral stories and traditions, but the evidence is inconclusive.[36] Unlike the *Historia*, the *Annales* mentioned only the Battle of Badon, "in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders," resulting in a victory for the Britons. The *Annales* did, however, mention Camlann, the battle where Arthur and Medraut died, which the *Historia* did not.[37] In both of these texts, Arthur was no king, but a warrior, a commander of armies. The authors dedicated a few entries to

[34] Caitlin Green, "A Bibliographic Guide to Welsh Arthurian Literature," Arthuriana: Arthurian Resources and Studies (Dr. Caitlin Green, 2015), http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/notes&queries/N&Q1_ArthLit.pdf, 4-5.
[35] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, translated by J. A. Giles, (London: J. Bohn, 1841), accessed via Yale University Lillian Goldman Law Library, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/nenius.asp.
[36] Green, "A Bibliographic Guide to Welsh Arthurian Literature," 5.
[37] *The Annales Cambriae*, translated by James Ingram in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. (London: Everyman Press, 1912). Accessed via Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/annalescambriae.asp.

him that showcased his battle prowess. He was not the center of the narrative, though, and especially in the *Annales* had little to set him apart from the other figures mentioned.

It was Geoffrey who wrote about Arthur *rex*, who crowned him a king of Britain in a text. He dedicated a significant portion of *The History of the Kings of Britain* to Uther Pendragon, Arthur, Merlin, and their exploits. This text located Arthur within a line of kings who stretched back to the heroes of Troy and founders of Britain, which demonstrated Geoffrey's attempt to legitimize British rulers by linking them to the empires of antiquity. With Anglo-Norman patrons, Geoffrey's writing could not actively subvert their claims to rule. In the introduction to his translation of Geoffrey's work, Lewis Thorpe asserted that two political purposes influenced Geoffrey's work: providing a historical precedent for the Norman kings' claim to rule and ingratiating himself with those to whom he dedicated his book.[38] Perhaps most important, Geoffrey displayed "a deep-felt and often bitter desire to denigrate the Romans and to put the Britons in their place in the forefront of history."[39] Whatever sympathy Geoffrey may have harbored for the Celts, he could not openly support the groups resisting the rule of his patrons in his writing.

The questionable historical nature of Arthur allowed Geoffrey to write a history of Britain, particularly in the sixth century, capable of commenting on his present moment in the twelfth century. Arthur was descended from Trojan heroes, an ancestral lineage the Anglo-Norman rulers could plausibly slot themselves into. Geoffrey imbued his character with British qualities—twelfth century British qualities—that contemporary rulers could link to their own

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[38] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe, (London, England: Penguin Book, 1996, 10.
In Michael Faletra's translation, the three dedicatees are Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, Stephen, King of England, and Robert, Earl of Gloucester, but in Thorpe's translation, Stephen was omitted.
[39] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Thorpe, 10.

behavior in order to justify their right to rule. Finke and Shichtman argued that "the recent history of Norman conquest and colonization, the displacement of the island's previous occupants, and the uneasy cohabitation of the Saxons, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish inhabitants of the British Isles could be masked by appeals to an archaic, holistic past, so that, at its birth, the Arthurian legend was isolated from the immediate political and historical context of its production.[40] Higham, in a similar line of reasoning, asserted that Geoffrey's construction of Arthur "provided a magnificent model of an earlier insular kingship which had prevailed across all western Europe" and "was embedded within an historical tradition redolent with ancient and prestigious British, as opposed to Anglo-Saxon, origins to which [Anglo-Norman courts] could attach themselves."[41] Arthur's campaigns concluded with his defeat of the Anglo-Saxons invaders and successful reclaiming of the island for the Britons. One way Geoffrey's Anglo-Norman patrons could have read this narrative was analogous to their attempts to establish control and legitimate their rule, with Arthur as a clear threat to their sovereignty and a figure for the British inhabitants to identify with in their resistance. However, Arthur's function as a quasi-historical character crafted for Geoffrey's particular narrative meant he did not have existing ties to political groups—especially because Geoffrey was the first to compile in written form many of the disparate Arthurian sources. Thus, Arthur could act as a paradigmatic king the Anglo-Normans used to legitimize their rule *and* a native Welsh hero repelling foreign invaders, depending on who read *The History* and in what context.

While the figure of Arthur in Geoffrey's history possessed features that distinguished him from other rulers in the text, he was not an explicitly magical king or ruler of fantasy-

[40] Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 2.
[41] N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, (London: Routledge, 2009) 264.

proportions. His most notable successes were in battle: he brought Scotland, Normandy, Denmark, and Gaul under British rule during his reign, and he defeated the Romans when they demanded tribute. Arthur expanded his kingdom, suffered grievous injuries, traveled to Avalon for healing, and surrendered his crown. Geoffrey offered little else about Arthur's life beyond those deed and mentioned him only briefly in the rest of *The History*. Thorpe asked, "What is there about Geoffrey's Arthur which was to make him a world figure?"[42] After all, Merlin featured more prominently in Vortigern's reign than Arthur's; Belinus won great battles and conquered many people; Corineus fought giants long before Arthur; and Guinevere was one of many beautiful queens in the text.[43] Arthur's achievements defied normal human comprehension; however, *The History* featured many warriors and kings with preternatural abilities. He was similarly mundane to those who preceded and succeeded him. That is not to suggest he had no contact with the supernatural—Geoffrey implied divine intervention when Arthur bore the Virgin Mary's face upon his shield and struck down enemies with a single blow, and four archbishops led his coronation.[44] Arthur himself did not wield magical powers, though. His sword, Caliburn, was forged in Avalon, but it was not the enchanted Excalibur, with a scabbard that prevented him from losing blood. Merlin gave the prophecy of Arthur's reign and aided Uther in Arthur's conception, but he never met Arthur nor provided him magical aid. The magic associated with the Arthurian legend, especially related to Merlin and Morgan le Fay, came later, with the courtly romances.

Merlin, perhaps the most mythical of any figure in Geoffrey's *History*, wielded knowledge more than supernatural powers. Born of an incubus and human woman, Merlin had

[42] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Thorpe, 22.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 167 and 175.

access to information beyond what was available on earth, as his prophecies to Vortigern demonstrated.[45] His greatest feat, moving the Giant's Dance (Stonehenge) from Ireland to Britain, Geoffrey attributed to an advanced understanding of physics and mechanics. Merlin claimed, "that it is not by sinew but by knowledge that these stones shall be moved."[46] Geoffrey did not describe Merlin casting a spell or opening a portal—this was not an explicitly magical act. Nor was the identification of the pond ruining the foundation of Vortigern's tower—it was an issue related to masonry and construction.[47] Merlin possessed information the average man could not access, but Geoffrey refrained from including explicit references to magic in the *History*. Geoffrey implied Merlin's knowledge came from his parentage, and divine though it was, Merlin functioned like a prophet rather than a magician. It was a bastard boy—a bastard like William the Conqueror and Robert of Gloucester—who claimed Stonehenge for Britain and who guided the conception of Arthur, the legendary king. He accomplished these tasks by nature of being a bastard and having access to a specific kind of knowledge. Geoffrey attributed some of the greatest moments of Britain's history to bastard sons. He offered another way for the Norman elite, and any potentially illegitimate heir, to justify their right to rule.

Geoffrey's *History* contained a mixture of Christianity, paganism, and a nebulous knowledge accessible only to Merlin. Malory repeated the coexistence of Christianity and explicitly magical arts in the *Morte*. Deonn, too, included a similar mix of Christian faith, Arthurian magic, and a third system of belief in *Legendborn*. Though each author demonstrated biases toward one belief system, their inclusion of multiple forms lent their narratives elasticity. Geoffrey established this trend and provided another aspect of the Arthurian legend that could

[45] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 129 and 131-142.
[46] Ibid, 152.
[47] Ibid, 129.

endure through time. Arthur occupied a liminal place between truth and fiction, supported by his and Uther's association with Merlin; it was precisely this ambiguity that allowed Geoffrey of Monmouth and future authors to shape him into a world figure.

In 1136, during the time Geoffrey wrote his *History*, the Welsh escalated their rebellion against the Normans. They seized castles at Usk and Caerleon and took territory in central and south Wales.[48] Geoffrey, patronized by the Anglo-Norman elite, could not produce a work of history that sided with the rebels over the Normans without risking his position in court and his life. Thus, even though Arthur was a Briton by birth, Geoffrey wrote about his campaigns against upstarts *on* the island. He still represented British control and might as the ruling figure. In the case of the war between Matilda and Stephan, Arthur's tale functioned equally well to support the "true heir" of Britain blessed by God. Geoffrey did not indicate which of the contenders with which he aligned himself (he dedicated the book to Robert and Stephen in different copies, after all), but he created a narrative that both could adopt to their cause without questioning his loyalty. The same ambiguity with which Geoffrey characterized Arthur's identity—factual or fictional—he applied to Arthur's political symbolism. Thus, Geoffrey, his patrons, and his readers could ascribe different meanings to him "that served to legitimate particular forms of political authority and cultural imperialism."[49] Geoffrey shrouded Arthur particularly, insulating the text from direct, explicit parallels to the twelfth century political conflicts, namely "the recent history of Norman conquest and colonization, the displacement of the island's previous occupants, and the uneasy cohabitation of the Saxons, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish inhabitants of the British Isles" with appeals to an archaic, holistic past."[50]

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[48] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 35.
[49] Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, 2.
[50] Ibid.

As king, Arthur not only governed his subjects, he fought wars to ensure their independence and expanded Britain's power by securing new tributary states. This trend did not begin with Arthur, however, but rather his father, Uther, and uncle, Ambrosius Aurelianus. Uther campaigned against the Saxons to drive them out of Britain; he also subdued the Scots before Arthur's conception. Geoffrey wrote that he "delivered that unruly people from their barbarity."[51] He justified Uther's actions by framing the Scots as barbarous brutes in need of refinement. The language of deliverance echoed Christian doctrine, thus elevating Uther's quest to a holy one. When it came time for Arthur to fight the Saxons, he denigrated them as "heathens" and similarly dismissed the Irish as "barbarians." He assured his men that "With God on our side, we shall certainly defeat them," and Geoffrey further emphasized Arthur's piety by describing the image of Mary painted on his shield and his ability to kill a man with a single blow when he invoked the name of the Lord.[52] Geoffrey incorporated morality into the Pendragons' campaigns to justify their actions. He aligned their cause with that of the Lord's, which left little room for doubt about the true heroes of the time period.

The Christianizing mission was also a colonial one, as Uther and Arthur sought to impose British ideals on the other inhabitants of the island. Geoffrey's account of Arthur's war with Rome carried similar undertones. The rhetoric was that of east versus west, the Briton's refusal to pay tribute to Rome because they believed they were the true heirs of the island, despite the previous Roman conquest.[53] Helen Fulton categorized the war as "a political and ideological conflict between West and East: while Arthur's armies are drawn from Western Europe, the Roman emperor Lucius, at the opening to book 10, calls on the "Kings of the Orient" to assist

[51] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 157.
[52] Ibid, 166-167.
[53] Ibid, 178-179.

him."[54] Even though Arthur's war with the Saxons and Scots was not explicitly east versus west, the cultural and ethnic clashes were like those that instigated the war with Rome, and the Britons' desire to civilize the barbarians demonstrated a perceived superiority in their own culture.

In addition to political and moral references, Geoffrey anchored Arthur's battle against the Saxons with details from the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae.* Both texts mentioned Arthur's great victory at Badon, and the *Annales* included specific details about the holy image on his shield. According to Geoffrey, Arthur slew 470 men at the battle, while Nennius claimed the number was 940 in the *Historia*. While scholars have concluded the historical value of the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* is dubious insofar as they pertain to accurate information about the fifth and sixth centuries, the texts' influence on Geoffrey's writing is valuable.[55] About the *Annales*, Higham concluded, "These entries were constructed primarily for contemporary rhetorical purposes and have considerable meaning in the context of the mid-tenth century…The *Annales* is valueless, therefore, as to modern constructions of an historical Arthur, but these brief entries had a considerable impact on the later development of the legend."[56] In writing about Arthur, Geoffrey followed the previously established precedent in historical sources—both in terms of how he wrote and what he wrote about. Geoffrey composed a text concerned with Britain's history over the course of two-thousand years, from its founding to the start of Anglo-Saxon rule in the seventh century. The content was about *what had already happened* but the text was concerned with *what was currently happening*. Additionally, Geoffrey did not invent Arthur—he compiled his character from numerous sources. He did some amount of research into the previous histories of Britain

[54] Helen Fulton, "History and Myth: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnum Britanniae*" in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, edited by Helen Fulton, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 53.
[55] For more, see Higham, 169 and 217
[56] Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, 217.

and Welsh stories about Arthur, used those text as the basis for his work, and filled in the gaps to provide a coherent narrative. If Geoffrey meant for Arthur to be a purely fictitious character of his own imagination, why include historical details about him from previous sources? Geoffrey may have lacked definitive proof that Arthur existed—that he *lived*—but the symbol of Arthur, the character, was certainly real for him (and Nennius and the authors of the *Annales*).

To cloak the political messages in his writing, Geoffrey could not transpose twelfth-century political events into *The History* and simply change the dates to place them in an earlier time period. Writing about a figure called Stephen challenging another called Matilda for the right to the throne would have shown his hand and risked his neck. Instead, he used a technique authors of fiction rely on—interpretation and adaptation. Some events of King Arthur's life resembled Matilda's struggle for the throne. After Henry I died in 1135, a debate over succession broke out, and Matilda's cousin Stephen challenged her claim for the throne.[57] Stephen and the barons refused to comply with Henry I's designation of Matilda, his only surviving and legitimate child, as heir because she was a woman.[58] Arthur also encountered challenges to his throne in the early days of his reign. Though his enemies were from different ethnic groups who had long been at war with the British kings, and Matilda's enemies were Stephen and his supporters, Geoffrey drew a parallel to both by making success in battle a prerequisite to claiming the crown. This commonality extended to William the Conqueror—himself a bastard—who fought other potential kings to become Edward the Confessor's successor. The rule of the Normans in Britain was fraught with intergenerational conflict and inheritance disputes, from William to Matilda and onward.

[57] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 13.
[58] Ibid.

The inciting events of the civil war occurred in the 1130s, the very time Geoffrey worked on *The History of the Kings of Britain.* Though he completed his work before the war fully broke out, the dynastic conflict certainly influenced his writing. Later in life, Arthur battled his nephew Mordred and the Saxons, Scots, Picts, and Irish armies with which he allied himself.[59] Matilda, too, suffered betrayal from a family member and the vassals of her court. Geoffrey ascribed characteristics from important ruling figures in his present moment to those in his book; it cannot be coincidence that the king he plucked from legends shared key experiences with Matilda. Arthur operated as a mostly-blank canvas Geoffrey used to convey his rhetorical purpose. During a civil war between two contenders for the throne in the twelfth century, Geoffrey imbued Arthur with battle-prowess fighting to reclaim the land that was rightfully his in a sixth-century conflict. With enough fantastical elements in his purportedly historical work already, Geoffrey primed his text to include a legendary figure in the line of kings, one he could enliven with issues that represented the current conflict. Thus, Arthur became one answer Geoffrey's offered to the question of Henry I's heir. Politically, it would have been dangerous for him to take an explicit stand—the outlet of writing offered him a more secure way to express his opinion.

In the context of Matilda's war with Stephen, one must consider the role of women in Arthur's story and *The History* as a whole. While Geoffrey did draw parallels between Arthur—a great hero who reunited Britain and elevated it to a time of prosperity—and Matilda, his work did not primarily feature women in positions power. The women fall, for the most part, into two categories: rulers and ornaments. Gwendolen, the first female ruler of the Britons whom Geoffrey included, raised an army from Cornwall to battle her husband, the king Locrinus, when he tried to install his mistress as queen instead of her. He had kept his mistress, Estrildis, hidden

[59] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 197.

in a cave for seven years before that point, during which she gave birth to a daughter. After killing Locrinus, Gwendolen had Estrildis and her daughter, Habren, thrown in a river. She ruled as regent for fifteen years (five years longer than Locrinus had) until her son came of age, then lived the rest of her life in Cornwall.[60] Geoffrey characterized Gwendolen like the kings: she fought for her crown, raised and led and army, and killed challengers to her throne. He did not demonize her decision to kill Estrildis and Habren or attempt to undermine her desire to rule. Thus, he rejected the objections of the barons and Stephen that women could not rule—and in fact established a precedent of queen regents successfully maintaining the kingdom of Britain.

To some, Geoffrey's equal treatment of Gwendolen and the kings who came before her might be the most fictitious part of *The History*, especially considering the hostility to Matilda at the time Geoffrey wrote. However, there was a historical precedent for female rulers, in Britain and internationally: Cartimandua, Boudicca, Æthelflæd, Brunhilda, and Wu Zeitan, to name a few. Talking about Matilda and her relatives, Catherine Hanley argued that, "The men of this rarefied group were able to pursue their own paths, whether secular or clerical, with varying degrees of success but with nobody doubting their right to do so. [The women] on the other hand, had to make their way through a world filled with gendered expectations…[Matilda] was not a person but a woman, and thus her ambitions became both unusual and unacceptable."[61] Despite the misogyny operating in twelfth-century British culture, Geoffrey described queens with the same tone and diction as kings—equally.

A few generations after Gwendolen, Marcia, wife of Guithelin, ruled in the period between her husband's death and her son's coming of age. Geoffrey described her as "noble" and

[60] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 60-61.
[61] Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Warrior, Queen,* (New Haven: Yale Univeristy Press, 2019), https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.12987/9780300245066-toc, 237-238.

"learned in all the arts," as well as "mighty in council and wisdom." He credited her with creating the Marcian Law code, which was of "among the many brilliant things she devised in her great wisdom."[62] Marcia not only kept the kingdom together after the king died, she improved it by developing a law code. She added to the splendor of the realm, rather than simply maintaining it. Geoffrey added a new role for women beyond what he established with Gwendolen: leavers of legacies. Women could act as regents and they could contribute to governance in all their wisdom and expertise. This was a favorable depiction of two queens suited to administer the Britons and justified in claiming their crowns.

While it is easy to dismiss female arts—sewing, dancing, social graces, and managing a household—as irrelevant for running a country, women possessed the necessary skills for navigating politics. Hanley rejected the claim that Matilda was passive at the start of her return to England after Henry's I death. Instead, she offered that "Matilda had spent her entire life in royal courts, and was not stupid. She was well aware of social mores and distinctions, particularly those that related to the treatment of women of rank."[63] Geoffrey depicted women capable of mustering armies to defend their crowns; he also showed women who maintained peace and brought new order. He did not depict women as worthy of ruling only if they could match the violence of the men around them—Gwendolen and Marica were equally presented as competent queens, in some part because of their "more feminine" nature. In Matilda's case, navigating the quagmires of court with ease was a considerable strength, a distinctly feminine trait, and one that gave her an advantage during her return to England. Geoffrey did not tie value, therefore, solely to physical strength or battlefield successes but rather to merit.

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[62] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 79.
[63] Hanley, *Matilda*, 118.

Geoffrey also depicted women who were merely ornamental, essentially footnotes in the accounts of the great kings of Britain. Of Igerna, Duke Gorlois' wife, he wrote, "[her] beauty surpassed that of all the other women of Britain"[64] and of Guinevere, Arthur's wife, "[she] sprang from a noble Roman family. She had been brought up in the household of Duke Cador and surpassed all other women of the island in beauty."[65] Geoffrey used the same epithet to describe Arthur's mother and wife and associated both with the respective Dukes of Cornwall. They could be the same person: wives of powerful men who betray their husbands and disappear from the narrative. Geoffrey continued the parallels between both women at the end of their lives. After Uther's army killed Gorlois, the king "took Igerna to him" and the two "lived together as equals bound by mutual affection."[66] About Mordred, Geoffrey said he "had seized the throne of Britain and now took his wicked pleasure with Guinevere, who had broken her marriage vows."[67] The women existed to decorate the men, to bring beauty to their court. Igerna bore the future of Britain by carrying Arthur; Guinevere and Arthur never conceived a child, but she completed the courtly image of a united king and queen, pious and in love with each other. Geoffrey was far from a raging feminist, and the disparity between the role of women and men in *The History* is significant. However, he showcased women in a range of positions with varying degrees of agency, which demonstrates that the attitudes of twelfth-century scholars were not monolithic.

When news reached Guinevere that Arthur's troops battled Mordred's, "she gave up hope and fled from York to Caerleon, where she joined the nuns at the Church of St. Julius the Martyr

[64] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 157
[65] Ibid, 170.
[66] Ibid, 160.
[67] Ibid, 196.

and was determined to live chastely."[68] Geoffrey's language did not indicate whether Guinevere fled because Mordred regrouped his troops or because Arthur came to fight his nephew, and this ambiguity left her character in question. Her actions to join the nuns and live a holy life indicate some guilt on her part and a need to repent her adultery. However, Geoffrey also indicated Mordred organized a coup and forced himself upon Guinevere. She might have had little choice in breaking her wedding vows. Certainly today, feminist theory would argue that consent given under threat of bodily harm or coercion is not true consent. With that understanding, Guinevere cannot be blamed for "breaking her marriage vows" because Mordred assaulted her. Igerna, too, technically committed adultery when she slept with King Uther, who disguised himself as Gorlois. Uther raped Igerna, and, after his army defeated her husband and captured Tintagel castle, made her his queen. One must be skeptical that Igerna could live in "mutual affection" with Uther after he caused her husband's death and forcibly removed her from her home.

Geoffrey invented much of the Arthurian section of *The History*, which meant he had near-total control over the characters' actions. The lack of detail about Igerna and Guinevere in particular reduced them to beautiful women seduced by powerful men. However, it prevented Geoffrey from fully condemning their actions in the text because he provided so little information with which to judge them. Igerna and Guinevere existed within a patriarchal system where their biggest mandate was to further the interest of their children and secure a dynastic legacy, whether the cost be brokering peace or starting a war. At eight years old, Matilda was betrothed to Henry V, Holy Roman Emperor and eleven years her senior, and expected to consummate the marriage at twelve.[69] She was far from a figurehead, though—at sixteen, Henry appointed her to rule northern Italy, which required an advanced knowledge of statecraft and

[68] Geoffrey, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Faletra, 199.
[69] Hanley, *Matilda*, 238.

mastery of multiple languages.[70] As a woman, Matilda could rule a large and complex territory at an age when most children today are concerned only with acquiring their driver's licenses; she could also be a bargaining chip to a political union before she had lived a decade. This was the duality for women of the twelfth century.

Through *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey created a foundational work of Arthuriana—one that did not feature Arthur as its protagonist. However, he wrote the Arthurian section with characteristics that allowed the narrative to endure long past his death. In fact, the lack of specific, concrete details that would trap Arthur in a specifically sixth-century or twelfth-century context lent him immortality. Geoffrey constructed an archetypal hero for Britain, one whose struggles and triumphs could be adapted and retold over centuries to suit a particular political, social, or cultural climate.

[70] Ibid.

Chapter Two: The King's Court and Beyond

Malory dispensed with much of the list-like style Geoffrey employed to chronicle battles, kings, and their descendants in *The History* for his account of Arthur's life. Indeed, Malory's magnum opus took the blunt, informative history of Geoffrey and developed a complex, detailed web of stories for King Arthur and the Knights of his Round Table. The most significant difference between *The History of the Kings of Britain* and *Le Morte d'Arthur* was that Geoffrey wrote an account of Britain's rulers as an article of history while Malory wrote a courtly romance. Despite this difference in genre, Malory maintained elements of the Arthurian tale as written by Geoffrey and conducted a similar process of composition: compiling previous texts into a single narrative and inventing details to connect disparate elements. As the title made clear, Malory's story covered the death (and preceding life) of Arthur, and, by extension, his court. At times, the narrative departed from Arthur entirely to follow the quests of Sir Tor, Sir Pelinore, and Sir Gawain; Malory also included whole books dedicated to other knights, like Sir Tristan or Sir Lancelot and Guinevere. Malory's text contained a wider narrative scope by nature of being a literary work. The entire tale, related by an omniscient narrator, nevertheless shifted its focus to different characters as the plot necessitated. The result was a story driven by plot rather than lineage chronology.

One issue that arises when comparing Malory's life experiences to the text of the *Morte* is the ambiguity of his identity. Scholars have even less information about Malory's life than Geoffrey's, and while some author signed the end of the manuscript "Sir Thomas Malory," scholars remain uncertain as to which of several knights could have authored the stories. Stephen H. A. Shepherd built his chronology of Malory's life from P. J. C. Field's *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* and Elizabeth Archibald's and A. S. G. Edwards' *A Companion to Malory*,

both of which identify the Thomas Malory from Newbold Revel, Warwickshire as the "most feasible" man to author *Le Morte d'Arthur*.[71] Malory, like Geoffrey, was involved in the courtly and political life of Britain. He experienced both sides of the law, as a knight and a criminal imprisoned on various charges. Thomas Malory received his first criminal accusations on October 10, 1443, almost exactly two years after the first records that list him as a knight. He was between 26 and 28 years old. Seven years later, Malory was charged with a number of crimes, including theft, attempted murder, extortion, robbery, and two counts of rape. He spent the next decade in and out of prison, until Edward IV granted him a pardon in 1462. However, in 1468, Edward IV specifically excluded Malory from a pardon because he became a Lancastrian sympathizer (presumably following the change of allegiance of the Earl of Warwick from a Yorkist to a Lancastrian), and he remained in jail intermittently until his death on March 14, 1471. He wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* during this time.[72]

Malory held two sets of dual roles in his life—knight and criminal, Yorkist and Lancastrian. While I concede to Lynch that "Malory did not invent the most part of his Arthurian plot-line, and it would be a mistake to see *Le Morte Darthur* as a story written to illustrate the politics of his lifetime," there nevertheless exist analogous sections in *Le Morte d'Arthur* to the fifteenth century when Malory wrote.[73] Even if the political circumstances in *Le Morte d'Arthur* do not have exact matches to the events of the Wars of the Roses, the characters face challenges that resemble Malory's own: deciding which of two powerful factions to support and committing crimes that break the values of knighthood. The *Morte*'s more literary nature (as compared to

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[71] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur, or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, translated by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), xxiv.
[72] Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, trans. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, xxix-xxvii.
[73] Andrew Lynch, "Malory's Morte *Darthur* and History" in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, edited by Helen Fulton, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 302.

Geoffrey's *History*) offered one explanation for the complexity of Malory's characters, particularly Arthur, Morgan, and the Knights; however, the grey or contradictory morals exhibited by the characters likely reflect Malory's own experiences with the knighthood, the law, and the war. One clear indication that Malory engaged with fifteenth-century courtly culture in his text about the sixth century is the "difficulty of finding knightly identity in idealist principles while dealing with a world that falls short of those ideals."[74] The Wars of the Roses complicated knights' ability to follow Geoffroi de Charny's strict, idealized code of chivalry.[75] A man who failed to meet knightly expectations, Malory wrote characters who fell into the same trap he did.

Though Arthur is the titular character of the *Morte,* Malory text focused on more than just his story. After Geoffrey finished *The History of the Kings of Britain,* circa 1135, Wace introduced the Round Table and transformed Arthur's court to a chivalric one; Marie de France continued this tradition and featured more love stories.[76] Their works were written in 1155 and between 1160 and 1180, respectively, and both Wace and Marie de France wrote in the French vernacular rather than Latin, as Geoffrey had, which made their work more accessible to Anglo-Norman and French aristocrats. Chrétien de Troyes solidified this trend with his series of Arthurian romances—released between 1160 and 1191—by introducing the knights Gawain, Lancelot, and Percival, as well as the kingdom of Camelot.[77] Besides the new characters Chrétien introduced, Roberta L. Krueger asserted that his "rhetorical art and his subtle irony established Arthurian fiction as a sophisticated medium for reflection about social identity and chivalric ethics…Chrétien created a vast imaginative space encompassing history and fiction, the marvelous and the real…Celtic legends and Christian teachings…east and west, enterprising

[74] Jill M Hebert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9
[75] Ibid.
[76] Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, trans. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, xviii.
[77] *Ibid*.

women and callous or courageous knights, [and] adulterers and wise men…"[78] Tracy Deonn, too, would write a story featuring Arthur but not solely dedicated to him and the Round Table. Her version would include cultural collision, fantasy and history, powerful women and cowardly men, and other elements introduced to the Arthurian legends between the thirteenth and fifteenth century. *Le Morte d'Arthur* was thus a culmination of previous Arthurian modes of writing that amalgamated and rewrote previous source materials. With the enormous corpus he produced, Malory also solidified the style of reinvention and reappropriation used to write future Arthurian stories. His work became a point of reference for future writers of Arthurian stories.

One legacy of Geoffrey's *History* that Malory reinforced was use of the Arthurian lineage to justify monarchical legitimacy. Henry VII commissioned an ancestry report from Wales based on Geoffrey's *History* to show he was a descendent of Arthur and Brutus, Britain's founder, and prove to Richard III he had a right to rule.[79] The Tudor king came to power in August 1485, the same year Caxton published Malory's manuscript. This would have brought Arthur to the national consciousness and could have prompted Henry to seek an Arthurian heritage. Caxton's edition of *Le Morte d'Arthur* harkened back to "a feudal economy of patronage relationships" and anticipated "symbolic economies dependent upon representations of an English nation imagined as a corporate and sovereign entity."[80] Malory's text helped solidify the English identity during a time of political division. Though Malory portrayed Arthur as a sixth-century king, the inclusion of courtly issues and chivalric challenges clearly referenced the fifteenth century. This quasi-historical text provided unifying ideals knights and kings could aspire to; it offered contenders to the throne a legendary figure with which to identify themselves.

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[78] Roberta L. Krueger, "Chrétien de Troyes and the Invention of Arthurian Courtly Fiction," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, edited by Helen Fulton, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 173.
[79] Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, 159.
[80] Ibid, 161.

Beyond the character of Arthur, Malory's war episodes helped further dynastic actions. The expansion of Arthur's kingdom and his success in battle—fundamental parts of the legend and a large section of Malory's text—were explicitly tied to colonial interests. After his coronation, Arthur "wan alle the North, Scotland, and alle that were under their obseissaunce; also Wayls"; following his war with Rome, "Sawdon of Surré and of Ethyope the Kyng, and of Egypte and of Inde two knyghtes full noble," and Emperor Lucius were killed.[81] By explicitly mentioning African and Islamic rulers, Malory employed racist rhetoric that pitted the West, civilized and righteous, against the East, barbaric and unjust. Arthur grew from a king to a conqueror, an emperor crowed by the Pope with control over Britain, Rome, and France. Arthur prefigured European colonialism and imperialism, dominating lands and extracting tribute. The story of Arthur was used for more than the justification of rule—it was used to justify colonial actions.

Malory opened the *Morte* with a dispute between Uther Pendragon and the Duke of Cornwall. He gave the first line of dialogue in *Le Morte d'Arthur* to Igraine, Duchess of Cornwall, which placed her in a position of power. She initiated the story, both on the physical page and by birthing Arthur. However, her rape—which took place mere paragraphs later when Uther, disguised by Merlin, snuck into Tintagel—and subsequent retreat from the story rendered her a plot device for Arthur's conception. Like in Geoffrey's *History*, Uther wed Igraine, "in all haste…with grate myrthe and joye," and Malory emphasized that his behavior was "lyke a lusty knyghte."[82] Uther acted like a conqueror claiming spoils from a defeated enemy—his behavior was not that of a noble king in the chivalric tradition. Further, Malory wrote that Igraine "made

[81] Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, trans. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 11 and 138.
[82] Ibid, 5.

grete joye whan she knewe who was the fader of her child."[83] The knowledge of Uther's deception was not cause for alarm; rather, Igraine celebrated it. She secured her social standing by wedding Uther after her husband was poisoned by others but still feared bringing a potentially bastard child into the court of her king. In context of the Wars of the Roses, Igraine's relief at carrying the legitimate heir to the throne was perhaps more understandable than it might be to modern readers. The Wars broke out when the houses of York and Lancaster, both supporting a different heir to Edward III, challenged each other for the right to the throne. The Yorkists deposed Henry VI and installed Edward IV in his place; Richard III succeeded Edward, but eventually lost control of the throne after Henry VII, the Tudor (the bastard line of Lancastrians), married into House York and established peace.[84]

Igraine would have hesitated to bring a potential threat to Uther's reign into Camelot, for fear of starting a war or losing her child, which Malory demonstrated. Because her child was now the heir to the throne, her dynastic interests and place at court were secured. However, Malory neglected a reunion between Igraine and Arthur after he was taken immediately after his birth to be raised by Sir Ector at Merlin's request.[85] Unlike Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI, who ruled England in the 1450s when the King's mental illness prevented him from executing his office, Igraine had no way to fight on Arthur's behalf or claim power for herself. Malory separated her from her child with apparent ease and indicated she had little interest in acting as regent after Uther died from poison.

In the decades preceding the publication of *Le Morte* d'Arthur, Margaret married Henry VI to solidify the truce between England and France, near the conclusion of the Hundred Years'

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[83] Ibid, 6.
[84] Jill M Hebert, *Morgan Le Fay, Shapeshifter*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 66.
[85] Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, trans. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 6.

War.[86] Her hand in marriage—and her entire person—was given to a man eight years her senior as part of an alliance, and she was expected to bear heirs for the English throne. Her son's birth, which coincided with Henry's temporary insanity, resulted in her "immediate decision to advance her own claim to exercise authority on their behalf."[87] Malory was almost certainly familiar with these events, which occurred a decade before the Wars of the Roses broke out.

Unlike Margaret, Igraine did not marry Uther to bring peace between his court and Cornwall; rather, she was taken as spoils from his battle with Duke Gorlois. But Malory did not portray her with any of the political ambitions of Margaret, despite their similar circumstances as bargaining chips in the patriarchal culture of fifteenth-century Anglo-French politics. Despite Igraine making the entire narrative possible by carrying and birthing Arthur, Malory dispensed with her as soon as he could. She was little more than a walking womb, afforded a few lines of dialogue to show her suspicions of Uther's summons. She abandoned her reservations almost immediately, entered into a happy marriage, and faded into the background.

Even Guinevere, who played a larger role in the *Morte*, lacked political agency. After Arthur ascended the throne and defeated the knights and lords who rejected his claim to be Uther's son, he decided to take a wife. When prompted, he told Merlin, "I love Gwenyvere, the Kynges doughtir of Lodegrean, of the londe of Camelerde, of whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde that ye tolde me he had hit of fadir Uther. And this damsell is the moste valyaunte and fayryst that I know lyvyng, or yet ever I coude fynde."[88] Merlin immediately warned Arthur, "that Gwenyvere was nat holsom for hym to take wyff, for her wanted hym that Lancelot scholde

[86] Helen Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=30060587, 288-289.
[87] Castor, *She-Wolves*, 302.
[88] Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, trans. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 62.

love hir, and she hym agayne."[89] Guinevere's beauty and integrity attracted Arthur initially—she represented the best possible addition to Camelot, his ideal counterpart. At the same time, her affair with Lancelot sealed Arthur's fate and ended the Round Table. Through the narrative, Malory condemned Guinevere for her inconstancy by linking her betrayal with the downfall of Arthur's kingdom. Though she resisted Mordred's attempts to marry her by fortifying the Tower of London to withstand a siege, the damage to Camelot had been done.[90] When her husband's position was threatened—and her son's, by extension—Margaret of Anjou raised an army, made a network of political allies, and instrumented battles against the Duke of York.[91] Malory depicted Guinevere in a similar, though greatly reduced, position when she held out against Mordred. However, Guinevere's sexual choices defined her worth and her character far more than any political action ever did. In the same way that Igraine was a walking womb, Guinevere functioned a sex symbol. Catherine Batt identified the worth of female characters in Malory's work: "Women's heroism then appears to relate to their consent to the use of their bodies in the service of particular institutions (often to the great convenience of the narrative)."[92] By this metric, Guinevere transgressed the acceptable use her body by having an affair with Lancelot, which Malory reinforced with her retirement to a nunnery at the end of the narrative. Despite historical precedent from the women in Geoffrey's *History* and the contemporary examples of

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[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid, 679.
Shepherd noted that Malory's inclusion of Mordred's siege weapons, the cannons, referenced the Yorkist's use of cannons against the Lancastrian garrison in 1460. By Malory's account, Mordred's attack was the first time cannons were used against the tower and the Yorkist's was the second.

[91] Castor, "Might and Power" in *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=30060587, 315-336.

[92] Catherine Batt, "Malory and Rape," in *Le Morte Darthur, or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, translated by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), 809.

powerful women—such as Margaret of Anjou—Malory demonstrated less support for women's agency and female monarchs in the *Morte* than Geoffrey did three hundred years earlier.

If the women Geoffrey wrote were rulers or ornaments, Malory's women were ornamental queens (but not rulers) and witches. Morgan le Fey, first introduced in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, became a key character in Malory's retelling. Malory wrote that she "was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye."[93] "Nygromancye," as Kristina Pérez explained, "does not explicitly connote trafficking in the dead but rather magic that skirts the bounds of acceptability, somewhere between white/good and black/bad magic—that is, abject magic." [94] Despite her education in a nunnery, a holy place, Morgan became a skilled practitioner of magic that marked her as marginalized, on the bounds of acceptable society. Morgan's great accumulation of knowledge led her to magic arts—it was unclear whether the nunnery specially instructed her in necromancy or if she polluted their teachings.

Like Merlin, Morgan accessed information the other characters in the *Morte* could not. However, her knowledge of the magical arts related both to her intelligence and her gender. Edman read Malory's association of the nunnery with magic as the author "plant[ing] his own views of the war from his time within the legend of King Arthur and his battles" and "hold[ing] on to Christian moral doctrines," which would explain the limited role of magic-wielding female characters, who were tied to Celtic pagan traditions.[95] Morgan gained magic through education, magic she used to oppose Arthur. Her knowledge made her a threat, especially because she, a

[93] Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, trans. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 5-6.
[94] Kristina Pérez, *The Myth of Morgan La Fey*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 139.
[95] Timuçin Buğra Edman, "A Comparative Study of King Arthur's Radial Journey: Back to the Beginnings," *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences* 18, no. 70, (April 1, 2019), 607-608.

woman, challenged Arthur, the patriarchal and civilizing Western force. Malory did not associate Merlin's magic with a pagan tradition as explicitly as he did Morgan's. Thus, magic was not the source of marginalization—gender was. Pérez argued, "The devolution of Morgan la Fey from a goddess in the ninth century to a witch in the fifteenth century holds implications for the status of women not only in medieval times but also today."[96] Further, Malory's portrayal of Morgan demonstrated cultural anxieties about educated women and the power they could wield.[97] Morgan, who gained knowledge from a source men could not control (the nunnery), had agency but functioned as an antagonist. Based on Malory's fifteenth-century ideals, Morgan could not know more than the king, could not question him, and still be considered good. With the advent of moveable type printing, introduced to Europe by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1440s, the production of books and manuscripts increased. So, too, did the books available to the public. Information became cheaper and more accessible, breaking down the divide between classes. Thus, Malory represented the aristocracy's fears about losing control over knowledge through Morgan's powers. Whether they were queens or magic-users, Malory portrayed women in a reduced state. He chose not to depict them as competent rulers and instead used the *Morte* to uphold a patriarchal society. He gave women like Margaret of Anjou no historical or literary justification for their rule.

The presence of magic in Malory's *Morte* indicated a shift toward the more imaginative genre of Arthurian texts. However, he did not write an egregiously fantastical work that relied on magic to function. In the context of the Wars of the Roses and the other histories published, the *Morte* served a similar purpose to Geoffrey's *History*: it provided a lineage of kings and set of ideals for the court to follow. His text gave to the fifteenth century what Geoffrey's gave to the

[96] Pérez, *The Myth of Morgan La* Fey, 5.
[97] Ibid, 139.

twelfth. Malory compiled French and English sources that had been written about Arthur since Geoffrey wrote his *History*; he modified and adapted the story to situate it within the civil war of the fifteenth century. The Wars of the Roses and the influence of chivalric codes affected his retelling, just as the Norman dynastic struggles affected Geoffrey's. After Arthur's historicity was debunked, interest in his story decreased, but many more authors would write about the legendary king in the centuries to come. Malory solidified another stepping stone in the line of Arthurian texts.

Chapter Three: Breaking the Cycle, Making a Legend

Writing more than five hundred years after Malory, Tracy Deonn, a "second-generation fangirl," grew up in North Carolina; she attended UNC-Chapel Hill as an undergraduate and went on to receive her Master's degree in Communication and Performance Studies.[98] UNC's performance studies program exposed Deonn to "the practice of putting different art forms and texts in conversation with one another in order to understand something in a fresh way," a strategy she clearly employed to write *Legendborn*.[99] She won the Coretta Scott King Award[100] for *Legendborn* and debuted as a *New York Times Best Seller*.

Deonn sought, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, to write a history that had yet to be told—she began "looking to explain the pattern of loss in [her] family."[101] Her project was a personal history, but a history nonetheless. In the acknowledgements, Deonn listed her research consultants and subject matter experts, including Dr. Hilary N. Green (UNC alumna and alternative walking tours leader), Dr. Gwilym Morus-Baird (Welsh medievalist, bardic tradition consultant, and translator), and Dr. Cord J. Whitaker (professor of Middle Ages literature and the history of race).[102] She expressed her "own personal wish for accurate historical representation with the creative fictions of the canon" in a note in the sequel, *Bloodmarked*.[103] The process of

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[98] Deonn, *Legendborn*, "About the Author."

[99] Kristen Chavez, "A Seat at the Round Table," College Arts & Sciences Magazine, June 11, 2021, https://magazine.college.unc.edu/news-article/a-seat-at-the-round-table/.

[100] The American Library Association's website describes the award as follows: "The Coretta Scott King Book Awards are given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values. The award commemorates the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and honors his wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace and world brotherhood."
"Coretta Scott King Book Awards Round Table (CSKBART)," A Round Table (American Library Association, March 2023), https://www.ala.org/rt/cskbart.

[101] Tracy Deonn, "Every King Arthur Retelling Is Fanfic about Who Gets to Be Legendary," Tor.com, March 22, 2021, https://www.tor.com/2021/03/23/every-king-arthur-retelling-is-fanfic-about-who-gets-to-be-legendary/.

[102] Deonn, *Legendborn*, 500

[103] Tracy Deonn, *Bloodmarked* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books, 2022), 556.

writing her Arthurian book followed the tradition established by Geoffrey: consolidating and making cohesive centuries of disparate records, narratives, and legends from Britain's history. She worked in a manner opposite of Geoffrey, but toward the same purpose: Geoffrey wove Arthur into Britain's history to provide its people with a heroic conqueror, using the history and stories available to him. Deonn, conversely, based *Legendborn* in reality and incorporated Arthur to interrogate how the American historical record privileges the histories of certain groups of people over others. Both wielded Arthur toward a rhetorical purpose in telling a specific historical narrative.

Though Deonn said *Legendborn* was a book about Bree, not Arthur, his legacy lived on in the story. She asserted that Arthuriana constantly evolves with each retelling:

> Arthurian stories originated in Wales, but for the modern audience the body of work we call Arthuriana is not drawn from a single reference point…Not only are these calls for a single true Arthur story themselves ahistoric, but they ignore hundreds of years of Arthurian storytelling tradition–a tradition that has always included remixes and reinventions…This transformative approach is in the genetic make-up of King Arthur. In fact, rewriting King Arthur from new cultural, national, and experiential perspectives is the tradition. [104]

In the world of *Legendborn,* Arthur has been dead since the sixth-century battle of Camlann. The legacy of the Knights of the Round Table lives on through the Order, and it is the Legendborn children who channel the power of their ancestors. Rather than reincarnations of the Knights, the characters all exist as their own people. Deonn's choice to separate the events of the novel from the sixth-century origins of Arthur signaled a new tradition, a new generation of warriors. She was not reproducing the Arthurian matter exactly as either Geoffrey or Malory wrote it; rather, like those authors, she adapted aspects of the legend to construct a narrative. Her story answered her questions about the pattern of death in her family and addressed the experiences of living as a

[104] Deonn, "Every King Arthur Retelling Is Fanfic."

Black woman in the Southern United States. In a style more like Chrétien de Troyes' and Thomas Malory's, the narrative structure of *Legendborn* focused not on the once and future king but on his descendants, the modern heirs to Camelot.

The cultural changes from Malory to Deonn were immense, which forced Deonn to update the narrative to suit her audience. Teenagers with an interest in Arthuriana exist today, but they are not a significant demographic of the publish industry. If Deonn wrote with a tone that mimicked Middle English, it would provide an obstacle to her readers. Further, repackaging the same tropes of Arthurian legends from Geoffrey's or Malory's time would not appeal to her intended audience. As Daniel José Older noted in his interview with Deonn,

> If you were to have written a book about a legacy that went on from Arthur down through the ages and was passed on and just conveniently negated to talk about the fact that those people have power and continue to have power because they owned human beings—Black human beings—it would have felt like a lie. But you decided to lean into that and deal with the truth of that.[105]

Deonn knew the past upon which she drew and consciously integrated Arthuriana into her story because it dealt with the same themes she desired to explore, themes of "legacy, power, family, and the responsibilities laid before each generation when the previous generation dies."[106] Through *Legendborn*, Deonn engaged with the American political climate in the few years leading up to 2020 and clearly linked that climate to the settler-colonialism and slavery from America's founding.

To achieve this bridge, Deonn wove fantasy and fact, legend and history together. She anchored *Legendborn* at UNC-Chapel Hill, a geographical location with which she was familiar. Enslaved people built the school in the late eighteenth century, and the records of "which buildings were built by enslaved people and who owned that person…" were available to Deonn

[105] Tracy Deonn, "*Legendborn* Virtual Tour" interviewed by Older, 29:00.
[106] Deonn, "Every King Arthur Retelling Is Fanfic."

in UNC's archives for her primary research.[107] She set *Legendborn* in the South because "the question of whose lives we memorialize is in the air we breathe," and this living history allowed Deonn to "intentionally use [Bree's] experiences as a Black teenage girl in the South to interrogate and refresh King Arthur and the legends, both in her world and ours."[108] The effects of white supremacy and discrimination echo in Bree's story because they echo in America today. Just as Arthur conquered other kingdoms and wrestled with cultural divides that reflected the contemporary issues in Britain, Bree navigated the bigotry of twenty-first century America. The majority white European men who wrote Arthurian stories focused less on elements of inclusion and diversity because those issues barely affected them, if at all, and were not present in their everyday lives. However, for Deonn, those issues exist at UNC and in her personal life. The tension of the double histories of UNC's campus—the facts given on campus tours and the truth of enslavement hidden away—haunt Deonn's work.[109]

Deonn's approach to writing made her book inherently anti-colonial and anti-imperial. She problematized and broke down the Arthurian legend and the practice of recording history—historiography—with her central question: Whose lives get memorialized and whose lives get forgotten? The entire history of enslaved people at UNC is obscured, both in *Legendborn* and real life. In one scene, Bree visited the campus cemetery and learned that it's segregated, with two sections of mostly unmarked graves reserved for Black people, those who were enslaved on the campus or freed people living in the area. Her mentor, Patricia, tells her of a preservation study that revealed nearly five hundred total graves. Many were damaged in the 1980s when the

[107] Tracy Deonn, "*Legendborn* Virtual Tour" interviewed by Older, 32:45.
[108] Deonn, "Every King Arthur Retelling Is Fanfic."
[109] Melody Hunter-Pillion, Jaqueline Sizing, Ivana Devine, hosts, "Legendborn + Legendmaking, Part 1," Southern Futures (podcast), March 2021, 6:45.

grassy area was used for football parking.[110] In an interview, Deonn revealed that the study actually happened—it was led by the Chapel Hill Preservation Society—and that UNC really did allow people to park on grounds of the Black cemetery.[111] Deonn made her work distinct from Geoffrey's and Malory's by setting the story in her present moment. The legends of Arthur live on through the Order of the Round Table, a trick made possible by the fantasy genre. However, the legacies of slavery and colonialism also operate in the novel because they still operate in the world today. Deonn wove her experiences at UNC, the campus' geography, and the imaginary story of Bree together, fully blurring the line between the history of "what actually happened" and her narrative inventions.

The instances of colonialism, the societal position of women, and the presence of the supernatural presented in Geoffrey's *History* and Malory's *Morte* were, overall, separable from one another. In *Legendborn*, all three of those plots collapsed together and thus require an intersectional analysis. Bree's identity as a Black girl living in the South affects every part of her life; one cannot separate her race from her gender. Deonn linked colonialism to Bree's racialized identity, which also impacted her experience as a woman, and the two in turn determined Bree's relationship to magic. María Lugones posited that Western European colonizers introduced binary gender to the Americas and the people they colonized.[112] In her framework, gender was a privilege only afforded to civilized Westerners; because the colonizers did not view Indigenous peoples or enslaved Africans as human, they did not categorize them with the same binary system. Thus, "the behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial

[110] Deonn, *Legendborn,* 220-221.
[111] Melody Hunter-Pillion, Jaqueline Sizing, Ivana Devine, hosts, "Legendborn + Legendmaking, Part 2," Southern Futures (podcast), March 2021, 3:00-4:56.
[112] María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* vol. 25, no. 4 (Fall, 2010), 742-745.

and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful."[113] Lugones' theory levereaged the concept of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw used intersectionality to describe how multiple forms of oppression can intersect and compound on one another. In her words, "Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex."[114]

The discrimination Bree experienced in *Legendborn* was intersectional. Unlike the women in previous Arthurian texts, Bree contended with racial discrimination in addition to gender-based discrimination. When Bree discovered the Order of the Round Table, she was sixteen years old, the same age as Matilda when Henry V appointed her as guardian of northern Italy, one year older than Arthur when he was crowned. Bree's concerns were not running a country but rather navigating her Early College classes and making new friends. Deonn gave Bree more agency than Matilda and Margaret of Anjou, than Guinevere and Igraine because the novel took place in the twenty-first century. The overt restrictions imposed by patriarchal power were weaker and Bree was not the only woman, or one of very few, in the narrative. However, Bree is the only Black person in the Legendborn society at UNC, an intentional choice by Deonn to demonstrate the white supremacy and European nationalism which exist in secret societies of the twenty-first century and in far-right groups that claim Arthurian heritage. In fact, Andrew Elliot argued that banal medievalisms, which "most often pass unnoticed as references to the past and are usually accepted as innocuous or atemporal references to a phenomenon understood by

[113] Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 743.

[114] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Volume 1989, Issue 1, Article 8. (1989), 149.

all" are used by far-right groups and fascist dictatorships to "anchor the present as a logical inheritor and descendent of a medieval precursor" and attempt to "legitimize current abuses of power."[115] Deonn based the Order's rhetoric in banal medievalisms and demonstrated how quickly they become threatening medievalisms, rendering the biases of medieval culture less innocuous in our understanding of the present.

In the penultimate section of *Legendborn*, Martin Davis, the Viceroy of the Southern Chapter, kidnaps Bree. He recounts the story of Aglovale, a knight who "fell in love with a Moorish princess and got her with child," but whose son was prevented from joining the Round Table because, according to Davis, "He was not worthy."[116] Davis tells Bree she is not worthy, either, his racist implication clear that because she is Black she cannot truly join the Legendborn society. He claims Bree "sits at the crux of two faults," and quotes Malory's chivalric ideal that knights exist to fight on a lady's behalf to justify his exclusion of her.[117] Through Davis, Deonn exemplified how biases ingrained in historiography and literature provide justification for racism and sexism, particularly when individuals reference texts already in line with their views. Elizabeth Elliot, following Andrew Elliot's line of reasoning, concluded, "Locating the Middle Ages as site of an idealised feudal social hierarchy, Order propaganda shares common ground with the alt-right."[118] Deonn created the Order as a living link from the sixth century to the twenty first; they must constantly reach back to the past for the identity. Further, Deonn demonstrated how adhering to historical legacies, particularly ones founded on white nationalism and imperialism, reproduced prejudices and exclusion. Far-right groups like the English Defence

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[115] Andrew B.R. Elliott, "Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages," *History Compass* 16, no. 3 (2018), 4.
[116] Deonn, *Legendborn*, 423.
[117] Ibid, 424.
[118] Elizabeth Elliott, "Restorying Arthurian Legend**:** Space, Place and Time in *Once & Future* and *Legendborn*," *Journal of the International Arthurian Society* 10, no. 1 (January 2022), 87.

League and Stormfront reference their Western European medieval past, especially the Crusades, to justify Islamophobia and genocide.[119] In the twenty-first century, political factions do not use Arthur to bolster their claims to kinghood; instead, they cite Arthur and a general medieval past as their heritage, a heritage which glorifies contemporary imperialism and the murder of non-whites and non-Christians.

Deonn created a complex web of identity politics through the Legendborn society. The Order recognizes women as eligible Scions and allowed them to compete for Squire positions. Some older members, however, like Lord Martin Davis, believe that women should not be members of the Round Table. Deonn depicted layered, nuanced forms of sexism, rather than overt misogyny. She excluded instances of homophobia among Bree's Legendborn peers and indicated relationships where "pregnancy is one-hundred percent impossible" are not only supported, but encouraged, by the Order.[120] Deonn featured two canonically queer relationships—Victoria and Sarah and William and his Onceborn boyfriend—with Tor and Selwyn both canonically confirmed as bisexual and William as gay. For one of Bree's friends, Deonn used they/them pronouns. Greer describes themselves as a "disruptor" of "certain people" who, "if the world is simple…will never be inconvenienced."[121] Once again, Deonn showcased a variety of beliefs within the Order. While they accepted lesbian, bisexual, and gay members, many of its older members resist learning about and using people's preferred pronouns. Their hostility toward gender nonconforming people also extends to anyone who is not white. Sarah, Tor's girlfriend, tells Bree that her father avoids Order gatherings because he's Venezuelan—

[119] A. B.R. Elliott, "Internet Medievalism," 6.
[120] Deonn, *Legendborn,* 289.
The Order keeps careful track of the Lines of each Knight's descendants. Relationships between members of different Lines or potential Scions are prohibited to eliminate the possibility of multiple heirs.
[121] Deonn, *Legendborn,* 185.

and, like Bree, is treated poorly—though she can pass, which means people say "racist crap" around her when they forget she's mixed-race.[122] Tor is racist and openly hostile to Bree throughout the book. In the sequel, she aides the High Council of Regents in kidnapping and torturing Bree and acts as their spy.[123] In *Legendborn*, being queer does not character people from being racist; being young does not mean characters are without faults and prejudices.

Deonn's variations in her character's beliefs, aside from being a hallmark of advanced and dynamic writing, eliminated a monolithic representation of ideas among the Legendborn and the Order. She avoided creating a utopian world within the Order that was radically progressive on all counts except racism and instead illustrated how issues of homophobia, sexism, and racism intertwine and reinforce one another. The prejudices Deonn gave her characters and the microaggressions she had them demonstrate were not the same with the single Order organization or restricted solely to one generation. In *Bloodmarked*, Deonn introduced another Black woman in Order, Samira Miller, Liege of the Line of Bedivere.[124] She assures Bree that "the Liege networks are a bit more...*worldly* than the Regents…"[125] Deonn showed that bias is pervasive, not restricted by age or other aspects of one's identity. She created antagonists for Bree, but rather than give one character all the negative qualities, she imbued them in different degrees across her characters. Thus, Deonn made the systemic and institutional injustices the true villain of the story, and the characters symptoms of that broken system. Young and Finn assert that "The novel's strong anti-racist stance and its incisive reading of a foundational medieval mythos illustrate a way to incorporate those flawed but deeply loved medieval topics into larger

[122] Ibid, 144.
[123] Tracy Deonn, *Bloodmarked* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books, 2022), 520.
[124] Deonn, *Bloodmarked*, 185.
[125] Ibid, 225.

conversations about race, representation, and white supremacy."[126] Deonn claimed the Arthurian story for herself—for Bree—and adapted it to explore the myriad of ways history preserves prejudice. She incorporated elements of gender roles, colonialism, and domination into the story, simultaneously reproducing fundamental elements of the Arthurian tradition and critiquing their function in contemporary United States culture.

Bree's story culminated in her, a Black girl, inheriting the power of King Arthur, cultural symbol of British identity and white imperialism. Deonn leveraged this transformation to reveal the biases of medieval stories and how they uphold prejudice and exclusion today. While Geoffrey's and Malory's work glorified colonialism, as evidenced by Arthur's campaigns against Denmark, Scotland, Ireland, Gaul, and Rome, Deonn's work condemned it. In the eleventh hour, Bree uncovers the truth of her past with the help of Vera, her foremother eight generations back, guiding a memory walk. Bree learns that a Scion of Arthur, a plantation owner, raped Vera. Vera escaped, pregnant from the assault, and made a deal with her own ancestors to protect her unborn child. The Scion's wife also had an affair with a man from the Line of Lancelot. From that point forward, Vera's daughters were heirs of Arthur's while the Davises became heirs of Lancelot.[127] Through a violent crime from her ancestor's past, Bree metamorphosed into the Scion of Arthur. Deonn punished the Davis line for their ancestor's rape and shifted the nexus of power from a white slaveowner to a Black woman who escaped enslavement. *Legendborn* "rejects white racial gendered assumptions about descent that structure the spatial medievalisms of settler colonies."[128] Deonn updated the Arthurian narrative by refusing to reward violence with power, an action that subverts Geoffrey and Malory, who justified and glorified Arthur's conquest.

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[126] Helen Young and Kavita Mudan Finn, *Global Medievalism: An Introduction*, Elements in the Global Middle Ages, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 53.
[127] Deonn, *Legendborn*, 464-468.
[128] Young and Finn, *Global Medievalism*, 55.

Further, she showed Bree's continued resistance to the white medieval rhetoric of the Order after Arthur Awakened her. Arthur wanted to possess Bree and restore his sixth-century kingdom, a goal that directly paralleled the actions of the far-right groups Andrew Elliot identified.[129] His possession represented the desire of white historiography to erase her story and force her into submission, like the strategies UNC employed to hide the legacies of slavery on the campus. Bree resisted the physical colonization of her body, which Deonn used to symbolize the work of Black people and other marginalized groups to recover their history that society tried to erase.

Deonn provided another example of this reclamation with the second magic system she incorporated in *Legendborn*. She based Rootcraft on the African American spiritual traditions of rootwork, also called hoodoo or conjure, a "historic and living folk tradition." Though she did not replicate rootwork exactly in Legendborn, Deonn's Rootcraft shares the tenants of "ancestor reverence and communion, the ritual use of organic materials, naturopathic medicine and healing, and themes of protection."[130] Like with her interpretation of the setting, Deonn adapted real aspects of a belief system to achieve her purpose. In this instance, she contrasted Rootcraft with the magic the Merlins and Legendborn wield. Rootcrafters "borrow root temporarily, because [they] believe energy is not for [them] to own" by making offerings to their ancestors, who in turn lend them power.[131] Bloodcraft, on the other hand, is "Colonizer magic. Magic that *costs* and *takes*" because the Order practitioners "don't *borrow* power from their ancestors, they steal it. Bind it to their bodies for generations and generations."[132] Deonn recognized the connections between gender, race, and colonialism and extended them to her magic systems. The Order, which has its roots in white nationalism, slavery, and the secret workings of power, was

[129] Deonn, *Bloodmarked*, 448-538.
[130] Deonn, *Legendborn*, 496.
[131] Ibid, 223.
[132] Ibid, 233.

started by white men from Britain. Their magic reflects their practices. Rootcrafters, all Black women, did not perpetuate a system of violent control and practiced a form for magic in line with their different spiritual beliefs.

Legendborn is the culmination of previous Arthurian projects, the logical conclusion to the narratives begun by Geoffrey and Malory. It is the most recent retelling, which does lend it a more immediate bearing on the present moment. More than that, though, Deonn initiated a new cycle of stories by making Bree the next version of Arthur. And even in this action, Deonn twisted the tradition. At the conclusion of *Bloodmarked*, Bree rejects her title as Scion of Arthur and refuses to "serve the Order's mission above all others."[133] She also severs her connection with Vera and her matrilineal line, concluding that "I think [my ancestors] ran so I could choose one day. And today, I choose me."[134] Deonn provided a solution to Bree's conflict: radical action. She could not carry out the Order's mission because it was inherently opposed to her identity and her hopes for the world; she could not bear the expectations of her foremothers, who in their own way tried to control her story. Deonn recognized Bree could not change the Order through piecemeal reforms—altering its administrative structure or mandates within the permitted channels to do so—she had to start over, outside the system. This is a clear reference to radical activists, who favor the dismantling and abolition of oppressive systems that perpetuate systemic injustices. Bree fights not to subjugate her enemies and control them, unlike Arthur. After a millennium of retellings that privileged the same point of view, it comes as no surprise that someone would write an Arthurian story from a marginalized perspective.

On two levels, *Legendborn* exists as a historical project—the plot, in which Bree searches for the truth about her mother and female ancestors, and the structure, a way for Deonn to ask

[133] Deonn, Bloodmarked, 537-538.
[134] Ibid, 546.

questions of the historical discipline. Reading *Legendborn* as a historiographic exercise in addition to a contemporary fantasy reveals the way certain narratives are prioritized and popularized in favor of others to uphold systemic and institutional oppression. The book answers Hayden White's call to understand the act of writing history as a literary one. A reader can learn about the contemporary context of the Southern United States in the twenty-first century based on Bree's interactions with the physical UNC campus and the students who attend the school. In some ways, it is easier to identify the historical references and lessons in Deonn's work because she diligently incorporated the geographic details of UNC—the statues, dorms, and memorials offer insight into the political views and priorities of the administration. The setting is current and historical, which serves Deonn's greater purpose of identifying the racist legacies that persist on the campus, in the nation, and in historiographical tradition.

Conclusion

Through the study of the Arthurian texts by Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn, this thesis determined that the political, cultural, and social climate of a given time affects the way authors write accounts of a particular event, whether that writing is historiographic, fictional, or in-between. The depictions of Arthur's life, told in the eleventh century, the fifteenth, and the twenty-first, vary in genre, form, and content despite the same historical sources being available to each author. It is only through an approach that acknowledges and considers the literary aspects of historiography that one can account for Arthur's transformation from a historical fact to a historical fiction. With this understanding, one must reconsider the power of political agendas, authorial bias, and popular opinion in determining not only what counts as history, but what histories become part of the accepted canon and which histories are suppressed.

The research and composition of processes Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn act as a microcosm to illustrate the complex nature of historiographic writing. Operating under Finke and Shichtman's framework, we see that historical truth is not objective nor does it exist in isolation from everything else. I do not mean to allege that historical truth does not exist (and neither do Fink and Shichtman). Rather, I intend to call attention to the malleability of the historical record caused by the process of historiography. No single, original narrative of Arthur's story exists, just as no single, authoritative text on everything that ever happened exists. Historians must consider the sources available to them and the context in which they were written to even begin to decode a document's meaning and historical value. After that process of analysis, they must compile a body of resources that point toward a unified narrative—dates, numbers, and locations that align with each other and the current understanding of history—and emplot the events in a way that most effectively portrays the information from the sources or best serves their purpose.

Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn did the same when they wrote about Arthur. Through the process of writing, historians decide what facts become historical canon and which ones do not, based on the story they seek to communicate.

Historiography, though it aims for objectivity and empiricism, cannot separate itself from the literary act of writing, an act often feared to be ahistorical. Polydore Vergil debunked Arthur's historicity because *The History of the Kings of Britain* failed to meet the standards of the fifteenth century Renaissance scholars. However, his decision did not immediately disqualify every text that claimed to be "a history" written before the fifteenth century. A new style of historiographic writing or preference for particular type of narrative is not reason enough to deem something fictional. Vergil's decision was not unwarranted, as Geoffrey invented parts of the *History*. But if tomorrow, his "certain very ancient book," the alleged source for much of the *History* turned up, historians would have to reconsider Arthur's identity and the truth of Geoffrey's text. The act of selecting what histories counted, as Vergil did, proves that historiographic practices were not uniform throughout time. The process evolves with time and still occurs today. Modern historians benefit from technology that grants them access to records and archeological evidence unavailable to previous scholars, as well as audio and video recordings of that provide a more definitive truth of what actually happened during a certain event. These factors do not mean that today's historiographic practice is infallible, nor does it exclude us from the act of consigning potentially historical events to the realm of fiction. The danger with concluding truth based on a majority agreement from primary documents is that doing so overlooks and dismisses the minority perspective. As the recent efforts to reclaim histories that were erased by Western imperialism and to rewrite biased histories that ignored alternative points of view show, the majority never shares the whole story.

Outside the realm of the academy, what bearing does history have in the minds and lives of average people? Loathe as historians are to acknowledge it, the general public's understanding of history no longer comes from textbooks or historical studies. Rather, they gain it via osmosis of popular media—films, TV shows, and books that use history as their inspirations. With the influence of the public's understanding and opinion of what happened in the past, historiographic narratives become much more subjective. The most satisfying narrative, the one that conforms to and confirms preexisting beliefs will be the one that the majority of people accept. Thus, "popular culture medievalism conventionally 'desires and reifies a white, predominately cisgender and male, Middle Ages'" in the same way medieval historiography does in the academy, which renders "all popular culture medievalisms…political because popular culture both reflects and shapes the ideologies of its production."[135] The process of determining historical truth no longer belongs solely to the academy—if it ever did.

The average person now plays a part in sorting through the quagmire of conflicting narratives and obscure primary sources. Snyder explained that readers and scholars possess "a legitimate set of historical criteria for evaluating these works (apart from plot, character development, etc.)," criteria that questions whether an author "convincingly captured the spirit of the age…offered legitimate historical or archaeological detail…[and] has read recent scholarship on Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries."[136] However, readers have no training in this particular exercise and receive most of their information from media based on history. Their deliberations are subconscious rather than active, which removes much of the critical reflection from their decisions. What do readers who seek an authentic "spirit" of sixth-century Britain, for example,

[135] Young and Finn, *Global Medievalism*, 1.
[136] Christopher A Snyder, "The Use of History and Archaeology in Contemporary Arthurian Fiction," *Arthuriana* 19 (Fall 2019), 115-116.

judge their historical fiction against? Primary sources and a range of historiographies? Perhaps. More likely, they compare their latest historical fiction novel to their own idea of the historical record, an idea developed by reading and watching *other* historically-inspired media. They have constructed an imaginary concept of history—one with at least some basis in historical scholarship but informed primarily by an amalgam of pop culture medievalisms—and adopted all the biases from their sources.

The pop culture Middle Ages, the Middle Ages represented by historical documents, and the actual events of the Middle Ages are three separate entities. Like the texts of Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn, each version depends upon the time period from which it was imagined. Therefore, "the Middle Ages of 2022 are not the Middle Ages of 2002 any more than they were the Middle Ages of 1602. These processes of reinvention—that is, medievalism—have produced multiple, often conflicting, 'Middle Ages'"[137] History, the great justifier, affects the lives and rights of people today. Most "medieval" medias feature a vaguely Western European setting with white people in positions of power, women at the mercy of men, and characters of color and queer characters relegated to background roles or killed for the sake of the white, cisgender, male protagonist. Thus, viewers conclude that society has progressed in terms of social and legal rights and are implicitly led to believe than anyone who wasn't a white, cis, straight man had always been subjugated. When police officers across the United States murder Black people, when courts dismiss the accusations of rape survivors bring against their perpetrators, and the government passes anti-gay and anti-trans legislation, these actions all coincide with the facts presented by popular medievalisms. The public has little reason to question these crimes against marginalized groups because they understand them as congruent with their own history.

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[137] Young and Finn, *Global Medievalism*, 1.

The invocation of historical truth and historical authenticity is a double-edged sword. Oppressive regimes point to the past to soothe activists who protest for freedom and rights. *Look how bad it was for queer people and people of color and women back then. Aren't things so much better now?* They select one particular narrative of history and emphasize the disparity between the past the present. They construct a narrative that shows progress as always forward marching, that represents the current moment as the best possible iteration of everything that came before. Despite the wealth of evidence that queer people, people of color, and women had rights and freedoms in the past, sometimes even more than today, the history that prevails is one that oppresses them. The white medieval history prevails. Bigots, racists, homophobes, misogynists, and others also point to the past to justify the same types of exclusion and subjugation today. We can imagine the historiography speaking to us: *There are no Black people in my fantasy story because there were no Black people in Britain in the Middle Ages; queer people did not exist in the Middle Ages, so we should not grant them rights today.*

Comparing Arthurian texts from different centuries demonstrates how the public's conception of history changes based on what text they read and how the author incorporates their own biases. Edman traced the evolution of the Arthurian myth over time:

> [It] will be transformed into a Christian myth rather than a pagan myth, through pseudo-history that distorts history to propagate Christianity… Then we will see the transformations in medieval times, when women's place was lowered and became associated with the devil and with witchcraft…Pseudo-history (distorting the reality of the past to create an alternative history) and parataxis techniques…are used to change some facts and to create the effect of fiction.[138]

Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan have their roots in Celtic and Welsh oral traditions and mythology. They were coopted by authors like Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory to support and legitimize a colonial, Christian project in Britain. Their texts provide the audience with a

[138] Edman, "A Comparative Study of King Arthur's Radial Journey," 601.

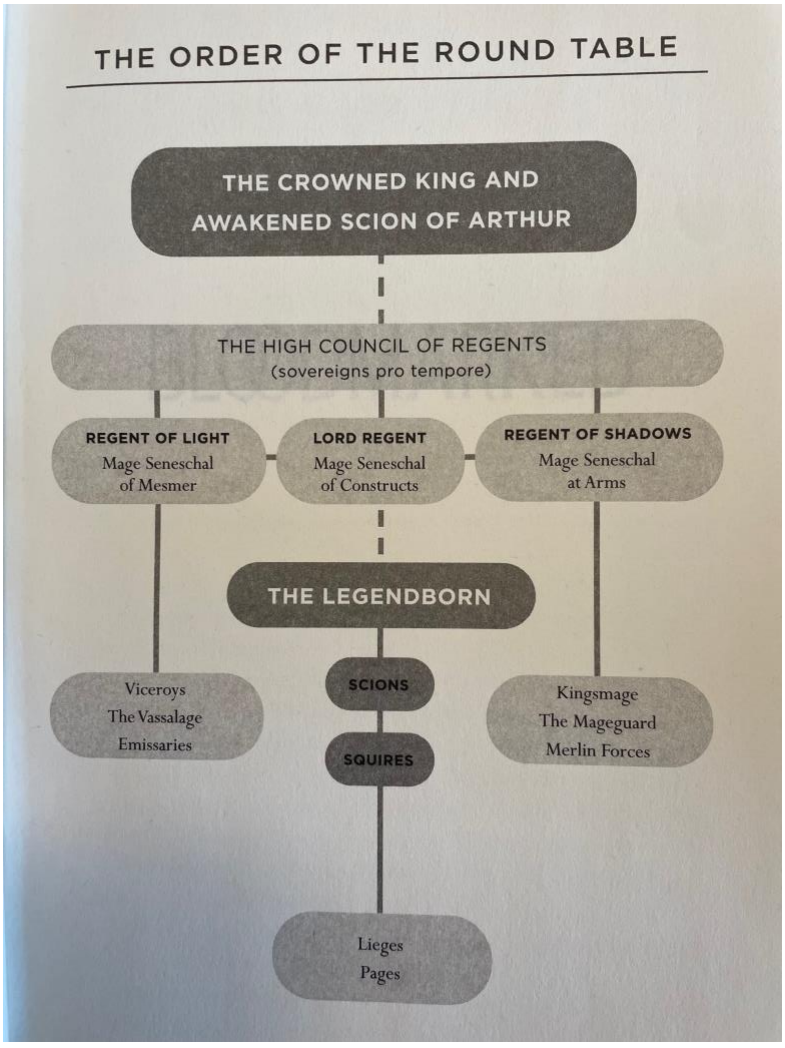
certain narrative of sixth-century British history and culture, affected by their twelfth- and fifteenth-century biases. Using only the information provided in the Arthurian section of Geoffrey's *History* and Malory's *Morte*, one would conclude that the Middle Ages were white, cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal. While this understanding is not false, it is far from the whole picture. The rarer cases of matriarchies and female rulers, of racial diversity, of sexual variety, are pushed to the margins. But they still happened. They help complete the historiography of the Middle Ages. If fiction authors do not represent those aspects of history because the historical fictions they read did not include those details (because they were based on white, Western, imperial historiographies), their stories will never come closer to reflecting the complete historical record. Further, the public won't demand more historiographies of marginalized groups because—based on the history they developed from those books—they won't think those historiographies exist. The relationship between historiography and historically-inspired fiction is reciprocal. They inform the other, inform the public, and are in turn shaped by the public's opinion in a continuous feedback loop. Changing one will change the other will change society, but failing to interrogate historical sources for the stories they obscure and erase will only reproduce the same exclusionary historiographies, media, and societies.

Historiography is a collaborative act of storytelling. The narrative possibilities expand with each new primary source, each point of view added. Historians prune the branches until they have a text that supports their purpose and upholds their worldview—including their biases. Accounting for the subjectivity of historical narratives is essential for the future of historiography. Rather than eliminate any value historical texts have or make it impossible for scholars to determine what happened, accepting the literary aspects of history expands the possibilities of historical analysis and application. Just as Geoffrey, Malory, and Deonn had a

hand in shaping Arthur's story, individuals can take a more active role in historiography. Vesting power in the hands of the people, especially marginalized groups who must fight to protect—much less write—their histories, creates a global narrative, one that approaches the truest account of history we can write. At the very least, identifying the connection between an author's historical context, their depictions of people and events in their text, and the beliefs those depictions support takes a step toward decolonizing history and creating space on the page for new narratives. Historians and literary authors have the opportunity to collaborate on future texts, creating more cohesive narratives and more accurate, inclusive stories.

Appendix A: Glossary of Select Terms from *Legendborn*

Order of the Round Table (the Order): Secret society reaching back to sixth century Wales whose original members include Arthur and his 12 knights. In the modern setting of the book, comprised of all the people who know the truth of Arthur's existence and participate in the fight against the Shadowborn. Responsible for founding UNC to train more Legendborn. Feudal-style hierarchy that includes Vassals, Lieges, Pages, Squires, and Scions. Tracy Deonn's way of linking a legend with origins in the sixth century to the twenty-first: "I pretty much knew [it was going to be Arthur]…Arthur has the narrative weight and the narrative spread to accommodate a very cool magic system if you ask the question: 'How could the Round Table persist to the modern day?'"[139]



Hierarchy of The Order of the Round Table, as shown in *Bloodmarked*.

[139] Tracy Deonn, "*Legendborn* Virtual Tour" interviewed by Older, 27:00.

Legendborn: Highest-ranked members of the Order. Heirs to the Arthur and the Knights, literally and figuratively. They are descended from the original 13 members and can trace their family Lines back to Lancelot, Gawain, and others.

Scion: The eligible sixteen- to twenty-two-year-old child of each Line in each generation who can inherit the power of their ancestors. When they are Called by their knight, Scions are designated as Awakened.

Lieges: Retired Scions and Squires who can no longer be called.

Onceborn: normal, mundane people

Merlin: Title given to Merlin's descendants, who are natural-born magic users because of their half-human, half-demon ancestry (cambions). One Kingsmage is sworn to the Scion of Arthur in each generation.

Page: Onceborn individuals who aren't Legendborn but compete to become Squires of the Legendborn. They belong to Vassal families, who don't fight the Shadowborn but support the Order with their connections in the Onceborn world as politicians, CEOs, &c.

Squire: A Onceborn who is now Legendborn because they bound to a Scion and share the power of their knight.

Shadowborn: Demons from a hell realm that cross over to the human world. They feed on human energy and aether, and the Legendborn are tasked with killing them to protect humanity.

Rootcraft: A form of practicing magic passed through the maternal line of Black families. Women give offerings to their ancestors in exchange for accessing their power for a finite amount of time.

Bloodcraft: What Root practitioners call the magic practiced by the Order because Merlin bound power to the bloodlines of the Knights, which is how the Scions can access their power.

Aether: Term used by the Order to describe the magical energy Merlins can manipulate and use. When Scions are Awakened, they can call aether as armor and weapons. Also called mage flame.

Appendix B: Names

The spelling of many characters' names changes through the centuries and across translations. When directly quoting from a source, I use the spelling provided. All other times, I use a modern, standardized form. Listed below are the names I use in my analysis, alongside alternative spellings.

Arthur: Arthure

Guinevere: Gwenyvere

Merlin: Myrddin

Morgan: Morgan Le Fey, Morgan la Fey, Morgan le Fay

Lancelot: Launcelot

Tristan: Trystrams, Tristam

Percival: Percyvayle

Igraine: Igerna, Igrayne

Nygromancye: necromancy

The History of the Kings of Britain: *The History*, Geoffrey's *History*

Le Morte d'Arthur: the *Morte*

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